A BIRD’S EYE VIEW: EXPLORING THE BIRD IMAGERY
IN
THE LYRIC POETRY OF WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

By
ERIN ELIZABETH RISNER

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Thesis Approved:

_________________________________________  ____________________________
Dr. Ronald W. Carstens, Ph.D.  Date
Professor of Political Science
Chair, Liberal Studies Program

_________________________________________  ____________________________
Dr. Martin R. Brick, Ph.D.  Date
Assistant Professor of English

_________________________________________  ____________________________
Dr. Ann C. Hall, Ph. D.  Date
Professor of English
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INTRODUCTION

It would not be incorrect to call William Butler Yeats the paramount Irish lyricist poet. During a career that spanned from the end of the Romantic period into Modernism, Yeats labored over his poems, resulting in works that are still read, studied, and revered today. His poetry was born out of several sources of inspiration, from his boyhood in Sligo, to his role in Irish nationalism and his relationship with Maud Gonne, to his marriage, children, and battles with old age and death. All of these influences appear in his lyrics, along with several recurring images. One of these recurring images, birds, represents Yeats’s own maturation process in his writing.

Yeats’s use of birds is an example of his capability of “retaining the basic symbolism itself throughout his life and developing and adapting it in various situations to suit his own special purposes and needs” (Allen, Jr., 118). A broad overview of his poetry shows Yeats’s poetry breaks into three periods: an early period with Romantic and mystic overtones, a middle period widely influenced by Irish nationalism and Maud Gonne, and a late period influenced by Yeats’s old age and his return to mysticism. Birds appear in all books of his poetry, but they appear in varying ways including simple, natural scenes, chaotic scenes, romantic scenes, and mystical scenes, and as Allen noted, Yeats was able to adapt his birds to fit the purpose of each poem.

From a young age in Sligo, bird “pride, beauty, and instinctive designs of conduct obsessed him” (Parkinson 124). Along with the Sligo birds, Yeats loved the Sligo landscape and nature to which he was exposed. Yeats was so influenced by his time in Sligo that “by sheer bulk — and by Yeats’s insistence that they are his chief symbols — tree, bird, tower, sea, house, Mask, and rose eventually strikes Yeats’s persistent reader as of crucial importance” (Unterecker
36). This upbringing in Sligo also inspired Yeats’s early dedication to the pastoral, scenic images and Celtic, mystic overtones in his early poetry.

Early Yeats poetry was largely influenced by the Romantics and featured birds in simple, pastoral images. Rather than serving a deep purpose in this early poetry, the birds were simply placed in the poem and in nature. While Yeats began to truly enjoy writing poetry, he did not possess “much poetic theory beyond the necessity of writing about and in favor of dream” (Ellmann, *Identity* 33). He still “dream[ed] for protection, and only dimly grasp[ed] that they may one day serve him as offensive weapons as well” (Ellmann, *Identity* 33), meaning Yeats wrote merely as an outlet and had not attained complete control of his craft. Yeats’s use of Romantic overtones, syntax, and imagery demonstrate the immaturity of his poetry. In summary, the birds have only decorational purposes in his early poetry.

During this period, Yeats would join several mystical and occult organizations (including the Golden Dawn in the Theosophy movement because he “refused to accept the universe that their scientific, materialist, rationalist, and often hypocritically religious elders tried to hand to them” (Ellmann, *Masks* 56). Yeats found “the world of the Golden Dawn provided a compensation for the daily struggle in Bedford Park: a sign that, somewhere, a world might exist where reality could echo and confirm his magnificent imagination” (Foster 106). Along with the intellectual stimulation he found in the world of the Golden Dawn, Yeats would also propel himself forward.

Yeats’s belief in the power of human thought fueled his studies, and “he wanted to show that the current faith in reason and logic ignored a far more important faculty, the imagination” (Ellmann, *Identity* 3). Yeats’s use of bird imagery in his early poetry reflects the influences of the time: the Romantics and his interest in mysticism. The Romantic influences come across in
the personal and natural tones of his poetry, while the mystical influences come across in the folklore of the Irish countryside and Yeats’s occult studies.

His use of Romanticism and mysticism is evident in several poems, such as “The Two Trees,” in which ravens appear “Flying, crying, to and fro” (Yeats 49). The poem draws influence from Blake’s “The Human Abstract,” and “the imagery of the poem is drawn from the passage he had read in Mathers’ *The Kabbalah Unveiled* about the birds (Mathers identified them as souls and angels) which ‘lodge and build their nests’ in the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” (Unterecker 85). The ravens’ flight in the poem notates an image the will recur throughout Yeats’s poetry — the chaotic flights represent discontent and confusion, indicative of the personal and political chaos in Yeats’s life.

Yeats scholars note a distinct shift into a second period, where he moved from the late 1800s’ natural and pastoral mood to more physical and nationalistic writing. Yeats removed himself from the Romantic, aesthetic poetic tradition and was now committed to writing poems of “insight and knowledge” rather than “longing and complaint” (Ellmann, *Masks* 54). To begin this transition, Yeats began “to experiment with [poetry] based on current events, where he [would] find distinct success” (Vendler 112): current events encompassing the Irish Nationalist movement movement.

The importance of the Irish nationalist, Maud Gonne, cannot be overstated in the second period of Yeats’s poetry. From the first moment he saw her, Gonne became Yeats’s muse and “lingers in the memories of even those who know little of Irish history as one of the most beguiling personalities in Yeats’s poetic pantheon” (Steele 119). Gonne and Yeats shared the belief of Irish independence, but differed in their approach. Yeats believed in a diplomatic approach to independence, while Gonne was not afraid to advocate war as a means for Irish
independence. Yeats would express his vision through his poetry, and birds continued to appear in this poetry, but scenes shifted from early, natural images to more realistic, political scenes to be used as a tool for protests.

One of the poems composed to depict the realism of Ireland was “The Three Beggars.” Yeats uses a crane which “shows no competitive spirit [the heron for Yeats represents solitude, contemplation]. The moral seems that quiescence pays in the end” (MacNiece 112). The crane is detached from the poem, but there is also among the framed narrative “a savoring of energy, a delight in the filth and blood” (Sidnell Yeats 90). The poem is simply not pretty, like the poems seen in his first period of writing. Instead they are blunt and have a purpose — to teach their audience.

By the 1920s, critics recognize a shift in Yeats’s poetry to a third and final stage. Yeats had settled into married life and truly began to write with self-confidence. This period marks his attempts to “mend his soul” (Ellmann Masks 164) and he “felt called upon to rebel against his own past, as he had done repeatedly since his revulsion against science in late childhood, and particularly against the vague unity in his life and work which he had tried to attain near the century’s end” (Ellmann Masks 164). Yeats had continually struggled to come into his own during his youth and his time in the nationalist movement, and during this later period he found his true voice.

This later poetry marks Yeats’s foray into Modernism and “had Yeats died instead of marrying in 1917, he would have been remembered as a remarkable poet who achieved a diction more powerful than that of his contemporaries but who, except in a handful of poems, did not have much to say with it” (Ellmann Masks 223). Yeats’s contributions to Modernism made him a truly outstanding poet and one who is revered today.
Review of Existing Scholarship

Yeats’s poetry has been studied since before his death in 1939. In 1941, Louis MacNiece published *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, and Yeats experts Richard Ellmann, Dwight Eddins, Frank Tuohy, John Unterecker, R.F. Foster, and Helen Vendler, among others, would follow. It is important to recognize the importance of such critics like Ellmann and Vendler in appreciating their attention to Yeats. All critics studied in this thesis are respected Yeats scholars, and their interpretations are important in the study of Yeats.

In *The Poetry of WB Yeats*, Louis MacNiece’s observances provide a good introduction to Yeats’s lyric poetry. As a contemporary of Yeats, MacNiece concerned himself with how Yeats’s poetry fit into their world. MacNiece believed his review of Yeats would “make his poetry more intelligible and more sympathetic” (MacNiece 3) and “improvement in his poetry seems related to an extension of his subject matter … there are few poems in the world which can be taken exactly at their face value” (MacNiece 4). While MacNiece was able to read Yeats’s poetry as a contemporary and realize there was a deeper meaning to his poems, any historical context and interpretation was lacking.

In 1943, Joseph Hone followed with his publication *W.B. Yeats: 1865–1939*. Hone was blessed with access to Yeats’s personal papers and the assistance of Mrs. Yeats in his research. This volume recognizes the genius of Yeats in both his poetry and prose and provides a more biographical interpretation of his writings. The role of Yeats’s family and youth are studied, as well as what would become one of the biggest influences on all of his writings: Maud Gonne. It is through Hone and his access to Yeats’s journals and family that one of the first biographical studies of Yeats appeared. After this book, it is not until 1959 that another important work, John Unterecker’s *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats* is published.
Unterecker’s Reader’s Guide is the first to identify a development in maturity in Yeats’s lyrical poetry. Unterecker not only recognizes this progression in Yeats’s poetry, but also outlines the themes Yeats uses during the progression. This work is meant to be used as a supplement to Yeats’s Collected Poems in order for the reader to come “to an intelligent evaluation of those poems” (Unterecker iii). This book is also interesting in that, like Collected Poems, it is meant to be read as a whole and in the order Unterecker composed it. Additionally, Unterecker is one of the first critics to mention the importance of Yeats’s bird imagery and how they were used by Yeats as an indicator of his maturity through his poetry. Yeats’s ability to use birds in varying degrees of instances and dimensions grew as he aged. This resource recognizes Yeats’s lyric poetry as a lifelong work as a whole, and not individual poems or collections of poems.

