



# Yeats, A Vision, and Art History

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Yeats worried that his poetry might be destroyed if he wandered too far down what he called the *hodos chameliontos*, the chameleon road, in which the imagination became so replete, overstimulated, that it kept producing images in such profusion that the images became unintelligible. In a number of passages deleted from his plays, we can see Yeats experimenting with these wild profusions of images. In the art historical writings he studied, Yeats found visual analogues to the *hodos chameliontos* in the world of Persian art.

### Hodos Chameliontos

[John Kavanaugh: v. Gilbert's *Golden Dawn Companion* says that item U in catalogues of MSS issued to the Members of the Second Order was "The Secret Wisdom of the Lesser World or Microcosm which is Man. from the section 'Liber Hodos Chameleonis' of the Book "minutum Mundum." Comprising seven parts: Secret Wisdom of the Microcosm; Of the Evil Persona; Of the Task of the Adeptus Minor; A Reference in Th. A. M. (How the Spiritual Consciousness can act around and beyond the Psher of Sensation'); Of Travelling in the Spirit Vision; Concerning other Microcosms; Of Obsession; Tance and Death.]

#### 1.

I have always liked chameleons. As a boy I took care of an anolis lizard, a local American reptile incorrectly called a chameleon: it could vary its color between a bright apple-green and a discreet brown; but, disappointingly, those two shades exhausted its entire repertory, and I yearned for a more gifted pet—the sort of chameleon that, in Cocteau's phrase, might drive itself crazy when placed on a square of plaid. My wish was granted, several decades later, when my fourteen-year-old son bought a veiled chameleon, native to Yemen, an animated gargoyle, with independently swiveling eye-turrets, a crest like a shark's dorsal fin, and a prehensile tail usually twisted into an art-nouveau curl. There is no strangeness that has not some beauty in it, and I thought this creature at once eerie and gorgeous in its defiance of the conventions of vertebrate life. Each foot had only two toes, strongly opposing, as if evolution were trying to turn it into a lobster; when it climbed up a twig, it felt its way forward with a slow, hunched, palsied gait, withdrawing backwards a bit before each step. This sort of locomotion made no sense until you realized that the lizard was designed to counterfeit a leaf shaking idly in the wind. On a writing desk it was the most conspicuous thing in the world; but on a tree, even a hibiscus only a foot high, it was hard to find even if you knew exactly where it was. Its fluorescent, motile colors—mostly viridian or cyan, fining down to celadon and aquamarine, intermitted with blobs and streaks and pulses of dark brown or angry yellow—confused the eye and seemed to deny the possibility of form; to stare at it was like peering at one of those collations of swimming dots that ophthalmologists use to test for color blindness. And, of course, if you stared at it, it would stare back at you, with a single eye, as the other eye gazed backward, as if it were making an arrogant display of ignoring you.

As a visual tease, the chameleon was seductive, and I felt it the sort of improbable being devised by a Romantic poet:

She was a gordian shape of dazzling hue,  
Vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue;  
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,  
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barr'd;  
And full of silver moon, that, as she breathed,

Dissolv'd, or brighter shone, or interwreathed  
Their lustres with the gloomier tapestries—  
So rainbow-sided, touch'd with miseries,  
She seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf,  
Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self.  
Upon her crest she wore a wannish fire  
Sprinkled with stars, like Ariadne's tiar:  
Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet!

She had a woman's mouth with all its pearls complete . . . (*Lamia*, 1.47-60)

Keats's picture of Lamia isn't an exact description of a chameleon, but it captures something of the chameleon's glint, evasive power, metamorphic fury, and capacity to become invisible through sheer garishness. Lamia seems a coming-to-expression of every process of desire and terror, an embodiment of imagination transshifting through the whole range of its objects; and, in a famous letter, Keats explicitly equated poet and chameleon:

As to the poetical Character itself [. . .] it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—it has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosop[h]er, delights the camelion Poet. (To Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818)

The chameleon is nearly the ideal image for the Romantic poet, and sums up most of the grand metaphors: it seems to tremble in the wind, like Coleridge's Eolian harp; it iridesces while unseen, like Shelley's glowworm; like Blake's Albion before the fall of man, its eyes, not recessed into sockets, have a 360 degree range of motion; and it plucks quick elusive things out of the air, like the faculty of imagination itself. Like a poet its whole life seems concentrated in its mouth, and its thick, muscular, foot-long tongue is capable of prodigy.

