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‘For a further union’: Conceptions of Unity in the Later W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot

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Abstract

This paper considers the shared preoccupation with unity in the later works of W.B. Yeats and T.S. Eliot with the aim of emphasizing the likeness in their thinking despite their vastly different theological stances. The unity strived for by both poets involves a dedicated resolution or transformation of contraries. Yeats scholars such as George Bornstein have termed Yeats’s dedication to all things opposite his ‘antinomial vision’ and Eliot scholars such as Jewel Spears Brooker refer to Eliot’s ‘dialectical imagination’. This paper is aimed at further developing the established view of these comparable tendencies by pointing to a three-part pattern that emerges from Yeats and Eliot’s later works. This pattern suggests a similar process behind their ‘antinomial vision’ and ‘dialectical imagination’ that entails: 1) a concern with opposites, 2) an ensuing inarticulacy, and 3) a capacity for incarnation. While this paper analyses Yeats and Eliot’s individual contributions, it draws broad philosophical patterns between them and illustrates the similarities and parallels that incidentally emerge from the comparison.

Keywords: W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, Modernism, unity, Unity of Being, opposites, religion, incarnation

Introduction

Yeats and Eliot grappled with similar Modernist problems, albeit from different vantage points. In particular, both poets assumed a deeply theological approach to the Modernist crisis. Indeed, among the Anglophone poets who contended with religious and transcendent questions in the years surrounding the Second World War, Yeats and Eliot stand out. Both poets understood the relation between history and eternity as ‘a question of theodicy’ (Soud 3). However, the

two poets differed significantly in the theological substance that informed their thinking. While Eliot is most often associated with Anglo-Catholicism, Yeats's exploration of religious beliefs was more varied, constantly drawing on different sources. The stark difference in their theological stances also influenced their view of each other. Of Yeats's early style, for instance, Eliot wrote: 'you cannot take heaven by magic, especially if you are, like Mr. Yeats, a very sane person' (*CP V4* 697). Yeats and Eliot's unsteady literary reception of the other's verse is best outlined by John Kelly in his essay on the two poets in the 2016 *Yeats Annual* (No. 20). While the scepticism with which Eliot and Yeats viewed each other waxed and waned, it is this perspective that often deters critics from reading them alongside one another. Yet, in his analysis of their literary relationship, Kelly hints at a connection 'between Yeats's quest for Unity of Being and Eliot's nostalgia for an undissociated sensibility' (186). It is this notion that the present paper explores more closely by comparing Yeats and Eliot's use of opposites as the instruments of unity. Where the questing after unity is concerned, they are often more alike in their thinking than is commonly accepted. In their later works, both poets aspire to create what is otherwise lacking in modern life through what is often a three-part process. In this paper, I propose that this process includes: 1) a concern with opposites, 2) an ensuing inarticulacy, and 3) a capacity for incarnation. The close readings that follow identify this process in Yeats's 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' and Eliot's *Four Quartets*, with an emphasis on 'Little Gidding'.

Antinomies and Dialectics

While Yeats and Eliot's interest in opposites is well-documented, I frame it here as part of a larger religious and/or transcendent process. To date, Yeats scholars have come to know the poet's predisposition as his 'antinomial vision' (Bornstein 382) or his adherence to a 'Blakean model of conflict and discord' (Cuda 58). Yeats was continually attracted to the theme of opposites and the tensions they revealed. In a letter to Ethel Mannin, only a year prior to his death, Yeats tells of his 'private philosophy': 'To me all things are made of the conflict of two states of consciousness, beings or persons which die each other's life, live each other's death' ('Letters' 918). A dynamic dialectic is activated by consciousness seeking after an opposite. Bornstein argued that Yeats's antinomial vision lies in 'accepting the full dialectic, not merely half of it' (Bornstein 384). I would go further and suggest that Yeats's vision emphasized not just the acceptance of the full dialectic but the sequential and intentional pursuit of the full dialectic. This pursuit is perhaps best exemplified by Yeats's conceptualization of the Daimon, which he believed to be 'our autonomous opposite, which bore within itself the weight of all that we are not but desire to be' (Meihuizen 1). While Yeats's conception of the Daimon would develop over time, consider the poem 'Ego Dominus Tuus' in which one of the antinomial characters in the poem, Ille, calls up his own opposite in so many words: 'By the help of an image / I call to my own opposite, summon all / That I have handled least, least looked upon' (*CWI* 161). To this, Hic replies: 'And I would find myself and not an image' (*CWI* 161). This call, then, serves as something of a conjuring of the persona's Daimon whose appearance will result in the energy that emanates from the meeting of contraries.