In 1970, Harold Bloom inaugurated a decade of resurgence of Yeats criticism with his Yeats. Thus began an era of critics who attempted to place Yeats in a historical perspective as well as those who attempted to define him as Romantic or Modernist. Bloom recognized these difficulties in defining Yeats and instead in Yeats studied “the major relations of Yeats’s work to English poetic tradition, rather than to any of the esoteric traditions that Yeats clearly invokes” (Bloom vii). By critically studying Yeats, Bloom pays homage to the visionary genius of Yeats.

Richard Ellmann can be considered the foremost Yeats critic as well as Modernist studies. Ellmann published two books in the 1960s on Yeats: The Identity of Yeats and Yeats: The Man and the Masks, along with articles and book contributions throughout his life. Ellmann believed Yeats’s stylistic development proceeds in waves. The earliest style is followed by a period of simplification and then by a period of “intensification through sheering away from his images whatever united ‘them to one man rather than to another.’” His mature style is not
developed until after 1900, although there are many hints of it before that time; and in his last 
years it too undergoes modification” (Ellmann Identity 119). Ellmann’s recognition of stages in 
Yeats’s poetry was a theme that continues to be studied.

In Yeats: The Man and the Masks, Ellmann provides information focusing on the role of 
Yeats’s life and the nationalist influence on his poetry. It must be understood that having at least 
a basic understanding of Yeats’s biography is fundamental to a clear understanding of his poetry. 
These influences made him realize that “all the latent possibilities of his being [were] exactly 
what he wanted; he needed help to change his personality, to purify himself of timidity, to learn 
to control others and himself, to become the hero of whom he dreamed” (Ellmann Masks 64). 
This longing led to Yeats’s view of himself as a man divided into two parts, and Ellmann studied 
how this split was reflected in his poetry. Ellmann believed Yeats viewed himself as first the 
“insignificant man who is given, whether by God, by society, or simply by birth” and then “the 
significant man who is made by the first” (Ellmann Masks 72). This concept reflects Yeats’s 
own life — he was truly a self-made poet who rose to prominence through talent and dedication 
to his craft.

The studies of Ellmann were followed by a plethora of Yeats publications in the 1970s. 
Dwight Eddins stated in his 1971 publication of Yeats: The Nineteenth Century Matrix, 
“Yeatsian scholarship, after several decades of relative neglect of the early poetry, has suddenly 
veered back to correct its omissions. Within the last three years, at least four books dealing in 
whole of in large part with Yeats’s verse up to 1899 have appeared” (Eddins vii). Eddins 
believes “Yeats remained in some sense a ‘Romantic’ through his entire career …. It is the 
elevation of his artistic focus and of his subject matter with which he is concerned here, and with 
his role as diminished but determined heir to the great tradition” (Eddins 155). Eddins
recognized the importance of the Romantic influence to Yeats’s poetry as a whole, and this is communicated in his book.

Thomas L. Byrd, Jr., also recognized the importance of Yeats’s early poetry and would continue this study in *The Early Poetry of W.B. Yeats: The Poetic Quest*. Byrd believed “Yeats is not one of the ‘last Romantics:’ he is a modern Romantic …. Yeats reveals his development as a unique artist whose genesis should not be ignored” (Byrd 6). As Ellmann recognized, the periods of Yeats’s poetry, Byrd and Eddins finally identified the importance and influence of the Romantic poetry. They showed that even though there was mimicry of earlier Romantics, the talent of Yeats began to emerge during this time period.

In the late 1990s, R.F. Foster published *W.B. Yeats: A Life*, a two-part biography much lengthier than any previous book produced on Yeats. Foster provides a much more in-depth look at Yeats’s youth, spent between Sligo and London, as well as his foray into occult studies and his introduction to Gonne, and then his maturation and role in Irish politics. While Foster recognizes Ellmann’s contributions to the study of Yeats, he does take exception to Ellmann’s “divided self” definition of Yeats and instead believed Yeats’s “interests and involvements ricocheted off one another” (Foster 89). So, instead of dividing forces, Foster believed Yeats’s differing interests served as a catalyst to one another.

One of the most recent studies on Yeats, Helen Vendler’s *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* was published in 2007. Vendler’s studies focus on the stylistics of Yeats’s poems. She states she chose to take this approach because “there has been no volume in which students can find descriptions of the inner and outer formal choices Yeats made, the cultural significance his forms bore for him, or the way his forms — in all their astounding variety — become the material body of his thought and emotions” (Vendler xv). Vendler recognizes that
along with content, Yeats struggled to perfect his form in poetry as well, an aspect that had not been studied before.

Even though Yeats has not been dead 100 years, there is a wealth of research that confirms his importance in the literary canon. From contemporaries studying his poetry on a personal level, to those seeing the evolution of his poetry a couple decades later, to biographical and technical studies later still, there are plenty of books and articles published on Yeats to attest to his aesthetic and procedural genius.

By studying the stages of Yeats’s poetry, a true understanding of his evolution as a poet emerges. He progresses from a young Romantic to an unsure nationalist to a master of Modernism. Studying the bird imagery in his poetry gives readers a sense of this evolution by showing birds in composed, natural settings then those in political settings and finally those in apocalyptic, uneasy settings. The following chapters of this thesis will examine lyrical poems from *The Rose, The Wind Among the Reeds, In the Seven Woods, The Green Helmet and Other Poems, Responsibilities, The Wild Swans at Coole, Michael Robartes and the Dancer, The Tower, The Winding Stair*, and *Last Poems* to show the evolution of bird imagery from Romantic settings, to political settings, to a Modern setting. Yeats’s talent and ability shine through, in that he was aware and able to use bird imagery alone to show this evolution.
CHAPTER 1

Crossways, The Rose, and The Wind Among the Reeds

William Butler Yeats would begin writing and publishing in the late 1880s and early 1890s. Three books of poetry, Crossways (1889), The Rose (1893), and The Wind Among the Reeds (1899), were published in this time frame. Yeats’s craft reflected his own immaturity, and “his verse at this time is full of anarchisms from Edmund Spenser, and it hops from rhyme to rhyme in the manner of Shelley, but it already contains the individual rhythms by which a new poet is first recognized” (Tuohy 40). Yeats also fell under the influence of the Romantic William Blake and his idea of “writing in paired opposites — soul and self, body and soul, love and death, chance and choice, subjective and objective, conflicting yet establishing a unity in a man’s life and history” (Malins 61). Yeats continually strove to perfect this unity, and this is evidenced throughout his life and his work.

Yeats also expounded Blake’s theories in The Works of William Blake (1893) and “it consisted of the belief that there were three orders of existence: the natural, the intellectual, and the emotional. The first was material and illusory, the second a mental form existing in time, and the third God, eternal and infinite and outside of time and space” (Lenoski 86). Yeats’s own early writings attempt to grasp at all three levels, but emphasis lies in the natural. In the 1880s, Yeats was “looking for a role in the world of art, and trying to define himself against the declamatory certitudes of his father and the easy cynicism of middle-class Dublin” (Foster 46). An example of this is the introductory poem of The Rose, “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time.” In it, the speaker “sing[s] the ancient ways” (Yeats 31). This indicates that “Gaelic legend has provided the mythological background, the occult mysticism has given him a symbol which he
hopes will be universal and speak to all mankind” (Malins 79). By using the mystical background of Ireland, Yeats saw this as a way to bridge between the ancient past and an appropriate way of Irish life — not the materialism Yeats saw inundating the Irish middle-class.

Between 1884 and 1888, “he was besieged by a mob of ideas, uncertainties, and passions, which grew difficult to control” (Ellmann Masks 41). Yeats found solace in his uncertainties by studying mysticism, where he could “construct a mythology for himself, his past, and the circles with whom he intersected” (Foster 59), and mysticism makes its way into his early poetry.

Yeats’s interest in mysticism resulted in his membership in the Golden Dawn, and “the membership of the Golden Dawn in the last ten years of the nineteenth century gives some insight into the social history of the time …. [where] men of the new professional classes without sufficient education to occupy their minds outside their profession …. [and] the idea of a secret conspiracy gives them self-importance that society has denied them” (Tuohy 68). Yeats certainly fell into this grouping. From the time of his entrance into Dublin society, he continually felt unsure of himself and lacked self-confidence. The Golden Dawn made him feel included with high society.

In addition to Romanticism and mysticism, Irish folklore and nature also played an important role in his poetry. This influence was “gathered in Sligo and elsewhere, was non-English, anti-materialist, anti-bourgeois, and connected to Theosophical and Rosicrucian symbolism” (Foster 129). Early poems are “heavily populated with various forms of animal and vegetable life, and in such a natural way that the reader is not so much aware of their importance as he is conscious of their presence, just as the average person is aware of the natural life around him without thinking about it” (Byrd 19). Yeats used natural imagery to provide a link of familiarity to his audience.
Additionally, “Yeats was aware of the importance of the function of animal and plant life throughout his career as a poet …. [and] even though his earliest poetry may seem artificial to the modern ear, Yeats counters the artificiality of Arcadia with a constant undertone of living reality” (Byrd 20). The artificiality of Yeats’s early poetry may in part be caused by its mimicry of Romanticism, but the use of nature and living reality shows Yeats’s dedication to the beauty of the Irish countryside.

