WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS AS A LITERARY CRITIC

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A Dissertation

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Department of English, Memorial University of Newfoundland, March 20, 1972.

ABSTRACT

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William Butler Yeats's literary criticism derived from his impulse to examine and promote the kind of art he believed in, and to repudiate art founded upon what he believed were false aesthetic and philosophical principles. It shows how relentless Yeats was in his attacks upon Irish propaganda and upon what he believed was decadent in English literary tradition. His practical criticism clearly reveals the nature of his errors as a critic, but it reveals also the strengths of a dedicated man struggling towards a poetic.

Yeats's theoretical criticism is significant for its insistence upon the importance of the poetic impulse to art, for its insistence upon the autonomy of art enhanced by, but not ultimately dependent upon, biographical and historical considerations, and for its promotion of heroic and visionary art in an unheroic and materialistic age. It shows also Yeats's unending endeavour to determine how Mask, mythology, and symbol could best be used to bring art into meaningful relation with life.

Yeats's criticism reveals not only his aesthetic principles but his 'life-values' as well. It exposes his prejudices and caprices; but more important, it emphasizes what was essential to him: faith in heroic man, in aristocratic traditions, and in the educative image which great art provided. Ultimately, Yeats's literary criticism records his attempts at getting his own thoughts in order, and its greatest value lies in the kind of poetry it helped him to write.

PREFACE

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) wrote copiously on the purpose and nature of art. And though his poetry will always remain primary, his criticism is significant for the insight it gives into his own poems, and into the defects of the literature of his time. Above all, it records his dedicated struggle towards a poetic, and reflects his profound development as a poet.

Any assessment of Yeats as a critic must logically begin with the practical criticism, especially with the reviews which Yeats wrote before 1900. This is so because these reviews provide the earliest indication of his thoughts on literature and because, taken together with his later practical and theoretical criticism, they show not only his debilitating prejudices but also the rightness of his instincts.

The early reviews provided Yeats with a means of getting closer to his subject. After 1900 his criticism became more theoretical as his earlier aphorisms developed into more 'reasoned' critical concepts. Yeats retained his antagonism towards realism, materialism, and overt didacticism but his criticism became more positive as he sought to discover how Mask, mythology and symbolism could be used to provide the educative image which made great art life-enhancing.

It is difficult to summarize Yeats's achievement as a critic because while some things remained constant to him, his critical methods and objectives changed with increased literary experience. This study attempts to show where Yeats needed to modify his views and what remained essential to him. It progresses from the practical criticism where his prejudices are perhaps most evident, to the theoretical criticism -- the rationale of his art -- to an examination of the kind of life which Yeats wanted as the referent for his art.

I should like to thank sincerely the Trustees of the Rothermere Fellowships Trust for awarding me a fellowship to study in England. Thanks are also due to the library staffs of University College London, the Senate House, and the British Museum; and to Dr. Keith Walker of University College London for directing my early research. A number of people at Memorial University aided me in various ways, but I wish to thank especially the following persons: Dr. E. R. Seary, for encouraging me to do graduate study; Professor D. D. Stuart, for reading some early drafts and for his helpful suggestions; Dr. P. G. Gardner, my supervisor, for his kind but perceptive criticism of the scripts. I wish to thank also the Library staff for invaluable assistance. My greatest debt is to my wife, who not only typed all the drafts but who encouraged me and bore with me over the several years when my teaching and

research must often have imposed unfair burdens upon her. "More is thy due than more than all can pay."

-- D. R. B.

Memorial University of Newfoundland,
March 15, 1972.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A number of works are frequently referred to and, after their initial documentation, the following abbreviations are used:

Auto.	Autobiographies
E & I.	Essays and Introductions
Expl.	Explorations
Collected Plays	The Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats
Collected Poems	The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats
J. B. Yeats: Letters	J. B. Yeats: Letters to his Son W. B. Yeats and Others, 1869-1922
Letters	The Letters of W. B. Yeats
Letters on Poetry	Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley
Var. Plays	The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats
Var. Poems	The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

> The critic does not need a formal philosophy; he needs a wide and generous conception of man's nature and destiny.
>
> Martin Turnell

Yeats's reputation as a critic is still marginal. That this is so is due less to undervaluation than to neglect. Judged by its quality and scope, his criticism in fact constitutes a substantial achievement. That achievement is represented mainly in Explorations (1962), Essays and Introductions (1961), and Autobiographies (1955).[1] His voluminous letters, especially those edited by Allan Wade in 1954, provide valuable critical comments. Significant criticism is found also in the numerous uncollected articles which he contributed to periodicals,[2] and even in his poetry and drama. Study of these sources shows that Yeats's

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[1] For convenience I have quoted from these more recent collections and have resorted to such earlier texts as Essays (1924) and The Autobiography (1938) only for omissions or for important variants.

[2] This applies mainly to the period 1886-1899, and to such periodicals as The Bookman and United Ireland. My research began in 1966, and the first two sections of this study were written before John P. Frayne's Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats was published in 1970. Consequently, my references are to the original sources.

primary interests as a critic were the literature of the Renaissance, the Romantic Revival as he believed it was exemplified in Blake and Shelley, and Irish mythology upon which he hoped to found a modern Irish literature.

As early as 1900, and in one of his best known essays, Yeats stated that

> All writers, all artists of any kind, in so far as they have had any philosophical or critical power, perhaps just in so far as they have been deliberate artists at all, have had some philosophy, some criticism of their art . . . .[3]

Two decades ago Mr. Balachandra Rajan declared that

> No critic since Matthew Arnold has seen the necessities of his time more clearly, or isolated with more revealing starkness, the alienation of the contemporary poet from the prevailing standards and culture of his age.[4]

And as recently as 1965 an anonymous reviewer noted that

> . . . when some of his [Yeats's] critical essays were published two or three years ago, in volumes called Essays and Introductions and Explorations, there was even some speculation that his influence as a critic might have been greater than Eliot's had these essays been permanently in print since they first appeared.[5]

Nobody today can seriously doubt that Yeats was a

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[3] "The Symbolism of Poetry", Essays and Introductions (London, 1961), p. 154. It should be stressed that Yeats meant by 'philosophy' a set of beliefs rather than a 'system'. Cf. the excerpt from "Estrangement" quoted on p. 4 below.

[4] "W. B. Yeats and the Unity of Being", The Nineteenth Century and After", CXLVI (1949), 161.

[5] "Under Ben Bulben", The Times Literary Supplement, January 21, 1965, p. 47.

"deliberate" artist;[6] and the previous three excerpts would seem to invite study of his criticism and his poetic in themselves, and not merely as marginal commentary on his poetry. Until recently,[7] however, references to Yeats's "philosophy of art" were oblique and cursory. W. H. Auden, in his admirable elegy, noted a discrepancy between Yeats's ideas and his poetic achievement.[8] Auden was more explicit when he remarked, in another instance, that Yeats's success is the more astounding when one remembers "how antagonistic were both his general opinions and his conception of his art to those current in recent literary movements".[9]

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[6] The following books, not to mention a number of articles, have Yeats's revisions as their subject: Thomas Parkinson, W. B. Yeats: Self-Critic (1951), and W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry (1964); Curtis Bradford, Yeats at Work (1965); Jon Stallworthy, Between the Lines (1963), and Vision and Revision (1969); Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (editors), The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats (1957); and Russell K. Alspach (editor), The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats (1966).

[7] Edward Engelberg's The Vast Design (1964) is a discussion of patterns in Yeats's aesthetic. Peter Faulkner makes a brief survey of some of Yeats's essays in "Yeats as Critic", Criticism, IV (1962), 328-29. Marion Witt makes a plea for consideration of Yeats's essays, especially those that have not been reprinted, in "Yeats: 1865-1965", PMLA., LXXX, No. 4 (September, 1965), 311-20.

[8] "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", Another Time (New York, 1940), pp. 94-95 in particular.

[9] "Yeats: Master of Diction", The Saturday Review of Literature, XXII (June 8, 1940), 14. See also T. S. Eliot, "A Foreign Mind", Athenaeum, 4653 (July 4, 1919), 552-53.

This feeling that Yeats was outside the precincts of contemporary poetics and cultural values certainly helps to explain the regrettable neglect of Yeats's critical writings. But there are other reasons. First of all, Yeats is clearly a great poet and until recently it was the poetry, the man, and the milieu which attracted his most perceptive critics. Consequently, his prose was used mainly as marginal commentary on the poetry. Second, Yeats refused to systematize his scattered pronouncements on art. His opening remarks in "Estrangement" (1909) are characteristic:

> To keep these notes natural and useful to me I must keep one note from leading on to another, that I may not surrender myself to literature. Every note must come as a casual thought, then it will be my life. Neither Christ nor Buddha nor Socrates wrote a book, for to do that is to exchange life for a logical process.[10]

Such an approach is strongly autobiographical, and as often as not it directs the reader's attention to the man who perceives rather than to what he perceives. Third, there has been the question of texts: many of his best essays have only recently been collected and made easily accessible, and much of his earlier criticism had not, until 1970, been reprinted. The latter, despite its topical interest and limited scope, is informed with cogent pronouncements vital to any study of Yeats as a critic. Fourth, the twentieth-century reader is hardly likely to find Yeats's prose style congenial, especially

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[10] Autobiographies (London, 1955), p. 461.

the ornate and involuted style which he cultivated during the Nineties. Finally, Yeats's attitude towards criticism may have caused many readers to take him less seriously than they did the more professional critics. He was contemptuous of 'popular' criticism generally; he believed that even good criticism was inferior to creative writing. And, unlike Wordsworth, he did not preface his early poetry with a manifesto. He was, in fact, cautious even among friends. In 1897, he wrote to Robert Bridges: "One has to give something of one's self to the devil that one may live. I have given my criticisms."[11]

The remark to Bridges may have been more than just another protest against the necessity of journalism. Yeats was then thirty-two years old and astute enough to realize the difficulty of defending his sometimes intuitive, often dogmatic pronouncements on art. Fourteen years later he confided to Edmund Gosse:

> . . . when I was thirty and less I wrote articles I sometimes remember now with a start. I was so clumsy that I could not say what I really thought and <u>through fear of insincerity</u> was sometimes particularly harsh to those for whom I had much respect. If I disliked anything they did I felt bound to set it down without disguise or qualification.[12]

and in 1924 he wrote:

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[11] <u>The Letters of W. B. Yeats</u>, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954), p. 286.

[12] <u>Ibid.</u>, p. 563. Italics mine.

> . . . if I give a successful lecture, or write a vigorous, critical essay, there is immediate effect; I am confident that on some one point, which seems to me of great importance, I know more than other men, and I covet honour.[13]

Criticism was serious business for Yeats; and there is an obvious need for re-valuation of his criticism, not to 'rank' him as a critic but to analyse the critical principles upon which his own art is based. The fact that he did not formulate these principles or beliefs into a philosophy of art as, say, Aristotle did, is not really important.

> The critic does not need a formal philosophy; he needs a wide and generous conception of man's nature and destiny. It is the essence of beliefs that they cannot be applied dogmatically, that they 'open up the widest horizons' instead of systematically reducing visibility. They cannot be external to the work of art; they should be so completely absorbed that they are part of the critic's psychological make-up and diffuse a wisdom which illuminates his individual judgements and enables him to turn literary criticism into a criticism of the human condition.[14]

Yeats's poetic and the principles which underlie that poetic are based on his concern for the human condition, and reflect his struggle to bring his own art into meaningful relation with life.

Modern readers often find Yeats's prose style dis-

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[13] "The Bounty of Sweden", Auto., p. 533. Italics mine. The essay appeared first in September, 1924, in the London Mercury and the Dial.

[14] Martin Turnell, "An Essay on Criticism", Dublin Review, 444 (1948), 89. A Vision, Yeats's formal 'philosophy', was not written until 1925 and by that time many of his best poems had already been written.

concerting. His preoccupation with occultism and magic suggests anti-intellectualism, and his terminology is partly at fault. Dr. F. R. Leavis epitomized the critics' disquiet when he wrote of Yeats: ". . . 'reverie' and 'trance' are dangerous words, and in the critic who announces that 'All art is dream' we fear the worst."[15] Yeats's syntax is often difficult; and his disregard for historical fact and his habit of misquotation are sometimes annoying. Professor C. K. Stead has recently pointed out that apparent contradictions in Yeats's writings often result "from carelessness rather than from any fundamental confusion of thought" and that these contradictions disappear once one realizes where Yeats's sympathies lie.[16] Professor A. Norman Jeffares has noted Yeats's early reliance upon "the hammered gold and gold enamelling of names, allusive and decorative, of knowledge recondite and cryptic".[17] And Louis MacNeice has pointed out Yeats's fondness for indefinite pronouns, parentheses,

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[15] New Bearings in English Poetry (London, 1932), p. 39.

[16] The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot (London, 1964), pp. 16-17. Professor Stead illustrates his point by citing two sentences from Yeats's essay "Certain Noble Plays of Japan" which seem contradictory. He then points out that the apparent contradiction is in the term 'common people', and that it disappears when we realize that the 'common people' of the first sentence refers to Yeats's agrarian, feudal, folk-ideal, while in the second sentence it refers to members of an urban, industrial society.

[17] W. B. Yeats: Selected Criticism (London, 1964), Introduction, p. 15.

rhetorical questions, and self-quotation.[18]

All of this may seem strange to readers who are familiar only with the simple, powerful, and direct prose of such later writings as "Modern Poetry" and "A General Introduction for my Work". But readers coming unprepared to those essays and reviews which Yeats wrote before the turn of the century are likely to be dismayed. Even though his very early prose is reasonably simple his topics are often narrow and dated. Unfortunately, with the broadening of his interests during the Nineties there came also, under Pater's influence, an elaboration of style which Jeffares describes as "almost ritualistic and incantatory".[19]

His style does, however, have compensating qualities -- not the least of which is the absence of jargon. It is true that he makes his own distinctions between "joy" and "pleasure", "character" and "personality", and that as his thoughts crystallized "dream" took on a different meaning and "Renaissance" a different connotation. This notwithstanding, the vocabulary of the critical essays is far from incomprehensible.

Subjective Yeats certainly was; and he usually ignored writers whose works, by their merits or demerits, failed to illustrate some point central to his own belief. Naturally,

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[18] The Poetry of W. B. Yeats (London, 1941), p. 199.

[19] Op. cit., p. 10.

his tone varied according to his particular bias. He could be intolerant -- as in his treatment of Owen's poetry -- or abusive and vindictive -- as he always was towards journalists. He was exasperated and angry when his idols were desecrated:

> A man has a perfect right, even before he has read them, to think "the prophetic books" nonsense, but if he think this, then let him, in the name of the nine gods, keep from editing Blake . . . .[20]

But literary criticism can never be a science: and Yeats's criticism conforms to Baudelaire's principle that "criticism must be partial, passionate and political, that is to say, it must be written from an exclusive point of view, but from the point of view which opens up the widest horizons".[21] Furthermore, Yeats's subjectivity is so easy to detect that, rather than seriously damaging the criticism, it adds vitality and emphasis to it.

Yeats was not, however, an extremist. In "The Tragic Generation" he declared that "No mind can engender till divided into two",[22] and in a note to "The Trembling of the Veil" he added: "All creation is from conflict, whether with our own mind or with that of others . . . ."[23] Absolutes were essential but only to allow one to achieve an equilibrium:

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[20] "The Writings of William Blake", The Bookman, IV (August, 1893), 147.

[21] Quoted by Turnell, op. cit., p. 89.

[22] Auto., p. 345.

[23] Ibid., p. 576. Cf. ". . . the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries." E & I., p. 255.

> . . . nor can I think it a coincidence that an epoch founded in such thought as Shelley's ended with an art of solidity and complexity. Me at any rate he [Balzac] saved from the pursuit of a beauty that, seeming at once absolute and external, requires, to strike a balance, hatred as absolute. Yet Balzac is no complete solution . . . .[24]

His faith-knowledge antithesis helped to save him from both the relative and the absolute. An essential paradox characterized Yeats's dialectic: 'Life', or essential being, he felt to be incorruptible and therefore absolute; yet he was always haunted by the knowledge that life, in its physical manifestations, was subject to corruption from what theologians call Original Sin and from prevailing bourgeois values. This dialectic was germane to his developing poetic. It finally taught him that extremes are detrimental to art.

> An art may become impersonal because it has too much circumstance or too little, because the world is too little or too much with it, because it is too near the ground or too far up among the branches.[25]

Art that is rooted solely in the supernatural is insubstantial and irrelevant; art that is rooted solely in the social milieu is both insubstantial and ephemeral.

Yeats's criticism ranges far beyond the usual limits of literary criticism: "the elucidation of works of art and the correction of taste"[26] and the relation of a particular

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[24] "Prometheus Unbound" (1932), E & I., p. 425.

[25] "Discoveries" (1906), ibid., p. 272.

[26] T. S. Eliot, "The Function of Criticism" (1923), Selected Essays (London, 1932), 3rd ed., 1951, p. 24.

work to the literary tradition. But so long as the emphasis is literary, additional references are likely to enhance the criticism. T. S. Eliot, who cautions against 'impurities' in literary criticism, readily admits that

> A critic who was interested in nothing but "literature" would have little to say to us, for his literature would be a pure abstraction . . . . he must have other interests . . . for the literary critic is not merely a technical expert, who has learned the rules to be observed by the writers he criticizes: the critic must be the whole man, a man with convictions and principles, and of knowledge and experience of life.[27]

Art was, for Yeats, both text and pretext, a thing of aesthetic merit and a vehicle for some spiritual quest. Graham Hough finds it significant that "the two great writers of this period who are least interested in novelty of technique, Yeats and Lawrence, are the two whose work reveals a continual spiritual quest".[28] Yeats's spiritual quest, simply stated, was for unity -- Unity of Being and Unity of Culture -- an attempt to check the fragmentation of society and the alienation of the artist from his public.

> If we would create a great community -- and what other game is so worth the labour? -- we must recreate the old foundations of life, not as they existed in that splendid misunderstanding of the eighteenth century, but as they must always exist when the finest minds and Ned the beggar and Seàn the fool think about the same thing, although they may not think the same

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[27] The Frontiers of Criticism (The Gideon Seymour Memorial Lecture Series, University of Minnesota, 1956), p. 18.

[28] Image and Experience (London, 1960), p. 74.

thought about it.[29]

At first Yeats believed that the fragmentation which he perceived in modern society began with the Renaissance when Puritanism and the rise of the Middle Class forced both the artists and their public to be false to themselves. However, shortly after the completion of his essay on Spenser, in 1902, Yeats changed his mind and thereafter the Renaissance symbolized his ideal in both art and life.

Literature, Yeats maintained, and not religion or politics, was "the great teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of all values", and "Literature must take the responsibility for its power, and keep all its freedom".[30] Imaginative literature, especially, existed "to reveal a more powerful and passionate, a more divine world than ours".[31] The literary critic had a special role to play since great art may suggest "something, even, beyond the knowledge of its creator, a possibility of life not as yet in existence".[32] Further-

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[29] W. B. Yeats, "Gods and Fighting Men", Explorations, selected by Mrs. W. B. Yeats (London, 1962), p. 28. The essay was first published in 1904 as a Preface to Lady Gregory's book by the same title.

[30] "An Irish National Theatre" (1903), Expl., p. 117.

[31] W. B. Yeats, "The New Irish Library", The Bookman, X (June, 1896), 83.

[32] "Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty", Expl., p. 302.

more, Yeats believed that "all good criticism is hieratic".[33] To conduct criticism of this kind one needs a standard of values -- aesthetic, humanistic, and spiritual: one needs a 'world-view' to give one's work substance and an aesthetic to give it disciplined expression. The interaction between Yeats's critical and aesthetic principles on one hand and his philosophy of life on the other is fundamental to this study.

Literary endeavour based on such an interaction would seem to be moralistic. However, 'morality' generally implies the teaching of some standard of conduct either religious or social. Against such overt didacticism Yeats remained adamant:

> Only that which does not teach, which does not cry out, which does not persuade, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible.[34]

In "A General Introduction for my Work", written in 1937, he reiterated his stand against doctrinaire literature: "I hated and still hate with an ever growing hatred the literature of the point of view."[35] Art, he believed, was revelation:[36] and any approving reference he made to morality was to individ-

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[33] "Discoveries", E & I., p. 289.

[34] "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time" (1910), ibid., p. 341.

[35] E & I., p. 511.

[36] Cf. ". . . Art is a revelation and not a criticism . . . ." "An Irish National Literature", The Bookman, VIII (September, 1895), 168. Yeats's quarrel with what he called "the Matthew Arnold tradition" is discussed in Chapter III below.

ual morality rooted in instinct and exemplified in the apocalypse of art. That apocalypse, made possible by the creative imagination, was the momentary reconciliation of the real with the ideal.

Such a philosophy of art placed Yeats in the Romantic tradition, but intervening time had reduced Romanticism to Aestheticism -- a yearning for a world of essences, and a fanciful reverie over the transmutation of life into art as a means of escape from life. However, I believe that the realist in Yeats made him more stable than were many of his fellow artists, and more substantial than some of his earlier writings suggest. His father's pronouncement that "All art is reaction from life but never, when it is vital and great, an escape"[37] epitomizes Yeats's ultimate conception of art. After his flirtation with Aestheticism, he wrote, in 1906: ". . . nothing can justify the degradation of an element of life even in the service of an art."[38] That same year, in his Preface to Poems 1899-1905, he wrote:

> All art is in the last analysis an endeavour to condense as out of the flying vapour of the world an image of human perfection, and for its own and not for the art's sake . . . .[39]

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[37] J. B. Yeats: Letters to his Son W. B. Yeats and Others, ed. Joseph Hone (New York, 1946), p. 144.

[38] Var. Plays, p. 526. Yeats added the note to On Baile's Strand when he included the play in Poems: 1899-1905.

[39] Var. Poems, p. 849.

Perhaps it should be mentioned here that when Yeats used "life" pejoratively he was referring to physical reality, especially to the social environment. But after around 1900 he tended to substitute "realism" and to speak approvingly of "life". After that, "life" usually meant essential being, the self untainted by selfish aspirations and untroubled by overt moralizing.

Pursuit of his three main interests -- "interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality"[40] -- so broadened his perspective and honed his sensibility that in speaking for his own race he spoke for humanity itself. He remained faithful to his early conception of the poet as a man committed to high ideals, "to high responsibilities to himself, to his race, to man's historic image of himself".[41] Yeats's integrity helped him to become a great poet; but, as Edward Engelberg puts it, "He could be an artist only after he had been a critic. And once he was an artist the criticism would become more casual, more subtle, less definitive".[42] The significant thing about Yeats's development as a critic is not so much his radical changes as the sureness of his instincts. This is manifest in the way in which isolated statements in his early criticism developed

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[40] "If I were Four-and-Twenty" (1919), Expl., p. 263.

[41] John R. Moore, "Yeats as a Last Romantic", Virginia Quarterly Review, XXXVII, 3 (Summer, 1961), 449.

[42] The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats's Aesthetic (Toronto, 1964), p. 45.

into the basic principles of his mature poetic.

When Yeats finished Per Amica Silentia Lunae, in 1917, he described it as "philosophical", "a kind of prose backing to my poetry".[43] I do not wish to expatiate upon the 'philosophy' of either that book or A Vision which followed it except where I feel it has real significance for his criticism and his poetic. However, to separate his literary criticism from his general criticism is sometimes difficult and dangerous since almost everything he wrote was meant to justify his own poetic theory or practice. Therefore a few words need to be said about the structure of this study.

Arrangement of Yeats's criticism by authors or genres would be artificial for, except in the case of Blake, his concern was not to give definitive analysis but to use his subjects as illustrations of some principle of his own. Similarly, any attempt at evaluating all of the critical pronouncements he made would be tedious, perhaps futile. On the other hand, to cite out of context some of his more startling pronouncements would be an injustice to him. To claim, as he did, that Shakespeare was "always a tragic comedian"[44] sounds absurd. Yet it is consistent with his distinction between tragedy and comedy, personality and character, and in that context it is

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[43] Letters, pp. 624-25. Yeats had tentatively entitled the book An Alphabet, but he gave it its Virgilian title before its publication in 1918.

[44] Ibid., p. 549. See also "The Tragic Theatre", E & I., p. 240.

not invalid.[45] Yeats's criticism must be treated as a whole, not always consistent but growing increasingly coherent in terms of what he perceived to be the proper Art-Life relationship. Finally, discussion of the criticism within a purely chronological framework, would, I fear, be repetitive and dull.

How then should one proceed? Some overlapping is, perhaps, inevitable; but it can be minimized by viewing the whole subject from different perspectives. Consequently, this study divides itself into three major areas: "Yeats's Practical Criticism", "Yeats's Theoretical Criticism", and "Life as Referent". The unifying motif is the Art-Life relationship, how Yeats imposed upon life and art some shape and significance.

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[45] Yeats's theory of drama is discussed in Chapter X below.

PART ONE: YEATS'S PRACTICAL CRITICISM

To criticise is to neither praise or [sic] denounce,
but to get nearer your subject . . . .

J. B. Yeats

CHAPTER II

FIRST PRINCIPLES

> Great poetry does not teach us anything -- it changes us.
>
> W. B. Yeats

Unlike I. A. Richards and T. S. Eliot, Yeats wrote very little about literary criticism as such. He made it quite clear, however, that literary criticism was a serious practice, and that sound criticism was essential to good literature. "If Ireland has produced no great poet, it is not that her poetic impulse has run dry, but because her critics have failed her . . . ."[1] The literary critic should, by education and temperament, be fitted for his task. Reviewing The Life of William Carleton, Yeats wrote:

> The publisher has attached to the book a critical essay by Mrs. Cashel Hoey, which scarcely seems relevant or excellent in any way. Mrs. Cashel Hoey has, I understand, done much useful work, but she is not a critic; and it is only in Irish literature, which has always been at the mercy of the first comer -- priest, leisured amateur, town councillor, member of parliament, or casual jack of all trades -- that she would be set to so uncongenial a task.[2]

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[1] "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson", Dublin University Review, II (November, 1886), 923.

[2] "William Carleton", The Bookman, IX (March, 1896), 189. Carleton's incomplete autobiography was completed and edited by D. J. O'Donoghue. It was published in two volumes (1896) with a critical essay by Mrs. Hoey (1830-1908), a novelist.

And a year later:

> . . . popular criticism has learned the importance of the science and philosophy and morality of its time, and of the greatest persons of history; but a poetry which is personal and solitary, and must therefore be judged by the poetic instinct alone, leaves it puzzled and angry.[3]

Yeats never relented in his attack on journalism (which he regarded as a perpetuation of bourgeois values), or in his plea for a lyric poetry which did not conform to the Victorian demand for 'utility' in art. But his use of the phrase "poetic instinct alone" certainly did not mean that he was advocating impressionistic criticism.

> If one set aside Shelley's essay on poetry and Browning's essay on Shelley, one does not know where to turn in modern English criticism for anything so philosophic -- anything so fundamental and radical -- as the first half of Arthur Hallam's essay "On some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson." We have plenty of criticism in which a stray passage out of one poet is compared with a stray passage out of another, but all mere impressionism of this kind is easy and superficial in comparison to such an exposition of the first principles of a school . . . as is contained in this essay.[4]

The 'impressionistic' criticism Yeats had in mind evidently precluded intellectual standards and that intimate knowledge

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[3] "Mr. Arthur Symons' New Book", The Bookman, XII (April, 1897), 15.

[4] "A Bundle of Poets", The Speaker, VIII (July 22, 1893), 81. Nor would Yeats, I believe, subscribe unreservedly to Pater's critical theory which appears to emphasize the personal and the aesthetic in art at the expense of the universal and the visionary. See The Renaissance (London, 1873), 5th ed., 1910, Preface, pp. viii-ix.

of literary works which confirms a subtle relationship between the individual's emotions and the emotions of the race. He enthusiastically quoted Hallam as authority: ". . . every bosom contains the elements of those complex emotions which the artist feels, and every head can, to a certain extent, go over in itself the process of their combination, so as to understand his expressions and sympathise with his state"[5] -- a remark which echoes both Dr. Johnson's approval of Gray's "Elegy" and Wordsworth on the ideal poet.

Hallam's ideal, however, was not being realized. Public taste had been so vulgarized that Yeats, at this time under the influence of the London literati, thought the following comment by Hallam significant enough to merit italics: "Hence, whatever is mixed up with art, and appears under its semblance, is always more favourably regarded than art free and unalloyed."[6] To be 'popular' the artist needed only to fill his work with 'impurities'; hence the present state of literature and criticism. In an early letter to Frederick Gregg, Yeats condemned George Eliot for allowing her preoccupation with reason, psychology, and morality to stifle her spiritual and imaginative impulses.[7] In his essay "At Stratford-on-Avon" (1901), he arraigned her and the Shakespearean critics of the time:

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[5] "A Bundle of Poets", The Speaker, VIII (July 22, 1893), 81. Italics mine.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Letters, p. 31. Wade dates the letter 1887.

> They and she grew up in a century of utilitarianism, when nothing about a man seemed important except his utility to the State, and nothing so useful to the State as the actions whose effect can be weighed by reason. The deeds of Coriolanus, Hamlet, Timon, Richard II had no obvious use, were, indeed, no more than the expression of their personalities, and so it was thought Shakespeare was accusing them, and telling us to be careful lest we deserve the like accusations. It did not occur to the critics that you cannot know a man from his actions because you cannot watch him in every kind of circumstance, and that men are made useless to the State as often by abundance as by emptiness, and that a man's business may at times be revelation, and not reformation . . . . Because reason can only discover completely the use of those obvious actions which everybody admires, and because every character was to be judged by efficiency in action, Shakespearian criticism became a vulgar worshipper of success.[8]

It can be seen, then, that Yeats refused to sanction either extreme of criticism. He rejected the impressionistic extreme because it lacked enduring critical basis; he rejected the pragmatic extreme because it worshipped false gods and encouraged the artist and his public to do likewise. Tennyson and Wordsworth had "troubled the energy and simplicity of their imaginative passions by asking whether they were for the helping or for the hindrance of the world . . . ."[9]

So much for Yeats's affirmations of what criticism should not be: the implications are obvious. Literary criticism should be based on "philosophic" and "fundamental" principles. Yeats insisted on the superiority of the truly

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[8] E & I., pp. 102-103.

[9] W. B. Yeats, "William Blake and the Imagination" (1897), ibid., p. 113.

literary critic over the journalist, and on the obligation of artist and critic alike to spurn "what every fool can see and every knave can praise".[10] Furthermore, "all good criticism is hieratic, delighting in setting things above one another, Epic and Drama above Lyric and so on, and not merely side by side".[11] But, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, to conduct criticism of this kind one needs a standard of values. If that standard must not relate to either circumstantial reality or institutional morality, from what source must it get its authority? Yeats answered that question by insisting on the validity of a spiritual reality, on the authority of instinctual morality, and on what might be broadly termed the Romantic tradition in literature. He refused to sacrifice his aesthetic principles to church or state; and he maintained that the elevating quality of art was its revelation, especially its revelation of man's heroic nature. It was in this sense that Yeats was a moralist and could assert without self-contradiction "that a masterpiece is a portion of the conscience of mankind".[12]

He believed that great literature was an affirmation of an intense, personal life. In moments of intensity all human

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[10] "Discoveries", ibid., p. 280.

[11] Ibid., p. 289.

[12] Postscript, "The Reform of the Theatre", The United Irishman, IX (April 4, 1903), 3. See also "Moral and Immoral Plays", Expl., p. 111.

life was related -- not merely the living with the living but also the living with the dead. Such an affirmation implied a rejection of the realists and a refutation of the scientists. Yeats sought to substantiate his claim chiefly by his theory of Anima Mundi or Race Memory. Deriving from Henry More, and before him, Plato, Race Memory is essentially the same as Jung's "collective unconscious".

Good literature, Yeats felt, aroused common elemental forces in man, placed him in sympathy with humanity, and thereby showed him how to live. Criticism based on such beliefs is sometimes termed "archetypal" or "totemic", and, because it so circumscribes other critical approaches, Dr. Wilbur S. Scott describes it simply as "a demonstration of some basic cultural pattern of great meaning and appeal to humanity in a work of art".[13] Describing the attraction of this relatively modern approach to criticism, Dr. Scott writes:

> But whether done well or ill, the totemic approach obviously reflects the contemporary dissatisfaction with the scientific concept of man as, at his highest, rational. Anthropological literature seeks to restore to us our entire humanity, a humanity which values the primitive elements in human nature. In contrast to the splitting of the human mind by emphasizing the warfare between the conscious and the subconscious processes, anthropological literature re-establishes us as members of the ancient race of man. And archetypal criticism seeks to discover in literature the dramatizations of this membership.[14]

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[13] Five Approaches to Criticism (New York, 1962), p. 247.

[14] Ibid., p. 251.

Any attempt at re-establishing ourselves "as members of the ancient race of man" or at dramatizing that membership would be moralistic in a sense acceptable to Yeats, and his own attempts at such objectives were made primarily through his use of Irish folk-lore. The resultant success or failure of these endeavours is manifest in his poetry and drama. For example, just as disillusion with English moralists and Irish propagandists turned Yeats towards Aesthetic-Symbolist literature in the Nineties, so did disillusion with the Abbey Theatre and his Irish audience turn him towards Noh drama two decades later.

At least equally fundamental to Yeats's vacillation was the conflict between heart and head. Dorothy Wellesley aptly describes Yeats's distinctive quality as "an excess of passion disturbed by reason".[15] He denounced Victorianism but he was never really at ease with the Aesthetes. He sought to restore the primacy of emotion and imagination but he was keenly aware of the validity of reason.[16] This is why, as a critic, he was delighted to find AE (George Russell) writing poetry that was "profoundly philosophical in the only way in which poetry can be: it describes the emotions of a soul dwelling

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[15] "Comments and Conversations", Letters on Poetry from W. B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley, ed. Dorothy Wellesley (London, 1940), p. 193.

[16] Cf. "Discoveries", E & I., p. 266. ". . . we have lost in personality, in our delight in the whole man -- blood, imagination, and intellect running together . . . ."

in the presence of certain ideas".[17] On the other hand, it was in the suppression and distortion of his emotions that Spenser had prostituted his art. "Spenser had learned to look to the State not only as the rewarder of virtue but as the maker of right and wrong, and had begun to love and hate as it bid him."[18]

The morality which Yeats wanted in literature and in life had to be personal, instinctual, and spontaneous. He revered the exceptional man and rebelled against a society which, he believed, sought to reduce all to norms. Contrasting Spenser with the great Elizabethan dramatists, Yeats wrote:

> The dramatists lived in a disorderly world, reproached by many, persecuted even, but following their imagination wherever it led them. Their imagination, driven hither and thither by beauty and sympathy, put on something of the nature of eternity. Their subject was always the soul, the whimsical, self-awakening, self-exciting, self-appeasing soul. They celebrated its heroical, passionate will going by its own path to immortal and invisible things.[19]

Immortality was not attained by curbing the emotions: nor was it the result of overt moralizing. In his very first critical essay, Yeats stated aphoristically what was to be one of his chief critical tenets: "Great poetry does not

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[17] "A New Poet", The Bookman, VI (August, 1894), 148. Italics mine.

[18] "Edmund Spenser", E & I., p. 371. The essay is dated 1902, and was written as an Introduction to his Poems of Spenser. The edition was not published until 1906.

[19] Ibid., p. 370.

teach us anything -- it changes us."[20] Having not yet joined the Aesthetes, he did not deny poetry a 'use'. Heroic poetry especially, had an 'extra-literary' function to perform:

> It is the poetry of action, for such alone can arouse the whole nature of man. It touches all the strings -- those of wonder and pity, of fear and joy. It ignores morals, for its business is not in any way to make us rules for life, but to make character. It is not, as a great English writer has said, "a criticism of life," but rather a fire in the spirit, burning away what is mean and deepening what is shallow.[21]

This brash refutation of Arnold did not make it clear how poetry would "make character" without being instructive. Yeats was more explicit when, six years later, he was one of "four distinguished poets"[22] (and presumably competent critics) consulted on the question of the Laureateship. Again he referred to heroic poetry and the heroic age:

> In the old days the imagination of the world would have fared but ill without its kings and nobles, for in those times, when few could read and pictures were many a mile between, they kept before men's minds a more refined and ample ideal of life than was possible to the small chief in his rush-strewn tower or to the carle in his poor cottage. By a phantasmagoria of royalties and nobilities the soul of the world displayed itself, and whatever there was in the matter of court poet or court pageantry helped it to draw them away from their narrow circle of eating and sleeping, and getting and begetting. It showed them life under the best conditions, and king or

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[20] "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson", The Irish Fireside, October 9, 1886, p. 220.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Editor's Note, "The Question of the Laureateship", The Bookman, III (November, 1892), 52.

> queen, baron or duke, became to them a type of the glory of the world. Thus, at any rate do I, with my perhaps too literary eyes, read history, and turn all into a kind of theatre where the proud walk clad in cloth of gold, and display their passionate hearts, that the groundlings may feel their souls wax the greater.[23]

He modified these views somewhat during the decade as he moved towards Aestheticism. This notwithstanding, the passage can be regarded as a valid index to certain essential views Yeats held of art and life. First, there is his belief in an ideal culture where the aristocracy sets the model for the peasantry. Second, there is the belief in poetry and in the poet's role in society. Third, there is the belief that the external world provides symbols of an eternal reality.

