Athens Journal of Humanities & Arts - Volume 13, Issue 3, July 2026 – Pages 285-300

Some Thoughts on Humour in Yeatsian Style

*By Nicholas Meihuizen**

Yeats has a keen understanding of the ramifications attending style, and the effect of the right touch or tone in conveying certain materials. This is where his use of humour comes into play. For instance, in parodic mode, he writes of the congruence of natural and supernatural with an elegant nonchalance, at once prosaic and strange, and this paradoxical coupling generates a quirky sense of otherness, in keeping with the subject. He also uses humour, though, in a way that simply makes fun of self and family, without any apparent doctrinal positioning; here he seems to enjoy the mode of humour for its own sake, a stylistic trait not often commented on by critics. The present article would consider the two different contexts in which both uses of humour are to be found in Yeats, that in A Vision (1937 version) and that in Reveries Over Childhood and Youth.

Introduction

Relatively few critics have engaged with Yeats's apparent lack of seriousness in presenting certain esoteric matters. Elizabeth Müller, in her thorough investigation of "derision" in the prologue to the 1937 version of *A Vision*, feels that this work "constitutes a healthy proof, if we needed one, of Yeats's sense of humour", and further observes that the prologue "conceals important occult knowledge under the cloak of irony and self-derisive wit".[1] Steven Helmling, also in reference to *A Vision*, writes of the satiric play involved, where "a certain single-mindedness", the "obtuseness of being earnest", is made fun of, while at the same time another type of single-mindedness is being "celebrated and exemplified". That is, the single-mindedness involved in "the self-evident … ludicrousness" of Yeats's "system" makes of it an "heroic, gay, quixotic *credo quia impossibile est*, rising ebulliently out of the stony rubbish of the disillusioned postwar wasteland". The point, Helmling feels, is that through these means Yeats combats:

> the regnant materialism of [an age which] scorned the fictions of imagination in favor of "facts", supposed to be real in some ungainsayable way. In "reality" (a compromised word, which Yeats defiantly liked using) "facts" are only the Gradgrindian mainstay of another fiction, or myth, the myth of science. When we say we are mastering "facts",

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1. Elizabeth Müller, "The Mask of Derision in Yeats's Prologue to *A Vision* (1937)" in *Yeats Annual 19: Yeats's Mask*, eds. Margaret Mills Harper and Warwick Gould (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2013), 125, 121.

https://doi.org/10.30958/ajha.13-3-4 doi=10.30958/ajha.13-3-4

> we are only making matter the measure of our minds, so that "fact" masters us, narrowing the possibilities of human prerogative and imagination.[2]

Eugene Korkowski, rather, understands that the Prologue of *A Vision* uses jocularity to make serious philosophical thought appealing and entertaining (in the vein of Menippean satire).[3] Chris Miles refers to another article by Korkowski concerning Cornelius Agrippa's ambiguous recantation of his "magical" text, *De occulta philosophia* (1533), demonstrating how the recantation paradoxically recants itself, a fact overlooked by literalists, and thus offers a Yeatsian-type smokescreen behind which true occult knowledge might be revealed.[4] James Olney sees the "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends", part of the Prologue material of *A Vision* (1937), serving as a type of parody comedy which anticipates some of the elements of the divine comedy that is the rest of *A Vision*. He writes of its "virtually impenetrable maze of humor and fiction", whose obfuscatory function should alert us to the fact that the "truths" within the work "are not literal but symbolic".[5] Hazard Adams refers to *A Vision*'s self-derisive irony which presents the opposite of what is announced.[6] He also notes that the book, as a work expressing Yeatsian *sprezzatura*, is not to be taken seriously.[7] Writing in more general and provocative terms, Frank McGuinness, however, feels that "Yeats, when it comes down to it, had no or next to no sense of humour".[8] He sees Yeats's adoption of "ridiculous" poses as a function of his "sheer doggedness", as the poet's mind is "upstaged and confounded by its own machinations", in a rather pointless act of self-defeating wilfulness, which nevertheless elicits the type of admiration one feels, perhaps, for a character from Greek tragedy or Beckett, compromised by fate. Yoko Sato invokes Bakhtin, through Michael McAteer's suggestion "that Yeats's sense of farce owes much to his reading of Chaucer in the 1900s, 'giving expression to the transgressive and transformative power of laughter Bakhtin identifies in medieval

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2. Steven Helmling, *The Esoteric Comedies of Carlyle, Newman and Yeats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 187-88.

