YEATS: THE IDEA OF STYLE

A STUDY OF W.B. YEATS'S IDEA OF STYLE

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PREFACE

The main purpose of this thesis is to arrive at an understanding of Yeats's idea of style. In much of his prose writings and several of the poems Yeats had sought to define his concept of 'style'. However, the idea of style must depend on the poet's idea of the function of poetry because even the most elaborate metaphysical discussion of style serves little purpose if it cannot be related to the act of writing poetry. Yeats's idea of the nature and purpose of poetry underwent various changes during his long writing career. These changes were directly related to corresponding changes in his attitude towards life and the arts. In other words, the changes in Yeats's poetry were determined by the changes in his personality. Therefore, in addition to arriving at a formal definition of Yeats's idea of style, I have attempted to follow the changes in the more technical aspects of his style by considering the relevant changes in the poet's outlook.

The first chapter analyses Yeats's idea of style on the basis of his various statements about it and the related concepts of the mask, aristocracy and the Unity of Culture. This chapter forms the point of reference for the rest of the thesis. In the four chapters that follow I have traced

the growth of Yeats's artistic maturity over the years. I have considered the earlier poetry in greater detail than the poems Yeats wrote after 1914. Though the poems of Yeats's mature years are richer and far more exciting than the earlier poems, it is in the latter that we find Yeats groping towards an understanding of the idea of style. In trying to trace the development of Yeats's concept of style I have found the years 1885 - 1914 more rewarding than the later years.

I find it difficult to adequately express my gratitude to Dr. Brian John for his patience and invaluable guidance. Without his help this thesis could not have been completed.

CONTENTS

I

'STYLE'

The quest for a 'style' was one of the primary concerns of Yeats's poetic career. For him the implications of the word were not limited merely to the questions of rhetoric and to forms of expression. Basically, he believed, 'style' reflects the unique personality of the artist. Through a conscious process of discipline and self-realization the individual artist creates an identity for himself. This distinct identity individualizes a person and sets him apart from the rest of humanity. Yeats's poetry and his prose are full of references to this conscious process of self-individualization. The hero, the creative artist or the aristocrat - in short, any person who is distinct as an individual - achieves his identity by seeking out and living according to the 'style' that best expresses his personality.

> Style, personality - deliberately adopted and therefore a mask - is the only escape from the hot faced bargainers and the money changers.[1]

The constant search for an identity through which to distinguish one's self from the man on the street can be understood only in terms of Yeats's concepts of the Unity of Being and the Unity of Culture. Yeats's view of the modern society,

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[1] "Estrangements", Autobiographies, p.393.

with its limited bourgeois interests, was one of intolerance and contempt; he believed that such a society of "money-changers" and logic-choppers tends to destroy the creative individual mind. The mind of the person who lets himself be caught up by the atrophying forces of the modern society is "the creation of impersonal mechanisms - of schools, of text books, of newspapers".[2] The common man, trained by these mechanistic processes, learns to speak a common language and to think according to a common logic. This results in what Yeats described as "the ill-breeding of the mind, every thought made in some manufactory and with the mark upon it of its wholesale origin. . . ."[3] No extraordinary endeavour, whether artistic or heroic, can be expected from such a person since he is incapable of thinking or feeling independently. The only faculty that distinguishes one individual from another in a mechanistic society is one's intellectual capacity to use the common logic efficiently or otherwise. In other words, there is no essential difference between the sage and the fool; they share the same logic-chopping, bourgeois mind and have similar notions and concerns.

The conscious individual, the creative person, refuses to accept the dictates of such a society and, by doing so, liberates his passional self from the clutches of his rational self. The passionate person knows how to live and create

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[2] Ibid., p.394.

[3] Ibid., p.394.

according to his own personality. Yeats believed that, like every noble thing, art springs from passion rather than intellect. For this reason he celebrated the passionate man in much of his writing. The visionary, the poet and the leader of the people constantly fight the accepted codes of behaviour and thought to create, whether in action or in art and imagination, a vital and living universe. For the literary artist the fight consists of a deliberate adoption of style. Because of this it is impossible to discuss Yeats's idea of 'Style' in purely artistic terms. 'Style' is not merely a matter of craftsmanship but has highly significant moral and metaphysical implications. The development of style or the adoption of a mask (for Yeats the two processes were quite similar) constitutes an "active virtue as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a current code . . . [and] is the condition of an arduous full life".[4] The ability to exercise this "active virtue" is the sign of the well-bred mind. Yeats's idea of excellence firmly rooted itself in the notion of an aristocracy of the mind. This, in turn, was related to his idea of the Unity of Culture. In a really unified culture every individual possesses a well-bred mind that defies any attempt by the logic-chopping world to corrupt it. Ireland always had this aristocracy of the mind which had given her "a distinguished name in the world - 'Mother of

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[4] Ibid., pp.400-401.

the bravest soldiers and the most beautiful women.'"[5] Heroism and beauty are possible only in a society where mechanistic values have not destroyed nobler sentiments. Like heroism and beauty, art too is the product of an imagination opposed to logic and science:

> The Irish story-teller could not interest himself with an unbroken interest in the way men like himself burned a house or won wives no more wonderful than themselves. His mind constantly escaped out of daily circumstance, as a bough that has been held down by a weak hand suddenly straightens itself out. / italics mine /.[6]

With ancient Ireland, India and Japan also, Yeats believed, were seats of such culture and it is not surprising that references to these cultures should appear repeatedly in his poetry in the figures of such persons as Cuchulain, Fergus and Mohini Chatterjee, and in the form of the highly symbolic sword of Sato. The thematic preoccupation with the idea of nobility, aristocracy and the well-bred mind is reflected in the technique of his best poems. The tonal quality, images and symbols, metrical structure and the use of words are carefully manipulated to bring out effectively the central themes. One of the most important ways by which Yeats sought to define and explore these concepts was the dramatization of situations where, for example, the well-bred mind conflicts with the ill-bred. The dialogue, as such, became a significant form of poetic expression in Yeats's works.

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[5] Ibid., pp.395.

[6] Preface to Gods and Fighting Men, Explorations, p.8.

By introducing the element of theatricality he created the opposing personae that take part in these dialogues. I will point out these technical changes and innovations in the relevant sections of this essay.

Among the virtues a unified culture fosters are patriotism, heroism, generosity, moral strength, and above all a love of beauty. Yeats used the highly suggestive word "courtesy" to describe these virtues; he had picked up the word from his reading of Baldassare Castiglione's Il Libro de Cortegiano (1528). A year after his acquaintance with Castiglione's book in 1903 Yeats described his idea of courtesy in an illuminating passage:

> It has been said, and I think the Japanese were the first to say it, that the four essential virtues are to be generous among the weak, and truthful among one's friends, and brave among one's enemies, and courteous at all times; and if we understand by courtesy not merely the gentleness the story-tellers have celebrated, but a delight in courtly things, in beautiful clothings and in beautiful verse, we understand that it was no formal succession of trials that bound the Fianna to one another.[7]

The nobility of character that Yeats clearly believed ancient Ireland possessed was the cornerstone of his nationalism. His nationalism was not a jingoistic interest in a politically free Irish state but sprang from a consciousness of the cultural heritage of Ireland. It is because of the broad basis of his nationalism that one cannot discuss his artistic interest to the exclusion of his interest in Ireland

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[7] Ibid., p.21.

and in a philosophy of life in general (founded on his idea of 'nobility' and the aristocracy of mind). In his mature poetry the issues are intricately interwoven. His poetry is actually a synthesis of these interests, and the process of his artistic maturity really the process of refining that synthesis.

> One day when I was twenty-three or twenty-four this sentence seemed to form in my head, without willing it, much as sentences form when we are half-asleep: "Hammer your thoughts into unity". For days I could think of nothing else, and for years I tested all I did by that sentence. I had three interests: interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality.[8]

Of the three interests mentioned by him the second has most puzzled his critics and students. His interest in a 'form of philosophy' led him through hermetic philosophy, theosophy and the cabbala on to an interest in spirits, fairies and the Shidhe, and through a belief in the existence of a Universal Mind or the Anima Mundi, finally to his complicated system of the phases of the moon in A Vision. To trace a definite line of development running through all of them can be a frustrating task. Indeed, it is difficult even to decide how sympathetically one should consider each one of them. Broadly speaking, there is, however, one essential similarity between all these interests: they are extra-mundane. Once we realize this it is possible to understand Yeats's enthusiasm for them. It is often forgotten

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[8] "If I were Four and Twenty", Explorations. p.263.

that by the year 1900 Yeats was thirty-five years old and that he had spent these years in an age that can be best described as the age of naturalistic thought. His search for the supernatural and his interest in esoteric philosophies and in mysticism are in reality reactions against late nineteenth-century naturalism. For him T.H. Huxley, Tyndall, Marx and Zola were prophets of the logic-chopping universe he hated. In Autobiographies he repeatedly denounces these men: they are the 'hot-faced money changers' the creative mind must oppose. In these persons, along with 'rhetoricians' and 'journalists', he saw manifested the ill-bred mind which he later on described by the word "Whiggery":

> What is Whiggery?
> A leveling rancorous, rational sort of mind.
> ["The Seven Sages" (1932), ll.10-11]

Every great mind hates "Whiggery"; consequently, Yeats counted among his heroes persons who have defied logic and science. In his youth he admired Madame Blavatsky. Later on, during the late 'twenties of this century, he included Berkeley, Swift and Goldsmith. For very similar reasons he admired aristocrats and the aristocratic way of life that rejects petty bourgeois values. In his early poetry Yeats deliberately attempted to avoid the 'unpoetic' idiom of language corrupted by 'Reason' and 'Naturalism'. The vague, imprecise, dreamy quality of these poems is often the result of conscious effort rather than artlessness.

The dispute between the rational intellect and reason-defying spiritualism does not, however, remain a sustained theme in Yeats's poetry. The differences are too obvious and the contrast between the two interests is absolute. This can hardly be a satisfying theme for poetry because it generates no tension only difference of opinion, and "We make out of our quarrel with others, rhetoric," not poetry.[9] Supernaturalism and magic slowly lose their fascination for Yeats as his interest is caught by the more immediate and more human problem of reconciling reason and passion. This becomes a dominant theme in Yeats's mature poetry and a number of his major poems dramatize the conflicting claims of the head and the heart. It must be realized that in its ideal state a society does not force its members to make a choice between the dictates of reason and the desires of the heart. Ideally, the division does not exist. Yeats believed that the Irish imagination had always been romantic in its admiration for extra-mundane values and of a way of life 'more wonderful' than actually existed. However, the Ireland Yeats found himself living in had forgotten its ancient spirit and had lost itself in the crowd of 'hot-faced bargainers'. But as a poet he knew that every creative artist must re-live for himself his ancient nobility: "He [the artist] is above all things well-bred."[10] It is

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[9] "Per Amica Silentia Lunae", Essays, p.492.

[10] "The Subject Matter of Drama", Essays, p.352.

the moral responsibility of the artist not to deny his "long and noble descent."[11] He "can only set up a secondary or inferior personality created out of the tradition" of himself; this, however, is "only possible to [him] in [his] writings."[12] Therefore, the artist must acquire a 'style' that will help him escape the clutches of the "bargainers and the money-changers":

> In life courtesy and self-possession, and in the arts style, are the sensible impressions of the free mind, for both arise out of a deliberate shaping of all things.[13]

The idea of 'style', which arises out of a "deliberate shaping" of art, by implication rejects the inspirational theory of poetry that Yeats upheld in his youth. Poetry is no longer viewed as a half-magical phenomenon and is recognized as a product of the human will and a process of impersonality. By asserting his freedom to shape and create according to his will the creative artist defies the mechanistic universe which always attempts to impose a common 'pattern' upon man. The world of logic and science denies human beings the right to exist as individuals. Actually, Yeats's view of art is based on the tragic awareness of this lack of freedom. In his everyday self the poet cannot escape

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[11] Ibid., p.353.

[12] "Estrangement", Autobiographies, p.395.

[13] "Poetry and Tradition", Essays, p.313.

the logic-chopping world, therefore he assumes various masks and through his *personae* examines himself and his dilemmas.

In order to assume his masks successfully the poet must develop a keen theatrical sense. The process of dramatizing his own doubts and desires is actually a process of impersonalization:

> If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves . . .[14]

The putting on of the mask of our opposite self is a heroic task, for it requires a complete understanding of the experiences the assumed self undergoes: to exult in its joys and to suffer, in imagination, all its pains. The poet, therefore, has to be capable of a double-vision - of self and of the anti-self - for to have a single vision (that of the self only) is to be unable to achieve the freedom art provides. The mask, Yeats said, brings "the whole of life to drama, to crisis," and it is the purpose of the style to express the drama adequately through the best possible use of language, rhythm, stanza structure, various rhetorical devices (the use of repetition, for example). Style, as such, effectively brings out the dialectical tensions involved in the 'situations' the various poems explore. Since it unfolds the climax in the confrontation between the self and the anti-self, it is not difficult to understand Yeats's

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[14] "Estrangement", *Autobiographies*, p.400.

description of poetry as "the quarrel with ourselves".[15] The poet creates in solitude, while the rhetorician and the journalist argue with the world. Curiously enough, the gregarious rhetorician and the journalist are the ones who are open to the attacks of the world and are accountable to the man on the street. The poet, because he does not use the commonly shared idiom of logic and reason, can escape the abuses of the world. The mask is, indeed, a barrier between the poet and the logic-choppers. While the world abuses and derides the poet he remains secure and untouched behind the mask: the logic of the world of action is invalid within the sphere where the quarrel with one's own self takes place. The mask enables the poet to be secret and to exult, and "of all things known / That is most difficult."[16]

So far I have discussed 'style' in what may be best described as its metaphysical sense. However, the question of style is directly related to the question of technique in Yeats's poetry. By 1904, the year of the publication of In The Seven Woods, Yeats had formed a more or less firm notion of the mask and its importance in the process of creating poetry. In 1899 he founded the Irish Literary Theatre, and his involvement with writing and production of drama had, no doubt, greatly helped him to formulate the idea

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[15] "Per Amica Silentia Lunae", Essays, p.492.

[16] "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing", ll.15-16.

of the mask. Theatricality and the mask, as we have seen earlier, go hand in hand. The experience with the stage contributed to the introduction of this theatricality in his verse which had so far been purely lyrical. But while he was still to write a great deal of expository prose on the mask and its uses, on self and anti-self, and on the relation of the mask to one's personality, his understanding of the mask does not undergo any radical change after this date. Henceforth, 'style' - in the sense of technique - becomes the key concern: having defined to himself the purpose and the function of the mask Yeats busied himself with the more difficult task of acquiring a 'style' suitable for the masks. The problems of expression, the act of capturing in the words the tonal quality of speech appropriate for the _personae_, became his major concern. In _The Gaiety of Language_ Lentricchia points out:

> As the years went on, Yeats would continue to speak more and more of the problems of expression and less and less of the problems of idealistic metaphysics: "Call it art for art's sake if you will," he concluded in the 1905 issue of the _Samhain_.[17]

Yeats believed that style could be acquired only through continuous labour. Like all noble things, poetry is the result of conscious and hard effort:

> . . . It's certain there is no fine thing
> Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
> [_"Adam's Curse" (1902), **U**.21-22._]

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[17] F. Lentricchia, _The Gaiety of Language_, p.69.

Yeats's practice has been more consistent with his theories of art than the practice of other poets. It is not surprising that the various revisions of his poems are found so illuminating by the students of his poetry. Most of the changes he made in the manuscripts and in subsequent editions of his published poems reflect a careful and meticulous artist at work. He seldom wrote more than a few lines of verse in a day.[18] In spite of this he found it necessary to constantly revise his poems. But the alterations he made were not merely for the sake of beautifying his verse. Each and every change in his style reflects a changing awareness about forms of expression. Sometimes the revisions reflect a change in his personality and consequently a change in his attitude towards the subject of the particular poem. Yeats was very conscious of the reasons for which he effected changes in his style. In a poem published in 1908 he warned his readers not to take the revisions casually for to ignore them would amount to ignoring the change in the poet's personality.

> The friends that have it I do wrong
> Whenever I remake a song
> Should know what issue is at stake:
> It is myself that I remake.[19]

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[18] See B. Rajan, W.B.Yeats, p.66.

[19] The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B.Yeats, p.778. Referred to as The Variorum hereafter.

The dependence of 'style' on the personality of the poet is made abundantly clear in the last two lines. It is possible then, by Yeats's own admission, that in some cases of drastic revision the connection between the writer of the earlier version of a particular poem and the writer of its final version may only be nominal. Some revisions that the mature Yeats made in his early poetry leave us with a final revised form which is as entirely different from the original version as the mature Yeats was from the early Yeats.[20] It is understandable that Yeats preferred to retain the later form and reject the earlier poem altogether:

> Accursed who brings to light of day
> The writings I have cast away!
> But blessed he that stirs them not
> And lets the kind worm take the lot!

