THE POETRY
OF W. B. YEATS

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WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

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by

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I

William Butler Yeats was born at Sandymount, Dublin, on the 13th of June, 1865. He was the eldest son of Jack B. Yeats, R.H.A., the well-known artist, and the grandson of William Butler Yeats, M.A., Rector of Tullylish, County Down. On his mother's side he was descended from respectable merchants and ship-owners, his maternal grandfather, William Pollexfen, having some little reputation in Sligo and the surrounding counties as a bold seaman and a shrewd business man. The ink of commerce did not, however, flow in the veins of all the Pollexfens: George, the uncle of Mr. Yeats, having been secured an adequate income by the acumen and industry of his father, devoted himself in youth to the pleasures of the stable and hunting field, and in middle age to the more intellectual delights of astrology and the practice of magic. It was his influence that later contributed something to turn Mr. Yeats' mind in the direction of a practical mysticism and set him dreaming of a sacred order practising a secret and ancient ritual in a deserted castle on one of the many lake isles of which Innisfree is typical. In one of the later poems Mr. Yeats has drawn his uncle's portrait, indicating a change similar to that which some critics have considered to have occurred also in his own mind.

> "And then I think of old George Pollexfen,
> In muscular youth well-known to Mayo men
> For horsemanship at meets and race courses,
> That could have shown how purebred horses
> And solid men, for all their passion, live
> But as the outrageous stars incline
> By opposition, square and trine;
> Having grown sluggish and contemplative." (1)

(1) Later Poems, In Memory of Major Robert Gregory

The poet's mother had some of this mixture of robustness and dreaminess, combining with a good deal of practical ability an intuitive understanding that made her an ideal mate for one so sincerely and intolerantly an artist as Jack B. Yeats. That the offspring of the pair should be a great poet might be explained, though it could scarcely have been predicted, by anyone conversant with the laws of heredity.

Both art and nature contributed to foster and develop the poetic faculties inherent in the mind and heart of the young William Butler. At the home of his father, in Ireland and later at London, he was in an atmosphere where art and literature was a constant, if not the sole, subject of conversation. His father lectured him: first on the beauties of the Pre-Raphaelites and the evils of realism and Victorian art and literature in general; later, on more modern schools of painting, and always with violent but clearly reasoned diatribes against the plush and horsehair of the accepted Victorian masters whether of the brush or the pen.

Extremely sensitive to nature, Mr. Yeats was fortunate in the desolate beauty and grey splendour of the country in which he spent the most impressionable years of his youth. His grandparents lived in Sligo, and it was in the Sligo country that he passed his long holidays from the Erasmus Smith school in Dublin. Here by Lough Gill with its lake isle of Innisfree, in the haunted region of Drumcliffe and Rosses, is the country that forms the background of all his early work in prose and verse. Here he wandered, dreaming and drinking in

the beauty of Nature, until sometimes a strange and mystical experience would seem to bring him, not into a state of at-one-ness with nature, but into a condition of loneliness when all nature seemed to have fallen away from him as the flesh from the spirit at death. "Sometimes on grey days on the Galway shore when a faint mist has hung over the grey sea and the grey stones (I felt) as if the world might suddenly vanish and leave nothing behind, not even a little dust."(1) This is the testimony of one who lives the inner life intensely and who dwells on the border of trance so that the monotony of grey and the sound of the breakers and the wind and the waters serves that purpose for which Mr. Yeats has designed the rhythm of verse - "to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation."(2)

It is the testimony,too, of one whose mind is peculiarly sensitive and receptive to the influence of popular folk-lore and legend. Indeed the tales of faeries and ghosts and gods and fighting men which Mr. Yeats heard as a boy in the haunted region of Drumcliffe and Rosses have had a profound influence upon his life and work, giving to both that special colour which the texture of his mind was most fitted to receive, and if not actually making him a poet, at least making him the particular kind of poet which he afterwards became.

In the countryside of Sligo and Galway the people of the invisible world exist, and in the minds of the peasants the relations between the natural and the supernatural are so intimate that <u>not</u> to have seen a ghost, or to have been deaf to the singing of the Sidhe

(1) <u>Essays</u>, p. 118
(2) <u>Essays</u>, p. 195

was the mark of one particularly gross and almost inexplicably earthy. (1) Often, in fact, ghosts became a nuisance, as to the man who exclaimed: "By the cross of Jesus! how shall I go? If I pass by the hill of Dunboy old Captain Burney may look out on me. If I go round by the water, and up by the steps, there is the headless one and another on the quays, and a new one under the old churchyard wall. If I go round the other way, Mrs. Stewart is appearing at Hillside Gate, and the devil himself is in the hospital lane." (2) Old Pagan beliefs persist along with the Christian mythology of the church. "To the wise peasant", says Mr. Yeats in The Celtic Twilight, "the green hills and woods round him are full of never fading mystery. When the aged countrywoman stands at her door in the evening, and, in her own words, 'looks at the mountains and thinks of the goodness of God', God is all the nearer because the pagan powers are not far: because northward in Ben Bulben, famous for hawks, the white square door swings open at sundown, and those wild, unchristian riders rush forth upon the fields, while southward the White Lady, who is doubtless Maeve herself, wanders under the broad cloud nightcap of Knocknarea. How may she doubt these things, even though the priest shakes his head at her? Did not a herd boy no long while since see the White Lady? She passed so close that the skirt of her dress touched him. 'He fell down, and was dead three days.' " (3)

(1) Only the other day I clipped this item from the Montreal Gazette: "London, March 22.- The horns of Elfland have been heard blowing recently near Milltown, Ireland, and hundreds of people have been travelling daily to a clump of bush, recently cut down, whence the unearthly music is said to proceed. While none could be found who claimed to have seen 'the little folk', or fairies, many declared they could hear strange, haunting melodies.

According to one story, a tiny figure dressed in red has been seen mounted on a horse near the bush. The old folks say Ireland never has seen good times since the fairies departed, and now that they have returned, brighter days may be expected."

(2) Early Poems and Stories: The Celtic Twilight p. 151

(3) Early Poems and Stories: The Celtic Twilight p. 249

It was in this region that the abduction occurred which has been recorded by an earlier Irish poet in that magical poem beginning "Up the airy mountain, down the rushy glen". William Allingham, too, had wandered through this haunted country as a boy, and his account of how the faeries stole little Bridget "for seven years long" is but the re-telling of one out of a countless many of such incidents. The airy mountain is Ben Bulben, and the rushy glen where none dare go a-hunting "for fear of little men" is the valley of Drumcliffe lying at the foot of the mountain. These are place-names that occur many times in the writings of Mr. Yeats. Often while staying with his granddparents as a lad he rambled through the rushy glen and climbed the "vapour-turbaned steep". And here he found himself influenced not altogether by a communicating spirit in nature, but by "something far more deeply interfused" whose dwelling was deep in the mind of primitive man- a firm belief in the real existence of the invisible world. "Drumcliff and Rosses were, are, and ever shall be, please Heaven! " he writes, "places of unearthly resort. Drumcliff is a wide, green valley, lying at the foot of Ben Bulben, whereon the great St. Columba himself, the builder of many of the old ruins in the valley, climbed one day to get near Heaven with his prayers. Rosses is a little, sea-dividing, sandy plain covered with short grass like a green tablecloth, and lying in the foam midway between the round, cairn-headed Knocknarea and 'Ben Bulben, famous for hawks' ".(1)

It was an ideal country for poetic youth, and provided the perfect environment for Mr. Yeats. The spiritual quality of the Sligo

(1) Early Poems and Stories: The Celtic Twilight p. 247

landscape, the indefinite greys and watery blues, bare hills and misty steeps, "the length of the yellow sands and Lisadell far off and its leafy ways" and the sound of the wind that was like the cry of the Banshee appealed to one whose natural Celtic temperament had been made more refined and sensitive by a delicate aestheticism, partly an inheritance from his father and partly due to the influence of his home.

Another influence was that of books. As a boy, Mr. Yeats tells us, he had loved poetry, and had always longed to hear poems spoken to a harp. He read Spenser and Shelley attentively, so attentively, indeed, that later he had deliberately to fight against their influence upon his verse. Before he was twenty, however, he had tried to mix their styles together in a pastoral play; while Prometheus Unbound he regarded as among the sacred books of the world. He was moved deeply,too, by the paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite school, more perhaps by thier subject matter than their technique. A passage from one of the essays in The Cutting of an Agate recalls vividly a moment of youthful rapture:

"Two days ago I was at the Tate Galleries to see the early Millais's, and before his 'Ophelia' as before the 'Mary Magdalene' and 'Mary of Galilee' of Rossetti that hung near, I had recovered an old emotion. I saw these pictures as I had seen pictures in my childhood. I forgot the art criticism of friends and saw wonderful, sad, happy people, moving through the scenery of my dreams. The painting of the hair, the way it was smoothed from its central parting, something in the oval of the peaceful faces, called up memories of sketches of

my father's on the margins of the first Shelley I had read, while the strong colours made me half remember studio conversations, praise of the primary colours, heard, it may be, as I sat over my toys or a child's story book. " (1)

It is these same wonderful, sad, happy people, moving through the scenery of dreams that make so much of Mr. Yeats' poetry seem like the memory of an old childish indefinable emotion which defies criticism as water cheats a sieve. The influence of the pre-Raphaelites is apparent not only in the subject matter of so much of the early poetry but in an occasional delicate minuteness of detail and turn of phrase recalling Rossetti which may be found in one or two of the earliest lyrics. Such a poem, for example, is the exquisite sonnet, She who dwelt among the Sycamores, which, unfortunately, has never been reprinted since it was included in The Wanderings of Oisin and Other Poems in 1889. This volume has long been out of print and many of the shorter poems it contained have never been republished in any subsequent edition. For its rarity, then, as well as on account of its own peculiar beauty and as an illustration of the pre-Raphaelite influence, I will quote the poem which I have been able to find nowhere but in Mr. Forest Reid's excellent, but outdated, study of Yeats:

"A little boy outside the sycamore wood
Saw on the wood's edge gleam an ash grey feather;
A kid, held by one soft white ear for tether,
Trotted beside him in a playful mood.

(1) Essays, p. 429

A little boy inside the sycamore wood
Followed a ringdove's ash-grey gleam of feather.
Noon wrapt the trees in veils of violet weather,
And on tiptoe the winds a-whispering stood.

Deep in the woodland paused they, the six feet
Lapped in the lemon daffodils; a bee
In the long grass- four eyes droop low- a seat
Of moss, a maiden weaving. Singeth she:
'I am lone Lady Quietness, my sweet,
And on this loom I weave thy destiny.' "

Echoes of other singers occur here and there in the early poems. The Falling of the Leaves, with its first line

"Autumn is over the long leaves that love us"

and its last line

"With a kiss and a tear on thy drooping brow".

recalls Tom Moore. In this case, however, the similarity is due to the fact that Mr. Yeats wrote this poem "to some traditional air", less consciously, perhaps, but in much the same manner as Moore utilized old Irish melodies.

A lover of Spenser and Shelley, of Keats, the early Tennyson and Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites, Yeats might have said of all these poets, as Cowley was compelled by the accident of time to say of the first of them alone: (I) "was infinitely delighted with the stories of the knights, and giants, and monsters, and brave houses which I found everywhere there (though my understanding had little to do with all this); and, by degrees, with the tinkling of the rime and dance of the numbers; so that....I.... was made a poet as naturally as a child is taught to speak." (1)

(1) Abraham Cowley, Of Myself

But much as the reading of these English poets may have contributed towards the perfecting of Mr Yeats' art and the turning of his mind in youth toward romantic poetry one is never allowed to forget that he is an Irishman. A far greater influence upon the thought and the art of the young poet was exerted by the written and spoken traditions of his own country. As a boy and young man in Dublin and among Irishmen in London he discussed avidly everything that was known about Ireland, especially Irish literature and Irish history. "I could have told you at that time", he says, "the dates of the birth and death, and quoted the chief poems of men whose names you have not heard, and perhaps of some whose names I have forgotten."

"I do not think Shelley or Spenser ever moved me as did these poets", he adds, including in the generalization the vast number of ballad poets who filled the Irish newspapers with popular sentimental and patriotic verse. He knew that most of them wrote badly, but dreamed that if somebody could make a style that was not an English style and yet musical and full of the colour of the Irish landscape that a great school of ballad poetry would arise in Ireland which would move everyone as it moved him. So definitely and so vividly did this idea present itself to the mind of the young Irishman that he tells us how perfectly he can remember the day on which the thought first came to him.(1) Then, with a deliberateness which he declares is still a source of surprise, he set to work to find a style and a subject matter, and sought to make his verses hold as in a mirror the colour of his own Irish climate and scenery and in their right proportion. He made, too, a conscious effort to remove from his poetry the reds and yellows which Shelley

(1) Essays: p. 4

had gathered in Italy, and tried to make his rhythms faint and nervous and to fill his images with a certain coldness and wintry wildness.

It is apparent from all this that Mr. Yeats' patriotism was not- nor, indeed, has it ever been- in any sense a narrow political pride. He was concerned more for the intellectual and artistic freedom of his country than for its political independence. He had studied at the Slade School in London, had read Ruskin attentively, had come under the direct personal influence of William Morris, and hated England for the Phillistinism of the middle-class Britisher. He saw in Ireland a race of people more primitive, more sensitive to beauty and the imaginative appeal, cherishing with the two mythologies of Christianity and Paganism, a certain love of wildness and careless vigour for its own sake, a race which must be kept at all costs from the contamination of successful, pushing, commercial England where frugality, temperance, and sound common-sense were the cardinal virtues, and, in the words of Stevenson, "never to forget your umbrella through a long life would seem a higher and wiser flight of achievement than to go smiling to the stake". (1)

In the Essay on Poetry and Tradition included in The Cutting of an Agate, Mr. Yeats has outlined the intellectually patriotic purposes with thich he and Lionel Johnson and Katherine Tynan began to reform Irish poetry. "We sought", he writes, "to make a more subtle rhythm, a more organic form, than that of the older Irish poets who wrote in English, but always to remember certain ardent ideas and high

(1) R. L. Stevenson, Virginibus Puerisque, Crabbed Age and Youth

altitudes of mind which were the nation itself, to our belief, as far as a nation can be summarised in the intellect... Lionel Johnson was able to take up into his art one portion of that tradition that I could not, for he had a gift of speaking political thought in fine verse that I have always lacked. I, on the other hand, was more preoccupied with Ireland (for he had other interests), and took from Allingham and Walsh their passion for country spiritism, and from Ferguson his pleasure in heroic legend, and while seeing all in the light of European literature found my symbols of expression in Ireland. One thought often possessed me very strongly. Now from the influence, mainly the personal influence, of William Morris, I dreamed of enlarging Irish hate, till we had come to hate with a passion of patriotism what Morris and Ruskin hated... Ruskin and Morris had spent themselves in vain because they had found no passion to harness to their thought, but here were unwasted passion and precedents in the popular memory for every needed thought and action... We were to forge in Ireland a new sword on our old traditional anvil for that great battle that must in the end re-establish the old, confident, joyous world."

This "passion and precedent in the popular memory for every needed thought and action" was the heroic mythology of the Celtic gods and heroes, a background of legend and heroism which has been a source of inspiration to Irish bards since the days of Oisin.

