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The Darker Vision of W.B. Yeats: "A Woman Young and Old"

by CAROLE VOPAT

As YEATS’s physical potency declined, his poetic power strengthened into genius; although infirm of body, his will towered: his doctors advised him to read detective stories while his spirit burned with words and visions. And, ironically, those last words and visions were of the utter fulfillment, communion, and transcendence—the Unity of Being, as he called it—to be realized in sex, a realization which could only come to him finally, as to old Crazy Jane and the Old Woman of “A Woman Young and Old,” through memory and desire.

“A Woman Young and Old” traces the sexual history of a woman from her first casual experiments through the realization of Unity of Being achieved in sexual communion, to an angry, bereft old age into the final calming revelation of an eternal transcendence when that age is done. In this cycle of poems Yeats confronts the overwhelming question—what triumphs over Time?—which he resolves in the course of his poem. Not Art nor God nor Nature but Sex transcends time, momentarily while we are on earth, but eternally once “this soul, its body off./Naked to naked goes” (IX). and all our selves are united.

“Father and Child,” the first poem of the series, although reporting a dialogue, has but one narrator, as do all the poems save for “Parting,” when communion has been achieved, and “Meeting,” when communion is remembered. The father, vigorously moral, reproves the child for being seen with a man “that has the worst of all bad names.” Her reply is as removed from his passion (“She hears me strike the board”) as it is from the artless innocence usually associated with children. Indeed, the poem marks the beginning of the loss of that innocence, a loss continued in “Before the World Was Made” as the older child constructs her mask, and finalized in “A First Confession” with her first sexual experience. The child does not answer the father’s question, for there is no communion here; she speculates upon the man’s “beautiful” hair and his eyes “cold as the March wind.” The father’s moral judgment, indicative of his sense of communal values and an authoritative tradition—his judgment is shared by “all good men and women”—becomes in the child a distant and solitary aesthetic appreciation. The man’s combination of beauty and aloofness fascinates her, for in him she senses an image of herself, an intuition which she will fully realize and mask in the next poem. Like that man she too will be amoral, beautiful and cold; sex will come to mean no more than the cold beauty of an aesthetic experience (II), or the glutton of vanity’s appetite (III), as she realizes the power of sex’s easy intimacy to break through others’ masks, penetrate their coldness and seize their beauty,
while leaving her own secrets untouched and her dark places unfilled. Sex will
mean no more to her than someone else’s poetry; she will not give or feel.

By the second poem the child has grown enough to realize the necessity of a
mask. In the first stanza she experiments, but her attempts at formulating her
second self are childish and awkward: she darkens her lashes, reddens her lips;
hers first mask is the mere intensification and heightening of what she already is.
By the second stanza she has grasped the concept of the mask and evolved her
antithesis; her cold blood and unmoved heart will be masked by a pretense of
passion and involvement. She will have two selves until, the chain broken and
her ankles free (IV), she will become her mask, and with her lover “stare
astonished at the sea” (IV). Her mask will be the Eternal Feminine, Helen, Leda,
the Moon, the Earth, that dark sensual force that existed “before the world was
made,” a primeval and compelling sea with which her frail cold soul seeks to be
united. In becoming her mask she will become immortal, for the mask she has
chosen is one greater than herself, not a she but a “thing,” vast, impersonal,
transcendent and eternal. It is this which she would have her lovers love in her;
not what she is, but the mask of what she contends to be. Now she answers her
father’s charges of immorality: she is not cruel, nor vain, nor betraying. Since her
lovers do not love her but her mask, her vanity cannot be appeased; in presenting
them with an image of the Eternal Feminine, if not its actuality, she offers them
more than if she presented her true cold self, and so not cruel; nor does her
dissembling betray, for the image in her mirror, and his eyes, while not her own,
yet is a part of her, the antithesis of the self she is trying to become. If, in realizing
it, she gives her lover supreme ecstasy, can he complain?

In the second poem the mask is made; in the third it is put on, and the woman
begins the struggle of living through a divided life while pursuing ultimate unity.
“A First Confession” shows her after her first sexual encounter. It meant nothing
although she pretended it did; even her cry of pain was pretense, for she had lost
her true virginity—that is, innocence—before these poems began. So the “briar/
Entangled in my hair/ Did not injure me”; she only pretended to “blench,” for she
lost no blood, and her trembling attested to her artistry, not her fear. Sex was no
great experience for her—neither ecstasy nor horror, pleasure nor pain; she felt
“nothing . . . nothing.”