The question of 'style' is directly related to the question of technique. Revision of earlier poetry made by Yeats during his later years is only one way of determining the changes the idea of style (and therefore the technique) underwent during his long poetic career. In the chapters that

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[20] This interesting question of the relationship between the various revisions of Yeats's poetry and the different phases of his 'style' has been exhaustively discussed by Thomas Parkinson in W.B.Yeats: Self Critic. The section on the final revisions (1925-1933) is specially illuminating for the observations the author makes on the mature Yeats's view of poetry.

[21] The Variorum, p.778.

follow I will try to point out the way in which Yeats's idea of style evolved through a process of artistic maturity. At every stage I will make specific reference to the technical changes that have been involved in the process.

II

1885 - 1889

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Critical opinion about Yeats's early poetry is sharply divided. Most critics tend to agree that the poems Yeats wrote during the eighties and nineties of the last century do not contribute much to an understanding of his mature poetry and they serve as inadequate standards to measure his greatness.[1] Even David Daiches, intending to write an essay specifically on the early poems, confines his discussion to a handful of selected poems which may be said to reflect sparks of Yeats's later genius.[2] On the

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[1] Miss Stock neatly sums up the stand [redacted] taken by several critics on the worth of Yeats's early poems. In order to be fair to her own attitude to these poems I have quoted her at length: "They [i.e. the early poems] please, and will perhaps always please, most readers who want no more than to accept self-evident beauty. But in later life he [Yeats] himself grew impatient of his early style, and critics have tended to agree with him. It is not because of these he is counted among the greatest poets of our time; they are overshadowed by his later work which has fewer readers but evokes deeper admiration . . . contemporary critics tend to distrust dreaming for the dream's sake and turn away from the obvious beauty which carries no visible traces of agony. They demand that poetry should light up sharp psychological or social conflicts." - A.G.Stock, W.B.Yeats: His Poetry and Thought, p.37.

[2] David Daiches, "The Earlier Poems: Some Themes and Patterns", in A.N.Jeffares and K.G.W.Cross, eds., In Excited Reverie, pp.48-67.

other hand, there are a few scholars who, fascinated by the lure of symbol hunting, have sought to read into these early poems meanings that the poems may not actually warrant. Certain interpretations of the significance of the monster in The Wanderings of Oisin, Book II, are well known. Unterecker mentions Morton Seiden's Freudian interpretation where the monster is seen as the poet's father John B. Yeats.[3] More recently Harold Bloom has suggested that the monster is actually Oisin's natural self struggling to free itself from his dreaming-self.[4] Though never before presented in exactly these terms Bloom's reading of the poem is indirectly related to the conflict between pure aestheticism and naturalism in the late nineteenth century. It is also remotely connected with the notion that the monster is Yeats's libido or unsatisfied sexual desire (the phallic suggestion of the eel-like monster is quite obvious). But what critics like Bloom fail to explain is the significance of the once-in-four-days struggle (why should it not take place at irregular intervals?) and supply the reason why awakening of the natural self does not break the enchantment while the mere sight of a beech-bough succeeds in doing so.

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[3] John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats, quoted p.49.

[4] Harold Bloom, W.B.Yeats, p.98.

The surprising thing is that critics on both sides claim support from Yeats's own writings for their praise for or denunciation of these poems. In letters to Katherine Tynan written in 1888 Yeats said:

> I have noticed something about my poetry that I did not know before . . . it is almost all a flight into faeryland from the real world, and a summons to that flight.[5]

and that his poems are "all . . . confused, incoherent, inarticulate."[6] These statements are thought sufficient justification to warrant a rejection of the early poems as trivia. On the otherhand, Yeats also wrote in the same year that in the Second Book of The Wanderings of Oisin "under the guise of symbolism I have said several things to which I only have the key . . . the whole book is full of symbols."[7] Though Yeats clearly indicated in this letter that hunting out those meanings will spoil the effect of the poem, some critics still find the temptation to seek the 'meaning' of this and other early poems too great to resist.

There are two reasons why one has to disagree with the views of the first set of critics. Firstly, a poet's judgement about the quality of his own poetry is seldom

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[5] The Letters of W.B.Yeats, ed., Allan Wade, p.63.

[6] Ibid., p.84.

[7] Ibid., p.88.

totally dependable and often quite inaccurate. There is an unmistakable note of self-consciousness in these letters and Yeats is evidently on the defensive. Secondly, the quotations prove that by the year 1888 Yeats had some notion of the main defect of his poems - the "dream-burdened will"[8] - and hence one may look forward to certain improvements in the quality of his work from this point onwards. To dismiss the entire body of his early poetry to the turn of the century on the basis of a statement made in 1888 seems unjustifiable. (As far as his poetry published before that date is concerned one can, to a great extent, agree with Yeats's self-criticism). It is worth noting that in the second letter quoted above Yeats also wrote:

> Yet this I know, I am no idle poetaster: My life has been in my poems. To make them I have broken my life in a mortar.[9]

Even if we overlook the youthful exaggeration in the last sentence, the underlying concept that poetry is more vital to the poet than his personal happiness becomes clear. The seriousness with which Yeats took his art should never be taken for granted. Even at this early point in his career he had no illusion about the total self-immersion that art requires of the creative artist. It is, of course, true that at this date Yeats had no knowledge of the extent to which

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[8] The Variorum, p.814.

[9] Ibid., p.84.

he would have to break his "life in mortar" in order to put the whole of his being in his art. He did not meet Maud Gonne till the beginning of the next year and therefore he had not, so far, known how vital a role woman, love and the frustration of unrequited love will play in the shaping of his future poetry. The most significant event that had happened to him by 1888 was his coming over to London the previous year. This resulted in a sense of isolation and a feeling of being lost in the crowd which influenced both his art and his thought. His idea of an unified culture, of the Unity of Being, his hatred for a mechanistic logic-oriented society and his sense of Irish nationalism were greatly influenced by his experiences in London. Life in London, in spite of his best attempts to act and feel like one native to that city, was never congenial to his spirit, and his heart cried for the rural warmth of Sligo. Borrowing the phrase from T.S. Eliot, Paul West rightly comments that Sligo was the "still centre" of Yeats's mind during these years in the huge and indifferent metropolis.[10] It is not entirely untrue that Sligo is metamorphosed into the Arcadia, the faery-lands, and the India of his early poetry. Therefore, the extent of personal suffering that went into his art up to the time the above letter was written chiefly consisted of his experiences in London. But the important fact the letter

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[10] Paul West, The Wine of Absurdity, p.5.

testifies to is his commitment to sorrow and his desire not to escape bitterness of life from which his later concepts of heroism and tragedy were to spring.

To labour the point any further at this stage may amount to suggesting that the early poetry should be treated on a par with the mature poetry which, indeed, is far from my intention. On the other hand, scholars who seek to establish the artistic validity of the symbolism of the early poems often forget the possibility that symbols Yeats mentioned in the letter to Katherine Tynan may not be literary symbols at all. Young Yeats's interest in esoteric symbols is well known. He was still maintaining the 'magical' or 'inspirational' theory of poetry. If by his suggestion that The Wanderings of Oisin was full of symbols Yeats had meant literary symbols (in the sense he used the term in his best poetry), he would not have suggested that seeking out their meanings would spoil the poem.[11] The sort of symbolism Yeats

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[11] It may be helpful, at this point, to make a few comments about Yeats's symbolism. As a literary symbolist (it is difficult to avoid the clumsy prefix 'literary' because of Yeats's early interest in esoteric symbols) Yeats believed symbols to be of vital importance to poems. But, unlike the French symbolists, he did not believe in the autotelic idea of symbols: that the symbols are an organic part of a poem and they create themselves automatically, independent of the poet's will. For Yeats a symbol is an artistic necessity - something the poet develops deliberately and with great care. Very often, during Yeats's long poetic career certain words and images, initially used casually and for the sake of an appropriate description, gathered a wealth of meaning and suggestibility and became so rich in connotative value that they acquired the status of literary symbols. In no case were Yeats's symbols compulsive or automatic - they were primarily means of poetic communication and Yeats taught himself to use them to his best advantage.

had in mind when he wrote that letter of warning could in all likelihood have been deliberate attempts at introducing into the poem esoteric symbols, bits and pieces he had picked up from his rambling readings in folklore, myths and mysticism. They may have been, as he soon realized, an amateur's attempt at writing a learned and 'significant' poem - we cannot overlook the fact that The Wanderings of Oisin aspires towards epic proportions with its basis in Irish mythology, the voyages, and the battle with a monster in Book II (which was Yeats's own innovation and, ironically, the least exciting part of the poem). It is significant that Yeats did not attempt a similar poem again. The gradual awareness that his poetical temper was dramatic rather than epic was the reason for this rejection of the long narrative form. His involvement in the actual production of drama with the founding of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899 helped him shape his dramatic attitude to a great extent.

While critics have been generally lukewarm in their appreciation of Yeats's early poetry, biographers have usually found these years extremely interesting. The main reasons for this are the number of mutually incompatible activities Yeats was involved in as a young man. A short apprenticeship at painting under his father ended in a period of disillusionment for the poet when John Yeats attempted to infuse his own skepticism and his vigorously naturalistic bent of mind into his son. Yeats set up a society to learn the secrets of

hermetic philosophy; this was an attempt to counter not only his father's influence on him but also the rationalistic attitude that prevailed in intellectual circles in the late nineteenth century. In London he joined the Theosophical Society in 1887 but resigned his membership within three years to enrol in the Order of the Golden Dawn. At the same time he was writing poems on Irish themes; and joining hands with the exiled Irish leader John O'Leary, he founded the Irish Literary Society in 1892. An inclination towards scholarship engaged him in the task of editing a three-volume edition of Blake's works. Meanwhile, he met Maud Gonne and was immediately captivated by her beauty and powerful personality. For Yeats it was love at first sight ("Did I tell you how much I admire Miss Gonne? . . . If she said the world was flat or the moon an old caubeen tossed up into the sky I would be proud to be of her party", Yeats wrote to Ellen O'Leary just four days after meeting Maud Gonne for the first time).[12] Falling in love with Maud Gonne and the subsequent rejection of his suits by her was possibly the most important shaping influence on his character and art. The lover - poet - nationalist displayed an interest in drama also, and by the turn of the century he had written The Countess Cathleen (1892) and The Land of Heart's Desire (1894). In 1899 he founded the Irish Literary Theatre. Yeats was

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[12] Letters, p.110.

evidently groping for some sort of a wholeness of belief and attitude which would enable him either to choose between these multiple interests or to effect a meaningful synthesis. Ellman is correct in commenting that during these years Yeats was almost a "man in frenzy".[13] Since the question of style is so closely related to the question of personality these events in the early years of Yeats's poetic career are of special interest to the student of Yeats's evolving style.

In his preface to the 1895 edition of the poems he explained that he had chosen Crossways as the title for the collection of his earliest published poems because in them he had "tried many pathways".[14] It is significant that though as a poet he had found a definite bearing in Irish mythology after the publication of The Wanderings of Oisin in 1889, as a person he was still on the crossways. He realized much later that each of those apparently incompatible interests contributed to the emergence of his mature genius. Like the Great Memory of Anima Mundi Yeats's own mind became the reservoir for these disparate experiences and contributed to the richness of his art. Figuratively speaking, all the paths led to the same temple.

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[13] R. Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p.70.

[14] The Variorum, p.845.

ii

The epigram Yeats chose for the The Wanderings Of Oisin is important for understanding the poem:

> Give me the world if thou wilt, but grant me an asylum for my affections.

This immediately sets the mood of the poem: the fundamental conflict between the extra-mundane world of imagination and the empirical reality of the world of action. Though the poem explores this conflict very inadequately, it hints at the opposition between systematised religion and science on one hand and freedom of the 'land of heart's desire' on the other. Looking back at his poems Yeats wrote in 1932:

> The swordsman throughout repudiates the saint, but not without vacillation. Is that perhaps the sole theme - Usheen and Patrick - 'so get you gone Von Hugel though with blessings on your head'?[15]

It is easy to make such a generalization in retrospect when all the equations have been finally arrived at. But at best it is only an approximate statement. There is definitely the conflict between the 'saint' and the 'swordsman' in The Wanderings of Oisin but there is very little noticeable tension or vacillation that characterizes the best of Yeats's poems. The struggle, if Yeats intended any, within the mind of Oisin has not been adequately dramatized. The confrontation between Patrick and Oisin is one of absolute opposites and there is a total lack of communication between them; as such no 'dialogue' takes place between the two. For

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15 Letters, p.798.

Patrick the "pearl-pale" Niamh is only "a demon thing" (Oisin, I, l.4); the demonic visions that inspire Oisin to a rhapsody of love are to Patrick nothing more than shameful "heathen dreams" (Oisin, I. l.31). On the other hand, Oisin's song to the stars is a close echo of Blake and Shelley in its denunciation of God:

> You stars,
> Across your wandering ruby cars
> Shake lose reins: You slaves of God
> He rules you with an iron rod,
> He holds you with an iron band,
> Each are woven to the other,
> Each are woven to his brother,
> Like bubbles in a frozen pond;
> [Oisin, I, 329-336]

Patrick has very little to say in defence of this tyrannical God who resembles Blake's Urizen and Shelley's Jupiter. In fact, Patrick, ironically, reinforces the picture of this despotic God further by offering to have Oisin and his brave pagan forebears burnt in hell-fire:

> Where the flesh of the foot sole clingeth
> on the burning stones is their place;
> Where the demons whip them with wires on
> the burning stones of wide Hell.
> [Oisin, III, 197-198]

"Whatever scribe first wrote the story of Oisin was an unregenerate old heathen", writes Amy Stock, and for him to express such a view of the Christian God would only be natural.[16] If Yeats had chosen the story of Oisin to depict, as its "sole theme", a vacillation in the mind of the hero, he would have made significant changes in the attitudes of

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[16] Stock, W.B.Yeats: His Poetry and Thought, p.19.

both Oisin and Patrick. Evidently the dramatic possibility of such a tension was not apparent to Yeats in 1888-1889. The airtight doctrinal difference between the two men leaves little scope for the ambiguity that vacillation demands. One cannot agree entirely with Lentricchia's statement that "total rejection or total commitment to a philosophical position is not the response typical of Yeats".[17] The attitude typical of early Yeats is, in fact, a direct struggle of opposites in which his own viewpoint is definite and unequivocal. As David Daiches has pointed out, the development of Yeats's mind can best be described as the progress from a two-term dialectic to a three-term dialectic:

> His early poems are full of simple contrasts between pairs . . . In his later poetry he resolves these 'antinomies of day and night', achieving a either in a tertium-quid or else in a sense of the interpenetration of opposites.[18]

Because The Wanderings of Oisin has a two-term dialectic, the epigram from Tulka rightly suggests the poet's attitude. The material-rational world is accepted as an unavoidable fact but it is not seen as the congenial home for "affections". The poet needs a world quite outside this mundane world in order to let his art thrive. Poetry springs in a world that knows "nor tumult nor hate nor strife" (Oisin, I, l.95) and:

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[17] Lentricchia, The Gaiety of Language, p.41.

[18] Daiches, "The Early Poetry: Some Themes and Patterns", In Excited Reverie, p.50.

