

# Mirrors and Lamps: Yeats's Vision and the Logic of the Palimpsest

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## Abstract

This study aims to provide a novel understanding of W. B. Yeats's systematic view of reality and human experience, generally referred to as his Vision. De Man's deconstructive reading of Yeats has demonstrated that this vision operates according to a particular mode of logic that differs radically from the standard economy of binary oppositions. Building on de Man's findings, and with reference to Shelley's poem "Witch of Atlas," this paper attempts to re-configure the primary-antithetical structure of Yeats's Vision in terms of 'repetition with-in difference,' interpreting his view of personal and historical reality as a 'graft' of lives and destinies—layer upon layer, none erased yet all under-erasure, like a palimpsest. In this respect, the fatalistic strain within Yeats's vision is read as a heterogeneous play of Fate and Destiny. The remainder of the paper thoroughly examines Yeats's iconic metaphor of mirror vs. the lamp regarding the role of the poet as imitator vs. creator and the theological analogy of the poet as God. Applying the insights derived from the study, and with reference to Goethe's idea of "repeated reflection," the lamp-mirror divide is argued to be governed by the undecidable logic of the palimpsest.

**Keywords:** Mirror vs. Lamp, Repeated Reflection, Palimpsest, Repetition with-in Difference, Yeats's Vision, Paul de Man, Derrida

## 1. Introduction

At this point in the long history of critical studies of Yeats's oeuvre, the structural conflict within his mythopoetic Vision and the concomitant tension beneath the dramatic veneer of his major later poems are not difficult to ascertain: an essential strife between the human, the earth-bound, the heroic, the sensuous, the commitment to life, the intellectual triumph over nature, profane artistic values, and the Renaissance and Hellenistic sensibility "founded on human intellect brought to quasi-divine perfection," (de Man, 2012, p. 137) on the one hand; and on the other, the divine, the emblematic or revealed wisdom, the non-incarnate and esoteric truth, the purely contemplative, the ascetic, the transcendent, the "Asiatic vague immensities" (Yeats, 1997, p. 345), and the Eastern and Byzantine sensibility based on a movement away from human intellect (de Man, 2012, pp. 136-138). In the humanistic interpretations of Yeats's most significant accomplishments, such as "Among School Children" and "Vacillation," the conflict is always resolved in favor of the antithetical desire for self-perfection, for the human form divine, compensating loss by re-conceiving life as "a continually invented creative act extended over time" and as "an internal

image that the self makes of the self,” fashioning an identity “self-choreographed throughout life” (Vendler, 2006, p. 85). However, Paul de Man, by deconstructing this very conflict, has persuasively shown that the dramatic structure so exquisitely laid out in Yeats’s later works “is not the drama of the conflict between what *A Vision* calls primary and antithetical forces or values. The primary as well as the antithetical realm contain dramatic conflicts and these conflicts cut across the borderline that separates the two areas” (de Man, 2012, p. 135). De Man identifies a number of such cross-sections, most notably in the case of Christ who, while categorized as a primary figure in *A Vision*, cannot impart to humanity his unfathomably expansive love and his purely divine wisdom (emblemized by his tunic, which, no longer bound by his flesh, symbolizes the rejection of the human nature of Christ) without the human frailty of the kenotic flesh becoming fully palpable as he suffers physical torture on the Cross and feels the anguish of *lama sabachthani* at the threshold of natural death. Among other examples, Matthias Grünewald’s painting of the Crucifixion from the *Isenheim Altar* (c. 1512-1516) serves as a poignant representation of this all-too-human agony, particularly considering “the terrifying rictus on the face of the dying Christ, which makes this image of sacrifice so disruptive to the Christian notion of transcendence” (Elmer, 2002, p. 184). In other words, while, as Neil Mann explains, the “primary invite God to inhabit their hollowed heart, as the macrocosm is reflected and expressed in the microcosm of the human being” (2019, p. 108), the very possibility of such reflection is dependent upon an antithetical principle. In this respect, Elizabeth Cullingford, in “Yeats and Gender” (2006), shows how the secular and the sacred are intertwined in Yeats’s poetry, by providing an intriguing reading of the poems “Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland” and “He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven,” specifically in terms of Catholic rituals and icons. For instance, the former poem, “by rendering masculine erotic abjection indistinguishable from religious and political devotion, ... taps into a powerful psychological force field in which masochism provides the major affective thrust” (p. 173). Cathleen ni Houlihan, or Maud Gonne as Mother Ireland, stands “purer than a tall candle before the Holy Rood” (Yeats, 1997, p. 80) as a composite symbol of national politics and sexualized Christianity, while the image of her admirers having “all bent low and low and kissed [her] quiet feet” (p. 79) conjures comparisons with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Heaven, as venerated in the practice of *hyperdulia*, the eternally unattainable Woman that has enthralled all her worshippers: “Irish Catholicism, with its iconographic emphasis on the tortured male body hanging above the altar, the ‘Holy Rood,’ encouraged this emphasis on male self-sacrifice” (Cullingford, 2006, p. 173). In short, as de Man (2012) puts it, “Yeats emphasises the profane elements in the primary, Christian world and the divine elements in the antithetical, pagan world. Profane and divine periods do not conflict but alternate in succession similar to that of the seasons” (p. 138). The same goes for any other pair of binary oppositions, such as the blind man vs. the fool or intellectual excitement vs. unself-conscious joy.