II

Irish legendary literature divides itself into three cycles- the divine, the Conorian, and the Fenian. The first deals with the exploits of the Tuatha de Danaan- the Celtic gods; the second with Cuchulain and the heroes of King Conchubor's court; and the last with Finn and the heroes of the Fianna, most prominent among whom is Finn's son Oisin. According to this mythology the original inhabitants of Ireland were the Fomorians and the Firbolgs, "a dark race of strong fighters", whose descent has been traced in popular tradition to the sons of Noah. These at some undetermined early date were conquered by the Tuatha de Danaan, or the tribes of the goddess Danu, who finally defeated the Fomorians after four days of terrific combat in which "furies, monsters, and hags of doom took part". The invaders granted the province of Connaught to the vanquished, and subsequently a good deal of mixture and intermarriage took place between them. The Tuatha de Danaan was a divine race, and the gods of Celtic Ireland were all descended from Danu. Just as the Fomorians were driven out by the Sidhe, as the Danaan tribes were known among the Irish peasantry, so were they in their turn driven to the mounds and woods by the Milesians, the race from which the Irish are descended. This is represented as being a race of heroes and fighting men, becoming semi-divine by union with the Danaans. Indeed, the two races, the godlike and the heroic, lived in the closest proximity, freely mixing in one another's quarrels, forming varying and temporary alliances, and engaging in a good deal of promiscuous philandering that very soon had the result of endowing the heroes with superhuman powers

properly associated with gods, and of diluting the godlike qualities of the Tuatha de Danaan with some very human characteristics. Sometimes, since the Danaan people had the power of becoming invisible or of changing themselves or anyone else into the likeness of an animal a strange and complicated state of affairs arose. For example, Bran and Sgeolan, the hounds of the hero Finn were nephews of his own "for Illan married Finn's wife's sister whom his faery mistress transformed into a wolf-hound which gave birth to these famous dogs." (1) In all of the heroes of note was the blood of some god or goddess. while the love of Aengus for Edain, "a daughter of a king of Ireland" is one of the most famous stories. "There is not a king's son or a prince, or a leader of the Fianna of Ireland, without having a wife or a mother or a foster-mother or a sweetheart of the Tuatha de Danaan", says an old Gaelic poem translated by Lady Gregory in Gods and Fighting Men. Cochulain, indeed, was a son of the god Lugh.

There is some doubt as to whether the Cochulain stories or those of the Fianna is the older cycle. Yeats considers the Ossianic to be the older. (2) How much all these stories are mixed with history and folk-lore and how indelibly they are engraved upon

(1) The Mythology of All Races; (Boston, Marshall Jones & Co. 1918) Vol III Celtic Mythology, John Arnott Maccolloch. p. 169

(2) Note: To avoid confusion it should be remembered that the words "Conorian" "Cochulain" "Red Branch" refer to one of the two heroic cycles, while "Fenian "Ossianic" "Fianna" refer to the other. Conchubor (pronounced Conochar) was the Red Branch "King of Kings"; Cochulain (pronounced Coohoolan) the chief champion among his warriors. Usheen or Oisin was the son of Finn, chief of the Fianna or Fenians.

the imagination of the Irish peasantry is made clear in the following passage from Mr. Yeats' introduction to a book which he has declared worthy to set beside Le Morte d'Arthur - Lady Gregory's Gods and Fighting Men . These legends, he writes, "are known in one form or another to every Gaelic speaking countryman in Ireland or the highlands of Scotland. Sometimes a labourer digging near a cromlech or Bed of Diarmuid and Grania, as it is called, will tell one a tradition that seems older and more barbaric than any description of their adventures or of themselves in written text or story that has taken form in the mouths of the professed story tellers. Finn and the Fianna found welcome among the court poets later than did Cochulain; and one finds memories of Danish invasions and standing armies mixed with the imaginations of hunters and solitary fighters among great woods. One never hears of Cochulain delighting in the hunt or in woodland things; and one imagines that the story teller would have thought it unworthy in so great a man, who lived a well-ordered elaborate life, and had his chariot and his chariot driver and his barley fed horses to delight in. If he is in the woods before dawn one is not told that he cannot know the leaves of the hazel from the leaves of the oak; and when Emer laments him no wild creature comes into her thoughts but the cuckoo that cries over cultivated fields. His story must have come out of a time when the wild wood was giving way to pasture and tillage, and men had no longer a reason to consider every cry of the birds or changes of the night.

Finn, who was always in the woods, whose battles were but hours amid years of hunting, delighted in the 'cackling of ducks from the Lake of the Three Narrows; the scolding talk of the blackbird of Doire an Cairn; the whistle of the eagle from the Valley of Victories or from the rough branches of the Ridge of the Stream; the grouse of the heather of Cruachan; the call of the otter of Druim re Coir.' "

The men of the Fianna were not only closer to the natural; they were also closer to the supernatural. "Although," continues Mr. Yeats, "the gods come to Cochulain, and although he is the son of one of the greatest of them, their country and his are far apart, and they come to him as god to mortal; but Finn is their equal. He is continually in their houses; he meets with Bodb Dearr, and Aengus and Manannan, now as friend with friend, now as with an enemy he overcomes in battle. When the Fianna are broken up at last, after hundreds of years of hunting, it is doubtful if he dies at all, and certain that he comes again in some other shape, and Oisin, his son, is made king over a divine country. The birds and beasts that cross his path in the woods have been fighting men or great enchanters or fair women, and in a moment can take some beautiful or terrible shape."

Mr. Yeats' conception of these legendary heroes and the old Celtic gods is an interesting one inasmuch as he views them with the imagination of a mystic, and sees their persistence in the mind of the Irish peasantry as an evidence of that community of mind, or <u>Anima Mundi</u> which, following Henry More and the neo-Platonists, he

has deduced also from personal visionary experiences. He thinks of the Fianna "as great-bodied men with large movements, that seem, as it were, flowing out of some deep below the narrow stream of personal impulse .. that are a portion of the strength of things. They are hardly so much individual men as portions of universal nature, like the clouds that shape themselves and re-shape themselves momentarily, or like a bird between two boughs, or like the gods that have given the apples and the nuts; and yet this but brings them the nearer to us, for we can remake them in our image when we will, and the woods are the more beautiful for the thought." (1)

(1) Gods and Fighting Men, arranged and put into English by Lady Gregory. With a preface by W. B. Yeats. (N.Y. Scribner's 1904) p. XIII

It was of the heroes of the Fianna and the gods of Tuatha de Danaan that Yeats' first long poem of any consequence deals. This is The Wanderings of Usheen [1], a narrative poem in three books, which formed the title piece of his first published volume of lyrics, which made its appearance in 1889. The characteristic features of the plot of the poem are common enough in folk lore and balladry and are not confined by any means to the legends of the Celts. It is the tale of a mortal who is wooed by a faery, and carried by her to the faery country where he lives in all manner of bliss until after "three centuries of dalliance with a demon thing" he yearns for a sight of his own land once more. The poem opens with a dialogue between St. Patrick and Usheen, now old and blind and lonely, for he has disobeyed the faery injunction not to touch the earth (another common incident in folk tales of this description) and the weight of his three hundred years has fallen upon him and the old careless happy world of the heroes and hunters has withered away leaving in its stead the strange and ugly realm of Christendom. Sadly the old warrior begins the tale of his life, invoking in the first few lines of Yeats' magical poetry

> "The swift innumerable spears,
> The horsemen with their floating hair,
> And bowls of barley, honey and wine,
> And feet of maidens dancing in tune...."

He tells how when the chieftains of the Fianna were hunting the deer, they

(1) 'Usheen' is a variant for 'Oisin', now favoured by Mr. Yeats

"found on the dove-grey edge of the sea
A pearl-pale, high-born lady, who rode
On a horse with bridle of findrinny;
And like a sunset were her lips,
A stormy sunset on doomed ships;
A citron colour gloomed in her hair,
And down to her feet white vestures flowed,
And with the glimmering crimson glowed
Of many a figured embroidery."

It was Niamh [1], daughter or Aengus and Edain, who had left the Country of the Young for love of Usheen. At her invitation, and following a glowing account of Tir n'an Og and the happy townland of the young, Usheen mounted behind her and rode into the land of faery. Here he dwelt for three hundred years first in the Island of Dancing, then in the Island of Victories and finally in the Island of Forgetfulness until "at the heel of a century" he awoke and was overcome by a great longing to see once more the beard of Finn and all the men of the Fianna in battle array. Full of foreboding, Niamh consents to let him return, on the condition, however, that he shall not touch the earth. Should he do so, she warns him, old age will fall upon him and the happy Fenian times will crumble away like a rotten leaf. On his return to Ireland he saw some men struggling to lift a heavy sod, and with all a strong fighter's scorn of their weakness, he stooped from the saddle and hurled it five yards. At once the full weight of his three hundred years fell upon him, and he was left "to be shaken with coughing and broken with old age and pain, without laughter, a show unto children, alone with remembrance and fear".

(1) pronounced Nee-av

The first edition of The Wanderings of Usheen differs materially from the version published in the volume of Poems, 1895. The latter, though a few slight changes have been made in later editions, is substantially the version that has appeared in Earlier Poems and Stories, published in 1925. In its present form the poem is undoubtedly one of the greatest Anglo-Irish poems in existence. Its superiority to the narrative poems of predecessors like Mangan, Ferguson, and Todhunter lies in the fact that while they are certainly familiar enough with the legends of Ireland, thay are not able to infuse enough warmth into their retelling of the stories. They seem to come to them in much the same manner as they would to the myths of Greece or Rome, while Yeats has been able from the first to create an impression of intimate harmony between himself and his subject, triumphantly vindicating, at least in his third book, his theories of a style as a mirror of the Irish landscape.

The remarkable fidelity of the poem to its old Irish source, and at the same time the elevation of what is undoubtedly poetry, to a poetry of another and higher sort, can be seen by a comparison of The Wanderings of Usheen with Lady Gregory's translation of the Gaelic tale. Mr. Yeats, himself, it should be borne in mind, is among the few Irish writers who know no Gaelic.

Here is Lady Gregory's account of Niamh's description of the Country of the Young and her call to Usheen:

"It is the country is most delightful of all that are under the sun; the trees are stooping down with fruit and with leaves and with blossom.

"Honey and wine are plentiful there, and everything the eye has ever seen; no wasting will come on you with the wasting away of time; you will never see death or lessening.

"You will get feasts, playing and drinking; you will get sweet music on the strings; you will get silver and gold and many jewels.

"You will get, and no lie with it, a hundred swords; a hundred cloaks of the dearest silk; a hundred horses, the quickest in battle; a hundred willing hounds.

"A hundred coats of armour and shirts of satin; a hundred cows and a hundred calves; a hundred sheep having golden fleeces; a hundred jewels that are not of this world.

"A hundred glad young girls shining like the sun, their voices sweeter that the singing of birds; a hundred armed men strong in battle, apt at feats, waiting on you, if you will come with me to the Country of the Young.

"You will get everything that I have said to you, and delights beyond them, that I have no leave to tell; you will get beauty, strength and power, and I myself will be with you as a wife."

Here is what Niamh says in Mr Yeats' poem:

"O Usheen, mount by me and ride
To shores by the wash of the tremulous tide,
Where men have heaped no burial mounds,
And the days pass by like a wayward tune,
Where the broken faith has never been known,
And the blushes of first love never have flown;
And there I will give you a hundred hounds;
No mightier creatures bay at the moon;
And a hundred robes of murmuring silk,
And a hundred calves and a hundred sheep
Whose long wool whiter than sea froth flows,
And a hundred spears and a hundred bows,
And oil and wine and honey and milk,
And always never-anxious sleep;
While a hundred youths, mighty of limb,
But knowing nor tumult nor hate nor strife,
And a hundred maidens merry as birds,
Who when they dance to a fitful measure
Have a speed like the speed of the salmon herds,
Shall follow your horn and obey your whim,
And you shall know the Danaan leisure,
And Niamh be with you for a wife."

Then follows a passage more exalted and lovely than anything in the Gaelic original:

> "Then she sighed gently, 'It grows late,
> Music and love and sleep await
> Where I would be when the white moon climbs,
> The red sun falls and the world grows dim.'
>
> "And then I mounted and she bound me
> With her triumphing arms around me,
> And whispering to herself enwound me."

The greater part of the poem, indeed, is wholly the creation of Mr. Yeats' poetic imagination, as the strange adventures that befell Usheen during his three hundred years in the land of Faery are not described in the Gaelic sources. In the poem the hero tells of his journey to the Country of the Young:

> "We galloped over the glossy sea:
> I know not if days passed or hours,
> And Niamh sang continually
> Danaan songs; and their dewy showers
> Of pensive laughter, unhuman sound,
> Lulled weariness, and softly round
> My human sorrow her white arms wound."

They come to the Island of Dancing where the trees seemed to tremble because of the myriad of song-birds which were flying and hovering about their leafy tops; and where the land and ocean meet they tie the horse to a leafy clump. Then

> "from the woods rushed out a band
> Of men and maidens hand in hand."

Here a hundred years are spent in singing and dancing and hunting and fishing and love. At one moment a maiden gave Usheen a harp, but when he sang of human joy, "a sorrow wrapped each merry face",

and all wept. The song with which Aengus Og answered Usheen's human singing is worth quoting not only for its beauty and because it is typical of Mr. Yeats' earlier style, but because it expresses as clearly as possible the faith in which he consciously became preoccupied with Celtic mythology.

"Joy drowns the twilight in the dew
And fills with stars night's purple cup,
And wakes the sluggard seeds of corn,
And stirs the young kid's budding horn
And makes the infant ferns unwrap,
And for the peewit paints his cap,
And rolls along the unweildy sun,
And makes the little planets run:
And if joy were not on the earth,
There were an end of change and birth,
And earth and heaven and hell would die,
And in some gloomy barrow lie
Folded like a frozen flie;
Then mock at Death and Time with glances
And wavering arms and wandering dances.

"Men's hearts of old were drops of flame
That from the saffron morning came,
Or drops of silver joy that fell
Out of the moon's pale twisted shell;
But now hearts cry that hearts are slaves,
And toss and turn in narrow caves;
But here there is nor law nor rule,
Nor have hands held a weary tool;
And here there is nor change and death,
But only kind and merry breath,
For joy is God and God is joy."

At last at the turn of the century, Usheen comes upon a broken spear-shaft and an old memory overcomes him. He is like an old man who stirs the fire to a blaze in the home of a friend or a brother, dreaming of battle and love "and the cry of the hounds on the hills of old."

Again with Niamh he fares over the sea, and she sings to him of

> "Wars shadowy, vast, exultant; faeries of old
> Who wedded men with rings of Druid gold;
> And how those lovers never turn their eyes
> Upon the life that fades and flickers and dies,
> But love and kiss on dim shores far away."

But "the fall of tears troubled her song", and after a trance-like, indefinite time that may have been days or hours the horse of faery screamed and shivered. The travellers had come to the Isle of Many Fears. Here amid scenery that might have provided a setting for some adventure in The Faery Queene , Usheen sets free the Maiden chained to two eagles "bald and blind", and fights with the Demon who held her captive.

