

Chapter Five

The Evolution of William Butler Yeats's
Sequences I (1913-29)

1. "Upon a Dying Lady" and the Civil-War Sequences

At the time Hardy was writing his elegiac masterpiece, Yeats was composing his first sequence, also elegiac. "Upon a Dying Lady" is, despite fine moments, the least successful of Yeats's ten or so sequences. Certainly it never approaches the heights of Hardy's *Poems of 1912-13*. But it does share, with all but one of Yeats's sequences, one major structural advantage of the genre: freedom from dependence on plot. (The one exception is the group of seven poems beginning with "The Three Bushes," a ballad that provides a clear narrative reference for the six "songs" following it.) As with most great sequence writers of our century, Yeats presents inner, associative voyages of discovery that rely on tonal dynamics rather than on surface continuity. In this respect he follows in the wake of Whitman and Dickinson, not of Tennyson and Hardy, despite the deceptive surface conventionality of his verse and its reliance on something like normal discursive syntax—aspects that have encouraged ideational rather than dynamic readings of his work by his critics.

With Yeats, as pre-eminently with Pound, we have an embarrassment of sequential riches. In order of composition, they are "Upon a Dying Lady" (primarily 1913),¹ "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (begun in

1. See George Brandon Saul, *Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Poems* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), p. 111, for a discussion of the dating problem. We agree with him that the January 1912 date given for one of the sections by Richard Ellmann in *The Identity of Yeats* is too early. Poetic texts are taken from *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1956); but see *infra*, p. 137, footnote.

1919, published in *The Dial* in 1921), "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (the first poem dating from 1921, the rest from 1922), "A Man Young and Old" (1926-27), "A Woman Young and Old" (1926-29), *Words for Music Perhaps* (1929-32), "Vacillation" (1931-32), "Supernatural Songs" (c. 1934), the cluster of seven poems starting with "The Three Bushes" (1936), and the nineteen poems of *Last Poems and Two Plays* (primarily 1938) in their original order—not immediately obvious in the incredible jumble of the "Last Poems" section of *Collected Poems*. (This last sequence was published posthumously in 1939 with the closely related plays *The Death of Cuchulain* and *Purgatory*.) *The Tower* (1928), in which the two Irish civil-war sequences and "A Man Young and Old" appear, can also be considered as a larger sequence. The volume as a whole, with special attention to the civil-war sequences, has been discussed at some length in Rosenthal's *Sailing into the Unknown: Yeats, Pound, and Eliot*.² In the course of exploring relationships among all the sequences, however, we shall be adding some further observations on those in *The Tower* as well.

In Yeats's sequences, we find a world of legendary, conventional, and stock or generic types. Not only do they mingle on the page with figures out of the poet's own life, and with the poet speaking in the first person; they also provide alternative personae, masks by which the floating sensibility can objectify this or that phase of itself. Figures like A Man Young and Old, A Woman Young and Old, and A Dying Lady may be given familiar human attributes though not even identified by name. In *Words for Music Perhaps*, identified figures (Crazy Jane, the Bishop, Jack the Journeyman) exist in a realm of archetypes burning with pure intensities suitable to their symbolic roles. Ribh in "Supernatural Songs" is a Blakean prophet of profane mysticism. Lady and Lover and Chambermaid in "The Three Bushes" are modern re-creations of types often found in folk ballads. Other legendary and mythical figures move through the directly personal sequences, often silently. The range of interaction is enormous in Yeats between the private sensibility and the impersonal forces of history and tradition and natural or cosmic process. It frees his sequences from dependence on narrative and dramatic plot for structural unity, and of course from merely thematic and discursive development. Indeed, as with Whitman and Dickinson, it changes our conception of the unity of any complex work, sequence or not. For this reason, the evolution of Yeats's sequences is particularly worth observing in some detail because of their evolving contribution to the form. (He wrote more sequences than anyone else among our major poets except Pound.)

2. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 26-44, 116-55.

We are hardly proposing that Yeats's sequences are uniformly successful. The poems sometimes trip over their archetypal mysteries; and the poet's obsession with aristocratic values, inseparable from his dependence on heroic tradition and in any case to be understood idiosyncratically, can be an intrusive nuisance. Witness the fate Yeats wishes on the "dying lady" of his first sequence:

When her soul flies to the predestined dancing-place
(I have no speech but symbol, the pagan speech I made
Amid the dreams of youth) let her come face to face,
Amid that first astonishment, with Grania's shade . . .

To "come face to face . . . with Grania's shade" is a thrilling thought in a lovely phrase, but how far it is from any serious engagement with a real dying woman! From Yeats's letters and certain allusions in the sequence we know that the lady's character is based on that of the actress Mabel Beardsley, sister of Aubrey Beardsley. That is hardly the point, however; the sequence betrays its human concern by trifling with it. The dying lady, "our Beauty," is translated into a Nietzschean heroine, an aristocratic spirit at one with "Achilles, Timor, Babar, Barhaim, all / Who have lived in joy and laughed into the face of Death"—as if her demeanor and condition could be one whit ennobled by such rhetoric. In this early experiment with an extended structure fusing intimately private feelings with cosmically impersonal perspectives, Yeats's sense of proportion was unclear. He wished to write an adequate and moving elegy but also to make his dying lady a model of heroic transfiguration. That is, he wished to connect her crisis as a vital, suffering person with an ideal image of the artist as one whose aesthetic self-transformation could transcend her own bodily illness and death.

No doubt this aim is defensible, but the effort in "Upon a Dying Lady" is uneven and too often forced. The sequence moves falteringly despite its best moments: a sudden rush of compassion or admiration, an angry slash of resentment against a priest whose arrival in the hospital puts the lady's artist-friends and their gaily playful gifts in a demeaning light, a note of fine courtesy. Only the final poem of the sequence, "Her Friends Bring Her a Christmas Tree," finds the right balance of bravery and pathos:

Pardon, great enemy,
Without an angry thought
We've carried in our tree,
And here and there have bought
Till all the boughs are gay,
And she may look from the bed

On pretty things that may
Please a fantastic head.
Give her a little grace,
What if a laughing eye
Have looked into your face?
It is about to die.

This works superbly, in itself and because the center of interest has shifted from the earlier self-conscious and sometimes trite or pretentious descriptions of the sickroom scene, with their theological, mythopoeic, aristocratic, and other contrived implications. Instead, we have the poet confronting death directly, serving as knight-intercessor for the dauntless, uninhibited, childlike lady. Death, now cast in the role of *his* "great enemy" as well as hers, provides a strong personal interest that mobilizes the language. The poem is an early instance of Yeatsian interplay between the heroic and the vulnerable as the key to the tonalities informing a sequence. The technical virtuosity with which rhyme, meter, and enjambment are deployed in the increasingly concentrated and emotionally intense succession of sentences is both unobtrusive and climactically effective. Both the vision and the craft foreshadow the power of the later Yeats.

From the bold but awkward start represented by "Upon a Dying Lady," the poet moved on to the magnificent civil-war sequences of *The Tower*, paired in reverse order to that in which they were written: "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." Here our special point of departure for catching the whole spirit of these sequences must surely be Yeats's complex obsession with aristocratic and heroic—and political—values. For this obsession, the civil-war sequences provide a far more congenial field of operation than does "Upon a Dying Lady." The feelings and attitudes involved are no mere sentimentally Miniver-Cheevyish nostalgia for a glamorous past, nor can they be reduced to the crude class-arrogance and eugenicism Yeats sometimes displays. He *can* be foolish and irritating in the latter regard, as in the fifth poem of "Upon a Dying Lady" when he actually writes that

She knows herself a woman,
No red and white of a face,
Or rank, raised from a common
Unreckonable race . . .

Even more disheartening, because calculated to demoralize his own children, is a passage in "My Descendants," the fourth poem of "Meditations in Time of Civil War":

And what if my descendants lose the flower
 Through natural declension of the soul,
 Through too much business with the passing hour,
 Through too much play, or marriage with a fool?

Some of the thought here may be taken as merely cautionary. But the second line, and the eugenic implications of "marriage with a fool," are uncomfortable foretastes of the racist and fascist notes that crop up in the prose sections of *On the Boiler* (1939) and in certain of the last poems. This of course is the period of Nazism's swift rise and the coming on of World War II. Such thinking, however innocent of any lust to create death-camps, took on sinister implications despite the facts that Yeats was not Cinna the conspirator but Cinna the poet, and that he belonged to a generation among whom his old-fashioned assumptions and prejudices were rather widespread. As Auden put it in his elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," he was "silly like us." That is, he had preoccupations engendered under maddening circumstances of history—our "nightmare of the dark," Auden calls it in the same poem: the "intellectual disgrace" of our inability to unfreeze "the seas of pity" and create a humane world. In the civil-war sequences he brings to bear on the world's and Ireland's post-World War I crises a crisis in his own sensibility, drawing on all the resources of his political thought and feeling. And as Auden's elegy, again, suggests, Yeats's art—whatever his private prejudices—discovers "a rapture of distress." His image for the modern soul, and his own, in crisis issues forth dazzlingly in the third poem of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen":

The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven:
 That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
 To end all things . . .

