

# The Yeatsian Concept of The Mask

Kim, Tai-yul\*

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The aesthetics of the mask is a complex to which many writers and thinkers of this century contributed unevenly: some sporadically, some possessedly, and some cumulatively. Although that aesthetics is due also to subtle influences of the intellectual milieu they called “Decadence,” and although that complex, in general, has its roots more in the cultivation of their genres than in the accidents of their biography, it will be amiss, where some authors are concerned, at least, not to inquire into their personal or “pathological” preoccupation with the mask and consider its relevance to the concepts of the mask they came to formulate. More than any other authors of this century, for whom the mask theme is central to their work, William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) is the case in point, where an examination of the “biographical” genesis of the mask is indispensable to a fuller understanding of a doctrine of the mask. And, fortunately, for us, Yeats was one of those rare writers who, by successively accumulating their reminiscences of life and work in an autobiography, made it easy for the critics to grasp the essential stages of their development.

“The doctrine of the mask is so complex and so central in Yeats that we can hardly attend to it too closely”—so observes Richard Ellmann in his biography of the poet, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks*.<sup>1)</sup> The word “mask” begins to occur frequently in Yeats’s writings during the first decade of the century. But, even at this early stage of its development the mask for the poet was a variable concept which possessed multiple meanings. Yeats entitled one of the three essays in which he first developed his doctrine of the mask “Estrangement.”<sup>2)</sup> As its subtitle indicates, the essay is made up of “extracts from a diary kept in 1909.” Even if we do not look beyond those few pages of the extracts, we must find that the mask as a symbol had a peculiar fascination for Yeats the man and the poet.

\*Professor, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences (Seoul)

1) Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* (N.Y., Dutton, 1958), p. 172.

2) William B. Yeats, *The Autobiography of W. B. Yeats* (Garden City, Doubleday, 1958), pp. 311–366. The other two essays are “The Death of Synge” (1919; 1928) and “Synge and the Ireland of His Time” (1911).

## I. The Mask and Self-Estrangement

“Style, personality—deliberately adopted and therefore a mask—is the only escape from the hot-faced bargainers and the money-changers.”<sup>3)</sup> In this entry, the mask is seen as both a protective shield and a place of refuge for the individual who is placed in a world that is basically incompatible with his temperament and aspirations. More concretely, it is a “deliberate” imposition on oneself of an attitude or a state of mind with which one can shut out from or remain indifferent and impervious to what the German philosopher Nietzsche calls “the dangerous, downdragging currents of the age”—the age that is fast being dehumanized and despiritualized. The mask is conceived as a by-product of the dialectic of self with the reality outside of self, implying man’s estrangement from his fellow men or external circumstances. In a later entry in “Estrangement,” however, the mask implies, first, a self-estrangement, that is, an estrangement of self from self, and, then, a return of his self, a finding himself in all masks. Setting forth a triadic (Hegelian) project of the artist’s need for masks, Yeats observes as follows:

All my life I have been haunted with the idea that the poet should know all classes of men as one of themselves. . . .

(Ia: the positive ideal of the poet, the representative man.)

Fifteen or twenty years ago I remember longing, with this purpose, to disguise myself as a peasant and wander through the West, and then to ship. . . .

(Ib: application to the poet Yeats.)

But when one shrinks from all business with a stranger, and is unnatural with all who are not intimate friends, because one underrates or overrates unknown people, one cannot adventure forth.

(IIa: the negative; Yeats’s lack of gift for that role.)

The artist grows more and more distinct, more and more loses grasp of the always more complex world.

(IIb: the negative; all other poets too lose contact with real people in the everyday reality.)

Some day setting out to find knowledge, like some pilgrim to the Holy Land, he will become the most romantic of characters. He will play with all masks.

(III: the synthesis; the poet will live again through his creative vocation.) (A, 318)

Yeats’s dilemma arose from the fact that, a man of artistic temperament who knew life so much in its ideal essence, he desired to grapple with it in its practical essence with its common complexity of cause and effect. And every artist forfeits an understanding of the

3) *The Autobiography of W. B. Yeats*, p. 311.

real life in the real world proportionately to his own self-fulfillment. Accordingly, the reason for his failure to “adventure forth” is attributed to his uncertainties concerning his ability to cope with the real people in the real world. But someday, when he must needs set out for his pilgrimage to the Temple of Knowledge, he will have to be equipped with “all masks.” With these masked-selves alone he will be equal to the challenge of the external world. His masks are, therefore, set against the reality outside of his self, but they are, a nevertheless, by-product of the dialectic of self with self, which is indicative of a split personality, an estrangement of self from self. This quality of Yeats has been paid tribute to by Horace Gregory:

. . . We should not overlook his talent as an actor . . . who richly cultivated his poetic attitudes, who wore many masks and spoke in many voices. . . . No actor played a role with a more luxurious show of temperament and delight than the Yeatsian performance behind a mask.

But it may also be noted that there was fear in him that he would not find his way out of his many masks, many roles, and his self-multiplications: “I often wonder if my talent will ever recover from the heterogeneous labor of these last few years. . . . Evil comes to us men of imagination wearing as its mask all the virtues.” (A, 328) One is reminded of Yeats’s multifarious activities and achievements, of the hand he had in many phases of Irish national life in that tumultuous period of its history. In retrospect, he would seem to have shared in life more than any other modern poets, and, in view of so many pursuits, experiences, contacts, he would seem to have been, among his fellow poets, actually “the most romantic of characters.”

