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S. Wiqar Husain

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Selim Sarwar

DECONSTRUCTING YEATS: CLASHING CODES AND MULTIPLE VOICES IN A SELECTION OF W.B. YEATS'S POEMS

> We must not make a false faith by hiding from our thoughts the causes of doubt... Neither must we create, by hiding ugliness, a false beauty as our offering to the world.
>
> W.B. Yeats, *Essays* (1924)

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A close look at the interpretations of some of the widely read poems by W.B. Yeats can raise uneasy questions about the reading strategies generally followed by the Yeats critics for well-over half a century. The richness and the variety of the critical insights resulting from a bewildering multiplicity of interpretative foci are not in doubt. Even a brief glance reveals a varied topography of reading: critics have charted the complex dialogue between the poet's individual and artistic selves;[1] the Neoplatonic[2] and gnostic[3] inheritance of the poetry, the thematic and formal sources in the visual arts[4] and the Romantic patrimony of the poems[5] have all been conscientiously explored.

In spite of the diversity of orientations plentifully manifested in the wide choice of critical approaches, however, the readings in most instances were controlled by impulses

readily identifiable as variations of the New Critical will-to-form. The careers of the foremost interpreters of Yeats's poetry actually parallel the growth and dominance of the New Critical aesthetic dogma which provides the overarching theoretical *langue* behind the individual critical endeavours. The aesthetic predilections and the rhetoric of the New Critics predominate and guide the readings turning the poems into well-crafted, unified and organic wholes but suppressing the conflicts, divergences and inner contradictions which endow the texts with their rich polyphony.

John Unterecker's excellent exposition of Yeats's poems, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*, can be considered representative in this regard.[6] Unterecker's elucidation of the poems is cognisant of the heterogeneity of the material that forms the poems: elements of personal biography, Irish legends and traditions, contemporary history, the mystical and theosophical arcana, and finally the theories of individual psychology and cosmic history developed by the poet himself. The analysis of the poems are preceded by chapters surveying many of these areas. However, in the actual readings of the texts, the thrust is towards the discovery of "form", "unity" and "wholeness." The starting assumption of Unterecker's study is that Yeats's "project, always, was to give his work *organic unity*. Everything, he felt, should fit into a *whole*."[7] Not only the individual poems, but the entire oeuvre of the poet is to be seen as a "unified thing, one comprehensive work of art."[8] Unterecker's statement in this regard is categorical:

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> The Collected Works were, I believe, to be what T.S. Eliot would call an objective correlative for the entirety of Yeats's life and thought, a kind of literary equivalent for the total experience of a man, a total experience shaped, through art, into a form less perishable than flesh, a form freed from accident.[9]

Among Yeats's mid-twentieth-century critics only Richard Ellmann comes close to the recognition that absolute unity is not a part of the schemes of an Yeatsean poem. Ellmann's perception of the "alternatives" and contradictions underlying the arguments in Yeats's poems is keen: "Every poem offers alternative positions... The alternative is never competely overwhelmed, but remains like the other side of the moon... or like some imprisoned animal, ready to burst out again with its message of common sense or of renunciation of the world." Ultimately, however, they emerge as a part of the tension-generating antithesis which forms "the laws that govern the complexities of Yeats's poetry."[10] Clearly, one can still find, as Frank Lentricchia points out, "many traces (perhaps "scars" is the word) of the New Criticism" in "contemporary theory;"[11] nevertheless, it comes as a shock when even such arch deconstructionists as Paul de Man echo the residual vocabulary of unity and organicism. At the same moment as he discusses the possibilities of divergent readings of Yeats, de Man refers to "the almost miraculous skill" by which the elements in Yeats's poetry are "held together" and speculates on how the poems gain their "deeper structural unity."[12]

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In their attempt to discover if not invent formal unity, the explicators with New Critical orientations and those who found it difficult to extricate themselves from the spell of the old dispensation produced readings which were neat and shapely but which proved castrating for the poems. Most of the readings as a result failed to foreground the unresolvable contradictions, disunities and impasses to be found in the poems leading to undue mutilations and informal censorships of the texts. In spite of their professed abdication of teleology and intention, the tribes of Brooks and Tate and their later descendants pursued a critical route which on the hindsight was also end-directed, albeit to a different destination: namely, the Sangrila of form. The single-minded quest for form often involved authoritarian decisions of exclusion: components of the text which refused to conform to the schemes of "organic" unity were mentally liquidated. The accolade often awarded to the formalists as champions of the neglected text is thus tainted with the blood of many rebellious but suppressed details in the texts themselves.

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The poetry of Yeats suffered a similar fate at he hands of the formalist or crypto-formalist readers. As the following re-reading of some of the best known of his poems will show, the standardised New Critical responses to Yeats's texts failed to recognize that some of these poems were far from autotelic and had diverse intertextual links. Sometimes they employed codes which were mutually cancelling and in clear conflict with one another. At times the central speaking voice in the poem

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is subtly contradicted and subverted by the details in the text. The apparent unity of tone in some of the poems sometimes disintegrates in chaotic but lively polyphony. In the end, Yeats's poetry emerges as an example of texts which refuse to be pinned down and commit themselves.

A fresh look at "The Second Coming" can be illuminating.[13] As a careful unravelling of the text can show, this is a poem in the world of which the rhetoric of "unity" and "organicism" would seem grossly out of place. The language of chaos and disorder dominates the text from the beginning till the end. Deep-rooted intertextuality would deny the poem any claim to New Critical autonomy. Finally, the poem is perched on the fault-line of two contradictory, mutually cancelling codes the awareness of which seemed to create a mood of hesitancy in the speaking voice.

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The poem unfolds crowding signs of disintegration, violence, horror and confusion attending a moment of cosmic transition. Not only does the opening image of the snapped bond between the falcon and the falconer signify a momentous break-up, the "widening" of the gyre, in addition to the meaning invested in it by the Yeatsean interpretation of history in *A Vision*, is also suggestive of the expanding incohesion predicted in the laws of thermodynamics. Indeed, the verse that follows, with the image of things falling apart and a centre losing its power to hold together seems a neat summation of the ultimate fate of the cosmos envisaged by modern physics. Loss of control and authority in the "mere anarchy" that is

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"loosed upon the world," is followed by the universal carnage and violation of which the "blood-dimmed tide" is a telling index. This is a world from which orderly cultural forms— "ceremonies of innocence"— have been wiped out. Stark opposition and contradiction disrupt human conduct as the lack of conviction in the best and the "passionate intensity" of the worst clearly suggest. The most powerful signifier in the text, the "rough beast" — "A Shape with lion body and the head of a man" — is a supreme icon of incoherence and confused form.

The heterogeneity of the material employed in "The Second Coming" has been resented by many readers. In its obvious debt to *A Vision*, the poem relinquishes any claim to contextual exclusivity. Many of its critics have registered visible discomfort at the extensive linkage between the poem and the discourse on history in *A Vision*. While acknowledging that "almost everything Yeats wrote after 1922 and a good deal that he wrote before that date is linked to *A Vision*," Unterecker continues to maintain that "one can read the poems without knowing the system."[14] In an example of New Critical textual autonomy "The Second Coming," according to him, establishes its dominance over the system and "manages to use the system without being servant to it."[15] Norman Jeffares considers the poem to be "independent of [Yeats's] ideas, of his theory of history, his imagery of the gyres."[16]

Such readings were intended to assert the tight formal

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unity of the poem. However, no one can deny that if "the imagery of the gyre" used in the poem is not related to the processes of historical collapse and extension expounded in *A Vision*, its field of signification is drastically curtailed: from a profound symbol, it is reduced to a realistic metonymy for the path traced by the wayward falcon. A similar reduction marks the significance of the "reeling" desert birds. In the same way, if unsupported by the system, the "twenty centuries" would be no more than a simple arithmetical count of the Christian era. Clearly, the signifying impulse of the various elements in the poem can be given its full play if the reading is allowed to break the shackles of the kind of contextuality the new apologists for uncompromising formalism advocated.

The different interpreters of "The Second Coming" have shown an equal degree of neglect towards the poem's links to the traditional Christian apocalyptic texts. The paradigms of the apocalyptic, the presence of which asserts itself so emphatically at various points, are either overlooked or relegated to unobtrusive and matter-of-fact footnotes. Thomas Perkinson in his discussion of the poem does not recognise the apocalyptic at all.[17] Likewise, Jon Stallworthy's study of the poem's early drafts and gradual evolution shows little awareness of the apocalyptic antecedents of some of the vital images in the poem.[18] Jeffares's notes make a passing reference to "the beast of the Apocalypse in Revelation"[19] as does John Unterecker's commentary.[20] Characteristically, Richard Ellmann's exploration of the poem is more thorough,[21]

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but no existing reading of "The Second Coming" fully maps the extent and implication of the elements from the Book of Revelation in the poem.

Though most readers' perception of the eschatological in "The Second Coming" seems rarely to move beyond the title with its echoes from Matthew: 24, the poem in fact is soaked in the apocalyptic rhetoric chiefly from the Book of Revelation. The scenario of disaffection and loss of cohesion in the opening lines of the poem bears unmistakable traces of the credal confusion and lack of commitment that prevails in the apocalyptic churches of the Book of Revelation. The eroded faith and the crippling apathy shown by "the best" who "lack all conviction" and who are bereft of the "passionate intensity," refer back to the "lukewarm" faith of the Loadecians (Rev. 3: 15-16).[22] The earthquakes and the floods which wreck havoc to the faithless world of Revelation re-emerge in the imagery of disintegration and deluge in the poem. The image of "the blood-dimmed tide" which recurs in this poem and elsewhere in Yeats and which drowns the "ceremony of innocence" has multiple parallels in Revelation (8:8; 16: 3-4) the most remarkable of which is the bloody stream that reaches "even upto horses' bridles " (Rev. 14:20). The murderous forces of anarchy "loosed" upon the world in the poem perform functions akin to those of the angels of carnage "loosed" to annihilate the world in Rev. 9:15. The immediacy of the crisis is brought out in the poem with the repeated "at hand" which is a direct echo of the language of urgency that is characteristic of the texts of the Apocalypse. Variants of

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the phrase "time is at hand," for example, are repeated at four different points in the book of Revelation (1:3; 14:7; 16:6; 22:10). Finally, Yeats's sphinx— the evil deity who will preside over the disaster — combines the animal and the human in a monstrous shape like the "ten-headed" beast of the Apocalypse.

"The Second Coming" clearly borrows some of its most crucial rhetoric and imagery from *A Vision* and the Book of Revelation— two texts based on mutually conflicting concepts of human history. History as it is envisaged by Yeats in *A Vision* is relentlessly cyclical; it moves through the repetitive patterns of the external recurrence of what Yeats calls the "Primary" and the "Antithetical" phases. The eschatology of the Apocalypse on the other hand visualises a pattern which is linear and which finds a triumphant conclusion in the establishment of the divine kingdom on earth.

