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YEATS IS UNUSUAL, IF NOT UNIQUE, among poets for having formalized his subject matter into an extra-poetic system.[1] Although certainly poetry always remained his final aim, its fluid movement, subtle ambiguity, and defiance of confinement (especially characteristic of symbolic poetry) promised to frustrate any attempt to conceive a unified vision of the whole in it alone. He had first to achieve his unity of vision in the abstract; then he could proceed to weave it, with control and precision, into the rich and complex tapestry of his verse. Testimony to the predominance and urgency of this quest for unity appears in his 1919 "Exploration" entitled "If I Were Four-and-Twenty": "One day when I was twenty-three or twenty-four this sentence seemed to form in my head, without my willing it, much as sentences form when we are half-asleep: 'Hammer your thoughts into unity.' For days I could think of nothing else, and for years I tested all I did by that sentence" (p. 23).

The Dialectical Logic of Yeats's Byzantium Poems

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I. The Logic

Yeats sought to attain the unity he so desired through the symbol. Because the symbol is able to comprehend vastly more than what it literally denotes it fills the imagination with an awareness of the underlying unity of a multiplicity: multifarious images, emotions, and ideas, each with its own radiating associations, are all united in the symbol. Yeats describes how meaning emanates in all directions from a symbolic poem in "The Symbolism of Poetry": "A little lyric evokes an emotion, and this emotion gathers others about it and melts into their being in the making of some great epic; and at last, needing an always less delicate body, or symbol, as it grows more powerful, it flows out, with all it has gathered, among the blind instincts of daily life, where it moves a power within powers, as one sees ring within ring in the stem of an old tree" (pp. 157-58).

From a dialectical point of view nothing simply is what it is; the distinctions between things break down as all forms flow out beyond their boundaries and radically interpenetrate.

This concept of the symbol entails, to some degree, a form of what is known to philosophers as "the doctrine of internal relations." This doctrine asserts that all of a thing's relations to other things pertain to the essence of the thing or are constitutive of its intrinsic nature. Likewise, the symbol, conceived as a center of widening rings, carries an unlimited number of associations, each of which is part of its essential, intrinsic meaning and is not merely incidental or external to it. For, although these symbolic relations are not properties that could be deduced from the notion of the object which the symbol literally is, they still do represent part — the truly vital part — of the symbol's essential meaning and import. Their imaginative and emotional content, just as much as the symbol's analytic content (the set of predicates logically deducible from the subject), determine the essential nature of the symbol as an aesthetic object, even if this dimension of the symbol's significance is too elusive to be specified in a proposition that is simply true or false.

For this reason, there is something to be learned about Yeats's symbolism from the doctrine of internal relations. The doctrine entails that in an exhaustive description of any given thing, all items are essential. Such a description would include the thing's relations to all other things. On the highest level of abstraction, these are relations of being different from each of these other things, that is, of *not being* any of them, or of being a negation of each of them (in a mild sense of negation implying only difference, not diametric opposition). But according to the doctrine of internal relations, as we have just noted, all these relations of negation (as relations categorically) are included in the thing's essence. This means that the thing can be what it essentially is only by virtue of not being what it is not, that is, by standing in a negative relation to each of its negations, or by being different from what is other than it. Thus all things other than the thing we have selected, through being essentially related to it, are constitutive of its identity. The thing in this sense takes up and includes all other things within itself — it becomes a locus of relations in which the whole is embraced. Yeats expresses something of this sort in "Vacillation":

And half is half and yet is all the scene;
And half and half consume what they renew . . . .

The logic of our symbolism now resembles the dialectical logic of Hegel, and it is rife with the paradox that so fascinated both Hegel and Yeats. From a dialectical point of view nothing simply is what it is; the distinctions between things break down as all forms flow out beyond their boundaries (the half into the whole) and, because they are essentially inter-related, radically interpenetrate. Yeats thought of his psychological phase, the Demoniac Man, in terms very much resembling this type of dialectical flux: "As contrasted with Phase 13 and Phase 14, where mental images were separated from one another that they might be subject to knowledge, all now flow, change, flutter, cry out, or mix into something else . . ." (*A Vision*, p. 141).