The description of the fight is excellently done. Yeats can clash the shield as well as pluck a plaintive string. With the magic sword given him by the sea-god, Mananan mac Lir, Usheen confronts the monster. The beast

> " slowly turned:
> A demon's leisure: eyes, first white, now burned
> Like wings of kingfishers; and he arose
> Barking. We trampled up and down with blows
> Of sword and brazen battle-axe, while day
> Gave to high noon, and noon to night gave way;
> And when he knew the sword of Mananan
> Amid the shapes of night, he changed and ran
> Through many shapes; I lunged at the smooth throat
> Of a great eel; it changed, and I but smote
> A fir tree roaring in its leafless top;
> And thereupon I drew the livid chop
> Of a drowned dripping body to my breast;
> Horror from horror grew; but when the west
> Had surged up in a plumy fire, I drave
> Through heart and spine; and cast him in the wave."

Every fourth day the demon comes to life again, and the battle is prolonged. For a hundred years there is war and the feasting without dreams or fears, languor or fatigue, "an endless feast, an endless war".

Again at the end of the century he is assailed by the memory of Finn and the heroes, and is overcome by a longing for change. Sorrowfully Niamh takes him to the Isle of Forgetfulness.

Here in the third book Mr. Yeats, definitely and triumphantly finds himself. The description of the drowsy island and its giant sleepers is worthy to be ranked among the highest flights of English poetry. Now we are, as in Hyperion,

> "Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
> Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
> Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star... "

Usheen and Niamh push on:

> "But the trees grew taller and closer, immense in
> their wrinkling bark;
> Dropping; a murmurous dropping; old silence
> and that one sound;
> For no live creatures lived there, no weasels
> moved in the dark:
> Long sighs arose in our spirits, beneath us bubbled
> the ground.
>
> "And the ears of the horse went sinking away
> in the hollow night,
> For as drift from a sailor slow drowning the
> gleams of the world and the sun
> Ceased on our hands and our faces, on hazel and
> oak leaf the light,
> And the stars were blotted above us, and the whole
> of the world was one."

In a deep valley, they see,

"Under the starlight and shadow, a monstrous
slumbering folk,
Their naked and gleaming bodies poured out and
heaped in the way.

. . . . . .

"So long were they sleeping, the owls had
builded their nests in their locks,
Filling the fibrous dimness with long generations
of eyes."

"Never", says Usheen, "Have faces alive with such beauty been known to the salt eye of man", Here in the roots of the grasses and sorrels, he sinks into dreams and slumber with the white body of Niamh in his arms, while years are heaped upon years, and the leaves of the ivy move over them, binding them down to their rest.

But when the hundred years are at an end the hero wakes again. He longs, if but for a day, to see once more the faces of his comrades and to hunt with them through the valleys of Ireland. Sorrowfully Niamh consents to his departure, for she knows that if his foot "brush lightly as haymouse earth's pebbles" he will come no more to the Country of the Young.

He returns to Ireland which he had left in the heroic Pagan times to find that the Fianna are dead and the country degenerate under the penance and prayer of the new religion. Lonely and sad he seeks to return to Niamh, but in a moment of forgetfulness he breaks the spell, and a withered old man is left to hurl defiance at a proselytising St. Patrick.

It is hard to overestimate the importance of <u>The Wanderings of Usheen</u>. It was the first poem of any length dealing wholly with

Irish legend and Irish ideals, and at the same time of an intrinsic merit worthy of being placed beside the great poetry of England. It marked the advent of a new poet, an Irishman, who at the age of twenty-seven had essayed the epic and had produced poetry that could challenge comparison with Coleridge or Keats. The poem is dominated by a dreamy and magical mood. These lines open magic casements, and are filled with romantic and wild beauty that is at once delicate and full of colour. The writing reveals a temperament that is completely and utterly poetic, and is the work of a mind that opens itself, as a flower to the sun, to reverie, dream, and the spell of a Pagan enchantment. There is music and colour in the poetry, but little to suggest that feeling for form which has become an increasingly important factor in the technique of the poet's later work. I am referring here to the imagery in the lines; not to the structure of the poem. The form of the whole could not be bettered. It is unfolded with lucidity and coherence, and the narrative purpose is never for a moment lost sight of. The effect of the poetry, however, unlike that of the complete poem, is not one of form; it is of colour and music- as though the colours which come before the eyes of the mind when we listen to a Chopin nocturne had, together with the music, been imprisoned in the page to be released at our will.

A different form of verse is employed in each of the three books, and the variety thus obtained prevents the whole from

having that monotony which one sometimes finds in a poem of this length. Of the three parts, the last is undoubtedly the best. In this, the imagery becomes less that of an indefinite faeryland, and more that of the Sligo landscape. Occasionally here from the splash of colour a form will protrude, gaunt and grey, as in this picture of trees as Mr. Yeats must have seen them on some wet windy day on the Sligo coast:

"And we rode on the plains of the sea's edge;
the sea's edge barren and grey,
Grey sand on the green of the grasses and over
the dripping trees,
Dripping and doubling landward, as though they
would hasten away
Like an army of old men longing for rest
from the moan of the seas."

In its present version there is a sense of completeness and inevitableness about the whole poem as though it had sprung white-hot from the poet's mind. This, of course, is not the case. The first two books have been almost entirely rewritten since their first appearance.

The improvement has been immense. Traces of Shelley and Keats have been removed, conscious archaisms cut out, and lines that might have been considered guilty of mere "prettiness" transformed from pleasant verse into what is undeniably poetry, while the unity of the whole has not only been preserved, but it has been materially strengthened. It now has that sense of inevitableness about it that is perhaps the final test of poetry. It surprises, according to the axiom of Keats, not by singularity, but by a fine excess, and appears almost like a remembrance. Not,

however, because it strikes one as the wording of his own highest thoughts, but because it is the recasting of our dreams. The poem, indeed, makes its appeal an emotional one, not an intellectual one. It is a dream of youth and beauty and impossible hope; a denial of the world of reality and hard facts "where youth grows pale and spectre-thin, and dies; where but to think is to be full of sorrow." If the objection be made that reality and fact cannot be denied, I can only point to The Wanderings of Usheen and its world "where one listens to a sweet music, where one has spring flowers in one's hair". It has, frankly, nothing to offer save its beauty- and that of a Pagan, sensuous kind- its music and its evocation of a mood. It is in poems like The Eve of St. Agnes, The Lotus Eaters, The Faery Queene that The Wanderings of Usheen finds a kindred mood and a similar art.

IV

The shorter poems published in 1889 with the first edition of The Wanderings of Usheen are, with a few notable exceptions, the tokens of promise, not of achievement. The technique of many of them is as yet uncertain, and the form often conventional or derivative. In some of them the scene is laid in certain far-away lands; India in the golden age, Arcadia, or some dim region that might be anywhere, -and is nowhere; but though all of these contain passages of beauty, and here and there a delicate image, it is only in the Irish poems, such as The Stolen Child, The Madness of King Goll, The Salley Gardens, that the poet really begins to find himself, and to succeed in reflecting as in a mirror the dim indefinite greys and blues of the Irish landscape. Indeed, he found the subject-matter of all his most successful youthful poems, either in an evocation of the simple, homely life of the Irish peasantry or in a retelling of the Celtic legendary lore. Many of the finest poems- some of them among the most famous he has ever written- in his second collection which appeared in 1893, deal with one or other of these twin themes, though here the poetry of ideal love becomes increasingly important.

Mr. Yeats was at this time an art student in London, and the separation from the Irish scene was having the not unusual effect of awaking in the mind of the exile a passionate feeling of nostalgia that spent itself in a re-creation in poetry of the Sligo country of the poet's boyhood. His most famous lyric- the perfect Lake Isle

<u>of Innisfree</u> - was suggested by the sight of a fountain in the window of a florist in Fleet Street which sent the mind of the young poet back to the cool waters and the lakes in the vicinity of Drumcliff and Rosses, recalling the days when as a boy under the first influence of Thoreau's <u>Walden</u> , he had planned to live in solitude on the island of Innisfree in the middle of Lough Gill.(1) The poem in its original version- not as it was published, but as it was sent in a letter to Katherine Tynan- differs vastly from the perfection that it now possesses. "Here are two verses I made the other day", he writes:

> "I will arise and go now and go to the island of Innisfree,
> And live in a dwelling of wattles, of woven wattles and
> wood-work made,
> Nine bean rows will I have there, a yellow hive for the
> honey-bee,
> And this old care shall fade.
>
> There from the dawn above me peace will come down,
> dropping slow,
> Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the
> household cricket sings,
> And noontide there be all a glimmer, and midnight be a
> purple glow,
> And evening full of the linnet's wings." (2)

Lengthened to three stanzas, with the lines somewhat closer knit and the rhythm more even flowing, more delicately responsive to the mood, and with the wonderful chiming of vowel sounds that gives the poem its rare and haunting music, the lyric was included with those that were published with <u>The Countess Kathleen</u> in 1893.

(1) <u>Reveries over Childhood and Youth</u> p. 83

(2) Katherine Tynan, <u>Twenty Five Years</u>

In this, his second collection of short lyrics, Mr. Yeats is already a great poet. It contains two or three balleds, among them the simple and moving Ballad of Father Gilligan; two or three short heroic poems in which some tale of fighting or death out of the old legends is lifted to the heights of passionate poetry; that magical poem The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland, which W.E. Henley enclosed in an enthusiastic letter to a friend with the comment, "See what a fine thing one of my lads has done"; and, most important of all, the first few of those short, ecstatic, mystical love poems which he is later in The Wind among the Reeds to make so distinctively his own- lyrics from which everything which is not the purest poetry has been ruthlessly removed so that what remains is sheer essence, as it were a spiritual flame playing with a passionate intensity about some simple emotion.

In the ballads and legendary poems and lyrics of the Irish countryside, the grey and mournful mountains, sedge-encircled lakes and faery glens are mirrored with an accuracy and absence of blurring that is a triumphant vindication of the poet's theories. We read of "the pale waters in their wintry race under the passing stars", and hear "lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore". The"cold and vapour-turbaned steep" and "the gleaming and humming sands where windy surges wend" are called up to the eye of the mind by an irresistable magic. There runs through all of these poems - as, indeed, through the best of those in the earlier collection- a kind of natural charm and delicacy, an essentially youthful quality. They

deal with all aspects of the countryside, nor do they forget the wild and pitiful creatures of the woods and streams; there is in them a kind of tender understanding for weasels and herons, "drowsy water rats", calves lowing on the warm hillsides, mice that bob "round and round the oatmeal chest", "slumbering trout" "in pools among the rushes that scarce could bathe a star", and the cormorants shivering on their rocks. There is a sympathy in them for the very young and for the very old: The Stolen Child tells how the faeries carried away a little boy, "the solemn-eyed", to the waters and the wild where the faeries dance in the moonlight on the sands and among the pools and rushes. "Come away" is the refrain they sing,

> "Come away, O human child!
> To the waters and the wild
> With a faery, hand in hand,
> For the world's more full of weeping than
> you can understand."

The Meditation of the Old Fisherman is poignant in its fidelity and beauty to the music of Irish folk song and to a universal emotion,

> "The herring are not in the tide as they were of old;
> My sorrow! for many a creak gave the creel in the cart
> That carried the take to Sligo town to be sold,
> When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart."

Both of these examples have been taken from the earlier collection. Although this vein was amplified in the poems published with The Countess Kathleen, it was overshadowed to some extent by the love poems and by an increasing preoccupation with mysticism. Love and mysticism were the themes that became increasingly important

in Mr. Yeats' second volume. They were the sole preoccupation of the third collection of poems, The Wind among the Reeds, which made its appearance in 1899. In examining the characteristics of this early lyricism in its full development it will be well to consider the collections of 1893 and 1899 together. In the later volume there is technical improvement and a more conscious concentration upon a deliberate and studied music, but the development consists in all respects only in a deepening of the grooves. There is no lateral deviation in the lyrics of The Wind among the Reeds from the matter or manner of those in the Countess Kathleen volume. What were hints and the first breakings of a new path in the earlier book become in the later a deep channel of achievement, but in the same direction. It is progress but not change.

Here, to take concrete examples, are two lyrics, kindred in subject-matter and mood: from an examination of their technique and the treatment of the theme I will try to make clearer the difference and similarity of the two volumes from which they are drawn. This is The Pity of Love, a poem that represents the high water mark of technical achievement in the Countess Kathleen volume:

A pity beyond all telling
Is hid in the heart of love:
The folk who are buying and selling,
The clouds on their journey above,
The cold wet winds ever blowing,
And the shadowy hazel grove
Where mouse-gray waters are flowing,
Threaten the head that I love.

And here is The Fisherman from The Wind among the Reeds:

> Although you hide in the ebb and flow
> Of the pale tide when the moon has set,
> The people of coming days will know
> About the casting out of my net,
> And how you have leaped times out of mind
> Over the little silver cords,
> And think that you were hard and unkind,
> And blame you with many bitter words. (1)

Both of these poems are essentially of the same kind. Their music is unique, unlike that of any other English lyric and peculiarly the possession of their author, but it is the same music. It is based upon the skilful manipulation of vowel sounds throughout the interior of the lines, upon the use of an unexpected rhyme or rather half-rhyme ("love" - which occurs twice- in the first poem; "words" in the second) and most of all upon the simplicity of the phrasing. Both of the poems might have been called by the title of the first, so similar is the mood of each, a similarity which is in no way disturbed because the emotion arises from a different cause in each case. In the former, the lover represents all nature as coming between himself and his love, who is - at least there is no indication to the contrary- prepared to return in full measure the love which he gives her; while in the latter, it is the loved one herself who is complained of. This, however, is of little importance; what matters is the mood which the poet evokes, and in both cases it is the same- the sense of an overpowering sadness, of tears in the heart of things. And yet there is a difference- a

(1) The theme and style of this poem shows some indebtedness to the poetry of Ronsard, and should be added to the much quoted When You are Old as an example of the influence of the Pleiade upon Mr. Yeats' early work.

difference not of kind, but of intensity. There is about The Fisherman a strange and haunting magic that after a few readings sings in your head like an incantation, reiterating and deepening its evoked emotion without the slightest reference to any increased understanding or fuller grasp of meaning. The reason for this is seen not in any difference in the outward form of the two poems, but in the inner treatment of the theme. The earlier poem is definite, direct and concrete in its imagery. It still deals with the "folk", with the simple aspects of nature and with the landscape of the Irish countryside, the clouds, the cold wet winds, the shadowy hazels and gray waters all are there. Compared, however, with the earliest poems, it represents a move in the direction towards the wavering rhythm, indefinite colouring and strangeness which are the noticeable features of the poems in The Wind among the Reeds. It is the intenser possession of such qualities that contribute to the greater appeal of The Fisherman. The direct reference to country things in the Pity of Love has been transfused in our later example to a magical, half-hidden imagery. The Fisherman is one of those poems that keep half their meaning to themselves and lull the reader into a receptive mood, which may perhaps be half trance. Then the mind becomes capable of understanding that the "ebb and flow of the pale tide", the moon, "the little silver cords" and the fish which has escaped "times out of mind" are symbols which imprison in their inner meaning the story of an eternal quest.

That this was then the purpose of Mr Yeats' art is attested to by a passage in the Ideas of Good and Evil from which I have quoted a few phrases, and which now must be examined in some detail for its clear light upon a theory of poetry which has had a remarkable

influence upon Mr. Yeats' work- the theory of symbolism.