> Music and love and sleep await,
> Where . . . the white moon climbs,
> The red sun falls and the world grows dim.
> / Oisin, I, ll.103-105 /

The idea of poetry (and of the poet) espoused in The Wanderings of Oisin is close to the description of art we find in Yeats's essay "The Autumn of the Body", (1898) written almost a decade after the publication of the poem:

> I see, indeed, in the art of every country, those faint lights and faint colours and faint outlines and faint energies which many call 'the decadence', and which I, because I believe that the arts lie dreaming of the things to come, prefer to call the autumn of the body.[19]

It might seem inappropriate to draw similarities between a poem published in 1889 and a critical statement made nine years later - specially when we consider the fact that Yeats's poetry was undergoing definite changes during these years. But the comparison in this particular instance may not be inadvisable since the faery-land world of Niamh is, indeed, full of those "faint lights and faint colours" that Yeats speaks of. Critics often tend to believe that The Wanderings of Oisin is actually about the conflict in attitude between the heroic pagan Oisin and the ascetic Christian Patrick. Yeats's oft-quoted letter (mentioned above) of 1932 is responsible for this mis-representation of the poem. Perhaps in 1932 Yeats deliberately wanted his readers to see the poem as the mood-setter for his life's work. The conflict between Oisin and Patrick is merely the narrative frame-work into

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[19] Essays, p.235.

which the wanderings of the former is woven. Patrick's question to Oisin about his experiences while under the enchantment of "a demon thing" is the excuse needed to narrate the adventures of the hero. The conflict itself does not come to the forefront till the closing sections of Book III. Even the epigram does not suggest the presence of the tension between paganism and Christianity. The poem is, as the title suggests, about the 'Wanderings' of the hero who also happens to be a poet. The wanderings take place in three enchanted islands on each of which Oisin spends a hundred years. The theme of the poem, as such, is 'flight to faeryland', and while Oisin does return to the earlier after three hundred years, there is no suggestion that he is unhappy about his experience in faeryland. In some ways the poem actually celebrates the land of dreams.[20] The poet's escape into that dream world is seen as the necessary first step towards the chanelling of the creative energies. The idea that the poet, or the creative individual, must escape from the logic-chopping world is, not too remotely, connected with the idea of the mask as a means of escape from the "hot-faced bargainers" (to quote the epigram) as the world of dreams was. This is, to my mind, the actual significance of The Wanderings of Oisin in relation to the whole of Yeats's poetry.

It is not my aim to attempt a comprehensive interpretation of Yeats's poetry but to trace a line of development

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[20] See, for example, Oisin, I, ll.261-342.

in his attitude towards poetry and its effect on his style. Because The Wanderings of Oisin is a celebration of the land of dreams it is evident that Yeats still views poetry as a means of escape from the world of actual, tangible facts. However, this attitude is not the product of any pseudo-romantic desire to escape the harsh facts of life - in other words, he is not saying with Shelley, "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" ("Ode to the West Wind", l.54). Yeats's idea of escape is directly linked with his belief that art is more than reason. In his early prose writings he repeatedly makes this point, maintaining that the writer's struggle has to be against "that 'externality' which a time of scientific and political thought has brought into literature".[21] The assertion of the value of art and of the integrity of the artist's struggle spring from a definite sense of responsibility and a deep faith in the nobility of the artist's profession. Unfortunately, Yeats's poems of this period fail to make real this conviction. The figure of the poet, who is expected to be at the centre of this drama, often loses his identity as the artist and is seen either as a half-crazed but inspired seer as is Kevin in the 1892 version of The Countess Cathleen:

> A man of songs -
> Alone in the hushed passion of romance,
> His mind all ran on sheogues, and on tales

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[21] Ibid., p.232.

Of Finian labour and the Red Branch Kings,
And he cared nothing for the life of man.[22]

or like Oisin - an enchanted lover of a faery mistress "longing to leap like a grasshopper into her heart" (Oisin, III, l.132). Even a casual reading of Yeats's prose of the nineties makes it clear that the mature Yeatsian realization of the closeness of poetry and tragedy had not emerged. Poetry, in fact every creative act, is seen as a "banquet of moods" and the "imaginative artist belongs to the invisible life, and delivers its ever new and ever ancient revelation".[23] Often one comes across such vague remarks as that the poet must fill "our thoughts with the essence of things, and not with things".[24] These essays seldom try to face such formal technical questions as how a poet is to arrive at the disembodied "essence of things". At this point it will be worthwhile to realize that though the contentions of the prose statements approximate the spirit of the poems, the poems themselves are more exacting in demanding from the poet more than merely facile statements and metaphysical assertions. In the formal essays Yeats is actually arguing to establish a metaphysical theory of art that refutes the scientific spirit of the age.

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[22] The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B.Yeats, p.134.

[23] Essays, p.237.

[24] Ibid., p.237.

The early essays, Yeats's attempts at literary journalism, are not so much statements of conviction as they are protests against the age. Art, dreams, fairies, spirits, Theosophy, the Cabbala, magic and the magical theories of art - Yeats calls all these to his aid to ward off the influences of a technological society. This is the reason why most of his early prose is full of abstract statements that do not adequately explain the technical and formal issues involved in the actual process of writing poems. In his prose he was fighting concrete science with abstract metaphysics. Frayne's perceptive comment, "Journalism supplied Yeats with one of his earliest masks," is worth noting.[25] From behind this mask the confident scholar-critic-literary prophet-journalist could make abstract metaphysical assertions. But as a poet the mask did not help him much. He had, sooner or later, to admit to himself that talking about the "essence of things" was one thing and evoking such "essences" in his poems was quite another. Consequently a study of his poetry of this period is more rewarding than the essays. Yeats's definition of poetry as the quarrel with one's self is very appropriate in this respect. Once the mask of the confident journalist is dropped he has to face his naked self with all its diverse interests, its hatred and love, its tragic awareness of the hostility of life and its predilection for dreams

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[25] Uncollected Prose by W.B.Yeats, Vol.I, ed., J.P.Frayne, p.19.

and for an idealistic concept of nationalism. On the purely technical level Yeats was, at this point, faced with the choice between depicting vague, dreamy, 'dim' worlds or the natural world with all its colour, vitality and vivid details.

iii

The Wanderings of Oisin was not the first poem Yeats wrote. Though he had placed it as the opening poem of the Definitive Edition its first publication was preceded by several poems, some of which he collected in Crossways. Most of the poems in this volume were published before 1887 - a few of them even as early as 1885. It is not surprising that Yeats's earliest poems, in keeping with the mood of his youth, were written about idyllic settings. Yeats's Arcadia was India - the India of the romances. In a curious sort of way Yeats believed that this picture of India had subtle similarities with ancient Ireland. It is, however, not entirely correct to suggest that Yeats's India was merely a far off land of dreams. For Yeats it was also a country which harboured a philosophy that seemed to have answers to some of his own perplexing problems. And even when India ceases to be the setting for Yeats's poetry certain philosophical issues connected with Indian thought continue to reappear in Yeats's poetry even during the last years of his life.

Yeats's initiation into Indian (or supposedly Indian) thought was through his acquaintance with the pamphlets of the Theosophical Society, through Sinnett's Esoteric Buddhism

and later on through his contact with Mohini Chatterjee. Yeats's involvement with Indian philosophy, as taught to him by Mohini Chatterjee, was in the same spirit of rejection of naturalistic thought as were most of his other interests. Hence India offered him a spiritual asylum to which he could escape from the pressures of the world. But India was not merely an asylum for his 'affections', its philosophy offered him a very tempting alternative to the strictly time-oriented ethics of Christianity. In the theory of re-birth he found support for his belief that the self can exist in a timeless eternity. Chatterjee taught that neither sorrow nor joy as we know them on earth (to which Yeats was so painfully vulnerable) is permanent. It is only the 'self' (not the Christian 'soul' which is the creation of God, but ātman - that which is a part of the Universal Self) that is eternal. Such a philosophy equipped Yeats with the courage to face life. Once the mind is able to view practical life as māyā or illusion and the 'Self' as the only reality (Brahmā satyam jaganmithyā - the Universe is illusion, Brahmā or the Self is real), all suffering born out of human longings disappears. In a poem, not included in the Definitive Edition, this idea is expounded by Yeats:

> Long thou for nothing, neither sad nor gay;
> Long thou for nothing, neither night nor day;
> Nor even 'I long to see thy longing over'
> To the ever-longing mournful spirit say.[26]

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[26] The Variorum, p.734.

But Yeats lacked the philosophical bent of mind that is needed to realize that the 'self' is a part of the 'Universal Self' (Aham Brahmāsmi - I am Brahma). He had neither the patience nor the spiritual need for such a knowledge. The essential difference between Samkaran Hinduism and Christianity is that while the latter insists on faith the former insists on knowledge. Not to believe in Christ is the greatest sin a Christian can commit. To believe that the 'self' is Brahma is a contemptible act of self-deception according to Samkara - the realization has to be arrived at through self-discipline and self-knowledge (Atmanam Viddhi - know thyself).

Fortunately, Yeats did not try to achieve that knowledge. Had he done so, the result would have been disastrous for his poetry - the drama of conflicting passions that characterizes the best of Yeats's works would never have been conceived. Samkaran philosophy was inimical to the spirit of Yeats's poetry, and while he came back to Mohini Chatterjee's teachings at different periods of his career, on the whole he was able to free himself from the Brahmin's influence. It is understandable that he should have excluded the poem quoted above from the Definitive Edition of the poems. For a time Indian philosophy offered Yeats the provisional faith that is so necessary for a poet to build his poems upon:

> Poetry does not flow from thin air but requires
> always either a literal faith, an imaginative faith,

or . . . a mind full of many provisional faiths.[27]

In Indian thought Yeats found one the several provisional faiths on which he based his poetry. It is disputable whether he was quite aware of the provisional nature of this faith; nevertheless, it was one of the passing phases of his life. One might perhaps argue that "the Indian" in his early poetry was the earliest mask Yeats used in his poetry. Bachchan has suggested that Kauri (later Kanva) whose name appears in the original title of the poem "The Indian Upon God":

> "From the Book of Kauri the Indian, Section V. On the Nature of God".

was the forerunner of the numerous personae like Hanrahan, Aherne and Michael Robartes.[28] "The Indian" of Crossways was one of those masks that Yeats found necessary to doff very soon. For even during the years in which he wrote the Indian poems he composed a parallel group of poems on Irish themes in which very little trace of the Arcadian mood is found.

While one part of young Yeats's personality was attracted by Indian metaphysics, another part of his personality, his passional action-loving self, found expression through the Irish poems. Yeats's bent of mind was not metaphysical in the real sense of the word and even his interest

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[27] R.P.Blackmur, Form and Value in Modern Poetry, p.34.

[28] H.R.Bachchan, W.B.Yeats and Occultism, pp.46-47.

in mysticism and the occult was marked by scientific skepticism.[29] The equanimity with which Samkaran philosophy looks on life was essentially alien to Yeats. As a result one can find in Crossways lines as opposed in spirit as the following:

> 'Ah do not mourn', he said,
> 'That we are tired, for other loves await us,
> Hate on and love through unripening hours.
> Before us lies eternity; our souls
> Are love, and a continual farewell'.
> /"Ephemera", ll.20-24_7

> In a field by the river my love and I
> did stand,
> And on my leaning shoulder she laid her
> snow-white hand.
> She bid me take life easy, as the grass
> grows on the weirs;
> But I was young and foolish, and now am
> full of tears.
> /"Down by the Salley Garden", ll.5-8_7

While the first poem attempts a philosophical summing up of the impermanence, and therefore the invalidity, of human experience, the second poem even in its pathetic sentimentality accepts the validity of life's tragedy. It is interesting to note that in these poems we find two of mature Yeats's realizations in their early germinal states. In a much transformed manner the theme of "Ephemera" reappears in such late poems as "Mohini Chatterjee" (1929), "Meru" (1934), "Lapis Lazuli" (1936) and perhaps in the celebrated epitaph "Cast a cold eye/On life, on death./Horseman, pass by!" ("Under Ben

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[29] Yeats's 'experiments' with spirits betray a rather T.H.Huxleyan attitude.

Bulben", 1939, ll.92-94). In the other poem, "Down by the Salley Gardens" we have, if we overlook the sentimentality of early Yeats, the sort of acceptance of pain that finally evolved into the characteristic Yeatsian attitude towards tragedy as expressed in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1928).

With the passing of years Yeats grew increasingly conscious of the necessity of a 'local habitation and a name' for his poetry. The rejection of the India of the romances was the first step in that direction. His emerging sense of nationalism prompted him to think in terms of a national literature for Ireland. And looking around him he was fascinated by the richness of Irish mythology and a sense of national identity in the arts. Ireland is not England, the Irish are not Englishmen, why should not then Ireland have a literature of its own as distinct from the tradition of English literature? In the beginning he was not quite sure if nationalism and art could be combined. Like most late nineteenth-century poets drawing inspiration from the concept of 'pure art', Yeats believed in the validity of art as an experience complete in itself. The process of breaking away from the charmed circle of pure aestheticism was an important phase of Yeats's poetic development. In his essay "What is Popular Poetry?" he describes the first steps he took:

> With a deliberateness that still surprises me, for in my heart of hearts I have never been quite certain that one should be more than an artist, that even patriotism is more than an impure desire in an

> artist, I set to work to find a style and things to write about that the ballad writers might be the better.[30]

The ballads in Crossways were the first products of this determined effort. It is not surprising that a ballad like "The Ballad of Father O'Hart" (first published in 1888) should mention a string of local place names to give it its Irishness:

> There was no human keening;
> The birds from Knocknarea
> And the world around Knocknashee
> Came keening in that day.
>
> The young birds and old birds
> Came flying, heavy and sad;
> Keening in from Tiraragh,
> Keening from Ballinafad;
>
> Keening from Inishmurray
> Nor stayed for bite or sup;
> This way were all reproved
> Who dig old customs up.
> /11.29-40_7

The list of names, one coming swiftly at the heel of the other, gives the poem a very superficial kind of Irishness. However, if one remembers the very effective use Yeats learned to make later on of Irish proper names - Swift, Berkeley, Cuchulain, Connemara, Cashel to name only a few - the significance of this early attempt can be understood. We also notice the deliberate but somewhat excessive use Yeats makes of dialect expression ("keening").

Yeats's stay in London was, to my mind, the most

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[30] Essays, p.4.

important event that shaped his commitment to Irish themes. In Irish folk-lore he found an escape from the noisy influence of the city. His interest in the Shidhe, his researches in Irish mythology and his meeting with John O'Leary, equipped him with the necessary background and impetus to undertake the composition of a fully-fledged Irish poem - The Wanderings of Oisin.

The Ireland Yeats wrote about in the Crossways poems was only nominally Irish. But with the solid background of a centuries-old mythology, The Wanderings of Oisin succeeded in being more essentially Irish than the earlier poems. Oisin, the visionary poet, was the ideal protagonist for Yeats in the late nineteenth century. While his strong nationalistic feelings permitted him to compromise his literary ideals with patriotism, he was still incapable of bringing into his verse specifically human questions. A warrior hero like Cuchulain would have badly demolished his dreamland concept of art. With Oisin and Niamh he was more comfortable since they allowed him to write about a paganism that was characterized not by its lust for life but by its otherworldliness. The visionary pagan poet whose most intense experience consists of an impractical love affair with a faery princess adequately summarizes the aesthetic position of Yeats. Like most aesthetes of the period Yeats believed in Pater's doctrine that art must express "intensity". In years to come this doctrine would enable Yeats to discover the meaning of passional life, aristocratic living, sexuality

and all the diverse forces that make a Cuchulain fight the waves. But in 1889 this intensity expresses itself in the enchantment of a magical island where:

> the moon like a white rose shone
> In the pale west, and the sun's rim sank,
> And clouds arrayed their rank on rank
> About his fading crimson ball."
> [Oisin, I, ll.152-155]

There is a particularly 'decadent' note in these passages - they are calculated to be beautiful and, sometimes, even vaguely sensual:

> Dreaming of her own melting hues,
> Her golds, her ambers, and her blues,
> Pierced with soft light the shadowing deeps.
> [Oisin, I, ll.162-164]

But the important thing is that, unlike the decadents, Yeats found his way out of the tendency to indulge in this sort of tawdry finery. As Paul West has pointed out, Yeats was the only writer of the age who did not take Pater's aesthetic principle as a sanction for hedonism or for a lighthearted denunciation of the world of everyday values:

> Yeats alone understood Pater's doctrine and when others notoriously misconstrued it into hedonism, made it his departure-point for a lifelong attempt to apprehend the passional lives of all poets and conditions of men.[31]

In 1889 the passional life he was exploring was the dream-world visions of Oisin and the love between a mortal and a supernatural being. To the "dream-burdened will" of the poet these were the only events worth celebrating. Once Yeats

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[31] West, The Wine of Absurdity, p.15.

realised the limited scope of his imagination and the unearthly nature of the theme, he dropped Oisin from his collection of 'circus animals'. Cuchulain, to a great extent, replaced Oisin in Yeats's poetry. By virtue of his reckless heroism and full-blooded vitality, Cuchulain became a recurring figure in his plays and poems so that he eventually became a valid symbol for the passional man - a status Oisin never attained.