3. Eugene Korkowski, "Yeats's *Vision* as Philosophic Satura", *Eire – Ireland* 12, no. 3 (1977): 67.

4. Chris Miles, "Occult Retraction: Cornelius Agrippa and the Paradox of Magical Language", *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 38, no.4 (2008): 445-8. Miles refers to Eugene Korkowski's "Agrippa as Ironist", *Neophilologus* 60 (1976): 594-607. I have not been able to access this article. Agrippa's language, according to Miles, "is designed to foster exactly the kind of mistrust in any human language's ability to convey truth" (448). Might Yeats's approach in *A Vision* be informed by occult tradition, in which he was well-versed? See Kathleen Raine's *Yeats the Initiate: Essays on Certain Themes in the Writings of W.B. Yeats* (Mountrath: Dolmen Press, 1986), 177-246.

5. James Olney, "W.B. Yeats's Daimonic Memory", *The Sewanee Review* 85 (1977): 598.

6. Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's* A Vision, *Romantic Modernism and Antithetical Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 20, 30.

7. Ibid., 40.

8. See Frank McGuinness, "A Kick in the Head", *The Poetry Ireland Review* 116 (2015): 46.

literature'".[9] If Bakhtinian "carnival laughter" is "directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants", and is ambivalently "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding, asserting and denying", then Yeats's humour is certainly attuned to it.[10]

My paper, I hope, will add to the voices of these critics, in order, first, to consider the straightforward use of humour in Yeats's early autobiography, *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*. Second, I hope to help clarify the effect of the more sly, doctrinally-inclined humour associated with *A Vision*. Before engaging with these matters, though, I consider, briefly, those instances where Yeats is parodied by others, as I believe his turn to self-parody emerged in some part from his awareness of his susceptibility to such mockery.

Yeats Parodied by Others

Conor Cruise O'Brien's essay, "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W.B. Yeats", provides an anecdote which he feels encapsulates Yeats's relation to factual truth:

> My father, at the Arts Club, used to poke gentle fun at Yeats's "Fascism", parodying him as referring in a speech to "that very great man, Missolonghi" and then, when corrected, saying majestically: "I am told the name is not Missolonghi but Mussolini – but, does it . . . really . . . matter?"[11]

This strand of humour levelled at Yeats by others goes further back, at least to a Beerbohm cartoon from the 1890s, where a bent and lanky Yeats presents George Moore, looking as if "carved from a turnip" (as Yeats once wrote of him in his

9. Yoko Sato, "Yeatsian Heroes and Laughter", *Journal of Irish Studies* 34 (2019): 46. Sato refers to Michael McAteers *Yeats and European Drama*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 84. See also R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats, A Life: I The Apprentice Mage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 327. Foster includes Ben Jonson among the works read by Yeats at this time, surely another pertinent influence.

10. Ibid. Sato refers to Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), 34. Max Nänny, writing on Ezra Pound and Menippean satire, notes of this satire that "frequently the author himself makes an appearance", certainly true of Yeats's "Stories". Pound was, of course, an influential figure for Yeats, even playing a prominent role in the introductory matter to *A Vision*, in "A Packet for Ezra Pound". See Max Nänny, "Ezra Pound and the Menippean Tradition", *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 11, no.3 (1982): 401.

11. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Passion and Cunning, and Other Essays* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1988), 33.

Autobiographies),[12] to a diminutive Queen of the Fairies, a proto-type Tinkerbell.[13] Then there is the cartoon by Mac, explaining how Yeats and George Russell, though seeking each other out, pass one another by without realizing the fact: Yeats has his nose in the air, Russell's is pointing at the ground.[14]

William O'Donnell also provides a classic anecdote:

> Yeats announced to Higgins, "I have never been in a pub in my life and I'd like to go into a pub". Higgins dutifully selected a Dublin pub that he hoped would not offend Yeats's refined sense of propriety. When the great moment came, Higgins took charge and prudently ordered mild drinks. Yeats looked around for a moment and then announced, as his first and last words in an Irish pub, "Higgins, I don't like it. Lead me out again".[15]

As Helmling notes, "there is no end to such stories".[16] But perhaps the worst pieces of mockery levelled at Yeats, the ones which had the most effect on him, were those by George Moore, in his sketches in the *English Review* of January and February, 1914 (slightly revised in *Vale*, under threat of legal action from Lady Gregory).[17] Helmling summarizes:

> In it Moore announces publicly, while professing to scold those who whispered it privately, that Yeats was ashamed of his family's social standing; presents as a frequent matter for speculation in Dublin the interesting question whether Yeats and Maud Gonne ever "gratified" their "passion"; reports as from the poet's own lips that the answer was no, Yeats explaining that as a young man he had made himself content with the "spirit of sense"; represents himself as having replied to this disclosure, "Yes, I understand, the common mistake of a boy": then makes mock of lamenting the death of Yeats's inspiration and the effective end of his literary career, prematurely passed "because it had arisen out of an ungratified desire".[18]

R.F. Foster offers another quotation from *Vale* (the 1914 edition, "for the sake of vividness", not the revised one of 1933). Here Moore mocks Yeats the public

12. W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), 405.

13. In Frank Tuohy, *Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 149. The picture is housed in the National Gallery of Ireland.

14. Ibid., 179. Made available to Mr Tuohy by the late Prof D.J. Gordon, Department of English, Reading University.

15. William O'Donnell, "The Textual History of Yeats's *On the Boiler*", in *Yeats Annual 21: Yeats's Legacies*, ed. Warwick Gould (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2018), 403. O'Donnell's footnote reads, "As told by Brinsley MacNamara in a BBC broadcast, June 1949". His source is William R. Rogers, "W. B. Yeats: A Dublin Portrait", in *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute to William Butler Yeats: 1865–1939*, ed. by A. N. Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 3.

16. Helmling, 160.

17. Ibid., 162.

18. Ibid., 162-3.

man, at a meeting concerning Lane's controversial bequest of his impressionist paintings:

> As soon as the applause died away Yeats, who had lately returned to us from the States with a paunch, a huge stride, and an immense fur overcoat, rose to speak. We were surprised at the change in his appearance, and could hardly believe our ears when, instead of talking to us as he used to do about the old stories coming down from generation to generation, he began to thunder … against the middle classes, stamping his feet, working himself into a great passion, and all because the middle classes did not dip their hands into their pockets and give Lane the money he wanted for his exhibition.[19]

Helmling feels that in the "aftermath" of these attacks Yeats was able to crystalize his motives for writing *A Vision*. While in the first decade of the twentieth century Yeats had "shed his ninetyish poses of detachment from the world", wishing "to appear not as an otherworldly dreamer, but as an active public man", after the attacks he entered "a period of reflection and consolidation in which [he] pressed the antitheses of active and contemplative, esthete and nationalist, occultist and controversialist to yield new syntheses concerning self and antiself and the project of compelling their tensions and interplay into a 'unity of being'. Yeats is withdrawing from his 'public man' role and investing his energies again, after a lapse of several years".[20]

Another point which I briefly touch on at the conclusion of this essay, is the relation of Yeats's humour to his notion of tragic joy. He enlarges upon the idea in, for example, "A General Introduction for My Work": "The heroes of Shakespeare convey to us through their looks, or through the metaphorical patterns of their speech, the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death…. I have heard Lady Gregory say, rejecting some play in the modern manner sent to the Abbey Theatre, 'Tragedy must be a joy to the man who dies.' Nor is it any different with lyrics, songs, narrative poems".[21] Though he refers here specifically to tragedy, the joyful attitude he envisions pertains to life in general, and humour surely plays a role in its cultivation.

Yeatsian Self-parody 1: *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth*

While Moore's intensity of mockery had indeed appeared to mark a turning point in Yeats's relation to self and world, self-parody had never been far from the poet's thought;[22] this is so even in his most seriously-undertaken researches. In

19. In Foster, 327.

20. Helmling, 163.

21. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 522-3.

22. That the boy Yeats was prone to enjoying comic humour is perhaps indicated by the report that he gave a copy of a popular Victorian comic, Alley Sloper, to his brother, Jack. See

Reveries Over Childhood and Youth (1916), for example, he writes of his attendance at his first séance in the 1880s, a precursor moment of the studious effort that went into the production of *A Vision*:

> Presently my shoulders began to twitch and my hands. I could easily have stopped them, but I had never heard of such a thing and I was curious. After a few minutes the movement became violent and I stopped it. I sat motionless for a while and then my whole body moved like a suddenly unrolled watch-spring, and I was thrown backward on the wall. I again stilled the movement and sat at the table. Everybody began to say I was a medium, and that if I would not resist some wonderful thing would happen.

