The Sewers, the City, the Tower:
Pynchon’s V., Fausto’s Confessions, and Yeats’s A Vision

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Abstract: This article examines the connections between Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* and the work of W. B. Yeats, arguing that it is not only Yeats as poet, but also Yeats as mage, who interests Pynchon. It will be shown what part is played in *V.* by the concepts developed by Yeats in his works *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* and *A Vision*—the symbol of interlocking gyres, the twenty-eight phases, the Great Wheel, and the *Anima Mundi*, or soul of the world. It argues that in the course of the chapter “Confessions of Fausto Maijstral,” Pynchon uses the destruction of the Maltese city of Valletta first to both represent and criticize the abstraction of Yeats’s Byzantium and second, through the figure of the child poet, to recast Yeats’s *Anima Mundi* as a textual realm open to and changing with the demands and experiences of the present.

Keywords: memory, Thomas Pynchon, W. B. Yeats

In his essay, “The Widening Gyre: Yeats and Pynchon,” Thomas Whitaker observes that although Thomas Pynchon’s *V.* and *Gravity’s Rainbow* are “blatantly anti-Yeatsian [. . .] loose and baggy monsters, undermining all discipline, coherence, and nobility, digressing into technical jargon and pop culture crudities,” there are still “remarkable similarities” between Pynchon and W. B. Yeats (161). Commentary on these similarities, or on the relation between the writers’ works, remains relatively rare; extant criticism usually either identifies short, specific parallels between Yeats’s poems (particularly “Sailing to Byzantium”) and shared references to the Tower and the Fool of Tarot, or draws Yeats into general discussions of Pynchon’s concerns with apocalypses, patterns of history, and systems of order.¹ Whitaker gives an overview of connections between Yeats and Pynchon’s *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow*, seeing, for example, the lullaby sung by Kurt Mondaugen in *V.* (254)² as “Pynchon’s evident response to Yeats’s early romanticism and his later vision of history” (Whitaker 163). However, Whitaker sees the strongest links between the two writers in the Maltese sections of *V.*, where the wishes expressed by Fausto Maijstral for his daughter Paola echo those made by Yeats in his poem “A Prayer for My Daughter,” and where *V.* herself is close to fulfilling the poet’s dream of an immortal form. The aim of this article is to explore these connections further, focusing on “Confessions of Fausto Maijstral” and arguing that it is not only Yeats as poet, but
also Yeats as mage, whom Pynchon addresses as he works through his relationship with the early twentieth-century’s literary legacy.

The Tower: Yeats’s Vision

Yeats described magic as “next to my poetry, the most important pursuit in my life” (qtd. in Jeffares xi). His understanding of magic and the system of beliefs he built around it were informed by a number of sources: Platonism, Indian philosophy, Japanese Noh drama, and, particularly, the works of Emanuel Swedenborg and William Blake. From an early age, he was also aware of and influenced by the myths and folktales of Irish culture, especially those which told of a fairyland of excess and great achievements existing side-by-side with the mundane world, accessible through the raths (hill-forts) and stone rings that dot the Irish landscape. It was said that fairies could shape and form this other world as they desired, so that it became a reflection or projection of the mind, and Yeats would find something similar to this idea of the subjugation of matter to mind in the writings of William Blake. As Kathleen Raine describes it, “Blake challenged the concept of a universe consisting of ‘matter’ and existing in independence of the mind that perceives it, and declared that all things exist in the human imagination,” so that “not matter but mind—consciousness—is the ground of reality as we experience it” (5). For both Blake and Yeats, life takes place not in a material world but in a mental one, and humankind is not confined to the shell of the physical body, but exists in the universe as a living consciousness, as mind, imagination, or spirit. The universe itself is, as Raine says, “a universe sustained by mind and contained in mind” (7), with all knowledge, thoughts, and memories housed in an all-encompassing consciousness shared by humankind. This “collective spiritual being” (8) corresponds to Swedenborg’s concept of the “Grand Man of the Heavens” or “Divine Humanity” (qtd. in Raine 8).

In his 1901 essay “Magic,” Yeats outlined three doctrines of magical practice, based on this understanding of a shared mind:

1. That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy. [end of page 36]
2. That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
3. That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols. (33)

Both Yeats and Blake lament that humankind’s perception of the self as a physical entity interacting with a material universe seen as external to the self undermines a spiritual conception
of a mental universe. In *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917), Yeats writes of his efforts to reassert his contact with the mental universe, to immerse his mind “in the general mind where that mind is scarce separable from what we have begun to call ‘the subconscious,’” maintaining that “[i]f you suspend the critical faculty, I have discovered, either as the result of training, or, if you have the gift, by passing into a slight trance, images pass rapidly before you” (507, 508). In Yeats’s experience, images would arise through an act of association with some idea or sound, drawing with them unremembered fragments from the subconscious. But he believed that some images would later prove to have been previously conceived of by someone else, contributing to his or her study in another way, as if the image or idea had been shared among many. As a result, Yeats came to believe in “a great memory passing on from generation to generation,” which he called the *Anima Mundi*, the soul of the world (510).

