



The Significance of Phantasmagoria in W. B. Yeats's "The Wild Swans at Coole"

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Abstract

This study studies the significance of Yeats's phantasmagoria and discusses its constructive role in the poem "The Wild Swans at Coole". Yeats speaks of the significant role of phantasmagoria in the preface to *The Wild Swans at Coole* and introduces it as a means through which he can express his convictions of the world. The poet, according to Yeats, never speaks directly; there is always a phantasmagoria involved. The term phantasmagoria can be regarded as a key concept in Yeats's *The Wild Swans at Coole*. A deep interpretation of the poems of this collection necessitates a close study of the images and symbols constructing the related phantasmagoria. It is the analysis of the phantasmagoric images and symbols of the poems that helps reveal both the poet's mind and its development. Yeats's phantasmagoria is extensive and has multiple facets. It can be traced in various forms in different poems. Its vivid presence can well be noticed in the elegies, personal love lyrics, and philosophical poems of *The Wild Swans at Coole*.

Keywords: *Phantasmagoria; W.B. Yeats; "The Wild Swans at Coole"; The Wild Swans at Coole*

1. Introduction

In the preface to *The Wild Swans at Coole*, W.B. Yeats speaks of the significant role of phantasmagoria in his poetry by introducing "the phantasmagoria through which alone I can express my convictions about the world" (qtd. in Murry 1920, p.39). His statement is direct and clear. Right at the beginning, the essential plan and the constructive basis of the whole collection are given. Yeats's statement is suggestive of his angle of vision which can even include the direct transcription of common reality whether found in the sensible world or in the emotion and picture of the mind. According to *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word "phantasmagoria" is a "shifting series of phantasms, illusions, or deceptive appearances, as in a dream or as created by the imagination". It is derived from the word "phantasm which is a fleeting moment, a phantom, and apparition. Phantasmagoria is said to be a multiplicity of phantasms; it introduces the realm of magical vision and heightened perception, of fantasy and dream imagery, of hallucination. Most psychiatrists believe that all human perception is, in fact,

hallucinatory in nature and that we synthesize all we hallucinate and call it life. According to Carl Jung, phantasmagoria are archetypal forms, patterns, images and symbols which “codify our perceptual experience and, as art, render it permanent, since the mind organizes impressions into archetypal forms that recur in human societies worldwide as they develop over centuries” (qtd. in Coleman 2006).

In literature, phantasmagoria is wide ranging: it can be traced back to Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the works of Lewis Carroll, Charles Baudelaire, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, to innumerable science fiction and fantasy tales and even in a descriptive passage taken from a poetic glimpse and rapturous extraneous visions including both the personal and the impersonal. It is in these most complicated moments that the full spectrum of phantasmagoria is perceived; during the occurrence of a literary vision, the artist visits and experiences the initial fascination with the awesome phantasmagoric motifs, phenomena, symbols or patterns afresh. Yeats, following Rimbaud, Baudelaire and Poe, grew strongly fond of phantasmagoria during the nineties. He believes in Baudelaire’s view of the poet as a seer, as a person who has the ability of seeing through and beyond the real world and he can let the mind float in the world of ideal forms and essence. Yeats’s theory of the relationship between microcosm and macrocosm is also rooted in Baudelaire’s idea of the existence “of a real constitutive analogy between our soul and the universe” (Moore 180). Phantasmagoria designated for him that structure of related images through which he could express himself and through which, as he later said, “the dream and the reality” might “face one another in visible array” (qtd. in Ellmann 1954, p.62). It also has furnished him with a group of universal images that have attracted men for hundred of years and has paved the way for him to unite effectively what is personal and transitory with what is impersonal and permanent.

The outbreak of the violent revolution of Easter 1916 had a great impact on Yeats’s mind and attitudes. The failure of the struggles made him begin to view the world as a complicated drama in which he was no longer able to participate as he once did. He took refuge in the occult practices and particularly in what he called phantasmagoria. As symbolists believe, it is the human imagination that constructs the world that we perceive. Imagination’s production is not a mere reflection of the given forms of external objects. Aided by images and symbols, the poet’s mind is able to surpass his ordinary self and to achieve a preternatural level of being and perception.

Yeats declares that imagination acts as the true interpreter of reality shared by all men at all times. He goes on saying that “we must cry out that imagination is always seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and patterns of that Great Mind” (qtd. in Lentricchia 1968, p.43). Yeats’s view of reality as consisting of moods, and his view of moods as having an eternal or archetypal character, might hinder the reader from making a precise decision as to what stand for the phantasmagoric images, but a careful study of the symbolic patterns and structures of his poetry can undoubtedly assist one in grasping a deeper, if not a precise, insight into his poems.

2. Objective and Scope of the Study

The purpose of this study is to make some poems from W.B. Yeats’s *The Wild Swans at Coole*, particularly the poem “The Wild Swans at Coole” understandable to the reader on the basis of the images and symbols that construct Yeats’s personal phantasmagoria. As Catherine Cook Smith believes, “the idea of the symbol is central in understanding Yeats’s poetry” (Smith 1930, p.58). Therefore, the significant symbols of most poems of this collection will be analyzed. Writers and poets, who are also talented in criticism, usually try to practice the philosophy and ideas they put forth in their critical essays. This study tries to illustrate how successful Yeats is in expressing his ideas and emotions in the poems of *The Wild Swans at Coole* by means of phantasmagoria. Yeats, like Goethe, believes that the great artists cannot produce masterpieces without any philosophy. To Yeats, such philosophy “has evoked their most startling inspiration, calling into outer life some portion of divine life or of the buried reality” (Yeats 1899, p. 29). The philosophy underlying his poems, though his own, bears affinity to that of the Romantic

poets, especially Blake and Shelley. He reviews the way they used primary and magical symbols in their poetry. A. G. Lehmann defines the Yeatsian symbols as “any representation serving as a sign of general mood which either tradition or supernatural decree has invested with powerful emotional resources” (qtd. in Ellmann 1954, p.62). Therefore, tradition and the supernatural are the two sources of the symbolism that appears in his poetry.