Perhaps the most important influence on Yeats’s early poetry and career was the entrance of Maud Gonne into his life in 1889. Yeats describes their initial meeting as “when the troubling of my life began” (Levenson 56) and he was “fascinated by her beauty and her passion, he also found in her a rather crude mystical belief akin to his own” (MacNiece 81). Their relationship would be filled with personal and political drama their entire lives. Yeats fell in love with Gonne, and by 1891 he proposed marriage for the first of many refusals. In addition to their personal drama, Yeats and Gonne had differing opinions on how to achieve Irish independence. Yeats believed in the power of intelligence and diplomacy to achieve independence, while Gonne believed in war and violence to achieve independence.

But Gonne was still the driving influence in much of Yeats’s poetry. She embodied his dream-woman of epic beauty and mystery. In his early poetry, her influence abounds in several poems, such as “The Heart of the Woman,” “The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love,” and “He Tells of the Perfect Beauty,” among others. Her beauty tied in to his early Romantic writing and “she seemed a classical impersonation of Spring with her ‘complexion luminous like apple-blossom through which the light falls,’ and she summoned him to action and fulfillment, to romantic love and to the creation of the true image of Ireland” (Tuohy 60). It is easy to surmise Yeats’s poetry would not have taken its shape without Maud’s influence.
Romanticism, mysticism, nature, and Maud Gonne all shaped Yeats’s early poetry, and study of Yeats’s bird images demonstrates his early influences. His first book of published poetry, *Crossways*, represents “some of the ‘many pathways’ he had tried out in his first poetic efforts” (Unterecker 67). The poems were written as early as 1885, and “the best of them could give the reader insight into the evolution of Yeats’s major themes and techniques” (Unterecker 69), as Yeats would continually rework and edit these poems throughout his career.

Blake’s technical influence shines through in Yeats’s final arrangement of the collection. Yeats used the examples of “Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* [as] a model for the successful integration of a group of lyrics,” where poems were arranged based on their relationships with each other. The importance of this type of ordering would stay with Yeats his entire writing career.

Many of the *Crossways* poems center on Arcadian and Indian scenes. “The Indian to His Love” is one of these poems, and several birds — a peahen, parrot, and dove — appear in the poem. The poem also contains romantic language, and even though Yeats edited the poem several times, he “was enough of a craftsman to know that destruction of the tone of the poem would destroy the poem” (Unterecker 71). The comparison below of the early version and the final version demonstrates Yeats’s evolution as a poet, and the bird imagery itself is developed and enriched through the versions.

In the final version, the peahen, parrot, and dove still lead the poem, but “they are made to function not only as part of the island scenery, as they do as in the original, but also as elements of dawn and dusk which mark the boundaries of the poem” (Unterecker 72). The poem describes a lifetime of love between the speaker and his beloved. The original version contains the images of “the pea-hens dance, in crimson feather / A parrot swaying on a tree / Rages at his
own image in the enameled sea” (Yeats quoted in Unterecker 70). The second version states, “The peahens dance on a smooth lawn, / A parrot sways upon a tree / Raging at his own image in the enameled sea” (Yeats 14). The difference between the parrot “rages” and “raging” is that “he may be hushed” (Unterecker 72). The parrot is an active participant in the scene in the second version.

The other bird image in the poem is the dove. Yeats’s first version contains “Like swarming bees, one with the dove / That moans and sighs a hundred days” (Yeats quoted in Unterecker 71). The dove serves only as part of a simile in this version. Additionally, the dove is surrounded with the romantic ideas of the sigh and the hundred-days exaggeration. In Yeats’s edited version, the dove is still surrounded by Romantic language, but is now an active participant in the scene — “The unadorned dove of the first draft is now burnished in the evening light; wings that ‘gleam and dart’ have been added to the evening. And our shades will rove ‘by the water’s drowsy blaze’ only after ‘eve has hushed the feathered ways’” (Unterecker 72). Not only is the dove acting in the poem, it serves as an object that can be acted upon.

Yeats followed his initial poetry publication with The Rose. The poems in The Rose are better understood with Harold Bloom’s description of the Rose as “Maud Gonne, Ireland (Dark Rosaleen), a central symbol of the Rosicrucian Order of the Golden Days, a sexual emblem, the sun, and much else” (113) and that they “emphasize the negation rather than the affirmation of the quest for the objects of desire” (114) — this is especially apparent in the 1893 version of “The Sorrow of Love.”

Like the majority of his other poems, “The Sorrow of Love” contained the influence of Maud Gonne. Quite simply, the early version “of the poem affirms the power of love over nature in a conventional” (Porter 43) sense with Romantic influence. This statement, in relation
to this poem, does not mean love has won, but simply that love is more powerful than nature. The poem begins with “The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves” (Porter 43), a verbal argument. The sparrows set up the poem: a conflict between two entities, like the conflict between the speaker and the woman for whom he longs. Through this first version, Yeats uses simple adjectives and images to convey the speaker’s inner struggle, the appearance of the woman, and their conflict in relation to mankind.

The poem concludes with more imagery of the sparrows, but this time “the sparrows warring in the eaves” (Porter 43). Their violence has escalated from “the quarrel” in the first line to physical violence. Richard Ellmann summarizes this early poem with “at the beginning of the poem nature seems for a moment to have an independent power, but at the end it is entirely a symbolic reflection of man” (122), and Yeats feelings for Gonne in the 1890s were so strong they did stir war-like emotion in Yeats. In this way, the sparrows are symbols for Yeats’s feelings for Maud Gonne. While his heart was madly in love with her, his reasoning (and her reasoning, too, for that matter) was that a romantic relationship between the two could never work.

The final version of “The Sorrow of Love” was published in 1925 after enduring several edits throughout Yeats’s life. This stage of Yeats’s writing demonstrates “a steady expansion of his world to include cosmic, public, political, and domestic themes” (Ellmann 146), as aspects of these are apparent in “The Sorrow of Love.” Yeats’s poetry of course would have been changed “because he led a long eventful life during a period of social and political changes, [and] his treatment of love over half a century continues to bear political, social, and artistic significances” (Khan 130). The reflections of Yeats’s view on love and his relationship with Maud are evident in the later version.
The 1925 version of “The Sorrow of Love” contains more complex wording and imagery than the original version. This edition begins with a problematic image: “The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves” (Yeats quoted in Porter 44). This is problematic because the question of possibility is raised — is it possible for a sparrow to brawl with itself? This is Yeats’s way to set up the poem on a singular, personal level. The sparrow is brawling with itself — much like Yeats’s lifelong inner struggle with his feelings toward Maud.

The third stanza continues with the girl, not with the sparrow, as in the 1893 version. The stanza begins with the repetition of the word “arose” (Yeats quoted in Porter 44), signifying the importance of the presence of this girl. This event causes “the instant clamorous eaves, / A climbing moon upon an empty sky, / And all that lamentation of the leaves, / Could but compose man’s image and his cry” (Yeats quoted in Porter 43). The girl’s power lies in her ability to create man and his cry — seemingly for love.

In “The Sorrow of Love,” Yeats recognized the weaknesses of the early version and continued to work on this poem the rest of his life. Yeats stated, “I have felt when rewriting every poem — ‘The Sorrow of Love’ for instance — that by assuming a self of past years, as remote from that of today as some dramatic creation, I touched a stronger passion, a greater confidence that I possess, or ever did possess” (Yeats quoted in Ellmann Identity 239–240). Yeats’s description of his writing practice “draws attention to a fundamental concern of lyric poetry — its tricky relationship to history, to time, and to the subject that they together construct” (Ben-Merre 71). Yeats’s ability to revisit and revise a poem over 30 years old is a testament to his dedication and vision.

Another poem in the collection with bird imagery is “The White Birds,” another poem influenced by Maud Gonne. Yeats and Gonne spent a day walking the cliffs at Howth, where
both of them had spent parts of their childhood. Two seagulls flew by, which inspired the opening lines, “I would that we were, my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea!” (Yeats *Collected Works* 41). Like “The Sorrow of Love,” after the introduction of the birds in the opening lines, the speaker laments on hopeless love through the rest of the poem. This time, though, he offers solutions for his unrequited love.

The second stanza concludes with the speaker’s wish: “For I would we were changed to white birds on the wandering foam: I and you!” The bird “images perfection, and that in both the world of time, while much disparaged, is only partially surrendered” (Ellmann *Identity* xxv). In addition to the perfect image of the bird, the whiteness represents the innocence of youth when Yeats composed the poem. The poem concludes again with the speaker’s wish: “Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed out on the foam of the sea!” (Yeats *Collected Works* 42) — the speaker’s wish for escape from reality and everlasting love with his beloved.

