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Introduction

Few modern writers have had careers as long, varied, and complex as W. B. Yeats. Born in 1865, he produced works that arguably belong to each of three major literary historical periods or traditions: the Romantic, the Victorian, and the Modernist. His thought was profoundly dialectical; for nearly every truth he made or found, he also embraced a counter-truth: a proposition that contradicted the first truth, was equally true, and did not negate it. He repeatedly remade himself as a writer, as a public figure, even as a person. And yet his life and work revolved around a few central preoccupations and themes: the Ireland of his day, the occult, sexual love, and the power of art to work in and change the world. In 1938, the year before he died, he wrote "The Spur," whose speaker accuses the reader of thinking it "horrible" that an old man should be filled with "lust and rage" and retorts "They were not such a plague when I was young. / What else have I to spur me into song?" (*VP* 591). The continuity Yeats asserts here is both genuine and false. If we turn from this poem to the early poetry expecting to see the young Yeats lusting and raging, we will be disappointed. The explicit embrace of lust and rage is a feature of Yeats's later years, when he cast himself as the wild, wicked old man to avoid settling into any of the more comfortable poses available to him: the venerable sage, the elder statesman, or the famous poet. All these roles appealed to him, and he adopted each of them at times, but he also drove himself beyond them, towards more risky personae. As he put it in "An Acre of Grass," "My temptation is quiet. / . . . Myself must I remake" (*VP* 575–6).

On the other hand, the continuity between the early and late work implied by "The Spur" is not simply spurious: there *is* a real continuity there. Yeats's early poems are not exactly lustful, but they do circle obsessively around desire and its objects. They depict a kind of desire that cannot be satisfied; it feeds off its own frustration, and it exceeds its objects. This desire is an eternal, disembodied force that sweeps across humanity; poems like "The Travail of Passion" describe what happens "When an immortal passion breathes in

mortal clay" (*VP* 172). As for rage, Yeats's early works do not display the naked anger and the will to shock that one finds in many of the later poems, but they repeatedly portray speakers who are struggling, isolated, and embattled in some way; many are poet-figures. The speaker of "The Sad Shepherd," for example, tries to comfort himself by finding or creating sympathetic correspondences between his mood and his natural surroundings in the manner of the Romantic poets. But nature remains alien and indifferent to him; the shell to whom he tells his story "Changed all he sang to inarticulate moan / Among her wildering whirls, forgetting him" (*VP* 69). So we can and should discern, beneath the shifts and transformations that mark Yeats's career, the underlying threads that link all the phases of his work together.

Most of his major preoccupations were established quite early in his life. His lifelong interest in the theatre manifested itself in his earliest writings; his very first publications, in the spring of 1885, when he was just twenty, consisted of several lyrics and a verse play, *The Island of Statues*. Throughout his career, dialogue appealed to him because it allowed him to stage conflicts between opposing principles, voices, or moods. His earliest work was not Irish in its themes, but that same year Yeats met the ageing Fenian John O'Leary, and, at O'Leary's urging, joined the Young Ireland Society. This and his connection with another society, the Contemporary Club, brought Yeats into contact with a circle of nationalist intellectuals. He began to read Irish literature, and his subsequent publications bore the marks of that new interest. Over the next few years he began to establish himself as a freelance critic and editor. The year 1885 also attests to Yeats's early and enduring interest in spiritualism and the occult. That year he helped found the Dublin Hermetic Society, and in 1886 he met the charismatic Mohini Chatterjee, whose Eastern mystical philosophy was much in vogue in Theosophist circles. In the late 1880s he met Maud Gonne for the first time, and conceived one of the most famous unrequited passions in literary history. Within three months of their meeting (as Yeats later dated it), Gonne became pregnant by her lover Lucien Millevoye; Yeats would learn about Millevoye and their two children nearly ten years later. By 1890 he was living in London, and helped start the Rhymers' Club, a bohemian literary society with a significant homosexual subculture and a set of aesthetic ideas that participated in Decadence and Symbolism.