3. Significance of the Study

The significance of phantasmagoria in Yeats’s poetry is not yet discussed in detail by critics while it is indisputable. Yeats himself believes that a poet always talks about his personal life and that there is always a phantasmagoria involved. A study of Yeats’s phantasmagoria and the elements that have constructed it, i.e. images, icons and symbols are indispensable in the reader's attempt to get insight into his poetry. The significance of Yeats’s phantasmagoria depends on the power of the images and symbols constructing it. Symbols, to Yeats act as a recourse to which he refers to set his imagination free to fly high and discover the higher or spiritual realities: “It gave dumb things, voices and bodiless things bodies” (Loizeaux 2003, pp 1-2 & 50). Yeats’s obsession with symbolism is rooted in the fact that symbolism could say things which cannot be said so perfectly in any other possible way.

4. Review of Literature

Yeats’s collection *The Wild Swans at Coole*, published in 1919, marks a turning point in the trajectory of his poetic career. At the time of its publication, Yeats was already well-known and, as C.K. Stead states, was “widely regarded as the most important living poet writing in English” (Stead 1986, p.13). Richard Ellmann, a great critic of Yeats’s poetry and plays, in his prominent book *The Identity of Yeats* discusses the phantasmagoric and symbolic structures found in his works. As he states, phantasmagoria designated for Yeats that structure of related images through which he expressed himself and through which as he himself once said, “the dream and the reality face one another in visible array” (62). He also goes on to trace two symbolic and phantasmagoric structures in his works: the first built up from his boyhood and is retained until after 1900, the other appearing mainly from 1915 to 1929. As Ellmann believes, a clearly articulated structure is missing in the poems composed from about 1903 to about 1914. The power of the second symbolic structure is noticeably abated from about 1935 to his death in 1939.

The years before and during the composition of the poems of *The Wild Swans at Coole* were hard times for Yeats; a series of catastrophic personal, national and international events took place, all of which had a role in forming the framework of the poems ultimately arranged in this collection. The first world war, the death of Hugh Lane, the violent outbreak of Easter 1916, the dismemberment of Lady Gregory’s estate, the death of Maud Gonne’s husband, Maud Gonne's and her daughter’s rejection of him, his marriage and the death of Robert Gregory left a great impact on Yeats’s life and poetry. He started to view the real world as a complicated drama in which he was assigned no prominent role, for recourse he turned to his imaginative world of images and symbols, i.e., phantasmagoria. As John Unterecker, another great critic of Yeats’s poetry, in his *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats* observes, the design of the poems of *The Wild swans at Coole* is “Death, life, and the patterns of Life and Death” (131). Yeats’s masks transferred from his phantasmagoria into the poems of this collection are also introduced as “survivor, Defeated Lover, and Scholar. The progression is from uncomplicated personal statement to an elaborate presentation of the intricate image on which *A Vision* is founded” (131).

It would be no exaggeration if J.Middleton Murry’s account of Yeats’s use of phantasmagoria in his poems, especially in those included in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, be regarded as unfair or as

Graham Martin says, “one of the strangest misjudgments in the history of Modern criticism” (54). In his “Mr. Yeats’s Swan Song” from *Aspects of Literature*, J. Middleton Murry, focuses on Yeats’s notion of phantasmagoria and states that “the poet, if he is a poet, is driven to approach the highest reality he can apprehend. He cannot transcribe it simply because he does not possess it his passion would flag” (39). He goes on to question Yeats’s visionary powers: “Mr. Yeats has too little of the power to be able to vindicate himself completely from the charge of idle dreaming” (41). He shockingly enough concludes that “The Wild Swans at Coole” is indeed a swan’s song. It is eloquent of final defeat; the following of a lonely path has ended in the poet’s sinking exhausted in a wilderness of grey. Not even the regret is passionate, it is pitiful” (44).

Graham Martin’s criticism of Murry’s understatement of Yeats’s poetry in his *Countries of the Mind* is also noticeable. In his essay “The Wild Swans at Coole”, he proves it being mere misjudgments by referring to some quite helpful facts from both Yeats’s life and his poetry. He focuses primarily on Murry’s description of Yeats’s state of mind while composing the poems of the collection, i.e. on the statement that he “has the apparatus, but no potency in his soul” (qtd. in Martin 54). Martin believes that though it is generally admitted that some of the poems of *The Wild swans at Coole* express exhaustion or defeat, and one or two others complain of the sacrifices which the artist had to demand of the man, “Murry’s sweeping diagnosis rests on more than these poems” (54); he considers the whole collection. He goes on to comment on Murry’s statement that “He is empty now” (Murry 1920, p.45) by claiming that “in the case of *The Wild swans [at Coole]* it quickly becomes evident that the poems Murry reviewed are much too various to express anything simple or definite about Yeats in 1918-19 without, at least, certain preliminaries” (54).

