

J.B.YEATS AND W.B.YEATS

JOHN BUTLER YEATS
AND
WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

By

JEAN ELIZABETH D'OLIER PATRICK, B.A.

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AUTHOR: Jean Elizabeth d'Olier Patrick, B.A. University of Manitoba

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

'Influence' is a term which conceals and mitigates the guilty acquisitiveness of talent.¹

The student who approaches the work of William Butler Yeats with an interest in sources, analogues and influences, finds himself faced with a formidable task. There are several reasons for this, the first of which is the sheer volume of work -- poetry, drama and prose -- which Yeats produced during his lifetime; work, moreover, which was constantly revised. Another reason lies in the nature of Yeats's mind and the characteristics of his imaginative process. Yeats had a mind like a magpie: he swooped down on glittering fragments, carried them off and stored them away for future use. He was not a scholar, but he read widely and often erratically in whatever interested him, and, being a painter and the son of a painter, he was influenced in his image-making by visual as well as intellectual impressions. T.R. Henn² and Giorgio Melchiori³ have discussed at length the visual sources of many of his images and clusters of images, but perhaps one of his most important symbols, the tower, may serve here to illustrate this complicated imaginative process. Since Ireland is a land of towers, the image was probably a

¹Ellmann, Eminent Domain, p.3.

²Henn, The Lonely Tower.

³Melchiori, The Whole Mystery of Art.

visual one in the beginning, dating from Yeats's earliest years. To the visual was added gradually the mythological in the burning towers of Troy and perhaps the Tower of Babel, which arrogant man hoped would "reach unto heaven". Literary associations came with his early reading: Milton's Platonist who asks that his "lamp, at midnight hour, / Be seen in some high lonely tower,"⁴ and Shelley's "visionary prince".⁵ Both these sources add to the symbolical meaning of the tower the idea of the poet-scholar's essential isolation and solitude, and of the "mind looking outward upon men and things", as Yeats expresses it in his essay "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry".⁶ The visual appears again with Palmer's illustration "The Lonely Tower", which was well known to Yeats; he writes in 1918 to Lady Gregory that his table at the Bodleian "is covered with such things as the etchings and woodcuts of Palmer and Calvert".⁷ Another visual source was the stage setting for Villiers de l'Isle Adam's Axel, which Yeats saw in Paris in the nineties, and which was to become one of several "sacred books". Since his French was and always remained very rudimentary, the deepest impression of this first meeting with the play must have been visual; he writes in his introduction to the Jarrold edition of 1925:⁸

⁴Milton, Il Penseroso, ll. 85-6.

⁵W.B.Yeats, The Collected Poems of W.B.Yeats (hereafter cited as Poems), p.184.

⁶W.B.Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p.87.

⁷W.B.Yeats, The Letters of W.B.Yeats (hereafter cited as Letters), p.616.

⁸Quoted by A. Norman Jeffares in "Thoor, Ballylee", English Studies, XXVIII, 1947, pp.161-168.

Now that I have read it again in Mr. Finberg's translation and recalled that first impression I can see how those symbols dominated my thought...Is it only because I opened the book for the first time when I had vivid senses of youth that I must see that tower room always and hear always that thunder?

From these associations the tower derived its Romantic meaning of poetic isolation and solitude, retreat from the world, and the lonely search for wisdom and perfection of art.

In 1917 Yeats bought Thoor Ballylee and the two cottages which went with it, thus acquiring "An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower".⁹ From the beginning it was for Yeats a symbol for his own work as a poet - rooted in the soil of Ireland, but stretching into the heavens. "I declare this tower is my symbol" he writes in "Blood and the Moon",¹⁰ and earlier, in 1919, he had written to John Quinn of the Tower as a "fitting monument and symbol".¹¹ It was to become, however, much more than this, and by his constant use of the tower symbol from this time on, he added new connotations to the old. It became part of the Helen myth and symbol, so that he could say "I pace upon the battlements"¹² as if he were one of the old men of Troy, looking down upon the destruction below, and growing "gentle as the old men of Troy grew gentle when Helen passed by on the walls".¹³ Within its solidity and fixity the Tower

⁹W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.226.

¹⁰W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.268.

¹¹W.B.Yeats, Letters, p.659.

¹²W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.219.

¹³W.B.Yeats, Mythologies, p.28.

encased the "winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair"¹⁴, and became at once a symbol of man's life with its winding, serpent-like path, and of the gyres of history. It was now that Anglo-Protestant minority of which in his later years he was so proud to be a part, and on its stair "Goldsmith and the Dean, Berkeley and Burke have travelled..."¹⁵; again it was Ireland itself or the modern world (with echoes of Burke's idea of the nation as a tree), "half dead at the top".¹⁶ At the end of his life the Black Tower became a beleaguered fortress, defended by a handful of men - a symbol perhaps of the "subjective" minority in the dying Christian world, waiting for the new dispensation. The connotations are almost endless; in the tower symbol we indeed find those "half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth..."¹⁷

A third characteristic of Yeats's life and consequently of his work was his constant involvement in societies, movements, and events, both in Ireland and, particularly during the nineties, in London. Writing at the end of his life about poets and propaganda, he admits to Ethel Mannin: "I have been always a propagandist though I have kept it out of my poems and it will embitter your soul with hatred as it has mine..."¹⁸ And again he writes: "All my life it has been hard to keep

¹⁴W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.268.

¹⁵W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.268.

¹⁶W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.269.

¹⁷W.B.Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p.87.

¹⁸W.B.Yeats, Letters, p.831.

from action, as I wrote when a boy,--'to be not of the things I dream'¹⁹. One has only to remember groups as divergent as the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the Order of the Golden Dawn, the Rhymers' Club, the Irish Senate, and O'Duffy's Blue Shirts to realize how far-flung was Yeats's participation in movements which had to do with the three main interests of his life: his art, Irish nationalism, and the occult.

When all this is considered, the task of the seeker after sources and influences involves knowledge in many categories: poets from Homer to Ezra Pound; artists from the makers of mosaics who adorned Hagia Sophia and the churches of Sicily, Rome and Ravenna to Charles Ricketts; sculptors from Phidias to Brancusi; philosophers from Plato to Croce and Gentile; Greek mythology and Irish mythology; magic and the occult; Ireland and Irish nationalism in all its phases; Greek drama and the Noh plays of Japan; a "parish of rich women"²⁰ (though they were not all rich) from Katharine Tynan to Lady Gerald Wellesley - and the list could be extended. But the "influence" which this thesis will consider stands apart; it is one which, as it were, Yeats was born with. His father was the dominant figure in his childhood and early youth, and his ideas, his education of his son, and his strong personality moulded the young Yeats. When the son came to manhood he rebelled against his father's domination and struck out in search of independence along paths of which his father did not approve, notably his occult studies and the violent nationalism of Maud Gonne. Later, however, and especially after his

¹⁹W.B.Yeats, Letters, p.868.

²⁰Auden, "In Memory of W.B.Yeats", in Unterecker, Yeats, p.8.

father went to New York in 1908, the dialogue between the two was resumed and the old man's ideas kept travelling across the Atlantic. W.B. Yeats, as we shall see, valued his father's ideas more as he grew older and acknowledged how much he owed to him.

Finally, there is the question of heredity, of how the Yeats personality reacted in the poet in conjunction with, and often in opposition to, the Pollexfen heritage. W.B. Yeats became interested in his genealogy about the time his father went to America, and during the last years of his life he developed an almost obsessive interest in the questions of heredity and eugenics, as can be seen from On the Boiler, the play Purgatory, and certain of his Last Poems such as "Under Ben Bulbin":²¹

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.

But long before this he had realized the duality of his own personality and the need to achieve some kind of unity out of the two inherited strains in his own nature, and out of this struggle was to come some of his basic doctrines, such as the doctrine of the mask, and out of the resulting tension some of his finest poetry. He found Blake's opposites in his own personality; as he said, "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry".²²

²¹W.B. Yeats, Poems, p. 399.

²²W.B. Yeats, Mythologies, p. 331.

CHAPTER I

He doesn't know what a success he is, how fine his work is, what a big man he is.¹

John Butler Yeats was born at Tullylish, County Down, on St. Patrick's Eve, 1839, "the year of the big wind" as his daughter Lily wrote John Quinn in 1918.² Since she was devoted to her father and was his favourite child, the unconscious humour in this probably did not occur to her, but it would not have escaped J.B.'s irreverent sense of humour and his occasional self-deprecation. In a long, busy and very active life, the only activity in which he achieved a completely unqualified success was the art of conversation. His birthdate is interesting for another reason: although he was, as Jeffares has said,³ pre-eminently a man of the nineteenth century, and a Victorian in his virtues, he was born early enough in the century to have, through the talk of his elders, a glimpse backward into the eighteenth; and his catholic taste in literature carried him forward into the twentieth without great discomfort, so that he was able to appreciate James Joyce and, though his taste in art was more rigid, to admit, at the end of his life, that there was something

¹Letter from Lily Yeats to Quinn, Dec. 10, 1917, in Reid, The Man from New York, p.310.

²Reid, The Man from New York, p.363.

³A. Norman Jeffares, "John Butler Yeats", in In Excited Reverie, edited by A.N. Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross, pp.24-47.

to be said for Matisse.

He was the son and grandson of Church of Ireland clergymen, though earlier the family had been merchants. His grandfather, John Butler Yeats, was the "Old country scholar, Robert Emmet's friend, / A hundred-year-old memory to the poor...".⁴ He was also a fisherman, "kept two racehorses in his stable because he liked the look of them" and died leaving a wine bill of four hundred pounds to be paid by his heirs.⁵ His father, William Butler Yeats, was "very tall, red-headed and the most eloquent of preachers; like his father before him, an Irish gentleman of the old school, and a sociable scholar".⁶ J.B.Yeats's wife once heard from an old man who had known his father that he was a good preacher "...but flighty - flighty".⁷ The son remembered him as "sweet-tempered, and affectionate, also he constantly read Shelley, and no less, Shelley's antidote, Charles Lamb..." He was dreamy, and to be in his company "was to be caught up into a web of delicious visionary hopefulness"⁸ for "the artist within him incessantly arranged and rearranged life, so that he lived in fairyland."⁹ J.B.Yeats seems to have felt none of the pain of childhood of which W.B.Yeats

⁴W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.113.

⁵Hone, W.B.Yeats:1865-1939, p.4.

⁶Hone, W.B.Yeats:1865-1939, p.5.

⁷J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.35.

⁸J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.35.

⁹J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.38.

speaks: he says "I think as a child I was perfectly happy; my father my friend and counsellor, my mother my conscience." The son inherited the father's dreaminess: "In those childhood days I discovered the world of fantasy, and I still spend all my spare moments in that land of endearing enchantment."¹⁰ Yet this same father who, when "Macaulay's History came out...bought it, threw the parish to his curate and went to bed until he had read all the volumes"¹¹, went about among his people during a cholera epidemic "fearlessly...consoling them with religious hope and comforting them also in many secular ways."¹² He was fond of sports, like all the Yeatses, and had been rebuked when a young curate by his rector for riding about the parish on a spirited horse; the rector told him "that he had hired a Curate and not a jockey."¹³ But above all it was his father's intellectually curious mind that appealed to the son; he had the gift of conversation, and would sit with his eldest son at night after the rest of the household were in bed, talking of his friends and of the West of Ireland. "There are men with a social gift who must dominate their company, expecting others to woo them. This was not my father's way. Rather would he lure you on till you believed, not in him, about which he did not

¹⁰J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.2.

¹¹Hone, W.B.Yeats: 1865-1939, p.5.

¹²J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.42.

¹³J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.39.

care, but in your own self." But stimulating as his father's mind was ("A new word was to him, as to me, a pearl of discovery, fished up out of some strange book he had been reading, and we would enjoy it together")¹⁴ he was unable, like J.B.Yeats in his turn, to muster sufficient patience to teach his son.

J.B.Yeats's account of his schooldays in England makes his formal education sound brutal enough, with Latin and Greek learned simply because of the fear of the cane, but they seem not to have scarred his nature at all; his natural gaiety and optimism and good spirits surmounted the loneliness of the long school year, with no visits home to Ireland except for six weeks in the summer. He felt, as his son was to do later, the difference between himself and the English boys, and began his lifelong observations about the two nationalities. And he made a friend, George Pollexfen, his opposite in almost every way, melancholy, always looking on the darkest side of everything. "On a summer day he would remember that winter was coming, and if prosperity came to him, as it did all his life, he made elaborate preparations for the arrival of misfortune."¹⁵ J.B.Yeats saw him as essentially Puritan in that "he saw human nature sorrowfully, and with little hope"¹⁶, but "George on a race-course, above all if mounted on a wild and splendid race-horse, was a transformed being. Puritanism was shattered, torn away, a mere rag of antediluvianism."¹⁷ His solitariness appealed to the sociable, communicative Yeats, who all his life maintained that "poetry is the Voice of the

¹⁴J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.36.

¹⁵J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.12.

¹⁶J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.14.

¹⁷J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.18.

Solitary Spirit, prose the language of the sociable-minded. Solitary feeling is the substance of poetry. Facile emotion, persuasion, opinion and argument and moral purpose are the substance of prose, and belong to the sympathetic side of our nature, reaching out for companionship."¹⁸ Since J.B.Yeats married Susan Pollexfen, this heritage was to be an important element in his son's character. As the old man said, "...to live amongst my people was pleasanter, but...to live amongst the Pollexfens was good training."¹⁹

Education continued at Trinity College, Dublin, and here occurred one of the two events in J.B.'s life which were to have a profound influence on his son. He lost his faith in the religion of his fathers through reading Butler's Analogy; he says that because of his father's teaching him to think for himself, the book had the opposite effect on him from its intended one: "I was reading Butler's Analogy...when I suddenly amazed myself by coming to the conclusion that revealed religion was myth and fable."²⁰ He was to remain all his life an agnostic of the gentler, humane kind, though retaining the more pleasant of the Christian virtues. He seems to have had a rather low opinion of Trinity College, though he was later to be greatly disappointed that his son could not pass the entrance examinations and follow in the family tradition. "Trinity College Dublin did very little for me", he says, "which is entirely my own fault, neither did Trinity College Dublin inspire me with

¹⁸J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.20.

¹⁹J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.91.

²⁰J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, pp.71-2.

affection, and that was the fault of Trinity College Dublin." He felt that it should have been "made beautiful in its buildings, its quadrangle, its trees and its park."²¹ It "inspires no love; outside what it has done for learning and mathematics and things purely intellectual it has a lean history."²² During his University years he found a refuge at Sandymount Castle, his "Capua" he calls it, where his uncle Robert Corbet lived. Here, he says, "I did not think, I did not work, I had no ambition, I dreamed."²³ He did not sit for his final examinations in metaphysics and logic, the honours course he was reading, because of a bout of rheumatic fever, but with his usual habit of looking on the bright side of things he says: "Possibly had I read sternly for these courses I should have turned away to the abstract side of life and deserted, for good and all, the concrete world of colour and of images."²⁴ "The abstract side of life" was to remain always a target for his vehement disapproval.

After taking his degree he won a prize in political economy and promptly spent the money, with true Yeatsian prodigality, on a holiday in Sligo. He also discovered J.S.Mill, and, he says, "began to think..." His admiration for Mill was to be one of the subjects upon which he and W.B.Yeats disagreed heartily; J.B. says that his new discipleship made

²¹J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.68.

²²J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, pp.68-9.

²³J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.56.

²⁴J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.57.

him "more disagreeable" and that he picked up at this time "the habits of dictatorial emphasis & dogmatism"²⁵ which he was never to get rid of.

His loss of faith made a career in the Church impossible, so he turned to the law and worked for a time under Isaac Butt, of whom he has left a memorable word-picture as well as one of the best of his portraits. But he could not stomach for long the "malodorous Law Courts down beside the river Liffey"²⁶ and took the decision which changed his entire life and that of his family. In 1867 he decided to become an artist, though he was now married to Susan Pollexfen and had a young and growing family. It was a decision which the practical-minded Pollexfens, his wife's family, thoroughly disapproved of, and they continued to regard Yeats as feckless and improvident, which he undoubtedly was.

In 1867 the Yeatses moved to London, where J.B. Yeats attended Heatherley Art School, and later studied at the Academy School where he worked with Poynter. At the Heatherley School he met Samuel Butler, whom he has commemorated in one of his essays. He worked hard at his painting, but had no commissions for five years, and although he had a small income from family lands in Ireland, he was, like his father before him, "an Irish gentleman of the old school and not at all thrifty."²⁷ An important result of the poverty of these years was that the increasing family of children and their mother often spent protracted periods of time in Sligo (one child was born there), and Sligo became one of the most

²⁵J.B. Yeats, Early Memories, p. 57.

²⁶J.B. Yeats, Early Memories, p. 54.

²⁷J.B. Yeats, Early Memories, p. 1.

important formative influences in the poet's childhood.

After living in two houses in London, the family moved in 1876 to Bedford Park, the new colony of red brick houses conceived by Norman Shaw and influenced strongly by the aesthetic ideas of William Morris. It was a community of artists and literary men, described by J.B. Yeats to his family as "a little city protected by walls against newspapers and the infections of commercial progress."²⁸ Here J.B. formed with three other friends, J.T. Nettleship, George Wilson, and Edwin Ellis, a "Brotherhood", united by their admiration for Rossetti and Blake and their belief in the unity of the arts; here also began that constant exposure to artists and their talk which was to be a second important influence in the son's development.

In 1880 the Yeatses moved back to Ireland; the Land Act had put an end to the income from the family property, and living was cheaper in Ireland than in London. W.B. was enrolled at the Harcourt Street High School, where his father, whose unorthodox ideas about education were to be echoed later by his son, constantly interfered by coming to the school and arguing with the masters. This was the period of which W.B. Yeats has said "My father's influence over my thoughts was at its height."²⁹

J.B. Yeats's career as a painter did not prosper during this period in Dublin; as Jeffares suggests, "He charged too little and perhaps he talked too well and too much."³⁰ In 1887 the family were back in London, again in Bedford Park. Here Mrs. Yeats suffered two strokes and lived

²⁸ Hone, W.B. Yeats: 1865-1939, p. 26.