## 2. The Logic of the Palimpsest

In Yeats’s vision of reality, the content of any primary-antithetical conflict, that which serves to provide a dramatic context for the production of meaning through dialectical resolution, always reveals, or, more precisely, has always already revealed, a reproduction of a similar conflict within each of the poles of the opposition, and so on and so forth, layer upon layer, yielding a “graft” of inaccurate replications. Owing to its peculiar diaphanous structure, the depth of this textual graft is,

at once null and infinite—infinite in that each of its layers harbors another layer. The act of reading is thus analogous to those X rays that uncover, concealed beneath the epidermis of one painting, a second painting: painted by the same painter or by another, it makes little difference, who would himself, for lack of materials or in search of some new effect, have used the substance of an old canvas or preserved the fragment of a first sketch. (Derrida, 1981a, p. 357)

This creates a multiplicity of structural disruptions, a particular form of *mise en abyme* which follows the logic of the palimpsest: not “a mirroring of mirroring through tidy embedding, but a palimpsest ... an overlapping stratification” (Hobson, 1998, p. 75). An astounding imagery of such grafting is to be found in the essay “The Philosophy of Shelley’s Poetry” (1903): Yeats (2007) traces the dominant symbolism of “rivers and streams and wells, flowing through caves or rising in them” (p. 62) throughout Shelley’s oeuvre and, associating the cave with Plato’s allegory, proceeds to summarize Porphyry’s interpretation of Homer’s obscure description, in the thirteenth book of the *Odyssey*, of the “Cave of the Nymphs” in Ithaca where the Phaeacian boat leaves Ulysses (Yeats, 2007, pp. 62-64). Yeats identifies many of the details of Porphyry’s account in the cave of the Witch of Atlas, “the most elaborately described of Shelley’s caves” (64), and links the Romantic poet’s symbolism with his view of the human mind and its mysterious source, citing Shelley’s “Speculations on Metaphysics”: “thought can with difficulty visit the intricate and winding chambers which it inhabits. It is like a river, whose rapid and perpetual stream flows outward [...] The caverns of the mind are obscure and shadowy; or pervaded with a lustre, beautiful and bright indeed, but shining not beyond their portals” (as cited in Yeats, 2007, p. 65). At this point, Yeats inserts his magnificent gloss on Shelley’s description, in stanzas LVIII-LIX, of the witch passing the Mareotic lake:<sup>1</sup> “When the Witch has passed in her boat from the caverned river, that is doubtless her own destiny, she passes along the Nile ‘by Moeris and the Mareotid lakes,’ and sees *all human life shadowed upon its waters in shadows that ‘never are erased but tremble ever’* [emphasis added] ... she compares unhappiness to the ‘strife that stirs the liquid surface of man’s life’” (2007, p. 65). The Witch of Atlas has spun the threads of every human life, and woven them into tapestries of destiny; her threads, as the thirteenth stanza of Shelley’s poem describes, are not made of yarn but of light:

Which when the lady knew, she took her spindle  
And twined three threads of fleecy mist, and three

Long lines of light, such as the dawn may kindle  
 The clouds and waves and mountains with; and she  
 As many star-beams, ere their lamps could dwindle  
 In the belated moon, wound skillfully;  
 And with these threads a subtle veil she wove --  
 A shadow for the splendour of her love.