His early work often combines all these elements: nationalism, the occult, love, and contemporary avant-garde poetry. Perhaps the most famous examples are the Rose poems of *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899); the Rose is imagined variously as a symbol of eternal beauty, a bringer of apocalypse, an actual beloved, the priestess of an occult shrine, a figure for Ireland, a force for peace, and an incitement to war. For the

poet–speaker, the complex and shifting symbolism of the Rose often helps him to structure relationships between conflicting imperatives. For example, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" uses the Rose to explore a tension between the search for the eternal, abstract, and transcendent, and the drive to remain rooted in the concrete, personal, and everyday: "Come near, come near, come near – Ah, leave me still / A little space for the rose-breath to fill! / Lest I no more hear common things that crave" (*VP* 101). "To Ireland in the Coming Times" invokes the Rose in order to take up another potential conflict: between Yeats's occult pursuits and his nationalist politics. The poem asserts their compatibility, but implicitly acknowledges that future readers may or may not agree. Yeats's poems of this period are more dreamlike and ornate than his later poems, but they are best approached without condescension; many of them are (in their own way) just as intellectually rigorous, complex, and concerned with conflict as his later works.

The Yeats of the early work also drew on the world of Irish myth and folklore to meditate in verse on the incompatibility of the natural and supernatural worlds. Critics sometimes label his early poems escapist, but this is somewhat misleading. The early work is full of speakers who yearn to escape from the everyday. But the escapism is nearly always qualified in some way. In some poems, such as "Fergus and the Druid," the speaker is granted access to a supernatural realm or knowledge, but pays too great a price: "now I have grown nothing, knowing all" (*VP* 104). In others the wish to escape is never fulfilled, and pursuing it ruins the speaker's life: examples in this vein include "The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland" and "The Song of Wandering Aengus." Still other poems represent the supernatural as alluring but also threatening; these include "The Hosting of the Sidhe" and "The Stolen Child." Finally, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (*VP* 117) offers a speaker whose nostalgia for an idealized Ireland is a product of city life among the "pavements grey," and whose wish to leave the city – "I will arise and go now" – will remain perpetually deferred. Yeats consistently combined an immense need for revelation, for belief, with an intense and critical skepticism; this makes it difficult to determine exactly what he believed and when. In any event, however, the world of the occult and the supernatural was real enough to him to pose genuine dangers.

Many of Yeats's early lyrics are love poems; the early Yeats explored love and desire in several different registers. Very early poems like "The Falling of the Leaves" and "Ephemera" adopt the world-weary pose favored by the Decadents. Yeats, who did not have his first sexual experience with a woman until he was over thirty, wrote at age twenty-four of "that hour of gentleness / When the poor tired child, Passion, falls asleep" (*VP* 80). Mostly, however, versions of romantic and sexual frustration dominate. And much of

the imagery in these early poems also displays the influence of the poets of the 1890s. Female figures have dim, dewy, or half-closed eyes; they are "pearl-pale" (*VP* 158) or "cloud-pale" (*VP* 163), they have long, heavy hair and a generally sensuous atmosphere. As George Watson observes in his chapter (pp. 46–7), they look like pre-Raphaelite paintings. The speakers are lover–poet figures who are at the utter mercy of the beloved; their abasement ranges from the material – "But I, being poor, have only my dreams" (*VP* 176) – to the fatal and the apocalyptic.[1] However, these speakers often salvage significant personal and artistic power out of frustration and failure. The speaker of "He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" may not have the cloths of heaven to offer his beloved, but instead he produces a poem whose intricate patterns of repetition create a beautiful, tapestry-like effect. Every rhyme in the poem, for example, involves the repetition of the same word; "cloths" is rhymed with "cloths," "light" with "light," and so on. To take another example, the jester in "The Cap and Bells" does capture the heart of the queen, though he has to die to do it.