²⁹ W.B. Yeats, The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats (cited hereafter as Autobiography), p. 42.

³⁰ Jeffares, In Excited Reverie, p. 32.

on as a semi-invalid until her death in 1900, when J.B.Yeats, whose sons were now more or less established, returned to Dublin. His two daughters, who had learned embroidery and printing under the tutelage of May Morris, William Morris's daughter, established the Dun Emer Industries at Dundrum. This was the period of J.B.Yeats's greatest success, when his finest portraits were painted: those of Synge, Lady Gregory, Miss Horniman, George Moore, Padraic Colum, Standish O'Grady, W.B.Fay. He charmed Dublin society with his witty conversation, and Susan Mitchell, after he went to New York, wrote to John Quinn that he was a greater loss to Dublin than George Moore: "Conversation has become a lost art in Dublin since he left it; people only gabble now."³¹

At the end of 1908 J.B.Yeats decided to go to New York, a momentous decision for a man who would soon celebrate his seventieth birthday. His daughter Lily was exhibiting her embroideries there, and he and she were the only members of the Yeats family who had not visited John Quinn, the American friend and helper of Irish artists and writers. Once in New York J.B. decided to stay, although Quinn tried to dissuade him; this twentieth-century "Pilgrim Father" as Lily called him, was sure, as always, that he would achieve a great success and that fame and fortune were just around the corner. At first things went fairly well: there were commissions for portraits (often engineered by Quinn); Yeats established himself at the Petitpas boarding-house on West 29th Street, where he became the admired centre of a group of writers and painters whom he charmed with his conversation as he had charmed the Dubliners; he found an outlet for his loquacity in lectures to various groups; and he even tried

³¹Reid, The Man from New York, pp.97-8.

his hand at writing - essays, verse, even a play. Quinn kept an eye on him, supplied him with books and magazines, invited him to outings and to dinner, and generally looked after him, although he found the responsibility of the "father of all the Yeatsssssss", as Ezra Pound called him,³² at times a heavy and exasperating one. One of J.B.'s most successful activities during these years (although it did not bring any of the money he was always short of) was his constant letter-writing. He wrote not only to his children, but when he was unable to talk to Quinn he wrote him long letters about literature and art, hundreds of letters which, it is to be hoped, will one day be published. B.L.Reid in The Man from New York, recently published, has given many extracts from them, as well as supplying many details about this period of J.B.'s life. There are glimpses of him which show his zest in living, his childlike delight in new experiences, and his warm humanity: eating enormous meals at Quinn's dinner-table, while on the other hand able apparently to subsist on a handful of apples for several days; on an outing to an amusement park with Quinn, Ezra Pound and others, riding an elephant and "smiling like Elijah in the beatific vision";³³ delighted with his first book, published when he was seventy-eight; at the end of his life "dancing to the music of the gramophone" at his boarding-house, where "he took a gay part and picked up the new dances with ease."³⁴ But there was another side too, which appears most clearly in his letters to Lily:

³² Reid, The Man from New York, p. 15.

³³ Reid, The Man from New York, p. 86.

³⁴ Reid, The Man from New York, p. 520.

the lack of money and of a proper studio in which to paint; the increasing infirmities of age, including deafness which made his beloved conversation difficult; and loneliness, especially near the end of his life, when he looked in every mail for letters from his children. He writes to Lily in 1921, after an illness: "This time I was and am all alone. How glad I shall be to be back among my family. I thought I could live alone. It is impossible."³⁵ And then, with his irrepressible gaiety he adds: "Perhaps I might get married. There are many to choose from", followed in the letter by little sketches of some of the aspirants for his hand. He writes to Quinn in 1917: "I don't like going out in the evening. In the morning I am a radiant youth of promise; in midday and afternoon a virile man; in the evening a depressed old fellow - like an old rooster I become somnolent. I don't eat much at dinner but drink two bottles (half bottles) of California wine, which makes me rather more somnolent, but with a cheerful quality, like good dreams."³⁶ He was aware of the fact that he was a financial burden, while always able to forget about it in his work, as he writes to W.B.Yeats in 1921:³⁷

I have been an unconscionable burden to you and George on your comparatively slender resources and I do assure you that I have sleepless nights thinking of it. Yet from the moment that you invited my burthening of you, I have given all my thoughts to the portrait of myself. So all my sleepless nights only ended in my going on with the painting. When

³⁵J.B.Yeats, Letters to his Son W.B.Yeats and Others (cited hereafter as Letters), p.285.

³⁶Reid, The Man from New York, p.316.

³⁷J.B.Yeats, Letters, p.280.

you see my magnum opus, I think you
will forgive me. I mean it to be ahead
of any portraits Quinn may have and to
know this will soothe my last moments.
'Ripeness is all'....

Both Quinn and his family in Ireland were concerned about his welfare, and helped financially both by direct gifts and by various stratagems. W.B. Yeats arranged to send manuscripts of his works to Quinn, the proceeds to be used for his father, and he set his father to writing his memoirs, to be paid for at so much per thousand words by Quinn. An edition of excerpts from his letters was made by Ezra Pound and his essays were collected and published. Quinn offered him a project which proved to be a source of exasperation to him and the cause of one of the few battles he had with the old man: J.B. was to paint his own portrait, which Quinn would buy. The portrait was commissioned early in 1911; on the artist's death in 1922 it was still unfinished, the paint on it an inch thick; but J.B. thought until the end that it would prove to be his masterpiece and he worked away happily at it, constantly scraping or painting out and beginning again. In 1921 he wrote to Quinn:³⁸

I have been doing my very best. Some days I am on the pinnacle of hope and confidence, and then down in the valley of despondency. It fills my life. I have never an idle moment or idle thought. It is a long revel, just as satisfying to me as Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," and I think I have been at it almost as many years. This morning I scraped away all the paint, but now it looks very promising.

³⁸ Reid, The Man from New York, p.495.

The family begged him to come back to Ireland, but he kept putting off his departure with various excuses: his unfinished portrait, and his reluctance to leave New York, which he called "a high gaming table where the poorest has a welcome and a chance."³⁹ He wrote to W.B., he tells Quinn, that he was "afraid to return to Dublin, afraid as a child dreads the fire."⁴⁰ The real reason may very well have been that given by Mrs. W.B. Yeats, who had a sympathetic liking for the old man -- that he dreaded being in his old age a burden upon his children.

He died in New York in February, 1922, just before his eighty-third birthday, undaunted and cheerful, jesting and telling anecdotes to the end. His last words were a gay farewell spoken to Mrs. Jeanne Robert Foster, one of several women who admired and befriended him during these years, reminding her that she had a sitting with him in the morning.

J.B. Yeats's ideas will be considered in subsequent chapters, but this is perhaps the best place to assess his achievements. Outstanding among them, although it is the one of which no evidence remains, was his gift of talk, that supremely Irish accomplishment. Elton refers to "the atmosphere of unending, mocking, fencing, glancing, talk" which "quickened all Yeats's powers." "Ceaselessly, humorously, and with rare exceptions tolerantly, he brooded on the scene and on the people."⁴¹ He had high standards for the art of conversation: it was not argument, but dialogue between civilized people, governed by good manners. In a letter in 1917

³⁹J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 273.

⁴⁰J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 262.

⁴¹J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 8.

to Quinn he dismisses argument or wrangling as the great enemy of real conversation: argument is "only intensity of bullying. Dr. Johnson's way was not wrangling but 'wit combats' -- an entirely different thing, a matching of intellects." He maintained that "argument is only for Methodist parsons, undergraduates, and the public house."⁴² And in an earlier letter he writes: "Damn nervous energy and damn efficiency. They have killed good manners and they have killed conversation, for sake of which good manners exist, and they have killed art and literature."⁴³ His own love of conversation had its drawbacks, since his portraits were painted from a distance in order that he might walk to and fro in front of his sitter, talking all the time. His son Jack "calculated that his father had walked thousands of miles while painting portraits."⁴⁴

Yeats's letters comprise the greatest bulk of his written work, though many of them have not yet been published except in excerpts; even Hone's edition of his letters shows severe pruning. But there is enough to prove that they have many of the virtues of his conversation; they flow along in a lively, easy style, even when he is discussing his ideas about art and literature and life. They are filled with amusing anecdotes about people and places, often enlivened with quick little sketches in ink; there are occasionally outrageously general statements and aphorisms are common; he frequently makes ironic fun of himself and his

⁴²Reid, The Man from New York, p.312.

⁴³J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.1.

⁴⁴Reid, The Man from New York, p.59.

talents; and always they show the good manners he prized in conversation. He once wrote: "I was asked the other day how it was that Irish women can write such good letters. I answered because they did not take themselves too seriously."⁴⁵ Although his subject-matter is often serious enough, he is never guilty of taking himself too seriously, and he varies the tone of his letters to suit the recipient. He wrote on another occasion: "An indulged facility is the clever man's curse in painting, in writing, whether prose or poetry, and in life itself. In writing a letter one generally escapes it, because one is so interested in the person who is to receive the letter."⁴⁶

His essays and his memoirs are less rewarding so far as style is concerned. They are discursive, repetitive, rambling and badly organized. Ezra Pound's opinion of his prose was that he had a mind (like his son's, Pound added) "a bit woolly at the edges."⁴⁷ In his argument, as in his art, he had "excellent powers of observation and analysis but poor powers of synthesis."⁴⁸ Like his paintings, his arguments were often left uncompleted, but there is much perceptive observation in his Early Memories and his Essays Irish and American and also much of the charm and the "liveliness and quick, imaginative, paradoxical wit"⁴⁹ that characterized his conversation.

⁴⁵J.B.Yeats, Further Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.76.

⁴⁶J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.9.

⁴⁷Reid, The Man from New York, p.292.

⁴⁸Reid, The Man from New York, p.315.

⁴⁹Jeffares, In Excited Reverie, p. 36.

He never attained the success in painting that he worked so hard for and looked forward to so optimistically. Joseph Hone suggests that perhaps he never acquired the reputation he deserved because he charged so little for his work;⁵⁰ he never seems to have sought fame, and was always unhappy about commissions from people he did not like.⁵¹ "He was not strikingly accomplished in the mere technique of painting, and his bent was intellectual rather than sensuous...", but his finest portraits, such as those of John O'Leary and Standish O'Grady and George Russell "have an air of mingled intimacy and dignity."⁵²

Lady Gregory, like others of his contemporaries, thought his quick little sketches, done with a soft pencil, were his best works; she found in his paintings always "something to forgive",⁵³ and she wrote to Quinn in 1909:⁵⁴

Poor old J.B.Y....It is wonderful how hopeful, how cheerful, how impossible he is. I admire him immensely at a distance, and I think him the most trying visitor possible in a house. Space and time mean nothing to him, he goes his own way, spoiling portraits as hopefully as he begins them, and always on the verge of a great future! I should lock up his paints and only allow him a pencil, and get occasional rapid sketches from him,

But the old man felt that sketches were unfinished and only a beginning,

⁵⁰J.B.Yeats, Letters, p.37.

⁵¹J.B.Yeats, Letters, p.37.

⁵²J.B.Yeats, Letters, p.37.

⁵³Reid, The Man from New York, p. 30.

⁵⁴Reid, The Man from New York, pp. 88-9.

as he wrote discerningly to Quinn in 1920:⁵⁵

A sketch is an affair of twenty minutes. A portrait is the result of many efforts, all of them tentative; its object the subtle truth of portraiture. In its final form it becomes like a sketch.

Unfortunately, he often did not succeed in reaching the "final form" because of his vacillation, indecisiveness and a certain self-doubt which had manifested itself very early in his life when he could not bring himself to call on Rossetti, though invited to do so. His son has told in his Autobiography how his father could never bring himself to consider a picture finished:⁵⁶

My father was painting the first big pond you come to if you have driven from Slough through Farnham Royal. He began it in spring and painted all through the year, the picture changing with the seasons, and gave it up unfinished when he had painted the snow upon the heath-covered banks.

And he writes in the same vein of the unfinished self-portrait in his Preface to his father's Early Memories:⁵⁷

I have not seen this portrait, but expect to find that he had worked too long upon it and, as often happened in his middle life when, in a vacillation [*sic*] prolonged through many months it may be, he would scrape out every morning what he had painted the day before, that the form is blurred, the composition confused, and the colour muddy.

A reproduction in colour of the self-portrait is not available, and the

⁵⁵Reid, The Man from New York, p.429.

⁵⁶W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 17.

⁵⁷J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, Preface.

colour therefore cannot be judged, but the other criticisms hold for all of the portrait except the face; in the face J.B. Yeats shows that he has not lost the power he had in the early years of the century when his finest portraits were done. The mischievous, irreverent, yet kindly old face with its bright, searching eyes is a vivid capturing of the warm, intensely human personality. J.B. himself called it "an honest portrait",⁵⁸ and in this respect it fulfilled his high ideals about portrait painting. He once wrote, when he was looking at walls hung with portraits:⁵⁹

One feels at once the pride and the pomp
and the sadness of life. One feels as if
one was sitting beside the loom of time
and heard the invisible shuttle. This kind
of spiritual intentness is strained to the
highest point if the artist is good, not
merely knowing how to draw but how to comment.

He was interested, not in perfect beauty, but in the essential personality revealed by his sitter, and he thought that there should be weakness as well as strength, that a portrait "should illustrate the flaw or weakness that goes to the making of beauty."⁶⁰ Susan Mitchell said of his portraits of women that "he had the rare quality that he not only made his women pretty, any artist can do that, but he made them lovable, manifesting some interior beauty in their souls. Incomparable executants like Sargent and William Orpen have not this faculty: they exhibit all a

⁵⁸J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 258.

⁵⁹The Massachusetts Review, Winter 1964, p. 270.

⁶⁰Jeffares, In Excited Reverie, p. 35.

woman's character, but no spiritual life looks out of the faces that are so superbly drawn,"⁶¹ Ian Fletcher has suggested⁶² that W.B. Yeats may have had in mind the same sort of distinction when he compared the portrait of the "Venetian gentleman" by Strozzi with Sargent's portrait of President Wilson:⁶³

Whatever thought broods in the dark eyes of that Venetian gentleman, has drawn its life from his whole body; it feeds upon it as the flame feeds upon the candle - and should that thought be changed, his pose would change, his very cloak would rustle for his whole body thinks. President Wilson lives only in the eyes, which are steady and intent; the flesh about the mouth is dead, and the hands are dead, and the clothes suggest no movement of his body, nor any movement but that of the valet, who has brushed and folded in mechanical routine. There, all was an energy flowing outward from the nature itself; here, all is the anxious study and slight deflection of external force...

W.B. Yeats, speaking very much as a Pollexfen, attributes his father's failure as a painter to a "sheer infirmity of will":⁶⁴

It is this infirmity of will which has prevented him from finishing his pictures and ruined his career. He even hates the sign of will in others. It used to cause quarrels between me and him, for the qualities which I thought necessary to success in art or in

⁶¹ Ian Fletcher, "Rhythm and Pattern in 'Autobiographies'", in An Honoured Guest, edited by Denis Donoghue and J.R. Mulryne, p. 171, footnote 5.

⁶² Donoghue and Mulryne, An Honoured Guest, p. 171, footnote 5.

⁶³ W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 194.

⁶⁴ Reid, The Man from New York, pp. 493-4.

life seemed to him "egotism" or "selfishness" or "brutality." I had to escape this family drifting, innocent and helpless, and the need for that drew me to dominating men like Henley and Morris and estranged me from his friends, even from sympathetic unique York Powell. I find even from letters written in the last few months that he has not quite forgiven me.

Any consideration of J.B.Yeats's achievements would be incomplete without mention of what many of those who knew him regarded as his supreme one: himself. His son pays him the tribute of calling his mind "The most natural among the fine minds that I have known...",⁶⁵ and it was his naturalness, his honesty, his scorn of any materialistic values and his conviction of the loftiness of the calling of poet or painter, as well as his wit, his courage and gaiety, the wisdom of his insight into fundamental questions about art, and above all his humanity, which made so many people admire and love him. George Russell thought he was "the most loveable of all bearing the name"⁶⁶ and Nora Niland called him "the portrait painter whose other gifts eclipsed his artistic achievements."⁶⁷ Lily Yeats's praise at the head of this chapter, coloured by her devotion to her father though it is, is valid; but J.B. Yeats defends himself and other artists with eloquence in a letter to his son:⁶⁸

⁶⁵J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, Preface.

⁶⁶Reid, The Man from New York, p.22.

⁶⁷Nora Niland, "The Yeats Memorial Museum, Sligo", The Irish Book, Vol. II, Nos. 3/4, pp.122-6.

⁶⁸J.B.Yeats, Letters, pp.199-200.

As artist, as man, seeking what I have called dreamland I am concerned still to find myself and my own mind, and only incidentally am I concerned with the intentions of Nature and her mind. Herein I am the reverse of the historical and the scientific student. They are concerned with what is other than themselves, whereas the artist in us and in all men seeks to find himself...The men of science hate us and revile us, being angry with impotent rage because we seem to them to live in profitless idleness, and though we have sad faces we are yet of such invincible obstinacy that nothing can induce us to join their ranks...We are weak as water, our weakness is our *raison d'être*, and now and again when the strong man is broken he comes to us that we may comfort him. We even may make merry together, for we love our fellow men more than we do ourselves.

C H A P T E R II

I wish Willie had Jack's tender gracious manner, and did not sometimes treat me as if I was a black beetle.¹

It [a lecture W.B. Yeats was writing] has made me realize with some surprise how fully my philosophy of life has been inherited from you in all but its details and applications.²

The relationship between J.B. Yeats and his son was a complex and often difficult one, as the relationship between two forceful and dogmatic people, especially when they are father and son, is almost bound to be. When you add the fact that W.B. was both a Yeats and a Pollexfen, and the further fact that they were both Irish, there seems to me no need for an explanation of the friction and the quarrels in Freudian psychology. There is no evidence in the writings of W.B. Yeats to show that he felt any abnormal affection for his mother; she is seldom mentioned at all, and it is unlikely that a son who was passionately attached to his mother would leave home, as Yeats did, while she was living there as a semi-invalid.