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The incompatibility of the two patterns— one inexorably circular and the other emphatically teleological— has traditionally caused endless debates among theologians and historians. Basically, the cyclical theory is incommensurate with the Christian view of time. The repudiation of the concept of time as an ever-recurring cycle, as George Boas has shown, was one of the central preoccupations of the early Christian exegetes who sought to distinguish the new faith from pagan cosmologies.[23] Christian divines at various points in the church history have castigated the doctrine of circularity. According to St. Augustine, for example, it is "the ungodly" who "will

walk in a circle, not because their life is going to come around again… but because the way of their error, the way of false doctrine, goes round in circles."[24]

A recognition of the fact that Yeats employs two mutually clashing codes in "The Second Coming" clearly jeopardises the received notions of the poem's unity. If it is an embodiment of a moment of transition in the circular revolutions of Yeatsean history, then the language of Christian eschatology, with its irreversible finality, has no place in the poem. On the other hand, the possibility of reading it as the rendition of an apocalyptic prophecy — or an ironic inversion of it— is problematised by the poem's obvious debts to the vocabulary of *A Vision*.

The dilemma blocks any convincing reading of one of the central elements in the text— the sphinx— on the recuperation of which the crux of the poem's interpretation lies. Is the sphinx an initiator of the new historical cycle which according to *A Vision* would follow the second Christian millennium? The poem's links to the system seem to sanction such a role to the sphinx. However, the attributes given to the sphinx in the poem complicate if not hinder such a reading. Even though the era-change in *A Vision* is visualised as a moment of great violence, the images of horror generated by the sphinx are too overwhelming. The sphinx is monstrous in its composite shape with a "gaze blank and pitiless as the sun." It "troubles" the speaker's sight as it emerges out of dark archetypal depths and it rouses the indignation of the desert

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birds. As it "slouches" on its "slow thighs" towards its birth, the "rough beast," in imposing its terrifying presence even before it is "born," clearly shows itself to be an unnatural and enigmatic embodiment of horror that does not belong to the normal scheme of time. The connotation of evil around the sphinx is too powerful for its role as the messiah of a new dispensation.

The contrast between the sphinx and the swan in "Leda and the Swan" can be enlightening at this point. The Leda poem which was placed at the beginning of the "Dove or Swan" section of his treatise was meant by Yeats himself to be seen as the poetic rendition of the pre-Christian "annunciation that founded Greece."[25] Admittedly, the act of initiation narrated in the sonnet is also violent and the initiator is designated as "the brute blood of the air." Nevertheless, the bird-god, with his caressing web and bill, his "strange heart" beating against that of his mortal lover, is eulogised as "the feathered glory" which can be a source of both "power" and "knowledge." In spite of the forceful and startling nature of the annunciation, the world— as Leda's "loosening thighs" and her getting "caught up" in the act of passionate annunciation indicate— proves receptive. In contrast, the sphinx in "The Second Coming" generates nothing but pure horror, rejection and puzzlement.

The sphinx does not fit into the scheme of the Christian apocalypse either. The beasts of the Apocalypse, in spite of the horror and violence they spread through most of St. John's

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book, ultimately prove to be the vanquished and humiliated adversaries of Christ. They signify the eventual futility of evil and negation. The sphinx in "The Second Coming" is a part of a different scenario altogether. In a complete reversal of the teleology of the biblical apocalypse, the "beast" supplants the messiah and the poem concludes with the inevitable horror of its imminent inauguration.

To any reader trying to place "The Second Coming" within the Yeatsean oeuvre and to relate it to the poet's conceptions of history and Christianity, the intensity of the horror presented in the poem is likely to seem discordant. If the poem is read as a vision of the era-change, then the transition scripted here is one from the "Primary" dispensation to the "Antithetical" phase of the gyre of history.

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The Primary Era, as it is charted in *A Vision*, produces a "scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilisation." The series of adjectives employed here is a catalogue of the values which Yeats all along deemed to be of severely limited significance. His attitude towards what Ellmann phrases as "the inhuman abstraction of science"[26] and philosophical rationality is given a forceful expression in *On the Boiler*. "Of late I have tried to understand in its practical details the falsehood that in all knowledge, science more false than philosophy, but that too false."[27] His antipathy towards democracy as the rule of the vulgar and the low-bred is too often and too openly expressed in both his poetry and prose to need recounting. Finally, keeping in mind Yeats's life-long

search for what he called the "unity of being", heterogeneity would definitely signify something to be shunned and overcome. For a reader conscious of the horizons of the Yeatsean problematics, it would be difficult to see the termination of the Primary civilisation as the world-shattering catastrophe portrayed in "The Second Coming." In fact, since it would be the dawn of a new "Antithetical Era" that would be subjective, anti-democratic and instinctual, it would merit enthusiastic welcome.

A similar puzzle stands in the way of interpreting the poem as an inversion of the biblical apocalypse. Yeats's attitude towards Christianity has been described as "complicated" by some of his leading critics.[28] His characterisation of Christianity as a religion "which would trample nature as a serpent under its feet"[29] on the one hand and as "an Asiatic importation"[30] which threatened the order, form and "measurement" which are the foundations of the European culture on the other testifies to the forms of negation Yeats associated with it. Yeats's fascination with the Neoplatonic philosopher Proclus's description of Christianity as "a fabulous formless darkness" recorded in "Two Songs from a Play" is further confirmation of Yeats's perception of Christianity as a religion which worked against the basic grain of the Nordic man. If the emergence of the sphinx was to be read as the arrival of an Anti-Christ signifying the inception of a faith with values opposed to Christianity, then the tone of Yeats's poem should definitely have been more celebratory.

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The question about the identity of the "rough beast" which concludes the poem is perhaps a summation of the uncertainty and hesitancy of tone the speaker of the poem registers all through. The beast is characterised as "rough," the inevitability of its emergence is recognised, and the itinerary of its birth is charted, but still the speaker expresses his confusion about its identity.

"The Second Coming" is thus burdened with incompatible textual legacies which are not reconciled in the poem. If the divergence of the elements in the poem is kept in mind, the verse "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" would read like "The Second Coming's" self-reflexive comment on itself as a text.

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When in formalist interpretations even such catalogues of conflict and contradiction emerge as patterned and unified, questions arise about strategies of reading. If the textual elements themselves act as signifiers of formlessness, how appropriate is a reading that either authoritatively imposes on or ingenuously invents from a piece of writing patterns of unity and coherence?

As examples of texts that speak in multiple voices, the Byzantium poems also stand out. In "Sailing to Byzantium" and its companion piece "Byzantium" the puzzling pluralities of tone and shifting perspectives warn the reader against attempts at easy recuperation. The bold confidence of the earlier readers of the poems who declared that "the poems… are clear enough"[31] disintegrates when it is realised that the

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numerous assertions made in the text stand subverted by the very images on which they are built. Endless acts of internal sabotage prevent the poems from turning into monolithic systems of authoritarian artistic or organic unity. The gaze of the speaker or speakers of the poems shifts, moves and turns around with dizzy rapidity making it difficult for any static pattern to emerge.

Transcendence into a state of artistic perfection beyond the flux of life is generally identified as the central semantic thrust in the poems. Alienated by the overwhelming sensuality of the world of nature and youth, the speaker of "Sailing to Byzantium" has travelled to the holy city of Byzantium which is a locus of timeless spirituality. He seeks release from the fleshly existence and urges the Byzantine sages to transform him into an eternal artwork like the golden songbird created to entertain an emperor. In "Byzantium," the focus is on the internal scenery of the holy city watched by a wandering observer: the deserted and silent streets at midnight and the glittering dome rising above them; the "superhuman" ghostly presences; the miraculous bird on a golden bough singing songs contemptuous of human passions; the purgatorial rituals on the palace pavements, and finally, the seascape crowded by the hosts of unredeemed souls.

The denunciation of the poems seems categorical. The rejection of youth and desire is intended to be the opening note in "Sailing to Byzantium": "That is no country for old men." The rhythms of sensuality in which the "dying

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generations" of "fish, flesh and fowl" are caught up invoke in the aged speaker a spiritual urge that may seem decisive: "And, therefore, I have sailed the seas and come/ To the holy city of Byzantium." The same note of urgency marks his appeal to the Byzantine holymen: "Consume my heart away" and "gather me/ Into an artifice of eternity." The speaker claims to be determined not to revert back to the temporal scheme of things: "Once out of nature I shall never take/ My bodily form from any natural thing." In "Byzantium," written as a response to Sturge Moore's criticism of the earlier poem that the renunciation of time therein was ambivalent,[32] the assertions of spirituality appear to be more programmatic. The dome declares its superiority over "All that man is/All mere complexities"; the artificial golden bird "in its glory of changeless metal" expresses its scorn for "common bird or petal"; finally, the golden smithies, the artificers of the golden bird, break the "furies" of human and temporal complexity.

The readings of the poems which see in them "a meditation of timeless existence or eternity"[33] and find in Byzantium a symbol of "the heaven of the neoplatonist,"[34] or "the supreme stasis" and "the final achievement beyond human life"[35] seem thus to have textual sanction.

However, when a reader digs deeper into the tropes and figures at work in the poems, the grounds for such confident readings give way. That the poems contain discordant elements was recognised in some of the earlier readings of the poems, but in most cases they were treated as ambiguities and ironies

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which ultimately enriched the poems' unity. It was rarely recognised that the contradictions and shifts in perspective are fundamental enough to threaten the structures of the poems.

The question of the speaker's perspective at the opening of "Sailing to Byzantium" has been inadequately investigated. Contrary to the implications in the title and despite the accepted critical views, the text does not present "a picture of the voyage *from* the material world *to* the holy city of eternity."[36] As the use of the present perfect form in lines 15-16 indicates, the journey has already been accomplished and the speaker has already arrived at his desired world of spirituality. Therefore, the images of the sensory world in the opening lines of the poem are retrospective: the speaker here recreates in fascinating detail the earthly existence he has left behind. Yeats's revision of the opening line from "*This* is no country for old men" to "*That* is no country for old men"[37] clearly locates the speaker at a distance from what he is describing. Once the speaker's perspective is established, the opening of the poem seems to introduce a definitely puzzling note. In spite of the categorical assertions of rejection, the speaker's sojourn in the holy city seems to begin with his eyes turned back to the sensual landscape he renounced.

Yeats's reworking of some of the images as recorded by Jon Stallworthy adds to the ambivalence.[38] As the revisions considered by Stallworthy show, the poem was originally titled "Towards Byzantium" and was intended to focus on the journey "south eastward toward Byzantium" in the company

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of "sun-browned pleasant mariners." In the final version of the poem, however, all the details of the journey— "the dark-skinned pleasant mariners," "the splash" of "the sudden falling oars," the "glint of foam", "the jetty and the marble stairs" that are "mirrored in water" are deleted. The speaker here has simply "sailed the seas" in an abrupt journey of renunciation. At the end of the trip, his gaze is fixed not at the holy city to which he has arrived but at the mortal world he has left behind.

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The raw sensuality and the simple binary of soul and body in the earlier drafts in verses such as "For many lovers have I taken off my clothes/ for some I threw them in haste, for some slowly and indifferently… but now I will take off my body" were similarly revised into the much more sensitive "The young/ In one another's arms." The earlier drafts were also replete with pictures of human debility in the forms of sleep, hangovers and weariness: God is "an infant sleeping on/ His Mother's knees:" and "Weary with toil Teig sleeps till break of day"; others "drowsy with night's gallantries/ Has snored the morning's dreary night away" and the speaker, who has also "toiled and loved" "sleeps[s] [his] nights away." Such images were clearly more powerful signifiers of man's mortality and the frailty of human flesh than those which replaced them.