## 2.

For Keats, the chameleon represented the poet as histrion, able to foresuffer, fore-enjoy, any conceivable role. But for Yeats, the chameleon was, it seems, the poet's chief enemy, blurring and smearing the luminous images beheld in vision, garbling every attempt at speech. A chapter of Yeats's autobiographical book *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922) is called "Hodos Chameliontos"—that is, the Chameleon Road, the path of poetic error; there Yeats vividly describes a condition of imaginative paralysis caused by venturing too far, too deeply, into the domain of occult symbols. First Yeats sketches his early hope of founding a "mystical Order" at Castle Rock, a small island in a lake, where the initiates might "establish mysteries like those of Eleusis and Samothrace; and for ten years to come my most impassioned thought was a vain attempt to find philosophy and to create ritual for that Order"; perhaps "invisible gates would open as they opened for Blake, for Swedenborg," and the initiates would forever consecrate the landscape of Ireland as a topography of symbols, symbols with both pagan and Christian meaning (*Autobiography*, pp. 169-70). As Yeats continues his reminiscence, he thinks of the poems he wrote in connection with the Castle Rock project, and quotes some lines from "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time":

With a rhythm that still echoed Morris I prayed to the Red Rose, to Intellectual Beauty:  
Come near, come near, come near—ah, leave me still

A little space for the Rose-breath to fill,  
Lest I no more hear common things . . .  
But seek alone to hear the strange things said  
By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,  
And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.

I do not remember what I meant by “the bright hearts,” but a little later I wrote of Spirits “with mirrors in their hearts.”

My rituals were not to be made deliberately, like a poem, but all got by that method Mathers had explained to me, and with this hope I plunged without a clue into a labyrinth of images, into that labyrinth that we are warned against in those *Oracles* which antiquity has attributed to Zoroaster, but modern scholarship to some Alexandrian poet. “Stoop not down to the darkly splendid world wherein lieth continually a faithless depth and Hades wrapped in cloud, delighting in unintelligible images.” (*Autobiography*, p. 170)

I will have something to say later about those spirits “with mirrors in their hearts,” but for the moment we must try to discover just where you go when you go down the Chameleon Road.

Zoroaster’s oracle appears twice in Yeats’s public utterances. The first time is in his essay “Swedenborg, Mediums, and the Desolate Places” (1914), though here he speaks not of the chameleon but of the god Proteus:

We speak, it may be, of the Proteus of antiquity, which has to be held or it will refuse its prophecy, and there are many warnings in our ears. “Stoop not down,” says the Chaldean Oracle, “to the darkly splendid world wherein continually lieth a faithless depth and Hades wrapped in cloud, delighting in unintelligible images,” and amid that caprice, among those clouds, there is always legerdemain; we juggle, or lose our money, with the same pack of cards that may reveal the future. (*Explorations*, p. 57)

Yeats goes on to discuss the magician Houdin (from whom Houdini borrowed his name) and the inextricability of true occultism from the arts of charlatans and prestidigitators of every sort. Here it seems that the Chameleon Road is simply the road of lies, a detour into mirage and false-bottomed hats from the narrow path of valid evocation of the world that lies beyond our world. But the Chameleon Road of *The Trembling of the Veil* seems to pertain not to lies but to overly seductive truths, truths that overwhelm the mind’s capacity to assimilate them.

When Yeats writes of deriving his rituals not “deliberately, like a poem” but by Mathers’s method, he is referring to an earlier passage in *The Trembling of the Veil*. Macgregor Mathers—a quixotic, war-obsessed visionary—advocated a method of influencing thought and reality by meditation on symbols: for example, when Mathers walked through a field of sheep he said “‘Look at the sheep. I am going to imagine myself a ram,’ and at once the sheep ran after him”; when Yeats closed his eyes and Mathers held a cardboard symbol to Yeats’s head, “there arose before me mental images that I could not control: a desert and black Titan raising himself up by his two hands from the middle of a heap of ancient ruins. Mathers explained that I had seen a being of the order of Salamanders because he had shown me their symbol” (*Autobiography*, p. 125). Like Proteus, like Keats’s chameleon poet, Mathers was so negatively capable that he could transform himself into a ram in the imagination of a flock of sheep; he was even able to help Yeats to become an amphibian, moving effortlessly from the world of common experience to an intensified primeval realm of higher meanings. According to old lore, the

salamander could walk unhurt through the midst of flames; and the Chameleon Road seems to lead to a burnt-up landscape where hair-raising black presences are figured against a general evacuation of things.