This is not, however, some form of genetic memory where untold knowledge is hardwired into the brain, but is an only fitfully accessible source. The *Anima Mundi*, this site of shared memory, is formed by the commingling of the minds of those past generations, by the spirits of the dead, the discarnate. The one great memory streams through every living individual and washes back through all who have lived before: “Our daily thought was certainly but the line of foam at the shallow edge of a vast luminous sea” (*Per Amica Silentia Lunae* 511). One should think, suggests Yeats, of “one’s own life as symbolised by earth, the place of heterogeneous things, the images as mirrored in water and the images themselves one could divine but as air; and beyond it all there was […] the fire that makes all simple” (511). After death, the spirit, leaving the body, “becomes a part for a while of that stream of images which I have compared to reflections upon water” (515). Entering the *Anima Mundi*, the spirit is like the fairy returning to its antiworld, for the spiritual realm conforms to and is shaped by the mind. “We carry to *Anima Mundi* our memory, and that memory is for a time our external world” (521), so that we may even create for ourselves our own Heaven or our own Hell. Living in memory, each spirit communicates with other spirits through the discovery of a common experience but gradually gains freedom until finally all spirits are “running together and running of all to a centre and yet without loss of identity” (523).

The living can gain access to this great mind of the dead through the subconscious, trances, and dreams, wherein the dead sometimes visit and convey images of universal significance. In great art, therefore, Yeats finds an expression of the *Anima Mundi*, a presence of the shared mind of which even the artists themselves [end of page 37] might be unaware. Of Shelley, Yeats writes that his “early romances and much throughout his poetry show how strong a fascination the traditions of magic and of the magical philosophy had cast over his mind […].
One finds in his poetry, besides innumerable images that have not the definiteness of symbols, many images that are certainly symbols” (“Philosophy” 95–96). Yeats made it part of his project to discover these images that would transcend description of the everyday and provide access to the spiritual realm, arguing that the aim of art should not be to mirror reality but to provide insight into this greater reality; ideally, as Daniel Albright says, “to subvert a language created for the description of the everyday world, in order to embody visions of the extra-terrestrial" (Introduction xxxiii). If the Irish countryside is a land strewn with sacred places and gateways to fairyland, the language of the poet should similarly contain points of symbolic power, images that would reveal the spiritual kingdom.

In 1917, four days after his marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees, Yeats found himself with a direct conduit to the other side and a guaranteed source of symbols. To their surprise, Georgie began to produce automatic writing, her hand guided by what Yeats would call his Instructors, teachers from the great memory. Yeats’s interpretation of more than fifty copybooks of automatic script and notes of his wife’s sleep-talking resulted in the publication in 1926 (though it was dated 1925) of A Vision. The book provided a detailed account of a system for understanding human nature and the path of human history, all centered around the inspired symbol of “cones or gyres, one within the other, turning in opposite directions” (A Vision 11). To visualize this symbol, one should imagine two interlocking gyres, two interpenetrating cones wherein the tip of each cone touches the centre of the base of the other, and the two cones rotating in opposite directions. Yeats presents them graphically as two overlapping triangles, one shaded and the other unshaded, each with associated tinctures or qualities related to Yeats’s first identification of the shaded cone with “Concord” and the unshaded with “Discord.” The interaction of the two cones allows Yeats to map the relations between the assigned qualities. For example, at the plane at the bottom of the unshaded cone, the point of the shaded cone rests invisibly on that base of the other, but if one were to move a small distance away from the point toward the base of the shaded cone and then take a cross-section parallel to the bases of that part of the double cone, the result would be a small shaded circle at the centre of a larger unshaded one. In other words, this is Concord surrounded by Discord. If one were to then move further along the shaded cone, travelling from its apex towards the base, one would see the size of Concord’s circle increase, while the circumference of the surrounding slice of the cone of Discord would decrease. At the midway point, the two cones would coincide exactly before reversing their relation. As a result of the organization of the cones, therefore, any series of cross-sections that begins at the base of one cone and works toward its apex will see the visible area of that cone decrease while the area of the other cone increases. Yeats saw a corresponding relationship between the qualities assigned to
each of the cones. An [end of page 38] increasing presence of one would result in an increasing absence of the other, so that, as with the gods and men of Heraclitus, they are “[d]ying each other’s life, living each other's death” (qtd. in A Vision 68).

To chart human nature, Yeats uses what he calls “the cone of the Four Faculties which are what man has made in a past or present life” (A Vision 71). The Faculties are formed of two pairs, Will and Mask (“the will and its object, or the Is and the Ought”) and Creative Mind and Body of Fate (“thought and its object, or the Knower and the Known”), which are arrayed on and mirror each other’s position on the two cones (73). Concord, seen as objective, is now called the primary cone; it also characterized as reasonable, moral, solar, and space. Discord, conversely, seen as subjective, is called the antithetical cone; it is also characterized as natural, emotional, aesthetic, lunar, and time. Any person can be classified according to the place of Will in the system, which sets the positions of the other Faculties and reveals their relation to the primary cone, in which “we express more and more, as it broadens, that objectivity of mind,” and to the antithetical cone, in which “we express more and more, as it broadens, our inner world of desire and imagination” (73). By taking fifteen cross-sections of the double gyre and marking the possible positions of the Four Faculties at those points, Yeats can identify twenty-eight typical incarnations or phases for a person. Two, however—Phase 1 and Phase 15, where Will is at the base of the primary cone (“Complete plasticity”) and of the antithetical cone (“Complete beauty”) respectively—are ideal, because “human life is impossible without strife between the tinctures” (96, 97, 79).