In defense of *The Wild Swans at Coole*’s structure, Martin first distinguishes between two editions of the poems: a Cuala edition of twenty-nine poems and the play “At the Hawk’s Well”, published in 1917; and a Macmillan edition of forty-six poems, published in 1919. He states that the omission of “Easter 1916” from both volumes and the intentional delay in publishing some personal poems written before 1917 bespeaks of the fact that “Yeats’s book-making was no casual affair” (Martin 1966, p.55). Pursuing this approach, John Unterecker’s commentary on the volume also assumes that “the order of the poems expresses a meaningful design--‘Death, Life, and the patterns of Life and Death’ ” (qtd. in Martin 1966, p. 55). Graham Martin also observes that the forty-six poems of the Macmillan volumes are written over seven years from January 1912 to January-February 1919. Not only is this the longest span covered by a single collection, but also it comes from a period when Yeats’s poetry was blossoming amidst its most radical developments. Taking all the afore-mentioned preliminaries into consideration, Murry’s statement, i.e., “He is empty now” (45) seems to flicker away.

A. Norman Jeffares, a truly eminent critic of Yeats’s poetry, in his comprehensive *A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, states that the main intellectual interest of *The Wild Swans at Coole* lies in the poems it includes which occasionally deal with the system of *A Vision*. As he believes, Yeats, in part, “regained his poetic energy (whose loss he had lamented in *The Green Helmet*) by using poetry as a vehicle for his strange thoughts [i.e., his personal phantasmagoria] and for his own personal life” (Jeffares 1984, p.129). He goes on to give a description of some of the features of the poems in *The Wild Swans at Coole*. He believes that beside the innovations in subject matter, they reveal Yeats’s developing use of ancestors and friends as subjects for poetry: “he is now more prepared to delineate details of personality just as he is to use personal names” (130).

Curtis B. Bradford’s opinion of Yeats’s *The Wild Swans at Coole*, is also significant. In his *Yeats at Work*, he describes the collection as a “typical and brilliant Yeatsian meditation, clearly a personal utterance from first to last which already avoids the danger that mere accident may intrude into and spoil such utterance” (Bradford 1965, p.63). He also makes an important remark, that is, regarding *The Wild Swans at Coole*, as “the enlargement of Yeats’s art which took place during the middle years, an enlargement that is intellectual as well as technical” (63).

Balachandra Rajan's opinion of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, which is expressed in his *W.B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction*, is no less significant than others'. As he believes, the collection stands judiciously balanced between the sense of withering away and its growing knowledge of the truth. *The Wild Swans at Coole* begins with "the muted melancholy of the title poem and ends with the bleak ambivalences of the "Double Vision of Michael Robartes. . .it moves through the deaths of friends and the persistence of love to a harsher world which the light of the vision dominates" (Rajan 1965, p.107).

Herbert J. Levin in " 'Freeing the Swans': Yeats's Exorcism of Maud Gonne" states that at the time of *The Wild Swans at Coole*'s publication, Yeats is regarded as being "less arch, less vulnerable, less self-obsessed, more fully human than at any other time in his career" (Levin 1981, p.411). He also agrees with those commentators on Yeats who decidedly prefer Yeats's poetry written between 1915 to 1919, i.e., the years during which the poems of *The Wild Swans at Coole* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* were composed.

According to Jahan Ramazani, death was W. B. Yeats's muse, and his best poems are his meditations on loss and decay. In his immensely learned book, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Selfelegy, and the Sublime*, Ramazani reviews Yeats's elegies, self-elegies in the sublime mode. He also analyses Yeats's love lyrics with close revisionist readings of his individual poems, and traces interrelations between the lyrics and the traditions that inspired them.

4. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Phantasmagoria, originating from the poet's visionary imagination, is a key concept in Yeats's *The Wild swans at Coole*. Therefore, a study of this concept and the related images and symbols as its components can lead to a deeper interpretation of the poems of this collection, its titled poem in particular. The analysis of the phantasmagoric images and symbols of the poems, reveals both the poet's mind and its development. Applying eclectic approach to this study is quite helpful, since it makes room for analyzing the poems from different angles and scopes.

5. Discussion

5.1. Phantasmagoria

As Yeats believes, the poet has always his phantasmagoria, his personal imaginative world of ideas and emotions; it is not important whether the elements of this phantasmagoria are the mythologies of a Homer or Dante, the characters chosen from romance and history of a Shakespeare or even the moods and emotions of Yeats himself. The message Yeats tries to bring home is that the poet's personal phantasmagoria and that of his poems will be the same and that the object it creates will be identical, in the same as the "golden bird" of "Sailing to Byzantium" is both poet and his works. What Yeats, as a critic, emphasizes in his idea of phantasmagoria is the objects, the images and the icons which can give pattern and meaning to experience. As he himself believes, his phantasmagoria absorbs the mass of sensations produced by the writer and his work; it reproduces them in its own iconography and patterns, "its own phenomenology on the written page, creating a verbal structure analogous to the phantasmagoric process, the argumentation of the5 critical statement paralleling the mental process of the critic" (Fallis 1976, p. 72).

