

Yeats's "Veronica's Napkin" and the Great Year

The Heavenly Circuit; Berenice's Hair;
Tent-pole of Eden; the tent's drapery;
Symbolical glory of the earth and air!
The Father and His angelic hierarchy
That made the magnitude and glory there
Stood in the circuit of a needle's eye.

Some found a different pole, and where it stood
A pattern on a napkin dipped in blood. (VP 483)

Introduction

With the exception of Russell Murphy, who has written several articles devoted mainly to the short verse "Veronica's Napkin," that poem has attracted little attention from critics, and when it has done has mainly been related to the opposition between the states of transcendence and immanence. Thus Richard Ellmann writes of it: "This poem contrasts two kinds of religion, or art, or thought, the first based on transcendence of life, the second on participation in it."¹ In his most recent article, Murphy himself has speculated that Veronica's Napkin may have been associated by Yeats with the *Mandyion*, or image of Christ's face on a towel which appeared to Abgar of Edessa in the first century as a present from Christ himself: a possibility compounded by the fact that Veronica is in various legends a Princess of Edessa.² Noting that the *Mandyion* was brought to Constantinople in 944 CE, he sees the poem as being related to "Byzantium" through the idea of "Hades'

Bobbin bound in mummy cloth” being Veronica’s napkin, a view supported by the fact that the Turin shroud may well be the *Mandylion* due to the sacking of Byzantium in 1204.³ However, Murphy also partially condones Ellmann’s position that the first is an entirely transcendent pole, an image of “how we would imagine heaven to be,” and the second more corporeal and a “mortal extremity from the everlasting joy of Eden.”⁴ While ontology is certainly an important part of the poem’s meaning, it also makes use of astronomy and, I would argue, the precession of the equinoxes, a concept which was intriguing Yeats mightily at the time when he wrote the poem, and bears relation to other poems like “Chosen” and “His Bargain.” Central to the poem’s meaning is the concept of heavenly movement in a geocentric universe, and it is to this factor that this chapter will be mainly dedicated..

In “Veronica’s Napkin,” apart from the somewhat startling inclusion of Berenice’s Hair – presumably both the myth of Ptolemy III’s wife, who sacrificed her hair for love of her husband, and the constellation which resulted from this sacrifice - we have two major metaphorical fields that are used to describe the heavens in a way which appears to collapse them, the stars and the planets included, into a microcosm. The first is the “[t]ent-pole of Eden” and “the tent’s drapery” – an image which Jeffares equates with the pole star rising above Eden (*NC 277*), but could just as easily be related to the Tree of Knowledge, not least because the later “pole” to which it is compared is the cross of Jesus Christ, which traditionally has also been described metaphorically as a tree. The “tent’s drapery” would appear to be either the foliage of the tree around the trunk or tent-pole, or else even the stars themselves, since there is a potential equation with the “heavenly circuit” mentioned earlier – a position which Murphy takes as well.⁵ If so, the heavens have been reduced by

this image to something of smaller perspective and artificial construction through metaphors involving fabric: the drapery inside a tent and the shroud which was used to clean Christ on the *via Dolorosa*.

The second metaphorical field is the comparison of the “heavenly circuit” to a “needle’s eye,” which again serves the purpose of collapsing the macrocosm of the “heavenly circuit.” This is a phrase which, as almost every critic has noticed, was later used in “Supernatural Songs” xi (1936). While Jeffares writes that the phrase “heavenly circuit” is taken from the title of one of Plotinus’s essays in the *Enneads*, as translated by McKenna (NC 277), Yeats was also already acquainted with many other sources for the movement of the eighth sphere, or stellatum, from the likes of Franz Cumont, Hasting’s *Encyclopedia* and E. M. Plunkett (CW14 438n9; 425nn10-13; 185).⁶ He was in particular interested in computing the movement of the Vernal Equinox which had been one of the ways of measuring the Great Year (*Ex* 395), as used by the likes of Ptolemy, Nemesius and Cicero, following the discovery by Hipparchus that the Vernal Equinox occurred at a different constellation every two thousand years or so (CW14 182, 184).