But even in this early poem one finds signs of Yeats's unconscious bonds with reality. Poetry, even when rapt in vision, cannot exist without a firm imagistic basis in reality (though, as I will shortly demonstrate, during these years Yeats was in principle opposed to the intrusion of reality into poetry). In spite of the abundance of "dim twilights", "pearl-pale" ladies, "fluttering sighs", "humming seas" and "gentle-dreams", both The Wanderings of Oisin and the poems in Crossways surprise the reader with refreshingly alive, tangible, realistic images and similes:

> And when the dew drowned stars hang in the air
> Look to long fishing-lines, or point and pare
> An ashen hunting spear.
> [Oisin, II, 11.54-56]

> "if only your shoe,
> Brush lightly as haymouse earth's pebbles,
> you will come no more to my side".
> [Oisin, III, 11.127-128]

> A white beard stood hushed on the pathway,
> the flesh of his face as dried grass,
> And in folds round his eyes and his mouth,
> he sad as a child without milk.
> [Oisin, III, 11.173-174]

Autumn is over the long leaves that love us,
And over the mice in the barley sheaves.
["The Falling of the Leaves", ll.1-2]

and, of course, the celebrated stanza from "The Stolen Child":

Away with us he's going,
The solemn-eyed;
He'll no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal-chest.
[ll.42-49]

While one cannot claim any greatness for Yeats on the basis of these few lines, they surely are indications of a less dream-burdened will to come. However, in the meanwhile certain changes must take place in Yeats's personality and attitude before a significant change in style can be expected.

Clearly such a change in attitude had not taken place so far. Yeats was still in the mood of rejecting anything that approximated realism. Like the abstract ideas expressed in his essays, he was deliberately vague in his poetry, attempting to ward off the influence of a naturalistic world. In this he was very much a late nineteenth-century romantic refusing to admit in his work any well-defined concrete quality. The contrast with Elizabethan drama brings out the point best. Not only in the plays of Shakespeare but even in such a dramatist as Tourneur the flight of imagination is strictly controlled by a sense of realism. The Forest of Arden is the stage for a vibrant human drama. To the young Yeats this was an unpardonable violation of the sanctity of art and imagination:

> The poet who writes best in the Shakespearean manner is a poet with a circumstantial and instinctive mind who delights to speak with strange voices and to see his mind in the mirror of Nature. / italics mine /[32]

Because his mind is "circumstantial" such a poet, according to Yeats, cannot write about pure 'visions' and expresses merely the "vivacity of common life".[33] Understandably, he was critical also of Blake; though he admired Blake's 'vision', he did not approve of the latter's passionate presentation of it in concrete and realistic terms - a style not 'artistically' toned down:

> The limitation of his view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of imagination. / italics mine /[34]

It is no wonder that even the ideal paganism of early Yeats bears very little similarity to the full-blooded paganism of his later poetry. Douglas Bush is right in commenting:

> In the tired nineties paganism ran rather to nostalgia than to full-blooded revival of the antique joys of sense.[35]

Though Yeats gradually overcame this predilection for dreams, he was, as we find him in the late eighties and early nineties still at the "banquet of moods".

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[32] Essays, p.247.

[33] Ibid., p.248.

[34] Essays, p.147.

[35] Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry, p.462.

III

1889 - 1899

Yeats's poetry of the last decade of the nineteenth century shows certain minor but definite changes which indicate a tendency to grapple with realities rather than to indulge in dreams. The desire to escape into dreams remains strong but there is, at the same time, a growing awareness of the world of everyday joy and sorrow. While in the earlier poems the world of dreams was evoked more for the joys it offered than as a cure for pain of the world of reality, in these later poems the opposition between the two worlds is more firmly established. Oisin's escape into faeryland was not prompted by a sense of great dissatisfaction with the real world. Within the framework of The Wanderings of Oisin the tension between the two worlds is not adequately explored - what we have is actually a celebration of the dream world. But now the desire to escape into that world is prompted by a clearer understanding of the sadness inherent in the world of reality. Falling in love with Maud Gonne and the subsequent emotional turmoil Yeats was thrown into by her refusal to marry him, made grief and distress more tangible for him than they had so far been. The abstract nature of grief in his earlier poetry is replaced by a more concrete realization of pain. While this change is not

accompanied by any significant change in technique, the change of attitude is evident in quite a few poems.

One important effect of the new realization of pain is a certain movement from the impersonal to the personal mode of feeling. The central figure in most of the love lyrics in The Rose and in The Wind Among the Reeds is Yeats himself rather than the poet-dreamer Oisin or a shepherd from idyllic India. It is true that in the latter volume Yeats introduces three imaginary speakers Aedh, Michael Robartes and Hanrahan. In spite of Yeats's attempt to impose a dramatic pattern on the volume, with the help of elaborate notes to explain the allegorical nature of the three speakers,[1] the poems fail to individualize the personae. No matter what names these speakers are given, they function very passively in the poems. For all practical purposes they stand for the poet himself: he has yet to learn the skill of using personae forcefully and effectively. However, the introduction of the first person in place of vague dreamer-poets is in itself a move towards realism: it determines the extent to which the poet's outlook upon life has shifted from evasion to a recognition of pain. The desire to escape into an ideal world of bliss and eternity is still there but it is no longer an Oisin who is being sent to faeryland. On the contrary, the poet himself is found longing for

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[1] The Variorum, p.803.

Innisfree:

> I will arise and go now, for always night
> and day
> I hear the lake water lapping with low sounds
> by the shore;
> While I stand on the roadway; or on the
> pavement grey,
> I hear it in the deep heart's core.
> /"The Lake Isle of Innisfree", ll.9-12_7

The reference to "roadway" and "the pavement grey" are more definitely autobiographical than anything Yeats had written so far. The streets of London give a concrete setting for the drama of longing, and the contrast between the scene the poet wishes to escape and the tranquility of Innisfree reflects the degree of that longing. The short fourth line effectively establishes, without apparent effort, the affinity between the poet's heart and Innisfree. There is no attempt to convince the reader of this affinity through undue elaboration. The controlled tone of this stanza suggests a certain degree of poetic maturity since Yeats has successfully avoided both excessive sentimentality that could accompany the memories of Innisfree and hysterical denunciation of the city he wishes to escape. "I will arise and go now" has a straight forward quality that gives it the rhythm of living speech. Yeats was aware of what he was doing, for he spoke of "Innisfree" as "my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music. I had begun to loosen rhythm as an escape from rhetoric. . . ."[2]

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[2] Autobiographies, p.134.

The world of vision itself has begun to have a new and fuller implication; as it comes into a direct opposition with the world of concrete realities, the dream world too achieves a kind of reality. Innisfree, though an island (like the islands in The Wanderings of Oisin), has a specific location which gives it an accessibility that is reflected in the line, "I will arise and go now". No supernatural power is invoked to effect the translation from reality to vision; the vision itself has a unique permanence in that it remains alive in the "deep heart's core" even when the dreamer is physically separated from Innisfree. Previously the state of being alive in actuality and the condition of dreaming were incompatible. One had to surrender reality temporarily to recall the world of dreams. Now the world of dreams throbs in the pulses of the poet while he stands "on the roadway, or on the pavements grey". There is no indication that the poet has to be in a mystical trance to be in communion with the world of dreams. This actualization (which is also, in a sense, interiorization) of the dream world is reflected in the style of the poem. In addition to the speech-rhythm of the poem and its lack of sentimentality, there is a delimiting of all dimensions. Time, for example, replaces eternity and the poet does not 'wander' for three hundred years but asks for only a short period of respite from the painful burden of reality. Similarly, space has been whittled down. The huge islands, full of forests, meadows, long horse rides to palaces have been transformed into

a little island where the poet retreats into "a small cabin . . . of clay and wattles made" (line 2). It is interesting to note that while revising The Wanderings of Oisin for the 1895 edition of Poems, five years after the publication of "Innisfree", Yeats included the following lines in the poem:

> A beautiful youngman dreamed within
> A house of wattles, clay, and skin.
> /Oisin, I, ll.248-249_/

Obviously, a firm association of the young dreamer image with the image of a house of clay and wattles had taken place in Yeats's mind after "Innisfree".

Not in all the poems, however, is the picture of the dream-world so positively altered as in "Innisfree". "The White Birds" is reminiscent of his earlier dream poems. But even here the speaker is the poet himself, a moral being who wants to escape Time; moreover, he does not undertake the journey to faeryland accompanied by a supernatural mistress but by his mortal beloved. Both the lover and the beloved are human beings who have found the world they live in an impediment to the full flowing of their love.[3] In biographical terms the situation is not strictly true because the beloved, Maud Gonne, was more passionately interested in

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[3] In a way the situation bears comparison with Forgael's desire for a love that is possible only beyond the limits of the everyday world in The Shadowy Waters and to the hero of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's Axël who shuts himself and his beloved off from the mere business of living.

the world of action than she was in the dream world of her lover. The poem is Yeats's attempt to convince himself that taking Maud Gonne away from her active public life will bring harmony between them. This was a peculiarly late nineteenth-century attitude - a belief that aesthetic liberation is possible only through the rejection of the everyday world. To some extent one can account for Yeats's later distrust of the common man, and his concept of the mask by taking into consideration the influence of this essentially defensive attitude characteristic of the fin-de-siècle aestheticism. As such "The White Birds" is a self-justification, since by putting the blame on the world of reality (in which ideal love is not possible) Yeats convinces himself that he has not acted irresponsibly in bestowing his love on an unworthy woman. The fault is neither his nor his beloved's, it is purely circumstantial. The poem is also partly an attempt to persuade Maud Gonne to leave logic-chopping reality and participate more fully in the world of vision that Yeats, because he is above everything a poet, wishes to create with her help.[4] (The conflict between them over Maud Gonne's distrust of poetry was the subject matter of a number of successful

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[4] The realization that disharmony between Maud Gonne and himself would actually help him as a poet had not dawned on him yet. In his Diary of 1910 Yeats wrote, "If she understood I should lack a reason for writing and one can never have too many reasons for doing what is so laborious". A.N.Jeffares, W.B.Yeats: Man and Poet (London, 1962), quoted p.141.

poems including "He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" in The Wind Among the Reeds). Self-justification, either to convince himself or someone else ("how much of the best that I have done and still do is but the attempt to explain myself to her?"[5]) or both as in the present case, springs from a very immediate and contemporary way of feeling and has its basis in actual emotional states. This is a departure from the abstractions of his earlier poems.

The visionary world - the Islands of Danaan - to which the poet wishes to escape is, however, more "dream-burdened" than Innisfree. The poem is unashamedly wistful as the use of the word "surely" in the second line of the following stanza indicates:

> I am haunted by numberless islands, and many
> a Danaan shore,
> Where Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow
> come near us no more;
> Soon far from the rose and the lily and fret
> of the flames would we be,
> Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed
> out on the foam of the sea!
>
> [11.9-12]

The dream world Yeats wishes to go to is not the faeryland of his earlier days. It is the land where poetry will prevail over politics. For the first time the world of vision is taking a specific shape in terms of definite ideas; all dream worlds are extra-mundane and anti-rational but this one has a definite purpose in being so - the preservation of

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[5] Ibid.

the value of art. Once she is on this island, Maud Gonne is expected to come round and recognize the supremacy of the poet's profession. Though the poem makes no direct reference to artistic creation, it does so through an implied contempt of 'flames' that die:

> Ah, dream not of them my beloved, the flame
> of the meteor that goes,
> The flame of the blue star that lingers hung
> low in the fall of the dew.
> /¯11.6-7_/

The poet's desire, therefore, is to escape into a world where the "flames" would not die. Also, a distinction between the purely temporary "flame" of the "blue star" and the eternal "flame" of the Danaan islands is implied in these lines. The eternal "flame" is obviously a symbol for the creative energy and the shaping spirit of art since years later Yeats made a similar symbolical use of "flame" in "Byzantium". In "The White Birds" the poet is actually longing for a world that permits Art to live in Eternity thus making the poem Yeat's' earliest statement about Byzantium or the City of Art:

> At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
> Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
> No storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
> Where blood begotten spirits come
> And all complexities of fury leave,
> Dying into a dance,
> An agony of trance,
> An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.
> /¯"Byzantium", 11.25-32_/

It would be irresponsible to suggest that one can trace a direct line of development from "The White Birds" to "Byzantium". But it is not possible to overlook the fact that the poem is about a dream world in which specifically the poet

(or the artist), rather than the romantic lover, wishes to escape.

Unlike the word "flame" in lines 6 and 7 the "flame" in line 11 refers to the corruptible force of the elements, because once translated into the Danaan Island the poet and his beloved will be beyond the influence of Nature and Time: "fret of the flames would we be". The double meaning of the word "flame" is repeated in "Byzantium" in line 27. Even the line "fret of the flames would we be" returns in the later poem as "An agony of a flame that cannot singe a sleeve". The meanings of the two lines are entirely different as are their functions in the respective poems - but the verbal echoes are worth noting (which include the substitution of 'fret' by 'agony'). There is a significant imagistic similarity between "The White Birds" and the two Byzantium poems: in each case a 'bird' becomes the key symbol of the city of Art (both 'golden' and 'white', again, are symbolical of the birds' supernatural, miraculous and perfect nature). Yeats's habit of constant revision kept the early poems fresh in his mind even in his later years and it may not be entirely unlikely that he drew upon "The White Birds" while writing the Byzantium poems.

Together with the introduction of the personal mode of feeling in some of the poems of this period, one also notices an occasional line or turn of phrase that refuses to accept without qualification the validity of the dream world.

In spite of a poem like "The White Birds" several poems show a hesitant attitude towards dream. This is best seen in the introduction of qualified, rather than absolute, assertions about the power of dreams. In "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" the poet invites the Rose to come near him and make him forget the world altogether, yet at the last moment he wants a "little space" (italics mine) to be left for "common things that crave" (ll.13-15). The poet is unwilling to make a definite acceptance or rejection of either world. Similarly, in "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" the poet expects to find "some peace". The introduction of the qualifying words "little" and "some" indicate a change in attitude which points out the way towards a maturer, and somewhat more realistic, approach to the tragedy of life.

The weaning away from the total reliance on a world of visions is seen also in "Fergus and the Druid". The Red Branch King comes to the Druid to seek wisdom:

> Be no more a king;
> But learn the dreaming wisdom that is yours.
> /ll.21-22/

What Fergus fails to realize in the beginning is that the "dreaming wisdom" may not, after all, be the right answer to his "sorrow" and "despair". He refuses to understand the warning of the Druid that wisdom is really gay stoicism - a passion for the endurance of suffering:

> Look on my thin grey hair and hollow cheeks
> And on these hands that may not lift the sword,
> This body trembling like a wind-blown reed.
> No woman loved me, no man sought my help.
> /ll.23-26/

Yeats was referring to the equanimity of the mind that Samkaran philosophy advocates. But to Fergus, as to Yeats at this point in his life, this attitude was quite alien. The king benefits nothing from the knowledge of his previous births:

> But now I have grown nothing, knowing all.
> [line 38]

The knowledge of the Self, which, according to Mohini Chatterjee, brings the greatest joy brought only sorrow to Fergus. Yeats tried to find in Indian philosophy a support for his idea of the perpetuation of self in Eternity, but he soon realized that the Self is perpetuated only in an impersonal condition. To a poet vaguely groping towards an understanding of tragedy impersonal eternity was as useless as the total termination of self at death. This disillusionment with Indian philosophy was an inevitable step in the right direction. First he will have to learn to reject dreams and accept the tragedy of life before he can finally go back to the idea of an impersonal self and to the kind of gaiety 'hermits' on mount Meru have attained. The distrust of knowledge and of dreams that characterizes "Fergus and the Druid" is also repeated in "He thinks of his Past Greatness":

> I have drunk ale from the country of the young
> And weep because I know all things now.
> [11.1-2]

Harold Bloom has called The Rose poems Yeats's "Songs of Experience".[6] There is some truth in this since some of

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[6] Bloom, Yeats, p.105.

the poems reflect Yeats's impatience with his own credulous mind. Dreams and visions are inadequate to answer all the pressing questions of life and once this awareness dawns on a person it is impossible to regain the state of Innocence. "The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland" is no other person than Yeats himself. The lure of the world of spirits has a destructive effect on life in this world and the poem makes this point in a tone of slightly bitter self-accusation. On the other hand he is unable to free himself entirely from the worlds of dreams. In "To Ireland in the Coming Times" (1892) he declares that he will have for his theme "The love I lived, the dream I knew" (line 34). This is a considered statement of faith, a conscious literary manifesto asserting the validity of both mystical and natural experience as subject matter for art.