Phantasmagoria is all that we do not expect to see in real life, unless we are seeing outside of what is generally agreed upon to be objective reality. A poet's peace of mind is achieved there in the sphere of the phantasmagoric; his personal phantasmagoria is the medium through which he can communicate his innermost levels of thoughts and feelings to the external world. W.B. Yeats expresses his convictions about the world through phantasmagoric images, icons and symbols that are transferred

from his personal phantasmagoria to his poems. His phantasmagoria is a personal imaginative world of ideas, emotions, and symbols on which most of his poems are based.

The imagery and symbols constructing phantasmagoria are usually chosen arbitrarily by the poet to represent his specific ideas which make it a complicated but an undoubtedly substantial angle for the reader to penetrate.

5.2. The Significance of Symbols

A symbol is not an imitation of the world; it is a product of imagination and is closely related to the mind that has created it. It is through symbols that one is able to “discover more about reality than is revealed in the phenomenal” (Sunkal 1971, p.81). Another significant aspect of the symbols is the depth and variety of meanings they add to the language. As Yeats himself believes, “It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings beside the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of nature.” (72) Yeats’s idea of correspondence in symbolism has been influenced by several other ideas from which Carl Jung’s ideas are noticeable. Carl Jung believes that symbols can be considered as the product of Anima Mundi, Absolute Ego or the Collective Unconscious. Yeats similarly states that “certain forms or symbols have acquired a definite meaning of the unconscious mind in which we all have a share, and form, language that is understood by. . .the dark side of the mind” (Smith 1930, p. 65). Swedenburg’s idea of the relationship between the spiritual world and the ordinary world also had some influence on Yeats’s idea of symbolism. Kant’s view of the relationship between the noumenal and phenomenal world can also be traced in Yeats’s view that the microcosm is related to the macrocosm through symbols. As a matter of fact, symbolism is often used as a method of uniting the internal and the external or projecting the internal onto the external. When it comes to explaining the phantasmagoric elements and their relationship to both the interior world of the imaginative mind of the poet and the exterior world, the importance of the symbols as explicators is highlighted.

Yeats’s later poetry is based on his system of symbols, and as Ellmann believes, “it is hard to find specific images which are incomprehensible to someone who has not read *A Vision*” (235).

Although a general interpretation of the poems is possible, it is strongly recommended that the reader should have prior knowledge of his system of symbols in *A Vision* in order to obtain a better insight into the ideas embedded in the poems. As Abjadian states, “he tried to create a cult from poetry, folklore and magic. . .he produced his own Bible, *A Vision*, which is the outcome of his sensuality to the disorder of the modern world” (Abjadian 2000, p.464). “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes” for instance is filled with *A Vision*-based material. The time of the first section of the poem, in lunar terms, is phase 1, “When the old moon is vanished from the sky/ And the new still hides her horn” (Yeats 1994, p. 144). Yeats sets his hero “on the rock of Gashel, Tipperary, where Cormac Mac Carthy had in the twelfth century built the now ruined ‘house’ in which Michael Robartes has his double vision” (Unterecker 1967, p.154) or Yeats has his personal phantasmagoria. The phantasmagoric interpenetrating image of the bat that appears at the end of “The Phases of the Moon” is by itself related to the central image of *A Vision*. In a note to “The Phases of the Moon”, Yeats elucidates the use to which he has put the characters of this poem, Aherne and Robartes: “They take their place in a phantasmagoria in which I endeavor to explain my philosophy of life and death. To some extent I wrote these poems as a text for exposition” (qtd. in Unterecker 1967, p.149). “The Phases of the Moon” includes, if not a full exposition, a summary of *A Vision*.

Yeats insists on the existence of numerous connections between his system and the traditional occult system with which he got familiar when he was in the society of Golden dawn. His *A Vision* relies heavily on symbolism and diagrams. He has introduced the spiral cones, twenty-eight phases of the moon and the Great Wheel in his book as his system. These concepts and symbols are all in the service of

constructing the poet's phantasmagoria through which alone he can express his emotions and ideas which have made the poems of *The Wild Swans at Coole* what they are.

5.2.1. The Phantasmagoric Symbols

Two phantasmagoric or symbolic structures can be traced in Yeats's poetry: the first built up from boyhood and retained after 1900. The other accumulated mainly from 1903 to 1914, which lacks a clearly articulated structure though it has occasional elements of the early and late ones.

Toward the last years of Yeats's life, that is, from about 1935 to his death in 1939, the power of the second phantasmagoric structure is distinctly abated. If the early structure is largely made up of familiar symbols treated in an unfamiliar way, the later structure contains much less common phantasmagoric images that Yeats attempts to make seem familiar. W.B. Yeats in "A General Introduction for My Work" insists that a poet "writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria" (qtd. in Fallis 1976, p.71). In his poetry the poet is reborn as an idea and like the images of "Byzantium", he is "more type than men, more passion than type" (71) and finally becomes "part of his own phantasmagoria and we adore him because nature has grown intelligible, and by so doing a part of our creative power" (71).

