The early poetry of W. B. Yeats

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ALTHOUGH Yeats's early poems have always been popular with the general reader, on the whole Yeatsian criticism has, understandably, concentrated on the elucidation and evaluation of the more difficult later verse. Recent criticism, however, has swung to the extreme assertion that the early poems are worthy of serious attention not merely in relation to the whole body of Yeats's poetry but as *better* than the later poetry. This claim has some support from Yeats himself when, in a letter to Margot Ruddock in 1935, he says:

'those early poems in their objective simplicity, their folk life, are greater in kind than my later poetry (which are better poems) but one has to take one's raw material from one's time, one's life. A day came when I could no longer live those simple poems — I had to face ceaseless popular insult in creating the Irish Theatre and I became bitter. I remember a woman commenting on the change in my face.'[1]

This reference to his unpopularity with the very audience in Ireland he wrote for is confirmed by the letters written at the turn of the century which indicate his depression and wounded bewilderment at the hostility his work met with in Dublin. 'I am in the ebb tide and must wait the flow' he sighs, fortunately unaware that the tide would retreat much farther yet and that when the delayed flow came, it would be disappointing in that his more recent poetry would be passed over in favour of the early poetry which he had by that time outgrown. This may in part account for his disparaging comments on his early verse, as for instance, when he writes in 1904 to A.E. that 'in some of my lyric verse of that time, there is an exaggeration of sentiment and sentimental beauty which I have come to think unmanly'.[2] This

[1] *Ah, Sweet Dancer*, ed. Roger McHugh, 1970, p. 39. All quotations from W. B. Yeats's work are by kind permission of Senator M. B. Yeats.

[2] *Letters of Yeats*, ed. Wade, 1954, p. 434.

was made even more apparent to him by the young poets who imitated him and A.E., as he shows not only in the poem 'To a Poet, who would have me Praise certain Bad Poets, Imitators of His and Mine', but also in 'A Coat'. And some of the discontent he felt with his early poetry, especially with the ballads, he attributes to the same weakness in himself, to his imitation of the Young Ireland poets Mangan and Davis: 'Mangan and Davis are not sentimental and trivial, but I became so from an imitation that was not natural to me'.[1] In another preface written a few months earlier, he recognized that he had turned from lyric writing to drama:

'in a search for more of manful energy, more of cheerful acceptance of whatever arises out of the logic of events, and for clean outline, instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret.'[2]

This anticipates his comment twenty years later that his remorse for the abstract nature of his thought 'helped to spoil my early poetry, giving it an element of sentimentality through my refusal to permit it any share of an intellect which I considered impure'.[3]

It is usual to think of the change in Yeats's style as becoming evident in the 1903 volume, *In the Seven Woods*, and to see the change as characterized by a new note of realism and bitterness epitomized in the poem 'The Coming of Wisdom with Time'. Yet this poem also epitomizes what must be constantly stressed, that there is an underlying unity, especially of theme, in all his poetry — 'the root is one':

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

This new note of sardonic humour, of self-mockery in that word 'lying' is present, in gentler form perhaps, in the passage from *The Bounty of Sweden* when Yeats contemplates the Nobel medal showing a young man listening to a young and beautiful Muse

[1] Preface to *In the Seven Woods*, 1906 (*Variorum* Edition of *Poems*, eds Peter Allt and R. K. Alspach, 1957, p. 851).

[2] Preface to *In the Seven Woods* (London and Dublin), 1906 (*Variorum Poems*, p. 849).

[3] *Autobiographies*, 1926, p. 233.

and reflects 'I was good-looking once like that young man, but my unpractised verse was full of infirmity, my Muse old as it were; and now I am old and rheumatic, and nothing to look at, but my Muse is young'.[1]

Yet the comparison is not always in favour of the later poetry. Some of the ballads of *Last Poems* and even 'Under Ben Bulben' itself seem to me to be marred by the 'mechanical rhythms' that satisfy 'the dull ears of the common man'[2] which Yeats complained of in the Young Ireland poets.