Yeats now saw how literature could "make character" without dictating "rules for life", how the educative image could change men without actually teaching them. In this feudal society he saw a mingling of the romantic and the real, and of the transcendental and the temporal. "The soul of the world displayed itself" in the cultural environment and showed people "life under the best conditions". Physical and temporal things became symbols of eternal reality; and the poet helped the world-soul to display itself and to divert people from the ignoble task of getting ahead. The

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[23] Ibid., p. 54. Yeats's letter is reprinted by Wade, in Letters, pp. 213-20. The third Bookman letter is signed R. B., but the others are unsigned. Yeats's authorship of the second letter is confirmed by a remark to John O'Leary. Letters, pp. 220-21.

poet's task, Yeats believed, was to feign images of an ideal life wherein we might behold "passionate hearts" at their most intense moments and feel our "souls wax the greater" because of the experience. This conviction survived alike the influence of the English Aesthetes and the French Symbolists. In his Preface to Poems 1899-1905 (1906), he defined art as "an endeavour to condense as out of the flying vapour of the world an image of human perfection, and for its own and not for the art's sake".[24] In 1907, acutely aware of the artist's isolation in a world that demanded 'utility' of art, he re-asserted his ideal: ". . . life is greater than the cause . . ." and artists "are the servants not of any cause but of mere naked life, and above all of that life in its nobler forms, where joy and sorrow are one, Artificers of the Great Moment . . . ."[25]

Yeats followed the great Romantics in placing the imagination first among the poetic faculties. "The imagination", he wrote to George Russell in 1900, "deals with spiritual things symbolized by natural things -- with gods and not with matter. The phantasy has its place in poetry but it has a subordinate place."[26] It was evidence of imaginative genius that Yeats first looked for in art. A work might be technically

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[24] Var. Poems, p. 849.

[25] "Poetry and Tradition", E & I., p. 260.

[26] Letters, p. 343.

perfect, yet if it lacked imagination and passion -- vast concepts of man's heroic struggle with destiny -- it would normally elicit no praise from him. Dorothy Wellesley recalls how he reviewed one of her poems by saying testily: "You have written a flawless lyric."[27] In another instance, he modified his praise of a poem by Clarence Mangan: " -- not that this is, in the highest sense, a great poem; it is a great lyric, an altogether different thing."[28]

Very often Yeats identified weakness in art or criticism not with the moral inadequacy deplored by Dowden and his followers but with some spiritual inadequacy of the artist or critic. Since Yeats believed that great literature was "the Forgiveness of Sin",[29] the inadequacy he found was usually a lack of sympathy. George Eliot, Dowden, Spenser, and even Milton, were arraigned by Yeats at various times for being concerned only with condemnation. "A soul shaken by the spectacle of its sins, or discovered by the Divine Vision in tragic delight, must offer to the love that cannot love but to infinity, a goal unique and unshared; while a soul busied with others' sins is soon melted to some shape of vulgar pride."[30]

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[27] "Comments and Conversations", Letters on Poetry, p. 190.

[28] "Clarence Mangan", The Irish Fireside, I, N. S. (March 12, 1887), 169.

[29] "At Stratford-on-Avon" (1901), E & I., p. 102.

[30] "Art and Ideas" (1913), ibid., p. 351.

Shakespeare, Yeats argued, regarded Richard II with "sympathetic eyes, understanding indeed how ill-fitted he was to be king at a certain moment of history, but understanding that he was lovable and full of capricious fancy . . ." and saw in him "the defeat that awaits us all . . . ."[31] Greatness of soul was a prerequisite of great art: the quality of art depended ultimately upon the fullness of the artist's life. Looking back over the first half of his life's work, Yeats admitted that his interest in the "delicate senses" during the Nineties had left him discontented; he had been envious of the superior work "of those careless old writers one imagines squabbling over a mistress, or riding on a journey, or drinking round a tavern fire, brisk and active men".[32] He concluded that "The old images, the old emotions, awakened again to overwhelming life, like the gods Heine tells of, by the belief and passion of some new soul, are the only masterpieces".[33]

I have treated Yeats as a serious critic, and have said nothing of his naiveté. Indeed, to mention it seems superficial criticism, for who can tell where credulity gives place to incredulity?[34] The important things are that he

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[31] "At Stratford-on-Avon", ibid., pp. 105-106.

[32] "Art and Ideas", ibid., p. 348.

[33] Ibid., p. 352.

[34] Yeats had his first seance in 1887, yet in a letter to Katharine Tynan a few months later he wrote of a clairvoyant who "has seen or believes she has seen" terrible things at seances. In the same letter Yeats added, in what may have been

knew that the existing literary standards failed to promote vital and vibrant poetry, and that he was receptive to any experience which might help to re-instate the arts. Aestheticism was a necessary corrective to 'utility' and 'moral adequacy'; and spiritualism was a means of combating the scientists. But spiritualism was an adjunct, not an essential. It was art and art criticism that really mattered:

> All writers, all artists of any kind, in so far as they have had any philosophical or critical power, perhaps just in so far as they have been deliberate artists at all, have had some philosophy, some criticism of their art; and it has often been this philosophy, or this criticism, that has evoked their most startling inspiration, calling into outer life some portion of the divine life, or of the buried reality, which could alone extinguish in the emotions what their philosophy or their criticism would extinguish in the intellect.[35]

Like the poetry it was intended to justify, the criticism -- from the early reviews and controversies to the theoretical essays -- was a means of preserving and defining, through every change of language, through every change of heart, what was essential to him.

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a tongue-in-cheek manner: "A sad accident happened at Madame Blavatsky's lately, I hear. A big materialist sat on the astral double of a poor young Indian. It was sitting on the sofa and he was too material to be able to see it. Certainly a sad accident!" Letters, p. 59.

[35] "The Symbolism of Poetry", E & I., p. 154.

CHAPTER III

EARLY REVIEWS AND CONTROVERSIES[1]

> . . .legends are the magical beryls in which we see life, not as it is, but as the heroic part of us, the part which desires always dreams and emotions greater than any in the world, and loves beauty and does not hate sorrow, hopes in secret that it may become.
>
> W. B. Yeats

Arthur Hallam's theme, in the essay so much admired by Yeats, was the superiority of poetry of sensation over poetry of reflection. The essay provides an early illustration of a controversy between the aesthetes and the Wordsworthians:

> It is not true, as his [Wordsworth's] exclusive admirers would have it, that the highest species of poetry is the reflective: it is a gross fallacy, that, because certain opinions are acute or profound, the expression of them by the imagination must be eminently beautiful. Whenever the mind of the artist suffers itself to be occupied, during its periods of creation, by any other predominant motive than the desire of beauty, the result is false in art.[2]

Matthew Arnold, the most influential critic in England at the time Yeats began to write, had revived the controversy

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[1] Yeats's controversy with Dowden over Shakespearean criticism has been deferred until Chapter V below.

[2] "On Some of the Characteristics of Modern Poetry, and on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson", The Poems of Arthur Hallam, ed. Richard Le Gallienne (London, 1893), p. 90.

by ranking Wordsworth above Keats and Shelley.

From the publication of his essays on Ferguson (1886) until the end of the century, Yeats strongly opposed what he termed "the Matthew Arnold tradition".[3] His review of William Watson's Wordsworth's Grave and Other Poems indicates the reasons for his early criticism of Arnold. Yeats distinguished between two 'schools' of poets: the first "looks upon poetry as a direct message from the Most High, and amenable to no law but its own"; the second considers poetry to be "a purely human act, a criticism of life by subtle and refined thinkers".[4] He claimed that Arnold and his followers, among whom Watson was the best example, belonged to the second school. Yeats disliked, above all, the idea of poetry as "a criticism of life", and the review makes it clear that his opposition to Arnold was based on religious as well as aesthetic grounds. He quoted, from Literature and Dogma, Arnold's definition of God as "something not ourselves that makes for righteousness"; he then added that Arnold's writings exemplified "the opposite habit of mind".[5]

Arnold, seeking a middle way between theology and

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[3] W. B. Yeats, "A Scholar Poet", Letters to the New Island, ed. Horace Reynolds, p. 205. This review of William Watson's Wordsworth's Grave and Other Poems first appeared in the Providence Sunday Journal, June 15, 1890.

[4] Letters to the New Island, p. 205.

[5] Ibid.

science, concluded that "the object of religion is conduct",[6] and that sanction for "conduct" or "morality" or "righteousness" comes from "The Eternal", "the not ourselves", which helps men "to do right".[7] Arnold argued that the Hebrews

> . . . had dwelt upon the thought of conduct, and of right and wrong, until the not ourselves, which is in us and all around us, became to them adorable eminently and altogether as a power which makes for righteousness; which makes for it unchangeably and eternally and is therefore called The Eternal.[8]

There was, Arnold insisted, no metaphysics in either their use of this term or "in their conception of the not ourselves to which they attached it. Both came to them not from abstruse reasoning but from experience, and from experience in the plain region of conduct."[9] This rejection of metaphysical authority for the Bible was followed later by a rejection of the assumption that there was "a secret sense in the Bible"[10] -- the very assumption used by Yeats and Ellis in their patristic exegesis of Blake.

Religion, Arnold wrote, differed from morality chiefly in being heightened by emotion:[11] and "Religion

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[6] Literature and Dogma (London, 1873), p. 11.

[7] Ibid., pp. 22-23.

[8] Ibid., p. 24.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., p. 194.

[11] Ibid., pp. 15-16.

springing out of an experience of the power, the grandeur, the necessity of righteousness, is revealed religion, whether we find it in Sophocles or in Isaiah".[12] From such a comparison of powerful secular and religious literature, he went on to state, in "The Study of Poetry", that:

> More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.[13]

Such an idea was not new to Yeats. Blake, he wrote, had "announced the religion of art"[14] and Browning's essay on Shelley, with which Yeats was acquainted,[15] presented a religious aesthetic. Yeats, too, had been inclined towards such an aesthetic:

> I was unlike others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians . . . . I had even created a dogma: 'Because those imaginary people are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the nearest I

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[12] Ibid., p. 37.

[13] Essays in Criticism, Second Series (London, 1888), First Pocket Edition, 1925, pp. 2-3.

[14] "William Blake and the Imagination", E & I., p. 111.

[15] See "A Bundle of Poets", The Speaker, VIII (July 22, 1893), 81.

> can go to truth'. When I listened they seemed always to speak of one thing only: they, their loves, every incident of their lives, were steeped in the supernatural.[16]

Arnold certainly did not wish to steep himself in the supernatural, and his insistence on "conduct" as the only means to righteousness antagonized Yeats. Furthermore, in his essay on Wordsworth, Arnold had denounced aestheticism: "A poetry of revolt against moral ideas is a poetry of revolt against life; a poetry of indifference towards moral ideas is a poetry of indifference towards life."[17]

Yeats was hardly fair to Arnold though, because the latter had used the term 'moral' in a broad sense: "Whatever bears upon the question, 'how to live,' comes under it."[18] His illustrations of moral ideas from Milton, Keats and Shakespeare certainly do not suggest didacticism and institutional morality. Yeats may have suspected that the most serious difference between himself and Arnold was in their beliefs of how poetry was to edify man. This is suggested by the distinction, mentioned in the previous chapter, which Yeats made in 1886: "Great poetry does not teach us anything -- it changes us."[19] But for the present it was enough that

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[16] Auto., pp. 115-16.

[17] Essays in Criticism, Second Series, p. 144.

[18] Ibid., p. 142.

[19] "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson", The Irish Fireside, October 9, 1886, p. 220. Yeats's criticism of Arnold is not consistent with his own messianic attitude in some of his early reviews.

Arnold had used the damning phrase "criticism of life", and that, at the conclusion of his essay on Byron, he had ranked the Romantic poets in a manner most unacceptable to Yeats. Arnold had ignored Blake, had placed Wordsworth and Byron above Coleridge and Keats, and had dismissed Shelley as a "beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain".[20]

In 1898 Yeats became involved in a controversy with John Eglinton (William K. Magee) whom he came to regard as a representative of the Arnold school. The controversy started when Eglinton's essay "What Should be the Subjects of a National Drama?" was published in the Dublin Daily Express, September 17. Yeats was busy promoting the idea of an Irish dramatic movement and Eglinton had previously supported him.[21] In his essay, however, Eglinton seemed to reject the idea of drama based on Irish legends. "The proper mode of treating them [the legends] is a secret lost with the subjects themselves,"[22] he wrote. In a Postscript to a review of Nora Hopper's poetry, published in the Express the next week, Yeats claimed that the success of Ibsen's Peer Gynt and Wagner's

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[20] Essays in Criticism, Second Series, pp. 203-204.

[21] See Letters, p. 289.

[22] John Eglinton et al., Literary Ideals in Ireland (London, 1899), p. 11.

The Ring proved Eglinton wrong.[23]

Eglinton answered to the effect that there were two antithetical conceptions of poetry: there was the Wordsworthian (his favourite) which stressed philosophy rather than craft; and there was the aesthetic (Yeats's choice) which stressed craft rather than philosophy. Poets of the first school got their inspiration from, in Wordsworth's phrase, "Man, the heart of man, and human life"; poets of the second school looked to tradition for their inspiration. The weaknesses of the first school were "an inclination to indifference toward the form and comeliness of art," and a tendency toward dogmatism. The weakness of the second school was more serious: ". . . the second, if it hold aloof from the first, cuts itself asunder from the source of all regeneration in art."[24] He concluded that the poet of the second school

> . . . looks too much away from himself and from his age, does not feel the facts of life enough, but seeks in art an escape from them. Consequently, the art he achieves cannot be the expression of the age and of himself -- cannot be representative and national.[25]

Eglinton insisted that ancient legends, if used by the modern poet, should be so infused with the spirit of the age that they "become entirely new creations", and that the

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[23] Ibid., p. 17.

[24] Ibid., p. 26.

[25] Ibid., p. 27.

legendary figures should "take upon their broad shoulders something of the weariness and fret of our age, if only to show how lightly they may be carried, and to affright with shadowing masses of truth, such as mortals hurl not now, the seats of error".[26] Yeats himself had earlier insisted that art should provide images of ideal life, and he later achieved originality and vitality by the infusion which Eglinton recommended. In 1898, however, he seemed only to have noticed the Victorian demand for 'utility' in art. His reply was explicit:

> I believe that all men will more and more reject the opinion that poetry is "a criticism of life," and be more and more convinced that it is a revelation of a hidden life, and that they may even come to think "painting, poetry, and music" "the only means of conversing with eternity left to man on earth."[27]

Subsequent articles by Eglinton and William Larminie were hostile to Yeats's aesthetic principles and they provoked him to write "The Autumn of the Flesh" (1898),[28] a radical defence of 'decadent' literature. In this article he condemned all the great masters from Homer to the Victorians for dealing with external realities, and went on to say that

> . . . it was only with the modern poets, with Goethe and Wordsworth and Browning, that poetry gave up the right to consider all things in the

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[26] Ibid., pp. 23-24.

[27] Ibid., p. 36.

[28] Yeats changed the title to "The Autumn of the Body" when he reprinted the essay in Ideas of Good and Evil (1903).

> world as a dictionary of types and symbols and began to call itself a critic of life and an interpreter of things as they are.[29]

He continued:

> The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things.[30]

The controversy with Eglinton illustrates Yeats's passion for a nationalist literature; but, above all, it illustrates his passion for a literature which would have transcendental qualities and which would be independent of Victorian demands for 'utility'. His antagonism towards Victorianism and his passion for an Irish national literature explain to some extent why, in his reviews, he was often obliged to judge Irish writers on the basis of intention and subject-matter rather than achievement.[31] He was trying to create an Irish national literature devoid of the chauvinism which spoiled so much Irish literature, and which, unfortunately, was so popular. Consequently, using the criteria that it was based on Irish subject-matter and that it was not a mere vehicle for religious or political propaganda, Yeats sometimes over-rated the work of Irish poets.

With the exception of John Synge, whom he met later,

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[29] " The Autumn of the Body", E & I., p. 192.

[30] Ibid., p. 193.

[31] His incompetence in Gaelic, and the mediocre quality of Irish literature were other factors.

AE (George Russell) was Yeats's favourite modern Irish poet.[32] This was because AE's aesthetic, especially in so far as it touched upon morality and transcendentalism, was congenial to Yeats. Reviewing AE's Homeward: Songs by the Way, Yeats wrote:

> He is a moralist, not because he desires, like the preacher, to coerce our will, but because good and evil are a part of what he splendidly calls "the multitudinous meditation" of the divine world in whose shadow he seeks to dwell.[33]

According to Yeats, AE had

> . . . a perfect understanding that the business of poetry is not to enforce an opinion or expound an action, but to bring us into communion with the moods and passions which are the creative powers behind the universe; that though the poet may need to master many opinions, they are but the body and the symbols for his art, the formula of evocation for making the invisible visible.[34]

In his review of Songs by the Way, Yeats had merely noted that there were certain defects in AE's craft; five months later he admitted that the book was "not specially Irish in subject".[35] Criticism such as that accorded to AE suggests that Yeats was judging writers in the light of his own particular goal -- a literature that was at once transcendental,

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[32] See "Irish National Literature", The Bookman, VIII (September, 1895), 169: "No voice in modern Ireland is to me as beautiful as his . . . ."

[33] W. B. Yeats, "A New Poet", The Bookman, VI (August, 1894), 148.

[34] "Irish National Literature", The Bookman, VIII (September, 1895), 169.

[35] Letters, p. 250.

undidactic, and Irish. Similarly, on the basis of Sir Samuel Ferguson's use of Irish legends and his passion for "barbarous truth", Yeats had earlier proclaimed him to be "the greatest Irish poet".[36] The essays on Ferguson make it clear that, for Yeats, Ferguson's bardic qualities of "fatherland and song"[37] were the chief reasons for the older poet's eminence.

Yeats seems to have regarded R. D. Joyce as Ferguson's successor. Again, one notices the emphasis Yeats put on bardic literature. In fact, it was in an article on Joyce that he made his earliest distinction between sophisticated and bardic poets:

> Poets may be divided roughly into two classes. First, those who -- like Coleridge, Shelley, and Wordsworth -- investigate what is obscure in emotion, and appeal to what is abnormal in man, or become the healers of some particular disease of the spirit. During their lifetime they write for a clique, and leave after them a school. And second, the bardic class -- the Homers and Hugos, the Burnses and Scotts -- who sing of the universal emotions, our loves and angers, our delight in stories and heroes, our delight in things beautiful and gallant. They do not write for a clique, or leave after them a school, for they sing for all men.
>
> Both classes are necessary; yet these, though they have not, as the first often have, a definite teaching intention, are perhaps more valuable to mankind, for they speak to the manhood in us, not to the scholar or the philosopher. They are better for a nation than savans [sic] or moralists, or

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36 "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson", The Irish Fireside, October 9, 1886, p. 220.

37 "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson", Dublin University Review, II (November, 1886), 941.

> philosophers. Such may teach us to know the good from the evil, the true from the false, the beautiful from the ugly and the coarse; but only the poets can make us love what they please -- and that which makes men differ is not what they know, but what they love.
>
> To this latter class belongs Joyce, and, indeed, almost all our Irish poets. He is essentially a bard. He sought to give us whole men, apart from all that limits; therefore he went for his subjects to that simple and legendary past, whither every hill in his own many-fabled Limerick must have appeared to beckon him.[38]

The above passage is important for several reasons, and once again they have little to do with Yeats's particular topic. First, the passage provides a more accurate index to Yeats's literary ideas than do some of the oft-quoted pronouncements which he made during the Nineties. For instance, it clearly indicates that he favoured edification through art, provided it was properly effected. Second, it shows Yeats's early awareness of the malady T. S. Eliot later described as "a dissociation of sensibility".[39] Third, it shows at what an early age Yeats had conceived of an Irish national literature. And finally, it indicates the gulf between his theory and his practice; for, whatever he may have intended, his poems of the Eighties and Nineties certainly do not "speak to the manhood in us". Yet it is comments such as these and not his

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[38] "The Poetry of R. D. Joyce", The Irish Fireside (November 27, 1886), p. 331.

[39] "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), Selected Essays, 1917-1932 (London, 1932), p. 274. Cf. Yeats's praise of AE, whose poetry he described as "the emotions of a soul dwelling in the presence of certain ideas". The Bookman, VI (August, 1894), 148.

evaluation of particular Irish writers which make the early articles valuable to us. Yeats certainly realized the limitations of these writers, and after the publication of A Book of Irish Verse (1895) the names Ferguson, Tynan, Weekes, Joyce, Allingham and Russell seldom appeared in his critical writing.

Yeats likely would have expressed dissatisfaction with modern Irish literature sooner than he did,[40] had he not been placed on the defensive, early in 1895, by an attack from Professor Dowden, the most influential critic in Ireland at the time. The controversy started when a Miss Hickey read a lecture on Sir Samuel Ferguson, at which occasion Dowden "expressed scorn for the Irish Lit movement and Irish Lit generally".[41] Yeats had evidently received his information about the happenings from Standish O'Grady[42] who, according to Hone, "treated Dowden like a pick-pocket for daring to suggest that Ferguson was not in all essential qualities, except precedence, a greater poet than Homer".[43] In a letter

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[40] Cf. Yeats's attitude to Russell's Deirdre, in a letter to Lady Gregory, 1902. Letters, p. 365.

[41] Letters, p. 245.

[42] See the excerpt from Yeats's letter to Lionel Johnson, quoted by A. Norman Jeffares, W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet (London, 1949), p. 97.

[43] Joseph Hone, W. B. Yeats, 1865-1939 (London, 1943), 2nd ed., 1962, p. 110.

to Lionel Johnson, January 27, 1895, Yeats stated that T. W. Rolleston had written a defence of Irish literature for the Daily Express, and that Dowden, in reply, had sent "to the Dublin papers an extract from the preface of a new book of his in which he says by implication that we go about raving of 'Brian Boru' and 'plastered with Shamrock' . . . . Dowden thinks we praise every kind of Irish work 'whether good or bad' . . . ."[44]

The preface referred to formed the Introduction to Dowden's New Studies in Literature (1895).[45] In it Dowden condemned as decadent "literature which consciously aims at cosmopolitanism".[46] He condemned chauvinistic literature also, and steered a middle course between the two extremes: "Every great literary movement of modern Europe has been born from the wedlock of two peoples."[47] Yeats would almost certainly have concurred with these opinions.

In his Introduction, however, Professor Dowden refused to acknowledge that the recent work of the Irish Literary Society and the Gaelic League had improved the literary

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[44] Jeffares, loc. cit.

[45] Dowden's introductory essay, with minor differences, had been published earlier as "Hopes and Fears for Literature", The Fortnightly Review, XLV (February 1, 1889) 166-83.

[46] New Studies in Literature (London, 1895), p. 16.

[47] Ibid., pp. 18, 19.

scene in Ireland.[48] This was bad enough, but the following assertion must have been especially provoking to Yeats: "In Ireland at the present, apart from the Universities -- we must sorrowfully acknowledge the fact -- little interest is taken in literature."[49] Yeats answered Dowden in letters to the Daily Express and articles on Irish national literature in The Bookman. He considered his anthology of Irish verse, published that year, to be another "shot in the battle".[50]

Yeats began his defence of the Irish Literary Movement by claiming that Dowden had failed as a critic, and that the Movement had

> . . . denounced rhetoric with more passionate vehemence than he [Dowden] has ever done. It has exposed sentimentality and flaccid technique with more effect than has been possible to his imperfect knowledge of Irish literature, but, at the same time, it has persuaded Irish men and women to read what is excellent in past and present Irish literature . . . .[51]

But the substance of Yeats's defence of an Irish national literature -- literature written "under Irish influence and of Irish subjects"[52] -- is found in The Bookman (1895). He

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[48] Ibid., pp. 17, 18.

[49] Ibid., Preface, p. ix.

[50] Quoted by A. Norman Jeffares, W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet, p. 97.

[51] "Prof. Dowden and Irish Literature", The Daily Express (Dublin), January 26, 1895, p. 5.

[52] "Irish National Literature: From Callanan to Carleton", The Bookman, VIII (July, 1895), 105.

acknowledged that Carlyle had remained a Scotsman while he wrote of German kings;[53] but, Yeats argued, this was possible because Carlyle had the backing of a literary tradition. The great writers of England and Scotland had merely to "obey rules and instincts which have been accumulating for centuries".[54] Ireland, especially English-speaking Ireland, lacked a national literary tradition, and this explained the inferior quality of Irish literature.

> The Irish national writers who have bulked largest in the past have been those who, because they served some political cause which could not wait, or had not enough of patience in themselves, turned away from the unfolding and developing of an Irish tradition, and borrowed the mature English methods of utterance and used them to sing of Irish wrongs or preach of Irish purposes. Their work was never quite satisfactory, for what was Irish in it looked ungainly in an English garb, and what was English was never perfectly mastered, never wholly absorbed into their being.[55]

Yeats's argument is clear enough, and it accounts for much of what Dowden thought was decadence in Irish literature. Yeats went on to say that young Irish writers, in attempting to be original, were "but half-articulate". This was true of William Carleton who wrote at a time when little of Irish history, folk-lore, and poetry had been translated into English. Consequently, Carleton "had to dig the marble for

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[53] Dowden had argued thus. New Studies in Literature, pp. 16-17.

[54] W. B. Yeats, op. cit., p. 105.

[55] Ibid.

his statue out of the mountain side with his own hands, and the statue shows not seldom the clumsy chiselling of the quarryman".[56]

Dowden and Yeats were arguing from different motives. Dowden was the established critic treating aesthetic and ethical matters in the light of literary history. Yeats was a young poet, filled with desire and devotion, in search of a style of his own. His remarks on Carleton show that he was aware of the problems confronting young Irish poets. But he was patient and generally confident. In answering Douglas Hyde's speech on "The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland", given before the National Literary Society in 1892, Yeats wrote:

> Can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language?[57]

And he cited American literature to prove his point.

Yeats was convinced that art should ennoble mankind, yet he opposed didacticism; he sought to create a national literature, yet he was aware of our common nature; he opposed

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[56] Ibid., p.107. In this article Yeats advocated Irish subject-matter chiefly as a stimulus for creativity. Usually, his motives were more varied: to stress the 'religious' truths embodied in mythologies; and not only to create an Irish national literature, but, through the use of Irish history, folklore, and mythology, to direct European literature in general back to its ancient springs. See especially "The Celtic Element in Literature", E & I., pp. 173-88.

[57] "The De-Anglicizing of Ireland", United Ireland (December 17, 1892), p. 5.

scientists and materialists, yet he was not entirely at ease with the occultists; he rejected the Church yet he sought a religion of art. These antitheses explain, to some extent, the limitations of his criticism -- a criticism conceived in defiance, born of desire, and nurtured by expediency. He must have smiled knowingly, perhaps a little ruefully, when, a few years later, he wrote:

> In Ireland, where we have no mature intellectual tradition, and are in imperfect sympathy with the mature tradition of England, the only one we know anything of, we sometimes carry with us through our lives a defiant dogmatism like that of a schoolboy.[58]

Many of the problems that helped to shape Yeats's Irish criticisms haunted him long after he had ceased writing reviews. Some are evident in his criticisms of English writers. In the latter instance, though, he was more competent and he had a wider and richer field from which to choose his models and from which to find sanction and support in shaping his own poetic theory.

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[58] "John Eglinton", The United Irishman, VI (November 9, 1901), 3.

CHAPTER IV

ON BLAKE AND SHELLEY

> No artesian well of the intellect can find the poetic theme.
>
> W. B. Yeats

Yeats's more mature literary criticism centres on such major English writers as Blake, Shelley, Spenser, and Shakespeare. For all but Spenser he had unbounded admiration which increased literary **experience** only slightly diminished. Long after he had outgrown his passion for the Pre-Raphaelites and could challenge Plato himself, Yeats was still a disciple of Blake.

> Grant me an old man's frenzy,
> Myself must I remake
> Till I am Timon and Lear
> Or that William Blake
> Who beat upon the wall
> Till Truth obeyed his call.[1]

There were several reasons for Yeats's interest in Blake. As an adolescent he "was in all things Pre-Raphaelite", having acquired from his father a preference for the art of Blake and Rossetti.[2] He must have seen in Blake's opposition to Newton, Locke, Hobbes and Sir Joshua Reynolds a parallel

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[1] W. B. Yeats, "An Acre of Grass", Collected Poems (London, 1965), p. 347.

[2] Auto., p. 114.

to his own hatred for the ideas of Huxley and Tyndall and for 'realism' in art. He believed that Blake was England's national prophet and that he himself would play a similar role for Ireland.

> I had an unshakable conviction . . . that invisible gates would open as they opened for Blake, as they opened for Swedenborg, as they opened for Boehme, and that this philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature, and set before Irishmen for special manual an Irish literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind, and turn our places of beauty or legendary association into holy symbols.[3]

Early in 1889 Yeats informed Katharine Tynan that Edwin Ellis and he were preparing a commentary on Blake's mystical works. The study, Yeats added,

> . . . should draw notice -- be a sort of red flag above the waters of oblivion -- for there is no clue printed anywhere to the mysterious 'Prophetic Books' -- Swinburne and Gilchrist found them unintellibible.[4]

Yeats was then a 'mystical' writer, and he had been engaged for some time in occult experiments. His study of Blake, he wrote in his "Esoteric Sections Journal", was a substantial contribution to theosophy;[5] and on September 7, 1890, he wrote that "The mystics all over the world will have to acknowledge Ellis and myself among their authorities".[6] It

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[3] Ibid., p. 254.

[4] Letters, p. 112.

[5] See Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks (New York, 1948), p. 65. The entry is dated October 24, 1889.

[6] Letters to Katharine Tynan, ed. Roger McHugh (New York, 1953), p. 127.

worked both ways: his knowledge of mysticism, he claimed, enabled him to understand Blake's prophetic works.[7] Yeats went even further in a letter to John O'Leary, in 1892:

> If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would The Countess Kathleen have ever come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write. It holds to my work the same relation that the philosophy of Godwin held to the work of Shelley and I have always considered myself a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance -- the revolt of the soul against the intellect -- now beginning in the world.[8]

One can hardly over-emphasize Yeats's 'extra-literary' interests because they account for a serious limitation in the Yeats-Ellis edition of Blake's works.

Yeats's claim that there was "no clue printed anywhere to the mysterious 'Prophetic Books' -- Swinburne and Gilchrist found them unintelligible" was not entirely correct. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's contribution to Gilchrist's Life of William Blake indicates that Rossetti, with his concern for aesthetic criteria[9] and his lack of sympathy for occultism,[10] did indeed prefer Poetical Sketches and Songs of Innocence to the prophetic works. James Thomson, in an essay

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[7] Letters, p. 125.

[8] Ibid., p. 211.

[9] Alexander Gilchrist, Life of William Blake, II (London, 1863), 77.

[10] Ibid., II, 25.

written in 1866, treated only the early lyrics;[11] and in 1889 Coventry Patmore condemned all but "four or five lovely lyrics".[12] But Swinburne, despite his superlatives, showed a genuine insight into Blake's purposes and into the nature of Blake's limitations.

Swinburne appears to have been the first to study Blake's "creed", as he called it, and to apply it to Blake criticism. He did not, however, extend it far enough. Apart from admiration for isolated passages, Milton and Jerusalem received little attention; and Vala, the existence of which Swinburne knew about, was ignored. His neglect of Vala and his remark that he found the "externals" of Jerusalem "too incredibly grotesque . . . to be fit for any detailed coherence of remark"[13] epitomized the prevailing critical attitude towards Blake. It was this attitude toward the prophetic works especially that Yeats and Ellis hoped to correct when, in 1889, they collaborated in a study of Blake.

In their Preface, Yeats and Ellis claimed that there were two main reasons why the critics had not understood Blake: first, there was "the solidity of the myth"; and second,

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[11] See Biographical and Critical Studies (London, 1896), pp. 240-69.

[12] See Principle in Art (London, 1907), p. 92.

[13] A. C. Swinburne, The Complete Works, ed. E. Gosse and T. J. Wise (London, 1925-27), VI, 355. It has already been mentioned that Arnold ignored Blake.

there was the variety of terms or "synonyms" employed by Blake.[14] As early as 1870, Ellis had believed that by finding the key to these "synonyms" he could meet Gilchrist's challenge for anyone to interpret "To the Jews".[15] Yeats later went to Ellis and "asked to have Blake explained", and he immediately saw that Blake's mythology "was no mere freak of an eccentric mind, but an eddy of that flood-tide of symbolism which attained its tide-mark in the magic of the Middle Ages".[16]

The essay "On the Necessity of Symbolism", written by Yeats,[17] gives the basis of Blake's symbolic structure. It was in what Swedenborg had called "correspondence" or "a symbolic relation of outer to inner"; but this relation was in no way a "product of nature or natural reason", because it began "with a perception of something different from natural things". And this, Yeats claimed, was "the first postulate of all mystics".[18]

The Yeats-Ellis commentary is often difficult and questionable, and is not always carefully documented. Geoffrey Keynes, Blake's bibliographer, dismisses the work with these

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[14] The Works of William Blake: Poetic, Symbolic and Critical, ed. Edwin John Ellis and William Butler Yeats, I (London, 1893), Preface, viii-ix.

[15] Ibid., I, viii-ix.

[16] Ibid., I, ix-x.

[17] Letters, p. 170.

[18] Op. cit., I, 235-36.

remarks:

> The chief value of these volumes lies in the interpretation of the symbolism, the paraphrased commentaries, and the lithographic reproductions which they contain. The memoir introduces a new theory of Blake's ancestry, according to which he is supposed to be of Irish origin. The value of the printed texts is reduced by the large number of inaccuracies which occur in them; some of these are intentional alterations, but the majority are mistakes made in copying. This appears in particular in the poems from the Rossetti MS . . . .[19]

It was, however, the first study to give credence to a consistent mythology which, it claimed, underlay Blake's prophetic works. It showed, as its authors had maintained, that Blake's prophetic works had affinities with the spiritual symbolism of the Middle Ages.

The Yeats-Ellis commentary errs in the opposite direction from that of Swinburne. He had neglected important mystical aspects of Blake's work: Yeats and Ellis tended to ignore Blake's aesthetic aspects. Their conclusion that Vala is "Blake's literary masterpiece"[20] seems based on a criterion no more 'literary' than the fact that Blake had a consistent mythology deriving from spiritual and medieval sources. And since Blake's symbols are examined chiefly for 'theological' significance, one is not at all convinced that the editors have shown how language (the vehicle) "ceases

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[19] A Bibliography of William Blake (New York, 1921), p. 275.

[20] The Works of William Blake, I, 46.

to be theological and becomes literary and poetical".[21] Furthermore, the editors' interest in theosophy seems to have blinded them to the merits of earlier work: Poetical Sketches was "for the most part, mere literature".[22] It may also account for their failure to perceive or their refusal to indicate, as Swinburne had indicated, defects resulting from a "jarring and confused mixture of apparent 'allegory' with actual vision".[23] Their theosophical 'conditioning' seems to have narrowed their perspective to such an extent that they refused to allow Blake anything but "a technical language in which every word has the same invariable interpretation".[24] Hence, what they regarded as literary symbolism in their analysis of Blake's works was really what literary critics term 'allegory'.

The Yeats-Ellis theory and method were, no doubt, necessary correctives to previous Blake critics. The error was in their being applied too rigidly to literature. Yeats was aware of this very danger when, in 1900, he wrote of the Yeats-Ellis edition: "I think that some of my own constructive symbolism is put with too much confidence. It is mainly

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[21] Ibid., I, xi.

[22] Ibid., I, 186. Italics mine.

[23] A. C. Swinburne, William Blake (London, 1868), p. 56.

[24] W. B. Yeats, "Seen in Three Days", The Bookman, V, (February, 1894), 152.

right but parts should be used rather as an interpretive hypothesis than as a certainty."[25]

We know from their Preface that Yeats and Ellis worked on a division-of-labour principle, but as far as I know there is no way to determine all of Yeats's contributions. Therefore, instead of pursuing the Yeats-Ellis study in further detail, it might be more prudent to consider some essays on Blake which Yeats contributed to periodicals.

In August, 1893, Yeats wrote a review of Lawrence Housman's Selections from the Writings of William Blake. Housman, Yeats claimed, "treats 'the prophetic books' with the amused patronage, and dismisses them with the shallow remark about their formlessness, which we all know so well, and chatters about their unintelligibility".[26] Furthermore, Housman had ignored "the correct text"[27] (the Yeats-Ellis edition), and had relied upon earlier texts, notably those of W. M. Rossetti and Alexander Gilchrist. Yeats regarded this not only as an abuse of Blake but also as an affront to the scholarship of Ellis and himself. His article was a protest against making Blake "a theme of endless eloquence without

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[25] See Allan Wade, A Bibliography of the Writings of W. B. Yeats (London, 1951), 3rd ed., rev. and ed. Russell K. Alspach, 1968, p. 241.

[26] "The Writings of William Blake", The Bookman, IV (August, 1893), 147.

[27] Ibid., pp. 146-47.

knowledge".[28]

A second defence of Blake's mythology and of the Yeats-Ellis commentary appeared in The Bookman, April, 1896. Yeats was provoked this time by Richard Garnett's edition of Blake which evidently owed too much to the Rossetti edition. Yeats felt that Garnett's edition, in spite of some merits, perpetuated the earlier abuses of Blake's works. To Garnett's suggestion that only the lyrics were worth attention, Yeats replied that this was tantamount to saying "the songs of Shakespeare are very clear, let us therefore trouble no more over the mystery of Hamlet, for all that was writ at haphazard".[29] He sensibly pointed out the folly of judging what one does not understand, and declared that

> . . . Mr. Garnett, like Mr. Gilchrist, Mr. Rossetti and almost every one who has ever written on the subject, does not show evidence of having ever given so much as a day's study to any part of Blake's mystical writing, or of having anything of the knowledge necessary to make even prolonged study fruitful.

Yeats properly answered Garnett's complaint that the "Prophetic Books" had not been written in blank-verse:

> The pity is, not that Blake did not write the "Prophetic Books" in blank verse, but that he did not sustain the level of their finest passages.

He ended the review on a note of resignation:

> . . . Garnett's book may be cordially recommended to all who would learn a little of one of the most

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[28] Ibid., p. 147.

[29] All references in this paragraph are to "William Blake", The Bookman, X (April, 1896), 21.

> creative minds of modern days, for its futilities are wholly, and its errors almost wholly, in the parts where it touches mysticism, and for mysticism the general reader cares nought, nor is it dreadful that he should.

