

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 16
Issue 3 *September*

Article 4

September 1980

Behind the Lines: Strategies of Self-Portraiture in Yeats and Joyce

David G. Wright

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 16, no.3, September 1980, p.148-157

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

*Behind the Lines:
Strategies of Self-Portraiture
in Yeats and Joyce*

by DAVID G. WRIGHT

YEATS and Joyce both wrote constantly about their own lives, but they had conspicuously different ideas of what it meant to do so. Yeats said that man's intellect must choose perfection in either life or work, yet having prescribed the choice he refrained from making it, and strove for perfection in both realms. Joyce, about whom Yeats could have been writing when he made the remark, chose the perfection of the work, and ran life ragged to fashion the fabric of his art. Yeats's view that art and life are distinct, balanced, reciprocally related entities might be described as materialistic, not that Yeats was a materialist in the usual sense. On the other hand, Joyce's fierce determination to use his life up for art derives from a Christianity subtly altered, but not inverted as Stanislaus Joyce or Stephen Dedalus might invert it. In early life, Joyce declined to be crucified to attest the perfection of his art;¹ later he partly changed his mind. In *Finnegans Wake* he took on all sins, saving himself by making them into art and so creating a world in which he could be a martyr on his own terms.

If life and art coexist in Yeats's sense, there will be a constant jostling between them, forcing an autobiographical writer to analyze his own strategies of self-portraiture. If life is absorbed into art, as for Joyce, this need may never arise. Thus it is not surprising that Yeats theorizes constantly about the autobiographical aspects of his writing, while Joyce hardly ever does so. In Yeats, life is allowed to comment on art; in Joyce, art must be its own commentary.

Cyclic introspection like Yeats's, in which there is always a point of view on a point of view, could have become either narrowly reductive or infinitely regressive ("Mirror on mirror mirrored").² However, Yeats usually escapes these traps through his sustained self-discipline, vigorous use of metaphor, irony and humor, and the sheer fertility of his imagination, which never remained long content with a single mode or theory of self-portraiture.

Yeats's autobiographical theory and practice both underwent continual evolution. Either might run ahead of the other. Speculation on pos-

1. See *Letters of James Joyce*, II, ed. Richard Ellmann (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), 83. Subsequent references to *Letters*.

2. "The Statues," in W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1950), p. 375.

sible methods might yield a text illustrating the possibilities, as in "The Trembling of the Veil"; or a completed work might prompt later investigation of the modes of self-analysis by which it had been composed, usually conducted in letters but occasionally in verse, as with his late re-evaluation of early autobiographical poetry and drama in "The Circus Animals' Desertion." Theory and practice—both of which were, for Yeats, simultaneously creative and analytical acts—fed on and nourished one another.

Fastidious comparison of his theory and practice would therefore be a misguided and misleading exercise. Discrepancies between the two are implicit in both, the theory sometimes admitting the difficulty of fulfilling its precepts, and the finished autobiographical tracts hinting at their own divergence from plans made for them. Theories devised after the fact are suspect too, having their own rhetorical purposes. Often Yeats deliberately avoided following his own prescriptions, or tried to change his meanings in retrospective analysis.

Yeats always needed an antagonist when testing his thoughts, and he tried out his musings about autobiographical writing on his father. Suggesting that J. B. should write his own life, Yeats observed gently that the autobiographer need not fear egotism, as if to qualify his father's earlier strictures on the egotism of personal utterance and so clear the way for easy paternal approval of his own efforts.³ Yeats noted that an autobiography should raid the past for materials which the present can use. By expounding this program, ostensibly to assist his father, Yeats freed himself not to follow it (just as he avoided that choice of perfections by declaring its necessity). It was also to his father that Yeats directed his manifestos: "Of recent years instead of 'vision' . . . I have tried for more self portraiture" (Wade, p. 583). By formulating such statements, Yeats gave shape to works already written and laid foundations for new ventures as well.

