

The Pirouette of Ideas:

Dance as Metaphor in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

by Julianne White

What is a metaphor if not a kind of pirouette

performed by an idea, enabling us to assemble its diverse names or images?

---Paul Valéry

“Philosophy of the Dance”

I. Introduction

Yeats was enormously interested in the art of dance, particularly in the middle- to late-periods of his career. In fact, the imagery of dance and the figure of the dancer are familiar images to readers of Yeats, and they are distinctive markers of Yeatsian poetry. He lived during a time of great innovation and popularity for the dance arts, as modern dancers such as Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan became famous for their challenges to classical ballet forms. In addition, dance has a long association with Irish culture, a culture which claims its own unique dance forms. Dance appears regularly and prominently in many of the ancient stories and legends of Ireland, especially as the means of movement and communication among the faeries, a tradition Yeats will capitalize on and which will become the largest group of poems in this paper.

Yeats showed an interest in the dance even as a young man, though dance was not a major interest to his art-oriented family. In his life, according to Mester, “Yeats never specifically mentions a desire to be a dancer, but he left a trail of hints that he loved to dance” (28). She cites evidence from: 1) an early short story, “Rosa Alchemica,” in which dance plays a role; 2) Yeats’s taking dancing lessons both in his youth and during his third American lecture tour; 3) his urge to dance “after smoking Indian hemp with followers of Saint Martin” (29); and 4) T. Sturge Moore’s drawing of a dancer on a

bookplate that he drew for Yeats's then-six-year-old daughter, Anne. In addition, Yeats helped sponsor one of Ruth St. Denis's London seasons in 1912 (Magriel, 230). All of these details suggest that dance was indeed important to Yeats personally as well as professionally.

Dance is an integral element of the total package of Western cultural tradition—along with music, the visual arts, poetry, drama and literature—that Yeats inherited culturally, intellectually, intuitively and emotionally. The choruses of the plays of Sophocles and the dances of seasonal bacchanalian festivals are as much a part of that cultural heritage as they are a part of each other. Drama includes choral recitations, which also include dance and poetry. Yeats intuitively understood this aspect of Western culture, and the evidence he left in the poems suggests strongly that he saw no distinctions between music and poetry or dance and sculpture. Part of that cultural tradition could have been passed on to him through two important poems, which were a likely part of every educated family's library. Sir John Davies's (Oxford-educated solicitor and contemporary of Shakespeare's) "Orchestra, or A Poem of Dancing," (ca. 1594), and Soame Jenyns's

(Cambridge-educated Member of Parliament) "The Art of Dancing" (ca. 1729) confirm the Western mind's habit of conflating dance, music, art and poetry.

Additionally, Davies's poem expresses the Renaissance worldview that all things in life, natural as well as supernatural, are interrelated and connected. Jenyns's poem provides evidence of the importance of dancing, particularly the minuet, to 18th-century social interaction. The minuet became so popular, in fact, that, according to Anne Cottis, editor of the 1978 edition of the Jenyns poem, "Several dancing masters declared it to be the basis of all good dancing" (9). While there is no solid evidence proving Yeats's familiarity with these two poems, they were so widely read and their influence so undeniable, that even had Yeats not read the poems directly, he would probably have been at least aware of them or their authors' reputations, as well as been strongly influenced by the worldviews and philosophies about the interrelatedness of the arts they espoused.

In Yeats's poetic vision, dance becomes a metaphor for physical movement that is elegant, graceful, and meaningful. Ninety-seven references to the

dance and dancing appear in 47 poems that span Yeats's entire career and constitute 13% of the canon. Seven of these poems contain the word "dance" or "dancer" in the title, representing 15% of the 47 poems containing dance references and 1% of the entire lyric canon. Nine of these 47 poems also contain references to music and the arts. This particular statistic also supports the notion that Yeats did not fully distinguish between dance, music and the arts; rather, he saw them all as manifestations of the single impulse to create something meaningful and important. The poem "Sweet Dancer" leads the list with 8 references to dance in a poem of only 14 lines. "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is second with seven references to dance. Eleven poems have three, four, or five references to dance; 34 poems have 1-2. What all of these statistics taken as a whole seem to suggest is that, compared to music and art, dance is less prevalent, but equal in metaphorical power and symbolic importance to Yeats.

I found these 97 references to dance by looking up the following key words in the Parrish and Painter Concordance: 1) dance/danced/dancelike/dancer(s) /dance's/dancing/ dancing-place/out-danced; 2) whirl/whirling/whirled; and 3) jig. Many references to dance appeared in the form of names of famous modern dancers and ballerinas, such as: Ruth St. Denis (American 1878-1968), Loie Fuller (American 1862-1928), and Anna Pavlova (Russian 1866-1950). I also counted other references to dance in the poems that were made in the form of phrases or whole lines. These are:

—"That there be no foot silent in the room" ("The Mountain Tomb");

—"If head and limb have beauty / And the in-step's high and light"
("His Phoenix");

—"Heel up and weight on toe" ("She turns the Dolls' Faces to the Wall");

—"Who had seemed to glide to some intrigue in her red shoes" ("She turns the Dolls' Faces to the Wall");

—"All are on their toes" ("She turns the Dolls' Faces to the Wall");

—"There is great danger in the body" ("Michael Robartes and the Dancer");

—"Even from the foot-sole think it too" ("Michael Robartes and the Dancer");

—“O body swayed to music” (“Among Schoolchildren”); and

—“her feet / Practice a tinker shuffle / Picked up on the street” (“Long-legged Fly”).