Above all, Mathers's method, far from being deliberate, is wholly involuntary. The black Titan rears up in the mind less as a reverie than as a seizure. Just as André Breton, ten years after Yeats, would describe the goal of Surrealism as convulsive beauty, so Yeats seems to cultivate trance for the sake of some unpredictable spasm of imagery. But Yeats, at least in his youth and middle age, was no Surrealist: far from remaining content with the unintelligible and disconnected, Yeats worked hard to write poems that discipline and organize the pictures evoked by trance: the black Titan in the desert was unavailable for poetry until Yeats fitted it into a system, transformed it into (say) the sphinx-Antichrist of "The Second Coming." What Yeats wanted was a road down which he could walk until he plucked some miracle; then he wanted to return to ordinary life and logic, in order to build a verbal cage or vitrine for the miracle. The danger of the Hodos Chameliontos was that it might be a one-way street, leading into some realm beyond words, beyond art, beyond the event horizon of the universe, where the poet could only gesticulate vainly and gibber a tongue men do not know. Yeats wrote in 1898 that the "mystic is not the greatest of artists, because his imagination is too great to be bounded by a picture or a song" (*Essays and Introductions*, p. 150). By following the Chameleon Road, Yeats might become so mighty in imagination that he would render himself incapable of poetry, incapable of being human. The Chameleon Road may lead to a sort of empty apotheosis, just as Keats, at the end of the fragment of *Hyperion*, describes the paroxysm in which shrieking Apollo turns into a god—but then Keats breaks off, unable to continue the poem. The overstimulated imagination may collapse into catatonia.

### 3.

The most compelling examples I know of Yeats's frustrations with the Hodos Chameliontos can be found in the publication history of Yeats's plays. As a dramatist Yeats shows a strong inclination to plunge madly down the Chameleon Road, but then to repent and withdraw—to inch his way backward to some more manageable sort of poetics. For example, in the 1892 text of *The Countess Kathleen*—Kathleen spelled with a *K*—two devils summon a procession of shapelessnesses:

*First Merchant.* [ . . . ] Hither, tevishes,  
 Who mourn among the scenery of your sins,  
 Turning to animal and reptile forms  
 —The visages of passions. Hither, sowlths;  
 Leave marshes and the reed-encumbered pools,  
 You shapeless fires, that once were souls of men,  
 And are a fading wretchedness. [ . . . ]

*Second Merchant.* I hear  
 A crying as of storm-distempered reed.  
 And now the sowlths and tevishes rise up  
 Like steam out of the earth; the grass and leaves  
 Shiver and shrink away and sway about,  
 Blown by unnatural gusts of ice-cold air.

*First Merchant.* One they are with all forces of decay—  
Ill longings, madness, lightning, hail and drouth.

[*The darkness fills with vague forms, some animal shapes, some human, some mere nebulous lights.*]

Come you—and you—and you, and lift these bags.

*A Tevish.* We are too violent—mere shapes of storms.

*First Merchant.* Come you—and you—and you, and lift these bags.

*A Sowlth.* We are too feeble, fading out of life.

(ll. 436-42, 443-54; *Variorum Plays*, pp. 92-96)

*The Countess Kathleen* comprises several different classes of personages: (1) normal human beings; (2) demons and angels that can assume plausibly human shape; (3) monsters, such as the man with ears like “wings of bats” and the man with “no mouth, / Nor ears, nor eyes—his face a wall of flesh” (ll. 6, 8-9; *Variorum Plays*, p. 6); and (4) these sowlths and tevishes, dissolute creatures unable to constitute themselves properly, will-o’-the-wisps, reptiles made of cloudy light, chameleons of the void. But in revising the play, Yeats deleted this fourth class, as if he had ventured too far in the direction of the dim, the unintelligible, the unstageworthy.

*On Baile’s Strand* offers a still better example of compulsive vagrancies of imagination.

In the first printing (1903), the Blind Man makes the following speech to the Fool:

I will tell you about Aoife’s country. It is full of wonders. There are a great many Queens there who can change themselves into wolves and into swine and into white hares, and when they are in their own shape they are stronger than almost any man; and there are young men there who have cat’s eyes and if a bird chirrup or a mouse squeak they cannot keep them shut even though it is bed-time and they sleepy; and listen, for this is a great wonder, a very great wonder, there is a long narrow bridge, and when anybody goes to cross it, that the Queens do not like, it flies up as this bench would if you were to sit on the end of it. Everybody who goes there to learn skill in arms has to cross it. It was in that country too that Cuchullain got his spear made out of dragon bones. There were two dragons fighting in the foam of the sea, and their grandam was the moon, and six Queens came along the shore. [. . .] Wait till you hear what the six Queens did. Their right hands were all made of silver. (ll. 120-137, 139-41; *Variorum Plays*, pp. 468-70)

The Fool pouts, “I won’t listen to your story [. . .] I will have my dinner first” (ll. 138, 142), but the narrative seems well designed to amuse a half-wit, with its long string of preposterous inconsequential events. Yeats once wrote a story called “Dreams that have no Moral,” which told of “a time when nothing had consequences, when even if you were killed, if only you had a good heart, somebody would bring you to life again with the touch of a rod” (*Mythologies*, p. 125); and the Blind Man’s outspray of parataxis induces the listener into an twinkly infantile domain in which the moon gives birth to dragons and dragons turn into spears and queens transform themselves into wolves and into swine and into silver and  $x$  keeps effortlessly metamorphosing into  $y$ , for every  $x$  and every  $y$ . This speech is one of the triumphs of the chameleon that lurks inside Yeats’s imagination, for the images shift and slosh and sly about in every direction, decompose into a soupy murk of words. Yeats presents the whole evocation as a fairy tale devised to soothe and distract an obstreperous fool; and yet even in this humble state the speech may have made Yeats uneasy, for he deleted it from later printings.