Quarrels and friction there were, undoubtedly; we are told of one occasion when his father pushed W.B. so violently that his head broke a glass behind him, and of another when during a quarrel his father offered to box with him. When W.B. said he could not box with his own father,

¹J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 78. (Letter dated June 27, 1904)

²W.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 549. (Letter dated February 23, 1910)

J.B., who always treated his children as contemporaries, answered "Why not?" Elizabeth Yeats's observation, written in her diary in 1888, is perhaps the best commentary on their quarrels:³

...I am writing in the kitchen...can hear a murmur of talk from the dining-room where Papa and Willie are arguing something or other. Sometimes they raise their voices so that a stranger might fancy they were both in a rage; not at all, it is only their way of arguing because they are natives of the Emerald Isle...

In his essay "Back to the Home", J.B.Yeats describes the "typical Irish family" as being "poor, ambitious, and intellectual", and he continues with what could have been a description of the Yeats household in London or Ireland:⁴

We like bright men and bright boys. When there is a dull boy we send him to England and put him into business where he may sink or swim; but a bright boy is a different story. Quickly he becomes the family confidant, learning all about the family necessities; with so much frank conversation it cannot be otherwise. He knows every detail in the school bills and what it will cost to put him through the university, and how that cost can be reduced by winning scholarships and prizes...He studies constantly, perhaps overworks himself while his mother and sisters keep watch...The family habit of conversation into which he enters with the arrogance of his tender years gives him the chance of vitalizing his newly acquired knowledge...He is full of intellectual curiosity, so much conversation keeping it alive...He is at once sceptical and credulous, but, provided his opinions are expressed gaily and frankly, no one minds...We love the valour of the free intellect; so that, the more audacious his opinion, the higher rise the family hopes.

³J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 291.

⁴J.B.Yeats, Essays Irish and American, pp.30-31.

It seems probable that "Willie" was the "clever boy" of this description, and his father apparently felt very early that his eldest son was different from the rest of his children. We find him in 1872 writing anxiously to his wife from London during one of the family's sojourns in Sligo:⁵

I am very anxious about Willy, he is never out of my thoughts. I believe him to be intensely affectionate, but from shyness, sensitiveness and nervousness, difficult to win and yet he is worth winning...Willy is sensitive, intellectual and emotional, very easily rebuffed and continually afraid of being rebuffed so that with him one has to use sensitiveness which is so rare at Merville...I wish greatly Willy could be made more robust by riding or other means - not by going to school...Above all keep him from that termagant Agnes [an aunt] who is by no means as indulgent to other people's whims and foibles as she is to her own... Willy is only made timid and unhappy and he would in time lose frankness.

J.B.Yeats continued to see his son in this light for a long time, and all his portraits of him show him as the romantic, delicate, dreamy and rather weak poet. It is strange that a painter who could divine so well the hidden strengths and weaknesses in most of his sitters' faces, failed to see in his son either the hidden strength which emerges in later photographs and portraits or the latent sensuality which Augustus John was to perceive in his "drunken gypsy" portrait. W.B. came to dislike these portraits after he had emerged from the mists of the Celtic Twilight, and would permit only one of them to appear

⁵Hone, W.B.Yeats, p.17.

in the Collected Edition of 1908. He felt, he said, that his father had seen him through "a mist of domestic emotion".⁶ But J.B.'s reading of his son's character as a child is confirmed by Yeats's "Reveries", and because the son was timid and sensitive and therefore malleable, his father dominated his mind during his formative years. He undertook his education, but his methods were sporadic and erratic and highly personal. When he decided to teach W.B. to read, "he was an angry and impatient teacher and flung the reading-book at my head...", Yeats writes.⁷ Periods of instruction at home alternated with attendance at schools in London and Ireland, schools where the boy seems to have been for the most part unhappy and where he learned very little. His father constantly interfered with his formal education and seemed to disapprove of most of it, from the time when at the dame school in Sligo he was taught to sing and his father, after listening to him, wrote to the old woman that he was never to be taught to sing again. J.B. continued to dominate his education even when he was attending Art School in Dublin; as Yeats says, "...my father, who came to the school now and then, was my teacher...for the most part I exaggerated all that my father did."⁸ His father had wanted him to go to Trinity College, following the family tradition, but W.B. had refused, concealing from his father the fact that he knew he could not pass the entrance examinations. Yeats always regretted

⁶W.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 502.

⁷W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 14.

⁸W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 52.

his lack of education and wrote in "Reveries" of his father that "he should have taken me away from school. He would have taught me nothing but Greek and Latin, and I would now be a properly educated man, and would not have to look in useless longings at books that have been, through the poor mechanism of translation, the builders of my soul, nor face authority with the timidity born of excuse and evasion."⁹

Yeats's real education came from his father's reading and from the constant flow of talk on art and literature and every intellectual topic which interested J.B. at the moment. The reading had begun very early, with narrative poems, but later J.B. made his own idiosyncratic choices, reading "always from the play or poem at its most passionate moment."¹⁰ Yeats has described this period of his life in "Reveries", and it is not difficult to see the correspondence between his father's ideas and his own, although, as he says, he did not at the time see his father's views as a whole:¹¹

He never read me a passage because of its speculative interest, and indeed did not care at all for poetry where there was generalisation or abstraction however impassioned... He did not care even for a fine lyric passage unless he felt some actual man behind its elaboration of beauty, and he was always looking for the lineaments of some desirable, familiar life.... All must be an idealisation of speech, and at some moment of passionate action or somnambulistic reverie... Looking backwards, it seems to me that I saw his mind in fragments, which had always hidden

⁹W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 38.

¹⁰W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 42.

¹¹W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, pp. 42-3.

connections I only now begin to discover...
 He no longer read me anything for its story,
 and all our discussion was of style.

For J.B.Yeats the highest form of poetry was the dramatic, and he dismissed lyric poetry as "egotism"; although his son was to achieve his greatest fame as a lyric poet, he never really disclaimed his father's teaching and from the performance of Todhunter's A Sicilian Idyll in 1887 until the end of his life he continued to believe in the possibility of a poetic drama which would appeal to the select few with cultivated tastes and aristocratic minds. In his review of A Sicilian Idyll in 1890, he says that "A fine poetic drama...lifts us into a world of knowledge and beauty and serenity", although he admits even this early that poetic drama "demands so much love of beauty and austere emotion that it finds uncertain footing on the stage at best."¹²

During his stay at the Art School W.B.Yeats's ideas were beginning to run counter to his father's in certain respects, but he still did not have the courage to rebel. His father had given up his Pre-Raphaelitism at this point, and had become a follower of a type of Impressionism which was really a form of realism. He would say to his son, "I must paint what I see in front of me", but W.B., thinking his attitude an offshoot of Victorian science which he "had grown to hate with a monkish hate"¹³, would long to argue with him. "When alone and uninfluenced, I longed for pattern, for pre-Raphaelitism, for an art allied

¹²W.B.Yeats, Letters to the New Island, p. 113.

¹³W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 54.

to poetry...Yet I was too timid, had I known how, to break away from my father's style and the style of those about me."¹⁴

Nevertheless, his own art studies and his father's example were to influence his later work. He says of his work at the Art School: "I could not compose anything but a portrait and even to-day I constantly see people, as a portrait painter, posing them in the mind's eye before such and such a background."¹⁵ The truth of this is evident in many poems of his: some random examples are "The Fisherman" ("The freckled man who goes/ To a grey place on a hill/ In grey Connemara clothes/ At dawn to cast his flies"); "Upon a Dying Lady" ("She lies, her lovely piteous head amid dull red hair/ Propped upon pillows, rouge on the pallor of her face"); "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz" ("Two girls in silk kimonos, both/ Beautiful, one a gazelle"); and almost every line of "Beautiful Lofty Things".¹⁶

Yeats has written: "It was only when I began to study psychical research and mystical philosophy that I broke away from my father's influence."¹⁷ The break was not complete and was never to be so, but the relationship changed with the son's passionate pursuit of the study of magic and the occult. J.B. had no use for either, nor for mysticism, although he was superstitious and even consulted fortune-tellers. A letter from W.B.Yeats to John O'Leary shows the opposition between the

¹⁴W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, pp. 53-4.

¹⁵W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 55.

¹⁶W.B.Yeats, Poems, pp. 166, 177, 263, 348.

¹⁷W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 59.

two Yeatses on this subject:¹⁸

Now as to Magic. It is surely absurd to hold me "weak" or otherwise because I chose to persist in a study which I decided deliberately four or five years ago to make, next to my poetry, the most important pursuit of my life. Whether it be, or be not, bad for my health can only be decided by one who knows what magic is and not at all by any amateur. The probable explanation however of your somewhat testy postcard is that you were out at Bedford Park and heard my father discoursing about my magical pursuits out of the immense depths of his ignorance as to everything that I am doing and thinking...The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.

Yeats was driven along the path to magic and the occult not only by the natural leaning towards such things which had come to him with his Pollexfen blood, but also, in a negative way, by his father's scepticism. His father's questioning mind and his agnosticism had turned the son to Huxley and Tyndall, and when he came to detest them and all science, he had to make a religion for himself, since, as he tells us, he was "very religious". At first his religion consisted of "an almost infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions..."¹⁹ He retained this kind of religion, and as he grew older made for himself his private hierarchy of people from his ancestors, relatives and friends, but his study of the occult turned him toward what was to become his "system", a private religion which has, as far as I know, made no converts. He denied that he was a mystic, but

¹⁸W.B.Yeats, Letters, pp.210-11.

¹⁹W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 77.

readers of A Vision might be pardoned for finding his father's definition of a mystic applicable: a mystic, said J.B., "is a man who believes what he likes to believe and makes a system of it and plumes himself on doing so."²⁰ And what his father said of Blake applies with equal cogency to the use which his son made of his "system";²¹

I know that Blake's poetry is not intelligible without a knowledge of Blake's mystical doctrines. Yet mysticism was never the substance of his poetry, only its machinery. You need not be a believer in his mysticism to enjoy his poem, "Oh Rose, thou art sick." The substance of his poetry is himself, revolting and desiring. His mysticism was a make-believe, a sort of working hypothesis as good as another. He could write about it in prose and contentiously assert his belief. When he wrote his poems it dropped into the background, and it did not matter whether you believed it or not, so apart from all creeds was his poetry. I like a poem to have fine machinery, but if this machinery is made to appear anything more than that, the spell of the poetry is broken.

We are reminded that Yeats's spirits came to bring him "metaphors for poetry", and when he wrote to his father of his philosophical work, Per Amica Silentia Lunae, a kind of prelude to A Vision, he was careful to point out that it was "a kind of prose backing to my poetry".²²

There were other areas of disagreement, one of them Maud Gonne and W.B.'s devotion to her and to her violent brand of Irish Nationalism. J.B. Yeats approved of Nationalism, but not of violence, particularly in a woman.

²⁰J.B. Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.16.

²¹J.B. Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.19.

²²J.B. Yeats, Letters, p.238.

Then there was the constant poverty of these days and his father's improvidence and fecklessness. The humiliations of his school-days, when he had lied and told a fellow student that his mother knitted and mended because she liked to do so, the constant need to contribute whatever little he earned to the family purse, his memory of his Sligo aunt telling him that "You are going to London. Here you are somebody. There you will be nobody at all",²³ a blow, as he says, directed at his father: incidents such as these must have led him, when he was old enough to judge his father, to a certain disenchantment. His father believed that all members of a family should share in the fortunes of one another, good or bad, as he wrote to his son in 1904, apparently about some disagreement over money:²⁴

I think you have acted very well by us, and I have said so several times with considerable emphasis...

...In my family we have always all of us been in the same situation in life for many generations living naturally and have entirely occupied ourselves with mutual affections and ideas; for instance we supported Aunt Ellen and enabled her to bring up a large family of little children. Among us we gave her an income for about 30 years. There was no fuss - no one in Sligo, above all none of the Pollexfens knew of it.

Tom Yeats [J.B.'s uncle, a brilliant mathematician] was buried in Sligo because at his father's death he gave himself up to the immediate support of near relations, - in those days women did not support themselves, and I could give you lots of other instances in our family.

W.B. Yeats never renounced his responsibility for his father and his two

²³W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 16.

²⁴J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 79.

sisters; he partly supported his father for years and spent much time over the embroidery and printing-press projects of his sisters. But occasionally these family cares rankled, as his letter to Lady Gregory in 1904 about some crisis in the Dun Emer Industries shows. Apparently his sisters had written asking for some money, and Yeats pours out his feelings to Lady Gregory:

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I don't know whether it is selfish of me, but my sisters have for so many years written me so many complaints... that I feel a little cross. Lolly is businesslike within certain limits and a strong soul but my father is a heavy weight - Lilly would probably take advice but for him...I confess I do not like the thoughts that the first money I ever earned beyond the need of the moment will be expected to go to Dun Emer...family duties - just perhaps because they are rather thrust upon one - leave me colder than they should.

When J. B. Yeats went to New York in 1908, the dialogue between him and his son continued by letter; this is the period when J.B. formulated many of his thoughts about art and poetry. W.B. welcomed these letters, and frequently complimented his father on their content, asking permission occasionally to use ideas and phrases in his own work. The rebellion was over, and he realized with some surprise, as the quotation at the head of this chapter shows, that his father's ideas and his own were much closer than he had thought. On J.B.'s part the affectionate interest in his son's career continued until his death, and he rejoiced

²⁵W.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 430.

in his son's marriage and the birth of his grandchildren; but he apparently found it rather difficult at times to be the father of a poet:²⁶

I wrote to Willie some time ago and said that it was as bad to be a poet's father as the intimate friend of George Moore. If you listen to Shelley his father was a monster, in reality his father was a well-intentioned and kind father, however mistaken he may have been in the handling of that rather strange person, his son... all poets have a tendency to see facts metamorphosed. They will sacrifice anything to a tyrannous need of self-expression.

And he grumbled at his son's failure to acknowledge a play the old man had written and had sent him:²⁷

Willie I know has a curious idea that he is an extraordinarily wise person, and that I and everybody else are puppets to be moved about hither and thither as his wisdom directs.

In Yeats's poetry his father and his father's family are mentioned far less often than the Pollexfens and Middletons, his mother's relatives, but his only direct reference to his father is a moving tribute to the old man's courage and wit. At the public debate on The Playboy of the Western World, in 1907, J.B. Yeats had jumped onto the stage and made a mischievous little speech. His own account is rather different from the way in which his son has "metamorphosed" the facts: writing to Joseph Hone, he says:²⁸

Of course I did not make a speech in favour of patricide. How could I? Here is what I said. I began with some information about Synge which interested my listeners and

²⁶J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 274 (Letter dated March 13, 1921).

²⁷J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 247 (Letter dated May 29, 1918).

²⁸J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 214 (Letter dated 29th December, 1915).

then: 'Of course I know Ireland is an island of Saints, but thank God it is also an island of sinners - only unfortunately in this Country people cannot live or die except behind a curtain of deceit'. At this point the chairman and my son both called out, 'Time's up, Time's up.' I saw the lifted sign and like the devil in Paradise Lost I fled. The papers next morning said I was howled down. It was worse, I was pulled down...

The incident lived on in W.B.Yeats's mind as one of those significant gestures, unique, unforgettable, "a thing never known again"; gestures which belong to his heroes, "All the Olympians"²⁹. In his Autobiography Yeats tells of the moment in prose:³⁰

On the night of the "Playboy debate" they were all there, silent and craven, but not in the stalls for fear they might be asked to speak and face the mob... No man of all literary Dublin dared show his face but my own father, who spoke to, or rather in the presence of, that howling mob with sweetness and simplicity. I fought them, he did a finer thing - forgot them.

The lines from "Beautiful Lofty Things", written in the last year of Yeats's life, form a fitting final note in the relationship of father and son:³¹

My father upon the Abbey Stage, before him a raging crowd:
'This Land of Saints,' and then as the applause died out,
'Of plaster Saints'; his beautiful mischievous head thrown back.

²⁹W.B.Yeats, "Beautiful Lofty Things", Poems, p. 348.

³⁰W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 327.

³¹W.B.Yeats, Poems, p. 348.

J.B.Yeats expressed in a vivid metaphor the essential nature of his son's heredity:³²

I myself am eagerly communicative, and when my son first revealed to me his gift of verse 'Ah!' I said, 'Behold I have given a tongue to the sea-cliffs.'

Inarticulate as the sea cliffs were the Pollexfen heart and brain, lying buried under mountains of silence. They were released from bondage by contact with the joyous amiability of my family, and of my bringing up, and so all my four children are articulate, and yet with the Pollexfen force.

W.B.Yeats cherished his father's statement:³³

...it was a Yeats who spoke the only eulogy that turns my head: "We have ideas and no passions, but by marriage with a Pollexfen we have given a tongue to the sea cliffs."

The Pollexfens fascinated J.B.Yeats all his life, and he never tired of analyzing their personalities; in Early Memories he keeps coming back to the subject, and especially to his school-fellow and brother-in-law, George Pollexfen. The Pollexfens, as they are revealed in Early Memories and in W.B.Yeats's Autobiography, were a silent, intense, forceful, even on occasion violent people, of great strength of will and intensity, but uninterested in ideas or the intellect. They were magnificent horsemen, and their lives were ordered and disciplined in a way that the Yeatses never achieved. They also had a shrewd sense of the value of money, and approved of "getting on", which to old J.B.Yeats

³²J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, pp. 20, 92.