Yeats concluded his early Romantic poetry with *The Wind Among the Reeds*, and it “reflected the circumstances of his life: political expectations, doomed love, mystical faith, the slings and arrows aimed at Gonne by an uncomprehending world. Another note struck by the collection stressed Celticism, visions of the apocalypse, and what can only be described as flamboyant obscurantism” (Foster 215–6). But, while the poems originate from “elaborate origins, these are among Yeats’s least difficult poems. Read as a group in their final form, they record gracefully “the shifting moods of a complex man” (Unterecker 90).

This book represents an important piece of Yeats’s early works, and bird imagery appears, although not as widely as in other collections. The poem, “He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead,” represents the doomed love, mystical faith, and apocalyptic tones of this era. The speaker in the poem addresses his beloved, like the speaker in “The Sorrow of Love” and “The
White Birds,” and also like the previous poems in the collection, the speaker faces unrequited love from his beloved. So while bird imagery is not obvious in this collection, it is still an important aspect of Yeats’s identity as a poet during this period.

“He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead” is evidence of “a love affair gone wrong, a great passion that after rising to a climax necessarily fades” (Unterecker 93). The imagery of the dead figure of the beloved is not passionate and speaks to the unreciprocated love of Maud Gonne. It was during this time period that Yeats learned of Gonne’s secret affair with a French nationalist and the surviving child, Iseult Gonne, this affair produced. Yeats and Gonne entered a spiritual union during this period, but Yeats still longed for a real, physical marriage between them.

In this poem, Yeats describes his beloved as having “the will of the wild birds, / But know your hair was bound and wound / About the stars and moon and sun” (Yeats 72–73). While the woman possesses the courage to fly away, she remains tied to the stars, moon, and sun. These galactic figures are ironic in that they normally represent freedom and vastness, yet they tie down this wild woman. What is usually a symbol of freedom and possibility has become a form of entrapment while the speaker is trapped on earth. Yeats’s only solution to the hopelessness of their situation is to wish the woman dead — their only chance for union. Unterecker states, “both poet and his lady and consequently fitted carefully into a heavenly astrological paradise” (93), and this poem represents Yeats’s mystical influences.

In summary, these three books and selected poems represent the natural, Romantic, and lovelorn overtones of Yeats’s early poetry. This was an important stage in his career, because he “moved ahead by trial and error, only gradually learning his potentialities” (Ellmann Masks 166). From an early age, the beauty of Yeats’s poetry (despite its immaturity) shines through, but the immaturity was necessary to his growth. Because “birds had attracted him from his solitary
boyhood in Sligo, and their pride, beauty, and instinctive designs of conduct obsessed him to death” (Parkinson 124), they are an instinctual and comfortable symbol for Yeats’s use.

Yeats would soon enter the middle phase of his poetry. Yeats “came of age at a time when nationalistic sentiments were running high” (Harrington 13), and this began to shine through at the turn of the 20th century in Yeats’s poetry. His next collection, *In the Seven Woods*, began to reflect these changes and represents the transition from the beginning to middle phase of his poetry.
Chapter 2

In the Seven Woods

In the late 1890s, Yeats declared that he and his contemporary poets stood “at the crowning crisis of the world, at the moment when man is about to ascend, with the wealth he has been so long gathering upon his shoulders” (Sidnell Yeats 109–110). With this declaration, Yeats would begin his transition into the middle period of his poetic career. The collection that best represents Yeats’s transition is In the Seven Woods, which “progresses from narrative poems concerning myths of queenly women to dramatic first-person lyrics about the fallen world of individual middle-class experience … and toward popular, collective, human experience” (Holdeman 253). Once again, a study of the poetry and bird imagery found in this poetry showcases this change from the comfort and mimicry of Romantic poetry to a more aggressive and nationalist form of writing.

Yeats began to remove himself from the Romantic, aesthetic tradition of poetry and began to compose poems of “insight and knowledge” instead of “longing and complaint” (Ellmann Masks 54). In order to do so, Yeats began “to experiment with [poetry] based on current events, where he [would] find distinct success” (Vendler 112). These current events were, of course, the conflicts stemming from the Irish nationalist movement, a movement in which Yeats never quite found his place.

While Yeats’s lyrics were shifting toward nationalist writing, that is not to say that his poetry in this collection was vacant of his romantic feelings. Several poems, such as “The Arrow,” “The Withering of the Boughs,” and “Adam’s Curse” are lamentations of his love for Maud Gonne. In 1903, Yeats’s world would come crashing down around him when Gonne married Major John MacBride. Yeats’s fourteen-year-old pursuit and several proposals were a
seemingly lost cause. This torment produced “some of the best love poems he ever wrote, poems
telling in spare, unadorned language the story of his ill-fated devotion to Maud Gonne”
(Levenson 205). While the poems still contain the youth’s lovelorn feelings, the language
becomes more mature.

In “The Withering of the Boughs,” “the swans exalt the mind to a point beyond the limits
of temporal experience” (Parkinson 127). In this instance, the swans are used in a mystical
setting and echo the poems of Yeats’s earlier poetry. “The Withering of the Boughs” takes place
in “the land of the dead where unrealized human possibilities can be lived out … [and] these
swans are dreamlike and unnatural because their reference is to the fabled design of love that
Baile and Aillinn body forth” (Parkinson 126). Swans were one type of bird that was used
several times though Yeats’s poetry. Of course, there are certain ideals associated with swans,
such as grace, beauty, sacredness, and purity — all ideals Yeats was continually seeking in his
poetry and life.

But “Adam’s Curse” begins to show the maturation and “a different kind of technique is
the subject … one of the first of the dramatized conversations Yeats was eventually to make his
most characteristic form” (Unterecker 99). The Romantic language and imagery still exists
(“weary-hearted as that hollow moon” in “Adam’s Curse”), but Yeats is exploring a new

technique.

He would also publish several poems where birds appeared as a tool for protests. While
Maud Gonne and loneliness were still a theme in Yeats’s poetry, political rumblings began to
influence him as well, but there were divisions in how to achieve Irish independence. Yeats was
“certainly less sympathetic to the idea of violence” and believed instead “the whole country fully
united would drive England from Ireland as a magician exercises an evil spirit” (Ellmann, Mask
Yeats believed the means nationalists were using “encouraged mass hatred and he postulated that the ousting of the enemy would automatically make Ireland an earthly paradise” (Ellmann *Masks* 114), but instead this caused internal conflict. To combat this and promote nonviolent nationalism, Yeats formed literary societies beginning in 1891 as a more peaceful means of protest.

Along with the nationalist feelings, Yeats’s entrance into dramatic writing influenced his poetry. Yeats published *In the Seven Woods* in 1904, five years after the publication of *The Wind Among the Reeds*. During this time, Yeats also began writing drama, which influenced the speech of his poetry and evolved a new poetic language for Yeats (Unterecker 95). His language strayed away from “the romance, mistiness, and elevated beauty of his nineties poetry, and the new, toughened diction which he had consciously begun to seek” (Foster 252). It was this language development and rethinking that allowed him to develop from a talented Romantic poet in the 1890s into a major contemporary poet in the 1900s (Holdeman 254), and would cement his place in Irish literature.

Even though *In the Seven Woods* is one of Yeats’s more obscure collections, it reflects Yeats’s mindset during the time. Yeats said “most of the poems were composed … while he was walking in the woods from which the book takes its title” (Sidnell *Tara* 117–8), and the preposition “in” “intimates the new interest in self-dramatization. It is Yeats’s only title for a collection of poems that directly implies the physical presence of the poet somewhere” (Sidnell *Yeats* 71). The woods serve as a source of power for recuperation and introspection during a time of transition for Yeats.

The title poem “In the Seven Woods,” presents bird imagery where the speaker hears “the pigeons of the Seven Woods / Make their faint thunder” (Yeats 75). This “opening lyric details
the speaker’s painful estrangement both from his beloved and from the political and social milieu of contemporary Ireland” (Holdeman 253). In this case, pigeons symbolize Yeats’s “reactive ideological bitterness” and “the disequilibrium that so disturbed his writing life — has been staged here as an inner sonnet quarrel between pastoral and apocalypse” (Vendler 160). Since Yeats uses pigeons, which was a term for naive or gullible during this time, this can be seen as an insult for those whose ideologies Yeats held in contempt and could not connect with. The “faint thunder” shows that while there are rumblings, these are not of any significance.

The poem juxtaposes the pigeons/bees and the speaker (I). While there are no derogatory words or tones directed at the pigeons, the pigeons are a harbinger of the dissension Yeats felt toward the middle class — something that would become more pronounced in later poems. The speaker “I” exists above the scene and is content to exist apart from the majority of the pigeons and bees. This distance indicates Yeats’s growing nationalistic beliefs — that power and revolution should be the responsibility of the upper class, not the middle class. It is in a further explication of this scene that these feelings continue to come across.

“The Seven Woods” is a haven for Quiet while Tara, the ancient seat of the kings of Ireland had become a point of contention with Yeats and Irish nationalists. Ireland had been vandalized by archeologists at Tara, and Yeats is caught between an idea of justice and the terrible spirit of the place both represented by the archer, a figure who awaits his chance to rise above this dilemma. Once “the Great Archer at last looses his arrow from his cloudy quiver, Tara will be restored and Ireland will become independent” (Vendler 160). If “Quiet” can be seen as representative of Yeats, then the end of the poem shows Yeats’s disenchantment with the “pigeons” — other nationalists of Ireland — as he patiently awaits to rise above them. While the
pigeons make unintelligible rumblings, “Quiet” remains stoic and waits for the moment to make a meaningful move.

