Chapter 1

Early Yeats

> A conviction that the world was now but a bundle of fragments possessed me without ceasing.
>
> *Four Years: 1887–1891*, Book I of *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922)

At the age of fifty, Yeats surprised his family by revealing that he remembered "little of childhood but its pain" (A 45). This confession may also surprise new readers of his early works, where his sorrowful, otherworldly longings sometimes seem more literary than real. But the young poet's pain was only too real. It arose from his keen perception of the fractured state both of the world around him and of his own inner being, a perception that made life appear incoherent and therefore empty of meaning and value. In response, he devoted his art to the never-ending effort to forge his fragmented self and surroundings into unity, with outcomes by turns triumphant and failed, admirable and problematic. This chapter outlines his early life and work through the end of the 1890s.

Childhood

Yeats's youthful anxieties originated in the tensions that troubled his family and in the social and political divides of late-nineteenth-century Irish life. In 1867, less than two years after the poet's birth in suburban Dublin on June 13, 1865, his father abandoned a promising law career and enrolled in a London art school with the intention of becoming a painter. Influenced by such

scientific and rationalist thinkers as Charles Darwin and John Stuart Mill, John Butler Yeats had already exchanged Christian belief for skeptical, agnostic views that compensated for religion by playing up the importance of art. Such radical breaks with convention eventually fostered W. B. Yeats's development, not least by bringing him into contact with London's intellectual and artistic circles. But they also opened a deep rift between his parents, placed him at times in impoverished circumstances, and weakened his ties to his forefathers' faith. As a child who divided his time between London and visits to family back home, he grew sharply conscious of the conflicts that alienated colonial Ireland from imperial Britain and that, within Ireland, divided Protestant descendants of British settlers from their usually less powerful and poorer Catholic neighbors.

Yeats's mother, Susan Mary (née Pollexfen) Yeats, came from a prosperous Protestant family. His father's background was even more impeccable: John Butler Yeats hailed from a long line of well-off merchants, government officials, landowners, and Church of Ireland clergymen. When Susan Yeats married in 1863, she had every expectation that her handsome young university-educated husband would become a prominent Dublin lawyer and provide a comfortable Irish life. She certainly had no desire to live among artistic bohemians, and disliked the eccentric friends her husband made in London. She also disliked living in England, and resented the financial hardships and loss of social position that attended her husband's altered choice of an unprofitable and (to her mind) vaguely disreputable career. Over the course of her eldest son's youth she gradually retreated into a speechless and bedridden state, brought on by depression and by a series of strokes that hastened her death in 1900 at the age of fifty-eight. Although the patriarchal structure of Victorian life and her own poor health obliged her to suffer in silence, her brooding presence imprinted her children with a profound sense of loss associated not only with the missing harmony that might have characterized a happier family's life but also with their exile from Ireland and their diminished class status.

John Butler Yeats might have minimized his family's hardships had he been better able to translate his considerable artistic talents into finished, saleable paintings. Had he lived in an earlier era, however, he might never have needed to worry about his fortunes. These were declining even before he left the law for art. His own father had made a number of unsuccessful investments, and at the time of his marriage his only income came from some house property in Dublin and some modest farms in County Kildare. Although this sustained him in comfort in 1863, it soon shrank drastically. By 1880 his property was earning next to nothing, and by 1888 it had all

been sold, the proceeds consumed by debts. These were the years when the organization known as the Land League was encouraging poor and mostly Catholic tenant farmers all over Ireland to protest their lot by taking concerted action against their usually Protestant landlords. Tenants withheld rents, ostracized landlords, and sometimes engaged in violent intimidation. Though many landlords responded by evicting their tenants, the Land War (as it came to be called) eventually led to legislative concessions that limited rents and provided funds to assist tenants in purchasing the land they worked. The Yeatses were one of many Protestant landowning families whose status was diminished by this process. Such diminishment – in the form of unpaid bills and somewhat shabby residences – amplified their household tensions and indelibly marked the attitudes of the boy who would later write such poems as "Upon a House shaken by the Land Agitation."