Yeats himself used the theme of weaving light in one of his most famous poems, “He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven”: “the heavens’ embroidered cloths / Enwrought with golden and silver light, / The blue and the dim and the dark cloths / Of night and light and the half-light” (1997, p. 70). Thus, the tapestries of all human lives are woven in the form of “subtle veil[s]” or “shadow[s]” over the lake, shadow upon shadow interlaced, infinite shadows grafted together on the liminal surface of the water, none erased but all under erasure (*sous rature*), trembling like a “troubled mirror” (Yeats, 1997, p. 212) which reflects the uneasy strife of human desire. What the Witch of Atlas sees, therefore, is a living, shimmering palimpsest of shadows in which the heterogeneous play of void and infinity takes place.

Rodolphe Gasché (1986), in his discussion of “iterability,” describes the non-empirical mode of repetition discussed above, one that is always already prior to repetition in the ordinary sense of the word, as “the ‘repetition of repetition,’ or *repetition in general*, repeatability” (p. 212). This repetition is with-in difference: in a similar manner to other infrastructures (différance, hymen, arche-trace, supplementarity, etc.), “*iterability* reunites two opposite, or rather incommensurable, meanings: the possibility of iteration or repetition, and also the possibility of alteration” (p. 212). The possibility (and not necessarily the actuality) of repetition must be inscribed in a sign for it “to be possible in its singularity in the first place” (p. 214). In other words, iterability amounts to the paradoxical inscription of alterity within singularity, of the possibility of replacement within the irreplaceable, a reference to the radically other built into the structure of the same, allowing of “a meaning of death prior to the proper meaning of what we commonly understand by death”—death as that “from which life with its limitations and finitude springs forth” (p. 214). Death, in this infrastructural sense, is the condition of iterability, and hence, of reproduction, of representation, and, above all, of memory. It marks a haunting of the present by a pure or immemorial past that never becomes (fully) present, and is not a mere modification of the present as past or future, but that which (is) always already anterior to the economy of the tenses: an absolute past (*passé absolu*), constituting the present as an effect of itself. This falls in line with Yeats’s idea of the purgatorial mode of *Dreaming Back* in which

the *Spirit* is compelled to live over and over again the events that had most moved it; there can be nothing new, but the old events stand forth in a light which is dim or bright according to the intensity of the passion that accompanied them. They occur in the order of their intensity or luminosity, the more intense first, and the painful are commonly the more intense, and repeat themselves again and again. (1962, p. 226)

The ghost returns atermminably, returns to returning, as the very condition of the living: “[The soul] only returns to itself, in both senses of assembling itself and waking itself [*s’éveiller*], becoming conscious, in the consciousness of self in general, through this concern for death” (Derrida, 1995, pp. 14-15).

In this respect, as Derrida explains in *Memoires for Paul de Man* (1989), memory “is not essentially oriented toward the past, toward a past present deemed to have really existed” (p. 58). Memory can never erase the difference between past and present; rather, it “stays with traces, in order to ‘preserve’ them, but traces of a past that has never been present, traces which themselves never occupy the form of presence and always remain, as it were, to come—come from the future, from the *to come*” (p. 58). This is a memory older than interiorized remembrance or recollective memory: it is a memory of the present which “far from fitting the present to itself” splits the moment (p. 60). Thus, the present, “always belated with regard to itself” (Gasché, 1986, p. 198), hollows itself out as an opening for the difference which constitutes memory, grafting temporal traces according to the palimpsestic logic of the future perfect, a past that is always ‘to-come.’ This is a memory of that which can never be remembered, a memory of (the act of) forgetting (*mémoire de l’oubli*), the acquiescence and en-gagement to a pure past as the paradoxical yet necessary condition of possibility of all present experience and action.

We have traced the primary-antithetical conflict at the heart of Yeats’s Vision to an absolute past, a radical anteriority, a future perfect always already marking the imperfection of the present in its ironic self-interruption. The authors suggest that this retrospective logic may provide a proper response to the predetermination that seems to govern the structure of the Great Wheel, a fact that plagued Yeats’s intellectual vision throughout his career as a poet, playwright, and critic, a philosophical defect for which he never found a satisfactory remedy. Yeats is well aware that his Vision of cones and gyres is essentially diagrammatically structured, and therefore, operates according to an im-personal or non-human schema anterior to all free choice; it is “founded on divine will alone and leaves no room for human freedom or rebellion” (de Man, 2012, p. 138). As Yeats acknowledges in the finishing lines of “Vacillation,” we merely “play a predestined part” in the larger scheme of things (1997, p. 257). The utterance “Surely some revelation is at hand” does not express the poet’s despair of waiting for “The Second Coming” of Christ (p. 189); rather, it voices his frustration with the unoriginality of what will have been revealed, with the non-transformative truth of the Passion, a sentiment best described in “The Magi”: “hoping to find once more, / Being by Calvary’s turbulence unsatisfied, / The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor,” the pale-faced Magi yearn, “now as at all times,” for another star-led journey to lay gifts at the feet of another Christ Child to be the harbinger of a perhaps more satisfactory revelation, only to be frustrated all over again—the “mystery” of the Incarnation is “uncontrollable,” that is, first and foremost, fatalistic (p. 125). However, Amy Ireland provides an enlightening approach to this originary inscription of predestination (albeit in the accelerationist context of spironomics, the poememenon, and hyperoccutation, not addressed in the present study)