Yeats found the writing of "Reveries over Childhood and Youth" straightforward: "While I was immature I was a different person and I can stand apart and judge" (Wade, p. 589). His prefatory remarks to "Reveries" legitimate his desire for freedom to reconstruct the past as he now sees it or wants it to be seen, unencumbered by conflicting recollections or evidence which other sources might impose on him. When he came to treat his more recent past, Yeats worried that the numerous witnesses to his life who were so unhelpful as to be still living would curtail the form, as well as the content, of his writing. Yet he found ways to express personal truths within the impersonal, fragmented structure which remained, as he also did in *A Vision*, and may even have found the text engaging his personality at deeper levels than he had antici-

3. See *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (London: Macmillan, 1954), p. 571; and W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 102. Subsequent references to Wade and A respectively.

pated. While working on "The Trembling of the Veil" he remarked that "this memoir writing makes me feel clean. . . . It rids me of something and I shall return to poetry with a renewed simplicity" (Wade, p. 672). Autobiographical writing, then, is cathartic, purifying and strengthening the relationship of the poet and his poems.⁴ Yet Yeats kept much back. He said of his treatment of writers of the 1890s that he studied each of them at a moment of crisis but lacked a crisis himself; the middle 1890s were a time of crisis (sexual and intellectual) for Yeats too, but his own difficulties are edited quietly out of his autobiographical work and, equally, out of his comments on it. André Gide also tried to change his life by retroactive decree. Yeats found that this kind of editing became more difficult as he brought his autobiography towards the present, presumably because so much was already known about his life. After the mid-1920s his autobiographical impulse migrated almost completely into the lyric, where he could escape from the adherence to sequence and linear causality demanded by prose, and express himself more tersely and enigmatically. The letters, diaries and expository essay with which he filled out *Autobiographies* drew little comment from Yeats either before or after publication, though they too illustrate his dissatisfaction with more purely narrative forms of self-presentation.

Yeats's purposes in writing different sections of *Autobiographies* vary; so does his candor in acknowledging them. Sometimes he seems to avow a real but minor concern while skipping past more important pre-occupations; thus in "The Trembling of the Veil" his accounts of the self-destructive artists of the 1890s do illuminate his own contrasting stability and integrity, as he says, but also serve to keep his character enigmatic. In this section he tries to free himself from his own autobiography; but this kind of escape is difficult to make, and it may only be possible if an explicit self-representation is included in the text as a kind of decoy. Yeats's reluctance to appear makes us wonder where he is hiding. Elsewhere in *Autobiographies*, though, he appears forcefully, aware that he is constructing a personality, not merely depicting one. He wants to provide, on his own terms, a substantial image of the poet behind the poems: "I must go on that there may be a man behind the lines already written" (*A*, p. 485). Sometimes he warns of more speculative purposes. Like Blake, he has had to make a tradition of and for himself: "Lacking sufficient recognized precedent, I must needs find out some reason for all I did" (*A*, p. 166). In "The Death of Synge" he acknowledges that "I write for my own good" (*A*, p. 502). Yet his magiloquent, declamatory style—Yeats always writes as if to prevent an imagined antagonist from getting a word in—threatens to hide such confessions, and seems intended to do so. His aims may, indeed, have

4. Again anticipating *A Vision*. In the first version, Yeats says of his "scientific" writing that "I am longing to put it out of reach that I may write the poetry it seems to have made possible." See *A Vision* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1925), p. xii.

always been more private and therapeutic than he normally allowed his comments to admit or his style to imply.

Although he never worried much about the limits of self-knowledge or memory, Yeats had mixed feelings about the feasibility of self-portraiture. "We are never a unity, a personality to ourselves," he reflects (*A*, p. 503). Even his diary oscillates markedly between impulses to concealment and revelation. He was never able or willing to paint a "definitive" portrait of any part of his life. Indeed, he risks the kind of distortion his father created in a painting by superimposing the seasonal variations of a landscape on a single canvas until snow obliterated the evidence of previous seasons. Yeats's account of this incident (*A*, p. 28) applies as eloquently to dangers inherent in his own character and literary methods as to the limitations he perceived in his father. Yeats's writing constantly juxtaposes a desire for definition and completeness with the realization that life prohibits such finality. In "Estrangement" he observes that "neither Christ nor Buddha nor Socrates wrote a book, for to do that is to exchange life for a logical process" (*A*, p. 461). To summarize part of a life may be to remove it from the life, and so to lose any inspiration it might have provided. Yeats jealously guards the sacredness of his own past.

