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Shadows Deep: Change and Continuity in Yeats

by DONALD PEARCE

*He made songs because he had a will to make songs
and not because love moved him thereto.*

Uc de Saint-Circ

EVERY POET is, at bottom, a kind of alchemist, every poem an apparatus for transmuting the “base metal” of life into the gold of art. Especially is this true of Yeats, not only as regards the ambient world of other people and events, but also the private one of his own art and thought: “Myself must I remake / Till I am Timon and Lear / Or that William Blake. . . .” So persistent was he in this work of transmutation, and so adept at it, that the ordinary affairs of daily life often must have seemed to him little more than a clumsy version of a truer, more intense life lived in the clarified world of his imagination. However that may have been for Yeats, it is certainly true for his readers: incidents, persons, squabbles with which or whom he was intermittently entangled increasingly owe what importance they still have for us to the fact of occurring somewhere, caught and finalized, in the passionate world of his poems. More and more the true “reality” of Maud Gonne, for instance, all that remains of her, is the fact that she is a *dramatis persona*—a rather privileged one, no doubt—in the poetry of her great admirer, on an equal footing, say, with Emer, or perhaps Red Hanrahan, no longer a historical fact of much consequence in her own right, but an esthetic one, instead, of great lyric importance. There are even times when the historical Maud Gonne—the person who she “was”—merely gets in the way, comes distractingly between the reader and the text, as seems to me to be the case with the very beautiful “When You Are Old” (1893):

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur a little sadly, how Love fled

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And paced upon the mountains overhead
 And hid his face amid a crowd of stars. (*CP*, 46/40-41)

These lines are usually taken as addressed to Maud Gonne, Yeats gracefully coming to terms with her rejection of him as lover. The poem can certainly be read this way. Yeats may have thought of it this way himself. But I think it is ultimately a narrow reading, one which only succeeds in usurping or obliterating other more interesting interpretative possibilities.

The poem first appears in a letter (Mar. 2, 1892) written by Yeats to Katharine Tynan (to whom, a little earlier, he had thought of proposing marriage) as an example of "my recent attempts at love poetry." "I am . . . correcting *The Countess Kathleen* for the press," he goes on, "and getting ready a quantity of lyrics and ballads to go with it" (*L*, 204). This sounds encouragingly business-like: poems are being written, selected, arranged for incorporation in a book, with "When You Are Old" offered as a sample of his recent experiments. No hint anywhere of private heartache. The poignant phrase "old and full of sleep," moreover, with which the poem opens, and which seems so perfectly aimed at beautiful, cruel Maud Gonne, Yeats had already used in *The Countess Kathleen* months before—where it wasn't applied to the Countess, as one might suppose (since she was a surrogate for Maud Gonne), but applied by Oona, the ninety-year-old foster mother, to herself: ". . . nor found refuge / Other than growing old and full of sleep" (*Plays*, 39). But three years before that, in "The Wanderings of Oisín," Yeats had already had Oisín speak of himself as "a creeping old man, full of sleep" (*CP*, 445/379). So that it is a little difficult in the case of this poem to know where its roots began.

Of course, as is very well known, "When You Are Old" is an adaptation of a famous sonnet by Ronsard,¹ which literally rendered into English goes as follows:

When you're well on in years, in the evening, by candlelight,
 Sitting near the fire, winding yarn and spinning,
 You'll say, chanting my verses and marvelling,
 "Ronsard celebrated me once, in the days when I was beautiful."
 And at that time, there won't be one of your servants who, hearing that news,
 Though already drowsing off from her heavy chores,
 At the mention of Ronsard won't stir awake,
 Blessing your name made immortal by my praise.

I'll be underground, boneless, a ghost,
 Taking my rest among the myrtle shades;
 You'll be at your fireside, a squatting old woman,
 Missing my love, and regretting your coy disdain.

Live now, if you believe me, forget about tomorrow;
 Gather them today, the roses of life.

This is number 24 of a series of 130 "Sonnets pour Hélène" which Ronsard wrote in 1578 for Hélène de Surgères, a young maid of honor in the

1. See endnote.

court of Catharine de Médicis desolated by news of the death in battle of her betrothed. Catharine summoned Ronsard, now nearing fifty, and commissioned him to celebrate Hélène in verse in the hope of at least alleviating her grief. During this interesting and fairly lengthy assignment, little by little the two seem, for a time at least, to have fallen in love.