In 1897 Yeats proclaimed that Blake was ahead of his time: at a time when "educated people believed that they amused themselves with books of imagination, but that they 'made their souls' by listening to sermons and by doing or by not doing certain things", Blake had known that the Imagination was the source of divinity in art.[30] Blake knew "that the imaginative arts were therefore the greatest of Divine revelations, and that the sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike, which the imaginative arts awaken, is that forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ".[31] This is made possible, Yeats tells us later, when the imaginative arts present man in the "procession", as he frequently called it, where his limitations and potentials alike are displayed.[32] This revelation, this awareness of our common humanity, and not didacticism, is central to what I call the 'morality' of Yeats's poetic. It underlies his appreciation of Shakespeare, and his condemnation of, say,

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[30] "William Blake and the Imagination", E & I., p. 111. The essay was first published in The Academy (June 19, 1897), under the title "William Blake".

[31] Ibid., p. 112.

[32] See Chapter V below. For a definition of "procession" see n. 26, p. 82 below.

George Eliot.

Imagination and passion, Yeats insisted, allow man to put on immortality, to become "a part of the body of God".[33] His conclusion that this knowledge kept Blake "more simply a poet than any poet of his time, for it made him content to express every beautiful feeling that came into his head without troubling about its utility or chaining it to any utility",[34] suggests that opposition to overt didacticism was now as important to Yeats as was the mysticism he found in Blake.

Yeats now acknowledged in Blake's art faults which he had ignored earlier. The confusion and obscurity of the 'Prophetic Books' were the result of Blake's being born at an inopportune time: "He was a symbolist who had to invent his symbols . . . . He was a man crying out for a mythology, and trying to make one because he could not find one to his hand."[35] Yeats's oversimplified the solution:

> Had he been a Catholic of Dante's time he would have been well content with Mary and the angels; or had he been a scholar of our time he would have taken his symbols where Wagner took his, from Norse mythology; or have followed, with the help of Professor Rhys, that pathway into Welsh mythology which he found in Jerusalem; or have gone to Ireland and chosen for his symbols the sacred mountains, along whose sides the peasant still sees enchanted

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[33] E & I., p. 113.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., p. 114.

> fires, and the divinities which have not faded from the belief, if they have faded from the prayers, of simple hearts; and have spoken without mixing incongruous things because he spoke of things that had been long steeped in emotion; and have been less obscure because a traditional mythology stood on the threshold of his meaning and on the margin of his sacred darkness.[36]

Explicitly Christian symbols would certainly have had the authority of a tradition, and would have been more readily accepted and understood than Blake's "counties of England, with their correspondence to tribes of Israel, and his mountains and rivers, with their correspondence to parts of a man's body . . . ."[37] But Yeats ignored the fact that Blake did have Christian symbolism at his disposal and that he often used it.

Yeats's emphasis on mysticism and his interest in a national literature sometimes caused him to equate the mystic with the folk-lorist, and to confuse Blake's mysticism with the machinery of the poems. In his essay on Shelley (1898), Yeats wrote that "all the machineries of poetry are parts of the convictions of antiquity, and readily become again convictions in minds that brood over them with visionary intensity".[38] Years later his father aptly drew attention to this confusion:

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

[38] "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry", E & I., p. 74.

> You will remind me that Blake was a mystic. I know that Blake's poetry is not intelligible without a knowledge of Blake's mystical doctrines. Yet mysticism was never the substance of his poetry, only its machinery . . . . The substance of his poetry is himself, revolting and desiring. His mysticism was a make-believe, a sort of working hypothesis as good as another. He could write about it in prose and contentiously assert his belief. When he wrote his poems it dropped into the background, and it did not matter whether you believed it or not, so apart from all creeds was his poetry. I like a poem to have fine machinery, but if this machinery is made to appear anything more than that, the spell of the poetry is broken.[39]

The search for a consistent interpretation of Blake's works as "the signature of his genius, and the guarantee of his sanity",[40] and a theosophical bent for definite and precise meanings seem responsible for the limitations of Yeats's comments on Blake. During the Nineties, however, Yeats's interests in theosophy declined somewhat as he moved towards Aestheticism. Evidence of that change is found in his essay "William Blake and his Illustrations to The Divine Comedy" (1896).

After claiming that "William Blake was the first writer of modern times to preach the indissoluble marriage of all great art with symbol",[41] Yeats took a more critical

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[39] Passages from the Letters of J. B. Yeats, ed. Ezra Pound (Churchtown, 1917), pp. 19-20.

[40] The Works of William Blake, I, viii.

[41] E & I., p. 116. The essay was first published in monthly instalments in The Savoy (July, August, and September, 1896).

approach than he had previously taken:

> The limitation of his view was from the very intensity of his vision; he was a too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature; and because he believed that the figures seen by the mind's eye, when exalted by inspiration, were 'eternal existences,' symbols of divine essences, he hated every grace of style that might obscure their lineaments. To wrap them about in reflected lights was to do this, and to dwell over-fondly upon any softness of hair or flesh was to dwell upon that which was least permanent and least characteristic, for 'The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: that the more distinct, sharp and wiry the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism and bungling.' Inspiration was to see the permanent and characteristic in all forms, and if you had it not, you must needs imitate with a languid mind the things you saw or remembered, and so sink into the sleep of nature where all is soft and melting.[42]

Perhaps the most significant comment that can be made on the above passage comes from Yeats himself:

> What matter if in his visionary realism, in his enthusiasm for what, after all, is perhaps the greatest art, he refused to admit that he who wraps the vision in lights and shadows, in iridescent or glowing colour, until form be half lost in pattern, may, as did Titian in his Bacchus and Ariadne, create a talisman as powerfully charged with intellectual virtue as though it were a jewel-studded door of the city seen on Patmos?[43]

The two passages show that Yeats was beginning to doubt the artistic value of mystical literature, and of purely arbitrary symbols. Implicit interest in "softness of hair or flesh" and in "lights and shadows", and the rejection of

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[42] E & I., pp. 119-20.

[43] Ibid., p. 121. Italics mine.

Blake's determinate outline that refused to admit stylization almost certainly reflect the influence of the English Aesthetes and the French Symbolists upon Yeats's poetic.

Though he seems never to have written purely literary criticism of Blake, Yeats was becoming more conscious of literary criteria. Blake's best works were said to succeed "because they have the only excellence possible in any art, a mastery over artistic expression", a perfection which is possible only when the artist's "imagination is perfect and complete".[44] Yeats was becoming more aware of what later he believed to be the secret of all great art -- the fullness of the artist's life, the relationship between his personal idiosyncrasies and his insatiable desire to frame infinity:

> The errors in the handiwork of exalted spirits are as the more fantastical errors in their lives; as Coleridge's opium cloud; as Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's candidature for the throne of Greece; as Blake's anger against causes and purposes he but half understood . . . .[45]

Despite its shortcomings, the Yeats-Ellis edition of Blake was a contribution to English studies. It was the first edition to include Vala; and it did anticipate more recent Blake scholarship. Its importance to Yeats as a developing artist is, of course, conjectural. Still it seems likely that interpreting Blake's 'system' provided him with intellectual discipline. More important, he found in

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[44] Ibid., p. 127.

[45] Ibid., p. 128.

Blake confirmation of the primacy of the Imagination. He must have found there, also, sanction for the human (mythological) and spiritual (mystical) aspects of art. In any event, he never once denied his doctrinal debt to Blake, although he came to realize that it was Shelley who most influenced him as a poet.

Percy Bysshe Shelley, English-born Protestant, later an atheist and a champion of free-love, was hardly the model for Yeats to hold up before the Irish populace. Consequently, he made very few biographical references to Shelley; and those which he did make were carefully considered. When, in 1904, for example, Yeats wished to cite Shelley as an example of a "creative mind" whose influence was salutary, he hastened to add that "There never have been men more unlike an Englishman's idea of himself than Keats and Shelley . . . ."[46]

Among Yeats's literary associates of the Eighties and Nineties, however, Shelley was quite popular. Reflecting upon this popularity, Yeats wrote, in 1932:

> The orthodox religion, as our mothers had taught it, was no longer credible; those who could not substitute connoisseurship, or some humanitarian or scientific pursuit, found a substitute in Shelley. He had shared our curiosities, our political problems, our conviction that, despite all experience to the contrary, love is enough; and unlike Blake, isolated by an arbitrary symbolism, he seemed to sum up all that was metaphysical in English poetry. When in

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[46] "First Principles", Expl., p. 158. Reprinted from Samhain: 1904.

> middle life I looked back I found that he and not Blake, whom I had studied more and with more approval, had shaped my life 47

The above reminiscence reflects accurately enough the curious blending of scepticism and naiveté which characterized the early Yeats and his circle. And their interest in Shelley is verified by the fact that besides Yeats, John Todhunter, Ernest Rhys, T. W. Rolleston, William Sharp, Stopford Brooke and Aubrey de Vere all published works on Shelley.

Yeats's remarks on Shelley are legion: but his systematic analyses of Shelley's poetry are found chiefly in two essays written approximately three decades apart. "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry", the earlier essay, is divided into two parts; the first part deals with Shelley's ideas and was first published in The Dome (July, 1900): the second part deals with Shelley's symbolism and first appeared when Yeats expanded the essay in Ideas of Good and Evil (1903). The essay shows a commendable awareness of Shelley's Platonic ideas; and, more important, it indicates what Yeats's beliefs were at that particular time.

Yeats began the essay by reasserting the autonomy of art. As a boy, his belief had been "that whatever of philosophy

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47 "Prometheus Unbound", E & I., p. 424. The following passage from Yeats's papers, quoted by Jeffares (W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet, p. 58), shows that Yeats felt a special affinity with Shelley: "All young men that I knew lived the life Edwin Ellis told me of but I had gathered from Shelley and the romantic poets an idea of perfect love. Perhaps I should never marry in church but I would love one woman all my life."

has been made poetry is alone permanent, and that one should begin to arrange it in some regular order, rejecting nothing as the make-believe of the poets".[48] Apparently his 'psychic' experiments had verified his belief, for he added:

> Since then I have observed dreams and visions very carefully, and am now certain that the imagination has some way of lighting on the truth that the reason has not, and that its commandments, delivered when the body is still and the reason silent, are the most binding we can ever know.[49]

Yeats rejected the popular belief that Prometheus Unbound "was Godwin's Political Justice put into rhyme", and attempted to show that Shelley was no anarchist.[50] He quoted freely from Shelley's works to show that Shelley believed not so much in political revolution as in a universe animated by some divine spirit. The liberty which Shelley referred to, Yeats maintained, was synonymous with Intellectual Beauty or divine order.[51] A poet's role in this divine order could be found in A Defence of Poetry, where, Yeats claimed, Shelley had insisted that the poet is a seer who translates into words "his vision of the divine order"; that life is the province of poetry; and that poetry is itself an image of the divine mind, and therefore its 'morality', unlike that of

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[48] "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry", E & I., p. 65.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., pp. 65-66.

[51] Ibid., pp. 66-67.

the pragmatist, is benevolent.[52]

Shelley, Yeats continued, seemed to have discovered "that memory of Nature the visionaries claim for the foundation of their knowledge".[53] Yeats did not define the "memory of Nature", but it would appear to be a reference to Anima Mundi. In any event, it was in the realm of the Imagination and therefore superior to Reason. It was an easy step from this to mythology -- one means by which poetry could be at once national and universal -- and Yeats did not hesitate to proclaim that the "ministering spirits" of Shelley's divine order "correspond to the Devas of the East, and the Elemental spirits of mediaeval Europe, and the Sidhe of ancient Ireland".[54] In fact, he found Prometheus Unbound so congenial in both its message and its machinery that he regarded it as a new expression of an ancient and simple faith,[55] and proclaimed it as one of his "sacred Books".[56]

Yeats began the second half of "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" with a discussion of the origin of Shelley's chief symbols. Although he drew close parallels between Shelley's thought and symbols and those of the Platonists

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[52] Ibid., pp. 67-68.

[53] Ibid., p. 74.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid., pp. 77-78.

[56] Ibid., p. 65.

and the Neo-Platonists, he was apparently not interested in literary 'influences' as such.[57] Referring to the 'cave' symbol, Yeats wrote:

> It may be that his subconscious life seized upon some passing scene, and moulded it into an ancient symbol without help from anything but that great Memory; but so good a Platonist as Shelley could hardly have thought of any cave as a symbol, without thinking of Plato's cave that was the world; and so good a scholar may well have had Porphyry on 'the Cave of the Nymphs' in his mind.[58]

Later in the essay, Yeats stated:

> The contrast between it [the tower] and the cave in Laon and Cythna suggests a contrast between the mind looking outward upon men and things and the mind looking inward upon itself, which may or may not have been in Shelley's mind, but certainly helps, with one knows not how many other dim meanings, to give the poem mystery and shadow. It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings besides the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement, into the abundance and depth of Nature. The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet finds of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstances of life.[59]

The above passage is interesting for several reasons.

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[57] Yeats made an extended comparison of The Witch of Atlas and Porphyry's commentary on Homer's Cave of the Nymphs, but he made no attempt at actually determining Shelley's sources. For a discussion of Shelley's possible debt to Thomas Taylor (1758-1835), the Neo-Platonist whose translations Yeats mentioned, see George Bornstein's Yeats and Shelley (Chicago, 1970), pp. 77-82.

[58] E & I., pp. 81-82.

[59] Ibid., p. 87.

It anticipates Yeats's own mature use of symbolism; and it suggests his awareness of the dangers of a purely intellectual arrangement as a substitute for an emotional base for art. More immediately important, the two passages (but especially the latter one) reflect the antithetical attractions that theosophy and Aestheticism had for him. For example, this section of the essay points towards tradition as the source of the authority, suggestiveness, and association that Yeats later proclaimed to be the distinguishing qualities of the truly literary symbol.[60] On the other hand, one finds him using such expressions as "images that have not the definiteness of symbols", "more deliberately symbolic purpose", and "the most precise of all Shelley's symbols".[61]

This ambivalence was fundamental: for Yeats was uncertain of Shelley's status as a mystical poet -- an uncertainty that was reflected in his discussion of Shelley's thought as well as his symbols. At first, Yeats was inclined towards absolutes: ". . . all the machinery of poetry are parts of the convictions of antiquity, and readily become again convictions in minds that brood over them with visionary intensity."[62] Three years later he was less certain, and he concluded his essay on Shelley with perhaps the most low-keyed

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[60] See Chapter VIII below.

[61] E & I., pp. 78 and 88.

[62] Ibid., p. 74.

sentence he ever wrote: "But he was born in a day when the old wisdom had vanished and was content merely to write verses, and often with little thought of more than verses."[63]

It is not surprising that Yeats would return specifically to Prometheus Unbound for it is not only Shelley's best long poem, it is also a myth of universal rebirth. Nothing could have been more congenial to the later Yeats with his theory of cyclical history. However, when Yeats wrote "Prometheus Unbound" (1932), he briefly reiterated his earlier claim that Shelley was a poet of infinite desire whose ruling symbol was the Morning Star, and then attempted to solve a problem which at the turn of the century he had found insoluble.[64] "Why . . . does Demogorgon, whose task is beneficent . . . bear so terrible a shape?" And why was it included since it made the "plot incoherent, its interpretation impossible?"[65]

Yeats's thesis was that, for all his idealism, Shelley was haunted by nightmare, and that he needed a scapegoat for "his unconscious hatred".[66] Yeats saw parallels in Aubrey Beardsley's work where the "secreted indecencies" of

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[63] Ibid., p. 95.

[64] W. B. Yeats, "Prometheus Unbound", E & I., p. 419. For Yeats's commentary on the Morning Star as symbol, see E & I., pp. 88-95.

[65] E & I., p. 420.

[66] All references in this paragraph are to ibid., p. 421.

Beardsley's designs are his subconscious "sacrifice to Priapus", and in "the Salome drawings where sex is sublimated to an unearthly receptivity". Yeats claimed that Shelley "imagined under a like compulsion whatever seemed dark, destructive indefinite".

By 1932, of course, Yeats had come to see life (and art) as a series of antinomies. He felt that Shelley, the idealist, had deliberately refused to depict evil as humanity's antagonist, and that in so doing, Shelley had deprived his work of the balance essential to great art. The man who accepts good and evil as parts of a Divine Purpose can, as Shelley would not, attend "to the whole drama of life, simplicities, banalities, intoxications, even lie upon his left side and eat dung, set free 'from a multitude of opinions'".[67] It was this incompleteness, this imbalance in Shelley's work, which caused Yeats to complain sometimes that Shelley lacked "the Vision of Evil".[68] Comparing

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[67] Ibid., p. 423.

[68] Other critics have tried to explain this imbalance in Shelley's work. Kathleen Raine thinks Shelley's idealism resulted from "the mistaken notions of his time on the innate virtue of 'natural man'", and that Shelley died before he could, in Yeats's phrase, "wither into the truth". Defending Ancient Springs, p. 153. Stephen Spender inclines towards this explanation also: Shelley's vision of cosmic transformation was "a known idea, not an experience derived from living". Shelley, "Writers and Their Work" series, No. 29, rev. ed., 1960, p. 25. C. S. Lewis, on the other hand, claims that Shelley was sometimes explicit in asserting the doctrine of Original Sin. He goes on to suggest that Shelley deliberately avoided a personal conviction of sin, and that he was wise to do so. "If a man will not become a Christian, it is very undesirable that he should become aware of the reptilian inhabitants of his own mind. To know how bad we are, in the condition of mere nature, is an excellent recipe for becoming worse." Rehabilitations and Other Essays, pp. 18 and 20.

Shelley with Dante, both of whom belong to Phase Seventeen of the Great Wheel, Yeats wrote in A Vision:

> He [Shelley] lacked the Vision of Evil, could not conceive of the world as a continual conflict, so, though great poet he certainly was, he was not of the greatest kind. Dante suffering injustice and the loss of Beatrice, found divine justice and the heavenly Beatrice, but the justice of Prometheus Unbound is a vague propagandist emotion and the women that await its coming are but clouds.[69]

Yeats attributed Shelley's failure to depict good and evil to two things: first, Shelley lived in a fragmented age when "Unity of Being was almost impossible"; second, his "practical reason" was "out of phase" and so in order to conceal the evil he could not face, Shelley resorted to what Yeats termed automatonism -- poetical invention deriving from Fancy rather than from Imagination.[70]

Yeats's second criticism was related to the first: Shelley's conscious desire to envision a divine order and his deliberate rejection of evil caused him to vaporize and generalize his landscapes.[71] He felt that Shelley needed "hatred as absolute"[72] to give balance to his work. Yet when the repressed demon did appear, as in Demogorgon, the result was incongruous with the intent. Yeats now answered the

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[69] A Vision (1937), p. 144.

[70] Ibid.

[71] "Prometheus Unbound", E & I., p. 423.

[72] Ibid., p. 425.

question implicit in his earlier essay on Shelley.

> Shelley was not a mystic, his system of thought was constructed by his logical faculty to satisfy desire, not a symbolical revelation received after the suspension of all desire. He could neither say with Dante, 'His will is our peace', nor with Finn in the Irish story, 'The best music is what happens'.73

Shelley, like Blake, was one of Yeats's champions in the battle against the materialists, and his influence upon Yeats's developing poetic cannot be minimized. But Yeats's critical interests were not confined to Blake's terrible vision and Shelley's unearthly idealism. At the turn of the century he was studying two more earthy poets, Spenser and Shakespeare. In the one he found an overt and debilitating didacticism; in the other, a free spirit which could depict humanity without glancing sidewise at the Ten Commandments.

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73 Ibid., pp. 421-22.

CHAPTER V

ON SPENSER AND SHAKESPEARE

> I think that before the religious change that followed on the Renaissance men were greatly preoccupied with their sins, and that to-day they are troubled by other men's sins, and that this trouble has created a moral enthusiasm so full of illusion that art, knowing itself for sanctity's scapegrace brother, cannot be of the party . . . . A soul shaken by the spectacle of its sins, or discovered by the Divine Vision in tragic delight, must offer to the love that cannot love but to infinity, a goal unique and unshared; while a soul busied with others' sins is soon melted to some shape of vulgar pride.
>
> W. B. Yeats

Yeats's selection of Spenser's poems was not published until 1906, but he had completed his introductory essay before the end of 1902,[1] and this probably accounts for certain Ninetyish overtones. The theme of the essay was the cultural climate of Renaissance England and its effect upon Spenser's poetry. Yeats emphasized that climate by contrast: feudal England that was passing away he contrasted against modern England then emerging, the haven of Puritan and merchant. Yeats believed that concurrent with that change came the triumph of craftsman and connoisseur over "the more humane, the more noble, the less intellectual art of Malory and

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[1] Letters, p. 391.

the Minstrels", the triumph of Renaissance craft over "the passion of the Middle Ages".[2]

Early in the essay Yeats hinted at his chief criticism of Spenser: "Sidney was doubtless the greatest personal influence that came into Spenser's life, and it was one that exalted moral zeal above every faculty."[3] Yeats was more specific in a reference to The Shepheardes Calender, which Spenser had dedicated to Sidney:

> It was full of pastoral beauty and allegorical images of current events, revealing, too, that conflict between the aesthetic and moral interests that was to run through wellnigh all his works . . . .[4]

After claiming that Spenser cherished alike "the beauty of the soul and the beauty of the body", Yeats wrote, a few lines further on, that Spenser "began in English poetry, despite a temperament that delighted in sensuous beauty alone with perfect delight, that worship of Intellectual Beauty which Shelley carried to a greater subtlety and applied to the whole of life".[5] Despite the apparent inconsistency, the context in which these remarks occur makes Yeats's point clear enough. Spenser's natural bent was evident in the unfinished Faerie Queene where King Arthur was meant to

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[2] "Edmund Spenser", E & I., pp. 356 and 362.

[3] Ibid., p. 359.

[4] Ibid., p. 360.

[5] Ibid., p. 366.

epitomize that "ancient quality, Magnificence".[6] In other words, Spenser had inclined towards the fullness of life that one finds in Chaucer. But, anxious to justify himself to his new masters, -- the rising Middle Class, Church, and State -- Spenser had fastened his poetic creations "with allegorical nails to a big barn-door of common sense, of merely practical virtue".[7] Yeats, then, accounted for Spenser's 'impurities' in terms of personality and history.

Yeats argued, at this time,[8] that Spenser, in trying to be of the 'new' age, had differed from the great Elizabethan dramatists:

> Their imagination, driven hither and thither by beauty and sympathy, put on something of the nature of eternity. Their subject was always the soul, the whimsical, self-awakening, self-exciting, self-appeasing soul. They celebrated its heroical, passionate will going by its own path to immortal and invisible things.[9]

Spenser, on the other hand, had forfeited this freedom and "had learned to look to the State not only as the rewarder of virtue but as the maker of right and wrong, and had begun to love and hate as it bid him".[10] This was hardly the

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[6] Ibid., p. 367.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Yeats claimed later that "The mischief began at the end of the seventeenth century when man became passive before a mechanized nature . . . ." The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, p. xxvii.

[9] E & I., p. 370.

[10] Ibid., p. 371.

instinctual or personal morality which Yeats felt that art should embody. Moreover, Spenser, who was "a poet of the delighted senses" and whose "genius was pictorial", lacked the deep moral and religious convictions which "alone make allegory real".[11]

Once again Yeats's remarks are interesting chiefly for the insight which they give into his own allegiances at this point in his career. He was rejecting, or at least half-rejecting, the poet after whose manner he had once written "play after play".[12] (That emulation had, of course, centred on subject-matter and style, and had nothing to do with overt didacticism.) He maintained that poets had become increasingly more isolated from the heroic life than Spenser had been and that, lacking "the sanguineous temperament",[13] the modern poet, "if he would not carry burdens that are not his and obey the orders of servile lips, must sit apart in contemplative indolence playing with fragile things".[14] A decline in England's literary tradition had made the modern poet's position tenuous. Yeats explained that decline in terms of sociological change:

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[11] Ibid., pp. 370, 362, and 369, respectively. C. S. Lewis argues against such an interpretation of Spenser, but acknowledges that it was common enough in Yeats time. The Allegory of Love, pp. 317-321.

[12] Auto., p. 66.

[13] E & I., pp. 379-80.

[14] Ibid., p. 378.

> Because poetry belongs to that element in every race which is most strong, and therefore most individual, the poet is not stirred to imaginative activity by a life which is surrendering its freedom to ever new elaboration, organisation, mechanism. He has no longer a poetical will, and must be content to write out of those parts of himself which are too delicate and fiery for any deadening exercise. Every generation has more and more loosened the rhythm, more and more broken up and disorganised, for the sake of subtlety of detail, those great rhythms which move, as it were, in masses of sound. Poetry has become more spiritual, for the soul is of all things the most delicately organised, but it has lost in weight and measure and in its power of telling long stories and of dealing with great and complicated events.[15]

Although the passage above still reflects Yeats's earlier inclination towards Aestheticism, the last sentence in particular, reveals an ambivalence in Yeats's attitude. Indeed, the essay itself provides perhaps the first extensive evidence of his growing dissatisfaction with that 'movement'. His experience in the practical affairs of the Theatre, and his reading of Nietzsche[16] must have driven iron into Yeats's poetic. In any event, the essay marks a turning away from one of his earlier models. It merits attention also for its continued condemnation of 'impurities' in art, and for the emphasis it placed on the artist's passion and integrity. But to show that art depends, ultimately, upon the personality of the artist, Yeats could point to Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's greatness lay in his ability to watch

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[15] Ibid., p. 380.

[16] Letters, p. 379.

"the procession of the world with that untroubled sympathy for men as they are, as apart from all they do and seem, which is the substance of tragic irony".[17] This is the theme of "At Stratford-on-Avon" (1901). The first half of the essay condemns London cosmopolitanism and realistic art; the second half is a confutation of nineteenth-century Shakespearean criticism. Yeats named Edward Dowden and the German critic G. G. Gervinus as prime exemplars of the century's misconception of Shakespeare's dramas, but added that their criticism was only the natural result of rising democracy, Puritan morality, and Middle Class utilitarian values. These critics

> . . . grew up in a century of utilitarianism, when nothing about a man seemed important except his utility to the State, and nothing so useful to the State as the actions whose effect can be weighed by reason. The deeds of Coriolanus, Hamlet, Timon, Richard II had no obvious use, were, indeed, no more than the expression of their personalities, and so it was thought Shakespeare was accusing them, and telling us to be careful lest we deserve the like accusations . . . . Because reason can only discover completely the use of those obvious actions which everybody admires, and because every character was to be judged by efficiency in action, Shakespearian criticism became a vulgar worshipper of success.[18]

Yeats argued that this misconception was most manifest in the antithesis which critics had drawn between Richard II and Henry V. The former was said to be 'sentimental', 'weak', 'selfish', 'insincere', while the latter was regarded as

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[17] W. B. Yeats, "At Stratford-on-Avon", E & I., p. 106.

[18] Ibid., pp. 102-103.

'Shakespeare's only hero'.[19] Yeats agreed that these figures were allegorical, but he opposed the idea that Shakespeare intended Richard II to represent the useless and sentimental, while Henry V represented the practical and heroic. Such criticism, Yeats maintained, was the result of intense imperialism. Shakespeare opposed usurpation of regal authority but he

> . . . cared little for the State, the source of all our judgments, apart from its shows and splendours, its turmoils and battles, its flamings-out of the uncivilised heart . . . . he had no nice sense of utilities, no ready balance to measure deeds . . . .[20]

It is true that Dowden regarded Henry V as the hero and the central figure of the history plays,[21] but he did not agree that Henry V was Shakespeare's "ideal of highest manhood". The latter statement (which Dowden attributed to Gervinus)[22] he modified to the effect that Henry V was Shakespeare's "ideal of the practical heroic character".[23] Moreover, Dowden's criteria, while essentially ethical, were not nearly so narrowly utilitarian as Yeats had claimed. Dowden believed that

> . . . the theme of tragedy, as conceived by the

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[19] Ibid., pp. 103-104.

[20] Ibid., p. 106.

[21] Edward Dowden, Shakspere: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art (London, 1875), p. 210.

[22] Ibid., p. 74.

[23] Ibid.

> poet [Shakespeare], is not material prosperity or failure; it is spiritual; fulfilment or failure of a destiny higher than that which is related to the art of getting on in life. To die under certain conditions may be a higher rapture than to live.[24]

Yeats would hardly have disagreed with such a statement. However, he would not accept Dowden's theory that the plays were, above all, evidence of Shakespeare's growth both intellectual and moral.[25]

Yeats believed that Shakespeare's purpose was to present the spectacle -- the "procession" or "phantasmagoria",[26] as Yeats sometimes called it -- and thereby to give insight into the human condition:

> I cannot believe that Shakespeare looked on his Richard II with any but sympathetic eyes, understanding indeed how ill-fitted he was to be king, at a certain moment of history, but understanding that he was lovable and full of capricious fancy . . . . He saw indeed, as I think, in Richard II the defeat that awaits all, whether they be artist or saint, who find themselves where men ask of them a rough energy and have nothing to give but some contemplative virtue, whether lyrical fantasy, or sweetness of temper, or dreamy dignity, or love of God, or love of His creatures. He saw that such a man through sheer bewilderment

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[24] Ibid., p. 123.

[25] Ibid., Preface to the First Edition, p. xiii.

[26] Unpublished material, quoted by Ellmann (The Identity of Yeats, pp. 105-106), suggests that Yeats meant the "procession" or "phantasmagoria" to mean a symbolic structure where "dream and reality" are visibly arrayed against one another. Certainly the contexts in which Yeats used these 'synonyms' suggest a semi-mythological, semi-historical presentation of humanity. The figures in the "procession" are, in a sense, the artist's representation of impressions out of Anima Mundi.

> and impatience can become as unjust or as violent as any common man, any Bolingbroke or Prince John, and yet remain 'that sweet lovely rose'.[27]

Yeats continued:

> To pose character against character was an element in Shakespeare's art, and scarcely a play is lacking in characters that are the complement of one another, and so, having made the vessel porcelain, Richard II, he had to make the vessel of clay, Henry V. He makes him the reverse of all that Richard was.[28]

This, of course, is reminiscent of the Shakespearean criticism which Yeats deplored; or at least the motif of opposites is similar. But there was a difference in purpose: Yeats was concerned with understanding and tolerance rather than condemnation. He repudiated the idea that Shakespeare was inviting his audience to judge and to condemn. He believed that Shakespeare meant for us to suspend moral judgement and, through the imaginative experience of the theatre, to understand more fully human nature. In another instance, Yeats wrote that we identify ourselves with the Shakespearean tragic hero, and that despite his crimes we "rejoice in every happiness that comes to him and sorrow at his death as if it were our own".[29]

Far from being the extremes of some moral scale, as the critics of his day would have it, Yeats understood

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[27] W. B. Yeats, "At Stratford-on-Avon", E & I., pp. 105-106.

[28] Ibid., p. 108.

[29] "First Principles" (Samhain: 1904), Expl., p. 154.

Richard II and Henry V to represent the 'subjective' and 'objective' personality, respectively. Here, then, in embryonic form, was the doctrine of opposites which Yeats later articulated in terms of Soul and Self, man and Mask, and intersecting gyres. Shakespeare's opposing characters, like Yeats's, complement one another; and Shakespeare's work, Yeats believed, might be explained in the light of a single myth: a wise man, "blind from very wisdom" is defeated by a man who "saw all that could be seen from very emptiness".[30] Yeats seems to have seen little difference between the history plays and the later tragedies. Richard II was an "unripened Hamlet", and Henry V a "ripened Fortinbras".[31]

Yeats and Dowden were equally partisan. Dowden's moral zeal caused him to gloss over Henry V's weaknesses -- notably his callous rejection of Falstaff.[32] Yeats's lyrical bent (and, no doubt, his felt affinities with Richard)[33]

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[30] E & I., p. 107.

[31] Ibid., p. 108.

[32] Dowden, op. cit., p. 217. Cf. Dowden's justification of the rejection of Falstaff, pp. 365-66: "The central principle of Falstaff's method of living is that the facts and laws of the world may be evaded or set at defiance, if only the resources of inexhaustible wit be called upon to supply by brilliant ingenuity whatever deficiencies may be found in character and conduct. Therefore Shakspere condemned Falstaff inexorably."

[33] The poetic personality of Richard II seemed to haunt Yeats. In 1937, he wrote to Dorothy Wellesley: "Did Shakespeare in Richard II discover poetic reverie?" Letters, p. 899.

caused him to sentimentalize over Richard II's poetic personality while glossing over his moral defects. The more practical-minded Dowden condemned Richard II for his boyish irresponsibility and his failure to grasp realities,[34] and praised Henry V for "his noble realisation of fact".[35] It is evident that Yeats, however, regarded Shakespeare's dramatic figures as essentially allegorical: Richard II was representative of the poetic imagination in a hostile world.

Yeats's purpose in the Stratford essay was to refute Dowden's claim that Shakespeare dealt in moral opinions. Righteous indignation and his own temperament caused him to sentimentalize and to overstate. But his rejection of Dowden's merit-award system shows where he was to remain constant, while his incipient antinomical vision suggests a transition.

Yeats wrote many critical essays and reviews during the period 1886-1902. His criticisms of both Irish and English writers had this in common: it was the spirit of a work which primarily interested him. He usually dealt with a single aspect of a particular work, with some quality which he felt needed to be promoted or condemned. He continued to write essays during the remainder of his life, but I consider most of those written during the first two decades of this

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[34] Shakspere: A Critical Study of his Mind and Art, pp. 193-94.

[35] Ibid., p. 212.

century to be theoretical rather than practical criticism, and, as such, they will be treated later. During the last decade of his life he wrote Introductions which can be regarded only as straws in the literary wind. His comments on Bishop Berkeley, Swift, and Burke, for example, seem to have been prompted by his desire to ascribe to these men a role in an Irish tradition which he believed should be a model for modern Ireland.[36] The one notable exception was The Oxford Book of Modern Verse (1936), which, by its selection and Introduction, was highly controversial. Examination of that anthology will show what his prejudices were, and what was essential to him.

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[36] All three men are lauded in various places in "Pages from a Diary Written in Nineteen Hundred and Thirty", Expl., pp. 289-340. Here and elsewhere Berkeley's Commonplace Book is said to represent an Irish victory in the fight against deterministic materialism and objectivity. (See E & I., pp. 396-411.) Swift is represented as a political theorist and an impassioned champion of the traditional hierarchical society Yeats so admired. (See Expl., pp. 343-363.) Burke, in impassioned moments, played a similar role. Similarily, Yeats wrote of Ireland after the Civil War: "Now that Ireland was substituting tradition of government for the rhetoric of agitation our eighteenth century had regained its importance." "Ireland, 1921-1931", The Spectator, CXVII, January 30, 1932, p. 137.

CHAPTER VI

A PROVOCATIVE ANTHOLOGIST

> Let such teach others who themselves excel,
> And censure freely, who have written well.
> Authors are partial to their wit, 'tis true,
> But are not critics to their judgment too?
>
> Alexander Pope

"What an anthology and what a Preface." Such was Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's expressed[1] disapproval of The Oxford Book of Modern Verse edited by Yeats and published on November 19, 1936. The following day the anthology was enthusiastically welcomed by The Times, and as lustily damned by The Spectator. The next day, November 21, The Times Literary Supplement gave a balanced evaluation of the anthology, having first of all drawn attention to its uniqueness:

> Let us be grateful to the Oxford Press for giving Mr. Yeats and ourselves this opportunity instead of committing the task to someone who would have chosen a more objectively "representative" selection, and would have made his introduction a

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[1] Letter to Lord Alfred Douglas, dated November 27, 1936, and quoted by Jon Stallworthy in "Yeats as Anthologist", In Excited Reverie, ed. A. Norman Jeffares and K. G. W. Cross (New York, 1965), p. 189. Stallworthy's article, largely a collection of letters, reveals some lively exchanges in which Yeats was involved both immediately before and after publication of the anthology.

> mere register of the poetry included.
> Mr. Yeats's is an anthology which reflects its maker . . . .[2]

There was certainly some cause for consternation. If the anthology reflected Yeats's greatness it also reflected his idiosyncrasies. Sixteen pages were devoted to W. J. Turner and fifteen to Dorothy Wellesley, both of whom Yeats had only recently 'discovered'.[3] One questions Yeats's selections from Auden's poetry, and indeed some of the selections from his own work. Sassoon and Blunden were represented, but not by their war poems. Isaac Rosenberg and Wilfred Owen were excluded. T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were included, but Robert Frost was not.[4]

There is no doubt that Yeats was partial towards his friends both old and new; but that is not the whole story. His guiding principle seems to have differed very little from that which determined his selections from Spenser's works

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[2] The Times Literary Supplement, November 21, 1936, p. 957.

[3] Yeats's first mention of Turner is in a letter dated September 17, 1935, and it gives the impression of 'discovery'. See Letters on Poetry, p. 30. He first became acquainted with Dorothy Wellesley, both as poet and person, in 1935. Ibid., pp. 1 and 2.

[4] Yeats's Agreement, signed in May 1935, specified that "British, Irish, and American poets" would be included in The Oxford Book. See In Excited Reverie, p. 175. However, he later confined his choice to writers who, by subject-matter or long residence in Europe, seemed to be a part of the English literary scene. The Oxford Book, Introduction, p. xlii.

more than thirty years earlier. At that time Yeats had written:

> I have put into this book only those passages from Spenser that I want to remember and carry about with me. I have not tried to select what people call characteristic passages, for that is, I think, the way to make a dull book.[5]

Yeats certainly did not seek "characteristic passages" for inclusion in The Oxford Book. Indeed, he seems to have taken the advice of T. S. Eliot: "'If your selection looks representative you will commit acts of injustice.'"[6]

In his provocative Introduction, Yeats traced the development of English poetry from 1892 to 1935, and attempted to justify his inclusion or exclusion of particular authors by pointing out their strengths and weaknesses. In many ways the retrospection of an old man, the essay is never marred by mawkish nostalgia and it often pierces straight to the heart of things. Recalling his generation's youthful obsession, Yeats wrote:

> The revolt against Victorianism meant to the young poet a revolt against irrelevant descriptions of nature, the scientific and moral discursiveness of In Memoriam . . . the political eloquence of Swinburne, the psychological curiosity of Browning, and the poetic diction of everybody.[7]

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[5] "Edmund Spenser", E & I., p. 381.