We arrive at such dialectical thinking as a result of a disposition to view things in their wholeness. By widening our perspective without limit — and what limit would not be arbitrary? — we would come eventually to a consideration of the sum of relations any given thing has to all other things. If we then consider the sense in which all these relations are essential — the sense, that is, in which all things other than the chosen thing, in respect of their relations to it, are included in its individual identity — we see the thing as a particular incarnation of the whole, that is, as a "concrete universal." Hence, "To see the world in a grain of sand." In this way opposites — a thing and its negation — cease to be mutually exclusive and become dependent on each other. They are conceived of as contained within each other rather than as separated poles.

Yeats's use of this sort of logic is most evident in what he termed the "fundamental symbol" of his system, the double cone or vortex. It consists of two antithetical gyres which, far from being obdurately held apart, interpenetrate from vertex to base. In the gyres, Yeats finds his symbol for the whole, since it can be used, he says, to represent and interpret "every possible movement of life and of thought" (*A Vision*, p. 78). This is a truly universal symbol, one in which all things come together into unity. But the unity thus achieved is only a formal unity, and the symobl in which it is achieved merely an abstract symbol; all things have been united only through a common form which was found by abstracting from the content of each individual thing. The human mind, being unable to apprehend the totality of relations of a particular thing, where those relations are sensuous and concrete rather than being conceptually colligated in an analytic formula, is capable of experiencing in poetry the unity of only a limited number of images and impressions. And thus for the subjects of his poems Yeats required less universal symbols that would evoke certain particular imaginative associations more vividly than others. One of the most powerful and richly poetic of all Yeats's unifying (if not universal) symbols is the Sacred City of Byzantium.

For Yeats, ancient and medieval Byzantium was an emblem of unity as well as a unifying symbol. His fascination with the city resulted in large measure from his imagining it as having attained to an ideal of cultural unity. He writes, "I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religous, aesthetic, and practical life were one." And he illustrates this oneness in the portrait he sketches of "some philosophical worker in mosaic," to be found in "some little wine shop," "who could answer all my questions, the supernatural descending nearer to him than to Plotinus even . . . ." Here everything could be woven "into a vast design, the work of many that seemed the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work or rail and lamp, seem but a simble image . . . ." (*A Vision*, pp. 279-80). But the Byzantium poems could be written only after Yeats had worked out his system in *A Vision*. They present a concrete poetic embodiment of unity but do nothing to explicate it. Yeats had first to grasp unity in his formal geometry, which gave him the abstract design for the exquisitely-cut cameos of the

poems.

Before descending upon the poems themselves, we must draw out one further consequence of our theory of the symbol and its dialectical logic. The mind (including conscious sensibilities in general) is what forges the connections between objects in a symbolic poem. We may look to Yeats's "Symbols" for illustration of this fairly obvious, though deceptively simple point:

A storm-beaten old watch tower,
A blind hermit rings the hour.

All destroying sword-blade still
Carried by the wandering fool.

Gold-sewn silk on the sword blade,
Beauty and fool together laid.

The links between the hermit and blindness, between the sword-blade and the fool, between Beauty and the fool, are not physical relations of empirical objects. Physical relations are extremely important in determining how things will be related in our minds, and admittedly our understanding of the words depends on our empirical experience; but there is so much more that is added by the emotions, the imagination and the intellect, and it is these connotations, intimations, and allusions that enable us to experience the blindness of the hermit as really meaning something, as more than just a dumb fact.

