

Envisioning the Invisible: Understanding “Among School Children” through *A Vision*

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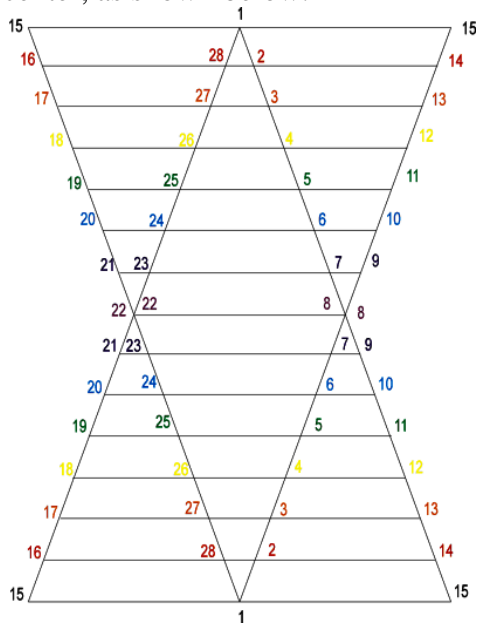
The diachronic definition of ultimate human history of civilization, in Yeatsian occultic beliefs, can be summarized in a pair of “interpenetrating gyres” (Ellmann 232), with one polar being the objective and the other being the subjective. W. B. Yeats demonstrates this model of epistemology in his automatic writing masterpiece, *A Vision* (1925). Previous poststructuralist studies on Yeats’s late works propose his poetic attempt to revive the language of the mythical age (Pearson 21), when “subject and object are linked by a common power of energy” (Frye, qtd in Pearson 21). In order to refute the ambiguity between the sign and the referent in poetic expressions, the language itself becomes self-referent, meaning everything it refers to is embedded in the text itself. While Yeats’s late poetry is accused of being unsettling and confusing, *A Vision* can serve as its own lexicon and be the “primary” in his language referring to objectivity, leading to the “antithetical” or subjective poetic texts. The course of this essay will present such reading of his prominent late work “Among School Children” (1926) in which multiple symbols that unite several widely perceived binaries are adopted with intricate purposes. Exemplifying the multitudes in possibilities of reading, “Among School Children” is unambiguously celebrated as “the triumph of the reconciliatory image” (Kermode, qtd in de Man 197).

When old age falls upon W. B. Yeats with its byproduct of hazed eyesight, a public fame comes against the “wild old wicked man’s” will (The Wild Old Wicked Man 3). Nesting himself high up in a tower called Thoor Ballylee in County Galway, Ireland, Yeats not only strived to define a border between the private and the public but also to immerse himself in the new world seen through his metaphorical “vision,” collected in *A Vision* (1926). In the same year *A Vision* was completed, Yeats came across an instance where he had to confront a public audience – the children at St. Otteran’s School – with impaired eyes that look over the children into a wilder, private void (Zinsmeister). His reflective poem concerning this instance, “Among School Children,” is a specific case when he “embraces the aesthetic of conflict” and “drives toward a mythic unity” (Ben-Merre 71). The “mythic unity,” however, could be

taken to another level for an audience with previous knowledge of *A Vision*, as recent critics recognize Yeats’s late poetry as “self-referent” to *A Vision* and an attempt to enclose the arbitrariness between the signifier and the signified¹ (Pearson 26). Being one of the earliest attempts in this genre, “Among School Children” deserves to be specifically explored for deeper implications because of its multiple binaries that distinctly negotiate reality and imagination, which ultimately comes back to the desire of envisioning the invisible “Unity of Being.”

¹ In Saussurean Structuralist theory, language is an inherited social institution of arbitrary “signs” that is reinforced by individual’s usage of it. Inherently, the sign (or the signifier) i.e. the language is not related to the object or concept that is referred to i.e. the referent (or the signified). The terms “sign” and “signifier” are used interchangeably in this essay, and so are “referent” and “signified.”

Because this essay is an attempt to read “Among School Children” through the lens of *A Vision*, brief context of *A Vision* will be introduced. In *A Vision*, the diachronic definition of the history of civilization can be summarized in a pair of “interpenetrating gyres” (Ellmann 232), shaped like a timeglass that is wide on the ends but narrow in the middle. To illustrate the model dimensionally, the gyres are represented as two equilateral cones that have the tips at the bottom center, as shown below:



“The Historical Cones” (AV 266)

W. B. Yeats details this model of epistemology in the second edition of his automatic writing masterpiece², *A Vision*. It is important to note that the version most critics rely on is the revised one published in

