Passion and Imagination: Yeats's 'Fundamental Agreement' with Lewis at Phase 9 in the Great Wheel of *A Vision*

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Scholarly accounts of the intellectual and artistic relation between W. B. Yeats and Wyndham Lewis have understandably tended to draw upon, in particular, the revised version of Yeats's philosophical treatise *A Vision* (1937). There, in 'A Packet for Ezra Pound', Yeats explicitly approves, as Hazard Adams describes it, Lewis's 'attack on the modernist obsession with flux' in *Time and Western Man* (1927).[1] Yeats's siding with Lewis on this front is illuminated by R. F. Foster's portrayal of how the ageing Irish poet, recovering in early 1928 from his first major health scare, 'continued to regain his strength, to send entertaining letters to [Olivia] Shakespear, to cogitate about Wyndham Lewis and their "fundamental agreement" about philosophical matters'.[2] This key quotation is drawn from Yeats's letter to Shakespear dated 29 November 1927: 'I am reading *Time and the Western Man* [*sic*] with ever growing admiration and envy – what energy! – and I am driven back to my reed-pipe. I want you to ask Lewis to meet me – we are in *fundamental* agreement'.[3] Contextualizing the recuperating Yeats's contemplations, Foster writes: 'He had met Lewis through Sturge Moore nearly twenty years before, and kept desultorily in touch, but it took the philosophic readings of the later 1920s to convince him that Lewis's cosmopolitan modernism had elements in common with his own "System"' (Foster, *WBY* 355).

Unsurprisingly, Yeats's notion of 'fundamental agreement' has taken hold in the critical field, albeit quite belatedly (since around the turn of the century) given that he died in 1939 and Lewis in 1957. In the course of his account of Yeats's later life and art, Foster sketches a range of similarities and differences between Yeats and Lewis but duly refers the reader, in a note, to the essay 'In Fundamental Agreement: Yeats and Wyndham Lewis' (1998) by Peter L. Caracciolo and Paul Edwards, which he describes as 'much the fullest account of their intellectual relationship' (Foster, *WBY* 727). In my analysis here, I wish to extend

critical appreciation by these writers (Foster included) of Yeats's wider 'fundamental agreement' with Lewis by highlighting some textual evidence in *A Vision* and associated writings pertaining to the thinly veiled presence of Lewis at Phase 9 in the Great Wheel. A significant time shift occurs in Foster's narrative by way of the same note, in which he mentions that the 'automatic writing from 1917' which formed the basis of the 'System' of *A Vision* (dated 1925 but published in 1926) 'shows an interest in Lewis, reciprocated by the medium' (Foster, *WBY* 727). The intellectual and artistic relation between Yeats and Lewis can be further illuminated by focusing critical consideration of their 'fundamental agreement' more emphatically on the location of Lewis at Phase 9 in both the original and revised *A Vision*, where Lewis is evidently the 'unnamed artist' referred to, as the example, in the almost identical phasal summaries.[4]

Caracciolo's and Edwards's substantial account of Yeats's 'fundamental agreement' with Lewis is nevertheless remarkably sparse on Lewis's inclusion as the sole exemplar of Phase 9. Whereas Foster as biographer is acutely attuned to the Yeats circle, as it were, and therefore understandably bypasses Lewis along with many other phasal exemplars in his critical overview of the Great Wheel, Caracciolo and Edwards somewhat obliquely touch upon the placement of Lewis at Phase 9 by reference, mainly, to volumes 1 and 3 of *Yeats's Vision Papers* (both published in 1992 under the general editorship of George Mills Harper). Caracciolo and Edwards thus come at Lewis's phasal placement via the automatic script, and a consequence is that the significance of Lewis's location at Phase 9 in *A Vision* itself, in relation to Yeats, is scarcely examined:

> Certainly Yeats admired the revised *Tarr* that Lewis issued in 1928 […]. He had however been fascinated earlier by Lewis enough to regard him as important in the scheme of *A Vision*. On 30 Nov. 1917, only a week into the mediumistic activities upon which the book is based, he asked the Control, 'Can you tell me where Wyndham Lewis comes?' […]. The replies to this and later questions were perceptive about Lewis's character: 'Short passion – stiff vanity destroying emotion – long curiosity – supple kindness', and 'obscurity & passion (?) about self caused by the very desire to go to the root of the self'.[5]