If Yeats' lyric may be called a variation on a theme by Ronsard, Ronsard's is itself a variation on a theme by Petrarch—that of the unper-suadable beloved, one of a number of Petrarchan topoi which Ronsard prided himself on bringing into French poetry of the time. In fact, however, Ronsard had helped himself to several other poets besides Petrarch. The *carpe diem* theme that neatly clinches the argument in his closing lines is from Horace (Odes, I, ii). The weary, half-asleep servant who “stirs awake” at the mention of Ronsard's name comes almost unaltered from Tibullus (Elegies, I, iii, 87). The “myrtle shades,” haunted by immortal lovers, among which Ronsard says he will take his long rest, are from Book VI (443) of Virgil's *Aeneid*. And, wonderfully, the grieving girl happens to be called Helen—which precipitates the intriguing question of whether it may not have been that charmed, history-laden name, after all, which caused Ronsard's poem initially to “stir awake,” rather than the grief or the shy beauty of his youthful ward, and that centuries later stirred the ear of Yeats as he pondered his Ronsard in far away Dublin, or London. In any case, what we have here is a perfectly artificial renaissance poem, with literary roots going back quite unabashedly to Petrarch, to Horace, to Virgil, and other Latin poets, on the ancient theme of Helen grown old, to which Yeats has made his own brilliant addition: the rejected lover's book of poems, which she is pictured as one day holding in her aging hands, remains fresh and timeless, she herself having become “old and full of sleep.” Yeats does something visually spectacular at the end: their unsuccessful love, sublimated in his book of poems, becomes a “cloud of stars” (stars are white marks on a black background, poems black marks on a white background).

Relationships among poems alter with time, deepen and complicate, with the result that later readers can sometimes perceive ironies previously hidden. Thus, although the focus in Yeats' poem is principally on the youthful beloved as the old woman she will one day be, anyone familiar with the poems of Yeats will appreciate the irony in the fact that some of the most moving and characteristic lines he would ever write would be about aging, his own, however, not the beloved's, lines like:

What shall I do with this absurdity—
O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature,
Decrepit age, that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail? . . .

Read with Yeats' future work in mind, “When You Are Old” can be seen to abound in embryonic or anticipative ironies—ur-themes, symbols, images that reappear again and again throughout the middle and later

work down to the very last pages, and which account, I think, for much of the charm and mystery of the poem. To give a few examples:

1. The image of a meditative figure, seated by a fire (“of turf,” or “under a broken tree,”) musing on former friends, lovers, times gone by, etc.
2. “The soft look your eyes had once.” No elegiac note is sounded more often in Yeats than the loss, from whatever cause—politics, sickness, fanaticism, enmities, the erosions of time—of the soft look the eyes had once, and of the gentleness of mind and soul he considered essential not just to woman, but also (cf. “The Second Coming,” “Meditations in Time of Civil War”) to the very existence of civilization.
3. “One man loved the pilgrim soul in you.” The central meditative theme of Yeats’ entire oeuvre, lyric and philosophic, is the adventure or “pilgrimage” of the soul (“pilgrim soul”), stunningly adumbrated in this poem.
4. “How love fled”—the permutations and reverberations of this theme throughout Yeats’ poetry hardly need comment, being one of its principal leitmotifs.

Although “When You Are Old” can be read as a poem commemorating Maud Gonne’s rejection of Yeats, in its deeper themes and interests it is a complex, self-conscious literary alloy combining two radically different elements—one linking backward via a sophisticated and illustrious poetical tradition that extends from Ronsard to Petrarch to the troubadours of medieval Provence to poets of Roman and Greek antiquity, the other forward to poems in volumes Yeats was yet to write. Of the two memorable tableaux in the poem—the aged beloved by firelight, bending, remembering, and the young poet pacing the mountains, face in the stars—the latter is the more intense and arresting. Appropriately so: for “this book” which she will one day be holding in her old hands—*The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1893)—by that time will form section two of a very much bigger and more famous book, the *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*. “When You Are Old,” in other words, reveals itself more as a dedication, or prophecy, of the birth of a lengthy and distinguished poetical career than a youthful elegy on an episode of unrequited love.

If in ways such as these more than a little of this poem’s effectiveness can be said to derive from its ghosts—images and motifs found in prior and future texts—it is not, at the same time, an effect peculiar to this one poem. On the contrary, it was clearly basic Yeatsian practice: “What can I but enumerate old themes?” he writes in 1938, making poetry out of his lifelong way of making it. Instances of such recapitulative and prophetic passages occur again and again throughout the *Collected Poems*; another such, from the 1893 volume, would be “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” and its archetypal hermitage of clay and wattles.