The second stanza tells us why: she longs for “truth”—i.e., realization, the
mask, her “better self,” yet the self who must contend with time and space
demands its satisfactions too. The cold, vain part of her craves attention; bone
longs for bone and flesh for flesh; the weak human being on earth would have
affection. She would give all herself and so pounce upon her mask and have it,
yet the coquettish self she is trying to reject has claims upon her too; its actuality
outweighs the pretense of the other. In Auden’s words (“September 1, 1939”),
uncannily similar to Yeats’s:

For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.
Caught up in divided aims, she surrenders to the weakness of vanity and finds in sex: "Nothing but dissembling; Nothing but coquetry."

Lying on her back, she looks up past the questioning eyes of her lover into the Zodiac as if: "Struggling for an image on the track/Of the whirling Zodiac" (VI). In the Zodiac she would find an image of the mask or an answer, or "the truth," but the Zodiac returns only her own questioning, the reflection of her own doubt and bewilderment, and the chilling realization that perhaps her mask is not to be fulfillment but emptiness. But she does not turn from the stars, nor from the eyes of her earthly lover who is perhaps asking if the experience had meaning. Let him see the "empty night" in her eyes; let him know it was "nothing"; her failure was his also, and the emptiness he sees in her eyes, a reflection of his own. This "First Confession" is not a confession of the sexual act, but a confession of doubt: is she empty? And is her lover, the night, the stars, the entire world?

But her doubt is resolved in the fourth poem and both her selves are answered. The temporal She feels the earthly ecstasy of sex and is satisfied. Previously, sex had been for her loveless and casual, a momentary release from boredom ("Those deeds were best that gave the minute wings"); the most she asked of it was that she be amused ("And heavenly music if they gave it wit"). She was in control, she "let the kerchief fall"—a reference to the coquette’s hanky, the signal for the start of a game or race, the dropping of clothes—and began the tournament. Her experiments ("improvisations") were detached and clinical; thoughts of love were no stronger nor more compelling than "fancies." But this firm Saint George or Perseus would not let her play her "mocking games"; his strength, stronger than hers, "mastered" and so released her. No longer bored nor jaded, her cold beauty, that stony Medusa whose emptiness bred answering stone in the eyes of those who looked at her, is transfigured in passion and tumult. In feeling, participating, giving, her first self is simultaneously fulfilled and annihilated; she has become her mask—not as the result of a selfish and solitary quest, a running through of lovers, but as a product of giving to another, surrendering up the self. "I" becomes "we"; the lovers are united with each other and thus with the sea, the surging force of nature, the current of life, eternal and primordial, what her mask represents. The bird who shrieks is not the familiar harbinger of time, the lark or nightingale of VII, but a "miraculous strange bird," unearthly, never before encountered or imagined; together they hear the first notes of eternity, brief and wild.

This, she learns, is the "Consolation" for loss of Eden and the coming of Time, Death, and Morality. That final comfort is mute, physical, bone on bone, in the ecstasy of sex and its aftermath of tenderness. No longer cold and detached, she gently bids her lover rest beside her.

Man’s comfort is in a place, a "where" not a how, in that part of his body where "passion run[s] so deep"; not in the philosophic but in the physical. The "crime of being born"—original sin, the destruction of innocence, the beginning of time and with it death—can be forgotten in the ecstasy of the bed "where the crime’s committed" and generation begins. Sex consoles not only by giving pleasure to blot out guilt and loss, nor by ensuring an earthly immortality through children,
but by revelation of an eternal Union of being. Sex can give man back that paradise, but with a difference: it is an Eden with apples free for the plucking, our fall was indeed fortunate, and man moves through many paradises.