A perfect synthesis of dream and reality is, however, very difficult to achieve. Gradually the scale will weigh in favour of reality just as it did for dream in the beginning. One of the noticeable changes that takes place in Yeats's poetry during the middle and late nineties is the emergence of a sense of contrast between earth-born beauty and the beauty of the world of dreams. The "pearl-pale" Niamh is set against the beauty of the woman Yeats has fallen in love with. For the first time he realizes that the beauty of a mortal woman can far surpass the anaemic glimmer of a supernatural mistress. Correspondingly, the world in which the beloved lives gains a special desirability that has so

far been associated only with the world of dreams. In spite of a poem like "The White Birds", in several of the other poems the stage of emotions is brought down to the terrestrial level and the ideal 'Rose' is perceived as blooming in our world. Maud Gonne opened the door of Yeats's imagination to the entire history of love between man and woman: to Greece and Helen, to Solomon and Sheba and ultimately to Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman. For the first time he discovered the grandeur of human passion. Though this did not lead to an outright rejection of the word of dreams, it paved the way towards the exploration of human emotions. In "The Rose of the World" the beauty of a woman is celebrated in unequivocal terms:

> Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?
> 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.
> . . . . . .
> Bow down, archangels, in your dim abode:
> Before you were, or any hearts to beat,
> Weary and kind one lingered by His seat;
> He made the world to be a grassy road
> Before her wandering feet.
>
> /I1.1-5, 11-15_7

The association of beauty with nobility and with tragedy gives a special dimension to this love lyric. The lips are not merely red - in itself a definite improvement upon the pallor of dream-woman - they form part of a woman's countenance that evokes the memory of all immortal sagas of love and passion that human history has been witness to. The beautiful woman, unlike her supernatural counterpart,

does not sigh or melt in grief. She is proud of her beauty, proud of the power she wields over the hearts of men. But a pride that amounts merely to arrogance is a blemish that spoils the delicate features of a woman. Therefore, the truly beautiful woman, even in her pride, is aware of the tragedy beauty can bring about in the lives of men. Moreover, she is aware also of the fact that the greatness of heart that made human beings participate in the grand drama of passion has been lost for ever. With all her beauty she is doomed to live in a world where passionate hearts have been atrophied by logic-chopping minds. The idea is repeated years later by Yeats in "No Second Troy" (1910):

> Why, what could she have done, being what
> she is?
> Was there another Troy for her to burn?
> [ll.11-12]

The compound epithet "mournful pride" (line 2) effectively brings out this idea and shows an improvement upon such facile and inept use of the device as "foam-oozy" and "cloud-pale". The unexpected juxtaposition of opposites 'mournful' and 'pride' reappear in Yeats's mature poetry as, for example, in "Her Vision in the Wood" (1929):

> And, though love's bitter-sweet had all come back,
> [line 27]

The use of the word "high" in line 4 signifies that Yeats had already begun to form the concept of aristocracy that was to reappear as a very important theme in his later poems. Pride, sorrow, and beauty are linked also in "The Rose upon the Rood of Time":

Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days.
/ line 1 /

The symbolic Rose, whether it stands for Ireland or for a beautiful woman, is proud in all its ancient glory. The pride of belonging to a long and noble line - of having a historical identity - is further qualified by the adjective "sad". The sadness comes from the same awareness of the passing of a way of life in which beauty can thrive. The "Rose" not only suffers the agony of having to exist in a world that does not befit her glory but also serves as a reminder to the poet of all the noble values that are no more respected in our days. The three adjectives, arranged in the order Yeats has set them in, gather strength from each other and build up the final meaning through acumulative effect. The lamentation over lost glory is found again in "He remembers Forgotten Beauty":

When my arms wrap you round I press
My heart upon the loveliness
That has long faded from the world.
/ 11.1-3 /

The most important point to note is that only the beauty that exists in the world of reality - whether it is of a woman or of a culture - can evoke this sense of tragedy in the poet. The Beauty of the world of dreams, even when it is so elusive and unattainable, has no power to give rise to this profound tragic sense.

The celebration of worldly beauty, and the resulting sense of tragedy offered Yeats a much more valid poetic idiom than did supernatural beauty. Only a faint outline of

this concept of tragedy is noticed in the poems up to 1899. Subsequent volumes from 1904 to 1914 will reveal the emergence of a definite notion of this tragedy and its relevance to Yeats's conceptions of aristocracy, heroism and the mask of the passionate man.

In spite of the successful use of such words as "pride" and "sad", Yeats's poems still retain the vagueness of his Celtic Twilight days. These poems abound, for example, in the use of the word "dim". In a line like the following, one is not quite sure to what particular shade between "blue" and "dark" is Yeats referring to by "dim":

> The blue and the dim and the dark cloths.
> "He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven", l.3

Also it seems surprising that during these years Yeats should have experimented with so few stanza forms. The general tendency is to write whole poems in a single sentence. Though the effect is often very powerful and appropriate it leaves one with the doubt if Yeats had begun to think of this form as the 'style' best suited to him. We will see how he overcomes this idea in future volumes and starts experimenting with various stanza forms.

IV

1899 - 1914

i

> I was busy with a single art, that of a small unpopular theatre; and this art may well seem to practical men . . . of no more account than the shaping of an agate, and yet in the shaping of an agate, whether in the cutting, or in the making of the design, one discovers, if one have a speculative mind, thoughts that seem important and principles that may be applied to life itself.[1]

Yeats's involvement with the theatre, not only as a playwright but also as a director and producer, was the most significant single influence on the style of his poetry after 1899. Over the next fifteen years he drew heavily upon his experience in the theatre for both stylistic and technical innovations, and themes. Theatre offered him a more effective poetic idiom than long-forgotten myths and occultism: poetry is no longer required to "tell/Of things discovered in the deep,/Where only body's laid asleep." ("To Ireland in the coming Times, ll.20-22). For his newly emerging social and literary attitudes the 'theatre business' provided a valid metaphor. "Thoughts that seem important and principles that may be applied to life itself" refers to the significance and appropriateness of this metaphor. In

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[1] Preface to "The Cutting of an Agate", Essays, p.271.

this chapter I will try to trace the relationship between these 'principles' and concepts and Yeats's poetry between 1899 and 1914. The principles themselves - primarily, the mask, the heroic ideal, nobility and aristocracy, and the relationship of these with the poet and the poetic process - have been discussed to some extent in the opening chapter. Instead of a theoretical discussion of the concepts themselves, I will try to examine how these emerge from Yeats's poems of this period and the consequent change in the style of his poetry.

In terms of style one is increasingly made aware of the presence of a theatrical element in Yeats's poetry henceforth. It is difficult to find a more suitable word to described this change in his poetry. The vague groping towards some notion of the mask that we observed in the earlier poems finally emerges as a carefully conceived and well-defined doctrine of objective art. The movement is from an inspirational, semi-magical concept of poetry, through a body of self-conscious and rather painfully sentimental love lyrics, to a gradually emerging poetic of will. The deliberate artist replaces the typical lyricist.[2] However, Yeats does not stop writing lyrics altogether - in a sense he never did; after 1899 he adapted the newly discovered dramatic manner of writing to his lyric needs. But even as late as 1914 he was

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[2] Yeats testily remarked about a poem by Dorothy Wellesley, "You have written a flawless lyric." Letters on Poetry, p.172.

yet to write the profoundly penetrating and highly metaphysical poems of the kind found in The Tower and The Winding Stair and Other Poems. In this sense Yeats's poetry of the period 1900-1914 can be called his middle poems; they show the rejection of a highly romanticised earlier poetic and the evolving of a more satisfying, and in many ways more sophisticated, concept of deliberate art. Few poems of this period, however, show complete mastery of the dramatic technique and Yeats often fails to exploit sensitively the possibilities of the linguistic medium (words and their meanings, pauses, images, rhythm, repetition of the same word to suggest a differentiation of meaning and similar rhetorical devices).

The 1914 volume of Yeats's poems has been appropriately titled Responsibilities for among the various responsibilities of the artist the most important is the awareness that he is a creator or 'maker' and not a mere translator into words of mystic dreams. By shifting the emphasis from inspiration to creation the entire burden is now put on the poet who is required to create art not out of the harmony of dreams but the antinomies of the finite world. Lentricchia has rightly pointed out that this responsibility brings with it a greater degree of individual freedom for the artist and consequently an acuter sense of isolation:

> Not being an extension of higher, spiritual reality - in the sense of continuity envisioned in romantic theory - being in fact totally cut off from divinity,

man's freedom is absolute (a point that existentialist philosophy insists upon).[3]

On the technical level the change in Yeats's poetry at this stage can be described as the replacement of the idea of language as the medium or tool of poetic communication by that of language as the substance of poetry. In the early poems words were used to evoke the atmosphere of dreams, the words themselves were, so to speak, refined out of existence. This is one reason the earlier poems abound in vague, indefinite and imprecise use of words. But now the poet finds himself left not with dreams and visions but only an otherwise barren language and his own poetic will with which to fashion and manipulate it meaningfully. Had Yeats continued writing in the earlier spirit he would have been regarded as a very successful poet in the late nineteenth-century tradition, possibly the best of the school, for even when he was writing of dreams he was not artless. But with the publication of In The Seven Woods (1904) he earned the right to be counted among the 'modern' poets. Above everything else 'modern' poetry recognizes the value of the poetic will and of poetic language as something more than evocation. The idea of the conscious and deliberate artist is a peculiarly 'modern' phenomenon - modernity in this sense does not refer to historically contemporary writing but to this idea of art

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[3] Lentricchia, The Gaiety of Language, p.78.

as, among other things, artefact. As a result the complexity, allusiveness, obscurity and irony that so delightfully shock and surprise the readers not only of T.S.Eliot, Yeats and Wallace Stevens's poetry but of such nineteenth-century poets as Emily Dickinson and G.M.Hopkins as well, have become inseparably associated with the idea of 'modernity' in poetry.

ii

Yeats's idea of language as the substance out of which poetry is made did not, fortunately, reduce the function of the poet to that of a mere craftsman. Quoting the following lines from "Adam's Curse" (1902) Lentricchia remarks that, "craft becomes almost everything /for Yeats_7."[4]

> A line will take us hours maybe;
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
> . . . . . .
> It's certain there is no fine thing
> Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.
> /11.4-6 and 21-22_7

In spite of the importance of "stitching and unstitching" mentioned in these lines, the poem's real emphasis is not on the act of 'labouring' but on the attitude that values "seem/ing/ a moment's thought" above a vulgar display of concentrated effort. The worth of beauty does not depend on the amount of labour that goes into its creation, it is rather in the act of hiding that labour; and beauty springs not from the technical aspects of the act of shaping but the

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[4] Ibid., p.99.

attitude of the creator who delights in appearing "careless". This applies to the poet, the lover, the beautiful woman and to the creator and custodian of everything that is beautiful. Had labour been the only criterion for judging the nobility of mind, the person who "scrub/s/ a kitchen pavement" (l.8) and the "old pauper" who "break/s/ stones . . . in all kinds of weather" (ll.8-9) would have been commended along with the poet and the lover. The attitude that values seeming 'carelessness' more than an athletic display of labour distinguishes the noble mind from the vulgar. 'Style', as Yeats understood the term, is reflected in more than merely a technique of composing verses - it reflects the well-bred mind. Because of the broad-based meaning of 'style', it is difficult to substitute it by words like 'aesthetic' and 'poetic' which tend to limit the concern to the world of arts and letters. For Yeats, 'style' took into account the whole field of human awareness - the personality itself.

"Adam's Curse" is Yeats's first articulate poetic statement about the interpenetration of the artistic concern with a more broadbased concern with beauty. As such the poet is shown sharing essentially similar experiences with the beautiful woman, the courtier and the lover. It shows, precisely the pre-occupation with an idea of heroism that consequently led to a well-defined concept of the aristocracy of mind. Nevertheless, "Adam's Curse" is a tentative first statement and though the notion of heroism is expounded quite adequately in this poem, all the elements of that heroism have

not yet been sorted out. The reason for this is not difficult to imagine. The basic distinction, between the vulgar ill-bred mind of the man on the street and the noble, heroic mind of the essentially well-bred person, upon which the poem depends for its chief effect is, as yet, understood by Yeats more in theoretical terms than in terms of actual experience. The romantic dreamer of the nineties has been replaced by the man of action only for a few short years. His idea of moulding a cultural consciousness in Ireland is yet to be shattered by the crisis over Synge's The Playboy of the Western World and the dispute over the Hugh Lane pictures. The mood in which he wrote "The Fascination of What's Difficult" about eight years later has not come upon him at this date. We cannot expect Yeats's concept of the well-bred mind and its contrast with the ill-bred, vulgar mob mentality to emerge in a final shape before he has gone through these experiences: the disillusionment with the bourgeois patron of art. Also, he did not read Castiglione's Book of Courtiers till 1903. Though it will not be correct to suggest that Yeats depended upon Castiglione for his ideas of heroism and aristocracy, it is certainly true that Castiglione confirmed his views about them (in 1913 Yeats made direct reference to Castiglione's book in "To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription"). "Adam's Curse" makes very little specific reference to aristocracy. Also there is no mention of the vital dual relationship between the artist and the aristocracy; the latter not only inspires the former and provides him with themes to

create around but is also his audience.

It is not my intention to attempt a detailed interpretation of "Adam's Curse" and what follows may be misunderstood to be a denunciation of the poem. It is important to realize that I am using the poem first to show where and how Yeats's idea of theatricality and the mask stood in 1902, and second to pick up points from the poem itself and to relate them to future developments of these very concepts. In doing so I will have to switch back and forth between this poem and a number of Yeats's later poems. This will, it is hoped, give a unity to this section of the essay since "Adam's Curse" will become the point of reference for most critical statements. The importance of this poem lies in the fact that Yeats is able to bring together for the first time several of his beliefs and ideas that are to play such vital roles in the growth of his poetry. As such it may not by entirely inadvisable to take "Adam's Curse" as a point of departure.[5]

"Adam's Curse" is structured around the idea of 'carelessness' or sprezzatura. But one finds that any definite concept of heroism has not yet formed in Yeats's mind. For

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[5] Unfortunately, the poem may seem to suffer in the absence of a detailed and coherent interpretation, but such an interpretation would be rather irrelevant in the context of the present study. Since only some of the points about this poem are discussed - the ones relevant to a study of Yeats's style - several others will remain untouched upon. The final effect may be quite out of balance with the real worth of the poem. The idea is to use the poem for a critical discussion of the development of Yeats's style rather than to evaluate the poem itself.

example, one of the more vague points in the poem is that it fails to suggest that sprezzatura is an acquired rather than instinctive quality. To a certain extent the poem seems to suggest that it is, in fact, instinctive:

> 'To be born a woman is to know -
> Although they do not talk about it at
> school -
> That we must labour to be beautiful'.
> [11.18-20, italics mine]

Essentially, sprezzatura results from a conscious sense of personal heroism - a sign of nobility lacking in "the bankers, schoolmasters and clergymen" (1.13). If the carelessness is instinctive rather than conscious and deliberate, it loses its heroic quality. But even sprezzatura is a very limited sign of aristocracy. Heroism consists of more than the simple wish to hide labour. As Yeats gradually realized, for the artist and the aristocrat heroism can mean the ability to hide pain and personal tragedy, and even to delight in secret joy while the world expects one to be totally demoralised and ruined. For the artist it can mean rejecting popular taste; for the aristocrat the upholding of self-esteem and pride in the face of levelling democracy and mob rule. In "These are the Clouds" (1910), a poem addressed to Lady Gregory, Yeats touches upon the problem of resisting the will of the common man who wishes to see all enduring principles and institutions, all distinctions of birth and achievement brought down to his vulgar level. The truly noble person will not break down before such an experience since the rejection of his worth by popular taste is only an

indirect recognition of his 'greatness':

> The weak lay hand on what the strong has done,
> Till that be tumbled that was lifted high
> And discord follow upon unison,
> And all things at one common level lie.
> And therefore, friend, if your great race were run
> And these thing came, so much the more thereby
> Have you made greatness your companion,
> [11.3-9, italics mine]

The demands of a popular culture can often tempt the artist to compromise his ' nobility' to appease the 'schoolmasters' and 'journalists'. But the heroism of the artist consists in totally rejecting such ignoble demands even at the cost of fame, popularity and financial ruin - even to the point of being a total public failure. But this should not be a cause of pain to him because the artist delights, above everything else, in his act of creation and as such cannot be made unhappy by the adverse judgement of the man on the street. The artist must never forget his 'high breeding', his noble ' ancestry'. This sentiment is best expressed in "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing" (1913):

> Bred to a harder thing
> Than Triumph, turn away
> And like a laughing string
> Whereon mad fingers play
> Amid a place of stone,
> Be secret and exult,
> Because of all thing known
> That is most difficult.
> [11. 9-16]

To "be secret and exult" requires the adoption of a very different kind of mask than is hinted at in "Adam's Curse". Here it is not merely putting up a public appearance that is required of the poet but the far more difficult task of

total withdrawal into a private sanctuary within himself - a place where individual tragedy is lost in the delight of artistic creation. The aristocrat and the artist are capable of this severe discipline by which they detach their essential 'aristocratic' self from the gregarious 'Triumph'-loving everyday self, and turn every public failure into a very personal triumph.