In Yeats's view, the phantasmagoric image or symbol can be regarded as a member of the external world that is related to a supernatural unity; in his poetry, the power of the image is emphasized in order to make analogies; moreover, to penetrate to the Great Memory. The affinity felt between Yeats's idea of Great Memory and Carl Jung's idea of the collective unconscious or racial memory can not be overlooked; Yeats is in fact referring to Jung's philosophy. In "The Philosophy of Shelley's poetry", he states that "our little memories are but a part of some great memory that renews the world and men's thoughts age after age, and that our thoughts are not, as we suppose, the deep but a little foam upon the deep" (qtd. in Saddlemeyer 1967, p.110). Yeats's Anima Mundi is strongly reminiscent of Jung's idea of universal unconscious, and quite related to Mme Balavatsky's idea "that Anima Mundi, a reservoir of all that has touched mankind, may be evoked by symbols" (Tindall 1961, p.244). Yeats expresses three doctrines in his essay called "Magic": That the borders of our minds are ever shifting and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy. 2) the borders of our memories are always shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself; and 3) this great mind and Great Memory can be evoked by symbols. (40). What makes these doctrines significant is their bespeaking of the fact that the past believed in what we now believe. It is the magic of imagination that makes the external world objects correspond to a higher reality through being connected to our Great Memory.

Yeats in "The Symbolism of poetry" declares that "we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination that . . . wishes to gaze upon some reality" (32). This type of reality is beyond our senses and thoughts; consequently, molding it into something tangible is unreachable unless "words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious life as the body of a flower or a woman" (32). The symbols and images used in the construction of phantasmagoria evoke the presence of the infinite or what Yeats calls the Great Mind. The borders of our mind are open to any change in the Great Mind; our mind can become part of this consciousness only through inspiring images and symbols. The moment of creation during which the production and the reception of the texture joined through Anima Mundi, is a moment in which we are both asleep and awake. It can also be described as the threshold in which the mind is liberated from the pressure of the will and works under the function of imagination.

Yeats states that the memory is evoked through consciousness, moments of trance, contemplation or "the moment when we are both asleep and awake." He adds that, "in making and understanding of a work of art, and the more easily if it is full of patterns and symbols and music, we are lured to the

threshold of sleep” (32). Yeats proclaims that poets in moments of contemplation, receive the “creative impulse from the lowest of the nine Hierchies, and so make and unmake mankind . . .for does not ‘the eye altering alter all?’” (31) As Wilson states, “Yeats believed in a collective unconscious which would operate to suggest his archetypal meaning to all readers” (13). Yeats’s use of private symbols in his personal phantasmagoria and poetry is rooted in his growing interest in mysticism, magic and occult theologies of the Hermetic and Kabalistic tradition. Images and symbols play an important role in the composition of Yeats’s poems. It is the fact of which the poet is quite aware, for in “Ego Dominus Tuus”, he hints at that when he says, “I seek an image, not a book/ Those men that in their writings are most wise/ Own nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts” (Yeats 1994, p.134). He explains it best in “Upon a dying Lady”: “I have no speech but symbol, the pagan speech I made/ Amid the dreams of youth” (133). It should be noted that though insistence on mystery has its own haunting beauty about it, more often than not, it results in the obscurity in language, especially with the system of symbols in which the correspondence between a concrete term and its associations seems private to the artist.

Yeats was obsessed with magic and occult which furnished him with the subject matter of many of his poems and plays which make the reader ponder over his symbols and imagery to get the kernel of his ideas. Lentricchia describes Yeats’s symbolism as a magical one: All art is not mere story-telling or mere pictures, it is symbolic, and has the purpose of these symbolic talismans, which medieval magicians made with complex color and forms, and bade their patients ponder over daily, and guard with holy secrecy; for it entangles, in complex color and forms, a part of the Divine Essence. (50)

In his “The Symbolism of Poetry”, Yeats talks about two types of symbols, i.e., emotional and intellectual symbols. Emotional symbols stimulate the reader’s emotion, that is, they can make the reader feel either attracted or disgusted through the images evoked by the symbol. Under the spell of such symbols, the reader is so peculiarly moved that even he himself cannot tell. Intellectual symbols, on the other hand, evoke ideas alone or ideas blended with emotions. They are primarily there to invade the mind of the reader with the idea that the poet has in mind. As Yeats believes, “if the symbols are merely emotional, the reader gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world, but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession” (33). He apparently prefers symbols that are both intellectual and emotional. Intellectual symbols convey wisdom and such symbols never become old, the more they are used, the richer they become. For his symbols, Yeats rarely gives direct references. He makes use of Greek, Roman and Christian mythology in his poems to signify his symbols. He also has his “personal mythology and a related symbolism, partly in the manner of Blake” (Henn 1965, p.123).

Yeats’s poetry is not so filled with Irish mythology as his Cuchulian plays are, but still it is not devoid of his personal Irish mythology. In his search for an appropriate tradition, as David Daiches states, Yeats went first to Romantic literature, and then to mysticism of one kind or another, to folklore, theosophy, spiritualism, Neo-Platonism, and finally elaborated a symbolic system of his own, based on a variety of sources and in terms of this was able to give pattern and coherence to the expression of his thought. (107) In Yeats’s poetry, two structures can be perceived; the early structure is basically composed of familiar symbols which are treated in an unfamiliar way, “while the latter structure contains much less common symbols which Yeats made to seem familiar” (Ellmann 1954, p. 63-64).

