

like that. "It is self-evident" that the way to "romantic" achievement is prosaic "capacity for fact":

that one must do as one is told
and eat rice, prunes, dates, raisins, hardtack, and tomatoes
if one would "conquer the main peak of Mount Tacoma."

The moral realm is as plain and inexorable as the natural, and here, too, Miss Moore would have us "rigorists." "Guns, nets, seines, traps and explosives" are not allowed in the National Park, for it is or should be "self-evident / that it is frightful to have everyone afraid of one." She is committed to a copybook morality with its definiteness and simplicity and cites the old-fashioned heroes—"Cincinnatus was; Regulus"—of the copybook. She sympathizes with whatever is integral, positive, self-controlled, and self-respecting. Reticence is a virtue, and few things can be worse than crying in someone's lap. In poetry there must be no adventitious charm or seductiveness. It "must not wish to disarm anything." It must be what it is and you must like it or leave it, for that is the way superior people behave. They respect one another's individuality and do not intrude by offering or seeking intimacies, much less confessions. If the way they express themselves is rather complicated and punctilious, this is partly to effect the precise nuance and implication, partly to secure close attention, and partly, it must be acknowledged, to keep people off. The matter and the rind of her poetry are somewhat prickly, like the upright spruce tree, "all needles," like the hedgehog "with all his edges out," like the monkey puzzle tree, "this pine tiger,"

This porcupine-quilled, complicated starkness—
this is beauty—"a certain proportion in the skeleton
which gives the best results."

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

THROUGHOUT the entire period covered in this volume Yeats was one of the major living poets. We have discussed his work in connection with the poetry of the Celtic Twilight, with the development of Symbolism in the 1890s, with the reaction against *l'art pour l'art* after the turn of the century, and in several other contexts. For this reason he can here be discussed more briefly than would otherwise be the case. He was born in Ireland in 1865, and named William Butler after his grandfather, a clergyman. His father, John Butler Yeats, married Susan Pollexfen, who was descended from a family of shipowners. J. B. Yeats was a painter. He delighted in conversation and argument, and his opinions changed like shot silk. Chesterton used to say that he never knew but one man who could talk like old Yeats, the painter, and that was young Yeats, the poet. Yeats spent his boyhood and early youth in London and in Sligo, on the west coast of Ireland, where he stayed with his maternal grandparents. Between these two homes was no very long journey, but they were different worlds.

In the 1890s Yeats's lyrics evoked a bleakly beautiful landscape of streams, lakes, hills, rocks, woods, wind, and clouds, and it was the countryside about Sligo that planted these images in his imagination. Persons and places in the vicinity came back

in memory to the end of his life. In Lough Gill, three miles from Sligo, was the small, wooded island of Innisfree. On the shores of this lake, where midnight was

all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings,

he picked blackberries and daydreamed of living alone in a hut on the island. West along the coast was the hill of Knocknarea, with a cairn on the summit under which the legendary Queen Maeve of Connaught was said to lie buried. Not far off was the great country house of Lissadell. All through his later boyhood Constance Gore-Booth, who lived there, was an object of romantic interest to Yeats, though he did not then meet her. Years later he recalled his impression:

When long ago I saw her ride
Under Ben Bulben to the meet,
The beauty of her country-side
With all youth's lonely wildness stirred.

A few miles north of Sligo was the mountain of Ben Bulben, with the waterfall on its side that "childhood counted dear"; under "bare Ben Bulben's head" was Drumcliff Churchyard, which Yeats later chose for his place of burial.

For the artist's son the Sligo relatives were a romantically different type of person. In London and in Howth, near Dublin, where his family settled when he was fifteen, the adults Yeats met were artists, lawyers, professors, intellectuals—his father's friends. They talked of paintings, books, styles, politics, morals, philosophy, religion, in short, of ideas, and his father, at least, talked with irresponsible exaggeration. But in Sligo were silent, practical men of action and business, like his formidable grandfather, who had once been shipwrecked, or his horse-racing uncle, George Pollexfen. Their talk at the dinner table was of ships and cargoes. J. B. Yeats admired the Pollexfens as the opposite of himself and later speculated that his son's poetic genius derived from the union of the sociable, vocal, and imaginative Yeatses with the deep-feeling, intuitive Pollexfens: "By marriage with the Pollexfens," he said, "I have given a tongue to the sea cliffs." Yeats later remarked that this was the only compliment that ever turned his head.

Yeats's education began at home, when some of his Sligo uncles and aunts tried to teach him to read. He made so little progress that they feared he did not have all his faculties. In London he was sent to school. His teachers reported favorably on his character, but he was not a gifted scholar. "My thoughts were a great excitement, but when I tried to do anything with them, it was like trying to pack a balloon into a shed in a high wind." He had many fights, partly because his English schoolmates looked down on him as Irish, while he looked down on them as English. Eventually he cultivated the friendship of an athlete, who protected him. After his family moved from London to Dublin, he attended the high school there. His formal education ended in 1883.

His family called him Willie. Gentle and dreamy, he pored in adolescence over *Alastor*, Shelley's romantic, obscurely symbolical, narrative poem about a world-disappointed visionary. Shelley's poet-hero saw and loved a woman in his dreams, and afterwards no mortal girl, not even a passionate Arab maiden, could win his heart. Seeking the dream, he floated down a river to his death. Yeats longed, he recalled in his *Autobiography*, "to share his melancholy, and maybe at last to disappear . . . drifting in a boat along some slow-moving river between great trees." Sometimes he would sleep out at night in a cliffside cave above the sea, for Shelley's sages had dwelt in caverns by the sea. As he climbed along the narrow ledge to the cave, he thought of Byron's romantic hero Manfred on his glacier. The tendency to make such indentifications did not fade away as Yeats grew older. He associated himself and the people he knew with figures in story and poetry. His imagination mythologized his life.

From the time he was eight or nine years old his father read poems to him; his *Autobiography* mentions Macaulay's *The Lays of Ancient Rome* and Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*; the latter made him wish to be a magician. Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Spenser, and Morris seem to have been among his favorites in adolescence. By the time he was seventeen, he was writing poetry. In fact, he never seriously imagined any other role in life. From his earliest verses on, his father took a great, encouraging interest. J. B. Yeats was brimful of ideas about poetry and daily urged them on his son, beginning at breakfast.

Since the father's opinions were the second important influence in forming Yeats's poetry (the first being the English poets of the nineteenth century), we may briefly summarize them. Some can be read in letters to his son, subsequently published. But because what J. B. Yeats may actually have said matters less than what his son took to heart, we can turn to Yeats's *Autobiography* for his recollections of his father's doctrine. The major Victorians, J. B. Yeats said, had loaded their verse with arguments and ethical teachings. These, however, had no place in poetry. This tenet was typical of the Pre-Raphaelite generation; another was less so: he cared little "for any of that most beautiful poetry which has come in modern times from the influence of painting." If we think of the Pre-Raphaelite verse J. B. Yeats had in mind, we understand that not just the pictorial, but a nexus of associated values also—contemplative mood, symbolism, quasi-religious mysticism—were under attack. In poetry J. B. Yeats relished what he called drama, by which he meant character revealing itself in a moment of intense feeling. "He did not care even for a fine lyric passage unless he felt some actual man behind its elaboration of beauty." Poetry was an "idealization of speech." These views were never accepted by Yeats without strong qualifications, and they were more or less adverse to his own tastes when his father argued them in his adolescence. But they influenced his poetry from the start. Later in his career he sought to write poetry that would be "an idealization of speech," and his father's ideal found a marvelous fulfillment in the Yeatsian talk of the son's mature style.

Yeats thought of himself as a person of religious temperament who had been deprived of religion by nineteenth-century science. A "religious temperament" in his case implied a need to sense a spiritual depth and mystery in the universe and, beyond this, an ultimate coherence and meaning. It implied also an imaginative need for concrete symbols in which the mystery could be invoked and contemplated. His religious quest was more urgently motivated by metaphysical and imaginative hungers than by moral ones. Feelings of the vanity of human life unless religion gives a purpose or of the evil of the heart unless it can be redeemed—feelings that sent Eliot on his religious quest—did not press upon Yeats so strongly or appall him so intensely as the thought of the drabness and emptiness of the

universe as it was conceived in the materialistic world-view of nineteenth-century science.

