“A Dialogue of Self and Soul”

Summary:

William Butler Yeats was born into a middle-class Church of Ireland family—that is, he was a product of Protestant and English descent. His grandfather and great-grandfather were members of the clergy. His father, however, rebelled against the family’s religious life, so Yeats was not reared in the traditional Christian faith, although Christian imagery and beliefs, especially moral, remained a continuing and powerful element in his poetry. For instance, his Crazy Jane poems thematically echo the conflicts between Christian morality and human desire which are the concerns of “A Dialogue of Self and Soul.” Too, Yeats used the form he used in “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” in the seventh section of “Vacillation,” although in the latter poem the debate is between the “Soul” and the “Heart.” Certainly, a knowledge of the story of the conception and birth of Christ, as well as of that birth’s religious significance, is necessary for the reader of the antithetical images of Yeats’s “The Second Coming.” However, Yeats’s own “religious” life was a committed interest in, faith in, and even practice (largely synthetic) of various occult beliefs, from his early involvement with the Rosicrucians and Theosophy to his acceptance of aspects of Eastern religions. He was far from being a rationalistic unbeliever.

Yeats was also an Irish patriot and regarded Irish culture as his own; his earliest works are steeped in Irish myth. At the same time, however, he was intensely proud of his English ancestry (to the point of exaggerating its status) and felt himself a part of historical European high culture. He would never really leave Irish myth behind, but his commitment to the European tradition, based as it was on the Christian religion, was almost everywhere in his writings. Too, he made direct use of his own life, especially in his later works—a use that gives solidity, facts, and images to his poetry, making them more alive.

In “A Dialogue of Self and Soul,” Yeats employs the traditional Christian-based form of a dramatic poetic *débat*, or debate, between the Soul (or heart) and the Self (or body), reversing the usual Christian message of works in which the soul laments what the body has done. Sinning has condemned both body and soul to hell. Traditionally, sin originates with the body, since that body desires pleasure—the pleasures of the egoistic present and so not of the future in heaven in contemplation of God. Paradoxically, Yeats’s poem chooses the body and life—with all its failures, sins, and humiliations—over the morality of the soul.

Because Yeats’s poem echoes and responds to this debate tradition, its place in that tradition is a necessary part of its meaning. For example, the fifteenth century French poet François Villon’s “Le Débat du corps et du cur de Villon” (1461; the debate of the body and the heart of Villon) is a concentrated and emotional series of short exchanges between body and heart, “heart” meaning here the soul. Villon’s “heart” speaks the truth and so “wins” the argument. Yeats, too, is concrete, his poem rich with imagery, although his poem lacks that quick interchange of argument and so is less dramatically presented. However, the “argument” that Yeats gives the Soul, although powerful emotionally in its imagery, is also more enigmatic in meaning than what he gives the Self.

“A Dialogue of Self and Soul” is also built upon traditional patterns: Most of the lines are iambic pentameter, although with great variants, plus rhyme, although not all the rhymes are perfect; the effect is to emphasize the chanting human voice. The rhymes are *abbacddc*, a modification of another traditional pattern, the ottava rima. Thus, if this pattern of repetitions controls as well as emphasizes the emotion, behind the intensity of the imagery the pattern tells us there is order in the world. Still, that order is problematic: Is it divine or is it simply imposed by humankind?

The poem is divided into two main sections. In the first section, the Soul and the Self alternate, the Soul beginning and ending the exchange. In giving the Soul an extra stanza, Yeats would seem to be coming down on the side of the Soul, but the second part of the poem is one long speech by the Self alone, emphasizing that it chooses, has chosen, to live life in all its pains and difficulties, since that is what life is. The Self would be "content to live it all again":

I am content to follow to its source. Every event in action or in thought; Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot! When such as I cast out remorse. So great a sweetness flows into the breast. We must laugh and we must sing. We are blest by everything. Everything we look upon is blest.

Explanation:

In the first stanza the Soul calls the reader to the tower of learning where "the star," the most distant part of our universe, "marks the hidden pole." The soul seems to be talking about the contemplation of eternity. On the other hand, the poem itself seems to imply that the soul's goal is so vague as to be virtually unknowable. "Thought," as represented by the tower, cannot distinguish "darkness from the soul." In a later poem Yeats says the tower is "half dead at the top." If we see the tower as an individual, as a source of knowledge, this would seem to imply that there is no more original thought there. If, on the other hand, we see the tower as a phallic symbol, it has become impotent.

In the second stanza, Self says it holds an ancient Japanese blade wrapped in a piece of embroidered silk. As pointed out in the next stanza, these seem to be symbols of war and love. The sword can stand for the blood that has been spilled, while the dress seems to have been given to the samurai out of love. The sword also seems to represent self-discovery, "a looking glass," where man discovers his penchant for violence. The silken embroidery represents art, one thing many romanticists felt transcended time.