The early structure is related to the time when he was a young poet and the latter refers to his mature years of life. In *A Vision*, Yeats explains the second structure, but does not mention the first one. The first structure is the rose symbol that belongs to the arbitrary symbols which consist of “cross, lily, bird, water, tree, moon and sun” (Tindall 1961, p.47). The idea of gyres and phases of the moon that he has introduced in *A Vision* appears in his poetry after he witnesses Georgie Hyde Lees’s (his wife’s) automatic writing. In his book, he renders the views of history according to his own system; *A Vision* is composed of a group of interrelated symbols that are basically there to elucidate the rhythms and basic pattern of both natural and supernatural existence. He also believes he has obtained the metaphors for his

poetry through having communication with some spirits. Gyres or vortex are regarded by Yeats as a series of expanding cones that can be used in order to interpret history. The gyre is usually depicted as a double cone; the narrower end of each cone is set in the center of the broad end of the other, Smith describes it as “the apex at the center of the other’s widest arc” (108). The gyre can be applied to each man’s life, as well as history; the double cones are divided by horizontal bends which in their own turn illustrate the correspondence between different ages. The two cones are in contrast with each other and it is the contrast that leads to their movement. The double cones are different in that while one is expanding, the other is contracting or when one of them increases, the other diminishes. As Balachandra Rajan observes, the gyres are “fundamentally diagrams of conflict” (83). Gyres seem to be constantly at war with each other and take turns in being victorious in a series of fights. All this is quite reminiscent of what William Blake says about the significance of contraries emphasized by William Blake who in his "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" says, "Without contraries there is no progression." Another significant intellectual symbol mentioned in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, is that of the Great Wheel which can be considered as another restatement of the gyres equipped with twenty-eight spokes corresponding to twenty-eight phases of the moon. As Unterecker states, the Great Wheel which represents everything, is “represented as well as the twenty eight basic phases of each cycle of world history” (Unterecker 1967, p.27).

The Wheel represents the cyclical movement of history as well as the cycle of incarnations of an individual. The movement of the wheel provides the man with the opportunity to seek the opposite of his condition and obtain his object as far as it is obtainable. The opposition is a recurrent motif in the Great Wheel and phases of the moon in terms of waning and waxing of the moon. His mask or antiself can be considered as the man’s opposite. Intellectual symbols, some of which can be noted in some poems of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, are preferred by Yeats, since it is “the intellect that decides where the reader should ponder over the procession of the symbol” (Yeats 33). The richness of implication that the intellectual symbols possesses activates the mind’s imagination and leads one’s thought to extensive analysis and creates more correspondence between the images and symbols that have obsessed one’s mind and constructed the personal phantasmagoria through which alone the poet can express his conviction about the world.

5.3. The Phantasmagoric Lamentation

W. B. Yeats’s phantasmagoria plays a decisive role in his elegies, for the elegies included in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, i.e. , “The Wild Swans at Coole”, “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”, “Upon Dying Lady” and “Lines Written in Dejection”.do owe their beauty and strength to the apt phantasmagoric images and symbols constructing them. A close study of these images and symbols is highly suggestive, for it helps reveal Yeats’s fortifying elegiac elements designed in a way as to attain his poetic purposes. In the years 1916 and 1917, no theorizing about fact and mask, the miracle of transformation, and no autobiographical apologies could hide from Yeats the fact that his personal life was still inadequate. Being fifty years old and utterly cognizant of the loss of his imaginative and power, Yeats felt plagued by an adolescent insecurity. Maud Gonne’s final rejection of his proposal added to his bitter feelings of frustration. He was, in fact, an unsettled, sensitive and lonely man in need of companionship. Being an old bachelor with a new style and method, he filled most of his poems composed during these years with phantasmagoric laments for his lost youth. This regretful lament is even put at the center of almost all his elegies written in those years.

It was quite natural for Yeats to start to ponder over old age and meditate on his lost youth. In October 1916, he finished composing the poem “The Wild Swans at Coole” with the theme of old age put at its very center. According to Curtis B. Bradford, “in this characteristic work, Yeats uses what is nearest to him and most familiar, a walk along Coole water, to express a universal state of mind and emotion” (48). In the first speculation of the poem, as Richard Ellmann states in

The Identity of Yeats, “the fifth stanza came after the second” (153) and the third stanza was put at the end. As Ellmann believes, by doing so, Yeats “emphasized his personal deprivation in time and made possible the symbolic reading that his awakening would be his death, a paradox well within his intellectual boundaries” (253). Ronald Schuchard in his essay “Hawk and Butterfly: The Double Vision of *The Wild Swans at Coole*”, traces some signs of the liberation of visionary imagination, “the transference of rational thoughts into magical images, the recovery of a joy and an ecstasy that had abandoned his poems for over a decade” (211). Schuchard describes *The Wild Swans at Coole*, as Yeats’s Prufrock volume in which his poetic sensibility is tormented by a growing consciousness of age, by his awareness of a higher plane of existence that is presently inaccessible to him, by an intense awareness of an intellectual and emotional predicament from which he is powerless to extricate himself. (212)

In order to construct an effective phantasmagoric lament in “The Wild Swans at Coole”, Yeats invites to his phantasmagoria, “the trees in their autumn beauty”, the dry woodland paths, the October twilight, a still sky and the brimming water and he inserts the sensual beauty of nine-and-fifty swans, for the aging Yeats views the wild swans as unaging. Yeats believes that symbols can possess several different meanings. His use of the swan symbol perfectly illustrates his view of symbols. The speaker of the poem, i.e., the “I”, regardless of its being dramatic or biographical, perceives the swans as lovers that possess the passion and vigor of he is deprived. In his phantasmagoria, the swans are also his lost youth and the repetitive act of counting them keeps him in an illusory contact with it. The brief phantasmagoric encounter collapses the moment the swans lift from the lake and he loses his transient hold over the swans, for the swans will be to some other “lake’s edge or pool” (Yeats 1994, p. 107) and delight some other men’s eyes, not the speaker’s. The swans’ flight reminds him of his present state, he can no longer command the birds; he is rather commanded by them. The phantasmagoric nostalgia steps in to make him lament the loss once more:

But now they drift on the still water
 Mysterious, beautiful;
 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? (167)

The perception “When I awake some day / To find they have flown away”, is broken off by Yeats’s phantasmagoric lament for his broken heart: “I have looked upon those brilliant creatures / And now my heart is sore” (Yeats 1994, p. 107). As Herbert J. Levine believes, “Yeats prefers to keep the swans floating on the lake, where he can continue to possess what is left to him of their special meaning” (419). The movement of the swans, i.e., paddling or climbing are not so significant as the contrast they make with the poet’s poignant mind and their companionable hearts, which unlike that of the solitary poet, have not grown old. This very idea that for the wild swans “Passion or conquest, wander where they will/ Attend upon them still” (Yeats 1994, p.107), ignites the relentless memory of an out-of-reach ideal past but it is instantly quenched when the present view of his filled with self-pity steps in.

In the self-elegiac “The Wild Swans at Coole”, the poet tries to count the swans setting in motion the mental operation that “kant describes as the mathematical sublime” (Ramazani 1990, p.116), but the act of counting stops the moment the swans mount above the poet. They transport his mind “with an intimation of incalculable aggregates” (116) which leads only to his lamentable fall from the dream of the sublime into self-pity. The “nine-and-fifty” (107) swans are placed against “the nineteen autumns” in the phantasmagoric picture formed in the poet’s mind.

Unlike the speaker himself, the swans seem to have remained unchanged and “unwearied still”; They will not accompany him for a long time; that is the fact that he, sadly enough, comes to realize. They, however, linger enough to pose a question for the reader: Why should the number of the wild swans directly referred to in the last line of the first stanza be exactly “nine and- fifty”? Apparently, the number fifty-nine does not refer to any personal concern of Yeats, such as his age.

As Joseph F. Vogel states, “the number fifty-nine occurs in no well-known poems-perhaps in no poems- except ‘Thomas Rymer’ and ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ gives added grounds for thinking that Yeats derived it from the ballad and perhaps even intended to allude to the ballad” (298). According to Francis J. Child, when Thomas meets “the queen of fair Elfland”, who escorts him away to live in her domain, he notices that “At ilka telle of her horse’s mane/Hung fifty silver bells and nine” (qtd. in Vogel 1968, p.298).

The allusion to the ballad “Thomas Rymer” highlights the affinity felt between the ballad and “The Wild Swans at Coole”. The speaker’s enchantment with the beautiful and mysterious swans and his later recognition of the fact that the treacherous time separates him from their company is not much unlike Thomas’s meeting with the lovely queen “followed by his learning that after seventy years he will have to leave the world of the fairies” (Vogel 1968, p. 299). The very correspondence between “The Wild Swans at Coole” and the ballad gives enrichment to the meaning of “now my heart is sore” (Yeats 1994, p.107). In his phantasmagoric lament, the speaker recalls his first joy and concludes the fairyland atmosphere with later poignant expectation of loss. Thomas’s sad departure from the lovely queen of the fairyland can be felt in the speaker’s concluding prediction that he “will awake some day to find the swans have flown away”. Beside the lost youth, the speaker’s own death can also be inferred from the sad departure from the swans.

The constant and recurrent visits made to the Coole Park are faced with the imminent threat of decay, for the “bell-beat of their wings” that once brought him exaltation, now rings the warning bells for him: a phase of life is ending. The recognition of the difference between the speaker’s status and that of the wild swans is now gained. He has looked upon the “brilliant creatures” and now his heart is sore, for nothing is the same as it used to be nineteen years ago when he was a young vigorous man with his own vehement passion not much unlike the wild swans:

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. (107)

5.4. The Significance of the Swan as a Symbol

The symbolic significance of the swans can by no means be overlooked, for the swan is the symbol of a great complexity. The swan “always points to the complete satisfaction of a desire, the swansong being a particular allusion to desire which brings about its own death” (Cirlot 1962, p. 306). The affinity between Yeats’s swan and Thomas Rymer’s fairy queen can be best felt in Bachelard’s description of the white swan: “in poetry and literature it is an image of a naked woman, of chaste nudity and immaculate whiteness” (qtd. in Cirlot 1962, p. 506). To Helen Sword, “swans are graceful, like the rhythms of poetry; white like an unwritten page; romantic, singing only at the moment of death” (320). The swan connotes purity, strength and immortality; it is the emblem of godhead and “receives its significance as the symbol of inspiration” (Melchiori 1961, p.140). As George Brandson believes, “

Swans are emblematical of triumphant love-unwearing, mysterious, beautiful, not grown old at heart- in contrast to human beings who are subject to decay and mutation” (254).

The wild swans, in a sense, stand for the life-force, for their hearts “have not grown old” (Yeats 1994, p.107). They are also vigorous; they do not just fly through the air, they rather “climb the air” (107). They “wander where they will” (107), for don’t they possess and rule “passion or conquest” which is absent to the once-young speaker? They also stand for the poet’s muse and inspiration, for although he finds them gone when he is awoken from his phantasmagoric recollection of an ideal past, he still needs their memory for forming both his real and phantasmagoric lament for a lost youth. What makes Yeats’s lamentation of old age the more interesting is “the suggestion that the power of poetry has deserted the poet is probably offered in order to be rejected by the poem” (Rajan 1965, p.108). The message Balachandra Rajan tries to bring home is that the poet’s power of imagination can stay fresh and vigorous as that of the wild swans and can even surpass them by soaring higher than the borders of the mind in the realm of phantasmagoria.