The passage embodies Yeats's effort, in the civil-war sequences, to confront the murderous desolation he feels at the heart of modern existence and to find a stay against personal chaos. The sequences gave him scope to test and qualify his desire for heroic assertion in the face of desolation and chaos, and for correcting the relatively oversimplified "tragic joy" of "Upon a Dying Lady." That work did include qualifying notes—quiet dismay here and there, and the gallant pleading and pathos of the closing poem—that expand, in the later sequences, into open grief, confusion, and bitter self-analysis. Even so, it cannot be compared with the civil-war sequences, which developed around the poet's distress and excitement at the violence raging in Ireland and the rest of Europe during the first World War and immediately afterward. Viewed

as a music of consciousness in the eye of the storm, they are at once prophetic, introspective, heroically visionary, and skeptically antiheroic—altogether beyond "Upon a Dying Lady" in range and depth.

In these qualities they parallel, despite all surface differences, the early sequences of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot. It is extremely interesting that Yeats was composing them during 1919–22, a period that encompasses the making of Eliot's *The Waste Land* (published in 1922) and the publication of Pound's Canto 4 (1919), Cantos 5–7 (1921), and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920). The civil-war sequences, *The Waste Land*, and Cantos 5–7 appeared originally in *The Dial*, and Canto 4 was reprinted there in 1920, as were the first six poems of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. Pound's closeness to Yeats and Eliot during this period is common knowledge, and he may well have been the catalyzing agent in the creation of prototypes of the twentieth-century lyric sequence. In fact, the early versions of Pound's Cantos 1 and 3 had appeared in 1917 (very different from the cantos so numbered in the final text). Read with an eye to comparable tones and interests in the Yeats sequences, they suggest a similar struggle to repossess and reorient values of the classical, medieval, and Renaissance past, when "greatness" is supposed to have lived up to itself rather than abdicating its responsibilities in the face of violence.

We have oversimplified this last point of comparison in the interest of avoiding a detailed case for the younger poet's literal "influence" on his Irish friend, a case that would involve arguing too emphatically in any event. And we are talking less about themes than about an athletic effort of morale. The important thing to note here is the seriousness of the poetic engagement. In all the major sequences we find one overwhelming pressure at work: an urgent need to cope with an intractable situation. This need becomes an energizing element in the aesthetic of any given work. It presents itself as a sense of being balked, or of being beset by an engulfing flood of circumstance and consciousness that can be stayed only momentarily. The counter-efforts of sensibility lead to clarifying an inner state and relating it somehow to the intractable principle—the irresistible torrent of fatality, the sheer mass of sensations and memories and feelings, the impersonal sweep of history, the uncontrollable forces of political life, the cycles of existence, the unpredictable working of the psyche, the erosion of cherished values—through poetic equilibrium.

The connection between these counter-efforts and the traditional epic task or tragic choice of older literature will be apparent. So also will be the tremendous changes in modern emphasis. As *Maud* and *Song of Myself* and the Dickinson fascicles revealed long ago (to say nothing of the obvious parallels in Symbolist poetry), it has devolved more and

more upon private sensibility to carry the impossible yet necessary heroic burden. In the process, classical narrative and dramatic structure have given way to the subjective primacy of lyrical structure. The concepts of "protagonist" and "plot" and "argument" and even "voice" are still convenient for critical discourse, but these terms are not, finally, accurate. Instead, the succession and interaction of the larger units of affective language and the related streams of tonality running through a work have emerged as the key to the intrinsic movement and quality of poems, and to poetic art itself. They alone create whatever semblance of consciousness may be said to inhere in a charged structure of verbally evoked awareness.

Yeats's double civil-war sequence clearly reflects this development. Its immediacy of presentation—the distressed engagement with bloody political chaos and with the failure of personal dreams—makes it a work of crucial significance. It places the modern sequence in its artistic character as a reflex, in its human function, of the predicament and dreams of the creative spirit in our century. In this role it is matched by only two other sequences of the modern age. The first is *The Waste Land*, with its brilliant succession of portentous and satirical and lyrically yearning tonalities and its confessional self-placement, just before the end, in the line "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." The second is *The Pisan Cantos*, with its glow and sweat of humiliation and heroic failure. Both these latter works begin with challenging notes of disturbance or frustration: "April is the cruellest month"; "The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent shoulders." Similarly, Yeats's whole opening poem, "Ancestral Houses," is obsessed with the intractability of the degenerative principle. The historically irreversible betrayal of nobility leaves the tradition-saturated sensibility high and dry:

Homer had not sung
Had he not found it certain beyond dreams
That out of life's own self-delight had sprung
The abounding glittering jet; though now it seems
As if some marvellous empty sea-shell flung
Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams,
And not a fountain, were the symbol which
Shadows the inherited glory of the rich.

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,
The gentleness none there had ever known;
But when the master's buried mice can play,

And maybe the great-grandson of that house,
For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse.

What can the inheritor of that ancient companionship of warrior-aristocrat and artist do? He must play the roles of both, creating an illusion of power to remake the world "out of life's own self-delight." Yeats ends "Ancestral Houses" with a question engendered by the sight of a characterless élite, their privileges now pointless:

What if those things the greatest of mankind
Consider most to magnify, or to bless,
But take our greatness with our bitterness?

The question reaches further than the local situation. It touches on what civilization itself will do with its heritage, and on what the individual sensibility will do with the rich gifts of the entire past. The poem's tone is such that it presents a challenge and an ideal, both embedded in the passages just quoted. At the same time it projects an elegiac pathos, quietly devastating in its ironic evocation of effiteness and languor. The two closing stanzas, in fact, are each a periodically structured question whose essence the final three cited lines catch perfectly. These stanzas present a subtle catalogue of possessions in a context of exhausted passions:

gardens where the peacock strays
With delicate feet upon old terraces,
Or else all Juno from an urn displays
Before the indifferent garden deities . . .

Everything recalls power now grown obsolete: "the glory of escutcheoned doors," "buildings that a haughtier age designed," "famous portraits of our ancestors." The telling over of such possessions is nostalgic, sometimes witty, sometimes ironic. These mingled tonalities make for a stream of disillusionment, not without its bittersweet edge, throughout the poem. But the *vital* energy comes from elsewhere—from a paradise of pure vision out of which Homer's art sprang, and from the furious need that engenders a civilization in the first place.

The vision and the need enclose an intensity and a force of desire beyond the poem's overt thought. The language for them—such phrases as "the abounding glittering jet," "some violent bitter man," and "the sweetness that all longed for night and day"—quickens the whole reach of the double sequence. It is a language of urgent power, of haunting loss and the keenest will to repossession. The next poem. "My House,"

leaves behind the tones of meditation and of scornful telling over of empty possessions but picks up the stream of intensity and rich desire of "Ancestral Houses," giving it a new context. Now we are in the toiling poet's domain, an old farmhouse and tower on "an acre of stony ground." No "flowering lawns" and straying peacocks here, but "old ragged elms, old thorns," wild waterfowl, some cows. The Norman tower is a link with a harsh past that accords both with the pastoral yet rugged landscape and the poet's life of reverie and hard work:

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,
A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,
A candle and a written page.
Il Penseroso's Platonist toiled on
In some like chamber, shadowing forth
How the daemonic rage
Imagined everything.

Here the telling over of possessions lacks complacency and "slipped ease." The urgent power, the passion to take over the "violent bitter" drive that longs for a sweetness that is its opposite and therefore creates in vibrant pride, now resides in the poet and mystical thinker. His task is to summon up the "daemonic rage" as Milton, in "*Il Penseroso*," dreamed of doing

in some high lonely tow'r,
Where I may oft out-watch the Bear,
With thrice great Hermes, or unsphere
The spirit of Plato to unfold
What worlds, or what vast regions hold
The immortal mind that hath forsook
Her mansion in this fleshly nook;
And of those daemons that are found
In fire, air, flood, or under ground,
Whose power hath a true consent
With planet, or with element.

Yeats's own tower, the literal one, is presented as more prosaic than Milton's imagined one. Its previous "founder" was an obscure "man-at-arms," a cavalry officer stationed with his men "in this tumultuous spot"—then as now "tumultuous" because exposed to wind and floods and to "long wars and sudden night alarms." In this place the poet, equally heroic in his own way, and equally vulnerable, isolated, and obscure, will assume his stern symbolic task of repossessing the spirit abdicated by the privileged classes.

Two men have founded here. A man-at-arms
Gathered a score of horse and spent his days
In this tumultuous spot,
Where through long wars and sudden night alarms
His dwindling score and he seemed castaways
Forgetting and forgot;
And I, that after me
My bodily heirs may find,
To exalt a lonely mind,
Befitting emblems of adversity.