"The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me" he says, "is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance in which the mind liberated from the presence of the will is unfolded in symbols."(1)

This is an extremely important statement, important both for its implications and for the definiteness with which they are put forward. This passage can be applied to the lyrics in The Wind among the Reeds (which were written at practically the same time) as evidence that the very effect which the poems do have upon the mind of the sensitive reader is that which the artist consciously designed them to have. It implies the necessity of a certain peculiar musical quality, a rhythm, hushed and saved from over monotony only by subtle and not too frequent variations. This is, indeed, the music of Mr. Yeats' poems of this time. They have a rhythm which was as new to English poetry as was the music of Swinburne, and which was strongest where Swinburne's was weakest, having nothing emphatic or surging about it with a great roaring of rhyme like an ocean wave, but rippling delicately, quietly, twisting and turning, like a brook flowing over grey stones and through tall osiers. But in spite of the subtlety of his rhythms, Mr Yeats has never been guilty as Swinburne and Tennyson have of allowing the music to gain the advantage of the sense. He has sacrificed less to rhythm than

(1) Essays pp. 195-196

perhaps any other poet. Never does he impress the superfluous adjective to swell out the metre or fill up a gap. Read his poetry for the sense and you cannot fail to get the utmost from the rhythm and music, the accent falling naturally on those syllables which must be stressed to bring out at once the tune and the sense. In other words, Mr. Yeats' prosody is based upon what Mr. Robert Bridges has called "true speech-stress"; his poems are made to be read aloud, and only thus can the delicate dreaminess of the music which harmonizes so exactly with the mood and feeling of the poems be heard with all the variations upon monotony that have been designed to bring about that liberation of the mind from the will when "the inner meaning of symbols" is to be made apparent.

This belief that in trance and vision and the brooding upon certain magical symbols the mind could become aware of some occult and special wisdom had been growing upon the poet for some time. In the first place, he had a mind and temperament peculiarly receptive to such a system of ideas; while the impressionistic years of his boyhood spent among the superstitious Irish country people had not been without its effect upon him. Many of his friends also were believers in the occult. Edwin Ellis, with whom he was to undertake a long and elaborate study of the mystical philosophy of Blake, Macgregor Mathers, author of The Kabbala Unveiled, who could attract sheep by imagining himself a ram (1) and control the mental images of certain receptive friends by means of magical symbols, the great Madam Blavatsky herself- these were among Mr. Yeats friends and

(1) The Trembling of the Veil, p. 71

acquaintances during the Nineties, and it is little wonder that one whose mind was so naturally tuned to mystical concepts and occult suggestions should soon find himself equally able to control trance and call visions out of the vasty deep. He became, indeed, as one who had put the matter to the proof, a believer. "I had soon mastered Mathers' symbolic system", he says, "and discovered that for a considerable minority- whom I could select by certain unanalysable characteristics- the visible world would completely vanish, and that world, summoned by the symbol, take its place".(1)

This belief, reinforced for the poet by many instances and practical examples, crystallised gradually into a very definite credo, so that in 1901 he could write in an essay on magic which appeared in Ideas of Good and Evil, "I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundation of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are-

"(1) That the borders of our mind 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.

(1) The Trembling of the Veil p. 72

("(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols." (1)

Before going on to a discussion of symbolism in general and Mr. Yeats' use of symbols in particular, it must be pointed out that this preoccupation with an occult mysticism does not represent in any way a break from the subject matter of Irish legend and the poetry of the folk. Indeed, it was Mr. Yeats' interest in beliefs found in the old folk tales and heroic legends, and which are inherent in the mind of a primitive race that led him directly to symbolism. "I learned", he writes, "from the people themselves..... that they cannot separate the idea of an art or a craft from the idea of a cult with ancient technicalities and mysteries. They can hardly separate mere learning from witchcraft, and are fond of words and verses that keep half their secret to themselves." (2)

"Verses that keep half their secret to themselves": this might be a description of the lyrics in The Wind among the Reeds, and more than half the book, in the early editions was occupied by notes which unlocked some of the mystery concealed in the symbolism of the poems. The subjects are taken in most cases from the legends of the Celtic gods, and the symbols, when they are not some universally understood symbol, such as the moon for weariness, or the rose for love or beauty, are taken from the symbolism of the ancient legends, in which use is made of such complex figures as a "white deer with no horns" and "a hound with one red ear" to symbolise "the desire of man for woman" and of woman for that desire.

(1) Essays p. 33
(2) Essays p. 12

Now, having seen Mr. Yeats' own temperament, his interest in the folklore and mythology of Ireland, his study of Blake, and his preoccupation with magic had all contributed something towards turning his mind towards Symbolism, we must pause to ask What is Symbolism? Where does it differ from Allegory? What influences did earlier symbolists have upon the work of Yeats? Only when these questions have been answered will we be in a position to appreciate the symbolism of The Wind Among the Reeds, and be ready to understand the even more delicate symbolism of the later poems.

V

It is in its earliest beginnings, Mr. Arthur Symons declares,(1) that we can see precisely what symbolism in literature really is:- "A form of expression, at the best but approximate, essentially but arbitrary, until it has obtained the force of a convention, for an unseen reality apprehended by the consciousness". In this definition Mr. Symons stresses the importance of the time-element in the creation of a symbol, and implies the existence of traditional bonds, the very strength and firmness of which give to the symbolist poet a freedom of expression that can be obtained in no other way. Though a symbol, he holds, may at first have been arbitrarily chosen, long association has created a hidden correspondence and traditional usage has endowed it with a mystical significance, changing what was once but an approximate expression to an apprehension of the unseen reality for which it stands.

Symbolism may be more clearly and easily explained by the use of examples and by analogy with simile and metaphor. A simile states a resemblance, as Love is like a rose". A metaphor states an identity: "Love is a rose". The symbol, however, assumes, but does not state the identity, and instead of writing "love" the symbolist poet will write "rose" and the symbolist painter will embroider roses upon the gown of a maiden to show that she is in love.

Symbolism as a distinct art arose because of the desire on the part of ancient writers to make certain that only the initiated

(1) Arthur Symons: The Symbolist Movement in Literature.

would be able to discover their meaning. It was an assurance that one would be intelligible only to an intellectual aristocracy. According to Iamblicus, the mode of teaching through symbols was considered by Pythagoras as most necessary, and symbolism as a form of erudition was cultivated by nearly all the Greeks "as being most ancient". In the Apologie for Poetrie, Sir Philip Sidney wrote, "There are many mysteries contained in Poetrie, which of purpose were written darkely, least by prophane wits, it should be abused". Blake, most conscious of symbolists, echoed this and some of the ideas of Swedenborg, when he wrote in a letter to a literalist who had objected that truth cannot be told too plainly; "You say that I want somebody to elucidate my ideas. But you ought know that what is Grand is necessarily obscure to Weak men. That which can be made explicit to the Ideot is not worth my care. The wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouzes the faculties to act. I name Moses, Solomon, Æsop, Homer, Plato."

But symbolism is something more than a mere device for making one's reader use his intellect in order to decipher a code. This it perhaps became among the Alchemists, but as used by the poets, it is a development of the very nature of Poetry. It is an attempt to express the inexpressible, to "hold infinity in the palm of your hand, and eternity in an hour". It is the language of Mysticism, which, ever tending toward a more tenuous subtlety, seeks to give an outward form of expression to emotions, intuitions, half-thoughts

and gleams which are as shadowy and elusive as a rare perfume or a chord of music. "A Symbol", Mr. Yeats has written in an essay on William Blake,(1) "is the only possible expression of some invisible essence, a transparent lamp about an invisible flame". Shelley was writing of symbols and symbolism when he tells how the imprisoned Cythna became wise through subjective contemplation, and wrote upon the sands in "signs" that were "clear elemental shapes whose smallest change" made a "subtler language within language".

This mystical significance of symbolism was acknowledged by Carlyle, who points out that in the Symbol proper there is always, more or less distinctly and directly, an embodiment and revelation of the Infinite. "In a symbol",he says, "the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there". It is by means of symbols alone that the soul can give some embodiment to the apprehended wisdom that waits upon loneliness, reverie, solitude. "There is a solitude of space", wrote Emily Dickinson:

> "There is a solitude of space,
> A solitude of sea,
> A solitude of death, but these
> Society shall be,
> Compared with that profounder site,
> That polar privacy,
> A soul admitted to Itself;
> Finite Infinity."

It is of this intense subjectivity, this inner solitude, that Symbolism is the interpreter. The element of mystery, indeed,

(1) Essays p. 142.

is one that is ever present. There is a sense of far horizons, of an undiscovered country, of a beauty we can only signify, not describe. A symbol has, in fact, been characterized as "a representation which does not aim at being a reproduction". This is true in a much more special sense of symbolism than it is of art in general, though of course, all art but the most photographic realism can also be so characterized. A symbol, however, is a concrete object which is made to signify an abstract idea or emotion, and cannot, therefore, in any sense be a reproduction. Where the ordinary poet would say, "My heart is filled with longing", the symbolist would perhaps write "The rose is torn by the wind". The former is much nearer being a reproduction than the latter.

Originally, the word "Symbol" was used by the Greeks to denote the two halves of the tablet which they divided among themselves as a pledge of hospitality. Later it was used for every sign or rite by which those initiated in a mystery made themselves known to each other; gradually, however, the word extended its significance until it came to mean the representation of idea by form, of the unseen by the visible, of the Infinite by the finite. "In a symbol," to quote Sartor Resartus again, "there is concealment yet revelation: hence, therefore, by Silence and by Speech acting together, comes a double significance". A certain amount of obscurity, evocation, and suggestion is implied in all symbolist poetry. "The essential characteristic of symbolist art", says Jean Moreas, "consists in

never going so far as the conceptio n of the idea in itself". The reader or hearer thus becomes a partner in the poet's task. He must bring with him some gift of interpretation, sometimes of divination, and is allowed by the poet "the delicious joy of believing he creates".

A representation, then, rather than a reproduction, and mingling in its speech something of silence, a Symbol is the ritual of a mystery.

This element of suggestion rather than direct statement is, perhaps, the chief characteristic of the Symbolist poets who arose in France at the close of the last century, and whose methods and ideals undoubtedly influenced the poetic technique of The Wind Among the Reeds. In Yeats, symbolism is a definite repudiation of the spirit of his age, a rejection of the scientific materialism, the bleak morality and the easy objectivity of much of the literature of the later nineteenth century. "The scientific movement", he writes, "brought with it a literature which was always tending to lose itself in externalities of all kinds, in opinion, in declamation, in picturesque writing, in word-painting....." A reaction was inevitable, however, "and now", he continues, "writers have begun to dwell upon the element of evocation, of suggestion, upon what we call the symbolism of great writers." (1)

One of the earliest and best expositions of this Symbolist technique is found in Verlaine's Art Poetique. "De la

(1) Essays p. 191

musique avant toute chose", cries this most musical of the Symbolistes,

> "Et pour cela préfère l'Impair
> Plus vague et plus soluble dans l'air,
> Sans rien en lui qui pèse ou qui pose."

The emphasis upon suggestion and evocation is strong: "Rien de plus cher que la chanson grise Ou l'Indécis au Précis se joint." The image or idea is likened to "des beaux yeux derrière des voiles." There is to be no emphasis on colour: "Pas la couleur, rien que la nuance." The importance of rhyme, greatly overestimated by the Romantics and Parnassians alike, is to be reduced to its more appropriate level. Verlaine's music lies not only in his very subtle use of rhyme, the placing of unemphatic words in the rhyme position and the use of assonance and half rhymes, but in the harmonious variation of the vowel sounds within the line, and the frequent use of an internal rhyme. The result was, in the words of Coppée, a poetry, "at once naive and subtle, made up of fine shades, evoking the most delicate vibrations of the nerves, the most fleeting impressions of the heart. . . poetry in which the verse, still verse, and exquisite verse, is already music". This might almost be a description of the critical rules which Yeats set before himself in writing the lyrics of The Wind Among the Reeds, and, in the words of Coppée, of the music which resulted.

The question of the exact difference between Allegory and Symbolism is an important one because in England the value

of the Faery Queene and The Pilgrim's Progress had for a long time caused the latter to be overshadowed by the former, and, indeed, in the Eighteenth Century to become confused with it. The definition in Johnson's Dictionary for a Symbol is "That which comprehends in its figure a representation of something else"; and for an Allegory, "A figurative discourse in which something other is intended than is contained in the words literally taken", by which it would seem that an Allegory were an integration of Symbols, whereas many Allegories make no use of Symbols at all. Bunyan's is one of these. Much of The Faery Queene, on the other hand, is symbolical, but in no sense is the symbol but an isolated contingent part of the Allegory.

William Blake was the first modern who seems to have realised a difference between what we now understand by the words "Allegory" and "Symbol". His testimony, however, is apt to be somewhat confusing because his use of the word "allegory" is not always consistent either to our present-day meaning or to his own at different times. "Vision or Imagination", he has written, "is a representation of what actually exists, really or unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is formed by The Daughters of Memory." Here "Allegory" is used in the same sense as it is used to-day, as I am using it for the purpose of this distinction; while what has been contrasted with it, under the name of "vision or imagination" is exactly what is meant by modern critics when they speak of Symbolism. Substitute "Symbolism" for "imagination" and the definition

might be by Mr. Arthur Symons. Another strikingly modern definition of symbolism has also been given by Blake, but owing to a changed use of words he now calls it "Allegory": "Allegory addressed to the intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal understanding, is my definition of the most sublime poetry." Because Blake wrote "Allegory" where we would write "Symbolism" is no indication that he confused the two things, but merely that he used the word inaccurately. In this second quotation "Allegory" cannot possibly be the same thing as it is in Blake's remark about The Daughters of Memory. For there the use of the word is identical with our's to-day. But in his definition of the "most sublime poetry" Blake expressly states that it is "altogether hidden from the Corporeal understanding". Now this is the very fundamental distinction between Symbolism and Allegory as <u>we</u> use the words. Allegory can <u>not</u> be hidden from the corporeal understanding without destroying the moral power which is its excuse for being, and ceasing to be allegory and becoming Symbol; while Symbols as they are defined by us are defined exactly also by Blake's description of the most sublime poetry, as well as by that of "vision and imagination".

Symbolism, in other words, says things that cannot be said so perfectly in any other way, and needs but a right instinct for its understanding; while Allegory says things which could be

said as well, or better, in another way, and needs a right knowledge for its understanding. These "other words" are those of Mr. Yeats. (1)

Mr. Yeats as we have seen was led to symbolism partly because he had found that an understanding of symbol had grown up in the mind of the people fed upon legend and folk lore, partly becuase he had come to believe in magical doctrine, the natural expression of which was by means of symbols, but mostly because he was by nature a mystic and as such driven to make use of symbols as the sole way in which he could translate the ineffable into terms of the mundane. He has, as might be expected, very definite ideas upon the nature and purpose of symbolism. Some have already been embodied in my account of symbolism in general, others yet remain to be discussed. He draws carefully the distinction between symbolism and allegory, and points to the former as the language of the mystic, while the latter is too often but the cloak of the moralist. He sees as the substance of all style in literature a "continuous indefinable symbolism", but recognizes beyond this emotional symbolism a definite intellectual symbolism which evokes ideas alone or ideas mingled with emotions. As an example of the emotional symbolism that is at the basis of all great style, he quotes the following lines from Burns:

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

"These lines", he says, "are perfectly symbolical. Take from them

(1) Essays p. 181

the whiteness of the moon and of the waves, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty. But when all are 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.