The images which compose the picture of the sensory world in the final version focus on the themes of youthful love, music, movement and creativity. The abundance of life and the process of continuance and regeneration are suggested by

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the salmon falls and the sea crowded with mackerel. In the commendation of the dynamism of procreation, birth and death, the earth, the sky and the seas participate. If the speaker of the poem intended to present the picture of a festering mortal world that deserved to be renounced, his intention here has been clearly defeated by his own words. The images of the young lovers or "birds in the trees… at their song," and the summer-long "music" could only be denounced by an extremely puritanistic sensibility which is definitely not to be associated with the speaking voice here. Even the reminder of mortality that the speaker inserts in the appositive "the dying generations" is, as many earlier readers of the poem recognised, fraught with contradiction: the concept of death is undercut by the reference to "generation." Under the declarations of rejection in the opening stanzas of the poem rings a strong strain of nostalgia.

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The images of mature spirituality and wisdom set up in opposition to the powerful invocations of the senses are hesitant and contradictory. Against the symphony of sensuality in which "the fish, flesh and fowl" participate, the speaker pits the compensatory notes from the solo voice of the clapping spirit. Even the perceived Blakean ancestry of the image cannot redeem it from its impression of desperation— perceptible in its attempt to "sing and louder sing" — and juvenility suggested by the references to "schools" and "singing masters." The themes of "unageing" maturity thus stand subverted. The speaker's desired metamorphosis into an eternal artwork is equally riddled with problematic

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connotations. The use of the word "artifice" suggestive of expedient contrivance is not the only jarring detail in the description of the clockwork songbird. The reference to "enamelling" bears connotations of a thin and superficial gloss limited to the outer appearance. Moreover, the "form" created by the Grecian goldsmiths clearly lacks the perceptual concreteness of the "birds in the trees." The vagueness of the image is confirmed by the critics' puzzled descriptions of it as a "nightingale," "burnished dove" or even "a metal cock."[39] Its indeterminate shape certainly reduces the effectiveness of the image.

The poem's apparently reluctant allegiance to earthly life and time surfaces most powerfully in its last stanza. Sleep and drowsiness— the emblems of mortality repeatedly drawn by Yeats in the earlier versions of the poem— and the theme of the passage of time repossess the poem. Even the emperor of the city of supreme spirituality surrenders to the debilities of temporality and falls "drowsy," and in a total reversal of all the assertions about transcendence and eternity, the golden artwork sings of time: "Of what is past or passing or to come."

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Sturge Moore in his famous letter on the poem read the conclusion as anticlimactic. The poem, he wrote to Yeats, "magnificent as the first three stanzas are, let [him] down in the fourth" because "a goldsmith's bird is as much nature as a man's body, especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies."[40] However, the conclusion is hardly as abrupt

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as he suggested: even the first three "magnificent" stanzas were deeply tainted by what Sturge Moore called "nature."

"Byzantium," prompted by Sturge Moore's response to the earlier poem, was intended by Yeats to be a more emphatic "exposition" of the message of eternity scrambled by the unruly images in "Sailing to Byzantium."[41] However, though the sequel tends on the surface to be a more categorical statement of spirituality, an inquisitive reading can unearth the shaky underpinnings of the apparent message.

Both the opening and the conclusion of the poem focus on "unpurged images" —the "drunken soldiery" and the "nightwalkers" in the city streets in the first stanza and the freshly arriving human souls at the sea-front in the final lines of the poem. The presence of the inebriated soldiers and prostitutes within the perimeters of a city that is the locus of pure spirituality is not easy to explain. The arrival of the impure souls at the end of the poem also takes on the force of a surprise invasion: "Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood/ Spirit after spirit!" The conclusion of the poem does by no means embody a state of spiritual calm. On the contrary, the "dolphin-torn" and "gong-tormented" sea resembles a battle scene.

A close look at some of the pivotal images in the poem can also be disorienting for a seeker of formal and tonal unity in the poem. The "superhuman" presence in the second stanza, though "shade more than man, more image than a shade," cannot wholly extricate itself from the flesh. The reference to

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the "mummy-cloth" invokes a scheme of belief which emphasised the physical no less than the spiritual continuity and which strove for the preservation of the flesh. The fact that the speaker chooses to call it by the mutually opposing designations of "death-in-life" and "life-in-death" not only adds to the complexity of its identity but also shows its continued complicity with life. The transformation that the artificial songbird first seen in "Sailing to Byzantium" undergoes seems puzzling as well. Though less of a "bird or handiwork" and more of a "miracle" now, it is shown to have lost its power to "sing." Instead, it "crows" like "the cocks of Hades."

Moreover, the world of Byzantium is yet to purge itself of the common mortal emotions even though "the fury and mire of the human veins" are disowned repeatedly. The moods of "disdain" ("A starlit or moonlit dome disdains/ All that man is"), bitterness (the golden bird is "embittered" by the moon) and "scorn" and "agony" signify an ambience of emotional turmoil that clearly contradicts the impressions of calm and detachment that absolute spiritualism would generate.

The purgatorial rituals described in the poem also contain problematic details. The process of purification underway on the emperor's pavement in which dead spirits are to be cleansed keeps on reverting back to the images of blood and begetting. As the rituals progress, the erotic metonymy of the discourse comes to the forefront: the "spirits come" suggestively "astraddle on the dolphin's blood and mire." They are seen "dying into a dance" with "dying" and "dance"

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invoking their traditional semantic links to coition and thus, ultimately, the distinctions between orgasm and spiritual euphoria are blurred.

Finally, the speaker's perspective in the poem traces a route which leads away from the centre of the holy city to the sea-shore of mortality: after traversing the city-streets, the artificial garden with the clock-work bird in it, the emperor's palace and the city walls, the speaker stands transfixed in front of the sea crowded with impure human souls. Both at the opening of "Sailing to Byzantium" and at the conclusion of "Byzantium," the speaker's gaze is turned away from the city of spirituality towards the colour and movement of the temporal world.

It is definitely an instance of glaring critical blindness that the innumerable commentaries on "Byzantium" declined to see that the purported message which the poems were commissioned to carry is also way-laid by the poet's own comments. Yeats's frequently quoted notes on "Byzantium" talk about how he, after an illness, "warmed [himself] back to life" with the poem.[42] First, in the context of the message of cold spirituality read into the poem, sometimes with Yeats's own connivance, the metaphor of warmth in the poet's comment would seem incongruous. Secondly, the irony of "warming" oneself "back" to life through words that are intended to express icy contempt for and categorical renunciation of the passion and complexity of human existence also seems to have escaped most interpreters.

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All in all, the Byzantium poems emerge as texts where the slippage between the signifier and the intended signified is wide and crucial. They clearly lack the unity of well-ordered signs jeopardising readings that would set the poems up as exemplars of organic formal coherence.

A similarly puzzling plurality of tones obstructs easy recuperation in yet another familiar poem by Yeats: "Lapis Lazuli." The poem is a celebration of gaiety in defiance of catastrophe as creation and destruction are phases of a cyclical process. The contemporary rhetoric of crisis which subsumes a contempt for the arts is overblown. Even the bitterest tragedy man can face contains, when viewed in its totality, a sense of fulfilment and joy. In spite of the world-shattering catastrophes confronting them, "Hamlet and Lear are gay." Gaiety likewise inheres the glittering but calm eyes of the oriental ascetics gazing at life. Like the minor blemishes in an art-work, the negativities ultimately cohere into a pattern to be viewed with pleasure: "All things fall and are built again/ And those that build them again are gay."

The unity of the poem rests on the uniformity of the visions of gaiety experienced by the Western tragic heroes and the Chinese sages. The text of the poem certainly promotes the idea of a shared response to the pain and suffering of life and a shared ability to transcend them. Indeed, there is little in the actual poem to encourage the notion that the Western version of the gaiety is to be distinguished, set aside, or held to be superior to its Eastern form.

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Such a reading of "Lapis Lazuli" founded on the perceptions of a formal and philosophical monism, though sanctioned by the actual text, is problematized by the poet's own commentary on the origin and the intended meaning of the poem. Yeats's letter to Dorothy Wellesley first invokes and then emphatically rejects the idea of a shared vision between the East and the West:

> Ascetic, pupil, hard stone, eternal theme of the sensual east. The heroic cry in the midst of despair. But no, I am wrong, the east has its solution always and knows nothing of tragedy. It is we, not the east that must raise the heroic cry.[43]

The contradiction between what the text actually says and what the poet wanted it to say is self-evident. The poem, unlike Yeats's comments on it, "confronts Asia and Europe without representing them at odds with one another."[44]

Yeats's poetry, then, illustrates abundantly the intransigence embedded in language, an intransigence which defies not only the express intentions of the authors, but also the will and the fiat of the readers attempting to capture the texts in the reductive straight-jackets of forms and patterns. The realization that his poems do not display the type of unity imposed on them by New Critical reading does not detract from Yeats's poetic achievement in any way. On the contrary, it liberates his poetry into a polyphonic and polygamous economy revealing once again the uncharted possibilities Yeatsean texts have as signifiers.

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11. Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p.xiii.
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22. The biblical text quoted here is from the *Authorised Version of King James' Bible.*
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26. Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats,* p.262.
27. W.B. Yeats, *On the Boiler* (Dublin: The Cuala Press, 1938); quoted by Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, p.211.
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29. Quoted by Ellmann, ibid., p.52.
30. Ibid., p.190
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33. Vivian de Sola Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry 1840-1880* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), p.122.
34. Wilson, *W.B. Yeats and the Tradition*, p. 232.
35. Melchiori, *The Whole Mystery of Art*, p. 202.
36. Pinto, *Crisis in English Poetry,* p.122. Italics mine.
37. Jeffares, *Commentary*, p. 254.
38. Stallworthy, *Between the Lines,* pp.87-112.
39. Ibid., p. 100.
40. Bridges, *W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore,* p.162.
41. Ibid., p.164.
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43. Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats*, p.185.
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RE-READING *THE TIN DRUM*

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The Nobel prize for literature 1999 went to Germany's Günter Grass who received much critical acclaim from the beginning of his literary career. When Süddeutscher Rund funk organized a poetry competition in 1954, the prize was awarded to "Lilien aus Schlaf" (Lilies made of sleep)[1] by Günter Grass, at that time twenty-seven and a student of sculpture in Düsseldorf and Berlin. In 1958, the budding artist was given the coveted annual award of Gruppe 47,[2] then West-Germany's trend-setting literary club, for his reading of a chapter from his incomplete first novel.[3] Published a year later as Die Blechtrommel,[4] this novel of almost 600 pages was an enormous success instantly and was selected "Book of the Month" in October of the year of publication. Also in the same year, however, a public outcry against the young author's novel made the city of Bremen reconsider the decision to bestow the prestigious Honour of the Free Hanseatic City on Grass. Despite (or because of ?) growing dissent, the author's career continued to be accompanied by numerous literary recognitions, i.a. the 'Literaturpreis des Verbandes der deutschen Kritiker' in 1960 and France's literary award for the best foreign book in 1962.[5]

Die Blechtrommel was quickly followed by the novella *Katze und Maus* in 1961 and the long novel Hundejahre in 1963.