To graph the twenty-eight incarnations, as well as to preserve some sense of the movement of the revolving, interlocking gyres, Yeats arranges the phases around a circle, a “Great Wheel” (A Vision 65, 80), onto which the lunar phases are also superimposed, so that the interplay of the shaded and unshaded cones can be equated with the waxing and waning of the moon. The circle also has the advantage of illustrating a cyclical movement that is less obviously implied by the image of two overlapping triangles, though it is central to Yeats’s system. In discussing the cycles of human history, Yeats writes of how a “Great Wheel of twenty-eight incarnations is considered to take, if no failure compels repetition of a phase, some two thousand odd years”; but for each individual the “wheel or cone of the Faculties may be considered to complete its movement between birth and death” (202, 188). Within a lifetime, this “wheel is every completed movement of thought or life, twenty-eight incarnations, a single incarnation, a single judgement or act of thought” (81). Yeats illustrates the process completed in a cycle by linking the four quarters of the wheel to the four elements, so that
Phases 1 to 8 are associated with elemental *earth*, being phases of germination and sprouting; those between Phase 8 and Phase 15 with elemental *water*, because there the image-making power is at its height; those between Phase 15 and Phase 22 with elemental *air*, because through *air*, or space, things are divided from one another, and here intellect is at its height; those between Phase 22 and Phase 1 with elemental *fire*, because here all things are made simple. (93)

Moving from Yeats to Pynchon, in the next section, I explore the role that this cycle (and the related phases and gyres, as well as the *Anima Mundi*) plays in “Confessions of Fausto Maijstral.”

**The City: Fausto’s Confessions**

The beginning of chapter 11 of Pynchon’s *V.* finds Fausto Maijstral sitting in a small room, measuring “17 by 11½ by 7 feet,” writing an apologia for his life (304). Worried that he might be accused of being too young to write an apologia, he justifies it “simply by calling life a successive rejection of personalities” (306). He divides the timeline of his life into four parts, each occupied by a different Fausto, unknowable to the others. Considering that Yeats’s cone of the Faculties completes one revolution in a lifetime, if Fausto is close to completing one cycle of the Great Wheel, his succession of selves could be charted by assigning each of his personalities to one of the quarters of the cycle. Writing in 1956, Fausto IV’s meticulous and unadorned description of his room suggests the influence of the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet (Grant 148), and the timing leads John Dugdale to group him with postwar anti-Romantic writers (93). Fausto is concerned with his life in Malta during World War II and the Siege between the years 1937 and 1943, and here begins his account of the life of Fausto I by referring to him and his two friends as the “grand School of Anglo-Maltese Poetry—the Generation of ’37” (V. 305). According to Judith Chambers, Pynchon here cites Pound, Eliot, and Yeats as models (86), suggesting first that Fausto I tends toward late Romanticism and Modernism, but also that he can be placed in the third quarter, where Phase 17, Yeats’s own phase, can be located. This quarter, from Phase 15 to 22, has air as its element, even as Fausto’s surname is Maltese for “North-western Wind,” or the Mistral in English (Cassola 330). It is also in the third quarter that “[p]oets start to fall in love with real women instead of ravishing goddesses; history starts to replace mythology” (Albright, Notes 593) and, indeed, it is during this period in his life that Fausto falls in love with Elena Xemxi.

Fausto II is born with his daughter, Paola, and corresponds to the fourth quarter, when “the soul increasingly drowns itself in the objective world, surrenders its integrity to some
external system” (Albright, Notes 593). As Fausto says of this period in his life, “We still wrote—but there was other work to do. [. . .] We were builders” (V. 306). As he moves through this quarter from Phase 22 toward Phase 1, the primary cone of objectivity increases so that he is moving “towards that island-wide sense of communion. And at the same time towards the lowest form of consciousness”; gradually, he “became more inanimate,” became “like any dead leaf or fragment of metal [. . .] subject to the laws of physics” (315, 321). [end of page 40]

The death of Fausto II is brought about by the death of Elena and the dispersal of the Bad Priest. Yeats says that the fourth quarter ends with the soul’s dissolution in God, whereas the first, from Phase 1 to 8, begins with the soul’s dissolution in nature. So it seems to be with Fausto. As Fausto II ends, he assumes the role of priest to perform the sacrament of Extreme Unction for the dying Bad Priest. But in response to why he did not help the Priest in any other way, Fausto can only say that perhaps “he was now Fausto III, with no further need for God,” for he was as the rock and “had taken on much of the non-humanity of the debris, crushed stone, broken masonry, destroyed churches and auberges of his city” (V. 345, 307). Of course, the element associated with this phase is earth.