In the context of the individual poems in which these phrases appear, these lines are not at all ambiguous; they are direct references to dancing or graceful movement. Unlike the music and art references, which appear in a much wider vocabulary—a wider variety of words that refer to those arts—dance references in Yeats’s poems are almost exclusively limited to some form of the word dance. He will occasionally use whirl when he means dance, but that word almost always appears in a poem that will use dance also. He uses jig once, and it appears in the same line as the word dance. I also looked up the following list of words, none of which appear at all in the entire canon: 1) reel; 2) polka, waltz, minuet, gavotte, or tango; 3) Highland fling; 4) fandango, flamenco, rumba, cha-cha, or mambo; 5) arabesque, ballet, ballerina, pas de deux; 6) choreography/ choreograph. The absence of these words in his poetry suggests that when Yeats means dance, when he wants to suggest graceful, elegant or meaningful movement or motion, he uses the generic term dance.

Once I identified all these references (and other words and/or forms of dance were eliminated from consideration), then I grouped the poems that make these references into categories of poems that use dance in similar ways or in which dance has a similar meaning. Unlike music and art, in each of which I found a wide variety of themes (some containing large groups of poems), the dance poems were more uniform and fell naturally into only three categories. These categories are: 1) dance as a site of tension and negotiation between men and women; 2) dance as a site of tension, attempts at communication, and negotiation between the natural and supernatural worlds, especially as represented by the faeries; and 3) dance as a signifier of the achievement of Unity of Being. In Yeats’s vision, music and art are woven into the entire fabric of human experience, spanning an entire lifetime or the entire spectrum of human experience. Dance is far more limited in this vision. Dance, in Yeats’s view, is an elegant way of moving; and as a conceptual metaphor, it is limited to describing: 1) the tension inherent in people’s relationships with each other and 2) the supernatural world; and 3) as a metaphor for the reconciliation of that tension. Unlike the music and art poems, where a single poem could have “fit” into more than one category, the poems that make reference to dance were clearly in one group or another.

Yeats's focusing of dance imagery on describing tension and its resolution I believe to be a reflection of his instinctive and intuitive understanding of (albeit perhaps not his acceptance of) the inescapable fact that human experience and human relationships are overwhelmingly informed by tension. Human relationships, relationships either with another person or with the natural and supernatural worlds, are always filled with tension; the potential for miscommunication is always present. Yeats proposes a solution for this tension in the Unity of Being, which he suggests throughout *A Vision* is the absence of conflicting impulses and the essence of a person's being existing in harmony with everything around it, as well as within itself. It is a "form created by passion to unite us to ourselves" (82). The poems containing references to dance that refer to relations either between the sexes or between people and the supernatural forces at work in the world use dance between partners as the main metaphor. However, the poems that refer to dance as the resolution of tension, represented by the Unity of Being, almost exclusively show a lone female figure dancing. This suggests that as long as there are two partners in the dance, there is tension; the only resolution to that tension, and this resolution is not achievable in a mortal human life, is to dance alone. This is the metaphor I will discuss more fully at the end of this paper.

II. The "Dance Poems"

Group One: Dance as Negotiation between Men and Women

The concept of dance has the potential to allow communication between people to be far more pleasant and perhaps even a little less troublesome. When seen through the lens of the dance, communication becomes more a site of negotiation, less a struggle for control in a relationship. In this vision of communication, control becomes fluid and negotiable, and the boundaries that separate the partners in the dance, while always in existence, become more permeable than intransigent. The most interesting physical space in this construct of communication is the space located between the bodies of the partners. Most dance instructors will insist that the space between the partners be maintained at all times, that the "instructions" that come from the leading partner be communicated through touching hands and the tension that is maintained, approximately a foot in measurement, in that space. Additionally, direction, rhythm, and/or speed are signalled to the partners through eye contact, facial expression, body language and other non-verbal means. However, it is also true that in the best, most experienced, and most seamless of partnerships, neither party leads all the time. There are

times, in fact, when the leading shifts, and then shifts back again; the important element is the ability of both partners to perform both the leading and the following, and the ability to be quick enough and sensitive enough to make the shift without stumbling.

For most of Yeats's adult life, his relationships with women were hesitant, uncertain and insecure. In most of his relations with women, he very much felt like the novice to more skilled and experienced women. He consistently saw these women as more skilled in the art of the metaphorical dance of mating rituals. These images also suggest that Yeats saw women's skill and worldliness in this area of life as evidence of the performative aspect of the art of dance, an interpretation that is supported by his choice of talented women in "His Phoenix," all of whom in the second stanza were famous performers. While "His Phoenix" and "On Woman" are both important poems that show this metaphor at work, I will discuss only two important poems: "Owen Aherne and his Dancers" is representative of a "dance" between partners that, while it shows inverted gender roles, also shows that both parties benefit from their engagement in the dance. However, the poem, "VII. Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers," shows what happens when the dance is destructive and dysfunctional. These two poems contrast each other nicely as examples of extremes in tension-filled, male-female relationships.