"Ancestral Houses" and "My House" superbly illustrate what we have called Yeats's aristocratic obsession as transmuted in his poetry. The transmuting involves three major streams of tonality, the first of which we have been discussing: the language of urgent power. We have taken note, too, of the second such stream: the language of something like heroic staunchness, mingled with that of vulnerable isolation. The third stream, less insistent and yet decisive for the dimensions of intelligence and self-questioning it introduces, is that of sardonic irony. We find it most clearly in the opening of "Ancestral Houses" ("Surely among a rich man's flowering lawns"—*surely*, indeed!) and again in the closing couplet of the third stanza:

And maybe the great-grandson of that house
For all its bronze and marble, 's but a mouse.

In dwelling on "Ancestral Houses" and "My House," we have been concerned, precisely, with this "transmuting" process. This is the process whereby initial pressures on sensibility enter the dynamics of a work. The resultant streams of tonality constitute the active principle animating and relating the otherwise separate units of affect. At any one point along the way in a sequence, one or another of these streams is likely to be dominant, although it may soon disappear only to surface again further along. Or it may, of course, merge with one or more of the other streams; and in fact once it has appeared its presence will be felt thereafter. It may attach itself to highly varied objects and contexts, as when the haunting loss evoked in "Ancestral Houses" has added to it, in "My House," the sense of isolation and vulnerability of the stalwart man-at-arms and his retinue and then, more intimately, the whole complex of intermingled feeling that swirls about the poet's own person. To this variable of context we must add another variable: of intensity. Thus, the initial irony of "Ancestral Houses" is converted, in the second stanza, into fierce and imaginatively soaring disillusionment. And in "My House" the sympathetic evoking of the man-at-arms' courage and hardships is

converted into a different sort of confrontation of adversity, artistic and quixotic and presented with a climactically *singing* concentration at the poem's close. These two variables, of the context of a continuing stream of tonality and of the degree of intensity (such as can convert somewhat distanced irony to darkly bitter exclamation) are essential in the structural and qualitative life of a long poetic work.

Following through very quickly, we can see that the third and fourth poems, "My Table" and "My Descendants," complete the diversion of the first tonal stream from the context of a degenerate aristocracy to that of the embattled speaking self. The shift is emphasized by the use of "my" or "I" in the titles of all the poems of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" except the first. "My Table" continues the tonality of tragically darkened exaltation reached at the end of "My House"; but it does so in an altered key, becoming a celebration of an ancient Japanese sword, a "changeless work of art" embodying great chivalric and mystical values the world now considers obsolete. This celebration is interrupted by the negative fears of "My Descendants," a poem whose low intensity (by contrast with the succession of ecstatic couplets in the single unbroken stanza of "My Table") makes it seem almost genial despite its arrogance and pessimism. The very familiar language toward the end of this poem, when the poet says he has chosen the house "for an old neighbour's friendship" and has "decked and altered it for a girl's love," contributes to this tonal relaxation. But then, in the two succeeding poems, "The Road at My Door" and "The Stare's Nest by My Window," the second major tonal stream, of vulnerability and isolation, re-enters the work mightily. We are in the midst of civil war. Fighting men from opposed factions appear at the poet's door and shock him into realizing that he has been living in "the cold snows of a dream" while brutality prevails all about him. The poems arrive as traumatic recognitions, the one in anecdotal personal terms, the other in its delineation of horror:

Last night they trundled down the road
That dead young soldier in his blood.

In both poems, meanwhile, natural life is shown going calmly on. The moor-hen guides her chicks, "those feathered balls of soot," on the stream. The bees build in the tower's "loosening masonry." "Mother birds bring grubs and flies" to their fledglings. The contrast is deadly ironic, picking up from the mockeries of "Ancestral Houses" but more bitterly personal. The bitterness wells up particularly in the refrain to "The Stare's Nest by My Window," with its invitation to honeybees (and perhaps unnamed others) to "come build in the empty house of the stare." The fullest retreat into self-depreciation, however, occurs in the

closing poem of "Meditations in Time of Civil War." This is "I See Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness." Here all the external terms of reference of the sequence so far—houses, possessions, civil war, the generations—are replaced by visionary figures. Yet the major streams of tonality reappear in this totally altered context. In the exquisite yet harshly self-knowing first stanza, the world of the preceding poems fades into a mist that recalls yet distorts it. In the following stanzas a succession of fantasies arise in reverie—a senselessly vengeful mob emerging from the recesses of the far-off past; elegant ladies from faerie, mounted on unicorns and lost in voluptuous dreams; and, finally, an "indifferent multitude" and "brazen hawks" with "innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon." These are all "monstrous familiar images" arising from the previous desperate confrontations of the sequence. The poet, falling into extreme stylistic buffoonery by mimicking Wordsworth's solemnity of diction at the very end of the poem, confesses that these "daemonic images" are all that his "half-read wisdom" amounts to. They must (in Wordsworthese) "suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy."

"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," the second part of the double sequence, is in part a compressed reprise of the first part's tonalities. Its poems are numbered but untitled, so that the tonalities relate to one another with less overt thematic guidance from the poet. The opening poem, in the same *ottava rima* as "Ancestral Houses," to some extent presents similar concerns. Its intensity is of a more burning order, however; it has a more profoundly elegiac aspect, and its stunned horror at human savagery picks up from the phrasing in "The Road at My Door" and "The Stare's Nest by My Window." In short, it is more complex and driven than any single poem in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and it raises "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" to a higher pitch of feeling from the start. Its special energy is confirmed in the extraordinary third poem, the climactic internalization of the double sequence's turbulent course. All the important tonal streams we have encountered converge in this, the psychological centerpiece of the civil-war poems:

Some moralist or mythological poet
Compares the solitary soul to a swan;
I am satisfied with that,
Satisfied if a troubled mirror show it,
Before that brief gleam of its life be gone,
An image of its state;
The wings half spread for flight,
The breast thrust out in pride
Whether to play, or to ride
Those winds that clamour of approaching night.

A man in his own secret meditation
 Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made
 In art or politics;
 Some Platonist affirms that in the station
 Where we should cast off body and trade
 The ancient habit sticks,
 And that if our works could
 But vanish with our breath
 That were a lucky death,
 For triumph can but mar our solitude.

The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven:
 That image can bring wildness, bring a rage
 To end all things, to end
 What my laborious life imagined, even
 The half-imagined, the half-written page;
 O but we dreamed to mend
 Whatever mischief seemed
 To afflict mankind, but now
 That winds of winter blow
 Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed.

Such is the force of the proud image of the swan readying itself for flight and then leaping "into the desolate heaven," and so absolutely concentrated is the meditation on the worth of human accomplishment, that one might almost miss the "rage" toward suicide in this poem. The three main tonal streams of the double sequence—of urgent power, staunchness in isolation, and sardonic irony—are drawn into the double vortex of the swan's leap and the poet's "rage / To end all things." The power of the poem gives it independent life, yet its reciprocities with the poems before and after it in the two sequences give it a clarity of resonance it could not otherwise have. The swan has reciprocities with the "abounding glittering jet" and even the "marvellous empty sea-shell" of "Ancestral Houses"; the "Platonist" who "affirms" that it is "lucky" to have all one's works vanish has affinities with "*Il Penseroso's* Platonist" toiling in "My House"; and the poet's "rage" is like the "daemonic rage" whose imaginative creation of "everything" Milton "shadowed forth." These are but a few reciprocities of the sort we have mentioned. Another of importance is indicated by the fact that "My House" has the same intricate stanzaic form as the poem now under scrutiny. The aims set forth in "My House" are now seen to have been vain, yet the staunchness is of the same order—in the one instance the careful construction of a dream-architecture out of unpromising reality; in the other, its heroic deconstruction.

The tragic exulting of the third poem of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" can be compared—another reciprocity—with that of "My Table," but its wild power and deeper inwardness make it at once the unquestionably climactic poem of the double sequence and the most decisively introspective as well. Similarly, the short closing poem at the end of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" goes beyond the closing poem of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" ("I See Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness") in its terrified recognitions. In the thirteen poems of the double sequence Yeats had discovered the extraordinary dynamic possibilities afforded by the genre. The compressed recapitulation enabled by the double-sequence form was an added discovery—conceivably influenced by Pound's double sequence *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, whose second part, "Mauberley (1920)," is a subjective, associative reprise of the more externally directed and active first section.

2. "A Man Young and Old" and "A Woman Young and Old"

Very noticeably, there are no poems dealing with love in the Yeats sequences we have so far discussed. Civil war and hard-fighting politics have made the heart grow "brutal," as "The Stare's Nest by My Window" puts it. The sexual emphasis, if that is the right term, is on possible racial degeneration in these poems. It is true that both parts of the double civil-war sequence end with poems that include figures of erotic fantasy: the ladies with "hearts . . . full / Of their own sweetness, bodies of their loveliness" in the one poem; and "Herodias' daughters" with their "amorous cries," "the love-lorn Lady Kyteler," and "that insolent fiend" who is her incubus in the other. But even in the latter instance there is a certain emphasis on racial degeneration—the violation of a lady by a loutish demon—in the riddling passage that closes "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen":

thereupon
 There lurches past, his great eyes without thought
 Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,
 That insolent fiend Robert Artisson
 To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought
 Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks.