Of his eventual “return to life,” says Fausto, “little can be said” (345), but Albright writes that after Phase 1 in the first quarter, the “soul gradually grows self-aware, disengages itself from the natural world” (Notes 592). Last, Fausto moves into the second quarter, from Phase 8 to 15, where the antithetical cone of subjectivity dominates, where “the soul gains painful mastery over the world” (Notes 592), and where Fausto IV is a “man of letters” (V. 307). 8

If the Great Wheel is evident in Fausto’s confessions, so are the double gyres.

Immediately preceding a reference to the “old cyclic idea of history” (V. 338), the double vortex is clearly evoked in a discussion of the Maltese children's view of the evil of the Germans in conflict with the pure good of the Allies: “if their idea of the struggle could be described graphically it would not be as two equal-sized vectors head-to-head—their heads making an X of unknown quantity; rather as a point, dimensionless—good—surrounded by any number of radial arrows—vectors of evil—pointing inward” (338). Here, therefore, with the apex of the other cone at its center, is the base of a cone of evil, placed by the children “dead-level, its own rim only that of the sea’s horizon” (339), then rising, perhaps, up into the sky, where the cone of good would expand even as the R.A.F. Spitfires achieved domination over the German ME-109s.

However, the form of the gyres is most diligently applied by Pynchon in an account of one day, a single cycle, in the lives of Fausto and his wife Elena (V. 332–37). This section draws closely on two Yeats poems, “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Among School Children,” from the collection The Tower, which shares its structure with A Vision. 9 Also important is the elemental
sequence first mentioned in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* as Pynchon traces a movement from earth to water to air and fire through the course of the passage: The couple emerge in the morning from the sewers underground, washing themselves in a stream of rainwater that has “caused a merry water-fall to enter our quarters” (332). They spend the morning walking by the sea and then head inland—“Forenoon for sea, afternoon for the city”—where the wind begins to blow off the harbor and clouds to surround the sun, as if “winds were blowing today from all thirty-two points of the rose” (334, 335). As the day ends, gulls fill half the sky, “drifting slow, up and down and inexorably landward, a thousand drops of fire” (337), just as Yeats describes “the fire that makes all simple” and *end of page 41* “the fifth element, the veil hiding another four, a bird born out of the fire” (*Per Amica Silentia Lunae* 511, 512).

Significantly, through this same train of imagery, Pynchon also transforms Valletta into Byzantium, so often for Yeats the epitome of the antiworld where life is abstracted into art. (Malta was under Byzantine rule from the fourth to the ninth century.) Byzantium has as one of its characteristics an ethereal nature, as if it were “manufactured out of air and shadowed on water” (Albright, Notes 629). In an early draft of “Sailing to Byzantium,” Yeats spoke of “St. Sophia's sacred dome [...] [m]irrored in water” (Stallworthy, qtd. in Albright, Notes 629). In *A Vision*, St. Sophia is Byzantine art perfected, for it is where all “pictured ecstasy” (282). In keeping with the construct of the gyre, the abstract nature of Byzantium can only be at the expense of the physical Valletta, and Pynchon signals through simile the spiritual seeping into the spaces left by the destroyed buildings and broken streets: “Sunlight came to us broken by walls, window frames, roof beams: skeletal. Our street was poked by thousands of little holes like the Harbour in noon’s unbroken sun” (*V.* 334). Fausto becomes a Yeatsian figure, the old scarecrow of “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Among School Children,” for as Fausto and Elena enter the park, the birds have abandoned their nests, “all but one whose head was visible, looking out at God knew what, unfrightened at our approach. It looked stuffed” (335). The bird is as artificial, of course, as Yeats's golden bird. Elena becomes Fausto’s Maud Gonne, linked by her name to Gonne’s mythical precursor, Helen of Troy. Gonne’s aging face in “Among School Children,” “Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind/ And took a mess of shadows for its meat” (4.3–4), is reflected in the faces of Elena and Fausto, who “had been using, it seemed, nothing but Valletta to fill up the hollows of ourselves. Stone and metal cannot nourish” (*V.* 335).10