Christianity was, from his point of view, impossible to believe, and his religious needs drove him to other traditions. He studied occult, hermetic, theosophical, kabalistic, Rosicrucian, alchemical, astrological, mystical, magical, and spiritualist lore with Mohini Chatterji, with the Dublin Hermetic Society, with the Order of the Golden Dawn, with the celebrated Madame Blavatsky (said to be in telepathic communication with immortal Tibetan sages), and with many other groups and persons. He worked with Edwin Ellis for four years (1889–1893) on an edition of the writings of William Blake. For this edition the two students thought out an "interpretation of the mystical philosophy of the Prophetic Books." The atmosphere of Yeats's hermetic studies is illustrated by a passage in an autobiographical manuscript published in 1972: in the Dublin Hermetic Society he was

a member of their Esoteric Section, an inner ring of the more devout students, which met weekly to study tables of oriental symbolism. Every organ of the body had its correspondence in the heavens, and the seven principles which made the human soul and body corresponded to the seven colours and the planets and the notes of the musical scale. We lived in perpetual discussion.

Yeats began to devote himself to these matters in the 1880s. His interest, which perhaps never passed over into absolute credence, lasted all his life. The casual reader of his poetry can have no idea how constant and intense this interest was. He invoked magical symbols, saw visions, consulted the stars, attended seances, and wrote out several esoteric systems of his own elaboration. This had a profound effect on his poetry. The first important effect was that it gave him a cluster of ideas and imaginative habits that might be called a theory and practice of symbolism.

His studies suggested that certain symbols can summon unknown spiritual powers—such symbols, traditional in occult lore, as the four elements, the planets, the directions of the compass, the sun, the moon, the sea, the rose, and various geometrical designs. Even if one doubted this premise of magic, it was certain, at the very least, that such symbols in poetry evoked ancient tra-

ditions and manifold, complex associations, so a poem using such symbols acquired a depth and density of implication greater than even the poet might know. "A hundred generations might write out what seemed the meaning . . . and they would write different meanings, for no symbol tells all its meanings to any generation." As Yeats put it in an essay on Shelley (1900):

It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of Nature. The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet finds of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstances of life.

Along with concepts of symbolism, Yeats's occult studies taught him a technique of what he called "reverie." He would fix his mind upon a symbol, and this would call up other images or symbols, provided only that he could suppress his own will and remain passive in order to receive whatever was presented. He presumed that such reveries might put him in touch with profound meanings or profound "states of the soul." His commitment to symbolism and reverie shaped his style. He thought in images; he was alert to exploit their manifold possible implications; he felt that the value of poetry lay in its power of implication or suggestion, not in anything it could state. In an essay on "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900) he asked himself how poetic style would change if poets learned that they should evoke and contemplate symbols; his answer partly described his own style. It also revealed how much his "theory" of symbolism at this time gathered in other ideas typical of the nineties. If or when the symbolical movement comes, we shall see

a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, or the moral law for the sake of the moral law, a casting out of all anecdotes and of that brooding over scientific opinion that so often extinguished the central flame in Tennyson . . . and we would cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms, as of a man running, which are the invention of the will with its eyes always on something to be done or undone; and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination.

Since the contrary is still sometimes assumed, we may repeat that Yeats was a Symbolist before he encountered the French symbolistes. As he wrote to Ernest Boyd in 1915, "My interest in mystic symbolism did not come from Arthur Symons or any other contemporary writer. I have been a student of the medieval mystics since 1887 . . . Of the French symbolists I have never had any detailed or accurate knowledge."

As he prepared his edition of Blake, Yeats came more and more to feel that there was a hidden significance in his initials. Were not Blake's initials W.B., and were not his W.B.Y.? It was not surprising that Blake would appear to Yeats from time to time and dictate revisions in the poems of Blake that he was editing—revisions which Yeats faithfully incorporated in the text he published. It was also typical that Yeats found what no one else has found: that Blake had been an Irishman. Blake's grandfather had been an O'Neal, Yeats argued, and "Ireland takes a most important place" in Blake's "mystical system."

For still another factor shaping Yeats's early poetry was his Irish nationalism. These were times of boiling emotional politics in the Irish struggle for independence from England. Yeats aspired to bring into being an Irish national literature. Perhaps he would have written in Gaelic, had he known the language. As it was, he would at least be an Irish, rather than an English, poet. He would draw on Irish myth and legend, as opposed, for example, to classical or Germanic myth. His poetry would assimilate the native folklore of the peasantry. It would rid itself of "Shelley's Italian light" and dwell amid the low, wet skies, the rock and heather of Ireland. The legends and history associated with particular places and objects would be revived and made familiar. He would "bring again in[to] imaginative life the old sacred places—Slieveanamon, Knocknarea—all that old reverence that hung—above all—about conspicuous hills," so that, as in classical Greece, the local features of the landscape would have imaginative resonance for the people who lived there, and, up to a point at least, a shared imaginative lore would once again unite the poet with a whole people, as it had in the heroic ages of the past. Above all, however, this national literature would be written in accordance with exacting standards of taste and style, of sensitivity and imagination. A national literature emphatically did not mean writing down. It was not to be a literature of patri-

otic rhetoric; although Yeats himself wrote some poems of this kind, he quarreled bitterly with nationalists for whom any criticism of patriotic verse was treason. His idea was to create through literature a national mind, which would, in turn, bring a nation into being. But the "national mind" was to be one that would support a great literature.

For his cause Yeats learned to give speeches and dominate committees. He helped form the Irish Literary Society in 1891 and the National Literary Society in 1892 and gradually engaged in more direct political activity. There used to be many a former Irish revolutionary who knew little of Yeats the poet but remembered very well Yeats the agitator. In 1896 he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and a police report from 1899 speaks of him as "a literary enthusiast" and "more or less of a revolutionary." In the speeches and articles—even, to some degree, in the poems in which he elaborated his idea of what Ireland would be—he was articulating a vision that had little relation to possibility, just as his characterizations of England presented a monstrous bogey. Both images help define what he valued, however. In brief summary, England was the home of materialism and middle-class morality, of industrialism and imperialism, of power, wealth, and the coarse insensitivities these things breed. (One of his favorite symbols of all this was Carlyle's prose.) The Irish, on the other hand, would become a mainly agricultural people of delicate perceptions, imagination, and spiritual insight.

He immersed himself in nationalist politics out of conviction and also, as he said, out of "desire for a fair woman." "The great trouble of my life," as he called his love for Maud Gonne, began in 1889, when he met her in London. She was a nationalist, a revolutionary, a maker of incendiary speeches, wholly devoted to the bringing about of Irish independence. Yeats was in love with her for at least fifteen years, and during the 1890s his political activity was a kind of wooing; he hoped to draw her to him by sharing her cause. To this love Yeats brought his immense capacity for imaginative idealization. He felt a high-minded pride in Maud Gonne, in her beauty, courage, and "pilgrim soul." He compared her to Helen of Troy. He felt a tender protectiveness. He was proud also of his own passion. But she would not have him, though she would not decisively drop him either,

and the years of frustration doubtless contributed to the eventual hardening and embittering of his character. For reasons of poetic style and personal discretion, the many poems he wrote to or for Maud Gonne in the 1890s—such poems as "Aedh Gives His Beloved Certain Rhymes," or "Aedh Hears the Cry of the Sedge," or "When You Are Old"—are rather abstract. Nevertheless, they make up the finest group of love lyrics that has been written in modern times and are the more moving to the extent that one knows the biographical circumstances. "The Fish" is one example:

Although you hide in the ebb and flow
Of the pale tide when the moon has set,
The people of coming days will know
About the casting out of my net,
And how you have leaped times out of mind
Over the little silver cords,
And think that you were hard and unkind,
And blame you with many bitter words.

As late as 1908 Yeats was still addressing much of his poetry to Maud Gonne. As he soliloquized in a journal of that year, she "never really understands my plans, or nature, or ideas," but "How much of the best I have done and still do is but the attempt to explain myself to her? If she understood, I should lack a reason for writing, and one never can have too many reasons for doing what is so laborious."