³³W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 13.

was something a gentleman never gave a thought to. J.B. writes in one of his letters that his wife despised a young man "since he was so 'unpractical' and without force in a material world."³⁴

The Pollexfens felt deeply, but found it impossible to show affection easily; indeed they despised an easy show of feelings. They were not, like the Yeats family, university and professional men, but merchants and ship-owners. They were often psychic, and were interested in magic and the occult; George Pollexfen became an adept astrologer. And despite their inarticulateness, they were born story-tellers: at school, after lights were out, George Pollexfen, usually so silent, would keep the boys "wide awake & perfectly still while he told them stories, made impromptu as he went along."³⁵ J.B. Yeats thought them Puritans, a term of disapprobation with him; but he conceded that Puritans had their uses, if only to provide other men with the "enthraling" opportunity of meeting men whose "life was a long imprisonment."³⁶

W.B. Yeats's mother has remained a rather shadowy and elusive figure; we know from the Autobiography that she was generally silent, and that she had no interest in her husband's art, never entering his studio nor attending any of his exhibitions. Things of the intellect did not attract her, and she read no books, but she and a fisherman's wife of Rosses Point "would tell each other stories that Homer might have

³⁴J.B. Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p. 16.

³⁵J.B. Yeats, Early Memories, p. 13.

³⁶J.B. Yeats, Early Memories, p. 15.

told, pleased with any moment of sudden intensity and laughing together over any point of satire." "My father was always praising her to my sisters and to me, because she pretended to nothing she did not feel... She had always, my father would say, intensity, and that was his chief word of praise..."³⁷ She was passionately attached to Sligo, and never, her son says, really happy away from it; she kept alive in her children their love of her birthplace:³⁸

She would spend hours listening to stories or telling stories of the pilots and fishing people of Rosses Point, of her own Sligo girlhood, and it was always assumed between her and us that Sligo was more beautiful than other places.

J.B. Yeats, brooding in his old age on the heredity which he and his wife had bestowed on their son, writes revealingly of his wife:³⁹

There is a good deal of his mother in Willie. I often said to her these words: "You know I have to take your affection for granted", for I never saw the slightest sign of it, except once, and here was the manner of that "once": I had left the house and been gone a few moments when, remembering something, I returned and found her where I left her, and she showed so much pleasure that I was surprised and gratified - that was the "once". I knew and never doubted that, more than most wives, she was "wrapt up" in her unworthy husband. She was not sympathetic. The feelings of people about her did not concern her. She was not aware of them. She was always in an island of her own. Yet had you penetrated to her inner mind you would have found it all occupied with thoughts of other people and of how to help them. She was much liked by simple people - the poor and uneducated - for

³⁷W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 40.

³⁸W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 19.

³⁹Reid, The Man from New York, pp. 425-6.

these people, knowing nothing of sympathetic discourse and its courteous ways, did not miss what others looked for and so were able to see her as she really was. They knew that she was not thinking of herself...I used to tell her that if I had been lost for years and then suddenly presented myself she would have merely asked, "Have you had your dinner?" All this is very like Willie.

He realizes that the Yeats strain in his son would not have been sufficient for that growth necessary to produce an artist or poet:⁴⁰

It is obvious that the puritan doctrine of self-loyalty is serviceable to this kind of growth. Yet the puritan doctrine would cut off the sunshine of enjoyment and pleasure and easy relaxation, and the poet or artist, though self-loyalty be the condition of every excellence, must have enjoyment. He must have tears and laughter & romance and vision and relaxation and ease, otherwise his soul for poetry and beauty withers and dies away. Among my friends and in their type of civilization we made enjoyment of first importance, and for that reason we were eager for art and poetry, which are all made of enjoyment. Yet it was bound to come to nothing, because we had not that deep sincerity, which is another name for what may be indifferently called human force or, better still, genius.

A consideration of W.B.Yeats's mixed heritage casts some light on his life and his work. Many of the masks he assumed during his lifetime were efforts to develop traits which were opposites of others which he possessed. He overcame his Yeats timidity and self-doubt while at school and later by forcing himself to do things of which he was afraid, and he forced himself to speak in public and to become an eloquent and persuasive public speaker. He was a brilliant conversationalist, like

⁴⁰J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p. 92.

his father, but only when he was with people he knew well; in a crowd of strangers or with people who bored him he assumed a pose which was often labelled arrogance. His admiration for old William Pollexfen and the other eccentric men among his mother's people probably had something to do with his assumption of the mask of a "man of action" during the period when "Players and painted stage"⁴¹ occupied his time. He was aided during this phase by the Pollexfen shrewdness in business; this he did not have to cultivate, as there is evidence of it in early letters. He was able to put aside all his delvings into the occult and to conduct committee meetings and to balance accounts without any trace of the mental "woolliness" which Pound mentioned to Quinn.⁴² A contemporary has written of the impression he made at meetings of the Abbey Board:⁴³

I think Yeats dominated the Board because he had clear well-considered views on practically every issue that could arise, because he argued every point equably and reasonably and because his prestige and air of lofty detachment gave his views added authority.

He never discussed the occult but was "always the cautious, cool-headed business man..."⁴⁴

Above all, the opposing forces which his heredity set loose in his personality were probably one reason for his continuous and remarkable

⁴¹ W.B. Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion", Poems, p. 392.

⁴² Reid, The Man from New York, p. 292.

⁴³ MacManus, The Yeats We Knew, p. 62.

⁴⁴ MacManus, The Yeats We Knew, p. 69.

growth as a poet. His constant will to "remake" himself resulted in a body of work which is probably unparalleled in modern times for the vigour with which it changed and developed; he did not, like Wordsworth, wither "into eighty years, honoured and empty-witted".⁴⁵

⁴⁵W.B.Yeats, Mythologies, p. 342.

CHAPTER III

My father says, "A man does not love a woman because he thinks her clever or because he admires her, but because he likes the way she has of scratching her head."¹

Yet many, that have played the fool
For beauty's very self, has charm made wise,
And many a poor man that has roved,
Loved and thought himself beloved,
From a glad kindness cannot take his eyes.²

J.B. Yeats was all his life attractive to women, who liked and admired him, but, as Jeffares says, he "was no Bohemian".³ His views on marriage appear at first glance rather staid and old-fashioned, but they contain considerable realism, and no sentimentality; in marriage, as in everything else, it is the personalities which interest him.

Marriage was for him a lifelong affair, but not for the usual reason that this was what Christianity taught:⁴

Marriage is the earliest fruit of civilization and it will be the latest. I think a man and a woman should choose each other for life, for the simple reason that a long life with all its accidents is barely enough for a man and a woman to understand each other; and in this case to understand is to love. The man who understands one woman is qualified to understand pretty well everything.

¹W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 313.

²W.B. Yeats, "A Prayer for My Daughter", Poems, pp. 212-13.

³Jeffares, "Women in Yeats's Poetry", in Homage to Yeats, p. 44.

⁴J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 236.

He writes again in the same vein:⁵

People seem to me to have quite forgotten what a wife is. A man may admire one woman and be in love with another, and all sorts of wanton fancies in his restless heart may play continually about a third. There is one woman whom he accepts and she is his wife - all her limitations, her want of intellect, even her want of heart, all her infirmities and all her waywardness he accepts and would not have any of them altered. This feeling grows slowly, it is not affection, it is not passion, it is just husband's feeling and she has doubtless a corresponding wife's feeling... it exists and...it comes into maturity very slowly so that it really often seems to me that the Catholic idea that marriage is a sacrament is the true one and founded deep in the laws of human nature.

The spirit engendered in marriage is "like any force in nature":⁶

This is the central fact in marriage. And for the sake of that feeling marriage will always remain. Let there be within every man's reach one being whom he does not want to criticise; amid 'the ruins of time' one little spot which change cannot touch...

J.B. regarded weakness as a virtue, and believed that the greatest beauty was the one which had some flaw, and he carries this idea into his discussion of marriage:⁷

When people marry it is not as the vulgar vainly imagine, that they may bring strength into union with strength. Marriage of that sort is not a marriage at all, no tenderness on either side. Marriage means that two people are bringing into the common stock all their weaknesses, and there are two comparisons possible.

⁵J.B.Yeats, Further Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.75.

⁶J.B.Yeats, Further Letters of John Butler Yeats, pp.75-6.

⁷Reid, The Man from New York, p.137.

Marriage is sometimes like two drunken men seeing each other home. Neither can reproach the other or refuse sympathy or help. The other comparison is this: Marriage is like two mortal enemies (the sexes are enemies) meeting on the scaffold and reconciled by the imminence of the great enemy of both.

Sometimes J.B. sounds very Victorian indeed, as when he says that women want "someone to love", and "this means they want someone to 'influence' which means someone to be at their feet...they cannot live without a subject..."; and that "A woman should be sympathetic, affectionate and tender, but love is for the man...love is egotism and egotism is the husband's privilege. There cannot be two egotists in one house."⁸

Women are creatures without self-control, a virtue which J.B. prized highly and which he thought essential for a man, especially for the artist or poet:⁹

Every woman at heart is restless and therefore longs for restfulness. She is without self-control, he is the symbol of self-control. Women in place of self-control will do violence to their own inclinations in every kind of self-suppression. He is the symbol of a self-control which is never self-suppression, and of all that a woman wants herself to be and is not.

There are echoes here of one of J.B.'s basic ideas, that of the necessity for self-control, of bringing into harmony all one's feelings, of achieving that "unity of being" which is so important a part of his son's thought. There may also be an oblique reference to Maud Gonne, who thought little of her own beauty, and suppressed that which was most essentially her self.

⁸J.B.Yeats, Further Letters of John Butler Yeats, pp.71-4.

⁹J.B.Yeats, Further Letters of John Butler Yeats, pp.72-3.

Although he warns women against marrying a poet or an artist because "It is too dangerous, though like most dangerous things, it is enticing ", he feels that poets, because they are solitary, are "the friends of true marriage, while their hatred of insincerity makes them hostile to false marriage. Marriage is to the solitary who is behind every man, and most of all behind the poet, a hermitage and a well-fenced solitude."¹⁰

He was therefore understandably delighted when his son finally married, though concerned about the great difference in age. With a typical illogicality, he was reassured when he learned that W.B.'s new wife was tall:¹¹

I think tall women are easier to get on with and live with than little women... They have more sentiment and gentleness, and because they are more conspicuous are more watchful of themselves. The little women are constantly out of sight so that you don't know what they are up to.

Although the events of W.B.Yeats's life were utterly dissimilar to his father's, and though he writes much less directly about marriage and women, it is possible to discover certain correspondences between the two men.

The event which had such consequences both for Yeats's life and for his poetry, was his falling in love with Maud Gonne. Not only was marriage postponed and his health threatened during the early period of his hopeless, frustrated passion for her, but she continued to haunt him and his poetry until the very end, despite estrangements and bitterness.

¹⁰J.B.Yeats, Letters, p.130.

¹¹Reid, The Man from New York, p.308.

In "Among School Children" the "sixty-year-old smiling public man" suddenly dreams of "a Ledaean body" and his heart "is driven wild", even though he knows that her image now is "Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind".¹² When he sees the bronze bust of Maud Gonne as an old woman, he remembers her "form all full/ As though with magnanimity of light".¹³ His greatest love-poetry was written either to or about her, and she became part of his most important symbols, merging in his imagination with Helen of Troy, Deirdre and the peasant beauty, Mary Hynes.

There were, of course, many other women and various love affairs, Platonic or otherwise. Florence Farr was apparently his mistress for a time; Mrs. Yeats says that their affair ended because she became bored.¹⁴ The one woman who brought him solace in the midst of his almost desperate despair about Maud Gonne was Olivia Shakespear, who would have made him a perfect wife if she had been free and if he had been able at that point to forget Maud Gonne. She was beautiful, elegant, cultivated, a minor novelist, and interested in Yeats's art and in his occult pursuits. They lived together for nearly a year in the nineties, and they remained very close friends until her death in 1938. Yeats is always very guarded in his references to her, and as he told her, he had to leave out of his Autobiography much that concerned this episode in their lives; she is disguised in the Autobiography under the name of "Diana Vernon". The affair ended temporarily because Yeats could not cast off the spell

¹²W.B.Yeats, Poems, p. 243.

¹³W.B.Yeats, "A Bronze Head", Poems, p. 382.

¹⁴Clifford Bax, ed., Florence Farr, Bernard Shaw and W.B.Yeats, p.43.

wielded by Maud Gonne, but in later life they corresponded steadily, and Yeats's many letters to her are filled with deep affection and sometimes a wistful longing for something he had missed in his youth. The poems inspired by Maud Gonne may occupy many more lines in his collected works, but there is none of them that surpasses the little poem about Olivia Shakespear written by an elderly man who has come to realize the truth of that saddest of all proverbs: "Si jeunesse savait; si vieillesse pouvait." It is called "After Long Silence" and refers to one of their meetings while Yeats was visiting London:¹⁵

Speech after long silence; it is right,
All other lovers being estranged or dead,
Unfriendly lamplight hid under its shade,
The curtains drawn upon unfriendly night,
That we descant and yet again descant
Upon the supreme theme of Art and Song:
Bodily decrepitude is wisdom; young
We loved each other and were ignorant.

In another poem, "Friends", she is referred to again:¹⁶

And one because her hand
Had strength that could unbind
What none can understand,
What none can have and thrive,
Youth's dreamy load, till she
So changed me that I live
Labouring in ecstasy.

In the same poem, a third woman appears who also changed Yeats's life: Lady Gregory of Coole, who rescued him in the late nineties when he was physically and nervously exhausted and on the verge of a breakdown from overwork and frustration. Her ordering of Yeats's life and her

¹⁵W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.301.

¹⁶W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.139.

cossetting of him with eggs beaten into wine are often treated as rather a joke, but she gave him a place to work, a home during at least part of every year, and she ordered his physical life and set his mind free. Her interest in Irish folk-lore fed what he already knew was to be the soil out of which his poetry would grow, and her enthusiasm and help brought about the realization of his early dream of a national theatre for Ireland. As he said in "Friends", nothing "Could ever come between/
 17
 Mind and delighted mind".

In the introductory verses to "Responsibilities", Yeats addresses his ancestors in tones which suggest that his unmarried and childless state weighed heavily on him. He asks their pardon

...that for a barren passion's sake,
 Although I have come close on forty-nine,
 I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
 Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.¹⁸

His concern seems to have reached some kind of climax in 1917. The year before he had bought his "castle", Thoor Ballylee, near Coole Park; the first mention of it occurs in a letter to Olivia Shakespear.¹⁹ It was the fulfilment of a dream and the first property he had ever owned; the dream had probably been intensified by his poverty-stricken childhood and his father's frequent moves from one house to another. In 1917 he set about getting himself married in a series of proposals which it is difficult to take seriously: Maud Gonne was now a widow and free to marry, so his

¹⁷W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.139.

¹⁸W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.113.

¹⁹W.B.Yeats, Letters, p.615. (Letter dated Nov.8 [probably 1916])

first proposal was to her, perhaps from habit more than anything else. When she refused him once more, he turned to her seventeen-year-old daughter Iseult and gave her the opportunity of becoming his wife, setting a time-limit for her refusal or acceptance. Again the answer was "No"; he thereupon proposed to a young woman half his age, whom he had known for some time, and this time he was lucky. Such a marriage, in which the wife was the husband's third choice, would seem doomed to fail, but miraculously this one succeeded. For a few days after the marriage Yeats was distraught and unhappy; then came the discovery that his wife was capable of automatic writing, and whether by the intervention of the spirits or the stratagem of a wise woman, the success of the marriage was assured and A Vision launched. Mrs. Yeats seems to have been just the sort of wife J.B. Yeats advocated for a poet: she seems, from Yeats's letters, to have taken over all the practical business of living and guarded his need for solitude. Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory in December, 1917: "My wife is a perfect wife, kind, wise, and unselfish.... She has made my life serene and full of order."²⁰ In a few years he had a daughter and a son; his prayer for his daughter, that she might "live like some green laurel/ Rooted in one dear perpetual place."²¹ reveals the depth of his longing, fulfilled so late in his life, for a home and family.

²⁰W.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 634

²¹W.B. Yeats, Poems, p. 213.

In the theme of old age which runs through all Yeats's late work, there is often an obsessive interest in sexuality: an old man's "lust" as well as an old man's "rage". "Sex and the dead", the life of the senses and the life after death, became the "only two topics...of the least interest to a serious and studious mind", he wrote to Olivia Shakespear in 1927.²²

Old age had been a theme even in his early poetry: "My first denunciation of old age I made...before I was twenty", he tells Olivia Shakespear in 1932.²³ Oisín's speech to St. Patrick,²⁴ in which he describes the contrast between an old man's bodily weariness and limitations, and his dreams, and the description of Oisín as a "creeping old man, full of sleep, with the spittle on his beard never dry",²⁵ as well as Hanrahan's curse on everything old,²⁶ show how constant in Yeats's work was this theme which reached its fullest and most personal expression in "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Tower". The theme of sex shows no such consistency. As a youth, he tells us in his Autobiography, when he thought of women "they were modelled on those in my favourite poets and loved in brief tragedy, or like the girl in The Revolt of Islam, accompanied their lovers through all manner of wild places, lawless women without homes

²²W.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 730.

²³W.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 798.

²⁴W.B.Yeats, Poems, p. 422.

²⁵W.B.Yeats, Poems, p. 445.

²⁶W.B.Yeats, Mythologies, p. 243.

and without children."²⁷ The awakening of sexual desire drove him to spend long nights in a cave above the sea at Sligo: "I thought that having conquered bodily desire and the inclination of my mind towards women and love, I should live, as Thoreau lived, seeking wisdom."²⁸ This asceticism lasted throughout his youth and even during his twenties; his romantic passion for Maud Gonne condemned him to hopeless longing and frustration: as he says in "Friends", she "took/All till my youth was gone/ With scarce a pitying look...".²⁹ This phase ended with his affair with Olivia Shakespear, but the struggle between body and spirit was one which lasted all his life, and finds full expression in such poems as "Sailing to Byzantium", "The Tower", "Among School Children" and "Vacillation". The passionate, foolish old man, driven by lust and rage, calls up Hanrahan, "Old lecher with a love on every wind", can "mock Plotinus' thought/ And cry in Plato's teeth", submits to the Steinach operation, and writes the erotic poetry of his last years; but the seeker after wisdom who realizes that "That is no country for old men", that he is "a comfortable kind of old scarecrow", dragging "Decrepit age that has been tied to me/ As to a dog's tail...", realizes that he must "make" his soul.³⁰

²⁷W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 43.