Soul argues that these are foolish symbols, and that if imagination would just "scorn the earth" (perhaps, instead, contemplate how many angels can dance on the head of a pin or meditate on its navel) and intellect would quit wandering from topic to topic, then together they could deliver us from the "crime of death and birth," suggesting a Buddhist-like escape from the cycle of eternal rebirth.

In the fourth stanza, Self sets purple flowers the colour of the heart and the sword, with its implied blood, against the darkness that the tower represents. Passion, in and of itself, Yeats seems to suggest can make life meaningful. We shouldn't try to avoid life and death; we should live it passionately.

Soul finally argues that when intellect and imagination are focused on philosophy that intellect no longer knows Is from Ought or Knower from Known and that is like ascending to Heaven. It's obvious that Yeats is a Romantic and believes in the power of intuition, not rational arguments.

Part II of the poem is spoken entirely by the Self. Luckily, it needs little explanation. It is a celebration of life itself, though a rather strange celebration, no doubt, by some people's standards. No matter how miserable our life has been, the narrator argues, if we follow it to its source, measure the lot, and forgive ourselves for our mistakes, we will transcend those mistakes and become "blest."

Part of the power of the poem comes from our realization that, we, too, have suffered most of these indignities. Who hasn't felt the awkwardness of childhood, or the fears of becoming a man or woman, and fear of enemies who would have our job? How can we escape the hurtful image that malicious acquaintances project onto us at different times of life?

The power of the poem, of course, also comes from the power of the description, not the mere intellectual argument. Lines like … if it be life to pitch/ Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch, / A blind man battering blind men" are the kinds of lines that can stay with you for years. Equally amazing is how these lines can be transformed into the optimistic lines that the poem ends with: "We must laugh and we must sing, / We are blest by everything, / Everything we look upon is blest." Yeats must have been blessed by the blarney stone to compose lines this magnificent.

Analysis:

In the first stanza the Soul calls the reader to the tower of learning where the star, the most distant part of our universe, marks the hidden pole. The soul seems to be talking about the contemplation of eternity. On the other hand, the poem itself seems to imply that the soul's goal is so vague as to be virtually unknowable. Thought, as represented by the tower, cannot distinguish darkness from the soul. In a later poem Yeats says the tower is half dead at the top. If we see the tower as an individual, as a source of knowledge, this would seem to imply that there is no more original thought there. If, on the other hand, we see the tower as a phallic symbol, it has become impotent.

As Yeats matures in life, the focus goes from what the world is doing and what he can do. In other words, he focuses on the meaning of his life, this is shown in the poem a Dialogue of Self and Soul. A dialogue of Self and Soul is broken down into two parts. The first part is the actual dialogue between self and soul. The soul is driven by the past or ancient events. The self is the reaction to the soul. In this poem Yeats soul can be describe as " think of ancestral knight, that can, if but imagination scorn the earth and intellect its wondering." The self of Yeats in this play is describe as " the wooden scabbard found and wound, can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn." In the second part of this poem his self is only expressed. The self and soul have become a whole. You can conclude from this poem that a person has matured ,self-actualization is obtained. For example, in this poem Yeats says " I am content to follow to its source every event in action or in though; measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!"

From *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933). Told in eight-line stanzas composed of two In Memoriam stanzas. The first five stanzas are actually a dialogue between the soul and the self. Begins with the soul summoning the self to ascend the tower of eternity, with a response from the Self that recalls "A Coat", where Yeats describes his Song as an embroidery of old mythologies: he imagines himself "The wooden scabbard bound and wound, / Can tattered, still protect, faded adorn." This conversation goes on until part two, in which the self emerges as the soul speaker (successfully sublimation?) for four incredible stanzas, in which he reflects on the process of aging and comes to turns with "the defiling and disfigured shape" of human experience: "I am content to live it all again."

This dialogue begins with the Soul imperiously calling on the Self to transcend the earthbound cycle of existence (which could be interpreted as reincarnation, or simply as the endless re-enactment of psychic patterns by which individuals and societies are enslaved). In psychoanalytical terms, the poem records an argument between death-wish and life-force. And it is a real, painful argument: there is nothing trumped up about it, nor any easy victory.

Symbolism in poem:

The Self, though, is stronger than the Soul. It possesses the "razor-keen" sword with its ancient silk covering, a stunningly erotic symbol (Yeats told Olivia Shakespeare the sword represented his own life). As it recalls a difficult progress from the "ignominy of boyhood" to the "finished man" beset by enemies, the Self seems to gain new certainty. The Soul is left behind in Part I (so much for transcendence!) and the poet finds resolution by discarding remorse in favour of self-forgiveness. The final, gloriously childlike "We must laugh and we must sing" rings out after all the turbulence like the Ode to Joy at the end of Beethoven's ninth symphony.
In this great, late poem, the myths and "phantasmagoria" co-exist with a lucid directness of expression, a voice whose emotional honesty is underwritten by the flexible rhythms (notice the way he shortens by a beat lines 4, 6 and 7 in every stanza, as if dancingly shrugging off the grip of the iambic pentameter) and the effortlessly dazzling mirror-work of his rhetoric. Written roughly a decade before his death in 1939, the poem was first published in The Winding Stair (1933), a collection rich in masterpieces, though none more eloquent and powerful than the Dialogue.