In one of his letters addressed to Lady Augusta Gregory Yeats speaks remorsefully of the loss of instincts from his personal life: “. . . I have reasoned myself out of the instincts and rules by which one mostly surrounds oneself. I have nothing but reason to trust to, and so am in continual doubt about simple things.”<sup>5</sup> This theme of self-estrangement receives poetic treatment in “The People” (1919).

The poem “The People”<sup>6</sup> expresses Yeats’s condemnation of the middle class of Ireland, “the people of this unmannerly town, Where who has served the most is most defamed. . . .” The essence of the poem, however, is found in a contrast between two personalities, the speaker who is the poet himself and “phoenix” for Maude Gonne, a leader of the Irish independence movement, whom Yeats courted in vain for many years. In the concluding stanza the speaker takes issue with her words, interpreting them as a veiled criticism of his

4) Horace Gregory, “On W. B. Yeats and the Mask of Jonathan Swift” in *The Shield of Achilles: Essays on Beliefs in Poetry* (N.Y., Harcourt-Brace, 1944), p. 137.

5) Quoted in p. 273 of *The Autobiography of W. B. Yeats*.

6) *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (N.Y., Macmillan, 1956), pp. 148-149.

way:

. . . You, that have not lived in thought but deed,  
 Can have the purity of a natural force,  
 But I, whose virtues are the definitions  
 Of the analytic mind, can neither close  
 The eye of the mind nor keep my tongue from speech.

The contrast is between two different modes of being or two different styles of living: one embodies “the purity of a natural force” and the other is conditioned by “the definitions of the analytic mind.” The incompatibility of one with the other is clearly registered in the mind of the speaker, whose rhetoric is aimed not so much at Maude Gonne, his “phoenix,” as at himself. To pursue a logical process is to cut oneself off from full life and, at the same time, all that is profane and imperfect in people.

However, the poem is rich in ambiguities, leading the reader into uncertainties as to what the speaker considers to be his ideal or ideal self. The first half of the poem is given over to his determined rejection of the people, of what they have done to him, through whom he has “the reputation of a lifetime lost.” And the poet is very clear about the life he would have chosen: to have been a courtier-poet at Ferrara or Urbino with its steep street, “where the Duchess and her people talked/ The stately midnight through until they stood/ In their great window looking at the dawn. . . .” The poet would have been preoccupied with “the unperturbed and courtly images,” with no friends but who could mix “courtesy and passion into one.” He makes it clear that his life with the people has not matched his ideal or his ideal self.

In her answer his “phoenix,” great beauty, great actress, and great demagogue, also admits that in her life there was a flux and reflux between her world of ideality and her world of actuality: “The drunkards, pilferers of public funds,/ All the dishonest crowd I had driven away,/ When my luck changed and they dared meet my face. . . .” They set upon her again, and she had to live with them and their dirty politics. But there she is different from him, the poet: she, who has “not lived in thought but deed,” never found the chasm unpassable between her two worlds, between the two realities of her life. She has severer words for the viciousness of the people than he, yet, she declares, she has never complained of them. This capacity to reconcile the two realities of self festers in the poet’s mind. Although the last fourth of the poem is given over to a renewed self-definition and self-justification, even now “after nine years, I sink my head abashed.” Her brief words have made more impression on him than his own long speeches. If the idealism of the poet has all the rhetorical advantages, the realism of the passionate politician leaves all the emotional impact.

Note that in the poem Yeats considers the “analytical mind” or “reason” to be a quality not only of thinkers but of poets and artists as well. He attributes it to all men of “subjective” temperament, defining it broadly as a form of reflective consciousness. Thus the poet’s way is viewed as incompatible with things which embody “the purity of a natural force.” In an earlier poem entitled “He Tells of the Perfect Beauty” (1899),<sup>7)</sup> Yeats explains the way of the poet by contrasting it to its antitheses:

O Cloud-pale eyelids, dream-dimmed eyes,  
The poets laboring all their days  
To build a perfect beauty in rhyme  
Are overthrown by a woman’s gaze  
And by the unlaboring brood of the skies:  
And therefore my heart will bow . . .  
Before the unlaboring stars and you.

The antitheses of the poet’s way are such as “woman’s gaze” and “the unlaboring brood of the skies.” Also, in Yeats’s poetry “the purity of a natural force” is often represented by the cry of birds. The cry of the curlews in “He Reproves the Curlews,” for instance, like his symbol of the gong or bell in his later poem “Byzantium,” seems to serve as an emblem of the instinctive, passionate unthinking life from which the poet is estranged irrevocably.<sup>8)</sup>

The relationship between self-estrangement and acting in Yeats’s personal life may be most succinctly and meaningfully divulged by a passage from his letter addressed to Robert Gregory (Aug. 2, 1910): “All my moral endeavour for many years has been an attempt to recreate practical instinct in myself. I can only conceive of it as a kind of acting.”<sup>9)</sup> Acting assumes a role, a mask, or a different self, which in “Estrangement” the poet designates as “a secondary or interior personality” as distinguished from “the mere daily self”: “I can only set up a secondary or interior personality created out of the tradition of myself, and this personality (alas, only possible to me in my writings) must be always

7) *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, p. 64.