Fausto IV is critical of his earlier self’s account of this day, if it was just one day, because it takes place in “the universe of Romanticism, in which confidence in the animateness of its human and non-human contents licenses an unconstrained poetic writing and an unembarrassed use of metaphor” (Dugdale 79). The disparity between the two Faustos’ artistic values is evident
in the way the poet as a younger man still seeks a dream world and is disillusioned with a Valletta that has not achieved the Byzantine ideal, saying “this city was a mockery, a promise always unfulfilled” (V. 336). Indeed, Fausto II is about to give way to Fausto III, passing through Phase 1, the phase of “complete passivity, complete plasticity” as Yeats describes it, but Byzantium occupies Phase 15, the opposing phase “of complete beauty” (A Vision 183, 135). However, Valletta’s reality is about to effect a change in Fausto. “Among School Children” offers an abstract and perfect unity between Yeats and Gonne, their “two natures blent/ Into a sphere [. . .] / Into the yolk and white of the one shell” (2.5–8). In Blake’s symbolism, this image suggests the Mundane Shell that, as Raine describes, represents the “confines of the temporal world” from which one hatches to “return to ‘Great Eternity’” (34, 35). But there is no such escape for Fausto and Elena, painfully aware of fleshly vulnerability. As Fausto looks into the whites of Elena’s eyes, her “nails, broken from burying the dead, had been digging into the bare part of my arm [. . .]. My own nails fastened in reply and we became twinned, symmetric, sharing pain” (V. 336). In “the fire that makes all simple” (Yeats, Per Amica Silentia Lunae 511), Elena makes a simple declaration, “I love you [. . .] love you, Fausto,” but Fausto’s response can only be “But how could I know [. . .]. How could I infer [. . .] that her pain was mine” (V. 337). There is no shared vision here, no merging of minds. As Fausto writes, even after a “thousand drops of fire [. . .] there are no epiphanies [. . .] no moments of truth. We had used our dead fingernails only to swage quick flesh; to gouge or destroy, not to probe the wards of either soul” (337). Losing faith in epiphanies, in the revelatory moment, Fausto breaks with Yeats and Modernism.

Pynchon’s portrayal of Byzantium is an illustration of the way in which, as Dugdale describes, “Fictions are demystified in V. by reference to that which is the case, the reality of situations, flesh-and-blood and its sufferings” (106). More than this, the emphasis on the physical reality of pain and suffering places in stark relief the view, shared by Yeats and Blake, of the material world as something held in the mind. Yet Fausto himself would not find it hard to understand such a perspective. Writing of the power of metaphor, by which one could “apply to a rock human qualities like ‘invincibility,’ ‘tenacity,’ ‘perseverance,’ etc.” so that “Manhood on Malta thus became increasingly defined in terms of rockhood” (V. 325), Fausto IV reveals the extent to which the human imagination can envelop raw matter, but his interpretation of this poetic apprehension contrasts with Yeats’s. For Yeats, the poet, “[l]iving as he does much of the time in a world of metaphor” (V. 325), moves beyond the everyday to touch the Anima Mundi, but for Fausto, “metaphor has no value apart from its function; that it is a device, an artifice. [. . .] Fausto’s kind are alone with the task of living in a universe of things which simply are, and cloaking that innate mindlessness with comfortable and pious metaphor so that the ‘practical’ half

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of humanity may continue in the Great Lie” (V. 325, 326). For Yeats, poetry reveals the Great Eternity which transcends reality; for Fausto, poetry veils reality and sustains the Great Lie.

Of course, some lies are necessary, and, says Fausto, “Poets have been at this for centuries. It is the only useful purpose they do serve in society: and if every poet were to vanish tomorrow, society would live no longer than the quick memories and dead books of their poetry” (V. 326). Malta survives because of the deluding metaphor of rockhood, but Pynchon still presses for a poetry that attends to the living, rather than conspiring with the dead: “Poetry is not communication with angels or with the ‘subconscious.’ It is communication with the guts, genitals and five portals of sense. Nothing more” (318). In the account of that one day in Valletta, Pynchon emphasizes the strange relation between “the street and under the street” in the old sewers where Fausto, Elena, and their young daughter Paola shelter from the air raids (325). Fausto had previously explained his desire to roam the streets when “everything civilian and with a soul was underground” by saying: “But in dream there are two worlds: the street and under the street. One is the kingdom of death and one of life. And how can a poet live without exploring the other kingdom, even if only as a kind of tourist? A poet feeds on dream” (323, 325). Here Fausto shows that, although normally it might be expected that the space under the street, the underworld, would be for the dead, here in Valletta the bombed city is the place for ghosts, “the street—the kingdom of death” (330). In essence, Fausto is here following Yeats as poet, who also fed on dreams, because through dreams he communicated with the pooled mind of the dead in the Anima Mundi. But, sheltering in the sewers during the worst of the bombing, Fausto retreats “from reality to something else,” recasting his world as dead history by referring to a religious and military order of the sixteenth century, and writing of how “in this wretched tunnel we are the Knights and the Giaours; we are L'Isle-Adam and his ermine arm, and his maniple on a field of blue sea and gold sun” (Pynchon 310). It is then clear that, exploring a dead world, Fausto finds only dead images. Yeats’s eternal symbols are seen as secondhand, recycled things, their power now exhausted. The Anima Mundi is simply not sufficient for the present.