that could be regarded as a palimpsestic reevaluation of Yeats's vision of reality: constituted by "the gyres that spin both ways at once" and "the intersecting but inverted cones—one 'primary', the other 'antithetical'—that exchange places at the turning of a Cycle," engendering a catastrophic shift from the vertex of one cone to the base of the other, hence forming a liminal space of crisis for an apocalyptic revelation (such as the Second Coming), Yeats's systematic Vision "affords an insider/outsider perspective, licensing prediction . . . but outlawing positive knowledge" as it "comprehends catastrophe chiasmically. Seen from within, it documents collapse into ultimately unknowable terrain; seen from without it discloses a pattern of assembly" (Ireland, 2017, p. 5). From the outside perspective, what shall come out of the catastrophe is always already decided by the elemental powers of fate: this chiasmic conception of the temporality of crisis marks an irreducible dissymmetry between God and man's knowledge of each other. The systole-diastole structure of the gyres, superimposing cyclicity over linearity, demands a 'simultaneous' playback or dreaming-back of the movement of the historical era toward its catastrophic end, "one part travelling forwards towards catastrophe, the other travelling backwards from anastrophe—to encounter itself, in time, as another," an experience of the self as other than itself, which is a defining fin-de-siècle sensibility (p. 7). From a point external to the construct of the Vision, the past and the future meet, in a twin gesture of disintegration and reintegration, at the disjunction and heterogeneity of a present split from within. It is this rupture that, allowing the play of Destiny and Fate or of Will and Necessity (Yeats, 1962, p. 86), prevents the diagrammatic predestination from being an *essentialist* theorem of death: the Witch of Atlas, the Norn of the Mareotic lake, interweaves with her threads of light all possible destinies of man, as his specter returns again and again, dreaming-back, life after life, inaccurate replications lived within each other at once, numberless lives grafted together in a palimpsest of shadows.

### 3. The Mirror and the Lamp

In this section we shall focus on a particular primary-antithetical conflict in Yeats's Vision and delineate, in the manner discussed above, the structural tension which recasts its binary logic as a palimpsestic play of traces: the mirror vs. the lamp. Yeats's iconic metaphor refers to a familiar debate in the history of literary criticism, best formulated by Coleridge as the Romantic opposition of "fancy" and "Imagination": the mechanistic, lifeless, determined, reproductive, and unoriginal operations of fancy against the vital, organic, productive, originary, and free creativity of Imagination. The major thrust of this argument is a stark distinction between two aesthetics: one considers the artwork as constructed, brought into being, that is, conceived, on the basis of pre-determined structures that are already at-hand; the other seeks the immaculate self-generation of the unconceived, that would be free of any and all determination. Almost a century later, in his preface to the controversial *Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935*, Yeats (1936) described what he perceived as historical shifts in the structure of the poetic canon toward the Romantic spirit, in terms of a movement from the mirror to the lamp, highlighting exceptional moments in literary history when the "soul must become its own betrayer, its own deliverer, the one activity, the mirror turn lamp" (p. xxxiii). Thus, the Romantics, the seventeenth-century and Elizabethan poets, and the Georgians (such as Dorothy Wellesley) would be categorized by Yeats under the writers of the lamp, characterizing the liberation from a prison made for a mind become "passive before a mechanized nature" (p. xxvii), or from a modernist "flux where man drowned or swam" (p. xxviii), "thrown upon this filthy modern tide / And by its formless, spawning, fury wrecked" (Yeats, 1997, p. 345). However, this disdain for the transcendent flux of violent energies, characteristic of the early fin-de-siècle Yeats and his involvement with the Pre-Raphaelites and Paterian aestheticism, merely masks how integral Dionysian madness is to his entire oeuvre. When Paul de Man (2012) asserts that "the whole of Yeats is already contained in the first poems" (p. 177), he is not exaggerating the role of French symbolism, among others, in the formation of the Anglo-Irish poet's creative vision. Despite Yeats's best efforts, the mirror cannot be so easily excluded from the poetic imagination.