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English translations, all by Ralph Manheim, were published very promptly by Random House: The Tin Drum (1962), Cat and Mouse (1963) and Dog Years (1965). These works came to be known collectively as the "Danzig Trilogie", since they are set mostly in Danzig, the Polish Gdansk, where on the first of September 1939 Hitler's army fired the salvo which ignited the Second World War.[6] In Germany and abroad, Günter Grass became known as the author of The Tin Drum and established his reputation with the Danzig Trilogy as the writer who "captured the German reaction to the rise of Nazism, the horrors of war and the guilt that lingered in the aftermath of Adolf Hitler's regime."[7]

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Grass always was a prolific writer of great versatility – poet, novelist, playwright, essayist and also a graphic artist and sculptor. The mantle of spokesman for the generation that had grown up in the Nazi era fell easily on the proclaimed committed writer. Grass soon gained fame for his special brand of militant pacifism and his vociferous advocacy of political, cultural and environmental issues. In a balanced comprehensive evaluation of Germany's outspoken Nobel laureate, Dorothea Dieckmann sums up his achievements:

> the morality represented by Günter Grass's artistic and intellectual stand derives the obligation of humanism from memory of Auschwitz. Tribute must be paid to Günter Grass as inseparably both writer and political being. In him the Swedish Academy honours an intellectual and political universalism, which is one of Germany's most important traditions.

In this passage, the critic's high praise is centered on the artist's role in society. Grass, the writer, is commended in

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Dieckmann's eulogy with a sentence spanning a long paragraph, beginning thus:

> The author of the *Tin Drum*, that furiously fabulating, ruggedly wild diagnosis of German distortions and excrescences; the Kashubic homeland writer whose "Danzig Trilogy" gained him the reputation of a blasphemer and pornographer; the grotesque realist whose linguistic and narrative talent in such opulent edifices of montage as the *Flounder* and the *Rat* increasingly turned away from the baroque tradition of *Simplizissimus* and the modernism of Franz Biberkopf in favour of the mannerist allegories of a poetic moralist;[9]

These remarks about the Nobel laureate's literary achievements may be juxtaposed with a brief observation made in 1969 with great perceptiveness:

> Grass is a writer of great versatility, a master of language who recalls Rabelais and Joyce. His great danger is excess: sometimes the feast is too lavish, the devices are too ingenious, the books too long.[10]

Here the discerning critic, Henry Hatfield, raises points which help to explain why the tremendous success of Grass' first novel was never equalled by any of his subsequent books. Even the *Tin Drum* is too meandering: there are many passages, which could be struck off without any loss to the book as a literary work of art. In fact, the author's style, depending heavily on cumulative parallelism, alliteration and repetition, tends to make for tedious reading. In the *Tin Drum* the author-protagonist goes on and on - "sometimes excessively wordy"[11] — first person and third person narrator in one, with seemingly endless drumming obscuring the

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structure of the novel.

Throughout the novel, Grass makes frequent use of the device of the reader being addressed directly by the narrator, as in the opening paragraphs:

> Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital; my keeper is watching me, he never lets me out of his sight; there's a peephole in the door, and my keeper's eye is the shade of brown that can never see through a blue-eyed type like me.
>
> So you see, my keeper can't be an enemy. I've come to be very fond of him; when he stops looking at me from behind the door and comes into the room, I tell him incidents from my life, so he can get to know me in spite of the peephole between us. He seems to treasure my stories, because every time I tell him some fairy tale he shows his gratitude by bringing out his latest knot construction. I wouldn't swear that he's an artist. But I am certain that an exhibition of his creations would be well received by the press and attract a few purchasers.[12]

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With this exposition, the first person narrator established his identity as one who does the explaining and expects his views to be accepted. In consonance with this, the first mention of the narrator's name occurs in a deferential query with which Bruno Münsterberg, the keeper, seeks clarification:

> 'Oh, Bruno,' I said, 'would you buy me a ream of virgin paper?' And Bruno, looking up at the ceiling and pointing his index finger in the same direction by way of inviting a comparison, replied: 'You mean white paper, Herr Oskar?'[13]

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Confiding in his keeper only, not in his weekly visitors — his lawyer, friends and family — Oskar writes his memoirs in strict secrecy. It is thus evident from the outset that the keeper and the kept, Bruno and Oskar, rely on one another and are both well-adjusted to their routines in the mental institution.

It is the keeper's passion to collect discarded gift-wrapping strings, disentangle the strands and fabricate "elaborate contorted spooks."[14] He refrains from using any dyes on the resulting plaster of Paris creations, respecting his patient's judgement of the ideal: Herr Oskar espouses white, the colour of his enamel hospital bed, "this most perfect of all beds."[15]

While Bruno is tying into complicated knots that which is normally treated as waste material, Oskar tells story after story about his life and times. In these tales told by the "eternal three-year-old drummer"[16], Oskar Matzerath now turned thirty, Günter Grass calls to our mind two fateful World Wars, Hitler's Third Reich, and Danzig, the city of birth of the author and his alter ego's. The often highly improbable accounts are full of sound and fury and explore a past wont to be forgotten. *The Tin Drum's* resounding fame is that this book shocked a nation out of complacency, readers and non-readers alike. By focussing in the early 1950s on the witch-hunts, the crimes and the guilt of the Nazi era, Grass gave a much needed stimulus to the intellectual life of a people overawed by their country's unprecedented economic miracle. The young author made the 'Wunderkinder,' the children of the miracle, reflect about the past, the present and the future. This end was achieved by all sorts of means, not all of

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which can find our approval. One regrets the vicious circle in which infantile humour, pornography and blasphemy are read as a sign of the times. And one notes with relief that the grotesque and the bizarre is not the only way to produce an absorbing novel about the darkest chapter in German history, when one reads *Death in Danzig* by Stefan Chwin.[17]

Re-reading the *Tin Drum*, one realizes the fast fading of the novelty of that clever narrative device of making Oskar, the misshapen gnome, watch from an angle that is always different, often distorting and distorted, and at times astoundingly revealing. We become aware of smugness as the dominant note in the cacophony accompanying Oskar's analysis of events, as in this description of the full-length portrait taken of him in honour of his third birthday:

> I've got my drum. It is hanging in front of my tummy, brand-new with its serrated red and white fields. With a solemn, resolute expression, I hold the sticks crossed over the top of it. I have on a striped pull-over and resplendent patent leather shoes. My hair is standing up like a brush ready for action and in each of my blue eyes is reflected the determination to wield a power that would have no need of vassals or henchmen. It was in this picture that I first arrived at a decision, which I have had no reason to alter. It was then that I declared, resolved, and determined that I would never under any circumstances be a politician, much less a grocer, that I would stop right there, remain as I was and so I did; for many years I not only stayed the same size but clung to the same attire.

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> (...) I remained the three-year-old, the gnome, the Tom Thumb, the pigmy, the Lilliputian, the midget, whom no one could persuade to grow. (...) I remained the precocious three-year-old, towered over by grownups but superior to all grownups, who refused to measure his shadow with theirs, who was complete both inside and outside, while they to the very brink of the grave, were condemned to worry their heads about 'development', (...).[18]

There are innumerable pages in Grass' novel where this derisive, mocking tone is employed. Suffice it to discuss briefly three passages signifying Oskar's way of telling his story ranging from "how shall I begin?" to "Don't ask Oskar(...)! Words fail me."

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The innocuously put "how shall I begin?" is an innuendo: having recourse to an established rhetoric device, followed by a delightful parody of the old, yet so modern dilemma of writing "a novel to end all novels,"[19] Oskar in fact once more firmly establishes his position as clear-headed narrator. After all, he is already two and a half pages into Book One, Chapter One, 'The Wide Skirt' which he commenced with the blunt statement: "Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital." Therefore the reader can appreciate the irony that Grass' protagonist is also presented as our trusted cicerone to the world of literary criticism:

> I have also been told that it makes a good impression, an impression of modesty so to speak, if you begin by saying that a novel can't have a hero any more because there are no more individualist, because individualits is a thing of the past, because man - each man and all men together - is

> alone in his loneliness and no one is entitled to individual loneliness, and all men lumped together make up a 'lonely mass' without names and without heroes. All this may be true. But as far as I and Bruno my keeper are concerned, I beg leave to say that we are both heroes, very different heroes, he on his side of the peephole, and I on my side; [20]

Indeed, we are in medias res. After a reaffirming repetition of the argument presented, Oskar carries on with that paragraph which he would like us to consider the beginning. In the context of the novel it is significant that there we also get the first example of the continuously employed shift from first person narration to third person narrator:

> I shall begin far away from me; for no one ought to tell the story of his life who hasn't the patience to say a word or two about at least half his grandparents before plunging into his own existence. And so to you personally, dear reader, who are no doubt leading a muddled kind of life outside this institution, to you my friends and weekly visitors who suspect nothing of my paper supply, I introduce Oskar's maternal grandmother.[21]

There is derision in the patronizing tone of voice and it is heightened by the calm authority with which 'no doubt' is inserted in the statement that a less arrogant narrator would not have made to begin with. Underlying it all is the irony that the manic drummer's 'dear reader' will begin reflecting about the meaing of life. Of course, we may hesitate to agree with the assumption that ours is 'a muddled kind of life', but with our consent or without, Grass' character has made known his opinion with that ring of truth about it in which agreement is anticipated; and the childlike candour of

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the protagonist's statements is given the more readily our indulgent approval because the mixing of the perspectives between 'I' and 'he' is true to life, an experience we all underwent, whether we can recall it or not.

From the fifth chapter on, Grass refers to actual children's songs and games to emphasize the verisimilitude of Oskar's childhood recollections. From infancy Oskar chose to stay aloof though famous for his ability to scream glass to pieces when in a tantrum. Never joining the children's games that act out aggression, Oskar would at most turn the tables on teasing brats by assuming the role of their leader, Pied Piper fashion:

> Whenever I caught the attention of the neighborhood children, whose games - such as "Pickled herring, one, two, three' or 'Where's the Witch, black as pitch?' or 'I see something you don't see' - didn't interest me in the slightest, the whole unwashed chorus of them would begin to squeal:
>
> Smash a little windowpane,
> Put sugar in the beer,
> Mrs. Biddle plays the fiddle,
> Dear, dear, dear.[22]
>
> It was a silly, meaningless jingle and troubled me very little; I took up the simple rhythm, which was not without charm, and drummed my way from start to finish, through the little pieces and through Mrs. Biddle. Thus drumming, I marched down the street and though I was not the Pied Piper, the children followed in my wake.[23]

Here we encounter the motif of the black witch - curiously 'the black cook' in the original German[24] - who gets such a significant

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position in the final pages of the novel. The motif is taken from a traditional ring dance, where the circle is gradually broken up until only one child is left: the odd person out - the black sheep, the guilty one. Past events and future happenings are reeled off by Oskar in the end as revolving around the black witch, and the reader cannot but accept the petulant refusal to do any more explaining in this regard as quite in character. The novel ends on the final tone of scoffing, mocking laughter:

> 'Where's the Witch, black as pitch? Here's the black wicked Witch. Ha, ha, ha! You're to blame. And you are too, You're most to blame, You! You! You! Where's the Witch, black as pitch?...' She had always been there. (...) Don't ask Oskar who she is! Words fail me. First she was behind me, later she kissed my hump, but now and forever, she is in front of me, coming closer.
>
> Always somewhere behind me, the Black Witch.
> Now ahead of me, too, facing me, Black.
> Black words, black coat, black money.
> But if children sing, they sing no longer:
> Where's the Witch, black as pitch?
> Here's the black, wicked Witch.
> Ha! ha! ha![25]

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1. cf. Franz Lennartz, *Deutsche Dichter und Schriftsteller unserer Zeit* (Stuttgart 1969, 10th edition), p.244.