In his early reviews and essays, Yeats was a forceful proponent and theorist of the Irish Literary Revival, even though, taken together, the early prose works suggest a changing struggle for definition as often as they demonstrate the articulation of a steady set of principles. The early poems proclaim Yeats's engagement with Ireland and Irish culture in various ways too. Some, like "The Ballad of Moll Magee" or "The Ballad of Father Gilligan," use a ballad measure to invoke the folk tradition and oral culture. Others link themselves to a specific landscape by using Irish place names. "The Ballad of Father O'Hart" refers to Coloony, Knocknarea, Knocknashee, Tiraragh, Ballinafad, and Inishmurray, all places in the Sligo area.[2] These references combine towns, natural features (a mountain, an island) and the folkloric associations of such places. The poem thus suggests a symbolic geography that maps relationships among the human, natural, and supernatural or mythic worlds, something the poems do in other ways as well. It also displays a geographical imagination that is profoundly local, rather than national, but that is harnessed in the service of a nationalist re-possession of territory. Other poems use figures out of Irish myth like Oisin, Fergus, and Cuchulain. The early Yeats's Ireland is alternately a homely, rural landscape populated by rustics, and an idealized, otherworldly place. In both cases Yeats associates it with childhood, and with extreme age. "Into the Twilight" claims that "Your mother Eire is always young" (*VP* 59), but this is the eternal youth of the ageless, ancient Ireland that Yeats consistently identified as the source of vital Irish culture and tradition.

While the twilit moods of the early Yeats might suggest impracticality and detachment from the material and public worlds, the early Yeats was

also an active, assertive, even manipulative participant in the clubs and societies he founded and joined. He threw himself enthusiastically into the internal conflicts of organizations like the Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn. He and his friends became noted for praising each other in their reviews; when he published his first novel, *John Sherman*, in 1891, he coached Katharine Tynan about her review: "you might perhaps, if you think it is so, say that Sherman is an Irish type. I have an ambition to be taken as an Irish novelist not as an English or cosmepolitan one chosing Ireland as a background [*sic*]."[3] The next year he fought a losing battle against Charles Gavan Duffy for control of a new series of books called the Library of Ireland. And he routinely orchestrated public controversies in the newspapers and magazines in order to promote his pet projects, such as the opening of the Irish Literary Theatre seven years later. While he often appeared to contemporaries as the impractical, otherworldly Celtic poet, in many respects Yeats was a shrewd judge of people, events, and opportunities.

By the early 1890s this combination had made him something of a public figure, and the years 1895–6 marked a new phase of his life and work. He published *Poems* (1895), a collected and revised edition of previously published poems, which would be a reliable seller for decades and create a steadier income than his previous work. He also moved out of his family house and got his own flat in London, began his first love affair (with Olivia Shakespear), and threw in his lot with a scandalous new literary magazine named *The Savoy* after the hotel where Oscar Wilde took his lovers.

But his life and work were about to incorporate still further new directions. He also met two people who were not part of his slightly racy milieu in 1896: Augusta Gregory and J. M. Synge. Yeats's interest in folklore and fairytales, and in their potential to help create an Irish national literature, predated his relationship with Gregory. He had already published *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), *Irish Fairy Tales* (1892), and *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), and, as James Pethica points out, his "early literary achievement rested significantly on his work as a folklorist" (p. 129). But his collaborations with Gregory enabled him to continue, and also to transform, this interest. Gregory would support him, and other members of his family, in various ways for decades. Her house in Galway became an important refuge for Yeats; he went there to recuperate from his exhausting involvement in various public controversies, and to find the peace conducive to writing poetry. In the summer of 1897 Yeats and Gregory formulated the idea of the Irish Literary Theatre, which opened in May of 1899 with the production of Yeats's *The Countess Cathleen* and Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field*. Synge came to symbolize for Yeats a kind of national art that drew energy and inspiration from the peasantry but that was also modern, innovative,

even shocking. In the wake of the controversies that occurred when audiences protested against his plays *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903) and *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), Synge also came to symbolize the Irish public's unwillingness to accept such art.