Amusingly, given the rather opaque nature of these replies from beyond, and that the first four in fact represent, as detailed in volume 3 of the *Vision Papers*, the association of such qualities with types of necks (as we shall see shortly, so to speak, in relation to Lewis)[6], it is not surprising that the writers add circumspectly: 'These perceptions go beyond mere approval or disapproval' (Caracciolo and Edwards, *IFA* 117). Moreover, it is only in their notes that Caracciolo and Edwards explicitly indicate Lewis's placement at Phase 9. In a note inserted after quotation of these replies, they report: 'YVP1 290 (answer given on 26 January 1918) and YVP3 58, Phase 9. The editors point out that "& passion" is a mistranscription of "of vision"'. In the prior note, relating to Lewis's perception in 1916 of Yeats's likely disapproval of both himself and *Tarr*, Caracciolo and Edwards speculate that '[p]erhaps Yeats had views about Lewis's attitude to his parental responsibilities (he had two children by Olive Johnson, supported them financially, but was not otherwise much of a father to them), or his misogyny, which was at its most powerful around 1916'. They add: 'In his entry on Phase Nine in *A Vision*, Yeats notes that "one finds at this phase, more often than at any other, men who dread, despise and persecute the women whom they love", and records as indicative Lewis's remark to him about Augustus John's "mistress" (perhaps his wife, Dorelia, whom Lewis disliked), "She no longer cares for his work, no longer gives him the sympathy he needs, why does he not leave her, what does he owe to her or to her children?"' (all quotations from Caracciolo and Edwards, *IFA* 145).

While these connections of Lewis to Phase 9 in the Great Wheel of the notoriously abstruse *A Vision* are certainly compelling, it is more beneficial, in terms of tracing Yeats's sense of their 'fundamental agreement', to situate Lewis at Phase 9 firmly within the sequence of lunar phases in the treatise (the same in both versions). In the concentrated section V of 'Part II: Examination of the Wheel' in 'Book 1. The Great Wheel' in the revised *A Vision*, Yeats explains that 'the phases signified by odd numbers are *antithetical*' whereas 'those signified by even numbers are *primary*. Though all phases from Phase 8 to Phase 22 are *antithetical*, taken as a whole, and all phases from Phase 22 to Phase 8 *primary*; seen by different analysis the individual phases are alternately *antithetical* and *primary*' (Jeffares, *WBY* 135). Significantly, then, Lewis at Phase 9 inhabits an odd-numbered phase within the broad antithetical sequence, i.e. a 'double antithetical' phase. With the 'System' of *A Vision* tilted in favour of the antithetical aspect and man,

Lewis's location at Phase 9 in the Great Wheel, in both versions of the treatise, can be seen to be *fundamentally* favourable.

Moreover, Yeats's evident association of Lewis with two fundamentals of intellectual and artistic achievement – passion and imagination – is eminently compatible with the placement of Lewis at the 'double antithetical' Phase 9. As the editors explain in a note in volume 3 of the *Vision Papers*, in the 'AS 26 Jan 18 and CF' Yeats 'described Wyndham Lewis, in an unpublished MS, as a "bullet headed young man, who had that short neck which I associate with passion"'.[7] The importance of this oddly anatomical association of Lewis with passion can be gauged in part by recalling Yeats's assertion in section X of 'Anima Hominis' in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (dated 1917 but published in 1918), the key esoteric work in which he elaborately presents his doctrine of the Mask duly incorporated into *A Vision*, that it 'is not permitted to a man who takes up pen or chisel, to seek originality, for passion is his only business' (Jeffares, *WBY* 45).[8] Earlier, in section V, Yeats writes that the 'other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality' (Jeffares, *WBY* 40). Yeats's high estimation of passion as essential to artistic inspiration intersects with Caracciolo's and Edwards's argument, at the start of their essay, that Yeats and Lewis 'shared the view that a willed struggle with a contradictory version of the self was the basis of achievement in the arts' (Caracciolo and Edwards, *IFA* 110). It also intersects with their claim shortly thereafter that while Yeats 'had acclaimed Spengler's book [*Decline of the West*, attacked by Lewis in *Time and Western Man*] for its essential agreement with his own cyclical theory of history', he nonetheless 'admired Lewis's intellectual passion, irrespective of whether he agreed with him. There was more to his admiration than this: he concluded that, beneath their disagreements, he and Lewis were "in *fundamental* agreement"' (Caracciolo and Edwards, *IFA* 111).