The use of pigeons represents Yeats’s ability to adapt the basic symbol of a bird to serve his current views. When compared to the other birds Yeats used (swans, sparrows, geese, even mechanical birds, to name a few), the connotations of pigeons are strikingly negative. Domesticated, widespread, and common are a few descriptions used for pigeons in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. In regard to persons, a pigeon has been used to describe a fool, coward, and embezzler. Yeats was beginning to see all of these characteristics in the Irish middle class.

This poem then shows Yeats’s shift toward nationalistic writings and straightforward diction. Gone are the Romantic phrasings and dreamy atmospheres of his nineteenth century poetry, including the “divine homestead” in “The Rose of Peace,” “midnight’s all a glimmer” in “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” and “cloud-pale eyelids, dream-dimmed eyes” in “He Tells of the Perfect Beauty.” Yeats was formulating…

…new poetical, psychological, and political theories that stressed self-mastery, [and] by 1903 these theories had not yet significantly affected Yeats’s art … but soon after 1903 Yeats’s new thinking began to manifest itself in his poetry, and between 1905 and 1908 he created three new revised version of the collection. (Holdeman 254)

The revisions continue his nationalist and Modernist growth. This time frame also contained a “the premature deaths of a number of the poets of the ‘tragic generation’ … the non-occurrence of the expected Armageddon, and there was also Yeats’s acute disappointment over Maud Gonne … [and Yeats] reshaped his poetic that rather bleak period,” (Sidnell, *Yeats* 78) culminating in the publication of *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* in 1910.
CHAPTER 3

*The Green Helmet and Other Poems* and Responsibilities
In 1910 and 1914, Yeats published his fourth and fifth books of poetry, *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* and *Responsibilities*, respectively. These two books represent an advance in his poetry to a middle period — full of autobiography, nationalism, and realism. Many of the poems still celebrate Maud Gonne, while others express his “conviction that his own poetry should be both personal and Irish” (Unterecker 103). It was with these influences that *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* and *Responsibilities* grew and evolved into a new era of poetry for Yeats. Through an analysis of several poems and the bird imagery contained in these poems, a better of understanding of the changes in his poetry as images become more and more physical and nationalistic in tone. This development occurred as Yeats increasingly used his poems as a tool in the Irish political struggle.

By 1910, Gonne was divorced from Major John MacBride, and Yeats returned to apotheosizing her — making her “something larger than life [in *The Green Helmet* poems] ‘A Woman Homer Sung’ fits her into a heroic dream, while announcing explicitly Yeats’s determination to paint her portrait for ‘coming time’ … and ‘No Second Troy’ defines as Helen her mythological counterpart” (Unterecker 105). In “No Second Troy,” Yeats uses what would become a common tool in later poetry — the introduction of questions in his poetry. This indicates a more reflective and intuitive form of poetry as Yeats matured.

While these poems idolized Gonne, several others “are bitter and some are disillusioned …. Yet these are significant in showing his emergence from Celtic twilight into the hard light of Irish day” (Malins 83). While Yeats still yearned for Gonne’s love, he began to enter a more realistic mode of thinking about their relationship and life in general. He became more vocal to Gonne about their disagreements in how to attain Irish independence, and these disagreements caused intermittent strains on their relationship.
Yeats’s nationalist writing became more prevalent and his convictions more obvious. Yeats believed the method for Irish independence laid within the power of the educated people through literature and the establishment of a united Irish government. But he had struggled to define his role and find his purpose in the movement. Woefully, Yeats found “Romantic Ireland was … dead and gone …. and [he was] confronted with the pettiness and meanness with the practical world, the conflict between the aristocratic idea of service and the suspicion and ingratitude with which it is received” (Henn 38). It would be in this middle period that his power as a writer helped serve the cause and celebrated the nationalists, even though he was reluctant to use his writing as a tool for that purpose.

A significant technical change in this period was that “the diction matches the change; no longer overladen with epithets like ‘honey-pale’ but apt, few unexpected and straightforward like ‘spontaneous joy,’ ‘natural content,’ or ‘theatre business’” (Malins 83), which Yeats described as “speech so natural and dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling” (Sidnell Yeats 100). Part of this new diction was due in part to the introduction of Ezra Pound to Yeats. Pound encouraged Yeats to use more concrete nouns and verbs and less abstract adjectives for a more precise style of writing (McDowell/Materer 576). It is interesting to note though, as Yeats’s language was becoming more concrete, he was using it in poems to describe abstract ideas, such as in The Green Helmet poems “His Dream,” “Words,” “Reconciliation,” and “Peace.”

If The Green Helmet and Other Poems encompasses Yeats’s maturation as a poet in a broad sense, Responsibilities showcases these changes with bird imagery. The title itself comes from the phrase “‘In dreams begins responsibility’ … and it echoes the assertion in his 1912 lecture ‘Apparitions:’ ‘Dreams are irresponsible things and the medium is, therefore, an
irresponsible person”” (Foster 520). This represents the change in his outlook from the airy, dreamy poetry of his early poetry and “now the wheel has moved round; the dream-world is taken as a sanction of the world we live in” (MacNiece 110). Yeats used this book of poetry to imbue “the problematic issues of nationality and identity that arise from Ireland’s colonial predicament and Yeats’s own membership in the literary and artistic fraction of what had been the colonizing class of Ireland” (Bradley 290). During this period, Yeats struggled with the role of the middle class in Ireland and its independence.

Perhaps the most well-known poem in this collection is “September 1913,” which illustrates Yeats’s issues with the middle class. Yeats shows his indignation toward the rising obsession with materialism in Ireland and pays homage to nationalistic figures. Yeats believed the modern Irishman “seem[ed] concerned only with private money matters [and] a race of heroes had been transformed into a race of shopkeepers who ‘fumble in a greasy till’” (McDowell/Materer 585). The concrete verb “fumble” contrasts with the dramatic “greasy till” and produces “an abstract feeling [that] has been particularized by the description of a single act” (McDowell/Materer 586), an act that Yeats sees as the epitome of the downfall of the middle class.

These thoughts continue in the first stanza. Yeats portrays merchants as greedy misers who “add the halfpence to the pence” (Yeats 106) until they “have dried the marrow to the bone” (Yeats 106). By the second stanza, he remembers revolutionaries from the Romantic period and longs for “Romantic Ireland[’s], dead and gone, / It’s with O’Leary in the grave” (Yeats 106). John O’Leary, who initially drew Yeats to the Irish cause, was an Irish nationalist who returned to Dublin in 1885 after exile, whose courage and dedication Yeats highly regarded. Yeats’s loss of hope in the Irish cause and those leading it by 1913 is evidenced in the first two stanzas of this
The third stanza of “September 1913” begins with bird imagery — “Was it for this the wild geese spread / The grey wing upon every tide; / For this that all that blood was shed” (Yeats 106). The geese represent the spreading ideas by traveling revolutionaries during the mid to late 1800s, which were known across the continent and across the ocean. The only glimmer of hope Yeats finds for the situation in Ireland is saved by his “evocation of the supposed freedom and wildness of Ireland’s ‘wild geese’” (Bloom 172). So to Yeats the geese represented a natural and beautiful part of Irish identity. Also, according to Jon Stallworthy in The Norton Anthology of English Literature, “wild geese” was a “popular name for the Irishmen, who, because of the penal laws against Catholics, were forced to flee to the Continent from 1691 until Catholic Emancipation in 1829” (2099). Yeats was able to use the image of the geese in two ways — as part of the natural scene of Ireland and as a way to reminisce over Irish history.

By 1913, he had become disillusioned with Ireland’s social and political turbulence, and did not have much hope for the Irish cause. Even though the figures fighting for the Irish cause “were mercenaries, and in no sense Romantic revolutionaries, the Yeatsian rhetoric successfully confounds them with genuine Irish revolutionaries [including his nationalist idol, John O’Leary] of the Romantic period” (Bloom 172). Yeats wrote this poem in a satiric tone with his mixing of Romantic and current revolutionaries. The poem concludes with the order to “let them be, they’re dead and gone” (Yeats 107), showing Yeats’s reverence to the dead.

“Paudeen” is a poem that begins with the frustration of the speaker and his encounter with a paudeen, an Irish shopkeeper. The speaker “stumbled blind / Among the stones and thorn-trees” (Yeats 109) after stating his disgust with the paudeen. The paudeen can be seen as a
symbol of the Irish middle class, and echoes back to the greed of the shopkeepers in “September 1913.”