In London in the 1890s he knew most of the poets of that time. Henley, with whom he shared almost no opinions, he nevertheless admired for his sincerity, generosity, and "aristocratic attitudes, his hatred of the crowd and of that logical realism which is but popular oratory . . . frozen and solidified," and Yeats was one of the young writers Henley warmly encouraged and published in his *National Observer*. At an opposite pole of the literary world, Yeats also admired Oscar Wilde, whom he met before Wilde was famous, having been invited by his fellow Irishman to Christmas dinner in 1888. Wilde read from *The Decay of Lying*, and Yeats found the style flawed. "Like all of us," Wilde had learned from Pater, "but in him the cadence became over-elaborate and swelling, the diction a little lacked in exactness." But Yeats was dazzled by Wilde's audacious, self-

possessed wit, in which Yeats saw a swaggering courage, and said of Wilde, "He is one of our eighteenth-century duellists born in the wrong century" and "he would be a good leader in a cavalry charge." As for Dowson, Yeats did not know him well but sensed in him "that weakness that seems to go with certain high virtues of sweetness and of courtesy." He "was burning to the socket, in exquisite songs . . . full of subtle refinement." Lionel Johnson became "for a few years my closest friend . . . He had taken from Walter Pater certain favorite words which came to mean much for me: 'Life should be a ritual,' and we should value it for 'magnificence,' for all that is 'hieratic.'" Arthur Symons at first "repelled" him because he "saw nothing in literature but a series of impressions." But Symons later became, briefly, his "most intimate friend," and the two shared lodgings for a while. "Whatever I came to know of Continental literature I learned of him . . . He had the sympathetic intelligence of a woman and was the best listener I have ever met." All of these writers except Henley belonged to the Rhymers' Club, "a weekly or was it fortnightly meeting of poets at the Cheshire Cheese," the London tavern associated with Samuel Johnson. At these meetings the poets would read and discuss their verses.

When he came to write of these figures in his *Autobiography*, Yeats called them the "tragic generation" and described them with warm sympathy and admiration, even if he told many feline anecdotes about them. They disdained, as he portrayed them, the middle-class reading public, its attitudes, values, and way of life. Their art rejected rhetoric, mechanical logic, and moral responsibilities and embodied subtle and delicate sensitivities in clear, firm forms. In some degree or way they all had that "noble courage" that Yeats, thinking of Aubrey Beardsley, was tempted to call "the greatest of human faculties." On drink, drugs, scandal, passion, or madness their lives had shipwrecked; contemplating this, Yeats felt that self-destructiveness had been at work in them all and that whatever brought about their personal tragedies had also limited their art. Just what this was he could not make completely clear to himself; more exactly, he made it clear in several different ways. But he seems to have felt that in the intensity of their rejection of middle-class existence they had also—inevitably in their circumstances—rejected life itself—that is, natural, normal existence with its experiences and

passions—so that there was not enough to nourish their art. In turning away, they had not turned toward anything. Only the mystic and the saint, Yeats later believed, could reject nature and the world and still be full. For anyone else, there would be only an "unnatural emptiness." Johnson had taken to drink in order, Yeats said, to recapture "accident, the unexpected, the confusions of nature," without which "we cannot live."

What Yeats most learned from these poets was, he felt, the necessity of working as a close, fastidious craftsman. In London in 1890 he had "still the intellectual habits of a provincial, and fixed my imagination on great work to the neglect of detail." These poets taught him that we must "constantly analyze what we have done, be content even to have little life outside our work, to show, perhaps, to other men as little as the watchmender shows, his magnifying glass caught in his screwed-up eye." However clearly he saw their limitations, Yeats sympathized with their rejection of the attitudes of the Victorian middle-class, and critics whose judgment carries much weight have thought that his own values to the end of his life were ultimately aesthetic ones. Such oppositions as those between art and natural life or between imagination and moral responsibility were always, for Yeats, real and vital in a way that reflects a nineteenth-century influence on his thinking. They were fought out in many poems and also in his journals and letters, where one finds such typical remarks as, "Evil comes to us men of imagination wearing as its mask all the virtues. I have known, certainly, more men destroyed by the desire to have wife and child and to keep them in comfort than I have seen destroyed by harlots and drink." But also typically, on the other hand, he wrote another journal entry only twelve days later: protesting against the time and energy he was taking away from his poetry and spending on other work, he added, "yet perhaps I must do all these things that I may set myself into a life of action, so as to express not the traditional poet but that forgotten thing, the normal active man." That Yeats did not resolve for one side or the other, but lived in tension and inner debate, was characteristic and is one of the reasons for his poetic achievement.

In a single chapter on Yeats's whole career, one can hope to characterize his poetry of this period only in a general way, and in earlier chapters I attempted this. The point to be stressed

here is that all we have noticed in his early career helped form this poetry. His aims as a poet were diverse, but he struggled to unify them. In the many lyrics he wrote to the rose, for example, the "Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days" that he invoked as both subject and inspiration is a traditional symbol. It is perhaps the Beauty to which the London aesthetes, disciples of Pater, devoted themselves, and it is certainly the eternal and transcendent Beauty and Love of which Yeats read first in Shelley and later in Neoplatonic, Rosicrucian, and other occult books. (He may also have read Plato, for Lionel Johnson had given him a one-volume edition of Plato in 1893, saying, "I need ten years in the wilderness," and "you ten years in a library.") In all these respects the rose was an image of symbolic, even mystical, profundity, appropriately to be invoked and contemplated in wavering yet incantatory rhythms, in moods of solemn awe and religious prayer. Yet if Yeats was hearing or hoping to hear "strange things said by God," he had also heard and absorbed his father's argument that poetry lies essentially in the rendering of passion, character, and speech, and his style had somehow to reflect these premises also. Moreover, the rose is Ireland in its long history of suffering, and Yeats, writing to serve "old Eire," felt that he must write for the people, which meant, he sometimes thought, that he must forsake elaborate symbolism for "Ballad and story, rann and song." Certainly it meant that while his lyrics invoked the symbolic rose, they must also present heather and thorn trees, describing the natural landscape of Ireland. Finally, Yeats was in love; in her old age Maud Gonne, having outlived Yeats, used to say that the rose was a symbol of herself, and surely it was.

REMAKING A SELF, 1899-1914

Yeats's early style reached its finest development in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, which was published in 1899. The next fifteen years were difficult and bitter. At the end of them he had developed a new lyric style, a style of talk that could be intensely actual and personal, often with stark directness and force. In "A Coat" (1914) he referred to this change of style while exemplifying it:

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it,
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

Gentle, dreamy Willie Yeats, with his sweet and wistful melody and his beautiful symbols, had died into a larger, more formidable poet, amazingly articulate in all his many moods, though not necessarily more attractive in personality.

If we ask why Yeats's style changed, we can again recall that from his earliest efforts as a poet he had been pulled in different directions. At one pole he had been symbolist and hieratic, to use Lionel Johnson's favorite word; at the other he had responded to his father's praise of simple, passionate speech. As early as 1888 he had written Katharine Tynan, "I have woven about me a web of thoughts. I wish to break through it, to see the world again"; after finishing his Romantic and symbolical *The Wanderings of Oisín* that year, he had "simplified" his style by filling his "imagination with country stories." He had admired folk ballads and tried to imitate their diction and rhythm. In 1899 he had read some verses written by a man returning to Ireland to die. Though they were not good verses, they had moved him, "for they contained the actual thoughts of a man at a passionate moment of life." We should, he had decided, make poems by writing out "our own thoughts in as nearly as possible the language we thought them in, as though in a letter to an intimate friend. We should not disguise them in any way; for our lives give them force as the lives of people in plays give force to their words." Twenty-four years later, in a 1913 letter to his father, he explained the new style he had now achieved in more or less the same terms:

I have tried to make my work convincing with a speech so natural and dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling. . . . It is in dramatic expression that English poetry is most lacking as compared with French poetry. Villon always and Ronsard at times create a marvellous drama out of their own lives.

These opposed alternatives of symbolist mystery and folk or dramatic actuality were part of a wider dialectic to which we shall come back in connection with Yeats's achievement in the 1920s and 1930s. To his mind "art" was a polar opposite to "nature," and he assumed a similar, mutually excluding opposition between such values as "intellect" and "wisdom," on the one hand, and "passion" and "life," on the other hand. His career of fifty-seven years was an ongoing attempt to conceive how such antithetical values might be reconciled and to embody such a synthesis in his poetic style. At the same time one can also view his career as a sequence of gradual shifts of emphasis, his poetry developing from one pole to the other and then moving back again. In this perspective the change of style that was consolidated by 1914, when *Responsibilities* was published, was both a reaction against his earlier style and the culmination of a tendency that had been intermittently strong in the 1880s and 1890s and gradually assumed prominence after 1900.