His father comes to mind at this point, as a type of superego cum censor, but Yeats remains at the table:

> I remembered that my father had told me that Balzac had once desired to take opium for the experience's sake, but would not because he dreaded the surrender of his will.

His continuing account (in which he bypasses his father's warning without comment – a fact significant in itself at this time of youthful rebellion) has the candid simplicity of reportage emptied of literary devices:

> We were now holding each other's hands and presently my right hand banged the knuckles of the woman next to me upon the table. She laughed, and the medium, speaking for the first time, and with difficulty, out of his mesmeric sleep, said, "Tell her there is great danger". He stood up and began walking round me making movements with his hands as though he were pushing something away.

The matter-of-fact nature of the account adds to its sense of veracity:

> I was now struggling vainly with this force which compelled me to movements I had not willed, and my movements had become so violent that the table was broken.

Yet the humorous tone found elsewhere in this book is not far from the author's perception of his earlier self:

> I tried to pray, and because I could not remember a prayer, repeated in a loud voice –
>
> "Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit
> Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
> Brought death into the world and all our woe . . .
> Sing heavenly muse."

Michael Connerty, "Comic Acts", *Irish Arts Review* 39, no.1: 100. Connerty refers to Hilary Pyle's *The Different Worlds of Jack B. Yeats: His Cartoons and Illustrations* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 16.

The humour continues, as he conveys his own credulity in a deadpan way:

> Then I saw shapes faintly appearing in the darkness and thought, "They are spirits"; but they were only the spiritualists and my friend at her prayers. The medium said in a faint voice, "We are through the bad spirits". I said, "Will they ever come again do you think?" and he said, "No, never again I think", and in my boyish vanity I thought it was I who had banished them.[23]

This violent intervention of the supernatural in his life, its physical manifestation, so to speak, is coloured by "disobedience" towards the father, intensified, if through a humorous enough reference to Milton, to humankind's inherent disobedience towards God. The sense of transgression is manifest, and yet this tone tinged with humour puts the whole matter into a new perspective, one conditioned by an acceptance to step beyond what is given, what is commonly deemed proper. The humour sweetens the blow, as it were, while making the experiencer (because so willing to parody himself, hinting at some ridiculousness in the whole account) strategically complicit (for an ambiguous moment) with the probable upholders of common sense, including the father.

Humour in *Reveries* is also at times related to the general theme of familial peculiarity, not unconnected to the larger concerns associated with the imponderable nature of existence, which were to trouble Yeats for years, until the material for *A Vision* began to cohere in his mind. Humour is apparent in the opening pages: for instance, writing of the misery of childhood, Yeats says, in chiasmic fashion, "having prayed for several days that I might die, I had begun to be afraid that I was dying and prayed that I might live".[24] The form, with its mannered, inverted repetition, hints at the absurdity inherent in the views life sometimes forces on one. In the case of his eccentric father, who gets in the way of the school's educational system, he "often interfered, and always with disaster, to teach me my Latin lesson". And the head-master at school, aware of the father's interference, tells the boy: '"I am going to give you an imposition because I cannot get at your father to give him one"'.[25] A further lightly humorous example of his father's interference in his education follows:

> I was asked to write an essay on "Men may rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things". My father read the subject to my mother who had no interest in such matters. "That is the way", he said, "boys are made insincere and false to themselves. Ideals make the blood thin, and take the human nature out of people".[26]

23. W.B. Yeats, *Reveries Over Childhood and Youth* (London: Macmillan, 1916), 206-9.
24. Ibid., 3.
25. Ibid., 106-7.
26. Ibid., 108.

These points are to remain with Yeats all his life: the importance of sincerity, of not being false to oneself, of suspecting ideals or opinions, of valuing human nature. But a wickedly humorous touch follows:

> He walked up and down the room in eloquent indignation, and told me not to write on such a subject at all, but upon Shakespeare's lines, "To thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day thou canst not then be false to any man".[27]

The words chosen by his father are those originally uttered by the hypocritical Polonius. Surely an element of irony is present in Yeats's portrayal of his parent, anticipating in miniature his future adolescent rebellion against him? This humour, quietly fomenting, barely discernible, softens our impression of the stern Victorian father J.B. Yeats could sometimes be, and adds a stylistic charm to the work.