²⁸W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 47.

²⁹W.B.Yeats, Poems, p. 139.

³⁰W.B.Yeats, Poems, pp. 222, 223, 217, 243, 218, 224.

In middle age Yeats's interest in heredity and eugenics set him thinking about the importance of sexual choice, and he writes in "If I were Four-and-Twenty":³¹

If...the family is the unit of social life, and the origin of civilisation which but exists to preserve it, and almost the sole cause of progress, it seems more natural than it did before that its ecstatic moment, the sexual choice of man and woman, should be the greater part of all poetry. A single wrong choice may destroy a family, dissipating its tradition or its biological force, and the great sculptors, painters, and poets are there that instinct may find its lamp.

The idea that painters, sculptors and poets provide the "lamp" for instinct is repeated in Last Poems, in, for example, such lines as:³²

That girls at puberty may find
The first Adam in their thought,
Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,
Keep those children out.

Yeats early learned that, perhaps because of his Yeats timidity and self-doubt, women were a better audience for his ideas than men:³³

I had various women friends on whom I would call towards five o'clock mainly to discuss my thoughts that I could not bring to a man without meeting some competing thought...

He continued, even after he had gained some of the Pollexfen self-confidence, to find in women a satisfying audience; his friendships from

³¹W.B.Yeats, Explorations, p. 274.

³²W.B.Yeats, "Long-legged Fly", Poems, p.382.

³³W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 102.

Katharine Tynan to Dorothy Wellesley testify to this. He did not like intellectual women, and like his father distrusted women who were too clever, who, as J.B. Yeats wrote, "established a record for being noisy and prancing",³⁴ who had "that kind of cleverness which draws all its ideas from the outside, not from within."³⁵ J.B. admired Isadora Duncan because she was "self-contained", and therefore could do and say "the spontaneous and the unsuspected" and never lapse into "chatter".³⁶ His son had an equal distaste for "clever" women, and particularly for women who had been ruined by higher education; he writes to Katharine Tynan as early as 1889:³⁷

What poor delusiveness is all this 'higher education of women.' Men have set up a great mill called examinations, to destroy the imagination. Why should women go through it, circumstance does not drive them? They come out with no repose, no peacefulness, their minds no longer quiet gardens full of secluded paths and umbrage-circled nooks, but loud as chaffering market places. Mrs. Todhunter is a great trouble mostly. She has been through the mill and has got the noisiest mind I know. She is always denying something.

Women had something more important to contribute to mankind; as he says many years later in the "Pages from a Diary Written in 1930": "The un-economic leisure of scholars, monks, and women gave us truth, sanctity,

³⁴J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 114.

³⁵J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 113.

³⁶J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 116.

³⁷W.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 123.

and manners."³⁸ And he prays that his daughter may be "chiefly learned"³⁹
in courtesy.

Something of his father's belief that true love accepts the weaknesses and flaws in the partner's personality is echoed in Yeats's idea that love creates a mask:⁴⁰

It seems to me that true love is a discipline, and it needs so much wisdom that the love of Solomon and Sheba must have lasted, for all the silence of the Scriptures. Each divines the secret self of the other, and refusing to believe in the mere daily self, creates a mirror where the lover or the beloved sees an image to copy in daily life; for love also creates the Mask.

For Yeats a woman's absorption in political opinion destroys an essential part of her nature; like Maud Gonne and Con Markiewicz, she disregards her beauty, and becomes shrill and vehement with hatred:⁴¹

...a raving autumn shears
Blossom from the summer's wreath;
.....
.....and she seems,
When withered old and skeleton-gaunt,
An image of such politics,

He prays that his daughter will not become such a revolutionary as Maud Gonne, opinionated, consumed by hatred:⁴²

An intellectual hatred is the worst,
So let her think opinions are accursed.
Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good
By quiet natures understood
For an old bellows full of angry wind?

³⁸W.B.Yeats, Explorations, p. 335.

³⁹W.B.Yeats, "A Prayer for My Daughter", Poems, p.212.

⁴⁰W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 313.

⁴¹W.B.Yeats, "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz", Poems, p.263.

⁴²W.B.Yeats, "A Prayer for My Daughter", Poems, p.213.

Great beauty has a destructive force: Helen and Deirdre, Maud
Gonne and Mary Hynes, the peasant beauty of Galway who drove men mad,
are symbols of the power of beauty to destroy:⁴³

For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,
Mournful that no new wonder may betide,
Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,
And Usna's children died.

And so he prays that his daughter may be granted beauty, but not beauty
"...to make a stranger's eye distraught, / Or hers before a looking-glass,"
since such women

Consider beauty a sufficient end,
Lose natural kindness and maybe
The heart-revealing intimacy
That chooses right, and never find a friend.⁴⁴

Although W.B. Yeats, since he had the Pollexfen emotional inten-
sity, and since the events of his life were so much more complicated, held
inevitably more complex views about women than his father, he was essen-
tially no more Bohemian than J.B. It is perhaps not fanciful to assume
that as a background of "his happier dreams...A small old house, wife,
daughter, son..."⁴⁵ were his father's attitude to marriage and his own
memories of that "Irish home" which his father described, with its warm
affection, its naturalness, and its constant talk.

⁴³W.B. Yeats, "The Rose of the World", Poems, p. 41

⁴⁴W.B. Yeats, "A Prayer for My Daughter", Poems, p. 212.

⁴⁵W.B. Yeats, "What Then?", Poems, p. 347.

CHAPTER IV

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,¹
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

False education is like the pressure which
the Chinese mother applies to the feet of
her infant. True education liberates...man
is naturally a singing bird...True education
would liberate him so that he could sing in
the open sky of knowledge and power and
desire.²

W.B. Yeats and his father both received most of their early education in England; for both it strengthened their Irishness and confirmed their dislike of the English; for W.B. Yeats the knowledge that he was the son of an artist was an additional factor in his sense of separation from his fellows. W.B. Yeats, perhaps because his was a poor school and because his attendance was sporadic, seems to have retained very little of what he learned; he makes several references to his having forgotten most of his Latin and Greek. In fact, it can be said that W.B.'s education was largely the result of his father's teaching through conversation, discussion, and the reading aloud of the great poets and dramatists. His father, who learned through fear of the cane, fared somewhat better, and proceeded to Trinity College Dublin. In Early Memories he writes of the

¹W.B. Yeats, "Among School Children", Poems, pp. 244-5.

²J.B. Yeats, Essays Irish and American, p. 57.

teaching of the classics:³

In those days the classics were taught after the crudest methods. Without the constant menace of the cane no healthy minded boy would have faced the difficulties of our task.

But in his letters he deplores, rather inconsistently, the lack of thoroughness in American education:⁴

The American system of education in their high-class schools is destructive of mental concentration - nothing is thoroughly taught. In my day we learned nothing except Latin and Greek, but we learned that in a very minute way, undergoing all sorts of moral and physical tortures, the lessons made as difficult as possible.

He felt that boarding-schools, since discipline was all external, encouraged the development of a moral void:⁵

A boarding-school develops selfishness. Every boy for himself. Does one acquire self-control? In such a school as mine the discipline from without was too searching and too constant for that other discipline from within to have a chance. When I left that school for good, I felt myself to be empty of morals. There was a void within. The outer control had gone and it was a long time before the inner control grew up to take its place. My legacy from that school was a vivid and perfectly unconscious selfishness. From my short, far separated, loving holidays I carried away memories of affection and what it might be for me. And I think my history ever since has been the conflict between these two principles.

³J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p. 31.

⁴J.B.Yeats, Letters, p.156.

⁵J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p.34.

On the other hand, happiness for J.B. meant growth, and part of growth was the discovery of the joy of solitude, even through pain. He describes in one of his letters the experience of a small boy at a boarding-school who has been punished and to solace his misery turns his thoughts elsewhere, to his home or to something outside himself:⁶

...he may even look up at the blue sky and for the first time in his life hear the birds singing in the hedges. By this shock and by this suffering he has discovered spiritual things and his real education has begun, and he makes another discovery which perhaps puzzles him as much as doubtless it would his friends - He wants to be by himself. Trying to get rid of his misery he makes this momentous discovery.

For the artist (and J.B. includes in the term all creative artists, whether poets, painters, musicians or sculptors), there must be idleness and freedom to develop: what he calls "abandon, and a world of dreaming and waiting and passionate meditation."⁷ This is impossible if material goals are set up as the end of education; we are reminded of his dictum that a "gentleman is such, simply because he has not the doctrine of getting on and the habit of it."⁸

We have seen how J.B. constantly interfered in his son's education and some of his views were to be remembered and repeated years later, when W.B. Yeats was concerned with education in Ireland and spoke in the Irish Senate, and even later when his son Michael was at school. J.B. Yeats,

⁶J.B. Yeats, Further Letters of John Butler Yeats, p. 63.

⁷J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 121.

⁸J.B. Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p. 52.

for example, thought that the teaching of history and geography was useless and unnecessary; and he dogmatically refuted the idea that Euclid served any purpose, as his son tells us in his Autobiography:⁹

"Geography should never be taught...It is not a training for the mind. You will pick up all that you need, in your general reading." And if it was a history lesson, he would say just the same, and "Euclid", he would say, "is too easy. It comes naturally to the literary imagination. The old idea, that it is a good training for the mind, was long ago refuted."

In 1930 we find W.B.Yeats saying the same thing in "A Letter to Michael's Schoolmaster":¹⁰

Do not teach him one word of geography. He has lived on the Alps, crossed a number of rivers and when he is fifteen I shall urge him to climb the Sugar Loaf. Do not teach him a word of history. I shall take him to Shakespeare's history plays, if a commercialised theatre permit, and give him all the historical novels of Dumas, and if he cannot pick up the rest he is a fool.

Anything that tended to destroy a child's sincerity - one of the cardinal virtues for J.B.Yeats - also roused him to interfere; thus, he refused to let his son write an essay on the topic "Men may rise on the stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things" because, he said,¹¹

"That is the way boys are made insincere and false to themselves. Ideals make the blood thin, and take the human nature out of people."

⁹ W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 36.

¹⁰ W.B.Yeats, Explorations, p. 321.

¹¹ W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 37.

W.B. was told to write instead on "To thine own self be true...". It was not surprising that shortly after he had finished his schooling, W.B. should say to a young schoolmaster:¹²

I know you will defend the ordinary system of education by saying that it strengthens the will, but I am convinced that it only seems to do so because it weakens the impulses.

When Yeats was writing his Autobiography, he said that he believed then all that his father had said on education to be right, but he later changed his mind about the value of Latin when he began to see the Romans as sharing in the materialism and decadence which he found in modern England. He instructs Michael's schoolmaster:¹³

Do not teach him one word of Latin. The Roman people were the classic decadence, their literature form without matter. They destroyed Milton, the French seventeenth and our own eighteenth century, and our schoolmasters even today read Greek with Latin eyes.

Greece and the Greeks were another matter. His father had preferred Greece to Rome, and had once written: "I call myself a Greek, because I will not pretend to know what I do not know, and because I reject a faith which is not true to fact."¹⁴ W.B. would have his son learn Greek, though not by orthodox methods: he should plunge at once into the Odyssey, he advises Michael's schoolmaster, and "Grammar should come when the need comes."

Science, which was the one thing W.B. Yeats was really interested in as a high-school student, by 1930 was relegated with Latin to the category of

¹²W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 62.

¹³W.B. Yeats, Explorations, p. 321.

¹⁴J.B. Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p. 16.

non-essentials; in the same "Letter" he says of science that his son can "get all he wants in the newspapers and in any case it is no job for a gentleman." But mathematics remained, partly perhaps because of the family memory of that Tom Yeats who had never been beaten at mathematics at Trinity College, although this is not the reason Yeats gives:¹⁵

Teach him mathematics as thoroughly as his capacity permits. I know that Bertrand Russell must, seeing that he is such a featherhead, be wrong about everything, but as I have no mathematics I cannot prove it. I do not want my son to be as helpless.

W.B.Yeats was to think about education all his life, and to add to his father's views his own knowledge of the Montessori method, the philosophy of Giovanni Gentile, and the Italian experiments; education was to become part of his Irish Nationalism, but in essentials he did not differ from the precepts absorbed in his younger days. We find him in 1892 writing an article for The Boston Pilot and musing on the aims of education as he sits in the National Library surrounded by students studying for examinations:¹⁶

On all sides men are studying the things that are to get them bodily food, but no man among them is searching for the imaginative and spiritual food to be got out of great literature.

Nobody...ever seems to do any disinterested reading in this library, or indeed anywhere else in Ireland. Every man here is grinding at the mill wherein he grinds all things into pounds and shillings, and but few of them will he get when all is done.

¹⁵W.B.Yeats, Explorations, p. 321.

¹⁶W.B.Yeats, Letters to the New Island, pp. 154-5.

Again, he describes with approval in another article written in 1889 a new type of school where "each boy will be educated not according to any hard and fast rule or system, forced on all as in other schools, but according to the tendencies he shows, whether they be to follow the plow or paint pictures, to train horses or write histories."¹⁷

The education of the Irish people by means of great literature, by a theatre for poetic drama, and by a knowledge of their own folklore and history, particularly the legends and myths of the heroic age, formed the basis of Yeats's dream of the revival of the arts in Ireland. The first two owed much to his father's influence, not only to his views on education in general, but to J.B.'s reading and discussion of the great poets and dramatists with his son. W.B.'s dream of a national theatre where poetic drama would be supreme yielded before the popularity of realistic prose drama until in 1916 he wrote: "In the studio and in the drawing-room we can find a true theatre of beauty"; and he claimed to have "invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or Press to pay its way - an aristocratic form."¹⁸ The roots of this form of drama and Yeats's "preoccupation with the theatre, with an attempt to free it from commercialism", went back, as Horace Reynolds has shown, much earlier than Ezra Pound's translation of the Noh plays;¹⁹ as Yeats says,²⁰ the roots went back to the Bedford Park days and the little

¹⁷W.B.Yeats, Letters to the New Island, pp. 99-100.

¹⁸W.B.Yeats, Essays and Introductions, pp. 228, 221.

¹⁹W.B.Yeats, Letters to the New Island, p. 51.

²⁰W.B.Yeats, Letters to the New Island, p. vii.

clubhouse theatre where Dr. John Todhunter's poetic play, A Sicilian Idyll, was performed. His ideas about the drama at this time were derived from his father, and his model was the Elizabethan drama, not the contemporary, commercialized theatre. Both his view that a "fine poetic ...drama...lifts us into a world of knowledge and beauty and serenity" and his later view of poetic drama as something for an exclusive, small audience are anticipated in his comments on the performance he reviewed for The Boston Pilot in 1890:²¹

As the Mohammedan leaves his shoes outside the mosque, so we leave our selfhood behind before we enter the impersonal temple of art. We come from it with renewed insight, and with our ideals and our belief in happiness and goodness stronger than before.

In this same review his later disillusionment about poetic drama's ever becoming an influential part of the national revival is anticipated in his statement that it "demands so much love of beauty and austere emotion that it finds uncertain footing on the stage at best."

Yeats became an Irish Senator in 1922, one of three Senators appointed to advise the new Free State government on such matters as education, literature and the arts. As Donald Pearce says, his "nationalism was a lifelong passion...But he knew what political revolutionaries are less apt than poets to know or understand - that unity without culture is valueless, or even vicious."²² He brought to his new work on behalf of

²¹W.B.Yeats, Letters to the New Island, p. 113.

²²W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, p. 15.

Ireland his earlier convictions about the value of great literature and of Irish history and mythology and his interest in all the arts. He was largely responsible, as Chairman of the Coinage Committee, in providing Ireland with what is generally conceded to be the most beautiful coinage of any modern nation; as Chairman of the Irish Manuscript Committee, he pressed for the endowment of scholarly work in editing and translating Gaelic manuscripts. As he said,²³

I think it is of great importance to set before our own people a task which they will feel naturally inclined to undertake. It is a great thing, when you find people wanting to learn anything, that you should encourage them to learn that, and not something else that they do not want to learn.

He pleaded for the encouragement of the arts in Ireland and for "some unified system of teaching which will include such institutions as the School of Art and the schools of the country"; good taste should be taught and art teaching brought into relationship to industry.²⁴ His interest extended to crafts such as lace-making and stained glass, where he tried to impress upon his hearers the importance of good design instead of the shoddy, commercialized, sentimental work that was available.

In his speeches on education he is eloquent on the need for proper physical conditions in the schools and the right of the child to clean, sanitary buildings: the government "should not ask the school children to enter those buildings until they are certain that those

²³W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, p. 44.

²⁴W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, pp. 63-4.

buildings are fit to receive the children." He deplores "stupid, ill-trained" teachers, and an "ill-planned system", and claims that to spend all day in school under such conditions "is less good for that child than that the child should be running through the fields and learning nothing."²⁵ The general principle of education which he enunciates, although he phrases it differently, is very close to his father's view of education as free, uninhibited growth: "I would like to suggest another principle, that the child itself must be the end in education."²⁶ Not any religious system, as had been the case in the past, nor, as in the modern world, the state or the nation, should be more important than the child. He cites the United States as an example of the latter perversion of the true end of education:²⁷

I have seen education unified in America,
so that the child is sacrificed to that
of unified Americanism, and the human mind
is codified.

In a speech made to the Irish Literary Society in 1925, he carries his ideas into the actual curriculum. Until the age of ten, a child is "content with a wild old tale", but after that he must have "something with more of the problems of life in it." In literature children should "begin with their own, and then pass on to the world and the classics of the world." His father's catholic taste in literature is reflected in his statement that he "would like to see the great classics, especially

²⁵W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, p.110.