His changed style was a victory in the realm of technique and even more in the overcoming of psychological inhibition. In 1892 he hated what he called "generalization" and "abstraction" as much as he ever did later. But he did not know how to escape them and began a love poem,

A pity beyond all telling,
Is hid in the heart of love.

By 1910 he had learned how to write poetry that sounded like "the actual thoughts of a man at a passionate moment of life" and compelled himself to speak directly from his personal self, writing of the actual woman in the actual world and in his own life:

Why should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great?

"We see all arts and societies passing from experience to generalization," he said in 1909, "whereas the young begin with generalization and end with experience."

Yeats's stylistic development was motivated and assisted by many experiences life brought him. His immersion in Irish poli-

tics, with his work as an organizer of meetings and manipulator of committees, dealing with practical men for a practical purpose, had an effect on his character and, more important, on his idea of his character. He was proud of himself in evenings "spent with some small organizer into whose spittoon I secretly poured my third glass of whiskey."

From 1899 on Yeats was seeing his plays performed in the theater, and in 1902 what became the Abbey Theatre Company was formed. This is not the place to tell the history of this famous theater, neither can we notice the plays Yeats wrote for it, but his experience with the theater contributed strongly to the formation of his poetic style. Between 1899 and 1908 he wrote twelve plays, some of them in prose. In the discipline of composition for the stage he was forced to write dialogue, direct speech in which characters talked to each other and in which what they said could be taken in by an audience. In contrast to his symbolist poetic, which emphasized the importance of rich, suggestive words, writing for the theater drove home the importance of construction. "Poetry," he now said, "comes logically out of the fundamental action" and must not turn aside "at the lure of word or metaphor."

Two close and admired friends, Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge, had a direct influence on his style through their own writings and especially through their dramas. He met Lady Gregory in 1896 and began spending summers at her estate of Coole in the western part of Ireland. She took him collecting folktales in the cottages of the local peasants, and in the evening she wrote out in dialect what they had heard. Yeats now told George Moore "that one could learn to write" only from the peasants, "their speech being living speech, flowing out of the habits of their lives, struck out of life itself." In the comedies she composed for the Abbey Theatre, Lady Gregory used an approximation to a folk dialect; Yeats collaborated in some of these. A similar idiom was handled much more powerfully in the plays of Synge. Yeats was fascinated by the character and work of this "rooted man," who had a "hunger for harsh facts, for ugly surprising things, for all that defies our hope."

Yeats handled the affairs of the Abbey Theatre for its first ten years. "Theatre business, management of men" further developed his sense of his own character as capable and formidable

and of his own life as charged with the interests and passions of the "normal active man." When their plays aroused religious, moral, or patriotic protest—Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*, for example, caused a week of riots in the theater in 1907—Yeats fought back in letters to newspapers, in essays, and sometimes in speeches to hostile crowds. He was brave and effective, and felt himself to be so, rejoicing in this image of himself.

Meanwhile, in 1903 Maud Gonne married Major John McBride, a soldier and, in Yeats's opinion, "a drunken, vain-glorious lout." Yeats received the news in a letter from her just as he was about to give a lecture and, though he managed to get through the lecture, he was afterwards unable to remember what he had said. For the next several years he wrote few lyrics. In his hurt he emphasized his ideal of "noble courage," which he increasingly thought of as "aristocratic." At the same time he fought against his tendency to imaginative idealization, for Maud Gonne's marriage suggested that he had been living in a fool's romantic dream. She had always seemed "in some sense, Ireland," and what with his disillusion at her marriage, his anger at religious or patriotic protest over the plays in the Abbey Theatre—not to mention other similar episodes in the cultural life of Dublin—and his own increasing absorption in concerns other than politics, he swung violently against his earlier political idealism. His view of things was much embittered, and he also deliberately embittered it, cultivating an unflinching realism as part of a heroic attitude.

The attitude was especially difficult to maintain in the lyrics he wrote to Maud Gonne. In 1909 he began a poem,

All things can tempt me from this craft of verse:
One time it was a woman's face, or worse—
The seeming needs of my fool-driven land.

He was insulting Ireland, and doubtless enjoyed this arrogance, but he was also dismissing reductionistically, as "a woman's face," his long idealistic love of Maud Gonne.

"All art," he said, "is in the last analysis an endeavor to condense as out of the flying vapour of the world an image of human perfection." The moral ideal he now strove to embody in his style had to do with wholeness and energy of personality.

The writing of plays was "the search for more manful energy," he said in 1906, for "more of cheerful acceptance of whatever arises out of the logic of events, and for clean outlines, instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret." He held before his mind's eye the image of medieval and Renaissance writers, as he conceived them: "those careless old writers, one imagines squabbling over a mistress, or riding on a journey, or drinking round a tavern fire, brisk and active men." He told Lady Gregory, with much satisfaction, "My work has got more masculine. It has more salt in it." In his early verse, he explained in a letter to George Russell, there had been "an exaggeration of sentiment and sentimental beauty which I have come to think unmanly." And he called in the world of spirits to support him in his new ideal: "A mysterious command has gone out," he said, "in the invisible world," and we are to have "no emotions, however abstract, in which there is not an athletic joy."

In accordance with this ideal he labored to express in his poetry a greater variety of feelings, including especially feelings excluded from his earlier lyrics, such as anger, insult, mockery, and humor. He began "September, 1913" in scornful irony, attacking the Irish middle class, which he considered pinched, money-grubbing, and superstitious:

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone?

Although addressed to Parnell's ghost, "To a Shade" was no mystic incantation. It opened with a line made colloquially awkward by many weak accents and a late caesura, and the parenthesis of the third line, conveying the witty aside of conversation, reinforced the effect of actual talk:

If you have revisited the town, thin Shade,
Whether to look upon your monument
(I wonder if the builder has been paid).

Not that Yeats always spoke in his own person, but when he adopted other roles, they were no longer those of his earlier

poetry, such as Aedh and wandering Aengus. He was now more likely to speak in the person of

A cursing rogue with a merry face,
A bundle of rags upon a crutch,

and in such alter egos he also extended his repertoire of moods. "Beggar to Beggar Cried" (1914) was sardonic mockery and self-mockery. Lady Gregory and other friends had been urging unromantic, prudential advice upon him—take a vacation for his health, find a wife, settle down—and Yeats put something of this into the mouth of a beggar who talks as though he belonged to the middle class:

"Time to put off the world and go somewhere
And find my health again in the sea air,"
Beggar to beggar cried, being frenzy-struck,
"And make my soul before my pate is bare."

"And get a comfortable wife and house
To rid me of the devil in my shoes,"
Beggar to beggar cried, being frenzy-struck,
"And the worse devil that is between my thighs."

But Yeats knew that he was not the sort of man who squabbled over a mistress or drank round a tavern fire. He did not feel an "athletic joy." He was not at all instinctive, direct, or spontaneous in his emotions. On the contrary, he still usually seemed to himself dreamy, sentimental, shy, timid, and uncertain, always doubting and qualifying, and so little capable of instinctive emotion that he constantly paralyzed himself by self-analysis. Self-distrust was, he suspected, usually the main motive for whatever he did; "I even do my writing by self-distrusting reasons." So, though he argued that one should not "find one's art by the analysis of language or amid the circumstances of dreams but . . . live a passionate life, and . . . express the emotions that find one thus in simple rhythmical language," he knew that the deeper psychological truth was that his bold, direct style of speech as from the active, whole man was a deliberate pose, a stance assumed, a mask worn. It was an image he held before himself, a role he played, hoping he would become the role. "Active virtue," he said, "as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code," is "theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask."