Besides a lament for the lost youth, the nostalgic “The Wild Swans at Coole” can also be described as “a lament over estrangement from a self passionately attached to the feminine: nineteen years ago at Coole he was desperately in love [with Maud Donne], but ‘All’s changed’ ” (Ramazani 1990, p. 144). The poet’s phantasmagoria at this point dwells more on a self lost rather than on a beloved lost, for he is now old, weary and companionless. Yeats’s visit made to Coole Park and his failure to make a compromise between the present state and the gone past is quite reminiscent of Wordsworth’s “Line Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey” in which Wordsworth returns to the banks of the Wye to discover that he can no longer feel the same passion and vehement feeling he once had tasted in youth for he has learnt:

To look on nature, not as in the hour

Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes

The still, sad music of humanity (Wordsworth 1944, p. 68).

The similarity of the beginning of “The Wild Swans at Coole” and that of “Lines written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey”, however, does not go beyond creating the expectation of recompense, for unlike the latter, the former fails to meet the expectation. The fact that the moment is held in a state of “autumn beauty” (Yeats 1899, p. 107) hints at the speaker’s recognition of a specific incarnation of beauty that is cherished by him only because he has cultivated a deep intimate relationship with the region , during those nineteen autumns. All the scenes and episodes, regardless of their sublimity, might be a mere image or vision formed by nostalgia and rendered into poignant phantasmagoria. The last stanza bespeaks of gloom and failure. Although elements of elegizing the lost love and youth make “The Wild Swans at Coole” doubly elegiac, the real poignant point comes with the threat of the loss of desire and imagination from which he drives the substantial elements for constructing his personal phantasmagoria through which alone he can express his convictions. The threat is implied in “When I awake some day to find they have flown away?” (Yeats 1899 , p.107). If the swans’ flight be taken as the departure of the hope of relating and elevating to the sublimity from the poet, the poet’s “.awake some day” (107) might also connote his mode of imagination and the emotional defeat at the age of fifty-one.

Although the young Yeats wrote few formal elegies, his early works seem to be replete with elegiac pathos which makes his work much similar to many contemporary late Romantic contemporaries. The mature Yeats, however, resisted some of the governing conventions of elegy when he composed poetry in this genre. Although most English elegists lament the death of an individual with high pathos, Yeats tends to tame pathos to an acceptable extent, and he commemorates the death of a group and not one single person. No account of Yeats’s phantasmagoric lament in his elegies would be complete without some mention of the deep images and symbols of the greatest poem of *The Wild Swans at Coole*

collection, i.e., “In Memory of the Major Robert Gregory”. This elegy, as Graham Martin believes, “is not only (and perhaps even not primarily) a matter for grief, and its formal structure contributes something further than dramatic detachment peror an appropriate decorum” (Martin 1961, p. 70). As Yeats grew older, he focused more on the meaning of life and the inevitability of death. He, with increasing horror, witnessed the death-toll of relatives and friends. Life became for Yeats, as it is for most sensitive people, “a kind of catalogue of dying; and he tried, examining all those deaths, to extract from dying faces and from dying statements insights into universal patterns” (Unterecker 1967, p. 144).

Although in the poem “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” the setting shifts from Lady Gregory’s estate at Coole Park upstream to Yeats’s tower, the subject is still the mortal man and the poet’s focus is on the Gregorys. “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” can be considered as one of Yeats’s finest achievements or as Amy G. Stock calls it, “the most genuinely commemorative of all the great English elegies” (qtd. In Perloff 1966, p.307). This poem gets much of its power from Yeats’s genuine personal feeling that helps him manage to extend the subject from the death of Robert Gregory to a universal one, i.e., “the death of young heroes”. A contrast between the dead and the living, and between the painful and the familiar loss can be noticed in this elegy. In the world where the speaker’s life and living friends are just involved in mourning the loss or mere “talk” or “quarrels”, the dead evoke the poet’s memory and phantasmagoria. Major Robert Gregory’s death is indeed strong enough to set Yeats’s phantasmagoria at work and help him elegize his dear friend’s dear son’s death through a phantasmagoric lamentation.

Although the first two stanzas of the elegy are in no direct relationship to the dead and the loss, they properly enough help the poet’s mind to focus on his dead friends: “For all that comes into my mind are dead” (Yeats 1994, p. 108). Yeats himself once stated that, “The dead at times outface a living rival” (qtd. in Ramazani 1990, p. 41). It is, in fact, their very absence that has made the dead friends dominate the poet’s memory and engender the poem. The dead cannot come in at eye or ear, instead they come into the mind alone which can obliquely be suggestive of the fact that phantasmagoria manages to work vigorously even in the absence or death of its object.

Conclusion

This study has endeavored to demonstrate the significance of phantasmagoria as a key concept in W. B. Yeats’s poetry. The reason why he should introduce his personal phantasmagoria in the preface to the collection *The Wild Swans at Coole*, and begin the collection with weighing heavily on his phantasmagoric images and symbols have been discussed. The theme of yearning and regret for the lost youth that finds expression in the title poem and his elegies have also been analyzed in this study. The deployment of phantasmagoric images and symbols have been analyzed in “The Wild Swans at Coole” in particular in this study.

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