The crude imagery — the stones and thorn-trees — is juxtaposed with the end of this short poem. The hopeful tone of the end of the poem is set by birds, this time a curlew, which is a shorebird. The speaker stumbled “Until a curlew cried and in the luminous wind / A curlew answered; and suddenly thereupon I thought / That on the lonely height where all are in God’s eye, / There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot, / A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry” (Yeats 109–110). The vision of the curlew “comes like lightning; no elaborate machinery is necessary to set it off, the cry of a most ridiculous little bird is sufficient. It is secularized vision, and, instead of alternating between opposites, it transcends them” (Ellmann Masks 206). This natural imagery of the bird shows the restorative power of nature the speaker needs after his encounter with the maliciousness and stupidity of the Irish middle class. Yeats’s uses of these two birds once again shows his ability to adapt the same image (a bird) repeatedly to serve his purposes. The geese in “September 1913” have a literal and figurative use in Irish identity. The curlews in “Paudeen” offer a restorative quality in a depressing setting.

This poem “sets the tone for much of what follows: to relieve his sense of bitterness and defeat, to justify his friends, and to nurse the love story that was to continue for so long,” (Henn 40). The love story of course refers to his unrequited passion for Maud Gonne, and like previous collections, Responsibilities contains love poems written about her. One of these poems is “A Memory of Youth,” in which Yeats uses a technique similar to that in “Paudeen.” Instead of the paudeen, Yeats (the speaker) takes issue with a woman who refuses to return his love despite the fact he “praised her body and her mind / till pride had made her eyes grow bright / And pleasure made her cheeks grow red, / And vanity her footfall light” (Yeats 123). Despite his praises, the
love “for all that praise, could find / Nothing but darkness overhead” (Yeats 123). This echoes Yeats and Gonne’s relationship: Yeats praised her beauty and her nationalistic fervor from the day he met her (even though he did not always agree with her methods), but there truly was nothing but darkness for Yeats in regard to this relationship. Gonne continually turned down his proposals and never viewed him as more than a friend despite his repeated praises of her.

Like “Paudeen” too, this poem ends with a unifying and reconciliatory tone. As the speaker and his love sit together, they “knew, though she’d not said a word, / That even the best of love must die, / And had been savagely undone / Were it not that Love upon the cry / Of a most ridiculous little bird / Tore from the clouds his marvelous moon” (Yeats 123). While Yeats and Gonne never pursued the type of love Yeats wished for, they still remained an integral part in each other’s lives — and in “A Memory of Youth,” “the man and woman who have failed to find unity are suddenly united by an image” (Ellmann Masks 206) — the image of the marvelous moon. Once again, the bird serves as the catalyst of the reconciliation of the speaker. And like “Paudeen,” the speaker finds solace in the action of the bird. The Green Helmet and Other Poems and Responsibilities signal Yeats’s journey away from Romanticism and into a more nationalistic, precise style of writing. Yeats’s nationalistic feelings and his belief in the bourgeoisie’s importance in Irish independence come across clearly. Once again, birds continually appear throughout his poetry, and he shows his talent by carefully choosing and placing these images in his poems. After these two books, Yeats’s poetry would take another turn — this time into a Modernist mode of writing. His next two books, The Wild Swans at Coole and Michael Robartes and the Dancer signify a serious transition into Modernism.
Chapter 4

The Wild Swans at Coole and Michael Robartes and the Dancer

The transition from the middle to late period of Yeats’s poetry occurred the late 1910s and marked Yeats’s entrance into Modernism. Yeats had entered the fifth decade of his life, and after a last marriage proposal rejection from Gonne as well as her daughter, Iseult Gonne, he had married Georgie Hyde Lees in 1917. His marriage was an important influence on his writing on two levels. First of all, Yeats was finally in a fulfilling, reciprocal relationship with a woman and he finally felt at peace in his life. Secondly, Mrs. Yeats would become highly involved in automatic writing, and Yeats felt mystic wisdom was within his reach. Two books of poetry mark this important period — The Wild Swans at Coole and Michael Robartes and the Dancer. Birds continue to appear throughout the poetry, this time used as tools in poems of lost youth, his lamentation of the middle-class, disillusionment with politics, and his introduction of gyres into his poetry. All of these themes marked a deeper step into Modernism.

The Wild Swans at Coole, published in 1919, marked “the presentation of an integral and controlling self becoming ever more powerful in Yeats’s poetry until it [became] strident” (Sidnell Yeats 92). Yeats’s continual self-doubt and how he fit into Ireland’s literary landscape was finally ebbing into a controlled, mature style of writing. As noted before, Yeats was in his fifties at this time, and aging had become an important theme in his poetry. Yeats not only wrote about his own aging and its “evidence of maturity and settlement, of an affirmed continuity between past and present” (Martin 57), but of Maud and Iseult Gonne’s aging as well. Maud’s age represented “a loyalty sustained, a hard victory over time” and Iseult’s represented “lost vitality, shrinking horizons, the pain of accepting these” (Martin 57).
One of the more important poems in this collection is its title poem, the first of the collection. The poem is a lamentation of age using swans to “achieve, without intellect or imagination, the end which human beings can attain only by imaginative acts that might, in their turn, purify the human being to the state naturally available to the swan” (Parkinson 131). As noted earlier, swans were a bird that Yeats used repeatedly, so much so that by 1932 he felt he had exhausted its use and dropped it altogether from his poems (Parkinson 125).

In “The Wild Swans at Coole,” the use of the swans shifts from a mystical state, to those used in a real, physical setting. But, like those in “The Withering of the Boughs,” these swans appear “at a moment of crisis that affects not only the mind of the poem’s protagonist but also the natural and historical milieu” (Parkinson 127). Also, the beauty and sacredness of the swans are still revered. The poem takes place in October at twilight, and “this specific flock size represents the stillness of the moment just before a shift, the last segment of time before one goes out of what was and into what will be” (Fox 57). In this way, the swan imagery also represents Yeats’s own shift into Modernism.

There are “nine-and-fifty swans” (Yeats 131) on the lake. Fifty-nine signifies loneliness — there are twenty-nine pairs with one lone swan. While this poem was published in 1919, its roots may have gone back to Gonne’s continual rejections of Yeats and the dejection he felt in those times. Additionally, the speaker states this is, the “nineteenth autumn has come upon me / Since I first made my count” (Yeats 131), so this loneliness has existed for a considerable amount of time. In this way, to the speaker, “the swans are also his youth, and the annual counting rite amounts to a familiar kind of magic which keeps him in illusory contact with it” (Martin 62). While time keeps passing, the speaker keeps in touch with his youth through his return to Coole.
In addition to loneliness, the number fifty-nine relates to Yeats’s fixation with time. One possibility in Yeats’s choosing fifty-nine is because it “directly links the birds to Yeats’s view of the cyclicity of history. The minute hand of a clock, reaching its fifty-ninth mark, signals the beginning of the hour’s last minute” (Fox 55). This also works hand in hand with the time settings in the poem — October and twilight — which nearly end the year and day respectively. All of these time issues correlate to Yeats’s aging and his coming to terms with his lost youth.

The speaker then compares himself with the swans, saying “Unwearied still, lover by lover, / They paddle in the cold / Companionable streams or climb the air; / Their hearts have not grown old; / Passion or conquest, wander where they will, / Attend upon them still” (Yeats 131). The swans are unwearied, seemingly unaffected by the changing years. While the speaker sees himself aging each year, the swans retain their youth to him, but this is misleading. There are obviously new swans that visit Coole each season, but the speaker only sees the swans as unaging creatures — as Yeats saw swans as a symbol of purity. So while the scene reminds the speaker of his youth, Coole has also aged and is not unaffected by time.

The poem ends with a question — a characteristic of Yeats’s later poetry. While Yeats was becoming more and more confident with his writing style, old age and death were becoming more pervading thoughts for Yeats. These questions that continually will end Yeats’s poemsoften pose existential questions, and this questionis no exception. As the poem ends, the speaker asks, “Among what rushes will they build, / By what lake’s edge or pool / Delight men’s eyes when I awake some day / To find they have flown away?” (Yeats 131–2). The speaker realizes the swans do not exclusively belong to him — they may visit other lakes and have other spectators. By admitting this lack of control, the speaker follows “their imaginary flight into a future which excludes him and the speaker thus begins to transcend his own nostalgia and
despair” (Martin 62). This signifies his maturity in accepting that he will not be around forever and he is at peace with it. This would be a major theme to emerge in Yeats’s later poetry.

Another important work in *The Wild Swans at Coole* is “Ego Dominus Tuus.” This is a longer poem, composed of a dialogue between Hic and Ille, which is representative of personal inner struggles. Where Hic provides the “subjective vision of the artist” (Malins 85), Ille counters with “the antiself or objective viewpoint of the sportsman-soldier” (Malins 85). This duality was something Yeats had experimented with his entire career, and finally felt comfortable enough at this point to publish this poem.

Additionally, Yeats wrote in his notebook about this poem:

Now I know what it is I have in the dark lanes of the wood, always thinking to find it at every new corner: what I have sought on the smooth sand of little bays on the sea, places delightful under the feet; what I have sought behind every new hillock as I climbed the shoulder of the mountain I have sought that only I can see the being that bears my likeness but is without weariness or trivial desires that looks upon far off things, bearing its burden in peace. (Foster 519)

Once again, the idea of coming to peace with aging appears. This philosophy became the conclusion of “Ego Dominus Tuus” and bird imagery helps convey these thoughts.