Because in our symbolist credo symbolic relations, which exist only in the mind and are therefore ideal, are taken as, in a very meaningful sense, real, we must adopt something of an idealist metaphysic. Even if we accept empirical verificaton as the only definitive test of objective existence or realness, ideal symbolic reality can be held to qualify. This is the claim of astrology and of many other of Yeats's occult interests: it is believed that physical phenomena can be predicted and influenced by symbolic relationships. Less controversally, we can affirm that symbols have an aesthetic reality. On this basis, the symbol is conceived of as creating a poetic universe that we can enter into and experience imaginitively. Without necessarily committing ourselves to the view that mind is the metaphysical source and foundation of all reality and meaning, we can simply declare that we experience some sort of reality or meaning, though perhaps it comes all from fiction, from inventions of ideas and imaginings in art. Thus at the root of Yeats's symbolist technique there is an affirmation of ideal reality. From this affirmation springs a conflict between the ideal and the physical, which becomes one of Yeats's most obsessive themes, notably in his Byzantium poems.

II. The Poems

The Byzantium poems pivot upon the conflict of the spiritual with the material, the ideal with the physical, and their reconciliation in art by means of the synthetic, unifying powers of the imagination. These concerns are general parameters of Yeats's thought, and they are crucial in his poetry right from his earliest works. The ideal world by itself is depicted as sorrowfully sterile in an early poem, "Fergus and the Druid," where Fergus, feeling the burden of a worldly crown upon his head, takes from the Druid a "little bag of dreams," but finds in the wisdom he acquires from the bag cause only for unrelenting exasperation and declares,

But now I have grown nothing, knowing all.
Ah! Druid, Druid, how great webs of sorrow
Lay hidden in the small slate-colored thing!

This must be set next to lyrics such as "The White Birds" of the same volume, expressing ecstatic exaltation in an ideal existence outside time:

I would that we were, my beloved, white birds
on the foam of the sea!
We tire of the flame of the meteor, before it
can fade and flee;

And the flame of the blue star of twilight, hung low on the rim of the sky,
Has awaked in our hearts, my beloved, a sadness that may not die.

. . . .

I am haunted by numberless islands, and many a Danaan shore,
Where Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow come near us no more;
Soon far from the rose and lily and fret of the flames would we be,
Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed out on the foam of the sea!

Such juxtaposition gives an indication of the great difficulty, for Yeats, of choosing between this world, the temporal world of the body, and the other world, the eternal realm of the soul. He confronts this choice directly, with divided will, in "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time":

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 that crave;
The weak worm hiding down in its small cave,
The field-mouse running by me in the grass,
And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass;
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
. . . .

This ever-present theme of the conflict between the natural and the transcendent is paralleled throughout the poems by the theme of its resolution in art. Art begins its career as a unifying value, bringing together all that is worthy of human attainment, in the very first lyric of the *Collected Poems*, "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," with the lines:

For words alone are certain good:
Sing, then, for this is also sooth.

Continually reworked in every subsequent group of poems, this motif along with the related matter-spirit dichotomy, reaches perhaps its sublimest expression in the Byzantium poems.

The opening stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium" sets the dialectic of the time-eternity, body-soul antinomy into motion. These first eight lines purport to announce a rejection of Ireland, the land of the body and time. It is "no country for old men," such as this elderly expatriate. But the words spoken ostensibly in condemnation of Ireland present such an attractive picture, on the whole, that we cannot help but feel some under-current of half-heartedness or ambivalence in the speaker's attitude of rejection. The world of nature, including some blissful human inhabitants, is enticingly limned with "The young / In one another's arms" and "birds in the trees." Furthermore, the "salmon falls" are emblematic of strength and vigor. Yeats would remember, as A. Norman Jeffares observed, "that in Celtic legendry the salmon is used as a symbol of strength; the hero Cuchulain is renowned for his 'salmon leap', and his energy is compared to the flight of a bird" (Jeffares, p. 47). And similar in effect, the phrase "mackerel-crowded seas," filling the mouth with the abundance it denotes, portrays nature as teeming with life, as at its climax rather than in decline. The "sensual music" thus becomes seductive and emits vibrant overtones celebrating the land being renounced. This mingling of attraction and repulsion is captured in the paradox of "Those dying generations." While these words seem intended simply to designate recurrrent death, they also suggest, by dint of an ambiguity, life and generation and, moreover, the cycle through which life renews itself, which we cannot but feel as a positive value. Finally, "Monuments of unageing intellect" is too insupportably mighty a phrase, especially as a metaphor for a drooping old man, not to tremble with ironic resonance. Thus, from the first stanza we can sense the dialectical tension between the movement away from Ireland,

toward eternal, immovable monuments, and the countermovement toward Ireland with its temporal flux and the flow of nature.