"Owen Aherne and his Dancers," from *The Tower* (1928), is a thinly veiled account of Yeats's own confused love life. In this poem, an older man who, although in love with a much younger woman, a girl really, marries another, and is then torn with regrets and feelings that he had "betrayed three people" (Letters 633). In the fall 1917 when Iseult Gonne refused to marry him, Yeats married Georgie Hyde-Leeds three weeks later. In an agony of recrimination, Yeats's was brooding over his decision when George suddenly felt compelled to write "something she had lived through before." She wrote that "with the bird [Iseult,] all is well at heart. Your action was right for both but in London you mistook its meaning." Her first effort at automatic writing, therefore, was reassurance for her husband that he had, indeed, made the right choice, and that all parties involved would be happy. His gloomy emotional state and his physical pains disappeared, and he ceased to worry about his decision (Letters 633-4). Whether this was a genuine supernatural experience or a clever method of reassurance by a young but perceptive wife, the end result is a poem in which Yeats could step into his Aherne persona and express his ambivalence safely. Birds have the freedom and grace of movement that dancers have, even more so since they can defy gravity and leave the confined space of the ground itself. The dancers in this poem must, therefore, be wild birds, not caged birds, for it is only in the wild that birds can move/dance/fly freely. This strikingly departs from the traditional "bird in a gilded cage" imagery used during this period to describe the controlled life of the "domesticated" Victorian wife.

In the first part of the poem, the persona feared both “to give its love a hurt” (ll. 7) and “the hurt that she could give” (ll. 8), and therefore, in an agony of confusion, his heart “went mad” (ll. 8). In the second half of the poem, he identifies himself as the “caged bird” who “did not find in any cage the woman at my side” (ll. 19). The two dancers are, in fact, the “wild” birds, and he himself is the caged, even though one of the wild birds is married to the caged bird. She remains free and wild, even while married, in contrast to the more usual Victorian image of the wife as the “caged bird,” or one who is tamed and controlled by her husband. He comes to the conclusion that he must let the other wild bird go, emotionally, to marry a younger man, and relax and enjoy the “free bird” who has chosen to stay with him in his self-imposed cage of doubts and insecurities. It seems clear here that the women have the upper hand: Aherne is the one torn to pieces over his own fears and doubts; the “dancers” are free-spirited and joyous. In fact, if the story about the first incidence of George’s employing automatic writing is accurate and not apocryphal, then it seems even clearer that she is confident and in control of this relationship; Yeats is the one who requires reassurance. George seemed to know exactly what to do and how to do it, in such a way that her actions not only put her husband’s mind at ease, but in cleverly using a method that would keep him focused on her and not on Iseult Gonne, Maud Gonne, Olivia Shakespear, or anyone else he may have once had feelings for. George Yeats, the “free-caged bird,” is the dancer who is leading. Because she effectively calmed his fears, then Yeats, the follower in this dance, received a benefit from following that is immeasurable. Although there is an equitable trade-off suggested in this poem, that trade-off is problematized by the shifting of traditional gender roles in the dance.

The other poem in this section problematizes traditional gender roles even further, as well as the idea of sacrificing of control for the benefits gained in return. In “VII. Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers,” from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), it is unclear just who has the controlling hand. Crazy Jane is the detached observer, and she witnesses a man and a woman locked in a seemingly endless death-struggle-dance. Crazy Jane first sees the man, “that ivory image there” (ll. 1), “dancing with her chosen youth” (ll. 2). The man chooses the woman’s youth as a dancing partner, then he winds her “coal-black hair” around her neck “As though to strangle her” (ll. 3-4). Rather than being marked by passion and communication, this dance seems marked instead by hate and violence. The woman, strangely, does not scream; no, her “eyes under eyelids did so gleam” (ll. 6). Rather than being horrified and terrorized by the man’s violence, the

woman seems aroused by it. This relationship is one that seems dysfunctional at best, deviant at worst.

The story continues with answering violence by the woman toward the man: she “drew a knife to strike him dead” (ll. 10). The poem ends in ambiguity. Crazy Jane is uncertain what she has seen: “Did he die or did she die? / Seemed to die or died they both?” (ll. 15-16). Even though she claims to have “Cared not a thraneen for what chanced” (ll. 18), she makes this profound observation—an observation Yeats may have gleaned from his devotion to Blake—about the nature of love, which is also the refrain of the poem: “Love is like the lion’s tooth” (ll. 7, 14, 21). In a letter to Olivia Shakespear, Yeats reports that the inspiration for this poem came to him in a dream, and that he believed that the human tendency to hate what is loved has its roots in Blake: “I suppose it was Blake’s old thought ‘sexual love is founded on spiritual hate’ ” (Letters 758). This poem presents images of men and women dancing that are very different from the previous poem in this group. In the previous poem, the woman controlled and directed the dance between themselves and the man in her life. Even though this depiction defies tradition and inverts the gender roles, the “dance” that they represent is ultimately satisfying because the male dancer agrees to follow the woman’s lead. The tension is not based on who is going to lead, but instead on whether or not both parties can benefit from the dance.