8) “Rilke also finds symbols of completeness and harmony in animals. They are free of ‘Angst’ and live entirely in the present. There is a regular rhythm in their existence. Their gaze on life is steady. He finds this in wild beasts: ‘And somewhere lions still roam, all unaware, / In being magnificent, of any weakness.’” C. M. Bowra, *The Heritage of Symbolism* (N.Y., Schocken, 1961), p. 78. “. . . All . . . are equally types of that completion which needs nothing outside itself. This ideal, not unlike Rilke’s Angel, is also Yeats’s ideal. Certain types of completeness, whether in thought or in action, fill us with amazement and almost with despair.” C. M. Bowra, *The Heritage of Symbolism*, p. 207.

9) Quoted by Richard Ellmann in p. 175 of his *Yeats: the Man and the Masks* (N.Y., Dutton, 1958). According to Ellmann, the letter in which Yeats pursued a most relentless self-analysis was probably never sent.

gracious and simple.” (A, 312)<sup>10</sup>

As Richard Ellmann demonstrates in his critical biography of the poet, Yeats played with all roles and masks. “In the violence of ‘theatre business, management of men,’” Ellmann notes, “Yeats sought to wear his fiery mask and thereby to re-associate himself with ‘the normal active man.’”<sup>11</sup> Ellmann sees a contrast between the poet and the poet’s father who possessed a “harmonious” personality:

John Butler Yeats had not to act through the elaborate mechanism of the mask, but naturally, and W. B. Yeats lamented his inability to do likewise. The artist [the father] was always himself without being self-conscious, while the poet could rarely act directly.

It may be already evident that these extracts from the poet’s diary kept in 1909, so appropriately put together under the title “Estrangement,” together with some samplings of his letters, offer not only many interesting insights into the poet’s personal life, but also their relevance to the doctrine of the mask which he formulated. All intertwined and at times oracular in utterance, the passages cited from these sources offer most of the elements of a theory of the mask which can be disentangled more fully in the following chapters.

## II. The Mask as Discipline

The canonical text on the mask as discipline is the Section 22 of Yeats’s “Estrangement,” which discusses the importance of the relationship between “theatrical sense” and “discipline” in the art of wearing a mask. Explaining the meaning of what he calls “active virtue,” the poet speaks on the need of projecting a “second self” in order to create a self-imposed discipline:

There is a relation between discipline and the theatrical sense. If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves, though we may accept one from others. Active virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask. (A, 317)

For Yeats, “the wearing of a mask,” synonymous with “an active virtue,” is “the condition of arduous full life.” (A, 317) Therefore, the poet praisies voluntary and conscious posing

10) “The doctrine of the mask erects on the artist’s personality a kind of private mythology.” John Unterecker, “Faces and False Faces” in *Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Unterecker (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 30.

11) Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks*, p. 176.

12) *Ibid.*, p. 208.

as a zestful, positive act: "One constantly notices in very active natures a tendency to pose. . . ." (A, 318)<sup>13</sup>

Among modern writers, Yeats considers Oscar Wilde and James M. Synge as men of active nature with a tendency to pose. Wilde, who once declared "nothing in life interests me but the mask,"<sup>14</sup> was a man who tried to live his "second self" in a manner dictated by the classical ideals. Synge was "a doomed man picturing gaiety," (A, 307) a man of sinking health who appeared the image of all energy and passion. William Wordsworth, however, belonged to the category of writers whose life and work demonstrate no awareness of the relationship between a theatrical pose and a discipline. His poetry reads flat and heavy because his moral sense had "no theatrical element." Wordsworth only knew "an obedience to a discipline which he had not created." (A, 318)

Yeats pays the greatest compliment to the mask when he speaks on the active idealization which is part of a love relationship. He equates even this sublimation with creating a mask and a discipline when he says:

It seems to me that true love is a discipline. . . . Each divines the secret self of the other, and refusing to believe in the merely daily self, creates a mirror where the lover or the beloved sees an image to copy in daily life, for love also creates the Mask. (A, 313)

The lover wears a mask in an effort to be compatible with his image of the beloved, into which, out of adoration and longing, he projects every conceivable virtue and perfection. The love mask, too, is, therefore, the projection of a second self created out of the lover's desire to be worthy of the beloved. As an ideal to be emulated, it imposes a discipline upon its wearer.

Yeats's play *Deirdre* (1907), which comes closest in time to the meditations of "Estrangement," is also the play which deals strikingly with the theme of the wilful adoption of roles and self-discipline. The play reaches its climax with the scene in which Naoise and Deirdre, the Tristram and Iseult of the Irish legend, play chess as they await the fatal arrival of King Conchubar who has pursued them for six years. The fugitive lovers, living the brief remaining hours of their life together, emulate the example set by the mythological

13) Writing on the subject of discipline and breeding, Nietzsche says: "What is noble?—That one constantly has to play a part. That one seeks situations in which one has constant need of poses." Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale (N.Y., Vintage, 1968), p. 498. Nietzsche also recognizes the disciplinary value of playing one's role: "Noble . . . is the appearance of frivolity by means of which a stoical severity and self-control are being disguised." Kurt F. Leidecker, ed., *Nietzsche: Unpublished Letters* (N.Y., Philosophical Library, 1959), p. 13. When friends called his "second nature" an eccentric pose, Nietzsche countered: "I will prove yet that with this second nature alone was I able to become possessed of my first nature." Oscar Levy, ed., *Selected Letters of Friedrich W. Nietzsche* (1921), p. 276.

14) Quoted by Yeats in P. 111 of his *Autobiography*.