While the deprivations imposed by the Land War and by his family's break with convention forced Yeats to live out part of his boyhood in dingy urban exile, they also sent him to Sligo, the western Irish seaport home of the Pollexfens. After his father's departure for London, lack of money repeatedly obliged the rest of the family to take refuge with Susan Yeats's parents. Yeats's brother Jack – eventually one of the most distinguished Irish painters of the twentieth century – passed most of his childhood in Sligo. Yeats and his other siblings spent less time there, but nevertheless grew accustomed to staying in their grandparents' house for months on end, especially during their earliest years and their summers. That house, Merville, was an impressive one, a roomy mansion on sixty acres at the edge of town where, in addition to their grandparents, the young Yeatses mixed with a large complement of aunts, uncles, and servants. Although the Pollexfens were seen as socially inferior to Sligo's landed gentry, their wealth was considerable and, for the time being, secure, deriving from mid-sized manufacturing and shipping interests unaffected by the Land War. Merville exposed the Yeats children to solid material comforts and – more importantly – some of the most breathtaking countryside in Ireland. East of Sligo the waters of Lough Gill lapped the shores of many small islands such as the one later immortalized as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." In the north, waterfalls cascaded down the slopes of Ben Bulben, under which stood the fine church at Drumcliff, where Yeats's great-grandfather had been Rector, and where the poet himself would be buried. To the west lay the cairn-topped summit of Knocknarea, the fishing village of Rosses Point, and, after that, the sea.

Both Yeats's earlier and later works make it clear that these places solaced him in deep and lasting ways. And yet his Sligo sojourns did not wholly allay his anxieties. For every restoring voyage west there was another painful

return to London, and such oscillation made him wonder if he truly belonged in either place. In London he was the shy, day-dreaming son of a disconsolate mother and an (apparently) unsuccessful father; at school he was placed near the bottom of his class in most subjects and was derided by his classmates for being unathletic and Irish. In Sligo, he communed with soul-restoring beauty but could not escape some awareness of the fact that his Anglo-Irish family's connections to that beauty were less time-honored than those of the Catholic servants and laborers they employed, whose ties went back for centuries, and whose disadvantaged position reflected their ancestors' displacement by British settlers. A more immediate source of anxiety was the atmosphere at Merville. The Pollexfens were a moody, taciturn family. Chief among them was Yeats's grandfather, William Pollexfen, a "silent and fierce old man" who had run away to sea as a boy and, having made his own fortune by acting boldly, had little patience for those more timid or reflective than he (P 101). His grandson's later poems and *Autobiographies* celebrate the heroism he evinced by performing such deeds as diving off the deck of a ship to examine its damaged rudder. But to the sensitive child he was a forbidding figure who presided over a strictly governed household filled with unspoken frustrations.

Eventually, in 1881, in the throes of financial crisis, John Butler Yeats decided that his homeland might produce more art commissions than England had, and returned his family to Ireland, where they stayed for six years before uprooting back to London. They spent the first part of this homecoming at Howth, a scenic coastal village near Dublin. Though by no means reconciled to her life's unexpected turns, Susan Yeats liked Howth and enjoyed exchanging ghost stories and folk tales with the local fishermen's wives. Her husband and eldest son commuted daily by train to Dublin, where the former had a studio and the latter attended, first, Erasmus Smith High School, and then, beginning in 1884, the Metropolitan School of Art. It was during this period that the teen-aged Yeats began to formulate tentative responses to the conflicts that unsettled his country, his family, and his psyche. That he initially opted for art school is testament to his father's early influence. But by 1886 he had abandoned painting and was gathering his nerve to make his own way as a writer.

Early religious and political views

Spiritual impulses were among the first to stir Yeats into writing. His childhood coincided with a time when growing numbers of people were disavowing orthodox Christianity, largely because the stunning discoveries