Other deleted passages from *On Baile’s Strand* also display the pen in the chameleon’s

paw. At one point Conchubar suddenly remarks,  
Cuchullain is looking in his shield;  
It may be that the pale riders of the wind  
Throw pictures on it, or that Mananan,  
His father's friend and sometime fosterer,  
Foreknower of all things, has cast a vision,  
Out of the cold dark of the rich sea,  
Foretelling Emain's greatness.

*Cuchullain.* No, great king,  
I looked on this out of mere idleness,  
Imagining a woman that I loved. (ll. 299-307; *Variorum Plays*, pp. 494-96)

And later, when Cuchullain offers a gift a friendship to the young challenger who will turn out to be his son, he spreads out an embroidered cloak:

Cloidna embroidered these bird wings, but Fand  
Made all these little golden eyes with the hairs  
That she had stolen out of Aengus' beard,  
And therefore none that has this cloak about him  
Is crossed in love. The heavy inlaid brooch

That Buan hammered has a merit too. (*Variorum Plays*, p. 511)

These passages, cut or drastically curtailed in the final text, illustrate the Celtic element in literature, the riot of intricate, helplessly self-generating details that might be compared to the knotwork illuminations in the Book of Kells, in which involved lines keep sprouting feet and arms and other body parts. A shield's blank surface will start to fill with pictures; a cloak will elaborate itself into a set of finely-wrought talismans. Homer might devote a good deal of imaginative energy to depicting the microcosm on Achilles' shield, but in a play, as opposed to an epic, there is considerable danger that the action will stagger to a halt, that all force will lose itself in the mellifluous names of gods and in a labyrinth of tall tales. In *The Countess Kathleen* we saw the chameleon clouding the play's lens with vaseline; in *On Baile's Strand* we see the chameleon asking us to attend, as if with a jeweler's loupe, to all sorts of small gorgeous extraneities. Every Irish myth configures itself against a dense, swelling background of other Irish myths, and there is some danger that the sheer pressure of untold stories may overwhelm the events in the foreground of the stage—that the painted background will fall forward and squash the actors.

The sea-queen-embroidered cloak is one of several tapestries that Yeats carefully excised from his dramatic canon. In *The Countess Kathleen* (with a *K*), old nurse Oona tries to distract Kathleen from her anxiety about the famine by pointing to a tapestry:

See you where Oisin and young Niam ride  
Wrapped in each other's arms, and where the Finians  
Follow their hounds along the fields of tapestry,  
How merry they lived once, yet men died then. (ll. 169-72; *Variorum Plays*, p. 44)

In *Diarmuid and Grania* (1901)—a whole deleted play, written in collaboration with George Moore—Grania imagines a tapestry that she might have spun,

a grass green web on which to embroider my wanderings with Diarmuid among the woods. I should have been many years embroidering it, but when it was done and hung

round this room, I should have seen birds, beasts, and leaves which ever way I turned, and Diarmuid and myself wandering among them. (ll. 322-27; *Variorum Plays*, p. 1198)

The chameleon offers an uncontrollable profusion of images—but of flat images, static images, dead images, perhaps meaningless images. When Grania imagines herself transposed into a tapestry world, she is embarking on a two-dimensional mode of being, in effect trying to dwell in a documentary film of her life instead of actually living. The heady excess, the vertigo to be found in the far reaches of the Chameleon Road may dwindle into a strange, anti-dramatic condition of impoverishment; perhaps Houdini is, after all, an inevitable companion on the Chameleon Road, and vain trickery, verbal hijinks, always contaminate the wonders glimpsed on the way. Just as Yeats revised his poems by snipping out overwrought epithets, by turning *the curd-pale moon* into *the brilliant moon* in order to make the central image conspicuous against a background of “dull and numb” words (*Autobiography*, p. 291), so he revised his plays by concentrating on the swift development of a single plot instead of recessing his actors into the warp and woof of a million-figured tapestry, the whole Irish canon.