Since literary criticism has always been modeled on the analogy between the poet and God or the Romantic metaphor of the poet as a prophet, lending it an indelible theological color, it is tempting to suggest that the mirror-lamp conflict in question could be translated to a Christian context—the specular relationship between Christ the Son and God the Father in terms of the intermediary veil of kenosis. To clarify this point we may turn to Hebrews 1:3 and its depiction of the dignity of the Son: "who, being *the radiance [apaugasma]* of *His* glory and *the exact expression* of *His* substance, and upholding all things by the power of *His* word, through having made *the purification* of sins, sat down at *the right hand* of the Majesty on high" (Berean Literal Bible). The Alexandrian word *apaugasma*, here translated as "radiance," has been the subject of controversy throughout the history of biblical exegesis. This word occurs in the apocryphal book of the Wisdom of the Solomon (7:26), where the uncreated Wisdom of God, Sophia, is described as "the brightness of the everlasting light [*apaugasma*], the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness" (KJV). *Apaugasma* "may mean either what is flashed forth, or what is flashed back: either 'ray' or 'reflection'" (Dods, 1910, p. 250); either, in the active sense, "as a beaming forth or radiance, i.e. as a ray which flows forth from the light, e.g., of the sun" or, in the passive sense, "as *image, reflected radiance*, i.e. as a likeness formed by reflex rays, *reflection*" (Lünemann, 1882, p. 78). The latter sense has been approved of by such iconic theologians as Calvin, Erasmus, Beza, and Thayer; Lünemann too ultimately sides with "reflected radiance." On the other hand, this sense of *apaugasma* does not go beyond the passivity of the specular into the mystery of the kenosis. *Apaugasma*, actively speaking, may be defined as an outraying, an independent body of light derived or issued from a primary source, light emanating from a luminous body, for instance, the sunlight—a meaning reminiscent of the words of the Nicene Creed "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God," and of Yeats's expression "flame begotten of flame" in the poem "Byzantium" (1997, p. 253). Similarly, the consensus among the Greek fathers in this respect was the term "effulgence" (*effulgentia*) in contrast to

“refulgence” or reflection (*repercussus*). According to Davidson, “The word ‘effulgence’ seems to mean not rays of light streaming from a body in their connection with that body or as part of it, still less the reflection of these rays caused by their falling upon another body, but rather rays of light coming out from the original body and forming a similar light-body themselves” (as cited in Dods, 1910, p. 250). Thus, evidence suggests that the active sense of *apaugasma* is as admissible as the passive one, if not more so.

However, if both meanings are equally legitimate, the question remains as to whether Christ, with regard to the Light of God’s glory, is the mirror or the lamp (presupposing, of course, that God the Father is always a lamp, an original source of light, a pure *genius*). Is Christ the self-originating, active, creative, and productive bestower or the passive, reproductive, and mimetic reflector, of the Light? The lamp-like, imaginatively creative mind supposedly enjoys a freedom which mirrors the freedom of God. Coleridge attributes this freedom to “the transcendence-directedness of imagination and its symbols, prayer, and contemplation as imperfectly (humanly) traversing the divide between concept and idea” (Cheyne, 2022, p. 354). Imagination is, in Coleridge’s words in *Biographia Literaria* (1817), “a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM” (ch. 13). The term “repetition” here already betrays the mimetic fragility of the mirror-lamp distinction: the lamp is already a mirror since it is a mere imitation of the creative radiance of God. As Jonathan Culler explains in *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981):

the notion of poem as heterocosm, which is supposed to have displaced the notion of the poem as imitation, is always justified by an appeal to mimeticism: the poet imitates the creative act of God or, at the very least, the generative activity of nature. The work can only be a world in itself rather than an imitation of nature if it is produced in a process that imitates the production of the world. (p. 180)

Furthermore, establishing a specular relation between two modes of freedom (human and divine), results in an apparent paradox—imitation without imitation. As Derrida points out in “Economimesis”: “How can man’s freedom (in a liberal economy) resemble God’s freedom which resembles itself and reassembles itself in it. It [man’s freedom] resembles it [God’s freedom] precisely by not imitating it, the only way one freedom can resemble another” (1981b, p. 10). The original primary-antithetical conflict is reproduced.