Lugaidh and his lady. A king and queen of the bygone days, they had sat at the same chess-board at which Naoise and Deirdre now sit, and “played chess as they had every night/ For years, and waited for the stroke of sword”<sup>15)</sup> to fall. As the two lovers are about to start a game on the old chess-board, Deirdre assumes a heroic pose as she speaks to the Musicians:

Make no sad music.

What is it but a king and queen at chess?

They need a music that can mix itself

Into imagination, but not break

The steady thinking that the hard game needs. (Pl, 125)

After a while, however, Deirdre breaks down, and Naoise speaks calmly to her: “It is your move. Take up your man again.” (Pl, 126)

In the end, Deirdre as Conchubar’s captive regains her heroic composure, which allows her to hold back her tears over the news of Naoise’s murder, enabling her to maintain her feigned calm until she commits suicide over the body of her lover.

The pose Naoise and Deirdre adopt during the fatal hours of their life is the projection of their “second self,” an ideal self which they desired to emulate. It is the conscious and voluntary imposition of this mask upon their despairing, all-too-human self which calls for discipline.<sup>16)</sup> Of Deirdre’s struggle Peter Ure says it is “to discover in herself a self that can outface the worst.”<sup>17)</sup> And he sees the play consistently in the light of “energy”: “*Energy* is a key-word, a masterful fullness of life, ‘energy of soul’. It corresponds to or is transmuted into abundant personality.”<sup>18)</sup> According to Ure, in short, Deirdre is the personification of this spiritual energy. Thus the whole story is seen as a self-imposed subjection to a passionate ideal made difficult by circumstances, which requires constant self-control of the leading character in order to remain true to that ideal. And in all this “energy” is the “prime mover.”

One of the most outspoken passages in Yeats’s *Autobiography* identifies what the poet considers to be the highest goal, “Unity of Being,” with “seeking an antiself, a Mask that delineates a being in all things the opposite to their natural state.” (A, 166) And it is “energy” which transmutes the natural self into “some other self,” which is the poet’s desi-

15) *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats* (N.Y., Macmillan, 1963), p. 125.

16) On this Nikos Kazantzakis is in full agreement with Yeats. “It teaches man to control himself, to keep his troubles and pains to himself. Thus, gradually, the mask becomes a face, and what was originally noting but a form is changed into substance.” Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Rock Garden*, trans. Richard Howard (N.Y., Simon & Schuster, 1963), p. 54.

17) Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playwright* (N.Y., Barnes & Noble, 1963), p. 53.

18) *Ibid.*, p. 44.



gnation for "antiseif or image." Yeats calls that energy "imitative" since he sees it as man's capacity to "copy" the object of his ideal and make it his own reality.

### III. The Mask and the Will to a New Reality

In pursuit of the meanings of the Yeatsian concept of the mask, it has so far been revealed that *estrangement*, *acting*, and *discipline* all presuppose man's relationship with his other self or secondary self. Because of the very dialectic nature of the subject matter, it is only proper that the examination of the meanings be made continuously in a manner which places emphasis on a relational approach. This chapter further explores the Yeatsian concept of the mask in terms of man's attitude, motivation, and will in regard to the reality of his other self which he projects.

"Any understanding of Yeats's poetry depends upon a realization of his theory of the Mask," says T. R. Henn, and he bases his account on Yeats's dictum: "The other self, the antiseif, or the antithetical self . . . comes but to those whose passion is reality."<sup>19</sup> The Yeatsian "passion" is the "imitative energy," which is the energy "to assume the mask of some other self." (A, 340) And the "some other self" is the poet's designation for a self that is antithetical to the natural self—in essence, its rebirth—as Yeats says: "A writer must die everyday he lives, be reborn, as it is said in the Burial Service, an incorruptible self, that self opposite of all that he has named 'himself'." (A, 307)

In Yeats's discussion "antiseif" or "antithetical self," so defined, is used synonymously with the expression "image." In his reminiscences of the years 1887–1891 the poet is found lamenting his want of the knowledge of "image":

I have described that image—always opposite to the natural self or the natural world—Wilde, Henley, Morris copied or tried to copy, but I have not said if I found an image for myself. I know very little about myself and much less of that anti-self. . . . (A, 115)

Man is nothing till he is united to an image" (Pl, 267), declares Septimus, the hero in Yeats's comedy *Player Queen* (1919).<sup>20</sup> A gifted poet and dramatist who boasts of having performed before Kubla Khan, Septimus derives great misery from the constant fluctuation to which he is subjected between the natural self and the anti-self. He is unable to secure the anti-self which is his artist's wise, inspired self, for, once off the stage, he lapses into the sobriety and insipidity of his natural state. This is why he worships the Unicorn

19) T. R. Henn, *The Lonely Tower* (London, Methuen, 1965), p. 36.

20) "Perhaps the most representative of Yeats's plays in its revelation of the author, who appears to be satirizing himself in the character of Septimus." George B. Saul, "Yeats's Dramatic Accomplishment" in *W. B. Yeats: Centenary Essays*, ed. E. S. Maxwell & S. B. Bushrui (Nigeria, Ibadan Univ. Press, 1965), p. 147.

as “both an image and beast,” capable of begetting “the new Adam” (Pl, 267), a new species of man. “The Unicorn is both symbol and body,” notes Ellmann, pointing out its relevance to Yeats’s doctrine of the mask, “. . . when the self attains this unity, it is reborn. Yeats sees all human beings engaged in a great struggle to become united to their images of themselves.”<sup>21)</sup> According to John R. Moore, “Septimus,” Yeats’s alterego as George B. Seoul sees him, “seeks an end to the intolerable disunity of his own being. . . . He wants an impossible utopia.”<sup>22)</sup> what he wants is the “Unity of Being,” the ultimate goal for the Yeatsian man.