A NEW LEVEL OF ACHIEVEMENT, 1914-1928

After *Responsibilities* (1914) Yeats's poetry gradually consolidated a third phase in a sequence of memorable volumes, *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919), *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), and *The Tower* (1928). In *The Tower*, which included such famous lyrics as "Sailing to Byzantium," "Leda and the Swan," "Among School Children," and the title poem, the evolution was complete. If we ask why Yeats's lyrics of these years grip readers so powerfully, we think of the intellectual excitement they generate, their depth of suggestion, human interest, emotional intensity, imaginative sweep and surprise, and vivid, supple, concentrated presentation. But these or similar generalities would be true of many great poets. Yeats's mature poetry was shaped especially by three fundamental tendencies of his mind. Symbolism is central to his art, for he assumed that symbols invoke, embody, or, perhaps, are identical with "reality." Hence he wrote poems in which the entire poem might be described as the creation and contemplation of a symbol; "The Magi" is an example. And he wrote poems in which he explored the interaction of two or more symbols. He was deeply versed in the symbolic meanings that poetic tradition and occult lore had bestowed on countless images and he exercised to the full the symbol-making power of his own imagination. Images in his poetry that seem merely descriptive or incidental may, if we ponder them, disclose depths of implication. But Yeats was also committed to the expression in poetry of what he often called "personality." His poetry is to be read as the talk of a man vigorously responding to actual experience, a humorous, unpredictable, rich-natured man in whom we take a lively interest. Finally, his poems are shaped by his tendency to think in terms of antitheses; in fact, this figure of thought corresponded, Yeats believed, to the ultimately tragic structure of reality.

Between 1914 and 1921 Yeats wrote out recollections of his life up to the age of thirty-five (later published as *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, 1916; *The Trembling of the Veil*, 1922; and *Memoirs*, 1973). The setting down of these memories made the happenings and persons he described more fixed and vivid in his own mind and endowed them with symbolic meaning. About this time he was hammering his thoughts into a "religious system," as he called it in a letter to his father. This "prose

backing to my poetry" was published in 1918 as *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, and expounds Yeats's theory of the "mask," by which he meant a character that is the polar opposite of one's own. If mask and self could be unified, one would experience completeness of being. The mask is also the anti-self or Daemon, the "illustrious dead man" who is most unlike the living man and weaves his destiny. There is much about the *Anima Mundi*, or "great memory passing on from generation to generation" and how images from the great memory enter the individual mind. Yeats also explains the complex fate of the soul after death, the several phases it goes through before it is born again. "I find," he wrote his father, that "the setting it all in order has helped my verse, has given me a new framework and new patterns."

For three winters, 1913-1916, Ezra Pound acted as his secretary, the two poets sharing a cottage in Sussex. Pound was going through the manuscripts of Ernest Fenollosa, and Yeats was intrigued by what he learned of Japanese Noh drama. In Noh he saw a traditional and esoteric, symbolical and anti-naturalist art for the few. The plays he wrote henceforth were strongly influenced by Noh. Meanwhile, his ears full of Pound's praise of "efficient" writing, of spare, functional, concrete presentation, he asked the younger poet to go through his collected poems and cross out the abstract words and conventional metaphors. He was surprised to find there were so many. He set to work once again to clean up his style (from which he had been eliminating the nineties for more than a decade), and the results could be seen in the first play he had written in six years, *At the Hawk's Well* (1916):

The mountain-side grows dark;
The withered leaves of the hazel
Half choke the dry bed of the well.

It was probably because of such verses that Eliot, watching the play (which may have influenced some passages of *The Waste Land*), concluded that at least in his stark diction Yeats was a modern.

In 1916 the Easter Rebellion against British rule in Ireland revived Yeats's dream of a heroic Ireland and he wrote one of his finest poems, "Easter, 1916," on this event. But as bloody and vicious wars raged intermittently in Ireland between 1919 and

1923—first between the Irish patriots and the English troops with their Irish auxiliaries, and then between rival Irish factions—he again despaired of politics:

We, who seven years ago
Talked of honour and of truth,
Shriek with pleasure if we show
The weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth.

During the Easter Rebellion, Maud Gonne's husband was killed, and Yeats again proposed to her. When she refused, he proposed, with much hesitation, to her adopted niece, Iseult. She also lacked "the impulse," and in October 1917 Yeats married Georgie Hyde-Lees. His way of life now became more settled, and he had much domestic happiness in his wife, his two children, and the bustle of a thriving household. In 1915 he had purchased a Norman tower with an attached cottage in Galway, not far from Lady Gregory at Coole. During the next several years the cottage and tower were gradually made livable. "I am making," he wrote John Quinn, "a setting for my old age, a place to influence lawless youth, with its severity and antiquity." At this cottage and tower Yeats spent summers with his family, living within a symbol. The ancient tower recalled Shelley's towers in which sages and visionaries had dwelt; it brought to mind the tower in which "*Il Penseroso's* Platonist," as Yeats called the protagonist of Milton's poem, would outwatch the midnight hours, poring over Hermes Trismegistus or Plato. Seen from far, the midnight candle burning in the tower beside an open book was an emblem of "mysterious wisdom won by toil." The tower was also an emblem of many modes of integrity amid adversity—of the "unageing intellect" with its proud, embattled exultation amid the "wreck of body" in old age; or of the aristocratic past and those who still lived by its values against the commercialized, middle-class present; or of the soul confronting "the desolation of reality," its heroic defiance grounded in nothing except courage. The "narrow, winding stair" of the tower reminded Yeats of gyres or spiraling cones, symbols which, for him, diagrammed ultimate processes of reality. Even the rose that flowered in his "acre of stony ground" was symbolic.

During the 1920s Yeats read much philosophy, for he wished

to back up with reading and arguments the truths that came to him from esoteric sources. He traveled in Italy in 1924 and 1925 and had much pleasure in the paintings and mosaics of churches and museums. In 1922 he was named a Senator in Ireland and in 1924 received the Nobel Prize.

The most significant event of these years, however, was his composition of *A Vision*, whose first version he completed in 1925. I cannot here summarize this complex, pedantic prose work that sets forth his occult system. In *A Vision* one can read about the inexorable cycles of history that determine all that happens, each cycle starting over again every two thousand years, and how the cycles revolve from objective to subjective phases, from phases in which men abnegate themselves before some external reality to phases, such as the Renaissance, which take individual self-fulfillment as their ideal. One can study the twenty-six types of personality—twenty-six even though there are twenty-eight phases of the moon, for “there’s no human life at the full or the dark.” Or one can trace the labyrinth of Yeats’s thought on the four faculties of the soul, the four tinctures, and the fate of the soul between death and reincarnation—a fate more complicated than it was in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*.

To call Yeats the author of *A Vision* is to beg a question. Four days after they were married, Yeats discovered that his wife was psychic and that spirits spoke through her, at first by means of automatic writings and later by speech as she lay in a trance. After three years of such communications, he found himself with fifty notebooks of automatic writing and a much smaller number of notebooks recording what had been dictated orally through his wife. From these notes he pieced out his book.

That the communicators were actually spirits Yeats was not willing to affirm, at least publicly; perhaps there were more natural explanations for the sayings that filled the notebooks. If one asked him whether he believed in the doctrine of his *Vision*, he would have answered evasively. He believed what he had written, but sometimes more and sometimes less, sometimes literally and sometimes metaphorically. Perhaps he would have said that his “supreme fiction,” to use Wallace Stevens’ phrase, had as much to recommend it as any other. And if one pressed him hard enough, he would have entrenched himself within his system, saying that he was a man of the seventeenth lunar phase and the thoughts that came to men of that phase must seem true

to him. When he asked the spirits why they had given him their messages, they replied, “we have come to give you metaphors for poetry,” and Yeats reminds us that poets have often before nourished their imaginations in strange places. The muses, he says, are like women who creep out at night and give themselves to unknown sailors and then return to talk of Chinese porcelain or the Ninth Symphony.

As he elaborated his esoteric system in the 1910s and 1920s, the normally much-doubting, much-qualifying Yeats was occasionally confident that he had “mummy truths to tell.” A new mode of address, which may be called the oracular, was sometimes heard in his poetry. One finds it in “Mohini Chatterjee,” in the several poems spoken by Tom the Lunatic, in the “Supernatural Songs,” and in the Crazy Jane sequence. The convention that governs our response to oracular utterance in literature is that the truths imparted are ultimate; no equal countertruth can be summoned against them. Hence the oracle, however brief and obscure, is spoken without qualification and accepted without question (unless there is the question of what it may mean): “Fair and foul are near of kin, / And fair needs foul,” “Men dance on deathless feet,” “All things remain in God,” “All the stream that’s roaring by / Came out of a needle’s eye.” Since originally the gods were thought to be the source of oracles, the mode of address presupposes an unchallengeable, mysterious authority in the speaker. Naturally, therefore, Yeats was usually unwilling to voice oracular sayings in his own person, however much he wished to do so. He invoked, instead, the poetic conventions that put ultimate truths in the mouths of Eastern sages, fools, children, mad persons, and the like. The Crazy Jane poems differ from the others cited in that they include voices other than Jane’s and much that is spoken or implied contradicts or qualifies her sayings. But no reader finds that the Bishop or any other countervoice opposes Jane’s with a truth of equal authority, and the function of debate and irony in this sequence is to exhibit and enforce Jane’s intuitions.