The second extended section dealing with the father also presents him as highly critical towards his son, now in connection with horsemanship: "He was indignant and threatening because he did not think I rode well". This time Yeats does offer commentary on his father's attitude. His father had said: "'You must do everything well . . . that the Pollexfens respect, though you must do other things also'". The humour in Yeats's commentary once more colours our impression of the father's critical attitude:

> I can see now that he had a sense of inferiority among those energetic, successful people. He himself, some Pollexfen told me, though he rode very badly, would go hunting upon anything and take any ditch. His father, the County Down Rector, though a courtly man and a scholar, had been so dandified a horseman that I had heard of his splitting three riding breeches before he had settled into his saddle for a day's hunting, and of his first rector exclaiming, "I had hoped for a curate but they have sent me a jockey".[28]

It is the arrangement of elements that sets the tone of this portrayal of the father. The poet's comment, "that he had a sense of inferiority", refers to a commonplace enough psychological condition, attenuating our displeasure at the father's harshness towards the boy. But what really tell in J.B. Yeats's favour are the anecdotes about his bad riding and impetuous behaviour on horseback. And these are placed in a familial context that contributes to the softening effect, with its implication that such "half-legendary" family anecdotes (the account of the split breeches is almost vaudeville in nature) are shared in a spirit of amusement. Yeats again manages these elements with a straight-faced understatement, which is all the more humorous.

Belief in the supernatural was obviously of profound importance for Yeats. He appears to have been a psychically sensitive child to begin with, a fact which he

27. Ibid., 108-9.
28. Ibid., 97.

broaches with his usual matter-of-factness, and again, in this case, a disarming humour:

> One day some one spoke to me of the voice of the conscience, and as I brooded over the phrase I came to think that my soul, because I did not hear an articulate voice, was lost. I had some wretched days until being alone with one of my aunts I heard a whisper in my ear, "What a tease you are!" At first I thought my aunt must have spoken, but when I found she had not, I concluded it was the voice of my conscience and was happy again.[29]

The literalism of the child is satisfied, ironically, by an extraordinary event whose full significance is not apparent from the child's perspective; and, even from the perspective of the implied author it is recorded in factual, non-sensational terms, though its significance is better appreciated:

> From that day the voice has come to me at moments of crisis, but now it is a voice in my head that is sudden and startling. It does not tell me what to do, but often reproves me. It will say perhaps, "That is unjust" of some thought.[30]

It is almost as if the child were correct, that this is indeed a "voice of conscience". The voice is certainly not linked to "the father's constant badgering", as O'Hara claims.[31] This unsettling of perspectives to do with narrative point-of-view combined with humour adds an element of veracity, reflective of the non-circumscriptive nature of lived experience, and, as in a dream, of there being more to the experiences than can be dealt with by reason.

The passage in *Reveries* regarding his first exposure to sex confirms the presence of an imagination-fact binary even in his boyhood, making us realize how integral it is to his thought and experience. In terms of structure, the content of the passage conforms to a setting of the one against the other – imagination against fact. The whole is enlivened by the perspective of the adult looking back on the child and evoking a gentle humour at the expense of his earlier self, but it also captures the distaste present in the soiling of an innocent, even magical, view of the world. The passage taps into a central cluster of related notions, then: unbelief versus belief; science versus imagination; the factual versus the imaginative; the mechanistic versus the magical; the material versus the spiritual; the search for higher meaning in the face of blighted experience; the seeds of Yeats's later absorption of the downright nature of sex into a broader vision of process, including human elevation and degeneration based on sex (through the dubious theory of eugenics and his ideas on the impact of visual art on the womb of the

29. Ibid., 14-15.

30. Ibid., 15.

31. Daniel O'Hara, *Tragic Knowledge: Yeats's* Autobiography *and Hermeneutics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, 64.

mother);[32] the question of intellectual authority; the need for corroboration of evidence; the importance of words; and the power of images in evoking spiritual emotion:

> My father's unbelief had set me thinking about the evidences of religion and I weighed the matter perpetually with great anxiety, for I did not think I could live without religion. All my religious emotions were, I think, connected with clouds and cloudy glimpses of luminous sky, perhaps because of some Bible picture of God's speaking to Abraham or the like. At least I can remember the sight moving me to tears. One day I got a decisive argument for belief. A cow was about to calve, and I went to the field where the cow was with some farm-hands who carried a lantern, and next day I heard that the cow had calved in the early morning. I asked everybody how calves were born, and because nobody would tell me, made up my mind that nobody knew. They were the gift of God, that much was certain, but it was plain that nobody had ever dared to see them come, and children must come in the same way. I made up my mind that when I was a man I would wait up till calf or child had come. I was certain there would be a cloud and a burst of light and God would bring the calf in the cloud out of the light. That thought made me content until a boy of twelve or thirteen, who had come on a visit for the day, sat beside me in a hay-loft and explained all the mechanism of sex. He had learnt all about it from an elder boy whose pathic he was (to use a term he would not have understood) and his description, given, as I can see now, as if he were telling of any other fact of physical life, made me miserable for weeks. After the first impression wore off, I began to doubt if he had spoken truth, but one day I discovered a passage in the encyclopaedia, though I only partly understood its long words, that confirmed what he had said. I did not know enough to be shocked at his relation to the elder boy, but it was the first breaking of the dream of childhood.[33]

The present self observes the past self from the point of view of past ignorance, but incorporates into the narrative a continuing theme throughout the poet's life, that of belief. He manages to convey the child's innocence with the humour of the adult's perspective, yet also suggests the seriousness of the matter to the child, in telling of his "great anxiety", of how his views conflicted with those of his father (at an age when the authority of the father could not be intellectually or existentially contested). The clichéd nature of the child's "religious emotions" are in keeping with his stage of life, and add humour, never overstated, to the account. The "clouds" and "luminous sky" are, however, rescued from present cliché by our extended awareness of Yeats's work: we recall how they are to become significant images, which will recur in major poems concerning varying existential issues, such as "A Woman Homer Sung", "Paudeen", and "Fallen Majesty", if we only consider his work prior to 1916 (the publication date of *Reveries*).[34] After this date the same imagery is to be found in "The Tower", "Meditations in Time of Civil War", "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931", and "An Acre

32. See "Under Ben Bulben", *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, eds. (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 636-40. From this point on referred to as *VP*.

33. Yeats, *Reveries*, 42-5.

34. *VP*, 254; 291; 314.

of Grass".[35] In these first two sentences of the extract, then, we find serious matter combined with adulthood's humorous view of the child's perspective. This innocently conveyed, unforced humour has serious enough ironic undertones: for any reader familiar with the poet's work, originally vacuous clichés are reinvested with imaginative substance.

The situation of the child asking about the secrets of birth and being fobbed off with a false reason is a stock one, and is inevitably amusing. Yeats immerses us in the child's viewpoint through the use of a cluster of absolute statements in a few lines: "that much was certain"; "it was plain"; "children must come in the same way"; "I was certain". This perspective is further stabilized by the unquestioning application of the child's belief: calves are "the gift of God", and they come through God's agency "in the cloud out of the light". But then this naïve innocence, amusing to an adult's eyes, is brought into juxtaposition with a third perspective, that of the knowing child "of twelve or thirteen", who displaces miracle and wonder with a rationalist account of, pointedly, "the *mechanism* of sex" (my emphasis). The stark factual nature of the account makes the young Yeats "miserable for weeks", thereby exposing the passage to yet another mood, the miserable one of the child at the mercy of unsavoury knowledge. The mood of childish curiosity, the subsequent wonder, are juxtaposed with the mood of amusement, and now with that of misery based on disgust at the factual displacement of wonder by mechanistic natural process.

This play of moods is not incidental to the stock theme of lost innocence. The child eventually leaves his "misery" behind, as children do, but not through mere forgetfulness; rather, because of the same entrenched wilfulness we found in his account of his first séance, which will serve the man as it did the boy. Ironically, Yeats retains his innocence in the face of the homosexual relationship between the boy and his older partner – he did not know enough to be "shocked" – but yet experiences "the first breaking of the dream of childhood" because of a factual account which turns miracle into mechanism, and which is corroborated by a factual source, an encyclopaedia, a text not mastered by the child, but which he understands to be a source of objective knowledge. But after his initial bout of misery, he begins to "doubt" the account of the older boy, and so wilfully spurns that knowledge.

Again, the elements in this account are not tangential to the work as a whole, are not tangential to the entire Yeatsian oeuvre. In the passage Yeats seeks confirmation for belief, as he was to do throughout his life. Yet, in the face of apparent ignorance, he must, like Blake's Los, affirm his own "system" or be subjected to the perhaps incompatible systems of others;[36] in doing so, he introduces an agency beyond the quotidian, couched in semi-humorous terms, another typically Yeatsian move.