I do not mean to suggest that the speaker's departure is unjustified. He is indeed an "aged man" who is perhaps too infirm of body to move in time with the sensual music any longer. But there is not simply an espousal of the intellectual: there is rather a vigourous dialectic of the intellectual with the sensuous. This antithesis is further developed in the second stanza, where the speaker becomes "A tattered coat upon a stick," that is, a scarecrow, shrivelled and lifeless and antagonistic towards the birds that populate the scenery of Ireland in the first stanza. But the most significant development in this stanza is the introduction of the motif of art as the vehicle of transcendence. Singing is looked to as the soul's deliverance from "Decrepit age" and specifically as the antidote to mortality:

. . . and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress . . . .

In the third stanza the speaker invokes the sages standing inert, "in God's holy fire / As in the gold mosaic of a wall." He appeals to them to "Come from the holy fire," to give up temporarily the eternal stillness of "the condition of fire" in which "is all music and all rest" ("Anima Mundi," p. 524), and to "perne in a gyre," so that they may be the "singing-masters" of a soul yet spiraling through time. Thus the meeting of the eternal with the temporal takes place through art, art betokened here, as earlier, by song. The lines which follow embody perhaps the strongest repulsion in the poem between the natural and the supernatural, as the speaker entreats the sages to "consume my heart away," presumably by means of the purgatorial fires, and then traces his heart's consternation to a deficiency in knowledge — "It knows not what it is" — using the knowledge-power cognate of the divine-earthly polarity. But the poles do not fly apart. They are held together in dialectical interpenetration by "sick with desire," which confesses the persisting attachment of the speaker, a "dying animal," to nature even as he prays to escape it, and by the stanza's conclusion on a note that rings of art, the sign of reconciliaton and unity, in "the artifice of eternity." Moreover, the suggestion of artificiality in "artifice of eternity" secures its connecton with the primal materials out of which artworks are laboringly made, while at the same time the phrase chimes with the magnificent, unageing "Monuments" of the preceding stanza, intoning a hymn to great art as the author of eternity, be it through architecture, song, or artifact.

The paradoxical dialectic between nature and transcendence, in which each becomes inseparable from the other, culminates in the poem's final stanza, which concentrates on the unifying focal point of that dialectic — the state of artistic rapture. Nature, transcendence and art all fuse together beautifully in the symbol of the golden bird. The speaker says,

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,

but paradoxically he goes on to explain that he will take his shape from

. . . such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

As one of Yeats's correspondents, T. Sturge More, whom Yeats took very seriously on this point, noticed, ". . . a goldsmith's bird is as much nature as a man's body, especially if it only sings like Homer and Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come to Lords and Ladies" (Bridge, p. 162). Surely Moore is right that the eternal ideal is described in terms not entirely purged of physicality. This bird singing to the

sensual ear and wrought of "hammered gold" — the adjective "hammered" solidly grasping the bird's contact with brute forces of mutation — does not escape nature but rather transfigures it. The bird informs the natural with the eternal — in art. This synthesis of the worldly and the divine, achieved mainly in the paradoxical golden bird, is reinforced by the bird's association with the Emperor, who, as Yeats explains in his description of Byzantium in *A Vision*, is both a man and a "God dependent upon a greater God" (p. 277). Furthermore, the bird's song keeps the Emperor in a state between sleeping and waking that had special significance for Yeats as uniquely disposed to artistic insipiration: "The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols" ("The Symbolism of Poetry," p. 159).

Thus time-eternity-art — substituting whichever of the many correlates for time and eternity are preferred — forms the general thesis-antithesis-synthesis pattern of "Sailing to Byzantium." In "Byzantium" the dynamics of this pattern, which remains basically the same, become more violently dialectical.