With reference to the second original manuscript version of “Veronica’s Napkin” in “Rapallo Notebook D,” I shall be looking first at what both the image of the tent-pole and its drapery can be interpreted as meaning, how this further relates to Yeats’s concept of the Great Year in *A Vision*, and what the exact significance of reducing the heavenly circuit to a needle’s eye might mean in relation to the ontology which Yeats expresses there.

The Tent-Pole and the Needle’s Eye

In referring to the “[t]ent-pole of Eden” and the “tent’s drapery,” with what appears to be an allusion to the constellations of the “heavenly circuit” (including Berenice’s hair), Yeats is using a metaphor which employs fabric to symbolize the cosmos: a technique which he also utilizes in two other poems of the post-automatic script era of his writing. One is “The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid” (1924), in which the poet Kusta Ben Luka gives orders to an unspecified emissary to “Carry this letter/ Through the great gallery of the Treasure House/ Where banners of the Caliph hang, night-coloured/ But brilliant as the night’s embroidery” (VP 461, ll. 4- 7). Ben Luka further instructs him to hide it in the “Treatise of Parmenides” (l. 16), so that some “learned man” (l. 20) will find it, and discover a “mystery” entertained only otherwise by the “wild Bedouin,” they being “wanderers that welcomed in their tents/ What Harun Al-Rashid, occupied/ With Persian embassy or Grecian war, /Must needs neglect” (VP 462 l. 22, ll 23-26). The mystery is an allusion to the oppositional system of *A Vision* (the poem included in the original version of that work (1925), and, as Jeffares notes, is really a poem symbolizing Yeats’s marriage to George and the subsequent automatic script [NC 445]), the actual source for the system of *A Vision*. In the second edition of that book Yeats also describes how the gyre symbols were known to Arab tribesmen called the “Judwalis” or “Diagrammatists,” whose “children were taught dances which leave upon the sand traces full of symbolical meaning.”

Yeats had compared the heavens to “embroidery” before either of these poems, most notably in the much earlier poem “He [Aedh] wishes for the Cloths of Heaven,” in which the speaker longs for “the heavens’ embroidered cloths” (VP 177, l. 1). However, in “Veronica’s Napkin” the metaphor is in a poem which alludes to a “mystery” that is really a phasal, temporal system (that of *A Vision*), in which the spheres and stars of the heavens

are also part of a measurement of time, both through the phases of the moon, and the movement of the equinoctial point through the zodiac in what became the most macroscopic application of his antinomical system: the measurement of the Great Year through the precession of the equinoxes. This precession, first noted by Hipparchus, involves the realization that the equinoctial point at the Vernal Equinox will occur in a new sign of the zodiac every 2149 years, going from Taurus, to Aries, to Pisces (with the birth of Christ), and to Aquarius around the middle of our present century, with the equinoctial point moving backward through the zodiac rather than forward as it does in the 365-day year (it should be noted that these are standardized lengths used by astrologers and Calendrians, rather than related to the actual sizes of the constellations, which vary). As shall be explained later, Yeats divided up his 28 Phases of the moon into a further symbolism of twelve “Solar Months” to allow the Great Wheel to also symbolize this Great Year.

Another, later poem which also uses a metaphor of fabric when related to the heavens, although in a more displaced way, is “To Dorothy Wellesley” (1936), when the narrator addresses the poem’s titular subject as follows:

Stretch towards the moonless midnight of the trees,

As though that hand could reach to where they stand,

And they but famous old upholsteries

Delightful to the touch; tighten that hand

As though to draw them closer yet. (*VP* 579, ll. 1-5)

While the “upholsteries” here relate to the trees, they have in fact replaced the heavens, since the poem indicates later that the moon is in fact out (since the “Great Dane” “cannot bay the moon” [VP 579, l. 10]). Urging the mistress of the estate (we are told that “the horizon’s bought” [VP 579, l. 7]) to treat the wider landscape as though it were her surrounding furniture suggests a collapsing of macrocosm into a microcosm, even if, by obscuring the moon, the trees have already done this by hiding the heavens. The reference to the “moonless midnight” can also be seen as referring obliquely to *A Vision*, since while the temporal adjective clearly indicates the time of the night, Yeats refers to Phase 1 and Phase 15, the extreme points of his system – pure plasticity and pure beauty respectively – as points on a clock there, and in particular in relation to the “Perfect Number” in Plato’s *Republic*, which realizes itself at the end - and renewed beginning - of the Great Year. As Yeats states, hesitating to give an absolute value to Plato’s “Perfect Number,” or explain whether it is the complete number of years in the Great Year or simply the mystical number One:

It is as though innumerable dials, some that recorded minutes alone, some seconds alone, some hours alone, some months alone, some years alone, were all to complete their circles when Big Ben struck twelve upon the last night of the century. (CW14 181)

The “moonless midnight” created by the trees, replacing what we might call the “heavenly circuit,” seems doubly artificial, since Yeats specifically uses the clock imagery and midnight in *A Vision* to represent the end of the Great Year (see Figure 1 below), which would occur on the cusp between Aries and Pisces in his own system of Solar Months, and thus at a point when both the defining *Faculty of Will* and the *Creative Mind* are at full

moon and Phase 15 in relation to the Lunar Phases. Furthermore, the illumination which Dorothy Wellesley awaits from “The Proud Furies each with their torch on high” (VP 579 l. 16), as a result of being “Satisfied” with “Neither Content” nor “Conscience” at the top of her tower, bears all the hallmarks of an aggressive, *antithetical* struggle with the *Daimon* – presumably in the writing of her poetry - which occurs in phases closer to the full moon. The poem celebrates the aristocratic power of Lady Wellesley as much as it does her devotion as poet, by portraying her ability to create her own universe when collapsing microcosm into macrocosm: the compass of the individual soul becoming its own universe.

If we turn now to “Veronica’s Napkin,” a poem written in 1929-1930, after “The Gift of Harun al-Rashid” (1924), but before “To Dorothy Wellesley,” (1936) we can discern, I would argue, aspects that can be illuminated by both these other uses of fabric as metaphors for the “heavenly circuit.” Like the comparison to “embroidered banners,” the “drapery” inside the tent around the “[t]ent-pole of Eden” can be understood as referring to the stars, and also to the concept of their movement and measurement of time, which is a feature of the earlier poem as well. The imagery of a “tent” further recalls the Bedouin tribesmen there, who hold this knowledge within their mobile abodes, whom Yeats elsewhere identifies as the Judwalis, and who danced the gyre symbols in the sand. In relation to Dorothy Wellesley, who looks at the “upholstery” of the trees, in a “moonless midnight,” we can see the drapery as representing also the collapsing of the universe and the “heavenly circuit” into a microcosm and something much smaller, but can also identify the “[t]ent-pole” with the Tree of Knowledge, since the “upholstery” in the later poem represents the microcosm of the universe she herself owns with the trees which then become the even

smaller “upholstery” blotting out the moon, before she then further draws this image into her own consciousness.

The imagery of the tent pole and the drapery in “Veronica’s Napkin” is certainly drawn as a contradistinction to the later, “different pole” of the cross, itself a “tree” in Christian tradition, and of the “napkin” created by Saint Veronica when she mopped Christ’s brow on the Via Dolorosa. This contradistinction is even clearer in the second of the two original drafts of the poem contained in *Rapallo Notebook D*, kept between 1928-1930:

Heavens circuit! ~~Bereees~~ Berenice’s hair!

Tentpole of Eden! Edens drapery!

Images of glory! Substantial glories were

Within the circuit of ~~needls~~ ^{a needles} eye

Where ~~yo~~ ^{ye} first blown, like bubbles in the air, [?ear]

By those great spirits, that great ~~hierarchy~~ ^{harmony} are

That made all magnitude & minute by minute star [?far]

Make it anew & gives us term & Time [?rare]

Displayed your borrowed glory & within it

Image of a face that made that glory seem

No ~~purple~~ drapery where edens tenpole stood

But a torn napkin ~~mired~~ ^{stained} by mire & blood.

Wh those ^{great} spirits, that great ~~harmony~~ ^[?war] [?harmony]

~~Stood in the circuit of~~

~~That made all magnitu~~

~~That made all the made the [?magnitude] & glory th~~

That made the magnitude & ~~reen~~ reined it there

Stood in the circuit of a needles eye ⁷(*RND* 85r)

This second drafting of the poem shows that the “[t]ent-pole” of Eden is surrounded by Eden’s drapery, perhaps the heavenly circuit as it appears above Eden. In this draft the enclosed heaven “made the magnitude,” as though the universe and its circuit is originally confined to Eden (against the original creation myth, it must be admitted), but then from that – perhaps with the Fall – creates the larger universe (the use and then erasure of the word “purple” suggests the sky either at dawn or at sunset, as well as, of course, majesty), but in spiritual terms still never loses its ordinary smallness with God and his angels having no extension at all, since “reined [the magnitude]... there”. While Yeats rarely refers to Aquinas, it is quite likely that the metaphor of a “needle’s eye” here owes something to that theologian’s speculation on the infinite number of angels that can be balanced on a pinhead, with a “needle” being substituted for a “pin.”