## 4.

Nevertheless, Yeats understood every one of his plays, whether decorative or heroic or parabolic, as a tapestry. This is not surprising in the case of an overfigured play such as *The Countess Cathleen*, which (in its final text) begins with a direction specifying that the backdrop “should be painted in flat colour upon a gold or diapered sky,” and that “The scene should have the effect of missal painting” (*Variorum Plays*, p. 5); furthermore, Yeats criticized the 1892 version of his play as “ill-constructed, the dialogue turning aside at the lure of word or metaphor . . . It was not, nor is it now, more than a piece of tapestry” (*Autobiography*, p. 279). But it *is* surprising to learn that Yeats conceived *The Cat and the Moon* (1926) as a tapestry, since this play is a spare parable in which the relation of body to soul is symbolized by a blind beggar who carries a lame beggar on his back:

I have amused myself by imagining incidents and metaphors that are related to certain beliefs of mine as are the patterns upon a Persian carpet to some ancient faith or philosophy. [. . .] when the Saint mounts upon the back of the Lame Beggar he personifies a certain great spiritual event [. . .] I have altogether forgotten whether other parts of the fable have, as is very likely, a precise meaning, and that is natural, for I generally forget in contemplating my copy of an old Persian carpet that its winding and wandering vine had once that philosophical meaning, which has made it very interesting to Josef Stryzgowsky [*sic*] and was part of the religion of Zoroaster. (*Variorum Plays*, p. 805)

We recall that the origin of the Chameleon Road was (as William O’Donnell has shown, in *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats*, vol. V: *Later Essays*, ed. William O’Donnell, with assistance from Elizabeth Bergmann Loiseaux [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994]) a sentence from *The Chaldaean Oracles of Zoroaster*, no. 145, ed. Sapere Aude [William Wynn Westcott], vol. VI of the Collectanea Hermetica series (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1895), p. 46: “Stoop not down unto the Darkly-splendid world; wherein continually lieth a faithless Depth, and Hades wrapped in clouds, delighting in unintelligible images.” Yeats was uncertain that Persian prophet Zoroaster was the actual author of this sentence, but the association of Zoroaster, the rhythm of abstract symbolical ornament in Persian art, and the Chameleon Road was strong

in Yeats's mind: insofar as a poem or a play resembled a Persian carpet, a pullulation of half-natural or unnatural forms just barely constrained by a geometrical frame, to that extent it was the spoil of a voyage down the Chameleon Road. And since Yeats's knowledge of Persian art was chiefly derived from one source, *Origin of Christian Church Art: New Facts and Principles of Research*, tr. O. M. Dalton and H. J. Braunholtz (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1923) by the Austrian art historian Josef Strzygowski, we can look to Strzygowski for insight into the chameleon's work—into the convulsive background of the half-imagined that underlies every finite image.

Strzygowski argues that Christian art is the product of a dialectic between the representational tendencies of the South (such as Semitic-Hellenistic art) and the non-representational tendencies of North (such as Northern Persian and Turkish art)—this effort to understand art history as a dialectic, which so delighted Yeats, can also be seen in the work of other Germanic art historians of the age, such as Wilhelm Worringer and Heinrich Wölfflin. To Strzygowski, the Semitic-Hellenistic South is a “hot-house culture” (*Origin*, p. 112), and its aim of accurate representation of the physical world has a certain cloistered, perhaps overcultivated and materialistic quality; Strzygowski is more excited by the anti-representational North, with its ornamental motifs of “vine-scrolls, pomegranates, geometrical scrolls, and interlacings of bands channelled with two or with three slant-cut grooves, all developed almost to the point at which Islam took them up to form polygonal designs, or, constraining the vine-scroll to geometrical law, the so-called arabesque” (*Origin*, p. 112). The tone of this passage is sober, but there's a sort of suppressed glee at the sheer plenty of imagination: designs multiply dizzyingly, dizzyingly mutate into other designs, with something of the disturbing abundance of nature itself, as if nature were better displayed by an art that displayed its processes of generation than by an art that displayed its outer husks. Strzygowski stresses again and again that this Northern style originated among “nomad herdsmen,” suggesting that direct experience of life, not hothouse experience of libraries, governed its themes and techniques.

The non-representational Northern style, he goes on to argue, derives its symbolic force from the Zoroastrian religion:

At the very heart of Aryan piety on Iranian soil lay the idea of Hvarenah. [. . .] A comprehensive description of its nature is given in a long hymn in the Avesta [the Zoroastrian Bible]. [. . .] Hvarenah is the power that makes running water gush from springs, plants sprout from the soil, winds blow the clouds, and men come to birth. It governs the courses of sun, moon, and stars. Hvarenah therefore is that which permeates the whole countryside. [. . . Artistic expressions of Hvarenah landscapes] would not be representations in the strict sense, but compositions pieced together out of the elements enumerated above, mere symbols of nature, devoid of realism. (*Origin*, pp. 118-19)

The non-representational art of the Northern near-Asian peoples, then, is not a static expression of things, but a dynamic expression of the pulses and impulses that bring things into being and move things around—an early equivalent of those Futurist paintings in which Balla and Russolo depict radiation and sound-waves, naked physical force—the force that through the green fuse drives the flower—instead of finite objects. Indeed the existence of Futurism may have made it easier for Strzygowski to think such thoughts about the purposes of Northern Persian art.