"All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable, and yet precise emotions. . . . and when sound and colour and form are in a musical relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations, and yet is one emotion". (1)

Intellectual symbols are what are more ordinarily known as symbols. A cathedral as a symbol of Christianity, a policeman's truncheon as a symbol of the law are intellectual symbols. Mr Yeats explains the difference between the two sorts very clearly, "If I say 'white' or 'purple' in an ordinary line of poetry, they evoke emotions so exclusively that I cannot say why they move me; but if I bring them into the same sentence with such obvious intellectual symbols as a cross or a crown of thorns, I think of purity and sovereignty."

(1) Essays pp. 191, 192-193

VI

The lyrics in which Mr. Yeats is, to the most complete extent, consciously a Symbolist are those in The Wind Among the Reeds. In its first edition this was a slim grey volume containing sixty-two pages of poems and forty-six pages of notes explaining them. It was published in the last year of the century, and represents the pure gold of the poetry of Yeats. In it his genius comes to its full and brightest flower. No other volume before or since has reached such a high degree of perfection and maintained it throughout. It contains undoubtedly the greatest number of Yeats' most perfect lyrics, and expressed in all of them a lofty rapture, a single ecstacy, that gives the book itself a unity rarely attained by a collection of short poems.

What is most remarkable about these lyrics, as about some of the most perfect in the earlier collections, is their absolute originality. Here once again was an authentic individual voice, as unmistakeably recognizable as that which sounded in Poems and Ballads. But no greater contrast, as I have already pointed out, could be imagined to Swinburne's violent surges than these delicate rhythms. Sometimes they have a slow trailing splendour as of stars across the deep sky, sometimes their faint clear candour is suggestive of the pale waters of some woodland pool;

never is there any halting or any violence or over-emphasis. The change and flow of the beat is varied and exquisitely modulated into patterns of sound that are as subtle as those of any other musician whose medium has been words. One or two of Shelley's songs, a madrigal by Campion or one or another of the Elizabethans, some things of Poe, of Rossetti, a good deal of Verlaine- these alone have that metrical felicity that chimes pure music from the alphabet; and it is with them that one must place the poetry of The Wind Among the Reeds . But Mr Yeats' work is absolutely distinctive, with its own peculiar cadence, which though it has had imitators(1) since, was a new sound in English poetry. It is a sound that is indicated by the title of the volume, a sound that the poet seems to have caught from the very lips of Nature when she murmurs to herself on some grey day by the Galway shore so that her words are half-heard -

"in winds on the hill,
In shaken boughs, in tide on the shore." (2)

Save that the very music of the lines seems to call up some image of the Irish countryside, to translate, as it were, into rhythm the very spirit of the place, the wavering, uncertain, grey "moidered" air of Sligo and the ploughed lands and the bare

(1) Vide The Crying of the Waters, by Mr. Arthur Symons
(2) The Wind Among the Reeds, The Everlasting Voices

roads, the earlier preoccupation with peasant themes has given place to a brooding upon "old forgotten far-off things and battles long ago" and to a spiritual passion that makes this one of the great volumes of love poetry in the English language. There are one or two exceptions, of course, such as the well-known Fiddler of Dooney, and sometimes incidentally we hear-

> "The cry of a child by the roadway, the creak
> of a lumbering cart,
> The heavy steps of the ploughman, splashing
> the wintry mould" - (1)

but in the main the twin themes of the volume are the heroic Irish legends and spiritual love. The two themes are often united in a single poem, the figures and incidents of the legendary tales becoming symbols which are used to express some subtle or intricate aspect of Eros.

It is in the treatment of love that Yeats' poems show most clearly the peculiar beauty of his genius. The passion in them is rooted in a spiritual intensity that recalls Dante. They are a perfect union of spiritual and earthly passion, of sacred and profane love, a marriage of Heaven and Hell. Sometimes it is of a living mistress he sings, sometimes of "the divine beauty, pure and clear and unalloyed, not clogged with the polutions of mortality", (2) most often it is difficult to tell of which, because the poem could be laid at the shrine of either. Some again

(1) The Wind Among the Reeds, Aedh Tells of the Rose in his Heart
(2) Plato, Symposium (Jowett's trans.)

have a white flame of rapture in which all that is of the earth is refined as in an alchemists furnace, until pure spirit alone remains.

He finds in the kindness of his mistress a beauty that has not been in the world since the time of the queens and heroes of old Ireland-

"When my arms wrap you round I press
My heart upon the loveliness
That has long faded from the world" (1)

Love is transformed by the imagination until it is something out of time and place

"O hiding hair and dewy eyes
I am no more with life and death" (2)

No gifts are too precious to lay at the beloved's feet; yet in the end it is his dreams which the poet brings- the most precious gift of all:

"Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I being poor have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams " (3)

(1) The Wind Among the Reeds: Michael Robartes Dreamsof Forgotten Beauty
(2) The Wind Among the Reeds: The Heart of the Woman
(3) The Wind Among the Reeds: Aedh wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

Dreams, however, turn to sadness, and there is the certainty that time will bring change and separation. Only in a spiritual love is a sure refuge for the heart. He wishes that his beloved were dead- "were but lying cold and dead, And lights were paling out of the West". For the spirit would know a kindness and tenderness alien to the flesh.

> "And you would murmur tender words,
> Forgiving me because you were dead:
> Nor would you rise and hasten away
> Though you have the will of the wild birds,
> But know your hair was bound and wound
> About the stars and moon and sun." (1)

The symbolism of these poems is of both the more general poetic emotional variety and the arbitrary intellectual type. Here for instance Nature becomes for Mr Yeats nothing but a series of emotional symbols. His conception of it is altogether mystical and subjective. The world as we find it here is a world that has passed through the poet's mind and is wrapped in the twilight that is there. It is a world that seems always at the "moth-hour of eve" when "moth-like stars are flickering out" and "owls are beginning to call". Nature is never loved for her own sake as by Wordsworth. The cry of a curlew becomes the symbol of love seeking a lost love. It is an everlasting voice, a symbol of the cry in the poet's heart that echoes in birds, "in wind on the hill, in shaken boughs, in

(1) The Wind Among the Reeds: He Wishes His Beloved were Dead

tide off the shore". "Come heart", he cries-

> "Come heart, where hill is heaped upon hill:
> For there the mystical brotherhood
> Of sun and moon and hollow and wood
> And river and stream work out their will." (1)

The wind is a symbol of a disturbing beauty, of the desires and longings that blow through the heart from nobody knows where bringing in train discontent and uneasiness and the desire of the moth for the star. The faery people who carry mortals away ride in the wind- "Sidhe", indeed, is Gaelic for wind. The wind is a symbol for loneliness, for desolation and for sorrow. "There is enough evil in the crying of wind." "Desolate winds" cry "over the wandering sea", and "beat the doors of Heaven and beat the doors of Hell." Everywhere is the "fluttering sadness of earth."

Water is sometimes as Mr. Forest Reid points out (2) "the symbol of the passing of mortal beauty, and of the passing of time," so that men's souls "waver and give place like the pale waters in their wintry race under the passing stars." More often however it is a symbol of life and abundance, in accordance with the old belief that the generation of all things was through water. It is the waters of Hart Lake that set O'Driscoll dreaming "of the long dim hair of Bridget, his bride," and it is in the heart of London that the poet hears as a call to renewed life the cry of the

(1) The Wind Among the Reeds: Into the Twilight
(2) W. B. Yeats (by Forest Reid) (Martin Secker, 1915) p. 82

waters- "lake-water lapping with low sounds by the shore."

It cannot be denied, however, that the voices of the waters and of the wind are nearly always the messengers of sadness. The wind crying in the sedge by a "desolate lake" is telling of the hopelessness of love. The sea suggests bitterness. The "dim tides are hurled upon the wharves of sorrow." It is "the bitter tide". Regardless of man's sorrow the "dim sea" cries her old cry still. The moon, as in Shelley, is a symbol of weariness. She is "worn" like a pale shell. The poet speaks of being "As weary hearted as that hollow moon". The stars are a symbol of the heaven's unconcern with man's sorrow.

These are emotional symbols, and they are all used in a way that is quite natural to any imaginative person and in an essentially similar manner to that in which symbols are used by Shelley (1) though in some cases (e.g. the wind) the emotions for which the same symbols stand are different in the mind of each.

Beside these emotional symbols, however, many poems in The Wind Among the Reeds as well as some in other early volumes contain a good deal of the arbitrary intellectual symbolism, the characteristics of which have already been described. Some of these are derived from the early Gaelic stories, others from Mediaeval writers, others again from the traditions of the Alchemists, or from the mind of the poet. It is of these more arbitrary symbols

(1) With Shelley the wind, as in the Ode to the West Wind, is a symbol of life and energy as contrasted with Yeats conception of the wind as a messenger of sadness. Their symbolism of the moon and of fountains and towers are very similar.

that we need the explanation that is furnished in the exquisite (and often irrelevant and rambling) notes to the early editions of The Wind Among the Reeds, but which have not been reprinted in the collected works.

The most obvious intellectual symbol, however, and the one which runs consistently through not only this one volume, but through all of those containing his early poetry, is that of the rose. It is called by many names- the rose, the secret rose, the rose of battle, Rosa Alchemica, "the rose upon the rood of time", the rose of peace, the rose of the world. These are the titles of some of the early poems and stories; and despite the diversity of images evoked it is in all cases the same fragrant blossom that is hymned, for this rose is neither the symbol of peace not of war, neither of the world nor of secrecy, nor of time nor of eternity- but of all these, because it transcends them all, being, indeed the symbol of

"Eternal Beauty wandering on her way."

Like Plato, Spenser, the young Milton and Shelley it is of spiritual beauty that the "sage and serious" poet dreams. To Mr. Yeats this beauty was an ever-present reality. He saw her movements in the old heroic tales of kings and heroes and noble women of the Celtic dawn, and knew that she was still living

because he saw her walking in the grey of the twilight on the hills of Cualan. This beauty is kinder than any earthly loveliness in that it has no tryst with the dust.

> "Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream
> For these red lips with all their mournful pride,
> Mournful that no new wonder may betide,
> Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,
> And Usna's children died." (1)

The old heroic tales of long ago are one with the red lips of the poet's mistress, who, however, is no transient earthly lover but a personification of that beauty, before whose wandering feet God made the world to be a grassy road.

This beauty is sought after by those-

> "Who have sought more than is in rain or dew
> Or in the sun and moon, or on the earth,
> Or sighs amid the wandering, starry mirth,
> Or comes in laughter from the sea's sad lips." (2)

It is "beauty grown sad with its eternity"; and it blossoms as a rose in the deeps of the poet's heart so that he hungers to build the whole world anew, "and sit on a green knoll apart, With the earth and the sky and the water remade." Now, as in such a poem as the beautiful The Secret Rose the poet is lifted into a sort of mystical ecstacy-

(1) Early Poems and Stories: The Rose of the World
(2) Early Poems and Stories: The Rose of Battle

"Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose,
Enfold me in my hour of hours, where those
Who sought thee in the Holy Sepulchre,
Or in the wine vat, dwell beyond the stir
And tumult of defeated dreams; and deep
Among pale eyelids, heavy with the sleep
Men have named beauty." -

and waits expectant for the "great wind of love and hate" to blow the stars about the sky " like the sparks blown out of a smithy."

In taking the Rose as a symbol of spiritual love and supreme beauty, Yeats was departing in no way from the most venerable traditions of symbolism. It was once a symbol of the sun, itself a sign of the divine nature and the symbolic heart of the universe. The red rose, again, has always been associated with love, especially with an eternal, or continually resurrected love. Indeed according to the ancient myths its colour is attributed to the goddess of love: Aphrodite hastening to the wounded Adonis, trod on a bush of white roses, the thorns tore her tender flesh and her sacred blood dyed the white roses for ever red. (1)
In the Irish poets the rose is sometimes found as a religious symbol, or as a symbol of woman's beauty as in the Gaelic poem Roseen Dubh from which Mangan derived My Dark Rosaleen in which the rose as a symbol of the highest beauty is identified with Ireland. In this way, too, the rose is a symbol both of beauty and of Ireland

(1) Sir J. G. Frazer: The Golden Bough (Abridged Ed. 1924) p. 336

in Aubrey de Vere's The Little Black Rose. It is interesting to note that Mr. Yeats also has used the Rose as a symbol of his country. The Poem, The Rose Tree, in his last volume, Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921), deals with the Dublin Rebellion, and symbolises Ireland as a rose bush watered by the blood of Conolly and Pearse. Unlike Mangan and DeVere, however, Mr Yeats has never been able to symbolise contemporary Ireland and divine beauty at the same time, and the Rose in the early poems is always that perfect beauty transcending time and martality because its habitation is the spirit.

The intrinsic value of poetry such as this can never be estimated in cold prose, and subjected to the examination of pure reason. It must be judged by the note of sincerity in the verse. Is this poetry moving? Is it that thing of beauty which seems to give promise of an endless joy? Is it- and this is a hard thing that is demanded of genius- written in the very heart's blood? If we can truthfully and confidently answer these questions in the affirmative, then we may be certain that we are in the presence of great poetry. And of the poems of The Wind Among the Reeds and the best of the earlier lyrics we are aware that their writer achieves greatness- a greatness, we may feel to which nothing is added by the poet's theorising, but which is evident in the poetry itself.

VII

The poetry of Yeats falls clearly into two distinct groups: the early poems and the later poems: with, perhaps a short transitional period represented by the volume of lyrics which followed The Wind Among the Reeds. This was In the Seven Woods, published in 1903. At this period, however, the poet's interest was turning towards the stage. Beginning with the lyrical dramas, The Countess Kathleen, 1892, The Land of Heart's Desire 1894, and The Shadowy Waters, 1900, Mr. Yeats gradually became more and more absorbed in his dream of giving a national theatre to Ireland, and a poetic tradition to Irish playwrights. Between the publication of In the Seven Woods and of the next volume of poems he wrote The King's Threshold, The Hour Glass, On Baile's Strand, Deidre and one or two other plays. In prose he was writing the Stories of Red Hanrahan and occasional essays, while his earlier lyrical plays underwent a thorough, and not wholly successful, revision. It was not until 1910 that the poet turned to non-dramatic poetry, publishing with his play, The Green Helmet, his first collection of lyrics in seven years.

In the Seven Woods is by no means the least worthy of Yeats' collections of lyrics. Much of the old music is retained, while there are none of the adjectival excesses of "dream-heavy",

"pearl-pale", "dove-grey" which marred some of the earliest poems. One or two lyrics, such as The Withering of the Boughs and Red Hanrahan's Song seem to be a part of the spirit which fashioned The Wind Among the Reeds, while in what is perhaps the loveliest poem in the book- the beautiful The Folly of Being Comforted- the old style is caught in the very act of passing into the later, and possesses a beauty that makes one almost feel the heat and light of that exquisite line-

"The Fire that stirs about her, when she stirs."

In Adam's Curse the technique of the first part of the poem is that of the later lyrics, while it softens to a beautiful and subdued close in the older manner.