[6] The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, Introduction, p. xlii. Eliot's identity is established by a letter from Yeats to Charles Williams, a London editor for the Oxford University Press. See In Excited Reverie, p. 181.

[7] The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, p. ix.

He now realized the inaccuracy of their earlier diagnosis, and attempted to set matters in proper historical perspective:

> When my generation denounced scientific humanitarian pre-occupation, psychological curiosity, rhetoric, we had not found what ailed Victorian literature. The Elizabethans had all these things, especially rhetoric. A friend writes 'all bravado went out of English literature when Falstaff turned into Oliver Cromwell, into England's bad conscience'; but he is wrong. Dryden's plays are full of it. The mischief began at the end of the seventeenth century when man became passive before a mechanized nature; that lasted to our own day with the exception of a brief period between Smart's Song of David and the death of Byron, wherein imprisoned man beat upon the door. Or I may dismiss all that ancient history and say it began when Stendhal described a masterpiece as a 'mirror dawdling down a lane'.[8]

He continued:

> Change has come suddenly, the despair of my friends in the 'nineties part of its preparation. Nature, steel-bound or stone-built in the nineteenth century, became a flux where man drowned or swam; the moment had come for some poet to cry 'the flux is in my own mind'.[9]

The "flux" image may have come from Wyndham Lewis's Time and Western Man which Yeats had read nearly a decade earlier, and with which he found himself "in fundamental agreement".[10] Lewis had described the Bergsonian or relativist "duration-flux" as "the glorification of the life-of-the-moment, with no reference beyond itself and no absolute

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[8] Ibid., pp. xxvi-xxvii.

[9] Ibid., p. xxviii.

[10] Letters, p. 733. Five months later, April 1, 1928, Yeats noted, in a letter to Lady Gregory, that Lewis "attacked Ezra Pound and Joyce in Time and Western Man, and is on my side of things philosophically". Ibid., p. 739.

or universal value . . . ." It was "the doctrine of a mechanistic universe . . . ."[11] In any event, Yeats proclaimed that W. J. Turner was the first modern poet to resist this "flux", and to achieve "a control of plastic material, a power of emotional construction".[12] It was for these reasons that Yeats regarded Turner as one of the leading modern poets. He would have been happier, however, had Turner gone further and established the "private soul" as the image through which one might resist the "flux".[13]

Yeats's cult of the personality (the soul that is alike in all men), manifest in his philosophical criteria, is evident also in his aesthetic judgments. T. S. Eliot, in describing "life that has lost heart", made his own art seem "grey, cold, dry".[14] In only one instance did his early work attain the grand style:

> The host with someone indistinct
> Converses at the door apart,
> The nightingales are singing near
> The Convent of the Sacred Heart,
>
> And sang within the bloody wood
> When Agamemnon cried aloud,

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[11] Time and Western Man (London, 1927), pp. 119, 27, and 110, respectively.

[12] The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, p. xxviii.

[13] Ibid., p. xxx.

[14] Ibid., p. xxi.

And let their liquid siftings fall
To stain the stiff dishonoured shroud.15

Furthermore, Yeats claimed that Murder in the Cathedral was successful because it symbolized not what the author alone knew but what we all know.[16] Comments such as these, and the choice of allusive verse as an example of the grand style suggest that the life which Yeats revered was more imaginative and heroic than that usually depicted by Eliot. Consequently, he believed that Eliot's presentation of the human condition was that of a "satirist rather than poet".[17]

Ezra Pound had moments of "style", of "deliberate nobility", but his work often lacked "form".[18] Yeats gave two reasons for this. First, Pound had "made flux his theme; plot, characterization, logical discourse" were to him mere abstractions.[19] Second, uncontrolled rage and subconscious imaging interrupted his art.[20] Consequently, though certain lines had great beauty, the poems lacked unity, lacked the "control" that Yeats admired in Turner.

The most provocative issue of the anthology was the

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15 Quoted by Yeats, ibid., p. xxii.

16 Ibid., pp. xxii-xxiii.

17 Ibid., p. xxii.

18 Ibid., p. xxv.

19 Ibid., pp. xxiii-xxiv.

20 Ibid., p. xxv.

exclusion of the War Poets, especially Wilfred Owen, and Yeats's justification of their exclusion. Yeats included G. K. Chesterton's "Lepanto" and Herbert Read's "The End of a War" -- the latter poem complete with its author's note, part of which follows:

> It is not my business as a poet to condemn war (or, to be more exact, modern warfare). I only wish to present the universal aspects of a particular event. Judgement may follow, but should never precede or become embroiled with the act of poetry. It is for this reason that Milton's attitude to his Satan has so often been misunderstood.[21]

Wilfred Owen, on the other hand, opposed traditional heroism by condemning war and by making pity a subject for poetry. He wrote, in a fragmentary Preface to his poetry:

> My subject is War, and the pity of War.
> The Poetry is in the pity.[22]

Yeats's rejection of the War Poets was summary.

> . . . they were not without joy -- for all skill is joyful -- but felt bound, in the words of the best known, to plead the suffering of their men. In poems that had for a time considerable fame, written in the first person, they made that suffering their own. I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his Empedocles on Etna from circulation; passive suffering is not a theme for poetry. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced.[23]

Yeats was not questioning the courage of these young poets.

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[21] Quoted, ibid., p. 360.

[22] The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen, ed. C. Day Lewis (London, 1964), p. 31.

[23] The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, p. xxxiv.

It was just that they had socialized the suffering by sharing it, by spreading it over a collective society, and, in so doing, they had minimized the individual heroic role. In short, Owen and his fellow poets should have risen above circumstance by assuming a heroic mask.

Yeats's view of life was essentially tragic: "We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy."[24] But Yeats was not a fatalist. Life was meaningless without antinomies, and man had it within himself to rise above circumstance, his antagonist. This triumph of the heroic man was achieved by passion and will. Awareness of the tragic fact was only the beginning: man should take a stance before it. "To me the supreme aim is an act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy."[25] Owen, in Yeats's opinion, had been unfaithful to the highest form of poetry, the heroic, in not allowing tragic gaiety to transfigure the dread.[26]

Yeats, of course, was realistic enough to know that the stage and the battlefield were entirely different things. And there is reason to believe that Yeats himself had begun to doubt the heroic ideal. He had been saddened by the

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[24] Auto., p. 189. For a discussion of Yeats's tragic vision, see Chapter XII below.

[25] Letter to Dorothy Wellesley, July 26, 1935, Letters, p. 838.

[26] Cf. "Lapis Lazuli", Collected Poems, p. 338.

untimely death of Robert Gregory; and his letters show an increasing anxiety over affairs in Ireland and in Europe generally.[27] Indeed, immediately after his rejection of Owen, Yeats had reservations about military heroism: "If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering . . . ."[28] This is heroism toned down to a necessary stoicism. Further evidence of Yeats's second thoughts is found in "Reprisals", an unpublished poem addressed to Robert Gregory's shade, and set against the background of Black-and-Tan terrorism. The poem is important enough to merit full quotation:

Reprisals

Some nineteen German planes, they say,
You had brought down before you died.
We called it a good death. Today
Can ghost or man be satisfied?
Although your last exciting year
Outweighed all other years, you said,
Though battle joy may be so dear
A memory, even to the dead,
It chases other thought away,
Yet rise from your Italian tomb,
Flit to Kiltartan cross and stay
Till certain second thoughts have come
Upon the cause you served, that we
Imagined such a fine affair:
Half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery
Are murdering your tenants there.
Men that revere your father yet
Are shot at on the open plain.
Where may new-married women sit
And suckle children now? Armed men

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[27] Letters, pp. 613, 614, 690, 851, 869, and 873.

[28] The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, p. xxxv.

May murder them in passing by
Nor law nor parliament take heed.
Then close your ears with dust and lie
Among the other cheated dead.[29]

Joseph Cohen believes that Yeats's animosity towards Owen was not prompted solely by Owen's anti-war theme but also by Owen's diction. Cohen points out that Yeats, too, had written of 'bards', 'maids', and 'Titanic wars'.[30] There is substantiation for Cohen's thesis in Yeats's remarks to Dorothy Wellesley, December 21, 1936:

> My Anthology continues to sell, and the critics get more and more angry. When I excluded Wilfred Owen, whom I consider unworthy of the poets' corner of a country newspaper, I did not know I was excluding a revered sandwich-board man of the revolution, and that somebody has put his worst and most famous poem in a glass-case in the British Museum -- however, if I had known it, I would have excluded him just the same. He is all blood, dirt and sucked sugar-stick (look at the selection in Faber's Anthology -- he calls poets 'bards', a girl a 'maid', and talks about 'Titanic wars'). There is every excuse for him, but none for those who like him.[31]

Yeats certainly seems to have regarded Owen as the strongest opponent of the joy-of-battle theme; and Cohen may well be correct in stating also that Yeats's animosity "was a natural reaction to his realization that Owen had not only successfully contested that view [the joy-of-battle theme]

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[29] Var. Poems, p. 791.

[30] "In Memory of W. B. Yeats -- and Wilfred Owen", Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LVIII (October, 1959), 642.

[31] Letters, p. 874.

and diminished its force, but, in addition, had used Yeatsian materials to achieve the diminution".[32]

It would be idle, perhaps, to speculate further on Yeats's rationale for what is surely the most lamentable omission from the anthology. His oft-quoted, half-valid dictum that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry" can be understood though not always justified, if seen as a defence of a long-cherished poetic principle which he himself had begun to doubt.

Yeats gave general approval to the next generation of poets, especially to the so-called Auden Group. These "combined the modern vocabulary, the accurate record of the relevant facts learnt from Eliot, with the sense of suffering of the war poets, that sense of suffering no longer passive, no longer an obsession of the nerves; philosophy had made it part of all the mind".[33] In spite of the 'impurities' of their poetry, their obscurities, and their confusions, Yeats preferred them to Eliot, to himself even -- though he, too, had "tried to be modern".[34]

It is not surprising that Yeats should have been attracted by their poetry. They, like him, had employed traditional verse-forms -- notably the ballad. Their "refusal

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[32] Cohen, op. cit., p. 643.

[33] The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, p. xxxv. Italics mine.

[34] Ibid., p. xxxvi.

to multiply personality"[35] was akin to his own search for Unity of Being. The simple social panacea which they offered may have been in collective effort and therefore a lessening of the heroic role, but it was still a positive thing. Yeats was obliged to compromise a little: the Auden Group tried to be democratic where he had been aristocratic, but at least their suffering was an active virtue. Finally, they were shaping a heroic myth out of events in Spain. All this must have seemed to Yeats to indicate a return to the main current of English literary tradition. "If I understand aright this difficult art the contemplation of suffering has compelled them to seek beyond the flux something unchanging, inviolate . . . ."[36] By such a comment Yeats not only summarized the virtues he found in these young poets but, by implication, identified them with himself in a common pursuit.

Yeats was not a disinterested critic. He never relented in his attacks on narrowly realistic and didactic literature; and the very intensity of his attacks, especially in his early period, caused him to misrepresent Arnold, John Eglinton and Dowden. His interest in transcendental literature detracted from his criticisms of Blake and Shelley since it caused him to ignore or to minimize their interest in man's

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., p. xxxviii.

moral and political nature. Similarly, a flirtation with Aestheticism narrowed his perspective on Spenser and Shakespeare.

It is equally apparent that Yeats was not an interpretative critic. "When I reviewed a book I had to write my own heated thoughts because I did not know how to get thoughts out of my subject . . . ."[37] Even in the more erudite essays on English authors Yeats assumed that his readers had an intimate knowledge of the work in question. He then concentrated on what seemed to him the salient quality of that work, and, more often than not, his criticism was slanted towards some personal principle which he was defending.

Yeats wrote relatively little about the actual 'craft' of poetry. He was, however, a firm believer in the artlessness of art. He wrote in "Adam's Curse":

> . . . 'A line will take us hours maybe;
> Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
> Our stitching and unstitching has been naught . . . .'[38]

Yeats's care in composition and revision needs no comment here.[39] It is only fair, though, to point out that when he indulged in practical criticism of the work of his close friends, he was generally perceptive without being dogmatic. A good example of this type of criticism is found in a letter

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[37] W. B. Yeats, "I Became an Author", The Listener, XX, No. 499 (August 4, 1938), 218.

[38] Collected Poems, p. 88.

[39] See Chapter I above, p. 3, n. 6.

to Katharine Tynan:

> The want of your poetry is, I think, the want also of my own. We both of us need to substitute more and more the landscapes of nature for the landscapes of art . . . . We should make poems on the familiar landscapes we love, not the strange and rare and glittering scenes we wonder at; these latter are the landscapes of art, [? not] the range of nature.[40]

No doubt it was such sincere and kindly criticism which, years later, prompted Virginia Woolf to proclaim that "'praise from Yeats is the only solid thing of its kind now existing'".[41] It is Yeats's 'solidity', his honest endeavour at improving literature generally, which makes his criticism valuable. His critical and theoretical essays, his scattered and fragmentary remarks on art, and his careful revisions all bear witness to a conscientious artist struggling, not blindly but deliberately, towards a poetic. His genius was almost as strongly critical as it was creative; and his more important essays were motivated by his needs as poet and dramatist.

The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, through its Introduction and its 'representation' of modern poetry, serves to re-emphasize Yeats's life-long concern for literary criteria which were both aesthetic and moral. Part One of this study has been an attempt to show how difficult it sometimes was for Yeats to bring these criteria into meaningful relationship in his practical criticism. Ultimately, he

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[40] Letters, p. 99.

[41] Quoted by Dorothy Wellesley, Letters on Poetry, p. 78.

believed, the aesthetic and the moral were united in great art, in art which was representative "of that life where passion and thought are one",[42] and where heroic qualities are exalted until even ordinary folk become part of the "phantasmagoria". Craft was secondary: the mature Yeats was no "Idle singer of an empty day". It was primarily the spirit of a work which interested him; and his poetic -- an extension of his own critical principles -- was based on moral as well as aesthetic criteria. He wrote, in 1901:

> I believe that literature is the principle voice of the conscience, and it is its duty age after age to affirm its morality against the special moralities of clergymen and churches, and of kings and parliaments and peoples.[43]

Yeats's poetic, carefully considered and painfully arrived at over the next two decades, was the 'working formula' of his art and the result of his determination to immortalize his own passionate vision of man and society.

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[42] W. B. Yeats, op. cit., p. 360.

[43] Ibid., p. 356.

PART TWO: YEATS'S THEORETICAL CRITICISM

Art is a lofty tree, and may shoot up far beyond our grasp, but its roots are in daily life and experience.

Arthur Hallam

CHAPTER VII

"OUR HEADY CRAFT"

> A poem is the very image of life, expressed in its eternal truth.
>
> Percy Bysshe Shelley

W. B. Yeats left what amounts to an extensive testament of his art. Yet, for reasons mentioned in Chapter I, these scattered and voluminous remarks have received relatively little attention for what they really are -- notes towards a theory of literature. In his Introduction to The Vast Design (1965), by far the most elaborate study of Yeats's poetic, Edward Engelberg noted Yeats's interest in nationalism, philosophy, and a form of literature, and then specified what he himself was concerned with:

> My business here is the last of these and, to refine this even further, to chart the dominant patterns of the aesthetic, not to catalogue all of Yeats's utterances on art and artists (Yeats on Art and Society remains a fruitful subject about which much more remains to be said).[1]

In charting "patterns" in Yeats's aesthetic, Engelberg limited himself chiefly to a design of opposites.[2] The broader basis of the present study allows for progression

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[1] P. xxix.

[2] Ibid., p. xxvi.

from practical criticism to theoretical criticism to social criticism because, in treating Yeats as an ideological critic, it is impossible to separate his art and criticism from life, which he came to regard as their referent. The arbitrary divisions of this study, then, are for emphasis only.

When Yeats began to write he was surer of what he wanted to change in existing literary styles than he was of how the changes were to be effected. Consequently, he wrote very little that approximated to a theory of literature before the turn of the century. However, his Pre-Raphaelite background, his interest in the poetry of Blake and Shelley, and his antagonism towards the Victorian aesthetic leave little doubt of what his views were at that time. Despite the increasing national (as distinct from nationalistic) emphasis in his writing during the Eighties and Nineties, art was, for Yeats, an escape from 'realism', a severance from life, or at least art was only related to life in some rarefied form. He wrote, in 1887, in condemnation of George Eliot: "In literature nothing that is not beautiful has any right to exist. Tito is created out of anger, not love."[3] With some qualification of the word "beautiful", this statement would not be incongruous in Yeats's mature poetic. However, a glance at the poetry he was writing at the time suggests that "beautiful" was synonymous with strangeness, remoteness, with

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[3] Letters, p. 31. See also E & I., p. 102.

anything that was removed from the sordid materialistic world. Twelve years later he wrote to Katharine Tynan:

> My ideas of a poem have greatly changed since I wrote the 'Island' . . . . [Howth] thicket gave me my first thought of what a long poem should be. I thought of it as a region into which one should wander from the cares of life. The characters were to be no more real than the shadows that people the Howth thicket. Their mission was to lessen the solitude without destroying its peace.[4]

Art, or the fairyland of art, had been for Yeats a retreat, a sanctuary for the imagination.

Yet, remote in atmosphere as some of his early poems are, escape was not always his motive. For example, even as a young man he had been convinced that the arts exist "to keep our passions alive".[5] And the dogma of his "religion of art" was: "Because those imaginary people [of art] are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and his norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth."[6] Even in "The Song of the Happy Shepherd" where he wrote that "Words alone are certain good", Yeats sought reality. But the reality he sought was not the "Grey Truth" of Science: it was the truth of man's "own heart". Yeats's quest, then, was an extension of the Romantic tradition. As early as 1887 Yeats had written:

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[4] Letters, p. 106. The Island of Statues was first published in the Dublin University Review, 1885.

[5] Auto., p. 86.

[6] Ibid., p. 116.

"I feel more and more that we shall have a school of Irish poetry -- founded on Irish myth and history -- a neo-romantic movement."[7] His Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry, compiled the following year, "was meant for Irish poets".[8]

However, not all contemporary poets had capitulated to science and realism, and Yeats, who was now living in London, came under their influence. William Morris, William Ernest Henley, and later the members of the Rhymers' Club were among Yeats's acquaintances; and one notices in his prose during the Nineties a curious amalgam of folk and fairy, heroic myth and Irish history, theosophy cum Blake, propaganda and aestheticism. There was also a discrepancy between his literary theory and practice. Professor Jeffares has pointed out that Yeats was aware of the dangers of art for art's sake and was pleading for an Irish national literature even while his poetry was "becoming more complex" and un-Irish. Jeffares attributed this inconsistency to the influence of the Rhymers' Club.[9]

Yeats visited Paris in 1894, and while there he attended a performance of Axel. The idealism and ritual of the play greatly impressed him, and he frequently repeated what he believed to be a memorable line: "As for living, our

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[7] Letters, p. 33.

[8] Ibid., p. 88.

[9] W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet, pp. 91-92.

servants will do that for us." But his most radical defence of the Aesthetic-Symbolist 'school' of poetry was provoked by John Eglinton and William Larminie in 1898.[10] Yeats wrote:

> The arts are, I believe, about to take upon their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essences of things, and not with things.[11]

And, paraphrasing Arthur Symons on Mallarmé, Yeats continued: ". . . poetry will henceforth be a poetry of essences, separated from one another in little and intense poems."[12] That was in 1898. The next year he wrote approvingly of traditional literature, of literature that labours "to awaken again our interests in the moral and spiritual realities which were once the foundation of the arts".[13]

Such vacillation and eclecticism may have had a salutary effect on Yeats. His interest in the Aesthetic-Symbolist 'school', for example, must have helped him to

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[10] For a brief discussion of the controversy, see pp. 37-40 above. Yeats's hostility to what we call 'life' prompted John Eglinton to declare that Wordsworth represented "the high-water mark of poetry" in the nineteenth century and to arraign the Symbolists, whose only interest in life was in "the occult triumphs" they could achieve by twisting life "into an abnormality". See Literary Ideals in Ireland, pp. 41-46. William Larminie wrote an even more derisive attack on the Symbolists. See ibid., pp. 57-65.

[11] "The Autumn of the Body", E & I., p. 193.

[12] Ibid., pp. 193-94.

[13] Letters, p. 310.

avoid the chauvinism of many would-be nationalists; yet his own nationalism helped to keep him in contact with the soil. It is not difficult to believe that Yeats's promotion of art for art's sake was chiefly an experiment, even an expediency. This was how he himself regarded it in 1913: it was "a good switch while the roads were beset with geese; it set us free from politics, theology, science . . . ."[14] Even as he flirted with Aestheticism he was filling his imagination "with the popular beliefs of Ireland", and seeking some symbolic identification with the Irish countryside that he "might not be alone amid the obscure impressions of the senses".[15]

"Then in 1900 everybody got down off his stilts . . . ."[16] There was, indeed, a marked difference in Yeats's thoughts on literature after 1900. Certain basic tenets were still adhered to -- notably his belief in heroic poetry and his denunciation of overt didacticism -- but his attitude became more conducive to sound literary theory as narrow antagonism gave place to broader visions gained through experience. And equally important, he was now more adept at hammering his thoughts into unity.

Yeats's life-long quarrel with rhetoric was based on

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[14] "Art and Ideas", E & I., p. 349.

[15] Ibid.

[16] W. B. Yeats, The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, Introduction, p. xi. The change began a little earlier for Yeats: ". . . in 1897 a new scene was set, new actors appeared." Letters, p. 820. Cf. Auto., p. 395.

his conception of rhetoric as intent rather than technique. He once defined rhetoric as "the triumph of the desire to convince over the desire to reveal".[17] Yeats associated this kind of rhetoric with what was commonly called 'popular poetry',[18] the poetry of Longfellow, Campbell, Mrs. Hemans, as well as Macaulay's Lays and Scott's longer poems. Such poetry, Yeats argued, "never came from the people at all". It came from rhetoricians who wrote for the Middle Class and who wrote only what was expected of them. Great literature, on the other hand, depended for its enchantment "on an association of beauty with sorrow which [the] written tradition has from the unwritten, which had it in its turn from ancient religion".

Yeats could hardly have written in this manner without realizing that aestheticism was coterie art, and that, as such, it was not folk literature but rather another manifestation of the social and personal disintegration he so deplored. In 1906, he wrote:

> In literature, partly from the lack of that spoken word which knits us to normal man, we have lost in personality, in our delight in the whole man -- blood, imagination, intellect, running together . . . .[19]

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[17] "The Well at the World's End", The Bookman, XI (November, 1896), p. 38.

[18] "What is 'Popular Poetry'?", E & I., p. 8. All other references in this paragraph are from ibid., pp. 5-7.

[19] "Discoveries", E & I., p. 266.

More than a decade earlier he had meditated upon this disintegration and upon a possible remedy.

> If Chaucer's personages had disengaged themselves from Chaucer's crowd, forgot their common goal and shrine, and after sundry magnifications became each in turn the centre of some Elizabethan play, and had after split into their elements and so given birth to romantic poetry, must I reverse the cinematograph?[20]

This was just one of Yeats's many references to the current decline in Unity of Being, and it would appear that Yeats had diagnosed the modern malady a quarter of a century before T. S. Eliot coined his famous phrase "dissociation of sensibility".

In that compendium of literary theory, appropriately entitled "Discoveries" (1906), Yeats took a positive approach: "If we poets are to move the people, we must reintegrate the human spirit in our imagination."[21] This was possible in art by showing life heightened to "the essential moment" so that people would have "the strength they live by" increased by heroic example. It was precisely in this respect that Aestheticism had failed to "pull the cart out of the ditch".[22]

Yeats was not so close to the Victorian criterion of 'utility' as this colloquialism might suggest. His 'mysticism'

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[20] Auto., p. 193. Cf. "Three Movements", Collected Poems, p. 271.

[21] E & I., p. 264.

[22] Ibid., pp. 265-66.

predicated a correspondence of terrestrial and celestial orders. Following Plato, Swedenborg, Shelley, and Blake, Yeats believed that literature was the embodiment of certain archetypal emotions which he sometimes called "Immortal Moods". ". . . when the external world is no more the standard of reality, we will learn again that the great Passions are angels of God . . . ."[23] Yeats never once renounced his belief in Anima Mundi, but as his tragic-heroic vision of life intensified his art became more earth-oriented: "If we would create a great community -- and what other game is so worth the labour?-- we must recreate the old foundations of life . . . ."[24] These values, he proclaimed, were the greatest legacy of literature to mankind; and in "First Principles" he attempted to define that legacy as "A feeling for the form of life, for the graciousness of life, for the dignity of life, for the moving limbs of life, for the nobleness of life, for all that cannot be written in codes . . . ."[25]

In "Discoveries" Yeats stressed passion, imagination, and personal morality as components of art.

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the

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[23] "Irish National Literature", III, The Bookman, VIII (September, 1895), 168. It is included in "The Body of Father Christian Rosencrux", E & I., p. 197.

[24] "Gods and Fighting Men", Expl., p. 28.

[25] Expl., p. 162. The essay first appeared in Samhain: 1904.

> world, and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematic form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body. Its morality is personal, knows little of any general law . . . .[26]

But while "All art is sensuous", Yeats was careful to add that the sensations must not be too far removed from "general experience".[27] He was trying to define the moral factor in art, and a year later when he proclaimed poets to be creators "of the standards of manners",[28] he in no way implied an institutional morality. Art involved moral judgments, to be sure, but these judgments must be personal and instinctual. In another context, Yeats stated what he believed to be the correct response to Shakespeare's tragic figures:

> It is no use telling us that the murderer and the betrayer do not deserve our sympathy. We thought so yesterday, and we still know what crime is, but everything has been changed of a sudden; we are caught up into another code, we are in the presence of a higher court. Complain of us if you will, but it will be useless, for before the curtain falls, a thousand ages, grown conscious in our sympathies, will have cried Absolvo te.[29]

Implicit in instinctual morality are the polarities of law and love, spirit and flesh, intellect and passion. "If we were not certain of the law we would not feel the struggle, the drama, but the subject of art is not law, which

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[26] E & I., pp. 292-93.

[27] Ibid., p. 293.

[28] "Poetry and Tradition", ibid., p. 253.

[29] "First Principles", Expl., p. 154.

is a kind of death, but the praise of life, and it has no commandments that are not positive."[30] The test of poetry was "not in reason but in a delight", in an exaltation.[31] Art, especially heroic poetry, must provide "the orgiastic moment when life outleaps its limits".[32] And a year earlier (1909), in a preface to Synge's works, Yeats had written of the poet's obligation "to magnify the minds and hearts of our young men".[33] This was the 'morality of art' that Yeats sought.

How, then, might art be moralistic without being didactic? Yeats dealt with this problem by insisting on the feigned element in art. "I come always back to this thought. There is something of an old wives' tale in fine literature."[34] Rather than merely copy Nature, the poet must invent images to bring mankind into some affinity with "the archetypal ideas themselves".[35] Out of the contest between real and ideal came the momentary peace which Yeats believed to be

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[30] Ibid., p. 155.

[31] "Discoveries", E & I., p. 279.

[32] "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time", ibid., p. 325.

[33] Ibid., p. 306.

[34] "Discoveries", ibid., p. 276.

[35] "At Stratford-on-Avon", ibid., p. 102.

the end of art.[36] When he wrote in 1906, that "All art is dream",[37] he was not being escapist: he was thinking of the image which art must, by 'dreaming back' to man's ancient emotions, provide of the noble, impossible life.

At this point it may be useful to turn briefly to what is, perhaps, the most systematized statement of the nature and purpose of art Yeats ever made, The King's Threshold. Evidently with Shelley's A Defence of Poetry in mind, Yeats constructed a play around the following plot: King Guaire, under pressure from the pragmatists, has banished Seanchan, the ideal poet, from the legislative council. The expelled Seanchan, following an ancient custom, fasts upon the King's threshold. Fearing a peasant uprising, the King solicits help from the townsmen in getting Seanchan to break his fast. Among those who help are fellow-poets who plead with Seanchan, a mayor who threatens him, a monk who rebukes him for "wanton imagination", and the poet's sweetheart, Fedelm, who asks: "And are not these white arms and this soft neck / Better than the brown earth?" But all is to no avail. Finally, the King condescends to plead with Seanchan. This, too, proves futile. Guaire then threatens that all poets in the kingdom will be killed if Seanchan does not immediately relent. This time, however, the poets are defiant and they

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[36] "Ireland and the Arts", ibid., p. 207.

[37] "Discoveries", ibid., p. 285.

support Seanchan. He dies, and his followers bear him off-stage in a tragic-triumphant procession.

Explicit in the play is Yeats's understanding of the morality of art. Seanchan, fearing that one visitor is an impostor and not indeed his Oldest Pupil, asks "Why poetry is honoured?" The visitor proves his identity by answering correctly that

> . . . poets hung
> Images of the life that was in Eden
> Around the child-bed of the world, that it,
> Looking upon those images, might bear
> Triumphant children.[38]

But, Yeats states elsewhere, to provide such images of perfection the artist must live a full life:

> The imaginative writer differs from the saint in that he identifies himself -- to the neglect of his own soul, alas! -- with the soul of the world, and frees himself from all that is impermanent in that soul, an ascetic not of women and wine, but of the newspapers.[39]

In Yeats's mature poetic a poem was no longer a coterie expression of disembodied beauty; it was an imaginative experience at once personal and universal and related to life that was vital, vibrant, and passionate.

> To speak of one's emotions without fear or moral ambition, to come out from under the shadow of other men's minds, to forget their needs, to be utterly oneself, that is all the Muses care for . . . . All art is the disengaging of a soul from place and history . . . . It may show the crimes

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[38] Collected Plays, pp. 111-12.

[39] "Discoveries", E & I., p. 286. Cf. "The Choice", Collected Poems, p. 278.

> of Italy as Dante did, or Greek mythology like Keats, or Kerry and Galway villages, and so vividly that ever after I shall look at all with like eyes, and yet I know that Cino da Pistoia thought Dante unjust, and that Keats knew no Greek, that those country men and women are neither so lovable nor so lawless as 'mine author sung it me'; that I have added to my being, not my knowledge.[40]

It would be difficult to find a brief excerpt which more admirably epitomizes Yeats's mature thoughts on the nature and function of art. Juxtaposed against his earlier criticism, it shows where he needed to modify his views; but more important, it shows what remained essential to him. Art should be passionate and transcendental, national and universal, sympathetic and elevating: ". . . I have added to my being, not my knowledge." One remembers his earliest critical dictum: "Great art does not teach us anything -- it changes us." This was Yeats's literary credo.

The supremacy of art was in traditional statements "of certain heroic and religious truths, passed on from age to age, modified by individual genius, but never abandoned".[41] The morality of art, in the sense that Yeats promoted it, was an extension of sympathy to all men, an exaltation of life through the heroic ideal and of wisdom born from contemplating the "procession".[42] As late as 1935, in a

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[40] "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time", ibid., pp. 339-40.

[41] Auto., p. 490.

[42] See n. 26, p. 82 above.

letter to Ethel Mannin, he re-affirmed his belief in that morality:

> Our traditions only permit us to bless, for the arts are an extension of the beatitudes. Blessed be heroic death (Shakespeare's tragedies), blessed be heroic life (Cervantes), blessed be the wise (Balzac).[43]

In 1936, when European affairs seemed to verify the terrible prophecy of "The Second Coming", Yeats was tolerant, concerned, and unusually humble:

> . . . as my sense of reality deepens, and I think it does with age, my horror at the cruelty of governments grows greater . . . . Communist, Fascist, nationalist, clerical, anti-clerical, are all responsible according to the number of their victims. I have not been silent; I have used the only vehicle I possess -- verse.[44]

There was no panic, no attempt to impute blame according to a personal bias. Such serenity was akin to the calm of passionate individuals who pass beyond pain to pure contemplation. Yeats had achieved it by living fully, aiming all the time at the impossible perfection and yet being undeceived. "'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it,'"[45] he wrote to Lady Elizabeth Pelham just four weeks before he died. No single sentence better summarizes what the imaginative arts meant to Yeats: the embodiment of truth -- that was what the "procession" was all about.

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[43] Letters, p. 832.

[44] Ibid., p. 851.

[45] Ibid., p. 922.

Passion, or truth passionately perceived, was the poet's true subject-matter; and poetic language, the medium, Yeats came to believe, should "coincide with that of passionate, normal speech".[46] Style involved the manner as well as the matter of art; and manner implied the poet's craft: ". . . the conscious choice of words . . . . all that remains of the ego."[47] In the same letter, written in 1914, Yeats stated that great poetry was both "personal" and "impersonal". It must be emphasized, however, that he uses these terms to mean "individualistic" and "universal", respectively.

Yeats made it abundantly clear that style, unlike form,[48] was inseparable from personality. It was the manifestation of bias, of feeling, a pose even, rather than just the logical arrangement of materials. He equated objectivity or lack of bias with insincerity; and he regarded style as the "purification from insincerity".[49] On the other

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[46] "A General Introduction for my Work" (1937), E & I., p. 521.

[47] Letters, p. 587.

[48] Artistic form received little attention in Yeats's critical writings, where it was always the spirit of a work which engaged him. His letters and his revisions, however, attest to his concern for all aspects of the 'craft' of poetry. The most recent study of this aspect of Yeats is Robert Beum's The Poetic Art of William Butler Yeats (New York, 1969).

[49] "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time", E & I., p. 319.

hand, a poem could be too personal, too private.[50] Simply stated, then, good style meant the individual expression of a universal emotion.

Style and personality were, for Yeats, different expressions of the same thing -- individuality. Style was to letters what personality was to life; it was a form of self-possession and self-expression. Style, constituting literary personality, reflected an author's psychological personality. Little wonder, then, that Yeats took issue with his father's belief that all personal utterance was egotism.[51] Yeats was not unaware of the dangers of a too personal speech: but passion, he believed, was the possession of great men, and passion would find its own limits in archetypes. Great actors, "If worthy their prominent part in the play, / Do not break up their lines to weep".[52]

Yeats's critical writings clearly indicate that he regarded mind or critical judgment as an important but secondary part of the artist's apparatus. Personality was the primary requisite of all great art: and, while Yeats was not always consistent in his usage, it is apparent that "personality", unlike "character", meant self-identity

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[50] "A General Introduction for my Work", E & I., pp. 522, and 523.

[51] Auto., p. 102.

[52] "Lapis Lazuli", Collected Poems, p. 338.

engendered by passion and made manifest through speech.[53]

In "The Reform of the Theatre" (Samhain: 1903), Yeats wrote:

> I do not mean by style words with an air of literature about them, what is ordinarily called eloquent writing. The speeches of Falstaff are as perfect in their style as the soliloquies of Hamlet. One must be able to make a king of Faery or an old countryman or a modern lover speak that language which is his and nobody else's, and speak it with so much of emotional subtlety that the hearer may find it hard to know whether it is the thought or the word that has moved him, or whether these could be separated at all.[54]

No matter how universal the thought or the emotion, there must be a happy marriage of sound to sense, a plausibility or decorum deriving from unique verbal patterns appropriate to a particular situation.

Yeats's most extended discussion of style is found in the third section of "Poetry and Tradition". The emphasis once again is on passion and craft. Style is a discipline, "a deliberate shaping of things"; it is "a secret between a craftsman and his craft" whereby he transfigures "words and sounds and events".[55] Far from being purely intellectual and objective, this disciplined, passionate speech is his most of all amid the great crises of life. Shakespeare's heroes, when faced with death, "speak out of an ecstasy that is

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[53] Cf. "character" which was based on observation. Letters, pp. 548-49.

[54] Expl., pp. 107-108. The essay first appeared in the United Irishman (April, 1903). Yeats expanded it for the Samhain reprint later that year.

[55] E & I., pp. 253 and 254.

one-half the self-surrender of sorrow, and one-half the last playing and mockery of the victorious sword before the defeated world".[56]

A firm believer in duality as a means towards self-possession, Yeats explained in 1907 what he meant by the transfiguring power of tragic gaiety, later the subject of "Lapis Lazuli":

> Timon of Athens contemplates his own end, and orders his tomb by the beached verge of the salt flood, and Cleopatra sets the asp to her bosom, and their words move us because their sorrow is not their own at tomb or asp, but for all men's fate. That shaping joy has kept the sorrow pure, as it had kept it were the emotion love or hate, for the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the extremity of joy, perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender, overflowing turbulent energy, and marmorean stillness; and its red rose opens at the meeting of the two beams of the cross, and at the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity.[57]

The opening of the"red rose" was the supreme stylistic achievement: it was the peace Yeats sought in art, the still-point at once in and beyond the creative process. The idealism of Byzantium, for example, is countered by the "mire" of physical existence. Opposites are transformed by emotional stress and a new centre of awareness is created. Transcending the flux, the artist momentarily sees into the life of things, and his vision becomes frozen in the intensity

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[56] Ibid., p. 254.

[57] Ibid., p. 255.

of his art.

Yeats believed that only passionate men, heroes and poets, for example, are capable of comprehending and mastering the antinomies which perplex and vex mankind. The hero recognizes his place in the scheme of things but, defiant still, he triumphs in defeat. The poet finds his self-conquest in style.[58] Self-conquest is essential to self-possession. "To be impassioned and yet to have a perfect self-possession"[59] -- that was what Yeats sought in writing and what he so often described as a style "passionate and cold".

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[58] Auto., p. 516.

[59] Letters, p. 360.

CHAPTER VIII

SYMBOLISM

> All symbolic art should arise out of a real belief, and that it cannot do so in this age proves that this age is a road and not a resting-place for the imaginative arts.
>
> W. B. Yeats

It is one thing to expatiate on the nature and purpose of art: to achieve great art is quite another matter. Yeats was concerned with embodying truth; yet much of his early poetry was as empty as the Victorian poetry he condemned was doctrinaire. He realized this even in 1886 when, revising his poetry, he commented:

> I have noticed some things about my poetry I did not know before, in this process of correction; for instance, that it is almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world, and a summons to that flight . . . . it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge, but of longing and complaint -- the cry of the heart against necessity. I hope some day to alter that and write poetry of insight and knowledge.[1]

Later that same year he wrote: "I have buried my youth and raised over it a cairn -- of clouds. Some day I shall be articulate, perhaps."[2] His writing during the next three decades reflects the polarities of his own experience and

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[1] Letters, p. 63.