In contrast, this poem presents an instance when neither party will relinquish the right to lead in the dance; both insist on leading, so they end up going nowhere, suspended in space briefly. Stubbornly refusing to relinquish control is not the same thing as maintaining the tension between the dancers. The space between the dancers is necessary; in order for there to be enough energy for the dancers to move, they must have space between them where the tension remains inviolate. In spite of this fact, one partner must allow him- or herself to be lead. Both partners cannot lead at the same time, all the time. This is true in relationships as well as in dancing. These two lovers being observed by Crazy Jane are locked in a dance that goes nowhere; as a result, neither partner benefits at all. They are not dancing at all. They are only using the excuse of the dance to disguise their desire to inflict pain and anguish on each other. Crazy Jane, as the observer, realizes that there are times when love is more painful and more dangerous than any other human experience, and that the dance between men and women is not always what it should be: a negotiation between men and women for control

in the relationship; in this case, dance is the violence of a destructive, failed relationship.

In both of these poems, the images of dancing are those associated with mating rituals between men and women. In the most successful of these examples of courting, the dance is smooth because one of the dancers leads and the other follows, heedless of traditional expectations of male leadership. In the strained and/or difficult examples of male/female relations, the dance is so filled with tension that no one can move, and neither party will acquiesce control. The tension in the final example remains unresolved, and it is suggested that there simply is no fully equitable or fully satisfying way to resolve such tension that will ever meet everyone's needs.

Group Two: Dance as Negotiation between the Natural and Supernatural Worlds

Men and women are not only required to find ways to relate to each other in human life; they must also find ways to communicate and negotiate with the world and the supernatural forces that exist in the world around them as well. Without a clear understanding of the nature of the supernatural world, which is shrouded in mystery and legend, they will have trouble negotiating the natural world, too. I found that the movement of things in nature and attempts at communication with the supernatural are both signified by use of the word dance in many of Yeats's poems. Again, Yeats was drawing heavily on a long-standing, broad and comprehensive conception of dance that is part of the Western worldview. The editors of *What is Dance? Readings in Theory and Criticism* (1983), Roger Copeland and Marshall Cohen, confirm this view of dance by suggesting a deliberately broad definition of dance, broad enough to include the movement of the stars and the waves and other elements of the natural world. They define dance as "any patterned, rhythmic movement in space and time. A broad definition of this sort, which refuses to distinguish between human and non-human motion, enables us to describe as 'dances' the movements of the waves or the orbits of the heavenly bodies" (1). Perhaps because this view of dance is so prevalent and so ingrained on the Western psyche, then this is by far the largest of the three groups in this chapter, and it contains 23 poems. This group is so large, in fact, I have further divided it into sub-categories. These sub-categories are: 1) Dancing Waves and Stars; 2) Faeries Dancing; 3) The Dance of the Moon; 4) Dancing in Dreams of the Afterlife; and 5) Rituals, Failed and Not. What binds all of these poems together is that they are all concerned with dancing as a means

of communication and negotiation between human beings and the natural and supernatural worlds. There is too much in all these poems to include in this brief discussion; therefore, I will allow a couple of Yeats's poems describing dancing waves and one using dancing stars to represent the entire group.

Dancing Waves

The movement of the stars and other elements of the natural world being viewed as a dance is a conceit handed down to modern poets from the poets of the Renaissance as well as earlier time periods. This way of conceiving of the universe is "central to Renaissance ways of thinking" (13), a way of thinking that would have appealed to Yeats enormously, especially in his efforts to direct the Irish renaissance of the arts.

Yeats uses this traditional conceptual metaphor of the universe and its disparate but interconnected elements given to him by the poets of the Renaissance, while also expanding it further, to explore his concern with the contrast between youth and age and the anguish of mortality that serve as common themes to bind together the poems in *Crossways*. In "The Meditation of the Old Fisherman," the speaker addresses the waves of the ocean: "You waves, though you dance by my feet like children at play, / Though you glow and you glance, though you purr and you dart; / In the Junes that were warmer than these are, the waves were more gay, / When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart" (ll. 1-4). The dancing of the waves, like children at play, serve to remind the old man of his own advanced age, his mortality, and the inevitable comparison with "the good old days": even the waves were more gay back then than they are now. Dance is a marker of youth as carefree and happy. The movement of the waves and the human engagement with those waves are all a part of one dance, as they are all represent elements of life that cannot, and perhaps should not, be avoided. Dance is again representative of the movement of things in the natural world; this movement will later be contrasted with the movement of the faeries in the supernatural world, as well as the failed attempts to cross over those boundaries.