In a very superficial sense, the double sequence might be considered a kind of love poem, since "My Descendants" speaks of having "decked

Chapter Six

The Evolution of William Butler Yeats's Sequences II (1929-38)

1. *Words for Music Perhaps*

The twenty-five poems of *Words for Music Perhaps*, with the exception of the opening seven Crazy Jane poems, were written in two separate batches: Poems VIII-XX in 1929 and perhaps early 1930, and XXI-XXV in the latter half of 1931. The Crazy Jane poems span these years, three dating from March 1929 (I, VII, II), one from October 1930 (III), one from July 1931 (V), and two from November 1931 (IV, VI). They contain the heart of the sequence and make up a smaller sequence of their own whose essential preoccupation—like that of the volume as a whole—is the true nature of love. Yeats's exploration, however, moves forward by juxtaposition of highly agitated or otherwise intense states of awareness, not by the more logical development of, say, Plato's *Symposium*. Yeats uses to the hilt the opportunities provided by a cast of characters and by various refrains to play off a number of passionate beliefs and experiences against each other. Crazy Jane, all by herself, serves as a mouthpiece for quite a number of moods and perceptions. Indeed she, of all Yeats's characters or personae, approaches most closely the complex sensibility that informs the more directly personal great poems like "Byzantium," "Among School Children," "The Circus Animals' Desertion," and "The Man and the Echo."

However, despite the variety, from the opening defiant imprecations of "Crazy Jane and the Bishop" to the exultant torment of "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers" the shaping force is the same: a driven vision of enrapturing love that can fulfill both body and soul. Con-

comitant notes of pain, loss, and frustration—inescapable aspects of the mortal, human condition—punctuate the fundamentally ecstatic set of the group.

"Crazy Jane and the Bishop," the opening poem of the sequence, presents Jane's sensibility at its most exacerbated and sets certain key axes of thought and feeling that the rest of the sequence explores:

Bring me to the blasted oak
That I, midnight upon the stroke,
(*All find safety in the tomb.*)
May call down curses on his head
Because of my dear Jack that's dead.
Coxcomb was the least he said:
The solid man and the coxcomb.

With typical economy, Yeats plunges us into the middle of an emotional storm. The speaker here (and throughout the sequence) is identified as Crazy Jane only by the title; no time is wasted introducing a cast of characters or describing a dramatic situation. But by the end of the second stanza we know all we need to of the external events that have brought Jane to such a pitch:

Nor was he Bishop when his ban
Banished Jack the Journeyman,
(*All find safety in the tomb.*)
Nor so much as parish priest,
Yet he, an old book in his fist,
Cried that we lived like beast and beast:
The solid man and the coxcomb.

Here are the raw materials for a ballad or other melancholy narrative of lovers' separation and the death of the beloved wandering somewhere in foreign lands, but Yeats is after a different effect entirely. The plot is subordinated to a succession of lyric intensities; Jane is hardly a stock figure from romantic balladry; and the main drive of the sequence is towards an understanding, in emotional, intellectual, and sensuous terms, of the highest possibilities of love and its connection with artistic creation.

The emotional assault of the opening poem—dominated by rage—establishes immediately the enduring nature of the bond between Jack and Jane. Interference with their passion by the narrowly moralistic has been neither forgotten nor forgiven with the years; nor, seemingly, could the gap between two such antagonistic ways of life be bridged in any rational way. What can Jane do except "spit" at the distorted being who

subverts love in the name of arid spirituality? And what could a man dominated by such a vision have to say to a woman who exemplifies, for him, sin and beastliness—except to continue railing? Yeats starts us off on Jane's side in this debate between orthodox religion and sexual passion—sexual passion that has endured beyond the grave.

With the second poem, "Crazy Jane Reproved," the hyper-aesthetic joins the moral-religious and sexual-pagan views on love:

I care not what the sailors say:
All those dreadful thunder-stones,
All that storm that blots the day
Can but show that Heaven yawns;
Great Europa played the fool
That changed a lover for a bull.
Fol de rol, fol de rol.

To round that shell's elaborate whorl,
Adorning every secret track
With the delicate mother-of-pearl,
Made the joints of Heaven crack:
So never hang your heart upon
A roaring, ranting journeyman.
Fol de rol, fol de rol.

The reproving speaker here is neither the Jane of the first poem, nor the Bishop, nor Yeats exactly. Rather, the voice is that of an artist who perceives that divinity manifests itself in the difficult creation of beautiful form divorced from human turbulence and sexual passion. This speaker would discard Zeus with the bull and would deny the violent energy associated with artistic transcendence. Jane and Yeats would reply "*Fol de rol, fol de rol,*" for this truth is only partial. (The artistically ritualized violence and brutality of the dance in the seventh poem are more to the point,—and poems I, II, and VII, remember, were the original starting points of the sequence.)

The next three poems, "Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment," "Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman," and "Crazy Jane on God" explicitly introduce the supernatural. The Judgment Day in the first of these, if the "he" in that poem is God, is interestingly idiosyncratic. Jane does most of the talking, with God limited to sympathetic-sardonic agreement: "*That's certainly the case, said he.*" Also, the small *h* in "*he*" suggests that this is not the final Judgment of traditional Christianity, and obviously Jane is still caught in her obsession with profane rather than divine love. The preposition "on" in the title may of course mean "about" rather than "at," in which case one must read the poem as an

intimately relaxed, half-bitter exchange between Jane and her lover—and the "judgment day" of the title simply indicates some ultimate point in time from whose perspective all the implications of love (and life itself) will at last become clear. In any case, this remarkably vivid poem centers on the evocation of extreme states of feeling hardly containable within any boundaries of rational thematic statement. It is clear, though, that Jane's concept of human love involves soul as well as body, and that the first stanza is close to a key perspective already seen in "A Woman Young and Old" and developed with great economy and saving humor in the later "The Three Bushes." Yet the assertion is more a note of yearning than a point of argument:

"Love is all
Unsatisfied
That cannot take the whole
Body and soul";
And that is what Jane said.

The stanza implicitly synthesizes the opposing positions expressed in the opening poems: Jane's and the Bishop's, the sailor's and the aesthete's. In addition, it sets the scene for the next poem, "Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman," where the effects of love satisfied and unsatisfied are juxtaposed and the very nature of love is seen as unfathomable. But it is the simplicities of "Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment" that are so ambiguously suggestive: the almost delphic opening proclamation we have quoted, the clever self-characterizing of an intense and articulate woman in the second stanza, the description of a day of black desolation (but without explanatory context) in the third, and the return to questions of love's mystery in the fourth. The tonal shifts, together with the alternating ironic refrains—"*And that is what Jane said*" and "*That's certainly the case, said he*"—make for a remarkable play of cosmic bemusement, earthy realism, shivering despair and abandonment, and self-ironic deflation.

If one responds to this tonal mixture primarily, rather than attempting intellectual translation, the poem is perfectly attuned to the passionate opening of "Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman," which follows it.

I know, although when looks meet
I tremble to the bone,
The more I leave the door unlatched
The sooner love is gone,
For love is but a skein unwound
Between the dark and dawn.

This first stanza could almost be an embittered woman's worldly comment on the inevitable results of giving oneself to a man. Its tone radiates a mystical desolation (despite an attempt at rational control) encompassing both sexual excitement and its transitoriness. Then, in a characteristically Yeatsian abrupt turn, the second stanza sustains this affect at first—repeating the mystical love-skein image and suggesting that the spirit must shed it in sadness—and then takes an entirely new tack of bright exultation:

A lonely ghost the ghost is
That to God shall come;
I—love's skein upon the ground,
My body in the tomb—
Shall leap into the light lost
In my mother's womb.

The leap after death into the immortal "light lost / In my mother's womb" is impossible—in Jane's passionate, pagan "theology"—without one's having thoroughly explored and exhausted mortal love in one's lifetime. Otherwise, the spirit cannot free itself for that leap into transcendent joy:

But were I left to lie alone
In an empty bed,
The skein so bound us ghost to ghost
When he turned his head
Passing on the road that night,
Mine must walk when dead.

We have here the philosophical center of the Crazy Jane sequence, and the best gloss on the poem is Plato's *The Symposium*. Jane is in some senses a modern version of Socrates' far calmer instructress, Diotima, who (in Benjamin Jowett's translation) tells the world's aptest male pupil:

For he who has been instructed thus far in the things of love, and he who has learned to see the beautiful in due order and succession, when he comes toward the end will suddenly perceive a nature of wondrous beauty . . . not growing and decaying, or waxing and waning . . . not fair in one point of view and foul in another . . . And the true order of going or being led by another to the things of love, is to use the beauties of earth as steps along which he mounts upwards for the sake of that other beauty . . .