Yeats sometimes doubted the feasibility of significant autobiographical revelation so radically as to repudiate the notion. In his last published letter he implies that conventional self-depiction, with its stress on detail and contingency, has long ceased to satisfy his desire for unity (Wade, p. 922). In retrospect even an autobiography is merely part of the debris of existence, and thus an inadequate expression of the life's essence, which can appear only in the life itself as it approaches culmination. The deepest sense of the reality of a life is incommunicable, untranslatable to an account of it. In "The Autumn of the Body" Yeats reflects that the parts of a life which are susceptible to autobiographical treatment appear trivial beside deeper, more mysterious realities, for "our thoughts and emotions are often but spray flung up from hidden tides that follow a moon no eye can see."⁵

Yeats usually managed to live with such doubts, and his urge to build a myth of self made him persevere despite them. Yet his sensitivity to the hazards and limitations of all forms of self-portraiture led him to another paradox. The candor which autobiographical investigation seems to demand is threatened by the desire to control images of the self; but a candid account of one's own process of self-analysis (a process without which one could obviously not write autobiographically at all) requires in turn that such images should be diligently watched and reinforced. Any self-consciousness imposes this paradox, but it is more than usually acute for Yeats because of his particular convictions about

5. W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 189.

the relation of art and life. He felt that to be seen as sincere and credible, he must make great efforts of self-control, and create a distinct public persona. Candor may be better served by building up the self than by anatomizing it. In "Estrangement" he insists on the necessary discipline of assuming a second self more "real" than the real self (A, p. 469). This emphasis is consistent with Yeats's use of the term "reality," and it is more than a quibble. If reality resides in what one has created more than in the raw material from which that creation is made, any analysis of the given, uncreated self is in danger of becoming reductive and disguising what is felt to be the true essence of the personality: self-creation. Yeats argues that imaginative artists create a self as they create their work, and that their work cannot be appreciated without an understanding of the created self. This is a more sophisticated (and more accurate) version of his remarks on the need to convey a sense of the actual self behind his poems.

Yet it was not enough to create a past self capable of enacting his impulses towards revelation or concealment. The recording self or narrator also changes as it manipulates the recorded self or subject, sometimes growing to resemble it and sometimes looking quite different. The past self is created by divining what the present self is not, but awareness of this discrepancy makes the two grow more nearly akin. The relationship between present and past selves coincides with that between self and anti-self in Yeats's System, and self-presentation becomes cyclic as the past which Yeats describes both produces and grows out of the aesthetic assumptions informing its creation. Yeats said that when he wrote of himself he never knew when he was the finger and when the clay;⁶ and in his most cogent autobiographical writing there is a constant flickering between creative and created selves, a kind of alternating current which produces in the reader the illusion of a steady flow of investigative energy from present to past.

Thus Yeats argued that life and art should both be founded on the relationship between given self and created anti-self, a relationship which served partly as a means of controlling external tensions by internalizing them. He had a persistent inclination to find symbolism in both present and past, a tendency which led him away from the literal significance of experiences and memories yet held him back from a purely fanciful realm where he might have eluded the correspondences symbolism demands. In Yeats's world the ostensibly antithetical processes by which life becomes art and art becomes life are made curiously interchangeable; Michael Robartes becomes as real as Maud Gonne, while Mr. Yeats becomes a confessedly fictional character about whom his created personae dutifully write.

Yeats's theories about autobiographical expression, then, were flex-

6. W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1959), p. 366.

ible but consistent. He always appreciated that selection and shaping take precedence over fact and documentation, that what the autobiographer presents is a created rather than a remembered self; he never believed that autobiographical writing could be impartial or even that such a goal was desirable. If his inclination to treat his life as fiction is not always explicitly acknowledged, his tendency to dramatize it is, if anything, exaggerated; metaphors drawn from drama pervade "The Trembling of the Veil" and many of Yeats's letters as well as "Dramatis Personae" itself, and he clearly intends them to apply to his manner of self-presentation. The multiple implications of the title "Dramatis Personae" (Yeats's experience as playwright and producer; the drama of his life and friendships; his role as supreme manipulator of all the figures he discusses) neatly reflect his refined sense of the life-and-art duality.

Yeats should accept the validity of this comparison of his autobiographical theory and practice. He has his own theory about theories; in *Ideas of Good and Evil* he mentions the need for poets to develop a clear sense of purpose before composing. He tests the work of Blake against his own conception of Blake's attitudes. Moreover, Yeats provokes comparisons by placing theoretical remarks within his other writings, so that *Autobiographies*, for example, becomes a work about its own presuppositions as well as about Yeats's life.

Such fusions and clashes of precept and example have a metaphysical basis, apart from their function in dramatizing the process of composition. Yeats joins a record of the contingency of life with a view of how life should ideally be recorded, and hence—given his belief in the power of art to shape life—of how it should be lived in consonance with artistic criteria (consonance with such criteria, incidentally, need not be subjection to them). He maintains his balance between fact and fantasy, controlling the dualities of existence by providing both an image and an idea, both a dancer and a dance. Theory and practice meet in that vital nucleus of the Yeatsian universe, the arena where dreams become responsibility and where responsibility gives way in turn to dreams. It is thus no coincidence that the interplay of his precepts and examples so often takes us near the energizing center of his constantly shifting thought. This interplay tells us more about Yeats than either theory or practice studied alone.