The next two poems shift the dance images from the waves to the stars, and the emotions represented by that dancing change from carefree joy and

anxious fear to grief and lamentation for the losses suffered (and ultimately, caused) by humanity. “The Poet pleads with the Elemental Powers,” appearing *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), combines the symbolism of the Rose with the supernatural powers of the stars to make a statement about the state of the world. Those Powers “whose name and shape no living creature knows / Have pulled the Immortal Rose; / And though the Seven Lights bowed in their dance and wept, / The Polar Dragon slept, / His heavy rings uncoiled from glimmering deep to deep: / When will he awake from sleep?” (ll. 1-6). According to Yeats’s “Preface” in the *Variorum*, the rose is the symbol of spiritual love and supreme beauty, of divine nature, of the heart of things. This rose is growing on the Tree of Life. The Seven Lights are the constellation of the Bear, lamenting the theft of the Rose, and the Polar Dragon is the constellation Draco, which is the guardian of the Rose (811-12). In this poem, dance represents the movement of grief and the profound lament of the spirits who live in the supernatural world. Human intervention is neither requested nor offered, suggesting that the movement of the elemental powers is beyond human control. However, it is also intimated that human beings have failed to safeguard their most precious things, resulting in their loss. In this poem, human action and supernatural reaction are contrasted here, both of them seemingly out of the control of the other, yet both of them suffering consequences for neglect and ignorance.

Dance imagery works in concert with rose symbolism in “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time” (*The Rose* [1893]). The rose, as indicated in the previous poem, signifies perfection and unity, “eternal beauty” (ll. 12), and both peace and wisdom and pain and suffering. Yeats also associates rose imagery with physical love, Ireland, religion, the sun, and Dante’s image of Heaven as a white rose with a yellow center. The double nature of the rose (beautiful but with thorns), “under the boughs of love and hate” (ll. 10), represents the intersection of mortality and immortality, which Yeats considered “man’s richest experience” (Unterecker 76). The cross represents the ravages of time; however, a cross is also the symbol of both Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, both his death and his eternal life. Yeats places the Rose, the symbol of eternal beauty, on the cross, thus bridging the gap between “common things” (ll. 15) and the “strange things said / by God” (ll. 19-20). He continues to make these connections by combining sensuous detail with the “ancient ways” (ll. 2) of Ireland (“The Druid, grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed” [ll. 4]) in his poetry, particularly the poetry in this collection. The “stars, grown old / In dancing silver-sandalled on the sea” (ll. 6-7) sing of the sadness of the rose, which is saddened by the loss of the traditions of Ireland’s past.

This poem is an invocation, requesting that the Rose accompany him on his journey. His task is to restore Ireland's ancient ways, to diminish and hopefully abate the secularization of modern Ireland.

The images of sadness at the loss of ancient traditions and stars dancing in their grief is the theme of "Who Goes with Fergus?", a poem that asserts that those traditions will not be lost if the young poets of Ireland will only pick up the gauntlet of challenge. Dancing waves and stars represent the natural order of things to Yeats, an order that will be lost without carefully directed human intervention, and even that might not be enough to save them. Suspension between attraction and repulsion is represented by the dancing of the waves: Water, held in momentary suspension between rising and falling by the forces of gravity, continues to rise and fall in a regular rhythm, in spite of that momentary suspension. Dance in this poem is the movement of the waves, graceful and elegant, who are the witnesses to the loss of Irish traditions in the modern world. However, as it does in "The Poet Pleads with the Elemental Powers," human intervention seems relatively meaningless and ineffectual in the face of such an enormous task. The supernatural elements are as powerless to affect any kind of meaningful change in the state of things as humans are. In both this poem and "Elemental Powers," the gap between human action and supernatural reaction is unbridgeable.

Dance in the natural world is not always happy, sweet, carefree and joyous; but it also provides a means to express the poignant emotions of grief, sorrow, and loss. However, dance is also strongly associated with the naturally-occurring, rhythmic elements of the natural world. The waves are constant reminders of the gravitational pull of the moon on the waters of the earth. They never cease in their movements, and in so moving, they provide for human beings the stability of a never-ceasing rhythm that mimics the constant rhythms of the human heartbeat and the rise and fall of human respiration. Moreover, the stars provide also predictable, never-changing patterns of the movement of the earth in its yearly orbit around the sun. The constellations may shift their positions in the sky, but these shifts are part of a larger plan that charts the movement of the seasons of the year; also, the stars within the constellations never change. The daily patterns of the movements of the sun and moon, the monthly changes of the moon's shadows (which are also strongly associated with women's monthly menstrual cycles, and therefore the reproductive patterns of human life), and seasonal patterns indicated by the shifting of the positions of the constellations all bestow regularity and predictability on the otherwise chaotic and complex world of

human existence. Dance, based on moving bodies in concert with such rhythms, reassures and comforts human beings confronted daily, monthly and yearly with “mere” anarchy.