In 1899 Yeats published *The Wind Among the Reeds*; it would be his last collection of poems for several years and marks the end of the early phase of his poetry. The elaborate notes Yeats originally appended to the volume dismayed some of his readers; his father wondered why he had written them.[4] The original title of "He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven" was "Aedh wishes for the Cloths of Heaven," and Yeats laboriously explained in a note that Aedh was a "principle of mind" and that he represented (in magical terms) "fire burning by itself" or (in other, but no less obscure terms) "the myrrh and frankincense that the imagination offers continually before all that it loves" (*VP* 803). Clearly, some new departure was called for. For the next few years after the turn of the century the Irish Literary Theatre, re-organized and re-named several times, would dominate his creative and business life. Yeats had a reputation in some quarters as a Fenian sympathizer, and he touted the new theatre in nationalist language, but many of the controversies about the theatre arose from his conflicts with various strands of nationalist opinion. His success as a playwright was uneven. *The Countess Cathleen* had been attacked for blasphemy and for its portrait of the Irish peasantry; on the other hand, the controversy over the play was good publicity for the opening of the theatre, which was generally regarded as a success. The 1901 production of *Diarmuid and Grania* (the product of a stormy collaboration between Yeats and George Moore) was received with hostility by nearly everyone, but the 1902 staging of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, which Yeats and Gregory wrote together, was quite popular. Indeed, he would never achieve that kind of popularity with his plays again, and his commitment to an elite and symbolic – rather than popular and realistic – theatre would be strengthened in the coming years.

Meanwhile, although it took a back seat to his dramatic work for the moment, Yeats's poetry was also changing. In 1903 he published *In the Seven Woods*, a brief transitional volume, the first produced by Dun Emer (later Cuala) Press (run by his sisters). It indicated a new direction for his poetry, one that he described in these terms: "My work has got far more masculine. It has more salt in it."[5] The early themes and vocabularies are still apparent, but the difference between the volume's title poem and "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" (*VP* 117) is instructive. Both invoke the soothing sights and sounds of the natural world – birds, bees, vegetation – in order to escape from, or compensate for, the traumas of modern urban life. But while "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" simply mentions generic urban

spaces – "the pavements gray" – "In the Seven Woods" (*VP* 198) refers to a more specific modern malaise: "Tara uprooted, and new commonness / Upon the throne." The poem's title, which refers to a part of the Gregory estate, and this reference to the coronation of Edward VII (following the death of Queen Victoria), indicate a more particular historical location for the speaker, as well as a new emphasis on class: the poem sets the vulgarity of modernity against the leisured refuge represented by Coole. Increasingly, over the course of the next several volumes, Yeats's critiques of the modern world targeted the middle classes. At the same time, the comfort the speaker of "In the Seven Woods" derives is all the more complete, because of (not despite) the fact that it is purely an exercise of will. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" contains nothing as convincingly assertive as "I am contented, for I know that Quiet / Wanders laughing and eating her wild heart."

The year 1903 was also a watershed year in personal terms. Maud Gonne, who had repeatedly refused to marry Yeats, stunned him by embarking on an ill-considered, and immediately disastrous, marriage to Major John MacBride. Gonne turned to Yeats in a time of trouble, and he responded, giving her help and advice during a messy public scandal and separation. This was a pattern that would be repeated throughout their long friendship. On the other hand, his first American lecture tour, in the winter of 1903–4, was a great success. It brought him excellent publicity, a good sum of money, new skills as an orator, and new confidence in himself. He had lunch with President Roosevelt, and acquired an imposing fur coat. These personal developments contributed to a deliberate turn away from many of his earlier works and attitudes, as he reached for new modes that he formulated in terms of hardness, masculinity, and salt.