The 'unpractised verse' of the early poems has many qualities, chief among them the extraordinary sublety and variety of rhythm, as one of the very earliest poems, 'The Cloak, the Boat and the Shoes' shows. Yeats himself spoke of prosody as 'the most certain of my instincts'[3] and many of the early songs and lyrics, for instance 'A Faery Song', 'The Pity of Love' and 'Who goes with Fergus?' show the breath-taking virtuosity and the 'minute felicities of phrase and sound that are the temptation and delight of rhyme',[4] as Yeats put it, of the young poet who was indeed a 'singer born'. Yeats's love for the poetry of Shelley may have been as much a delight in Shelley's lyric gift as in his neo-platonic imagery. Certainly there seems to be more than a chance resemblance between the invocation of 'The Stolen Child' and the two versions of Shelley's 'To Jane, 1822'.[5] Not only is there a similarity in rhythm and vocabulary but the two poems have in common a romantic escapism, as Yeats himself admitted when he characterized his verse at the time as 'almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world, and a summons to that flight. The Chorus to the "Stolen Child" sums it up — that it is not the

[1] *Dramatis Personæ*, 1936, p. 159.

[2] *A Book of Irish Verse*, ed. W. B. Yeats, 1895, p. xiv.

[3] Letter to Edith Shackleton Heald, quoted by J. Hone, *W. B. Yeats 1865–1939*, 1942, p. 45.

[4] *Essays and Introductions*, p. 357.

[5] Shelley, *Poetical Works*, ed. Hutchinson, pp. 752 and 748;

(a) First draft:
Radiant Sister of the Day,
Awake, arise and come away
To the wild woods and the plains,
To the pools where winter rains
Image all the roof of leaves . . .

(b) From the final poem:
Away, away, from men and towns,
To the wild wood and the downs —
To the silent wilderness
Where the soul need not repress
Its music lest it should not find
An echo in another mind . . .

poetry of insight and knowledge, but of longing and complaint — the cry of the heart against necessity'.[1]

However, in an apprentice poet, the quality of lyricism far outweighs the defects of youth, though it must be admitted that the later poetry gains from the mature poet's ability not only to alleviate intensity but to heighten it with a sometimes deprecatory awareness of other possible responses to a given situation; the reasoning faculty, intellect, no longer suppressed or ignored but caught up in an imaginative whole. The early poetry seems sometimes too heavily charged with emotion for the circumstances, too little aware of the incredulity or humour of the audience: although it has been claimed with some truth that in 'The Madness of King Goll' Yeats found his true voice, such lines as 'A tramping of tremendous feet' and 'Our married voices wildly trolled' suffer from the characteristic defect of youth, of taking oneself too seriously.

By contrast, in 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited' Yeats has learnt to modify with humour what might otherwise seem an over-histrionic gesture, as for instance when he sinks to his knees in an access of emotion, 'My heart recovering with covered eyes'. The word 'heart-smitten' in the preceding line, with its lighter connotation of the absurdity of the lover's plight, is subtly transferred to the old man's physical infirmity; the pun suggests the physical pain as he shrinks from the intensity of feeling evoked by the picture before him, but immediately the humour forestalls any suggestion of self-pity. In the next line the poet at once suggests the involuntary tears which made him hide his eyes with his hand and yet the pun on 'covered' and 'recovered' saves the gesture from seeming false or exaggerated. A similar contrast can be drawn between the early poem 'Anashuya and Vijaya' and the late poem 'The Three Bushes', though the poems are similar in theme, as a note on the early poem shows. It was, Yeats tells us, 'meant to be the first scene of a play about a man loved by two women, who had the one soul between them, the one woman waking when the other slept, and knowing but daylight as the other only night'.[2] But in the early 'Indian' poem the mood is one of melancholy and weariness, the very sun 'has laid his chin on the

[1] *Letters*, ed. Wade, p. 63.
[2] *Variorum Poems*, p. 841.

grey wood'. The subject-matter of the section, *Crossways*, where this poem is included, has not yet become Irish and Yeats believed that the nature of his Irish audience was one element in the toughening-up process of his neo-romanticism:

To some extent I have an advantage in having a fierce nation to write for . . . It is like riding a wild horse. If one's hands fumble or one's knees loosen, one is thrown . . . It is fairly easy for me who do so much of my work by the critical rather than the imaginative faculty to be precise and simple . . .[1]