For the reader of Yeats, incidentally, the relation between this passage and the "fair" and "foul" lines in "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" is striking. But our immediate concern is Diotima's idea of using the "things of love"—the "beauties of earth"—to mount upwards toward that "wondrous beauty." (We may well recall the shell imagery in "Crazy Jane Reproved," and the birch tree of "Crazy Jane and the Bishop.") Diotima's vision of transforming delight in eternally beautiful forms is close, of course, to Jane's blissful certainty that she will "leap into the light lost / In my mother's womb." This leap may be contrasted with the difficulty of reaching celestial love while still under the spell of the physical evoked in "The Delphic Oracle upon Plotinus," the closing poem of *Words for Music Perhaps*. "Salt blood blocks his eyes"—that is the predicament of Plotinus, and the usual human predicament when love has not been fully experienced and so we are blocked off forever from ultimate transcendent vision. It would probably be forcing the poem to suggest that Plotinus' purely abstract thought will never enable him to live fully enough to be readied for the higher phase—but Yeats was capable of just this kind of paradoxical reversal, giving spiritual priority to the supposedly wanton: Jane over the Bishop.

To return to the poem at hand, we are not talking about impatiently sloughing off obstacles to higher things, but rather of experiencing the "things of love" fully so that the higher beauty will be reached in the only possible way: through "due order and succession." If the process is cut short (a violence symbolized in the Bishop's banishment of Jack), then the situation of the first four poems in the sequence must obtain. In the first, Jack's ghost walks. In the second passion is inadequately valued. In the third Jane is still chained to the things of earthly love. And in the fourth she predicts similar results from being "left to lie alone / In an empty bed." No wonder the curses of the first poem are so violent.

The fifth poem, "Crazy Jane on God," has something of the distancing of "Crazy Jane Reproved," but with its deep, visionary purity prefigures the rich but wryly acquiescent tones of Poems XIV–XX. The God of the title and refrain—"All things remain in God"—is like the beautifully creative Heaven of "Crazy Jane Reproved," except that here all the violence of historical and personal change is transmuted into song—"My body makes no moan / But sings on." The next poem, "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop," holds the same place in this sequence that "Meeting" does in "A Woman Young and Old." Again we have two furious old people confronting each other, bound together in the one case by their former love, in this case by their passionate commitment to their respective ideas of love. This sixth poem dramatizes the conflict alluded to in "Crazy

Jane and the Bishop," but now we have a dialogue at once stinging and exuberant, rather than frenzied raging. And this time Jane has the last word. In the first poem she could only react passionately to being accused of living with her lover like "beast and beast." Here she pre-empted the Bishop's Christian authority itself. She overrides his arid conception that Love prevails only in a "heavenly mansion, / Not in some foul sty" with her own earthy version, in which "Fair and foul are near of kin, / And fair needs foul." Her own boldly sexual reading of the meaning of Christ's conception and birth ends the dialogue triumphantly:

"A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent;
But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent."

We have already noted Diotima's paradoxical comment on fair and foul in *The Symposium*. Beneath the violence of the stanza just quoted, so different in tone from Plato despite its philosophical cast, lurk certain similarities. Part of Diotima's discourse on love touches precisely on the aspect shared by man and beast, the "bodily lowliness" that goes along with the "heart's pride":

"For love, Socrates, is not, as you imagine, the love of the beautiful only." "What then?" "The love of generation and birth in beauty."

For Crazy Jane, then, being "rent" is necessary for both physical and spiritual (including creative) generation and wholeness. As the refrain has it in "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers," love is "like the lion's tooth." In this seventh poem, all the more savage intensities of the sequence are aesthetically converted into passionate, murderous dance-movements that powerfully counterbalance hatred and love. The word "love" appears in the refrain only, but the whole implication is that great hatred springs from but one source: equally great love. Even if one disagrees with this interpretation, it is still undeniable that the poem exudes the excitement of artistically controlling a ferocious energy. Here we have the artistic analogue to the creation of the shell's "elaborate whorl," and indeed the human blazes with emotional and sensuous awareness far beyond the creation that "Made the joints of Heaven crack."

Words for Music Perhaps opens with its strongest poems, the "Crazy Jane" group we have just discussed. We shall not go into the others in

such detail. Of the next thirteen poems (VIII-XX), "Her Anxiety" (Poem X) and "Three Things" (Poem XV) are probably the most successful. Again, in this 1929 group, we have a movement from youth to old age. "Her Anxiety" focuses the youthful concerns in its two stanzas and refrain:

Earth in beauty dressed
Awaits returning spring.
All true love must die,
Alter at the best
Into some lesser thing.
Prove that I lie.

Such body lovers have,
Such exacting breath,
That they touch or sigh.
Every touch they give,
Love is nearer death.
Prove that I lie.

Yeats catches both the mutual absorption of lovers and its supposed inevitable lessening with the passage of time brilliantly in the second stanza. Yet one might almost wish he had contented himself with his crisply superb opening stanza, whose lyrical start softens the epigrammatic, staccato quality of what follows. At their simplest, the first two lines merely observe that wintry beauty will give way to the even greater beauty of spring. Or perhaps these lines annihilate the succession of seasons of growth and decay between one spring and another. After all, earth dressed in the beauty of one spring can look forward to renewal with absolute certainty, whatever wintry death may intervene. If we favor the first reading, however, "Earth in beauty dressed" provides a curiously erotic image for the bare winter landscape awaiting the spring, analogous to the relationship of human lovers in the next stanza.

In either case, the certainty of spring's return goes counter to the course of love, which—since it resides in mortal, aging bodies—must with equal certainty "alter . . . into some lesser thing." But there is also a resonance (reinforced by the ambiguity we have mentioned) in the first two lines that gives the poem an added poignancy; the spring and rebirth that winter awaits are unavailable to the old. The refrain's demand has been satisfied time and again, incidentally, in "A Man Young and Old," "A Woman Young and Old," the Crazy Jane poems, and here in such poems as "Young Man's Song" (IX), "His Confidence" (XI), and "His Bargain" (XIV). The "proof" has been furnished in many different ways, all powerfully moving because, despite all the dauntless giving of

the lie to time's destructiveness, the poignancy of empirical experience remains undiminished and is powerfully expressed in the very language of the counter-assertions. The heart remains "offended" even as it insists on the immortality of a loved woman's true beauty, as we are shown in "Young Man's Song":

"She will change," I cried,
 "Into a withered crone."
 The heart in my side,
 That so still had lain,
 In noble rage replied
 And beat upon the bone:

"Uplift those eyes and throw
 Those glances unafraid:
 She would as bravely show
 Did all the fabric fade;
 No withered crone I saw
 Before the world was made."

Abashed by that report,
 For the heart cannot lie,
 I knelt in the dirt.
 And all shall bend the knee
 To my offended heart
 Until it pardon me.

Platonic vision (recalled in words taken from the higher-spirited earlier poem, "Before the World Was Made," in "A Woman Young and Old") transcends earthly ruefulness but does not banish it. The point is made as beautifully but more bluntly in the closing lines of "His Confidence" ("Out of a desolate source, / Love leaps upon its course"). "His Bargain" goes further than all of these poems in its defiance of fatality. Or, at any rate, we are shown how seriously we are to take the earlier allusions to a time "before the world was made." The commitment to unchanging love antedates even "Plato's spindle" and eternity itself—and yet, subtly, the poem's brave show is belied by its tone:

Who talks of Plato's spindle;
 What set it whirling round?
 Eternity may dwindle,
 Time is unwound,
 Dan and Jerry Lout
 Change their loves about.

However they may take it,
 Before the thread began

I made, and may not break it
 When the last thread has run,
 A bargain with that hair
 And all the windings there.

"His Bargain" has, with a combined gentle dignity and romantic intensity, brought the spheres of spiritual and profane love together—an acceptance and affirmation of the wildly symbolic offering of the woman who speaks in the preceding poem, "Her Dream." She had dreamed that she had "shorn [her] locks away" and "laid them on Love's lettered tomb"—a surrender to the inevitable death of love, and a mourning sacrifice of her sense of her own womanly beauty. But the cosmos has other plans:

But something bore them out of sight
 In a great tumult of the air,
 And after nailed upon the night
 Berenice's burning hair.

In both poems love dies but its death is not accepted. Together "Her Dream" and "His Bargain" introduce a reprise, in a less violently passionate key, of the exaltation of love that reached its height earlier in this sequence with "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" and "Crazy Jane on God." It is the key of mellowed reconciliation.

The new, gentler synthesis can be clearly seen in "Three Things." Here the singing, wave-whitened bone of a woman is like Jane's body singing of past glory in "Crazy Jane on God." The bone celebrates life's sensuous pleasures as if they were the true source of all joy, worldly or otherwise. The three-fold pleasure involves that of her child, men she has gratified, and her own total fulfillment—sexual and spiritual—with her "rightful man." A similar zest for life informs "Lullaby" (XVI), "Those Dancing Days are Gone" (XIX), and the folk refrain of "I am of Ireland" (XX):

"I am of Ireland,
 And the Holy Land of Ireland,
 And time runs on," cried she,
 "Come out of charity,
 Come dance with me in Ireland."

The dancing motif is picked up in the first of the closing group of five poems ("The Dancer at Cruachan and Cro-Patrick"), all written in the last half of 1931 and employing a male complement to Crazy Jane, Tom the Lunatic, in all but the twenty-fifth poem. Tom celebrates the sexual

principle seen as the vital center of deity and artistic creativity. His last song, "Old Tom Again," is a magnificently paradoxical prophecy of the creative imagination's triumphing over the temporal:

Things out of perfection sail,
And all their swelling canvas wear,
Nor shall the self-begotten fail
Though fantastic men suppose
Building-yard and stormy shore,
Winding-sheet and swaddling-clothes.