In the Seven Woods, indeed, is notable for this, that it contains poems in both Yeats' earlier and later styles, and some in which the two manners are fused to a strange perfection. It has poems which are beautiful in two distinct ways, and none in which the defects of either style make themselves evident

The Green Helmet was scarcely so successful. The poems in this volume were written in a period of discouragement and uncertainty. With a few notable exceptions, they are lacking in spontaneity and.are filled with the gloom of the passing of youth. Nevertheless they are remarkable as representing a complete break - most clearly of all, with the style and technique of the early poems,

but also to some extent with their subject-matter and symbolism. In 1914 came Responsibilities, and three years later The Wild Swans at Coole. In these two volumes the recovery from what seemed like faltering is complete. They contain poems that are worthy to rank with the very best of Yeats' early work, though they achieve their success by reason of a different appeal. They continue and carry to perfection the method that made its first shy appearance in The Seven Woods, and its first definite appearance in The Green Helmet.

What are the characteristics of this later poetry, and how do they differ from those of the earlier poems?

The later lyrics are entirely free from "embroidery". They have none of the rich, dream-heavy, almost sensuous qualities that are a part of the beauty of The Wind Among the Reeds. Instead of the vague indefinite evocation of a mood by means of a supple and varying music we have the emphasis shifted to form: in place of a suggested nuance the image is brought sharply into focus; abstraction is whittled away, and generalities pounded into the particular. It is as though in his early poetry Mr. Yeats had dressed a tall queen in a shimmering robe made out of some fine coloured cloth decked with jewels and roses worked in gold, and had set upon her head a golden crown and strapped richly-worked shoes over her feet, and had bid all men to bow before her, giving praise to one who might be Venus or the Mother of God. In his later poetry

he has undressed her and bid her stand upon a rock, her hair tossed in the cold wind and her feet washed by the grey tide and her body bathed in the clear sunlight. There is no colour in this poetry now save grey. It is always some scene of grey rock, grey sea, grey mist that is conjured up before the eye of the mind. The dominant symbol is the hawk, proud and lonely high-flyer, winging over the grey Irish shore and the lonely forest.

"Now I have learnt to be proud
Hovering over the wood
In the broken mist
Or tumbling cloud." (1)

This, the"yellow-eyed hawk of the mind" is the symbol that we must contrast to the Secret Rose- "Beauty grown sad with its eternity" (2)- of the early poetry. The poet's symbolism has, indeed, in all respects changed from that of the earlier poetry. He announces his intention to-

"Hurl helmets, crowns, and swords into the pit." (3)

The beauty which he worships now is no mystical Lady Loveliness with a "rose-embroidered hem", but "beauty like a tightened bow... Being high and solitary and most stern". (4) There is a marked falling-off in the poet's interest in subject-matter from Irish legend, and though it still occupies his attention in such fine poems as The Two Kings and The Grey Rock, and gives him a certain number of his symbols, it plays nothing like so exclusive a part in his

(1) The Wild Swans at Coole: The Hawk
(2) Early Poems and Stories: The Rose of Battle
(3) The Green Helmet: Reconciliation
(4) The Green Helmet: No Second Troy

later poetry as in the earlier. His interest in it is now chiefly becuase the woman whom he loves has a beauty and a mind that seems to him proud and solitary like a queen out of the old stories, a loveliness "that is not natural in an age like this". (1) The Old Age of Queen Maeve, written in 1903, gives the first hint of this attitude towards the old stories, where Maeve is praised in these lines, which suddenly the poet realizes are applicable to his own mistress:

> "She had been beautiful in that old way
> That's all but gone; for the proud heart is gone,
> And the fool heart of the counting house fears all
> But soft beauty and indolent desire.
> She could have called over the rim of the world
> Whatever woman's lover had hit her fancy,
> And yet had been great bodied and great limbed,
> Fashioned to be the mother of strong children;
> And she'd had lucky eyes and a high heart,
> And wisdom that caught fire like the dried flax,
> At need, and made her beautiful and fierce,
> Sudden and laughing.
> O unquiet heart,
> Why do you praise another, praising her,
> As if there were no tale but your own tale
> Worth knitting to a measure of sweet sound?"

The idea expressed in this passage from a poem which is certainly one of the later poems come to birth before its time is echoed in half a dozen of the lyrics in The Green Helmet. The change is fundamentally one of from youth to age. This is no longer the poetry of young love. "O heart, we are old," he sings, " The living beauty is for younger men, We cannot pay its tribute of wild tears." (2)

(1) The Green Helmet: No Second Troy
(2) Later Poems: The Living Beauty

The mood is steadily becoming one of retrospect. The best has happened, and already lies behind. "When I was young" is the keynote of many of the songs:

> "For she had fiery blood
> When I was young,
> And trod so sweetly proud
> As 'twere upon a cloud,
> A woman Homer sung,
> That life and letters seem
> But an heroic dream." (1)

In poem after poem he records the beauty of body and mind which was his love's portion in her youth In His Phoenix, from The Wild Swans at Coole, he names the noted beauties of the day- Gaby and Ruth St. Denis and Pavlowa and a "player in the States" famous for her beautiful interpretation of Juliet- and other less famous beauties, comparing them bitterly to his own mistress:

> "There's Margaret and Marjorie and Dorothy and Nan,
> A Daphne and a Mary who live in privacy;
> One's had her fill of lovers, another's had but one,
> Another boasts, 'I pick and choose and have but two or three.'
>
> If head and limb have beauty and the instep's high and light
> They can spread out what sail they please for all I have to say,
> Be but breakers of men's hearts or engines of delight:
> I knew a Phoenix in my youth so let them have their way.

It is all remembered beauty, a looking back on passion, not passion itself, for now:

> "There is grey in your hair.
> Young men no longer suddenly catch
> their breath
> When you are passing. .

(1) The Green Helmet: A Woman Homer Sung

Your beauty can but leave among us
Vague memories, nothing but memories."

He seeks consolation in dreams and a Pagan faith in a life after death:

"Vague memories, nothing but memories,
But in the grave all, all shall be renewed.
The certainty that I shall see that lady
Leaning or standing or walking
In the first loveliness of womanhood,
And with the fervour of my youthful eyes,
Has set me muttering like a fool". (1)

It is the old theme of the passing of beauty, of the inevitable toll of the years, the dimming of the eye and the failing of strength. Even worse, the heart itself grows old. "I thought no more was needed", cries the poet:

"I thought no more was needed
Youth to prolong
Than dumb-bell and foil
To keep the body young.
Oh, who could have foretold
That the heart grows old?

"Though I have many words,
What woman's satisfied,
I am no longer faint
Because at her side?
Oh, who could have foretold
That the heart grows old?

"I have not lost desire
But the heart I had;
I thought 'twould burn my body
Laid on the death-bed,
For who could have foretold
That the heart grows old?"

(1) The Wild Swans at Coole: Broken Dreams
(2) The Wild Swans at Coole: A Song

This, however, is but the expression of one of many moods. Regret for the passing of youth and the aging of the heart must be a common and frequently recurring emotion to everyone after a certain time, but it is rarely the dominant one. Mr. Yeats, indeed, though he has his moments of regret and sometimes of despair, is confident that age has brought him a wisdom that his youth had lacked and revealed a truth which he was unfitted to perceive before. Four lines in the Green Helmet volume express this thought, though still, it must be admitted, with a note very like cynicism:

> "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." (1)

These lines afford a very definite repudiation of some of the earliest poems. Consider, for example, The Song of the Happy Shepherd, which was included with The Wanderings of Usheen in the poet's first volume, with its contrast between the golden age when "the world on dreaming fed" and the present when "Grey truth is now her painted toy", and note what a flowery dream has withered into truth.

To "wither into truth": so accurate and so perfect a phrase has something about it of the wildest poetry, for in three words we seem to see all the most brightly coloured dreams shrivelling into something grey and cold and hard. But, miracle of miracles! Phoenix-like out of the dust of that change, a new loveliness takes

(1) The Green Helmet: The Coming of Wisdom with Time

shape and form, and Intellectual Beauty is born. This is what happens before our startled eyes as we turn from Mr. Yeats' earlier poetry to his later. The emphasis of the former was upon Emotion. "I tried after the publication of The Wanderings of Usheen", he says in the dedication of his Early Poems and Stories, "to write of nothing but emotion." In the later work he has turned against abstraction and the evocation of feeling alone. Even in the latest edition of the early works (1925) he has undertaken considerable revision "cutting out or altering passages that are sentimental from lack of thought". (1) The style, accordingly, of the later poems, is no longer fluid, easy-flowing, variable, like a piece of music or a nocturne by Whistler; it is cold and hard, transparent and shining as a mirror. Now he is able to say,

> "I dream that I have brought
> To such a pitch my thought
> That coming time can say,
> 'He shadowed in a glass
> What thing her body was'." (2)

The italics are mine. This passage is significant as shewing not only the quality and the effect of the poet's later style, but also that its root is an intellectual one, that it is essentially thought not emotion. In The Fisherman, one of the poems in The Wild Swans at Coole, the poet tells how all day he had looked in the face what he had hoped it would be to write for his own race.

(1) Early Poems and Stories: Dedication
(2) The Green Helmet: A Woman Homer Sung

And then the reality-

"The living men that I hate,
The dead man that I loved (1)
The craven man in his seat,
The insolent unreproved
And no knave brought to book
Who has won a drunken cheer,
The witty man and his joke
Aimed at the commonest ear,
The clever man who cries
The catch cries of the clown,
The beating down of the wise
And great Art beaten down."

He goes on to describe how in scorn of this audience he had begun to imagine a man with sun-freckled face, clad in grey Connemara cloth, "climbing up to a place where stone is dark under froth" "at dawn to cast his flies", and how he had cried,

"'Before I am old
I shall have written him one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn.'"

It must not be inferred from this that Mr. Yeats has addressed his later poetry to the common people. the Irish peasantry. Nothing could be further from the truth. His sun-freckled fisherman climbing the grey Sligo hills is-

"A man who does not exist,
A man who is but a dream." (2)

(1) J. M. Synge
(2) The Wild Swans at Coole: The Fisherman

The very type of this poetry's beauty, "cold and passionate as the dawn", its frigid ecstasy, its intellectualism, its lack of sentimentality and human emotion is a long way removed from the thought and feeling of the people. The poet's aim was not, as it was in his earliest poetry, to treat of the Irish country people and their legends and beliefs. The completeness and full significance of this change are apparent when we have obtained the key which explains the symbolism of a poem in The Wild Swans at Coole. Here are the lines which beneath the surface of their apparent meaning (or lack of meaning) conceal an avowal of a change which the poet feels to be inevitable and yet not wholly to be recognized without regret. The title is Lines Written in Dejection:

"When have I last looked on
The round green eyes and the long wavering bodies
Of the dark leopards of the moon?
All the wild witches those most noble ladies,
For all their broomsticks and their tears,
Their angry tears, are gone.
The holy centaurs of the hills are vanished;
I have nothing but the embittered sun;
Banished heroic mother moon and vanished,
And now that I have come to fifty years
I must endure the timid sun."

It is obvious that here we are dealing with a poem which is expressing a thought and mood something akin to the thought and mood of The Coming of Wisdom with Time. (1) It looks as though the poet were lamenting a change from romanticism to reality as he is in that poem, although the symbol of the sun is used in exactly the opposite

(1) Cf above page 69

sense. In the lines just quoted it is apparent even to the superficial observer that the sun represents the harsh light of an inescapable reality. It is "timid" because in its light no great passion can be indulged, no high flight of the imagination dared. In The Coming of Wisdom with Time, however, the sun is represented as the warmth and light that nourished the leaves and flowers of his early poetry before his verse had withered into the truth. There, the effect is merely metaphorical, and the imagery of the leaves and the flowers and the sun has not the definiteness of symbolism. The Lines Written in Dejection, however, are very definitely symbolic, and when their symbolism is understood yield a meaning which is much deeper in its implications. The chief symbols are, evidently, the sun and the moon. They are contrasted with one another, the moon signifying the qualities or the purposes of the earlier poetry, while the sun stands for the qualities or the purposes of the later. There has been a change from the moon to the sun. What that change implies will be clear after reading this passage from the introduction which Mr. Yeats wrote for Lady Gregory's Gods and Fighting Men in 1905:

"Old writers had an admirable symbolism that attributed certain energies to the influence of the sun, and certain others to the lunar influence. To lunar influence belong all thoughts and emotions that were created by the community, by the common people, by nobody knows who, and to the sun all that came from the high

disciplined or kingly mind. I myself imagine a marriage of the sun and moon in the arts I take most pleasure in. . . From the moon come the folk songs imagined by reapers and spinners out of the common impulse of their labour. . . . and the folk tales. But in supreme art or in supreme life there is the influence of the sun, too, and the sun brings with it, as old writers tell us, not merely discipline but joy; for its discipline is not of the kind the multitudes impose. . . .but the expression of the individual soul. . . . "

The Lines Written in Dejection, then, is seen to be an expression of momentary regret at what is really a temperamental turning away from a poetry which drew its themes from folk-lore and a technique which treated them emotionally. The later poetry in the waning of the moon in the light of the sun. With an intellectual austerity in marked contrast to his earlier mood the poet has turned inward upon a highly disciplined mind in the effort to find final joy in the soul's true expression. This explains the growing esotericism of the later poems. Ideas become complex. Obscurity increases, and the poems which yield their meaning only after contemplation or study become more numerous. The credo of magic is assumed as an article of faith. Certain ideas of immortality are borrowed from Arabian philosophies, while a complicated symbolism of the "phases of the moon" is used to classify all possible types of the

human nature. Some interesting speculations are indulged in under the tutelage of the Cambridge neo-Platonists of the XVIIth century, especially Henry More, and the concept of "anima mundi" or world-memory, first accepted as offering an interpretation of some of Mr. Yeats' occult experiences and an explanation of the similarity between the folk lore of all countries and all periods, plays an increasingly important part in the poet's metaphysics.

What has occurred is that he has turned from the poetry of the folk to what is his essay on Popular Poetry he calls the poetry of the coteries (1) of which Shelley's Epipsychidion is an example. "The poetry of the coteries", writes Yeats, "which presupposes the written tradition, does not differ in kind from the true poetry of the people, which presupposes the unwritten tradition. Both are alike strange and obscure, and unreal to all who have not understanding, and both, instead of that manifest logic that clear rhetoric of the 'popular poetry' , glimmer with thoughts and images whose 'ancestors were stout and wise', 'anigh to Paradise' 'ere yet men knew the gift of corn'." By "popular poetry" is meant a poetry such as that of Longfellow, who "tells his story or his idea so that one needs nothing but his verses to understand it. No words of his (Longfellow's) borrow their beauty from those that used them before". The characteristics of such a poetry,as Yeats points out, are "triviality of emotion", "poverty of ideas" and an "imperfect sense of beauty".

(1) The use of the word "coteries" here must not be confused with its common use as a term of reproach applied to little groups of sterile dilettantes.

The essential similarity of the poetry of the folk and that of the coteries which is here noted as being due to the firm foundation of each upon tradition, though in one case it is a written tradition.while in the other it is an unwritten tradition. is responsible for the perfect ease and naturalness with which Yeats has been able to turn from the one kind of poetry to the other. He has never written popular poetry, it should be added, in the sense in which that adjective is applied to the typical work of Longfellow.