On the other hand, the very ‘act’ of imitating reality already implicates an active, self-conscious agent of aesthetic creation, suggesting that the mirror could function as a lamp. Culler writes, “it could be argued that this notion of *generative activity* [emphasis added], supposed to be distinctive of lamps, is already implicit in conceptions of the mind as mirror [...] the mirror already has formative power; it is implicitly a lamp” (180). An obvious example of this power is the anti-Cartesian concept of the mirror stage (*stade du miroir*) in Lacanian psychoanalysis: the construction of the *I* through the child’s identification with its imaginary mirror-image. Lacan provides an account of this process in his canonical “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I* as revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” (1949). As a function of the mirror and not the lamp, the narcissistic conflict at this stage, namely the mis-recognition (*méconnaissance*) of the ego, allows the child entry into the Symbolic order of language and its predetermined structures as a desiring subject: the mirror stage serves to “link the *I* to socially elaborated situations” (Lacan, 1989, p. 4). This subject is constituted by a lack (*manque*) at the heart of desire, a rupture between being and thinking: since the mirror-image is always no more than a (necessary) fiction, any object of desire the subject may identify with turns out to be a mere reflection, a disguise for another object, and so on, *ad infinitum*, a form of *mise en abyme* which “generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego’s verifications” (p. 3). Thus, a vector of desire always intrudes on the signifying chain that produces meaning—the process of “the deflection of the specular *I* into the social *I*” which opens a constitutive gap between the Symbolic and the Real, at the threshold of the im/possible (p. 4). This gap is formative of the desiring subject since it operates as the movement of difference with-in the process of idealization: the mirror stage “gives coherence to a body that still doesn’t perceive itself as an organic whole and, for this reason, the mirror image becomes the prototype of every narcissistic idealization” (Benvenuto, 2020, p. 79).

While the mirror and the lamp, within the mimetic structure of specularity, can function as one another, they are incapable of functioning without one another—the lamp needs a mirror and vice versa. As Culler (1981) elaborates,

A lamp illuminates when it is dark, when there is not enough light to see. The light of a lamp stands in a determined relation to natural light, which it replaces or imitates. The meaning of *lamp* depends on this system, which makes it a substitute sun or source of light; its significance is established by a relation of mimesis. Doubtless there is a difference between the poet as lamp, projecting, by God’s grace, a light like God’s own, and the poet as mirror, reflecting the light provided by God: but both give us a system based on visibility, presence, and representation, where the mind or author casts light upon that which he perceives and represents. To put it bluntly, a mirror is no use without light, and there is no point in illuminating a scene unless something will register or reflect what is there. The economy of mimesis presupposes light; the lamp fits into that economy. (pp. 181-182)

This seems to confirm Yeats’s assertion in “The Statues” that “Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show,” and that, consequently, “knowledge increases unreality” (1997, p. 345). This is the only piece of knowledge that the “empty eyeballs” (p. 345) of Buddhist statues of the Gandhara school possess: “no knowledge is worth a straw” (p. 146). In other words, the truth of the eyes is “emptiness” (p. 345). In this context, emptiness (which should not be confused with blindness) refers to the Buddhist ontological concept of *Śūnyatā* (un-Self, voidness) or, its extension in Mahayana teachings, *Śunyāvadā*: “no essential unchanging core, therefore no fundamentally real existence, as applied to all things without exception. In context the suggestion is that there simply is no such thing as ‘intrinsic nature,’” that is, all things are but dreams and illusions (Williams, 2009, p. 52). In this respect, the analogy of foam and bubbles from the Pali scriptures is noteworthy: “all things are like bubbly foam. They

collapse under (ontological) pressure. This is not some form of monistic absolutism, a *via negativa* negating in order to uncover a True Ultimate Reality. The ultimate truth is that there simply is no such thing as a True Ultimate Reality,” even Nirvana (p. 52). All things gather into “the forgetfulness / Of dreamy foam” (Yeats, 1997, p. 371) and all our thoughts are “but a little foam upon the deep” (Yeats, 2007, p. 61).