In the eleven years between the writing of "Adam's Curse" and "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing" Yeats had achieved considerable maturity both in attitude and technique. The metaphor of the 'stringed' instrument on which the 'fingers' of the artist play suggests the joyful abandon of artistic creation - but it is a much refined version of the same metaphor used in the 1903 poem "The Players ask for a Blessing on the Psalteries and on Themselves":

> Hurry to bless the hands that play,
> The mouths that speak, the notes and strings,
> O masters of the glittering town!
> [11.1-3]

The use of the word 'mad' in line 12 is very significant: it suggests both artistic frenzy and what can be best described as the 'split personality' of the artist (so important to him since he must maintain the duality between his essential artistic self that 'exults' and the public self that is hurt by unjust criticism). The word can also have an ironic implication : can the artist be less than mad if he refuses to conform to the aesthetic standards set by the

common man on the street?[6] "Stone" (line 13) suggests the non-responsive attitude of the common man to artistic sentiments as also the cruel callousness of public opinion to which the 'mad' fingers are indifferent. Also, it strengthens the secondary meaning of "brazen" (line 3) - of or like brass - being equally rigid and unfeeling. This ability to create a depth of meaning by a skillful manipulation of words and images is an early example of the mastery with which Yeats learned to use his medium in his later poetry. In "Adam's Curse", on the other hand, both the thematic concern and technique are relatively immature. It is true that Yeats had not written anything quite like it before 1902, and the influence of the theatre is clearly seen in the conversational framework of the poem, and in the manner in which the time, setting, theme and the cast are introduced in the opening lines:

> We sat together at one summer's end,
> That beautiful woman, your close friend,
> And you and I, and talked of poetry.
> /11.1-3/

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[6] Poems Written in Discouragement (1913), in which this and several other poems appeared, is marked by a distrust of public taste and judgement in matters of artistic, and even nationalistic, concern. This distrust frequently inspired ironic lines like:

> For men were born to pray and save.
> /"September 1913", l.6/

> You gave but, will not give again
> Until enough of Paudeen's pence
> By Biddy's halfpennies have lain.
> /"To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were Proved the People wanted Pictures," 11.1-3/

But the theatrical mode adopted here and the dramatic distance that Yeats maintains in the witty line, "Although they do not talk of it at school -" soon collapses and the poem returns to the old lyrical mood in the last two stanzas. Happily, the possibility of sentimental excessiveness is effectively controlled both by the use of pauses in the last four lines of the poem, and by the repetition of 'that' in lines 35 and 37. The latter device breaks the sentence into three distinct clauses that seem to move towards a climax, but the movement is suddenly arrested and changed into an anti-climax by the introduction of the tragic "yet" in line 37:

> "That you were beautiful", [l.35]
> "That I strove/To love you in the old high way of love;" [ll.35-36]
> "That it had all seemed happy, and . . . [l.37]
> ". . . yet we'd grown/As weary-hearted as that hollow moon." [ll.37-38]

The use of the word 'seemed' in line 37 is somewhat unfortunate because the use here fails to reinforce the meaning of the same word in lines 5 and 27. The central concern of the poem is 'seeming' in the sense of outward appearance that one puts up in public - this is the meaning in line 5 and 27. Compared to this the casual use of the same word in line 37 is rather disconcerting and appears careless. In his mature poetry Yeats seldom uses a key word casually within the same poem. Also, it is quite disturbing to read the poet's profession described as the articulation of "sweet sounds" (line 10) - one is almost tempted

to take it as an ironical statement. However, there is nothing in the context to suggest that it is ironic. "Sweet sounds" is a rather limited, and obviously unintentional, definition of poetry.

iii

With the gradual rejection of the dream-world of his earlier poetry Yeats was, as we have already noticed, overcoming the vague abstractions of his earlier 'poetic' use of language. In other words, the introduction of reality as the theme of his poetry made his use of language undergo definite changes towards a more precise and realistic form of expression. Concrete physical images are introduced in great number, particularly anatomical ones like 'thigh', 'bone' and 'marrow'. These add a new dimension to the poems, and the introduction of a certain amount of coarseness give some of the poems a healthy sexuality that is totally absent in the earlier poems:

> Once, when midnight smote the air,
> Eunuchs ran through Hell and met
> On every crowded street to stare
> Upon great Juan riding by:
> Even like those rail and sweat
> Staring upon his sinewy thighs.
> /"On those that hated 'The Play-
> boy of the Western World', 1907."/

The robust sexuality of a Don Juan shows by contrast the ineffectual clamour of 'Eunuchs . . . on every crowded street' who can do nothing better than to rail at any great endeavour they are incapable of appreciating. While Juan is not exactly a <u>persona</u> in this poem, he is definitely the

forerunner of such Yeatsian *personae* as Solomon, Sheba, Crazy Jane, and the 'I' in the very last poem he wrote, "Politics":

> How can I, that girl standing there,
> My attention fix
> On Roman or on Russian
> Or on Spanish politics
> . . . . . .
> And maybe what they say is true
> Of war and war's alarms,
> But O that I were young again
> And held her in my arms!
> [ll.1-4 and 9-12]

The introduction of realism in the language of his poems also occasioned the revival of one of his earliest beliefs about poetry - that the language of poetry should be the language of common speech. In *Autobiographies* he wrote:

> We should write out of our own thoughts in as nearly as possible the language we thought them in, as though in a letter to an intimate friend. We should not disguise them in any way . . . Personal utterance . . . could be as fine an escape from rhetoric and abstraction as drama itself.[7]

In a letter, the earliest on record, Yeats wrote, "my great aim is directness and extreme simplicity".[8] In spite of these assertions he was too taken up with dreams and visions to achieve this 'directness' in his early poetry. In the early years of his middle phase he tried to rectify this and in "Adam's Curse" we have an example of what Rajan has

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[7] *Autobiographies*, p.91.

[8] *Letters*, P.30.

described as a self-conscious attempt at common speech, "a studied avoidance of artificiality . . . [which] is not immune from an artificiality of its own "[9]:

> Better go down upon your marrow-bones
> And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
> Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
> For to articulate sweet sounds together
> Is to work harder than all these, and yet
> Be thought an idler by the noisy set
> Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
> The martyrs call the world.
>
> [11.7-14]

The notion that the language of poetry should be the language of common speech is somewhat naively romantic.[10] For one thing, it fails to distinguish the richness of poetry from the commonness of daily speech. With the passage of years Yeats realized the limitations of this assertion. But to a young poet desperately trying to get rid of a 'dream-burdened' style, the language of common speech obviously looked like the best alternative. As his concepts of nobility and aristocracy became clearer to him, he saw that directness and simplicity of expression (not necessarily the same as the language of common speech) are in themselves heroic virtues and signs of the well-bred mind. Indulgence in obscurities and vague abstractions is a convenient way to avoid the responsibilities of the artist and is often in cheap taste.

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[9] Rajan, W.B.Yeats, p.67.

[10] One recalls Wordsworth's oft-quoted statement about writing poems in "a selection of language really used by men", (Preface to the second edition of Lyrical Ballads, 1802) and its refutation by Coleridge in the famous Chapter XIV of Biographia Literaria.

Therefore 'style', even in the purely technical sense had specific moral implications for Yeats. In "Poetry and Tradition" (1907) he described "style" as "high breeding in words and in argument".[11] Years later in the essay entitled "Modern Poetry" he wrote:

> Style should be proud of its ancestry, of its traditional high breeding, that an ostentatious originality was out of place whether in the arts or in good manners.[12]

It is understandable why he should have delighted in creating music out of the simplest possible words and phrases in the very last years of his life. But that kind of mature experimentation with a simple diction could not be indulged in before he had also perfected the style of writing the impressive, ornamental, elaborate and resonant verses of The Tower and The Winding Stair volumes. For the time being, in these early years of the twentieth century, Yeats was trying to create poetry out of the language of common speech, hopefully to avoid both the "ostentatious originality" and excessive abstraction of his earlier style. Apparently, he was still to realize the necessity of such linguistic usage where images begat fresh images. From the self-conscious attempts at the language of common speech in In the Seven Woods to the quality of controlled, formal, passionate speech of his mature poetry was a long process of poetic development for

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[11] Essays, p.313.

[12] Essays, 1931-36, p.12.

Yeats.

The deliberate attempts to use the idiom of common speech in the poems of the early 1900's was, however, not entirely without merit. Unterecker has shown how ordinary conversational phrases were used by Yeats as a device to link groups of poems in The Green Helmet and Other Poems (1910).[13] It is difficult to agree with Unterecker's view that conversational phrases serve as the principal integrating device in the poems of this period, since the thematic and imagistic patterns are equally important in this respect. But it is, indeed, true that phrases from ordinary speech are found in great abundance in these poems as in the lines italicized below:

Why should I be dismayed . . .
/ "A Friend's Illness", l.3_7

I whispered, 'I am too young . . .
/ "Brown Penny", l.1_7

Why should I blame her that she filled my days . . .
/ "No Second Troy", l.1_7

At the same time there seems to exist in Yeats's mind a certain dissatisfaction with this notion of common speech as the language of poetry. A nagging doubt persists primarily because the common man, whose language he seeks to recreate in his verse, is suspect as far as the arts and every other 'fine thing' are concerned. The paradox was not easy to

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[13] John Unterecker, A Reader's Guide to the Poetry of W.B.Yeats, p.104.

resolve because the shift towards realism and the speech idiom from the earlier elaborate 'poetic' style seemed to be a step in the right direction. On the other hand, he had also to take into account the poet's 'noble ancestry' that sets him apart from the common man and his discursive, argumentative language. Therefore, we find Yeats vacillating between two opposite views of poetry - poetry as common speech and as the "gradual Time's last gift, a written speech/Wrought of high laughter, loveliness and ease".[14] Yeats knew that, away from the logic-chopping world of modern society, pockets of civilization still exist where language is not merely a mass of dead metaphors. Such vitality he admired in the works of Synge and Lady Gregory who incorporated the language of the Aran Islands and of Kiltartan respectively. But his essential difference was that, unlike either Synge or Lady Gregory, he was not prepared to write in a dialect. His idea of common speech was the language people actually speak in society; he wished to write "Greek tragedy . . . with a Dublin accent."[15]

IV

Yeats's concept of aristocracy sprang partly from his admiration for 'beautiful lofty things', partly from a deep psychological necessity - lacking strong moral or

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[14] "Upon a House shaken by the Land Agitation", ll.11-12.

[15] Autobiographies, p.384.

theological convictions he found in the concept of nobility certain ideals that became essential as a basis for his own life. But more importantly it resulted from a total distrust of the man on the street and his taste. The violent reaction to his play Cathleen ni Hoolihan and Synge's The Playboy of the Western World proved to him how false his hopes were about re-awakening the ancient cultural consciousness of Ireland. The man on the streets of Dublin was essentially no different from the logic-chopping Englishman. Mass hysteria, provoked either in the name of nationalism or religion, left Yeats totally disillusioned. He realized that the common man could neither inspire the poet nor be an understanding audience and that this double function could be served only by a refined but passionate, culturally aware and heroic aristocracy. The idea of the courtier enabled him to formulate his views on style and the function of the poet in society. It was at this point that Yeats saw the relation between the mask and 'style' - both were deliberate attempts at escaping the "hot-faced bargainers". The aristocratic mask became one of the most frequently repeated one in his poetry henceforth.[16] At the same time one of the functions of the poet was seen as the spokesman for the small circle of noble minds. A

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[16] See, for example, "These are the Clouds", "To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription", "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing", "To a Shade", "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and "Upon a Dying Lady."

sense of the artist's social obligations evolved in his mind and this in turn brought about a public voice in his poems. The domain of the artist's concern extended into public life; the new 'public' mode of speech becomes evident in poems like "To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription" and "September 1913":

> Was it for this the wild geese spread
> The grey wing upon every tide;
> For this that all that blood was shed
> For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
> And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
> All that delirium of the brave?
> Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
> It's with O'Leary in the grave.
> ["September 1913", ll.17-24]

The rhetoric of public speech [redacted] is used effectively in the thrice-repeated "for this" (lines 17,19 and 20) as in the phrase "And . . ./All that" (ll.21-22). Almost like a politician Yeats uses a string of names - Fitzgerald, Tone, Emmet and O'Leary - to reawaken shortlived public memory and to put it in shame for forgetting the ideals for which these heroes had laid down their lives.

This tone of voice is not restricted to poems specifically on 'public' themes but enters some of his more personal poems. "Friends" (1912) is a good example:

> Now must I these three praise -
> Three women that have wrought
> What joy is in my days:
> [ll.1-3]

Three very personal relationships become the subject of a public poem. In some of the best of Yeats's Last Poems one notices how this strain is continued and an intensely per-

sonal theme is blended with the openly public. "Beautiful Lofty Things" and "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" are two outstanding examples as is "Under Ben Bulben". Had Yeats not developed a keen sense of the poet's social obligations in the early years of this century, he would not have involved himself in public affairs and cultivated the sort of friendships which inspired these final poems. While he continued to write both purely personal poems ("A Bronze Head, "The Circus Animal's Desertion") and ones on purely public and topical themes ("Roger Casement", "Come Gather Round Me, Parnellites") the style that blended the two themes was almost always as successful and as characteristically Yeatsian.

A parallel development is found in a number of his love poems of this period. The blending of a public mode of writing and private sentiments gives a dramatic quality to these poems. In a sense, poems like "Never Give all the Heart" (1905) and "The Mask" (1910) are not love poems but poems about love. This may need a slight elaboration. Yeats's experience in the theatre and his ideas of heroism and aristocracy opened his eyes to the possibilities of the mask as a literary device. In his own life he found a very specific use of the mask in translating his private experience into the form of public art. The awareness of the contradiction between the subjectivity of the former and the objectivity of the latter was new to him, and he resolved it by introducing in his love poetry the same element of theatrica-

lity that marks his poems on public themes.

The rejection of his several suits by Maud Gonne and her marriage to Major McBride in 1903 were the source of greatest possible emotional distress to Yeats. "Never Give all the Heart" was written out of this painful experience of unrequited love. What gives this poem its special quality is the poet's ability to take a detached critical view of the situation. The use of the metaphor of acting in a drama ("play", lines 10 and 11) suggests the distance from which Yeats can now view his own unfortunate experience. There is an element of irony in the lines. "For they ["passionate women", line 3], for all smooth lips can say,/Have given their hearts up to the play" [11.9-10]. The particular reference here is to Maud Gonne and one notices the shift in the lover's attitude from the adulation in earlier poetry to a critical evaluation of the beloved in this poem. The poet uses the mask of a betrayed lover who has, however, been made wiser by the experience. The wisdom is contained in lines 11 and 12:

> And who could play it well enough
> If deaf and dumb and blind with love?

The sort of detachment Yeats speaks of here requires a very special kind of heroism - the ability to conquer sorrow in order to achieve the 'gaiety' that characterizes the actors,

artists and the wise Chinamen in "Lapis Lazuli" (1938).[17]

In "Poetry and Tradition" (1907) Yeats wrote:

> That we may be free from all the rest, sullen anger, solemn virtue, calculating anxiety, gloomy suspicion, prevaricating hope, we should be reborn in gaiety.[18]

The heroic quality required to "be reborn in gaiety" is not very different from what Yeats expects in the proud possessor of an aristocratic mind as expressed in a line like:

> Be secret and exult,
> Because of all things known
> That is most difficult.
> / "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing, ll.14-16 /

"The Mask" (1910) is an artistically more satisfying poem since it picks up the theme of "Never Give all the Heart" but sets it in a dramatic framework. Here Yeats exploits the dramatic potentiality inherent in the other poem by inventing a 'situation' and a cast - the man and the woman - and presenting them in the form of a short dramatic dialogue. The following lines from an early version of the poem indicate the mood in which the poem was conceived:

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17 When Yeats finally came to understand the full philosophic implication of 'gaiety' it brought him back to the Samkaran concept of detachment. This finds expression in two of his later poems, "Mohini Chatterjee" (1930) and "Meru" (1934). But this understanding could not come to him before he had attained the philosophical maturity to realize that the Samkaran idea of detachment is not a call to renounce the world of action in favour of a land of dreams. In the last chapter we saw how Yeats was trying to free himself from the influence of Indian philosophy in the 1890's - a philosophy that he really did not understand at that time.

18 Essays, p.312.

True love makes one a slave
Less than a man
The light lover is always
  love's master
So much the more is he man.[19]

At one level it is, indeed, a rather cynical view of the ideal man and woman relationship, and one may well wonder if the excitement generated in the heart of the woman by the mysterious lover hidden behind the mask is an adequate definition of love. But, at another level, it also speaks of a certain heroic quality that allows a person the strength to adopt this play acting attitude to life - to commit oneself without really caring to know "What's behind" (l.10). From this point of view it is understandable why Yeats preferred a 'Don Juan' to the 'Eunuchs' who run "on every crowded street".