In Yeats’s poetic vision, dance is continually used as a signifier of the blessed relief offered by the after-life, relief that mortals must wait for patiently. The overall message suggests that there is enormous wisdom in animals, trees, the ocean and its storms, the phases of the moon, i.e., naturally-occurring rituals, from which humans can learn much, and observing rituals and special occasions or dates of the calendar that allow for remembrance and honoring those who have crossed over. These elements of the natural and supernatural worlds and their properties also suggest that both disparate and similar elements in the natural world can learn from each other. The interaction between elements both disparate and similar is a dance. The dance is both the movement of elements in the natural world and the means by which they, humans and supernatural beings such as faeries and the Danaan, both learn and teach.

Group Three: Dance that Signifies the Achievement of Unity of Being

Dancing with a partner reveals the constant tension that is part of “normal” human experience. The resolution of that tension can only be found outside the confines, then, of “normal” human life. Because the following poem shows a solitary, female dancer who exists outside of time, space, and physical constraints who represents the achievement of such integral coherence, then it can be concluded that Yeats believes, as he explained in *A Vision*, that the resolution of tension—a resolution he termed Unity of Being—cannot exist in normal life. It can only be achieved in a liminal space that is beyond the grasp of human experience; however, its being beyond human grasp does not, after all, preclude its achievement as the ultimate goal of human existence. For Yeats, the Unity of Being is humankind’s most noble goal and its most profound achievement.

This image of the dancer who does not have to justify herself or her dance to the outside world will reach its fullest culmination in “To a Child Dancing in the Wind,” one of Yeats’s triumphs. Written for Iseult Gonne, daughter of Maud, “To a Child dancing in the Wind,” from *Responsibilities* (1914), begins

with: “Dance there upon the shore; / What need have you to care / For wind or water’s roar?” (ll. 1-3). Yeats recalls the day when he was inspired to write this poem in the 1937 edition of *A Vision*: “I remember a beautiful young girl singing at the edge of the sea in Normandy words and music of her own composition. She thought herself alone, stood barefooted between sea and sand; sang with lifted head of the civilisations that there had come and gone, ending every verse with the cry: ‘O Lord, let something remain’ ” (220). Foster reports that Yeats (along with many of his readers) considered this poem one of his best he had ever written (467); and Mester asserts that the reader can “feel the speaker’s longing for the dancer and the quality she represents” (46) because at this point in his career, Yeats was “learning from the dance how to break a line in simple, graceful cadences close to everyday speech” (47).

Because the child/dancer is so young and so beautifully innocent, she has no need to care about either the “wind or water’s roar” (ll. 3); she can afford to ignore the “monstrous crying of the wind” (ll. 12), the symbol of the presence of the Sidhe. She exists in a moment that stands apart from either time or space, and she is self-contained, alone and in need of nothing. The child-dancer is “dancing on the seashore unfettered by the reality of time” (Mester 28). She represents all the best qualities of feminine human potential: grace, poise, physical presence, youth, innocence, and unspoiled virginity. Because she is alone and self-contained, in addition to all of the other qualities of femininity, she is, therefore, the Unity of Being that so eludes the grasp of the older, more disillusioned speaker, who has lost love “as soon as won” (ll. 8), seen “the best labourer dead” (ll. 9), and still has, “all the sheaves to bind” (ll. 10), or, much work yet to be done. Because this moment exists outside of time, there is no pressure for the child to accomplish anything, live up to anyone’s expectations, or fulfill any obligation. She can just exist in this moment of innocence and joy, at harmony and unity with the natural world. This is a state that Yeats longed for, even while he recognized its unattainability. In this poem, the dance is the outward, physical presence of the possibility and potential for Unity of Being that exists for every person, but that eludes the grasp of most.

In Yeats’s conceptual metaphor, the dancer needs nothing, requires nothing, neither audience, purpose nor appropriate setting. She creates her own setting and then is released from its constrictions; the need for an audience dissipates in the face of her Unity of Being. The total integration of body, mind and spirit collapses the human constructs of time, space, and even purpose. She does not need to comment on anyone or anything; she is not required to justify her existence to anyone, even herself. She enjoys the ultimate freedom: the freedom to exist in meaninglessness. She seems

oblivious even to the need others may feel for her to justify herself and her actions. She enjoys the innocence of childhood without the fear that it may soon be gone, since time ceases to exist.