This dedication to opposites is at the core of what Yeats would later refer to as Unity of Being. From the Automatic Script sessions held by Yeats and his wife, George Hyde-Lees, comes this description of Unity of Being: 'Complete harmony between physical body, intellect & spiritual desire ...' (Mills Harper & Paul 237 n46). Uniting the aspects of one's being

involves an inner harmonization of concepts often perceived to be opposites (e.g., physical/spiritual). However, as Yeats's ideas surrounding Unity of Being developed, he came to a deeper understanding of the concept, even identifying it as his Christ. In 1937, Yeats articulates this faith as follows:

I was born into this faith, have lived in it, and shall die in it; my Christ, a legitimate deduction from the Creed of St. Patrick as I think, is that Unity of Being Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, Blake's 'Imagination,' what the Upanishads have named 'Self': nor is this unity distant and therefore intellectually understandable, but imminent, differing from man to man and age to age, taking upon itself pain and ugliness, 'eye of newt, and toe of frog' ('Introduction' 210).

This passage reveals not only the religious significance of Unity of Being for Yeats but also illustrates his syncretic approach to the search for unity. I have analyzed the three primary sources from this passage, Dante, Blake and the Upanishads, in another paper¹ and hope to emphasize here only how Yeats's conceptualization of Unity of Being reaches further than the harmonization of the self. His Unity of Being also relates to 'the greater unity between the individual and shared universal existence' (Swanepoel 20), especially if we consider Yeats's earlier naming of the Upanishadic 'Self' as the 'Universal Self but also that of a civilization' ('Mandukya Upanishad' 160). Yeats is also informed by Blake's notion of a 'Universal Mind,' a type of Neoplatonic Oneness that has been divided but that can be connected anew through 'Imagination' (that which may (re)unite opposites)². In the 1893 preface to *The Works of William Blake*, Yeats conveys this idea as follows: 'Consciousness is the result of the divided portions of Universal Mind obtaining reception of one another' (77). Yeats goes on to extend the understanding of Unity of Being gained from Automatic Script sessions in tandem with his own reading (of Blake and the Upanishads) to his understanding of the overall human condition. Opposites are not only within the individual but between individuals and across time.

Eliot scholars have identified a similar dedication to opposites in his poetry. Most notably, Jewel Spears Brooker sees the movement of Eliot's mind as a pattern involving 'a play between opposites that moves forward by spiralling back (a return) and up (a transcendence)' (3). Like Yeats, Eliot is informed by the various philosophies of his time. These influences include, among others, philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and F.H. Bradley, along with Eliot's Indic studies. Eliot's conception of opposites and their role in the quest for unity is particularly philosophical, even academic. As part of a graduate seminar at Harvard University, for instance, Eliot wrote three papers on Kantian Philosophy in which he advanced 'pieces of a provocative and sophisticated theory of opposites' while trying to find the 'corrective to Kant's absolute distinctions' (Brooker and Charron 48). Eliot's ideas began to take on a relativism that argues against contradictions or contraries and sees opposites as correlative and relative to one's point of view.