Yet—to give Yeats the last word on the matter—his theory functions partly as a decoy. At any point in its evolution it possesses its own consistency and imaginative quality, and Yeats deliberately blurs distinctions between it and his practice. He thus leaves his practice free to take its own road, and to indulge in subtleties of which the theory can profess blissful ignorance. Such deft manipulation allows Yeats to exercise in autobiographical writing that precise literary control which he found so fruitful throughout his work.

JOYCE never detains us at the door of his works, as Yeats does. He practised a scrupulous reticence about his own writing, cultivating like the Stephen of *Stephen Hero* "the enigma of a manner,"⁷ and eschewing Yeats's explicit self-analysis. When he did condescend to explain an aspect of his work he might obfuscate instead of clarifying, and he seldom bothered to correct past statements in the light of changed aspirations; it is as if he wanted such statements to remain as relics of the process of composition. While Yeats encourages us to identify the protagonists of *Autobiographies* and *Collected Poems* with phases of his own past life, Joyce takes up a position outside his works, watching over them but not speaking, and portraying his characters as if what they do in his books is more important than what their models may have done in actuality.

Nowhere in his criticism, letters or recorded conversation does Joyce say anything particularly significant about autobiographical writing, the relationship of author and character, or about his own purposes in writing of himself. In his early essay on Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*, he refrains from treating Ibsen's relationship to the protagonist of that highly autobiographical play. He says nothing of Defoe's autobiographical orientation. An early letter discussing his literary projects speaks of a book of songs, a comedy, and an "Esthetic" (*Letters*, II, 38), and gives no hint of the enthusiasm for self-portraiture which was about to strike him. He implies that he became an autobiographer only in spite of himself, writing in March 1907 "I have certain ideas I would like to give form to: not as a doctrine but as the continuation of the expression of myself which I now see I began in *Chamber Music*. These ideas or instincts or intuitions or impulses may be purely personal" (*Letters*, II, 217). This is Joyce's closest approach to an autobiographical program, and his offhand, retrospective theorizing contrasts with Yeats's fussier blend of foresight and hindsight. Joyce sometimes teased his correspondents by signing letters Stephen Daedalus, Joyce Bloom, Ulysses, or Shem, cultivating an awareness of associations which he was nevertheless careful to keep vague. He always made light of his relationship to Stephen, never explicitly acknowledged his kinship with Bloom, and remained reticent about the autobiographical content of *Finnegans Wake*.

Joyce's levity and evasiveness force us back to his books to observe his theories in practice; and this is what he wants us to do. His imaginative works are to be as nearly as possible self-contained. The key to the puzzle is the puzzle; the philosophical assumptions on which the works are based are, by design, to be found only within the works. Yet Joyce's

7. James Joyce, *Stephen Hero*, ed. Theodore Spencer, rev. ed. John J. Slocum and Herbert Cahoon (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 27. Subsequent references to *SH*.

attitudes to self-portraiture are almost as elusive within the books as outside them.

Stephen Hero presents Joyce's experiences in a raw and callow mode. He felt that his chief duty was the preservation of the past rather than the creation of a literary artifact; events are recorded without explicit or implicit attention to the recording process. Joyce has his narrator admit Stephen's weakness for "caressing . . . his own past towards which this inconsistent hater of inheritances was always lenient" (*SH*, p. 68); this lenience is also Joyce's in writing the novel. Stephen represents Joyce's past in a simple sense. The narrator calls Stephen's discovery of Ibsen "the most enduring influence of his life" (*SH*, p. 40), as though that life were already complete. Joyce probably did intend to take his narrative down to the moment of writing, something not contemplated for *A Portrait of the Artist*. There is little evidence in *Stephen Hero* that Joyce questioned the feasibility of precise recall of his life, or that he felt strenuous artistic intrusion was necessary to convert the facts of his past into an image of his present sense of that past. Awareness of such limitations in the text might have been an important reason for Joyce's abandonment of the project.

Portrait shows Joyce brooding on more philosophical aspects of autobiographical writing. Subtle ironies keep Stephen enigmatic and upset impulses to identify him with Joyce. Aspects of Stephen's development diverge from his creator's in order to dramatize Joyce's present conception of that past, in which weakness and guilt, for example, loomed larger than they had in reality. Joyce seems intent on more rigorous and subtle self-analysis here than in *Stephen Hero*; but by ending his account at a point in his life separated by some years from the moment of writing, he also preserves greater distance from his persona.