[2] Ibid., p. 84.

their effects upon his poetic theory and practice. Dissatisfied with his work, he concerned himself with three important questions regarding the substance and style of literature. How might literature be relevant without being directed towards materialistic ends? How might it be national without being chauvinistic? How might it be spiritual and elevating without being conceptual and doctrinaire? The solution to all these questions, Yeats believed, lay in symbolism; and, eclectic as he was, he found authority for his belief in diverse sources: in such English writers as Blake, Shelley, Pater (and to a lesser extent in the Pre-Raphaelites), in classical literature, in Irish mythology, in theosophy, and in the French Symbolists.

Yeats considered himself a Pre-Raphaelite when, in 1887, he and his family returned to London. During these early years, however, he made no attempt to distinguish between the work of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and that of Blake, Shelley, and Keats. In a review of Arthur Hallam's poems, Yeats stated that:

> Writing long before the days of Rossetti and Swinburne, Arthur Hallam explained the principles of the aesthetic movement, claimed Tennyson as its living representative, and traced its origin to Keats and Shelley, who, unlike Wordsworth, made beauty the beginning and end of all things in art.[3]

It was enough for Yeats that these writers opposed the

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[3] "A Bundle of Poets", The Speaker, VIII (July 22, 1893), 81.

Victorian criteria of 'utility' and moral 'adequacy'; a few years later he wrote approvingly of The Well at the World's End as "a typical expression" of an anti-Arnold movement in literature.[4] Whatever his understanding of Pre-Raphaelitism, there can be no doubting his admiration for Morris and Swinburne who, he believed, were the only poets worthy of succeeding Tennyson as Poet Laureate.[5]

However, despite his lasting admiration for Morris and despite the apparent influence of Rossetti, especially in The Wind Among the Reeds, these two poets do not appear to have figured greatly in Yeats's theory of symbolism. In "The Happiest of the Poets" (1902), Rossetti is characterized by his desire for "essences", for "impossible purities"; and his genius is said to have found expression in symbols of desire -- "the Star of the Magi, the Morning and Evening Star".[6] Morris's genius, on the other hand, is said to have expressed itself in symbols of "energy" -- the Green Tree and the enchanted waters.[7] The fact that Yeats made no attempt at analyzing their symbols as components of a 'system', as he had done with Blake and Shelley, seems to suggest that he

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[4] "Mr. Rhys' Welsh Ballads", The Bookman, XIV (April, 1898), 14.

[5] Letters, p. 219. Yeats's was one of four letters on the subject of the laureateship published in the November issue of The Bookman, 1892.

[6] E & I., p. 53.

[7] Ibid., p. 54.

excluded Morris and Rossetti from the mystical-symbolist tradition.

The Rhymers' Club was founded in 1891; and, according to Yeats, its members "looked consciously to Pater" for their philosophy.[8] Pater believed that art should appeal not to the intellect but "to the 'imaginative reason', that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol".[9] Art, he believed, could approach "the condition of music" only if 'pure' ideas were replaced by suggestion: and art should be judged by the extent to which it approached that "condition".[10]

Yeats's statement, in 1896, that "True art is expressive and symbolic, and makes every form, every sound, every colour, every gesture, a signature of some unanalysable imaginative essence"[11] reminds one not only of Pater and such earlier 'purists' as Hallam, but perhaps more immediately of the French Symbolists. These years marked the height of Yeats's friendship with Arthur Symons from whom he learnt much about Mallarmé. For this reason, and in view of Yeats's

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[8] Auto., p. 302. In that year, also, Yeats apparently read Marius the Epicurean for the first time. See Letters to the New Island, p. 137.

[9] The Renaissance (London, 1873), Library Edition, 1910, p. 138.

[10] Ibid., p. 139.

[11] "William Blake and his Illustrations to The Divine Comedy", E & I., p. 140.

eclecticism, it seems necessary at this point to examine briefly some tenets of the Symbolist Movement in France.

It is almost a commonplace of criticism to say that French Symbolist poetry is characterized by obscurity, by a desired affinity with music, and by decadence. Such a statement may be reasonably accurate for certain poets but it is scarcely accurate for the 'movement' itself because its members seem to have been united less by any common literary theory than by a common attitude of revolt against realism.

The French Symbolist Movement was essentially mystical. Its protest against realism postulated an ideal world beyond the senses. What appears to have been decadence was, in fact, more positive: it was a search for some spirituality which the Symbolists believed to be discoverable through external phenomena. Mallarmé, the most influential theorist of the 'movement', believed that art was sacred and that to remain sacred it must remain mysterious.[12] It was perhaps inevitable that Mallarmé with his hatred of realism and his aristocratic tendency would exceed the suggestive and mysterious, and write obscure poetry even when the symbols themselves were concrete.

In seeking to spiritualize literature, Mallarmé found

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[12] "Art for All", Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore, 1956), p. 9.

language to be inadequate: ". . . the diversity of language on earth means that no one can utter words which would bear the miraculous stamp of Truth Itself Incarnate."[13] He therefore denounced description and exposition and insisted that the essentials of art were "evocation, allusion, suggestion".[14] The poet, he maintained, should divest words of their accepted meanings and refrain from using words in normal syntactical patterns. In this way the reader would be obliged to discover for himself the chief symbols, and to guess at the essences distilled from their interrelation. Mallarmé continued:

> When I say: "a flower!" then from that forgetfulness to which my voice consigns all floral form, something different from the usual calyces arises, something all music, essence, and softness: the flower which is absent from all bouquets.[15]

"Flower", as symbol, was devoid of scientific minutiae and was related to what might be termed the Platonic Ideal.

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[13] "Crisis in Poetry", ibid., p. 38.

[14] Ibid., p. 40.

[15] Ibid., p. 42. Cf. Yeats's remarks on Rossetti: "If he painted a flame or a blue distance, he painted as though he had seen the flame out of whose heart all flames had been taken, or the blue of the abyss that was before all life . . . ." "The Happiest of the Poets", E & I., p. 53. This archetypal quality of the literary symbol was stressed by Jean Moréas, a disciple of Mallarmé, in his manifesto of September 18, 1886: ". . . in this art [poetry], pictures of nature, actions of men, concrete phenomena are not there for their own sake, but as simple appearances destined to represent their esoteric affinities with primordial Ideas." Quoted by William York Tindall, Forces in Modern British Literature, p. 254.

According to A. G. Lehmann, the French Symbolist Movement had begun to crystallize by 1884.[16] However, I can find no evidence that its work was extensively known in England until after 1890. Mallarmé's articles, published in The National Observer (March, 1892, to July, 1893), were too difficult for Yeats;[17] but we do know[18] that he read Edward Dowden's brief interpretation of the theories of Mallarmé and Maeterlinck. And Dowden's interpretation anticipates many of Yeats's ideas. For example, the belief that modern poets would "choose rather to suggest than to depict"[19] closely parallels Yeats's theory of symbolism and actually describes the quality of much of his poetry written during the Nineties. When Arthur Symons dedicated The Symbolist Movement in Literature (1899) to his friend Yeats, he proclaimed Yeats to be the chief English representative of that 'movement'. The very next year Yeats wrote "The Symbolism of Poetry", his most extensive treatment of the literary symbol.

The above resumé should not be taken as an attempt

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[16] The Symbolist Aesthetic in France, 1885-1895 (Oxford, 1950), p. 16.

[17] Yeats admitted this in "William Blake and his Illustrations to The Divine Comedy", The Savoy, No. 3 (July, 1896), p. 41. He omitted his remark from reprints of the essay.

[18] Letters, p. 180.

[19] Edward Dowden, "The 'Interviewer' Abroad", The Fortnightly Review, N. S., L (November, 1891), 724.

to assign specific sources to Yeats's ideas on symbolism. It is intended merely as an indication of the background against which Yeats made most of his pronouncements on symbolic art. It is probable, however, that in Pater and Mallarmé he at least found sanction for his developing theory, but beyond that one cannot safely conjecture.[20] In a letter to Ernest Boyd, in 1915, Yeats wrote:

> My interest in mystic symbolism did not come from Arthur Symons or any other contemporary writer. I have been a student of the medieval mystics since 1887 and found in such authors as Valentin Andrea [sic] authority for my use of the rose.
>
> My chief mystical authorities have been Boehme, Blake and Swedenborg.
>
> Of the French symbolists I have never had any detailed or accurate knowledge.[21]

A glance at The Rose (1893) will show that Yeats was indeed using literary symbols (as distinct from allegory) and availing himself of their traditional, national, and romantic associ-

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[20] Critics are divided over the question of Yeats's debt to the French Symbolists. Edmund Wilson, in Axel's Castle (1931), regards Symbolism as a second manifestation of English Romanticism reaching down to Yeats via Mallarmé and others. C. M. Bowra, in Heritage of Symbolism (1943), assumes that Yeats was an heir of French Symbolism. More recent critics, notably William York Tindall, Richard Ellmann, Edward Engelberg, William K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Cleanth Brooks believe that after the turn of the century Yeats's theory of symbolism developed quite independently of the French Movement.

[21] Letters, p. 592. Yeats was apparently referring to Johannes Valentine Andreae (or Andreas, 1586-1654), the German theologian and mystic. Wade notes that Yeats likely read The Hermetic Romance or the Chymical Wedding, a book ascribed to Andreas. The book was originally written in High Dutch by C[hristian] R[osenkreuz], and translated by E. Foxcroft. This translation was reprinted in The Real History of the Rosicrucians by A. E. Waite, 1887.

ations. On the other hand, the transcendental quality of the 'rose' suggests not only the influence of medieval mystics, but also of Blake, and of the theosophists. However, I believe it can be shown that Yeats was shaping his own theory of symbolism, and that he was following neither the theosophists with their arbitrary 'symbols' nor the French Symbolists with what Arthur Symons described as their "chimerical search after the virginity of language".[22]

Yeats was sometimes ambiguous in his early use of the term 'symbolism'. For example, in 1889, he informed Katharine Tynan that:

> In the second part of 'Oisin' under disguise of symbolism I have said several things to which I only have the key. The romance is for my readers. They must not even know there is a symbol anywhere. They will not find out. If they did, it would spoil the art.[23]

Five months later he supplied the 'key':

> . . . 'Oisin' needs an interpreter. There are three incompatible things which man is always seeking -- infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose -- hence the three islands.[24]

The two passages indicate a confusion in Yeats's mind between allegory and symbolism. During the next decade he sought to clear up that confusion, but as late as February, 1894, he was still biased towards the concept of symbolism

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[22] The Symbolist Movement in Literature (London, 1889), 2nd ed. rev., 1908, p. 127.

[23] Letters, p. 88.

[24] Ibid., p. 111.

upon which he and Ellis had based their interpretation of Blake's works: namely, that the symbolist employs "a technical language in which every word has the same invariable interpretation".[25] Two years later, however, he made the following distinction:

> A symbol is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about a spiritual flame; while allegory is one of many possible representations of an embodied thing, or familiar principle, and belongs to fancy and not to imagination: the one is a revelation, the other an amusement.[26]

Yeats's lamp metaphor still suggests the Hermetic correspondence of "as above so below", but it is apparent that he was no longer attracted to the one-for-one relationship which we call allegory.

Yeats further analyzed and defined the literary symbol in "Symbolism in Painting" (1898), when, by way of illustration, he recalled a conversation he had had with a German symbolist. This German, without any knowledge of Blake, shared Blake's belief that symbolism was synonymous with Vision or Imagination and that it could be understood if one possessed "a right instinct", whereas to understand allegory one needed "a right knowledge".[27] The German had

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[25] W. B. Yeats, "Seen in Three Days", The Bookman, V (February, 1894), 152.

[26] "William Blake and his Illustrations to The Divine Comedy", E & I., p. 116.

[27] Ibid., pp. 146-47. This essay was part of Yeats's Introduction to W. T. Horton's A Book of Images.

argued that to include a lily, a rose, or a poppy in a painting was to reduce the art to allegory. Yeats had argued that because an artist used such 'emblems' it did not necessarily follow that he was an allegorist. Yeats continued:

> I think I quoted the lily in the hand of the angel in Rossetti's Annunciation, and the lily in the jar in his Girlhood of Mary, Virgin, and thought they made the more important symbols, the women's bodies, and the angels' bodies, and the clear morning light, take that place, in the great procession of Christian symbols, where they can alone have all their meaning and all their beauty.[28]

The traditional associations that had gathered around 'lily', 'rose', and 'poppy' helped to ensure the transformation, in the mind of the beholder, from mortal to immortal things. Gazing upon the portrait of a beautiful woman, for example, one's thoughts might "stray to mortal things", but if one painted that same face

> . . . and set a winged rose or a rose of gold somewhere about her, one's thoughts are of her immortal sisters, Piety and Jealousy, and of her mother, Ancestral Beauty, and of her high kinsmen, the Holy Orders . . . .[29]

Yeats was, in effect, advocating a combination of two kinds of symbols mentioned by Dowden in discussing Maeterlinck. First, there was "the designed and deliberate symbol" through which the poet attempts to make concrete some abstraction. Second, there was the symbol which comes instinctively, and

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[28] E & I., p. 147.

[29] Ibid., p. 150.

which usually has meaning beyond the poet's conscious thought.[30] Yeats, however, later abandoned any attempt to distinguish between what he called "arbitrary" and "inherent" symbols.[31]

Yeats wished to avoid hackneyed poetic diction, but, unlike the French Symbolists, he did not believe that the function of a poem was "to be, rather than to express".[32] Mallarmé had written that words

> . . . take light from mutual reflection, like an actual trail of fire over precious stones, replacing the old lyric afflatus or the enthusiastic personal direction of the phrase.[33]

He had gone on to praise verse in which the words were just so many "vocables" completely devoid of denotation. In this way poetry attained the "isolation of speech" which Mallarmé sought.[34] All of this suggests that Mallarmé would eliminate from poetry not only the philosophical speculation which Yeats felt militated against Victorian verse, but also any perceptible expression of the poet's own thoughts and emotions. A

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[30] Edward Dowden, "The 'Interviewer' Abroad", The Fortnightly Review, N. S., L (November, 1891), 723. Yeats may well have been acquainted with Carlyle's distinction between the extrinsic and intrinsic values of symbols set forth in Sartor Resartus. With reference to Yeats's interest in Maeterlinck, see also pp. 173-75 below.

[31] "Magic", E & I., p. 49.

[32] Arthur Symons, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, p. 128.

[33] Quoted by Symons, ibid., p. 132.

[34] Ibid.

poem should have no referent beyond itself. Yeats wanted it both ways: a poem should "be" but it should also "express". To this end, he attempted, in 1900, to explain the intricacies of that "continuous indefinable symbolism which is the substance of all style".[35] He quoted, in a somewhat cavalier manner, from Robert Burns,

> The white moon is setting behind the white wave,
> And time is setting with me, O!

and then commented:

> . . . these lines are perfectly symbolical. Take from them the whiteness of the moon and of the wave, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty. But, when they are all together, moon and wave and whiteness and setting Time and the last melancholy cry, they evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms.[36]

Yeats's insistence, here and throughout the second section of "The Symbolism of Poetry", on the interaction of constituent images to evoke certain emotions and to create new wholes is in perfect accordance with Mallarmé. But Yeats did not deny these emotions and creations a referent beyond the poem.

Yeats regarded allegory as a product of the active will, whereas symbolism was a product of contemplation -- that state of trance, prolonged by rhythm, wherein "the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in

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[35] "The Symbolism of Poetry", E & I., p. 155.

[36] Ibid., pp. 155-56.

symbols."[37] However, he modified this the following year (1909) when he noted that poets use symbols "half unconsciously" to evoke the Great Memory.[38]

Yeats believed that the evils which plagued Victorian literature would disappear if people were to accept the theory that poetry moves us by its use of symbolism and mythology. It would then be understood that "the beryl stone was enchanted by our fathers that it might unfold the pictures in its heart, and not to mirror our own excited faces, or the boughs waving outside the window".[39] Two years earlier, he had made a similar distinction between literary 'movements':

> The old movement was scientific and sought to interpret the world, and the new movement is religious, and seeks to bring into the world dreams and passions, which the poet can but believe to have been born before the world, and for a longer day than the world's day. This movement has made painters and poets and musicians go to old legends for their subjects, for legends are the magical beryls in which we see life, not as it is, but as the heroic part of us, the part which desires always dreams and emotions greater than any in the world, and loves beauty and does not hate sorrow, hopes in secret that it may become.[40]

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[37] Ibid., p. 159. It should be understood that Yeats was referring only to the evocation of and response to symbols. His poetic practice shows that he handled his symbols quite deliberately.

[38] "Magic", ibid., p. 49.

[39] "The Symbolism of Poetry", ibid., p. 163.

[40] "Mr. Rhys' Welsh Ballads", The Bookman, XIV (April, 1898), 14-15.

The emphasis on an ultimate reality made visible only through trance, the talk about "magical beryls", and the idea of a 'dreaming back' all predicated, as referent, life in some idealized form and presupposed a repository of common symbols. That repository, Yeats believed, was Anima Mundi, and by sharing that race-experience, through imaginative literature, man could escape from modern alienation and attain Unity of Being. In "Magic" (1901), he went even further and announced his beliefs:

> (1) That the borders of our minds are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.
>
> (2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.
>
> (3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.[41]

The last two points, in particular, reiterate Yeats's belief in transcendental and archetypal symbols.

But while Yeats agreed with Mallarmé that the power of the literary symbol was in its evocation, in the 'reflection' of words, he did not want the "isolation of speech" which Mallarmé advocated. By 1900, having read "Symons's book very carefully", Yeats found French Symbolism, or at least Symons's exposition of it, to be "curiously vague in its philosophy".[42]

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[41] E & I., p. 28.

[42] Letters, p. 337.

It may have been this which prompted Yeats to give his own exegesis of symbolism in 1900.

I have already quoted fairly extensively from "The Symbolism of Poetry", but in Part IV of that essay Yeats distinguishes between "emotional" and "intellectual" symbols. The "emotional" or Mallarméan symbol has no definable referent, no traditional or intellectual meaning. Intellectual symbols, on the other hand, "evoke ideas alone", or, what was more acceptable to Yeats, "ideas mingled with emotions".[43] Symbols might be used to evoke a mood or to make concrete some abstraction, but they were most effective when, by association, they fulfilled a dual role. For example, 'white' or 'purple' might evoke emotions, but unless these words were strengthened by association with such "intellectual symbols" as 'cross' or 'crown of thorns' they would remain personal and ephemeral. Similarly, the sight of a rushy pool in the moonlight might evoke private memories and emotions; but if one thought of the ancient associations attached to 'moon' as symbol, one transcended oneself and became a part of the "procession".[44] Yeats believed that symbols needed a public genealogy if the arts were to replace religion in overcoming "the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world",[45]

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[43] E & I., p. 160.

[44] Ibid., p. 161.

[45] Ibid., p. 162. See also Expl., pp. 196 and 251.

and if they were to re-establish the old patterns of communal living.

For Yeats, then, a poem might be a symbolic structure complete in itself; but its constituent symbols, while defying mere literal statement, would transfer meaning. Language was more than vocables, and symbolism more than a myriad of titillating associations. The Rose, in "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time", for example, symbolizes Maud Gonne and alludes "through her to Ireland"[46] as inspiration for the creative imagination. But, by long association, Rose and Rood suggest the ephemeral and the eternal, beauty spiritual and physical. At the same time, the Rosicrucian symbolism represented the very interests which Yeats feared might alienate him from Ireland. Even as he invoked the mystical Rose to attend his muse, he feared that such a presence might eliminate from his verse "the rose-breath" of day-to-day life. He feared that he might

> . . . seek alone to hear the strange things said
> By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,
> And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.[47]

Hence, what might have been an abstract symbolical structure was humanized by a distinctly personal emotion. On the other

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[46] See A. Norman Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (London, 1968), p. 26. See also a diary entry, 1910, reprinted in Reflections by W. B. Yeats, ed. Curtis Bradford (Dublin, 1970), p. 24.

[47] Collected Poems, p. 35.

hand, Yeats's intense response to the Easter Rising was 'intellectualized' until it engendered the heroic myth of "Easter 1916". Thoor Ballylee (the Tower), in its ruinous state, represented social decline and Yeats's own physical dilapidation. But Yeats, a firm believer in creation-through-opposites, used the Tower also as a symbol of aristocratic values, and as a bastion against levelling democracy.

Many of Yeats's best poems refuse to be reduced to a single literary statement, and much of their success can be attributed to his use of what he called "intellectual symbols". Such symbols need not provide an objective philosophy. They act rather as a catalyst prompting and aiding the imagination in making manifest the "buried" reality. It was Yeats's belief that poetry could be philosophical only insofar as "it describes the emotions of a soul dwelling in the presence of certain ideas".[48] And his notes to certain poems, most notably those in The Wind Among the Reeds, attest to his concern for the intellectual content of his poetry. This notwithstanding, Yeats continued to vacillate between two poles during the Nineties. He sought to affix precise meanings to the symbolism of Blake and Shelley even while his interest in Aesthetic-Symbolic literature pulled him towards the indefinable symbol.

His most extreme reaction against assigning any

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[48] W. B. Yeats, "A New Poet", The Bookman, VI (August, 1894), 148.

meaning to symbols was expressed in "The Autumn of the Body" (1898), where he condemned all but the early bardic poets for being too preoccupied with "things". There had been, he maintained, a general poetic decline from these poets, through Homer and Dante, to Shakespeare; "but it was only with the modern poets, with Goethe and Wordsworth and Browning, that poetry gave up the right to consider all things in the world as a dictionary of types and symbols and began to call itself a critic of life and an interpreter of things as they are".[49] Yeats insisted, however, that a change was in process and that the arts would assume the role of religion and fill men's minds "with the essences of things, and not with things".[50] And then, via Symons, he quoted with approval from Mallarmé's "Crisis in Poetry" that art should embody only "'the horror of the forest or the silent thunder in the leaves, not the intense dense wood of the trees'".[51]

It is difficult to see how such art could do more than excite a refined and delicate sensibility. Such advocacy of art for art's sake is so extreme that one can hardly envision Yeats as a "maker" whose passion was to reshape the world in accordance with an aristocratic and a heroic ideal.

However, apart from this extreme if not perverse essay,

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[49] E & I., p. 192.

[50] Ibid., p. 193.

[51] Ibid.

Yeats's theory of symbolism was catching up with his practice. By 1901, he felt that he could dispense with his earlier attempted distinction between "inherent" and "arbitrary" symbols, for he now believed that "Whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the Great Memory".[52] This was merely a re-assertion of the thesis he had expanded in such essays as "Symbolism in Painting" (1898), and "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900): namely, that the power of the literary symbol rests not so much in a divine origin or in a deliberately assigned meaning as in its natural history -- the associations it has gathered unto itself over the years. Hence, while allegory remains constant in meaning and limited in appeal, the symbol is forever rich and suggestive, refusing to reveal all of its meaning to any one generation.[53]

Yeats's conviction that symbols embody both ideas and emotions deepened with increased literary experience. In 1906, for example, he asserted that "All symbolic art should arise out of a real belief", and that unless the arts rediscover the mythopoeic element "we may never see again a Shelley and a Dickens in the one body".[54] In 1913, Yeats wrote "Art and Ideas", a repudiation of his Aesthetic-Symbolist phase when

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[52] "Magic", ibid., pp. 49-50.

[53] "Symbolism in Painting", ibid., p. 148.

[54] "Discoveries", E & I., pp. 294, and 296.

he had sometimes regarded the symbol as an end in itself rather than a means to spiritual expansion. The poetic symbol, he now believed, was "an organic thing", "the flow of the flesh under the impulse of passionate thought".[55] Years later he insisted that while Helen of Troy appears to be "an image of softness and of quiet, she draws perpetually upon glass with a diamond".[56] Such was the distinctive quality of the symbol, as Yeats perceived it: it allowed both worlds, the subjective and the objective, to blend together as the dancer and the dance.

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[55] E & I., p. 354. See also pp. 348, and 349.

[56] A Vision (1937), p. 132.

CHAPTER IX

MYTHOLOGY AND MASK

> To be great we must seem to be so. Seeming that goes on for a lifetime is no different from reality.
>
> W. B. Yeats

There were a number of reasons why Yeats sought a mythology. He needed some 'system' of belief to give order and coherence in a world of flux. The lunar phases of A Vision, for example, were "stylistic arrangements of experience" designed to help him "to hold in a single thought reality and justice".[1] Irish mythology, in particular, might help him to establish himself in the great European literary tradition, and might help Ireland to find national unity.

> Might I not, with health and good luck to aid me, create some new Prometheus Unbound; Patrick or Columcille, Oisin or Finn, in Prometheus' stead; and, instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick or Ben Bulben? Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill?[2]

But circumscribing and superseding these reasons was the fact

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[1] A Vision (1937), p. 25.

[2] Auto., pp. 193-94. A corollary to this was Yeats's belief that true nationalism was not politically centred; that it was the perpetuation of the essential quality of life, in this case, Irish life. Mythological Ireland, idealistic and opposite to what is, should be modern Ireland's mask.

that literary symbols, as Yeats understood them, depended ultimately on association, on a public genealogy.

In his last important essay, he wrote: "A poet writes always of his personal life . . . he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria."[3] Yeats was reasserting the need for self-effacement, for that balance between the personal and the impersonal elements of art so essential to style, for the universalizing of personal emotions until their origins are half-anonymous. These passions, personified in the half-anonymous dramatis personae of art, would intensify the sense of historical continuity and of affinity with all men that Yeats sought to promote through literature. To achieve this end, he made extensive use of symbol, myth, and Mask, and of their interrelations.

It was imperative that his symbols should have a referent outside themselves if he were to resolve thought and passion into an organic unity and to give it permanence; or, as he put it in "The Statues", to press "Live lips upon a plummet-measured face".[4] Science had destroyed Yeats's faith in Christianity; and in later years The Golden Bough had made Christianity "look modern and fragmentary" even

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[3] "A General Introduction for my Work", E & I., p. 509.

[4] Collected Poems, p. 375.

as a myth.[5] Unlike Eliot, who salvaged what he could from the wreckage of civilization -- "These fragments I have shored against my ruins" -- Yeats sought in mythology the order of metaphysics and the spirituality of religion. Modern literature, he believed, lacked spirituality precisely because it lacked the mythopoeic elements of mystery and systematization.[6]

No longer interested in images about whose necks he could "cast various 'chains of office'",[7] Yeats sought in mythology meaning and pattern for life; he sought especially to determine the relation of individual experiences to race experiences. Mythology was neither fact nor fiction, but "one of those statements our nature is compelled to make and employ as a truth though there cannot be sufficient evidence".[8] In a sense, then, mythology was a religion, and Irish mythology seemed a viable alternative to the Christian tradition.

His associations with Sligo had always stirred his imagination, and by 1888 he was studying Irish mythology and legends in the British Museum. But this 'scholarly' mythology

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[5] W. B. Yeats, Preface to Upanishads, p. 10, quoted by Henn, The Lonely Tower (London, 1950), 2nd ed. rev. 1965, p. 160.

[6] "Miss Fiona MacLeod as a Poet", The Bookman, XI (December, 1896), 92.

[7] Letters, p. 469.

[8] W. B. Yeats, Introduction to The Resurrection, Expl., p. 392.

was scarcely related to the Irish peasantry, and would therefore have very limited appeal even in Ireland. Even such archetypal symbols as 'cross' and 'rose' became almost meaningless when couched in an elaborate art-form deriving from Mallarmé, Villiers de l'Isle Adam, and Pater. Consequently, the most satisfactory poems in The Rose (1893) and The Wind Among the Reeds (1899) are neither distinctly national nor distinctly symbolist: they are poems on romantic love. And although Yeats claimed that "the quality symbolised as The Rose differs from the Intellectual Beauty of Shelley and of Spenser in that I have imagined it as suffering with man and not as something pursued and seen from afar",[9] these poems are at best personal, at worst esoteric and obscure. Yeats seems to have realized this, as he defended himself in "To Ireland in the Coming Times":

> Know, that I would accounted be
> True brother of a company
> That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong,
> Ballad and story, rann and song;
> Nor be I any less of them,
> Because the red-rose-bordered hem
> Of her, whose history began
> Before God made the angelic clan,
> Trails all about the written page.[10]

When, during the first decade of this century, Yeats renounced his pale romanticism and sought to give his poetry "a local habitation", he realized that his symbols must, in

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[9] Var. Poems, p. 842.

[10] Collected Poems, p. 56.

some way, relate to real life. "I have always come to this certainty," he wrote in 1906, "what moves natural men in the arts is what moves them in life, and that is, intensity of personal life . . . ."[11] However, he was aware that the triviality of contemporary life, as depicted by the realists, was as dangerous as coterie art:

> An art may become impersonal because it has too much circumstance or too little, because the world is too little or too much with it, because it is too near the ground or too far up among the branches.[12]

This time Yeats was clearly using "impersonal" in a pejorative sense. On the one hand was the danger of being banal; on the other the risk of being obscure. Faced with "the choice of choices -- the way of the bird . . . or to the market carts?"[13] he sought a compromise which would make possible a poetry that was heightened without being abstract. He decided that art should "ascend out of common interests" but only so far as it could "carry the normal, passionate, reasoning self, the personality as a whole".[14]

As authority for such a procedure Yeats could cite the great masters whose dramatis personae were part of the "procession" or "phantasmagoria". These writers had achieved

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[11] "Discoveries", E & I., p. 265.

[12] Ibid., p. 272.

[13] Ibid., p. 267.

[14] Ibid., p. 272.

variety and psychological depth by suggestion: they had not profaned their art with mere circumstance or troubled their vision with psychological probing. The secret, Yeats decided, was their ability to create "emotion of multitude", something which was sadly lacking in modern literature, especially in modern drama.[15]

"Emotion of multitude" was not synonymous with mob-hysteria: in fact, it had nothing at all to do with mass response. It was, to summarize Yeats's argument, the feeling in the participant when confronted with great art, that he himself was part of the "procession". In Platonic terms, his mind imagined "shadow beyond shadow" until it had "pictured the world". Greek drama got "emotion of multitude" from the chorus; Shakespearean drama got it from the sub-plot which copied the main plot. "We think of King Lear less as the history of one man and his sorrows than as the history of a whole evil time." The sub-plot in Hamlet is really the main plot working itself out in more ordinary men and women and therefore "doubly calling up before us the image of multitude". This ability to suggest, within the limited confines of fable, the "rich, far-wandering, many-imaged life of the half-seen world beyond it", was an essential of great art.[16]

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[15] "Emotion of Multitude", E & I., p. 215.

[16] Ibid., pp. 215-16.

Implicit in such a discussion was the question of how the 'modern' poet might evoke this sense of historical continuity: or, to put it another way, how might contemporary life be so 'fabled' as to re-establish an affinity with the idealized communal life of the past? Yeats had earlier advocated mythology as a basis for literature. In 1901, for example, he had written that

> . . . literature dwindles to a mere chronicle of circumstance, or passionless fantasies, and passionless meditations, unless it is constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times . . . .[17]

The interests which had sustained Yeats's immediate predecessors -- Arnold's faith "the best thought of his generation", Browning's "psychological curiosity", and the "moral values that were not aesthetic values" of Tennyson, Shelley, and Wordsworth[18] -- were far too abstract for Yeats. And mythologies, both Christian and pagan were, as John Eglinton had pointed out, already complete and proper according "to the original conception of them".[19] In any event, Christianity had lost its credibility for Yeats. The revitalization of literature, and the revolt against the tyranny of fact, Yeats concluded, would come from Ireland. "England is old and her poets must scrape up the crumbs of an

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[17] "The Celtic Element in Literature", E & I., p. 185.

[18] Auto., p. 313.

[19] Literary Ideals in Ireland, pp. 41-42.

almost finished banquet, but Ireland has still full tables."[20]

There were several reasons why Yeats wanted to go back to Ireland's remote past. The poets of the "Young Ireland" movement were 'popular' in a pejorative sense: they were propagandists, and by harping on Ireland's past grievances and current political issues they were not, Yeats felt, working in the best interests of Irish nationalism. He wished to ignore the frictions of more recent times and to concentrate on a common heritage -- the heroic and remote past. Furthermore, because all folk mythology has a common origin, these remote Irish legends would be strangely familiar, yet at the same time pagan, novel, and unexploited. Then there was the mystical and magical aura that emanated from the storied past. In his Preface to Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne (1902), Yeats wrote:

> If we will but tell these stories to our children the Land will begin again to be a Holy Land, as it was before men gave their hearts to Greece and Rome and Judea. When I was a child I had only to climb the hill behind the house to see long, blue, ragged hills flowing along the southern horizon. What beauty was lost to me, what depth of emotion is still perhaps lacking in me, because nobody told me, not even the merchant captains who knew everything, that Cruachan of the Enchantments lay behind those long, blue, ragged hills![21]

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[20] Letters to the New Island, p. 148. The article, entitled "The Rhymers' Club", first appeared in The Boston Pilot, April 23, 1892.

[21] Expl., pp. 12-13.

Finally, Yeats hoped to appeal through mythology to the poles of literary consciousness -- the tradition of the peasant and that of the aristocrat.

Yeats believed that the revitalization of literature would come from Ireland, not because myths were the exclusive property of the Celts (myths, he knew, were traceable to all primitive peoples), but because "of all the fountains of the passions and beliefs of ancient times in Europe . . . the Celtic alone has been for centuries close to the main river of European literature".[22] At the same time he was aware that the twentieth century might be, in Milton's phrase, "an age too late" for popular acceptance of mythology.

> Shakespeare and Keats had the folk-lore of their own day, while Shelley had but mythology; and a mythology which has been passing for long through many literary minds without any new influx from living tradition loses all the incalculable instructive and convincing quality of the popular tradition.[23]

Even in Ireland, Oisin and Cuchulain were remote figures whose moral significance as symbols of man's restless and heroic spirit was relatively unknown. But the Sidhe, the Banshee and the Leprechaun, the mystery of haunted and holy places -- these were the possessions of the Irish peasants whose thoughts and images constantly enriched Anima Mundi.

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[22] "The Celtic Elements in Literature", E & I., p. 185.

[23] W. B. Yeats, "The Message of the Folk-Lorist", The Speaker, VIII (August 19, 1893), 189.

The mystic and romantic in Yeats could never quite eliminate the realist in him, and in 1927 he wrote to Sturge Moore concerning a design for The Tower:

> I need not make any suggestions, except that the Tower should not be too unlike the real object, or rather that it should suggest the real object. I like to think of that building as a permanent symbol of my work plainly visible to the passer-by. As you know, all my art theories depend upon just this --[the]rooting of mythology in the earth.[24]

One way of making one's mythology folk-oriented, and of giving it a "new influx from living tradition", was to infuse into it familiar and time-sanctioned names, scenes, and symbols. This, of course, was essentially what John Eglinton had advocated[25] in 1898; but in the heat of the controversy Yeats had chosen to ignore it. However, he must have recognized the validity of the principle of 'infusion' because he frequently applied it, albeit with a different emphasis, in his later poetry.

During the last three decades of his life Yeats often infused ancient mythologies, both Greek and Irish, into contemporary Irish thought and events. He was, in fact, shaping a 'new' mythology compounded of religion, heroic legend, folklore, and current events. He achieved this combination mainly by allusion: Maud Gonne became the modern Irish

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[24] W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence 1901-1937, ed. Ursula Bridge (London, 1953), p. 114.

[25] Literary Ideals in Ireland, p. 42. Yeats had made the same point five years earlier. See excerpt from The Speaker, quoted p. 151 above.

equivalent for Helen of Troy; the frightening events of modern Europe were made more terrifying by Biblical allusion in "The Second Coming"; and contemporary Irish figures -- Pearse, Connolly, and Yeats himself -- became one with Cuchulain:

> Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
> He stood where they had stood?[26]

It worked both ways: mythology, religion, and history were revitalized by the inclusion of contemporary figures and events which, in turn, were enhanced by traditional associations. Like the heroes of the Easter Rising, everything was "changed" to become part of a mood or myth. This transformation gave order to Yeats's life as present experiences became meaningful in the light of past events. It gave substance to his art by providing an idealistic and heroic life as referent for his symbols. This was what J. B. Yeats had in mind when he wrote to his son in 1921: "When is your poetry at its best? I challenge all the critics if it is not when the wild spirit of your imagination is wedded to concrete fact."[27]

One final point needs to be made: it was precisely because he could not define 'nationalism' intellectually[28] that Yeats needed a mythology to convey the quality of life

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[26] Collected Plays, p. 705.

[27] J. B. Yeats: Letters, p. 280.

[28] Auto., p. 472.

which he believed to be genuinely Irish, and to effect national unity.

> Nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind which is, of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult to that man, race, or nation; because only the greatest obstacle that can be contemplated without despair rouses the will to full intensity.[29]

This "bundle" of symbolic and evocative images, this ideal and mythological 'other self' of man and nation was the simplest definition of what Yeats later termed the Mask.

Although a national ideal was included in Yeats's concept of the Mask, the concept itself was developed in terms of 'personalities', of self and anti-self. The cultivation of dual personalities was characteristic of the Aesthetes; and Oscar Wilde, in particular, insisted that the artist's "first duty in life is to assume a pose".[30] However, the Aesthetes wished to avoid life and to present themselves as men in whom passions had been reduced to delicate sentiments. To Yeats, who, after around 1900, was moving away from the twilight, this amounted to a rejection of personality. He believed that one needed discipline and identity, and that these could be had by defining and redefining oneself in terms

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[29] Ibid., pp. 194-95.

[30] Quoted by Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 71.

of various literary _personae_.