Themes of poem

The main theme of the poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" by William Butler Yeats is an affirmation of earthly life. The elderly speaker embraces living, not dying. This differs from most poems contemplating end-of-life issues, which usually advise resignation and preparation for death.
The main theme of the poem is the conflict the narrator experiences between Self and Soul, with the Self, representing life, winning the debate.

The speaker is an old man, and the Soul is in dialogue with him. The Soul asks him to transcend his earthly Self and think of what is to come after he dies. The Soul argues that the speaker should ponder eternity (the "quarter where all thought is done"):

> Fix every wandering thought upon
>
> That quarter where all thought is done

Christian Themes:

The most striking comment on Christian themes in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" is the attitude toward the human body and experience, which reverses the traditional Christian stance. For instance, the English poet Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), in his "A Dialogue, Between the Resolved Soul, and Created Pleasure" (1681), has his Created Pleasure present the things of this earth as beautiful, pleasurable, and tempting. Human knowledge is powerful, although by

implication much less so than heaven; so too the pleasures of heaven are far beyond our human existence.

Yeats's Self, by contrast, promises nothing of this, saying rather that the experiences of this world are ignorance, pain, difficulty, and humiliation but nevertheless asserting that "I" would suffer it all again. Here the poem is filled with painful memories and images from Yeats's life, including a reference to his long and unrequited love for Irish actress Maud Gonne ("A proud woman not kindred of his soul"). Too, the image of the Japanese sword and the old and ragged but still beautiful embroidered cloth in which it is wrapped emphasizes both the violence (which can also be seen as courage) and the power of sex in human life, reversing two aspects of a once widely held ideal of the Christian life, peace and asceticism.

Yeats is arguing that life itself is—paradoxically, because of its difficulty—our reason for existence. The Self's arguments can be read as laying out the Eastern religious belief that the soul is born again and again, on the slow path to escaping the individual existence. However, Yeats, even in using these images, is still arguing against treating the body as something that leads only to sin. Yeats's poem also differs from the usual débat in that the débat normally begins at the end of life, when hell threatens and has, usually, won the struggle through the sins of the body. Although the Self in Yeats's poem is obviously no longer young, the poem still celebrates physical life, life as individual existence, and furthermore asserts it to be "blest."

Neither hell nor punishment enters into Yeats's poem. Nor, for that matter, does any vision of heaven: There is no promise of eternity in the presence of God, as in the standard Christian teaching. Indeed, Yeats's Soul offers a mystery, almost more threatening than comforting. The Soul urges the Self to climb the staircase of the tower on Yeats's Irish property, mounting toward death but not to see a landscape that somehow speaks of a Dantean heaven—rather to see only the darkness, the mystery, of the night. What that night may mean cannot be discerned. Indeed, the Soul's last speech closes with "Only the dead can be forgiven;/ But when I think of that [what follows life] my tongue's a stone." Heaven, in brief, hardly seems a reward. The Soul itself in not speaking, or being unable to speak, cannot therefore prove that it is right.

The Transition from Romanticism to Modernism:

Yeats started his long literary career as a romantic poet and gradually evolved into a modernist poet. When he began publishing poetry in the 1880s, his poems had a lyrical, romantic style, and they focused on love, longing and loss, and Irish myths. His early writing follows the conventions of romantic verse, utilizing familiar rhyme schemes, metric patterns, and poetic structures. Although it is lighter than his later writings, his early poetry is still sophisticated and accomplished. Several factors contributed to his poetic evolution: his interest in mysticism and the occult led him to explore spiritually and philosophically complex subjects. Yeats's frustrated romantic relationship with Maud Gonne caused the starry-eyed

romantic idealism of his early work to become more knowing and cynical. Additionally, his concern with Irish subjects evolved as he became more closely connected to nationalist political causes. As a result, Yeats shifted his focus from myth and folklore to contemporary politics, often linking the two to make potent statements that reflected political agitation and turbulence in Ireland and abroad. Finally, and most significantly, Yeats's connection with the changing face of literary culture in the early twentieth century led him to pick up some of the styles and conventions of the modernist poets. The modernists experimented with verse forms, aggressively engaged with contemporary politics, challenged poetic conventions and the literary tradition at large, and rejected the notion that poetry should simply be lyrical and beautiful. These influences caused his poetry to become darker, edgier, and more concise. Although he never abandoned the verse forms that provided the sounds and rhythms of his earlier poetry, there is still a noticeable shift in style and tone over the course of his career.

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