

# Colby



## Colby Quarterly

---

Volume 9  
Issue 6 *June*

Article 6

---

June 1971

## Yeats's Swans and Andersen's Ugly Duckling

Rupin W. Desai

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 9, no.6, June 1971, p.330-335

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 administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact [mfkelly@colby.edu](mailto:mfkelly@colby.edu).

## 330 Colby Library Quarterly

and changed him from a coward to a hero. The people lose their playboy but Christy finds himself.<sup>14</sup>

What is noteworthy, however, is that Christy Mahon's discovery of his true Self is precipitated by his desire to win Pegeen Mike's regard. Thus in *Peer Gynt* as in *The Playboy of the Western World* the liberating force, the orientation toward self-knowledge resides in the woman. One here cannot but note the striking difference in technique in the two playwrights' approach to the quest of Self. It has taken Ibsen a lifetime to carry his hero through to self-knowledge, while it has barely taken Synge twenty-four hours to accomplish the same end. Does this imply that, for all the differences between the two plays in question, what Ibsen spreads over a lifetime, Synge could do within one revolution of the sun, and, what is more, achieve concentration and immediacy through observing the three unities? I have no definite answer. But if this were his intention, we should not be surprised, for the note of challenge to Ibsen is sustained throughout his work.

<sup>14</sup> Arnold Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (London, 1953), II, 183.



### YEATS'S SWANS AND ANDERSEN'S UGLY DUCKLING

By RUPIN W. DESAI

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS'S poem "The Wild Swans at Coole," written in October 1916,<sup>1</sup> depicts a situation that in many ways bears a striking similarity to Hans Christian Andersen's well known tale for children, "The Ugly Duckling." This note points out the resemblances between both works, and suggests that in addition to the actual experience of witnessing nine-and-fifty swans on the lake in Lady Gregory's demesne, Yeats was influenced by the indelible impression that Andersen's story had left on his mind many years earlier when he was a boy.

Significantly enough, just two years before he wrote the poem, Yeats mentioned Andersen twice, both times with great

<sup>1</sup> For the dating of the poem see Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (New York, 1964), 289.

## Colby Library Quarterly 331

appreciation, the second time referring specifically to "The Ugly Duckling." In 1914, in "Art and Ideas," Yeats describes how, while on a visit to the Tate Gallery, he was stirred by the sight of paintings he had long been familiar with as a child. One painting in particular, Potter's *Field Mouse* that he remembered "had hung in our house for years," profoundly affected him: "I murmured to myself, 'The only painting of modern England that could give pleasure to a child, the only painting that would seem as moving as *The Pilgrim's Progress* or Hans Andersen.'"<sup>2</sup> The second reference to Hans Andersen occurs in the same year; in "Reveries Over Childhood and Youth" Yeats recalls his childhood passion for fairy stories and particularly mentions "The Ugly Duckling": "I read endless stories I have forgotten as I have forgotten *Grimm's Fairy Tales* that I read at Sligo, and all of Hans Andersen except *The Ugly Duckling* which my mother had read to me."<sup>3</sup> Two questions that arise are, first, why did "The Ugly Duckling" alone remain so deeply embedded in the poet's memory that nearly forty years later he could thus single it out? and, second, why did his thoughts revert to this favorite story of his boyhood around the time that he wrote his poem "The Wild Swans at Coole"?

Perhaps the answers to these questions should be sought for in the poet's own unhappy childhood. In *The Autobiography* Yeats, describing his childhood miseries, says that he remembered "little of childhood but its pain," and that his miseries were a part of his own mind.<sup>4</sup> "Some of my misery was loneliness,"<sup>5</sup> he tells us, and in an unpublished early autobiographical novel "he refers to himself in the title, *The Speckled Bird*, and quotes the Bible, 'Mine inheritance is as the speckled bird, all the birds of heaven are against it.'"<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, Yeats's personal appearance as a boy "was out of the ordinary; he was delicate with a complexion so dark that he looked foreign . . . . People would often think he came from India."<sup>7</sup> And Katharine Tynan, with whom Yeats maintained a consider-

2 W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London, 1961), 346.

3 *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York, 1958), 28. In a letter to his father dated December 26, 1914, Yeats wrote, "Yesterday I finished my memoirs" (*The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade [London, 1954], 589).

4 *The Autobiography*, 7.

5 *Ibid.*, 4. See also Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats: 1865-1939* (London, 1965), 18.

6 Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York, 1948), 24.