While writing his Ph.D dissertation on F.H. Bradley in 1915 and 1916, Eliot engaged with a principle not dissimilar to Blake's undivided 'Universal Mind' – Bradleyan epistemology. Bradley divides knowledge, as experience, into three levels: immediate, relational and transcendent (Brooker 184). First, much like Yeats's description of Unity of Being that is not 'intellectually understandable, but imminent' ('Introduction' 210), Eliot perceives Bradley's immediate experience as experience that 'has not been mediated through the mind' (Brooker 184). In Eliot's dissertation, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley*, he describes immediate

experience as ‘a timeless unity which is not as such present either *anywhere* or to *anyone*. It is only in the world of objects that we have time and space and selves’ (31). This phrasing is reminiscent of Yeats’s description of Blake’s belief that consciousness was ‘originally clairvoyant’ but shrinks ‘under the rule of the five senses, and of argument and law’ (‘The Works of William Blake’ 77). Bradleyan immediate experience, like Blake’s Universal Mind, then, is the undifferentiated condition Eliot refers to as ‘the starting point of our knowing, since it is only in immediate experience that knowledge and its object are one’ (‘Knowledge and Experience’ 19).

Only once mediated through the mind do we encounter relational experience, the second of Bradley’s levels of experience. Once we distinguish ourselves from our surroundings and our surroundings from each other through comparison and division, immediate experience dissolves ‘into the dualities of the intellect’ (Brooker 158). This is experience akin to Blake’s teaching of the separation of the one mind into sets of opposites, a separation likened to the fall of man. Relational experience is where Yeats and Eliot, and all Modernists, start from – a world of binaries and absolutes. However, the final level of Bradleyan experience, transcendent experience, ‘permits a return of sorts to the wholeness and unity of immediate experience’ (Brooker 186). This return is not a return to a state prior to existence, a reversal of knowledge and experience, but refers to informing immediate experience with the intellect of relational experience. In this sense, transcendent experience can be interpreted along the same lines as Yeats’s description of Blakean consciousness, as ‘the result of the divided portions of Universal Mind obtaining reception of one another’ (‘The Works of William Blake’ 77). Similarly, in *A Vision* (1925), Yeats writes: ‘when ... the *Daimonic* mind is permitted to flow through the events of his life ... and so to animate his *Creative Mind*, without putting out its light, there is Unity of Being’ (AVA 26). Another resemblance can be drawn between Yeats’s use of the term Unity of Being and Eliot’s use of the term ‘unity of consciousness’ in the following passage from *Knowledge and Experience* detailing Bradley’s ‘finite centres’:

The point of view (or finite centre) has for its object one consistent world and accordingly no finite centre can be self-sufficient, for the life of a soul does not consist in the contemplation of one consistent world but in the painful task of unifying (to a greater or less [sic] extent) jarring and incompatible ones, and passing, when possible, from two or more discordant viewpoints to a higher which shall somehow include and transmute them. ... Wherever, in short, there is a unity of consciousness, this unity may be spoken of as a finite centre (147–48).

Here, Eliot describes a conjoining of opposite points of view that produces a new vantage point cognizant of both opposites but somehow transcended. A few lines later, Eliot writes: ‘To realize that a point of view is a point of view is already to have transcended it: what was merely a picture in two dimensions (if you please) becomes a real landscape with an infinity of aspects ...’ (148). Attempts to mediate between opposites should then have the potential to reveal the world as a series of finite centres. Eliot’s explanation of the unifying process involved in transcending experience has much in common with Yeats’s description in the 1937 edition of *A Vision* of the relation between the ‘interchange of the tinctures’ (objective and subjective energies) and Unity of Being:

Every phase is in itself a wheel; the individual soul is awakened by a violent oscillation (one thinks of Verlaine oscillating between the church and the brothel) until it sinks in on that Whole where the contraries are united, the antinomies resolved (*AVB* 89).