The first stanza of "Byzantium" again defines the antithesis of the human and the divine. The "unpurged images of day" (in Yeats's system day is generally aligned with objectivity and the body) and "The Emperor's drunken soldiery" smack of the impurity of the flesh, while an aura of austere spirituality hovers, as a nimbus from heaven, about the disdainful moonlit or starlit cathedral dome. Yeats ingeniously compresses the antinomy into phrases such as "mere complexities": "mere" because belonging to the lower world, whereas in the eternal realm of pure being all is simplicity and unity (Plato), and "complex" like everything else having to do with man — that is, with "The fury and the mire of human veins" — and the natural world. However, even in this first stanza, the collapse of the disjunction between the human and the superhuman, foreordained by the dialectical logic of merging opposites, seems to be adumbrated, as it is the night-walkers' song that is grouped with the unpurged images and drunken soldiers, which together recede from the scene, and we have learned from the companion poem to recognize the potentially supernatural powers of song and its great affinity with the spirit.

Of course, an antinomy must first be drawn to tautness in order to forcefully collapse, and besides, even at the climactic release, the clarity of the poem depends upon the poles retaining some sharp contrast with respect to each other; thus the poem's incisiveness continues to augment through the second section, where the "image" (or "man or shade") floats in its distinctly supernatural element. Bound "in mummy-cloth" it "May unwind the winding path" that was spun during its natural life, thus rising out of nature into pure contemplation, or "mind's pondering," as it is termed in "All Souls' Night":

I need some mind that, if the cannon sound
From every quarter of the world, can stay
Wound in mind's pondering
As mummies in the mummy-cloth are wound . . . .

Yet, supernatural as this spectre may appear, it is not so entirely remote as to be unable to summon the "Breathless mouths" of humans — breathless with human excitement or exhaustion, though also — Yeats weaving in the paradox — breathless like the superhuman mouth that has "no moisture and no breath." The section concludes with the crowning paradox, "I call it death-in-life and life-in-death," joining together the contraries of life and death, since in Byzantium, this capitol city of symbols, op-

posites are mutually entailing.

The third stanza recalls the natural yet eternal, because artistically consummate, golden bird of "Sailing to Byzantium." This bird is the perfect symbol for the synthesis of nature and transcendence in art. Although in its aesthetic transfiguration it is "More miracle than bird or golden handiwork," it is nevertheless wrought of the hard and heavy "metal" of the earth. Since the bird is at once spirit (or divinity), nature and art, it is interchangeably "Miracle, bird, or golden handiwork." This directly parallels (though not in the same order) the "image, man or shade" of the preceding stanza and the "religious, aesthetic, and practical life" of Yeats's prose descriptions of Byzantium.

Thus, the whole poem, and indeed the whole Byzantium myth is sucked into a vortex that swirls around the single concrete-universal symbol of the golden bird. This is Yeats's unity achieved. Such a coalescence necessarily draws in elements from every quarter of Yeats's system. The crowing of "the cocks of Hades," which the golden bird simulates, signifies the moment of divine influx, when time and eternity meet, just as in "Solomon and the Witch" a cockerel "crowed out eternity." This occurs at Phase 15, when the moon is full, a phase of supernatural incarnation, like the phase that coincides with the eleventh century of Yeats's Byzantium, the mid-point of the two-thousand year long Christian Era. That the bird is "by the moon embittered" may be ambiguously interpreted either as envy of the full moon "Beyond the visible world" ("The Phases of the Moon," lines 60-63), which humiliates the bird for its material composition, or as antipathy, borne in allegiance to the full moon, toward all things that are not, like those under her aegis, "changeless," that is, antipathy towards things such as

> *Common bird or metal*
> *And all complexities of mire and blood.*

At midnight, the dark core of the night, which is another, like the full moon, of the symbols Yeats generally placed in the group favorable to Unity of Being,

> *. . . on the Emperor's pavement flit*
> *Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,*
> *Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame .*
> *. .*