The use of tents and cosmology thus points to the idea of the movement through the Great Year, or of the beginning and end of one whole Great Year before its renewal. Yeats was actually defining the length and mechanism of the Great Year when making notes in *Rapallo Notebook D*, largely through consultation with Sepharial’s *Hebrew Astrology*, excerpts on Hindu cosmology in Hastings’s *Encyclopedia*, and Pierre Duhem’s *Système du Monde*: all as part of the rewriting of *A Vision*.⁸ The poet had determined that the movement of the equinoctial point through the equinoxes – a discovery which he by now accepted as having been made by Hipparchus in the Second Century BCE rather than by earlier

Chaldeans (CW14 184) – was the true method for measuring the Great Year, with the difference between the sidereal and tropical years meaning that the equinoctial point would move backward through the zodiac by a small amount every year, so that every 2,149 years (once homogenized) the sun would pass the equinoctial point past a different sign of the zodiac.⁹ Thus symbolically, the equinoctial point had moved from Aries 0 degrees to Pisces 30 degrees around the birth of Christ: the point which, in Yeats's opinion (guided as much by the Pagan Virgil as by the Christian George Syncellus (CW14 178, 185)), a new Great Year began.

For Yeats the Great Year was thus measured by the twelve solar months understood as corresponding to the signs of the Zodiac. He reduced the twenty-eight phases of his lunar cycle to twelve by grouping the phases into groups of three, and reserving one month for each Cardinal Phase, so while symbolically Aries corresponds solely to Phase 15, Taurus comprises 16, 17 and 18.¹⁰ The movement of the Great Year, like the individual Solar Months of religious era themselves, is measured by the clockwise movement of *Creative Mind* on Yeats's most macroscopic sphere. The Lunar Months of civilisation, which he named after the calendar months, straddle the Solar Months of Religion, and are measured by the clockwise movement of *Will*. So when Christ is born, and the new Solar Month of Pisces begins, symbolically, at Aries 0, Pisces 30, and a new Great Year begins, the Lunar Month of classical civilisation, from 1000 BCE to 1000 CE, is at its midpoint. Thus the Great Year has to be measured by the Solar Months of religion, its macro *Creative Mind* effectively replicating the movements of the equinoctial point through the zodiac in the precession of the equinoxes, a conundrum which Yeats finally resolved only in the second edition of *A Vision*.