The need for an image, an anti-self or a mask, not only for individuals but for peoples and nations as well, is articulated in one of Yeats’s early plays, *The King’s Threshold* (1904). The focus of the play is Seanchan, the master poet, whose right to sit at the supreme council of the State has been forfeited due to the steadily declining popularity of poetry. Therefore he has chosen death by hunger, pleading for the restoration of “the poet’s right,/ Established at the establishment of the world.” (Pl, 71) And he wants to die at the threshold of the king’s palace, so that he may bring disgrace upon the king and his entire court. Positioned at the king’s threshold, Seanchan tests his oldest pupil who came to him with a plea to live. The master poet bids him to tell why poetry should be honored. The latter repeats his lesson, echoing his master’s prophecy of the advent of “a mightier race than any that has been.” (Pl, 89)

. . . The poets hung  
 Images of the life that was in Eden  
 About the child-bed of the world, that it,  
 Looking upon those images, might bear  
 Triumphant children. (pl, 73)

The essential function of poetry, according to Seanchan, is to provide the empiric reality with images of an ideal life, so that, it may, in contemplation of them, be transmuted into a higher reality. Hence the supreme importance of poetry and the poet, the maker of images.

In the play Seanchan personally exemplifies his teaching with his death. For days he sits at the king’s threshold, both rejecting and defying the concerted efforts of the entire court to make him live. He also resists pleas made by his pupils, kin, and betrothed, Fedelm, even as he wrestles with his vulnerable, all-too-human self. Seanchan’s inner struggle culminates in a long, hard, wakeful night, towards the end of which he finally overcomes his last temptation, the happiness Fedelm, his future bride, promises for him:

21) Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (N.Y., Oxford Univ. Press, 1964), p. 108.

22) John R. Moore, *Masks of Love and Death: Yeats as Dramatist* (Ithaca, Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), p. 174.

And that I do not love you? Did I not say  
 There was a frenzy in the light of the stars  
 All through the livelong night, and that the night  
 Was full of marriages? But that fight's over  
 And all that's done with, and I have to die. (Pl, 91)

Thus, in the end, Seanchan demonstrates his capacity to "imitate" an image, the ideal self he has projected for himself, and live that other self through death.<sup>23)</sup> Elated with some strange triumphant thought, he cries "King! King! Dead faces laugh."

### The Mask as Vocation

In search of the meanings of the Yeatsian mask, this study has come through several stages of examination which are all interrelated and mutually relevant. It is, first of all, an expression of man's self-estrangement, and, as such, it means the acting of a role; secondly, the mask as acting creates a self-imposed discipline on its wearer; thirdly, the mask becomes the object of "imitation" and transformation itself, which calls for an "energetic" action on the part of its wearer. Through these stages of investigation, the Yeatsian concept of the mask as "anti-self" or "image" has steadily been clarified. Still another dimension of the concept to be explored concerns the meaning of the mask in its relation to the vocation of its wearer. For this purpose, *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1935), may be chosen, which, although considered to be one of his least successful plays, shows Yeats's unmethodical, unmechanical, and unconstrained use of the mask in its full maturity.<sup>24)</sup>

In *The King of the Great Clock Tower* the stage direction is the only passage which openly makes much of masks, indicating their use as a theatrical prop. The Queen is fully masked; the Stroller wears a half-mask; the King, the title hero, wears no mask. It is, however, on the metaphorical significance of these masks where the essential meaning of the play hinges.

The beauty of the Queen is not only mask; its beauty corresponds with her beauty behind the mask. Thus, the reality of the Queen and her mask confirm and reinforce each other. The text of the incredibly concentrated play hurries on to a description of her living mask. The King knows absolutely nothing of his beloved Queen. Their whole life together

23) "In Seanchan's final speech one can feel Yeats's satisfaction . . . in contemplating the new race of Nietzschean supermen to come and the ultimate justification of the bard's superior wisdom." John R. Moore, *Masks of Love and Death*, p. 90.

24) Yeats dedicated the play to Ninette de Valois, "asking pardon for covering her expressive face with a mask." *The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats*, p. 397.

has been one lasting question from his side. Just before the appearance of the Stroller, the King puts the question to her in the presence of his entire court:

A year ago you walked into this house,  
 A year ago tonight. Though neither I  
 Nor any man could tell your family,  
 Country or name, I put you on that throne.  
 And now before the assembled court. . .  
 . . . .  
 I ask your country, name and family,  
 And not for the first time. Why sit you there  
 Dumb as an image made of wood or metal  
 A screen between the living and the dead? (Pl, 399)

The negative and positive qualities of the mask could not be juxtaposed more forcefully. Its limitation is its lifelessness and inexpression, "dumb as an image made of wood and metal." But its power is a life-transcending power, a participation in the two different realms of life and death as "a screen between the living and the dead." A screen separates but itself sees the two separated sides. But the Janus-faced mask is another subject, which may not be tackled here. Suffice it to note that the Queen is the mask, thus embodying a mystical unity of being in which the face and the mask are fused.

