Aesthetic Experience, Religion, and Economic Materialism in Yeats

The main argument in the previous chapters was that for James Joyce and W. B. Yeats the creative process is a form of aesthetic experience of self-recreation which is simultaneously a form of labour, a form of political experience, and a form of religious experience. New identities unfold from an epiphanic experience triggered through the invocation of the powers of art to reveal what is there to be seen in one’s relations to the world that can only be conceived in aesthetic language. There occurs a transubstantiation of the mundane self through this epiphany, achieved in the coalescence of the social self and the aesthetic self glimpsed in poetic vision or felt in ‘the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea’ (Joyce, 1965, p. 233). In practical terms, this transubstantiation triggers a transformation of the highly personal aesthetic experience into social attitudes. A specific aesthetic experience lived in a state of mind manifesting faith, belief, and enthusiasm in Yeats’s case, or faithlessness, disbelief/unbelief, and irony in Joyce’s case, informs one’s specific position in relation to the social, material world.

In the perspective of the present study, aesthetic experience is broadly defined as a poetic state of mind in opposition to the prosaic states of mind engendered by ideology. A prosaic or ideologically conditioned state of mind is the state of mind in which one rationalises experience by giving it measure in time and space in order to make it reproducible. It should not be confused with the state of mind engendered by prose poetry, or by the creative heteroglossia of novels in prose which, in being a creative state of mind, is not reproducible. The prosaic state of mind is kindred with the state of mind of a worker performing routine tasks of production. In Georges Sorel’s words, it is the state of mind of one ‘who is mainly successful in the unending reproduction of models
which are not his own'; by contrast: ‘The inventor is an artist who wears himself out in pursuing the realisation of ends which practical people generally declare absurd; and who, if he has made any important discovery is often supposed to be mad; practical people thus resemble artisans’ (Sorel, 2004, p. 243). In the experience of a prosaic state of mind thus defined, ideology can mobilise faith, belief, and enthusiasm because it can be safeguarded by social myths, which secure a poetic dimension of that experience, however diminished. The subjective experience of a prosaic state of mind presupposes a measure of faith, belief, enthusiasm, or their opposites in their lowly, as opposed to sublime, manifestation, but these states of mind are reproducible, with ideology the means of their reproduction. In Yeatsean perspective, a prosaic state of mind as defined in this study is characteristic of unpoetic practical men (to be distinguished from Sorel’s practical visionaries), sentimentalists ‘who believe in money, in position, in a marriage bell, and whose understanding of happiness is to be so busy whether at work or at play, that all is forgotten but the momentary aim’; by contrast, a Yeatsean poetic state of mind is a state of ecstasy: ‘for the awakening, for the vision, for the revelation of reality, tradition offers us a different word – ecstasy’ (Yeats, 2003a, p. 331). Sorel’s practical visionaries can be said to share a similarly ecstatic experience when they ‘wear themselves out’ in creative pursuits. In the prosaic state of mind conditioned by ideology, creative ecstasy is diminished into sentimentalism.

That state of ecstasy is explored in many of Yeats’s poems. An example relevant to the present discussion is ‘Wisdom’ from *The Tower* (1928). The poem suggests that the poetic representation of Jesus’ story as employed by the institution of the Church is enmeshed in a fundamentally prosaic state of mind. This institutionalised poetic-sentimental experience safeguards Church ideology:

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The true faith discovered was
When painted panel, statuary,
Glass-mosaic, window-glass,
Amended what was told awry
By some peasant gospeller;
Swept the sawdust from the floor
Of that working-carpenter. (Yeats, 1993, p. 219)
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The phrase ‘true faith’ is an ironic reference to Church ideology. The work of ordinary artisans obedient to Church ideology amends the true story of Jesus’ conception, seen by the Church as being told awry, amiss