2. Quite aptly characterised as 'a group of poets with showbiz flair', this loose association of intellectuals - writers, critics, professors of literature, and newspaper editors - was the crucible for literary

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talent in post-war Germany; cf. Jochen Hieber, "50 Years Ago: The 47 Group–Poetry, Politics and Ritual," in: *Deutschland Magazine*, (No.3, June 1997), p.55. The aims and objectives of the group during its 20 years of existence from 1947 to 1967 are concisely outlined by Eberhard Falcke in: *Funk-Kolleg Literarische Moderne* (Tübingen 1994), p.21.

3. Johannes Beer (ed.), *Reclams Romanführer*, Vol.2: Deutsche Romane und Novellen der Gegenwart (Stuttgart 1963, third edition 1968), p.673.

4. Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand 1959).

5. Lennartz, op. cit., p.244.

6. The English edition of *The Tin Drum* published by Random House under ISBN 0 7493 9475 7, does not get this crucial date right: "that streetcar ride in the jingling, jangling Number 5 might have been a quiet pleasure jaunt if it had not taken place on the day before September 1, 1993 (sic.!)" (London: Vintage 1998), p. 200.

7. Susanna Loof, "Günter Grass wins 1999 Nobel Prize for Literature," in : *The Times of India*, 1st October 1999, p.1.

8. Dorothea Dieckmann, "Günter Grass for Nobel Prize for Literature," in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*: reprinted in : *Kulturchronik* (Bonn 1999, No.6) p.17.

9. Ibid., p.16.

10. Henry Hatfield, *Crisis and Continuity in Modern German Fiction - Ten Essays* (Ithaca and London : Cornell University Press 1969), p.xviii.

11. Ibid., p.145.

2. Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum* (London: Random House, Vintage paperback 1998), p.1.

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13. Ibid., p.3.

14. Ibid., p.1

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p.47.

17. Stefan Chwin (49) is a Professor of Polish Literature in his birthplace Gdansk. His novel *Death in Danzig* has been published as *Tod in Danzig* by Rowohlt Verlag, Berlin 1997, paperback edition Rowohlt 1999.

18. *The Tin Drum*, op. cit., p.46.

19. Ibid., p.3, the allusion to Ulysses is obvious. cf. Hans Mayer, *Deutsche Literatur seit Thomas Mann* (Hamburg: Rowohlt 1967), p.46.

20. *The Tin Drum.*, op. cit. p.3.

21. Ibid., p.4.

22. This, of course, is not a traditional rhyme but Grass' original made up to the measure of Oskar runs thus:

    Glas, Glas, Gläschen,
    Zucker ohne Bier,
    Frau Holle macht das Fenster auf und spielt Klavier.
    (*Die Blechtrommel*, op. cit., 56)

23. *The Tin Drum*, op. cit, p.50.

24. cf. *Die Blechtrommel*, op.cit., Seite 56: "Ist die Schwarze Köchin da" und Seite 569: Fragt Oskar nicht, wer sie ist! Er hat keine Worte mehr. Denn was mir früher im Rücken sass, dann meinen Buckel küsste, kommt mir nun und fortan entgegen:

    Schwarz war die Köchin hinter mir immer schon.
    Daβ sie mir nun auch entgegenkommt, schwarz.

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Wort, Mantel wenden lieβ,schwarz.
Mit schwarzer Währung zahlt, schwarz.
Wahrend die Kinder, wenn singen, nicht mehr singen:
Ist die Schwarze Köchin da? Ja -Ja Ja!

25. *The Tin Drum*, op. cit, p.565.

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THEME AND STRUCTURE IN EDWARD ALBEE'S *THE DEATH OF BESSIE SMITH*

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Edward Albee bases *The Death of Bessie Smith* on a real news story: the death of the black singer Bessie Smith in an automobile accident. In his dramatization of the event which occurred in Mempis, Tennessee, he portrays the inhumanity of the racially - biased system in the South which excludes the black singer from the whites' hospital, resulting in her bleeding to death. In attempting to expose the decadent white superiority of the South, Albee comes directly to a contrast in the two opening scenes, the first scene revealing a community of love and concern among the blacks, the second, relationships of hatred and dereliction among the whites. However, the play soon veers from the actual event and its social thesis towards personal conflict between a white nurse and the men around her. Albee's excursion into documentary or journalistic theatre is diverted and overpowered by his real concern with a vicious female - gorgon of the hospital1 and also with the tension between people within that institution as a place where life and death are held in balance.

Albee himself represents the shift in focus: "... while the incident, itself, was brawling at me, and while the characters I had

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elected to carry the tale were wrestling [sic] it from me, I discovered I was, in fact, writing about something at the same time slightly removed from and more pertinent to what I had imagined...[2]
Bifurcation in direction is enforced by contrasting levels of time; the social theme, like the event itself, runs in chronological time beneath the sexual combat which is presented as a situation existing simultaneously in past and present. Construction is loose, the two themes strung out in a series of barely related episodes which are tied together only in the exposition of extremes, the polarities of black man - white man, dream - reality, love - hate, a mythic North and a corrupt South.[3] The play is surely not notable for either dramatic unity or thematic subtlety, but it is interesting as a forerunner of the sexual battles of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and gives us a hint, as well, of Albee's later concentration on the individual in respect to his cultural and traditional ties.

The personae are identified as Bernie and Jack, the blacks of the Bessie Smith portion - who have real names - and The Father, Three Nurse, The Orderly, Second Nurse and The Intern of the base play, not named as individuals, but called for station and function. The schism in identity of the two sets of characters indicates the split in the play. Bessie Smith, despite the play's title, does not appear at all; as Dan Sullivan writes in a review in *The New York Times*, the play isn't about her, anyway; "[It] is about a woman - not Bessie Smith, but the head nurse in the hospital outside which Bessie Smith dies - trapped in her own bitchery."[4]

The set is expressionistic as in *The Zoo Story* and The Sandbox, revealing the immediate scene against a large open

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background. Using spot lighting to focus on the procession of scenes, Albee has placed the central action in an admissions office of a hospital in stage centre. Back of it and on the sides is a platform on which the events outside the hospital occur. "All of this is very open, for the whole back wall of the stage is full of the sky, which will vary from scene to scene: a hot blue, a sunset; a great, red-organge-yellow sunset..." (p.25). Thus the human events are played out against a background which symbolically relates the microscopic humans to the immensity of space. The play begins outside the hospital set, in a bar room where Bernie (who never appears again) and Jack, the two "Negroes" meet, Jack tells Bernie he is going to take the singer Bessie Smith out of her drunken state and transport her north where he has plans to help her return to her former greatness.

In contrast to the intimacy and warmth of the first scene, the next scene introduces The Nurse and her father at home on a decaying front porch; The Father is an ineffective, "nigger" - hating parent, the cane -supported descendant of a decadent Southern family (out of Tennessee Williams). Their quarrel is vicious, pointing up an unhealthy relationship between the two, a jealousy of the father for the girl's suitor and a complete lack of communication.

The following several scenes shift between the outside world where the accident takes place (we only hear the crash), a second hospital where a duplicate version of the white Nurse refuses admission to the wounded and dying Bessie Smith, and the main scene, the admissions office of the hospital where The Nurse is in charge. Surrounding The Nurse in the admissions office are two

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men: The Orderly, a young, light-skinned "Negro" over whom the Nurse exercises complete command and The Intern who seeks to be her lover and her husband but is only teased and thwarted in his desires. The Nurse emerges as a prototypical Albee female in her assumption of superiority over both men. Like Mommy in *The American Dream*, she is interested in marrying for money and taunts The Intern for earning less than The Black Orderly. In retaliation, The Intern strikes back at her, accusing her of having sexual relations with everyone but him - perhaps even the young Orderly.

The scenes shift from the Bessie Smith story to the male-female situation in the hospital and not until the last scene do the two major sets of characters appear together when the Bessie Smith sector becomes the impulse for a resolution of the Nurse - Intern conflict.

The denouement comes when Jack, drunk and distraught, arrives crying for assistance for Bessie and the humane Intern goes out despite The Nurse's objections. Bessie Smith is already dead. Injustice to Bessie arouses the indignation of the socially aware though hitherto timid young doctor and he returns full of fury. This scene is notable in a chronological overview of Albee's work because it begins to crack the hitherto ascendant position of the Mommy-Nurse, marking for the first time in Albee the rise of male dominance and a regression of the female from the totally inhumane. Under the stress of Bessie Smith's death and The Intern's rejection, The Nurse begins to come apart, screaming with emotion and feeling. The Intern slaps her as if to bring her out of

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hysteria, and leaves. She has failed in her desperate attempt to retain her power over The Intern. The male gains as the female subsides - a situation repeated and expanded in later plays.

The Orderly, an incarnation of the Albee child, overcome by the hatred around him and the viciousness of The Nurse, stands at the end spread out with his back "against the wall". This posture is clearly related to the final imagery of Jerry on the bench in *The Zoo Story*, to Julian in *Tiny Alice* and very specifically to the girl child as sufferer; Julia in *A Delicate Balance*. The Orderly belongs in the category of the Albee child-victims.

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Albee's characters in the main portion of the play - the hospital scenes may be seen as related to the familiar roster of Albee people, with some variations. The Nurse is the quintessential Mommy of *The American Dream* and *The Sandbox* who castrates the men around them[5] and directs the very forces of life and death in the hospital as the house she rules. However, she is a transitional figure as well, bearing some resemblances to the new Mommy, beginning with *Who's afraid of Vargínia Woolf*?, who possesses some potentiality for feeling.

In the development of her character, Albee shows us The Nurse as prototype of the old Mommy, in states of dominance over The Father, The Orderly and The Intern. She reduces The Father to the level of a physical and moral cripple, which he literally is - perhaps destroyed by her. She is the voice of cruel reality, however, recognising the pretension of The Father to attain a position in his life:

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> You are going to go down there with that bunch of bums ... light up one of those expensive cigars, which you have no business smoking, which you can't afford, which I can not afford, to put it more accurately ... the same brand His Honor the Mayor smokes ... You are going to sit down there and talk big, about how you and the mayor are like this ... you going to pretend you're something more than you really are, which is nothing but ... (p.32).

The following symbolic gesture reflects his sexual importance - or perhaps even a hint of former incestuous relations:[6]

Nurse : I said, you make me sick, Father.

Father : Yeah, Yeah?

He takes his cane, raps it against the floor several times. This gesture, beginning in anger, alters as it becomes weaker, to a helpless and pathetic falling; eventually it subsides; the Nurse watches it all quietly.