Yeats's personality was, in simplest terms, a reflection of his mother's lyricism and his father's tendency towards violent and passionate speech. At art school the poet's earlier mental and emotional affinities with Alastor and Manfred gave place to such external impersonations as the Hamlet strut and the Byronic air.[31]

The Yeatsian Mask was born from the alienation of an imaginative man in an unimaginative world, and it was at first a glorification of that alienation. Yeats had yet to discover the dangers of living exclusively in a palace of art, but he was already vaguely aware of the possibilities inherent in literary _personae_. Recalling the period 1887-1891, Yeats wrote:

> My mind began drifting vaguely towards that doctrine of 'the mask' which has convinced me that every passionate man . . . is, as it were, linked with another age, historical or imaginary, where alone he finds images that rouse his energy.[32]

Such awareness was, no doubt, part of Yeats's growing belief in creativity through the clash of opposites: the fire and water symbols of theosophy, Blake's expanding and contracting vortex, Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian movements, and finally his own intersecting gyres. One may conjecture, however, that some of Yeats's enthusiasm for the Mask came

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[31] _Auto._, p. 83.

[32] _Ibid._, p. 152.

from Hallam's essay on Tennyson. Hallam had praised Tennyson's "power of embodying himself in ideal characters, or rather in moods of characters",[33] and had proclaimed Tennyson to be the inventor of "a new species of poetry, a graft of the lyric on the dramatic".[34] Such literary devices as symbolism and _personae_ as well as what was to become Yeats's preferred poetic form, the dramatic lyric, are all included in Hallam's remarks. Yeats would hardly have missed these points.

The Mask had several functions. First of all, it provided the self-conscious artist with a means of self-effacement; and the pseudonym is perhaps the most obvious example of this protective anonymity. Yeats's novel _John Sherman_ (1891) was published under the pseudonym 'Ganconagh'. Recalling his inherent timidity and his fancied heroics, Yeats wrote, in 1917:

> . . . when I shut my door and light the candle . . . I begin to dream of eyelids that do not quiver before the bayonet: all my thoughts have ease and joy, I am all virtue and confidence. When I come to put in rhyme what I have found it will be a hard toil, but for a moment I believe I have found myself and not my anti-self.[35]

Closely associated with the 'divided self', the timid

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[33] _The Poems of Arthur Hallam_, ed. Richard Le Gallienne (London, 1893), p. 109.

[34] _Ibid._, p. 133.

[35] "Anima Mundi", _Essays_ (1924), pp. 485-86.

and the heroic, was the second use of the Mask or persona: it provided a means of dramatizing one's self-conflict. And again John Sherman is a case in point. Sherman, the hero, is subjective, unsophisticated, self-conscious, and dreamy. His counterpart, the Reverend William Howard, is objective, sophisticated, self-possessed, and energetic. Sherman longs to marry a wealthy girl so that he may leave London and return to his native town of Ballah in western Ireland where he may dream his life away. When the chance of such a marriage does come, Sherman realizes that a wealthy woman would never be content to remain in Ballah. He cleverly turns his fiancée over to Howard, and returns to a childhood sweetheart at Ballah. The antithesis between Sherman and Howard is fairly well worked out not only in terms of character but also in terms of the London-Sligo axis and the choices which Yeats believed confronted him around 1890.

Thirdly, the Mask provided objectivity or aesthetic distance. Yeats informed Olivia Shakespear, in 1929, that through the persona of Michael Robartes he would discuss the implications of immortality "with an energy and a dogmatism and a cruelty I am not capable of in my own person".[36] And in "A General Introduction for my Work" he wrote: "I commit my emotion to shepherds, herdsmen, camel-drivers, learned men, Milton's or Shelley's Platonist, that tower Palmer

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[36] Letters, p. 769.

drew."[37]

Michael Robartes was only one among a number of *personae* used by Yeats in formulating his theories and in reassessing his values. Sometimes the *personae* engage in debate, as in "Ego Dominus Tuus", "A Dialogue Between Self and Soul", and "Shepherd and Goatherd". Sometimes the poems are monologues where a different *persona* is used to examine the same subject from a different point of view. "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", for example, is a personal elegy spoken by Yeats himself; "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" is a projection of Yeats's heroic ideal through the *persona* of Robert Gregory; while in "Reprisals",[38] using a skeptic as mouthpiece, Yeats voices second thoughts about heroic death. Such poems are most successful when *persona*, intent, and mood all complement each other. The irony in "Reprisals", for example, is mild because a sophisticated speaker discusses a tender subject. The irony in the 'Crazy Jane' poems, on the other hand, is the more trenchant because an unsophisticated speaker successfully repudiates institutional *mores* and morality. Furthermore, the harshness of Crazy Jane helps to save these poems from the nostalgia and sentimentality inherent in the subject of old age.

Finally, the Mask was an ideal which inspired the

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[37] *E & I.*, p. 522.

[38] *Var. Poems*, p. 791. See pp. 95-96 above.

poet to create, the lover to love. The man in love responds not to his lady's psyche but to a Mask which she has deliberately assumed to inspire his passion.[39] So it is, Yeats believed, with the poet, and his own early indulgence in secret 'selves' was replaced by the pursuit of a Mask or anti-self. "Ego Dominus Tuus", a poem written in 1915 but not published until 1917, is a dialogue between Hic and Ille, the objective man and the subjective man, respectively. It develops the idea of creation through opposites. Yeats complemented the poem with the essay "Anima Hominis" (1917).[40]

The thesis of both poem and essay is that a man must seek his Mask in whatever is the opposite of what he is in daily life. In yet another instance Yeats wrote:

> Among subjective men (in all those, that is, who must spin a web out of their own bowels) the victory is an intellectual daily re-creation of all that exterior fate snatches away, and so that fate's antithesis; while what I have called 'the Mask' is an emotional antithesis to all that comes out of their internal nature.[41]

This not very lucid statement seems to imply that the imaginative artist is bound to be defeated by the world unless he can make a disinterested appraisal of life; but this is

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[39] See "The Mask", Collected Poems, p. 106. See also Auto., p. 464.

[40] For commentary on the poem, and especially on its affinity with the essay, see A. Norman Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (London, 1968), pp. 195-203.

[41] Auto., p. 189. Yeats used 'Mask' and 'mask' interchangeably.

only possible if he can assume an objectivity which is alien to him. Such an interpretation is supported by a later and more lucid statement: "A writer must die every day he lives, be reborn, as it is said in the Burial Service, an incorruptible self, that self opposite of all that he has named 'himself'."[42]

Wearing a Mask, then, meant pursuing "an opposing virtue". The objective man is prone to capitulate to action and therefore needs a subjective Mask. The subjective man, prone to dream, needs an objective Mask. Richard Ellmann draws attention to the period 1900-1910 when, disillusioned with Ireland and Maud Gonne, and made callous by "the affairs of men", Yeats had actually pursued a subjective Mask in a desperate attempt to recover the "natural passions" he had lost.[43] Generally speaking, Yeats the subjective man needed an objective Mask. But this did not mean union with that Mask, for creation came from conflict and not from union. Yeats wrote to Ethel Mannin, in 1936:

> All my life it has been hard to keep from action, as I wrote when a boy, -- 'to be not of the things I dream.'[44]

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[42] Ibid., p. 457.

[43] Yeats: The Man and the Masks, pp. 174-75. In support of his argument, Ellmann quotes a long letter which Yeats wrote, but probably never sent, to Robert Gregory. See also Reflections by W. B. Yeats, ed. Curtis Bradford (Dublin, 1970), pp. 32-35.

[44] Letters, p. 868.

In "Anima Hominis", Yeats acknowledged that for some writers the pose was "less an opposing virtue than a compensation for some accident of health or circumstance".[45] He believed that Lady Gregory, wearied by her habit of harsh judgment, created in her comedies a world "where the wickedest people seem but bold children". Keats, deprived of "tangible luxury", compensated himself with "imaginary delights". William Morris, an active and irascible man, was quiet and contemplative in his art; and Savage Landor excelled all poets "in calm nobility when the pen was in his hand, as in the daily violence of his passion when he had laid it down". John Synge, dying, "gave to Deirdre the emotion that seemed to him most desirable, most difficult, most fitting, and maybe saw in those delighted seven years, now dwindling from her, the fulfilment of his own life".

Art such as that described above came from an attempted union with what ought to be rather than from conflict with what is. Yeats termed such art "happy"; it was "'a hollow image of fulfilled desire'".[46] Tragedy, the highest form of art, came from conflict with self or, in Dante's case, from conflict with both self and circumstance.

> . . . he celebrated the most pure lady poet ever sung and the Divine Justice, not merely because

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[45] All references in this paragraph are to Essays (1924), pp. 487-90.

[46] Ibid., p. 490.

> death took that lady and Florence banished her singer, but because he had to struggle in his own heart with his unjust anger and his lust . . . .[47]

One should not be misled by Yeats's famous dictum: "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry."[48] It was the quarrel with others which drove iron into Yeats's poetic after the turn of the century. Such a quarrel was negative only when it was so moralistic or propagandistic that it eliminated the quarrel with self. A poet must sometimes engage in conflict with society lest in failing to do so he seem to condone its false values. "All creation is from conflict, whether with our own mind or with that of others . . . ."[49] Dante fought that "double war",[50] and his art was tragic. The tragic artist creates his images not for compensation but to combat the limitations of self and circumstance. Only by realizing one's limitations is one aware of one's potential. "The other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality."[51]

Paradoxically, in seeking the Mask or anti-self, the

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[47] Ibid., p. 491.

[48] Ibid., p. 492.

[49] Auto., p. 576.

[50] Essays (1924), p. 491.

[51] Ibid., p. 493.

artist often achieved self-fulfilment. The subjective man, hurt by the world's objectivity, might retreat further into the dream. This had to be avoided. Recalling the dangers of Hodos Chameliontos, Yeats wrote: "I take pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I have found something hard and cold, some articulation of the Image which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life, and all that my country is . . . ."[52] On the other hand, the injured artist might capitulate to unheroic values; in which case pursuit of a subjective Mask was essential. "Style, personality -- deliberately adopted and therefore a mask -- is the only escape from the hot-faced bargainers and the money-changers."[53] Intensity and creativity were to be had only if men turned from the real to some ideal, "from the mirror to meditation upon a mask".[54]

The doctrine of the Mask was important aesthetically, psychologically, and morally:

> If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and try to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code, is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask . . . .[55]

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[52] Auto., p. 274.

[53] Ibid., p. 461.

[54] Essays (1924), p. 496.

[55] Ibid., p. 497.

Yeats was concerned with myth-making and image-making, with passionate activity as an ideal. "Wordsworth, great poet though he be, is so often flat and heavy partly because his moral sense, being a discipline he had not created, a mere obedience, has no theatrical element."[56] For Yeats, Wordsworth's 'acquiescence' in the mores of his time and Wilfred Owen's failure to assume a traditional heroic pose alike constituted artistic and moralistic failures. "Active virtue", deliberately sought by the wearing of a Mask, was a Yeatsian ideal.

Yeats dramatized his concept of the Mask in The Player Queen, and had Septimus remark that "Man is nothing till he is united to an image".[57] But Yeats always stressed that it was the struggle which was important. In A Vision he discussed 'psychology' in terms of four 'Faculties' which formed two pairs of conflicting opposites. Will (self) opposed Mask (anti-self), and Creative Mind (intellect, or in subjective men, imagination) opposed Body of Fate (circumstance). Yeats explained the interrelation metaphorically:

> The stage-manager, or Daimon offers his actor an inherited scenario, the Body of Fate, and a Mask or rôle as unlike as possible to his natural ego or Will, and leaves him to improvise through his Creative Mind the dialogue and the details of the plot.[58]

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[56] Ibid.

[57] Collected Plays, p. 420.

[58] A Vision (1937), p. 84.

The Yeatsian Mask was closely related to tragic art since each was a dramatization of "man's flight from his entire horoscope, his blind struggle in the network of the stars".[59] In contradistinction to this tragic-heroic effort was the insignificant life of the realist -- "The struggle of the fly in marmalade".[60] Behind it all was the Daimon, some supernatural, absolute self buried in Anima Mundi. Yeats claimed, rather cryptically, that "genius is a crisis that joins that buried self for certain moments to our trivial daily mind".[61] Yeats's association of crisis with genius seems to imply the exceptional moment -- the creative moment for the poet, the tragic-triumphant moment for the hero. The Daimons, or "personifying spirits", or "Gates and Gate-keepers" as Yeats sometimes called them, were responsible for the all-important crises, for bringing "their chosen man to the greatest obstacle he may confront without despair".

Closely akin to Yeats's understanding of tragedy are the attraction-and-repulsion, promise-and-restriction, love-and-hate antitheses invested in the Daimon. And so it is that "a hero loves the world till it breaks him, and the poet till it has broken faith".[62] Love of life and the struggle

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[59] Essays (1924), p. 489.

[60] "Ego Dominus Tuus", Collected Poems, p. 181.

[61] Auto., p. 272. All subsequent references in this paragraph are from the same page.

[62] Essays (1924), pp. 500-501.

against life's limitations existing together constitute tragic art. Keats and Landor used their Masks as compensation and were of lesser stature than Dante and Villon who confronted their respective Daimons and became "conjoint to their buried selves . . . . The two halves of their nature are so completely joined that they seem to labour for their objects, and yet to desire whatever happens, being at the same instant predestinate and free . . . ."[63]

Image, symbol, mythology, Mask -- all are interrelated and together constitute an "objective correlative" by which Yeats sought to give his work direction, discipline, intensity, and permanence. The wearing of a Mask had become a creative principle both psychologically and aesthetically: "Myself must I remake . . . ."[64] Theoretically, it meant the re-creation of man and nation through art. In practice Yeats's heroic Mask was a defence against "passive suffering" and Middle Class values. It enabled him to establish himself in a public mythology, and even to create a private one. Above all, it must have been partly responsible for the directness and masculinity of his mature poetry where so often the dialogue of his personae splendidly depicted his internal conflicts -- flesh-spirit, love-hate, tradition-modernity, art-life -- and allowed him the harmony which art momentarily provided.

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[63] Auto., p. 273.

[64] "An Acre of Grass", Collected Poems, p. 347.

CHAPTER X

YEATS'S THEORY OF DRAMA

> Stage-craft is always changing: drama is eternal.
> W. B. Yeats

Yeats's extensive remarks on drama reflect his early interest in semi-religious art, his involvement with the Irish Dramatic Movement, and his disillusion with that Movement. He was, in fact, writing plays before he became a critic and theorist of drama. During 1883 and 1884 he wrote a number of poetic dramas, two of which -- The Island of Statues and Mosada -- appeared later in the Dublin University Review. Another play, Vivien and Time, is said by Ellmann to have been rehearsed and possibly presented as a private production.[1] These early plays were 'escapist', and were in sharp contrast to the social drama of Ibsen which was to have so much influence upon the modern British theatre.

By 1890, Yeats appears to have become seriously interested in contemporary drama, and during the next few years he wrote reviews of several European plays. He did not, however, write an extensive critique of a particular dramatist

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[1] Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 35.

until he defended John Synge nearly two decades later.[2] This fact notwithstanding, these early reviews, too few and too anomalous to have been considered in Part One of this study, do give some insight into Yeats's developing theories of drama: theories which, one believes, were less important for the history of drama than for Yeats.

Yeats attended a performance of A Doll's House in early June, 1889. He hated the play because it was "Huxley and Tyndall all over again", and because the dialogue was "so close to modern educated speech that music and style were impossible".[3] However, Yeats and his contemporaries could not escape Ibsen because, as Yeats put it, "though we and he had not

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[2] Extensive discussion of Yeats's comments on Synge would be redundant since Yeats believed that he and Synge fought the same battles against the same foes. The following excerpt from Synge's Preface to The Playboy of the Western World (1907) indicates how similiar their aesthetic principles were:

> . . . in countries where the imagination of the people, and the language they use, is rich and living, it is possible for a writer to be rich and copious in his words, and at the same time to give the reality, which is the root of all poetry, in a comprehensive and natural form. In the modern literature of towns, however, richness is found only in sonnets, or prose poems, or in one or two elaborate books that are far away from the profound and common interests of life. One has, on the one side, Mallarmé and Huysmans producing this literature; and on the other, Ibsen and Zola dealing with the reality of life in joyless and pallid words. On the stage one must have reality, and one must have joy; and that is why the intellectual modern drama has failed, and people have grown sick of the false joy of the musical comedy, that has been given them in place of the rich joy found only in what is superb and wild in reality.

[3] Auto., p. 279.

the same friends, we had the same enemies".[4] In fact, Yeats indicated to Katharine Tynan, on July 25, 1889, that he planned to write an article on Ibsen.[5] That article may never have been written; but five years later Yeats did review Edmund Garrett's translation of Brand.

After drawing attention to diverse contemporary interpretations of Brand and Peter Gynt and insisting that art is not argument or criticism or propaganda but "the substance of life", Yeats made his own assessment of Ibsen:

> Ibsen saw two types underlying all others; he saw everywhere the old duality of the alchemist, the fixed and the volatile, and created two characters to embody them, and having carried each character to its moment of perfect expression, the one amid overwhelming and lifeless snow, the other face to face with the button moulder who would melt him down to make new buttons, new personalities, passed on to fresh creations. It is our business and not his to judge and measure and condemn, for the work of the poet is revelation, and the work of the reader is criticism . . . .
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> Ibsen is, however, a man of his age, and to him individual character, instead of being an end in itself, as it was to the Elizabethan dramatist, is but a means for the expression of broad generalisations and classifications, and of the pressure of religion and social life upon the soul; and it is his peculiar glory that he makes us share his interest in these things, and makes them move us as they move him, and yet never sinks the artist in the theorist or the preacher. But because he writes of things of which the theorist makes his theories, the preacher his commandments, he has been caught up by all manner of propagandists, who dream him

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Letters, p. 131.

one of themselves.[6]

The above passages are little more than restatements of Yeats's literary prejudices, and he wrote little else about Ibsen during the Nineties except to use Peter Gynt and The Vikings at Helgeland as proof, in his controversy with John Eglinton, that successful modern drama could be founded upon mythology.[7] Similarly, he rarely mentioned contemporary English dramatists, and then only to dismiss them.[8]

It appears that contemporary English drama and even the "impassioned realisms"[9] of Ibsen and Zola served only to

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[6] "The Stone and the Elixir", The Bookman, VII (October, 1894), 20-21. Cf. Yeats's comments on Synge, E & I., pp. 308-309:

> . . . the strength that made him delight in setting the hard virtues by the soft, the bitter by the sweet, salt by mercury, the stone by the elixir, gave him a hunger for harsh facts, for ugly surprising things, for all that defies our hope. In The Passing of the Sidhe he is repelled by the contemplation of a beauty too far from life to appease his mood; and in his own work, benign images, ever present to his soul, must have beside them malignant reality, and the greater the brightness, the greater must the darkness be.

[7] See Literary Ideals in Ireland, pp. 17-20, and 31.

[8] Yeats dismissed Pinero and Jones as would-be realists. See The Bookman (April, 1894), p. 15; also Letters to the New Island, p. 213. He had no serious interest in Shaw until after 1900; and he had mixed feelings towards Wilde. See Letters, p. 170, United Ireland (September 26, 1901), p. 5, and W. B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore: Their Correspondence, pp. 8-9.

[9] W. B. Yeats, "A Symbolic Drama in Paris", The Bookman, IV (April, 1894), 15.

convince Yeats that dramatization of modern social life was imcompatible with his ideal of poetic drama. On the other hand, Dr. Todhunter, an Irish dramatist, had performed a real service to literature by attempting to re-unite poetry and drama.[10] But Todhunter's success was only moderate, and Yeats, writing for the Providence Sunday Journal, February 10, 1889, complained that Helena in Troas was "essentially an art product, the appeal of a scholar to the scholarly".[11] In the Boston Pilot, a year later, he implied that both Helena in Troas and A Sicilian Idyll were too cosmopolitan and imitative.[12]

Yeats made his ideal of poetic drama more explicit in a review of The Poison Flower, in the Providence Sunday Journal, July 26, 1891. Drama, he said, should be elevating in the manner of Elizabethan drama; and he cited as an example Chapman's plays in which he found pages of pure poetry, speeches that had "no dramatic justification of any kind except their beauty".[13] This emphasis on poetic expression did not mean that Yeats was denouncing intense passions and violent, heroic actions. Elizabethan drama was supreme because it included "all the gamut of unhappy love from the deep bass

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[10] Letters to the New Island, p. 106. The article, entitled "Ireland's Heroic Age", first appeared in the Boston Pilot, May 17, 1890.

[11] Letters to the New Island, p. 175.

[12] Ibid., p. 106.

[13] Ibid., p. 214.

notes of realism to the highest and most intense cry of lyric passion".[14]

Yeats was generally critical of drama which lacked "the crowning glory of great plays, that continual revery about destiny that is, as it were, the perfect raiment of beautiful emotions".[15] But although he considered Maeterlinck's Aglavaine et Selysette inferior to the great Elizabethan plays, such expressions as "continual revery" and "beautiful emotions" suggest an Aesthetic-Symbolist influence, and for a few years Yeats tended to ignore the tragic dilemmas and intense passions which are the very essence of tragic art and to concentrate on what he believed to be the mystical and ritualistic aspects of European drama. This is evident in the tone and content of a review of Axel written in 1894. Yeats praised the play for its elevated prose, its symbolical characters, and its allegorical events.[16]

Although Yeats proclaimed Axel to be a "symbolical drama", he assigned precise 'meaning' to the Commander, to Janus, to the nun's veil, and to the lovers. He ended his summary of the plot, strangely enough, on an overtly didactic note:

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[14] Ibid., p. 216.

[15] W. B. Yeats, "Aglavaine and Selysette", The Bookman, XII (September, 1897), 155.

[16] "A Symbolical Drama in Paris", The Bookman, VI (April, 1894), 15.

> The lovers resolve to die. They drink poison, and so complete the fourfold renunciation -- of the cloister, of the active life of the world, of the labouring life of the intellect, of the passionate life of love. The infinite is alone worth attaining, and the infinite is the possession of the dead. Such appears to be the moral.[17]

One questions Yeats's interpretation, for it seems that Axel is more concerned with keeping the passionate movement inviolate than with reaching after the infinite. As was the case in his Blake studies, Yeats was commending a work of art for 'mystical' rather than aesthetic reasons. Some thirty years later he confessed embarrassment at his early "revivalist thoughts" about Axel, and stated that the play had impressed him not because it was a masterpiece, but because of its religious and ritualistic aspects.[18] Certainly the concept of suggestive and indefinable symbolism which Yeats so often mentioned derived less from de l'Isle-Adam than from, say, Maeterlinck, with whose plays Yeats was already acquainted.[19]

When, in 1897, Yeats wrote fairly enthusiastic reviews of Le Trésor des humbles and Aglavaine et Selysette,[20] he was eager to proclaim Maeterlinck as the champion of a

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[17] Ibid.

[18] W. B. Yeats, Preface to Axel, trans. H. P. R. Finberg (London, 1925), pp. 9, and 7.

[19] Op. cit., p. 15. See also Letters, p. 255. Yeats's theory of symbolism is discussed in Chapter VIII above.

[20] The Bookman XII (July, 1897), 94, and XII (September, 1897), 155. Two years earlier he had been less enthusiastic, and had complained of Maeterlinck's tendency to touch "the nerves alone". Letters, p. 255.

spiritual reality. The subject-matter of Maeterlinck's "static theatre" was indeed the spiritual life of his characters, a life which was incompatible with the violent passions and actions of physical life.[21] Moreover, Maeterlinck advocated the use of melancholy moods and vague, seemingly useless dialogue "for it is therein that the essence lies".[22] Yeats seems to have allowed Maeterlinck's ideas to 'colour' his interpretation of Axel. Axel, Yeats claimed, was "the first great work of a new romantic movement . . . . which never mentions an external thing except to express a state of the soul".[23] In his attempt to promote mysticism as subject-matter and symbolism as technique, Yeats ignored the passion, the abstractions, and the duel -- all important components of Axel.

There is no doubt that Yeats found in Maeterlinck support for his own bias towards incorporating lyricism, ritual, and mysticism into drama. "My own theory of poetical or legendary drama is that it should have no realistic, or elaborate, but only a symbolic and decorative setting,"[24]

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[21] Maurice Maeterlinck, The Treasure of the Humble, trans. Alfred Sutro (New York, 1911), p. 106. Yeats reviewed Sutro's translation. See The Bookman XII (July, 1897), 94.

[22] The Treasure of the Humble, p. 111.

[23] "Aglavaine and Selysette", The Bookman, XII (September, 1897), 155.

[24] Letters, p. 280.

Yeats informed Fiona MacLeod (William Sharp), in 1897. And The Shadowy Waters, revised that same year, was described by Yeats as a "magical and mystical" work in which he sought to create "a kind of grave ecstasy".[25]

Maeterlinck's influence on Yeats is especially evident in a review of Robert Bridges's play The Return of Ulysses.[26] Yeats began the review with a quotation from Maeterlinck which epitomized the "static theatre", and then evaluated Bridges in relation to it. Besides drawing heavily on Maeterlinck's terminology, the essay indicates the extent to which Yeats would sometimes go to accommodate a prejudice. For example, while Yeats was correct in stating that the play lacked the range of emotion and characterization of a Shakespearean drama, he was clearly incorrect in saying that Bridges had purified and subdued all passion "into lyrical and meditative ecstasies".[27] Moreover, he ignored Bridges's characteristic concern for plot and diction: the very things he had condemned in Todhunter's Helena in Troas as "the appeal of a scholar to the scholarly". Finally, Yeats's straining to fit a particular theory to a play he admired is evident in his description of Bridges's symbolism as "mysterious and

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[25] Ibid.

[26] E & I., pp. 198-202. The essay first appeared, in less concise form and entitled "Mr. Robert Bridges", in The Bookman, XII (June, 1897), 63-65.

[27] E & I., p. 201.

inscrutable" and of the dialogue as suggesting "delicate silence" and "low murmurs".[28]

Perhaps only three things need to be said about Yeats's early pronouncements on drama. First, his reviews show the extent to which he would go in his fight against realistic art. Second, his comments anticipate "The Theatre" (1899), his first manifesto on drama.[29] Third, his interest in ritualistic drama to some extent anticipates his later interest in Noh drama. Otherwise, Yeats's views during this period were so lyrically biased as to be of little value to drama at all.[30]

The Irish Literary Theatre was founded in May, 1899. Yeats's subsequent experience with it and its successor, the Abbey Theatre, brought him up against the harsh realities of Irish life and helped him to develop a more viable theory of drama than he had hitherto held. The first important statement of his aims as a dramatist appeared in "The Theatre" that same spring. The Theatre would produce plays which would be "for the most part remote, spiritual, and ideal",[31]

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[28] Ibid., p. 202.

[29] E & I., pp. 165-70. The essay was first published in the Dome, April, 1899; it was reprinted in Beltaine the following month.

[30] Yeats gave final expression to his early views on drama in "At Stratford-on-Avon" (1901). Despite some valid comments, that essay, too, was marred by extreme lyricism. See Chapter V above.

[31] E & I., p. 166.

and in which beautiful speech would not be made incongruous by naturalistic scenery. Yeats argued that poetry would

> . . . seem out of place in many of its highest moments upon a stage where the superficial appearances of nature are so closely copied; for poetry is founded upon convention, and becomes incredible the moment painting or gesture reminds us that people do not speak verse when they meet upon the highway.[32]

Yeats did not want the Theatre to be 'popular' in any vulgar sense. "We must make a theatre for ourselves and our friends, and for a few simple people who understand from sheer simplicity what we understand from scholarship and thought."[33] Urban living and the plays of commerce had led people "to live upon the surface of life", but, by beginning with a select audience, a dramatist might reawaken the "imagination, which is the voice of what is eternal in man".[34] Such a reawakening would occur only if poetical language and "grave and decorative gestures" returned to the stage. "The theatre began in ritual, and it cannot come to its greatness again without recalling words to their ancient sovereignty."[35]

"The Theatre" presented, as a direct statement of aims, ideas which were already implicit in Yeats's early drama criticism. Yet within a year or two Yeats was moving towards

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[32] Ibid., pp. 169-70.

[33] Ibid., p. 166.

[34] Ibid., pp. 166-67.

[35] Ibid., p. 170.

his new interest: folk-mythology and heroic legend would henceforth be his subject-matter. In a letter to Robert Bridges, July 20, 1901, Yeats wrote enthusiastically that:

> The old Irish poets wove life into life, thereby giving to the wildest and strangest romance the solidity and vitality [of] the Comédie Humaine, and all this romance was knitted into the scenery of the country.[36]

And in Samhain, the Theatre's official publication, Yeats wrote that same year:

> . . . I want to go down again to primary ideas. I want to put old stories into verse . . . . I hope to get our Heroic Age into verse . . . .[37]

Finally, Cathleen ni Houlihan, a prose play performed on April 2, 1902, was certainly not the kind of static drama that Yeats had advocated during the Nineties.

Critics have, no doubt, been correct in pointing out Nietzsche's influence on Yeats.[38] That 'influence', I believe, was by way of articulation and authority rather than original ideas. I believe that Yeats's dramatic principles grew out of his love for poetry and heroics, and out of his defiance of Middle-Class values and realistic art. That defiance was especially intense during the first decades of this century when Yeats found himself defending his own work and that of

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[36] Letters, p. 354.

[37] Expl., pp. 77-78.

[38] See especially Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats (New York, 1964), pp. 91-98.

Synge against a hostile and prejudiced Irish public. Contact with Lady Gregory had helped Yeats out of the twilight; but it was his association with Synge,[39] and his own increasing experience in the Theatre, which did most to toughen Yeats's poetic.

Having renounced the twilight, Yeats was determined to create a theatre which would unite the written and oral traditions, and which would exclude the social drama and journalistic language of the Middle Class. Yeats wrote in Samhain: 1902:

> Our movement is a return to the people . . . and the drama of society would but magnify a condition of life which the countryman and the artisan could but copy to their hurt. The play that is to give them a quite natural pleasure should tell them either of their own life, or of that life of poetry where every man can see his own image, because there alone does human nature escape from arbitrary conditions.[40]

The criteria here are at least as much moral as they are aesthetic; or, since Yeats himself never accepted this distinction in great art, they may best be described as life-enhancing.

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[39] Cf. Yeats's remark in a diary kept in 1909 and included in Auto., pp. 493-94: "When I was twenty-five or twenty-six I planned a Légende des Siècles of Ireland that was to set out with my Wanderings of Oisin, and show something of every century. Lionel Johnson's work and, later, Lady Gregory's, carried on the dream in a different form; and I did not see, until Synge began to write, that we must renounce the deliberate creation of a kind of Holy City in the imagination, and express the individual."

[40] Expl., p. 96.

Which "condition of life" should the artist magnify, and by what means? These questions entailed choice and responsibility, and were central to Yeats's poetic. They were implicit in his first review, and explicit in his last letters. In 1902, he was content to couch his ideal of life-enhancement in thinly veiled references to myth and Mask: ". . . that life of poetry where every man can see his own image." This was merely a different expression of a Yeatsian constant: namely, that in instinct and imagination lie the only escape from the arbitrary and dehumanizing conditions imposed upon the individual by social realism and institutional morality.

By 1901, Yeats was satisfied that he and his associates had succeeded in turning "a great deal of Irish imagination towards the stage".[41] The Theatre had not, however, been very successful in finding and staging Gaelic plays; and Irish drama was generally an emulation of contemporary British drama.[42] In achieving "a return to the people", the Theatre was at best a qualified success; and in 1903, Yeats published a four-point manifesto significantly entitled "The Reform of the Theatre". In a letter to John Quinn that same year, Yeats promised criticism that would lead "straight to action, straight

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[41] Ibid., p. 74.

[42] Ibid., p. 78.

to some sort of craft".[43] "The Reform of the Theatre" makes good that pledge, for it is essentially Yeats as stage-manager who speaks.

The importance of subject-matter and emotional intensity is implicit in Yeats's assertion that the theatre should be "a place of intellectual excitement" and liberation.[44] The remaining three points deal mainly with drama as 'craft': speech must be made the supreme component of drama; acting must be simplified so as not to distract attention from dramatic (that is 'poetic') expression; scenery and costume must likewise be simplified.[45] Yeats's opposition to the 'utility' of literature and his advocacy of poetic speech were scarcely novel for him. However, his demand that art should be "masculine and intellectual, in its sound as in its form",[46] indicates an advance over the young man who had

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[43] Letters, p. 403.

[44] "The Reform of the Theatre", Expl., p. 107. The first appeared in the United Irishman (April, 1903); it was expanded for Samhain: 1903.

[45] Expl., pp. 108-110. Yeats had once wished to rehearse a drama company in barrels, "that they might forget gesture and have their minds free to think of speech for a while". See ibid., p. 86. His obsession with speech did not delude him into thinking that drama could be made from craft alone. In an interview with Ashton Stevens, Yeats stated epigrammatically: "Stage-craft is always changing: drama is eternal." San Francisco Examiner, January 31, 1904, p. 43.

[46] Samhain: 1903, Expl., p. 109. This statement did not appear in the United Irishman version.

hitherto desired 'mystical' experiences evoked by vague symbolism.

"First Principles" (Samhain: 1904), marked a further advance in Yeats's dramatic theory and constituted one of his most important statements on art. Aroused by harsh criticism of Synge's The Shadow of the Glen, and, no doubt, by memories of the earlier attacks on The Countess Cathleen, Yeats refuted the charge that Synge's characters were not typically Irish. Yeats argued that in great art, far from being a personification of averages and opinions, a character is "typical" when he represents "something which exists in all men because the writer has found it in his own mind".[47] Hence, Yeats wrote of Richard II: "He is typical not because he ever existed, but because he has made us know of something in our own minds we had never known of had he never been imagined."[48]

Yeats now defined drama as "a moment of intense life".[49] He continued:

> An action is taken out of all other actions; it is reduced to its simplest form, or at any rate to as simple a form as it can be brought to without our losing the sense of its place in the world. The characters that are involved in it are freed from everything that is not a part of that action; and whether it is, as in the less important kinds of drama, a mere bodily activity, a hair-breadth escape or the like, or as it is in the more important kinds, an activity of the souls of the characters, it is an energy, an eddy of life

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[47] Expl., p. 144.

[48] Ibid., p. 145.

[49] Ibid., p. 153.

> purified from everything but itself. The dramatist must picture life in action, with an unpreoccupied mind . . . .[50]

Yeats was arguing for a new centre of vitality -- abundant life in the Renaissance sense. "I mean by deep life that men must put into their writing the emotions and experiences that have been most important to themselves."[51] He contended that whereas modern writers troubled themselves with "innumerable considerations of external probability or social utility", the great masters "were content if their inventions had but an emotional and moral consistency, and created out of themselves a fantastic, energetic, extravagant art".[52] He continued:

> Every argument carries us backwards to some religious conception, and in the end the creative energy of men depends upon their believing that they have, within themselves, something immortal and imperishable, and that all else is but as an image in a looking-glass. So long as that belief is not a formal thing, a man will create out of a joyful energy, seeking little for any external test of an impulse that may be sacred, and looking for no foundation outside life itself.[53]

And in another instance that same year he wrote:

> We, who are believers, cannot see reality anywhere but in the soul itself, and seeing it there we cannot do other than rejoice in every energy, whether of gesture, or of action, or of speech,

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[50] Ibid., pp. 153-54.

[51] Ibid., p. 157.

[52] Ibid., p. 150.

[53] Ibid., p. 151.

> coming out of the personality, the soul's image . . . .[54]

The emphasis on "energy", the hints of an instinctual morality, and the eulogizing of "life" all indicate a repudiation of the "static theatre" and a belief in passionate personality as the essential of great drama.

Passion, Yeats now believed, was the subject of all art;

> . . . and a passion can only be contemplated when separated by itself [sic], purified of all but itself, and aroused into a perfect intensity by opposition with some other passion, or it may be with the law, that is the expression of the whole whether of Church or Nation or external nature.[55]

In art, as in life, the centre of interest should be the heroic personality; and literature should "make us understand men no matter how little they conform to our expectations". The criteria by which we judge should not be "'What a philanthropist', 'What a patriot', 'How practical a man', but, as we say of the men of the Renaissance, 'What a nature', 'How much abundant life'".[56] It is according to this scale of values, Yeats maintained, that we absolve a Macbeth, an Anthony, or a Coriolanus. Yeats's awareness that tragedy centres upon passionate dilemmas and upon the hero's intense

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[54] "The Play, the Player, and the Scene" (Samhain: 1904), Expl., p. 170.

[55] "First Principles" (1904), ibid., p. 155.

[56] Ibid., pp. 161-62; see also pp. 154-55.

struggle against all limitations indicates his increasing critical perception and his movement towards a tragic-heroic view of life.

Interest in Renaissance "nature" continued in a series of notes written in 1906, and significantly entitled "Discoveries". In these notes, Yeats exalted passion above all else. Realistic art and the art of "essences" were alike arraigned for deficiency in "personality": the one being vulgar; the other, anaemic. Yeats hated, above all, the play of modern manners. In an important 'note' on the topic, he maintained that modern ethics, with its emphasis on restraint, had practically eliminated the passionate speech upon which drama depends. Consequently, when the crisis comes, the hero is gushing and sentimental. Ibsen, Yeats claimed, realized this and made his characters "a little provincial" so as to make their hackneyed speech more plausible. Such speech may have been appropriate to his characters but it was hardly suited to the climactic moment. The compromise, Yeats maintained, had been detrimental to Ibsen's art.[57]

Yeats's earlier dramatic theory and practice had excluded the essentials of tragedy: moral choice in response

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[57] E & I., pp. 274-75. The absence of exceptional people and of elevated speech, together with Ibsen's disposition to moral and sociological speculation, account for Yeats's refusal to accept Ibsen even though he believed that Ibsen was the most sincere and able of modern dramatists and quite capable of evoking "pity and terror". Expl., p. 166.

to social and personal dilemmas, tragic action, and the ensuing fear and pity aroused in the audience. The series of lyrical states which he admired in Maeterlinck's "static theatre" lacked dramatic tension. His praise, in "At Stratford-on-Avon", of "untroubled sympathy for men as they are, as apart from all they do and seem" emphasized the pathetic rather than the tragic; and the magic harp in The Shadowy Waters put Forgael and Dectora beyond the precincts of a tragic existence.