²⁶W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, p.111.

²⁷W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, p.111.

of the Catholic Latin nations, translated into Gaelic."²⁸ The teaching of geography should begin with the locality in which the child lives, history should deal with local monuments, arithmetic should begin by counting the school chairs, and religion by learning about the local saints. He quotes his father in support of this principle:²⁹

This is but carrying into education principles a group of artists, my father among them, advocated in art teaching. These artists have said: "Do not put scholars to draw from Greek or Roman casts until they have first drawn from life; only when they have drawn from life can they understand the cast." That which the child sees - the school - the district - and to a lesser degree the nation - is like the living body: distant countries and everything the child can only read of is like the cold Roman or Greek cast.

The immature imagination should be fed on folk-lore, but the college student should study Berkeley and Burke:³⁰

Feed the immature imagination upon that old folk life, and the mature intellect upon Berkeley and the great modern idealist philosophy created by his influence, upon Burke who restored to political thought its sense of history, and Ireland is reborn, potent, armed and wise.

The proper remedy for the violent and anarchic nature of children is not to teach "Civic Duty", but to teach "religion, civic duty and history as all but inseparable." Religion, whether Catholic or Protestant,

²⁸W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, p. 170.

²⁹W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, p. 171.

³⁰W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, p. 172.

should be "so taught that it permeate the whole school life...":³¹

Every child in growing from infancy to maturity should pass in imagination through the history of its own race and through something of the history of the world, and the most powerful part in that history is played by religion. Let the child go its own way when maturity comes, but it is our business that it has something of that whole inheritance, and not as a mere thought, an abstract thing like those Graeco-Roman casts upon the shelves in the art-schools, but as part of its emotional life.

Although his basic views about education as a process of free and unrestricted growth came from his father's teaching and discussion, Yeats found these views confirmed later by his knowledge of the Montessori method, and in the philosophy of Giovanni Gentile and the educational system of Italy he saw the type of education which he thought would foster in Ireland that "faith both in the richness of its soil and the richness of its intellect..." and would turn out, not simply clerks, but "efficient men and women who can manage to do all the work of the Nation."³² From Gentile comes the theory of education as a correlation of all subjects: "Indeed, the whole curriculum of a school should be as it were one lesson and not a mass of unrelated topics."³³

In 1926 Yeats visited, in the course of his investigation of Irish schools for the Senate, a convent school in Waterford, where the

³¹W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, pp.173-4.

³²W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, p.114.

³³W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, p.173.

Montessori method for young children had been inaugurated by the Mother Superior in 1920. Torchiana thus describes the education of the children:³⁴

Here, in addition to the Montessori emphasis on spontaneity and a training of the senses to prepare for and reinforce a child's first intellectual ventures, each child was encouraged to read his own choice in books, then allowed to narrate his reading, to write about it - or even to make a poem from his impressions.

The visit was frequently referred to later in Yeats's speeches and essays, but its impressions were caught up and crystallized in his great poem, "Among School Children", where his thoughts about a unified form of education become part of his theory of "Unity of Being" and are immortalized in the many-faceted symbol of the chestnut tree, the "great-rooted blossomer". Growth, which his father had called "happiness", is spontaneous, yet disciplined and unified; it includes both the roots in the soil and the branches in the air, both sense and spirit; and, as Torchiana in his brilliant essay on the poem asserts, such unity of study "provides a civic view of the nation where past, present and future are one much in the same way. that bole (past), leaf (present) and blossom (future) merge in a chestnut tree."³⁵

"John Eglinton", when writing of Yeats as a schoolboy in his Dublin High School, had spoken of his father "who had applied certain educational principles to his children's upbringing, of which spontaneous

³⁴Donald T. Torchiana, "'Among School Children' and the Education of the Irish Spirit", in In Excited Reverie, edited by Jeffares and Cross, pp.123-150.

³⁵Jeffares, In Excited Reverie, p. 146.

development was the essential..."³⁶ The sixty-year-old Senator added to and deepened his father's views, but the basic idea of spontaneous growth, of education as a process of becoming, remained unchanged.

³⁶Quoted by Torchiana in In Excited Reverie, p. 149.

CHAPTER V

Neither J.B. Yeats nor his son ever thought of Englishmen as anything but foreigners, and this feeling was deepened by the fact that both attended English schools, an experience which made them even more aware of their alienation and of their Irishness. As a boy W.B. "did not think English people intelligent or well-behaved unless they were artists". His prejudice had been strengthened by his holidays in Sligo:

Every one I knew well in Sligo despised Nationalists and Catholics, but all disliked England with a prejudice that had come down perhaps from the days of the Irish Parliament. I knew stories to the discredit of England, and took them all seriously.

His mother pointed out English people "kissing at railway stations, and taught me to feel disgust at their lack of reserve", while his father "explained that an Englishman generally believed that his private affairs did him credit, while an Irishman, being poor and probably in debt, had no such confidence."¹ One of the human traits which J.B. Yeats disliked most intensely was self-complacency, and he found it in the English in abundance.

J.B. Yeats had all his life a lively interest in the characteristics of different nationalities, and his writings abound in discussions of the English, the French, the Irish, and the Americans. In an essay "Why the Englishman is Happy", he contrasts the methods of English and

¹W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 21.

French in man's "long quest for self-knowledge and self-fulfilment"². While the French have forgotten themselves in "great ideas, great causes, great enthusiasms, in passionate love or humanitarianism, or even in the anger of battle", the English have cared only for the individual man, for "his spirit, his mind, his body, his temporal and eternal welfare." The English have been able to develop as individuals because of their freedom and their geographic isolation; they have not for centuries been subjected either to military or ecclesiastical despotism. Hence the French genius in literature as in life is "social and sympathetic and propagandist" and finds its highest expression in prose, while the English, given to "self-contemplation in its various forms of self-complacency, self-examination, self-condemnation, and self-exultation", write the greatest poetry. England produces personalities, individuals, egotists; and a personality

cannot explain itself or account for itself; it can only cure its ache and soothe its irritability by the music...of artistic creation. French art and literature concern themselves with ideas, and their effort is to make these brilliant, orderly and specious, using the emphasis and animation and sonorosity of art rather than its deeper music. So that in France they watch for a distinguished intellect, while in England we look for an individuality that is at once powerful, strange, and intimate, its expression intelligible only to those who have explored the farthest recesses of consciousness.³

Again, in a letter, he comments on the English distrust of ideas and reason, and says that while for the French and the Americans liberty is

²J.B.Yeats, Essays Irish and American, pp.37-50.

³J.B.Yeats, Essays Irish and American, p.44.

often an idea or theory, for the English it is "the feeling in his blood and in his bones." Nations which follow reason produce poetry which is "the lean music of argument and rhetoric." The Englishman follows imagination "which is the voice of essential longing, so that his poetry,...is true poetry,...English poetry is the human cry, it explains nothing, since to explain is to weaken, and that is not its purpose."⁴

England, however, contains men other than poets: she also abounds in "men who are selfish and arrogant and hypocritical and in fact in every form of the unamiable." But since "these very qualities generate the right atmosphere, a poet born in England inherits for himself the perfect solitude of self-isolation".⁵

Modern England where materialism was "triumphant crowned and sovereign - glorious in ancient memories and in great aristocracies well-knit and colossal without an idea anywhere to disturb the contours"⁶ could provide empire-builders, but for J.B.Yeats the production of men of "character" (which he equates with the predominance of will power) meant "too much strenuousness, too much efficiency" and consequently "no chance for the poor fine arts or for literature".⁷ The English poets whom he dislikes made their wills servants of humanity:⁸

Wordsworth to my mind was a sort of servile poet enforcing always will power. Browning who was only interested in conduct, much the same, and Shelley suffered also, wasting himself in conflict with the servitude

⁴J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, pp.3-4.

⁵J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.14.

⁶J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 156.

⁷J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 124.

⁸J.B.Yeats, Letters, pp. 124-5.

to which Wordsworth complacently yielded... Had Shakespeare possessed a strong will or an admiration for it he would have gone over like Browning and Wordsworth to the side of the authorities and the preceptors instead of remaining as he did among aristocratic 'publicans and sinners'.

J.B.Yeats in his comments on nationalities often gives the impression of being a detached and curious observer, but W.B.Yeats was much more deeply involved with enemies both in England and Ireland, and his views are consequently more vehement, more impassioned and frequently more bitter. English materialism and the commercialization of life, particularly by newspapers, critics and the modern theatre, were his frequent targets. Ireland had escaped the worst effects of the Industrial Revolution, but the Garden of modern England died when "Locke sank into a swoon" and "God took the spinning-jenny/ Out of his side."⁹ But, as he wrote Lady Gerald Wellesley, he could not hate England: "How can I hate England, owing what I do to Shakespeare, Blake & Morris. England is the only country I cannot hate."¹⁰

J.B.Yeats was a Nationalist and a Home-ruler, and a firm believer in the virtues of the Irish people, but he took no delight in politics, and he detested violence. He saw the Irish as lacking the "modern Englishman's will power", but "they have the ancient Elizabethan Englishman's abundance and variety of human nature and therefore their

⁹W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.240.

¹⁰W.B.Yeats, Letters on Poetry from W.B.Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley, p.111.

initiative and charm...".¹¹ The Irish, he says again, "are still medieval, and think that how to live is more important than how to get a living." Because they are "a people of leisure", they are "like people sitting at a play" who "watch the game of life and enjoy their neighbours...". It is because of this enjoyment that Ireland has produced "the ablest dramatists of latter-day England...".¹²

He could laugh at the expense of the Irish, as when he says that "A perfectly disinterested, an absolutely unselfish love of making mischief, mischief for its own dear sake, is an Irish characteristic."¹³ He disliked both extremes of religion in Ireland: the Ulster variety of Protestantism, which he said was, like the east wind, "good for neither man nor beast";¹⁴ and the bigotry, ignorance and narrowness of much of the Irish Roman Catholic Church. He saw the persecution of Synge as having its roots in intellectual hatred, and remarked to Quinn that "Nothing is ever persecuted but the intellect, though it is never persecuted under its own name."¹⁵

W.B.Yeats shared many of his father's opinions about Ireland, but his relationship with his country was infinitely more complex and more passionate than his father's, so involved was he throughout his life with actual events and movements in Ireland. The whole story is too well

¹¹J.B.Yeats, Letters, pp.124-5.

¹²J.B.Yeats, Essays Irish and American, pp.53-4.

¹³J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.60.

¹⁴J.B.Yeats, Early Memories, p. 15.

¹⁵Reid, The Man from New York, p. 49.

known to be retold here; his feeling for Ireland was very like Swift's, compounded of love and hate. Ireland gave him by far the greatest part of the material for his poems, plays, and stories; it was the object of his early nationalist aspirations and idealistic dreams of a renaissance of literary and artistic life. On the other hand, his "fool-driven land" brought him much bitterness through the controversies over The Countess Cathleen, The Playboy of the Western World, and The Plough and the Stars; in his struggles on behalf of the National Theatre, and for the Municipal Gallery and Hugh Lane's pictures; in the violence of the Civil War and the destruction of the great houses. He could write in "Easter 1916" that "A terrible beauty is born", and inveigh in "The Leaders of the Crowd"¹⁶ against those who

...must to keep their certainty accuse
 All that are different of a base intent;
 Pull down established honour; hawk for news
 Whatever their loose fantasy invent
 And murmur it with bated breath, as though
 The abounding gutter had been Helicon
 Or calumny a song.

Yet his faith in Ireland, and even in a sense his optimism, survived all the disillusionment and bitterness, so that at the end he could declare his pride in the Anglo-Protestant Ireland that had become for him a symbol of all that was greatest in Irish thought:¹⁷

It is time that I wrote my will;
 I choose upstanding men
 That climb the streams until
 The fountain leap, and at dawn
 Drop their cast at the side
 Of dripping stone; I declare

¹⁶W.B.Yeats, Poems, pp.203, 207.

¹⁷W.B.Yeats, "The Tower", Poems, pp.222-3.

They shall inherit my pride,
 The pride of people that were
 Bound neither to Cause nor to State,
 Neither to slaves that were spat on,
 Nor to the tyrants that spat,
 The people of Burke and of Grattan
 That gave, though free to refuse -...

And in "Under Ben Bulbin", written just before he died, he combines with his faith in Ireland the other love, his art, which all his life took pride of place, even before Ireland:¹⁸

Irish poets, learn your trade,
 Sing whatever is well made,

 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.

The third country concerning which W.B.Yeats and his father shared much the same views was the United States. At first J.B.Yeats had found it delightful, and New York a great fair where at any moment he might win a prize; and his attitude remained inconsistent, varying with his financial state. He admired the kindness, hospitality and generosity of many Americans and exempted from his strictures many friends such as John

¹⁸W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.400.

Quinn, just as he had made exceptions of Englishmen such as York Powell. He could be amusing about the modern American woman, and the ill-mannered American children, but the thing which concerned him most was the working of democracy. Americans, he said, "dissipate their energies in a world of forever shifting ideals and opinions"; they make art and poetry impossible:¹⁹

No American of those I have met or heard has ever felt the inward and innermost essence of poetry, because it is not among the American opportunities to live the solitary life, they all frequent the highways and high roads. It is implicitly and even explicitly an offence to steal away into by-ways and thickets.

The American belief in happiness is as inimical to the arts as their gregariousness; their minds remain prosaic because "they believe in happiness and pursue it; whereas the poetical mind believes in ecstasy, and knows that there cannot be ecstasy without pain: pain and ecstasy are the poetical gospel."²⁰ The democrat's pursuit of ideas leads only to didacticism and rhetoric, not to poetry:²¹

The Democrat is proud of his reasoning power and rightly so, and yet it is all he has got - when he attempts poetry he only succeeds in being didactic and eloquent, and eloquent of what? Duty and morality and upliftment - matters which, however valuable, are not poetry...

He found America full of the "half-educated"; an educated man, he said,

¹⁹J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, pp.17,19.

²⁰J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.31.

²¹J.B.Yeats, Letters, p.170.

was one "who has acquired the habit of intellectual disinterestedness",²²
 Although he had admired Whitman in his younger days, he came to believe,
 in America, that Whitman had provided, because he was "a man purely emotion-
 al", a dangerous image for the Americans, who admired his poetry "with its
 pleasant chanting of (mostly lies) brotherly love and of the grandeur of
 American democracy."²³ American democracy, for J.B.Yeats, was too apt to
 force the individual into a mould, to make him into "a mere item in the
 national totality".²⁴

W.B.Yeats, though he found in the United States on his first
 visit "charming people and charming houses",²⁵ later shared fully his
 father's view that America had made the mistake "of standardizing life
 ...in interest of democracy...but for the ultimate gain of a sterile
 devil." In America now "all was type".²⁶

J.B.Yeats's dislike of democracy is partly accounted for by the
 fact that he was aristocratic by nature; he uses the word "gentleman"
 without self-consciousness and without any class consciousness or snobbery;
 there is no hint of the strain which is sometimes evident in his son's
 cult of the great house and his interest in his ancestors. For J.B.
 a gentleman, as he said many times, was not concerned with "getting on",
 a man "enjoying a partial or complete pecuniary independence so that he

²²Reid, The Man from New York, p. 267.

²³Reid, The Man from New York, pp.312, 313.

²⁴Reid, The Man from New York, p. 313.

²⁵W.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 418.

²⁶W.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 661.

need not regard money with a hungry eye."²⁷ The artist "must always be an aristocrat and disdain the street. I measure a people not by its number or its amount of well-being but by the number of its aristocrats."²⁸ The man of letters is the "best specimen, because most characteristic" of the class of gentleman who have been "taught the value of idleness and how to use it", and J.B. would see this class "flourish and multiply everywhere under the protection of civilisation."²⁹ Years later W.B. Yeats echoed his father's words in a Senate speech, when he said:³⁰

This country will not always be an uncomfortable place for a country gentleman to live in, and it is most important that we should keep in this country a certain leisured class...I am of the opinion of the ancient Jewish book which says "there is no wisdom without leisure."

Similarly J.B.Yeats's statement that "...a poor peasant and a true artist are gentlemen...The contest is not against material things, but between those who want to get on and those who don't want to get on, having other important things to attend to",³¹ is reflected in W.B.'s "Dream of the noble and the beggar-man"³² and his growing belief that all that was best in Ireland was to be found among peasants or in the great houses, and most certainly not among those who "fumble in a greasy till".³³

²⁷J.B.Yeats, Further Letters of John Butler Yeats, p. 67.

²⁸J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p. 50.

²⁹J.B.Yeats, Further Letters of John Butler Yeats, pp.67, 69.

³⁰W.B.Yeats, The Senate Speeches of W.B.Yeats, pp.38-9.

³¹J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.52.

³²W.B.Yeats, "The Municipal Gallery Revisited", Poems, p.369.

³³W.B.Yeats, "September 1913", Poems, p. 120.

C H A P T E R VI

When J.B.Yeats decided to give up law for a career as a painter, he took a step which was to influence in several ways the career of his son. In the first place, art took the place of religion for J.B.Yeats, and every encouragement was given to W.B. when he started to write. His father not only discussed and criticized his work with him, but also actively promoted his career; we know that he showed some manuscript verses of his son to Edward Dowden. A letter written in 1884 shows his faith in his son's ability, a faith tempered by a certain reservation:¹

Of course I never dreamed of publishing the effort of a youth of eighteen. The only passage in it which seems to me finally to decide the question as to his poetic faculty is the dialogue between Time and the Queen. There was evidence in it of some power (however rudimentary) of thinking - as if some day he might have something to tell. I tell him prose and verse are alike in one thing - the best is that to which went the hardest thoughts. This is also the secret of originality, also the secret of sincerity - so far I have his confidence - that he is a poet I have long believed - where he may rank is another matter. That his doubt may have a chance of resolving itself I favour his wish to be an artist - his bad metres arise very much from his composing in a loud voice, manipulating of course the quantities to his own taste.

¹Jeffares, W.B.Yeats, p.23.