Nurse : (Tenderly): Are you done? (p.30)

The flagellating violence of her verbal attack on the other man, The Intern, forecasts the ritual of sex-play and the vicious gamemanship which will reach its apogee in *Virginia Woolf*:

Nurse : (steaming... her rage between her teeth). You have done it, boy... you have played around with me and you have done it. I am going to get you ... I am going to fix you ... I am going to see to it that you are through here... do you understand what I'm telling you?

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Intern : King of the castle. My, my you are something.

Nurse : You have overstepped yourself ... now you are going to wish you hadn't ... I'll get my father ... I'll have you done with myself ...

... ...

I said I'll fix you ... and I will ... Honey, your neck is in the noose ... I have a whip ... and I'll set the horse from under you ... when it pleases me. (pp.62, 63)

Like George in the later *Virginia Woolf*, The Intern plays the rough game of retaliation, with the verbalized death - wish for her. The imagery he employs - blood flowing from a wound — reappears a number of times within the Albee canon as an equivalent of sexual flow, beginning as early as *The Zoo Story*, through *Virginia Woolf*, Tiny Alice, and going as far forwards as *Box-Mao-Box*:

> May be sometime when you sitting there at your desk opening mail with that stiletto you use for a letter opener, you might slip and tear open your arm... then you could come running into the emergency ... and I could take hold of your arm ... and just hold it ... and watch it flow... just hold on to just hold it ... you and watch your blood flow ... (p.67).

The stridently exposed gamemanship for sexual ascendancy between male and female which characterizes the Albee canon is clearly present here alongside the alliance of death and sex which appears in every play. Most of the early and middle works are also distinguished by their victimized innocents. In *The Death of*

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Bessie Smith, the young black Orderly is the dramatic victim, a situation which few critics have evaluated. The Orderly paradoxically embodies the qualities of the twins in The American Dream; he is an example of societal pressures - the American Dream urge to get ahead in the world; and he is also the tortured child, a counterpart of the destroyed twin in the earlier play.

Like LeRoi Jones' *Dutchman*, the Orderly is a refined, highly articulate young man who suffers at the hands of the Nurse but retains within himself an innocent integrity and an awareness of self. Like other Albee youths, he is dislocated from his home and his kind, adrift in society. The Nurse mocks his dislocation from family and tradition with extreme cruelty:

> All this talk about what you are going to go beyond! You keep walking a real tight line here, and ... and at night ... (She begins to giggle) and at night, if you want to, on your own time ... at night you keep right on putting that bleach on your hands and your neck and your face ... and keep right on b-l-e-a-c-h-i-n-g away.
>
> ... ...
>
> Well, boy, you are going to be one funny sight come the millenium... The great black mob marching down the street, banners in the air ... that great black mob and you right in there in the middle, your bleached out, snowy white face in the middle of a pack like that ... ...
>
> ... ...
>
> Tell me, boy ... is it true that you have Uncle Tom'd yourself right out of the bosom of your family ... right out of your circle of your acquaintance ... Is it true, young man, that you are now an inhabitant of no-man' s-land, on the one

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> side shunned and disowned by your brethren, and on the other an object of contempt and derision to your letters? You go north, boy. (p.45).

The situation of the Orderly is central to both victimization and displacement in a sense more real than the story of Bessie Smith, as the news event and the black singer's actual death become only an obligate to the life-story of the ironically named "Orderly." This theory is not universally held.

Insensitive to the inherent human quality and the psychological maladies motivating this play, Rutenberg scolds the dramatist for not exploiting the character of Bessie Smith to the fullest so that her heath, this "spring board from which he will lauch his feelings about prejudice and bigotry"[7] would have "outraged the audience. Instead, Albee's technique has been sketchy, giving us a quick superficial look at a few uninteresting people caught in the grip of racial bias."[8] Although the racial thesis is unremittingly a part of the play, it is not the whole of it and is badly integrated into a structure which is finally preempted by Albee's real concern with human disorders on the most intimate scale. Debusscher has quite correctly stated that not only Bessie but all the characters in the play are victims,[9] of each other and of society. Much more significant than the propagandistic overlay in this work is the common denominator which unites all characters, the suggestion of detachment from secure places — that theme which will grow in strength and breath as Albee progresses. Either metaphorically or literally, all in this play are in some way displaced. Jack is taking Bessie away from a South where she is deteriorating

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to a North where he has hopes she will attain fulfillment of her talent. The Nurse clings to her position of importance in the hospital as a substitute for the glories of the past of her family. The Orderly has broken ties with his background, adrift in an unsympathetic world. The Intern, like George in *Virginia Woolf* is connected with a second rate institution which functions in a way which is at odds with his real convictions, and would, weakly, "like to get away from here" (p.58). Albee is dealing again with the frustrated people in society who are in constant inner turmoil and searching for peace.

Bigsby sees the characters as persons who rely on illusion to "give their lives a sense of purpose and have a 'pretty hard time reconciling' themselves to things as they are."[10] This is a valid position that does not get to the essence of the inner struggle of the individual, his isolation from his cultural or traditional environment and the kinds of substitutions he is forced to find. Although The Father is a stereotype of the literature of the South in mid-twentieth century, Albee has turned him to an example of his characteristic equation of loss of place and loss of power. The Intern taunts the Nurse with, "your family is a famous name, but those thousand acres are gone and the pillars of your house are blistered and flaking ... (Harder) ... Not that your family ever had within human memory a thousand acres to go .. or a house with pillar in the first place" (p.57). The Father, weak and etiolated, is one of the first examples in Albee of a generation separated from its roots, whether real or illusory, a figure without the security of a continuing tradition living in a world of invented dreams. In Albee's

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future works, especially Virginia Woolf and All Over, the theme of a discontinuous tradition grows stronger and more pervasive.

Although, *The Death of Bessie Smith* concentrates more on inter-personal conflict than social message, most critics incline to view it solely as an attempt at a propaganda play. James Baldwin decries Albee's efforts because the play does not "illuminate the contrast between the wonderfully wreckless life and terrible death of Bessie Smith and the white sepulchre in which the Nurse is writhing."[11] His view is related more to Baldwin than to Albee. Also, Rutenberg, carried away by his Marxist principles, with social revolution symbolized in every human struggle, sees Jack and The Nurse as representing opposite political movements; the critic imposes a structural unity which does not exist by interpreting both sides as "joined together" menaced from the outside by the prevailing system and allied "by the personal anguish each suffers."[12]

Bigsby is averse to the political interpretation, stating that Albee never "lets his play degenerate into a racial polemic."[13] Another critic, Amacher, vainly trying to fit the small play into the Aristotelian criteria which govern his interpretation of Albee's works, turns the social content into a "perverse tragedy".[14] However, Debuscher sees the work within the context of the whole of the Albee canon, and looks upon it as a transitional play.[15] Indeed, *The Death of Bessie Smith* is not primarily an agit - prop play nor a tragedy but rather a "drama" displaying private hates and loves within an overview of a despicable social situation.

Beneath the disruptive ending of the play, there runs the subliminal cry for love at all levels of human experience. This voice,

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heard in all the early works becomes more and more insistent. This play also develops an outlook on the capacity for individual resistance to sickness in society, a thematic and structural element in future works. When the Intern attains insight into his own position and exerts individual power to extricate himself, he becomes a predecessor of the embattled but finally self-assertive George in *Virginia Woolf* and Julian in *Tiny Alice*. These glimmers of hope for the ascendancy of the spirit grow stronger. After his beginning in the use of satire, allegory, and parody, Albee has reached a point of maturity in the command of his materials when he can enlarge upon his views and place his personal stamp on his playwriting, and *The Death of Bessie Smith* marks such a turning point in his oeuvre.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Baxandall observes that the Nurse is an Albee Mommy, in Fact the "meanest of the Mommies."

   Boxandall, Lee "The Theatre of Edward Albee", in Alvin B. Kernan, ed. *The Modern American Theatre* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p.82.

2. Edward Albee. *Two Plays by Edward Albee: The Sandbox. The Death of Bessie Smith* (New York: Signet 1963) Preface. All subsequent references to the text will be to this edition.

3. Debusscher, remarking on the multiple levels of the plot, calls it a play of parallels in structure and theme.

Debusscher, Gilbert. *Edward Albee: Tradition and Renewal.* Tr. by Annee W. Williams (Brussels: American Studies Center 1967), p.21.

4. Sullivan, Dan. "*Albee's Bessie Smith Revived,*" *New York Times*, 3 Oct. 1968, p.55.

5. Sullivan states: "Were she not able to castrate the men around her, she would cease to exist; so the knife is always out. But in the end she is the one who falls on it." Ibid.

6. Overlooking the structural function of the scene as a confrontation of father and child as well as the sexual implications in it, Rutenberg remarks in his sociological view that "The great problem of social injustice in this country has suddenly taken on the quality of soap opera, as this prosaic scene comes to an end. Albee, I image, was trying to trace the source of this girl's prejudice to a bitterly frustrated homelife; otherwise the scene is completely irrelevant."

   Rutenberg, Michael E. *Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest*, (New York: DBS Publications 1969), p.85.

7. Ibid., p.81.

8. Ibid., p.82.

9. Ibid., p.22.

10. Bigsby. C.W.E. *Edward Albee.* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd 1969), p.24.

11. James Baldwin. "Theatre: The Negro In and Out," in John A. Williams, ed. *The Angry Black,* (New York: Lancer Books 1962), p.21; quoted in Rutenberg, p.61.

12. Rutenberg, p.96.

13. Bigsby, p.23.

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14. Amacher, Richard E. *Edward Albee*. (New York: Twayne Publishers' 1969), p.73.

15. Debusscher, p.29.

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THE INGÉNUE AS "HERO": NEWLAND ARCHER'S LIFE OF INNOCENCE

After many, long and uneventful years, spanning more than half a lifetime, Newland Archer, the "hero" of Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, finds himself in the same city as Ellen Olenska, the woman he had loved and lost due to the pressures of wife, family and society. "He had", we are told, "to deal at once with the packed regrets and stifled memories of an inarticulate lifetime... while the stream of life rolled by..." (Wharton 297) At the insistence of his son Dallas he goes as far as the building where the Countess Olenska lives, looking forward to "a quiet harvest of friendship, of comradeship in the blessd hush of her nearness." (Wharton 298) However, having persuaded his puzzled son to visit the Countess by himself, Newland Archer sits on an empty bench outside her house and gazes for a long time at its awninged balcony; and then he walks back alone to his hotel.

Gary Lindberg says of Edith Wharton that "Society functions as a prison in her fiction, not because the individual... has accidentally fallen into it, not because he is being tested by exposure to its confines, but because he was born and reared

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in it; he learns to perceive reality through the bars of a cage." (Lindberg 186) Indeed, that is exactly how we feel about Newland Archer at the end of *The Age of Innocence* (and, for that matter, throughout the novel) — a helpless, naive and rather innocent prisoner viewing life through the bars of the cage of circumstances, family, society and tradition; in other words, for all his "habit of masculine solidarity" (Wharton 11), a typical ingénue.