What is to Eliot ‘the painful task’ is ‘a violent oscillation’ to Yeats. Clearly, both poets perceive the unifying process as dynamic and associated with violence or pain. This dynamic process takes visual form in Yeats’s many illustrations and descriptions of gyres in *A Vision* and in his later poems. Gyres, like ocean currents with the same name, are lines or cones spiraling up or down, depending on one’s perception. The inner and outmost points of a spiral are opposites that, on account of the violence of time and history, continually change place (and point of view, almost like changing Bradleyan ‘finite centres’). This dynamic collision of opposites is, however, also vital seeing that it brings forth more than it destroys. For instance, in the earlier 1925 edition of *A Vision*, Yeats identifies Unity of Being as ‘revelation by conflict’:

He who attains Unity of Being is some man, who, while struggling with his fate and his destiny until every energy of his being has been roused, is content that he should so struggle with no final conquest ... such men are able to bring all that happens, as well as all that they desire, into an emotional or intellectual synthesis and so to possess not the Vision of Good only but that of Evil. (*AVA* 26)

From the conflict sparked by joining opposites comes a ‘synthesis,’ a resolution or transformation – the final aspect of the three-part process behind Yeats and Eliot’s shared preoccupation with unity. In the same way that Eliot describes the ‘life of a soul’ that does not consist in ‘contemplation of one consistent world,’ so Yeats perceives no ‘final conquest’ for those who attain Unity of Being. However, Yeats and Eliot’s views of unity and the creation of unity in life and art are not stable constructs but develop over time. What is certain is that both poets were at one point influenced by the idea of a universal and undifferentiated initial (yet ever-present) state of existence that is either lost to Modern society or is inaccessible. Yeats, for one, explicitly ties the Blakean ‘Universal Mind’ and the Upanishadic universal ‘Self’ to his own symbolic Christ (Unity of Being). While Eliot makes no similar religiously motivated statement about Bradley’s theories of truth and reality, his own scepticism develops from these studies. Eliot dedicated much of his academic career to Bradley’s philosophy and continued to be challenged by the Bradleyan ideal that ‘everything is connected to everything else in a systematic way and that everything is part of a single all-encompassing whole’ (Brooker 176). Eliot’s religious statement would come later, with his 1928 ‘conversion’ to Anglo-Catholicism, which further layered his understanding of opposites with the unifying Christian doctrine of Incarnation.

Of the Inarticulate and Incarnation

Some of the most pertinent examples of Yeats’s antinomical vision in his later poetry occur in poems with a tête-à-tête tone and style, such as ‘Ego Dominus Tuus,’ ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul,’ sections of ‘Vacillation’ and ‘Man and the Echo’. In ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul,’ for instance, ‘My Soul’ and ‘My Self’ are caught in a dramatic exchange in which Self gets the last say in an astonishing four-stanza reply that embraces the continual ‘crime of death and birth’ (*CWI* 239). Like Yeats’s description of those who attain Unity of Being in *A Vision* – ‘content that he should so struggle with no final conquest’ (*AVA* 26) – Self is

‘content to live it all again’ (*CWI* 240). The poem celebrates, as it were, the incarnation that lies in the pursuit of opposites.

Throughout the poem, ‘My Soul’ emphasizes a gyre-like ascent and ‘the winding ancient stair,’ leading to a ‘quarter where all thought is done’ (*CWI* 238). Since such an envisioned quarter is devoid of thought and since Yeats would consider – via Blake – thought the great divider of all things into antinomies, we may interpret the gyre-like ‘ancient winding stair’ to be symbolic of the dynamic, and spiraling, quest for Unity of Being. Yet, in ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul,’ Yeats poses the questing for Unity of Being against what appears to be Unity of Being itself, what is referred to in the poem as an ‘ancestral night’ that resembles Blakean undividedness and even Eliot’s conception of Bradleyan immediate experience. Soul urges Self to set aside imagination and wandering and, instead, contemplate the deliverance of ‘ancestral night’:

Think of ancestral night that can,
If but imagination scorn the earth
And intellect its wandering
To this and that and t’other thing,
Deliver from the crime of death and birth. (CWI 239)