A SYSTEM OF SYMBOLS

A larger impact of Yeats’s esoteric system on his poetry was on his symbolism and the ways in which it functions. This aspect of

his art is probably the chief single source of the imaginative power and appeal of his poetry, and we notice what unusual, intriguing symbols he now deployed: the bird made of gold that crows on a golden bough in the starlight; the "rough beast" with a lion body and head of a man; Chinese sages that stare at the world from a carved piece of lapis lazuli; the interpenetrating gyres or spiraling cones; the moon with its twenty-eight phases and the weird sequence from hunchback to saint to fool associated with the final ones. The thinking out of *A Vision* supplied many of these symbols; it also exercised and emboldened his imagination to a heightened ingenuity and fantasticality. Even when Yeats seems most subject to hocus-pocus—

Crazed through much child-bearing
The moon is staggering in the sky;

or,

He holds him from desire, all but stops his breathing lest
Primordial Motherhood forsake his limbs;

or,

The gyres! the gyres! Old Rocky Face, look forth—

the hocus-pocus has its own attractions for imaginative minds. Of course it is not mere hocus-pocus but has esoteric meanings.

In the lyrics Yeats composed between 1900 and 1914 symbolism had been less prominent. The larger role it now acquired in his poetry can be seen as a return, with important differences, to a poetic method he had developed in the 1890s. That the "circus animals," as Yeats called his symbols in a late poem, no longer came from Celtic myth and legend was one of the differences. Such Celtic figures or features as Cuchulain, the Sidhe, and the valley of the black pig were not filled with associations for most readers. They brought to mind only whatever suggestions Yeats first pinned to them and thus contradicted his theory of the way symbols should function. Leda and the swan, however, or Byzantium, or the Second Coming are symbols of a much richer kind, and even though Yeats charged them with esoteric and private meanings, the familiar and traditional ones are also activated.

The writing of *A Vision* gave his ideas, memories, habitual

images, and symbols place and interrelation within a comprehensive system. Thus, it tended to make even more dense and elaborate the associative interconnections that had been important to the effect of his poetry from the 1890s on. Whoever reads many pages of Yeats's verse finds that any particular poem acquires greater depth of suggestion because it brings other poems of his to mind. We encounter the same or similar images, themes, symbols, and autobiographical references in different poems. We associate them, and the associations thus gathered about an image through the whole context of Yeats's writing create overtones of feeling and suggestion in the particular context. In the opening lines of "The Wild Swans at Coole"—

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry—

the first line might have come from a typical Georgian poem of nature appreciation. It has no special reference for habitual readers of Yeats. The second line continues the Georgian nature description, but in this Yeatsian context it also activates vague but relevant associations. The stress by rhyme on dryness does not suggest merely that the paths make pleasant going. The dry woods where the aging man walks contrast with the water of the lake where the swans drift, and the contrast may bring to mind that Yeats associated water with mortal and physical life, dryness with wisdom and death. Straight paths are symbols of abstract intellection in Yeats, as in Blake, and the paths of imagination and life are winding or crooked. But the dead may retrace the winding path from their dry realm to the watery realm of generation.

The swan figures prominently in many other poems of Yeats, such as "The Tower," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," "Among School Children," "Leda and the Swan," and "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1932." In one or another of these contexts the swan is associated with such things as youth, passion, and conquest, the animal as opposed to the human, being as opposed to knowing, and the solitary and defiant soul as opposed to nothingness. All these associations make a resonating background for any poem in which the swan appears. Or, to take a final instance from "Leda and the Swan," when the poem refers to the

"burning roof and tower" at the fall of Troy, we may call to mind the many towers of Yeats's poetry—his home at Thoor (or "tower") Ballylee, the defensive guard towers, the phallic towers, the towers from which Babylonian astrologers observe the stars, and the towers where students seek wisdom from books. We also remember the poems in which supernatural revelation is associated with fire, so that the "burning tower" suggests the disintegration in a quasi-sexual violence of a civilization. It also suggests the sudden destruction of a traditional lore or wisdom. But it suggests further that the disintegration and destruction come in or with a moment of supernatural revelation.

After 1914 Yeats's poems typically combined the symbol-making or symbol-contemplating impulses of his imagination and his impulse to create a personal or dramatic utterance that would seem vigorously rooted in actual life. He spoke directly of himself and of objects, places, and persons he knew or had known—his children, his house, his grandfather, friends, Lady Gregory's demesne at Coole, the lake and swans there, his Japanese sword, and even the bird's nest at his window. But these now brought to his mind dense associations and were transformed into symbols. He also continued, however, to derive symbols from poetic tradition, occult lore, and his own creative fantasy, but he tended now to handle them differently. He did not simply invoke and contemplate them but also talked to them in a personal or dramatic voice. He had done this to some extent in the 1890s. The change is more in degree than in kind. The speakers of his poems celebrate or query the symbols, they accept, reject, supplement, counter or complete them by other considerations, often by turning to different symbols. In short, they interact with the symbols in ways that create a strong human interest, and the symbol becomes only one element in a drama of human reactions. The difference is approximately that between "Byzantium," where the symbol is beheld and described in a mood of intense excitement, and "Sailing to Byzantium," where the speaker, not the symbol, is the primary focus. The latter poem generates intense dramatic and human interest as the expression of an old man in a moment of emotional and intellectual crisis and choice.

YEATSIAN TALK

Whatever else might be said of Yeats's mature poetic style, most of his poems give the impression of talk—pithy, usually excited talk that confronts us with a personality. He labored to create this impression, and the human interest it generates is one source of his appeal. Yeatsian talk had a large influence on younger poets from Masfield to Auden, although his style of poetic talk is strongly individual and does not resemble the imitations of the colloquial in Masfield, Auden, Frost, Stevens, Eliot, Pound, Williams, and Marianne Moore.

Analysis will show that in syntax and diction Yeats's lyrics can be quite remote from actual speech. He inverts normal word order, suspends syntactical constructions, and involves himself in extremely complicated grammar. How much he cared about economy and rapidity of presentation and how little, if he had to choose, about keeping close to the spoken language, is obvious, especially when he puts words in the mouths of unlettered persons. Crazy Jane deploys absolute constructions and the subjunctive mood. Yeats pursued concreteness of phrasing so eagerly in his mature verse that it became a mannerism. It is generally effective, but not as an approximation to talk. "Beyond that ridge lived Mrs. French," says the speaker in "The Tower," and the simple, direct words are colloquial English. "She was having dinner," might have been the natural next phrase, but Yeats composes a picture instead:

and once
When every silver candlestick or sconce
Lit up the dark mahogany and the wine. . .

The metonymy ("mahogany" instead of "table") is typical, and the effect, as is usual with this figure, is to secure a greater particularity and concreteness in the image. His substitution of concrete for generalizing diction contributed to the compressed, polysemous language that is one of his strengths. The lines in "Leda and the Swan"—

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead—

imply that the rape of Leda brought in the fall of Troy and the cycle of Greek civilization, but imply this in a few, spare images.

Economy, speed, and concreteness were general stylistic aims that tended to conflict with Yeats's wish to create an illusion of talk, and yet the illusion is strongly created. If we ask how, we must think again of the ways in which his poems, or many of them, are presented as what Yeats called "personal utterance," as the words of a man speaking amid the actual circumstances of his life. He describes, to repeat, his home, children, ancestors, friends, possessions, memories, plans, and doings, and in this and other ways activates the familiar Romantic convention that the poem puts us into direct contact with the writer. The poetry of Yeats, like that of Shelley, Goethe, or other Romantics, affords a special type of pleasure, besides the pleasure we have in it as art. We take an interest in the poet as a person. A similar convention prompts us to read the poems as spontaneous utterance, as tumblings-out of thought and feeling as they come to mind. Because the poem is read as spontaneous expression our sense of its form includes an appreciation of the natural course, the germination, development, and resolution of the emotions and trains of thought it embodies. The development may include digressions, unexpected amplifications, parentheses, dramatic turns of feeling, sudden introductions of new material, and the like, so long as these do not violate our sense of psychological probability.