After the turn of the century, Yeats worked towards a more viable theory of tragedy. That theory had its germ in a long passage from "Estrangement", a series of excerpts from a diary kept in 1909.

> Tragedy is passion alone, and rejecting character, it gets form from motives, from the wandering of passion; while comedy is the clash of character. Eliminate character from comedy and you get farce. Farce is bound together by incident alone. In practice most works are mixed: Shakespeare being tragi-comedy. Comedy is joyous because all assumption of a part, of a personal mask, whether of the individualized face of comedy or of the grotesque face of farce, is a display of energy, and all energy is joyous. A poet creates tragedy from his own soul, that soul which is alike in all men. It has not joy, as we understand that word, but ecstasy, which is from the contemplation of things vaster than the individual and imperfectly seen, perhaps, by all those that still live. The masks of tragedy contain neither character nor personal energy. They are allied to decoration and to the abstract figures of Egyptian temples. Before the mind can look out of their eyes the active will perishes, hence their sorrowful calm. Joy is of the will which labours, which overcomes obstacles, which knows triumph. The soul knows its changes of state alone, and I think the motives of tragedy are not related to action but to chances of state.

> I feel this but do not see clearly, for I am hunting truth into its thicket . . . .[58]

The above passage is inadequate as a distinction between tragedy and comedy, and it is incomplete as a theory of tragedy. Moreover, the emphasis which Yeats placed on personality and passion on the one hand, and on spiritual states and stasis on the other, seems responsible for the confusion and incoherence which inform his statement. It is apparent, however, that Yeats had in mind the paradox of tragic man -- predestined and free -- and the calm or "reverie" which follows the crisis. Moreover, despite the emphasis which Yeats placed on subjectivity, the implications are clearly universal. "A poet creates tragedy from his own soul, that soul which is alike in all men."

When, in the passage from "Estrangement", Yeats had insisted on the rejection of "character" from drama he was promoting tragedy over comedy. By "character" he meant individual differences, the expression of personal idiosyncrasies and not an individual expression of the essential passions which unite all men. Yeats was more lucid in "The Tragic Theatre" (1910) where he announced that he had discovered "that tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of the dykes that separate man from man, and that it is upon these dykes comedy keeps house".[59] He then quoted

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[58] Auto., pp. 470-71.

[59] E & I., p. 241.

Congreve's definition of "humour" as a "'singular and unavoidable way of doing anything peculiar to one man only, by which his speech and actions are distinguished from all other men'".[60] Yeats identified "humour" with "character" as "the foundation of comedy".[61] He wrote to his father that same year:

> . . . I look upon character and personality as different things or perhaps different forms of the same thing. Juliet has personality, her Nurse has character. I look upon personality as the individual form of our passions . . . . Character belongs I think to Comedy . . . .
>
> I probably get the distinction from the stage, where we say a man is a 'character actor' meaning that he builds up a part out of observation, or we say that he is 'an emotional actor' meaning that he builds it up out of himself, and in this last case -- we always add, if he is not commonplace -- that he has personality. Of course Shakespeare has both because he is always a tragic comedian.[62]

Associated with "character" are observation, intellect, emulation and wit; associated with "personality" are instinct, passion, defiance and imagination.

The great plays of Shakespeare, Racine, Corneille, and those of ancient Greece all invalidated the 'modern' critical beliefs that drama could be had only from "the contest of character with character" and that poetry encumbered

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[60] Ibid. See Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, ed. J. E. Spingarn (Oxford, 1909), III [1685-1700], 248.

[61] E & I., p. 241.

[62] Letters, pp. 548-49.

dramatic action.[63] Yeats pointed out that in Deirdre of the Sorrows it was not "character" and action but passion and memorable speech which lifted the audience into "that tragic ecstasy which is the best that art -- perhaps that life -- can give".[64] He argued that in such intense moments the audience is "carried beyond time and persons to where passion, living through its thousand purgatorial years . . . becomes wisdom".[65] Yeats's thesis was that we recognize in comic scenes the idiosyncrasies of others, whereas at the apex of the hero's passion we are confronted with "personality" -- a personal expression of an intense and universal passion. Consequently, at the tragic climax we do not say "'How well that man is realized! I should know him were I to meet him in the street,' for it is always ourselves that we see upon the stage . . . ."[66]

Hostility towards realistic drama and a profoundly lyrical bent seem to have prevented Yeats from acknowledging that poetic drama might have social significance, and that any drama is more likely to succeed if its protagonist battles

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63 "The Tragic Theatre", E & I., pp. 239-40.

64 Ibid., p. 239.

65 Ibid. Cf. Yeats's condemnation of the 'dated' writers of Phase 21, which included Shaw, Wells, and George Moore: "Writers of the phase are great public men and they exist after death as historical monuments, for they are without meaning apart from time and circumstance." A Vision (1937), p. 157.

66 E & I., pp. 240-41.

against external circumstance as well as against self.[67] Furthermore, the fact that the chief emphasis is not placed on the idiosyncrasies of, say, Hamlet, does not prove that either Shakespeare or the spectators saw him as personified passion, or that Hamlet was oblivious of the real world. To exclude characterization and circumstance, would be to reduce drama to little more than dramatic monologue. Luckily, Yeats's best plays run counter to his theory which advocated the elimination of "character" and a minimizing of the human antagonist.

However, certain tenets of "The Tragic Theatre" are sound: that poetry need not encumber dramatic action; and that there are two kinds of art -- "an art of the flood" which delights in exaltation, and realistic art which stresses "character" and circumstance. Finally, comedy generally divides people, and tragedy unites them. Yeats was clearly on the side of tragic art.

> Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding, moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance. The persons upon the stage, let us say, greaten till they are humanity itself.[68]

Yeats's reference to "reverie" and "trance" did not mean that he had reverted to his earlier 'mysticism'. He was no longer

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[67] When Yeats discussed his doctrine of the Mask, in 1917, his recognition of dual warfare in the tragic figure was quite explicit.

[68] E & I., p. 245.

advocating the elimination of intense and violent passions from drama as he had done in, say, "The Return of Ulysses". Passion, Yeats now believed, was necessary for inducing "reverie". And, as the above statement makes clear, no matter how intense the contemplation might be, the vision was a humanistic one.

The Theatre's audience, largely divorced from folk-traditions, wanted realistic drama. In this sense the Theatre had failed Yeats. He realized this, and his disillusion with Ireland, recorded in "Estrangement", was immense. Furthermore, Synge's death in 1909 deprived Yeats of his strongest ally. Refusing to give up his aristocratic values, Yeats turned, during the next decade, to Noh drama.

"Certain Noble Plays of Japan" (1916) was a manifesto for a 'new' dramatic form, and Yeats proclaimed it as such.

> . . . with the help of Japanese plays 'translated by Ernest Fenollosa and finished by Ezra Pound,' I have invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, and having no need of mob or Press to pay its way -- an aristocratic form.[69]

He then elaborated:

> All imaginative art remains at a distance and this distance, once chosen, must be firmly held against a pushing world. Verse, ritual, music, and dance in association with action require that gesture, costume, facial expression, stage arrangement must help in keeping the door . . . . the arts which interest me, while seeming to separate from the world and us a group of figures, images,

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[69] E & I., p. 221.

> symbols, enable us to pass for a few moments into a deep of the mind that had hitherto been too subtle for our habitation. As a deep of the mind can only be approached through what is most human, most delicate, we should distrust bodily distance, mechanism, and loud noise.[70]

In order to withstand the "pushing world", Yeats would use a chorus of three musicians to establish the setting, and the climax would be "in pantomimic dance".[71] Moreover, the actors would wear masks because, as Yeats put it, "the face seems the nobler for lacking curiosity, alert attention, all that we sum up under the famous word of the realists, 'vitality'".[72] Chorus, symbolic dance, and mask, then, were devices by which he hoped to minimize scenery, action, and "character".

Yeats had hoped to write two plays in the Noh manner to "complete a dramatic celebration of the life of Cuchulain planned long ago" and then turn to other things.[73] But his aversion for social realism and his distrust of 'popular' taste were intense:

> . . . I seek, not a theatre but the theatre's anti-self, an art that can appease all within us that becomes uneasy as the curtain falls and

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[70] Ibid., pp. 224-25.

[71] Ibid., p. 221.

[72] Ibid., p. 226.

[73] Ibid., pp. 221-22.

the house breaks into applause.[74]

Yeats, in fact, wrote four such plays[75] during the period 1916-1921, and traces of the Noh can be found in The Words upon the Window-pane (1934).

Anthony Thwaite emphasizes the aristocratic nature of Noh drama, but he hastens to add that the "relative success" of Yeats's dance-plays resulted from the fact that "Yeats grasped only some of the Noh elements with his intellect, leaving room for his own imaginative ideas to range freely; he knew no Japanese at all; his ignorance made him free".[76] Pronoti Baksi concurs with Thwaite:

> It is clear that Yeats's genius was sympathetic to the Noh before he encountered it. In the first flush of enthusiasm he imitated it. Then he freely adapted it to his own purposes, now leaving it for other forms as in The Herne's Egg, now combining it with other forms as in The Words Upon the Window-Pane.[77]

Yasuko Stucki, while quite cognizant of the aristocratic patronage under which the Noh developed, places greater

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[74] "A People's Theatre", Expl., p. 257. Cf. also: "I want to create for myself an unpopular theatre and an audience like a secret society where admission is by favour and never to many." Ibid., p. 254. "A People's Theatre" was published as an Open Letter to Lady Gregory, in the Irish Statesman, November 29, and December 6, 1919.

[75] At the Hawk's Well, The Only Jealousy of Emer, The Dreaming of the Bones, and Calvary.

[76] "Yeats and the Noh", The Twentieth Century, CLXII (September, 1957), 236.

[77] "The Noh and the Yeatsian Synthesis", A Review of English Literature, VI, No. 3 (July, 1965), 43.

emphasis on the native tradition in which the Noh was rooted. In a comprehensive essay[78] she discusses certain principles upon which Noh drama is based. First, there are two orders of reality, visible and invisible, resulting from two kinds of consciousness, the individual mind and the absolute Mind. The former sees the illusory, the latter sees the ultimate reality in the illusory. Second, the artist has a special relation to the ultimate reality and his task is to catch the light or vision that lies beyond the illusory. Third, the physical world is symbolic of the Absolute. Fourth, the artist, through his imagination and discipline, unites the two realms and provides his public with spiritual insight into, and thereby a "psychic unity with, the ultimate reality". Fifth, unity and suggestiveness are "the two principal conditions" by which the Noh evokes in its audience an awareness of the ultimate reality.

Yeats's practice shows that either he did not fully understand Noh drama or that he deliberately avoided too close an imitation of it. For example, poetry and dance and the emotions which they evoke and not ideas (much less occult ideas) comprise the activity by which Yūgen (ideal or metaphysical beauty) is experienced in Noh drama.[79] For Yeats,

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[78] "Yeats's Drama and the Nō: A Comparative Study in Dramatic Theories", Modern Drama, IX (May, 1966), 101-122.

[79] Ibid., p. 104. See also Arthur Waley, The Nō Plays of Japan (London, 1921), Introduction, pp. 21-22.

however, language had an intellectual as well as an emotional function, and he wove ideas, often occult ideas, into the fabric of his dance-plays. This marriage of feeling and thought was, of course, central to his theory of symbolism, and to his belief that truly philosophical poetry expressed "the emotions of a soul dwelling in the presence of certain ideas".[80] Whereas the Noh dramatist enjoyed a receptive audience and used traditional materials to express emotion in a "publicly understood context",[81] Yeats, for his 'select' audience, invested traditional materials with private meanings and manipulated traditional forms to express personal emotions. Hence, the difficulty of, say, The Only Jealousy of Emer which, on the emotional level, is a love story, while philosophically it seems to depict man at variance with a deterministic and impersonal cosmic order.

There are other differences between Noh drama and Yeats's adaptation of it, not the least of which is the fact that the former takes its central image from Nature and relates primarily to some action in this world,[82] whereas in Yeats's dance-plays the central image relates chiefly to the super-

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[80] W. B. Yeats, "A New Poet", The Bookman, VI (August, 1894), 148.

[81] Yasuko Stucki, op. cit., p. 108.

[82] Ibid., p. 116. Donald Richie also places great emphasis upon the natural, even primitive, aspects of Noh drama. "Notes on the Noh", The Hudson Review, XVIII, (1965), 70-80.

natural.

Underlying these aesthetic differences was an important cultural difference between Yeats's audience and the Noh audience. Discussing the aesthetic symbol in Noh drama, Yasuko Stucki writes:

> Between a symbol and what it symbolizes there must exist an intrinsic relation which can be intuited or imagined in the nature of a cultural experience. The primary requirement of such an aesthetic symbol must be its cultural validity for a large number of people within an ethnic society . . . . This primary requirement naturally calls for a common area of understanding and feeling which, in the case of the No, includes a native aesthetic sensibility towards external life, particularly Nature, from which the symbolic language is derived. Inseparable from this sensibility is a public ideal of beauty which becomes the object of evocation. These are some of the essential conditions which have enabled the No to exist as a symbolic drama. They imply that a symbol can not possess intrinsic power unless deeply rooted in the common consciousness of a society.[83]

"A native aesthetic sensibility" which was inseparable from "a public ideal of beauty" was precisely what Yeats felt that Ireland lacked.

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[83] Modern Drama, IX (May, 1966), 121. Cf. Yeats's sense of alienation as it is revealed in the following note (Var. Plays, p. 417) which he appended to At the Hawk's Well:

> Shakespeare's art was public, now resounding and declamatory, now lyrical and subtle, but always public, because poetry was a part of the general life of a people who had been trained by the Church to listen to difficult words and who sang, instead of the songs of the music-halls, many songs that are still beautiful. A man who had sung 'Barbara Allan' in his own house would not, as I have heard the gallery of the Lyceum Theatre, receive the love speeches of Juliet with an ironical chirruping. We must recognize the change as the painters did when, finding no longer palaces and churches to decorate,

Despite a despairing sense of alienation from the Irish public, Yeats still believed that literature could create a national consciousness. He hoped that there was a place even for his aristocratic art form:

> Perhaps some day a play in the form I am adapting for European purposes may excite once more, whether in Gaelic or in English, under the slope of Slieve-na-mon or Croagh Patrick, ancient memories . . . .[84]

Even as the rest of Europe began to realize the success of the Abbey Theatre and the existence of Irish drama, Yeats regarded the Irish Dramatic Movement as "a discouragement and a defeat".[85] In an Open Letter to Lady Gregory, in 1919, he wrote: "You and I and Synge, not understanding the clock, set out to bring again the theatre of Shakespeare or rather perhaps of Sophocles."[86] Disillusioned and despairing, he asked:

> When you and Synge find such an uneasy footing, what shall I do there who have never observed anything, or listened with an attentive ear, but value all I have seen or heard because of the emotions they

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> they made frame pictures to hang upon a wall. Whatever we lose in mass and in power we should recover in elegance and in subtlety. Our lyrical and our narrative poetry alike have used their freedom and have approached nearer, as Pater said all the arts would if they were able, to 'the condition of music'; and if our modern poetical drama has failed, it is mainly because, always dominated by the example of Shakespeare, it would restore an irrevocable past.

[84] "Certain Noble Plays of Japan", E & I., p. 236.

[85] "A People's Theatre", Expl., p. 250.

[86] Ibid., p. 252.

> call up or because of something they remind me of that exists, as I believe, beyond the world?[87]

But heroism and mythology and the spirituality which these embodied Yeats was determined to have;[88] and so he turned his back upon the Theatre he had worked so hard to establish, and sought an "unpopular theatre" where admission would be "by favour and never to many". Noh drama, or some adaptation of it, appealed to him because the more elaborate the art-form "the more is the writer constrained to symbolize rather than to represent life".[89]

Noh drama offered Yeats a refuge from the "pushing world", but he could hardly have failed to see that it would limit his handling of Irish subject-matter and of the violent passions of his heroes. It is erroneous, I believe, to regard Yeats's interest in the Noh as other than a parallel in drama to his earlier flirtation with Aestheticism. His interest in each of these 'aesthetics' was precipitated by his reaction to realism and by a natural bent for lyricism and ritual. In the final analysis, the somewhat static nature of Yeats's dance-plays may derive as much from

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[87] Ibid., p. 254.

[88] Peter Ure points out that Yeats's use of Irish mythology made elimination of character impossible and that this made the dance-plays "more human and less remote and aristocratic than the theory demanded". Yeats, Writers and Critics Series, p. 92.

[89] Var. Plays, p. 1295.

Maeterlinck as from Japanese drama.

Yeats's drama criticism -- the exposition and defence of his own ideas -- illuminates the defects of the theatre of his time and the difficulties of restoring poetic drama to the modern stage.[90] His thoughts on drama and his work with the Abbey Theatre had a salutary effect on his own art. They helped to make his style more masculine and his outlook on life more balanced. But his refusal to admit social dilemmas into his plots emphasizes a profound lyrical bias that weakened his dramas even as his dramatic interests strengthened his lyrics.

"A General Introduction for my Work", Yeats's last important essay, brought together many of his basic tenets of art; but Aestheticism and Noh drama were not mentioned. They did not need to be. Before he had ever met them as art 'schools' he had promoted certain qualities which he later believed they embodied. And their peculiar techniques were of only passing interest to him. Nor did he, in that vigorous essay, make any distinction between drama and lyric. His basic concept of literature applied to both genres. Each was a means of life-enhancement; each was related to man, to his

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[90] Critics have commended Yeats's efforts in restoring poetic drama. See, for example, T. S. Eliot's comments in "The Need for Poetic Drama", The Listener, XVI (November 25, 1936), 994, and in On Poetry and Poets (London, 1957), p. 261. See also Una Ellis-Fermor, The Irish Dramatic Movement (London, 1939), p. 61.

heroic spirit, and to "his blind struggle in the network of the stars".[91]

[91] "Anima Hominis", Essays (1924), p. 489.

PART THREE: LIFE AS REFERENT

How but in custom and in ceremony
Are innocence and beauty born?
W. B. Yeats

Out of cavern comes a voice,
And all it knows is that one word 'Rejoice!'
W. B. Yeats

CHAPTER XI

POLITICS AND THE ARISTOCRATIC IDEAL

> In life courtesy and self-possession, and in the arts style . . . .
>
> W. B. Yeats

> No art can conquer the people alone -- the people are conquered by an ideal of life upheld by authority.
>
> W. B. Yeats

Yeats's nationalism dates from his first acquaintance with John O'Leary, the old Fenian leader, in 1885. Intensified by the death of Parnell in 1891, this early patriotism reached its climax in the staging of Cathleen ni Houlihan in 1902, when Maud Gonne's politics rather than O'Leary's were most manifest.

O'Leary epitomized for Yeats the "Romantic Ireland" whose passing is lamented in "September 1913". He was the last Irishman

> . . . to speak an understanding of life and Nationality, built up by the generation of Grattan, which read Homer and Virgil, and by the generation of Davis, which had been pierced through by the idealism of Mazzini, and of the European revolutionists of the mid-century.[1]

His dignity and integrity commanded Yeats's respect and admiration: "'There are things a man must not do to save a

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[1] "Poetry and Tradition", E & I., p. 246.

nation,'" O'Leary maintained; and "'There was never cause so bad that it has not been defended by good men for what seemed to them good reasons.'"[2] This kind of self-possession and tolerance bespoke the aristocratic tradition, and O'Leary's heroic suffering[3] proved that his patriotism was genuine. Finally, it was O'Leary who introduced Yeats to heroic legends as the basis for a national literature.

When Parnell died Yeats was caught up in a new excitement -- political propaganda. He wrote the rather trite "Mourn and then Onward", accompanied Maud Gonne on political tours, and led the literary side of the movement for Irish independence. This period ended with the explosive Cathleen ni Houlihan: it was as close as he ever came to being 'popular' in the vulgar sense, and his intolerance indicated a marked departure from what he later believed was a part of the aristocratic tradition.

> . . . I turned from Goldsmith and from Burke because they had come to seem a part of the English system, from Swift because I acknowledged, being a romantic, no verse between Cowley and Smart's Song to David, no prose between Sir Thomas Browne and the Conversations of Landor.[4]

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[2] Both slogans are quoted by Yeats, ibid., p. 247.

[3] O'Leary, one of the Triumvirate of the Fenian Movement, was arrested in 1865 and sentenced to twenty years in prison. He was released after serving five years of his sentence, on condition that he did not return to his native land for fifteen years. He spent his exile in Paris.

[4] Introduction to The Words upon the Window-pane (1931), Expl., p. 344.

Then, in 1903, Maud Gonne married Major John MacBride, and Yeats retired from 'popular' political activity.

During the next decade Yeats's association with Coole Park, his contempt for John MacBride, the controversy over The Playboy of the Western World, and pride in his Protestant ancestry all helped to intensify his disillusion with the Irish populace. Literary and political interests were inseparable in Yeats's concept of nationalism; but, as Donald Pearce points out, this did not mean that Yeats was a mere propagantist:

> Yeats's nationalism was a lifelong passion; and no revolutionary desired Irish freedom more fervently than he, or worked more persistently to help bring it about. But he knew what political revolutionaries are less apt than poets to know or understand -- that unity without culture is valueless, or even vicious. The problem, therefore, was to effect value-changes in the Irish imagination, and to do it before, rather than after, revolutionary changes in her political structure; otherwise Irish freedom might not be worth the having.[5]

Yeats emphatically denounced Irish political partisans as eunuchs jealous of creative power:

> The root of it all is that the political class in Ireland . . . have suffered through the cultivation of hatred as the one energy of their movement, a deprivation which is the intellectual equivalent to a certain surgical operation . . . . They contemplate all creative power as the eunuchs contemplate Don Juan as he passes through Hell

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[5] Donald R. Pearce, ed., The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats (Bloomington, 1960), Introduction, pp. 15-16.

on the white horse.[6]

Political agitation, Yeats felt, caused people to lose their spontaneity in their obsession with abstractions; and their secret awareness and "continual defence" of the unreality of this kind of patriotism made them "bitter and restless". Moreover, by dwelling too long on past wrongs, Irishmen end "by substituting a traditional casuistry for a country".[7] Yeats's growing impatience with 'popular' Irish values can be seen in his attitude to the Middle Class who not only permitted this kind of dissipation, but further debased the heroic and aristocratic traditions by adding "the halfpence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer".[8] He poured out his contempt for the materialism and hypocrisy of modern Ireland in "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.[9]

Then came the Easter Rising (1916) and the execution,

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[6] Auto., p. 486. Yeats had in mind Charles Rickett's painting of Don Juan riding through Hell. The comparison was prompted especially by Arthur Griffith's attack on The Playboy of the Western World. See Letters, p. 525.

[7] "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time", E & I., pp. 313-14.

[8] "September 1913", Collected Poems, p. 120.

[9] Ibid., p. 121.

by the British, of the fifteen[10] political activists involved. The self-sacrifice of these men raised them to the status of heroes, and a "terrible beauty" was born. Yeats associated himself with the Easter Rising, and the event strengthened his faith in heroic Ireland. But he was greatly shaken by the event. On May 11, 1916, he wrote to Lady Gregory:

> I see . . . no reason to believe that the delicate instrument of Justice is being worked with precision in Dublin . . . . If the English Conservative party had made a declaration that they did not intend to rescind the Home Rule Bill there would have been no Rebellion. I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me -- and I am very despondent about the future. At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics.[11]

Two weeks later he confided to John Quinn:

> This Irish business has been a great grief. We have lost the ablest and most fine-natured of our young men. A world seems to have been swept away. I keep going over the past in my mind and wondering if I could have done anything to turn those young men in some other direction.[12]

The clash of opposites spurred Yeats's imagination: sacrifice had made heroes of ordinary men, but might not prolonged sacrifice to abstractions turn a nation's heart to stone?

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[10] A. Norman Jeffares believes that Yeats added Roger Casement, who was executed for treason in 1916, to the number. Hence, the title of one of Yeats's poems, "Sixteen Dead Men". Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, p. 229.

[11] Letters, p. 613.

[12] Ibid., p. 614.

National pride had been promoted through literature, but had it not been carried to excess? And besides, might not England have kept faith? Yeats's complex and intense emotions bore witness to his moral responsibility, and prompted him to immortalize the event in "Easter 1916". Evidence of the same concern for heroic and aristocratic values can be found also in "The Second Coming" and "A Prayer for my Daughter", poems which were written just three years later.

It can hardly be said that Yeats was actively involved in politics during the period 1903-1921. However, on December 11, 1922, he accepted a seat in the Senate of the Irish Free State.[13] Yeats's chief responsibility as a Senator was to advise the government on such cultural matters as education and the arts. His work for the preservation and translation of Irish manuscripts and his work for the design of Irish coinage attest to his ability as a public man. Far more important, however, were the "value-changes" which he sought to effect by his approach to education and to national unity. In the debate on divorce, for example, Yeats pointed out the illogicality of the Catholic majority in the Senate:

If you show that this country, Southern Ireland, is

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[13] Yeats's views at that time were distinctly reactionary. He wrote to Herbert Grierson (Letters, p. 693): "We are preparing here, behind our screen of bombs and smoke, a return to conservative politics as elsewhere in Europe . . . . The return will be painful and perhaps violent, but many educated men talk of it and must soon work for it and perhaps riot for it." See also Letters, p. 690.

> going to be governed by Catholic ideas and by Catholic ideas alone, you will never get the North . . . . You will not get the North if you impose on the minority what the minority consider to be oppressive legislation.[14]

In a Senate debate on the relationship between the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland, Yeats emphasized his life-long principle of image and ideal as the basis of cultural improvement. National unity could be had, he maintained, only "by creating a system of culture which will represent the whole of this country and which will draw the imagination of the young towards it".[15]

The debate on divorce is especially representative of Yeats's attack on the bigotry and religious intolerance that plagued Ireland. It shows his acute impatience with legislation based on theological rather than historical evidence; it shows also an ideal of nationalism based on a heritage of heroic and aristocratic traditions.[16] Meanwhile, in an undelivered speech, published in the Irish Statesman (March 14, 1925), Yeats argued less rhetorically but with admirable lucidity about recognition of minority rights, about illicit sexual relations resulting from indissoluble marriage, about the psychological damage done when "two people who hate one another because of some unforgettable wrong" are obliged

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[14] Senate Speeches, p. 92.

[15] Ibid., p. 87.

[16] See especially Senate Speeches, p. 99.

to live together, and about the harm done to "children brought up in a house of hatred".[17]

Yeats's first concerns regarding education were practical ones: schools should be hygienic, teachers should be well-trained, and the curriculum should be relevant to life.[18] His philosophy of education was based on two principles. The first was that all children should be given a sound education; the second was that "the child itself must be the end in education".[19] Above all, he advocated a system of education which would promote rich and imaginative personal experience, and "intellectual liberty".

> Every child in growing from infancy to maturity should pass in imagination through the history of its own race and through something of the history of the world . . . . Let the child go its own way when maturity comes, but it is our business that it has something of that whole inheritance, and not as a mere thought, an abstract thing . . . but as part of its [the child's] emotional life.[20]

Yeats concluded that it was the responsibility of every citizen, and especially of societies and public figures, to promote the kind of education which he advocated. Only in that way would the future of Ireland be "healthy, vigorous,

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[17] Ibid., Appendix II, pp. 156-160.

[18] See Senate Speeches, pp. 106-111.

[19] Ibid., p.111.

[20] "The Child and the State", Appendix IV, ibid., pp. 173-74. This speech, made to the Irish Literary Society on November 30, 1925, was published in the Irish Statesman, December, 1925.

orderly, and above all, happy".[21]

Yeats retired from the Senate on November 28, 1928. His defence of minority rights, his opposition to Church-dominated politics, his attacks on ignorance and intolerance -- especially evident in the question of censorship --, his promotion of a liberal education, his steadfast belief in the 'educative' image -- all these attest to his sense of civic responsibility. He was not, however, a believer in democracy. In fact, he came to hate it passionately as a political mechanism which could only result in reducing all values to Middle-Class norms and in passing leadership over to the mediocre, even to the incompetent. In his last Senate speech Yeats reiterated his belief:

> I think we should not lose sight of the simple fact that it is more desirable and more important to have able men in this House than to get representative men into this House.[22]

The intensification of these anti-democratic sentiments during the next decade was at least partly responsible for Yeats's flirtation with Fascism.

De Valera was elected president of the Executive Council in March, 1932, and his position was confirmed by a second general election in April of the next year. Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespear two months before the second election:

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[21] Ibid., p. 174.

[22] Ibid., pp. 151-52.

> If I were a young man I would welcome four years of conflict, for it creates unity among the educated classes, and I would force De Valera's Ministers, in all probability, to repudiate the ignorance that has in part put them in power.23

Two weeks later he again confided to Mrs. Shakespear: ". . . you are right in comparing De Valera to Mussolini or Hitler. All three have exactly the same aim so far as I can judge."[24] Yeats had been hasty and uninformed. However, in March he again reported to Mrs. Shakespear:

> I had an hour's interview with De Valera. I had never met him before and I was impressed by his simplicity and honesty though we differed throughout. It was a curious experience, each recognized the other's point of view so completely. I had gone there full of suspicion but my suspicion vanished at once. You must not believe what you read in the English papers.25

Yeats admired De Valera's firmness in dealing with Church interference and in forcing "political thought to face the most fundamental issues".[26] But he disapproved of the government's "panic measures" for suppressing the Blueshirts[27] -- formerly the Army Comrades' Association, a group formed in 1931 for the purpose of defending free public speech against I. R. A. extremists. Yeats was not, however, unequivocally

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[23] Letters, p. 805.

[24] Ibid., p. 806.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., p. 811.

[27] Ibid., pp. 813, and 815.

aligned with this now-pro-Fascist movement; nor was he totally in favour of Fascist theory. In 1933 he admitted being currently involved with others in formulating "a social theory" which could be used to combat Communism in Ireland, and added that what seemed to be emerging was "Fascism modified by religion".[28] And after discussing Fascism with General O'Duffy, the Blueshirt leader, Yeats wrote: "Doubtless I shall hate it (though not so much as I hate Irish democracy) . . . ."[29]

But if Yeats was ambivalent about Fascism, he was also excited by it, believing, as T. R. Henn points out, "that the discipline of fascist theory might impose order upon a disintegrating world".[30] Yeats's excitement is evident in a letter to Mrs. Shakespear, July 13, 1933:

> Politics are growing heroic. De Valera has forced political thought to face the most fundamental issues. A Facist opposition is forming behind the scenes to be ready should some tragic situation develop. I find myself constantly urging the despotic rule of the educated classes as the only end to our troubles . . . . The chance of being shot is raising everybody's spirits enormously. There is some politics for you of which your

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[28] Ibid., p. 808.

[29] Ibid., p. 813. Most critics accept this as a valid explanation of Yeats's interest in Fascism. One notable exception is Conor Cruise O'Brien who argues that one of the "impurities" of Yeats's life was a brief but intense pro-Fascist attraction. "Yeats and Fascism", New Statesman (February 26, 1965), pp. 319-322.

[30] The Lonely Tower (London, 1950), 2nd ed. rev'd., 1965, p. 344.

> newspapers know nothing (I can write it because my letters are not being opened).[31]

Behind the excitement, however, was a genuine concern for law and order and a distrust of the mob. In a later letter to Mrs. Shakespear, Yeats wrote:

> Here is our most recent event. Next door is a large farm-house in considerable grounds. People called ----- live there, 'blue shirts' of local importance, and until one day two weeks ago they had many dogs. 'Blue shirts' are upholding law, incarnations of public spirit, rioters in the cause of peace, and George [Yeats's wife] hates 'Blue shirts.' She was delighted when she caught their collie-dog in our hen-house and missed a white hen. I was going into town and she said as I started 'I will write to complain. If they do nothing I will go to the police.' When I returned in the evening she was plunged in gloom. Her letter sent by our gardener had been replied to at once in these words: 'Sorry, have done away with collie-dog' -- note the Hitler touch -- a little later came the gardener. In his presence, Mrs. ----- had drowned four dogs. A fifth had revived, when taken out of the water, and as it was not her own dog but a stray she had hunted it down the road with a can tied to its tail . . . . I tried to console George -- after all she was only responsible for the death of the collie and so on. But there was something wrong. At last it came. The white hen had returned.[32]

When one has sorted out the ironies of this amusing little anecdote, one detects, I think, two opposing sentiments. On the one hand there is a distrust of public hysteria masquerading as humanitarianism (symbolized by his wife's rash action); on the other hand there is a distrust of over-zealous destruction by the Fascists (symbolized by the wanton destruction of the

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[31] Letters, pp. 811-12.

[32] Ibid., pp. 820-21.

dogs). This letter, written on February 27, 1934, after the political excitement of the previous two years had passed, reveals a rather detached Yeats.

Yeats evidently equated Communism with "levelling democracy" and welcomed the Blueshirts as a counter-movement. O'Duffy had declared that the Blueshirts "did not support the view that Communists should be free to organize".[33] Add to that the fact that the movement was anti-British, that it was led by an energetic and eloquent man, that it had a uniform, a salute, a flag,[34] and a set of slogans -- all of which would appeal to the heroic dreamer who must himself avoid action -- and one can understand though scarcely condone Yeats's Fascist tendencies.

But O'Duffy was no Mussolini and De Valera was no weak politician. The latter found allies in his erstwhile foes, the I. R. A., in physically opposing the Blueshirts. Moreover, he discredited his foes and strengthened himself politically by accusing them "of flirtation with fascism, and of opposition to democracy".[35] By the end of 1934, the Blueshirt movement was in decline; and as Yeats's initial excitement

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[33] Quoted by David Thornley, "The Blueshirts", The Years of the Great Test, 1926-39, Francis MacManus, ed. (Cork, 1967), p. 46.

[34] A red St. Patrick's cross on a blue ground, apparently suggested by Yeats. Letters, p. 812.

[35] T. Desmond Williams, "De Valera in Power", The Years of the Great Test, p. 36.

subsided, his better judgment prevailed. He informed Ethel Mannin that "the old Fenian" in him made him excited at the thought that a Fascist victory (in Spain, let it be noted) might weaken British imperialism. He then added: "But this is mere instinct. A thing I would never act on . . . . I have a horror of modern politics . . . . When the rivers are poisoned, take to the mountain well . . . ."[36] This letter also makes it abundantly clear that Yeats had come to realize that Fascism was based on manipulation of the public and promoted by rhetoric. Add to that the well-founded fear that the Blueshirt movement was being replaced by Catholic Front 'fascism'[37] and one can understand Yeats's feeling that the political streams were indeed polluted.

Despite his six years in the Irish Senate and his keen interest in public affairs, Yeats was a poet rather than a politician. Often it was his disillusion with political systems which intensified his faith in the 'educative' image which art could provide. The disillusion and anxiety which prompted and animated many of his mature poems are manifest in a letter to Ethel Mannin in 1936:

> Do not try to make a politician of me, even in Ireland I shall never I think be that again -- as my sense of reality deepens, and I think it does with age, my horror at the cruelty of governments grows greater . . . . Communist, Fascist, nationalist,

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[36] Letters, pp. 881-82.

[37] Ibid., 881.

> clerical, anti-clerical, are all responsible according to the number of their victims. I have not been silent; I have used the only vehicle I possess -- verse. If you have my poems by you, look up a poem called The Second Coming. It was written some sixteen or seventeen years ago and foretold what is happening. I have written of the same thing again and again since. This will seem little to you with your strong practical sense, for it takes fifty years for a poet's weapons to influence the issue . . . .
> . . . . . .
> Forgive me my dear and do not cast me out of your affection. I am not callous, every nerve trembles with horror at what is happening in Europe, 'the ceremony of innocence is drowned.'[38]

It was a profound sense of responsibility and not partisan politics which compelled Yeats to incorporate into his poetry his tragic intuition of impending events. For example, he began "Leda and the Swan" because his friend AE had requested a poem for the Irish Statesman, a political review. But as Yeats wrote "bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it".[39] Politics, mythology, and Yeats's system of cyclic history are no more than scaffolding: what haunts the reader is the fearful spectre of power without wisdom. Aware of the violence of his own "fanatic heart", Yeats had the more reason to fear any system of government maintained by violence. As Conor Cruise O'Brien so admirably puts it, "The political man had his cautious understanding with fascism, the diplomatic relation to a great force; the

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[38] Ibid., pp. 850-51.

[39] Note to "Leda and the Swan", The Cat and the Moon and Certain Poems (Dublin, 1924), p. 37.

poet conveyed the nature of the force, the dimension of the tragedy".[40]

Yeats's contempt for materialism, liberalism, and democracy is closely correlated with his aristocratic ideal. His cult of the Big House is traceable to his father's dislike for the Middle Class and to the summers which Yeats spent among his somewhat eccentric relatives, the Pollexfens, at Sligo. But his first real impulse towards the aristocracy came in 1897 when he first visited Lady Gregory at Coole Park. There he found a select society which encompassed what was to be his holy trinity:

> Three types of men have made all beautiful things[.] Aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life, and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose and so do not fear, and the artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness.[41]

Of these three classes of people "freed by position, by poverty, or by the traditions of art",[42] the peasant is, contrary to popular opinion, the least important.[43] But the

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[40] "Yeats and Fascism", New Statesman (February 26, 1965), p. 322.

[41] "Poetry and Tradition", E & I., p. 251.

[42] Ibid., p. 252.

