ABSTRACT

"Mysterious Wisdom Won by Toil":
The Problem of Labor in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

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In poems spanning his career, William Butler Yeats wrestled with the problem of human labor, which he saw as a source of suffering and despair. Though some poems depict the satisfaction of ideal labor, many others portray the sting of corrupt labor. Remarkably, five poems written in the last decade of Yeats's life synthesize the earlier ideal and corrupt visions of work, exhibiting a third vision that is both tragic and joyous—the poetic labor of renewal. This poetic labor is incarnational; it descends into the embodied life—including all that is sordid—in order to ascend, infusing the soul with poetic wisdom. In the transformation of his own ideas about labor and the achievement of the penetrating insight that poetic labor cultivates wisdom, Yeats himself embodies the "mysterious wisdom won by toil."

"Mysterious Wisdom Won by Toil":
The Problem of Labor in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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to Dr. Richard Rankin Russell, who made my labor a joy

For what hath man of all his labour, and of the vexation of his heart, wherein he hath laboured under the sun? For all his days are sorrows, and his travail grief; yea, his heart taketh not rest in the night. This is also vanity. There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God.

–*Ecclesiastes* 2:22-24, *King James Version*

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Perhaps more than any other aspect of the human condition, the idea of labor perplexed and animated William Butler Yeats throughout his life. He saw labor as deeply linked to human suffering. More specifically, for Yeats the work of the poet was no spontaneous Wordsworthian overflow but an excruciating burden. In his 1989 essay "Yeats' Nobility," Seamus Heaney suggests that Yeats eventually discovered an insight into human labor that warrants greater attention: "It is possible that we have insufficiently pondered the general implications of [his] hard-won insight that all reality comes to us as the reward of labor" (13-14). As Heaney writes, Yeats was a poetic laborer who toiled in the tower at Ballylee as the "wisdom-speaker and the memory-keeper" (13).[1] Heaney urges readers, therefore, to contemplate Yeats's insight about the experience, meaning, and reward of work; this essay follows Heaney's suggestion.

The pursuit of wisdom appears in a number of Yeats's writings. In his poems alone, for instance, he uses the word *wisdom* 111 times.[2] Though Yeats zealously pursued poetic knowledge and skill, his writings also portray a tenacious desire to excavate the most profound aspects of human life and seek holistic insight. In particular, he seeks

[1] Yeats himself thought of his poetic work as an impartation of wisdom, as he writes in his 1901 essay *Magic*: "I must write or be of no account to any cause, good or evil; I must commit what merchandise of wisdom I have to this ship of written speech, and after all, I have many a time watched it put out to sea …" (*Essays* 51).

[2] This number is taken from Parrish's *Concordance to the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Ithaca, 1963) and includes the term in several forms (*wisdom's, wisdoms, wise, wiser,* and *wisest*). The number also takes into account several versions that Yeats created during revision, which themselves point to his laborious process of writing.

insight about labor, such as in the Byzantium passage from *A Vision,* where he envisions communal wisdom arising from joint labor. For him, wisdom is not simply the possession of knowledge; instead, it is a communal and incarnational experience—a lived reality. For instance, "Lapis Lazuli" and "Among School Children" suggest that this wisdom is found in the ability to experience joy while living and laboring in a tragic world. In brief, Yeats's poetic exploration of wisdom—especially wisdom about labor—captures his thirst to understand the deepest human problems.

Yeats was not alone in pondering the meaning of human labor. A vigorous conversation about the nature of work took place during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and this debate had far-reaching consequences for Western societies, economies, and governments. Extremely divergent ideas about labor proliferated. As a prelude to Yeats's contemporary debate on the subject, in the eighteenth century Adam Smith preached efficiency and the division of labor, postulating that when work was divided and workers assigned to specialized tasks an increase in production would result. However, in the nineteenth century Karl Marx challenged Smith's model, observing that workers were alienated from their work and that labor itself had lost significance as a meaningful human endeavor. Similarly, later in the nineteenth century William Morris promoted English socialism and preached that at the core of human suffering was a flawed conception of labor.[3] Founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement and friend to Yeats, Morris sought to revivify labor by uniting work with the pursuit of beauty and by supporting craftsmanship. Several of Yeats's poems appear to echo such contemporary

[3] David Ward notes that Yeats was an admirer of textiles from the William Morris Firm (42) and Grene observes that Yeats kept in his room a copy of Chaucer from Morris's Kelmscott Press (110).

theories of labor. For example, Leven Dawson finds an echo of Morris's philosophy in the last stanza of Yeats's poem "Among School Children." Dawson relates this stanza—which begins, "Labour is blossoming or dancing" (line 57)[4]—to Morris' philosophy that work must be transformed into play: "Until work had become play by being engaged in for its own sake, work would not be accomplishment, the achievement of happiness, and play would not be true enjoyment, the happiness of achievement" (287). Elizabeth Cullingford links the same stanza to Morris' ideas, citing his description of the good life as the ability "to feel mere life a pleasure; to enjoy the moving one's limbs and exercising one's bodily powers; to play" ("Labour" 218). Also, like Morris, Yeats was drawn to paradigms of labor from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance era. A number of his writings idealize agrarian, pastoral life, mourn the decline of the nobility, valorize the great estate, cast judgment on the middle class, and evoke medieval guilds. Thus, Yeats weaves different philosophies of labor into his poems, suggesting that he was an active participant in the greater conversation about it.

Yeats's poems also contain piercing criticisms of current labor practices. For example, as David Ward has observed, in "Adam's Curse" (1904) Yeats describes what he believes to be the "utilitarian" (42) mindset of the middle classes, who will not waste time with poetry but instead busy themselves with menial tasks. In another poem, "The Fascination of What's Difficult" (1910), Yeats expresses his irritation with the business of the theater, dreaming of escape: "I swear before the dawn comes round again / I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt" (lines 12-13). Yeats's engagement with the larger,

[4] All quotations of Yeats's poetry are from *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: The Poems*. Finneran, Ed. (New York, 1997).

contemporary discussion about labor complicates his image as a solitary artist at work in the tower. However, alongside the contemporary debate about labor, this essay focuses on theories of work that emerge from his poems themselves.

Yeats's poems carry on their own multi-faceted conversation about work. The question that most echoes through his poems is whether or not meaningful labor is possible at all in a fallen world. Yeats's exploration of this question can be traced through his use of three key words: *labour, toil,* and *work*. These multivalent terms appear throughout Yeats's poems, and each carries with it a distinct set of connotations. *Labour* appears 28 times in Yeats's poetry[5] and holds a complex range of meanings. The term is frequently used to describe tragic, noble, and heroic work and often depicts both the dignity and suffering inherent in the human condition. *Labour* also connotes a woman laboring to give birth, and although "Easter, 1916" does not contain the word *labour,* the poem nevertheless evokes an alarming birth: "A terrible beauty is born" (line 16). Yeats's second term, *toil*, has a harsher sense, often referring to futility, pain, weariness, and long years at the grindstone with no reward. Most of all, this word evokes a favorite concept for Yeats—striving. For example, Yeats explores the idea of striving in his poem "Down by Sally Gardens," where the lover advises the speaker to "take life easy" (line 18). Finally, the term *work* often names particular kinds of labor, including metalwork, woodwork, carpentry, sweeping, farm work, salting herrings, and, most of all, writing poems. As these three terms suggest, labor in Yeats's imagination encompasses many different aspects of the human experience. Essentially, labor for Yeats is the

[5] This number is taken from Parrish's *Concordance to the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Ithaca, 1963) and includes the term in all of its forms (*labours, labourer, labouring,* etc.).

vigorous human occupation that forms the soul and that invests individual lives with either a quality of despair or of joy.

These three principal terms—*labor, toil,* and *work*—continue to appear in Yeats's poetry throughout his 50 years of publishing. Used with similar frequency, the three words emerge in each collection of Yeats's poetry, beginning with *Crossways* (1889) and ending with *Last Poems* (1938-1939) (with the one exception of the 1935 volume titled *Parnell's Funeral and Other Poems*). The collections with the greatest number of poems that refer to labour, toil, or work come from the second half of his career: five poems in *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), five poems in *The Tower* (1928), seven poems in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), and six in *Last Poems* (1938-1939). Thus, not only did Yeats's interest in labor continue throughout his years of writing poetry, but also his interest in the concept grew over time. Though his terms remained the same, no one taking precedence over the others, his understanding of them developed in nuance and sophistication, as is evident from a number of his last poems. For instance, he increasingly uses the language of paradox to create sharply contrasting pictures of human labor, reflecting his fascination with the contraries or *antimonies* of human experience.[6] Also, though sometimes he portrays work as fulfilling and fruitful, at other times he depicts it as vexing and empty, opposing views that often appear side by side in the same poem. In "Adam's Curse," for example, he describes the work of a poet as "stitching and unstitching" (line 6), a labor so difficult that one might prefer to "scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones" (8). Yet, in the same piece he also winsomely describes

[6] See Harold Bloom's discussion of the *antithetical* man in his analysis of Yeats's "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (372).

poetic work as "articulate[ing] sweet sounds together" (10). In this way, Yeats offers a kaleidoscopic view of labor and examines the theme from many different angles.

In order to elucidate Yeats's contradicting pictures, I trace three distinct categories of labor in his poetry—*ideal work*, *corrupt toil*, and *the poetic labor of renewal*. These three categories organize the chapters that follow chapter one (the introduction). In chapter two, I investigate Yeats's vision of ideal work in his essays "Stratford-on-Avon" and "Edmund Spenser" and in passages from the "Dove or Swan" section from *A Vision.* These prose examples lay a foundation for interpreting Yeats's two Byzantium poems, "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium." Next, in chapter three, I explore a selection of Yeats's poems that display corrupt toil (many more exist): "Down by the Salley Gardens" (1889), "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890), "Adam's Curse" (1902), "The Fascination of What's Difficult" (1910), and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1928). As laments about labor, these poems contrast with the pictures of ideal labor in the first chapter. My study of Yeats's poetry comes to fruition in chapter five with an examination of his late poems that synthesize the positive and negative views of work and exhibit the poetic labor of renewal. Of all these, perhaps the most satisfying accounts of labor are found in the third group. They employ a series of natural and architectural images that map the evolution of Yeats's philosophy of labor—tree, dancer, mountain, tower, stair, and ladder. These six images anchor human work in reality and yet also ascend toward vision and wisdom. The poems that use these images belong to Yeats's third vision of labor, and all were written in the last ten years of his life: "Among School Children" (1928), "Lapis Lazuli" (1938), "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1928), "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1938-39), and "The Choice" (1931). After

explicating these poems, I conclude in chapter five with an exploration of W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," an elegy that sheds light on Yeats's legacy as a poet of wisdom. My study does not plumb the depths of Yeats's writings about labor—there is assuredly more to say—but it does offer one possible method for charting the complex movements of his mind regarding this rich theme. My argument is thus rhetorically Hegelian: thesis (ideal labor), antithesis (corrupt labor), and synthesis (the poetic labor of renewal).

In tracing the development of Yeats's thinking about work through his use of the terms *labour, toil,* and *work*, I follow the model set by Nicholas Grene in his 2008 book titled *Yeats's Poetic Codes*. Responding to Richard Ellmann's call for a code that would illuminate Yeats's poetry (1), Grene analyzes *poetic codes* including word pairings that appear throughout Yeats's poems (*bitter* and *sweet, this* and *that,* and *here* and *there*).[7] Furthering Grene's analysis of patterns in Yeats's poems, I examine his recurring use of *labour, toil,* and *work* and follow patterns such as the recurring movement of descent and ascent. These patterns highlight the poet's labor to refine his craft.

A number of elements from Yeats's life, however, demonstrate his quest to understand work and provide context for his poetic portrayals of labor. His autobiographical writings and letters suggest that his father, John Butler Yeats (JBY), expressed strong opinions about work that impacted his son's life. In particular, JBY held to the idea that he (and his literary son) must do only a gentleman's work, shunning forms of labor associated with the lower classes. As Terence Brown suggests, this way of thinking can be traced to JBY's school days at Trinity College, where his circle of

[7] Grene also attempts to turn Yeats studies in a new text-based direction: "This book seeks to shift the focus back from contexts to texts, from the poet's life to the work of the poems" (3).

friends strained between the desire to live as gentlemen and the practical need to make a livelihood. In an 1869 letter to JBY about a teaching job he had just acquired, school companion Edward Dowden writes: "If I were to give up my Professorship I should be obliged to work for my bread, and go to London and become a hack for the magazines, which consummation I fully intend to avert" (10). Like Edward, JBY seems to have acquired a feeling of distaste for middle-class labor and an ambition to be a gentleman. It was his aspiration toward gentility, Brown surmises, that led him to abandon a promising career in law in order to become an artist (11). This ideal of gentlemanly work, Brown notes, also appears in JBY's Pre-Raphaelite community of artists—a "secular cult of labour" (13):

> Perhaps the young aspirant artist imagined that such art as the Pre-Raphaelites had produced was the kind of work, with its powerful evocation of a life lived for art itself and in the service of a spiritualized eroticism, that a gentleman could produce and remain a gentleman; an art unsullied in its ethereal preoccupations by obvious commercialism. (13)

JBY's vision of gentlemanly labor may have been appealing, but his decision to change careers contributed to the financial ruin of his family, who thereafter moved incessantly due to a constant shortage of funds.

In his poetry, W.B. Yeats engages with some of his father's ideas about labor, such as the concept of noble labor and the idea that a person's identity is defined by work. "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" describes George Pollexfen, a country gentleman of leisure whose work consists of training purebred horses and cultivating horsemanship. Also, in the first stanza of "Adam's Curse" Yeats defines three kinds of labor based on three classes of people: poets, paupers, and the middle class—"the noisy set / Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen" (lines 12-13). Surprisingly, however, he

claims that poetic work is even more taxing than manual labor—"to articulate sweet sounds together / Is to work harder than all these" (10-11)—thus distancing himself from the picture of the gentleman of leisure and complicating his father's idea of genteel work and a class divide. As a young man, Yeats quarreled with his father about work, especially when the family's financial situation became severe. The poet wanted to find work in order to alleviate the financial crisis, but his father disapproved of his son taking a regular job. As Brown notes, in an 1888 letter to his poet friend Katherine Tynan, Yeats described the clash with his father as essentially an argument about work: "To me the hope of regular work is a great thing for it would mean more peace of mind than I have had lately but Papa see[s] all kinds of injury to me in it" (30). In the following month, Brown observes, the word *work* appears numerous times in Yeats's letters (30). Despite his father's wishes, Yeats eventually found transcribing work and, perhaps for the first time, experienced real drudgery: "I have had three months incessant work without a moment to read or think and am feeling like a burnt out taper" (31). Although Yeats saw the impracticality of his father's resistance toward work, he also felt its wearying effects.

Not all of Yeats's thoughts about labor were troubled by the conflict with his father, however. On the contrary, Yeats discovered a different and more intriguing way of thinking about artistic work – *sprezzatura*, or effortless work. A Renaissance idea that Corinna Salvadori identifies in "Adam's Curse," *sprezzatura* appears throughout Yeats's writing. Yeats's autobiographical writings suggest that the origin of this idea may be traced to his friendship with Oscar Wilde. In *The Trembling of the Veil*, Yeats describes his initial encounter with Wilde: "My first meeting with Oscar Wilde was an

astonishment. I never before heard a man talking with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all overnight with labour and yet all spontaneous" (*Autobiographies* 124). Yeats goes on to describe Wilde's "perfect rounding of the sentences" (124) that seemed as if they could only have been formed with careful "deliberation" (124). Yeats here imagines the kind of labor that appears effortless. With his easy yet artful manner of speaking, Wilde seemed to Yeats to come from an ideal age: "I think he seemed to us … a figure from another age, an audacious Italian fifteenth-century figure" (125). As demonstrated by his attraction to Wilde, who would joke about how few hours he went into the office, Yeats was fascinated with the notion of fine work appearing effortless. He reflects this idea in "Adam's Curse" when he writes that an element of a successful poem is that it must "seem a moment's thought" (line 5). For Yeats, then, the best labor conveys *sprezzatura*—an appearance of ease that adorns hard labor.

Beyond the influence of family and friends, Yeats was compelled by a strong internal motivation; he demonstrated an extraordinary dedication to the craft of poetry, a labor that to him was both painful and noble. Ellmann describes Yeats's zeal to attain greatness in poetry:

> By his constant advance and change in subject-matter and style, by his devotion to his craft and his refusal to accept the placidity to which his years entitled him, he lived several lifetimes in one and made his development inseparable from that of modern verse and, to some extent, of modern poetry. (1)

As Ellmann writes, Yeats constantly sought development and perfection, and this resulted in a life-long pursuit of ideal style and form. In her 2007 study, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form*, Helen Vendler describes the complex artistry of the poetic forms Yeats created. Late in his career, Yeats achieved a form that seems emblematic of the

perfection he sought—*ottava rima*. As Vendler writes, *ottava rima* embodied for Yeats "'courtliness, 'stateliness,' 'aristocratic personhood,' 'a patronage culture,' and 'the Renaissance'" (263).[8] Significantly, a number of the *ottava rima* poems reflect Yeats's third and most mature vision of transcendent poetic labor, including "Among School Children," "The Circus Animals' Desertion," and "The Choice." For instance, Vendler demonstrates the sophisticated form of "The Choice," which explores the glory and cost of perfection: "The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work" (lines 1-2). Tracing the shifts in diction that appear in each stanza, Vendler points to the artistry that Yeats achieved after years of laboring for perfection.

Because he was devoted to perfection, Yeats became an extensive reviser; Brown even calls him "an obsessive reviser" (xi). Even though Yeats was drawn to the idea of noble, genteel labor and the appearance of effortlessness, or *sprezzatura*, he also had a keen instinct to pursue artistic perfection. Demonstrating his extensive poetic efforts, the 1957 Variorum edition of Yeats's poems—a thick volume—annotates all of the poet's revisions. Moreover, in the 1960s a number of scholars produced fine studies of Yeats's revisions, notably Curtis Bradford in his 1965 book, *Yeats at Work*, and Jon Stallworthy in his 1969 work, *Vision and Revision in Yeats's Last Poems*. More recently, the Cornell Yeats Series has provided the manuscript materials for each volume of Yeats's works. It is telling that Yeats's revision work is abundant enough to warrant such an extensive body of scholarly work.

[8] In *The Place of Writing* (Atlanta, 1989), Seamus Heaney describes the *ottava rima* stanza as a "strong-arched room … which serves as a redoubt for the resurgent spirit … The unshakably affirmative music of this *ottava rima* stanza is the formal correlative of the poet's indomitable spirit" (29).

This pursuit of perfection in poetry was not without trial for Yeats. In fact, in his autobiographical writings he reveals, often with startling candor, that for him the work of the poet was enormously daunting. A memorable line from the "Anima Hominas" section of the 1924 *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* points to his fraught experience with poetic labor: "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry" (29). As this statement suggests, Yeats did not come by his poetic success with ease, even though he possessed extraordinary talent. On the contrary, he was well acquainted with hard work, frustration, weariness and despair as he struggled to develop his craft. In *Per Amica,* Yeats describes this struggle: "Metrical composition is always very difficult to me … When I come to put in rhyme what I have found, it will be a hard toil" (30, 36). Also, in *The Stirring of the Bones*, he confesses that it was not until later in his career that he finally found that he could go to his work without trepidation: "It has only been of late years that I have found it possible to face an hour's verse without a preliminary struggle and much putting off" (*Autobiographies* 283). Using even stronger language to describe the hardship of poetic labor in a 1909 journal entry, he writes,

> Two hours' idleness—because I have no excuse but to begin creative work, an intolerable toil. Little D— F— of Hyderabad told me that in her father's garden one met an opium-eater who made poems in his dreams and wrote the title-pages when he awoke but forgot the rest. He was the only happy poet. (358)

As these examples make clear, Yeats struggled with the work of poetry, and because of this he often turned for motivation to close friends.