When Mosada appeared in The Dublin University Review in June 1886, J.B.Yeats apparently felt that his son's work was now worthy of a larger audience, and he had it published, with his own portrait of the author as a frontispiece. When Gerard Manley Hopkins called on J.B. in the late autumn of 1886, he was presented with a copy of W.B. Yeats's first book, a gesture which he found somewhat embarrassing. J.B. had made the presentation "with some emphasis of manner" and Hopkins went on to remark in a letter to Patmore: "For a young man's pamphlet this was something too much; but you will understand a father's feeling."²

Because his father considered dramatic poetry superior to every other kind, W.B.'s earliest work was dramatic in form, but eventually he went his own way and made the discovery that "Personal utterance... could be as fine an escape from rhetoric and abstraction as drama itself", and he told his father that "We should write out our own thoughts in as nearly as possible the language we thought them in, as though in a letter to an intimate friend." His father disagreed, and told him that "personal utterance was only egotism".³ Whichever one was right, W.B.Yeats's later poetry, as C. Day Lewis has said, was both highly personal and intensely dramatic.⁴ The dramatic element was present from the beginning; even as early as The Wanderings of Oisín and The Shadowy Waters he showed that he could write effective dramatic dialogue, but

²Gordon, W.B.Yeats - Images of a Poet, p. 7.

³W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 68.

⁴Gwynn, Scattering Branches, p. 168.

years of writing for the Abbey Theatre and of actually working with stage productions brought a tautness and economy to his dialogue not evident in the earlier work. Dialogue, moreover, was not confined to his plays; it is an important element in many of his greatest lyric poems, especially in his later work. Many of his most personal and most philosophical poems take the form either of a dramatic monologue or of a dialogue: one has only to think of "Sailing to Byzantium", "The Tower", "Vacillation", "Michael Robartes and the Dancer", "Ego Dominus Tuus", among many possible examples.

Another dramatic element in his lyric poetry is the setting of a scene; many of his poems create immediately in the reader's imagination a stage-setting and leave the impression of a miniature drama: for example, "Ancestral Houses" and "The Road at My Door" from "Meditations in Time of Civil War", "Leda and the Swan", "Among School Children", "All Souls' Night" and "Upon a Dying Lady". Again, in the creation of character his work is intensely dramatic, not only in mythological characters such as Cuchulain and Fergus, but in his later creations such as Crazy Jane and Tom the Lunatic. And finally, his use of a form which is essentially dramatic, the ballad, shows how close his poetry always is to drama.

No matter how strong the dramatic element, however, the roots of his poetry are always in "Heart-mysteries"⁵ His poetry was made out of the stuff of his own life: specific events, passions, love and despair, the search for "Unity of Being", and the delving into the mystery of life

⁵W.B. Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion", Poems, p.392.

after death. He himself is present in all his work, whether drama or lyric poetry, and often unlikely characters such as Crazy Jane, Tom the Lunatic or the woman in "A Woman Young and Old" speak his own thoughts, as when Tom the Lunatic sings:⁶

'Whatever stands in field or flood,
Bird, beast, fish or man,
Mare or stallion, cock or hen,
Stands in God's unchanging eye
In all the vigour of its blood;
In that faith I live or die.'

Another way in which J.B. Yeats influenced his son's career was by his active discouragement of the dissipation of his talents in any work which did not interest him, or which was undertaken simply for gain. J.B. cared nothing for money, and had urged his son repeatedly "never to think of the future or of any practical result."⁷ Even when the family were very poor and his father's prospects gloomy, J.B.'s attitude did not change. W.B. Yeats tells the story:⁸

I was greatly troubled because I was making no money. I should have gone to the Art School but with my memory of the Dublin Art School put off the days. I wanted to do something that would bring in money at once for my people were poor. I saw my father sometimes sitting over the fire in great gloom, and yet I had no money-making faculty. Our neighbour York Powell at last offered to recommend me for the sub-editorship of, I think, the Manchester Courier. I took some days to think it over. It meant an immediate income but

⁶W.B. Yeats, "Tom the Lunatic", Poems, p. 305.

⁷W.B. Yeats, Autobiography, p. 59.

⁸Jeffares, W.B. Yeats, p. 306, note 21.

it was an unknown paper. At last I told my father that I could not accept and he said "You have taken a great weight off my mind".

It was a lesson well learned: as Stephen Gwynn has said, Yeats was the servant of his art always, and never, when he had achieved a reputation, turned that reputation into easy cash.⁹

Another effect of J.B.Yeats's choice of a career was that in Dublin and more particularly in London, his son was introduced to his friends - professors, writers and artists - some of whom were to influence him considerably, and many of whose personalities he was later to muse upon and incorporate into his Autobiography. J.B.Yeats in the early period of his career, when he was studying at Heatherley's, had been a Pre-Raphaelite painter, and he and three other men (J.T.Nettleship, Edwin J. Ellis and George Wilson) had banded together to form a "Brotherhood". They were, like the original Pre-Raphaelites, both painters and writers: in 1868 Nettleship published his Essays on Robert Browning's Poetry, and Ellis was a poet. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, they illustrated the poetry of others, and admired the same poets - Shakespeare, Blake, Shelley, Keats.¹⁰ When J.B.Yeats and his family returned to London in 1887, the old association was taken up again by the survivors of the group (Wilson died in 1890), and to their number was added Dr. John Todhunter, a younger man but a friend and patron. But by then the group had changed; even in earlier years they were, W.B.Yeats says,

⁹Gwynn, Scattering Branches, p. 6.

¹⁰Gordon, W.B.Yeats - Images of a Poet, p. 92.

Pre-Raphaelites who had lost their confidence.¹¹ J.B. had already changed his style before he left Dublin, and had begun to paint in a style which was a variation of Impressionism, a kind of scientific realism which his son, who was to remain Pre-Raphaelite in his taste in art, disliked intensely. His father would say "I must paint what I see in front of me. Of course I shall really paint something different because my nature will come in unconsciously", but his son would be miserable, believing "that only beautiful things should be painted, and that only ancient things and the stuff of dreams were beautiful".¹²

In London Nettleship was painting enormous lions in their natural habitat, and J.B.Yeats his portraits. W.B.Yeats, as Ian Gordon has said, found "in conversation and painting at Bedford Park what he most hated."¹³ He had turned away from his earlier interest in science, and now he turned against this "modern realism". Henceforth he would list with Huxley and Tyndall the names of two French painters of the period, now practically unknown, which were always on the lips of his father and his friends - Bastien-Lepage and Carolus Duran - as typical of the kind of scientific realism he despised. Moreover, as a group this rather sad little band of older men, all semi-failures, not only provided W.B.Yeats with a sounding-board for his own maturing ideas about art, but also furnished him with an early illustration, pathetic rather than tragic, of the theme he was to explore in "The Tragic Generation": the failure of young men such as Johnson and Dowson whose fragmented lives were lived in alienation from their own age.

As individuals his father's friends also influenced Yeats in

¹¹W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 28.

¹²W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 54.

¹³Gordon, W.B.Yeats - Images of a Poet, p. 93.

certain positive ways. He discovered Nettleship's earlier symbolic pencil drawings, inspired by Blake; and Ellis, who had never abandoned his earlier Pre-Raphaelite enthusiasms, especially that for Blake, was to become a member of the Rhymers' Club in 1891 and to collaborate with Yeats on the edition of Blake which appeared in 1893. As Gordon says, "It was in this circle and at this time that the roads were laid that led to W.B.Yeats's continuing concern with Blake: one of the threads that runs right through his work."¹⁴

Although Yeats disliked this English variety of Impressionism, he had, later in life, kinder words to say of French Impressionism as a whole. While he refers to Monet's "almost scientific studies" in "The Bounty of Sweden", he does say of French Impressionism that it provided an infinitely adaptable method of painting "at a moment when all seemed sunk in convention"; he continues: "It has suddenly taught us to see and feel, as everybody that wills can see and feel, all those things that are as wholesome as rain and sunlight, to take into our hearts with an almost mystical emotion whatsoever happens without forethought or premeditation."¹⁵ But, he claims, one Impressionist can often be mistaken for another, whereas the artists who meant most to him all his life, symbolic artists, "have imitators, but create no universal language. Administrators of tradition, they seem to copy everything, but in reality copy nothing, and not one of them can be mistaken for another..." They are

¹⁴Gordon, W.B.Yeats - Images of a Poet, p. 92.

¹⁵W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, pp.371-2.

the "great myth-makers and mask-makers, the men of aristocratic mind, Blake, Ingres in the 'Perseus,' Puvis de Chavannes, Rossetti before 1870, Watts when least a moralist, Gustave Moreau at all times, Calvert in the woodcuts, the Charles Ricketts of 'The Danaides,' and of the earlier illustrations of The Sphinx..."¹⁶ In an earlier essay on "Symbolism in Painting" he had said that

All art that is not mere story-telling, or mere portraiture, is symbolic...for it entangles, in complex colours and forms, a part of the Divine Essence. A person or a landscape that is a part of a story or a portrait, evokes but so much emotion as the story or the portrait can permit without loosening the bonds that make it a story or a portrait; but if you liberate a person or a landscape from the bonds of motives and their actions, causes and their effects, and from all bonds but the bonds of your love, it will change under your eyes, and become a symbol of an infinite emotion, a perfected emotion, a part of the Divine Essence.¹⁷

He then goes on, in the same essay, to group together various examples of symbolic art, a typically Pre-Raphaelite grouping:¹⁸

Wagner's dramas, Keats' odes, Blake's pictures and poems, Calvert's pictures, Rossetti's pictures, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's plays, and the black-and-white art of Mr. Beardsley and Mr. Ricketts, and the lithographs of Mr. Shannon, and the pictures of Mr. Whistler, and the plays of M. Maeterlinck, and the poetry of Verlaine, in our own days, but differ from the religious art of Giotto and his disciples in having accepted all symbolisms...

¹⁶W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 371.

¹⁷W.B.Yeats, Essays and Introductions, pp.148-9.

¹⁸W.B.Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 149.

The early Pre-Raphaelites had power to move Yeats long after his childhood and early youth. In his essay "Art and Ideas" (1913) he tells of a visit to the Tate Gallery to see the early paintings of Millais:¹⁹

...before his Ophelia, as before the Mary Magdalene and Mary of Galilee of Rossetti that hung near, I recovered an old emotion. I saw these pictures as I had seen pictures in my childhood. I forgot the art criticism of friends and saw wonderful, sad, happy people, moving through the scenery of my dreams. The painting of the hair, the way it was smoothed from its central parting, something in the oval of the peaceful faces, called up memories of sketches of my father's on the margins of the first Shelley I had read, while the strong colours made me half remember studio conversations...heard, it may be, as I sat over my toys or a child's story-book...I had learned to think in the midst of the last phase of Pre-Raphaelitism and now I had come to Pre-Raphaelitism again and rediscovered my earliest thought.

Another positive contribution which J.B.Yeats's circle made to W.B.Yeats's development was the performance of Dr. John Todhunter's A Sicilian Idyll, which has already been mentioned. When Yeats later developed his theory of poetic drama as an aristocratic form, to be performed before a small audience, with symbolic scenery, simple costumes, and a minimum of stage business and gesture, one of its most important elements was the speaking of the verse as poetry, undistracted by movement except of a stylized kind. As a child, he had heard his father read a scene from Coriolanus so vividly that he wrote years later:²⁰

"I have seen Coriolanus played a number of times since then, and read it

¹⁹W.B.Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 346.

²⁰W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p.42.

more than once, but that scene is more vivid than the rest, and it is my father's voice that I hear and not Irving's or Benson's." But his first introduction to beautiful speaking of verse and stylized economy of gesture on the stage came when he saw the performances of Florence Farr and Heron Allen, who took the principal parts in Todhunter's play:²¹

Heron Allen and Florence Farr read poetry for their pleasure. While they were upon the stage no one else could hold an eye or an ear. Their speech was music, the poetry acquired a nobility, a passionate austerity that made it akin for certain moments to the great poetry of the world. Heron Allen...had the wisdom to reduce his acting to a series of poses...I had discovered for the first time that in the performance of all drama that depends for its effect upon beauty of language, poetical culture may be more important than professional experience.

Not long before his death he wrote, in "An Introduction for My Plays", (1937), of his theories of drama:²²

When I follow back my stream to its source I find two dominant desires: I wanted to get rid of irrelevant movement - the stage must become still that words might keep all their vividness - and I wanted vivid words.

The "vivid words" he supplied; the possibility of stillness and the beautiful speaking of those words was demonstrated to him as early as 1889.

The matters which have been discussed in this chapter may appear rather far-removed from any direct influence by J.B.Yeats on his son,

²¹W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, pp.80-81.

²²W.B.Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 527.

but they are all related, directly or indirectly, to the fact that J.B.Yeats decided to become an artist and, in the beginning, a Pre-Raphaelite artist. W.B.Yeats's taste in art never recovered completely from his early exposure to the paintings he had seen as a child, although his dedication to symbolism in both art and literature made him single out for praise the aspect of Pre-Raphaelitism which appealed to him, its symbolism; he passes over the concreteness and realism so evident in, for example, the painting of the flowers in Millais' Ophelia. Again, his father's choice of a career meant that he was exposed to much studio talk during the years when his own ideas about art were maturing, and the fact that he disliked so much of what he heard acted as a spur to the formulation of his own independent ideas. His father's friends were also involved, as we have seen, with the development of two very important aspects of his work: his lifelong preoccupation with Blake, and his theories of drama.

The most significant result of his father's choice, however, may well have been the example he provided of a disinterested devotion to art as the highest calling possible to man. Not only did W.B.Yeats receive every encouragement when he decided to become a poet, but he had held before him always the ideal of never doing anything simply for material gain. Very few poets have shown a more complete dedication to their art; some of this devotion must surely be credited to his father's example and teaching.

C H A P T E R VII

Much of J.B.Yeats's correspondence is concerned with his views on the nature of art and the role of the artist. There is a remarkable correspondence between these views and those of his son; occasionally W.B.Yeats modifies or questions his father's ideas, and one concept of J.B.Yeats, that of Personality or "Unity of Being", he deepens and extends far beyond anything his father had conceived.

Art and poetry were for J.B.Yeats the products of dreamland: they are a dream, a vision, a phantasmagoria which we are allowed for a time to enter into:¹

The chief thing to know and never forget is that art is dreamland and that the moment a poet meddles with ethics and the moral uplift or thinking scientifically, he leaves dreamland, loses all his music and ceases to be a poet... The poet is a magician - his vocation to incessantly evoke dreams and do his work so well, because of natural gifts and acquired skill, that his dreams shall have a potency to defeat the actual at every point.

For J.B. emotion is more important than intellect:²

Dream is the excuse of all art and poetry. It is the dream-world against the actual. Every man lives in the first, so far as he is governed by feeling: governed by intellect and practicality he enters the second.

¹J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 198.

²J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.5.

J.B. does not mean, of course, that poetry must be "dreamy", but that the dream or vision of the poet is unreal when placed alongside the actual world of facts and figures; the truth the poet holds has nothing to do with the truth of prose. He several times makes the distinction between poetry and prose; poetry belongs to the solitary, subjective man, prose to the sociable, companionable man:³

What can be communicated or explained
is prose, let the companionable man
look to it, it belongs to his province.

Poetry reveals, and cannot be explained, and what it reveals is original and sincere:⁴

The method of the companionable is to find some truth on which all men agree and by harping on that to rouse his fellow mortals to spiritual excitement and intellectual effort...in all great poets...the meaning is not a something to be communicated or explained, but to be revealed, a vision and a dream - no more; we see it or we do not see, that is all - What can be communicated or explained is prose.

Poetry has nothing to do with preaching, with ethics, or with "uplift". Art exists simply to enable us to find ourselves, and Arnold's theory of poetry as a criticism of life is dismissed as "a bad heresy".⁵

Prose is for persuasion, rhetoric, logic and eloquence; "logic" and "rhetoric" are pejorative words in the vocabulary of both J.B. and W.B.Yeats. J.B. calls logic "that baser form of reasoning which is the

³J.B.Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p.45.

⁴J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 208.

⁵J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 178.

bane of the super-educated, or imperfectly educated person..."⁶ and rhetoric "expresses other people's feelings, poetry one's own."⁷

While J.B.'s conception of the nature of poetry seems to me fundamentally valid, his distinctions between prose and poetry, if carried to their logical conclusions (something J.B., being illogical by nature, would never do), become too extreme and hardly tenable. By his standards, much of eighteenth-century poetry, and especially Pope, would have to be dismissed, as well as much of Browning and even Milton; while many modern novels simply do not meet his definition of prose.

If J.B. Yeats frequently uses emotional words such as "longing" and "desire" to explain the nature of poetry, he does not dismiss the intellect as completely as would appear upon a first reading. As early as 1884, as we have seen,⁸ he was telling his son that "prose and verse are alike in one thing - the best is that to which went the hardest thoughts." And in 1915 he writes to him:⁹

The poet is not primarily a thinker, but incidentally he is a thinker and a stern thinker, since the source of his magic is his personal sincerity. What he says he believes, and from this it follows that he must have few beliefs and those of the simplest, for time will not allow him to be travelling over the whole world of thought - that is, for the professional thinker.

⁶J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 87.

⁷J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 161.

⁸See p. 85, note 1.

⁹J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 210.

Ideas, however, must never obtrude themselves; as in the finished portrait, which must appear to be a sketch, all the labour of thinking and the struggle with technique and pattern must not be evident in the finished work:¹⁰

...as to ideas in Poetry. These must never be expressed, they can only be implied. I say this because of my reverence for ideas - and because as I think if expressed at all it must be done with mathematical precision, forbidding alike eloquence and poetry.

And he writes again:¹¹

Have you noticed that poets use ideas in a way quite different from prose writers - the latter treat ideas as matters in which they believe, as scientists believe in the law of gravitation. With poets ideas are consciously or unconsciously part of their technique and of the machinery of poetry. We do not know and we do not care whether Wordsworth actually believed in Plato's doctrine of prenatal existence, the idea is not really an integral part of the poetry... Let poets, by all means touch on ideas, but let it be only a 'touching' and a tentative groping with the sensitive poetical fingers. It is bad poetry which proclaims a definite belief - because it is a sin against sincerity.