The incarnation stimulated by intentional pursuit of opposites can be thought of here as either/or the living of different lives, literally reincarnation, or the embodiment of the other or many others within a single life. It is this incarnation Soul seeks to end, or rather resolve. If ancestral night is deliverance from death and birth, an essential set of opposites in the questing after Unity of Being, it signifies the attainment of Unity of Being, a return to that undifferentiated state. Ancestral night, in that ‘quarter where all thought is done’ (*CWI* 238), is indeed later described as overflowing with fullness. Yet, in Soul’s final speaking turn in the poem, this fullness appears to evade clear definition:

My Soul. Such fullness in that quarter overflows
And falls into the basin of the mind
That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,
For intellect no longer knows
Is from the *Ought*, or *Knower* from the *Known* –
That is to say, ascends to Heaven;
Only the dead can be forgiven;
But when I think of that my tongue’s a stone. (CWI 239)

Undifferentiated Unity of Being stands outside of language and the poet’s expression. Soul’s affirmation of ineffability here is very much in line with the following description of immediate experience from Eliot: ‘the line between the experienced, or the given, and the constructed can nowhere be clearly drawn’ (‘Knowledge and Experience’ 18). Soul’s tongue turned to stone stands in direct opposition to Self’s affirmation that ‘We must laugh and we must sing, / We are blest by everything,’ (*CWI* 240) at the end of the poem when conveying the desire to continue questing. Yeats’s use of the word ‘everything’ further sustains the notion of the multitude of divisions that make up the pursuit, but not the attainment, of Unity of Being. This rhythm between acceptance and rejection of incarnation itself stages the struggle between oppositions.

From the struggle with opposites, an inarticulacy must surely emerge. When drawing opposites together, language can no longer suffice since language itself differentiates. Both Yeats and Eliot express an awareness of the limits of language following their pursuit of unity. Both aim at describing what is indescribable; this second aspect in the three-part process of embodying unity nevertheless takes literary form. While partly due to their difference in style, Eliot dedicates a greater quantity of text than Yeats does to what is referred to in 'East Coker' as 'a raid on the inarticulate' (*CPP* 182). In fact, Eliot addresses the difficulty with language in each of the poems in *Four Quartets*. This much is to be expected from a set of poems teeming with opposites presented by Eliot as paradoxes. Consider the very first lines of the first quartet ('Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future' (*CPP* 171)) and the last line of the last quartet ('And the fire and the rose are one' (*CPP* 198)). From start to finish, then, Eliot arranges words designed to divide in such a way that they gather, if not unite. Unlike Yeats's stoned tongue in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' Eliot's struggling with words to express unity is active. This movement is evident from the first of the quartets:

And all is always now. Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still. ...

('Burnt Norton' *CPP* 175)

In a self-reflexive way, Eliot consistently details the impossibility of articulating the unity he wishes to embody. Already in his Ph.D. dissertation, nearly two decades prior to the publication of *Four Quartets*, when discussing Bradleyan immediate experience, Eliot expresses a struggle with labelling or terming parts of experience and runs into 'unreal abstractions':

There is no absolute point of view from which real and ideal can be finally separated and labelled. All of our terms turn out to be unreal abstractions, but we can defend them, and give them a kind of reality and validity ... (*Knowledge and Experience* 18).

Eliot attempts just that in *Four Quartets*; he defends his conception of an inarticulate unity by giving them 'a kind of reality and validity'. It is at that point of near-validity that Eliot believes incarnation is to be glimpsed. If Eliot is able to put into language, even to some degree, how opposite points such as past and present cohere, then a version of reality will have been established for the transcendence of those opposites. Translation of a concept outside of the divisions of language into language is, however, no easy task. In 'The Dry Salvages,' Eliot explains that 'to apprehend / The point of intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint' (*CPP* 190). Yeats, again under the influence of Blake, similarly perceived poets and artists as 'apostles, priests and missionaries' of the Imagination that may reconnect the divisions of the Modern world (Swanepoel 7). For most of us, those who are not poets or saints, Eliot says in 'The Dry Salvages,' there is 'only the unattended / Moment, the moment in and out of time' (*CPP* 190). However, these moments are only 'hints and guesses':

... These are only hints and guesses,
Hints followed by guesses; and the rest
Is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.
The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is Incarnation.