From very earliest manhood, however, he seemed to forsee some such change as that which later actually took place in his work. In an introductory poem to the lyrics published with The Countess Cathleen in 1893 he expressed the fear-

> "Lest I no more hear common things that crave;
> The weak worm hiding down in its small cave,
> The field mouse running by me in the grass,
> And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass;
> But 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." (1)

This marks with a strange accuracy the path of development along which the poet was to travel. In his earliest poetry he was preoccupied with "common things that crave"; in the more mystical poetry that found its culmination in The Wind Among the Reeds he was lending an ear to "the strange things said By God to the bright hearts of those long dead"; and now in the later poetry the tendency is increasingly to "chaunt a tongue men do not know".

(1) Early Poems and Stories: To the Rose upon the Road of Time

It is a curious paradox that the esoteric, subtle and intellectual later poetry has a simplicity of form that is never achieved in the earlier books. Even the very simplest of the early poems seem a little ornate when compared with such a poem as A Song from The Wild Swans at Coole volume, (1) or with these lines from The Green Helmet collection, entitled To a Child Dancing in the Wind:

"Dance there upon the shore;
What need have you to care
For wind or water's roar?
And tumble out your hair
That the salt drops have wet;
Being young you have not known
The fool's triumph, nor yet
Love lost as soon as won,
Nor the best labourer (2) dead
And all the sheaves to bind.
What need have you to dread
The monstrous crying of wind?"

This is poetry the most musical, the most elevated, and yet the nearest to prose. The thought here is quite in keeping with the form. It is clear, straightforward, and without complexity. What are we to say, however, when we find embodied in a lyric that is as crystal-clear as limpid water a thought that is as subtle and deceiving as a shape seen under water? The small poem Memory is a case in point. In its technique and music and prosody it is ultimate simplicity; yet the idea that it expresses- and this is its chief importance because its appeal is essentially intellectual- is based upon such a subtle and only partially expressed analogy

(1) Quoted above page 68
(2) J. M. Synge

that this cold Pastoral seems almost to tease us out of thought.

It is but six lines in length-

> "One had a lovely face,
> And two or three had charm,
> But charm and face were in vain
> Because the mountain grass
> Cannot but keep the form
> Where the mountain hare has lain," (1)

In other poems the meaning is hidden behind an arbitrary symbolism. The Lines Written in Dejection, quoted above, is an example of this; another is the poem called The Collar Bone of a Hare in The Wild Swans at Coole. In this the poet expresses the desire to "cast a sail on the water" and follow in the wake of many a king and princess till he had come to the "comely trees and the lawn, The playing upon pipes and the dancing" where he would learn that the best thing is to change one's love's while dancing and to pay a kiss for a kiss:

> "I would find by the edge of that water
> The collar bone of a hare
> Worn thin by the lapping of water,
> And pierce it through with a gimlet and stare
> At the old bitter world where they marry in churches,
> And laugh over the untroubled water
> At all who marry in churches,
> Through the thin white bone of a hare".

Why through the thin white bone of a hare? is the question that one naturally asks. Of what is this a symbol? The answer is found

(1) The Wild Swans at Coole: Memory

in the story of The Three O'Byrnes and the Evil Faeries, one of the Irish folk tales collected in The Celtic Twilight. In this we learn that according to an old Irish superstition if one takes the collar-bone of a hare and bores a hole in it, one may look through it into the land of the faeries, and discover faery gold without being harmed by the evil sprites. In this poem, having been permitted to enter faery land the poet is using this in the inverted sense- as a means of looking back at the "old bitter world" he has left behind.

The obscurity of many of the poems in The Wild Swans at Coole and in Yeats' last volume of lyrics, Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1921), is not explained so easily. Poems such as The Sad Shepherd, Ego Dominus Tuus, The Phases of the Moon, and The Double Vision of Michael Robartes in the former volume, and Michael Robartes and the Dancer, Solomon and the Witch, An Image from a Past Life, Towards Break of Day, Daemon and Beast, and The Second Coming, from the later book are almost impossible to understand until one is acquainted with the strange mixtures of philosophies upon which they are based. Even then they remain extremely difficult. As the poet says in a note to his Later Poems written in 1922, "They take their place in a phantasmagoria in which I endeavour to explain my philosophy of life and death, and till that philosophy has found some detailed exposition in prose certain passages in the poems named above must seem obscure. To some

extent I wrote them as a text for exposition." The volume of prose to which a reference is here made is A Vision, which is announced for publication at an early date. Until that book is forthcoming one desiring elucidation had best read these poems in the light of certain passages from The Trembling of the Veil and the notes to the Four Plays for Dancers (1920). The light, it must be admitted, which these afford is extremely diffuse, and it is no easy matter to focus it into one coherent and bright beam, or to arrange in well-connected order a series of fragmentary speculations upon such topics as the nature of a woman's beauty, the relation of body to soul, previous and future incarnation, and the formulation of a system that seeks to classify all possible types of the human nature under an appropriate symbolism of some phase of the moon.

At the basis of all this superstructure of metaphysics and philosophy is the profound belief in what for want of a better term we call magic. Yeats' credo has already been quoted. It is a creed which cannot be brushed away as irrational because, in the first place, it is not of that type which postulates any interruption of or interference with the laws of nature. It limits its sphere of applicability solely to the countries of the mind, and to those borders between the conscious and the subconscious that are being most fruitfully explored by modern analysis. In the second place, it is a creed which has this in common with scientific law, that it

is based upon observation and experiment. Mr. Yeats has evidently the powers of a well-attuned medium and possesses a mind peculiarly receptive to vision and trance so that for him, a belief in magic is nothing other than a commonsense generalisation of his own experience. Moreover he was living among people for whom the same phenomena made themselves apparent. The following passage from his autobiography describes the genesis in Mr. Yeats of the neo-Platonic conception of the Anima Mundi-

"Another time when George Pollexfen had seen in answer to some evocation of mine a man with his head cut in two, she (their servant girl) woke to find that she 'must have cut her face with a pin, as it was all over blood'. When three or four saw together, the dream or vision would divide itself into three or four parts, each seeming complete in itself, and all fitting together, so that each part was an adaptation of a single meaning to a particular personality. A visionary being would give, let us say, a lighted torch to one, an unlighted candle to another, an unripe fruit to a third, and to the fourth a ripe fruit. At times coherent stories were built up, as if a company of actors were to improvise, and play, not only without previous consultation, but without foreseeing at any moment what would be said or done the moment after. Who made the story? Was it the mind of one of the visionaries? Perhaps, for I have endless proof that, where two worked together, the symbolic influence commonly took upon itself, though no word was

spoken, the quality of the mind that had first fixed a symbol in the mind's eye. . . Then, too, from whence come the images of the dream? No always, I was soon persuaded, from the memory, perhaps never in trance or sleep. One man, who certainly thought that Eve's apple was the sort that you got from the greengrocer, and as certainly never doubted its story's literal truth, said, when I used some symbol to send him to Eden, that he saw a walled garden off the top of a high mountain, and in the middle of it a tree with great birds in the branches, and fruit out of which, if you held a fruit to your ear, came the sound of fighting. I had not at the time read Dante's Purgatorio, and it caused me some trouble to verify the mountain garden, and from some passage in the Zohar, the great birds among the boughs; while a young girl on being sent to the same garden, heard the 'music of heaven' froma tree, and on listening with her ear against the trunk, found it was made by the 'continual clashing of swords'. Whence came that fine thought of music making swords, that image of the garden, and many like images and thoughts? I had as yet no clear answer, but knew myself face to face with that Anima Mundi described by Platonic philosophers, and more especially in modern time by Henry More, which has a memory independent of individual memories, though they constantly enrich it with their images and their thoughts." (1)

Mr. Yeats believes that any work of genius is written because of a knowledge or power that comes into the mind of the world

(1) The Trembling of the Veil. pp. 142-143

that is stored with the memory of all the individual minds of the past. Such knowledge or power is called up by an image. This image, he holds, is always the opposite of the natural self or the natural world. The image that Yeats follows is of a proud and exalted race of heroic comrades such as he found in the Celtic mythologies, and which is the antithesis of the world to-day. And of that image which is his personal anti-self, he has this to say: "I know very little about myself and much less of that anti-self. . . . It is perhaps becuase nature made me a gregarious man, going hither and thither looking for conversation, and ready to deny from fear or favour his dearest conviction, that I love proud and lonely things." (1)

In Ego Dominus Tuus the main theme is this pursuit of the Image, or Anti-Self. The poem, which is a dialogue between the poet and an interlocutor opens with a picture of the poet himself pacing the grey sands in the moonlight under an old weather-beaten tower, tracing on the sand, "Enthralled by the unconquerable delusion, Magical shapes".

"By the help of an image", (he says)

I call to my own opposite, summon all
That I have handled least, least looked upon".

"And I", replies his companion, "would find myself and not an image

Yeats holds -

(1) The Trembling of the Veil p. 58

"That is our modern hope and by its light
We have lit upon the gentle sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;
Whether we have chosen chisel, pen,or brush
We are but critics, or but half create
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed
Lacking the countenance of our friends."

Dante and Keats are made examples of artists who have resolutely pursued their antithetical Image. These lines treat of the Florentine-

"I think he fashioned from his opposite
An image that might have been a stony face
Staring upon a bedouin's horse-hair roof
From doored and windowed cliff, or half-upturned
Among the coarse grass and the camel dung.
He set his chisel to the hardest stone.
Being mocked by Guido for his lecherous life
Derided and deriding, driven out
To climb that stair and eat that bitter bread,
He found the unpersuadable justice, he found
The most exalted lady loved by man."

And these of the Cockney-

"His art is happy but who knows his mind?
I see a schoolboy when I think of him
With face and nose pressed to a sweet shop window,
For certainly he sank into his grave
His senses and his heart unsatisfied,
And made- being poor, ailing and ignorant,
Shut out from all the luxury of the world,
The coarse-bred son of a livery-stable keeper-
Luxuriant song."

"Yet surely", objects the interlocutor, "there are men who have made their art

Out of no tragic war, lovers of life,
Impulsive men that looked for happiness
And sing when they have found it."

"No, not sing", answers Yeats-

> "For those that love the world serve it in action,
> Grow rich, popular and full of influence,
> And should they paint or write still it is action:
> The strugle of the fly in marmalade,
> The rhetorician would deceive his neighbours,
> The sentimentalist himself; while art
> Is but a vision or reality."

In the concluding lines, the poet speaks again of his own purpose as an artist-

> "I call to the mysterious one who yet
> Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
> And look most like me, being indeed my double,
> And prove of all imaginable things
> The most unlike, being my anti-self,
> And standing by these characters disclose
> All that I seek; and whisper it as though
> He were afraid the birds, who cry aloud
> Their momentary cries before it is dawn,
> Would carry it away to blasphemous men."

One of the chief pruposes of an obscure symbolism is noted in the three final lines. The symbolist makes use of characters lest the holy thought should be carried away to blasphemous men.

Another poem which opens up even wider vistas upon Mr. Yeats' strange philosophy is <u>The Phases of the Moon</u>. In scene and setting the poem is very similar to the one just described. Again it is a night piece. Under a dwindling and late-risen moon two men are pacing the rough Connemara road. "An old man cocked his ear, What made that sound?" And then the reply

"A rat or water hen
Splashed, or an otter slid into the stream.
We are on the bridge; that shadow is the tower,
And the light proves that he is reading still.
He has found, after the manner of his kind,
Mere images; chosen this place to live in
Because, it may be, of the candle light
From the far tower where Milton's Platonist
Sat late, or Shelley's visionary prince;

. . . . . .

An image of mysterious wisdom won by toil;
And now he seeks in book or manuscript
What he shall never find."

This time the poet takes no part in the dialogue; it is of him that the two night wanderers are speaking. They are Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, personages that have already appeared in Yeats' works. In a note to this poem,Yeats says, "Years ago I wrote three stories in which occur the names of Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne. I now consider that I used the actual names of two friends, and that one of these friends, Michael Robartes, has but lately returned from Mesopotamia where he has partly found and partly thought out much philosophy. I consider that John Aherne is either the original of Owen Aherne or some near relation of the man that was, and that both he and Robartes, to whose namesake I had attricuted a turbulent life and death, have quarrelled with me." The three stories here referred to are Rosa Alchemica, The Tables of the Law, and The Adoration of the Magi . In the first of these Robartes is described as "Michael Robartes, whom I had not seen for years, and whose wild red hair, fierce eyes,

sensitive, tremulous lips and rough clothes, made him look now, just as they used to do before, something between a debauchee, a saint, and a peasant." (1) According to the tale, after having established a chapel in a wild spot on the Irish coast where Dionysiac orgies are practised under the guise of an Alchemical ritual, Robartes and his band of priests are slain by the outraged fisher-folk. The name was also used as a symbol in the title of some of the poems in The Wind Among the Reeds; there, however, it signified a principle of the mind rather than an actual personage. Owen Aherne is described in the second of these three tales of mystery and imagination as possessing a nature "which is half monk, half soldier of fortune, (which) must needs turn action into dreaming, and dreaming into action. . . For such there is no order, no finality, no contentment in the world". As a student in Paris he had devoted himself to speculations about alchemy and mysticism. "More orthodox in his beliefs than Michael Robartes, he had surpassed him in a fanciful hatred of all life, and this hatred had found expression in the curious paradox. . .that the beautiful arts were sent into the world to overthrow nations, and finally life herself, by sowing everywhere unlimited desires, like torches thrown into a burning city". (2)

(1) Early Poems and Stories p. 470
(2) Early Poems and Stories p. 499

These are the progenitors, partly imaginary and partly real who in The Phases of the Moon are represented as carrying on their nocturnal dialogues below the tower in thich the poet pursues his lonely search. The poem is an exposition of, as some of the Four Plays for Dancers are an application of, the "convictions about the nature and history of a woman's beauty, which Robartes found in the Speculum of Gyraldus and in Arabia Deserta among the Judwalis" (1)

The fundamental idea is that the soul in each cycle of its development incarnates through twenty-eight typical incarnations corresponding to the phases of the moon, the light of the moon's disc symbolising the subjective and the dark part the objective nature, the wholly dark moon (called Phase 1) and the wholly light (called Phase 15) symbolising complete objectivity and complete subjectivity respectively. This is how Robartes describes the system in the poem:

> "Twenty and eight the phases of the moon,
> The full and the moon's dark and all the crescents,
> Twenty and eight, and yet but six-and-twenty
> The cradles that a man must needs be rocked in:
> For there's no human life at the full or the dark.
> From the first crescent to the half, the dream
> But summons to adventure and the man
> Is always happy like a bird or beast;
> But while the moon is rounding towards the full
> He follows whatever whim's most difficult
> Among whims not impossible, and though scarred
> As with the cat-o'-nine tails of the mind,
> His body moulded from within his body
> Grows comelier. Eleven pass, and then
> Athenae takes Achilles by the hair,
> Hector is in the dust, Nietzche is born,

(1) Plays and Controversies p. 433

Because the heroes' crescent is the twelfth.
And yet, twice born, twice buried, grow he must
Before the full moon, helpless as a worm.
The thirteenth moon but sets the soul at war
In its own being, and when that war's begun
There is no muscle in the arm; and after
Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon
The soul begins to tremble into stillness,
To die into the labyrinth of itself."