[43] Yeats was interested in the peasants for their folk and fairy legends and for their role in the Irish tradition. He seems never to have understood them as fully, or to have utilized their life as art material as effectively, as did his friend John Synge.

responsibility for the total culture which Yeats laid upon artist and aristocrat can hardly be exaggerated:

> 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 and from never being swept away, whatever the emotion, into confusion or dullness.[44]

The affinity between artist and aristocrat is stated again and again, but a passage from "Estrangement" is important enough to merit quoting at length:

> Every day I notice some new analogy between the long-established life of the well-born and the artists' life. We come from the permanent things and create them, and instead of old blood we have old emotions and we carry in our heads always that form of society aristocracies create now and again for some brief moment at Urbino or Versailles. We too despise the mob and suffer at its hands, and when we are happiest we have some little post in the house of Duke Frederick where we watch the proud dreamless world with humility, knowing that our knowledge is invisible and that at the first breath of ambition our dreams vanish. If we do not see daily beautiful life at which we look as old men and women do at young children, we become theorists -- thinkers as it is called, -- or else give ourselves to strained emotions, to some overflow of sentiment 'sighing after Jerusalem in the regions of the grave'.[45]

Artist and aristocrat were, in fact, the creators and guardians of standards in both art and life.

Robert Gregory, Hamlet, Swift and Castiglione were but a few of Yeats's aristocratic paragons. Coole Park, Lissadell, Urbino, Thoor Ballylee -- and, with some qualifications, eight-

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[44] Ibid., p. 253.

[45] Auto., pp. 473-74.

eenth-century Ireland, the Renaissance, and Byzantium -- were his chief symbols of the aristocratic society. His concept of aristocracy included, first of all, good-breeding: ". . . no education, no culture gives a man good taste -- except in superficial things -- if the nursery was wrong."[46] It included also intellect, education, courtesy, refinement, discipline, "nonchalance", intensity, and a sense of noblesse oblige.[47] The aristocratic society was a kind of sophisticated feudal community where the leaders gave charitable guidance, where the followers gave loyalty and service, and where artists were uninhibited and unalienated. None of this differs greatly from the conventional concept of the aristocracy. What is significant, though, is Yeats's faith in it at a time when, as a social structure, the aristocracy was becoming obsolete. His fascination with the aristocratic ideal cannot be explained merely as a refusal to face reality. Yeats's romanticism was haunted by realism:

> . . . the dream of my early manhood, that a modern nation can return to Unity of Culture, is false; though it may be we can achieve it for some small circle of men and women, and there leave it till the moon bring round its century.[48]

Nor can his fascination with an outmoded tradition be dismissed

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[46] Letters on Poetry, p. 128.

[47] See, for example, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", "A Prayer for My Daughter", "The Municipal Gallery Revisited", and The Countess Cathleen.

[48] Auto., p. 295. See also p. 355.

as the Irish nostalgia for lost causes. His aristocratic ideal was more positive than either of these explanations suggests.

After the turn of the century, Yeats began to suspect that his dream of using literature to bring about O'Leary's kind of nationalism was futile. He wrote in "Estrangement":

> No art can conquer the people alone -- the people are conquered by an ideal of life upheld by authority. As this ideal is rediscovered, the arts, music and poetry, painting and literature, will draw closer together.[49]

Yeats believed that he had found that "ideal of life", with all the authority of tradition behind it, in Coole Park. Furthermore, it was, in a sense, "rediscovered": its prototype was the Court of Urbino as it was described by Castiglione in The Courtier.[50] Yeats came to regard Coole Park as a bastion against mediocrity and as the nucleus of true civilization. As Seanchan had instructed his Oldest Pupil, "the Courtly life / Is the world's model".[51]

Perhaps the most important thing that "the Courtly life" offered was leisure. In Yeats's writings leisure stands in juxtaposition to bourgeois confusion, and makes possible all the graces which the Middle Class lacks. It is often

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[49] Ibid., p. 491. Italics mine.

[50] According to Hone (W. B. Yeats, 1965-1939, p. 233), Yeats read The Courtier in 1907 at Lady Gregory's instigation.

[51] The King's Threshold, Collected Plays, p. 113.

associated with "courtesy", "nonchalance", "innocence" -- qualities exemplified by Urbino, where "youth for certain brief years imposed upon drowsy learning the discipline of its joy".[52] But, above all, leisure was essential to intellectual liberty. Dublin, the cultural centre of Ireland, was arraigned:

> . . . in Nationalist Dublin there was not -- indeed there still is not -- any society where a man . . . speaks his whole mind gaily, and is not the cautious husband of a part; where fantasy can play before matured into conviction; where life can shine and ring, and lack utility. Mere life lacking the protection of wealth or rank, or some beauty's privilege of caprice, cannot choose its company, taking up and dropping men merely because it likes or dislikes their manners and their looks, and in its stead opinion crushes and rends, and all is hatred and bitterness: wheel biting upon wheel, a roar of steel or iron tackle, a mill of argument grinding all things down to mediocrity.[53]

Modern Ireland had given herself up to hysterica passio precisely because she lacked the leisure of Urbino, and of Coole Park. "For without culture or holiness . . . a man may renounce wealth or any other external thing, but he cannot renounce hatred, envy, jealousy, revenge. Culture is the sanctity of the intellect."[54] And people pursuing political and materialistic ends could have no leisure, no culture.

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[52] Auto., p. 545.

[53] Ibid., pp. 230-31.

[54] Ibid., p. 489. Yeats used the term hysterica passio -- which he may have borrowed from King Lear, II, iv, 57 -- to imply frenzy, violence, madness. See especially Letters on Poetry, p. 94.

Ever cognizant of Unity of Culture, Yeats recommended that Irish youth should read La Comédie humaine, not only because Balzac seemed to justify Yeats's own belief in the traditional social hierarchy, but because Balzac, alone among writers, seemed to have perfected a synthesis of social and individual rights.

> Only, I think, when one has mastered his whole vast scheme can one understand clearly that his social order is the creation of two struggles, that of family with family, that of individual with individual, and that our politics depend upon which of the two struggles has most affected our imagination. If it has been most affected by the individual struggle we insist upon equality of opportunity, 'the career open to talent', and consider rank and wealth fortuitous and unjust; and if it is most affected by the struggles of families, we insist upon all that preserves what that struggle has earned, upon social privilege, upon the rights of property.
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> Throughout the Comédie humaine one finds . . . that the more noble and stable qualities, those that are spread through the personality, and not isolated in a faculty, are the results of victory in the family struggle, while those qualities of logic and of will, all those qualities of toil rather than of power, belong most to the individual struggle. For a long time after closing the last novel one finds it hard to admire deeply any individual strength that has not family strength behind it.[55]

It was indeed the family (that is, the aristocratic) struggle which most impressed Yeats. The only individual struggle which he admired was that of the hero, and the Yeatsian hero was not at all the 'democratic' individual arraigned in the passage on Balzac. The synthesis of "individual" and "family", now possible only in heroic literature, might yet be effected

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[55] "If I were Four-and-Twenty", Expl., p. 270.

through some extension of the aristocratic ideal. That extension, imaginatively conceived, was the basis upon which Yeats praised or damned any particular social system.

Yeats's dedication to the aristocratic ideal intensified in proportion to his disillusion with Ireland and his alarm at the "growing moral cowardice of the world".[56] In 1936, he expressed disgust with all political systems:

> . . . why should I trouble about communism, fascism, liberalism, radicalism, when all, though some bow first and some stern first but all at the same pace, all are going down stream with the artificial unity which ends every civilization? Only dead sticks can be tied into convenient bundles.[57]

The only thing that could sustain Yeats now was the politics of On the Boiler (1939), his most radical promotion of aristocratic society.

Yeats claimed that On the Boiler was his first public statement on his "beliefs about Irish and European politics".[58] However, apart from a more emphatic treatment there was little that was new. Art, politics, and aristocratic values were again treated as the major forces influencing a nation's culture. Characteristically, Yeats advocated that the intellectual leaders of a nation should remain proud and aloof. "Try to be popular and you think another man's thought, sink

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[56] Letter to Ethel Mannin, December 11, 1936. Letters, p. 873.

[57] Ibid., p. 869.

[58] Ibid., p. 910.

into that slow, slothful, inanimate, semi-hypocritical thinking Dante symbolised by hoods and cloaks of lead."[59]

Discounting the 'myth' of progress, Yeats treated history in terms of recurring cycles of expanding and contracting gyres. Civilization had reached its peak of subjectivity during the Renaissance, and had since declined until democracy had replaced the old "hierarchical society" and materialism had replaced psychic research.[60] However, any civilization, no matter how "fated" the historical cycles, could be improved once it was accepted that the social problem was not economic but "eugenic and ethnic".[61] Taking as his text a long passage[62] from The Anatomy of Melancholy, Yeats advocated selective marriage and breeding to safeguard against populating Ireland with fools. "It may be, or it must be, that the best bred from the best shall claim again their ancient omens."[63] Second to good breeding, Yeats placed a liberal education: "'Not what you want but what we want [you to have].'"[64] Arrogant and intolerant though this is, Yeats

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[59] Expl., p. 410. Cf. "The Words upon the Window-pane", ibid., p. 352: "He [Swift] defines a tyranny as the predominance of the One, the Few, or the Many, but thinks that of the Many the immediate threat."

[60] Expl., pp. 439 and 435.

[61] Ibid., p. 424.

[62] Quoted, ibid., pp. 418-20.

[63] Ibid., p. 437.

[64] Ibid., p. 414.

was writing from two convictions: first, of the importance to the state of a capable, creative, disciplined minority; and second, that, given the leadership of such a minority, the essential soundness of the Irish race would again display itself.[65] From these convictions, and from recent bitter experience in Irish politics, Yeats advocated a new course of action:

> 'If ever Ireland again seems molten wax, reverse the process of revolution. Do not try to pour Ireland into any political system. Think first how many able men with public minds the country has, how many it can hope to have in the near future, and mould your system upon those men. It does not matter how you get them, but get them . . . . These men, whether six or six thousand, are the core of Ireland, are Ireland itself.'[66]

Yeats never allowed himself to be enslaved by a 'system'. In his early years he had founded 'political' organizations while another 'self' looked ironically on.[67] His most elaborate 'system' -- A Vision -- is no exception. More than three hundred pages of quasi-determinism are negated by a single paragraph on the Thirteenth Cone, where the soul is liberated. Above all, there is the Yeatsian hero, at once predestined and free.

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[65] Ibid., pp. 441-42.

[66] Ibid., p. 414.

[67] See "Poetry and Tradition", E & I., p. 249.

CHAPTER XII

TRAGIC EXISTENCE AND THE HEROIC IDEAL

> We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy.
>
> W. B. Yeats

> Tragic man is man at his most prideful and independent, man glorying in his humanity.
>
> Richard B. Sewall

Yeats's predilection for the tragic both as an artistic mode and as an attitude to life was an extension of his belief in man predestined yet free. Consequently, he denounced any attempt to link tragedy with pity, and any criticism which implied that the tragic bent was a camouflage for self-pity and a rationalization for lack of will. "Cuchulain in the Irish folk tale had the passion of victory, and he overcame all men, and died warring upon the waves, because they alone had the strength to overcome him."[1] Later, in Per Amica Silentia Lunae, Yeats wrote: ". . . the passions, when we know that they cannot find fulfilment, become vision . . . ."[2] Far from resulting in despair or passive acceptance, the tragic experience became heroic and acquired apocalyptic

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[1] "The Celtic Element in Literature" (1897), E & I., p. 179.

[2] Essays (1924), p. 505.

significance.

The crisis and apocalypse which Yeats associated with tragedy postulated a denial of the belief that life itself was wrong.[3] Any such belief, Yeats felt, reduced life to mere misfortune and tragedy to pathos. In ancient times

> Men did not mourn merely because their beloved was married to another, or because learning was bitter in the mouth, for such mourning believes that life might be happy were it different, and is therefore the less mourning, but because they had been born and must die with their great thirst unslaked.[4]

Moreover, to believe that life was wrong might carry one beyond pessimism to cynicism or nihilism. Yeats did not lack a "Vision of Evil", but he could not accept the theory that evil was simply a product of social systems. Such a belief would likewise have lowered tragedy to misfortune, and might have promoted a facile optimism.

Destiny was man's antagonist; and destiny was above and beyond Utopian solutions. But ultimately even destiny was incapable of defeating the human spirit. It was man's indomitable spirit, his inherent heroism, which made him free in a largely deterministic world. For despite the determinism

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[3] The Yeatsian hero struggled against mortality out of sheer love of life; he did not deplore the human condition. Cf. "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" (Collected Poems, p. 267):

> I am content to live it all again
> And yet again, if it be life to pitch
> Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
> A blind man battering blind men . . . .

[4] "The Celtic Element in Literature", E & I., p. 182.

implicit in the cycles of history, and in the lunar phases of the Great Wheel of existence, Yeats believed in freedom of choice.

That choice, as this chapter will show, was between acquiescence and defiance. And closely related to this was the choice between two kinds of consciousness, between two moralities. First, there was institutional morality which was calculated and if it lacked charity, was bound to be cruel. Second, there was individual morality which was instinctual and benevolent.[5] Fear and guilt, for example, were feelings forced upon man by society when the causes -- death and sex, say, -- were not in themselves evil. Crazy Jane was condemned by the Bishop (institutional morality) and defeated by the human condition, but she would not have lived differently. The same is true, Yeats argued, for "all the august sorrowful persons of literature":[6] they follow their life-instincts and abide by the best they have known. Out of their adherence to instinctual morality comes their death. This is what Yeats understood by tragedy: but it in no way implied unfortunate death. Modern man, faced with a morality which emphasized evil but was largely silent on salvation, needed to provide himself with images of heroic potential.

Yeats condemned a great deal of Victorian and 'modern'

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[5] See especially Expl., pp. 154-55.

[6] "The Celtic Element in Literature", E & I., p. 182.

literature because it had substituted psychological speculation for individual passion. Moreover, science and democracy had militated against belief in mythology and the aristocracy, against all that venerated the exceptional individual. But these were social ills which could in time be remedied provided responsible men understood the problem and adhered fiercely to traditional values. Consequently, no matter how much Yeats played Is against Ought in a social or even in a poetic context (as with the Mask, for example), he refused to give them cosmic reference for to have done so would have been to reduce tragedy to pathos.

Implicit in Yeats's concept of tragedy was the need to face life heroically. This meant that escape from reality was out of the question. 'Dream' escapism, stoicism, and cynical immunity were not permitted the Yeatsian tragic figure for these 'solutions' militated against self-fulfilment and creativity as positive values in the tragic existence.

> There is in the creative joy an acceptance of what life brings, because we have understood the beauty of what it brings, or a hatred of death for what it takes away, which arouses within us, through some sympathy perhaps with all other men, an energy so noble, so powerful, that we laugh aloud and mock, in the terror or sweetness of our exaltation, at death and oblivion.[7]

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[7] "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time", E & I., p. 322. On August 15, 1938, after attending a performance of On Baile's Strand, Yeats informed Lady Gregory that Cuchulain was "a heroic figure because he was creative joy separated from fear". Letters, p. 913.

Obviously, the tragic hero possesses a sense of mastery: and though the limitations of life break him physically, he triumphs spiritually. Passionate defiance is a means by which man is momentarily united with his Mask, a means by which he transcends his daily self.

Tragedy implies suffering, defiance, reconciliation, transmutation, and transcendence. Yeats wrote to Dorothy Wellesley, in 1935: "To me the supreme aim is an act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy."[8] Commenting on these remarks in relation to Yeats's assertion, in "Lapis Lazuli", that "All things fall and are built again / And those that build them again are gay", B. L. Reid writes:

> To "rejoice in the midst of tragedy" is to transmute tragic fact into its opposite. "All things fall" confesses tragic fact; "and are built again" asserts transformation of tragic fact, man's adequacy to it: "those that build them again are gay" asserts transcendence of tragic fact, man's superiority to it.[9]

The "tragic fact" is that corporeal existence is beleagued by ruin, decay, and death. "We begin to live when we have conceived life as tragedy."[10] However, Yeats's statement was in reference to the insight, maturity, and defiance of subjective man; it was not a definition of tragedy. Yeatsian tragedy postulated a heroic opposition to ruin and death.

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[8] Letters, p. 838.

[9] "Yeats and Tragedy", The Hudson Review, XI (Autumn, 1958), 394.

[10] Auto., p. 189.

His tragic figures love life and hate death; and these sentiments, felt with varying intensity, are parts of the human condition. "Man is in love and loves what vanishes, / What more is there to say?"[11]

Yeatsian tragedy did not involve the moral question of good and evil: his tragic figures were not good men gone wrong. Furthermore, Yeats believed that the identification which one feels with the tragic hero is not because of 'What might have been', but because of what is. He wrote to Dorothy Wellesley, in 1936:

> You say we must love, yes but love is not pity. It does not desire to change its object. It is a form of the eternal contemplation of what is.12

His heroes go "Proud, open-eyed and laughing to the tomb".[13] Careful study of great dramatic literature and his own stage-experience, together with his intellectual toughness convinced Yeats that great tragic figures "Do not break up their lines to weep".[14] And although he insisted that "it is always ourselves that we see upon the stage",[15] after the sentimental "At Stratford-on-Avon", he never again fell prey to the melodrama and self-consciousness to which the tragic mode is so

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[11] "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen", Collected Poems, p. 234.

[12] Letters, p. 876.

[13] "Vacillation", Collected Poems, p. 283.

[14] "Lapis Lazuli", ibid., p. 338.

[15] "The Tragic Theatre", E & I., p. 241.

vulnerable. Real passion "looks beyond mankind and asks no pity, not even of God".[16]

Yeats's references to tragedy were those of a humanist. Despite his interest in occultism, magic, theosophy, and mysticism, man was the measure of all things:

> Death and life were not
> Till man made up the whole,
> Made lock, stock and barrel
> Out of his bitter soul. . . .[17]

Tragedy, both as an art form and as an intuited sense of life, had its locale in the terrestrial world: its terms of reference were man in relation to himself, his fellows, and his cosmos. The tragic figure was at war with the world he loved: ". . . a hero loves the world till it breaks him, and the poet till it has broken faith . . . ."[18] It was this conviction of the essential value of life and this commitment to live life to the fullest despite its limitations which led heroic man to the spiritual triumph which Yeats called alternately "tragic gaiety" and "tragic joy".

One of Yeats's principles of life and art was that comedy divides and tragedy unites.[19] Such a distinction was born of and nurtured by his view of history where comedy had replaced tragedy, where the personal had replaced the impersonal,

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[16] Auto., p. 524.

[17] "The Tower", Collected Poems, p. 223.

[18] Essays (1924), p. 500.

[19] See "The Tragic Theatre", E & I., p. 241.

and where individual differences had superseded the Race Memory. Indifference and opposition to his heroic ideal underlay all that Yeats most deplored in contemporary life and literature. Social consciousness militated against the exceptional individual, and too acute a self-consciousness militated against passionate conviction. The democratic age where every man is his own hero epitomized the Yeatsian unheroic, and made traditional heroic and aristocratic values essential. Yeats's humanism was explicit in On the Boiler:

> . . . we must hold to what we have that the next civilisation may be born, not from a virgin's womb, nor a tomb without a body, not from a void, but of our own rich experience.[20]

This was an extreme example of Yeats's contention that life should be self-ennobling rather than self-debasing, and that such a life was possible not through theological creeds but through heroic example.

Yeats was convinced that the tragic existence, as he understood it, was common to all men. Despite the reality of death and the manifest limitations of mortality, he believed that a craving for immortality was part of the human condition. Our common recognition of the "tragic fact" of death, and own common defiance of it made it possible for Yeats to write of tragedy as a great unifying force.

The tragic hero differed from the ordinary individual chiefly in being more subjective and therefore less likely

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[20] Expl., p. 437.

to abandon the struggle. The desired movement, then, was upwards towards the exceptional individual who, ultimately, was representative: he was Western man speaking to and for his fellow man. "The east has its solutions always and therefore knows nothing of tragedy. It is we, not the east, that must raise the heroic cry."[21] The fact that the Yeatsian hero was both representative and exceptional necessitates a brief comment on the heroic ideal.[22]

Yeats's concept of heroism was derived from divers sources, especially from mythology, literature, and history. Despite a number of constants, there was, however, a distinct shift of emphasis as Yeats's experience increased with age. For example, he remained adamant in his belief that "the four essential virtues" were generosity, honesty, courage, and courtesy (courtliness).[23] He was partial, also, towards the ancient Irish credo that the struggle and the defeat were more important than the victory.[24] On the other hand, his interest

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[21] Letters, p. 837.

[22] For an extensive study of the nature and development of Yeats's concept of heroism, see Alex Zwerdling, Yeats and the Heroic Ideal (New York, 1965).

[23] "Gods and Fighting Men", Expl., p. 21. The essay first appeared as Yeats's Introduction to Lady Gregory's book by the same title.

[24] Ibid., p. 20. Cf. Irving David Suss, "Yeatsian Drama and the Dying Hero", South Atlantic Quarterly, LIV (July, 1955), 379: "Here are the two touchstones, the battle and the defeat, inevitable in Ireland's social pessimism and in the minds of her highest artists."

in the Fianna was to be superseded by his admiration for Cuchulain. There were at least two good reasons for this shift of emphasis. First, the Fianna's heroism was "but their pride and joy in one another, their good fellowship".[25] Second, although Cuchulain was of immortal lineage, the gods visited him "as god to mortal", whereas Finn was "their equal".[26] Yeats's ideal hero was solitary and human.

Although sometimes nostalgic and often anachronistic, Yeats became increasingly reluctant to assimilate into his works mythological elements which might diminish the heroism. He became increasingly adamant in his belief that vitality or "earth power"[27] was the source of heroism. On the other hand, he was intolerant of social heroes; these, he felt, were merely rhetoricians articulating the values of the masses. The ideal hero, he came to believe, differed from both the mythological hero and the social hero. The Yeatsian hero was exceptional, seemingly eccentric, intense, passionate, solitary, distinguished, and doomed. Yeats's purpose was to use the heroic past to sustain the unheroic present, and strict

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[25] Op. cit., p. 22.

[26] Ibid., p. 17. According to an old Irish belief, endorsed by Yeats, Cuchulain was the son of an Irish woman and an immortal. In On Baile's Strand (Collected Plays, p. 257), Cuchulain speaks of

> . . . that clean hawk out of the air
> That, as men say, begot this body of mine
> Upon a mortal woman.

[27] Letters, p. 35.

adherence to either the mythological hero or the social hero would diminish the ethical force of the heroic image:

> . . . when the imaginary saint or lover or hero moves us most deeply, it is the moment when he awakens within us for an instant our own heroism, our own sanctity, our own desire.28

Alex Zwerdling, in Yeats and the Heroic Ideal, discusses the Irish Hero, the Aristocrat, the Public Hero, and the Visionary. Such a classification may help one to understand the development of Yeats's heroic ideal, but one should regard these 'personages' as different facets of the same heroic personality -- a personality compelled by passion and attaining to vision.

Love and battle were the chief worldly interests which aroused the hero to intensity, and these were generally private interests. But occasionally a public controversy or a public cause would act as a stimulus. The riots at the Abbey Theatre, especially the controversy over The Playboy of the Western World, aroused the heroic in Yeats; and the Easter Rising lifted a handful of Irishmen into the realm of national heroes.

The cultural values of generosity (noblesse oblige) and courtesy (courtliness) are manifest in the Countess Cathleen's liaison with her peasants and in Lady Gregory's patronage of Yeats. However, it was Lady Gregory's son, Robert,

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28 Expl., p. 196.

-- "Our Sidney and our perfect man" --[29] who epitomized for Yeats the ideal combination of hero and aristocrat. "Soldier, scholar, horseman, he, / As 'twere all life's epitome."[30]

The hero's "earth power" and his cultural interests are inextricably linked with Yeats's concepts of tragedy and aristocracy, respectively. And since these broader topics are discussed above, one may, at this point, pass on to the hero's visionary experience. This aspect of the heroic experience is not easy to define. It is not enough to say that the hero recognizes the limitations of mortality, for that might preclude the supernatural; and Yeats believed in the supernatural. However, his references to the supernatural were not related to the conventional 'machinery' of any religious sect. And therein lies the problem.

Yeats's various 'experiments' and especially the "three doctrines" he adhered to in his essay "Magic" postulated a supernatural world and the human potential to perceive that world.[31] But the terms of reference included the individual and the Race Memory rather than the individual and God. God's omnipotence would detract from man's heroism; and it was this, no doubt, which caused Yeats to complain about "an

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[29] "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", Collected Poems, p. 150.

[30] Ibid., p. 151.

[31] E & I., p. 28.

absence of tragedy in Indian poetry",[32] and to reprove his friend, Tagore, for writing "too much about God".[33]

Religious visionaries are ascetics. Yeats, however, admired the Fianna because, having no asceticism, they were more visionary than any ascetic.[34] Although he felt that this was as it should be, that in true visionary experience "The body is not bruised to pleasure soul",[35] he was often haunted by the dichotomy of flesh and spirit. Earlier in his career he had analysed and exploited this dichotomy through his various _personae_, but he had not resolved it.

During the last two decades of his life he combined an old theme of his with his most used technique -- juxtaposition of opposites -- to resolve, in art at least, the flesh-spirit dichotomy. AE's aphorism, borrowed from an old religious beggar, that "'God possesses the heavens, but He covets the earth -- He covets the earth'",[36] was but a religious variation on one of Yeats's early themes. That theme was that the gods are envious of passion. As one immortal explains to her mortal hero: "I have left them [the immortals] for thee, Dhoya, for they cannot love. Only the changing, and moody,

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[32] Joseph Hone, _W. B. Yeats, 1865-1939_, p. 459. Cf. Yeats's remark quoted on p. 233 above.

[33] _Ibid._, p. 458.

[34] "Gods and Fighting Men", _Expl._, p. 23.

[35] "Among School Children", _Collected Poems_, p. 244.

[36] Quoted by Yeats, _Auto._, p. 249.

and angry and weary can love . . . ."[37]

Yeats's quarrel with orthodox religions centred on their insistence that man should renounce the physical world. Where they wanted antithesis, Yeats wanted synthesis: he wanted, as he wrote in 1906, some dynamic spirituality, "-- a movement downwards upon life, not upwards out of life."[38] He may have found authority for such a spirituality in Plotinus, who, Yeats claimed in his Introduction to The Words upon the Window-pane (1931), was the first to claim the "timeless individuality" as the source of all life.[39] Yeats had, for some time now, renounced the view of annihilation as the means to salvation expressed by Paul Ruttledge, in Where There Is Nothing (1902): ". . . remember always where there is nothing there is God."[40] Yeats prescribed life. In 1912, he wrote of John Donne:

> . . . the intricacy and subtleties of his imagination are the length and depths of the furrow made by his passion. His pedantry and his obscenity -- the rock and the loam of his Eden -- but make me the more certain

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[37] W. B. Yeats, John Sherman and Dhoya (London, 1891), p. 183. A number of Yeats's poems express the same idea. Compare, for example, the following lines from "The Grey Rock" (Collected Poems, p. 118):

> 'Why must the lasting love what passes,
> Why are the gods by men betrayed?'

[38] Letters, p. 469.

[39] Expl., p. 368.

[40] Var. Plays, p. 1164. The play is not included in Collected Plays.

that one who is but a man like us all has seen
God.[41]

Yeats effected his synthesis through two opposite movements: man aspiring after the spiritual, and the immortals aspiring after the physical. It was another example of intersecting gyres. The balance, momentarily achieved -- the still-point -- allows vision. The lover experiences disappointment; the saint accepts defilement; the hero, linked with his image, becomes 'immortal' and dies. The gyres reverse and the poet begins all over again.

Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.[42]

The realization that the mire of life is essential and that one must "die blaspheming"[43] -- that is the apocalypse. Yeats's heroes are not heroic because they are visionaries; they are visionaries because they are heroic. "People much occupied with morality always lose heroic ecstasy,"[44] he wrote in 1935. The hero submits himself to instinct and will and these arise out of 'personality', the essential being which defeats the 'character' which social institutions attempt to impose upon him.

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[41] Letters, p. 570.

[42] "The Circus Animals' Desertion", Collected Poems, p. 392.

[43] Letters, p. 875.

[44] Ibid., p. 836.

> The heroic act, as it descends through tradition, is an act done because a man is himself, because, being himself, he can ask nothing of other men but room amid remembered tragedies; a sacrifice of himself to himself, almost, so little may he bargain, of the moment to the moment.[45]

Above all, Yeats's heroes were active and self-asserting. In a Note to The Words upon the Window-pane, Yeats recalled how he and John O'Leary "discussed perpetually the character of public men and never asked were they able and well-informed, but what would they sacrifice?"[46] In later years, Yeats insisted that leaders be "able and well-informed", but he was more adamant than ever against passivity. He put his theory into practice most noticeably in 1936, when he omitted Wilfred Owen from The Oxford Book of Modern Verse on the grounds that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry".[47] The fact that he misunderstood Owen does not mean that the theory was wrong.

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[45] Introduction to Fighting the Waves, Expl., p. 375.

[46] Var. Plays, p. 957.

[47] The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, Introduction, p. xxxiv.

CHAPTER XIII

CONCLUSION

> . . . [Criticism's] greatest single attribute is its force, its passionate declaration of the true nature of man and what his proper destiny must be . . . . It is the kind of criticism I always think of as histoire morale, that sums up the spirit of the age in which we live and then asks us to transcend it . . . .
> . . . . . .
> The critic who has the equipment to be a force, the critic who can set up standards for his age, must be a partisan of one kind of art and a bitter critic of another . . . .
> . . . he writes dramatically, marshaling his evidence in a way that pure logic would never approve and pure scholarship would never understand, but which is justifiable, if it succeeds, as moral argument in the great tradition of literature.
>
> Alfred Kazin

Apart from the period 1886-1898, during which time he wrote most of his numerous reviews, Yeats was not a 'professional' critic. Much of his criticism derived from the need to introduce or to defend his own work or the work of a friend. This helps to explain the 'occasional' and sometimes tendentious nature of his critical essays. Yet it is possible to trace in his criticism, as in his poetry, an increasing clarity and relevance, a broadening scope, and a growing command of his subject-matter. What were at first little more than casual remarks or defiant critical stances developed later into operative critical concepts. Much of his

later poetry, for example, can be seen as the fruit of his Blakean conviction that the poet

> . . . must go on perfecting earthly power and perception until they are so subtilised that divine power and divine perception descend to meet them, and the song of earth and the song of heaven mingle together.[1]

His fetish of an ideal society was balanced by a belief in heroic man in a tragic universe. Yeats's antinomical vision extended to his poetic theory and practice: the sophisticated, the exotic and the visionary were balanced by the simple, the bucolic and the rabelaisian.

Of Yeats's practical criticism, the following points need to be reiterated: he was tireless in his efforts to deliver Irish writers from what seemed to him the decadence of English literary traditions and at the same time to save them from the soul-destroying partisanship of Irish propagandists. His comments on Blake, necessary correctives to Victorian misconceptions, were rooted too firmly in transcendental desiderata at the expense of aesthetic principles. Similarly, Yeats's comments on Shakespeare and Shelley were valid correctives to the Victorian demand for 'utility' and 'moral adequacy'. But again Yeats distorted the perspective. His opposition to "the Matthew Arnold tradition" caused him to ignore the fact that Shakespeare and Shelley comprehended not only man's emotional and imaginative

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[1] W. B. Yeats, "William Carleton", The Bookman, IX (March, 1896), 188.

nature but his moral and political nature as well. Finally, Yeats's attack on Owen shows how wrong-headed and antagonistic he could be towards literature which he believed was founded upon false philosophical and aesthetic principles.

Yeats's theoretical essays are significant for their insistence upon the importance of the poetic impulse to art, for their insistence upon the autonomy of art enhanced by, but not ultimately dependent upon, biographical and historical considerations, and for their promotion of heroic and visionary art in an unheroic and materialistic age. His theory of symbolism reflects a genuine desire to avoid the doctrinaire literature of the Victorians and the 'realism' of many of his contemporaries without falling into the emptiness of the Aesthetes. Mask, mythology, and symbol were, he believed, the means by which literature could be revitalized, and by which he could embody in art those lofty and heroic principles which he believed to be life-enhancing.

Yeats did not always abide by his own dictum that criticism should be as international as possible.[2] He was also inconsistent in his attitude towards Arnold, Eglinton, Dowden, and Wordsworth on the one hand, and his own messianic attitude towards literature on the other. However, these inconsistencies are most frequent in Yeats's earlier work, and they appear to derive from his attraction towards such

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[2] Letters, p. 239.

inimical interests as mysticism, aestheticism, and nationalism.

After the turn of the century Yeats abandoned "the sad soliloquies of a nineteenth century egoism"[3] for an increased emphasis on the personality of the poet and the impersonality of the poem. Intense passions replaced lyrical essences as the essentials of art, violent actions took precedence over dream 'retreats', and a tragic-heroic vision replaced the static lyricism of the pre-1900 period. Moreover, Yeats's comments on Ibsen, in "Discoveries" (1906),[4] indicate a broadening critical perspective where even realistic drama is more fairly judged. And, despite a tendency to overrate his friend, Yeats's remarks on John Synge, made in 1905 and 1909, reflect even more noticeably an increasing tendency towards balanced criticism.[5]

Although Yeats's critical methods and objectives changed as he grew older, certain tenets remained constant

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[3] W. B. Yeats, "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson", Dublin University Review, II (November, 1886), 940.

[4] See E & I., pp. 274-75, and 283-84.

[5] Despite some valid remarks on Synge's language in his Preface to The Well of the Saints (1905), Yeats's emphasis on the "indirect" conflicts and "dreamy" qualities of Synge's characters runs counter to what we now regard as the basis of Synge's dramatic power. (See E & I., pp. 298-305.) In his Preface to Synge's Poems and Translations (1909), Yeats was more accurate in his observations. He stressed Synge's "astringent joy" and "the hardness that was in all he did", and his rejection of "the contemplation of a beauty too far from life to appease his mood". (See E & I., pp. 306-310.)

or were only slightly modified. Sometimes his inflexibility militated against good judgment. For example, his contempt for materialists and journalists made him too ready to reject as 'realistic' all literature which had an immediate social referent, and to condemn as 'didactic' all poets and critics who allowed their works such referents. So intense was his bias towards poetic drama that he sometimes reduced diverse plays which he admired to little more than lyrical ecstasies.

Yeats's concern, in both the reviews and the theoretical essays, was for the spirit of the work; his was not primarily an analytical approach. Consequently, he was not so consistently perceptive as, say, T. S. Eliot. Yet he had the cultural concern of Arnold and Eliot and he was, it seems, more inclined than they to promote the best culture he knew. That inclination led him backwards into tradition and mythology. He insisted that modern Irishmen, instead of dissipating their energies in religious and political friction, should seek in myths their common heritage; they should repudiate the sordid spectacle "of devils and angels which we call our national history".[6]

Yeats's errors as a critic were errors to which an idealogical critic is especially susceptible. There is, for example, the question of emphasis. Yeats's 'extra-literary'

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[6] W. B. Yeats, "The Life of Patrick Sarsfield", The Bookman, IX (November, 1895), 59.

interests sometimes militated against aesthetic judgment; sometimes his interest in the part militated against a balanced judgment of the whole. Yeats erred in the former manner in his commentaries on Blake, and in the latter way in some of his reviews of Irish writers. Also, despite valid observations by such critics as Turnell and Kazin[7] on the merits of subjective criticism, the ideological critic may be so uncompromising as to limit his scope as critic. Yeats's partiality for poetry and poetic drama, for example, may help to explain the dearth of critical commentary by him on that other major genre -- the novel. "One's 'definite position' is one's weakness, the source of one's liability to error and prejudice . . . ."[8]

On the other hand, Yeats's idealism and integrity, his artist's instinct, and his devotion to literature made him a prophet of art. He stood four-square against passivity, didacticism, realism (as he understood it), and emotional thinness in art. His criticism points up the defects of the art of his time, and the problems which confronted the poet who would turn men's minds again from the ephemeral to the eternal. But Yeats was not an original critic: many of his

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[7] See Martin Turnell, "An Essay on Criticism", Dublin Review, 444 (1948), 72-95, and Alfred Kazin, "The Function of Criticism Today", Commentary, 30 (November, 1960), 369-78.

[8] Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, 1957), p. 19.

critical 'touchstones' were borrowed, and his advocacy was always that the artist should rediscover or that the arts should turn again to ancient and lofty traditions. And to this end he made pronouncements which were largely ignored until T. S. Eliot 're-phrased' them. It may have been that Yeats's intellect was suspect (Time having not yet pardoned him for his esoteric activities), or that the age was not yet ready to return to essentially Romantic values.

Ultimately, of course, Yeats's criticism was a means of getting his own thoughts in order, and its greatest value lies in the kind of poetry it helped him to write. He continued to repudiate art which merely depicted the surface of life -- Stendhal's "'mirror dawdling down a lane'".[9] Art, Yeats insisted, was vital, meaningful, and permanent only when the artistic "ladders" were anchored "In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart".[10] He never lost faith in the educative image, immortalized in art, of man's heroic potential. "Whatever flames upon the night / Man's own resinous heart has fed."[11] This conviction that "earth power" and spirituality were inseparable in life and art, firmly held after 1900, was the paradox which Yeats sought to resolve in his criticism and to embody in his poetry. Auden's tribute, in 1939, to

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[9] The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, Introduction, p. xxvii.

[10] "The Circus Animals' Desertion", Collected Poems, p. 392.

[11] "Two Songs from a Play", ibid., p. 240. The songs are sung by the Musicians in The Resurrection.

Yeats's poetic achievement epitomizes precisely what Yeats himself perceived to be the poet's task:

> Follow, poet, follow right
> To the bottom of the night,
> With your unconstraining voice
> Still persuade us to rejoice;
>
> With the farming of a verse
> Make a vineyard of the curse,
> Sing of human unsuccess
> In a rapture of distress;
>
> In the deserts of the heart
> Let the healing fountain start,
> In the prison of his days
> Teach the free man how to praise.[12]

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[12] W. H. Auden, Another Time (New York, 1940), pp. 95-96. The poem was first published in New Republic (March, 1939).

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[1] A more comprehensive list of Yeats's works is found in Allan Wade's A Bibliography of the Writings of W. B. Yeats (London, 1951), 3rd ed. rev. 1968. See also George B. Saul's Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Poems (Philadelphia, 1957), and Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Plays (Philadelphia, 1958).

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