To sum up the quality of Yeats's poetry during these middle years one remembers chiefly the emergence of the concept of the mask and the aristocratic ideal. Both sprang, however indirectly, from Yeats's involvement with the theatre. Also one notices the total rejection of the dream world and a corresponding interest in a life of action, in public affairs, in politics and the enunciation of a poetic of will rather than of inspiration. On the technical level the movement is from an ornate 'poetic' style to a more realistic and

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[19] Ellman, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, quoted p.172.

'naked' diction, and a greater ease in handling a variety of stanza forms - the conversational and dialogue structure, for example - instead of the prevalent single sentence structure of many of the earlier poems. Broadly speaking the poetry of this period can be set against the body of Yeats's poetry up to 1899 to establish the two chief antinomies - a life of action and a sense of responsibility set against a world of dreams and a desire to escape into faeryland. The interaction of these opposites has not so far been adequately explored by Yeats. Consequently, there is very little vacillation in these poems. In his later phases he will write highly complex and deeply metaphysical poems that result from an interpenetration of the antinomies. And in order to dramatise this interpenetration he will have to create situations where the antinomies - time and eternity, the Swordsman and Saint, body and soul - confront each other, and then explore, in his poems, the implications of these encounters. So far Yeats has carefully and elaborately expounded the theory of the Mask but has made very little use of the Masks themselves. In the subsequent volumes he will invent dramatic <u>personae</u>, give them each an identifiable speaking voice and, not unlike Browning in his dramatic monologues, get behind each of these various masks to dramatize these situations.

V

1914 - 1939

> The other day Lady Gregory said to me: "You are a much better educated man than you were ten years ago and much more powerful in argument". And I put The Tower and The Winding Stair into evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-possession and power.[1]

> The late Shakespeare is occupied with the other task of the poet - that of experimenting to see how elaborate, how complicated, the music could be made without losing touch with colloquial speech altogether . . .[2]

i

It will be less than fair to group together all the poems Yeats wrote between 1914 and 1938 as belonging to a single phase of development. Scholars agree that his best work was produced during these years; the richness of texture and the variety of thematic concerns are surely unmatched in his earlier poetry. To a student of the thematic aspect of Yeatsian poetry the poems of these years offer a fascinating and imposing list to choose from - art and the artist, religion, passion, sexuality, love, nationalism and politics, myths, history, time and eternity, and the famous 'System'

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[1] "A Packet for Ezra Pound" (1929), A Vision, p.8.

[2] T.S.Eliot, "The Music of Poetry", On Poetry and Poets, p.36.

that brings together and orders all these. Since our concern is primarily with the question of style we can take a rather overall view of this large body of poems and avoid a discussion of the themes.

Stylistically, one notices two phases of development during these years, and they are quite accurately indicated by the two quotations at the head of this chapter. The first phase, which determines the character of volumes from The Wild Swans at Coole (1919) to The Winding Stair and Other Poems (1933) - though not totally abandoned in the later volumes - consists of 'serious' poetry. These are poems about themes that were very important to Yeats, and therefore written in a style that matches the gravity of the thematic concerns. The reason for Yeats's interest in this type of poetry is twofold. First, the influence of the 'System' is felt on most of these poems. However naive we may think Yeats to have been for his belief in the 'wisdom' imparted to him by the 'spirits' (communicated to him through Mrs. Yeats's automatic writing), we cannot ignore the significance of these dispersed thoughts in his poetry. After 1917 these became very important "metaphors for poetry".[3] Secondly, in his long poetic career Yeats never took the task of writing less than seriously, and during these years he was supremely conscious that at last

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[3] A Vision, p.8.

he had found really significant themes for his poems. It is understandable that he should not have spared himself any pain to seek out the right poetic idiom for his 'serious' poems.

Eliot's comment about the poetry of the late Shakespeare precisely sums up the kind of poetry Yeats too sought to create in the second and final phase. The elaborate, learned, and often ceremonial style of the earlier group of poems is dropped by the old poet as he indulges in the far more exciting but difficult task of writing equally profound poems that appear casual and lively on the surface. Yeats packed into the simple words, phrases and metaphors of these last poems the greatest concentration of thought, hiding behind a facade of light-hearted verse making sense that awes the mind. He created poems tantalizingly simple, yet complex without the elaborate artifice of a poem like "Byzantium" (1932). While the comparison with the poetry of Shakespeare's last plays is appropriate, the spirit in which some of these poems were written - the tongue in the cheek attitude - bears comparison with John Donne.[4] But more significantly these poems are the final examples of sprezzatura - the ultimate heroic struggle to make words obey

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[4] See "To a Young Beauty". Yeats did, indeed, ". . . dine at journey's end/With . . . Donne" (11.17-18).

his command while appearing so carefree and nonchalant at the same time.

ii

By the year 1914 Yeats had more or less firmly established the theoretical basis for his style. Most of his definitions about style and the poet's obligations date from the preceding period. The concepts of the mask, aristocracy, the ill-bred and well-bred minds, nobility, heroism, nationalism and poetry evolved gradually over the years and during the middle years these were clearly and convincingly established. As we have seen in the last chapter these concepts took time to attain their final shape. Aristocracy and the heroic ideal were explored, re-examined and clarified through a number of poems beginning with "Adam's Curse". Similarly, the theory of the mask, another significant influence on the development of Yeats's idea of the style, became quite clear to Yeats by the time he published Responsibilities in 1914. But while the idea of the mask had been explored and established, Yeats was yet to incorporate the idea into the act of writing poems. In other words, most of his poems so far have been statements about these ideas rather than their dramatic adaptations in verse. The important task, as Yeats must have soon realized, was to create personae for his poem who would dramatise the various ideas. Instead of speaking in the first person he should allow his personae to adopt the various masks and then explore the

arguments for and against these ideals and concepts. Yeats's poetry has so far lacked the most vital element of drama - the element of conflict. A generalized statement of this kind has to be, at best, approximate but as an overall view of his poetry it is quite accurate. The movement in Yeats's poetry after 1914 is from conviction to vacillation, from statement to conflict. It is not surprising, therefore, that his poetry should now concern itself with exploring the philosophical implications of the concepts he has so far laid down.

Basically, the key conflict in Yeats's best poetry is between Time and Eternity, reason and emotion, the head and the heart, or to use the original terms, between reality and dream. To dramatise the conflict the old quarrel between Oisin and St. Patrick (in The Wanderings of Oisin) has to be revived and all the antinomies clearly paired and set in action against each other. The greatness of Yeats can be judged only by examining the imaginative power with which he conceived the various dramatic situations and the characters that participate in them. These various situations reflect the metaphysical penetration of the Yeatsian vision - the ability to explore every ramification of the conflict between these fundamental antinomies - a conflict that is the basis for a passionate life. In 1917 Yeats published Per Amica Silentia Lunae, his first significant philosophical statement about his beliefs. In this short treatise he introduced the

idea of anti-self that is to figure so prominently in his reworking of the concept of mask henceforth. Unity or wholeness, according to Yeats, can be achieved only through the interpenetration of the natures of the self and the anti-self. This interpenetration can take place in imagination by recreating and reliving the soul's everlasting quarrel with itself. The self which is the conscious, but at the same time limited, part of our soul must be trained to perceive its antinomy - the ever-present but invisible anti-self. The self's encounter with the anti-self can only be fleeting and occasional, but in those rare moments the passionate and imaginative man lives to the fullest extent of his being. If Yeats was still a believer in occultism he would have suggested that the union can be achieved only in a mystical trance. Instead he tells us that these moments are relived in art since only the imaginative artist has the capacity to assume the 'mask' of the anti-self. This is a far more difficult discipline than assuming the aristocratic mask of 'nonchalance' or sprezzatura. The artist 'embodies' the conflict of his soul - he lives through the experience not only of his self' but also his anti-self: In 'Estrangement' (1926) he wrote:

> If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are and assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves . . .[5]

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[5] Autobiographies, p.400.

Accordingly, he revised the description of the mask in the first edition of A Vision (1925):

> the image of what we wish to become or of that to which we give our reverence.[6]

In this sense the ideal mask is of the anti-self for, above everything else, we wish to unite with it. But the mask - the anti-self - can be adapted only by a subjective man, the imaginative artist above all. It cannot be achieved through action nor through wisdom and learning. The rhetorician, the scholar, the scientist and the man of action are incapable of assuming masks:

> For those that love the world serve it
> in action,
> Grow rich, popular and full of influence
> And should they paint or write, still it
> is action:
> . . . . . .
> while art
> Is but a vision of reality.
> ["Ego Dominus Tuus", ll.42-48, (1917)]

The imaginative artist can invoke his anti-self because only he is capable of quarreling with himself. While Yeats had been writing about the mask from as early as 1902, this famous description of poetry appeared for the first time in 1917. From the mask as a social phenomenon to the mask as a literary device is the line of development between these years. In terms of style, the movement was towards the creation of an elaborate, complicated yet precise music that

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[6] C.Salvadori, Yeats and Castiglione, quoted p.77.

would express the various shades of this quarrel with himself.

iii

To dramatize the conflict within the soul Yeats invented a series of masks and situations. Like Browning, he explored the quarrel by allowing his _personae_ to express themselves in his poems, thus solving the basic aesthetic problem of subjectivity. By allowing his _personae_ to speak for his own divided self he could maintain the proper objective distance from the issues involved. Characteristically, the form that most suited these poems was the 'dialogue'. By very careful labour Yeats was able to perfect this form over the years. From the simple use of contrast in the 1917 poem "Ego Dominus Tuus" he slowly evolved the complex metaphysical pattern of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (1927). The basis for the early poem is the direct opposition between not merely the attitudes but also the intellectual power and sensitivity of the two speakers Hic and Ille. The poem is supremely ironical in that while a dialogue does take place on a very superficial level between the two, there is actually very little communication between them. Hic (the name is purposely made absurdly prosaic) is the logic-chopping mediocre man of 'action' who can never be expected to see the point in Ille's search for his anti-self. His contribution to the conversation consists of a series of facilely 'logical' interjections by which he seeks to counter

the validity of Ille's search. He cannot, for example, see the difference between the subjective emotions of the poet and the objective 'anti-self' created in his art;

> No one denies to Keats love of the world;
> Remember his deliberate happiness.
> [11.52-53]

Hic is not made any wiser by Ille's reply, "His art is happy but who knows his mind?" (l.54). Ille, in fact, goes quite out of his way to simplify the meaning of this line using concrete, everyday phrases like "schoolboy" and "sweetshop window" - phrases one would expect Hic to understand. When Hic makes positive statements they amount to lines like:

> I would find myself and not an image.
> [1.10]

or,

> A style is found by sedentary toil
> And by the imitation of great masters.
> [11.65-66]

On the other hand, when Ille expounds the idea of the anti-self in the last thirteen lines of the poem, Hic makes no reply - presumably he has already fallen out of a conversation to which he has made no meaningful contribution at any point, except, perhaps, as a useful foil to Ille. In a sense the last lines are spoken as a monologue, and being free of the obligation to explain himself in simple terms Ille is able to speak in an idiom appropriate to the occasion:

> I call to the mysterious one who yet
> Shall walk the wet sand by the edge of the
> stream
> And look most like me, being indeed my double,

> And prove of all imaginable things
> The most unlike, being my anti-self,
> And, standing by these characters, disclose
> All that I seek;
>
> [11.70-76]

The bank of the stream is a very significant place - it is the 'strand', the meeting place of water and the land - the scene of more than one important encounter in Yeats's works, the best known being Cuchulain's fight with the waves on Baile's strand. Yeats revised the original line 71 from ". . . wet sand by the water's edge" to ". . . wet sands by the edge of the stream". As symbol of the eternal quarrel between the self and the anti-self the continuously flowing 'stream' is more appropriate than the word "water". It is also worthwhile to recall that the stream Yeats had in mind was the one flowing past his tower in Ballylee. Understandably Hic fails to grasp the symbolic implications; for him it is only a "shallow stream" (l.1). His concern is with merely the physical dimension of depth while the same stream is measured by Ille in terms of eternity.

In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" the dialogue reaches its perfection as a poetic device for the exploration of metaphysical questions. In this poem the two sides are not represented by two individuals but by two parts of the same being. No attempt is made to allegorize the situation; the drama gains its significance from the fact that it is about a genuine conflict that arises out of the urgent need to determine the nature and meaning of one's being. The

poem can be best described as an 'internal' dialogue in which the two sides involved are really parts of one being and the issue in debate is equally vital to both. Irony of the kind present in "Ego Dominus Tuus" would surely be out of place in this poem and it is a sign of Yeats's maturity that he presents neither side as a villain or a fool in this drama. Both 'Self' and 'Soul' are treated with equal respect and the argument is not biased in favour of the one or the other. If Soul does not continue beyond the fortieth line it is not because he has been beaten in argument by Self but because he has quite adequately made his point. Soul admits that he can only 'measure' and not 'forgive'; consequently his tongue must turn into 'stone' at this point. Self, too, in its turn realizes that a strict compartmentalization of the two parts of the individual is not possible. In the last stanza he shows how he is capable of holding both the positions - to forgive and to measure - and that he is content to follow life to its source in both 'action' and 'thought'. The conflict is resolved not by the rejection of one by the other but accepting both the stands which is the essential interpenetration of the antinomies. In the last three lines of the poem the singular 'I' is changed to the plural form:

> We must laugh and we must sing,
> We are blest by everything,
> Everything we look upon is blest.
> / 11.70-72, italics mine /

It is true that ultimately Self triumphs, as it must in a subjective person, but it is not arrogant in victory. This

mellowing of Self following a process of vacillation is the essential spirit of the poem - its truth. The 'logical' structure closely follows the psychological movement. This gives the poem its depth and complexity.

What is common to both poems is that they deal in abstract truths - abstractions that can be made part of the personal world. This is true of most of the poems of this phase. Yeats's preoccupation with abstract philosophy and with the creation of an appropriate myth colours his poems considerably. Every personal sentiment - pride, hatred or love - is interpreted in abstract philosophical terms. Personality is interpreted in terms of the System. This gives the poems of this phase an academic or intellectual quality. Poems like "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes", "An Image from a Past Life", "The Second Coming" and "Blood and the Moon", to mention only a few, are particularly 'learned' because the symbols, the key words and phrases can be understood only by referring back to the System and to the various philosophical works Yeats read during these years. Most of the poems follow strictly logical patterns of argument. However complicated and difficult these arguments may appear on the first reading, an accurate and precise pattern of thought emerges as the reader starts understanding the poem better. In other words the poems have a strictly formal character; in this regard one should specially mention "Among School Children" and "The Tower". The poems in The

Tower (1928) and The Winding Stair (1933) bear out Lady Gregory's impression that Yeats was now a much "better educated" person than he was before and that the poems demonstrate an ability to present arguments powerfully.

The formal learned character of the poems introduces a new richness and sublimity to Yeats's poetry that is evident not only in the longer poems but also in short ones like "Veronica's Napkin", and "Oil and Blood". The elevated style of his poems can perhaps be best understood as the expression of a poet who has adopted an overall mask of greatness. This mask is not altogether unsuited to the mature Yeats. His marriage in 1917, election to Senatorship in 1922 (the same year he was also awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Dublin), and winning the Nobel Prize in 1923 had given him a sense of fulfillment. He almost became an Irish institution when he won the Nobel Prize; though this did not make him less responsible as a poet the excitement of this new found glory is reflected in this grand mask. The formal recognition of his philosophy that came with the publication of A Vision in 1925 is also partly responsible for this attitude. Throughout these years Yeats retains the self-knowledge that allows him to laugh at himself as "A sixty-year-old smiling public man" ("Among School Children", l.8). But his verse takes on a new eloquence that reflects his current moods. The richness of his life is translated into the richness of his poetry.

This richness consists not only of well argued metaphysical poems but also the variety of themes on which he writes during these years - all of which have the same formal, ceremonial character.

"A Prayer for My Daughter" (1919) is a good example of his ceremonial style. The poem begins in solemn controlled tone:

> Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
> Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
> My child sleeps on.
> . . . . . .
> And for an hour I have walked and prayed
> Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.
> [ll. 1-3 and 7-8]

Prayer itself is a very formal kind of expression, and onto it Yeats adds the still more formal theme of aristocracy so that the poem finally becomes more a celebration of certain ideals than a prayer. Bloom's description of the poem as a "celebratory prayer" is very appropriate.[7] A detailed examination of the poem's argument reveals that it flows smoothly from stanza to stanza without a serious break or disruption which gives the entire poem a unique coherence and a highly formalized structure.