The preface Yeats wrote for *The Book of Irish Verse* published by Methuen in 1895 certainly shows that Yeats's critical faculty was in advance of his poetic practice. Although he gives unstinted praise to its sincerity, he is already critical of a certain joylessness in Mangan's work even when his own poetry was still full of passive melancholy: 'A miserable man may think well and express himself with great vehemence, but he cannot make beautiful things, for Aphrodite never rises from any but a tide of joy.'[2] Moreover Mangan lacked 'the self-knowledge, the power of selection, the harmony of mind,' which enables the poet to be the master of life and to mould the world as he pleases. The linking here of self-knowledge with artistic power is significant:

The friends that have it I do wrong
When ever I remake a song,
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake.[3]

Yeats thought 'the labour of the alchemists' a 'befitting comparison for all deliberate change of style'[4] since alchemist and poet alike seek perfection, of which one symbol is gold and another the perfect circle, the snake with its tail in its mouth. It now seems an almost inevitable part of Yeats's dedicated craftmanship that he attempted so to arrange the final form of *Collected Poems*, balancing poem against poem, section against section, that it seems to embody his cherished concept of Unity of Being. Perhaps then it is no mere coincidence that the first section, *Crossways*, and the last poem, 'Under Ben Bulben', should

[1] *Letters*, ed. Wade, p. 358.
[2] Introduction to *Book of Irish Verse*, ed. W. B. Yeats, 1895.
[3] *Variorum Poems*, p. 778.
[4] *Variorum Poems*, p. 849.

both be concerned with a moment of spiritual initiation, as the epigraph to *Crossways*, the line from Blake, shows. The first poem of this section, 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd', is a natural opening to the whole volume for it describes Yeats's choice of the path of poetry rather than of action.

When Yeats spoke of the poet 'moulding the phantasmagoria' in his criticism of Mangan, he was anticipating the use of the term in the 'General Introduction to my Work' of 1937. Here he speaks of the poet as assuming a part in a drama, and in *Autobiographies*, of the lyric poet being shaped to 'some one out of half a dozen traditional poses, lover or saint, sage or sensualist, or mere mocker of all life'.[1] So, in his *Selections from Spenser* he chose from 'The Shepherds Calender' he says 'only those parts which are about love or old age'. As early as 'Time and the Witch Vivien' and in many of the early ballads, such as 'Moll Magee' and 'The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner', Yeats shows his preoccupation with the ravages of time. He had come to believe that 'the element of strength in poetic construction is common passion' as he had come to 'believe more strongly every day that the element of strength in poetic language is common idiom'.[2]

This stress on common idiom, reinforced by 'much knowledge of the stage, through the exfoliation of my own style', led him to a rigorous revision of his early work. He learnt the value of 'occasional prosaic words' in giving the impression of a man speaking, the effectiveness of contrast and of the subordination of detail: 'I have introduced such numbness or dullness, turned, for instance, "the curd-pale moon" into "the brilliant moon" that all might seem, as it were, remembered with indifference, except some one vivid image.'[3]

There is indeed, as Hone was the first critic to point out, a very real danger in taking at face-value what may seem in *Collected Poems* to be early poems, and before exclaiming at any line apparently characteristic of the later manner, it is as well to consult the *Variorum* Edition to see when the line first crept into print. Two instances may show more clearly than any other method the weaknesses in his early work Yeats himself was

[1] *Autobiographies*, 1926, p. 107.
[2] *Letters*, ed. Wade, p. 462.
[3] *Dramatis Personæ*, 1936, p. 53.

anxious to eradicate. The poem entitled 'The Dedication to a Book of Stories selected from the Irish Novelists' (Yeats's titles, like his style, exfoliated with the years) might lead us to suppose that already in 1893 Yeats was disenchanted with Ireland:

> That country where a man can be so crossed;
> Can be so battered, badgered and destroyed
> That he's a loveless man:

Here there is that typical triple group of words, an onomatopoeic building-up of verbs that batter and badger us as well as him; there is the half-humorous extravagance of the idiomatic 'destroyed' in a serious context, and in all, a sense of anger and frustration which seem in the later manner. A clue which might wake our suspicions is the final line 'On Munster grass and Connemara skies' which suggests that this belongs to a later, post-Sligo period, as indeed it does, having been rewritten and published in 1924. In its early form, it expresses an entirely different mood, far from disillusioned, and the language is mild to the point of insipidity. It is 'dream-burdened', full of oh's and ah's. The later Yeats must have deplored the sentimentality of such phrases as the 'old village faces' and the 'old dear places' and the vacuity of the final journalistic phrase 'the cause that never dies'.