“Chosen” recounts that moment of paradise. The woman struggles for “an image on the track / Of the whirling Zodiac”; she looks in the phases of the Zodiac for the other half of herself, a far greater mask: the female longs for the male, the earth for the sun, light for darkness; all contraries yearn for union and resolution: the lunar joins the solar, the gyres interpenetrate and are transformed:

I see the Lunar and Solar cones first, before they start their whirling movement, as two worlds lying within one another—nothing exterior, nothing interior. Sun in Moon and Moon in Sun—a single being like the man and woman in Plato’s myth, and then a separation and a whirling for countless ages, and I see man and woman as reflecting the greater movement, each with Zodiac, precession and separate measure of time, and all whirling perpetually. (A Vision. New York. 1938. 149)

The sun descends to the earth who turns to meet it; it slips below the horizon into the earth’s core, descends until midnight when it stops for one moment of ecstatic “stillness,” then begins its ascent, its withdrawal, until daybreak when the sun leaves the earth and communion is over. The lovers entered into one another, merged, and in ecstasy were transcendent: they spiralled down the “miraculous stream”—astrological (the Milky Way) and sexual—as all the whirling images and phases of the Zodiac were changed into a sphere and the pattern and plan of nature was revealed. Halves are wholed, conflict becomes harmony, antithesis is resolved in synthesis, the gyre becomes the perfect sphere, “everything we look upon is blest.” But the revelation is only momentary; daybreak comes and with it “Parting.”

In this next poem the lovers, echoing Romeo and Juliet, bicker over whether time’s ironic reminder be lark or nightingale. He, “timid Sun,” impractical and busy, would be on his way, but she, sensual earth and darker moon, would prolong their moment into infinity. Now knowing the “truth” she longed for in III, hearing in the strange bird shriek the midnight’s reply, the strength of that knowledge surges through the magnificent last lines as she cuts off the petty debate and charges with regal passion, choosing the lot of love for her life: “Let him sing on,/ I offer to love’s play/ My dark declivities.”

“Her Vision in the Wood” moves the woman from maturity into age in a savage and obscene poem, telling of self-mutilation, lust, murder—fit vehicle for the rages of frustrated loveless age. Lust glowing undiminished in the ashes of her body, incensed that her “dry timber” denies to her love’s “rich foliage,” she abandons herself to memory and desire and, finally, frustrated into frenzy, tears at that “dark declivity,” hoping to overwhelm the pain of longing with “a greater pang.” Holding her bloody hands before her eyes, she sees in them a vision of “stately women moving to a song,” bearing the gored Adonis. In envious hate she glares upon that frozen procession which time cannot touch, eternal as art or music. Cursing she joins their grief, but sees in her own blood the “blood-bedabbled breast” of the dying young god. Tears for her own lost youth become “shrieks” for Adonis, in whom she recognizes her lover and wails for what they had both lost, the youth they had burned out, the love replaced with hate, the
warmth with cold, the beautiful with the gnarled. Only recrimination remains; victim and torturer, they live on to murder their youth with each meeting; love is resurrected in memory, only to be torn to pieces when "face to face we stood" (X). Yet Adonis rose: his youth and fertility could not be gored away. So, too, in spite of all the pain, frustration, hate and insult of old age and death, when this cycle is over, a new, perfect one will begin. The old woman realizes this, and her dark mood of rage and grief changes to playful reminiscence in the opening lines of "A Last Confession."

Of all the experiences she has had on earth, the most pleasurable was that sex she gave lightly, teasingly, without intensity or pain, that sex that was a game. The terrible intensity and communion of love’s midnight has brought her, now aged, misery and gall, but, after she dies and “this soul. its body off. / Naked to naked goes,” she and her lover will fly towards each other again, unite to be separated by neither larks nor nightingales. for: “There’s not a bird of day that dare/ Extinguish that delight.” Then the Unity and harmony revealed only fitfully during life will endure into eternity; the two halves, male and female, will “close and cling so tight” in unending sexual communion, and every meaning will be bare. So it is only “awhile” that we are “hidden by old age.” she asserts, just before describing the recriminatory meeting with her aged love (X). Each hates in the other what he hates in himself: the reflection of time, the temple of delight become decayed wormwood. But, the tattered scarecrow on the stick laid aside, “this beggarly habiliment’· discarded, sexual love shall triumph, death shall die, and time run out. Love will “overcome” (XI) all the works of hands and days, will “hurl/Heaven and Earth out of their places,” merge opposites, unite contraries in an apocalyptic vision of an utterly transformed world: “By that great glory driven wild.” So “Oedipus’ child/ Descends into the loveless dust.” only to rise again, in supremacy.

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