**The Sewers: Pynchon’s V.**

Fausto says that “in dream there are two worlds” (V. 325). Indeed, while some of the older generation on the island “wrote a sonnet about a dogfight (Spitfire v. ME-109) taking a knights’ duel for the sustained image,” others were writing “poetry in a vacuum,” unconnected to the past or to tradition (316, 332). These “poets in a vacuum, adept at metaphor” are the children. However, their metaphors are not those of the dead, but a “game called R.A.F.,” where they
would spread their “arms like aeroplanes and run screaming and buzzing in and out of the ruined walls, rubble heaps and holes of the city” (339, 331). The children are from the world of dream under the street, for they “got about Valletta by their private routes, mostly underground” (332), but theirs is the kingdom of life in dream. If, as Raine, responding to Yeats, writes, “‘the dead are the wisdom of the living’ and so, in a certain sense, the living are the experience of the dead” (51), these children who run “jumping off the ruined ends of jetties into the sea” (V. 333) are the living poets who bring new images to the *Anima Mundi*, to what Wordsworth calls the “immortal sea which brought us hither . . . and near whose edge the children sport” (qtd. in Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* 511).

Pynchon’s child poets, then, stand in stark contrast with those who would perpetuate the Great Lie and continue the process in which “metaphors, myths and codes collectively compose a fictional overlay, disguising and repressing the realities of poverty, death, alienation and political disaffection” (Dugdale 119). Pynchon contrasts those of the street with those from under the street, or those who would, as Fausto says, “Retreat into a time [. . .] when warfare could at least be gilded with an illusion of honour” and those who “knew what was happening: knew that bombs killed” (316, 332). These young poets produced metaphors of unsettling but vital honesty because they were attuned to the present and “seem [. . .] to be the only ones conscious at the time that history had not been suspended after all” (338). Neither bound to nor limited by the images of the past, but open to and responding to the experiences of the present, the children actively produce the memories of the future.

This everyday poetry is important because of the acknowledged power that the human imagination holds over the material world. For Yeats, this was a magical power, and art could draw from the general mind images that were so strong that they could shape the world and make reality conform to their vision, even as the land of the fairies conformed to their will.

He argued:

Men who are imaginative writers to-day may well have preferred to influence the imagination of others more directly in past times. Instead of learning their craft with paper and a pen they may have sat for hours imagining themselves to be stocks and stones and beasts of the wood, till the images were so vivid that the passers-by became but a part of the imagination of the dreamer, and wept or laughed or ran away as he would have them. (“Magic” 52)

The wisdom that children, as young souls, might draw from the *Anima Mundi*—and what experiences they might add to it—is powerful indeed, for these visions past and present determine the images of the future. Yeats declared that “we must cry out that imagination is
always seeking to remake the world according to the impulses and the patterns in that great Mind, and that great Memory” (“Magic” 63), and might have been suggesting that his imagination had remade the world when he observed that his poem “The Second Coming” “was an accurate prophecy of the 1930s” (Dugdale 116). Indeed, Dugdale argues that “The Second Coming” “had an engendering capacity [. . .], something more than simply predictive, something less than causal” (116). It is no wonder that Dugdale argues that “There are many possible grounds for the hostility to Modernism in V. [. . .] but such a sense of its malignancy can perhaps only have a political basis” (109), for only Modernism’s politics imagined a world that would see Malta in ruins and its children versed only in the subject of war.13

Though Pynchon foregrounds the power of art, whether he believes in magic, or in the Anima Mundi, is another question.14 Nevertheless, the children, described once as “the children or ghosts of children,” do operate in “a common underworld,” and are seen as “recording angels” with a “group awareness” (V. 336, 341, 339, 339).15 If a less supernatural explanation is required, then it should be remembered that the children are not the only group mind, for there is also Fausto. The story he is telling is no longer his alone, for three other Faustos have gone before him. He cannot rely on memory, “based as it is on the false assumption that identity is single, soul continuous” (307). Unable to look back on his life as a progressing narrative, he populates his text with his disparate identities, his apologia becoming “half a fiction—in which all the successive identities taken [end of page 45] on and rejected by the writer as a function of linear time are treated as separate characters” (306). His past selves, then, do not trail behind him in time, but are arranged around him in his room. And through what medium does he communicate with his dead selves? Not through dreams or séances, but through the text of their diaries and journals. In a sense, this chapter, “Confessions of Fausto Maijstral,” is the shared mind of Faustos I through IV.

This connection between text and the Anima Mundi isn’t so surprising considering that Yeats repeatedly wrote about writers drawing on the Anima Mundi and of the use of images from the general mind in writing. In his essay “Magic,” he writes, “Almost every one who has ever busied himself with such matters has come, in trance or dream, upon some new and strange symbol or event, which he has afterwards found in some work he had never read or heard of” (56). If the symbols of the Anima Mundi already exist in print before its publication, then the soul of the world is held in the books of the world, or the imagination that houses the universe is now, as Borges writes, “[t]he universe (which others call the Library)” (78). Nor is this suggestion much troubled by Yeats’s description of the Anima Mundi, for when he describes “that stream of images which I have compared to reflections upon water” (Per Amica Silentia Lunae 515), there
is a sense in which the water, the substance of the *Anima Mundi*, exists only as the bearer of images. There are no images of the spirit world; there are only the images that are the spirit world, and the water serves as ectoplasmic paper for ghostly text.