"Talk" seems an appropriate term for most poetry within this system of conventions. Whether or to what extent a poet's uses of language actually correspond to those of informal speech is not necessarily important. What matters is that the poetry creates in the reader the presumption or illusion of hearing or overhearing talk, and to this effect such things as a personal subject matter and an apparently unpremeditated progression of thought contribute at least as much as a colloquial idiom. If the subject of a poem is "The Stare's Nest by My Window," we assume that the mode will be talk, and it would require a considerable degree of artifice in the language to dispell the illusion that it is talk. And we should keep in mind also that although "talk" implies informal speech, it need imply no lowering of mental or emotional intensity.

In Yeats the scale of "talk" is generally excited. His phrasing

has immense verve and force, expressing strong emotion. At the end of "The Tower" he does not tamely "disagree" with Plotinus or deny Plato's philosophy, but,

I mock Plotinus' thought
And cry in Plato's teeth.

In "Sailing to Byzantium" an old man is not merely "a coat upon a stick"; the scarecrow is provided with a "tattered" coat. The expression of emotional excitement through syntax appears especially in his interrupted or uncompleted grammatical structures, his suddenly changing modes of address, and his accumulations of words, phrases, or clauses in series of from two to eight or more. "The Tower" begins with a question—

What shall I do with this absurdity—

which is interrupted by an apostrophe—

O heart, O troubled heart—

and the sudden shift is typical and energizing. The sentence continues with phrases in apposition to "absurdity"—

this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?

Yeats shares with the English Romantic poets a tendency to put the main business of his sentences in subordinate clauses or in appositional or participial constructions. The construction suggests spontaneity, the discovery of one's thought in the process of saying it. The final section of "The Tower" contains extreme examples of such syntax. Perhaps Yeats had such syntax in mind when in "A General Introduction for My Work" (1937) he spoke of his "powerful and passionate syntax." He had discovered "some twenty years ago" that in order "to make the language of poetry coincide with that of passionate, normal speech," a "natural momentum in the syntax" was more important than any qualities of diction. The unusually excited or passionate character of Yeatsian talk may account for much in it that would embarrass other modern poets, most of whom linger more in lower ranges of emotion. Yeats makes a typically Romantic use of such sweeping collectives as "all," "every," "any,"

"everything," "everywhere," and the like, as in "Everything that man esteems / Endures a moment or a day" (from "Two Songs from a Play") or "and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned" (from "The Second Coming"). Similarly, there are his rhetorical questions and his huge hyperboles—

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—

and extravagant gestures—

Arise and bid me strike a match
And strike another till time catch.

Poetry of "personal talk," as Wordsworth once called it, is felt as talk all the more to the extent that it seems to break away toward the colloquial from norms of poetry—norms that may change from generation to generation. Such norms are present in the mind of every qualified reader, but they can be activated to a greater or less degree in different poems. If Yeats's style seems more effectively talky than that of most other modern poets, one reason may be that it is actually less so. The traditionally poetic is strongly present; therefore, the deviations toward a talky style become noticeable and expressive. His versification is the most obvious example. Without going into innumerable fine touches for particular effects, of which he was a master, we might describe the general impression of his versification as a pleasing awkwardness—pleasing precisely because it expresses personality and sounds like speech. He rejected free verse, for he wanted a regular beat in the background as "an unvariable possibility, an unconscious norm." But he handled his traditional meters with uncommon irregularity. Generally speaking, the roughening is obtained through frequent spondees, pyrrhic feet, inverted feet, hovering accents, and unusually late or early caesuras. His diction is stylized through words and phrases that are not apt to be part of anybody's speech nowadays: knave, lout, dolt, aye, cosseting, twelvemonth, "rhymers" for poet, and "day's declining beam" for sunset. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" rhythm compels us to pronounce "wind" with the long "i" that is traditional when the word is a rhyme word: he mocks the "great" who toiled

To leave some monument behind,
Nor thought of the levelling wind.

Yeats had no reluctance about using the more artificial figures of rhetoric; in "Sailing to Byzantium" one finds oxymoron ("dying generations"), apostrophe ("O sages"), antithesis, and a very rich assonance and alliteration. Tom the Lunatic implausibly concludes his oracular utterance with a chiasmus:

Nor shall the self-begotten fail
Though fantastic men suppose
Building-yard and stormy shore,
Winding-sheet and swaddling-clothes.

It is because they interplay with such stylizations that his colloquial idioms and homely metaphors come with special force—his "maybe's," his contractions of "is" or "was" to "'s," his exploitations of "dog's day" and "go pack" in "There's not a neighbor left to say / When he finished his dog's day" and "It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack." And, finally, we may also note the fact that he did not always speak as "Yeats" amid the circumstances of his own life. Throughout his last twenty years many poems were composed in accordance with a different convention; they contrast with the poems of excited, personal talk, and each kind highlights the other. As much as he praised and wrote the Romantic poetry of personal utterance, Yeats also asserted and exemplified that a writer of lyrics must speak in some traditional role as lover, seer, madman, shepherd, or beggar. "I commit my emotions," he said near the end of his life, "to shepherds, herdsmen, camel-drivers, learned men, Milton's or Shelley's Platonist. . . . Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage."

THINKING IN ANTITHESES

A further source of the human interest of Yeats's poetry is the many-sided debate with himself that runs through it. To say what the debate is about is not easy. One urgent question was what sort of person to admire, what sort of person to be. He searched for models. His poetry holds up for admiration and criticism a numerous collection, including Lady Gregory, Swift,

Berkeley, Blake, King Lear, Crazy Jane, the wild swans at Coole, and the Chinese carved in lapis lazuli. There are also the many different forms in which he represented himself—the master of occult truth, the “normal active man,” the “Wild Old Wicked Man,” and the like. All imaged for him one or a few virtues or ideal states. In Yeats’s eyes all were admirable. But they were diverse virtues or states and could not all be reconciled. How could he possess the traditionally ordered and ceremonious way of life of the aristocratic Lady Gregory and also the total acceptance of life, even its foulness, embodied in Crazy Jane? How could he pursue both the wisdom that comes with age and the unaging “passion or conquest” of the wild, sexual swans in Coole Park? And how could a seer or Platonist in his tower aspire also to be a “normal active man” abroad in the world? The tendency of Yeats’s imagination to strip these figures of natural complexities—to ignore that in actual life seers may also have children and business affairs—gave them greater impact as symbols, but it also made them more difficult to reconcile.

The values Yeats dwelt on as opposites include nature and art, youth and age, body and soul, passion and wisdom, beast and man, creative violence and order, revelation and civilization, poetry and responsibility, and time and eternity. The ultimate antithesis is that between antithesis itself, as the moral structure of human existence, and a realm or state of being in which all antitheses are annihilated. For each of the antithetical terms, moreover, he had many synonyms and symbols. “After Long Silence” concludes with the antithesis of passion and wisdom—

Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young
We loved each other and were ignorant—

and this antithesis inextricably involves that of youth and age. The antithesis of passion and wisdom closely resembles that of power and knowledge in “Leda and the Swan,” where in the closing lines the speaker asks whether the raped girl put on the “knowledge” of the swan

with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop.

Each antithesis restates the others in a different frame of reference, so that in this Yeatsian context power brings to mind also

the connotations of passion, nature, youth, body, beast, and so forth. Combining knowledge and power, the god in the form of a swan is a symbol of antitheses reconciled, and the antithesis Yeats poses at the end of the poem is that between the supernatural and the human. The supernatural is whole or unified being, and the question is whether even in a fleeting moment the human is capable of such completeness.

Antithetical thinking accounts for much of the complexity and intellectual excitement of Yeats’s verse. It made all his attitudes ambivalent. Youth was ignorant but passionate. In old age the soul might “clap its hands, and sing,” but the heart had grown cold. “The Coming of Wisdom with Time,” though published in 1910, is a good example, for it is short and can be discussed as a whole:

Though leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
Now I may wither into the truth.

Plato’s and Yeats’s antithesis of the many and the one, of concrete, natural life and the transcendent idea are here associated with the antithesis of youth and age. To grow old is to move from the many to the one, from deception to knowledge or truth. But deception is associated with motion, light, and life, and truth with darkness and death. Yeats himself sought truth in the messages “breathless mouths” brought from the grave, but in this poem the association of truth with darkness and death preserves, nevertheless, its full, ironic force as a grim reversal of what would be expected. The poem presupposes and exemplifies in a metaphor that youth and its rhyming term, “truth,” are both ideal values and yet each can be realized only at the cost of the other. The typically Yeatsian premise leads to the bitter ambivalence of “wither into the truth.”