It is difficult to measure how crucial for Yeats's creative productivity was the patronage of folklorist and playwright, Lady Augusta Gregory. In "The Stirring of the

Bones," the poet insists, "I doubt if I should have done much with my life but for her firmness and her care" (*Autobiographies* 283). To be sure, the support of Lady Gregory helped Yeats to escape several bouts of discouragement and lethargy and her invigorating friendship inspired him toward poetic productivity. In "The Stirring of the Bones," he describes one particular period during which he felt ill and inhibited, attributing the feeling to "the strain of youth" (282) and to having "lost" himself (282). At that time, he also found himself stalled on a novel that he "could neither write nor cease to write" (317). Since Yeats was visiting Lady Gregory at the time, she began taking him around the countryside to visit cottage-dwellers and collect folk tales as material for his writing. But when Yeats found that he still was "indolent" (283) and frustrated by the prospect of writing "that impossible novel" (283), he looked to Lady Gregory for mentoring and discipline. She helped him to develop a working routine: "[I] asked her to send me to my work every day at eleven, and at some other hour to my letters, rating me with idleness if need be" (283). This passage demonstrates Yeats's human reluctance to face hard effort and his recognition of his need for community in his work. As A. Norman Jeffares notes (*New* 123), Yeats praises Lady Gregory and her influence on his work in his poem "Friends":

> And one because her hand
> Had strength that could unbind
> What none can understand,
> What none can have and thrive,
> Youth's dreamy load, till she
> So changed me that I live
> Labouring in ecstasy. (lines 10-16)

Yeats's ecstatic language about work here is striking, especially considering the frustration he often experienced in his literary toil. It was at Coole Park, Lady Gregory's

estate where Yeats spent twenty summers (1897-1917), that the poet discovered "a life of order and of labour, where all outward things were the image of an inward life" (*Autobiographies* 107). Her support and companionship in the labor of writing was, by Yeats's own estimation, critically important for his fruitfulness as a writer.

Yeats's autobiographical writings indicate that labor was not merely an abstract concept but rather a personal struggle that lasted throughout his life. This struggle bore the fruit of penetrating insights about poetic labor, articulated most fully in his last labor poems. Scholars note the wisdom expressed in Yeats's writings; Heaney, for example, writes that Yeats views reality with "tough-mindedness and plangency" (12), which gives a kind of "nobility" (12) to his "great wisdom poems" (1). In this vein, I examine Yeats's wisdom about work.

A number of critics have written compellingly about labor in Yeats's poetry and my study, though it seeks to draw a more comprehensive picture, nevertheless stands upon the foundation that they built. These critics may be placed in several categories. First, several scholars emphasize Yeats's portrayal of toilsome work, an understandable choice since the majority of Yeats's allusions to work are colored with tragedy or disappointment. For instance, William Wenthe argues that Yeats invented a unique genre: "the poem about the technical difficulty of writing verse" (29). Wenthe argues that Yeats found the labor of versification difficult because it involved conflict between the poet and society (35) and ultimately conflict between the poet and himself (36). Though I do not take Wenthe's psychological approach, I on several occasions make use of his analyses of individual poems. In addition, David Ward presents Yeats's negative view of work in his analysis of "Adam's Curse." Not only does Ward highlight Yeats's

despairing view of labor, but also he argues that "Adam's Curse" fails as a poem because its speaker cannot sustain the labour required for poetry, beauty, and love and does not ultimately connect with his audience. Though much of Ward's analysis of "Adam's Curse" is astute, he is overly harsh in his judgment of the poem, overlooking the importance of the early lines that celebrate noble poetic labor.

In a second category, other critics highlight Yeats's attempts to discover ideal or meaningful work. For example, Dawson writes that, influenced by William Morris and socialism, Yeats's "Among School Children" presents labor as play. Although Dawson's point is useful, I argue that "Among Schoolchildren" and other late poems move beyond Morris's philosophy toward a broader understanding of labor. Additionally, Daniel W. Ross describes the healing nature of work in Yeats's "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and shows how, in his mature years, Yeats responded to the violence raging in his country by devoting himself to "domestic tranquility and the permanent, reconstructive power of art" (36). Ross's valuable argument demonstrates Yeats's belief in the potential for the poet to engage in fruitful and uplifting work, even in the middle of a harsh environment.

Next, Katarzyna Murawska provides context for Yeats's poems by describing the long tradition in art and literature that surrounds Yeats's tower emblem, a significant symbol for labor in this study. Murawska argues that Yeats ultimately rejects the tower and the scholar toiling alone there because they are static and aloof (161) and instead favors the tower's dynamic, spiraling stair (162). On the contrary, I propose that Yeats's images of the tower and spiral stair are held in tension because they represent the paradoxical nature of his understanding about labor. Furthermore, I argue that the ladder

in "Circus Animals' Desertion" should be considered as an even more important symbol (and tool) of poetic labor for Yeats.

Finally, in her fascinating piece, "Labour and Memory in the Love Poetry of W.B. Yeats," Cullingford argues that Yeats believed human labor could be redeemed through the influence of the imagination on memory.[9] As an example, she offers "Among School Children's" "Utopian vision of labour … a fusion of work and play" ("Labour" 219) and argues that this idea points to the influence of Morris. Although this may be true, I propose that ultimately Yeats's insight about labour is less idealistic and more profound than Morris's. Yeats recognized that any labour toward beauty must account for the harsh reality of the real world, an idea expressed in the image of the ladder in "The Circus Animals' Desertion": "I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (lines 39-40). Yeats's effort to redeem work finds its strongest expression in his extraordinary description of poetic labor.

These critics raise fascinating questions about Yeats and labor and yet, for the most part, they investigate only individual works. Few have traced the question of labor throughout Yeats's poetry or, more important, considered how his ideas on the subject developed throughout his canon. Thus, building upon their work, I provide a fuller—though not an exhaustive—picture of the different facets of labor in Yeats's poetry as a whole. In order to do this, I examine textual evidence that points to the relations between Yeats's different visions of labor and delineate the extent to which his understanding of

[9] Cullingford's study corresponds to the insights of Paul Ricœr on memory, imagination, and history. Ricœr notes that "a long philosophical tradition … considers memory the province of the imagination" (5).

labor matured throughout his lifetime. This development appears in the unfolding of three poetic visions of labor: ideal labor, corrupt labor, and the poetic labor of renewal.

CHAPTER TWO

Pleasure and Perfection: Yeats and Ideal Labor

In his poem "Adam's Curse," Yeats suggests the sweetness of laboring to create poetry, a labor that engages the poet in "articulat[ing] sweet sounds together" (line 10). Evoking the art of both language and music in this line, Yeats characterizes labor as a pleasurable occupation that creates beauty and harmony. This is his first picture of labor—ideal labor. Though in the same stanza of "Adam's Curse" Yeats bemoans the fact that poetry is such hard work and though the poem ends with the laborer's sorrow, in this one line Yeats points to ideal labor.[1] In fact, a number of his poems paint a picture of free, delighted, and peaceful labor. The noble world of antiquity captivated his imagination, and he often describes such ideal labor as occurring during such times. Viewing history as a fluid process that moved from one distinct era to another, he believed that human life reached its pinnacle at certain periods and in certain places. It is at such points, corresponding with particular lunar phases, that he envisioned human kind's most sublime labor. Accordingly, a number of Yeats's writings look toward the past for ideal visions of labor.

This chapter begins with an exploration of three of Yeats's prose works that describe ideal labor in the past: his essays "At Stratford-on-Avon" (1901) and "Edmund Spenser" (1902), and a passage from "Dove or Swan" from *A Vision* (1925). These three pieces, spanning 25 years of Yeats's career, demonstrate the poet's ultimate vision of

[1] Poetic labor in "Adam's Curse," a difficult but sweet and fruitful endeavor, contrasts with the poem's portrayal of striving for love, a labor that ends in emptiness. I explore striving more fully in chapter three.

ideal labor. "At Stratford-on-Avon" contrasts Shakespeare's birthplace with modern London, and its vision of ideal labor balances the ills of modernity. In "Edmund Spenser," Yeats's picture of labor grows fuller, enriched with a sense of labor's sacred and communal nature and depicting workers who labor with delight. Finally, in *A Vision,* Yeats reaches deeper into history to reveal his most glorious picture of ideal labor at the height of the Byzantine Empire in the city of Byzantium. Yeats represented the Byzantine Empire and all of history in the image of the spinning gyre, which reflects the rise and fall of distinct historical periods and corresponds to the twenty-eight phases of the moon. The spinning gyre theory shaped his thinking about human experience, including the human experience with labor.[2] In this system, the golden city of Byzantium serves as Yeats's paragon of perfection, illuminating his idea of ideal labor. To this end, the three prose works discussed in this chapter demonstrate Yeats's idealized view of certain historical periods and illustrate his vision of ideal labor.[3]

These prose works serve as preludes to Yeats's poems "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927) and "Byzantium" (1930). Reading them in tandem with the poems reveals themes of escapism and Gnosticism, recurring elements of Yeats's discussions of labor. While the prose works describe ideal labor in Stratford, "Merry England," and Byzantium, "Sailing to Byzantium" is an artist's fantasy of escaping to such ideal places. On the other hand, "Byzantium" moves away from idealized realms and toward the real world. Additionally, *A Vision* presents a picture of labor that unifies soul and body; the ideal

[2] Harold Bloom writes that this "Great Wheel or cycle of lunar phases [is] at least a double allegory [of] every individual life, and all of Western history" (217).

[3] Yeats's depiction of work in the Byzantine and Renaissance periods is decidedly artistic and not historical. As Maurice Hunt explains in his book *Shakespeare's Labored Art,* a turbulent economy in Elizabethan and Jacobean England created difficult work situations; many laborers were overworked and underpaid and death from starvation was not uncommon (13-17).

worker there labors with "delicate skill" (*Vision* 15) toward the creation of "a lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body" (158). Though perfect, this labor is also dynamic. By contrast, the end of "Sailing to Byzantium" presents a static image of perfection: the golden bird. In this piece, the poet's body is rejected in favor of the soul, an embrace of Gnosticism. Both Byzantium poems, which focus on the individual's experience with labor, contrast with the prose works, which display labor at a societal level. Though the prose works hint that labor in the world is far from ideal, the Byzantium poems vibrate with the tension between delightful labor in an ideal world and toil in a chaotic world. In sum, this cluster of prose and poetry—"Stratford-on-Avon," "Edmund Spenser," *A Vision,* "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium"—reveals Yeats's vigorous exploration of different approaches to labor and points in developing his definition of ideal labor.

The accounts of ideal labor in Yeats's prose all employ a compellingly fervent tone, as his essay "At Stratford-on-Avon" exemplifies. Yeats found inspiration in both the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Salvadori describes his attraction to the latter: "One of the ages in which Yeats … found images that roused his energy was the Renaissance: a historical age but also an imaginary one in that he saw it not with the critical eye of the historian but with the eye of the man who believed that it was the golden age" (34). This idealization of the past points to the influence of William Morris, and scholars have noted the strains of Morris' thought in "At Stratford-on-Avon," particularly because of its critique of modernity and praise of antiquity. As Thomas McAlindon notes, Morris believed that European culture had grown increasingly corrupt after the seventeenth century (158) and therefore idealized older centuries: "Until the rise

of commerce and the middle class, he taught, the aristocracy and the people shared in a common, unified culture, and art was truly 'organic' and popular" (158). In looking to the English Renaissance as an ideal age, Yeats's essay reflects Morris's belief that it was "the period of greatest life and hope that Europe had known till then" (McAlindon 158).

In like manner, "At Stratford-on-Avon" contrasts Stratford with London and censures the latter as a place defined by industrialism and utilitarianism and bereft of a taste for art. On the other hand, describing a visit to Stratford-on-Avon, Yeats represents the town as belonging to an older time of contentment: "One passes through quiet streets, where gabled and red-tiled houses remember the Middle Ages" (*Essays* 96). In its stillness, Stratford seems distant from modern life, which Yeats calls "our noisy time" (96). For Yeats, Stratford is a last frontier of an ideal age, a place that exudes a nobler aesthetic sense and, as yet untainted by commercial greed, sees labor (especially the labor of building theaters and putting on plays) as pleasure. His example of this is the theater in Stratford, which is focused on enjoyment and not on material gain: it is "a theatre that has been made not to make money, but for the pleasure of making it" (96).[4] Moreover, the setting of the theater harkens back to a pastoral ideal: "nor does one find it among hurrying cabs and ringing pavements, but in a green garden by a river-side" (96). Far from the noisy and commercial London, Stratford is a place of peace.

These picturesque descriptions in "Stratford-on-Avon" convey a note of sadness, however, because the text hints that such ideal times and places have all but faded away. This sadness appears in what McAlindon calls the "central antitheses" (159) of the

[4] This picture of the busy, industrial world with its "ringing pavements" also appears in Yeats's poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," in which the speaker dreams of a pastoral oasis while standing on "pavements grey" (line 11).

essay—not the antithesis between Stratford and London, but the distinction between the aristocratic character Richard II and the vulgar character Henry V. Yeats describes Shakespeare's Richard II as a tragic figure of a nobler age; the contrast with Henry V is a contrast between "pristine courtliness and modern vulgarity" (McAlindon 159). In this way, he defines the newer age by its loss of ideals, suggesting its view about labor: "The courtly and saintly ideals of the Middle Ages were fading, and the practical ideals of the modern age had begun to threaten the unuseful dome of the sky; Merry England was fading …" (*Essays* 106). The key word here is "unuseful," which implies Yeats's understanding of the shift in history as a change in people's essential ideas of worth. In the Middle Ages and in Merry England, according to Yeats's artistic portrait, people valued courtesy, virtue, and wholeness, but in the modern age people have lost the taste for beauty and instead value mere usefulness and the acquisition of money. These debased values result in joyless, relentless striving.

In his essay titled "Edmund Spenser," Yeats goes even further in articulating his vision of ideal labor. As a young poet, Yeats admired Spenser's work and emulated him as a figure of nobility.[5] In his essay on Spenser, Yeats praises Spenser's creation of a "long-descended, irresponsible, happy art" (*Essays* 367).[6] As McAlindon writes, Yeats characterizes Spenser's poetry as having a rare kind of energy: "Perhaps the highest compliment Yeats pays to Spenser lies in the observation that his verse has an unfailing energy and coherence such as no modern poet is capable of" (163). Moreover, Yeats sees

[5] Wayne Chapman insists on the significance of the Renaissance poet for Yeats: "Spenser's influence … has been seriously underestimated" (69).

[6] Yeats is not positive about Spenser in all respects. For instance, he criticizes Spenser's poetry for what he sees as its middle-class taste for allegory and Puritan moralizing.

Spenser as the last glorious spark of a fading era: "Thoughts and qualities sometimes come to their perfect expression when they are about to pass away, and Merry England was dying in plays, and in poems" (*Essays* 364). Specifically, he finds in Spenser's poems the remnants of the exuberant and passionate medieval spirit, "that indolent, demonstrative Merry England that was about to pass away. Men still wept when they were moved, still dressed themselves in joyous colours, and spoke with many gestures" (364). This medieval spirit blended music with work: "English labourers lilted French songs over their work" (365). In this way, Yeats focuses on labor as touchstone for the spirit of the age.

In contrast with the modern age, Yeats's Merry England is characterized by a belief in the "sacredness of an earth that commerce was about to corrupt and ravish" (365). Thereby, he puts the ideal labor of antiquity in tension with the corrupt labor of work in a modern commercial world. At the core of this ideal picture is the propensity to cherish the earth and believe in its holiness: "[W]hen Spenser lived the earth had still its sheltering sacredness" (365). For Yeats, in this ideal picture the earth is sacred and human labor shares in its sacredness. Human beings experience this sacredness as delight, the result of reverence for the sacred earth combined with pleasure in living on the earth. Moreover, Yeats suggests that labor, in the imagination of Spenser, shared in this holy delight: "a time before undelighted labor had made the business of men a desecration" (377). Delight appears a number of times in this passage: "[H]e delighted in smooth pastoral places" … "he could love handiwork" … "glad Latin heart" … "religious exaltation" (377-78). The primary quality of ideal labor in Spenser's pastoral settings, then, is sacred delight, and this is the crux of Yeats's contrast between modern

and medieval life—the ability to enjoy one's work and attend to it as one would attend to religious devotions.

Yeats describes Merry England and its era not only as sacred but also as harmonious. He points to the harmony of soul and body: the "beauty of the soul and the beauty of the body" (366) were treasured with "an equal affection" (366). This harmony between the spiritual and the physical endows physical labor with significance and reverence. Spenser, in Yeats's mind, was a poet who "could love handiwork and the hum of voices" (377). This delight in the tangible act and product of labor, surrounded by the "hum of voices" (377), perhaps evokes the redemptive image of worker bees, an important image for Yeats that appears in several labor poems. As the image of blending, humming voices suggests, work in Merry England is an essentially communal activity. Yeats writes in his essay that upon seeing a painting of "dancing countrypeople [and] cowherds, resting after the day's work" (377), he had a sudden vision of the beauty of older days. It was a time, he writes, when people found "poetry and imagination in one another's company and in the day's labor" (377); this community of workers is marked by creative productivity. In this "more imaginative time" (377), communal work spurred creative expression; for example, laborers would sing together as they worked (365). In Yeats's ideal picture, the harmony between body and soul is echoed in the harmony between workers and the human contentment with labor itself.

Yeats places this description of communal labor in "Edmund Spenser" in a distinctly agrarian setting. Perhaps referring to the pastoral episode in book VI of *The Faerie Queene*, Yeats writes that Spenser saw the natural world as the ideal place for work: "[He] delighted in smooth pastoral places, because men could be busy there or

gather together there, after their work" (377). Yeats associates this image with the paintings *The Mill* by Claude Lorrain and *The Temple of Jupiter* by J.M.W. Turner that depict "those dancing countrypeople, those cowherds, resting after the day's work" (377). A pastoral setting as seen in these paintings is ideal for Yeats because it provides a common ground where people can work and play in fellowship. Furthermore, the countryside balances work with recreation. Work and rest blend together, signifying balance and order and suggesting a prelapsarian Eden where Adam and Eve tended to the garden and where God rested on the seventh day. Labor in Merry England, like labor in Byzantium, connects one with the divine and produces pleasure, communion, "joy … [and] delight" (378). Also, Yeats points to Spenser's poetic delight in trees, referring to the colorful catalogue of trees in the first canto of Book I of *The Faerie Queene*. Interestingly, Yeats points out that Spenser praised the trees for their beauty, their contemplative value as "images of … meditation" (377), and also their "serviceableness" (377) in creating all kinds of practical items like shaves, staffs, and mills (377). Inspired by Spenser, Yeats merges productive work and beauty, aesthetics and pragmatics. He values Spenser's depiction of a flourishing natural world—the ideal place for human labor and well-being.[7]

In sum, Yeats draws vivid pictures of labor in "Edmund Spenser" and "Stratford-on-Avon" that emphasize joy and meaningfulness. He is drawn to the spirit of a lost age, a time, he imagined, when labor involved a profound sense of the holiness of the earth, a

[7] Yeats's idealization of Spenser and his work is deeply ironic because Spenser participated in oppressing the Irish people and, in *A View of the Present State in Ireland*, regarded them as barbarians. Yeats bemoans the fact that Spenser went to Ireland as an Englishman rather than as a poet and therefore was blind to the lively Irish imagination. Yeats writes that Spenser would have found examples of poetic *sprezzatura*: "He would have found men doing by swift strokes of the imagination much that he was doing with painful intellect" (*Essays* 372).

spirit of fellowship, and joy in one's work. Yeats seems to have pursued these values in his own life. For example, in the occult he sought spiritual presences in the world and held certain places to be holy; to Yeats, the whole of Ireland was, as Richard Ellmann writes, "a sacred, magical land" (125). Also, as is especially apparent in his relationships with Lady Gregory and his wife George, Yeats pursued the value of community, accomplishing much of his most important work collaboratively. Finally, the pursuit of joy is a theme in many of his works, though in later pieces such as "Lapis Lazuli" Yeats depicts joy that is wrapped up in tragedy. In life and in poetry, then, he sought to emulate the characteristics of ideal labor he admired in the ancient world.

As this chapter's final prose example, *A Vision* conveys Yeats's ultimate picture of ideal labor. In *A Vision*, he sought access to ancient wisdom and worked to discover an image that would bring unity and transcendent meaning to human life. *A Vision* articulates Yeats's understanding of human history and highlights labor as key to understanding the spirit of ideal historical eras. Perhaps because of its complexity, scholars have responded in very different ways to *A Vision*, which Catherine Paul and Margaret Harper categorize as "occult mythography" (*xxi*). Thomas Whitaker, in his seminal work *Swan and Shadow,* lauds *A Vision* as a "visionary and paradoxical dialogue" (4) that contains "great meditative poetry" (7) and demonstrates Yeats's "comprehensive and lifelong attempt to justify and transcend the fallen world" (7).[8] Harold Bloom, on the other hand, claims that "the book is nothing if it is not wisdom literature, yet it is sometimes very unwise" (210) and identifies this lack of wisdom as

[8] Whitaker also writes that the work "reflects Yeats's continual movement between man's condition as creator … and his condition as finite sufferer, enduring and yet transcending the serpentine cycles of history" (7).