1937, instead of the first edition which was previously published in 1926. The second edition is much more explained and defined than the first one; this “revision” is often received as a unity that combines the signified with the signifier that attempts to describe it (Ben-Merre 80). From another angle, the revision is also a de-mystification of the language of “spirits.” One of the people who thinks in this mind frame is Mrs. Yeats. She, as one of the visionaries who highly respects the authenticity of automatic writing, correctly foresaw the obscuring effects of the editing process. Her negative provision was proved true upon the publication of the second edition. Yeats raised many “second thoughts and doubts” about this vision, and eventually degraded it to be a stock of “images for [his] poetry” (Ellmann xvii). Nonetheless, for the readers who explore his late poetry, this insisted revision becomes an important lexicon that transforms myths and history into syntax for reference by dividing up the European history into 28 phases on the gyres and substituting the historical event with the gyre number (Donoghue 226). For Yeats himself, *A Vision* gives him a ground where he privileges emblem over image, meaning that the symbolic importance of his language exceeds that of the natural, actual entity (de Man 170). While traditionally a structuralist would privilege the signified over the signifier, Yeats here seems to invert the binary in order to prove that the oppositions have the potential to be resolved in unity.

As Yeats explains the gyres in accessible language, he strives to situate the model into the wider context of human life stages and European history. While enclosing almost four millennia in the mere thirty pages of the last chapter of *A Vision*, Yeats asserts the cycle of civilization to be “all things dying each other’s life, living each other’s death” (271), suggesting the seemingly polarized binary can be connected through the

² Automatic writing is a mystical practice of writing that is produced when the writer is unconscious; instead of the conscious author, it is said that the subconscious or the spirit that produces the writing. Yeats first attempted automatic writing after his marriage to George Hyde-Lees, with whom he frequently practiced this act and was able to assemble multiple collections of them. Automatic writing can take forms in all kinds of genres; *A Vision* is a combined collection of prose, poetry, and esoteric argumentative pieces.

everlasting turning of the gyres; thus the model itself is deconstructive. The everlasting revolvment of the gyres is consisted of twenty-eight phases, just like the moon, to illustrate the inward spinning from the objective to the subjective and then the outward spinning from the subjective to the objective, with only the two poles being completely objective (AV 266). Thus, between the inversions of the objective and subjective, there is always a mixture of both, which is meant to suggest the historical phases as well as the course of a human's life that is born in an objective infancy and ended in a sense of "objective oblivion" (Ellmann 227). By the time Yeats develops this model, he situates himself at Phase 17 where "the Unity of Being is more possible than any other phase" but is still on the downfall from subjectivity into objectivity (Ellmann 240).

At this point in his life, Yeats has returned to his homeland and is publicly recognized as a literary figure. He soon wins the Nobel Prize for Literature and is immediately appointed to be one of the senators of the newly established Irish Free State. This series of fame is followed by a visit to the St. Otteran's School in Westford and his creation of the poem, "Among School Children" (Zinsmeister). As mentioned earlier, Yeats completes the poem roughly at the same time as the first edition of *A Vision* and the public receives it in a way that involves neither the gyres nor the yet-to-be-named poststructuralist attitude of the poet, yet it is still perfectly comprehensible. The long poem, divided into eight stanzas, moves seamlessly from natural imagery to metaphor; a public audience sees the poem swirling back to natural imagery again by the end; however, knowing *A Vision*, the poem might have never returned from the mythic world. In de Man's analysis of the last stanza, the "leaf," the "blossom," and the "bole" of the

"chestnut tree" are emblems that have a mythic depth rather than mere images (de Man 197). Thus, the tree in this line is not a physical tree but, rather, a concept of "the tree of life" in his own definition (de Man 197). In a similar way, in the last line "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (Line 64), neither the dancer nor the dance are physical existences, but rather two concepts that sketch out a binary and are resolved into a unity in this line. de Man interprets the "dance" to be "a natural joy for the sake of divine revelation" (de Man 202). It is the sign, the emblem, the language and signifier. The "dance," opposes the "dancer," represents a "sensuous temptation" hosting merely "a few moments of pleasure," thus the referent, the image, the concept and signified (de Man 202). The questioning between the "dancer" and the "dance," in de Man's argument, demands the reader to choose one or the other, making the sign and the referent irreconcilable. However, considering the line itself, it is by all means suggesting the dancer and the dance are impossible to be told apart. As Frank Kermode suggests, "Among School Children" is "heralding the triumph of the reconciliatory image," therefore a sense of unity is implied throughout the poem (Kermode, qtd in de Man 197).

Looking at this poem through the gyres, it displays a "sixty-year-old smiling public man" who is currently at Phase 17 of 28 in the gyres model, confronting young girls in a Catholic school, who are arguably at Phase 13, parallel with Phase 17 on the gyre (AV 266). This parallel is polaristic in various ways: in age, gender, and intellectual aspiration; while on the gyres, they are opposed to each other as "subjective truth" of Phase 13 against "enforced self-realization" of Phase 17 (AV 129; 140). Despite the polarities, the two phases are aligned on the same plane, sharing the same

distance to the stage of Phase 15, when the complete subjectivity is attained.