35. Ibid., 409; 417; 490; 575.

36. William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. W.H. Stevenson (London and New York: Longman, 1989), 648.

Yeatsian Self-parody 2: *A Vision*

Humour is also used to deflate a much later version of the self (though appearing in verse at roughly the same time *Reveries* was published). In the poem "The Phases of the Moon" Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes, two personae dispatched by Yeats in the stories "Rosa Alchemica", "The Tables of the Law" and "The Adoration of the Magi" in the late 1890s,[37] now reappear, to critique him and his latest researches, which are part of the machinery of *A Vision*. They understand as a matter of course what he must labour over intensely, with fruitless results. It is as if Yeats, aware of the eccentric figure he sometimes makes in the face of the world (as suggested earlier), anticipates, and so disarms this criticism, bound to emerge from such dubious-seeming work. Aherne and Robartes refer disparagingly to the poet, working, "after the manner of his kind" (itself a contemptuous generalisation), late at night in his tower, which is tinted by the romanticism associated with past literary towers:[38]

> The light proves that he is reading still.
> He has found, after the manner of his kind,
> Mere images; chosen this place to live in
> Because, it may be, of the candle-light
> From the far tower where Milton's Platonist
> Sat late, or Shelley's visionary prince:
> The lonely light that Samuel Palmer engraved,
> An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil;
> And now he seeks in book or manuscript
> What he shall never find.

The humour becomes more intricate in intention, as, though the supposed barrenness of the research might be the message here conveyed, Yeats is actually pointing to the extra-human sources involved in the writing of *A Vision*, along with valued sources of literary inspiration. Ahearne and Robartes thus insinuate into the poem a sly message at the expense of would-be critics. And though themselves projections of the poet's own thought, they actually mirror to an extent the autonomous thought of Yeats's spirit interlocuters involved in *A Vision*. Thus Ahearne asks of Robartes:

> Why should not you
> Who know it all ring at his door, and speak
> Just truth enough to show that his whole life
> Will scarcely find for him a broken crust
> Of all those truths that are your daily bread;

37. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, vol.8 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1908), 105-77.
38. *VP*, 373.

And when you have spoken take the roads again?

Later, as Robartes is expounding the existential burden of the phases of the moon, Aherne laughs in an "*aged, high-pitched voice / … thinking of the man within, / His sleepless candle and laborious pen*". At the end of the poem, Aherne imagines himself playing the part of "some drunken countryman", who would stand at Yeats's door, and

> … mutter there until he caught
> "Hunchback and Saint and Fool," and that they came
> Under the three last crescents of the moon,
> And then I'd stagger out. He'd crack his wits
> Day after day, yet never find the meaning.[39]

The image of Yeats is hardly a flattering one, and ties in, though from the *opposite* of a skeptical viewpoint (and this is where Yeats gets his own back), with the popular prejudices levelled against poets and researchers into the arcane.

Robartes and Aherne are used in a similar destabilizing way in the final (1937) version of *A Vision*, in the "Stories of Michael Robartes and His Friends" which prefaces that work (as does a repeated version of "The Phases of the Moon".)[40] James Olney long since, in "W.B. Yeats's Daimonic Memory", considered the style of the "Stories" as follows:

> The virtually impenetrable maze of humor and fiction that contains and obscures whatever statement is being made should reveal to us that these truths, though stated literally, are not literal but symbolic…. Michael Robartes's story is wrapped in John Duddon's story, which is in turn wrapped in John Aherne's letter, and they are all like so many trial balloons sent up by Yeats – and I mean sent up in a double sense – so that if someone shoots them down neither Yeats nor his Vision will suffer.[41]

Olney begins to fathom the purpose of this manifestation of Yeatsian style, but stops short at the level of the "symbolic". Husain Haddawy, translator of the 1992 Everyman edition of the *Arabian Nights*, offers a possible, style-centred means for delving further. He notes how the great nineteenth century translators of the work (Edward Lane, John Payne and Richard Burton) with their exoticisms and archaisms violated the spirit of the original, most fundamentally by "failing to see that fidelity to the precise detail was crucial to achieve the essential quality of the *Nights*, by bridging the gap between the natural and the supernatural". Haddawy explains that the storyteller of the *Nights* does this bridging by using "precise and concrete detail" in a "matter-of-fact way in description, narration, and conversation", so that "the phantasmagoric is based on the concrete, the supernatural grounded in the natural".[42]

39. *VP*, 375; 377.
40. *Vision*, 23-40; 41-47.
41. Olney, 598.
42. Haddawy, xxv.