"inhumanity" or "calculated anti-humanism" (211). Though scholars disagree about the value of the book, *A Vision* nevertheless offers a fascinating dramatization of Yeats's mental landscape. As R. F. Foster writes, the work is crucial for understanding the mind of Yeats: "[T]he book's real value is to students of Yeats's mind, and of his aspirations" (*Yeats* 285).

In addition to displaying the inner pathways of Yeats's mind, the work itself testifies to his own arduous experience with the labor of writing. The first version of *A Vision* was the culmination of many years of labor, and in their introduction Paul and Harper call it "a distillation as well as exploded elaboration of ideas that had been gestating for many years" (*xxv*). Yeats wrote *A Vision* in his Norman tower called Thoor Ballylee, which for him symbolized the labor of the poet. His project was ambitious; as the subtitle indicates, he purposed to compose "An Explanation of Life." Paul and Harper describe the Herculean effort that went into the making of *A Vision*:

> By 1925, upward of ten thousand manuscript and typed pages of queries, replies, notes, outlines, charts, diagrams, drafts, revisions, and corrected proofs – including nearly four thousand pages of automatic script …, four hundred pages in journals, six hundred alphabetized index cards, and over two thousand sheets of handwritten as well as scribally typed drafts – stand testament to the difficulty of arriving at 256 published pages. (*xxii*)

Thus, *A Vision* is a monument to Yeats's dedicated poetic labor. With the author needing refreshment after such extraordinary exertion, his language about the project turns comic in several personal letters. For example, in a letter to London publisher T. Werner Laurie, Yeats confesses that he was waiting for the book to come out "with some excitement as I don't know whether I am a goose that has hatched a swan or a swan that has hatched a goose" (Paul and Harper *xxii*). This ability to laugh about his labor

delightfully complements Yeats's sober dedication to his toil and suggests the growing insight about work that he achieved in his later years.

"Dove or Swan," a section from *A Vision,* is a poetic vision of the course of Western history that highlights labor. Significantly, Ellmann writes that the passage displays Yeats's "pursuit of wisdom" (247). This wisdom is deeply concerned with labor, as signaled by the passage's lavish description of labor in antiquity. Labor becomes particularly important in section III, where Yeats traces the birth of Christianity, the fall of Rome, and the rise of the Byzantine Empire. His first mention of labor comes in his description of a lover as a worker, who "surrenders his days to a delighted laborious study of all her ways and looks" (*Vision* 155).[9] Work, in this passage, is associated with delight. The lover's intellectual labor—the labor of contemplating the beloved's unique qualities—produces love: "Love is created and preserved by intellectual analysis" (155). Four paragraphs later comes the famous description of the ancient city of Byzantium—for Yeats, the pinnacle of human labor. Yeats seeks to capture the spirit of Byzantium during Justinian's reign at the height of its golden age around 550 A.D., and according to his cyclical diagram of history, the fifteenth phase at the full moon. Therefore, this city represents the highest ideal for Yeats, a point at which spiritual ideals become tangible: "All thought becomes an image and the soul / Becomes a body" (53). As William O'Donnell writes, in Byzantium "beauty reaches absolute perfection" (118). Yeats also invests Byzantium with religious resonance by comparing it to "the Sacred City in the Apocalypse of St John" (*Vision* 158), a place that, for Christians, represents perfection, light, and perfect communion with God (158).

[9] All quotations from "Dove or Swan" are from *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats: A Vision.* Paul and Harper, Eds. (New York, 2008).

Yeats's description of labor in "Dove or Swan" is as sublime as the city in which it takes place. In Byzantium, both the work and the worker are ideal. Not only is labor profoundly philosophical and aesthetic, but the worker is skillful, wise, selfless, and engrossed. O'Donnell describes the unity of the spiritual and physical life in Byzantium according to Yeats's definition in *A Vision*: "In Byzantium, during the sixth century and following, mystics who had sought supernatural visions and craftsmen who worked with physical materials shared the same culture" (91). In Byzantium, metaphysicians and manual laborers seemed to enjoy the same status. Yeats describes what it would be like to meet a worker in Byzantium:

> I think I could find in some little wine shop some philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my questions, the supernatural descending nearer to him than to Plotinus even, for the pride of his delicate skill would make what was an instrument of power to Princes and Clerics and a murderous madness in the mob, show as a lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body. (*Vision* 158)

It is telling that Yeats imagines meeting this laborer at a wine-shop and not in his workshop; even outside of his workplace, this individual is defined by his craft. Also, in this passage skillful work with one's hands is connected to depth of soul. The worker's skill is not limited to manual labor but also includes a philosophical genius. Therefore, the speaker encounters this worker as a student approaching a wise teacher, prepared to ask many questions. Additionally, while the mosaic worker takes pride in his work, his pride is not tainted by a lust for power. Instead, it is a pride in the work itself. This craftsman values labor for its own sake and his devotion to his craft has beautified his soul and caused him to become a person of wisdom and vision.

The mosaic worker of Byzantium also labors in harmony with his community. The repetition of the word *some* and the description of the shop as "little" (158)

highlights the humble, ordinary status of this worker. Indeed, in the next paragraph Yeats shows that such workers abound in Byzantium: "The painter … the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of Sacred Books" (159). These workers have an anonymous and representative quality; they are "almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in [the] subject matter and that the vision of a whole people" (159). For example, Yeats describes the work over illustrated texts as a demonstration of unity: "[T]he work of many … seemed the work of one" (159). These workers are a far cry from the individualistic and violent workers of the modern world that Yeats terms the "murderous … mob" (158). In contrast to the destructive mob, the mosaic worker of Byzantium labors in harmony with his community and the products of his labor are "delicate," "lovely," and "flexible" (158). Therefore, Byzantium is Yeats's holy city, a place where artistic work thrives, labor produces beauty, and workers experience harmony between spirit and body and between the self and the community.[10] Though Whitaker argues that in "Dove or Swan" "human life [is] seemingly denied, [and] is transmuted into … a transcendental art" (89), I propose instead that in this work Yeats celebrates both soul and body. This becomes apparent when examining the passages about labor. As the mosaic worker labors, his creation becomes a "lovely flexible presence" (*Vision* 158) like a "perfect human body" (158). Moreover, Yeats places this evocation of movement, change, life, and body at the very end of this memorable paragraph, giving it emphasis. Though he describes Byzantium's worker as

[10] Yeats himself worked in community. *A Vision* was a collaborative work, the result of many sessions of automatic writing with his wife, Georgie (for more on this collaboration see Margaret Mills Harper's book *Wisdom of Two*). Yeats was enthusiastic about this form of work, as he expressed in a 1918 letter to Lady Gregory: "You will be astonished at the change in my work, at its intricate passion" (*Letters* 644). He imagined his own work as communal and supernatural – the merging of multiple voices into one.

philosophical, he also anchors this vision in earthly reality with the images of the wine shop and the lovely, flexible body.

Yeats's image of labor in Byzantium is idealized, but it is nevertheless set within a larger work that is essentially about change, movement, and opposition, pointing to the ephemeral nature of ideal labor. According to Paul and Harper, the change and movement in *A Vision* comes from its two central images, the wheel and the double cone: "One phase yields to another; faculties and principles all have their opposites and corners; souls spin forward and backward through lives and after lives; eras in history and movements in art and thought push toward and repel their own opposites" (*xliii*). Thus, for Yeats, ideal labor exists only on solitary islands upon the vast sea of human history. The themes of change and brevity are suggested in "Stratford-on-Avon," "Edmund Spenser," and the description of Byzantium in *A Vision*, but they become more dominant in Yeats's two Byzantium poems.

Whitaker notes the complexities, ironies, and "qualifications" (88) present in even the most ideal passages of "Dove or Swan," demonstrating "the full round of human potentialities, the various forms of action, passion, and contemplation … a complex image of the rich and yet limited human condition" (96). As he argues, the value of *A Vision* is found in its "imaginative grasp of the tensions of life" (96), and the complexity of the work reflects the intricacy of Yeats's picture of labor. Though Yeats's picture of labor in *A Vision* is sublime, it is neither simple nor fanciful. Instead it recognizes the conflict between the way things should be—as they were in ages past—and the way things actually are.

The idealized image of Byzantium in *A Vision* sets the stage for Yeats's two Byzantium poems, "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium," which as a pair present a complicated picture of ideal labor. In *A Vision,* Yeats casts Byzantium as the supreme place of artistic achievement; because of this we understand "Sailing to Byzantium," the first poem, to be a pilgrimage toward a perfect experience of artistic labor. As Bloom writes, the poem expresses the poet's quest for a perfect place where "the spiritual life and the creation of art merge as one" (345). Engaged with music in every stanza, from the "sensual music" (line 7) to the bird that sits "upon a golden bough to sing" (30), "Sailing to Byzantium" compares the labor of poetry to the labor of composing music. This musical analogy also appears in "Adam's Curse," where to make poetry is to "articulate sweet sounds together" (line 10). Similarly, "Sailing to Byzantium" investigates the kind of labor poetry requires—a musical labor—and imagines the ideal environment for such labor. This search for the perfect poet's place recalls Yeats's descriptions of ideal working places in his prose.

However, ultimately "Sailing to Byzantium" is at odds with *A Vision* because its final image of the golden bird is static and artificial in contrast with the images of life and dynamism in the Byzantium passage in *A Vision.* For instance, in *A Vision* labor results in freedom, beauty, and movement: "a lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body" (*Vision* 158). In stark contrast, "Sailing to Byzantium" culminates with the perfect but stiff image of the bird, perched "upon a golden bough to sing" (line 30) and performing like a robot. Thus, "Sailing to Byzantium" builds upon the Byzantium Yeats describes in his prose but also departs from it, suggesting the conflict in Yeats's mind as he developed a more nuanced understanding of labor.

My discussion of the range of criticism on "Sailing to Byzantium" begins with Jeffares's genetic study of the poem's drafts (obtained from Mrs. W.B. Yeats). He traces the changes in Yeats's numerous revisions of the poem, noting in particular how the poem seems to have originated in the poet's deeply personal feelings about age; it is his "complaint that, though [he] is interested in life and beauty, he is considered too old to write of them" ("Byzantine" 45). In subsequent revisions to the poem, Yeats sought to create distance and lessen the extent to which the poem revealed his personal experience, presenting instead a prototypical figure of an aging poet. As Jeffares demonstrates, "Sailing to Byantium" held personal significance for Yeats and represented his own thoughts about his identity in relation to poetic work.

The scholarly discussion about "Sailing to Byzantium" focuses on the poem's tension between soul and body and also debates the question of whether or not the conclusion is satisfying. F.A.C. Wilson writes that the bird is a hopeful symbol of permanence and also freedom from death: " Byzantium is … the city of *regeneration,* and the bird which sings … the soul itself, when it is freed from the 'dying animal' of the body" (285). Bloom, however, finds this conclusion less satisfying, calling it an essentially static image devoid of physical life that absorbs the artist into the purely spiritual song of a mechanical bird (347).[11] I favor Bloom's interpretation in this case—that the poet ends up in a purely spiritual state—because the end of "Sailing to Byzantium" lacks the image of physical labor in a physical world that appears in other of

[11] Ellmann argues that the poet's journey to Byzantium and renunciation of the body is fraught with longing for the physical world: "The poet has sailed to Byzantium, but his heart, 'sick with desire,' is full of Ireland, and he cannot speak of the natural life without celebrating it" (260). Similarly, Denis Donoghue argues that the poem registers a tension between body and soul, and suggests that the poem fails to resolve this tension (61).

Yeats's labor poems. Therefore, I contrast the images of the "lovely flexible presence … [and] perfect human body" (*Vision* 158) of *A Vision* with the static bird at the end of "Sailing to Byzantium," and suggest that Yeats may have been distancing himself from his earlier idealism about Byzantium. In sum, "Sailing to Byzantium" expresses the conflict between soul and body and the poet's desire both to embrace the world and to escape it. The absence of the body in this poem is important to my ultimate conclusion about the role of embodiment in Yeats's labor poems.

A number of different kinds of labor create layers of meaning in the poem, and the piece ends with an image of spiritual labor. However, because this image portrays labor as simple, static, and without embodiment in the world, it lacks the depth of Yeats's richer (and later) images of poetic labor. "Sailing to Byzantium's" final image may be unsatisfying, but the poem has value as a revelation of Yeats's developing understanding of labor.

An examination of the form of "Sailing to Byzantium" reveals Yeats's labor in honing his poetic craft because it demonstrates his work to perfect the form *ottava rima*. The stanzas show the progression toward perfect form, specifically when the first and last stanzas are compared. The first stanza is in *ottava rima,* but it is rough with an uneven meter and imperfect rhymes. However, the last stanza achieves perfect *ottava rima*, with pure rhymes and a steady iambic pentameter. Just as music is evoked throughout the poem, the final stanza becomes the perfected performance of that music.

Yeats's meta-labor in refining the form of "Sailing to Byzantium" resonates with the poem's themes and images about labor. My analysis of "Sailing to Byzantium" begins by defining the four different kinds of work portrayed in the poem. The first kind

is the work of self-fashioning or soul-making. In a 1931 BBC Belfast radio broadcast, recorded in Jeffares' *New Commentary*, Yeats refers to the work of soul-making: "Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts upon that subject I have put into a poem called 'Sailing to Byzantium'" (213). The speaker associates youth with body and age with soul. In the speaker's mind, it is the young who celebrate bodily experience; they are "in one another's arms … caught in that sensual music" (lines 2,7). Lamenting the deterioration of the body, the speaker turns away from physical experience and toward the soul that can "clap its hands and sing" (11). Primarily, the speaker seeks purification for his soul; as the Grecian goldsmiths hammer the gold, the speaker shapes his own soul.

In addition to soul-formation, the poem presents a second kind of labor—the quest of the protagonist. This aged laborer finds that his body encumbers his soul and therefore sets out to seek a place where "soul [can] … sing" and where he can study "Monuments" of the soul's own "magnificence" (11,14,14). Sailing the seas on a voyage toward the "holy city" (16), the poet is described with the language of the hero on a quest. His aim is to escape from the country that does not welcome old men and that is mesmerized by "sensual music" (7). By contrast, in Byzantium, neither art nor artist fade away but instead are gathered "into the artifice of eternity" (24).

"Sailing to Byzantium," then, points to a divine laborer (particularly in stanza three); this is the third kind of labor. As Ellmann writes, God is pictured here as the great worker or artificer: "God in the poem stands less in the position of the Christian God than in that of supreme artist, artificer of eternity and of the holy fire; he is thus also the poet and the human imagination which is sometimes in Yeats's system described as the maker

of all things" (258). This transcendent maker, along with the "sages" (line 17), crafts eternity and holy fire. The speaker desires to come into contact with these divine figures so that he can be instructed, purged, and healed; he wants to be drawn into a transcendent being greater than himself. This is reflected in his prayer: "[B]e the singing-masters of my soul. / Consume my heart away; sick with desire … gather me / Into the artifice of eternity" (20-21, 23-24). Seeking purification and release, the poet seeks to be absorbed into the labor of the divine artificer.

The final image of work appears in the last stanza: "Grecian goldsmiths" (27) hammer gold to create works of art for the Emperor, and the poet-protagonist, transfigured as a bird, sits upon a "golden bough to sing" (30). The protagonist has made his way from worrying about the body's decay to contemplating images of eternity—the golden bird sings of "what is past, or passing, or to come" (32). The work celebrated in this poem is essentially that of making eternal music:

> Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (25-32)

The poet's labor is to produce music of the soul.

Accordingly, the music modulates stanza by stanza into different musical variations. In the first stanza, the poet evokes "sensual music" (7): creatures of the earth, especially the young, spin in the cycle of nature driven by this powerful music. Then, the sensual music modulates into soul music, where the soul sings in exuberant contrast to the decrepitude of the scarecrow-like body: "unless / Soul clap its hands and sing, and

louder sing" (10-11). In the next stanza, musical instruction becomes the primary theme; the poet asks the sage "singing-masters of my soul" to teach him (20). Finally, the quest is achieved in the last stanza when the poet is transformed into a golden bird singing to the citizens of Byzantium.[12]

Though "Sailing to Byzantium" suggests an ideal image of labor, it also seems dissatisfying. When compared to the "lovely flexible presence" (*Vision* 158) found in *A Vision*, "Sailing to Byzantium's" culminating image of the golden bird appears lifeless. Though the poet does reach Byzantium and though the golden bird represents timeless and perfected artifice, the conclusion of the poem lacks complexity and vibrancy. As Vendler puts it, "Yeats then asks himself whether his soul would in fact like this new sacred existence 'out of nature.' He of course knows it would not: he does not want his soul to live in a single-sex choral group, inhabiting eternity … that heart-less and body-less 'me' is not, and never can be, the authentic Yeatsian self" (34). The poet escapes the confines of old age but loses his body altogether: "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing" (lines 25-26). The art is purely abstracted without an anchor in the material reality of the world, and the singing soul is divorced from the body. Because it denies the body, the last stanza presents a mechanical image that evokes no sense of movement or growth. The stanza begins with a negative statement: "I shall never take / My bodily form …" (25-26). The lethargy in this stanza also comes from its having only a few weak verbs, in contrast with the preceding stanzas. After the numerous vivid verb phrases of the penultimate stanza—"standing in God's

[12] The musical theme in "Sailing to Byzantium" suggests a line from "Adam's Curse," published twenty-five years earlier (1903), in which the poet works to "articulate sweet sounds together" (line 10).

holy fire" (17); "come from the holy fire" (19); "perne in a gyre" (19); "consume my heart away" (21); "gather me / Into the artifice of eternity" (24)—the final stanza seems anemic. This weariness spreads to the Emperor, who is "drowsy" (29), and to the bird that neither flies nor builds nests but simply "set[s] upon a golden bough" (30). Confirming the lack of vitality in the image of the bird, Robert S. Ryf calls it "an essentially static image" (614) and Elizabeth Kimball states that it is "no more than a wind-up toy" (216). Significantly, Ryf notes that Yeats used the "considerably more dynamic" (614) image of a dolphin in early drafts but deleted it in the final version. In fact, Ryf argues that the difference between the nightingale and the dolphin constitutes "the fundamental difference between the two Byzantium poems" (614). For a poem so interested in the labor of the poet, it seems strange that its conclusion lacks a fully satisfying picture of this labor. When compared with the image of the worker in *A Vision,* whose work celebrates the union of soul and body and whose craft evokes a sense of wholeness as "a perfect human body" (*Vision* 158), the culminating stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium" rings hollow.[13]

Essentially, "Sailing to Byzantium" is a story about escape: an aging artist flees the world of the young and repudiates his own body, entering a realm of perfection and permanence. The artist begs the "singing-masters" (line 20) to release him from human emotion and embodied life: "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal" (21-22). Moving even farther away from physical life, in the last stanza, he rejects nature and body: "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from

[13] Virginia Pruitt suggests that the poem contains "a deep vein of irony" (226) and ultimately undermines the ideal picture it paints. She reminds us that, historically speaking, the Byzantine city comes to a dramatic end and therefore suggests that Yeats "intimates the vulnerability of the very artifacts that, within the poem, symbolize immutability" (226).

any natural thing" (25-26). Because of the protagonist's turn away from nature, earth, and body, and because the final image of the bird does not seem satisfying, we may read this poem as Yeats's critique of escapism. In summary, "Sailing to Byzantium" is significant to the study of labor in his work because it relates work to the opposition of soul and body, describes the artist's pursuit of timelessness, presents poetic labor as music-making, but finally critiques such a process as escapist. In these ways, "Sailing to Byzantium" foreshadows Yeats's ultimate insights about labor.

The second poem, "Byzantium" (1930), serves as a revelatory companion piece to "Sailing to Byzantium"; whereas the earlier poem illustrates static perfection, the later one portrays dynamic complexity. Yeats wrote "Byzantium" as a clarification of his earlier poem, following artist T. Sturge Moore's judgment that the last stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium" was in need of expansion (Brandes 42). This stimulating poem serves as my final example of Yeats's vision of ideal labor, and it builds a bridge to the next two visions.

"Byzantium" is noteworthy for its complexity. Consequently, many interpretations exist about even the basic question of its relation to the less complex "Sailing to Byzantium." Some scholars consider the two poems to be essentially alike in subject and some consider them to be radically different. Richard J. Finneran argues for likeness, positing that in both pieces Yeats comes to the same conclusion: "Nature and Art are necessarily and inescapably interdependent" (5).[14] On the contrary, Ellmann proposes that "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" are essentially different because

[14] Also suggesting their similarity, Louis MacNeice writes that both poems contrast the world of Becoming with the world of Being; he argues that, like the golden bird in the first poem, "In *Byzantium* the poet is once again to be a metal cock" (141).

in the first "the sensual life is separated from the spiritual" (273) whereas in the second the two are joined. Similarly, in her study of the poems' form, Vendler elegantly argues that they are meant to be seen in contrast: "The second poem … is an afterward to its predecessor. [It is] a diptych in which left and right stand as proposal and counter-proposal. Finally, each poem has an independent and unique existence in its own right" (28). In accord with Ellmann and Vendler, I propose that "Byzantium" is quite different from "Sailing to Byzantium" and, in particular, demonstrates a development in Yeats's thinking about body and soul.