of nineteenth-century science – about the earth's age, the existence of now-extinct species, human evolution, and so on – had made it difficult to accept the Bible and other traditional religious authorities at face value. His father's skepticism was uncommon (especially in Ireland) but by no means unparalleled. Yeats found his father's forcefully expressed views difficult to ignore, but also possessed an unquenchable desire for some form of spiritual wholeness capable of easing the world- and self-splintering tensions he felt so keenly. His father's influence and the narrow conventionality he encountered in both Protestantism and Catholicism combined to make him averse to mainstream religious institutions and their official orthodoxies. But he could not share his father's agnosticism and by late adolescence had already rejected both conventional Christianity and scientific materialism. Insisting on intuitive spiritual truths inaccessible to his father's outlook, he embarked on a lifelong search for the secret, symbolically expressed wisdom he believed the world's various orthodox and unorthodox religious traditions might have in common. At the High School and then during his art school years he made friends with like-minded young men, including George Russell, subsequently to become the visionary poet and artist "AE". Soon he began to join and organize hermetical societies, and when the faddish mélange of eastern and western mystical lore known as Theosophy swept Dublin's occult circles in 1885, he immersed himself eagerly. Later, after his family's return to London in 1887, he sought out the Theosophists' leader, the notorious Madame Blavatsky, and continued his study of Buddhist and Hindu traditions as filtered by her and her followers. Although he always preserved some of his father's skepticism, he also experimented with magic and attended séances, experiencing great shock on one occasion when a spirit actually seemed to possess him for several moments. These experiences eventually affected not only the substance of Yeats's works but also, more fundamentally, what he perceived them to be: for him, there was a tantalizing similarity between the aesthetic wholeness created by a poem and the harmonizing supernatural powers of a magical spell. Poems used symbols to evoke mysterious forces that promised to fit life's broken fragments into a deeper hidden unity.

The urge to connect his broken life to a greater unity soon also led Yeats to write in sympathy with those whose visions of a united Ireland demanded reduced or severed ties to Britain. This commitment is often credited to John O'Leary, the bookish former revolutionary who became the young poet's political mentor in 1885. O'Leary urged his protégé to foster a coherent national culture by emulating Thomas Davis and other poets associated with the Young Ireland movement, who had come to fame in the 1840s by writing popular, patriotic verse about Ireland in the English language. O'Leary's

influence was crucial, but Yeats's father also molded his politics. Unlike most members of Protestant families, and despite his losses during the Land War, John Butler Yeats did not embrace Unionism: that set of political and social convictions centering on the preservation of Ireland's political union with Great Britain and of the privileged status conferred by that union on the descendants of the colonists who had crossed the Irish Sea during the centuries-old effort to merge Catholic Ireland with Protestant Britain's empire. He did not, however, approve the aggressive tactics of the Land League or of Charles Stewart Parnell, the leader of the Irish Party in the British Parliament. Before being driven from power by a sex scandal in 1890, Parnell used his control over both the Land League and the Irish Party to maneuver the British Parliament to the verge of granting Home Rule, which would have given Ireland its own partly autonomous legislature. John Butler Yeats supported Home Rule, but believed that pursuing it by threatening means violated the code of an Irish Protestant gentleman. Though his son would later experiment with more radical political ideas, he remained conditioned by his father's instincts about Home Rule and Irish Protestant gentility. His early poems typically offer chivalric allegories that meditate on the complexities of Irish politics and avoid direct calls for real-world insurrections.

Yeats's politics were also conditioned by his meditations on the contrast between London's deprivations and Sligo's more attractive physical and cultural landscapes. By the late 1880s his hatred for the city of his exile had less to do with mere poverty or the humiliation of being singled out as Irish than with the new understanding of London and, more generally, England that he had derived from England's own most radical artists and intellectuals. In addition to being the center of a global empire that included Ireland, England was also the cradle of the industrial revolution and of capitalism, the home of factory-filled, slum-ridden, bustling, wealthy cities. Its association with the enslaving, soul-deadening consequences of empire, mass production, and *laissez-faire* social policies had long been decried by a vibrant countercultural tradition stretching from such Romantic poets as Blake and Shelley forward to the critic John Ruskin and to the so-called Pre-Raphaelite group of artists, whose emphasis on individual imagination and preference for preindustrial modes of life and art had inspired John Butler Yeats's artistic aspirations. Steeping himself in this tradition, and in particular in the aesthetic and political doctrines of William Morris, Yeats associated England with everything he loathed about the modern world: with imperialism, with vulgar, godless materialism, with urban ugliness and squalor. Ireland, by contrast, appeared an unspoiled, beautiful place where people lived according

to age-old traditions and held on to magical, time-honored beliefs. Ireland's remote western regions held special importance, not only because of Yeats's ties to Sligo but also because of the west's comparative isolation from the British influences that had more powerfully affected the populous and accessible east. Although the west had been ravaged by the famines of the 1840s (and thus marked by the catastrophic effects of British neglect), many of its people still spoke Irish, and many more preserved distinctively Irish stories and values. By his early twenties Yeats was searching for the answers to his spiritual and political questions in the folk beliefs of Ireland's western country people and in the heroic myths of the whole island's ancient Gaelic culture. These traditions, he felt, preserved satisfying ways of life and eternal spiritual truths that had been forgotten in modernized places like England and that were threatened, even in Ireland, by the encroachment of British culture. The British sometimes justified their empire in Ireland and elsewhere by describing those over whom they held sway as savages. In texts ranging from novels to political cartoons, they stereotyped the Irish as irrational, effeminate, and drunken: in other words, as unfit to govern themselves. During his early years, Yeats sought to counter such stereotypes by presenting Ireland – and especially its ancient and rural aspects – as full of beauty, wisdom, and passionate heroism. He thus also laid a foundation for building his own satisfying identity.