YEATS’S LAST DECADE: “THE HEROIC CRY IN THE MIDST OF DESPAIR”

During the last eleven years of his life, from the publication of *The Tower* in 1928 to his death in 1939, Yeats continued to write

as much and as well as ever. Among his notable works of the period are the Crazy Jane sequence, the "Supernatural Songs," "Lapis Lazuli," eight plays, and a revised edition of *A Vision* (1937). His last poem, "The Black Tower," was written seven days before he died.

He was often very ill during these years and death sometimes seemed near. He cultivated in his poetry a heroic pose. Against the failing body and the "approaching night" he celebrated physical and sexual vitality, life in all its coarseness. Because body and soul, passion and wisdom, time and eternity were antithetical, the aging poet felt forced to choose between them and chose, with defiant incongruity, the life of bodily passion, the confusion of the desiring creature in the realm of time. The theme was elaborated in many aspects. He felt that his temptation, as an old man, was "quiet," and in "A Prayer for Old Age" his plea was

That I may seem, though I die old,
A foolish, passionate man.

Reincarnation was preferable to Nirvana:

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.

Yeats often reviled life as he portrayed it, for the worse he painted it, the more triumphant his life-affirming cry. The many poems on sexual themes written in his later years provoked much comment from diverse points of view. His typist refused in tears to copy "Leda and the Swan"; at the other extreme, T. S. Eliot found in "The Spur" an impressive honesty. However else we can explain such poems, they expressed his defiance of old age. The same thing may be said of his many poems praising drunkenness, roaring tinkers, and every sort of turbulence up to the collapse in war and the creative revival of civilizations. They are "all praise of joyous life," as Yeats said of the Crazy Jane poems, even though "it is a dry bone on the shore that sings the praise."

Such commitment to life was heroic, he felt, precisely because it was doomed. He had seen many apparitions in his life, but the worst was himself in old age:

Fifteen apparitions have I seen;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.

The "mystery and fright" of the inevitable end was never far from his mind. But a doomed heroism, a hopeless battle to the end, had always been the heroism that moved Yeats most deeply, that most addressed his sense of man's case.

YEATS AND THE MODERN MOVEMENTS IN POETRY

The long career of Yeats is sometimes said to reflect, in its successive phases, the development of modern poetry to the 1930s. The statement is an oversimplification, but a suggestive one. Modernism did not come about in a sudden revolution, but in a difficult, gradual transition. The starting point is the poetry of the later nineteenth century. This is true not as a vague generalization, but as a biographical fact in the lives of the poets who created the modern revolution. Eliot, Pound, Frost, Stevens, and Williams, along with most of the less important poets of their generation, started where Yeats did, as devotees in youth of the English Romantic and mid-Victorian poets and of the generation of English writers—Swinburne, Pater, Rossetti, and Morris—that had come of age in the 1860s and 1870s. Their earliest poems were composed out of feelings and styles they took over from their predecessors.

The first distinct identity Yeats imposed upon his poetry was a Celtic one, and the Celtic movement in Irish literature was a belated Romanticism. In London during the 1890s he was friendly with the avant-garde, the poets of what we have called *ars victrix*, and the attitudes of these poets collided in some ways with his Celtic Romanticism and began to transform it. In his Celtic poetry he wrote ballads of peasant life, he expressed the folk imagination, he described a natural landscape typical of Ireland, he voiced nationalist sentiment, and he spoke, although disguised as "Aedh," of his love for Maud Gonne. But so far as he was a London aesthete, he could not wholly approve of such poetry, for he believed that an artist must work only for the small audience of his peers. Art was the shaping of an impersonal beauty; it had nothing to do with the folk mind, nature,

politics, or personal life. In this phase also his development was representative, for the aesthetic movement in British poetry had more influence on the Modernist poets than is usually recognized. Particularly it transmitted a sense of the importance of patient, laborious, and minute craftsmanship and helped spread the notion that the poet is inevitably alienated from his society.

Meanwhile, in his study of the occult Yeats convinced himself that supernatural realities could be invoked through symbols; when in the 1890s Arthur Symonds instructed him in the poems and theories of Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Nerval, Verlaine, and other French poets, he saw a coincidence between their ideas and his own. He was convinced that he could see a new movement developing in the arts. Literature since the *Kalevala*, he said, had been descending the stairway toward ordinary reality, but the direction was now reversing itself and poets were abandoning realism for the evocation of "essences and pure ideas." Yeats called this the "symbolical movement" and explained that symbolical art would be evocative, subtle, and remote. Its rhythms would be wavering, unemphatic, and organic; its ancient symbols full of secret meaning for the adept. The self-conscious manipulation of symbols in twentieth-century literature developed from multiple sources, and Yeats was not an important, independent source for most poets. Nevertheless, his theory and practice of symbolism kept him in touch with one of the central tendencies in twentieth-century literature.

The new century was not far advanced when the praiser of unemphatic rhythms decided that "we possess nothing but the will" and must fly from the hollow land of sentiment and vague desire. He cultivated the homely phrases and the rhythms of the spoken language. He crowed in triumph when, revising an early play, he could work "creaking shoes" and "liquorice-root" into "what had been a very abstract passage." He resolved to "walk naked," to articulate experience and feeling without robbing them in myth and symbol; his lyrics descended the stairway, after all, and dwelt in zest or scorn on actual existence. The transformation was not total. Yeats did not begin to praise Ibsen. He was still repelled by the "mechanical" logic of Shaw, who once appeared to him in a dream as a sewing machine, clicking and shining. He did not abate his scorn of science, newspapers, materialism, and the middle class. In his personal life, as op-

posed to his lyrics, he remained devoted as ever to the occult and symbolical. Nevertheless, the change that now took place in his poetry makes it possible to align him with such other figures as Frost and Hardy and to say that in these three poets a typical mode of the age—what I have called the reflective, vernacular poem of actual life—reached its finest development. Such poetry was often written by some of the Georgians also, and it has continued as a live mode in England to the present day.

Between 1912 and 1916 Yeats saw much of Ezra Pound, who included Yeatsian doctrine in the principles of "efficient" writing that he spread abroad as Imagism. Pound revealed to Yeats that his rejection of poetic diction and dreamy sentiment was "modern." He told Pound of the existence of Joyce and doubtless heard much from Pound of Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Gaudier-Brzeska, the Image, and the Vortex. Although interested in these figures and movements, Yeats kept his humorous distance and continued to prefer the Pre-Raphaelites to the young Modernists. Nevertheless, Pound helped him to reduce still further the density of abstract terms (beauty) and conventional metaphors in his poetry. Although Yeats never shared the resolve of the Modernists to represent the contemporary, urban world, he put medieval and legendary Ireland behind him after 1900 and forced himself to articulate a wide range of "unpoetic" emotions in spare, frank language. These transformations repelled some former admirers but extorted praise from younger poets. "There is a new robustness," said Pound in reviewing *Responsibilities* (1914), and "there is the tooth of satire which is, in Mr. Yeats's case, too good a tooth to keep hidden."

In the 1920s and 1930s Yeats, now in his fifties and sixties, remained a contemporary. His work was of such kind and rank that he must be placed among the greatest writers of the twentieth century, with Joyce, Mann, Proust, Kafka, Rilke, and Eliot. He shared their ironical vision, for he contemplated human life in relation to remote, largely unknowable realities that wholly or partly determine individual fate and history. And yet, although the human so often seems dwindled and futile in his perspective, the characters and lives of men and women take on depth and significance by becoming symbolic or mythical. Sometimes in these years his poems dwell on the shocking, horrible, or grotesque, particularly in connection with his sense of the violence

of history. The vision of life that dominates his poetry in this period may best be characterized as tragic irony. It is an ironic vision for the reason given: he sees that the structure of existence will inevitably defeat human wish and effort. It is also tragic because, whether his protagonists are Crazy Jane, Mohini Chatterjee, Rocky Face, Ribh, Tom the Lunatic, The Wild Old Wicked Man, or Yeats himself, we feel that they are in some sense above us, richer in insight, courage, or experience. It is the persistence and depth of his Romantic belief in the possibility of human greatness that most essentially distinguishes Yeats from the other Modernist writers we mentioned.

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