"The Tower" (1927) is yet another poem that has been very carefully structured. The key to its structure is not in its metrical uniformity for the poem is divided in three

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[7] Bloom, Yeats, p.325.

distinct sections, each having a very characteristic stanza formation. Each section reflects a different mood. The first section with its irregular stresses and broken lines reflects an old man's agitation at being unable to reconcile "Decrepit age" with an "Excited, passionate, fantastical/ Imagination" - yet another example of the conflict between the self and the anti-self. The old man (one of the more popular I-personae of Yeats's mature years) decides to overlook the conflict and to busy himself with the study of philosophy. The second section of the poem picks up the question of self and anti-self in a narrative framework by relating events from the lives of the passionate people who once resided in the tower or its vicinity. The section consists of thirteen eight-lined decasyllabic stanzas that suit the partly meditative and partly narrative mood of this section. The last section counters the decision made in Section I and asserts the value of passion and pride - the qualities of the subjective man. This section is one of the best examples of Yeats's rhetorical skill. It begins in the grave authoritative voice of a proud old man spelling out his last testament:

> I choose upstanding men
> That climb the streams until
> The fountain leap, and at dawn
> Drop their cast at the side of
> dripping stone;
> /11.122-126_7

As the 'will' describes the passionate subjective man who is to be the heir to the old man, the tone of the speaking voice

catches the same passionate intensity and declares with a high-pitched rhetorical flourish:

> I mock Plotinus' thought
> And cry in Plato's teeth,
> Death and life were not
> Till man made up the whole,
> Made lock stock and barrel
> Out of his bitter soul.
> [11.146-151]

To bring out the passionate intensity of this section Yeats reduced the length of lines from pentameters in the earlier section to lines with only three stressed syllables.

In my discussion of the style of poems by Yeats written during these years I have not mentioned the imagistic and symbolical patterns that play important parts in determining the structure of many of them. To do this would require a detailed analysis of the ideas behind these symbols, for it is on the basis of this scholarship that the contribution of these symbols and images to the 'learned' style of Yeats's poetry can be judged. To introduce an explanation of even the more important Yeatsian symbols I would have to go beyond the immediate concern of this chapter. Suffice it to mention that the high style of Yeats's poetry, its profound and complex texture depends to a great extent on these symbols. Not all the symbols and images were, however, introduced for the first time during these years. Some of them had first appeared in Yeats's poetry merely as descriptive words which gradually gathered a rich connotative value and attained their final importance. The simple descriptive

word 'withering' is found in an early poem without any special connotative value attached to it:

> They know undying things, for they
> Wander where earth withers away
> ["Baile and Aillinn" (1903), 11.170-71]

Obviously 'dreams' begin where earth (or reality) 'withers' away - and the word can be easily replaced by 'fade' without changing the meaning of the lines. By 1910, however, the word reappears in Yeats's poetry as a metaphor for the process of gaining wisdom with age:

> Though leaves are many, the root is one;
> Through all the lying days of my youth
> I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
> Now I may wither into the truth.
> ["The Coming of Wisdom with Time"]

In 1929 this fairly simple metaphor is charged with so much meaning and is put in the context of such a complex poem that it becomes almost symbolical:

> Dry timber under that rich foliage,
> At wine-dark midnight in the sacred wood,
> Too old for a man's love I stood in rage
> Imagining men. Imagining that I could
> A greater with lesser pang assuage
> Or but to find if withered vein ran blood,
> I tore my body that its wine might cover
> Whatever could recall the lip of lover
> ["Her Vision in the Wood", 11.1-8]

The metaphor of the 'withered bough' gathers a complexity because of the considerable measure of the oblique introduced by Yeats in this poem. The poem is set in "the sacred wood" but the trees are not 'withered' - the old woman's veins are. Even the 'dry timber', as the first line tells us, grows rich foliage while no blood flows through her veins. If the

stanza had not mentioned the trees, the foliage and the wood, the 'withered' might have only been a purely descriptive word indicating the condition of the veins. But by making the veins 'wither' while the trees live Yeats makes a rather complex metaphorical use of the actual process of 'withering'.

Yeats could not have created poems of such outstanding quality as "Leda and the Swan" and "Byzantium" if he had held consistently (and blindly) to his earlier declared intent of writing simple, unadorned, direct verse. The rich, elaborate, myth-oriented language that gives these poems their complexity and depth cannot be described as the product of "simplicity" and "directness". In the last chapter I analysed the defects of the rather immature decision to write poems in the language of common speech. There is, indeed, some "enterprise/In walking naked" ("A Coat", 1914, 11.9-10), but, as Yeats soon realized, it should not be overdone. We have noted how Yeats freed himself from his early dream-burdened, 'poetic' style. The excessive use of vague adjective, specially compound epithets like 'silver-pale' and 'pearly-white' was strictly controlled. But when he uses a phrase like "The feathered glory" in "Leda and the Swan" it is done with superb art and without the fear of relapsing into the former style of writing. For a lesser poet it would be positively advisable to stick to a 'naked' style once it is found. But poetry of the quality of The Tower and The Winding Stair could never have been the product of

such a cautious and self-conscious style. In this sense Yeats's mature poetry can be described as art for art's sake. He tried his best to order his literary tool - the language of his poetry - in such a way as to exploit its maximum potentiality. He used various rhetorical devices such as the interrogative form and the repetition of words and phrases to create a rich complexity of effect. When he finally returns to the ballad form in his last years he makes excellent use of the refrain. Veeder's comprehensive study of these rhetorical devices show how effectively Yeats used them to create the rich poems of this period.[8]

iv

One of the important ways in which Yeats made language yield the maximum meaning was his multiple use of the same word. By examining a number of different contexts into which a word has been put, it is possible to arrive at a rather comprehensive understanding of Yeats's idea of the word. In this way one may examine, through a purely linguistic survey, what the various implications are for Yeats of concepts like heroism or manhood or divinity. It may be possible to have a clearer idea of Yeats's notion of love by following this method than by studying any single poem that might treat this idea.

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[8] William Veeder, The Rhetoric of Repetition.

Yeats used the word three hundred and fifty-three times in his poems and another seventy-two times as 'loved'. Considering only a few of these uses, we have in "A Drinking Song":

> Wine comes in at the mouth
> And love comes in at the eye;
> That's all we shall know for truth
> Before we grow old and die.
> [11.1-4]

The definition of love given in this poem poses no difficulty for the title of the poem itself indicates the frivolous mood in which it was written. The 'truth' asserted in this poem can be valid only as long as the mood lasts. But the frivolity of the poem is not without a certain element of sorrow for the life that allows the poet to know love only as superficial infatuation cannot, indeed, be worth much. Behind the frivolous cynicism lies a recognition of the fact that love should mean more than what it now seems to mean. In "The Two Kings" Yeats writes:

> What can they know of love that do not know
> She builds her nest upon a narrow ledge
> Above a windy precipice?
> [11.193-195]

This is, indeed, a responsible view of love - a view that takes into account the precarious conditions in which a man and a woman can surrender themselves totally to each other. It recognizes the fact that love is not possible without the special kind of heroism that consists of a desire to walk on tight ropes. Comfort and domestic security can not be a substitute for love. Ideal love, according to this definition,

is an adventure and without a very definite love for excitement it cannot be attained. But this love of excitement can not be taken too lightly - for love is not a pastime; it is not a thrilling experience in which one participates for a short while and then forgets all about it. Once one is in love there is no way of getting out of it without being totally annihilated, for its alternative is destruction and total ruin.

Now we should look at a metaphysical treatment of the same theme. The sexual imagery and abundance of the theme of lust should not lead us to believe that Yeats finally equated love and sexual passion. "The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul", wrote Yeats.[9] Sex unites the bodies of man and woman and at the height of passion a sort of unity takes place between them that for a moment captures the essence of true love. But real love can only be approximated, never really achieved, for the union of bodies is only part of the total union that must be effected: "Love is all/Unsatisfied/That cannot take whole/Body and Soul" ("Crazy Jane on the day of Judgement", ll.1-4). Given enough time true love can be known says Jane, but within Time's compass 'enough time' can never be had. Ideal love is possible only in eternity since "All could be known or shown/ If Time were but gone" (ll.18-19). Is Yeats's final view

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[9] G.B.Saul, A Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Poems, quoted p.147.

of love, then, one of despair? Far from it, the recognition that ideal love is not possible in Time also brings the knowledge that only the absence of ideal love (and ideal happiness) makes passion, heroism and tragedy meaningful and life worthwhile. Solomon and Sheba may never be able to bring Eternity back but their glory is in the fact that, even for a moment, they are able to make the cockerel crow. Man and woman can effect the unity of Time and Eternity:

> Yet the world ends when these two things,
> Though several, are single light,
> When oil and wick are burned in one;
> Therefore a blessed moon last night
> Gave Sheba to her Solomon.
> /"Solomon and the Witch", ll.28-32/

And when the fleeting moment is passed human love has once again demonstrated its power in defiance of the heavens. And man can repeat this heroic effort over and over again; "O! Solomon! let us try again", is his triumphant cry.

Love is transitory but once achieved it attains a permanence as it becomes a part of the Great Mind entering which nothing ever ceases to exist - not even a single night's experience. "Love is but a skein unwound/Between the dark and the dawn," says Jane in "Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman" (lines 5-6) and then goes on to elaborate it in the next poem:

> That lover of a night
> Came when he would,
> Went in the dawning light
> Whether I would or no;
> Men come, men go,
> <u>All things remain in God</u>.
>
> /"Crazy Jane on God,
> ll.1-6/

and therefore:

> The skein so bound us ghost to ghost
> When he turned his head
> Passing on the road that night,
> Mine must walk when dead.
> /"Crazy Jane and Jack the Journey
> man, ll. 15-18/

Finally, I will take the following lines from "For Anne Gregory":

> Never shall a young man
> Thrown into despair
> By those great honey-coloured
> Ramparts at your ear,
> Love you for yourself alone
> And not your yellow hair.
> . . . . . .
> That only God, my dear,
> Could love you for yourself alone
> And not your yellow hair.
> /ll.1-6 and 16-18/

The poem makes a distinction that has not appeared in any of the earlier poems: between physical love and a dispassionate love. The issue is not of cramming "loves two divisions"[10] but of keeping them apart; innocent Anne Gregory tends to think of ideal love in terms of a purely spiritual relationship. She is unable to realize that the young man's inability to love her "for /her/self alone/And not/her/yellow hair" does not make his love less than the ideal. What is, perhaps, the ideal love in the purely spiritual sense is not necessarily the ideal love for human beings. The poem is as much a definition of love as of man. Man is not God; this does not

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[10] "The Lady's Second Song", l.12.

attach an opprobrium to the state of manhood. To suggest that man should love dispassionately is the same as suggesting man should be God - a very un-Yeatsian proposition. In a sense the basic conflict between the Saint and Swordsman (or the Bishop and Crazy Jane) is brought up once again. The "old religious man" who "found a text" supporting the idea of God's perfect love reminds one of the "withered men" of "pedantic Babylon" ("The Dawn, ll.5-6) - the patently 'primary' figure in Yeats's poetry. On the other hand, the young man who loves with a physical passion comes close to the ideal 'antithetical' lover. In her ignorance Anne Gregory is unaware of the possibility of an ideal physical relationship between a man and a woman that can approximate, and almost rival, the purely Spiritual love that only God is capable of. The ideal form of love was, for mature Yeats, a passionate physical relationship that contains the seed of the ideal love - for in the moment of sexual consummation Chance and Choice, Time and Eternity, body and the soul can be brought together and the antinomies resolved even if for a fleeting second. There is an element of justifiable irony in the lines "Love you for yourself alone/And not your yellow hair" since it is impossible to conceive of a 'womanhood' which does not include the body. From the romanticized notion of an ethereal love relationship and faery mistresses to this affirmation of the power of physical love was a long process of development that parallels quite closely the change in the style of Yeats's poems.

V

The last phase of Yeats's poetry has been described variously as "An Old Man's Eagle Eye",[11] "An Old Man's Eagle Mind"[10] and "An Old Man's Frenzy."[13] A passionate old man's lust and rage is the predominant, though by no means the only, theme of Yeats's last poems. In this apparently 'unpoetic' mask of a person who is far from an ideal hero Yeats presents his final view of life. The coarse, rough speaking old man becomes a sort of 'super mask' in which all the earlier masks are lost. The process of development is one of weaning away from the deliberately artistic. In a very peculiar manner the mask of the mocking, raging old man is singularly appropriate for it unceasingly questions the ultimate validity of the elaborate art he has so far created. The "voice that ninety years have cracked"[14] replaces the resonant music of the earlier poems.

The edifice of 'fabulous artifice' that Yeats had so carefully, painstakingly and deliberately created is pulled down irreverently. It seems that at last his long apprenticeship is over and that he is free to create as he pleases. Poem after poem gives evidence of this new found sense of

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11 A.N.Jeffares, W.B.Yeats: Man and Poet, pp.276-298.

12 G.Melchiori, The Whole Mystery of Art, pp.235-270.

13 Rajan, W.B.Yeats, pp.171-187.

14 "Ribh at the Tomb of Baile and Aillinn", l.5.

nonchalance:

> The Roaring Tinker if you like,
> But Mannion is my name,
> And I beat up the common sort
> And think it is no shame.
> The common breeds the common,
> A lout begets a lout,
> So when I take on half a score
> I knock their heads about.
> /"Three Songs on the One Burden", I,_7

Often, he shows scant regard for the element of formal beauty in poetry as the monstrous alliteration in "A Bronze Head" proves:

> On gangling stocks grown great, great
> stocks run dry (line 25).

In "The Chambermaid's First Song" he rhymes 'ranger' and 'stranger' with 'sigh for' while in the six lines of "The Chambermaids Second Song" three are made to end with the word 'worm'. This is not unconscious carelessness but genuine nonchalance combined partly perhaps with a desire to appear spontaneous and conversational. The same tendency is apparent in the structure of "Meru". It has an abab cdcd efef gg rhyme scheme in strict accordance with the Shakespearean sonnet form, yet it has as many as five lines with eleven syllables in them in addition to one each with twelve and thirteen syllables.

The language of Yeats's last poems acquires a fast moving racy style that contrasts with the elaborate and ceremonial style of some of the poems in The Tower and The Winding Stair . Patently unpoetic words rush in upon the reader of these poems as I have italicized in a selection of lines

below:

There struts Hamlet, there is Lear
/ "Lapis Lazuli", l.10 /

There all the barrel-hoops are knit,
/ "There", l.1 /

'A laughing, crying, sacred song,
A leching song,' they said.
/ "The Three Bushes", ll.43-44 /

Yeats's new style permits him to extend his vocabulary to include such words as "belly", "bum", "warty" and "punk". Never before has he taken such liberty with language. But it is a language that now permits him to write with equal ease about both high and low themes. The changes in vocabulary reflected in the replacement 'high style' is also paralleled in the rejection of the earlier learned symbolism. The elaborate 'System' is forgotten and now he introduces new symbols as they come in handy: symbols from common life, from legends and from anything else that he might be immediately interested in at a particular moment. Into simple words and phrases he packs a concentration of meaning that might not be apparent to the new reader. Nor is there a key to these symbols in the form of a detailed philosophy. The excitement that these poems generate in the careful reader rests on the fact that they so unexpectedly reward his effort by uncovering a vast store of meaning.

"It was Yeats's aim, during the last years of his life, to embody the highest possible thought in the simplest possible language", wrote Kathleen Raine in her introduction

to Letters on Poetry.[15] It is a simplicity that gains richness through being oblique; one may slightly alter Yeats's professed statement about 'style' in his earliest surviving letter, ". . . my great aim is directness and extreme simplicity",[16] and define his last poems as "obliqueness and extreme simplicity".

It is not surprising that the readers of Yeats's poetry consider the poems written between 1914 and 1938 as his best work. Thematically, one may say, there is no significant difference between the early poetry and the later poems. Yeats's vital concerns remain the same even when the emphases alter. But it is the style that distinguishes the better from the worse in Yeats's poetry. Even during the mature years there are the two distinct stylistic phases as we have seen in this chapter. Yeats was never artless, not even during his early years of poetic apprenticeship but it was his idea of what the art of poetry is - in other words, the style - that underwent drastic changes and determined the course of artistic evolution. Ultimately, it was style that enabled Yeats to shape the final tragic-heroic gesture:

> I must lie down where all the ladders start,
> In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.
> /"The Circus Animals' Desertion", 1938,
> ll.39-40/

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15 Letters on Poetry, p.xii.

16 Letters, p.30.

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