The immediate occasion of this poem, Yeats tells us, was his hearing

somewhere in a London street in 1890 “a little tinkle of water,” whose source turned out to be “an advertisement for cooling drinks” in a shop window – the perfect Jamesian “germ, vital particle, grain of gold” – which set him dreaming of Sligo and lake water. But one can also overhear, or discern, origins of a more distinctly literary kind for this poem; and not only origins, but future avatars as well. Thus, in the background is another landscape, stretching away into the mists of saga and legend, Irish *Tir nan og* (“land over water”), the place where all pleasures abound, all troubles end. In the middle distance looms Yeats’ recently published long narrative poem about *Tir nan og*, “The Wanderings of Oisín” (1889), with its three mysterious islands, one of which like Innisfree offers perpetual peace, another is full of the fluttering of birds’ wings, and the third has an important building on it – hardly a cabin, to be sure, more of a tower, in fact – each in its own particular way reminiscent of Innisfree, or Innisfree of them.

A few years later, in 1896, Yeats along with Douglas Hyde and Maud Gonne became much absorbed in a project involving another island with a singular structure on it, “Castle Rock.” This island/castle complex, located in the middle of a magical lake in central Ireland was conceived as a kind of hermitage and headquarters for a little band of scholars who would meet there in order to make rituals out of old mythologies for the spiritual renewal of modern Ireland. Although this “Castle of Heroes,” as Yeats and Maud Gonne called it, never materialized, at least in the way they dreamed, it took on flesh not long after in a somewhat different form as the “Irish National Theatre”: “I hope,” Yeats wrote in 1901, “to put old stories . . . into dramatic verse”; “I hope to get our Heroic Age into verse,” so that (as he remarked later in a letter to Lady Gregory), Dublin playgoers might “think about their own trade or profession or class and their life within it, so long as the stage curtain is up, in relation to Ireland as a whole.”

In a few years time, having exhausted himself with “Theatre business, management of men” and regenerating Ireland along heroic lines, Yeats withdrew to another hermetic retreat, Thoor Ballylee. While this edifice bears little immediate resemblance to the lake isle of Innisfree, it is deeply related to it all the same in purpose and significance; in fact, it is the latest metamorphosis in a long evolving series of “Innisfrees.” Its connections with the mystic Castle Rock project are apparent enough; it was at Thoor Ballylee, that Yeats did most of the work on the visionary System which, as he explained to Ezra Pound, “when finished” would “announce” a new age, “a new divinity.” It resembled the Abbey Theatre in that, to an extent, Yeats thought of it as a dramatic and pedagogical “setting” (his term) from which “to influence lawless youth” with doctrine and example, with “severity and antiquity.” And like Innisfree, it was a place of remote rural beauty and quietude: “with the hawthorn all in blossom all along the

river banks," he wrote delightedly of it to Olivia Shakespear, "everything is so beautiful that to go elsewhere is to leave beauty behind."

Nor do the mutations of Innisfree end here. It is barely a step from Thoor Balylee to the most stylized and distinguished of them all, "Byzantium." Like Castle Rock, Tir nan og, and Innisfree itself, Byzantium, it will be recalled, can be reached only by crossing water. Instead of pastoral cabin and bee-loud glade, we now have (vide "Sailing to Byzantium") "gold mosaic," "lords and ladies," "artifice," and in the later "Byzantium," imperial "pavement," "cathedral gong," "golden smithies." The birds in this "holy city" are not Nineties linnets "at their [mating] song," but hand made timeless artifacts that sing of "what is past, or passing, or to come"; midnight is still a glimmer, but with flames "no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit"; a breakwater, built apparently of "marbles" of intellect, prevents the "tormented" sea from disturbing the intense, disdainful stillness.

In important ways, then, the theme of Innisfree—the withdrawal-and-re-assertion which it expresses—continued to be central in Yeats' work, changing with the years as he changed. If the poem that first enshrined it remains for us an effective lyric, this is perhaps less because of its period melopoeia and Pre-Raphaelite decor than, like "When You Are Old," because of its "shadows deep"—all those hermitages, sanctums, half-legendary retreats, both before and after Innisfree, that keep on reappearing and evolving, one out of the other, throughout his life and his literary work down to its very last page.

Note

Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir, à la chandelle,
Assise auprès du feu, dévidant et filant,
Direz, chantant mes vers, en vous émerveillant :
«Ronsard me célébrait du temps que j'étais belle.»

Lors vous n'aurez servante oyant telle nouvelle,
Déjà sous le labeur à demi sommeillant,
Qui au bruit de Ronsard ne s'aille réveillant,
Bénissant votre nom de louange immortelle.

Je serai sous la terre, et, fantôme sans os,
Par les ombres myrteux je prendrai mon repos;
Vous serez au foyer une vieille accroupie,

Regrettant mon amour et votre fier dédain.
Vivez, si m'en croyez, n'attendez à demain;
Cueillez dès aujourd'hui les roses de la vie.

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