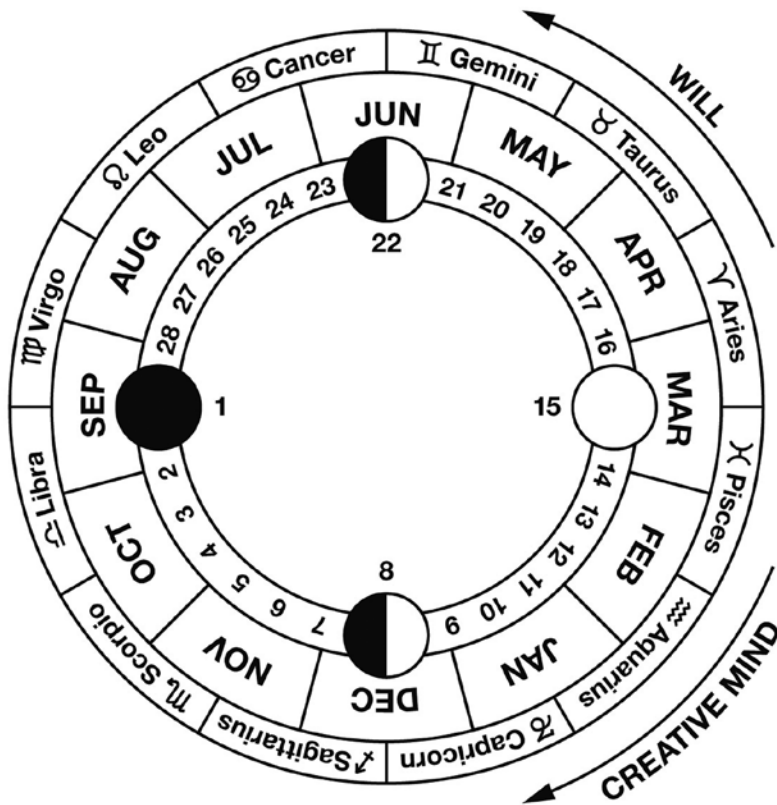


Figure 1: The twenty-eight phases of the moon (inner ring) adapted to the calendar or “Lunar” months (middle ring) and the zodiac signs or “Solar” months (outer ring). *Will* passes counterclockwise through the calendar months and *Creative Mind* clockwise through the zodiac

The two points represented by the poles can in fact be seen as measuring the First Great Year, the period from creation up until the birth of Christ. While the metaphor of the tent obviously recalls the wandering “diagramatist”s or “Judwalis,” who represented this cyclical system through their dancing (CW14 29-30), Jeffares’s point that the “[t]ent-pole” also recalls the “pole star” is probably correct because Yeats would have been aware that with the precession of the equinoxes the pole star would have been changing throughout

the centuries to a different star with each new Solar Month, and thus mobile through the heavens, never fixed. It would appear therefore that through the use of the metaphor of tent-pole and drapery Yeats's poem does something which his poetry rarely does elsewhere, which is to make use of Christian mythology as opposed to Classical, Irish or even Buddhist to present the limits of the Great Year which preceded the birth of Christ. In the process, through the metaphor of fabric, he also suggests that the macrocosm can be seen as something existing as a microcosm as well, with size being simply a relative element. This relates both to the fact that Yeats sees the path of the individual soul as replicating that of a World soul, but also crucially his immaterialism, and belief that matter and extension do not really exist.

¹ Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (London: Macmillan,) 266.

² Russell Murphy, "'Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth': Yeats's 'Veronica's Napkin' and 'Byzantium' and the *Sydoine* of Constantinople," *Yeats-Eliot Review* (2010), 1-33, at 3.

³ Murphy, 8, 22.

⁴ Murphy, 4, 3.

⁵ Murphy, 2.

⁶ eg. Fritz Hommel, "Calendar (Babylonian)," in James Hastings (ed.), with John A. Selbie and Louis H. Gray, *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 12 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), I: 183-88; Franz Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans* (New York and London: Knickerbocker/G. P. Putnam's Sons,

1912), E. M. Plunkett, *Ancient Calendars and Constellations* (London: John Murray, 1903), 3.

⁷ I am grateful to Neil Mann for having lent me his transcription of this Notebook, taken in the National Library of Ireland (MS no NLI 13,58).

⁸ Sepharial, *Hebrew Astrology: The Key to the Study of Astrology* (London: Foulsham, 1929); Pierre Duhem, *Le Système du monde: histoire des doctrines cosmologiques, de Platon à Copernic*, 10 vols. (Paris: 1913–1959).

⁹ The sidereal year is the length of time taken for the equinoctial point to return to the same place in the year against the framework of the stars, whereas the tropical year is the length of time taken from sunrise to sunrise at two the vernal equinoxes. Due to precession, the sidereal year is 20 minutes 24.5 seconds longer than the mean tropical year (365.242189 days), and is 19 min 57.8 s longer than the average year of the Gregorian calendar (i.e., the tropical year as approximated by the average calendar year of 365.2425 days established by the Gregorian calendar). My thanks to Neil Mann for this clarification.

¹⁰ While the Solar Month Aries symbolically represents Phase 15 on Yeats's system, and Taurus 16, 17 and 18, Yeats apportions zodiac signs to phases them differently in order to allow the actual movement of the *Faculties* to work through the Wheel, calling this "classification not symbolism" (*CWI4* 144). When actually describing the movements of the *Creative Mind* from Aries to Pisces, Aries extends from the midpoint of Phase 15 to the midpoint of Phase 17, Taurus from the midpoint of 17 to the beginning of Phase 20, as shown in Figure 1.