When Yeats read *Origin of Christian Church Art*, he was sensitive to the vertigo, even the nausea, that might proceed from long contemplation of

that decoration that seems to undermine our self-control, and is it seems of Persian origin, and has for its appropriate symbol a vine whose tendrils climb everywhere and display among their leaves all those strange images of bird and beast, those forms that represent no creature eye has ever seen, yet are begotten one upon the other as if they were themselves living creatures. (*A Vision* [1925], p. 192)

This passage from *A Vision* is one of Yeats's clearest statements of the rhythm that seems to govern the deepest processes of his imagination: every finite image, every *Gestalt*, arises out of a blooming buzzing confusion, and eventually recedes back into it. In the poem "Byzantium" (1930), for example, the architecture of the city seems a somewhat fragile dyke against the circumambient chaos:

Marbles of the dancing floor  
Break bitter furies of complexity,  
Those images that yet  
Fresh images beget,  
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

Early drafts of the poem read "blind images that yet / Blinder images beget" (Stallworthy, *Between the Lines*, p. 127), providing an even stronger sense of the aimless convulsions of aborted or hacked-apart images that provide a background, a source, for the poet's triumphant display of verbal objects. Behind the mummy, the golden bird, Hagia Sophia itself, there is a storm of failed images, unimaged images, a dark seethe.

The chameleon, then, lies at one pole of a dialectic of image-generating process. Though Yeats has to restrain himself from going too far down the Chameleon Road, it is possible that, without the challenge, the temptation, of such audacity Yeats's poetic imagery would be shrunken, overlegible; the poet needs some dim phosphor of strangeness to impart depth and fascination to the images. At one pole, then, the familiar, the effortlessly interpreted: the anchor, the skull-and-crossbones, the red traffic light—the sign or symbol that exhausts its meaning so readily that the mind doesn't stop to ponder it; at the other pole, the chameleon, "commotion and the pure forms of commotion . . . Matrix of surds" (to quote Beckett's phrase, *Murphy*, p. 110). In the middle are the sorts of images that appeal to Yeats, images that hover on the edge of construing without either utterly baffling us or yielding themselves completely to intellection; according to Yeats's catalogue of 1899,

The image—a cross, a man preaching in the wilderness, a dancing Salome, a lily in a girl's hand, a flame leaping, a globe with wings, a pale sunset over still waters—is an eternal act; but our understandings are temporal and understand but a little at a time. (*Variorum Poems*, p. 807)

The eternity of the image is partly a function of the chameleon's power to mystify, to leave inchoate, for if we could understand the image all at once we wouldn't be tempted to continue to contemplate it. An eternal image must display some trace of the incomprehensible—a shape that somehow alludes to shapelessness.

Yeats's career shows a continual oscillation between the search for the formal and the search for the formless, as he himself confessed in 1903: "I have always felt that the soul has two movements primarily: one to transcend forms, and the other to create forms. . . . I think I have to some extent got weary of that wild God Dionysus, and I am hoping that the Far-Darter [Apollo, the god of forms] will come in his place" (*Letters*, p. 403). Yeats wrote this letter after a close

reading of Nietzsche, and the Dionysus of *The Birth of Tragedy*, the god of ecstatic dismemberment, becomes a figure glimpsed somewhere near the terminus of the Chameleon Road. The most important sequel to Dionysus in Nietzsche's philosophy was the title role in *Also sprach Zarathustra*, the prophet who shook the cosmos with laughter, who felt in his body the midnight of the human race. Zarathustra, of course, is simply another name for Zoroaster; and Nietzsche's Zarathustra, and the oracle attributed to Zoroaster about the *Hodos Chameliontos*, and the giddy intervolvings of Persian designs which, according to Strzygowski, speak truths about the Zoroastrian religion—all these a part of a single complex in Yeats's imagination, a complex concerning Yeats's hopes and fears for a poetry that reverberates with echoes of the abyss. Even Freudian psychology plays a small part, along with Nietzsche and occult oracles, in this conjuring of a delirium beyond the power of the conscious mind, as we can see in a note that Yeats published in 1934 after a performance of his play *Fighting the Waves*:

A Dublin journalist showed his scorn for "the new paganism" by writing: "Mr. Yeats' play is not really original, for something of the kind doubtless existed in Ancient Babylon," but a German psycho-analyst has traced the "mother complex" back to our mother the sea—after all Babylon was a modern inland city—to the loneliness of the first crab or crayfish that climbed ashore and turned lizard . . . (*Variorum Plays*, p. 571)

Just as the poem "Byzantium" ends with an evocation of the sea that threatens to drown all the miracles of the city, so it seems that all finite forms proceed from "our mother the sea," and yearn in their solitude to be re-dissolved into the indeterminate. The lizard stands on the ocean's brink, encouraging the poet to surrender his images—not to fight the waves, but to yield to them. From the chameleon's point of view every fixed form is inert, dead, and all prestige accrues to frog-spawn, copulation in the foam, the whole sea of sea-changes. The sexual instinct itself seems to impel the poet along the Chameleon Road.