Probably the most famous of all of Yeats's solitary female dancers is the one described in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes" (*The Wild Swans at Coole* [1919]): "And right between these two a girl at play / That, it may be, had danced her life away, / For now being dead it seemed / That she of dancing dreamed. / [. . .] / O little did they care who danced between, / And little she by whom her dance was seen / So she had outdanced thought, / Body perfection brought" (ll. 21-24; 37-40). This is a poem of "visionary contemplation" in which Yeats expresses his gratitude for his continued and/or renewed sense of creative inspiration, despite the vagueness of the meanings of that vision (Brown 251). Although Terence Brown asserts that the meaning of this vision is "vague," it seems very clear that this vision of a lone girl dancing between two great monuments, a girl who had "out-danced thought," has achieved the very Unity of Being that means so much to Yeats and that remains out of his reach. As Mester claims, "Dancing is linked to the desire for a mystical, ecstatic wholeness" (28), a wholeness that continues to elude the poet, even at this later stage in his career. He was working hard on *A Vision* at this point, and it would be published in 1925. However, his work during this phase would lead him to the idea of the dancer as the chief representative of the antithetical fifteenth phase, when the moon is at its fullest. This phase symbolizes "complete beauty, imagination, and self-realization" (Mester 48). Like the "young girl dancing in the wind," the Dancer in this poem transcends times and space, is quite physical and erotic, and has a powerful beauty, one that is powerful enough to bring an entire civilization to an end like that of Helen of Troy, her counterpart. She is no longer human, although she may have been human at one time; she is now supernatural, the embodiment of the ideal. She achieves the humanly impossible: the total harmony of body and soul. Kermode asserts that "Her body silences the mind" (59), and that she "reconciles antithetical movements: the division of soul and body, form and matter, life and death, artist and audience" (60). Sylvia Ellis (after Kermode) confirms that "the dancer is the image of the unified body and soul; she is the great reconciler containing life in death, movement and stillness, action and contemplation, a healer of the split integrity which occurred when philosophers declared that mind and body were separate entities" (74). The dancing imagery all centers around the transcending of bodily constrictions, as well as the limitations imposed on the body by time and space. Once those restrictions are lifted, the soul is then free to move in its most graceful motions possible, and the

mind, body and spirit are unified in a wholeness that elevates the soul into the sublime possibilities of existence.

The girl who is “at play,” suggesting freedom and joy in the dance, has also “danced her life away.” Although the expression “dancing her life away” connotes that she has wasted her life, perhaps Yeats only means here that she is, in fact, a vision of the spirit, both of the actual spirit herself and the potential spirit of her observer, the poem’s persona. She is dead, but she is spending her afterlife dancing, which makes this not the “dance of death,” the dance of the life that is possible, if only human beings could achieve it. Whether or not she is actually, physically dead does not seem to matter; what matters is that dancing is paramount to her being. Indeed, she cares so little for who is watching, either the two monumental witnesses (the Sphinx and the Buddha) or the poem’s persona, they may as well have not even been in attendance. No, she has “outdanced thought,” and her dancing has brought not only her body but her whole being to perfection. The Sphinx looks on in envy, the Buddha looks on with love, and the persona looks on in wonder. The Sphinx is never at peace as long as she “Gazed upon all things known, all things unknown, / In triumph of intellect” (ll. 30-31); the Buddha can never be at peace as long as he loves all, for “those that love are sad” (ll. 36). The persona of the poem is overwhelmed by his sense of gratitude at having seen such a sight; but it is not the sight of the Sphinx and the Buddha that inspires such appreciation, but rather the image of the dancer who has achieved such beauty, simplicity and Unity of Being.

What these details suggest is that the dance is not only representative of perfection gained, which is defined essentially as being at one with one’s whole person, body, mind and spirit; it is also the means by which one achieves such unity. Sadly, the persona of the poem also realizes how far away he is from achieving such unity, since he continues to feel himself being “pulled” in two directions; he is “caught,” always between two polar opposites: opposite ways of being, thinking and feeling. To have such Unity of Being would not only be a welcome relief from such confusion, it would also represent the achievement of a huge step in evolution, not just for the persona of the poem, but for all people everywhere. If the reader sees the persona of the poem as being a representative member of the human race, and that all human beings are as conflicted and torn in two directions (sometimes many more) as he, then the achievement of Unity of Being for all is a goal that, while possible, remains just out of human reach. It is the vision of potential for unity that is at the heart of this poem, not the persona’s

gratitude for having been witness to it. Dance in this poem is the purest representation of Yeats's fervent hope and belief in the potential for Unity of Being, represented by bodily perfection, displayed through dance, and achieved only in the after-life, once the human dependence on the body is over. This tension between the educated intellectual and the Unified Dancer is actually only the tension experienced by the Poet himself (not just Yeats, but The Poet, a persona that exists outside the constrictions of a single personality), as he tries to reject the confines of his own body and mind and achieve the Unity he perceives in the Being of the Dancer.

Finally, Yeats's most famous affirmation of faith is found in "Among School Children," from 1928's *The Tower*. In "To a Child," the persona witnesses the dance of this innocent child, but he is a detached observer. He seems to bear her no ill will for her innocence, nor does he seem to blame her (or anyone else, for that matter) for the existence of these injustices in life. But in "Among School Children," he is not as detached. The persona here is part of the poem, walking through the school room, "questioning" (ll. 1). What distances him from the children in the school is his aging body. He dreams of sympathy with youth, either their sympathy for his old age, or their understanding each other on some inarticulate level, or both. He wonders, if a young mother could see her son as he will appear in the future, "with sixty or more winters on his head" (ll. 38), would she still think her son's life worth the pain of his birth? Is he, at age 63 and a "comfortable kind of old scarecrow" (ll. 32) a man who has done something valuable with his life? Or is he merely "old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird" (ll. 48)? His question seems not personal, regarding himself, as much as he is questioning the nature of life itself: is life really worth it, if all of our "enterprise" is going to be "mocked" (ll. 56) anyway as fruitless effort? And then he reaches this insight: "O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole? / O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (ll. 57-64). In the struggle to find the point behind the cruelty of age, he gains this insight: Youth and age are actually only two points along a single continuum. This greater whole is suggested here by the inability to separate the dancer from the dance. The dancer is the dance, in the sense that without the dancer, there can be no dance, and no potential for dance, no concept of dance. The dancer and her dance are as fused and cohesive as the parts of the chestnut tree are: the tree is not defined either by its trunk, its branches or its leaves separately; no, the tree is defined by the fusion of all of its parts, and the lines that separate those parts are blurry and indistinct. Perceiving the connectedness between the dancer and the dance leads the persona to perceiving the connectedness between the bipolar opposites that have left him in such confusion: between