The half-savage mask of the Stroller is likewise not a deceptive mask; it corresponds with the real character of that vagrant, wandering man. When he makes his entrance, his selfintroduction is most striking: "Enough that I am called/ A stroller and a fool. . . . I am a poet." (Pl, 399) And he shows that he is a poet: from the first day he heard of the supreme beauty of the Queen, he put her in his songs, and, although he had never seen her face, "day by day she grew more beautiful." (Pl. 399) The Stroller's half-mask, contrasted to the full mask worn by the Queen, is symbolic of the "undone," incomplete reality of his self which will be completed only with his union with the image he seeks. It is, therefore, also symbolic of his search for unity of being which the Queen as his image embodies. What is stressed, however, is the significance of the fully masked Queen as a metaphor—metaphor for the completeness, autonomy, and freedom of image.

The Stroller, looking at the Queen, finds the original less entrancing than his image. "What matter!" cries the poet-stroller, for the mask outdoes the face. Harold Bloom notes that "only what the Stroller calls 'the image in my head' matters."<sup>25</sup> By his brazen words, the poet-stroller forfeits his life. Led to his execution, he prophesies:

25) Harold Bloom, *Yeats* (New York, Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 339.

## First the Queen

Will dance before me, second I shall sing. . .  
 Then, grateful in her turn, the Queen will kiss  
 My mouth because it sang. (PI, 401)

In accordance with the prophecy, all this is fulfilled in the end: the Queen dances, the severed head of the Stroller sings, the dance begins again, and at the last stroke of the bell of the great clock tower, the Queen presses her lips to the lips of the severed head. The cost of image is dear, for it is life itself. Yeats's poet-stroller acts as he must, but he pays with his life for acting out his role. All the dramatis personae in the play behave in a manner analogous to an ancient rite, but the particular "rite" performed by the poet-stroller, as Ure sees, is "the relation of Poet to Muse."<sup>26</sup> The enactor of his own destiny and vocation dedicated to the way of image, Yeats's half-masked hero is all role, for he becomes the role he plays. And the role, the mask, equals the essence of his being inseparable from his vocation.

The Stroller's way is the way of image, not of life, and he must die to make the image his possession and fulfill the unity of his being. In the play the way of image as opposed to the way of life is envisioned in the context of a legendary realm called "Tir-nan-oge." A drama of the three, *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, is enacted against the backdrop of a vision of this realm which the opening lines of the play are evocative of.

There every lover is a happy rogue;  
 And should he speak, it is the speech of birds.  
 No thought has he, and therefore has no words,  
 No thought because no clock. . . . (PI, 398)

Also "they dance all day that dance in Tir-nan-oge" and, appropriately, Yeats's stage direction suggests a stencilled pattern of dancers on the inner curtain of the stage. Yeats's hero is the antithesis of the attributes of man whose habitat is "Tir-nan-oge." He is not a lover of a woman; he is in love with the image of a woman. He certainly is not a happy rogue, for he is sainted by the image he worships (he calls himself a "sacred man"). Although fearless of death, he is still time-bound, and is full of thoughts and words. And there is no evidence that he is a light-footed dancer. In short, he is estranged from "Tir-nan-oge" which embodies the perfection of life in its unreflected, unconscious state. Fallen from this paradisiacal realm, that is, a projection, in essence, of the inner reality of man that is "complete," he has become the pursuer of images.

However, with Yeats's Stroller, a character cast in a mythical frame in highly symbolic

26) Peter Ure, *Yeats the Playright*, p. 160.

terms, the estrangement from the "Tir-nan-oge" remains on the subconscious level. Or, it may be said that in his vocation of a poet the estrangement has become "institutionalized." (It is to be noted that in the play the conscious knowledge of "Tir-nan-oge" is confined to the all-seeing, all-knowing Attendants, the two supporting actor-musicians, who sing the lines evocative of this realm.) In Yeats's *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, the word "mask" acquires symbolic significance together with some mythical dimension. It seems to become something of a sacred word, and his hero is driven to this mask, or rather drawn to it, as in a trance. "Yeats counted on the use of persona, or mask," Bernard Levine says, in order "to communicate the sense of spiritual reality."<sup>27</sup> So very often Yeats's "actors" are the legendary, mythical, and archetypal protagonists of the eternal desires of humanity.

In Yeats's poet-hero, the Stroller, not only his estrangement from "Tir-nan-oge" but also his search for the other reality is "institutionalized," and in the play his search is strikingly dramatized in the half-mask which he wears. And the other reality Yeats's poet-hero pursues is coincidental with his vocation and destiny, a full-mask which connotes the attainment of this goal. Unlike his poet-hero, however, Yeats was a conscious searcher of his full-mask, a "de-institutionalized" poet, which made his process all the more arduous and painful. But, without a doubt, he was an equally passionate enactor and embracer of his role. Yeats's career in search of his full-mask leads the present inquiry to its final phase, an analysis of two of his greatest poems by way of a conclusion.

"Sailing to Byzantium," "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," and "Among School Children" are poems of the years after the first publication of *A Vision* (1925). The book is their commentary, and its central theme is "Unity of Being." But that "Unity" is a highly dramatic affair; it is for the poet an eternal becoming, an everlasting struggle between the anti-theoretical forces of art and life, mask and reality, and anti-self and self.