## 5.

Yeats, then, could never either accept the oracle's advice or reject it: the delight in unintelligible images was an indispensable component of his art, but a component about which he was deeply uneasy. Yeats feared that the chameleon would reduce his poetic imagery to puddles, and make his dramatic plots sputter into lists of hazy names. And yet without some fringe of the impredicable, some Gothic eeriness, Yeats's work might grow reasonable and trivial.

Yeats's difficulty in assessing the value of nebulous, confusing, perhaps nonsensical texts was a late development of a problem that confronted the whole Romantic movement. A great many Romantic poets, starting with Blake, faced charges of willful obscurity. One poet who found obscurity a particularly comfortable, well-cushioned domain was Coleridge, who quoted with approval, in a lecture on Shakespeare, Romeo's string of oxymorons ("Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health—*Romeo and Juliet* 1.1.180), and commented that here we have

an effort of the mind, when it would describe what it cannot satisfy itself with the description of, to reconcile opposites and qualify contradiction, leaving a middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other, when it is, as it were, hovering between images. As soon as it is fixed on one image, it becomes understanding; but while it is unfixed and wavering between them, attaching itself permanently to none,

it is imagination. [. . .] The grandest efforts of poetry are where the imagination is called forth, not to produce a distinct form, but a strong working of the mind, still offering what is repelled, and again creating what is again rejected; the result being what the poet wishes to impress, namely, the substitution of a sublime feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image. (*Lectures on Shakespeare VII*, 1811-12)

For Coleridge, then, the only road worth traveling on is the chameleon's: the unintelligibility of an image is a sign of its poetic viability, almost its sanctity, and many of Coleridge's most stunning later poems, such as "Limbo" or "Ne Plus Ultra," present loomings of erased or untenable images, in the almost complete absence of normal textual purchases for the reader's mind to grip. Coleridge's famous distinction between Imagination and Fancy is also relevant to the problem of evaluating the chameleon:

The primary IMAGINATION I hold to be the living power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former co-existing with the conscious will [. . .] It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create [. . .] it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

FANCY, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

(*Biographia Literaria*, pp. 304-5)

Imagination is a kind of lysol that eats away at the outline of every determinate thing; Fancy, by contrast, is a whimsical rearrangement of determinate things. Insofar as Yeats rejects the Chameleon Road, the darkly splendid realm where Hades is wrapped in a cloud, he rejects Imagination in favor of Fancy. Yeats wants to eat his cake and have it too, in that he wants bottomless images that never give up all their potency, and yet he also wants images that have a simple rational meaning, images that can be justified and explicated within the economy of a particular text.

For an example of this tension between Imagination and Fancy, between the chameleon and normal semiosis, let us look back to the original passage from *The Trembling of the Veil* where Yeats cites the oracle about the Hodos Chameliontos. You remember that he adduces some lines from "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," and then comments, "I do not remember what I meant by 'the bright hearts,' but a little later I wrote of Spirits 'with mirrors in their hearts.'" The mirror-hearts in fact appear in the story "Hanrahan's Vision"—indeed Yeats set about revising his early stories not long after he wrote *The Trembling of the Veil*. The passage in which the mirror-hearts appear is of great interest to students of the chameleon:

The mist spread out before him now like a deserted sea washing to the mountain with long grey waves, but while he was looking at it, it began to fill again with a flowing broken witless life that was part of itself, and arms, and pale heads covered with tossing hair appeared in the greyness. It rose higher and higher till it was level with the edge of the steep rock, and then the shapes seemed all but solid, and that new procession half lost in mist passed very slowly with uneven steps, and in the midst of each shadow there was

something shining in the starlight. They came nearer and nearer, and Hanrahan saw that they also were lovers, and that they had heart-shaped mirrors instead of hearts, and they were looking and ever looking on their own face in one another's mirrors. [. . .]

"Tell me who are those that have passed by," said Hanrahan.

"Those [. . .] that [. . .] have the mirrors in their hearts, are not put in songs by the poets, because they sought only to triumph one over the other, and so to prove their strength and beauty, and out of this they made a kind of love. [. . .]" (*Mythologies*, pp. 249-51)

At the beginning of this passage the gray mist slowly resolves into the streaming hair, the vague tangled bodies of fantastic lovers out of old stories—once again Yeats seems to be walking backwards up the Chameleon Road, receding from "flowing broken witless life" into something more positive and definite. Indeed Yeats walks into sheer allegory, a cold moral pageant patiently glossed by Hanrahan's interlocutor, the ghost of the traitor Dervorgilla. Yeats followed Blake in scorning allegory as a pickling process for making canned interpretations—in 1898 he quoted Blake's line, "Fable or Allegory is formed by the daughters of Memory" (*Essays and Introductions*, p. 146); and this ploddingly rationalized vision of bad lovers would seem to deserve the same censure. In his later work Yeats rarely descended to such heavy explicating of his imagery, but the very premise of *A Vision* is the need to put images into intelligible arrangements, to construct a scaffold of reason that supports and vindicates the disconnected symbol-pictures that imagination continually generates. In other words, in order to neutralize some of the chameleon's monstrous powers of invention, Yeats had to allegorize, to confabulate, to descend from poet to critic.