Yeats's task with his "Stories of Michael Robartes" (as with the earlier "Phases of the Moon") is precisely to bring the natural and supernatural together, to suggest a congruence of dimensions that, through humour, does not take itself too seriously, in accordance with modern predispositions and belief patterns. The appearance of what is strange in this work, though, reinforces the presence of artifice, but also, as Olney notes, the symbolic, and (in a context where the supernatural blends effortlessly with the natural) the suggestion of possible veracity underlying symbol. Style is used by Yeats here, then, to indicate the complementary relation of two opposite things, a pair of antinomies: artifice and truth. The two undermine each other to an extent, but also reinforce each other. Artifice that freely admits its own culpability by laughing at its own apparent pretensions, approaches the condition of truth; and if this is so, why should not humorous artifice be an oblique bearer of a deeper truth, otherwise blocked by the serious, rational mind?

A passage from near the conclusion of the "Stories" reads as follows:

> Mary Bell then opened the ivory box and took from it an egg the size of a swan's egg, and standing between us and the dark window curtains, lifted it up that we might all see its colour. "Hyacinthine blue, according to the Greek lyric poet" [Sappho], said Robartes. "I bought it from an old man in a green turban at Teheran; it had come down from eldest son to eldest son for many generations."

Aherne's intervention provokes a response from Robartes not unlike Yeats's nonchalant response in Conor Cruise O'Brien's anecdote:

> "No", said Aherne, "you never were in Teheran". "Perhaps Aherne is right", said Robartes. "Sometimes my dreams discover facts, and sometimes lose them, but it does not matter. I bought this egg from an old man in a green turban in Arabia, or Persia, or India…."

"It does not matter" chimes with "Does it really matter?" from the O'Brien anecdote. So the self-parody, again, perhaps incorporates Yeats's awareness of what might have been popular fare in the clubs and pubs of Dublin. The "Stories" concludes with a letter addressed to "Mr Yeats" (involving the author in his fiction, in the manner of Menippean satire), refers to his writings, and mentions the characters in the "Stories" as if they were actual persons.[43] The mingling of fact and fiction coloured by humour prompts a specific mood, wherein the improbable is made readily acceptable, as in the *Arabian Nights*.[44]

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43. Yeats, *Vision*, 38-40.

44. Yeats's library contains the 1923 Casanova edition of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night: Rendered from the Literal and Complete Version of Dr J.C. Mardrus and Collated with Other Sources by E. Powys Mathers* (Wayne K. Chapman, *The W.B. and George Yeats Library: A Short-title Catalogue*. (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2019), 28). There is textual evidence in "Rosa Alchemica" that Yeats was familiar much earlier with the Burton translation of the

Conclusion

There is a serious enough point to Yeats's strategy in this prologue: it is a means of conveying a truth, and not simply a symbolic truth or an aesthetic truth, to recall Olney and Haddawy. The style, drawing on figures which span over forty years of creative work (and which thus gain a degree of canonical authority), underwrites the literal truth of George's mediumship, the veracity of which, however, seems to lie in a scarcely comprehensible realm where fact meets fiction: humour – because it distances itself to an extent from the Balzacian human comedy (which includes the poet himself) – helps suspend disbelief. The humour in *Reveries*, more keyed to the tone of wonderment which permeates that book, and which is reflective of a developing consciousness, seems to counter the doctrinally-weighted humour in *A Vision*, with its freer, more generous feel. At the same time, though, a continuity is suggested, where the mysteries of existence are met with by an attitude not unconnected to Yeatsian joy, mentioned earlier; this fact perhaps brings to mind the old Chinamen in "Lapis Lazuli", who, looking out over all the "tragic scene" of existence, see beyond this surface, as a consequence of which:

> Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
> Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.[45]

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Nights (see Nicholas Meihuizen, '"I say that a Djinn spoke': Arabian Influences in Yeats", in *English Studies in Africa* 46.1 (2003): 37-40).

45. *VP* 567. The two old Chinamen encapsulate most directly in verse Yeats's idea of "tragic joy".

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