Beyond the Binary: Decoding W.B. Yeats’s Esoteric Metaphors

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The dueling elements of the concrete and imaginary have long preoccupied artists and intellectuals that seek out creation and destruction in the search for truth. In his work A Vision, W. B. Yeats attempts to find balance between the abstract and material worlds by quantifying the esoteric traditions derived from countless ancient belief systems. Throughout his life, he devoted himself to the diverse use of metaphors associated with the Fool’s Journey (alternatively the Hero’s Journey, the Monomyth, or the Arthurian Romance Quest). In A Vision, he uses the model of a binary gyre to diagram this device long used as a staple in literature and mythology.

I will use both qualitative and quantitative analysis to examine key words used in his poetry by explaining the contextual significance of his esoteric metaphors. Due to his attention to repetition and word placement, using digital tools to detect word frequency, concordance, and collocation of significant terminology is an exceptionally helpful approach to analyzing his work. Voyant Tools is an online text analytics environment that allows for distant reading of a corpus using quantitative methods. Using Voyants word trends, collocation clustering, and key words in context tools, I will analyze eight collections of Yeats’s poetry to reveal the relationships of the metaphors drawn from A Vision. I will then explain the relevance of frequently used terms in his works by relating them to the motifs and symbols that he associated with the gyre.

Yeats believed the metaphors and interactions between the abstract and material worlds are manifestations of a cyclical duality that catalyzes the process of creation and destruction in both empirical and subjective realities. He believed these binary metaphors summarized all psychological, spiritual, historical and physical interactions. By using digital analysis, not only can we offer clarity to Yeats’s philosophical constructs and literary influences, we can better engage with his work by continuing his tradition of quantifying the chaotic abstract world of metaphor by assigning meaning to the particular manifestations of transcendental ideas.