The central topic of the poem has also been a subject for debate. Finneran argues that the subject of both "Byzantium" and "Sailing to Byzantium" is the traditional conflict between nature and art (5) while O'Donnell suggests that essentially the poem dramatizes the soul's purgation after death (122). In contrast, I propose that the subject of "Byzantium" is the relationship between body and soul and that the poem expresses Yeats's critique of Gnosticism.[15] The poem displays the relationship between soul and body through balancing spiritual language with earthly and physical imagery. For instance, in the last stanza the poetic act begets "Spirit after spirit!" (line 34) but within a world of "mire and blood" (33). In picturing soul and body, "Byzantium" enters into conversation with "Sailing to Byzantium." Though like the earlier poem "Byzantium" evokes the ancient city and uses a number of the same key words—"Emperor," "bird," "golden bough," "smithies," and "fire"—I propose that it nevertheless progresses to a markedly different place. Whereas "Sailing to Byzantium" concludes with a simple,

[15] The critique of Gnosticism appears again in the Crazy Jane poems, which I explicate in chapter three.

static, and spiritual image, "Byzantium's" conclusion evokes complexity, energy, and embodiment. Moreover, the development from the earlier to the later poem demonstrates a significant progress in Yeats's thinking about work, a movement that comes to its fullest manifestation in his later poems.

The first direct image of labor in "Byzantium" suggests the opposing motions of winding and unwinding and the sovereignty of death over work: "For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth / May unwind the winding path" (11-12). This image evokes the ancient tools of the spindle and spinning wheel used to make yarn and cloth. The image has a sinister edge; it is Hades' bobbin used for mummy cloth. Thus, the image connects a traditional symbol of work with the idea of the labor of the lord of the underworld. Also, instead of winding up the thread, this labor unravels what has been done before: "unwind the winding path" (12).[16] Yeats cleverly mimics this winding and unwinding in the structure of his lines when he presents a line and then in the following phrase or phrases repeats it with modifications to the original meaning. He employs this stylistic technique immediately before and after the key "Hades' bobbin" line. First, he creates a circling effect between the words *image, man,* and *shade*: "Before me floats an image, man or shade, / Shade more than man, more image than shade" (9-10). Second, the words *miracle, bird,* and *handiwork* intertwine to similar effect: "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, / More miracle than bird or handiwork" (17-18). In this dramatization of his image of Hades' bobbin, Yeats builds a potentially disturbing parallel between his own work in crafting poetic lines and Hades' labor with his bobbin over the cloths of mummies.

[16] This image of unwinding echoes a passage from *A Vision:* "Each age unwinds the thread another age had wound" (*Vision* 152).

The third stanza, with its symmetrical form and balanced relationship between lines, formally renders the significance of labor. Although Bloom questions whether stanza three is necessary to the poem (391), I propose that in fact it plays a significant role; it shows, with its symmetrical form, the ability of artistic labor to unify the soul and body. The first three lines allude to the transcendent artist in "Sailing to Byzantium" and a purified, spiritual artistry: "Miracle, bird or golden handiwork, / … Planted on the starlit golden bough" (lines 17,19). In the next line the poet is transfigured into one of "the cocks of Hades" (20). Finally, in the last four lines the poet speaks words of "scorn" (21) and glories in the "common" (23) things of physical life: "metal … bird[s] … mire … [and] blood" (22-24). Thus, spirit and body are brought together in one stanza, joined by the spirited voice of the poet in the center.

Finally, labor appears in the last stanza with the image of the "golden smithies of the Emperor" (35), an image that recalls the Grecian goldsmiths at the end of "Sailing to Byzantium":

> Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
> Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
> The golden smithies of the Emperor!
> Marbles of the dancing floor
> Break bitter furies of complexity,
> Thos images that yet
> Fresh images beget,
> That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea. (33-40)

The smithies of "Byzantium" are different from the smithies of "Sailing to Byzantium." While the smithies of the first poem "make" (27) artistic works of hammered gold, a creative action, the smithies of the second poem seem to be engaged in destruction: they "break the flood" (34). This point is re-emphasized in the following lines with the second use of the word *break*: "Marbles of the dancing floor / Break bitter furies of complexity"

(36-37). Chaos erupts in these lines; the smithies are in the business of disrupting the dance. Whereas the smithies of "Sailing to Byzantium" represent the disciplined perfection of art, the smithies in "Byzantium," though triumphant (two exclamation marks appear in this stanza), are also mysterious and complicate the poem's representation of artistic labor. O'Donnell writes that the last stanza is ambiguous and could either be a celebration of the soul's flight away from mortality into Byzantium or could give "so much emphasis to mortal life as to undercut the value of purgation from life's complexity" (122). I suggest that the latter interpretation is more compelling; the poem does not ultimately seek to escape from the physical world. In its complexity and its embrace of the physical world, "Byzantium" stands in contrast to "Sailing to Byzantium," representing a more developed vision of ideal labor. In short, "Byzantium's" picture of labor is more complex, more vital, and more concerned with embodiment.

Complexity is a distinctive quality of "Byzantium," and indeed, the word itself is repeated four times: "All mere *complexities* … all *complexities* of mire and blood … all *complexities* of fury … break bitter furies of *complexity*" (lines 7, 24, 29, 37, emphasis added). Whereas the culminating image of "Sailing to Byzantium" is a single golden bird, an image of pure simplicity, the dolphin at the end of "Byzantium" is anything but simple. The dolphins, joined by numberless spirits, ride the embroiled sea. "Sailing to Byzantium" narrows to a single stationary point (the bird), but in striking contrast, "Byzantium" expands the reader's perspective to an ever-widening sea churning with dolphins and spirits. Also, the agitated sea of "Byzantium" portrays a kind of vitality that makes its earlier counterpart seem sedentary. "Byzantium's" evocation of death—

"Hades' bobbin" (11)—is paired by an equally strong focus on the creation of life. The last stanza's eruptive quality perhaps suggests birth: "the dolphin's mire and blood … The smithies break the flood" (33-34). This suggestion of a birth is confirmed at the very end: "Those images that yet / Fresh images beget" (38-39). Whereas the end of "Sailing to Byzantium" suggests sterility with words like "drowsy" and "set," "Byzantium's" conclusion presents images of tormented births.

Finally, whereas "Sailing to Byzantium" chronicles the protagonist's escape from his decaying body to a purely spiritual state, "Byzantium," in the end, emphasizes the body—"the fury and mire of human veins" (8). In the final stanza of this poem, the unflinchingly earthy image of "mire and blood" (33) is juxtaposed with "Spirit after spirit" (34), thus uniting the physical and the spiritual. In this way, "Byzantium" merges the immaterial with the material, the spiritual with the physical, and the transcendent with the bodily. Yeats here turns away from the urge to escape and embraces the real quality of human existence, in all of its restlessness and filth.

The significant development from Yeats's depiction of artistic labor in "Sailing to Byzantium" to his portrayal of labor in "Byzantium" exemplifies his lively intellectual quest for understanding about labor. In addition, the differences between these poems show his attraction to the ideas of complexity, vitality, and embodiment. In these ways, "Byzantium" prefigures Yeats's ultimate insight about labor in the last poems.

Yeats paints a compelling picture of ideal labor in both his prose and his poetry. In contrast to the prose examples, the poems present a more complex picture of ideal

labor; they register, to some degree, the reality of toil in a harsh world.[17] Though Yeats portrays ideal labor for different rhetorical reasons and in different genres, several recurring characteristics may be traced. A resounding theme in both the prose and poetry is the desire for perfection, not only the perfection of created art but also perfection of the community and of the laborer. For example, in "Stratford-on-Avon" and "Edmund Spenser," Yeats imagines pastoral communities in which work is done with pleasure and harmony. In *A Vision,* Byzantium is set forth as the ultimate workshop for the artist-laborer; the mosaic worker demonstrates unity of being, his physical and intellectual lives blending into one. The perfection of the laborer, or the attempt at perfection, also appears in the last two stanzas of "Sailing to Byzantium" where the artist embraces the holy refining fire and is transformed into a golden bird.

In addition to the pursuit of perfection, Yeats's ideal pictures of labor also have in common the theme of escape, defined as the act of turning away from the present moment and place to imagine ideal experiences in other times and places. For instance, "Stratford-on-Avon," "Edmund Spenser," and "Dove or Swan" celebrate perfected labor in the past. Yeats laments the loss of his invented notion of Merry England and the popular disdain toward characters like Richard II and sets up, in the city of Byzantium, an imaginative escape from modern life and work. Furthermore, "Sailing to Byzantium" is essentially the tale of an aging poet who escapes from a world ruled by the young and

[17] Even more depth emerges in the final poems (discussed in chapter three) where Yeats is able to create a synthesis of the ideal and the real. The early works (discussed in chapter one) tend to favor either the ideal or the real or offer a puzzling blend of both.

who arrives at a place where he expects his work and soul to be perfected.[18] In their tendency toward escapism and in their focus on the past, these works lack the full wisdom of Yeats's late poems on labor, which deal with work in the present and imperfect world. Nevertheless, the ideal vision of labor appears so vividly in "Stratford-on-Avon," "Edmund Spenser," *A Vision,* and the Byzantine poems that these works deserve careful attention in this study.

In this chapter, we have begun to see that Yeats's understanding of labor was neither simple nor static but rather that he nuanced his understanding of this complicated human experience over a lifetime. Yeats's developing insight about labor is signaled in the progression from "Sailing to Byzantium" to "Byzantium." While the first poem rejects the physical experience of labor, in the later poem Yeats portrays work as both transcendent and embodied, foreshadowing a primary theme in his last poems. His complex and compelling picture of ideal labor foils his picture of frustrated labor, the subject of chapter two.

[18] Yeats's poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," discussed in chapter two, may be read as a critique of escapism.

CHAPTER THREE

"Untuned by Striving": Yeats and Corrupt Labor

While Yeats's first vision of labor portrays the ideal, his second vision is more concerned with the real, diagnosing the corruption of the human spirit through toil. To quote Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion," this second picture of labor serves as a "counter-truth" (line 17). In an Hegelian manner, Seamus Heaney praises the poet's ability to fix an unflinching eye on the ills of the world in his essay "Yeats' Nobility":

> [T]he fortitude and composure of Yeats' gaze is equal to the violence and danger of the historical disintegration which it witnesses. His 'vision of reality' is in line with and adequate to the historical reality which cruelly imposes itself; and, in achieving such a combination of tough-mindedness and plangency, Yeats brings into modern poetry a quality which is rare indeed and which we may call 'nobility.' (12)

"[T]ough-mindedness and plangency" (Heaney 12) are evident in the poems analyzed in this chapter, and these two elements give them extraordinary intensity. These poems often mourn labor and describe it as an experience that causes pain. They evoke the image of a woman laboring in childbirth, except that while the pangs of childbirth usually end in new life, many of Yeats's labor poems offer no fruitfulness to reward the pain. Many of these poems are haunted by the suspicion that labor is meaningless and even sterilizing. For example, in "The Witch," Yeats paints an especially grotesque picture, writing that to toil for riches is to "lie / With a foul witch" and become "drained dry,"

ultimately ending in "despair" (lines 2-3, 4, 8).[1] His poems of corrupt labor are filled with grim imagery.

Striving is a common theme among Yeats's poems; it drives corrupt labor and explains the sense of weariness these poems often betray. Etymologically related to the word "strife," "striving" captures the tone of these poems, which often present the laborer in conflict with the world and with himself. In these poems, human striving contrasts against labor in the natural world, where creatures work peacefully. In several poems, Yeats alludes to bees building nests or making honey to picture natural, harmonious labor. By contrast, the striving of human beings seems unnatural and discordant. Yeats expresses this dissonance in some of his personal writings. In one letter, he finds it ironic that he must seek the "natural momentum" (*Letters* 710) of poetry through "intense unnatural labor that reduces composition to four or five lines a day" (710). He suggests that this arduous poetic work goes against nature because it is toilsome, and he envies the "ease of soul" (710) he observes in amateurs. For Yeats, labor is anything but easy, and his poems often paint an unyieldingly bleak picture of the sorrows and frustrations of human striving.

Yeats's theory of historical cycles colors his descriptions of labor with a sense of inevitable downfall. In his essay "Dove or Swan," Yeats maps the rise and fall of distinct historical periods according to the 28 phases of the moon. Barton Friedman writes that

[1] A number of poems also connect work with regret and emptiness. In "Fergus and the Druid," Fergus looks on his labor with regret: "A king is but a foolish labourer / Who wastes his blood to be another's dream" (lines 27-28). Also, "The People" questions whether work can produce any meaningful fruit: "What have I earned for all that work" (line 1). "What Then?" raises a similar question, telling the story of a man whose younger years are "crammed with toil" and who achieves many of his dreams. Yet, when he becomes old, and his "work is done," Plato's ghost haunts him, demanding, "What then?" (lines 4, 16, 20).

early in Yeats's career "he was already brooding on the cyclical theory of history to emerge in *A Vision* and in his later poems and plays … and moving toward the conviction that his culture was riding the downward arc of the cycle" (21). Yeats depicts the world as fallen, though usually not in the Christian sense (with the exception of "Adam's Curse"); he understands the world as deteriorating within the spinning gyre of history. He describes this deterioration in "The Second Coming": "Turning and turning in the widening gyre … things fall apart; the centre cannot hold" (lines 1, 3). The theory of the gyres shaped Yeats's understanding of the human experience of labor as an experience characterized by resistance. For Yeats, labor is pure, pleasurable, and meaningful during favorable historical periods but tainted, painful, and meaningless in other eras. His own era, he believed, was spinning downward, a trend that he depicted in his poetry about difficult toil.

While Yeats's poetic portrayals of corrupt labor are both vivid and numerous, my analysis focuses on five poems, arranged chronologically, that most clearly highlight his developing theme of corrupt labor. These poems illustrate the nuanced nature of Yeats's thinking about corrupt labor: "Down by the Salley Gardens" (1889), "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (1890), "Adam's Curse" (1902), "The Fascination of What's Difficult" (1910), and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1928). These plangent laments stand in contrast to the pictures of ideal labor in the first chapter.

The first poem, "Down by the Salley Gardens," is a lament for a life wasted in striving. Despite its significance, especially when read in relation to the other labor poems, criticism on "Down by the Salley Gardens" is sparse. Scholars have written about the poem only briefly or referred to it in passing, and in most cases they limit the

discussion to the poem's relationship with music or with the folk tradition.[2] As Louis MacNeice and others have shown, "Down By the Salley Gardens" is music as much as it is poetry. In reference to "Down by the Salley Gardens" as well as other of Yeats's poems, Harry White describes the "lyric strain in the language that calls deliberate attention to music and that intimates the kind of completion which only music itself can provide" (89). Originally titled "An Old Song Re-sung," "Down by the Salley Gardens" has been set to various tunes, as when it appeared in Alfred Graves' *Irish Song Book* in 1894, set to the tune of "The Maids of the Mourne Shore." This simple melody evokes wistfulness. Its natural phrasing and cadence seems to reflect the voice of the beloved, who counsels her lover to embrace a life of peace. I suggest that the poem's musicality sets a contrast between harmonious, natural labor and anxious striving. It embodies the beloved's poignant praise of easy, natural labor and accompanies the speaker's eventual grief.[3]

The poem becomes particularly meaningful when read through the lens of natural labor versus striving. The speaker and his beloved walk in a garden, surrounded by natural things that grow steadily and with patience. The word *salley* (willow) in the title suggests an image of the loose willow branches flowing in the wind. The environment stands in contrast to the speaker, who is "young and foolish" (line 4) and who strives with

[2] For instance, Vladamir Toporov conducts a structural analysis of the poem to illustrate how Yeats transformed folklore forms into poetry while, contrastingly, H.E. Shields refers to the poem to argue that Yeats was not devoted to renewing the Irish folk tradition. Richard Wall proposes that much of Yeats's work, like "Down by the Salley Gardens," became a significant part of the folk tradition in Ireland. Finally, MacNeice references the poem to illustrate the musicality of Irish poetry and the influence of folk music on Yeats's writing (211).

[3] The poem "How Ferencz Renyi Kept Silent" also interrogates the experience of striving. In this piece, the speaker laments the fact that "those who do good often be not good" because they are "untuned by their own striving" (lines 33, 37).

impatience. By speaking of love as a labor, the beloved implies that the manner in which one pursues love defines the love itself; indeed, as the poem's narrative shows, those who labor with foolish haste will reap sorrow. The beloved twice uses natural similes to advise her lover. First she urges patience in the labor of love: "She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree" (3).[4] She advises him to fall in step with the gradual rhythms of nature, not forcing love prematurely but allowing it to blossom in its proper season. This easy labor is nature's version of the human quality of *sprezzatura*, or apparent effortlessness, a concept that appears most clearly in "Adam's Curse."[5]

In the second stanza, the speaker continues to reject wise natural labor, and eventually comes to recognize the sorrowful result of a life of striving. The speaker seems burdened because he has not taken love easy: "[O]n my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand" (6). Thus, the beloved bids him to "take life easy as the grass grows on the weirs" (7). As in the first exchange, the headstrong young man does not listen. The musical quality of the poem emphasizes the young man's tragic deafness; he does not hear the music of his beloved's wise words. In the last line, the past is juxtaposed with the present, and the speaker recognizes his mistake: "I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears" (8). The headstrong young man, now a reflective old man, is filled with regret for the way he labored throughout his life. Relentless striving and the inability to live in harmony with nature have filled him with sorrow. The poem's poignant irony lies in the fact that wisdom about labor has come too late, only after a life spent in striving. White has usefully shown that the musicality of the poem creates a

[4] Yeats may be alluding here to Matthew 11:30, where Christ says, "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (*King James Version*).

[5] In both "Down by the Salley Gardens" and "Adam's Curse," love is a labor.

"quality of incompleteness" (89), and his insight can be expanded to apply to the old man's sense of having, through striving, lost much of the goodness of life. The reader also suspects that the speaker has lost his beloved, evoking "Adam's Curse" and the failure in that poem of the labor of love. Just as "Adam's Curse" ends in silence, "Down By the Salley Gardens" ends with the speaker apparently left in silent tears.

Whereas "Down by the Salley Gardens" depicts striving, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" paints an initial picture of peaceful work, though this picture turns out to be flawed. As Terence Brown has shown, this poem about work and life on a secluded island was written during a time of heavy labor, financial strain, and weariness for Yeats (31). In *The Trembling of the Veil,* Yeats writes that he was "very homesick" (*Autobiographies* 139) in London when he was composing the poem and that he modeled Innisfree after a small island in Lough Gill. In this same letter, Yeats compares his desire to live on Innisfree to Thoreau's retreat to Walden Pond[6] and writes that he was attracted to the idea of a solitary life devoted to "seeking wisdom" (85).[7] For Yeats, Innisfree represented a healing oasis. The poem he wrote about the island, however, not only evokes the yearning for an oasis, but also presents ideal labor as a mere fantasy and critiques escapism.

Yeats's critique of escapism is subtly revealed through the tonal shifts in the poem. Beginning his reverie with the words "I will arise now, and go to Innisfree" (line 1), the speaker imagines the work that he would do there: build a cabin and grow crops

[6] Harold Bloom argues that Yeats's poem is inferior to Thoreau's *Walden* because it lacks a sense of solidity (113) and Hugh Kenner writes that the poem is indicative of Yeats's still developing style, and that it is immature with its "Irish Eden" of "unreality" (51).

[7] Richard Ellmann compares the impulse to retreat in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" to Yeats's attempts to establish a spiritual retreat on the island of Lough Key (129-30).

while listening to the bees make honey. The music of the lines beautifully echoes the rhythm of work that takes place on Innisfree. Indeed, in *The Trembling of the Veil,* Yeats identifies this poem as the "first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music" (*Autobiographies* 139). Moreover, William O'Donnell praises the musicality of the work, writing that "more than anything else, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' works its effects through the soft, peaceful beauty of its diction, sounds, and rhythms" (44). Yeats uses sound imagery, repetition, and onomatopoeia to evoke the peace found on Innisfree. The effect is incantatory with the repetition of several words: "peace … peace … dropping … / Dropping" (lines 5-6). After ten monosyllabic words in line five, the word "dropping," with its two heavy syllables, is emphatic. The repetition of "dropping" again in the next line imitates the steady accumulation of peace, imaged in falling beads of honey. Yeats's musical lines create an hypnotic effect; it seems that escape has been achieved.