Another example of the generative power of the mirror, which may “go further still” (Yeats, 1936, p. xxxiii) than simply demonstrating the inevitability of mimesis, is Goethe’s idea of “repeated reflection” (*wiederholte Spiegelung*), a term borrowed from the field of entoptics, based on his own scientific experiments in optics and color. In a short essay (1823) titled eponymously, Goethe writes:

If one considers that repeated reflections in this psychical sense not only keep the past in lively memory, but actually enhance, intensify it to a higher degree of vitality, one is reminded of the physical phenomena in entoptics which similarly as they are reflected back and forth, far from fading away, become rather en-kindled. In this way we shall obtain a symbolic picture of what has been, and is being repeated daily in the history of the arts and sciences and even in the world of religion and politics. (as cited in Dieckmann, 1962, p. 156)

Based on Goethe’s idea, it could be suggested that an individual’s inner experience is intensified each time the response of an intimate other to that experience is reflected back on him, and vice versa, a resonating echo of reflections transforming the two, in the process, into compound individuals spoken through and as one another, interweaving an intrauterine space where the potential gestates for co-(e)lucidation of the latent content of the (shared) experience. In *Surprise and Psycho-Analyst* (1937), Theodor Reik, discussing “the possibility of analytic hearing the possibility of ‘unconscious communication’ or of ‘reciprocal elucidation of unconscious processes,’” suggests the Goethean repeated reflection as a method that, *mutatis mutandis*, could be employed in psychoanalysis, “falling back upon the idea of the necessarily mediate character of the knowledge of the Ego” (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, p. 164). He cites a letter Goethe wrote to Iken (September 23, 1827) about some obscure passages in *Faust*, where the notion of “reciprocal elucidation” finds its precedent: “Since we have many experiences that cannot be plainly expressed and communicated, I have long adopted the method of revealing the secret meaning to attentive readers by images that confront one another and are, so to speak, reflected in one another” (as cited in Lacoue-Labarthe, 1989, p. 164).

The mirror functions as a lamp, but not just any kind of lamp: the origin of its light is unidentifiable, as if reflection is all that there is. As Dieckmann (1962) observes, “reflections, taken in the concrete form in which Goethe himself applies them, do not only *appear* on parallel surfaces, but they are *produced* by them. Each reflection has an effect on the next one, namely that of an ever increasing intensity” (p. 157). This eternal recurrence of meaning as an effect of itself has far-reaching implications for our understanding of how language operates. The supplementary logic of the Goethean notion of “repeated reflections” seems to suggest that the subject coincides with the distances separating it from itself, recasting, in Derrida’s words in the essay “The Voice that Keeps Silence,” “sameness as self-relation within self-difference. [The movement of *différance*] produces sameness as the nonidentical” (1973, p. 82). We are already in the domain of deconstruction. Repeated reflection, in its continuous interruption of the meaning-formation process, constitutes meaning as difference with-in repetition. In a radically ironic manner, the generative power of the Goethean ‘stage of mirrors’ lies in its having always already cultivated an irreducible distance from any generative source of power. This resonates with de Man’s claim in “The Rhetoric of Temporality”: “The act of irony, as we now understand it, reveals the existence of a temporality that is definitely not organic, in that it relates to its source only in terms of distance and difference and allows for no end, for no totality” (1983: 222). In his favorable review of Barbara Naumann’s brilliant work *Philosophie und Poetik des Symbols: Cassirer und Goethe* (1998) and her perspicacious analyses of Goethe’s oeuvre, R. H. Stephenson writes: “Goethe was well aware that meaning is generated within a self-deconstructing system of a non-identical repetition of signifiers” as is clear from his 1823 essay on “repeated reflections,” “where an infinite series of reflections, both diachronic and synchronic, with no given, only an arbitrary, *point d’appui*, is envisaged with sovereign irony on Goethe’s part” (164). Furthermore, according to Stephenson, Naumann’s work presents a rather persuasive case for “Goethe’s sophisticated awareness that any apparent point of stable centrality (the *Urphänomen* preeminently so) is only ever a (necessary) fiction, from which one can trace, and enjoy, an in-fact decentered, multiperspectival site of multiple self-referential significations” (164). In the Goethean rendering of repeated reflections, the mirror we gaze into is like the eyes of an animal gazing back at us—a reflexive experience not simply serving as a negative confirmation of our self-conscious existence, but one which challenges our self-consciousness and enhances our knowledge of ourselves: “the gaze of the other animal, in its crucially indeterminate character, is rather positively subjectivizing. In its heterogeneity, the gaze of the other animal does not just reduce us but reconstitutes an open virtuality to our existence, not yet exhausted and arrested by our own knowledge of ourselves, our own keeping track of ourselves” (Khurana, 2021, p. 154).