The artist creates out of pain; suffering and pain are for J.B.

Yeats a necessary foundation for all great poetry:¹²

Science exists that man may discover and control nature and build up for himself habitations in which to live in

¹⁰J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 91.

¹¹J.B.Yeats, Letters, pp.220-21.

¹²J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 199.

ease and comfort. Art exists that man cutting himself away from nature may build in his free consciousness buildings vaster and more sumptuous than these...and we build all out of our spiritual pain - for if the bricks be not cemented and mortised by actual suffering, they will not hold together.

Art is the "expression of unsatisfied human desire"¹³ and artists "speak a strange language out of the strange country of pain and desire."¹⁴ Pain and pleasure "come together and cannot be separated. The greater the pain, the greater the pleasure - the immortal and the mortal in everlasting embrace - a nuptial embrace - not sterile."¹⁵

Another mark of the artist is his solitariness. All great art is born of solitude, J.B. Yeats says, and "Poetry is the voice of the solitary, as resonant and as pure and lonely as the song of the lark at sunrise."¹⁶ It is only in solitude that the poet can achieve sincerity and intensity, both important qualifications for J.B.'s poet. The solitary man, he says, is

...alone among men...himself and only himself. The companionable man is himself and someone else, seeking expression through the medium of prose or action, thinking of other people and therefore always leaning towards compromise and for that reason working in a spirit of insincerity. ¹⁷

¹³J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 269.

¹⁴J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 235.

¹⁵J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 235.

¹⁶J.B. Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p. 39.

¹⁷J.B. Yeats, Passages from the Letters of John Butler Yeats, p. 39.

The sincerity of the artist is beyond that of practical people:¹⁸

...the only sincerity in a practical world is that of the artist...If we speak at all, we must say what we believe otherwise our tongue is palsied. For which reason, artists, in the world's history, have, when they have been wise, always kept themselves apart.

English poetry is great because of the Englishman's "gift for personal liberty - he is self evolved, a law unto himself...":¹⁹

Other nations follow reason and their poetry is the lean music of argument and rhetoric; ideals and noble theories and all the rest, ...are the enemy plucking the unit man, the individual out of his sublime solitude to place him in this or that fraternity and be in the bonds of sympathy or antipathy with his fellows.

A man is most intense when alone... Let him keep his courage and remain alone and presently will burst from him the human cry which is poetry, the cry of a spirit at the self-same moment tormented and appeased.

Poetry is not, however, an escape, although "the poet is the antithesis of the man of action":²⁰

All art is a reaction from life but never, when it is vital and great, an escape.²¹

The solitary state of the poet creates an aloofness, even a certain coldness:²²

Emotionalism is bad because of its lack of seriousness...The true poet is like the statesman and has a cold heart notwithstanding its abiding ecstasy, and so more serious than any statesman.

¹⁸ J.B. Yeats, Letters, pp. 275-6.

¹⁹ J.B. Yeats, Letters, pp. 196, 197.

²⁰ J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 187.

²¹ J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 144.

²² J.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 237.

The "bird of poesy sings to itself alone in the heart of the wood, persuading and coaxing and commanding and admonishing its own soul, and thinking nothing of others."²³ The artist should refuse action so that he may "live with himself in self-centred solitariness."²⁴

For J.B.Yeats the artist should always seek the concrete, not the misty heights of philosophy. In writing of York Powell he says approvingly:²⁵

He sought everywhere the concrete,
which he could handle and love, and
laugh with and laugh at. He did not
care for dreams of intellectual
beauty.

And in his letters to his son he constantly urges upon him his belief that art is imitation and involves the finite and concrete:²⁶

All great poets and artists are rich
in the finite...These artists who say
that representation of the fact hin-
ders art are sinning against the first
law of art - for art is imitation -
and art is concrete, because you can
only imitate concrete things...

These views are not particularly original, and indeed some of them are the common coinage of Romantic theory, but they are interesting for the close correspondence they show with W.B.Yeats's conception of the calling of poet and the devotion he gave to his art throughout his life.

²³J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 168.

²⁴J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 193.

²⁵J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 88.

²⁶J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 217.

Not even Ireland came before his poetry, and though he was indolent by nature and poetry was for him the most laborious of tasks, he continued to write of "Heart-mysteries" until the end.²⁷ His intensity and sincerity as a poet need no documentation; he has said in unpublished notes that "A poet is by the very nature of things a man who lives with entire sincerity, or rather the better his poetry the more sincere his life..."²⁸

Yeats was the "solitary man", both in his need for physical solitude and in his spiritual solitude, his essential "coldness" or self-centredness. True personality, he says, "is born of solitude",²⁹ and his letters show how much more easily he could write poetry in the seclusion of Coole Park or of Thoor Ballylee. Mrs. Yeats has also told how necessary complete solitude was to him:³⁰

Of course he had to be absolutely alone, so completely alone that even when an infant was in the room and silent, he had still to be alone, because no personality must be there at all. It wasn't a matter of merely being spoken to or interrupted or anything else, but he had to be in absolute isolation in a room wherever he was writing.

The swan is often, as in "The Tower", a symbol (among other things) for the solitary, lonely voice of the poet, and in "The Fisherman" Yeats cries

²⁷W.B.Yeats, "The Circus Animals' Desertion", Poems, p. 392.

²⁸Joseph Ronsley, Yeats's Autobiography, p.2.

²⁹W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 195.

³⁰Jeffares, In Excited Reverie, pp.10-11.

to his ideal figure, "A man who does not exist, / A man who is but a dream":³¹

'Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.'

In his Autobiography he says:³² "And as I look backward upon my own writing, I take pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I have found something hard and cold..."; his own epitaph contains the same idea of a dispassionate "coldness" in its "Cast a cold eye / On life, on death."³³

J.B.'s "unsatisfied human desire" and pain as essential elements in the artist's work are reflected in such statements as "We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy"³⁴ and in the theme of "tragic joy"³⁵ which runs throughout W.B.Yeats's poetry; as he says, "The desire that is satisfied is not a great desire, nor has the shoulder used all its might that an unbreakable gate has never strained."³⁶

W.B.Yeats was fully aware that the poet is not a man of action, but he deliberately assumed the mask or pose of a man of action from his desire to "play with all masks":³⁷

³¹W.B.Yeats, Poems, p. 167.

³²W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 184.

³³W.B.Yeats, "Under Ben Bulben", Poems, p. 401.

³⁴W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 128.

³⁵W.B.Yeats, "The Gyres", Poems, p. 337.

³⁶W.B.Yeats, Mythologies, p. 337.

³⁷W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 318.

All my life I have been haunted with the idea that the poet should know all classes of men as one of themselves, that he should combine the greatest possible personal realisation with the greatest possible knowledge of the speech and circumstances of the world.

The resulting tension was great:³⁸

I cry continually against my life. I have sleepless nights, thinking of the time that I must take from poetry...and yet, perhaps, I must do all these things that I may set myself into a life of action and express not the traditional poet but that forgotten thing, the normal active man.

.....
I often wonder if my talent will ever recover from the heterogeneous labour of these last few years...I cry out vainly for liberty and have ever less and less inner life.

Another aspect of his work, with which his father would not have completely sympathized, was his need for an intellectual, philosophical backing for his poetry. While he disliked abstraction and generalization as much as his father, he felt the need for it, as he says in A Vision:³⁹ "Having the concrete mind of the poet, I am unhappy when I find myself among abstract things, and yet I need them to set my experience in order." In the poems which succeed least as poetry ("The Phases of the Moon", for example), his elaborate "system" obtrudes and the philosophy behind the poem is too evident; on the other hand, in his greatest poems the ideas contained in A Vision become, as his father said of

³⁸W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, pp. 333, 328.

³⁹W.B.Yeats, A Vision, p. 129 (1926 Edition, quoted by Ronsley, Yeats's Autobiography, p. 8.

Blake's mysticism, merely the machinery, the scaffolding. Ignorance of his ideas about immortality and the process of "dreaming back" do not lessen the impact of a play like Purgatory; nor does the power of "The Second Coming" depend upon a detailed knowledge of his theory of the cycles of history.

He was not quite satisfied with his father's theory of art as imitation, and he offers his own more subjective view, stressing the need for symbolic pattern:⁴⁰

In the last letter but one, you spoke of all art as imitation, meaning, I conclude, imitation of something in the outer world. To me it seems that it often uses the outer world as a symbolism to express subjective moods. The greater the subjectivity, the less the imitation. Though perhaps there is always some imitation. You say that music suggests now the roar of the sea, now the song of the bird, and yet it seems to me that the song of the bird itself is perhaps subjective, an expression of feeling alone. The element of pattern in every art is, I think, the part that is not imitative, for in the last analysis there will always be somewhere an intensity of pattern that we have never seen with our eyes. In fact, imitation seems to me to create a language in which we say things which are not imitation.

The most important of all J.B. Yeats's contributions to his son's thought, however, is his conception of Personality or "Unity of Being". Personalities, in the usual meaning of the word, exerted a lifelong fascination over both men: J.B.'s writings are full of his delight in observing and analyzing the personalities he encountered,

⁴⁰ W.B. Yeats, Letters, p. 607.

and much of W.B.'s Autobiography is devoted to a study of the personalities of his relatives and friends; while a whole section of A Vision is a pseudo-psychological analysis, within the framework of his "system", of various types of personality.

Yeats says that he first heard the phrase "Unity of Being" from his father, although he attributes it ultimately to Dante, and characteristically changes his father's musical metaphor to a visual one. His father wrote to Dowden in 1869:⁴¹

It seems to me that the intellect of man as man, and therefore of an artist, the most human of all, should obey no voice except that of emotion, but I would have a man know all emotions. Shame, anger, love, pity, contempt, hatred, and whatever other feelings there be, to have all these roused to their utmost strength, and to have all of them roused...is the aim, as I take it, of the only right education...Art has to do with the sustaining and invigorating of the Personality...In the completely emotional man the least awakening of feeling is a harmony, in which every chord of every feeling vibrates.

Again, he says, art cannot be created out of a single emotion, but it "achieves its triumphs great and small by involving the universality of the feelings...art is a musician and touches every chord in the human harp - in other words a single feeling becomes a mood, and the artist is a man with a natural tendency to thus convert every single feeling into a mood..."⁴² Ronsley, quoting from an unpublished essay by J.B.

⁴¹J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 48.

⁴²J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 185.

Yeats, says that he conceived of Personality not as the sum of external characteristics and mannerisms, but as "a bundle or mass of instincts, appetites, longings, psychical intuitions, resting on the firm basis of the five senses."⁴³

While these statements seem to stress emotion at the expense of intellect, J.B. did recognize intellect as the force which harmonizes and imposes control on the emotions:⁴⁴

People have an idea that poets live in disorder, and feed upon it. If they feed upon it, it is only that the pain of disorder sets their intellects to work in bringing to it order, so that in the ensuing silence and quiet, they might have leave to sing. The poet is an orderly man, because he allows no single feeling to remain single, forcing it into harmonious relation with all the other feelings. He is a whole man, whereas others are only sectional...Self-control is the essence of his being.

W.B.Yeats extends the basic idea of his father's theory far beyond anything which J.B. contemplated, but he acknowledges his debt to his father in his Autobiography:⁴⁵

...I delighted in every age where poet and artist confined themselves gladly to some inherited subject-matter known to the whole people, for I thought that in man and race alike there is something called "Unity of Being," using that term as Dante used it when he compared beauty in the Convito to a perfectly proportioned human body. My father, from whom I had learned the term, preferred a comparison to a musical instrument so strung that if we touch a string all the strings murmur faintly. There is not more desire, he had said, in lust than in true love, but in true love desire awakens pity, hope, affection, admiration and, given appropriate circumstance, every emotion possible to man.

⁴³Ronsley, Yeats's Autobiography, p. 38.

⁴⁴J.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 224.

⁴⁵W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, pp.128-9.

In W.B.'s conception, the intellect plays a greater part; he conceives of "Unity of Being", as Ronsley says, as "a state in which the intellect, joined with the emotions and many seemingly disparate aspects of the individual life and its surroundings, became exalted by fusion."⁴⁶

To his father's original conception, Yeats brought many additional ideas. The most outstanding was his theory of the Mask which played an important part in his lifelong striving to attain "Unity of Being" in his own personality. Since the Mask could be either shield or sword, it had undoubtedly a psychological value in that it enabled him to hide his natural timidity and his sense of failure as a lover after Maud Gonne's marriage in 1903, in a pose of action and power. It also acted as a shield in the sense that it helped him to preserve his poetic personality in that isolation necessary to the artist. Henn suggests that it supplied psychological compensations because it reinforced his successes or justified his failures.⁴⁷ Above all, it helped him to find his own identity, by exploring aspects of his personality in which he thought he was deficient, in the midst of the constant tension or struggle of what Ellmann calls the "internecine war within the self".⁴⁸

The concept was extended beyond the individual man to the culture of a nation and even of a race:⁴⁹

Somewhere about 1450, though later in
some parts of Europe by a hundred years
or so, and in some earlier, men attained

⁴⁶Ronsley, Yeats's Autobiography, pp.5-6.

⁴⁷T.R.Henn, The Lonely Tower, p. 35.

⁴⁸Richard Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p. 160.

⁴⁹W.B.Yeats, Autobiography, p. 193.

to personality in great numbers, "Unity of Being," and became like a "perfectly proportioned human body," and as men so fashioned held places of power, their nations had it too, prince and ploughman sharing that thought and feeling.

"Unity of Being" is one of the ideas basic to Yeats's whole philosophical system as expounded in A Vision, and it is the "machinery" behind some of his greatest poems, such as "Byzantium" and "Among School Children". But elaborate and far-reaching though it became, J.B. Yeats's original metaphor was never forgotten: as late as the second edition of A Vision W.B. Yeats refers again to his father's metaphor, when he says that in "Unity of Being" "Every emotion begins to be related to every other as musical notes are related. It is as though we touched a musical string that set other strings vibrating."⁵⁰

There is a close correspondence between the ideas of J.B. Yeats discussed in this chapter, and the theories and practice of his poet son. On many points they echo each other: the essential nobility of the poet's calling, his sincerity, intensity, solitariness and spiritual aloofness; both abhor rhetoric and abstraction, and both realize the necessity of a fusion of ecstasy and pain if great poetry is to be written. On some issues W.B. Yeats modifies his father's views: because he is a symbolist poet, he holds a more subjective and more elaborate view of his father's theory of art as imitation, but he still believes that a poet is concerned with the concrete. Intellect and ideas play for him a more important part in poetry than his father would grant them, and he admits a need for a philosophical basis for his life and for his poetry. "Unity of Being"

⁵⁰W.B. Yeats, A Vision, p. 88.

he transforms into something infinitely more complex and far-reaching than his father ever dreamed of. On the whole, however, he spoke truly when he wrote to his father in 1910 that he realized "with some surprise" how fully his philosophy of life had been inherited from J.B. "in all but its details and applications."⁵¹

⁵¹W.B.Yeats, Letters, p. 549.

C O N C L U S I O N

Yeats's debt to his father is less easy to define precisely than many others which entered into his work; he does not often refer to his father directly, except in "Reveries over Childhood and Youth", and his father's thought became so much a part of his own that it is sometimes difficult to disentangle the two. Certainly few poets can have been so lucky in their fathers: J.B.Yeats's early education of his son, his reading and discussion, his choice of an artist's career, his example of a disinterested and passionate devotion to art, and the dialogue he carried on with W.B.Yeats in the last years of his life, all support the claim which Stephen Spender has made for him, that he was "the midwife of the son's fortunes."¹

Yeats was more inclined as he grew older to acknowledge what he owed to his father and to perceive the similarity in their ideas, as the letter to his father, already quoted,² shows. After his father's death, his admiration and respect increased; he included him among "All the Olympians" in the poem "Beautiful Lofty Things",³ and in a late essay he placed him with the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish whom he admired so greatly:⁴

¹The Irish Times, 10 June, 1965, p. 1.

²Page 28, note 2.

³W.B.Yeats, Poems, p.348.

⁴W.B.Yeats, Essays and Introductions, pp.399-400.

I think of my father, of one friend or another, ... men born into our Irish solitude, of their curiosity, their rich discourse, their explosive passion, their sense of mystery as they grew old, their readiness to dress up at the suggestion of others though never quite certain what dress they wore, their occasional childish worldliness.

J.B. Yeats's influence on his son took several forms. In some of these W.B. Yeats had no choice: his father's vigorous and dogmatic personality, the Yeats heritage he passed on to his son, his taking over of W.B.'s education, and his highly personal choice of reading material were simply there and could not be resisted by a young and timid child. As we have seen, the inevitable rebellion took place and W.B. became independent of his father's domination and questioned and quarrelled with his ideas. But in the long dialogue between them, by discussion in earlier years and by letter in W.B.'s maturity, the father planted the seeds of certain views about art which his son continued to cultivate. Their correspondence during the years of J.B. Yeats's stay in New York shows, it seems to me, that the father's influence did not, as has often been assumed, cease when W.B. as a very young man plunged into his study of magic and the occult.

Ellmann has implied, in the quotation at the beginning of this study,⁵ that a man of talent acquires what he wishes and can use from those who influence him; certainly W.B. Yeats all his life followed this

⁵Page 1, note 1.

practice with other "influences" and there is no reason to think that as a grown man he acted differently as far as his father was concerned. The main difference between his father and other influences is that his father was there from the very beginning and at first could not be resisted; but even when W.B. was old enough to make up his own mind and to choose, he continued to listen with respect and to be influenced by his father's ideas. What he has said of Pre-Raphaelitism painting is equally applicable to his father's influence: during his maturity he "rediscovered" his "earliest thought."⁶

⁶W.B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, p. 346.

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