As O'Donnell writes, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" does create—on the surface—a "lulling, incantatory mood" (44); however, on closer examination it becomes apparent that Yeats left room for a different interpretation. The sounds on Innisfree evoke a degree of agitation. Three creatures inhabit Innisfree, the honey-bee, the cricket, and the linnet, and all three are busily occupied. The bee works in its hive and is "loud" (line 4), the "cricket sings" (6) and disturbs the serene morning, and the sound of the linnet's beating wings overwhelms the "evening" (8). Yeats emphasizes the wings of all three creatures, evoking relentless movement. All of the buzzing, droning, rasping, and fluttering faintly disrupts the peacefulness of the island. This is reflected in the speaker's qualification that he finds only "*some* peace" (5, emphasis added) on the island and that the peace is long in coming—"peace comes dropping slow" (5). In this poem, which

might be termed an anti-pastoral, Yeats hints that Innisfree is not immune from the restlessness of the outside world. Even the natural labor of creatures on a beautiful island is slightly disquieting.

In the poignant final stanza, the speaker contrasts Innisfree with the city, a place of enervating industrialism. The speaker seems for a moment to be conveyed to Innisfree, listening to the lake water—"I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore" (10)—and the alliteration in the line imitates the sound of lapping water. But with the word *while* the speaker is thrust back into his actual environment – "While on the roadway, or on the pavements grey" (11). This evokes a dull urban setting, devoid of the sensual lushness of Innisfree. Writing that the poem lacks a sense of awareness and solidity, Bloom calls it a "plangent but drifting poem" (113). I suggest that in its sudden return to harsh reality, the end of the poem belies Bloom's judgment. The speaker longs for peaceful, natural work, but finds it neither on Innisfree nor in the city.

In the end, the speaker recognizes that the dream of Innisfree—or the dream of perfect labor—is a mere fantasy. Yeats signals this with the sound of the poem; the incantatory rhythms, alliterations, and repetitions stop abruptly with the sharp sounds of the last two lines. In the last stanza, he juxtaposes two incantatory lines with two harsh-sounding lines. First, the repetition of the 'l' and 'w' in the line about the lapping water creates a lulling sound that imitates the sound of the water. But then, this soothing sound is interrupted by the hard consonants 'd' and 'g': "While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey" (line 11). Finally, the poem ends with a line shorter than any other in the piece that finishes with three heavy accents: "I hear it in the deep heart's core"

(12). The dream of escape is brought up short at the end as the speaker recognizes that its only reality is in his own imagination.

I suggest, then, that "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" critiques escapism for its fruitlessness and for its distressing effect. In Innisfree itself, the speaker the speaker does find peace and beauty, though this Eden-like place is compromised by the constant sound of busy work and movement. In the last two lines, the speaker is jerked back to the reality of the bleak city street with the unromantic images of "the roadway … [and] the pavements grey" (11). The reader recognizes that escape is not possible and in fact that it makes reality more rather than less difficult. Another narrative of escape is found in "Sailing to Byzantium"—"I have sailed the seas and come / To the holy city of Byzantium" (lines 15-16)—which also ends disappointingly. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," then, presents a counterpart to the city of Byzantium, where the speaker dreams of escaping the frustration of corrupt labor. In both cases, the attempt to escape ultimately fails.

More plaintive and despairing than either "Down by the Salley Gardens" or "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," the masterful poem "Adam's Curse" portrays the rigor of making poetry and renders the failure of the poet's labor for love. Vendler sees "Adam's Curse" as representative of Yeats's own "tenacious experimental work" (108) and the "intense labor required to articulate sweet sounds together" (108). As the title indicates, this poem explores labor in a world that suffers under the curse of *Genesis* chapter three, a curse on labor; labor and suffering are inextricably entwined. The central problem in the poem is that all things of value require this painful labor: "It's certain there is no fine thing / Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring" (lines 21-22). Despite the great effort toward

fine things, at the end of the poem the speaker suggests that such labor usually proves fruitless. "Adam's Curse" describes three kinds of labor: labor for poetry, labor for beauty, and labor for love. A comparison between the labor for poetry and for love is particularly meaningful in this poem; both are difficult, but the first proves fruitful while the second is ultimately disappointing. The work of the poet is successful, demonstrated by the excellence of the poem itself.[8] Contrastingly, the speaker's earnest efforts for love ultimately fail, reflecting Yeats's own failure to win the hand of his long-time love interest, Maud Gonne.[9] Though hinting at a hopeful view of the labor of poetry, "Adam's Curse," also expresses the core of Yeats's second vision—corrupt or frustrated labor.

While "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" resounds with the music of nature—"the bee-loud glade … lake water lapping with low sounds" (lines 4, 10)—"Adam's Curse" is filled with silence—"We sat grown quiet" (line 28). The play between dialogue and silence serves as a map to the poem's movements. Intriguingly, it is the one silent person in the poem who has the most effect on the dialogue. As Vendler writes, "[E]verything the young Yeats says in that poem … is directed not toward the interlocutor, Maude Gonne's sister, but toward the silent Maud" (375) and is meant to raise a response from her. For example, the speaker remarks on the futility of laboring for love, in the hope that Maud will answer by reassuring him that his labor for her love has not been in vain. Instead, she remains a silent specter, and the poem ends with an image of a hollow moon (Vendler 376). This evocation of hollowness signals that the speaker gives up on his

[8] O'Donnell writes that the piece demonstrates Yeats's maturing style, pointing to the strong diction, nuanced rhythm and phrasing, and subtle use of dialogue (50-52).

[9] An account of the conversation that inspired this poem is found in Maud Gonne MacBride's 1938 autobiography, *A Servant of the Queen* (328-30).

labor because it seems perfectly empty. In this way, the poem progresses from conversation to silence, and from interaction to interiority, thereby enacting the speaker's final arrival at despair.

While it ends in emptiness, the poem begins with pensive reflection about the labor of poetry and the labor of love; "Adam's Curse," as Vendler writes, is "about the pang of unrequited love, but also about the effort of verse" (375). Yeats portrays the labor of poetry in both a positive and negative light. It is both a sweet and a bitter occupation.[10] Early in the poem, he describes making poetry as pleasurable and beautiful; the poet "articulate[s] sweet sounds together" (line 10).[11] Through alliteration and consonance, with the repetition of 's' and 't' the line itself creates the sweet sounds it describes. In this way, the line stands in distinct contrast to the evocation of noise—"the noisy set / Of bankers …" (12-13)—two lines later.

Hearkening back to the description of easy, natural labor in "Down by the Salley Gardens," this poem also describes work that has the appearance of being effortless and delightful. In associating delight and effortlessness with work, Yeats evokes the Renaissance concept of *sprezzatura*, as Salvadori has argued (83). As Bloom observes, *sprezzatura* is "creative recklessness [and] self-possession that accompanies and hides mastery" (165) and thus stands in tension with the hard toil that Yeats describes in many of his poems. *Sprezzatura* appears in the first stanza of "Adam's Curse": "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and

[10] Yeats also uses the language of sweetness and bitterness in "Easter, 1916" when he describes a woman whose voice had once been sweet—"What voice more sweet than hers" (line 21)—but had since turned bitter—"her voice grew shrill" (20).

[11] See Nicholas Grene's chapter on *bitter/sweet*, starting on page 194. In his Introduction, he writes that in Yeats's poems the word *sweet* "must be unpacked in [its] shifting valencies" (3).

unstitching has been naught" (lines 4-6). These lines echo a passage from Yeats's essay "Certain Noble Plays of Japan" in which he admires the *sprezzatura* of professional dancers: "Doubtless their training had been long, laborious, and wearisome; but now one could not be deceived, their movement was full of joy … it all seemed but the play of children" (*Essays* 223-24).[12] Yeats's aesthetic of labor in "Adam's Curse," then, is *sprezzatura*—a refined and exuberant approach to work. Yeats gestures toward another positive element of labor when he describes the poet working to write a poem in community. The speaker imagines working with his companions through the writing process: "a line will take us hours" (line 4). This recalls the theme of communal labor in his essay "Edmund Spenser," which depicts "English labourers lilt[ing] French songs over their work" (*Essays* 365). These subtle evocations of ideal labor by contrast make the end's despair of love's labor even more potent.

Despite the sweetness of poetic lines, the depiction of *sprezzatura*, and the final success of poetic labor—Yeats's fine poem itself—in "Adam's Curse" the labor of poetry is also strenuous. Though it must appear effortless, in reality poetry involves the painstaking "stitching and unstitching" (line 6) of lines. To labor over poetry, the speaker insists, is harder than to "scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones / Like an old pauper" (8-9). Yeats here suggests that both poetry and love require discipline. In his note on a line from the third stanza, "compounded of high courtesy" (24), Jeffares writes, "Yeats thought true love was a discipline that needed wisdom" (*New* 79). The discipline of love mirrors the discipline of poetry; both require prolonged effort. Despite its difficulty, the poet's labor is unappreciated by modern businesspeople. Ignorant of the difficulty of

[12] In poems like "Among School Children," the dancer embodies ideal labor.

poetry, the "bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen" (line 12) think that the poet is an "idler" (12). The labor of the poet here is not only arduous, but also thankless. This is not the harmonious work of the mosaic worker of Byzantium, where the work of each individual resonated with "the vision of a whole people" (*Vision* 159). On the contrary, this poet labors in the face of opposition. William Wenthe writes that in this poem poetic labor stands in conflict with a corrupt society: "[T]he labor of verse is not just the labor toward an ideal loveliness, but involves a kind of oppositional stance to 'the world'" (32).

Love is the ultimate labor in "Adam's Curse," but it too proves troublesome and, unlike poetic labor, ultimately unfruitful. Though in the first stanza the speaker describes laboring over a poem with his companions, including Maud Gonne, the labor of love he imagines sharing with this woman ends in disappointment. The speaker confesses that his labor of love has failed; though he "strove" to love his beloved "in the old high way of love … yet we'd grown / As weary-hearted as that hollow moon" (lines 35-38). Also, the lunar image at the end of the poem suggests decline: "A moon, worn as if it had been a shell / Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell / About the stars and broke in days and years" (31-33). O'Donnell describes the power of the ending: "the poignant phrasing of the closing two lines leaves the reader with a stunning silence" (52). Thus, in contrast to the noise and music of the first stanza, the poem becomes an accretion of silences: the group's hush at the name of love; Maud's pervasive silence; and the reflective silence of the reader upon reading the last two lines. The tone of lament in "Adam's Curse" is perhaps even more plaintive then in "Down by the Salley Gardens" or "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." Striving after love is like trying to hold the tide as it falls back into the sea. In

a cursed world, the labor of poetry is painfully difficult and the old ways of love are impossible.

Whereas in "Adam's Curse" the speaker laments his failed labor with a melancholy and mournful tone, in "The Fascination of What's Difficult" he employs a harsh and cynical voice. This poem is both a vigorous complaint against corrupt labor, though not the labor of making poetry, and, like "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," a subtle critique of escapism. "The Fascination of What's Difficult" becomes more evocative and more closely related to other of Yeats's poems when it is read as a statement about escapism. O'Donnell points out that the work itself represents "a craftsman's heed to details of rhyme and image" (57) and Nicholas Grene agrees that the poem, which essentially concerns "the craft of verse" (56), is praiseworthy for its "technical achievement" (57).[13] As these scholars suggest, "The Fascination of What's Difficult" demonstrates Yeats's own precision in laboring over poetry. Focusing on the meaning of the poem, Bloom argues that though the speaker complains about the theater business in the poem, he actually offers a "tribute to the discipline imposed upon the frustrated lyricist by the limitations of a theater" (170). Rather than a tribute, I read the poem as a critique of relentless striving that enslaves people and denies *sprezzatura* and, more subtly, as a critique of escapism. Reading the poem as a multi-layered critique gives it greater resonance with other of Yeats's works.

Looking at "The Fascination of What's Difficult" through the lens of labor, we can trace the movements of the poem and understand the complexity of its conclusion.

[13] Vendler also explores the formal and technical elements of the poem and lists a number of original features: "a quotidian subject-matter, a closing burst from narrative into performative speech, and mixed factual and mythological diction" (164). The poem's greatest originality, she argues, comes from its adaptation of the sonnet tradition (164).

First, we see that corrupt labor enervates, debases, and enslaves people. The word *fascination* suggests that workers are bewitched, laboring for no other reason than because it is difficult. The speaker pictures himself as a tree and writes that this labor has drained away his ability to thrive; it "Has dried the sap out of my veins" (line 2).[14] Also, in more violent language, this *fascination* has wrenched from him the ability to enjoy his work: it has "rent / Spontaneous joy and natural content / Out of my heart" (2-4).[15] The words *joy* and *content* are key terms in Yeats's descriptions of the ideal labor of antiquity; contrastingly, labor in this poem denies people the pleasure that is possible in labor. The labor in this poem is cold, regimented, and violent; it is "the day's war" (10). Responding to this aspect of the poem, Wenthe calls the piece a statement of resistance: "The opposition of poet and society … forms the crux of 'The Fascination of What's Difficult'" (35). In this poem, the artist labors in conflict with society.

The image of "our colt" (line 4), introduced in the next section of the poem, is a multi-faceted image of labor. The colt refers to the winged horse Pegasus from Greek mythology who "on Olympus leaped from cloud to cloud" (6). Human beings, the speaker suggests, are divine creatures intended for glory and freedom: the sap that runs through their veins is "holy blood" (5). The speaker disapproves of work that divests human beings of their divine dignity, turning them into slaves who "Shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt" (7). Lines six and seven juxtapose the image of the soaring Pegasus (a classical emblem of the imagination) with the image of the human soul

[14] Contrastingly, in the last stanza of "Among School Children," a tree symbolizes positive labor: "O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer" (line 61).

[15] The word *rent* also appears in the last line of "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop": "For nothing can be sole or whole / That has not been rent" (line 18).

shivering under the lash, and this juxtaposition makes the debasement of such work all the more startling. Furthermore, this figure of Pegasus points to the series of dichotomies in the poem that illustrate the stark differences between ideal labor and corrupt labor: buoyancy versus heaviness; heaven versus earth; divine creature versus drudge; freedom versus enslavement.[16]

Next, in an imprecation suggestive of "Adam's Curse," the speaker pronounces a curse on work. But more specifically, the curse is directed at the frustrating labor of running a theater: "My curse on plays / That have to be set up in fifty ways … Theatre business, management of men" (8, 10-11). Finally, in the last two lines the speaker threatens rebellion, declaring that he will set free the colt of the human soul: "I swear … I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt" (12-13). Thus, in this poem, the speaker becomes both god and liberator, pronouncing a curse and setting the captive colt free from the tyranny of corrupted labor. The speaker rejects arduous, toilsome labor of "theater business" (11) and imagines that he will break free.

However, the tone in the last lines makes this desire for escape seem dubious, especially when compared with poems like "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" and "Sailing to Byzantium," which critique escapism in their final lines. At the end of "The Fascination of What's Difficult," the speaker echoes the violent language of the poem's beginning, thus creating a circling effect: "I swear before the dawn comes round again / I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt" (12-13). The poem does not end in peace, resignation, or the realization of a new insight, but instead it escalates in anger (with only a slight glimmer

[16] According to Vendler, Pegasus represents the Irish poet breaking free of forms and conventions associated with the continent and setting out on his own (164).

of hope). The speaker does not seem to progress by the end of the poem, and unlike the speaker in "Down by the Salley Gardens," he does not become wiser. There is no positive alternative to toil, but only an evasion of it. Though at first glance the end seems to be a victorious escape from burdensome toil, upon deeper examination it reveals a subtle critique of escapism.

As in the other poems discussed thus far, "The Fascination of What's Difficult" complicates labor by portraying its costs and pains while also suggesting the possibility of *sprezzatura*, the appearance of effortlessness. In this case, the speaker suggests the loss of *sprezzatura*: "The fascination of what's difficult / Has … rent / *Spontaneous joy and natural content* / Out of my heart" (1-4, emphasis added). *Sprezzatura* also appears in "Down by the Salley Gardens," when the speaker's lover bids him to "take love easy" (line 3) and "take life easy" (7). The lover beholds this easy style of living in nature, namely in the way the leaves grow on the trees and the grass grows on the weirs. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" evokes the idea of *sprezzatura*, especially through its natural setting. The speaker imagines building a simple "small cabin" (line 2) while listening to the soothing sounds of bees making honey. The work is peaceful: "I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow" (5). *Sprezzatura* appears in "Adam's Curse" in the first stanza: "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / Our stitching and unstitching has been naught" (lines 4-6). As Salvadori writes, Yeats here creates the effect of nonchalance: "[H]e wanted the reader to feel that his poetry had been a spontaneous utterance" (3). *Sprezzatura* suggests ideal

labor because it is free of striving. In these poems depicting the second vision of labor, Yeats heightens the suffering of modern labor by contrasting it with *sprezzatura*.[17]

Written fifteen years after "Adam's Curse" (1904), the poetic sequence "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (1919) is void of *sprezzatura*, expressing the bitterest pronouncement about labor of any of the poems in this chapter.[18] Originally called "Thoughts upon the Present State of the World," the poem's effect comes from its biting cynicism, mockery, and disenchantment. As Michael Wood notes, the year 1919 in Ireland was marked by escalating strife: "[W]ith the European war over, what had been an increasingly violent series of clashes between Irish guerrillas and English policemen became a war between countries" (57). As its historical context suggests, "1919" centers on violence; though explicitly mentioned only a few times in the poem, violence is rendered so vividly, with images such as the mother crawling "in her own blood" (line 28), that it leaves a lasting impression. Calling violence a "powerful emblem" (26) in the poem, Wood observes that it is "poised" (14) between two "key moments" (14): "first the aftermath of the wrecking event, then the waiting for immediate ugly revelation" (14).

The violence in "1919," as Vendler has written, points to the "enigma … [of] the human race's urge to obliterate the very civilizations it has constructed" (65). She here points to the intersection between construction, or human labor, and violence that appears in the poem. In the context of war, the speaker contemplates two concerns about human labor: the transience of human achievement and its tendency toward moral degeneration.

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[17] *Sprezzatura* also appears in "He gives his Beloved certain Rhymes" and "He tells of the Perfect Beauty." In these two pieces, Yeats contrasts the toil of poets to the apparently effortless loveliness of a woman.

[18] MacNeice writes that with its "vision … [of] futile violence" (154), "1919" conveys greater bitterness than "Meditations in Time of Civil War."

Human beings crave permanence, toiling to "leave some monument behind" (line 96), but their efforts soon blow away in "the levelling wind" (97). Not only do human beings lack the ability to create things of permanence, but in their work they tend to exchange "honour and … truth" (91) for evil and violence, becoming like "weasel[s] fighting in a hole" (32). The six parts of "1919" portray these frustrations in different ways but together form a narrative that dramatizes the vanishing and corruption of human labor.

In the first part, the speaker laments the loss of "many ingenious lovely things" (1)—artifacts made out of bronze, stone, olive wood, or ivory like "golden grasshoppers and bees" (8).[19] These artifacts have been replaced by acts of violence. In the fourth stanza, the speaker depicts a horrific act of violence: "the mother, murdered at her door, / To crawl in her own blood" (27-28). Though human beings often begin with noble intentions—"We … planned to bring the world under a rule" (31)—they often end by committing debased actions as "weasels fighting in a hole" (32). Moreover, all human work, whether it is noble or wicked, mental or physical, turns out to be ephemeral: "[N]o work can stand, / Whether health, wealth or peace of mind were spent / On master-work of intellect or hand" (35-37). The speaker ends this first part by describing the destruction of the opening stanza's artifacts—the "lovely things" (1): "[B]urn that stump … break in bits the famous ivories … traffic in the grasshoppers or bees" (46-49). The

[19] These images evoke "Sailing to Byzantium's" artifacts of "hammered gold and gold enamelling" (line 28) and the bird that sits "upon a golden bough to sing" (30).

speaker offers no hope of redemption but only cynicism: "What matter that no cannon had been turned / Into a ploughshare?" (19-20).[20]

If part one of "1919" is a statement about the corrupt human condition, then the second part posits that this condition is inescapable because human beings are controlled by outside forces—"a dragon of air … [that] whirled them round" (51-52). This section imagines that in work and life "all men are dancers" (49, 57), presenting the image of "Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers" (49). Published in the same volume with "1919," "Among School Children" also associates work with dancing—"Labour is … dancing" (line 57). In "1919," though, dance evokes not beauty and freedom but danger and annihilation. Calling the dance an emblem of "helplessness" (49), Wood points out that it "is not a question, as it is in 'Among School Children,' … of whether we can tell the dancer from the dance but whether we can see anything of the dancer but her name and her most famous device" (49). The dancers seem to be engulfed, or even eaten, by the dance. If we think of it as kind of labor (according to the 'labor is dancing' analogy in "Among Schoolchildren"), then it is a labor spurred on by a "dragon of air" (line 51) that whirls the dancers down a "furious path" (53). Accompanying the dance is a mysteriously nefarious music—"the barbarous clangour of a gong" (58). These images suggest to our imaginations slaves being hurried to their work by a maniacal overseer who beats a brutal drum. In this way, the poem suggests that work can be like overpowering music that flings human beings into subjugation and chaos.