Following this incantatory echo of Jane's envisioned leap into the light lost in her mother's womb, comes "The Delphic Oracle upon Plotinus." Just as "A Woman Young and Old," "A Man Young and Old," and the seven Crazy Jane poems end with poems involving a certain amount of aesthetic distancing, so now ends *Words for Music Perhaps*. The Old Tom poems have moved rather far from the personal into epigram and visionary statement; the struggle to realize the ideal through the flesh becomes almost pure symbol in the closing poem:

Behold that great Plotinus swim,
Buffeted by such seas;
Bland Rhadamanthus beckons him,
But the Golden Race looks dim,
Salt blood blocks his eyes.

Scattered on the level grass
Or winding through the grove
Plato there and Minos pass,
There stately Pythagoras
And all the choir of Love.

2. Between *Words for Music Perhaps* and *Last Poems and Two Plays*

Placed near the end of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, "Vacillation" (1931-32) is on the border between long poem and sequence. Mostly it seems a meditation centered on a series of images in poems of varied form, its tonalities ranging from musing to self-exhortation to humble gratitude to remorse to powerful conjuration of the past to self-affirmation: stages of thought as Yeats worries at the proper way to conduct a heroically artistic life. Beyond the personal, however, complex moments of realization are flung into this progression that stab into awareness of the mystery of human existence: the compressed vision, almost abstract, of man's whole condition in Poem I; the strange sexual-

sacred images that glisten in Poem II; the moment of pure, blazing bliss reported in IV; the refrain "Let all things pass away" counterpoised to fresh images and violent ones of sheer life-experience in VI; the teasing quarrel with a theologian in VIII. Poem III, a clarion call to artists, ends on a note we remember from "Upon a Dying Lady" and foreshadows "Under Ben Bulben":

Test every work of intellect or faith,
And everything that your own hands have wrought,
And call those works extravagance of breath
That are not suited for such men as come
Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb.

Other such foreshadowings of *Last Poems* are of interest here—for instance, the remorseful fifth poem anticipates the powerful "The Man and the Echo." Only Poem IV, however, approaches Yeats at his best, and "Vacillation" as a whole seems mainly a preliminary structuring on its way to *Last Poems*.

The twelve "Supernatural Songs" (c. 1934) are more successful, mainly because they include "What Magic Drum?" (VII), "Meru" (XII), and the fairly successful epigrammatic poem "The Four Ages of Man" (IX). The first seven poems, in the visionary mode, introduce a new character, the mystic Ribh. He adds a more religious-philosophical-historical dimension to Crazy Jane's and Tom the Lunatic's preoccupations with love and the nature of God. Unlike the Bishop, who used an "old book" to destroy Jack's and Jane's love-making, Ribh at the opening of the sequence is reading his "holy book" in the light provided by the celestial love-making of Baile and Aillinn. (This is an expanded and reoriented version of the cleaving of souls in the closing stanzas of "A Last Confession," in "A Woman Young and Old.") Ribh stresses the sexual nature of Divine creation even more vigorously than Tom and denounces "every thought of God mankind has had" (V). Notice how the line "Hatred of God may bring the soul to God" will be transmuted in "Under Ben Bulben," in Yeats's exhortation to artists to "bring the soul of man to God. / Make him fill the cradles right.") Then, in "What Magic Drum?" Ribh-Yeats fuses male and female, bestial and human, into a wondering, gently awe-struck vision of the Godhead utterly in contrast to the imagined violent rough beast slouching "towards Bethlehem to be born" in "The Second Coming":

He holds him from desire, all but stops his breathing lest
Primordial Motherhood forsake his limbs, the child no longer rest,
Drinking joy as it were milk upon his breast.

Through light-obliterating garden foliage what magic drum?
 Down limb and breast or down that glimmering belly move his mouth
 and sinewy tongue.
 What from the forest came? What beast has licked its young?

"What Magic Drum?" ushers in a series of poems closely linked to historical cycles (compare "Leda and the Swan" at the opening of the "Dove or Swan" chapter of *A Vision*). In this concern "Supernatural Songs" resembles the civil-war sequences and "Vacillation" more than the love sequences, but with the sexual basis an integral part of historical concern—especially in "Whence Had They Come?" and "Conjunctions." Of the epigrammatic poems in "Supernatural Songs"—"There" (IV), "The Four Ages of Man" (IX), "Conjunctions" (X), and "A Needle's Eye" (XI), the ninth is most successful in its cumulative power, as body, then heart, then mind win, until the final blow falls:

Now his wars on God begin;
 At stroke of midnight God shall win.

This poem and too many others in "Supernatural Songs" gain much of their interest from the reader's familiarity with Yeats's theories of history and personality as presented in *A Vision*. The sonnet "Meru," like "What Magic Drum?," is enriched by but not dependent on such knowledge. The basic conception is close to that of the sixth section of "Vacillation," with its refrain "Let all things pass away," and to "The Gyres" and "Lapis Lazuli," but the emphasis in "Meru," as in the civil-war sequences, is more on desolate awareness—the "desolation of reality"—than on the tragic joy such awareness may bring:

Hermits upon Mount Meru or Everest,
 Caverned in night under the drifted snow,
 Or where that snow and winter's dreadful blast
 Beat down upon their naked bodies, know
 That day brings round the night, that before dawn
 His glory and his monuments are gone.

After "Supernatural Songs," the only sequence Yeats published before *Last Poems and Two Plays* was the unique ballad-and-song cluster centered on "The Three Bushes," in the 1938 volume *New Poems*. Written in 1936, it is a small planetary system: a fast-paced ballad about a lady, a lover, and a chambermaid with small units of subjectively concentrated feeling whirling about it, as it were. The ballad is followed by "songs" of the individual characters: three by the lady, one by the lover

(hardly the "laughing, crying, sacred song, / A leching song" his hearers ask him to sing in the ballad), and two by the chambermaid.

The six songs dwell on the central sexual experience, the substitution at night of chambermaid for lady, from the three perspectives. Poetically, this structure is an intriguing device for affective exploration, sorting out as it does the essential lyrical elements from their surface ordering in the tale and allowing them to take over from any priorities of suspense or "interpretation" the ballad itself might suggest. The affective exploration also engages with old preoccupations of the poet having to do with body and soul, both in the meaning of love and in the priorities of the artist. The lover, a maker of songs, needs both kinds of love—spiritual and physical—to create. And the lady's deception of him partially resolves the dilemma of "A Last Confession" (Poem IX in "A Woman Young and Old"), in which the woman gives her soul and loves "in misery" but has "great pleasure with a lad" she loves "bodily." It is only partially resolved for her, obviously, since she must wait for death to have complete union—her success symbolized by three bushes on the three graves, growing inextricably together:

And now none living can,
 When they have plucked a rose there,
 Know where its roots began.
O my dear, O my dear.

This little sequence is a beautiful reduction of emotional motifs to their essentials before the great final effort in *Last Poems*.

3. *Last Poems and Two Plays*

Thus far we have been discussing Yeats's sequences in their final form. We have not concerned ourselves with earlier printed arrangements or paid any attention to Yeats's various working versions. But it might be useful to remind ourselves that there may be a good deal of shuffling of poems before the final order, or at least the provisionally final order, takes shape. At this stage, new poems or sections may well arrive: here a strengthening of intensity, there a muting contrast, or, very possibly, some further poetic exploration of the implications of two newly juxtaposed poems. One crucial decision may imply a whole flotilla of smaller ones, so that deciding to place a poem exactly *there*, or discard this one entirely, means that something must be dropped or rewritten, or a cluster of poems shifted in position. To hark back for a moment to an earlier

chapter, we should note here that—given the special circumstances of Emily Dickinson's life as an essentially unpublished poet—it is more than remarkable that she should have carried the process as far as she did.

Often this process goes on after the first publication. Whitman is only the first in a very long line of sequence shufflers. And to take one small instance in Yeats's work: he made changes in the Crazy Jane grouping between the 1932 Cuala edition of *Words for Music Perhaps* and the 1933 edition of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, reversing the order of "Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman" and "Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment" and adding "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" between "Crazy Jane on God" and "Crazy Jane Grown Old Looks at the Dancers." Eventually, however, the original pressure that brought the sequence into being exhausts itself; and even poems resulting from a similar pressure but, say, five years along in the poet's career, will just have to form their own constellation. *This* one is finally filled, although the poet probably seldom feels it is more than a tentative approximation of the best of several possibilities.

When we come to someone's last poems (Sylvia Plath's and Anne Sexton's are cases in point), we are extraordinarily lucky if the poet has had the time or forethought to arrange them for us. True, if he or she had lived just a few days or weeks longer a different order might have emerged; but that contingency, in turn, would demand decisions similar to those we have been discussing. All this is, naturally, by way of preamble to a consideration of *Last Poems and Two Plays* (1939), Yeats's hidden lyric sequence with dramatic complement. It has been very well hidden indeed since 1940, when Macmillan brought out *Last Poems and Plays*, garbling the sequence (originally published in Dublin by the Cuala Press) and reversing the plays' order as well.