Accordingly, some poems of this period translate Yeats's new salty assertiveness into a productive ambiguity about some of his most cherished convictions or stances. "The Folly of Being Comforted," which first appeared in 1902, praises, but also gently satirizes, the ideal of an inexhaustible passion. In response to the well-meaning friend who suggests that the ageing of the beloved's body will decrease the speaker's tormented desire for her, the speaker's heart claims his position as the eternal lover for whom she will always be beautiful: "Heart cries, 'No, / I have not a crumb of comfort, not a grain.'" But the poem's closing lines have a double meaning: "O heart! O heart! if she'd but turn her head, / You'd know the folly of being comforted" (*VP* 200). On the one hand, this means that if she turned her head the speaker's passion would be ignited, as ever, and he would realize that the idea of drawing comfort from her declining physical beauty was folly. On the other hand, to "know the folly of being comforted" also means to "know" comfort in the sense of being comforted, even though it is folly – and, indeed,

if she turned her head, he would see her ageing face. "Adam's Curse" (*VP* 204–6) strikes a similar pose about Yeats's romantic ideals, by holding to the value of "the old high way of love" while at the same time suggesting that this way has become exhausted, and now seems "an idle trade enough," the word "trade" implying disturbing links between that ideal and the fallen, materialistic world Yeats increasingly deplored.

Dimness and twilight, once attractive states connected with reverie and the supernatural, were now to be avoided. In the volumes that followed *In the Seven Woods*, Yeats embraces "reality," exposure, and directness, expressing his determination to "wither into the truth" ("The Coming of Wisdom with Time"; *VP* 261), praising "the lidless eye that loves the sun" ("Upon a House shaken by the Land Agitation"; *VP* 264), and declaring that he would give up his earlier preoccupation with ornament and mythology because "there's more enterprise / In walking naked" ("A Coat"; *VP* 320). He brought his poetic language closer to ordinary speech in diction and syntax, and embraced more irregular rhythms and rhymes. Failure and struggle, both personal and political, are confronted directly and defiantly, and Yeats's poems continued to locate him increasingly in a contemporary, rather than a mythic, Ireland. *Responsibilities* (1914) opens with the speaker's apology to his ancestors that he has "nothing but a book" to prove his, and his family's, "blood" ("Pardon, Old fathers"; *VP* 269–70), and closes with the bleak statement that "all my priceless things / Are but a post the passing dogs defile" ("While I, from that reed-throated whisperer"; *VP* 320–1). In between, Yeats meditates on public controversies, such as the Dublin Corporation's refusal to build an art gallery to house the pictures Hugh Lane proposed to donate, and private crises, such as his relationship with Gonne.

At the same time, after 1903 Yeats began to construct an increasingly elaborate mythology of class, in which he formulated his disenchantment with the modern world through ideas of middle-class corruption. The controversies over Synge's plays hardened his opinions about the capacity of popular audiences for appreciating good art, and his various struggles over the theatre made him particularly hostile to artists and actors he perceived as pandering to popular tastes or propaganda. In "The Fascination of What's Difficult" the frustrations of running the theatre (now re-named the Abbey), in which he was deeply involved, appear as "the day's war with every knave and dolt, / Theatre business, management of men" (*VP* 260). "These are the Clouds" laments that "all things at one common level lie" (*VP* 265), and "At Galway Races" mourns for a time "Before the merchant and the clerk / Breathed on the world with timid breath" (*VP* 266). Yeats reserved a special scorn and anger for middle-class Irish Catholics: "September 1913" paints a memorably unpleasant picture of them as grasping, timid materialists, who

"fumble in a greasy till / And add the half pence to the pence / And prayer to shivering prayer" now that "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone" (*VP* 289).

Against the corruption of modern Ireland this mythology of class ranges a number of forces and examples. They are all firmly anti-utilitarian and anti-materialistic, a quality encapsulated by the dictum "'Only the wasteful virtues earn the sun'" (*VP* 270), and they share a commitment to the value of art, passion, honor, and lofty ideals. Some are actual aristocrats, like the "honour bred" (*VP* 291) Gregory and the noble patrons of the arts during the Italian Renaissance that Yeats invokes in "To a Wealthy Man . . ." Others belong to a kind of natural aristocracy, like the nationalist heroes of "September 1913" or Maud Gonne. If Yeats spent a good deal of time dividing the world into the corrupt and the noble during these years, he also wrote a number of poems in which a speaker confronts corruption within himself: the corruption of bitterness, anger, and scorn. "Paudeen" begins with an attack on middle-class Catholics, but the poem ends with the speaker's counter-assertion that "on the lonely height where all are in God's eye, / There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot, / A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry" (*VP* 291). And the closing poem of *Responsibilities* is able to "forgive" the circumstances that make the speaker and his ideals the "notorious" (*VP* 321) targets of public scorn.