While there is no explicit reference to passion in the summary of Phase 9 in *A Vision* (both versions) beyond Yeats's description of the man's failure out of phase to master the sensuality of the *Body of Fate* 'through his dramatisation of himself as a form of passionate self-mastery',[9] it is clear that in terms of the principal symbol or interpenetrating antithetical and primary gyres, reimagined in the lunar scheme of the Great Wheel, passion belongs to the (as Yeats puts it in the revised version) 'emotional and aesthetic' antithetical rather than 'reasonable and moral' primary aspect and man of the 'System', and

therefore to Lewis's 'double antithetical' Phase 9, too (Jeffares, *WBY* 123). As Yeats explains in section II of 'Part II. Examination of the Wheel' in the revised *A Vision*, effectively revisiting section IV of 'Part 1: 3. The Great Wheel' in 'Book 1. What the Caliph Partly Learned' in the original version, 'All unity is from the *Mask*, and the *antithetical Mask* is described in the automatic script as a "form created by passion to unite us to ourselves", the self so sought is that Unity of Being compared by Dante in the *Convito* to that of "a perfectly proportioned human body"' (Jeffares, *WBY* 131). The passion/vision mistranscription referred to above is telling, too, not only because the False Mask at Phase 9 is 'Obscurity',[10] but also in light of Yeats's description in section XII of 'Anima Hominis' that 'the passions, when we know that they cannot find fulfilment, become vision; and a vision, whether we wake or sleep, prolongs its power by rhythm and pattern, the wheel where the world is butterfly' (Jeffares, *WBY* 46).

In addition, given that the True Creative Mind at Phase 9 is 'Self-Dramatisation'[11], a close link between passion and imagination can be inferred from the reference to a 'dramatization of himself as a form of passionate self-mastery' in the summary and Yeats's explanation, in section II of 'Part 1. 3. The Great Wheel' in the original *A Vision*, that by Creative Mind 'is meant intellect, as intellect was understood before the close of the seventeenth century – all the mind that is consciously constructive' (Paul and Harper, *WBY* 15). As Paul and Harper clarify in a note: 'This passage refers less to seventeenth-century epistemology than to a conception of the intellect as something that shapes, formulates, constitutes, and is equivalent to the imagination (rather than the fancy) of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*' (Paul and Harper, *WBY* 235).

Yeats's concomitant association of Lewis with imagination becomes clearer in the summary of Phase 9 (in both versions of *A Vision*). Curiously, the analytical eye that had fixed on Lewis's neck shifts, in concluding the summary of Phase 9, to Lewis's head. Lewis is thinly veiled in Yeats's description of 'immense confidence in self-expression, a vehement self, working through mathematical calculation, a delight in straight line and right angle';[12] and of having 'discovered this artist to be a cubist [Cubist in the revised version] of powerful imagination and noticed that his head suggested a sullen obstinacy, but that his manner and his speech were generally sympathetic and gentle'.[13] The alignment of Lewis at Phase 9 with the antithetical aspect and man of the 'System' is also apparent given that 'imagination' is a key defining

term of the antithetical gyre of the principal symbol. As Yeats elaborates in section IV of 'Part 1. The Principal Symbol' in 'Book 1. The Great Wheel' in the revised *A Vision*, which corresponds with section I of 'Part 1: 3. The Great Wheel' in the original version, by the antithetical gyre 'we express more and more, as it broadens, our inner world of desire and imagination' (Jeffares, *WBY* 123). In section XV of 'Introduction to "A Vision"' in 'A Packet for Ezra Pound' in the revised *A Vision*, Lewis's powerful impact on Yeats's imagination and contemplation of the 'System' is explicitly signposted: 'Some will ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon […] now that the system stands out clearly in my imagination I regard them as stylistic arrangements of experience comparable to the cubes in the drawing of Wyndham Lewis and to the ovoids in the sculpture of Brancusi' (Jeffares, *WBY* 86).

In conclusion, however, I must sound a note of caution: even as Yeats's sense of 'fundamental agreement' with Lewis can be related to the latter's exemplar status at the 'double antithetical' Phase 9 in both versions of *A Vision*, augmented by Yeats's positive references to Lewis in such writings as his letters to Shakespear and 'A Packet for Ezra Pound', so too are severe limits to that agreement, implied by the word 'fundamental', effectively encapsulated in the position of Phase 9 within the broad antithetical sequence. Some backspin is needed to the argument put forward by Caracciolo and Edwards, which illuminates Yeats's siding with Lewis in 'A Packet for Ezra Pound', that Yeats draws upon Lewis's philosophical treatment of reality in *Time and Western Man* 'as the basis of a critique of Pound's aesthetic' (Caracciolo and Edwards, *IFA* 111), with Yeats's shrewd selection of Lewis and Brancusi providing 'a contrast with the "Kandinskian" practice of Pound himself' (Caracciolo and Edwards, *IFA* 114). Yeats's ultimate rejection of Pound as an exemplar of the heroic Phase 12 was apparently, as George Mills Harper speculates, 'because he could not, by Yeats's definition, achieve Unity of Being', but we would do well to remember that neither could Lewis, by Yeats's definition, achieve the ideal condition of Unity of Being despite his fundamentally favourable inclusion in the Great Wheel at the 'double antithetical' Phase 9.[14]