At the very beginning of *The Age of Innocence* Edith Wharton makes it clear that "Few things seemed to Newland Archer more awful than an offence against 'Taste', that far-off divinity of whom 'Form' was the mere representative and viceregent." (Wharton 16) It is, therefore, not surprising that Archer spends his whole life conforming — to Taste, to Form, to social norms, to family obligations, to the dictates of circumstances, in other words, to the confines of his cage. Not once do we find him straying off the beaten path; the liberties he takes and the amorous adventures— such as the love affair with Mrs. Thorley Rushworth— he indulges in are but those that society permits him to indulge in. Indeed, his life seems to be so well-orchestrated and stereotyped that it would be more appropriate if we were to say "the liberties he is <u>allowed</u> to take and the amorous adventures he is <u>allowed</u> to indulge in" when we are talking about his dalliances which, we must hasten to add, are few, far between and quite forgivable.

Once, soon after his engagement, Newland Archer finds himself looking at a photograph of his fiancée May Welland

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and he thinks of her "with a new sense of awe" as "that terrifying product of the social system he belonged to and believed in, the young girl who knew nothing and expected everything." (Wharton 39). Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of Archer's life is that, in spite of his obvious awareness of the shortcomings of the system to which he belongs, when all is said and done, he himself comes across as just another male "May Welland" — as much a victim of tradition and social conventions as the young girl who, he knows will never surprise him "by a new idéa, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion" (Wharton 246). The fact that, at least at this stage of his life, he seems more or less unaware of his predicament merely serves to make his plight even more pathetic. Moreover, and this deepens the irony even further, while there are at least two instances of May Welland making well-planned and skillfully-executed forays into, what can perhaps be termed, forbidden territory for a young woman belonging to her class and age, not once does Archer surprise the readers "by a new idea, a weakness, a cruelty or an emotion."

The first time that May Welland manages to convey to Newland Archer that she is, after all, not as naive as he had imagined her to be is when she confronts him about his old romantic entanglement with Mrs. Rushworth, and startles him by suggesting that if "there is any way in which you can fulfill your pledge... don't give her up because of me!" (Wharton 127) The second, less innocent and more sophisticated instance of May's capacity to "go through life dealing to the best of her ability with each experience as it came" (Wharton 159) occurs

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when she lies to her cousin Ellen Olenska, who, May senses, is about to wreck her marriage, and informs her that she is pregnant. Thus, May dexterously uses the idea of the unborn child and Newland's responsibility towards it to rid herself of her rival, once and for all, and when Newland questions her about her premature disclosure to Ellen, she exults: "'No; I wasn't sure then— but I told her I was. And you see I was right' ... her blue eyes wet with victory." (Wharton 286).

Even before the stunned Newland can recover from the revelation of this startling and hitherto-unexposed facet of his wife's personality, he realizes, once again with a fresh sense of shock, that for months he has been "the center of countless silently observing eyes and patiently listening ears" and that his wife, family, friends, acquaintances and society, in general, have conspired "by means as yet unknown to him [to bring about] the separation between himself and the partner of his guilt." (Wharton 279). What better, or shall we say, worse, proof can there be of our "ingénue hero's" naiveté! We must also stress that, even as we are coming to terms with this irrefutable evidence of Newland Archer's gullibility and credulousness, we cannot help remembering that this very man had always insisted that "he did not want May to have that kind of innocence that seals the mind against imagination." (Wharton 123)

Furthermore, these are not the only instances which indicate that Newland Archer invariably tends to walk through life with his eyes shut and his mind sealed against imagination.

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When, in Paris, where the last scene of the novel is set, Archer's son Dallas refers to his own sweetheart Fanny Beaufort and saucily asks his father, "Wasn't she [the Countess Ellen Olenska] — once — your Fanny?" (Wharton 296), Archer is, yet once again, taken aback. His sense of bewilderment deepens further when Dallas informs him that it was his mother May who, on her death-bed, had told Dallas about Archer's involvement with and giving up of Madame Ellen Olenska. Once, before his marriage, Newland Archer had "shivered a little, remembering... the much cited instance of the Kentucky cavefish, which had ceased to develop eyes because they had no use for them." (Wharton 72) — he had been afraid that one day when he tried to take the bandage off from May's eyes they would be able to "only look out blankly at blankness." (Wharton 72) Ironically, when Newland Archer's son Dallas finally strips the bandage off his father's eyes by discussing openly, for the first time in his father's life, Ellen Olenska's relationship with him, all that the bemused Newland can do is to receive "this strange communication in silence" while his eyes remain "unseeingly fixed" (Wharton 297) into the distance. It is mainly because of this tendency to be taken by surprise, at almost every stage of his life, that the final impression that we have of Newland Archer is that of an artless, gullible and tame "ingénue", incapable of surprising anyone — least of all himself.

Another important characteristic that Newland Archer consistently displays is a singular lack of insight in his perception of the characters of May Welland and Madame Ellen Olenska. Not only does he flounder repeatedly in the proper assessment

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of the mental capacity and tenacity of his wife, he makes equally inaccurate assumptions about Ellen Olenska's character and abilities. Mary Suzanne Schriber writes that "It is clear that Archer relies on the stock idea of the dark lady in his thoughts of Ellen, for he is certainly not relying on observation.... Archer imposes comfortable stereotypes on the raw material Ellen provides, enabling him to conceive of himself as a literary hero rather than a traditional male." (Schriber195) Thus, Newland Archer treats as a helpless damsel in distress a woman who is, in reality, quite capable of taking care of herself, a fact borne out by her successful escape from the clutches of her cruel husband with the help of his secretary, and also by the independent establishment she manages to set up in Europe once she has made a clean break with Newland Archer. In this context, it is interesting to note that the only time we find her behaving in a conventional manner and conforming to the dictates of society or, to use one of Newland Archer's favourite words, "Form" is when, at the behest of Newland Archer, she decides to give up the idea of seeking a divorce from her estranged husband. "Isn't it you who made me give up divorcing — give it up because you showed me how selfish and wicked it was, how one must sacrifice oneself to preserve the dignity of marriage... and to spare one's family the publicity, the scandal? .... I've made no secret of having done it for you!" (Wharton 143) she accuses Newland Archer, revealing to him and to the readers the role that he had unwittingly played in her decision to toe the socially-acceptable line; needless to add. Newland Archer is, once again, caught unawares and left

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dumbstruck by Ellen's disclosure. Another important point to be noted is that this, perhaps, is the only occasion when Edith Wharton is unable to say of Ellen that "Once more she had managed by her sheer simplicity to make him [our oftmistaken 'ingénue' Newland Archer] feel stupidly conventional just when he thought he was flinging convention to the winds." (Wharton 240).

However, one person who is, in fact, adept at "flinging convention to the winds" turns out to be Newland Archer's own son Dallas; his uninhibited spontaneity, in spite of his very brief appearance in the novel, serves as a very effective foil to his father's unshakable conventionality. Edith Warton tells us that "Dallas belonged body and soul to the new generation. He was the first-born of Newland and May Archer, yet it had never been possible to inculcate in him even the rudiments of reserve." (Wharton 296) Newland himself is only too aware of this and it is not difficult to detect a note of regret as he ruefully admits, "The difference is that these young people take it for granted that they're going to get whatever they want, and that we almost always took it for granted that we shouldn't." (Wharton 295) Even as this statement suggests that, at least towards the end, NewlandArcher is aware of his conventionality and his tendency to conform, it also focuses attention on another important aspect of his ingenuousness and conformability, and that is that it is quite clearly a product of the age to which he belongs, the age which Wharton very aptly calls the age of innocence.

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Margaret B. McDowell uses the word "ineffectual" to describe Edith Wharton's male characters such as Lawrence Selden in *The House of Mirth*, Ralph Marvell in *The Custom of the Country*, George Darrow in *The Reef*, Arthur Wyatt in *Twilight Sleep* and Newland Archer in *The Age of Innocence*, and goes on to say that all of them are "men who had feet of clay." (Mc Dowell 526-527) Similarly, Julie Olin-Ammentorp expresses the opinion that "the social structures of Wharton's fictional world cause male waste as much as female." (Olin-Ammentorp 238) Indeed, the impression that the readers clearly get, at least in the last chapter of *The Age of Innocence*, is that if Newland Archer does, indeed, have feet of clay, if he has, perhaps, wasted his life, if in other words, he does come across as an ingénue, it is because he happens to belong to the age of innocence. It is obvious that, at least towards the latter part of his life, NewlandArcher is quite clearly aware of his predicament; therefore, we find him admitting regretfully that he has missed "the flower of life" (Wharton 289) and accepting that "There was good in the new order too." (Wharton 291) Then again, we are told when Dallas tells Newland Archer that May was aware of the fact that Newland had given up Ellen for her sake, it seems "to take an iron band from his heart to know that, after all, someone had guessed and pitied..." (Wharton 297) And that is the tragedy of Newland Archer — he has led the life of an "ingénue" and he knows it. However, by the time this realization gradually dawns on him he is fifty-seven years old, he obviously sees no point in renewing his acquaintance with the "Fanny" of his youth, Ellen Olenska,

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and so he must turn back from her very doorstep without, presumably, ever meeting her again Therefore, it is not surprising that a note of sympathy should creep into Edith Wharton's tone when she writes, "There are moments when a man's imagination, so easily subdued to what it lives in, suddenly rises above its daily level, and surveys the long windings of destiny. Archer hung there and wondered..." (Wharton 293) It would be difficult to think of a more fitting epitaph for an ingénue.

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OTHELLO AND THE BURDEN OF TRAGEDY

Othello has been a much discussed play over the centuries as the tragedy due to the unthinkable made plausible by its leading characters; the tragedy of a marriage with "a cloven foot in the bargain."(1) The unthinkable obviously is "a beautiful Venetian girl falling in love with a veritable Negro"(2). Iago is a confirmed villain and Othello's credulity is equally condemned. There is much discussion that does not acquit Desdemona from the charges of bringing the tragedy on herself and it is not of falling in love with someone she should have 'fear'd to look on' (3). What often baffles a reader more, is the great chasm between the iconoclastic Desdemona of Act I and the self annihilating Desdemona from Act III onwards. The concern of the present paper is to put forward the heroine as a disintegrated personality, as a woman wronged by the propounders of cultural prejudices against women, its apostles and her devotees alike. The attempt is to show how consumer-oriented the male world is and the harm it does to a woman's psyche. Desdemona is plagued with an irrational belief system in relation to the world and herself. For a clinical insight into her personality it is imperative to discuss very briefly a few terms of psycho-analysis relevent to the paper.

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I

Id, Ego and Superego: The harmonious interaction between these three subsystem leads to an integrated personality. Imbalance in any of the three produces disintegration. 'Id', the natural instinctive impulse one is born with it can be both creative: 'Eros' and destructive ('Thanatos'). 'Ego' meets the demands generated by 'id', helps the socialization process and is often synonymous with 'self'. 'Superego' is the conscience, the ethical ingredient of the personality.[4]

Studies have confirmed that in a society where women are accorded second-status the socialization of a woman is made difficult and a firm sense of self is not achieved.[5] Societies that lay down too many norms for women enlarge a woman's superego.

The following discussion of *Othello* is based on the theoretical model of personality of Albert Ellis' Rational-Emotive Theory (R-E-T). Some of its postulates are as follows:

1. Human emoting is caused by perceptual-cognitive processes. Our emotional reaction to a situation is largely governed by our cognitive responses. "You feel the way you think."
2. Humans think, emote and behave simultaneously.
3. Central to this theory is the A-B-C theory (propounded by Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius) which talks of three junctures in the 'thinking-feeling-acting' journey.

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a) Activating Event (A): An experience of an undersirable nature occurring at point A.