"Sailing to Byzantium" (1926)<sup>28</sup> is a poem written in praise of the permanence of art, into which the speaker, an aged man, wishes to be transmuted. Structurally the poem is built upon a series of opposites. On one thematic level, the antithesis is between the young and the old, and the physical and mental attributes are contrasted in terms of sensuality and impotence, and also in terms of the neglect or respect in which they hold "the monuments of unageing intellect." On a higher thematic level, the antithesis is between reality, where the paradox of youth and old age inheres, and art, which resolves this paradox.

The opening couplet of the first stanza in its most simple statement, presents the condition that is the genesis of the structure of the whole poem: "That is no country for old

27) Bernard Levine, *The Dissolving Image: the Spiritual and Esthetic Development of W. B. Yeats* (Detroit Wayne State Univ. Press, 1970), p. 13.

28) *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York, Macmillan, 1961), pp. 191-192.

men. The young/ In one another's arms, birds in the trees . . . ." In these lines the speaker's awareness of his exclusion from the country of the young is complete, and, with it, the contrast of the two realms of the young and the old. The succeeding lines of the stanza sharpen the contrast by indicating the exclusion of the young, in turn, caught as they are in life's sensual music, from the perspective of the old who contemplate the "monuments of unageing intellect." What is already evident in the first stanza is an ambivalence on the part of the speaker who, phased out of life, is torn between envy and disdain for the young.

But, then, what is an old man to do? He cannot be a singer of the sensuous reality without appearing ridiculous, for no "birds in the trees" sing for him. The opening lines of the second stanza are a lament of the old age: "An aged man is but a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick . . ." unless he learns to sing not of the flesh and blood, but of soul. But this is possible only if the soul can rejoice in its own magnificence. Thus his singing school must be among those monuments that only the most wholesome vision of life could produce. Therefore, he has sailed the seas and come to the holy city of Byzantium. A highly effective symbol in the poem, Byzantium is in essence the speaker's holy city of imagination, which embodies such vision of life.

Having arrived in Byzantium, the speaker prays to the images of the sages wrapt in God's holy fire to be inspirations for him, to step down momentarily from where they stand transfixed in the realm of art, and be the singing masters of his soul. Their wisdom will consume his heart away, still sick with the impossible desires, and transmute his whole being into "the artifice of eternity." Once "out of nature," he shall never take his bodily form from any natural thing; he shall be the imperishable thing itself, "the golden bird," the very work of art, which sings of eternity. The miraculous bird of the last stanza, contrasted to "the bird in the trees" of the opening stanza, is an emblem of art and, as such, it is opposed to life. It is free from the fate of all that is begotten, born, and dies.

But the vitality and richness of the poem "Sailing to Byzantium" derive from this very opposition, which is sustained through the entire poem, inasmuch as the speaker's appreciation of "the eternity of artifice" derives from his difficulty of abnegating life completely. As in Yeats's later poem "Byzantium" (1930), where "that dophin-torn, that gong-tormented sea"<sup>29)</sup> floods up to the holy city itself to be brought under control by "the golden smithies" of the Emperor, here Yeats seems unable to reject life without celebrating it.

In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1927),<sup>30)</sup> the internal division of the speaker is dramatized into the opposition of his Self and its antithesis, his Soul. Their respective emblems in the poem are a tower and a sword. The tower was a Norman relic in Western

29) *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, p. 244.

30) *Ibid.*, pp. 230-232.

Ireland that Yeats bought from Lady Gregory and the sword was a Japanese relic presented to him as a gift from his friend Sato, both of which the poet prized highly for their symbolic value. In the poem the opposition of Self and Soul, with their respective emblems, represents a conflict between the real and the ideal, the flesh and the spirit, life and art.

In the opening stanza Soul summons Self to set all its mind upon the continued ascent of the winding stair of the ancient tower:

Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,  
 Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;  
 Fix every wondering thought upon  
 That quarter where all thought is done.

The ascent for Heaven symbolizes the path of freedom or “nirvana,” of delivering itself from “the crime of death and birth.” One shall attain this freedom, his Soul declares, if only he lets the “imagination scorn the earth/ And intellect its wandering. . . .” But his Self prefers a different object of contemplation, that of Sato’s ancient sword which is a symbol of love and war. Its razor-keen blade is still unblemished after centuries of existence and its wooden scabbard is bound and wound by the flowering, silken embroidery, torn perhaps from some courtlady’s dress. In the end, his Self silences its opponent, his Soul, by claiming, as by a samurai’s right to the sword, “a charter to commit the crime” of life and death again and again.

The second section of the poem is the reassertion of the Self to live life again with all its imperfections: the toils of growing up, the ignominy of boyhood, the distress of adolescence, the clumsiness of the unfinished man, the perversity of the finished man, and the decay of old age. Clearly, by accepting life in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” Yeats is rejecting the solution “Sailing to Byzantium” offers. As Ellmann sees, the poet praises the life he is rejecting in “Sailing to Byzantium,” whereas, accepting life, he reviles it in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul.”<sup>31)</sup>

I am content to live it all again  
 And yet again, if it be life to pitch  
 Into the frog-spawn of a blind man’s ditch,  
 A blind man battering blind men;  
 Or into that most fecund ditch of all  
 The folly that man does  
 Or must suffer, if he woos  
 A proud woman not kindred of his soul.

31) Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks*, p. 258.



I am content to follow to its source  
 Every event in action or in thought;  
 Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!  
 When such as I cast out remorse  
 So great a sweetness flows into the breast.  
 We must be blest by everything,  
 Everything we look upon is blest.