The garbling was as follows. First, the nineteen "last" poems were tacked onto the earlier *New Poems* (Cuala Press, 1938). Second, their proper order was disregarded. Three of the opening four poems were shifted to the end and rearranged. They include the crucial opening poem, "Under Ben Bulben," which was made to close both the sequence and the "Lyrical" section of *The Collected Poems*. The original fifth poem, "Three Marching Songs," was dumped, with remarkable insensitivity, further on between "News for the Delphic Oracle" and "Long-Legged Fly." "Hound Voice" and "John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs. Mary Moore" were gratuitously reversed. "The Man and the Echo" leapfrogged over two poems to introduce the new closing group ("Cuchulain Comforted," "The Black Tower," and "Under Ben Bulben"), effectively burying "Politics," Yeats's original choice for the last poem in his last sequence. And third, three poems from *On the Boiler* (Cuala Press, 1939) were inserted: "Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?," "The Statesman's

Holiday," and "Crazy Jane on the Mountain." That the order of the 1939 *Last Poems and Two Plays*, though published six months after Yeats's death, was indeed Yeats's own has been demonstrated conclusively by Curtis Bradford, who located a table of contents in Yeats's handwriting.¹ There is no indication at all that Yeats would have agreed to the 1940 version.

The order of the sequence under discussion, then, is (1) "Under Ben Bulben," (2) "Three Songs to the One Burden," (3) "The Black Tower," (4) "Cuchulain Comforted," (5) "Three Marching Songs," (6) "In Tara's Halls," (7) "The Statues," (8) "News for the Delphic Oracle," (9) "Long-Legged Fly," (10) "A Bronze Head," (11) "A Stick of Incense," (12) "Hound Voice," (13) "John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs. Mary Moore," (14) "High Talk," (15) "The Apparitions," (16) "A Nativity," (17) "The Man and the Echo," (18) "The Circus Animals' Desertion," and (19) "Politics." The lyric section of the book is followed by two plays: *The Death of Cuchulain* and *Purgatory*.

Yeats's sequence, as opposed to Macmillan's nonsequence, moves not toward but away from the prophetic, exhortatory, heroically Irish grappling with death in "Under Ben Bulben" and the poems through "In Tara's Halls." After these it shifts to the heroic, sexual, artistic, classical transcendence of "The Statues," "News for the Delphic Oracle," and "Long-Legged Fly"; to the more personal sexual flaunting and heroic memories of poems 10–14; and to the closing group, in which the poet, under pressure of the terrifying unknown, struggles with some ultimate definitions of his life and art. Eschewing heroics and "high talk" at the last, the poems from "The Apparitions" through "Politics" have their own bravery, dignity, and powerful affirmation of passionate intensity. Here also a rigorous and somewhat appalled self-appraisal balances a touching desire for communion between one human being and another, no matter what the cost to one's pride. This overall progression was of course nullified by the Macmillan editors' apparent desire to give a coolly upbeat heroic ending to Yeats's *oeuvre*. Although we know the last poems he wrote were "Cuchulain Comforted" and "The Black Tower," his aesthetic decisions about where to place them in his sequence are another matter entirely. So was his decision *not* to round off his work with the stoically distanced epitaph closing "Under Ben Bulben"—"Cast a cold eye / On life, on death! / Horseman, pass by"—but rather with a passion for life still flaming from his page: "But O that I were young again / And held her in my arms!" (Few life-

1. "Yeats's *Last Poems* Again," in *Yeats Centenary Papers*, ed. Liam Miller (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1966), pp. 259–88. *The Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York and London: Macmillan, 1983 and 1984) separates *New Poems* and *Last Poems* and orders them properly at long last.

delirious poets, who hope as well that their art will not perish with them, really favor snapping it shut with an epitaph.)

We are thrown abruptly into Yeats's last sequence, somewhat in the manner of the opening of "A Woman Young and Old" ("She hears me strike the board and say"). The title of that poem, "Father and Child," establishes the dramatic situation. However sudden and striking its first impact, "Under Ben Bulben" is not as specific, so that we are not sure initially who is being asked by whom to swear to what:

Swear by what the sages spoke
Round the Mareotic Lake
That the Witch of Atlas knew,
Spoke and set the cocks a-crow.

Swear by those horsemen, by those women
Complexion and form prove superhuman . . .

The cluster of mystifying allusions in these lines contributes to their assault on our capacity for awe and unreasoning response to a challenge. The audience being asked to take the oath turns out, further on, to be a sophisticated modern one that needs to summon up primitive energies: "You that Mitchel's prayer have heard, / 'Send war in our time, O Lord!'" It contains "poet and sculptor," "Irish poets"—in fact all the "indomitable Irishry" willing to preserve heroic and artistic values fast vanishing from Ireland and the world:

Irish poets, learn your trade,
Sing whatever is well made,
Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds.
Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard-riding country gentlemen,
The holiness of monks, and after
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;
Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay
Through seven heroic centuries;
Cast your mind on other days
That we in coming days may be
Still the indomitable Irishry.

By singing "whatever is well made," poets will be fulfilling the commands given in the preceding section:

Poet and sculptor, do the work,
Nor let the modish painter shirk
What his great forefathers did,
Bring the soul of man to God.
Make him fill the cradles right.

The key to spiritual and physical renewal lies in the "other days," in the artists' preservation of the heroic Irish legends and myths and celebration of the intensely alive peasants and aristocrats, with proper attention as well to both "holiness" and randiness. Presumably what the artists are to swear to is that they will follow this artistic program with its social and political and spiritual implications: seek to implement the "profane perfection of mankind" that is the "purpose set / Before the secret working mind." The jaunty rhythms and randiness of some of the language in "Under Ben Bulben" are far in tone from "Her Vision in the Wood" (the eighth poem in "A Woman Young and Old"), where the wounded man is her "heart's victim and its torturer," but the artist's role in providing images of perfection is the same:

Michael Angelo left a proof
On the Sistine Chapel roof,
Where but half-awakened Adam
Can disturb globe-trotting Madam
Till her bowels are in heat . . .

The majority of the poems in this sequence are fueled by Yeats's conviction that it is up to the artists following him to continue to provide symbols from the "other days" to counter modern degeneracy. (See also *The Death of Cuchulain* and *Purgatory*, and the very explicit *On the Boiler* for other versions of this preoccupation.) Fortunately the poems are poems, not political rhetoric, and this pragmatic program is rarely as intrusive as it is in "Under Ben Bulben." True, one can find it easily in the lusty swashbuckling of "Three Songs to the One Burden" and "Three Marching Songs." But it is completely subsumed in the two excellent poems sandwiched between the sets of three: "The Black Tower" and "Cuchulain Comforted."

Of course, "The Black Tower" concerns "oath-bound men" waiting for their own "right king" to reappear, but the poem's archetypal evocative-ness and complexity involve far more than a staunch holding against modern political and social barbarity. The "burden" of the immediately preceding songs is the heroic refrain "*From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen,*" and the last of the three "Songs" is of the 1916 Easter uprising, cast in heroic terms. (The first song celebrates the lusty

sexuality of Crazy Jane and her ilk; the second projects a spiritual oasis in the midst of a people given over to the "devil's trade"—a center of power essentialized in the refrain.) The ancient men of the old black tower follow right on the heels of the modern heroes who had "gone out to die / That Ireland's mind be greater, / Her heart mount up on high." The suggestion is strong that men such as Pearse and Connolly were inspired by the enduring image of the oath-bound men of the black tower, those who wait patiently but probably in vain to hear the "king's great horn" again. The poem is a brilliant portrayal of one aspect of a mentality in communion with the past and the great dead. In that sense it projects a fundamental human predicament: of dedication in the face of intolerable odds. The essential hopelessness of the situation comes through in the heroes' response to the excitable, unheroic old cook's naive optimism ("But he's a lying hound") and in the impotence of the dead in the final refrain. Yet the refrain has an exultantly ominous note of reawakening as well:

*There in the tomb the dark grows blacker,
But wind comes up from the shore:
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.*

"Cuchulain Comforted" moves further into a realm of the dead where neither heroic action nor despicable inaction any longer has meaning. A community of cowards teach the individualistic hero to become one of them; all will have become singing birds together. The scene is an unearthly counterpart to "The Black Tower." In both the heroic spirit exists in a kind of Limbo. In the first, its external emblems are strongly asserted, as though enduring in the minds of men of succeeding generations. In the second, it would seem that only art (the "singing" of the birds) preserves faint traces of the memory. (The two poems together bring Pound's "The Return" irresistibly to mind.) In contrast, "Three Marching Songs" militaristically hurtle back to the present and its call for fanatical political action. "In Tara's Halls" presents us with an awkward little parable of the ruler who knows when it is time to abdicate.