As the poem ends, a final dispute between Hic and Ille is set up. Hic asks Ille, “Why should you leave the lamp / Burning alone beside an open book, / And trace these characters upon the sands? / A style is found by sedentary toil / And by imitation of the great masters” (Yeats 162). Hic views hard work and study of the past as the key to success, but Ille’s answer provides insight into Yeats’s mind at the time.
Ille’s response begins with this: “Because I seek an image, not a book. / Those men that in their writings are most wise / Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts. / I call to the mysterious one who yet / Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream” (Yeats 162). Ille not only seeks wisdom outside of traditional methods, but views these traditional methods as detrimental to personal growth. Instead, Ille searches for the mysterious one who will “disclose / All that I seek” (Yeats 162). Ille is seeking true personal enlightenment through his meeting with the antiself.

This time, Ille’s answer ends with a warning. The “mysterious one” must “whisper it as though / He were afraid the birds, who cry aloud / Their momentary cries before it is dawn, / Would carry it away to blasphemous men” (Yeats 162). The bird imagery symbolizes a shift in Yeats’s thoughts. While birds had previously existed in idyllic settings, these new birds could potentially upset the scene. Yeats imagery is becoming more and more physical and realistic.

Additionally, Ille once again chastises mainstream man — those who would use divine knowledge irreverently — and emphasizes “the artist-visionary’s dedication against the unsatisfactory transitoriness of life, which the ‘common dream’ of happiness disguises, but those intent on ‘reality’ cannot hide” (Martin 66). By using the generic “birds” rather than a specific bird, Yeats adds to the commonness of the simple-minded common man. This hearkens back to Yeats’s social commentary on the middle class in his middle period of poetry, but with added philosophical thoughts.

The birds then are the bridge between those who are enlightened and have experienced spiritual certainty and those who have not. The spiritually enlightened are in a precarious situation, where while they are aware of the knowledge, if they communicate it, it could fall into the wrong hands. The meaning of the title comes into play as well. “Ego Dominus Tuus.”
translates from Latin to roughly “I am your lord.” If the entire poem is an inner dialogue, the individual is then lord of himself. If his thoughts are conveyed to others, they are no longer personal and become a mass production and become what Ille has chastised — mainstream thought.

These two poems encase an important theme in Yeats’s transition to later poetry — his thoughts on aging. This evolution continued into *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. While *The Wild Swans at Coole* encompassed Yeats entering a more controlled, mature style of writing, the poems in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* fall into two groups: “a set of poems based on the Easter Uprising and the subsequent troubles, and a set which explored aspects of A Vision other than those Yeats had already examined in the poems explicating Mask and Phases” (Unterecker 157). Another interesting note on this set of poems comes from Donald Davie who said “the collection might seem to fall between two stools, between on the one hand the extremely private life of man and wife in love and on the other hand the public life of politics and armed insurrection. A second reading, however, reveals that all but two or three of the poems have one concern in common — the matter of woman’s role in society” (Davie 73). While the role of women in society does appear in these poems, the roles of Yeats’s private life and politics cannot be discounted in this collection.

April 24, 1916 marked the Easter Uprising and was a political event Yeats could not avoid writing about. This date marked the moment when “war becomes actual, when it is fought not by heroes but by men and women one knows, in places one has seen, reality is changed, and the imagination changes too” (Hynes 47). The war finally became personal to Yeats, as he knew
many of the martyrs on a personal basis, and from this moment on, the remainder of Yeats’s war poetry departed from his previous epic and romantic feelings of war (Hynes 47).

Yeats’s poem “Easter 1916” was his memorial to the uprising and those involved. In “Easter 1916,” he would rescind his satirical portrayal of early twentieth century revolutionaries, and pay homage to them in the poem. The narrative of the poem follows the speaker as he passes faces and exchanges meaningless words while walking home. Tributes are given to those, including Padraic Pearse and Thomas McDonagh, who had given their lives to the Irish cause in the twentieth century. And, once again, Yeats uses bird imagery in the line “The horse that comes from the road, / the rider, the birds that range from cloud to tumbling cloud, / minute by minute they change” (Yeats 178). The birds are presented in a chaotic image, similar to the atmosphere that consumed Ireland at the time. As he aged, Yeats became more and more disillusioned with violence as a means for Irish independence, and while he became more disillusioned, old friends (such as Maud Gonne) became more and more extreme in their views. As this distance widened, so did the cracks in several of his friendships.

The third stanza represents the “intellectual crux of the poem” and the birds tumbling represent a transmutation and shows that organic and inorganic entities are united. It is here Yeats uses birds and clouds as a physical manifestation of chaos; the birds exist among “tumbling” clouds and are changed “minute by minute.” These birds live in the midst of an unmoving “stone,” and while the stone does not change, it exists in the midst of the living and nonliving, existing in death and misery. Yeats uses this imagery to convey the coexistence of Irish nationalists and their dedication to Irish independence, but like the birds, they are surrounded by change and chaos.

1 “In July 1916 he [Yeats] said in a note to his bitter poem, ‘September 1913’ that it ‘sounds old fashioned now.’” (Unterecker 220).
If “Easter 1916” represents the nationalist Yeats at this time, “The Second Coming” represents the aging Yeats. “The Second Coming” is a prophetic poem, “based upon his cyclic philosophy of gyres and reincarnation but which, allowance being made for this parable convention, can be taken as a direct prophecy of imminent disaster” (MacNiece 132). With the introduction of gyres into his poetry, Yeats “hoped not only to interpret the past but to predict the future on the basis of the movement of the gyres” (Ellmann, Masks 247). One use of Yeats’s gyres was to symbolize “beauty and truth, value and fact, particular and universal, quality and quantity, the bundle of separated threads as distinguished from those that are still in the pattern, abstracted types and forms as distinguished from those that are still concrete, Man and Daimon, the living and the dead” (Yeats in Ellmann, Masks 231). This concept builds on the duality of “Ego Dominus Tuus,” examined earlier in this thesis.

The poem begins with a direct reference to Yeats’s gyres as well as bird imagery: “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer” (Yeats 187). The falcon’s chaos stems from its inability to hear the falconer, so a human is the catalyst of the confusion. The falcon spiraling out of control is a physical representation of the gyre.

In tune with his mystical beliefs, Yeats believed history operated in cycles, each cycle lasting approximately 2,000 years. The gyre in this poem is then representative of the dissolution of Yeats’s civilization in preparation for the beginning of another. Christ’s birth marked the beginning of the gyre in question, the one nearing its end. The use of the falcon brings a more direct religious and Christian overtone to the poem, and the falcon’s inability to hear the falconer indicates a sense of confusion and mayhem (Stallworthy Norton 2106).

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2 Yeats used gyres to represent cycles of history and personality. On a historic scale, he believed the birth of Christ indicated a new cycle of history. On a personal level, Yeats believed that “life is a journey up a spiral staircase; as we grow older we cover the ground we have covered before, only higher up; as we look down the winding stair below us we measure our progress by the number of places where we were but no longer are” (Stallworthy 2088).
This confusion and mayhem continues when “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (Yeats 187). They gyre is literally spiraling out of control, wreaking havoc upon the world. The uncertainty that the unraveling gyre presents is answered by “Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand” (Yeats 187). Once again a religious reference is made with the use of the word “revelation” and the revelation is directly called the “Second Coming” with the second “surely” line. The speaker’s “surely … surely” presumes and insists equally on everyone’s certainty” (Lynch 3), but a hopeless tone still pervades the poem.

This leads into the appearance of “A shape with lion body and the head of a man” (Yeats 187) whose “twenty centuries of stony sleep / were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle” (Yeats 187). The twenty centuries translates to two thousand years, the length of time Yeats believed history restarted, and the rocking cradle is another religious reference to Christ. The poem ends with “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?” (Yeats 187). This poem ends with a question, a tool Yeats would often use in his later poetry to note a more inflective style of writing, and “once again the form is that of the rhetorical final question in which the awful merger of the self and the idealized other is expressed as the knowing of the unknowable” (Lynch 70). The element of duality once again presents itself and leaves the reader questioning whether this poem is apocalyptic or a promise of a new civilization.

*The Wild Swans at Coole* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* both mark the transition of Yeats from a middle-aged nationalist writer to a more mature writer entering a Modernist mode of writing. He continues to use birds by placing them in realistic, apocalyptic scenes, a characteristic of Modernist poetry. His own maturation and marriage played a fundamental role
in his lyric poetry — Yeats finally felt comfortable in his own skin and comfortable in his marriage. His new poetic techniques would lead into a fully-fledged Modernist style of writing, the last period of writing in his career.
Chapter 5

The Tower, The Winding Stair, and Last Poems

Yeats’s next book of poetry, The Tower, was not published until 1928, seven years after Michael Robartes and the Dancer. By 1928, Yeats was entering his 63rd year, had two young children, had served as an Irish senator, won a Nobel Prize, and was writing as a Modernist poet. In the spirit of Modernist writing, or “the poetic enterprise, seen as emblematic of the problems that face men in a discarded world …. a continual struggle to attain meaning by contemplation and invention” (Parkinson 71), Yeats used his poetry as a source for meditating on old age, impending death, and a life spent fighting for Irish independence. Some of these last poems are Yeats’s greatest and most memorable poems, and he continues to use bird imagery as a tool. As he continued his poetic quest, he would take natural bird imagery and rework it by creating an artificial bird and using it as a representation of a mythological being. Most poignant is his use of a bird in “Under Ben Bulben,” a poem Yeats used to commemorate himself.