Here the impossible union
Of spheres of existence is actual,
Here the past and future
Are conquered, and reconciled, (CPP 190)

Much like Yeats's intentional pursuit of one's own and other opposites, Eliot suggests here that the coherence of opposites can be 'half guessed ... half understood' through dedication. As in 'East Coker,' 'We must be still and still moving / Into another intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion' (CPP 183). Eliot's use of 'communion' marks the most significant difference between his pursuit of 'union,' which is influenced by the Christian doctrine of Incarnation, and Yeats's pursuit of Unity of Being. A religious dedication is required to guess the hints and semi-comprehend the gift of moments in and out of time, moments that, when attended to, become not unlike immediate and relational experience transmuted. Eliot goes on to say that embodiment or apprehension of Incarnation – the realization of 'the impossible union' – requires both observation of hints in our experience ('The distraction fit ... or the winter lightning / Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all') along with religious devotion: 'prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action' (CPP 190). Eliot's Incarnation then also has the implicit significance of the reconciliation of man with God through the sacrifice of the Son of God. This reconciliation holds a redemption pointed to in 'Little Gidding'. In closing *Four Quartets*, when alluding to the motto of Julian of Norwich, Eliot compiles a phrase similar to Yeats's ending of 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul': 'We are blest by everything, / Everything we look upon is blest' (CWI 240):

And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one. (CPP 198)

Eliot's paraphrase from the anchoress Julian of Norwich's vision of Christ ('And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well') conveys a similar acceptance and joy as voiced by Yeats's celebration of the incarnation in the pursuit of opposites. While similar in essence, in tone it is loaded with a uniquely Christian significance that foresees a destructive yet creative purgatorial fire. And when all things are indeed 'well,' the opposites are reconciled, and the fire and the rose are one.

Conclusion

Yeats and Eliot certainly have in common the search for a transcending wholeness. As this paper has shown, Yeats's conception of Unity of Being is shaped by his wide-ranging study of esoteric and religious literature while Eliot's sense of unity is largely informed by his philosophical and religious sensibilities. Both poets actively pursue opposites and contradictory conditions in an attempt to embody in their poetry what they perceive to be a greater unity. To Yeats, this is Unity of Being, and to Eliot, this is 'the impossible union / Of spheres of existence' ('Dry Salvages' CPP 190). The examples outlined here suggest that Yeats is predisposed to embodying his conception of Unity of Being through images and symbols as aspects of the poet's Imagination, which, in Blakean terms, (re)connect the divided portions of the Universal Mind. Eliot's

Four Quartets illustrates his efforts to embody his conception of unity through language itself, through engaging with opposites in a medium not conducive to the unity of ‘one consistent world’. Most importantly, both Yeats and Eliot conceive of a unity that can or should only be pursued and not fully attained in life. In ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul,’ for example, continued incarnation through the pursual of opposites is actively chosen: ‘I am content to live it all again ... I am content to follow to its source / Every event in action or in thought’ (*CW1* 240). Likewise, opposites and their connections must be dutifully pursued in *Four Quartets* not through Imagination or art as Yeats would have it, but through ‘prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action’ (*CPP* 190).

Notes

- 1 See Swanepoel (OLH, 2022) for an analysis of the sources that inform Yeats’s conception of Unity of Being. Also see how this passage relates to the Creed of St. Patrick in Kathleen Raine’s chapter ‘Yeats and the Creed of Saint Patrick’ in *Yeats the Initiate* (Barnes & Noble, 1990).
- 2 Also see Yeats’s 1924 essay ‘William Blake and His Illustrations to The Divine Comedy’: ‘Our imaginations are but fragments of the universal imagination, portions of the universal body of God, and as we enlarge our imagination by imaginative sympathy, and transform with the beauty and peace of art the sorrows and joys of the world, we put off the limited mortal man more and more and put on the unlimited “immortal man”’ (103).

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