Another instance of rewriting is of the poem 'Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea'. In the original ending, the reiterated and weakening 'ands' and the self-indulgence of 'a moan' are to me positive defects, not to speak of the uneasy scansion of the last line, which has the sort of weakness Yeats's father excused on the grounds that the young poet composed 'in a loud voice, manipulating of course the quantities to his taste':[1]

> In three day's time, Cuchulain with a moan
> Stood up, and came to the long sands alone:
> For four days warred he with the bitter tide,
> And the waves flowed above him, and he died.

In the final version there are positive gains: the half-assonance of 'stirred' and 'stared', the linking by alliteration of 'cars' and 'cried' culminating in the magnificent polysyllabic 'invulnerable tide': these seem not only technically superior but also to carry the implication of an heroic out-facing of the elements, the defiance

[1] Quoted by J. Hone, *W. B. Yeats 1865–1939*, p. 43.

of a Lear rather than the self-pity of a Romeo's moan. The first title, 'The Death of Cuchulain' stresses the passive nature of the final surrender, whereas the final title, 'Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea', suggests the heroic stance against impossible odds.

In the early poems and stories the fairies, though not entirely benevolent — indeed their very heartlessness is a relief from the over-solemn human characters — seem more familiar than the frightening race of the Sidhe, 'that pale long-visaged company' that sweeps through the later poetry, making their first appearance in 'The Hosting of the Sidhe' in *The Wind among the Reeds*. As Yeats explained, 'the fairies can but appear in forms borrowed from our limited consciousness'. In the early poems too, there are frequent references to conventional religious symbols, to Mary, Mother of God, to candles, priests and angels, an imagery with Catholic rather than Protestant associations which may have been partly a conscious effort of Yeats to associate himself with the traditional beliefs of his Irish audience, as well as to suggest continuity with an earlier ballad tradition. The word 'divine' is common in these earlier poems but became less common after the turn of the century, for Yeats later seems to prefer a non-religious terminology, such as The Great Questioner or The Emperor or even 'congeries of beings'[1] for the deity.

Yeats was a believing man, and it is in this that he diverges most sharply from the French Symbolists whose influence upon him was at its height when he was writing the poems of *The Rose* and *The Wind among the Reeds*. The study of Blake that he and Edwin Ellis were to publish in 1893 had already shown Yeats the possibilities of a coherent philosophy behind poetry and his essays of the time, 'The Symbolism of Poetry' and 'Symbolism in Painting', show that Yeats realized that the new movement would enable him to reconcile the careful craftmanship that he had admired in the poets of the Rhymers' Club with his own yearnings for a coherent body of thought, a philosophy of poetry to which the Rhymers had been notably unsympathetic.

The characteristics of symbolism, the subtler rhythms, the inclusion of the mysterious and irrational, the ambivalent attitude to nature at once distrusted for its deceptive world of appearances

[1] *Explorations*, p. 305.

yet valued as symbolic of spiritual values; all these find a place in Yeats's essays as in Symons's famous definition of Symbolism:

'Description is banished that beautiful things may be evoked, magically; the regular beat of verse is broken in order that words may fly, upon subtler wings. Mystery is no longer feared, as the great mystery in whose midst we are islanded was feared by those to whom that unknown sea was only a great void. We are coming closer to nature, as we seem to shrink from it with something of horror, disdaining to catalogue the trees of the forest.'[1]