The Tower features one of Yeats’s most well known poems, “Sailing to Byzantium.” It marks the capture of Yeats’s imagination by supernaturalism (Ellmann Masks 193). The poem represents his “cultivation of aesthetic sophistication and instinctive drives … the youthful Yeats was confident of his intellectual drives, but felt out of touch with his instinctive drives, his efforts to develop those drives was the pursuit of a lifetime” (Pruitt 149). The theme of the poem “delineates the pursuit of an intellectual, or, if you will, spiritual, passion in order to efface the physical infirmities of old age” (Pruitt 150). In essence, it is Yeats’s celebration of his mental agility over his physical aging.

The poem can be split in half, with the first part as Yeats’s lamentation of old age. The speaker admits “That is no country for old men” (Yeats 191) and “An aged man is but a paltry
thing” (Yeats 191), surrounded by youth, who see sailing to Byzantium as a way to escape mortality (Vendler 37). By the second half of the poem, he chooses “to sing in the Emperor’s palace as a golden bird rather than to sing in God’s holy fire as a sage” (Vendler 37). Yeats’s poetry has reached a level of maturity and fulfillment of his desire to present “insight and knowledge,” rather than “longing and complaint.” He has presented a complaint, and, even though not realistic, has found a solution by sailing to Byzantium, a reflection of his return to the power of the imagination.

Bird imagery becomes prominent in the fourth stanza, while Yeats elaborates on his wish to become an artificial, golden bird. This bird is in contrast to the “birds in the trees, / Those dying generations” (Yeats 193), who are susceptible to death. By choosing to be an artificial bird, the speaker negates the possibility of death. The fact that it is a golden bird is also important. Gold is one the most treasured metals in all cultures, and pure gold can be easily molded to fit a need. By becoming an artificial, golden bird, the speaker can stop aging and exist forever in Byzantium, Yeats’s ideal city.

The golden bird will “set upon a golden bough to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium / Of what is past, or passing, or to come” (Yeats 192). By this stage of his career, Yeats had taken full control of his craft, and, had become the bird. This bird shows a “reconciliation of opposites and symbolizes: (1) the poem itself, the created artifact; (2) the protagonist, who fades into it; and (3) the poet, who becomes what he creates” (Ellmann Masks 252). Yeats’s maturity and control of his craft allow him to use the golden bird to represent the creation of poetry, a solution to a problem, and a representation of his own talents and imagination.

The poem’s overarching theme is “one of transcendence, the narrator abandoning the fraying husk of the body to seek immortality in imperishable form, in a monument of unaging
intellect, his soul being transmuted into the gloriously eternal art of a fabulous, holy city” (Genung 23). Put another way, “the aged man sails to Byzantium where he will lose his heart and natural body, be gathered in the artifice of eternity, and become a singing mechanical bird. But he has lived in the country of the emotional, sensuous, and dying” (Eggenschwiler 187). In this interpretation, Yeats gains eternity without discounting his life in Ireland.

Another poem in The Tower is “Leda and the Swan,” featuring a sexual occurrence between a mortal woman, Leda, and Zeus, in the form of the swan. The theme of the poem is a “feeling he had from childhood, of the tantalizing imperfection of human life; his own experience told him that power and knowledge could never exist together, that to acquire one was to lose the other” (Ellmann Identity x). This theme is similar to Eggenschwiler’s observation above — like the inability of the physical body to last in eternity, power and knowledge cannot exist together either.

Additionally, it is important to note that this swan is similar to the golden bird. Neither is a “real” bird, and both can be seen as symbols of the limits of nature. While the golden bird in “Sailing to Byzantium” is mechanical, the swan is a representation of the god Zeus. By using the birds in this fashion, the creativity and talent of Yeats really shines through. He continued to evolve his bird symbols in intriguing ways. As noted in Chapter 4, the swan was a symbol that Yeats discontinued using in his later poetry — he found in “Leda and the Swan” one last use of the swan without becoming repetitive.

Yeats uses the swan in the poem as a symbol of “divine power and knowledge, [and it is] still brute blood of the air” (Ellmann Identity viii), and “the swan’s flight, like the flight of the falcon, is associated with ‘spiritual’ excitement, tragic rage, and the hysterical feeling of the autoerotic ‘strangeness’ of body parts (whose body? whose heart?) that threatens consciousness
when it is ‘mastered’ by the idealized and omniscient otherness, the indifferent ‘brute of the air’” (Lynch 76). And while the swan has psychological implications on Leda, its physical force is its driving force.

While the swan holds the power in the poem, the reaction centers on Leda, and at the end the speaker asks “Being so caught up, / So mastered by the brute blood of the air, / Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?” (Yeats 214–5). Once again, Yeats ends a poem with a question, and this question reiterates his question of the possibility of knowledge and power existing together. The speaker questions “the disparity between gods and men, between the minds as well as the bodies of Zeus and Leda” (Ellmann, “Yeats Without Analogue” 33). The imperfections of human life are the reason knowledge and power could not exist together, and this was a concept Yeats struggled with throughout his life.

After *The Tower*, Yeats published *The Winding Stair* in 1933, and Yeats stated “sexual abstinence fed their [certain poem’s] fire — I was ill and full of desire” (Tuohy 206). Additionally, “the values declared in *The Winding Stair*, by majority vote if not unanimously, are those of time, place, and human limitation” (Donoghue 114). While this was one of Yeats’s most self-assured and complete collections, he still questioned human life and its inadequacies.

Yeats’s “Byzantium” followed “Sailing to Byzantium” and the “golden bird-soul” (Allen 119) makes a reappearance. In this poem, like the previous Byzantium poem, the bird is an example of “Yeats’s adaptation of the bird-soul symbolism to his own immediate purposes” (Allen 119). Allen states that “a bird is a fairly obvious and appropriate symbol for the disembodied soul” (117) but “one of the most important adaptations or developments of the bird-soul symbolism was his consistent inclusion of bird song in later usages” (119). Yeats is able to
transcend the common uses of bird-soul symbolism by adding actions to his birds — the songs of the golden birds, or the swan’s rape of Leda.

This time, the golden bird can either “like the cocks of Hades crow” or “scorn aloud / … common bird or petal” (Yeats 248). Yeats learned from Eugenie Strong’s *Apotheosis and After Life* that since the cock was herald of the sun, this signified the idea of rebirth. A distinction between the two types of birds — the cocks and the common birds — is the path between living with life and changing life.

One of Yeats’s final poems appeared in *Last Poems*, and he wrote “Under Ben Bulben” essentially as a eulogy of himself. This poem “bring[s] full circle the poetic career of one for whom the circle was a dominant symbol. The themes and interests of his early manhood — Irish folk-lore and history, the occult, Shelley, Blake, and the English Romantic painters of the late nineteenth century — fit like tesserae into the mosaic patterns of his later system” (Stallworthy *Ben Bulben* 53). So, while Yeats’s poetry is unified by themes and images, it is also paradoxically continually evolving.

Yeats repeats the use of the cock in this poem, beginning it with “Swear by what the Sages spoke / Round the Mareotic Lake / That the Witch of Atlas knew, / Spoke and set the cocks a-crow” (Yeats 325). Yeats’s thoughts on rebirth and resurrection come through again with his use of the cock in lines that follow in the poem. For instance, the speaker notes “Many times man lives and dies / Between his two eternities, / That of race and that of soul, / And ancient Ireland knew it all” (Yeats 325). A distinction is made between human (race) life and eternal (soul) life. Yeats viewed death as the “final stage of the purgative process for the man who has dared to face himself …. Life being a preparation for its end, Yeats saw his own

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3 Ben Bulben is a mountain in Sligo that Yeats often visited in his childhood, so this site echoes back to his earlier poetry with its Sligo influence. Nine years after his death, Yeats’s body would be moved and buried at the foot of Ben Bulben (Stallworthy 2121)
approaching death as a necessary part of the heroic ritual” (Ellmann, *Identity* 214). This imagery “is conceivably related to the cock that crowed over Saint Peter” (Stallworthy *Ben Bulben* 42) after his denial of Jesus Christ. The impending death of Jesus is similar to the reality Yeats faced at the time — his own impending death. Yeats did not see his poetic legacy ending after he died — it would continue after his life on earth was ended.

Yeats’s life would end in 1939, after a career that saw him become Ireland’s greatest poet. He overcame “various crises in his career, for poetic survival and, indeed supremacy” (Sidnell, *Yeats* 74). His survival as a poet was marked by his maturation, which evidences itself through his use of bird imagery in his poetry, and “by his constant advance and change in subject-matter and style, by his devotion to his craft and his refusal to accept placidity to which his years entitled him, he lived several lifetimes in one and made his development inseparable from that of modern verse and, to some extent, modern man” (Ellmann, *Masks* 1). From birds in simple, pastoral scenes, to those in political situations, and finally in mystical, highly imaginative scenes, these shifts show Yeats’s continual honing of his craft and dedication to his growth as a writer. This honing and dedication produced poetry still revered today — poetry that will continue to be read and respected into the future.
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