(b) Consequence (C): The emotional reaction which may be appropriate or inappropriate.

(c) Belief System (B): Between the two points A and C lies B, a belief causing one to react. It can be both rational or irrational. If the feeling is merely of disappointment, the belief is rational; if it leads to depression, anxiety or a sense of worthlessness it is irrational.

More than A, therefore, it is B that governs C. (6).

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II (a)

For an analysis into Desdemona's intra-psychic life that asserts itself on her personality, it is relevant to begin when crisis in her life first appears in Act IV, sc.i. When Othello strikes her for the first time, in the presence of Lodovico, her response is of baffled amazement:

> 'I have not deserved this.'

which is appropriate for a woman who is taken aback by this sudden change in her husband. It is only eight lines later however that her response takes the tone of an escapist:

> 'I will not stay to offend you.'
>
> and
>
> 'What is your pleasure?'

accepting that there must be probably something offensive about her, though she knows not what. In the next scene, when

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we meet Desdemona, her rational self, asserts:

'My lord, what is your will?'

though once again it is only according to his 'will' and 'pleasure' that she must refashion herself.

'... be as your fancies/Whate'er you be, I am obedient',

though at the same time unable to understand his 'horrible fancy', but her love and her faith in him is akin to a worshipper: 'Upon my knees...'. He is the centre of her life and in reference to his being does she offer her self-identity to his 'Why, what art thou?':

'Your wife, my lord : your true
And loyal wife.'

She does not make any attempt to move out of his shadow. Her faith in herself seems shaken; as his is shaken in her. The self probing begins in her for there is a deep concern in her voice:

'Am I the motive of these tears, my lord?'

And as Othello enlists the afflictions that he would have borne with patience but her infidelity, her sole concern is the fear of loss of esteem in his eyes:

'I hope my lord esteems me honest.'

She dwindles constantly between the two poles of rational and irrational feelings as she struggles to know whether she is the cause of his agony:

'Alas what ignorant sin have I committed?'

but on being abused as 'impudent strumpet' no anger touches

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her; it is as if she is oppressed under the weight of this word. One finds only a deep felt misery and an ineffective meek resistance:

'By heaven, you do me wrong.'

not violating anywhere the supreme conception of feminine love as endorsed by the age. This still-silent figure of Desdemona is deeply shocked, but there is no trace of aggressiveness in her personality and what should have woken her up to fight for her life, her cause, only finds her 'half-asleep'. When she says 'I have none' for the presence of her husband in her life, it is not disowning him but the voice of an orphan, disowned and abandoned by the parent figure. The depression is very evident here as a sense of worthlessness clasps her and she puts all the blame on herself, now that she is forsaken by the man she did her 'soul and fortunes consecrate':

'Tis meet I should be us'd so, very meet.'

She echoes the same commodity-consumer vocabulary as do the males or as does Emilia in describing women as consumables:

'They are all but stomachs and we all but foods'

On Iago's questioning and Emilia's soliciting of her cause, she only sinks deeply into the depressive mode of thought and resigns herself to fate:

'It is my wretched fortune.'

Her emotional responses are dysfunctional and only decode her helplessness at the hands of tragic destiny. Her 'I cannot

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tell' is reminiscent of her sororal counterpart, Ophelia's 'I do think nothing, my lord' and her similar pathetic doom. His love is the centre of her life and her whole life depends on it. Her misery is 'I know not how I lost him' and her sole concern, 'What shall I do to win my lord again?' for 'Unkindness may do much:/And his unkindness may defeat my life'. She is already thinking in terms of paying the price of displeasing him with her life. The real cause of her dysfunctional emotional response is what she is thinking, interpreting and telling herself. Therefore that disastrous component is at the cognitive level. She has already told herself that she be so punished, 'so very meet', for some 'ignorant sin' for which she lost him and that defeats the purpose of her life. The irony is that she is aware at the same time that never did her 'will trespass against his love'. Her emotional strength soon dissipates into depression; from the creative forces to the destructive ones, from Eros to Thanatos. There is no desire to continue now. The 'willow-song' in Act IV, sc. iii only encodes her despondency and her preparation to suffer the same fate as Barbara's.

To Othello's treacherous and violent words, Desdemona's questions fall flat and ineffectual. 'Talk you of killing?' she asks in the face of death. She is afraid to die, no doubt, but the desire to live is weak. Her defense at moments gets stronger but it is only to win him back. Act IV, sc.iii is the moment of strongest despair and deepest fear as she flounders in utter confusion and bewilderment, one feels her breaking into fragments. We share her experiences that not only wipe her a

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blow, but threaten to do the same to us. She makes no violent moves, physical or verbal, to defend herself. Her inner life is dangerously and monolithically connected with the outer; she surrenders to that death-wish inside her. As nothingness fills her, all actions point toward self-nihilism. The connection between the fragile self and its acts, the profounder awareness of love and its role in sustaining life is established as the drama catches the spiritual mystery. She could have as well said with Othello:

> 'But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,
> Where either I must live or bear no life,
> The fountain from the which my current runs,
> Or else dries up-to be discarded thence!'
>
> Act IV, sc. iii.

II (b)

The question that comes to mind now is: whatever happened to the woman who appeared initially as a social renegade rather than a cultural construction of the feminine? Desdemona stands up to her father to own Othello as her 'lord':

> '.................My heart's subdu'd
> Even to the very quality of my lord;
> I saw Othello's visage in his mind;
> And to his honours and his valiant parts,
> Did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.'
>
> Act I, sc. iii.

individuating and separating herself from her father. She is bold enough to claim:

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'I do perceive here a divided duty:
....
............you are the lord of duty-
I am hitherto your daughter; but here's my husband,
And so much duty as my mother show'd
To you, preferring you before her father,
So much I challenge that I may profess
Due to the Moor, my lord.'

Act I, sc.iii.

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Beneath the mature veneer of Desdemona there is something amiss. She starts with the support of Othello's love, seeing the world as no one does, rejecting the racist dictum and listening to none but the voice of her heart. She is true to her natural instinct, her 'id' in getting married to Othello; what then diminishes her instinct to live, that instinct of self-preservation known to practically all human beings? From where does she acquire that irrational belief system that took from her the desire to resist destruction?

Desdemona is a woman with a very weak 'ego' and an enlarged 'superego'. She is too naive about the world while her magnified conscience puts her to blame for all the undesirable events in life. This she has inherited from the social world she inhabits. Little is known about her childhood or girlhood, but much can be made out from the responses of the male counterparts to the female world. Here it is relevant to divide this male world known so well to Desdemona: the misogynist as represented by Iago, the deifying male represented by Cassio, somewhere in between these two

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worlds are Othello and Brabantio, reactors to situation and their concept of womanhood and not to the individuality in the woman they love. One thread of commonness runs through all: they all speak of women as property and give her a commodity status. In the opening scene of the play, the ridiculous way in which Brabantio is informed of his daughter's elopement speaks much:

> 'Zounds, sir, you're robbed:
> ....
> ....an old black ram
> Is tupping your while ewe. Arise, arise;
> ....
> or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.'

The whole scene is replete with such animal imagery or smacks of the daughter being merely a possession. Othello even in the moment of deep love refers to her as 'fortune'. It is not amazing then that Iago speaks of Othello's marriage with Desdemona in a similar vein:

> 'Faith, he tonight hath boarded a landed carrack.
> If it prove lawful prize, he's made forever.'
>
> Act I, sc. ii.

Even the first senator passingly refers:

> 'Use Desdemona well.'

The opening scene is suffused with thief - stolen commodity imagery. Brabantio too echoes Iago as he comes face to face with Othello:

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> 'Down with him, thief'

and

> 'O thou foul thief......'

His shock is his daughter making a choice when he has 'not given her leave' and more so because she has 'run from her guardage to the sooty bosom'. In both the cases, the unthinkable is made possible by a woman. Othello's answer to all maligning is :

> 'I won his daughter.'

What can be said of this world, where property is os important that as soon as Desdemona chooses Othello, Brabantio jealously retorts, disparaging his daughter:

> 'Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:
> She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee.

Just as rivals sacrifice their territories to the conqueror, so does Brabantio yield Desdemona to Othello. This is further reiterated in Othello's speeches in the latter half of the play. As soon as Desdemona is suspected to be unfaithful to him the vocabulary that he uses for her is abusive and derogatory. Such vocabulary only acknowledges the fact that where a woman is treated as a commodity, her socialization cannot take place as maturely as that of a man. So the product is Desdemona innocently choosing Othello for his qualities, seen mistakenly and quite superficially by him.

> 'She lov'd me for the dangers I had passed.'

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Extremely unaware of the world, where a harmless soliciting of Cassio could earn her the title of 'whore' and her husband's wrath. Such are the constituents of which this bleak male world is made of, 'but men are men.' Another blow to the construction of self-image comes from the excessive deification of a woman for much edification is synonymous with misunderstanding and leads to much slander. And thus it goes side by side with victimization.

There is Cassio who can see women in two dimensions represented by Bianca and Desdemona, revealing a social irresponsibility in both. From Iago's animal-imagery she is pulled into a goddess-like frame:

> '....he hath achieved a maid
> That paragons description and wild fame;
> One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,
> And in th' essential vesture of creation
> Does tire the ingener.'
>
> Act II, sc.i

And

> 'Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds
> the gutter'd rocks, and congregated sands,
> ....
> .... do omit
> Their mortal natures, letting go safely by
> The divine Desdemona.'
>
> Act II, sc.i

Othello's deification of her can be excused as he is in love, even though his vision of love is narrow and self enclosed, sunk in propriety and backed by his poor self-image. The

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motive is to present her as an angel in that world of men where women any other than this are treated as aliens or best not recognized. Thus there is much pressure on her to live up to that grand, fictitious image created by men for her. She must, to please him, be an angel. Too much expectation coupled with the demands of patriarchal order, that demands of a woman a certain subjection weakens further her ego system. Ruth Kelser in her book *Doctrine* for the Lady of the Renaissance has encapsuled the virtues of women as 'chastity, modesty, humility, obedience, constancy, patience, piety, temperance... and fortitude in affliction'.[7] Such repository of ethics that promotes self-sacrifice instead of individualism, passivity instead of action, silence instead of verbalizing, resignation instead of assertiveness only contributes to an overly enlarged superego, which impinges so harshly on the ego that the tendency to blame oneself for all the wrong and the attribution to one's fate comes naturally. The only tools available are tears and some meek resistance. Not being able to rise up to their expectations and criticizing self for their vilification of her, she fits into the groove only for self-devastation.

Thus the model is of a woman with a normal id, a dysfunctional ego and an excessive superego tormented by strong 'compunctious visitings of nature', subverting her claims and interests (even though they be of life). She stands as an epitome of extreme docility, the implications of which can be problematic in the socio-moral context.

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II (c)

So completely triumphant is the masculine patriarchal hegemony that Desdemona finds herself saddled in a situation for which she is not strong enough. The force of maidenly tradition of love checks her from being assertive. Therefore it is love yielding to unfair circumstances. The latter half of the play acknowledges how hard it is to achieve a rational belief-system where women are marginalized figures, how difficult it is for them to overturn such constructions of the immaculate feminine as handed over to them by the men. It is the truth that the male order prescribes to her.

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