youth and age, between natural and supernatural, between male and female, between sanity and insanity, between right and wrong, between faith and doubt, between mortality and immortality. The dancer and her dance are both the resolution to the tension between opposites and the point at which all things connect.

III. The Metaphor

In Yeats's poetry, dance is a metaphor for both tension and its resolution. However, Western culture does not consciously associate dance and tension: Most of the time, when people are seen dancing (unless they are clumsy or at odds, or both), their movements seem fluid and seamless, as if there seems to be no tension between them at all. In the best dancing, the tension between the partners is imperceptible; only partners who are unskilled, either independently or with an unskilled partner, reveal the tensions between them. The best dancers conceal the difficulty of their task with grace, talent and practice.

However, this cultural bias is not a particularly honest or open understanding of the nature of the dance. The site of tension between the dancers' bodies is always maintained, and, in fact, is the force that propels the dancers across the floor. Even when one partner is highly skilled at signalling where he wants his partner to go next, and even if the following partner is highly skilled at anticipating and acting upon the instructions signalled to her by her partner, the tension still exists. The potential for misstep is always high.

Dance as a metaphor for other aspects of human experience, such as running (toward something) or transport (another metaphor for development) is certainly not a new idea. It is an ancient and persistently occurring part of human experience. It is celebratory in nature, and very often, it allows people to step outside their "normal," ordinary selves to "become" someone else for a brief period, usually only one night. When people go to a dance, they "dress up" for it; when they dance, they move their bodies in a very different way from normal, everyday movement. Human beings can communicate through the use of their bodies rather than through speech. It is communication and body-worship through physical—rather than intellectual or verbal—means; Yeats believed that this kind of

communication is inherently more honest and real than verbal communication.

The dance is considered “high” art, a notion which has taken particular prominence since the beginning of the twentieth century. In large part because of the innovations of early Modernist dance artists, dance has come to be considered a celebration of the physical form. Although it is often highly stylized and rigid in rules, it still in many ways allows for freedom of individual expression. Additionally, the female form of the dancer is highly valued and prized; it is the “ultimate” in feminine beauty.

Moreover, dancing is a community-based activity that carries with it tradition and cultural heritage; it brings people of a community or culture together in a way no other activity can, other than possibly religious worship. Furthermore, the dance has healing, curative, or restorative power. Dance as exercise is often recommended and sometimes even prescribed by physicians and clinical psychologists to combat depression and other debilitating disorders today. Given that Yeats came to the final resolution of the tension underlying his confusion when he perceived the connectedness of things, represented for him in the figure of the dancer and her dance, the reader can see and feel the healing power of the dance at work in that resolution.

If the dance were the metaphor commonly underlying the way people in Western culture saw relationships, those relationships could possibly be marked with less confrontational hostility than they seem to be, given that many relationships are understood as “warring factions,” rather than “dancing partners.” The dance between men and women will always be marked by tension; that tension is, in fact, necessary in order for the dancers to even move at all; however, it is also true that one partner—either one, it matters not which—must agree to follow while the other leads. Otherwise, they are paralyzed by the inertia created by unrelieved tension of both partners trying to lead. That is not the tension that must be maintained in order for the dance to work, but that is often the tension as it interpreted by some individuals. The tension that exists in humankind’s relationship with the world around him, both natural and supernatural, is driven by the tension inherent in the unknown. The final resolution of tension collapses the space between partners, leaving the dancer alone and joyous. Perhaps upon the collapse of the division between male and female, the dancer

appears as female only, which suggests that female contains both male and female. Gender becomes inconsequential in the face of union. Unity of Being requires no tension, no opposites, no gender, time, or space; since tension, opposites, gender, time and space are all facts of human reality, then Unity of Being can only be achieved once those facts are no longer relevant.

Things previously unknown can be become known through the body, which further becomes a metaphor for that process itself, which facilitates understanding yet again. The levels of metaphors creating comprehension understood on a profoundly metaphoric level create that vast web of Lakoff and Johnson's "metaphoric coherence" that allows human beings to speak and understand each other in ways that surpass mere cognition: this is cognition layered with physical communication, layered with emotional and affective coherence. This is the coherence Yeats longed for his entire life, and which he found in his dancer, even though the Unity of Being she represents always remained outside his grasp.