The eight stanzas, each containing eight lines, consecutively alternate between the voice of public and the voice of private, weaving the unwilling exposure of the poet's private self in front of the public audience and achieving the realization of the desire for the other end of the gyre. For instance, the "smile" of the "public man" at the end of stanza I is later examined in a pessimistic, private light in stanza IV: "Better to smile on all that smile, and show/There is a comfortable kind of scarecrow" (Line 32). Responding to a concept demonstrated in *A Vision* about a smile that "disappeared with archaic Greece," "That smile is physical, *primary* joy, the escape from supernatural terror, a moment of irresponsible common life before *antithetical* sadness begins" (AV 288, emphasis his). The terms "*primary*" and "*antithetical*" are adopted by Yeats to substitute "objective" and "subjective" in *A Vision*. The state of pure *antithetical* can be achieved in Phase 15 – the midpoint between Phase 17 and Phase 13. If the poem were to draw emblems from *A Vision*, the "*antithetical* sadness" may very likely correspond to the "tragedy" that comes after "childish day" in stanza II, the latter corresponding to the "*primary* joy"(Line 12). Presenting himself as someone on Phase 17, Yeats clearly has experienced both emotions of joy and sadness and is able to display this "smile" in front of the children, implying his reminiscence of youth and frustration with aging, while the "smile" itself is received by the children as pure benevolence and joy, a "subjective truth." The poet, on the other hand, undergoes the "enforced self-realization" of his irreversible old age, implied by the line "Or else, to alter Plato's parable, / Into the yolk and white of the one shell" that fuses the shadows with reality in Plato's cave parable (Line 15-16).

Similar to the stirring of the yolk and white which has no revert process, the protagonist of the parable leaves the cave and would mix the shadows and reality into his perception of the world. Lamenting over the revelation that he would never be able to go back to the "childish day," the poet "smiles" in the poem to intensify the irony.

When his "smile" meets the stare with "momentary wonder" from the children, the general audience would read the scene as the compassionate old man bearing hope for the new nation on the shoulders of the innocent children, whereas a reader who reads *A Vision* can tell that both the children and the old man are longing for the full subjectivity of Phase 15, which the children have yet experienced and the old man is unable to go back to. The notion of "smile" is the signifier that unifies the polaristic emotions into one and thus attempts the "mythic unity," which greatly underlies the poem. By composing with a language full of dualities such as this, he informs the reader of the esoteric system of beliefs that are the actual referent of the poetic language in order to reconcile the signifier and the signified; although on a surface level, the reconciliation is between the old man and the children – they are reconciled in the same desire.

Similar to the approach he took with the notion of "smile," many duality-implied concepts are repeated in the poem for the sake of attaining a unity, such as "a Ledaean body" in stanza II and IV, the "Plato's parable" in stanza II and VI, and the "old scarecrow" in stanza IV and VI. In Elizabeth Kuhn's reading, this form of repetition suggests the "corporeal spiritualism" in Yeatsian epistemology, which implies an embodiment of a spiritual being (13). Thus in Yeats's late work, no physical body is detached from the soul, no sign is detached from its referent. Taking the "old scarecrow" example, the sign is "old clothes

upon old sticks to scare a bird” (Line 36), whereas the actual being that scares the bird is human. The old scarecrow, taking on the shape of a human, is perceived as a human by the bird; therefore, the entity of the scarecrow is between human and nonhuman, and again the binary is negotiated. Similarly, in the poem, the poet is perceived by the children as an old public man, while in his words, he is no more than a sign, a sign that negotiates between reality and imagination through poetic exploration. Going back to the lines “There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow” that follows his complex “smile”(Line 23-24), it can be understood that the poet is referring to himself as an “old scarecrow” that is used to imitate human shape, behavior, and even essence. Instead of scaring the bird, the poet deceives the children and presents himself as if he were a person – throughout the poem, there is no evidence suggesting the poet’s engagement in any interaction with the children. He is even a “comfortable kind,” for that he is smiling and not worried about children’s perception of him while, in reality, he might have been presented as a public sign in front of the children – he visits the school as the new senator – but he is overlooked as a poet, a playwright, or a philosopher who lives in a tower. Negotiating himself as a sign that encompasses both the public and private identities, Yeats resolves himself into a unity through the composition of “Among School Children.”

Being disabled in physical eyesight allows Yeats to enable his metaphorical vision, and through which he constructed *A Vision* on which he heavily relies in his late creations. The system of *A Vision* is rooted in oppositions and blossoms in resolving them (Watkins 3), and so reflects unity in one of his typical works – “Among School Children.” The poem can be read in drastically different ways between the

readers who interpret the scenes as natural images and the other crowd who deconstruct the language as emblems. Although suspected to be privileging the emblems over images in his late poetry, Yeats still stirs the binaries into unities, and eventually nothing could be told apart. This process of reconciliation between oppositions dominates the content of his late works, which allows the reader to hear the old man’s unutterable words and peek into the invisible, private world of his – to attempt the privilege of envisioning.

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