[20] These lines allude to Isaiah 2:4: "[T]hey shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (*King James Version*).

In parts three and four, as if the situation did not already seem bleak enough, the speaker asserts that those who labor to bring good to the world ultimately fail. The labor of these good-doers vanishes just as the Platonists "cast off [the] body" (73). At the beginning of part three, "[s]ome moralist or mythological poet" (59) attempts to resurrect creativity amid war; however, in the end the best this poet can produce is a symbol of solitude—"[T]he solitary soul" (60) appears in the symbol of the swan. Next, in contrast to the previous section where work is connected with the physical act of dancing, "some Platonist" (72) simultaneously condemns work and the body. This Platonist expresses the hope that people will "cast off body and trade" (73),[21] relinquishing the work of their hands just as they part from their bodies: "[I]f our works could / But vanish with our breath / That were a lucky death" (75-77). Then, to end part three, the speaker writes that his own "laborious life" (82) has been motivated by a dream of saving the world through human effort: "O but we dreamed to mend / Whatever mischief seemed / To afflict mankind" (84-86). Sadly, this effort is fruitless, as suggested by the last two lines' evocation of the wind (a symbol of transience) and the speaker's confession that "we were crack-pated when we dreamed" (88). As Michael Wood writes, "The crack-pated dreamers … are ruined by hind-sight … Even death will not convert their errors into anything but folly" (43). Likewise, part four (only four lines long) shows that not only were these dreams naïve, but that those who sought to engage in these labors eventually became corrupt and violent: "We, who … Talked of honour and of truth, / Shriek with pleasure if we show / The weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth" (lines 89-92).

[21] As David McWhirter has written, the poem, "with its repeated submissions to the need to 'cast off body and trade,' can itself be understood as a sequence of incarnations, of embodiments in language" (51).

In the first part of the poem the artifacts of human work—ivory sculptures and other "lovely things" (1)— vanish, but in part five, as Vender suggests, it is the laborers themselves who disappear (73). These laborers are named as the great, the wise, and the good. Mocking the great who "toiled so hard and late" (95), the speaker proclaims that all their toil is blown away by "the levelling wind" (97). Next, the speaker mocks the wise, who studied "all those calendars" (99) with "old aching eyes" (100) but whose academic work ended in blindness: "[N]ow [they] but gape at the sun" (103). Then, the speaker criticizes the good as naïve and ineffective; they sought after joy and tried to "proclaim a holiday" (106), but "[w]ind shrieked—and where are they?" (107). Last of all, the speaker turns on himself and mocks mockers; as Grene writes, "[I]n an act of savage, bitterly satiric self-laceration" (318), the speaker implicates himself as one of the foolish, striving, and fruitless human beings.[22]

Intensifying the theme of fruitless labor, the sixth and final part of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is dominated by images of horses, dancers, and the wind, all of which in this case point to the emptiness of labor. The horses are described uncannily as both violent and beautiful: "Violence upon the roads: violence of horses … garlanded / On delicate sensitive ear or tossing mane" (lines 113-14). As Wood writes, the horses have a spectral quality and seem to be "a visitation, a supernatural army" (202). Having evoked this paradox of beauty and violence, the speaker goes on to present the horses as symbols of endless, aimless labor: "horses … wearied running round and round in their courses" (lines 113, 116). The speaker suggests that people take on causes and set their

[22] In this piece, Yeats evokes the theme of striving that appears in other of his labor poems like "Down by the Salley Gardens." In "1919," striving ends in barren emptiness filled only by the screeching wind.

hands to labors that seem noble at first but turn out to be violent and aimless. In this way, the horses allude to the labor image of the colt in the "Fascination of What's Difficult."[23] In this earlier poem, the colt has to "shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt / As though it dragged road metal" (lines 7-8), a similar description to that of the "wearied" (line 116) horses in "1919." Though in "The Fascination of What's Difficult" the colt appears on the verge of escape, the horses in "1919" seem to be annihilated. They simply "vanish" (117) and are replaced by more violent figures, "Herodias' daughters" (118). With the image of Herodias' daughters, the speaker returns to the idea of the laborer-dancer, this time increasing its violence. According to the biblical account, Herodias' daughter performs a dance that pleases the king so well that he promises her a boon; the girl asks for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. With this image of a dancer, the speaker again suggests the temptations that can corrupt human labor and laborers.[24] Finally, wind imagery, present throughout the poem as a symbol of transience, becomes especially present in this final part. "A sudden blast of dusty wind" (119) interrupts the narratives of the horses and Herodias' daughters, jumbling all in a "tumult of images" (120) and creating a "labyrinth of the wind" (121). The wind finally overcomes all of the workers in the poem, who disappear in its dusty labyrinth. And last of all the wind signals the poem's downward fall into silence: "now wind drops, dust settles" (125).

As seen in "1919," Yeats depicts toil that leads to a labyrinth of weariness, sorrow, and violence. The poems that convey Yeats's second vision of labor range

[23] Yeats employs doubling in both these images: the colt leaps from "cloud to cloud" (line 6) and the horses run "round and round" (line 116).

[24] In his *Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, A. Norman Jeffares notes that Herodias' daughers may also refer to mystical creatures or witches (234).

broadly in tone, including lament, longing for escape, defiance, wistfulness, and frustration, but all react to the same problem of corrupt labor. Yeats's vision of ideal labor and his portrayal of corrupt labor are starkly antithetical; one is mainly joyful and fulfilling while the other is distinctly sorrowful and empty. His developing insight about work includes the bitter recognition that corrupt labor not only defiles society and incites violence, but also warps the human soul: people are untuned by striving. Looking forward, chapter three focuses on Yeats's synthesis of the first two opposing visions—ideal labor and corrupt labor—and his arrival at an insight that expresses not despair but the hope of progress.

CHAPTER FOUR

"The foul rag and bone shop of the heart": Yeats and the Poetic Labor of Renewal

No one who reads Yeats's poems could accuse him of starry-eyed idealism about work's demands. As in "The Fascination of What's Difficult" and other poems discussed in chapter two, Yeats's final labor poems, written in the last decade of his life, vividly render the toilsome nature of work. However, while the poems discussed in chapter two often end despairingly, these later pieces ascend toward potential and hope for labor. Yeats tempers the idealism of the first vision of labor and the bitterness of the second vision with a third vision—*the poetic labor of renewal*. Several of Yeats's early poems, such as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," subtly enact the urge to escape; however, his last poems completely eschew escapism, turning instead to face labor in the real world. Although set in an undeniably tainted world, these poems seek progress and renewal, looking toward the incarnation of wisdom in the embodied life.[1] Yeats's works do not present incarnation in a Christological sense, but they do suggest that mystical realities powerfully inhabit the physical and bodily life. Because of this hopeful prospect, the third vision of labor does not surrender to the despair of "Down By the Salley Gardens" or "Adam's Curse," but instead infuses painful toil with joy. The poetic labor of renewal appears with the greatest clarity in "Among School Children," "Lapis Lazuli," "Meditations in Time of Civil War," "The Circus Animals' Desertion," and "The Choice."

[1] The theme of incarnation appears throughout Yeats's poetry. For example, in the poem "No Second Troy," transcendent beauty is incarnated in Helen of Troy; this beauty is powerful because it is "not natural" (line 9).

The poet labors in these poems for a variety of goals: permanence, vision, beauty, wisdom, truth, and renewal. In order to achieve these objectives, the poet must resist the trends of a corrupt society, working in tension against the downward cycle of history that Yeats describes in *A Vision*. The vital energy of these poems is coupled with a colorful imaginative landscape graced by a series of natural and architectural images—tree, dancer, mountain, tower, stair, and ladder. These images represent work that ascends toward vision and wisdom. The tree and mountain imply both upward movement and rootedness; the dancer evokes freedom and joy; and the tower, stair, and ladder suggest progression and climbing.

In addition, chronology is more important in this final chapter than in previous ones, since I argue that Yeats arrived at a distinctly different idea of labor in the poems written during the ten years before his death (1939). These pieces all come from the final period: "Among School Children" (1928), "Lapis Lazuli" (1938), "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1928), "The Circus Animals' Desertion" (1938-39), and "The Choice" (1931).[2] Encompassing work for human kind in general, "Among School Children" portrays a world of frustrated toil but culminates with a vision of natural and joyful labor. The next four poems focus more specifically on the work of the artist; the first two consider the poetic worker's relation to the wide world and the final two intimately examine the soul of the laborer. "Lapis Lazuli" has a broad scope with its panorama of "all the tragic scene" (line 52) and defends artistic labor as a labor of tragic joy. "Meditations" also surveys the violence of the world and presents poetic labor as the work of restoration. Contrastingly, the last two poems emphasize the interior life of the

[2] A. Norman Jeffares assumes that "The Choice" was written in February 1931 since it originally served as the penultimate stanza of "Coole Park and Ballylee 1931" (*Commentary* 292).

poetic laborer. "The Circus Animals' Desertion" articulates the insight that poetry and vision originate in a lowly acceptance of the embodied life. Foregrounding the theme of embodiment crucial to "The Circus Animals' Desertion," I also briefly discuss the Crazy Jane poems. Finally, the chapter concludes with an explication of "The Choice," a poem that depicts in microcosm the three stages of Yeats's vision of labor and ends by laying bare the poet-laborer's soul.

To begin, "Among School Children" displays the complexity of the third vision – the poetic labor of renewal. In this poem, Yeats casts his eye over a broad range of human experience, emphasizing its struggle, despair, and seemingly fruitless toil. First painting a bleak picture of toiling figures, the poem ends with a triumphant declaration of free and exuberant labor, symbolized by the magnificently flourishing chestnut tree and the bright-eyed dancer. This movement toward exuberance at the end reverses the negative trajectory in Yeats's sense of work. In "Among School Children," labor is the slow growth of a majestic tree that drinks in the soil's nutrients through its roots and also the free and graceful movements of a dancer responding to music. Both images portray labor as beautiful, natural, and burgeoning.

The poem's first seven stanzas depict decrepitude and disappointed hope. In fact, as A. Norman Jeffares notes, Yeats recorded in his notebook that the topic of the poem was the wasted lives of school children (*New* 251), and in a diary entry made at about the same time he stated that life is "a perpetual preparation for something that never happens" (*Autobiographies* 473). Likewise, all of the characters that strive in "Among School Children"—lovers, nuns, mothers, and philosophers—ultimately are disappointed. Life disfigures and hardens them; a beautiful woman becomes an "old scarecrow" (line

32) and a mother fears that her child's life does not amount to "[a] compensation for the pang of his birth" (39). The seven stanzas lead to an invocation of those who would jeer at human labor: "O self-born mockers of man's enterprise" (56).

However, the last stanza contradicts these mockers with a startlingly positive declaration about labor:

> Labour is blossoming or dancing where
> The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
> Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
> Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
> 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? (57-64)

In light of Yeats's many descriptions of labor as painful, this characterization of work is strikingly hopeful; as Helen Vendler writes, in these lines "Adam's curse has been repealed … labor is no longer effortful, but spontaneous and beautiful" (283). The speaker rejects violence, despair, and extremism: "The body is not bruised to pleasure soul, / Nor beauty born out of its own despair, / Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil" (lines 58-60). Labor that involves physical injury, despair, and over-exertion becomes a thing of the past. Wisdom and beauty, finally, need not come from weary striving. Instead, the speaker declares that work can be natural and pleasurable.

Vendler has argued that the tree emblem is "unsatisfactory" (284) because as human beings we cannot relate to its ability to be fruitful in old age (284); she prefers the dancer emblem, claiming that it is a "far more generous (and far more accurate) sense of existence" (286). However, I suggest that they are equally valuable.[3] Though the line

[3] The tree is a principle image in "A Prayer for my Daughter," appearing in the middle of the poem—"May she become a flourishing hidden tree" (line 41)—and in the last line—"And custom for the

addressing the dancer is more emphatic—"O body … O brightening glance" (line 63)—the images of tree and dancer are equally important as culminations to the poem and deeply interrelated with each other. Both images portray labor as natural and balanced; it is the tree's nature to blossom and it is the dancer's nature to dance. Their labor is active and energetic, yet in different senses: the tree grows to the rhythm of the seasons and the dancer moves to the rhythm of the music. Their labor evokes joy and nonviolent progress.

First, the speaker describes labor as the flourishing of a great chestnut tree. The tree implies both change and permanence. The leaf and the blossom are seasonal; they bud, flourish, die, and then grow again; on the other hand, the bole (tree trunk) is fixed. The tree is rooted in one place but ever growing. Also, the tree is both high and lowly. Its branches reach to the heights—it is "great" (61)—but is also descends deeply into the earth through its roots. As a whole, this tree symbolizes flourishing and renewal. The thriving tree suggests the resurrection of the dying tree (or worker) in "The Fascination of What's Difficult": "The fascination of what's difficult / Has dried the sap out of my veins" (lines 1-2). In contrast, the chestnut tree of "Among School Children" signifies labor that is balanced and fruitful. Finally, the chestnut tree is fixed in a certain place, drinking nourishment from the soil that allows it to blossom. This implies that labor is rooted yet free, presenting the paradox of fixity and fluidity as a key element of Yeats's picture of work.[4]

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spreading laurel tree" (80). In this case, the tree symbolizes for Yeats the life of courtesy, custom, and nobility that he hoped his daughter would enjoy.

[4] The images of the tower and stair in "Meditations" also point to the paradox of fixity and fluidity.

As a companion to the tree, the final stanza also pictures labor as a dancer. The dancer is perfectly free, moving with exuberance as a creative artist. Yeats foreshadows the free movement of the dancer in stanza VI with the image of a playful "spume" (line 41)—the frothing foam that dances on the top of a wave. Like the tree, the dancer's unfettered labor is as natural as foam on a wave. Dancing, then, is central to Yeats's understanding of labor. The link between dance and labor appears in other places in his work; for instance, in "1919" he compares the work-like "tread" (line 57) of "[a]ll men" (57) to the whirling movements of "Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers" (49). Unlike the dance in "Among Schoolchildren," however, the dance of "1919" seems malicious; the dancers are "whirled" (52) around by a vicious wind and propelled by "[t]he barbarous clangour of a gong" (58). Contrastingly, the dancer in "Among School Children" moves in response to music, not as a slave but as an artist who seems free to improvise.[5] Moreover, this dancing artist is neither self-absorbed nor unaware. The dancer seems engrossed with the act of creation—"O body swayed to music" (line 63)—but also looks outward to engage a watching audience—"O brightening glance" (63). The total effect of the dancer image, as Vendler has written, is "wonder and joy" (286): "Yeats has found something to say for life … by locating joy and identity in the 'enterprise' of our devising an individual dance, Yeats can acknowledge the truth of universal heartbreak without letting it entirely destroy the energy, delight, inventiveness, and continuity of being" (286).

Whereas stanzas VI and VII feature the intellect by naming philosophers (*Plato*, *Aristotle* and *Pythagoras*) and referring to a number of abstractions (*passion, piety*, and

[5] This depiction of freedom recalls the colt in "The Fascination of What's Difficult," whom the speaker wants to set free so that it can leap "from cloud to cloud" (line 6) as it was meant to do.

affection), the final stanza emphasizes embodiment. "Among School Children," in the end, turns out to be about incarnation. In only eight lines, the word *body* appears twice, transforming the "old scarecrow" body (line 32) into the lithe dancer's body. As Harold Bloom remarks, the eighth stanza constitutes "Yeats's most memorable protest against his own Gnostic dualism" (368). The images of the tree and the dancer suggest the harmony of body and soul; neither is sacrificed for the other: "The body is not bruised to pleasure soul" (line 58). The poem ends, to use Whitaker's term, in "ecstasy" (275), and I suggest that this ecstasy comes from the marriage of body and soul and the union of labor and joy.

Finally, in the last stanza the speaker queries: "Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?" and "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (lines 62, 64). These rhetorical questions suggest that the essence of the tree is not located in any one of its parts but is a unified whole;[6] also, the dancer cannot be known apart from the dance. Thus, work and worker merge into one. According to David Ward, these images also unify work and play, "suggesting imagistically and implying 'logically' the union of work and play, 'labour' and joy, that is the solution offered by the poem to the problem of 'labour'" (291). The speaker here portrays labor as the joyful unity of life and work, and this ideal of unity is reminiscent of the imagined harmony of Byzantium and Merry England.

But "Among School Children's" final exuberant picture of labor does not constitute a flight into idealism, as it first may seem. Although the goal of the "blossoming or dancing" (line 57) labor is to achieve beauty and wisdom, this labor takes

[6] As Vendler writes, in these lines Yeats "means to imagine a joyous unity of being" (284).

place in a tragic world. The seven-stanza introduction to the final triumphant images provides a realistic context, acknowledging the realities of old age and disappointed work. As Vendler writes, "Yeats's discovery of the great importance of the creative continuity of life … cannot erase what he has seen of the shriek of infancy and the tragedy of idealizing attachment. It is part of the seriousness of the poem that it does not subside [into] fantasy" (289). In other words, the joyous blossoming and dancing of the final stanza is placed firmly within a somber setting. Nonetheless, in answer to the "mockers of man's enterprise" (line 56), "Among School Children" ultimately claims that harmonious, joyful labor is indeed possible. The speaker rejects a way of life that bruises the body and defeats the soul and instead presents a life of wholesome, natural labor. The chestnut tree and the dancer portray labor that is characterized by renewal, groundedness, and freedom.

In the next poem, "Lapis Lazuli," Yeats more specifically considers artistic labor, defending its value in a world filled with menacing dangers and distractions. This poem evokes upward movement through the image of climbing a mountain, corresponding to the blossoming tree of "Among School Children." In "Lapis Lazuli," the mountain is "lofty" (line 46) and arduous to climb; it serves as an overlook where one can watch the tragic play of the world. Mysteriously, to climb this mountain and survey "all the tragic scene" (52) is to be "gay" (56). The poet himself takes pleasure in contemplating these climbers: "I / Delight to imagine them" (49-50). The mountain evokes tragic joy, which William O'Donnell describes as one of Yeats's "most persistent ideas" (129) and which I suggest is essential to his understanding of noble labor.

Interrogating the connection between artistic labor and human suffering, "Lapis Lazuli" concludes that human beings have the capability to experience joy even in a tragic environment. As O'Donell writes, the poem portrays the art of "accommodating oneself to tragic circumstances" (128). This paradox of tragedy and joy appears in the juxtaposition of descent and ascent. The first three stanzas depict descent: "bomb-balls" (line 7) drop on the town until it is "beaten flat" (8); "The great stage curtain … drop[s]" (13); and "Old civilizations … fall" (27, 35). But in the final two stanzas, the poem moves upward as the Chinamen climb up the "lofty slope" (46) of the mountain. The word "gay," repeated in four out of five stanzas, connects the descending stanzas to the ascending stanzas and traces the development of tragic joy. In stanza one, the poem begins with "hysterical women" (1) who "are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow, / Of poets that are always gay" (3) because they are surrounded by the dangers of war: "Aeroplane … Zeppelin … bomb-balls" (6-8). The second stanza acknowledges this complaint and answers it by envisioning life as a drama: "[A]ll perform their tragic play" (9). Like "Hamlet … Lear … Ophelia … [and] Cordelia" (10-11), we all are actors in a tragic play, and those who perform their parts well "do not break up their lines to weep" (15). Yeats here praises those who play their parts with fortitude and with an attention to form and discipline; they do not "break up their lines" (15). Imagining life as a performance in a play, where one seeks to execute one's lines with excellence, transfigures fear and sorrow into joy. The word *gay* suggests delight in one's work—the work of performance and delivery. In contrast, the third stanza mourns the ephemeral nature of human civilization and human work, especially artistic work. As O'Donnell writes, the tragedy in this stanza is the "inevitable transience of man's accomplishments"

(133). Civilizations were "put to the sword" (line 27) and "they and their wisdom went to rack" (28). For instance, none of the fine work of the Greek sculptor Callimachus, "[w]ho handled marble as if it were bronze" (30) remains; in fact, Yeats laments, it "stood but a day" (34). Then, at the end of the stanza, Yeats envisions human history as a pattern of building, falling, and rebuilding and declares that "those that build them again are gay" (36). Tragedy and gaiety, then, are natural parts of human existence.