The inner workings of this process of twisting Imagination into Fancy can be shown by some occult documents preliminary to *A Vision*. Beginning on 9 January 1918 Mrs. Yeats's spirit-controls started urging Yeats to "make *one* list with *all* emblems descriptions phases masks genius & so on" (*The Making of Yeats's 'A Vision'* II 400), and for a good while afterwards Yeats struggled to make a table of emblems—that is, Tarot-like pictograms that would illustrate the twenty-eight personality types correlated to the phases of the moon. Because each phase displayed a varying quality of internal tension between self and anti-self—between what you are and what you want to be—each phase's emblem tended to display self-division, self-laceration, even self-mutilation, as these examples from the second lunar quadrant will show:

(8) a man across abyss hands in beak of bird of prey feet in mouth of bear. water below.

(9) leopard. Eagle on head plucking out its eyes

(10) a man with mouth forced open by gag & tongue torn out

(11) a sword cleaving through skull

(12) sword cutting hand in two

(13) man hanging over pool

(14) leopard springing (*The Making of Yeats's 'A Vision'* II 401)

The items speed by so quickly, so abstractly, so brutally, that the list has something of the quality of an Eisenstein montage of battle: not a grasping but a gasping, a sense of overwhelm. As in the later days in de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*, the imagination seems so fecund with lascivious horror that it can't stop even for a moment to pause or elaborate—we have what Coleridge calls a hovering between images, not a clear depiction. But this sense of potency and pressure of mind chills into something less appealing when Yeats starts to query, to gloss, to rationalize, as he

does concerning Phase 12, the phase of the hero struggling in frenzy to realize a vision of his inner being—the phase of Nietzsche and Ezra Pound:

Why is the sword cutting hand in two? The prevention of artistic expression by contest in dual nature of Antithetical. . . .

Ezra is example.

dual nature of Anti one half completed before beauty other half after but both united in beauty.

Sword is one half—hand other.

Sword = Wrath

Hand = beauty. (*The Making of Yeats's 'A Vision' II 402*)

Yeats grows uneasy with the chameleon's fluctuations and wild iridescences, and hopes to tame Imagination into an array of univocal determinations of meaning. But such tables of the mechanical operations of the spirit also fail to satisfy, and Yeats eventually abandons the whole project of producing visual emblems for the phases of the moon. Imagination and Fancy alike seem to exasperate him: on one hand a tremendous and obscure hoo-haa; on the other a frigid mnemonic.

## 6.

Sometimes you encounter people who seem like human chameleons. One example is Fred Astaire—a goggle-eyed man, at once inconspicuous and dazzling. I've never much enjoyed the big dance routines in his movie musicals—those tours de force that seem so effortlessly effortless; but I've always been in awe of the brief bits of pseudo-improvisation with which the grand spectacles sometimes begin: when, for example, Fred picks up the hatrack, turns it around, and glimpses its possibilities as a dummy woman. Such moments are among the finest simulations of the inspired instant, the sudden access of creative impulse, that I've ever seen. Yeats himself was much engaged with such seizures of working imagination, when the Muse strikes at all once:

That the topless towers be burnt  
And men recall that face,  
Move most gently if move you must  
In this lonely place.  
She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,  
That nobody looks; her feet  
Practise a tinker shuffle  
Picked up on the street.

*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream  
Her mind moves upon silence.* (“Long-legged Fly”)

Sometimes Yeats speaks of a Chameleon Road, sometimes of a waterbug dimpling its way on the surface of a stream; but in either case he means a naked creativity, either uncontrolled or not-yet-controlled. The burning of Troy, the crossing of the Rubicon, the breathing of life into Adam on the ceiling of Sistine Chapel, the composing of Yeats's poems: all these achievements result from a stooping down to a darkly splendid world, from a delighting in unintelligible images—since in intelligible images there's nothing tingly, nothing hairraising to be found. Like the stilt-

walker in the late poem "High Talk," Yeats stalks on through a terrible novelty, startling the barnacle geese and the sea-horses and all the other fauna of imagination, shapeshifting, wondrous, almost completely without meaning.

High Talk

Vine fills space Origin 122

Merlin's juggleries AV 287