But, although these lines completely expunge corporeality, and sure enough "all complexities of fury leave" or are eradicated in "the fire that makes all simple" ("Anima Mundi," p. 511), there are "blood-begotten spirits" that are taken into the dance and that are also necessary to the final synthesis. This synthesis is again achieved in art, and art that is once again intrinsically paradoxical: "Dying into a dance . . ." Just as this line couples death and animation, so the suceeding line — "An agony of trance" — both still and writhing, fuses incompatibles. (We may well be reminded at this point of Yeats's remarks, quoted earlier, regarding the one moment of creation when we are held "in that state of perhaps real trance.") But in addition to being a category of art, the dance also has tremendous vitality of its own as a symbol for the synthesis of opposites. The dance itself, which is the form of the display, and therefore ideal (Plato), is indistinguishable from the dancer, the laboring material body: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" ("Among School Children," l. 64). Both move in unison, soul and body together, mingled into the transforming beauty of art. The stanza concludes, appropriately, with another incongruous union: because "All power is from the terrestrial condition" ("Animus Mundi," p. 523-24) a purely pneumatic flame "cannot singe a sleeve," and yet it is a flame of "agony."

But a dialectical reconciliation is always one which contains and even depends upon conflict, such as swells up from the storming sea of the fifth stanza. The spirits moving through the sea toward the purificatory flames must ride "Astraddle" upon "the dolphin's mire and blood." They come in a "flood" of sea which the golden

smithies of the Emperor "Break," suggesting the violence of waves upon rock. Similarly, the marbles of the dancing floor "Break bitter furies of complexity," as they break "Those images that yet / Fresh images beget," or souls that have not yet escaped from the cycle of death and rebirth in nature. However, even in these furious clashes, the smithies of the Emperor, who rebuff the torrents of natural chaos, are themselves "golden smithies," and similarly the dancing floor is of "Marbles." The final collision is between the Marbles and "That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea," which images physical turmoil in the dolphin, already identified with "mire and blood," while at the same time alluding, through "great cathedral gong," to the cathedral of the first stanza that disainfully shines in the clear starlight of eternity. Thus, both in the poem and on the sea, the dialectic explodes in a shattering concussion of time and eternity held together by an intense artistic energy.

Later poems, as well as other poems from the same period, show Yeats continuing to vacillate "Between extremities" of the physical and the spiritual. In "The Tower" he announces that he has prepared his peace with

All those things whereof
Man makes a superhuman
Mirror-resembling dream,

while declaring in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul,"

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
A blind man battering blind men . . . .

Perhaps the dialogue of Soul and Heart in "Vacillation," suggesting the interdependence between art, the forge of eternity, and its earthly material, strikes a more stable balance:

The Soul. *Seek out reality, leave things that seem.*
The Heart. *What, be a singer born and lack a theme?*
The Soul. *Isaiah's coal, what more can man desire?*
The Heart. *Struck dumb in the simplicity of fire!*
The Soul. *Look on that fire, salvation walks within.*
The Heart. *What theme had Homer but original sin?*

But on the whole Yeats's voices in "Last Poems" have an increasing tendency to make choices following that of "The Wild Old Wicked Man":

"That some stream of lightning
From the old man in the skies
Can burn out that suffering
No right-taught man denies.
But a coarse old man am I,
I choose the second-best,
I forget it all awhile
Upon a woman's breast."

Still, even here there is still an opposite side to the coin, a side which appears facing up in "An Acre of Grass"

Grant me an old man's frenzy,
Myself I must remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat the wall
Till truth obeyed his call . . . .

This poem turns on the exaltation of "An old man's eagle mind" that can soar to heights of inspiration touching the heavens:

A mind Michael Angelo knew
That can pierce the clouds,
Or inspired by frenzy
Shake the dead in their shrouds . . . .

If these "old themes" ever finally deserted

Yeats, they did so only after producing the sublime beauty of the Byzantium poems. And we may now add in conclusion that it was a beauty born of dialectic: it "Grew in pure mind" working "In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart."

Note

1. I thank Milton Bates for reading and commenting on this essay.

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