Next, the fourth stanza turns from descent to ascent as two Chinamen labor up a mountain (this mountain reflects the titular lapis lazuli carving—a seventieth birthday present from poet Harry Clifton). With the image of the mountain, Yeats emphasizes the journey that all people make through our tragic world. As Vendler notes, Yeats uses tetrameter here, a meter he came to prefer in his later years that evokes "restless advance" (236). Then, in the last stanza the journey comes to a halt. Our gaze lifts from the climbing feet to the "eyes" (line 55). This upward movement resonates with the upward movement of the poem as a whole and the final image is that of the Chinamen's shining eyes looking out over the expanse of the world. Though it is a "tragic scene" (52) that they behold, nevertheless "their eyes … are gay" (55-56). Moreover, the faces of the Chinamen are wrinkled, for they have lived long and suffered. But at the end it is not the wrinkles but the glittering eyes that we see. Because the image of eyes emphatically repeats three times, they seem to come nearer and nearer and grow brighter and brighter: "Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes, / Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay" (55-56). In these rhythmic lines, we hear the crescendo of the melody played by "accomplished fingers" (54). The crescendo of image and sound seems to elevate the hero-like Chinamen. As Theodore Ziolkowski argues, they are "sages" (51) who "ascend

a mountain to contemplate … life" (51). Yeats here describes a certain way of seeing: directing an unblinking gaze on the sorrows of human existence, yet still expressing joy. This arresting image epitomizes tragic joy.

Thus, in this poem Yeats demonstrates human nature's ability to transcend a sorrowful world through the labor of art and to experience joy in a landscape of tragedy. The poem admits that the products of human labor often are lost; nevertheless, artistic labor leads to transcendent vision that looks on the sorrowful world and still exudes joy. Like the lapis lazuli that provides the material for Yeats's Chinese carving, the flawed and tragic world we live in acts as the raw material for our art:

> Every discolouration of the stone,
> Every accidental crack or dent
> Seems a water-course or an avalanche,
> Or lofty slope where it still snows. (lines 43-46)

Though Vendler argues that the Chinamen at the end of the poem portray "'coldness'" (239) because they express no sympathy at the tragedy of the scene they watch, I suggest that the poem presents them instead as courageous and warm-hearted laborers. Far from being aloof from the human experience, they too struggle to labor up the steep mountain. They are weary and must stop to rest at "the little half-way house" (line 38), still with half their journey ahead. Yet they do not complain, but instead listen to music to sweeten the struggle: "One asks for mournful melodies" (53). Their request for music shows that they know how to appreciate beauty even as they traverse a wasted landscape. Echoing the Chinamen's joy in their hardship, the chilly snow appears alongside the beauty of a "plum or cherry-branch" (47). This kind of paradox lies at the heart of "Lapis Lazuli"; Yeats suggests that hardship is mysteriously linked to joy.

Whereas "Lapis Lazuli" concerns artistic labor in general, "Meditations in Time of Civil War" focuses more narrowly on the labor of the poet. As a contrast to ideal labor and corrupt labor, a third kind of labor appears in "Meditations"; it is the noble work of the poet who struggles and creates works of art in a world of violence. As O'Donnell writes, "Meditations" displays the wonderful ability of imagination to thrive in troubled surroundings (94). Like "Lapis Lazuli," this sequence of poems paints an environment of war and reveals Yeats's distress over the political turmoil in Ireland. Written during the Irish civil war (1922-23), "Meditations" presents the noble labor of poetry in the tower as an alternative to the violent labor of war. The civil war consisted of a violent clash between the Free State army defending the Anglo-Irish treaty and the Republican army that refused to recognize this new political arrangement. As R.F. Foster writes, the IRA assassinated government officials associated with the new state while the provisional government executed dozens of republicans and imprisoned thousands of others (*Modern* 512-13).[7] According to Foster, this war was "both more traumatic and more influential" (*Modern* 511) than the earlier war for independence (1919-1921) because it produced deep and enduring divides between "parties … and even families" (*Modern* 511). According to Seamus Heaney, Yeats faced a "predicament as visionary poet in a time of violence and catastrophe" (1). This is seen in "Meditations," which mirrors the troubles of the civil war and seeks to define the role of the poet in such a time. As Heaney argues, in "Meditations" the laboring poet confronts this menacing world as a figure of wisdom:

[7] R.F. Foster argues that any account of the civil war period "must include the … challenge of Irish labour" (*Modern* 515), citing the formation of the Irish Farmers' Union, the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, and the rise of industrial militancy (513-14).

"[H]e dons the mantle of the wisdom-speaker and the memory-keeper, becomes the shaman figure who confronts menace with ritual song" (13).

Daniel Ross's useful exploration of Yeats's domestic images in "Meditations"—images of "repairing and rebuilding" (39) the home—can be expanded to show that the poem also describes the destructive labor of war and thus contrasts two types of labor. The first kind of labor is extreme, impatient, and destructive—the labor of war and violence. The second is solemn, slow, and redemptive—the poet's labor. Poetic labor in "Meditations" consists of resisting a violent society and engaging in rebuilding. For example, in "The Stare's Nest by My Window," Yeats writes, "[S]omewhere / A man is killed, or a house burned … Come build in the empty house of the stare" (lines 7-8, 10). By rebuilding in destroyed or empty places, the poet seeks renewal; however, this labor is undertaken with a somber spirit. Working in his tower, the poet distances himself from the rest of the world; as Yeats writes in "I see Phantoms": "I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone … I turn away and shut the door" (lines 1, 33).[8] Despite this solemnity of tone, "Meditations" conveys hope through redemptive poetic labor. Bloom critiques "Meditations" as betraying artistic immaturity (353), but I argue for the value of "Meditations," especially because of its discerning portrayal of transcendent artistic labor. Never ceasing to register the dissonance of a violent world, the poem nevertheless affirms the value of poetic labor.

Two images symbolize the poet's labor and frame my explication of the individual poems in "Meditations": the tower and the stair. Representing stasis and

[8] As Louis MacNeice writes, the poet "does not seem happy in his own aloofness" (153), and Nicholas Grene describes him as "enduring a solitary despair" (285). Similarly, Vendler identifies the poet's central problem as "estrangement" (232); climbing his tower, the poet feels isolated both from the "men of action" (232) fighting in the civil war and also from the natural world.

movement, respectively, these two architectural emblems serve as mainstays of nobility and virtue despite widespread societal decay. Both images were symbols of mystical significance for Yeats. The tower, as Yeats wrote in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," was "a very ancient symbol … [of] numberless meanings" (*Essays* 87), or, as Theodore Ziolkowski notes, a "literary image for the retreat of poets and thinkers" (50). In fact, as Ziolkowski argues, the tower became an increasingly personal image for Yeats as his "personal Byzantium" (59) or "retreat" (59). This tower corresponds to the Norman tower in County Galway named Thoor Ballylee where Yeats took up residence in 1919 and where he wrote "Meditations." As Ziolkowski writes, "Yeats regarded his tower as more than a habituation: it was being transformed into a symbol" (54) of "tradition" (56), "monument" (57), and "refuge" (57). It is not surprising, then, that Yeats evokes the image of the tower not only in the title of the 1928 collection in which "Meditations" appears—*The Tower*—but also on the front cover in a gilt design by T. Sturge Moore. In the poem, the tower evokes antiquity, ancestry, and nobility and memorializes all that Yeats valued in the past and feared would die out in the future. The top of the tower is a lookout from which the poet views the world and reflects on its descent into chaos. More hopefully, the loosening masonry of the tower provides a place for bees to build their nests and the nests suggest redemption. The tower is a place of work for bees and birds but especially for the poet. In "My House," Yeats envisions "*Il Penseroso's* Platonist" (line 14) laboring in a similar tower, and he reflects on his own artistic labor to seek images and craft poems.

Like the tower, the stair rises upward, but it is different in that it suggests interiority and fluidity. The stair image was also a visually powerful symbol for Yeats; in

his 1933 volume, *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, he commissioned Moore to create a cover depicting a spiraling staircase. Whereas the tower looks out at the world, the stair symbolizes the inward turn of reflection; this external-internal dichotomy is central to the labor of a poet. Also, like the tree and dancer in "Among School Children," the tower and stair in "Meditations" evoke the antithetical ideas of fixity and fluidity. As suggested by the tower, the laborer should be rooted in noble traditions and in continuing the work of ancestors; however, as suggested by the winding stair, the laborer must also move forward with creativity and ingenuity, building "nests"—or poems—upon the ruins of the past.

The first poem in "Meditations," "Ancestral Houses," presents the violent yet ineffectual nature of modern work but also the flourishing work associated with older and nobler ages. In the first stanza, the speaker describes a delightful life "without ambitious pains" (line 3). Homer's poetic labor of an ideal age is given as an example, and called an "abounding glittering jet" (12). In modern times, by contrast, the fountain is replaced by an "empty sea-shell" (13). As a sea-shell echoes the sound of the surf, the artistic labor of modernity merely echoes the flourishing labor of an ideal age. Then, in the third stanza a "violent bitter man" (17) attempts to have something built in stone that will, ironically, represent "the sweetness that all longed for night and day" (20). This attempt to create a monument of grandeur, however, proves unimpressive: "For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse" (24). Thus, "Ancestral Houses" finds noble work in the monuments of the past and a corrupted imitation of this labor in the present.

"My House," the second poem in the series, continues the themes of architecture and labor. Yeats here introduces the images of the tower and the stair as symbols of a

noble tradition and places of true labor: "An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower" (line 1). The tower, in this poem, represents constancy and fruitfulness within a chaotic and barren world. First, the speaker describes it as a place of fruitful labor "Where the symbolic rose can break into flower" (4). This flowering takes place in a landscape of desolation, indicated by the lines coming before and after: "An acre of stony ground … Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable" (3, 5). Clearly, the labor of the tower is not removed from reality. In the tower and up the "winding stair" (11), the speaker also imagines "*Il Penseroso's* Platonist [who] toiled on / in some like chamber" (14-15). This laborer in the tower becomes a beacon to travelers who "have seen his midnight candle glimmering" (20). In his steady doggedness, he is a symbol of constancy and dedication. Then, in the last stanza the speaker names two laborers who have inhabited the tower: "Two men have founded here" (21). First, he refers to the original owner of the tower, a "man-at-arms" (30) who passed along the tradition of laboring through "adversity" (30).[9] Then he writes that he himself has taken up the inheritance of laboring in the tower for the good of his children: "And I, that after me / My bodily heirs may find … Befitting emblems of adversity" (27-28, 30).

Just as "My House" ends by regarding the poet's "bodily heirs" (28), the fourth poem, "My Descendants," expresses the speaker's worry that his children will not understand true labor. Referencing the rose described in "My House," he fears that they will "lose the flower / Through natural declension of the soul" (lines 9-10). The speaker is concerned that his descendants will move to extremes: "too much business" (11) and

[9] A. Norman Jeffares identifies this original owner as Edward Ulick de Burgo (*Commentary* 225).

"too much play" (11).[10] In this way of life, work is divorced from pleasure and play, a reversal of the wholeness Yeats saw in Byzantium and in his misguided view of Merry England. As a stay against this worrisome trend toward extreme work and play, the speaker makes an invocation: "May this laborious stair and this stark tower / Become a roofless ruin that the owl / May build in the cracked masonry …" (13-15). The speaker hopes that the tower, with its toilsome stair, will maintain the solidity and moderation of noble labor, and form a bulwark against the onslaught of decay. Though in time it will become a ruin, the tower still will be a place of renewal where owls build their nests. Thus, the tower symbolizes permanence and the labor of renewal for the sake of coming generations.

The penultimate poem, "The Stare's Nest by My Window," once again reflects the speaker's contemplation about the destructiveness of war and voices even more emphatically his plea for the work of renewal. Though Vendler calls the poem "utopian" (231), I suggest that its emotion is more complex, reflected by the presence of both destruction and rebuilding. In a call and response form, images of violence—"That dead young soldier in his blood" (line 14)—alternate with petitions for rebuilding—"Come build in the empty house of the stare" (5). War surrounds the tower on all sides: "A man is killed, or a house burned" (8). As with the image of "cracked masonry" (15) in "My Descendants," the tower in this section also crumbles: "My wall is loosening" (4). However, the speaker calls to the bees to build their nests in the cracks of the tower. As in "The Lake of Innisfree," the work of bees here is an image of hopeful labor, though unlike the bees at Innisfree, these bees work in a hard, realistic environment. In "The

[10] Yeats shows a similar concern for extremes in his "A Prayer for my Daughter," in which he prays that she be beautiful, but not "beautiful overmuch" (line 20).

Stare's Nest by my Window" Yeats returns to this image, yet gives the bees an even greater significance. They build upon the collapse of human society, suggesting that with their peaceful industriousness they bring hope of restoration. The call to the bees repeats as a refrain at the end of each stanza, building in crescendo to the last stanza which climaxes with the emphatic plea, "O honey-bees, / Come build in the empty house of the stare" (19-20). In addition to creating a sense of urgency, this pattern also suggests a cycle of destruction and renewal. As Vendler proposes in her analysis of the poem's metrical variations, the poet's invocation of honeybees, because it restores the pattern of three anapests, acts as a "sign of hope, flickering within the poetic mind … in a rhythm antithetical to martial grimness" (235). Amid the violence, destruction, and death, the tower is a symbol of labor that restores and renews.[11]

Finally, in the seventh and last poem, "I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness," the poet chooses (with some hesitance) the austere work of the poet as resistance against the violent work of war. More than the other poems in the sequence, this poem examines the experience of the poet, whose mind swims with a frenzied rush of "monstrous … images" (line 8). These images—"rage-hungry troop … brazen hawks … innumerable clanging wings" (11, 29, 32) threaten to overwhelm the poet and put his "wits astray" (14).

Labor first appears in the poem as the meaninglessness of war: "Trooper belabouring trooper, biting at arm or at face, / Plunges towards nothing, arms and fingers spreading wide / For the embrace of nothing" (11-13). These laborers are driven by pure

[11] Ross argues that Yeats saw potential in his destroyed environment: "Yeats faces the inevitability of decay and destruction but, consistent with his later phase of thinking, believes that decay makes other forms of creation possible" (40).

passion without purpose, for *nothing*, and their work is "belabouring" (11) or excessive. Next, the third stanza echoes the warning against excess: "[T]heir minds are but a pool / Where even longing drowns under its own excess" (21-22). In this way the soldiers are like the speaker's descendants, who may lose their souls through "too much business" (11). Labor here is dangerous because it has no balance or restraint.

In the final stanza, the poet turns decisively away from unbalanced or warlike labor and toward the solitary labor of poetry: "I turn away and shut the door" (33). His "ambitious heart" (36) will not be satisfied with anything less than this solemn pursuit of "the abstract joy, / The half-read wisdom of daemonic images" (38-39). As Bloom writes, this stanza is a turning point: "The whole of *Meditations* turns upon the last stanza of its last poem [which] demonstrate[s] Yeats's dilemma in having chosen to make himself the kind of poet who labors to clarify the content of his own visions" (355). Because the poet's joy is merely abstract and the wisdom only half-read, there is work to be done. Here at the end of "Meditations," according to Grene, the poet comes to realize "what must now be his principal occupation" (285): he devotes himself to poetic labor—his pursuit of "joy" (line 38) and "wisdom" (39). The poet seems to find some satisfaction in this work: it will "[s]uffice the ageing man as once the growing boy" (40). This labor is steady, solemn, and controlled in contrast to the labor of excess and violence in the wider world, a violence that Michael Wood describes as "always sudden and surprising, visible, unmistakable, inflicts or promises injury and is fundamentally uncontrollable" (20). The poet laboring in the tower stands like a noble fortress in the middle of destruction.

While in "Meditations" the poet remains exalted above the world in his tower, in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" the poet assumes a humbler emblem—the ladder. Last in the series of labor images discussed in this chapter, the ladder symbolizes the poet's descent to earth and his recognition that poetic work must embrace embodiment. Whereas the other images function as symbolic monuments, especially the tower and the mountain, the ladder functions as a simple tool. The tower looks outward and the stair looks inward, but the ladder accomplishes both movements. It leads the poet to view the physical world around him—"a mound of refuse" (line 35)—and also to scrutinize the soul—"the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (40). Because it evokes humility and addresses both soul and body, the ladder is perhaps the most significant of the images (or tools) of labor. As David Ward writes, Yeats produced his most excellent work when he began to "confront the actual world and transform its language into forceful, dramatic poetry" (47). Moreover, Terence Brown calls embodiment "one of the major obsessions of [Yeats's] later poetry" (118) and argues that as early as the 1890s, he began to think of "the body as a living reality in which spiritual realities can be incarnate" (118).[12] Indeed, according to the Yeats *Concordance*, the word *body* (including *bodied, bodies, bodily,* and *body's*) appears 154 times in Yeats's poetry. "The Circus Animals' Desertion," written late in Yeats's career, demonstrates a particular concern with embodiment; in this poem, the speaker decides to set his creative foundation in the tangible reality of the world.

The poem begins with searching and ends with discovery. In the first section, a writer searches for a theme, and the repetition of the word *sought* suggests his frustration:

[12] Brown discovers the origins of this preoccupation with the body in Yeats's participation with the Order of the Golden Dawn, which he imagined as a "living body" (118).

"I sought a theme and sought for it in vain" (line 1). Because of his failure, he is "a broken man" (3). However, in the last section the poet discovers a new emblem for creativity; whereas at first he imagined a circus as a symbol of his gathered poetic images, in the final stanza the circus is exchanged for a "rag-and-bone shop" (40):

> Those masterful images because complete
> Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
> A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
> Old kettles, old bottles and a broken can,
> Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
> Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
> I must lie down where all the ladders start
> In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart. (33-40)

As Vendler notes, this stanza startles the reader: "[W]e are jostled by the cascade of concrete nouns … [a] shocked pell-mell inventory of the shop's contents" (277). The speaker recognizes that he must forage for his "masterful images" (line 33) in the real world. Work, in this passage, is decidedly physical and worldly and it takes place in a harsh environment: "A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street, / Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can, / Old iron, old bones, old rags" (35-37). Like a rusty clanging cowbell, this list of items grates on the ear and repulses the imagination. Sharp, percussive, and plosive sounds repeat, evoking the noise of people clattering through a pile of trash and kicking cans out of their way. The images grow more and more distasteful: "old bones, old rags, that raving slut" (37). This escalation reflects what Bloom has described as the speaker's tone of reluctance: "He *must* lie down … but he has not *chosen* 'the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart'" (459).