In *Ulysses*, Joyce sheds Stephen for good, though not without effort, using Bloom (partly a parody of himself) as a catalyst. His incursions into this novel show a great advance in tact and subtlety, and a more fully formed enigmatic manner. Stephen's Shakespeare theory claims to demonstrate that the relationship of an author to his creation is necessarily an autobiographical one; but Joyce forbids us to equate the theory with his own attitude, even implying that he has outgrown such notions. The transition from Stephen to Bloom takes us from a theoretician of art towards a practitioner of life. Bloom has a rich inner life but is not articulate; he embodies that privacy of essential experience which also preoccupied Yeats. Thus even as Joyce makes his art more radically autobiographical than before—by using Bloom, Molly, Dublin and literary style as autobiographical media—he insists that a Dedalian analysis of his method of so doing simplifies precisely those relationships which he has transposed into his novel. Part of the meaning of *Ulysses* is that we must emulate its own transcendence of any ideas which might initially have seemed to inform it. As Joyce's interest in autobiographical writing

reaches its peak, then, so does his aesthetic reticence. This correlation tends to confirm that Joyce did see his aesthetic pronouncements as a shield, a public substitute for that self-preoccupation which—when it attained sufficiently tough and stable forms—might stand alone.

Joyce's other works test his candor and insight, often strenuously, but reveal less of his attitudes to autobiographical expression. *Dubliners* mostly treats modes of being which Joyce had rejected, and self-definition (except by contrast with Dublin) is not a principal concern for him even in "The Dead." *Exiles* shows his awareness of dramatic antagonisms within his own character and the power of an objective literary mode to treat subjective states, but the play's austerity keeps his sense of self from coming fully to life. Joyce's notes to *Exiles* are more sustained and explicit than most of his comments on his work, yet they reveal little about what Joyce thought the play conveyed of his own nature and self-knowledge. *Finnegans Wake*, though in some ways Joyce's most candid published self-appraisal, evades in its forbiddingly idiosyncratic atmosphere that committed interaction of self and world which gives *Ulysses* so much energy. Such candid self-portraits disguise Joyce's true attitudes to autobiographical writing more thoroughly than works where he seems reticent. Richard and Robert, Shem and Shaun fit neatly into their fictive worlds in a way which is not possible for Stephen and Bloom; Stephen's and Bloom's relationship with environment has more of the complexity and subtlety of actual relationships between self and world. In both *Exiles* and the *Wake* Joyce established a milieu in which he could, in different ways, say anything about anything; thus there was no need constantly to come to terms with particular autobiographical possibilities and difficulties. *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, by contrast, are mixed works in which such a candid stance is not taken for granted, but must be constantly assumed, examined and revised in the light of a more objective representation of the reality surrounding the characters. That is, the Dublin of *Portrait*, and especially that of *Ulysses*, is invested with the ability to "place" the characters, something the environments of *Exiles* and the *Wake* are hardly able to effect. (The environment of *Dubliners* places the characters as well, but it does not place Joyce himself in the way the novels do.) The personae of *Portrait* and *Ulysses* are more often seen externally, and hence are more often judged, than those of *Exiles* and the *Wake*. Thus it is from these "mixed" works that Joyce's attitudes to his autobiographical personae can most readily be deduced. Yet we have to conclude that he intends us to deduce very little.

Ultimately, however, Joyce's persistent reticence about his autobiographical strategies strikes as true a note as Yeats's equally persistent expansiveness. Yeats chose to discuss his methods to prevent misinterpretation; Joyce preferred to isolate his works and command respect for their ability to stand up for themselves. The more aristocratic Yeats

argues that possessing a sense of one's past produces psychological coherence, more concentrated forms of self-expression and an ability to assert one's superiority. Joyce began by claiming that kind of distinction for his own experience. Later he accepted, then emphasized, the kinship of all experiences. With Yeats, we always know who is talking. Readers often comment that Joyce, on the other hand, seems to know more about them than they do themselves. This is because Joyce gives eloquent utterance to kinds of memories, and to ways of evaluating memories, which most people possess without being able to express them.

Yeats can never express himself quite as directly as Joyce, because he is so concerned to keep his life a distinct entity. This concern may underlie his compulsion for explanation, for bridging the gap between his writing and his readers, a gap which he nevertheless insisted on keeping open most of the time. Joyce, exhausting life in the service of his art, had no such preoccupation. For all his reticence, Joyce conveys in his works a vivid and immediate sense of the forms of self-awareness which we all share.

University of Auckland
New Zealand