In section XI of 'Part 1: 3. The Great Wheel' in the original *A Vision* (revisited in section V of 'Part II. Examination of the Wheel' in the revised version), Yeats explains that 'Unity of Being becomes possible at Phase 12, and ceases to be possible at Phase 18, but is rare before Phase 13 and after Phase 17, and is most common at Phase 17'

(Paul and Harper, *WBY* 26). As Richard Ellmann reports in *The Identity of Yeats* (1954), it is only 'in the four phases closest to full moon where what Yeats (borrowing the phrase from his father) calls "Unity of Being" is possible'.[15] The full-blooded passion and imagination of Daimonic inspiration, and resultant harmonious condition of Unity of Being, does not apply, in the lunar scheme, to Lewis at Phase 9 – it applies principally to the Daimonic Man Yeats at the ideal 'double antithetical' Phase 17.

Despite confirming a 'fundamental agreement' with Lewis at Phase 9, the antithetical phasal sequence projects a considerable distance intellectually and artistically between Yeats and Lewis, unchanged in the revised *A Vision*. In a way, this bears a certain resemblance to Lewis's perspective on Yeats, conveyed in 'W. B. Yeats' (1939). Although Lewis affirms that he is fundamentally '*for* this particular ghost' (*CHC* 286), his distancing of himself from Yeats can be measured by such comments that Yeats 'comes back to us as a memory of a limp hand. Or perhaps I should say, he does to me', and his judgment that 'the limp-hand effect' (*CHC* 285) was probably most typical of Yeats. His praise of Yeats and estimation of Yeats's achievement are severely limited: 'I could say that I thought he had written a half-dozen verses as lovely as anything in English. […] But everyone knows he has written a few lyrics of consummate beauty' (*CHC* 285). As Caracciolo and Edwards observe in a note: 'At the end of the obituary Lewis attempts to apply a "tougher" vocabulary to a commendation of Yeats's work, but not many readers will find the new formulation more satisfying' (Caracciolo and Edwards, *IFA* 153). The kick that Lewis gets out of Yeats seems ultimately, and quite considerably, less than ideal:

> The fact is that in a certain mood I *do* respond to Maeterlinck, even to an Irish brogue. And Yeats *has* given me a sort of kick: a kind of soft, dreamy kick. I am obliged to him. (*CHC* 286)

Notes

[1] Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's Vision: Romantic Modernism and Antithetical Tradition* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 128.

[2] R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life – II. The Arch-Poet 1915-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 355. Hereafter Foster, *WBY*.

[3] Allan Wade (ed.), *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), 733.
[4] See Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper (eds), *W. B. Yeats: A Vision* (1925), The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume XIII (New York: Scribner, 2008), 46. Hereafter Paul and Harper, *WBY*. Norman A. Jeffares (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: A Vision and Related Writings* (London: Arena, 1990), 157. Hereafter Jeffares, *WBY*.
[5] Peter L. Caracciolo and Paul Edwards, 'In Fundamental Agreement: Yeats and Wyndham Lewis', *Yeats Annual*, 13 (1998): 110-57, at 117. Hereafter Caracciolo and Edwards, *IFA*.
[6] See George Mills Harper (general ed.), *Yeats's Vision Papers*, vol. 3 (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), 162.
[7] Ibid., 213.
[8] The peculiar association could perhaps be related, in part, to Yeats's leanings toward eugenicist ideas.
[9] See Paul and Harper, *WBY* 47; Jeffares, *WBY* 158.
[10] See Paul and Harper, *WBY* 46; Jeffares, *WBY* 157.
[11] See Paul and Harper, *WBY* 46; Jeffares, *WBY* 157.
[12] See Paul and Harper, *WBY* 46; Jeffares, *WBY* 158.
[13] See Paul and Harper, *WBY* 47; Jeffares, *WBY* 159.
[14] Harper (general ed.), *Yeats's Vision Papers*, vol. 3, 404.
[15] Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (1954; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), 158.