The emphasis on the water, however, the need for the substantiated image, is a reminder that Yeats’s concept cannot be accounted for by an idea of disembodied textuality, but requires the impression of words on pages. If images of air must be reflected on water, text too must have a material element, though its association with the *Anima Mundi* still aligns it with spirituality. For example, Fausto and Elena's Byzantine day in Valletta finds a parallel in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* in the Zone, the newly occupied Germany of postwar Europe. In Berlin, the “straight-ruled boulevards built to be marched along are now winding pathways through the waste-piles, their shapes organic now” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 373). Berlin is as desolate as Valletta—“Ceilingless rooms open to the sky, wall-less rooms pitched out over the sea of ruins in prows, in crow's-nests”—but, even as the destroyed city of Valletta yields to sunlight and the non-physical, the influence of one gyre increasing as the other’s diminished, so in Berlin the advertisements that had once been kept within the pages of the newspaper are now “out in the wind, when the wind comes, stuck to trees, door-frames, planking, pieces of wall—white and fading scraps, writing spidery, trembling, smudged, thousands unseen, thousands unread or blown away” (373).

The needs and wishes of the citizens, some unspoken, some unheard, are distributed throughout the city, uncontained. Whereas physicality gives way to spirituality in Valletta, in Berlin, the physical more explicitly yields to the textual. However, the nature of the parallelism means it is easier to pinpoint the true textuality in Valletta, too, for the presence of the waste piles on the streets of Berlin suggests the presence of the children, the true poets of Valletta, emerging from the sewers onto the streets of the city. [end of page 46]

The destruction in *Gravity’s Rainbow* of the "straight-ruled boulevards” of Berlin (373) also has a symbolic function, as Pynchon is fundamentally aware of the city space as a possible expression of an autocratic rule. This is made all the more lamentable by the fact that the “physical shape of a city [...] has to do with our deepest responses to change, death, being human” (Pynchon, qtd. in Seed 241). In Zurich, the Argentine revolutionary Francisco Squalidozzi speaks to Tyrone Slothrop about the possibilities offered by the German Zone, free of the state borders and demarcations that had been mapped over the centuries. This virgin Germany reminds him of the early days of the Americas, when it “was a blank piece of paper,” untouched by the obsession with property that would see the country fenced, divided and subdivided, the new boundaries tracing “complex patterns on the blank sheet” in a way reflected around him in the “engineered scars of Swiss avenues” (*Gravity's Rainbow* 264). The parallels
drawn between land and paper, colonization and the act of writing, are an invitation to see
Germany as a clean sheet ready to receive a new inscription, and something similar occurs in the
razing of Valletta. At one point in his account of his day with Elena, Fausto observes, “how
amusing was a lone flush-toilet located in the upper right-hand room of an English club building
whose side wall had been blown away: feeling young I became angry and political at this toilet.
‘What fine democracy in war,’ I ranted” (V. 333). Here, with the destruction of the city, the fine
sensibilities of British imperialism are brought low by the advance of wasteful textuality, brought
down to the level, as Fausto puts it, of the natives. The leveling of Valletta, therefore, represents
an opportunity to reorient the space physically, socially, and spiritually. The children are at the
forefront of a living textuality that challenges the limited view of a supposedly universal
imagination defined by Yeats through the works of Blake, Shelley, Keats, and Wordsworth—all
male, English, and white. The children represent the chance to attend to the real world, not to
some imagined greater reality, and the chance to inscribe now in the Anima Mundi the previously
unrecorded memories of those who had been consigned to the sewers, those “bums, colonial
subjects, ethnic minorities, seditionaries, exiles, inner émigrés, outsiders, rejects, social waste”
(Dugdale 122).

Pynchon’s chapter begins with Fausto alone in a room “sealed against the present” (V.
305), communing in his Tower with his dead selves. But this tower cannot bear Yeatsian
symbolism, because it is a tower only by chance: “The room is in a building which had nine such
rooms before the war. Now there are three. [. . .] The room is stacked atop two others—the other
two-thirds of the building were removed by the bombing” (305). Fausto cannot cycle through the
past forever, because his confession, also a letter, is a text that will release him into the present.16
A new Valletta awaits him at the base of his tower, for between the tower and sewers, in the ruins
of the city, lie the words for the future.

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Notes

1. Whitaker cites Bloom, Cowart, Hite, Hume, Lense, Levine, and Lhamon, to whom can
be added Chambers, Dugdale, and McCarron.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Pynchon’s work are from V.
3. Yeats was a lifelong occultist and spiritualist. Some significant dates include his
founding of the Dublin Hermetic Society with Charles Johnson in 1885; his first visit to the
spiritualist Madame Blavatsky in 1887; and his membership in the Esoteric Section of the
Theosophical Society in London from 1888 to 1890, in the Society for Psychical Research from
1913 to 1928, and, from 1890 on, in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. The latter is
mentioned in *Gravity’s Rainbow* (746–48) in connection with a discussion of the tarot card The Tower, the title of Yeats’s 1928 collection. Yeats attended his first séance in 1888 in Dublin with Katharine Tynan, though the disturbing nature of the experience meant he did not attend another for many years afterward. He also intended to found a Celtic Order of Mysteries, but this was abandoned before 1900.