Yeats is at his best again in the next three poems: "The Statues," "News for the Delphic Oracle," and "Long-Legged Fly." Passages in *On the Boiler* throw an interesting light on the first of these. Yeats frequently wrote prose drafts of poems but rarely printed them, and so "The Statues" is unusual in its close correspondence to these scattered passages:

The old Irish poets lay in a formless matrix; the Greek poets kept the richness of those dreams and yet were completely awake. Sleep has no

bottom waking on top. Irish can give our children love of the soil underfoot; but only Greek, co-ordination or intensity.

. . . civilization rose to its high tide mark in Greece, fell, rose again in the Renaissance but not to the same level. But we may, if we choose, not now or soon but at the next turn of the wheel, push ourselves up, being ourselves the tide, beyond that first mark. But no, these things are fated; we may be pushed up.

There are moments when I am certain that art must once again accept those Greek proportions which carry into plastic art the Pythagorean numbers, those faces which are divine because all there is empty and measured. Europe was not born when Greek galleys defeated the Persian hordes at Salamis, but when the Doric studios sent out those broad-backed marble statues against the multiform, vague, expressive Asiatic sea, they gave to the sexual instinct of Europe its goal, its fixed type.²

"The Statues" fleshes out this meditation on modern Irish and Classical Greek cross-fertilization superbly, celebrating the artist who carried into "plastic art the Pythagorean numbers" by describing the effect of such statues on the living:

But boys and girls, pale from the imagined love
Of solitary beds, knew what they were,
That passion could bring character enough,
And pressed at midnight in some public place
Live lips upon a plummet-measured face.

Nothing else in the poem quite measures up to the shock here of the coming together of flesh and ideal in the superb line "live lips upon a plummet-measured face." The rest of the poem supplies the historical and political justification for this erotic center. "News for the Delphic Oracle" has a similar erotic center, but this time placed at the end rather than the beginning. The poem's movement is from the humorously "sighing" Pythagoras, Plotinus, Irish heroes, and that familiar "choir of love" from "The Delphic Oracle upon Plotinus" (the closing poem of *Words for Music Perhaps*), to the intolerable yearning of these soulful characters for the delights of brawny, earthy sex:

Foul goat-head, brutal arm appear,
Belly, shoulder, bum,
Flash fishlike; nymphs and satyrs
Copulate in the foam.

2. William Butler Yeats, *On the Boiler* (Dublin: The Cuala Press, 1939), pp. 28, 29, and 37 respectively.

"Long-Legged Fly," the best poem in the sequence, touches the heroic, sexual, and artistic centers we have been discussing, but does so purely presentatively and lyrically. In it the meditating mind so strongly present in "The Statues" is relegated to the first line of each stanza and to the haunting refrain, "*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream / His [Her] mind moves upon silence.*" Similarly, the lengthy description of the Isles of the Blest and their denizens in "News for the Delphic Oracle" is not as sharply effective as the placing here of three historical figures—Caesar, Helen, and Michelangelo—in concrete, intense vignettes that present them at the height of their own forms of inspiration. The "Caesar" of the first stanza, cast as the preserver of civilization, is caught not in the midst of slaughter but meditating his strategy of conquest. Helen, Yeats's prime symbol of the sexual force in action in history and art, is glimpsed at the onset of puberty—"part woman, three parts a child"—practicing a dance straight out of the lusty Irish countryside. Finally, Michelangelo is described in the midst of that creative act which will, in the words of "Under Ben Bulben," "disturb globe-trotting Madam / Till her bowels are in heat":

That girls at puberty may find
The first Adam in their thought,
Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,
Keep those children out.
There on that scaffolding reclines
Michael Angelo.
With no more sound than the mice make
His hand moves to and fro.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

All three figures are in utterly self-absorbed reverie, silently concentrating all their energies toward whatever form of creation is their *métier*—military action, physical beauty, art. Whatever the violent and generative impact of the results of such thought, the act of creation itself belongs to another realm, on which the outside world—soldiers, barking dogs, neighing ponies, the young girl's companions, noisy children—must not be allowed to intrude. Yeats may speculate on the results of Caesar's plans, Helen's perfection of her beauty, Michelangelo's painting, and all their analogues in every generation—as he does in the first line of each stanza. But he has depicted the creative figures themselves as yielding totally to the act, not to its results. Hence the singular purity of effect compared with the exhortations in "Under Ben Bulben."

"A Bronze Head," the next poem, introduces personal reminiscence into this sequence for the first time. Yeats is meditating on what is prob-

ably a representation of Maud Gonne but could be that of any woman who gave herself to some form of extremism, destroying imaginative possibility and wholeness of being. In the first stanza he contemplates the contrast between the work of art and the terrifying emptiness of the old woman who, like "man" in "Meru," has evidently ravaged, raged, and uprooted until she has achieved a similar "desolation of reality"—"*Hysterica passio* of its own emptiness." From there Yeats slides into a consideration of which stage of the woman's life was the "real" one, and of his own prescience in youth of what she would become. In the final stanza he endows her with his hatred of modern degeneracy. The images are variations on ones familiar from the earlier sequences and from "Under Ben Bulben," the six songs, and "The Statues":

Or else I thought her supernatural;
As though a sterner eye looked through her eye
On this foul world in its decline and fall;
On gangling stocks grown great, great stocks run dry,
Ancestral pearls all pitched into a sty,
Heroic reverie mocked by clown and knave,
And wondered what was left for massacre to save.

Fortunately, this is the end of the relatively unalloyed eugenics theme in the lyrics, although in *Last Poems and Two Plays* one encounters strong statements of it in the old man's prologue to *The Death of Cuchulain* and in *Purgatory* as well. And with "A Stick of Incense," a candidate for one of Yeats's worst poems, unalloyed sniggering crudeness exits as well.

Of the next five poems—"Hound Voice," "John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs. Mary Moore," "High Talk," "The Apparitions," and "A Nativity"—the fourth and fifth most effectively sound the notes that will dominate the end of the sequence. "Hound Voice" is a personalized, not very effective draft, in a sense, of "The Black Tower"; and the "Lament" is a small vaudevillian masterpiece whose bawdy surface comedy barely conceals its far-reaching elegiac strain. "High Talk" starts with a flamboyant bit of boasting—"no modern stalks" upon stilts higher than the poet's—but at the same time there are several disquieting elements. These are, first, failure to match the accomplishment of one's forebears; second, the necessity to start all over again—to "take to chisel and plane"—and finally, the closing passage that recalls, although it does not match, the image of the swan leaping into the desolate heaven in the third section of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." Once again we have the heroic spirit braving death:

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run wild,
 From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from father to child.
 All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle goose
 Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and the dawn breaks loose;
 I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on;
 Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn.

In contrast, "The Apparitions" mocks such fantasizing, projecting an aging figure desperately assuring himself that he has a "full" heart and the strength to bear the "increasing Night / That opens her mystery and fright." His appalled awareness of oncoming death is carried by the refrain, "Fifteen apparitions have I seen; / The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger." Personal fear is touched on here, as it is to some extent in the closing couplet of "A Nativity":

Why is the woman terror-struck?
 Can there be mercy in that look?

"The Man and the Echo," the first of the powerful closing triad, limns the struggle of the "old and ill" poet to put his actions "in one clear view" and stand in "judgment on his soul." The result is terror, not peace. The "echo" has no message except death and mystery; and instead of the "terrible novelty of light" in "High Talk," the final image is of the poet deep in the dark cleft, listening to a death cry:

Up there some hawk or owl has struck,
 Dropping out of sky or rock,
 A stricken rabbit is crying out,
 And its cry distracts my thought.

This darkest moment in the sequence is followed by a strenuous consideration of the sources of Yeats's art—as "The Man and the Echo" is concerned to some extent with the disastrous effect of his art and actions on certain individuals. Throwing aside the symbols and "stilted boys" of his earlier work, the poet returns to the "heart" that had originally provided the impetus for his work until his creations took all his love, "and not those things that they were emblems of." The staggering difference between then and now is conveyed by the contrast between the dream-images that once grew out of a heart "embittered" by need and the squalid reality that is the heart's ultimate, "foul" workshop:

Those masterful images because complete
 Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
 A mound of refuse or the sweepings of the street,

Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
 Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
 Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
 I must lie down where all the ladders start,
 In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

The pure mind—like that conveyed so powerfully in "Long-Legged Fly"—is only half the creative process. At the end of his life, Yeats savagely sums up the leavings of a lifetime, which are now only the contents of his heart. The closing stanza, especially, points up the infuriating dichotomy between the enduring art images and the all-too-mortal flesh and leads brilliantly into the last poem, "Politics," with its poignant focusing on the dominating desire of the old man—not for political or artistic achievement, but for youth and love:

And maybe what they say is true
 Of war and war's alarms,
 But O that I were young again
 And held her in my arms!

This heart's truth, affirmed in the midst of impending war, involves only the individual: *his* anguish; *his* longing; *his* affirmation of love. Here is the kind of intensity of feeling on which Yeats's art has been based throughout. No *artist* can both "cast a cold eye / On life, on death" and create "masterful images" that outlive the poet and affect the future.