"Crossways"

Depending on the edition, Yeats's collected *Poems* begins either with a series of lyrics grouped under the heading of "Crossways" or with a long poem called "The Wanderings of Oisin" (pronounced "AW-sheen").[1] Either way, it commences with material mostly drawn from the poet's first major book, *The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems* (1889). Yeats assembled "Crossways" in 1895 for his first collected edition, and though it makes an accessible point of entry to his poetry, readers should understand that it offers a much-revised distillation of the book that appeared in 1889. The desire to construct an oeuvre that brought himself and his world into unity made Yeats an inveterate reviser. As such, he created pitfalls for those who study his compositions without awareness of their textual histories. He also created opportunities for us to strengthen our grasp of his works by comparing earlier and later versions.[2]

"Crossways" opens with "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," a lyric that predates Yeats's decision to focus his writing on Ireland, and that instead

reflects his teen-aged immersion in the pastoral and Romantic traditions of English poetry. Though few would rank it among his most accomplished works, it manifests crucial early inclinations. Its speaker is an idealized poet-shepherd of the type that conventionally appears in pastoral poetry, the traditions of which extend back to the ancient Greeks. Belying the title's description of him as "Happy," the shepherd laments the death of these age-old traditions, extinguished in a world that has exchanged nourishing dreams for the "painted toy" of "Grey Truth" (presumably, the spiritless truth of scientific materialism). To a world made "sick" by this situation, he defiantly announces that of all the "changing things" constituting temporal, material experience, "Words alone are certain good." This resonant statement calls to mind Yeats's interest in magic, in symbolic words capable of summoning supernatural realities. But it also suggests the long-standing predilection of Romantic poets for proclaiming the primacy of mind or word over matter; one thinks of Blake's pronouncement that "Mental Things are Alone Real" or the implication of Shelley's "Mont Blanc" that the physical world would be nothing "If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy[.]"[3] Though interested in Theosophy and other similar creeds, Yeats tells us in his *Autobiographies* that, even at this stage of his life, he believed most fundamentally "that whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion" (A 97). Something deep within him always insisted on his right to imagine the truth for himself, unfettered by others' perceptions. An unmistakable hint of such boldness rings out here, even amid the derivative echoes.

Some of the shepherd's claims for poetic words are asserted so fervently, however, that they seem to betray anxiety. His blustering dismissal of the "warring kings," for example, suggests that, to some extent, his swagger masks the uncertainties of an instinctively timid poet who is far from sure that his preference for "endless reverie" really does make him superior to those who pursue heroic deeds. This uncertainty indicates the nascent presence of a quality that would eventually grow into one of Yeats's greatest strengths: his willingness to explore his doubts, even as he asserts his beliefs. Here, these doubts come across most obviously in what the shepherd tells us about the shell and then about the "hapless faun." The "twisted, echo-harbouring shell" – surely an emblem of poetry itself – responds with solipsistic "guile" to the stories people bring to it, offering comfort only for "a little while" before its echoing words "fade" and "die." Such language greatly undercuts the ensuing repetition of the claim that "words alone are certain good." The faun's evocation is similarly vexed; the only thing certain here is that the faun is dead and buried: that his ghost will be revived by

the shepherd's "glad singing" depends upon a dream, possibly an illusory, narcotic one, given the reference to "poppies on the brow." Can dream-inspired words transform the world of the living and reanimate the world of the dead? The poem hopes so, but the more one reads it the less confident its hopes come to seem.