These changes in Yeats's work were part of the development of literary Modernism. While Yeats often thought of himself as one of the "last romantics" (*VP* 491), the ways in which he remade his poetics during his middle and late periods gave him much in common with Modernism. In 1909 he met the younger poet Ezra Pound, who would become an important Modernist figure. They forged a lasting friendship and influenced one another's work, though Pound's influence on Yeats should not be overstated. As we have seen, Yeats had already begun to "modernize" his work. They spent three winters together sharing a cottage near Oxford from 1913 to 1915, Pound acting as Yeats's secretary. Yeats's growing emphasis on plain speech and harsh reality did not mean that he was simplifying the meaning of his poems. Rather, like many Modernists, he was using increasingly spare language to explore ever more complex and ambiguous states of mind. "The Cold Heaven," for example, begins with a simple, abrupt, declarative: "Suddenly I saw . . ." But, as is characteristic of the middle and late Yeats, the first eight and a half lines of the poem form a single, complex sentence. (Beginning readers of Yeats sometimes forget that most of his poems are written in sentences, and, helpfully, can be parsed like sentences.) The poem's opening exists in considerable tension with the ambiguities, even the "confusion" (a word the poem itself uses at one point), suggested by the poem's title and notoriously difficult lines such as: "And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,

/ Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro, / Riddled with light" (*VP* 316). The symbols of this period were, like all his symbols, used in various ways to mean various things. While the sun often represented the harsh but salutary glare of truth, "Lines Written in Dejection" laments the loss of an imaginative world populated by mythical creatures: "wild witches," "holy centaurs," and the "heroic mother moon." In their place, the speaker has nothing but the sun, which he describes as "embittered" and "timid" (*VP* 343–4).

Embracing directness and reality also did not mean giving up his interest in the occult; on the contrary, Yeats pursued his interests in the supernatural energetically during these years. Hugh Lane died when the *Lusitania* was sunk in 1915 and a dispute erupted, one Yeats was to be involved in for years, about whether he had really meant to leave his modern art collection to Dublin or London. Besides his more practical efforts to resolve the issue in Dublin's favor, Yeats also got in touch with a medium he had been consulting for years, Elizabeth Radcliff, in the hope that the dead Lane might make contact through automatic writing (which he did not). Apart from the Lane controversy, Yeats was not particularly engaged in the events of the First World War. Before the War, the winter of 1913–14 brought another profitable American lecture tour. He spent his summers at Coole, and he and Pound were isolated from wartime London (at least to some extent) at Stone Cottage the next winter. He began writing his autobiography, looking back over his life as if his major achievements were behind him. They were not; a series of significant upheavals in his life, in the world around him, and in his work, were on the way.

Events in Ireland interested him more. Yeats was still involved in the Abbey Theatre, which had become an important Dublin institution. His earlier sympathy for the physical force republicanism of Fenianism had moderated into support for constitutional nationalism and, like many other observers, he had been anticipating Home Rule for several years. The Easter Rising of 1916, in which a small force of Irish nationalists declared an Irish republic and took over some Dublin buildings for nearly a week before being subdued by the British, came as a shock to Yeats, and he initially thought it was a foolish and destructive act by the rebels. Then, as the British government imposed harsh martial law and began to execute the rebels, public opinion began to shift. Yeats became increasingly sympathetic to the rebels and increasingly critical of the British government. He returned to Ireland in May and saw the devastation of the city center. The contempt of "September 1913" seemed to require some modification now. He began writing "Easter 1916," his deeply complex and ambivalent response to the Rising, though he would not publish the poem until 1920.