Some critics have interpreted this conclusion of the poem as "a straightforward expression of artistic defeat by an old poet near death" (O'Donnell 154-55); however, I argue that it warrants a more positive reading. The first two lines evoke the realm of the

intellect; as Vendler writes, the poet in the past has "climbed up the Platonic ladder to the zoo of Pure forms: to *pure mind*" (277). But the poem refuses to relegate poetic labor to the realm of ideas. "Pure mind" does not constitute the essence or origin of the creative work, as implied by the question, "but out of what began?" (line 34). Contrasting with the abstractions in these two lines, the rest of the stanza unleashes "corporeal metaphor[s]" (Brown 118) that shock us with physicality and earthiness. The speaker draws us back down the ladder into the tangible, material world; we descend into a colorful and grotesque realm presided over by a "raving slut" (line 37) and perhaps evocative of a Dickens novel. The poet must lie down in filth, but this vile place also proves to be a place of creation and beginning, "where all the ladders start" (39). The poet's descent to earth is not a capitulation, but a discovery of where true art originates—in the real and often gritty things of life. In its embrace of the body, "The Circus Animals' Desertion" represents a significant advancement from the earlier poem "Sailing to Byzantium," which, as Vendler writes, culminates in a "heart-less and body-less" portrayal of the soul that can never be "the authentic Yeatsian self" (34). In contrast, heart and body lie at the core of the more mature "Circus Animals' Desertion's" picture of the human being. It is a picture of wholeness that, in its grotesque quality, recalls the end of "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop":

> But Love has pitched his mansion in
> The place of excrement;
> For nothing can be sole or whole
> That has not been rent. (lines 15-18)

In the beginning of "The Circus Animals' Desertion," the speaker tells of how he had been occupied with vain things: "Players and painted stage took all my love / And not those things that they were emblems of" (lines 31-32). Now, his goal is to find the

real source of "those masterful images" (33) and to discover truth without disguise. If the poet is to produce "masterful images" (33) he must embrace his embodied existence in the world and the reality of his own heart. O'Donnell confirms this reading, writing that "the poet's equation of 'heart' with life testifies to his indefatigable willingness to accept life and to transform it into art" (157). The ladder, I contend, presents a hopeful image of labor for Yeats, corresponding to the images of ascent in other labor poems like the tree and tower. Symbolic of the redemptive potential of artistic labor, the ladder is planted among the refuse "where all the ladders start" (line 39). This is only a preparation for an ascent.[13]

The form of the final lines reveals increased artistic arrangement and precision, demonstrating Yeats's harmonizing of embodied life and poetic fruitfulness. The poet is able to bring order out of the chaotic litany of refuse and crystallize it into a concise and vivid image. For instance, the words *bones* and *rags*—"old bones, old rags" (37)—echo chiastically in the last line—"the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (40). As Vendler suggests, the scraps that the speaker lists conceal noble images of the poet's works: "The old iron was once a sword, the old kettle a divine cauldron, the old rags his coat covered with embroideries, the old bones those of the Fenian heroes" (278). Presiding over these treasures is the "raving slut" (line 37), a figure who suggests a mythological oracle or Muse. The rhythm of the last line also betrays the work of the poet; after an uneven mixture of long and short words in the first part of the stanza, in the last line all the words are monosyllabic: "In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (40). Also, the

[13] A passage from Yeats's short story "The Tables of the Law" also evokes the image of *refuse* in relation to labor. In this story, the character Aherne describes labor, time, and creation: "Just as poets and painters and musicians labour at their works … these children of the Holy Spirit labour at their moments with eyes upon the shining substance on which Time has heaped the refuse of creation" (*Mythologies* 300).

penultimate fragment describing a disordered litany of pieces of trash contrasts with the final tri-partite sentence, which is complete, concise, and logical: "Now that my ladder's gone / I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (38-40). The poem ends with the disordered scraps becoming contained and meaningful, and this hints at the promise and potential of the poet's work and not its disintegration. The speaker does not relish the foundation of his ladder – the filthy reality of life – but nevertheless he accepts its necessity. The poet does not lie down in despair, but with a sense of lowliness that Vendler describes as "almost regal" (278). Therefore, the poet finds his creative source and foundation in a lowly embodied life; he is now ready to ascend the ladder of artistic labor and engage in the work of renewal.[14]

Leading up to this revelation about the work of renewal are the Crazy Jane poems, written between 1929 and 1932, which foreground the theme of embodiment central to Yeats's final vision of labor. Similarly to "The Circus Animals' Desertion," these poems glorify the corporeal life and protest against Gnosticism, especially the Gnostic view of the body as a shameful prison. As Grene argues, "Jane is famously insistent on the holiness of the body in all its basic materiality" (179) and possess "the wisdom of the body" (344).[15] Resonating with the message of this passage, Crazy Jane insists that the

[14] Yeats's labor of renewal, with its astonishing hopefulness, may evince his turn in later years toward belief in God. As Ellmann puts it, "God … forced His way ineluctably into Yeats's mind" (286). Yeats's conception of God appears in the 1937 version of *A Vision* in which he emphasizes the Thirteenth Cycle—a force that works to set men free and which has, according to Ellmann, "many qualities of divinity" (286).

[15] O'Donnell celebrates the unabashed erotic nature of the poems, calling them "brash, vigorous poems" that present a "sprightly old woman [who] expresses her unblushingly bold allegiance to sexuality through affection for her lover" (124).

gritty, earthy, fleshly reality of life in this world is not to be ignored.[16] For instance, in "Crazy Jane and the Bishop," Jane brazenly mocks the Bishop, a Gnostic figure, for trying to conceal his physical being: "Nor can he hide in holy black / The heron's hunch upon his back" (lines 18-19). Taking the tone of a seer in "Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment," Jane declares that love is insufficient unless it embraces both body and soul:

> 'Love is all
> Unsatisfied
> That cannot take the whole
> Body and soul';
> *And that is what Jane said*. (1-5)[17]

Becoming a suffering seer in "Crazy Jane on God," Jane describes the abuse she has undergone, comparing her body to a road trampled by men, though ultimately she speaks of her body as a site for joy and music: "My body makes no moan / But sings on" (22-23). Finally, Jane repeats her insistence on the value of the body in "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop"; her pronouncement that "fair needs foul" (8) links the poem to the culminating line of "The Circus Animals' Desertion"—"In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (40). In the context of Jane's message about the body, we read this final line of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" as concerning not only the heart, but also the body.

Both Crazy Jane and the speaker in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" repudiate Gnosticism and embrace embodiment. Yeats's insight about labor is that intellectual and artistic work must recognize the embodied life and that, as Brown writes, "the human

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[16] Yeats writes that Crazy Jane was modeled after a strange old woman known as the "local satirist" who had "an amazing power of audacious speech": "One of her great performances is a description of how the meanness of a Gort shopkeeper's wife over the price of a glass of porter made her so despair of the human race that she got drunk. The incidents of that drunkenness are of an epic magnificence" (*Letters* 785-86).

[17] In this poem, Jane also meditates on her own death, envisioning her body lying vulnerable and exposed in a grave: "Naked I lay / The grass my bed" (lines 11-12).

frame [is] the locus of real possibility" (118). This insight appears in a letter Yeats wrote 24 days before he died: "It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put it all into a phrase I say, 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.' I must embody it in the completion of my life" (*Letters* 922). Though Yeats's theme of embodiment holds potential for exploration in other directions, it is particularly significant for his ultimate vision of labor and of life.

Though many of Yeats's labor poems, such as "The Circus Animals' Desertion," reflect the complexity and paradox of his vision, "The Choice" with particular clarity illustrates the three stages of development in his vision of labor. Compared to the other pieces discussed in this chapter, criticism about "The Choice" is sparse. Yet, it is worthy of study because it provides an intricate yet compact picture of the contrapuntal movements of Yeats's mind and presents a microcosm of his multiple perspectives on labor. Like "the Circus Animals' Desertion," "The Choice" takes an intimate view of the poetic laborer. Only eight brief lines in length, the poem contains the words *work* and *toil*. In the beginning, it suggests the first and second visions—the ideal and the corrupt pictures of labor—and at the end moves toward the third vision. Vendler points to the poem's shifts between different types of diction: beginning with an exalted religious diction and proceeding to a mocking, cynical diction, the poem finally arrives at a more intimate language that registers the artist's inner life. She writes that the last line leaves behind the "lofty and vulgar" (266) voices and speaks instead in the voice of "moralized personal emotion" (266).

My analysis of "The Choice" builds upon Vendler's insights. The three shifts in language resonate with the three visions of work that I find in Yeats's poems. The first is

ideal, lofty, and unattainable. The second is utterly negative, even rancorous. The third, however, moves toward a more earnest and moral perspective:

> The intellect of man is forced to choose
> Perfection of the life, or of the work,
> And if it take the second must refuse
> A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark.
> When all that story's finished, what's the news?
> In luck or out the toil has left its mark:
> That old perplexity an empty purse,
> Or the day's vanity, the night's remorse. (lines 1-8)

The two halves of the poem stand in contrast with each other. In the first four lines, Yeats sets up a complicated opposition between life and work, suggesting that it is man's tragedy that he must choose one or the other. Yeats implies that to devote oneself to work is to choose death. This first half of the poem contains two allusions. In the first four lines life and work are divorced—"perfection of the life, or of the work" (2)—an exact opposite of the harmonious work and life in the city of Byzantium described in *A Vision* where both life and work are perfect. In a second allusion, the poem suggests a cosmic drama in the lines, "refuse / A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark" (3-4).[18] Yeats evokes a tragic persona, perhaps even an epic figure like Milton's Satan, who exchanges an exalted position in Heaven for fire and darkness. The implication is that human work, though heroic for its sacrificial devotion to perfection, may ultimately create disorder and pain in the world (like the work of Satan in *Paradise Lost*).

As Vendler suggests, the message of the second half of the poem opposes the first, and I propose that the contrast arises not only from its different diction, but also

[18] In "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," the image of the mansion serves as the touchstone for two different views of life. The Bishop tells Jane that she should "'Live in a heavenly mansion, / Not in some foul sty'" (lines 5-6) but she replies that "'Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement'" (15-16).

from its different approach to life and work. The first four lines posit that life and work must be harshly separated: "choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work" (1-2). The last four lines, however, argue that life and work are deeply entwined, though with negative effect: one's work leaves a "mark" (6) on one's life. Yeats returns to the religious tone he uses earlier in the poem by ending with an allusion to the book of *Ecclesiastes*, a book famous for its theme of the meaninglessness of human work. He suggests this connection with the word "vanity" (8), bringing to mind the well-known phrase from Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher; all is vanity" (*King James Version* 1:2).

In the last phrase of the poem, "the night's remorse" (line 8), the lens of the poem narrows and we see an intimate picture of the meditative soul. Though sorrowful, this serene and contemplative posture contrasts positively with the earlier "raging" (4), and points to wisdom about work. The potential insights of this nameless and lonely soul are two-fold: first, the soul recognizes that life cannot be divorced from work; second, the soul recognizes the vanity of striving only for material gain, to fill "an empty purse" (7). In the last line of this dense piece, Yeats creates a reflective mood by evoking nighttime, a time of silence. This noun suggests that the speaker has ceased to strive and instead seeks wisdom about work through meditation. At the end, the speaker is interested not merely in the "intellect of man" (1) but in his soul and moral fiber—his willingness to engage in self-reflection even if doing so produces "remorse" (8). This engagement with the soul of the laborer reflects the last line of "The Circus Animals' Desertion," where the speaker comes to focus on the "heart" (40). This move toward reflective wisdom is the first step toward renewal; it perhaps suggests that "the life … [and] the work" (2) might be unified and redeemed. "The Choice," a poem with three distinct dictions and tones,

reflects Yeats's three visions of labor in microcosm: the first is lofty and ideal, the second is bitter and cynical, and the third is sober yet wise.

In sum, Yeats's final vision of labor is a synthesizing vision. It is full of paradox: the tower rises inflexibly to the sky and the stair winds around and around. The tree stands rooted and the dancer moves in freedom. The Chinamen survey the tragic scene but their eyes glitter. The poet lies down amid bones and refuse but anticipates climbing up the ladder. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the wise laborer embraces both soul and body. The poet-laborer finds his workshop and his purpose in the real world. Yeats's most mature and complex vision of labor synthesizes both the *sprezzatura* of the first vision of ideal labor and the realism of the second vision of corrupt labor. Yeats reaches a conclusion about labor that is realistic and visionary, honest and hopeful, grim and joyous. Though he recognizes the pain of labor, he also suggests that poetic work might be redemptive. In this way, Yeats becomes a poet of wisdom who offers insight about how to work and rejoice in a tragic world.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Yeats's poems not only reflect the artistry of a skilled craftsman but also the penetrating reflections of a thinker with insights into human labor. One month after Yeats's death, W.H. Auden wrote "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," in which he describes the poet as a sage and highlights his labor and his wisdom about human labor as the centerpiece of his legacy. In the beginning, Auden's elegy seems strangely unfeeling—"A few thousand will think of this day / As one thinks of a day when one did something / slightly unusual" (lines 28-29)[1]—but by the end the poem laments Yeats's death and exalts him as a figure of poetic insight. Reflecting this insight, the poem evokes the paradox of poetic labor, suggests tragic joy as a response to a troubled world, and posits that poetic inspiration begins in low, earthy places—all central elements of Yeats's vision of labor. Ten years later, in an essay titled "Yeats as an Example," Auden again approaches Yeats with the posture of a student: "[W]hat can we learn from the way in which Yeats dealt with his world, about how to deal with our own?" (188). In his elegy, Auden portrays Yeats as an epistemological guide who demonstrates how one can come to understand the nature of the world and the human condition.

"In Memory of W.B. Yeats" is divided into three parts; my analysis focuses on the third part, which strikingly reflects Yeats's "The Circus Animals' Desertion" and refers to poetic labor. Lending it an air of distinction, this third section appears in

[1] All quotations of Auden's poetry are taken from *Selected Poems*. Mendelson, Ed. (New York, 1979).

trochaic tetrameter—"Earth, receive an honoured guest" (line 42)—and this carefully crafted meter points to Yeats's own dedication to poetic labor. The speaker begins by presenting images of body and earth: the poet is a "vessel … Emptied of its poetry" (45) and laid in the earth. This vessel image complements the mouth imagery that appears throughout the poem. The mouth becomes a multi-faceted metaphor: it is the horizon of the setting sun, the chamber of lamentation, the gateway to nourishment, the place where words are digested and transformed, and finally the essence and permanence of poetry itself. Early in the poem the speaker imagines that "mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day" (4) and that "[b]y mourning tongues / The death of the poet was kept from his poems" (10-11). Next, Yeats's words feed his readers and become transformed by them: "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living" (22-23). Finally, Yeats's poetry itself becomes a mouth: "[Your gift] survives, / A way of happening, a mouth" (41). The speaker also emphasizes the poet's body by describing his physical self as an invaded city—"The provinces of his body revolted" (14)—and as vulnerable to time's decay—"Time … [is] indifferent in a week / To a beautiful physique" (46, 48-49).

The situation of "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" is comparable to that of "Meditations in Time of Civil War," where the poet is surrounded by trouble and violence. Auden's speaker observes, "In the nightmare of the dark / All the dogs of Europe bark" (58-59). Moreover, human beings are marked by "intellectual disgrace" (62) and by pity that is "locked and frozen in each eye" (65). Because of the depravity of the world and of the human soul, the speaker exhorts Yeats to continue his work and suggests that his descent into the grave promotes this work; this exhortation appears in the last three stanzas:

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise. (66-77)

In urging the poet to descend to the "bottom of the night" (67) the speaker conjures a fearful journey down into the nightmarish darkness of nations' hatred (58-61) and into the depths of the freezing sea of the human heart (64-65). The downward movement in the poem recalls a line in "The Circus Animals' Desertion": "I must lie down where all the ladders start" (line 39). This imagery of descent reverses the images of ascent that prevail throughout Yeats's final labor poems (the tower, stair, tree, mountain, and ladder). "The Circus Animals' Desertion" stands apart because, though it evokes the upward image of the ladder, the true movement of the poem's conclusion is actually downward: "I must lie down" (39). The poet lowers himself to the place where the ladders start, which suggests Yeats's increasing emphasis on the embodied life and his understanding of the poet's labor as a labor of the body as well as of the mind and spirit. In similar fashion, Auden's speaker exhorts Yeats to travel down to the "bottom of the night" (line 67), also suggesting descent and embodiment. Surprisingly, the speaker imagines this grim and silent place as a stage from which the poet may "persuade us to rejoice" (69). The juxtaposition of darkness and rejoicing suggests Yeats's insight about

labor: embrace the grim reality of this world in order to reorient oneself and rise up through noble work.

Next, in the penultimate stanza, the speaker evokes not only death but also resurrection; death and decay lead to new life. To convey this idea, he creates an agrarian metaphor for poetic labor: the poet is a farmer planting a vineyard. In "[m]ake a vineyard of the curse" (71), the word *curse* refers to the Genesis account of God's curse on work and likely to Yeats's poem "Adam's Curse." Instead of despairing over the curse of toil, however, the speaker suggests that poetic labor can produce abundance, warmth, thaw, and flood. The stanza continues with several more paradoxes, reflecting Yeats's proclivity for contraries: the speaker urges the poet to rejoice in human failure, to "[s]ing … In a rapture of distress" (72-73). The opposite emotions of joy and sorrow are juxtaposed here to reflect the conflicted nature of human labor and the fact that poetic beauty is born through pain, life through death. This paradox of joy and sorrow evokes tragic joy, a theme found in "Lapis Lazuli" and in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," where "masterful images" (line 33) begin in "[a] mound of refuse" (35).

Finally, in the last stanza the speaker celebrates Yeats's wisdom about labor by closely paralleling the last two lines of "The Circus Animals' Desertion." For instance, the line "In the deserts of the heart" (line 74) may allude to Yeats's "In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (line 40). The first and last words of the lines are identical—*in* and *heart*—and the inner images suggest dryness, dust, and death—*deserts* and *rag and bone shop*. Also, both lines are concerned with birth or inception (signaled by their use of the word *start*). Auden's speaker juxtaposes the barren image of the "deserts of the heart" (line 74) with the place where "healing fountains start" (line 75). Similarly, Yeats

points to the origin of "masterful images" (line 33) in the place where "all the ladders start" (40): "the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (40). In this way, both poets seek inspiration not only in spiritual exaltation but also through bodily lowliness. The fountain image corresponds to the ladder in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" because both begin in lowly places—the desert and the rag and bone shop—and both are metaphors for the heart. The fountain springs forth in a desert; this desert perhaps suggests human limitation. Similarly, the ladder finds its foundation in a rag and bone shop; this shop, a place for cheap and unwanted objects, may illustrate the shallow foolishness of human nature. Echoing Yeats, Auden's speaker suggests that wholeness in the human heart begins with a humble recognition of the physical and spiritual limits of human beings.

By exalting in the lowliness of the body, "In Memory of W.B. Yeats" resonates with Yeats's vision of labor: the last two lines portray the body's "prison" (line 76) as a schoolroom and sanctuary in which men learn to praise: "In the prison of his days / Teach the free man how to praise" (76-77). By associating the body with a prison, the speaker refers to Gnosticism's negative view of the body, but reverses this view by suggesting that embodied creatures limited by time can nevertheless produce poetry and praise. Freedom and fullness become incarnate in the body and in the physical life. In this way, the speaker captures Yeats's vision of sober yet joyful labor, his attention to embodiment, and his conviction that poetry must first consider the raw reality of our embodied life before it can ascend to higher contemplation. The speaker paints Yeats's legacy as bound up with his insight about labor.

As Auden suggests and Seamus Heaney states, Yeats ultimately achieved "hard-won insight" (Heaney 14). Although he was perceptive about many other realms of life, his wisdom about labor developed over a long period of time, becoming exceptionally multi-faceted and profound. He came to see the embodied life as the soil (to use Auden's agrarian metaphor) in which the poet cultivates hope and renewal. This soil, permeated with the bones, rot, and decay of the earth, nourishes new life. As Vendler writes, "Yeats can acknowledge the truth of universal heartbreak without letting it entirely destroy the energy, delight, inventiveness, and continuity of being" (286). Like the bees building in the crumbling wall in "The Stare's Nest by My Window," restoration is possible. Moreover, those who do this work of restoration labor with a kind of joyful ease or *sprezzatura*, as in "Lapis Lazuli": "[T]hose that build … again are gay" (line 36). For Yeats, the paradox of tragic joy captures an essential element of the human experience of work. This tragic and joyful labor is far different from the striving depicted in earlier poems like "Down by the Salley Gardens." Though the poet descends to the place "where all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart" (lines 39-40), he also rises again up the ladder toward renewal.

Yeats does not directly claim that poetry can transform the world; in fact, as illustrated in "Lapis Lazuli," the world remains a "tragic scene" (line 52). Correspondingly, the speaker in Auden's poem provocatively announces that poetry is ineffectual: "Ireland has her madness and her weather still, / For poetry makes nothing happen" (lines 35-36). Yet, the speaker seems to come to a different conclusion by the end of the poem, where he admits that Yeats's poetry has meaning because of its permanence: "It survives, / A way of happening, a mouth" (40-41). Most importantly,

however, poetry produces inner renewal, or, as "The Circus Animals' Desertion" states, the renewal "of the heart" (line 40). As Yeats wrote in a 1935 letter, "To me the supreme aim is an act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy" (*Letters* 838). As suggested in this letter, though human beings can neither escape nor immediately transform their war-torn world, they can follow the example of poets like Yeats who teach them "to rejoice … [and to] praise" (lines 69, 77).[2] Poetry exerts transformative power: it can turn "distress" (73) into "rapture" (73), and even though a man remains "in the prison of his days" (76), poetic wisdom can make him "free" (77). In this way, Yeats becomes a purveyor of wisdom. He vividly portrays ideal work and corrupt toil but in the end conceives of a more balanced vision; as "Phases of the Moon" puts it, he discovers "mysterious wisdom won by toil" (line 19) in the poetic labor of renewal. As Heaney puts it, "[H]is work promotes a renovative idea of self-transcendence, and raises us to states where our emotional natures are replenished and our best-dreamt possibilities corroborated" (14). Embodying the tree, dancer, mountain, tower, stair, and ladder, Yeats rejects despair and declares that wise poetic labor has the power to transform and uplift the soul.

[2] In "Yeats' Nobility," Seamus Heaney confirms that "[the poet's] persistent drive was indeed what Auden divined it to be: to 'teach the free man how to praise'" (14).

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