Phase One and Phase fifteen- at which point the description is now arrived- symbolise two incarnations not visible to human eyes nor having human characteristics. The invisible fifteenth incarnation is that of the greatest possible bodily beauty, and the fourteenth and sixteenth those of the greatest beauty visible to human eyes. As the full of the moon approaches-

"All thought becomes an image and the soul
Becomes a body: that body and that soul
Too perfect at the full to lie in the cradle,
Too lonely for the traffic of the world:
Body and soul cast out and cast away
Beyond the visible world."

And after that come the phases of objectivity-

"And after that the crumbling of the moon.
The soul remembering its loneliness
Shudders in many cradles; all is changed,
It would be the world's servant, and as it serves,
Choosing whatever task's most difficult
Among tasks not impossible, it takes
Upon the body and upon the soul
The coarseness of a drudge."

In other words, to quote a note to The Only Jealousy of Emer, one of the Four Plays for Dancers, "Objective natures are declared to be always ugly, hence the disagreeable appearance of politicians,

reformers, philanthropists, and men of science". (1) Just as the full of the moon is the symbol of a beauty too perfect to be visible , so is the dark of the moon a sign of an invisible, superlative ugliness.

"Because all dark, like those that are all light,
They are cast beyond the verge and in a cloud,
Crying to one another like the bats;
And having no desire they cannot tell
What's good or bad, or what it is to triumph
At the perfection of one's own obedience;
And yet they speak what's blown into the mind;
Deformed beyond deformity, unformed,
Insipid as the dough before it is baked
They change their bodies at a word.

And then?

When all the dough has been so kneaded up
That it can take what form cook Nature fancy
The first thin crescent is wheeled round once more."

Much of the poem might be a commentary on Castiglione's saying that the physical beauty of woman is the spoil or monument of the victory of the soul, for physical beauty is described as the result of emotional toil in past lives. "All dreams of the soul", says Aherne, "end in a beautiful man's or woman's body", "else", as we might add with Donne, "a great prince in a prison lies."

"The song will have it
That those that we have loved got their long fingers
From death, and wounds, or on Sinai's top,
Or from some bloody whip in their own hands.
They ran from cradle to cradle till at last
Their beauty dropped out of the loneliness
Of body and soul."

I have dealt with this poem at some length because in an understanding of its symbolism and philosophy lies the secret

(1) Plays and Controversies p. 434

of all Yeats' final obscurity. All the poems which I have mentioned in the poet's last two volumes of lyrics as being especially difficult can only be interpreted in the light of this, while everything in the Four Plays for Dancers is based upon the same conception and makes use of the same symbols of the moon's phases. For instance, these lines from The Only Jealousy of Emer would be unintelligible to the reader unacquainted with the symbolism:

> "Who is it stand before me there
> Shedding such light from limb and hair
> As when the moon, complete at last
> With every labouring crescent past,
> And lonely with extreme delight,
> Flings out upon the fifteenth night?"

A song from the same play expresses a similar conception of woman 's beauty as that in The Phases of the Moon-

> "How many centuries spent
> The sedentary soul
> In toils of measurement
> Beyond eagle and mole,
> Beyond hearing or seeing,
> Or Archimedes guess
> To raise into being
> That loveliness?
>
> What death? What discipline?
> What bonds no man could unbind
> Being imagined within
> The labyrinth of the mind,
> What pursuit of fleeing,
> What wounds, what bloody press
> Dragged into being
> This loveliness?"

In Michael Robartes and the Dancer the theory is advanced that a blessed soul is the counterpart of a beautiful body, and further

that it can exist only in a beautiful body. No wisdom or learning or intellectual toil can create it unless that toil is shared emotionally by a beautiful body-

"For what mere book can grant a knowledge
With an impassioned gravity
Appropriate to that beating breast,
That vigorous thigh, that dreaming eye?

I have principles to prove me right.
It follows from this Latin text
That blest souls are not composite,
And that all beautiful women may
Live in uncomposite blessedness,
And lead us to the like- if they
Will banish every thought, unless
The lineaments that please their view
When the long looking-glass is full,
Even from the foot-sole think it too."

The most difficult of Keats' later poems are, perhaps, The Double Vision of Michael Robartes and The Second Coming. These possess a difficulty that transcends mere obscurity, and even when we think we understand their symbolism, we are possessed of the uncomfortable feeling that their real meaning is eluding us. The Double Vision is an evocation of "the cold spirits that are born When the old moon is vanished from the sky And the new still hides her horn". By the grey rock of Cashel, the poet sees a vision of a girl dancing between a Sphinx with woman breast and lion paw and a Buddha with hand lifted up to bless.

"Although I saw it all in the mind's eye
There can be nothing solider until I die;
I saw by the moon's light
Now at the fifteenth night."

The Sphinx -

"Gazed upon all things known, all things unknown,
In triumph of intellect. . .

"The other's moonlit eyeballs never moved,
Being fixed on all things loved, all things unloved."

The girl who danced was one of those to whom body's beauty has brought "uncomposite blessedness".

"No thought,
Body perfection brought."

The Sphinx symbolises the intellect, and the Buddha emotion. The girl who is perfect beauty is a union of both- intellect being expressed emotionally through her body. She has banished every thought except that which her whole body "even from the foot-sole" can share. Beyond this one hesitates to venture, and as to the ultimate meaning of the vision it is difficult to hazard a guess more satisfying than that given by the poet himself-

"I knew that I had seen, had seen at last
That girl my unremembering nights hold fast.

"To such a pitch of folly I am brought
Being caught between the pull
Of the dark moon and the full."-

which seems to ascribe the vision to the hallucination of a mind torn between subjectivity and objectivity, between itself and the world. The Second Coming is an extension of the philosophy of the phases of the moon from the individual soul to the soul of the world. This same extension

is also made in an interesting passage from The Trembling of the Veil. At the risk of some repetition, which, however, may serve to emphasise and clarify the fundamental ideas, I will quote it complete:

"The bright part of the moon's disc, to adopt the symbolism of a certain poem, is subjective mind, the dark, objective mind, and we have eight and twenty Phases for the classification of mankind. At the first Phase- the night where there is no moonlight- all is objective, while when upon the fifteenth night the moon comes to the full, there is only subjective mind. The mid-Renaissance could but approximate to the full moon 'For there is no human life at the full or the dark', but we may attribute to the next three nights the men of Shakespeare, of Titian, of Strozzi, and of Van Dyck, and watch them grow more reasonable, more orderly, less turbulent as the nights pass; and it is well to find before the fourth- the nineteenth moon counting from the start- a sudden change, as when a cloud becomes rain, or water freezes, for the great transitions are sudden, the face that Van Dyck called a fatal face has faded before Cromwell's warty opinionated head. Henceforth no mind like 'a perfectly proportioned human body' shall sway the public, for great men must live in a portion of themselves, become professional and abstract; but seeing that the moon's third quarter is scarce passed, that abstraction has attained but not passed its climax. . . they may subdue and conquer; cherish, even, some Utopian

dream; spread abstraction ever further till thought is but a film, and there is no dark depth any more, surface only. But men who belong by nature to nights near the full are still born, a tragic minority" (1). Wilde is cited as an example of one of these.

According to the symbolism, "somewhere about 1450, though later in some parts of Europe by a hundred years or so, and in some earlier," the moon was at the full; "men attained to personality in great numbers", and their soul came to be like a perfectly proportioned human body". At the present time, however, the moon in crumbling to the dark. It is a time of objectivity. Attempting to serve the world, and choosing whatever task is most difficult out of tasks not impossible, the typical man takes

"Upon the body and upon the soul
The coarseness of a drudge". (2)

Yeats brings out the contrast between the men of the Renaissance when the moon was approaching the full and the men of te-day when the dark is drawing near by comparing two portraits in the Dublin National Gallery. "In the Dublin National Gallery", he writes, "there hung . . . upon the same wall a portrait of some Venetian gentleman by Strozzi, and Mr. Sargent's painting of President Wilson. Whatever thought broods in the dark eyes of that Venetian gentleman, has drawn its life from his whole body; it feeds upon it as the flame feeds upon the candle- and should that thought be changed, his pose would change, his very cloak would rustle for his whole body thinks. (3) President Wilson lives only in the eyes, which are

(1) The Trembling of the Veil pp. 170-171
(2) The Wild Swans at Coole, The Phases of the Moon
(3) This "thinking with the body" it will be remembered was Michael Robartes' advice to the dancer in Michael Robartes and the Dancer. So too in the Double Vision of Michael Robartes the girl dances in perfect unity of body and soul under the moon of the fifteenth night.

steady and intent; the flesh about the mouth is dead, and the hands are dead, and the clothes suggest no movement of the body, nor any movement but that of the valet. . . There, all was an energy flowing outward from the nature itsel f ; here, all is the anxious study and slight deflection of external force; there, man's mind and body were predominantly subjective; here all is objective, using those words not as philosophy uses them, but as we use them in conversation". (1)

All this may appear fanciful , an idle speculation based upon arbitrary symbols, not only unscientific, but useless, a mere waste of time, perhaps the signs of an incipient lunacy; to some practical and matter of fact persons even "sheer moonshine". It must, however, be judged according to its own standards, and by what it sets out to be as well as by what it is. Mr. Yeats makes no claim to having evolved a philosophy. He is not concerned with isolating an objective, definite truth of fact. In the matter of truth, indeed, he is of the party of "jesting Pilate". He does not pretend to put forward a scientific system, but merely to have constructed out of his readings in neo-platonic philosophy and Arabian superstition a framework upon which he is able to hang his ideas of life and the world. He calls it himself a phantasmagoria, and, in a note to the Four Plays for Dancers, very justly states its purpose and its limitations. "In writing these little plays", he says, and, we may add, the obscurer of these later

(1) The Trembling of the Veil pp. 169-170

poems, "I knew that I was creating something which could only fully succeed in a civilisation very unlike ours. I think they should be written for some country where all classes share in a half-mythological, half-philosophical folk-belief which the writer and his small audience lift into a new subtlety". The concluding sentences are significant as an explicit statement of what a study of all his work goes to demonstrate, that such an art as that into which Yeats' later work has developed is but the natural growth of the poet's mind, not an arbitrary and wilful seeking after esotericism. "All my life", he continues, "I longed for such a country, and always found it quite impossible to write without having as much belief in its real existence as a child has in that of the wooden birds, beasts and persons of his toy Noah's ark. I have now found all the mythology and philosophy I need".

Although this "mythology and philosophy" is assuming a continually increasing importance in the poet's mind, it must not be thought that it takes the chief, or even a paramount position in Mr Yeats' later work. It does fill an important place, however, and as such deserves to be noticed at length, but even the poet himself realises that such a complex and arbitrary intellectual playing with symbols can only be undertaken at the cost of losing something of spontaneity and rapture. This is not the subject-matter for lyrical poetry, and it is perhaps this reason that has made

Mr. Yeats of late turn against the lyric. In an article in The Dial (1) describing his journey to Stockholm in 1923 to receive the Nobel Prize, he expresses the opinion that it is for his dramatic work rather than for his poetry that he will be remembered. This surely is a mistaken judgment. Of Mr. Yeats' plays, only Kathleen ni Hoolihan written in collaboration with Lady Gregory is essentially dramatic; it alone is said to improve when acted. Critics are unanimous that all his other plays appear to best advantage on the printed page. Indeed, it is not for their dramatic qualities that they can be praised at all. Plot is either negligible, or faulty. Character is cast out at once, in accord with Mr. Yeats' theory that character has no place in drama, so that the conflict is never between living persons, only between masks which are the embodiment of the emotions. What the plays are notable for, however, is their poetry, whether it is the poetry of single lines and passages, or the poetic beauty of the conception as a whole. In The Dial essay, Mr. Yeats goes on to narrate how the lyric gift has dried up in him of recent years He occasionally writes a poem, he says, "for no better reason than that I have written no verse for a long time"! He believes that his natural bent is for the drama, and is , he tells us, continuously dramatising in his own mind, his thoughts and emotions so that his poems are becoming dialogues or monologues in which some imagined character expresses one phase of the poetic thought or feeling.

(1) The Dial, September 1924: The Bounty of Sweden, by W. B. Yeats

What appears to have happened is that Mr. Yeats has saddled himself with a vast accumulation of occult philosophy which he knows cannot be expressed adequately in terms of the lyric. Unfortunately he has put the cart before the horse, and is sacrificing poetry rather than philosophy. Now that a complete prose account of that philosophy has been written and is to be published under the title of A Vision, it is to be hoped that the aridity with which it has tended to fill Yeats' lyrical poetry will not become a permanent quality of his work in this field.

The dryness and lack of spontaneity which is noticeable in some of the poems in The Wild Swans at Coole, in many in Michael Robartes and the Dancer, and in nearly all of those yet uncollected in book-form is not to be taken as a main characteristic of what at the beginning of this section I have called the "later poetry". The best poems in Responsibilities and The Wild Swans at Coole are among the finest in all of Yeats' works, and in concluding what I feel to be a rather unenthusiastic account of this later work, I would like to speak of the very special quality of their beauty.

It has always seemed to me that the best of these lyrics must be ranked among the finest that Mr. Yeats has written. Much as the rich, sensuous, dream-heavy poetry of the early volumes and the faint rhythms of The Wind Among the Reeds appeal to the senses, the cold, hard, crystal-clear, gemlike flame that is in

the later successes appears to me to be a higher type of beauty because Beauty is evoked not through the senses alone, but through the intellect as well.

As the work of perhaps the greatest poet of the period following the Victorian age it is interesting to note how these poems overthrow the accepted technique of the preceding century; as well as being a repudiation of Mathew Arnold's favorite dictum that literature is a criticism of life. The difference between this poetry and that, the best expression of which in in Tennyson is not merely a difference in form and diction, though all the "poetic" shifts of language- the deems, 'neaths, forsooths, etc., the inversions and high-sounding rotundities, and other excesses of rhetoric that make so much Victorian poetry now seem over appareled,- are rigorously excluded. It is something that transcends mere form, though it is, of course, more apparent in externalities. The change is in the spirit, and assumes its most characteristic manifestation in a sort of intellectual chastity that eschews all abstractions whether of thought or image. These lyrics strive for a concrete and immediate realization of their subject. They are less vague, less verbose, less eloquent and with a less obvious lilt in rhythm and rhyme than are most poems of the Victorian period, than much of Yeats' early work. Inversion is almost entirely discarded; there are no clichés; rhyme is much looser, and a skilful use of half-rhymes (so called imperfect rhymes) is the secret of a beautiful and delicate music.

The influence that this has had upon contemporary poetry can hardly be overestimated. The characteristics which I have just outlines of Yeats' best later poetry are also the characteristics in a broad general sense of the best poetry of the day, in which the chief tendency is a move away from abstraction towards the concrete and a rejection of a "literary" poetic diction. Indeed, Miss Harriet Monroe, in her Introduction to her Anthology The New Poetry, linking with Yeats the name of Synge writes, "It is scarcely too much to say that 'the new poetry'- if we may be allowed the phrase- began with these two great Irish masters." (1)

(1) The New Poetry ed. Monroe and Henderson (Macmillan 1923) p XXXIX

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