The concluding message of the poem gains its force not so much from the wisdom of the recommendation as from the context of the recommendation. What is sustained through the second part of the poem, where the voice of the Soul is kept suppressed, is still a drama of the antinomies, of the two opposing impulses for life and for art, for reality and for image. Speaking of Yeats's later poems, William K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brook note as follows:

. . . There is a real working dualism—real oppositions as distinguished from merely opposed positions in an abstract dialectic. The materials that make up the poems have enough substance to resist, and when ignited, to feed, combustion.

It may be said that the reality-image dichotomy of the two poems, "Sailing to Byzantium" and "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," are merely symptomatic of the face-mask or the self-anti-self duality so deeply implicated in Yeats's entire life and work. This dichotomy, as W. K. Wimsatt and Cleanth Brook view, does not imply the "opposed positions," but working opposites. The Yeatsian mask is not something that is superimposed upon the face, oppressing it, suffocating it, for it is not conceived in antagonism to the face. It means discipline, energy, and will, and stands for the enrichment of personality and searches and struggles that are essentially creative. Therefore, it is life-furthering and life-enhancing, and as such, it stands for what may be called "the reality of becoming." "Reality, for Yeats," observes John Unterrecker, "is neither to be found in that buried self which directs and orders a man's life or in its Mask, the anti-self, but in the product born of their struggle."<sup>32</sup>

In Yeats's poem "Among School Children" (1926),<sup>34</sup> the two master images which materialize in the concluding stanza are the chestnut-tree and the dancer. Changing from the declarative statement to apostrophizing, Yeats celebrates them jubilantly:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
 Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?

32) William K. Wimsatt & Cleanth Brook, *A Short History of Literary Criticism* (N.Y., Knopf, 1962), p. 606. They also note in the same passage: "Like the French symbolists before him, Yeats had learned, in part from Nietzsche, the uses of tension and conflict in art."

33) John Unterrecker, "The Doctrine of the Mask" in *Yeats: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Unterrecker, p. 30.

34) *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, pp. 212-214.

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

Both images symbolize the passionate integrity of things that are unspoiled and unadulterated by reflective consciousness. The chestnut-tree is neither leaf, blossom, nor bole; it is its own complex self which, existing indivisibly, finds its essence in all parts of itself. The dancer swept by music is integrated to his dance, for so long as the dance lasts the dancer cannot be distinguished from the dance. These pairs of symbols reconcile, respectively, the antinomies of body and soul, reality and image, life and art, and face and mask. For Yeats, both the chestnut tree and the dancer represent the pure activity which arises from the mystical unity of things or the original symbol.

What the poem "Among School Children" reveals is the poet's longing to go beyond the new reality the image, art, or poem itself represents in order to attain the still higher reality, the original symbol, where the image is reconciled with the reality and both as distinct entities are dissolved. The truth Yeats made was image, the antithesis of reality, its mask, which can reconcile the opposites but only *in its own terms*. The life of the mask is a reflected, vicarious activity, a stylistic arrangement of experience, a representation of the flux which transcends the flux only in its own terms.<sup>35)</sup>

Yeats never gave up hope of bringing together image and reality into a new religion and mask and man into a new Adam. But in face of his failure to comprehend and live reality, it was not possible for him to surrender image for the sake of the program which he called a "sacred drama of 'Unity of Being'."<sup>36)</sup> Image may be only half the truth, but for him it was the best and the only truth that was available to him, which sustained his life and work to the end. In a letter written to a friend (Jan. 22, 1939) six days before his death he said: "When I try to put it all into a phrase I say 'Man can embody truth but cannot know it'."<sup>37)</sup>

In early 1910's Yeats discovered the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore, and of those poems which make up Tagore's *Gitanjali* he wrote: "These lyrics . . . display in their

35) Luigi Pirandello speaks through his character in *Tonight We Improvise*: "Life . . . is subject to two opposed necessities, and for that reason is not art; just as art is not life, for the very reason that it succeeds in freeing itself from those opposed necessities and in achieving an enduring existence in the immutability of its own form." Luigi Pirandello, *Naked Masks: Five Plays*, trans. E. Bentley, G. Guerrieri, A. Livingston, E. Storer (N.Y., Dutton, 1958), p. 31.

36) This was also Luigi Pirandello's dilemma which arose from the mask-face dichotomy which constituted his major literary theme. Of Pirandello's dilemma R. Brustein notes: "Art is superior to nature, because it has purpose, meaning, and organization—the illusion is deeper than the reality. But art is inferior to life because it can never capture the transitory, formless quality of existence." Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt* (Boston, Little-Brown, 1964), p. 302.

37) Quoted by Ellmann in his *Yeats: the Man and the Masks*, p. 285.

thought a world I have dreamed of all my life long.”<sup>38)</sup> He found in them “a sense of visible beauty and meaning as though they held that doctrine of Nietzsche that we must not believe in the moral or intellectual beauty which does not sooner or later impress itself upon physical things.”<sup>39)</sup> In these lyrics of Tagore he found “the cry of the flesh and the cry of the soul seem one.”<sup>40)</sup> It may be said that in Tagore and in the spiritual traditions of the East which he believed Tagore represented Yeats had already met his own master image.

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38) W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (N.Y., Macmillan, 1961), p. 390.

39) *Ibid.*, 389.

40) *Ibid.*, 393.