In summary, the mirror-lamp distinction is undecidable. In fact, in the specular economy of mirror and lamp, the establishment of any binary opposition, such as the Romantic privileging of the lamp over the mirror, undermines itself when such privileging is inevitably represented, that is, *given* to the conscious mind of the reader (for instance, when the Romantic thought of the creative mind as lamp is expressed in terms of an analogy, the poet as God). Since expression can only take place in the medium of language and its systems of representation, the movement from the mirror to the lamp is subjected to the inherent limitations of language, its ineluctable metaphoricity, and the constructedness of its tropological configurations. “Meaning, signification, and exteriority,” de Man would agree, “depend upon an originary *narrative of tropes* ... [which] produces, by describing or narrating, a gap between subject (meaning/the figural) and object (existence/the literal)” (Colebrook, 2002, p. 193). If representation is the proper mode of language, and truth always has to be represented, then meaning cannot

reveal itself but as a story about meaning: “generality (the origin in general) becomes the accomplice of metaphoricity ... we learn from the trope about the status of literal, proper meaning, the status of that which gives itself as proper meaning” (Derrida, 1982, p. 280). What is given is an allegory of tropes, a description or narrative of the fundamental difference between tropes and that to which they refer. A narrative representation, however, cannot erase the difference which constitutes it: it is a mere mystification, a fictional escape from the ultimate indeterminacy of the text, a fantasy of closure built around mimetic devices, that is, mirrors or lamps functioning as mirrors, etc. Such mystification takes the form of an allegorical determinism with “its own narrative coherence, its own systematicity,” a designation of meaning based on a particular alignment of tropes (de Man, 1996, p. 179). This coherent determination is always interrupted by the radical anteriority of the originary difference which belies the stability of any deterministic resolution of meaning, the ironic disruption that simply exchanges one determinism for another: “It is in the self-conscious retracing of this narrative of tropes—parabasis—that irony reminds us that we are effects rather than authors of tropes” (Colebrook, 2002, p. 193). As Maebh Long has shown, the self-conscious quality of the irony implies that the ironic interruption itself “is bound by the laws of the play, and as such plays its own interruption” (2014, p. 92). In other words, our re-cognition of the ironic aporia of language merely amounts to a reproduction of the irony.

In a similar manner, we could argue that the analogy of the poet as God or the poem as heterocosm introduces an irreducible distance between the analogy and that to which it refers (the hypo-thetical referent), through constant ironic reproductions of the analogical narrative with different alignments of tropes, continually deferring the confrontation of the reader with the literal source of analogy which, thus, itself turns out to be nothing other than a palimpsest of these analogies. In the radical anteriority of irony, what remains of the purported *genius* of the lamp (i.e., of the Romantic myth of autopoiesis), is an imitation without imitation, the act of imitation itself. It is repetition itself, which, as we have seen, is always repetition with-in difference—a mirror that (is) a lamp that (is) a mirror.

#### 4. Conclusion

Yeats’ cyclical vision of personal and collective reality, frequently expressed in the form of the Great Wheel, with its reciprocally contrasting principles, operates according to a particular mode of logic that differs radically from the standard economy of binary oppositions. Thus, the Vision, contrary to Yeats’s poetic expectations, cannot be reduced to a dialectical resolution of coincident opposites in a punctual Unity of Being in which choice and fate become one and the same. On the contrary, the perpetual turning of the Wheel is not an eternal repetition of the same, but functions in terms of a repetition with-in difference, an elliptical displacement of unity into an endless ‘play’ of choice and fate. As demonstrated in this study, the primary-antithetical structure of the Vision may be interpreted as a grafting of the entire human experience, a palimpsest of possible realities. Perhaps the most recognizable of binary oppositions in Yeats’s Vision is the mirror vs. the lamp, a metaphor for the question of autopoiesis in the history of literary criticism: whether the poet is the creative genius or the mere imitator of nature, whether the poet can be analogized as a God creating his own poetic cosmos. As the study suggests, the mirror/lamp divide, beneath its dramatic surface, reveals a palimpsest of lights and reflections, a heterogeneous play of mirrors and mirror-images, since every lamp and every mirror is, in itself, as a mimetic device, constituted by a similar mirror-lamp division, and so on. Thus, the specular—the mimetic—could be traced to a radical anteriority, an absolute past, epitomizing the retrospective logic of the palimpsest.

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