Yet Yeats's essay 'Symbolism in Painting' draws religion and literature together as the French Symbolists did not, for he believed that religious thought and the poetic vision are alike in search of perfection and art 'entangles, in complex colours and forms, a part of the Divine Essence'.[2] 'Those dream associations which were the whole art of Mallarmé' are plainly the legacy of symbolism which had the most effect on such poems as 'The Secret Rose', 'The Travail of Passion' and 'The Poet pleads with the Elemental Powers'. Yeats recognized this not only in the reference in *Autobiographies* to the influence upon him of Symons's translations from Mallarmé, but much later, in 1937, in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley.[3] He had been reading Roger Fry's translations from Mallarmé, he said, and realized that 'for some furlongs' he and Mallarmé had trod the same road, although their paths had then diverged. The comments made by the editor, Julian Bell, on Fry's translations from Mallarmé,[4] which was presumably the book Yeats was reading, for it had appeared the year before, are interesting as indicative of the common ground of the two poets, as well as of the point of divergence. Bell speaks of Mallarmé's chief characteristic as being that he did not expressly state but 'used obscurity as a poetic instrument to hint, insinuate, suggest', thereby 'creating alike depth and distance'. Bell also remarks on the sterility which afflicted Mallarmé, his obsession with the blank page, the white paper: 'He can write, for his early poems are masterly, but he does not know what about' may be another link between the poets: 'What, be a singer born and lack

[1] Arthur Symons, Introduction to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 1896.
[2] *Essays and Introductions*, p. 148.
[3] *Letters*, ed. Wade, p. 887.
[4] *Poems of Mallarmé*, translated by Roger Fry, 1936, p. 308.

a theme?' cries Yeats, though in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' he makes a poem out of the very negation. But Bell's allusion to the way in which Mallarmé seems to anticipate the Cubist painters by 'breaking up the theme in the process of poetical analysis' may have seemed to Yeats the most striking difference between them. Certainly he expressed his distrust of the Cubist manner in no uncertain terms when he castigated 'those radical critics who encourage our painters to decorate the walls with those cubes, triangles, ovoids, that are all stiff under the touch'.[1] Perhaps, though, it was Mallarmé's example in 'Crise de Vers', from which Yeats took the title for 'The Trembling of the Veil', which encouraged Yeats to be one of those poets mentioned in 'Rosa Alchemica' who 'wrote the principles of their art in prefaces'.

And yet 'the logic of events', even if 'cheerful acceptance' was impossible to him at the time, played some part in Yeats's evolution, as what he called 'my wretched novel', *The Speckled Bird*, shows. This narrative of Michael Herne's unlucky love for Margaret perhaps most clearly reveals the nature of Yeats's inspiration and what he conceived to be the aim of his work when he was writing 'The Wind among the Reeds', and there are verbal parallels to support this view. The characters of Michael Herne (like Owen Aherne surely a persona of Yeats) and Margaret are but thinly veiled disguises for Yeats and Maud Gonne: apple blossom glimmers above Margaret's head as it had above Maud's when Yeats first saw her. Michael Herne prays to the 'Divine Essences' to help him win Margaret's love, for he was certain that she

'would understand his purpose and be ready to leave all the world for it if only he could get a few people to understand it, and make an image of this new life, and he remembered with shame his readiness to give up what he had called his dream.'[2]

Before setting out on this work, he writes her a letter embodying his aim:

I shall make a little kingdom, a part of the great kingdom to come, and I will ask you to sit beside me as its queen. We will only make a

[1] *Essays and Introductions*, p. x.
[2] *The Bell*, 1, 6, p. 28 (Extract from *The Speckled Bird*).

beginning, but centuries after we are dead cities shall be overthrown it may be because of an air that we have hummed, or because of a curtain full of meaning that we have hung upon a wall.[1]

The dream was finally crushed in 1903 when Yeats heard of Maud Gonne's marriage to John MacBride and a great wind of change, the counterpart of the big wind of 1903 that he describes in the epilogue to *In the Seven Woods*,[2] brought into his verse 'a less dream-burdened will'. As F. R. Higgins put it, 'his poetry of mood' gave 'way to his poetry of dramatic passion. It became hard-bitten: more Gaelic in feeling'.[3] A new era had begun.

[1] Ibid., p. 29.
[2] *In the Seven Woods*, Dun Emer Press edition, Dundrum MCMIII.
[3] *The Arrow*, W. B. Yeats Commemoration Number, Summer 1939.

Weary Night

Chill of the bamboo grove   enters my bedroom,
Wilderness-moonlight   fills a corner of the yard.
Heavy dew   forms tiny droplets,
Scattered stars   come and go.
In the murk   fireflies shine from themselves.
At rest on the water   birds call each other.
Amid ten thousand events   of shield and spear,
Empty sorrow   and the pure night waning.

TU FU
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translation by DAVID LATTIMORE