5. A revised version published in 1937 (the year of Pynchon’s birth) angered Georgie Yeats because it revealed her role in the automatic script, whereas the first edition had used a narrative introduction to give a source. She would have been understandably upset, given that the automatic writing was essentially, as Brenda Maddox sensibly observes, “a circuitous method of communication between a shy husband and wife who hardly knew each other, whose sexual life had got off to a troubled start, and for whom the occult and the sexual were virtually indistinguishable” (76–77).

6. The number four is related to the mandala, a four-part magic circle that is an important form in spiritual thinking, and that lends its shape to *Gravity’s Rainbow* (Weisenburger 10).

7. An individual’s phase is not determined by their birth date in the way that, for example, his or her sign of the Zodiac would be, but is the result of the “memories of the Daimon or ultimate self of that man” (*A Vision* 83). Yeats was Phase 17, “The Daimonic Man.” As has been noted (Whitaker 167), Tyrone Slothrop corresponds to Phase 28, the “natural man, the Fool” who “at his worst his hands and his feet and eyes, his will and his feelings, obey obscure subconscious fantasies, while at his best he would know all wisdom if he could know anything. [. . .] His importance will become clear as the system elaborates itself” (*Yeats, A Vision* 182). Slothrop’s libido expresses an obscure subconscious connection to the German rocket that, as he seeks to comprehend it, involves him in various political, technological, military, and symbolic systems, but ultimately leaves him with “not a thing in his head, just feeling natural” (*Gravity’s Rainbow* 626).

8. In the course of this cycle around the Great Wheel, Pynchon attaches further oppositions to the primary and antithetical cones, such as simplicity and intellectualism, reality and abstraction, and Maltese and British, each “dying each other's life, living each other's death” (Heraclitus, qtd. in Yeats, *A Vision* 68).

9. The title “Among School Children” is reshaped in the phrase “Among the hoarse screaming of aged children” in a poem by Fausto’s friend Maratt (*V.* 320). Pynchon also references Coleridge's “Phantom,” which Yeats quotes in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (512). On this morning, Elena Xemxi (her name means “bright sunny” [see Cassola 330]) sounds young again to Fausto, speaking “adolescent girl talk,” and looks similarly youthful as they walk by “an English club building whose side wall had been blown away”: “Her face, fresh from sleep, was so pure in that sun. Malta's old sun, Elena's young face” (*V.* 332, 333, 332). The Coleridge poem speaks of how “All accident of kin and birth, / Had passed away” and

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There was no trace / Of aught on that illumined face, / Upraised beneath the rifted stone, / But [. . .] / She, she herself and only she, / Shone through her body visibly. (2–3, 3–8)
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10. Dugdale also draws clear parallels between Maud Gonne and V. (88, 195).

11. Tourism, Dugdale points out, is related in the novel to “the ‘superimposed’ world of metaphor” (119).

12. This same division appears in chapter 5, “In which Stencil nearly goes West with an alligator,” where Father Fairing moves underground because he foresaw nothing but death above ground, “foresaw nothing but a city of starved corpses” (*V.* 118).
13. Maddox suggests that: “Perhaps Yeats needed to believe that his words could alter the course [end of page 48] of history” but that, at least in relation to some Irish and personal affairs, “his conscience was not clear” (371).

14. Whitaker notes, however, that “there are some remarkable similarities between Yeats and Pynchon. Both have been fascinated by quasi-metaphysical theories of history, from Joachim of Fiore’s three ‘eras’ or ‘kingdoms’ to Henry Adams’s chart of acceleration and dispersal. Both have studied the Kabbala, the Tarot pack, and the doctrines of the Order of the Golden Dawn” (161).

15. Such things are a recurring theme in Pynchon’s work. It could be argued that in The Crying of Lot 49, Oedipa Maas is following the instructions of the dead when she has to execute the will of Pierce Inverarity. The epigraph to part one of Gravity’s Rainbow, from Wernher von Braun, reads, though rather satirically: “Nature does not know extinction; all it knows is transformation. Everything science has taught me, and continues to teach me, strengthens my belief in the continuity of our spiritual existence after death.” There is also an account of a séance and scenes from the Other side, and, as Dugdale points out, the text “advances towards a magical explanation in its account of the propaganda film which somehow brings the black Schwarzkommando into existence in Germany” (112). In Vineland, there is the Thanatoid world, which is “like death, only different” (170). The entirety of Mason and Dixon might be a lament for the loss of magic from the world.

16. Fausto’s fate is in contrast with Sidney Stencil’s, some of whose traits, such as the “old diplomat travelling restlessly, and living in the past; the perception of others [. . .] merely as doubles of the self; the fear of chaos and the imminent end of civilisation; the need for a theory of history and a myth of a goddess of sexual love [. . .] are also attributable to Yeats” (Dugdale 97–98). Dugdale (98) and Whitaker (164) point out that the Epilogue of V. takes place in 1919, the year of Yeats’s “The Second Coming,” “A Prayer for My Daughter,” and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” and it is in the Epilogue that the ship carrying Stencil is lost to a waterspout, a gyre.

Works Cited