Yeats explores his uncertainties further in subsequent "Crossways" poems, such as "The Sad Shepherd" and the several poems inspired by classical Indian literature that follow. "The Indian upon God" considers whether any deity merely mirrors a narcissistic self, while a similarly narcissistic "parrot . . . / Raging at his own image in the enamelled sea" presides over the paradise promised by "The Indian to his Love." The possibility that poetic words might encourage a self-deceiving solipsism was taken up by an even greater number of poems in the original 1889 book; it represented an obvious nightmare for a young poet who feared nothing more than being trapped inside a fragmented inner being, isolated from cultural and spiritual unities. In 1889, however, the Indian lyrics came before rather than after "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," which there was followed by "The Madness of King Goll," an equally revealing early poem that also earned a prominent place in "Crossways." "King Goll" calls attention to the Happy Shepherd's uncertainties by dramatizing a warring king who has given up dusty deeds only to find that poetic dreams foster "inhuman" desires for things beyond the reach of mere mortals. The poem also illustrates another important facet of Yeats's early work: its interest in pre-Christian Ireland's heroic myths, something emphasized in the 1889 collection by the imposing presence of its lengthy title poem. Yeats based "The Wanderings of Oisin" on an old Irish legend known through comparatively recent English translations. It centers on a warrior much like King Goll whose decision to abandon the mortal world of his fighting companions similarly ends in disaster. Following a beautiful supernatural woman called Niamh (pronounced "NEE-iv"), Oisin crosses western seas to otherworldly islands inhabited by immortals; there he devotes a hundred years each to dancing, fighting, and resting before yielding to the impulse to revisit his former companions. He returns to find them long dead, their heroic, pagan way of life tamed by the Christian orthodoxies of the recently arrived Saint Patrick. Touching the earth, Oisin breaks the spell that has preserved his youth and is suddenly withered by the weight of his 300-year absence. Urged by the saint to repent and convert, he defiantly vows to rejoin the warriors of old, even if he must do so in hell.

Both "The Wanderings of Oisin" and "The Madness of King Goll" exemplify the youthful poet's emerging commitment to Irish cultural nationalism: they associate Ireland with traditions of heroism and beauty and so contest

the demeaning stereotypes sometimes used by the British to justify their rule. Traces of a more radical nationalism also show up in "Oisin." When the hero answers the saint by pledging loyalty to the Fenians, he invokes a name that Yeats's readers would have associated not only with Oisin's band of ancient warriors but also with the nineteenth-century forerunners of the Irish Republican Army. But the milder implications that predominate in "Oisin" and "King Goll" typify Yeats's earliest treatments of Irish heroic materials, distinguishing them from the more strident poems O'Leary had suggested as models. If one compares either "Oisin" or "King Goll" to such famous earlier poetic celebrations of Irish national heroes as James Mangan's translation of "O'Hussey's Ode to the Maguire" or Thomas Davis's "Lament for the Death of Owen Roe O'Neill," one notices a number of differences that make Yeats's poems more complex.[4] Yeats focuses on mythic heroes from an age that had faded centuries before the modern struggle between Ireland and Britain began; Mangan and Davis celebrate historical figures who led seventeenth-century rebellions. In Yeats's poems the central conflict takes place in the hero's psyche; Mangan and (especially) Davis describe external conflicts between the forces of Irish good and British evil. Their heroes are one-dimensional figures presented as having fought the good fight and as meriting unadulterated reverence. Oisin and King Goll are multifaceted: they appear more as failed questers than as tragically sacrificed patriots.

Indeed, "King Goll" depicts a man who becomes dissatisfied despite his success in unifying Ireland politically, driving away its foreign enemies, and bringing it prosperity. This happens when, at the climax of yet another violent triumph, he enters a "whirling and a wandering fire" that grows in his "most secret spirit" and inspires a strange vision of the cosmos and of the "battle-breaking men" around him. This epiphany enriches his perceptions, changing him from a shouting warrior who tramples in bloody mire to a gentle intimate of the natural world. But, by arousing desires for otherworldly experiences that he can imagine but never consummate, it also exiles him from human society and ultimately drives him mad. His "inhuman misery" is temporarily "quenched" after he finds a tympan, an ancient Irish stringed instrument that emblematically suggests Irish music and poetry. By the time we hear him speak, however, the tympan's wires have broken, and he seems fated to wander endlessly. The tympan's broken condition recalls the death of European poetic traditions confronted by the Happy Shepherd. It also evokes the precipitous decline of the Irish language and of native Gaelic culture that occurred in the early nineteenth century as a result of repressive British policies and the desolation wrought by famine. In so doing, it hints at Yeats's dissatisfaction with the English-language poetry written in Ireland in