7 *Ibid.*

## 332 Colby Library Quarterly

able correspondence for several years, imagined him as a child thus: "He must have suffered all through his youth from being unlike his fellows: a white blackbird among the others, a genius among the commonplace."<sup>8</sup>

Thus it is not difficult to see how Yeats as a child could have readily identified himself with Andersen's ugly duckling who is despised and slighted by the other birds. After the duckling is born, they attack him violently: "But the poor duckling who was last out of the egg and looked so ugly got pecked and jostled and teased by ducks and hens alike. 'The great gawk!' they all clucked."<sup>9</sup> Unable to endure their taunts, the duckling leaves home but insults continue to follow him wherever he goes. Then one evening he suddenly sees a flock of swans and is no longer the same abject creature after this experience:

Autumn now set in. The leaves in the wood turned yellow and brown, the wind seized them and whirled them about while the sky above had a frosty look . . . . One evening, when there was a lovely sunset, a whole flock of large handsome birds appeared out of the bushes. The duckling had never seen such beautiful birds, all glittering white with long graceful necks. They were swans. They gave the most extraordinary cry, spread out their magnificent long wings and flew from this cold country away to warmer lands and open lakes. They mounted high, high up into the air, and the ugly little duckling felt so strange as he watched them . . . . Ah! he could never forget those beautiful, fortunate birds . . . . He had no idea what the birds were called, nor where they were flying to, and yet they were dearer to him than any he had ever known.<sup>10</sup>

Yeats, by his own admission, remembered "The Ugly Duckling" alone of all the fairy tales he knew as a boy because, perhaps, the story in some way depicted his own unhappy condition.

Turning to his poem "The Wild Swans at Coole," we know that it was written at a crucial period in the poet's life: at fifty-one he was still a lonely bachelor conscious of his advancing age, childlessness, and unfulfilled longing for Maud Gonne.<sup>11</sup> According to Professor H. O. White's report, Yeats told him that when he wrote the poem in 1916 he was "very de-

<sup>8</sup> *Twenty-Five Years* (London, 1913), 144.

<sup>9</sup> *Fairy Tales*, ed. Svend Larsen, trans. R. P. Kelgwin (Odense, 1950), I, 281.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 289-290.

<sup>11</sup> Ellmann, *Man and Masks*, 218.

Colby Library Quarterly 333

pressed.”<sup>12</sup> The poem, like “The Ugly Duckling,” underscores the contrast between perfection and imperfection—the swans on the one hand, the lonely observer on the other:

The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are dry,  
Under the October twilight the water  
Mirrors a still sky;  
Upon the brimming water among the stones  
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me  
Since I first made my count;  
I saw, before I had well finished,  
All suddenly mount  
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings  
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,  
And now my heart is sore.  
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,  
The first time on this shore,  
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,  
Trod with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,  
They paddle in the cold  
Companionable streams or climb the air;  
Their hearts have not grown old;  
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,  
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake's edge or pool  
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?<sup>13</sup>

In Yeats's poem the time of day and year are the same as in Andersen's story—an evening in autumn—and in both poem and story the trees are particularly noticed. It is needless to say that Yeats's poem is not Andersen's story, yet what seem extraordinary are the frequent points at which the two works

12 A. Norman Jeffares, *W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet* (New York, 1966), 222. See also Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford, 1968), 153-156.

13 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, 1966) 322-323. Acknowledgment is made to the Macmillan Company of New York for permission to reproduce the poem in full.

## 334 Colby Library Quarterly

delicately touch. Both the situation of the poet and the tone of the poem are similar to those of the story. The poet, like the ugly duckling, is outside the enchanted and beautiful realm that the swans inhabit: he is a spectator whose "heart is sore" while, in sharp contrast to this condition, the swans are called "brilliant creatures." In Andersen's story the duckling is a forlorn spectator of a sight that is the complete opposite of his own plight: the swans are "beautiful birds, all glittering white with long graceful necks."

Again, in both poem and story the swans are invested with an aura of mystery—to the poet they are "mysterious, beautiful"; he tries to count them (a reductive attempt) but cannot quite finish doing so for they "suddenly mount/ And scatter wheeling in great broken rings." Man cannot fully grasp what lies beyond his limited range of apprehension; hence the poem concludes on a note of interrogation. Similarly, the ugly duckling hears the swans give a "most extraordinary cry" as they soar into the air. From his position of partial knowledge the duckling "had no idea what the birds were called, nor where they were flying to." Both poem and story present the imperfect at counterpoint with the perfect.

Moreover, in both works there is evident an acute consciousness of being left behind, of unfulfilled longing, of incomplete knowledge. The mortal catches a glimpse of the immortal and the consequence is an uneasy yearning. In Andersen's story the duckling later undergoes a transformation and realizes his true identity as a swan, but in Yeats's poem the last two lines contain a hint of human ineffectuality, for the departure of the swans for warmer lands leaves the spectator with a sense of loss that is implied: "when I awake some day/To find they have flown away?" The poet knows neither where the swans will build their nests nor to what land they will fly: "Among what rushes will they build,/By what lake's edge or pool?" Likewise the ugly duckling, unable to accompany the swans, wistfully sees them fly "from this cold country away to warmer lands and open lakes."

How conscious, if at all, Yeats was of Andersen's story (that a short time earlier he had specifically mentioned as being the only childhood story he still remembered) while composing "The Wild Swans at Coole," and how deeply it lodged in his mind when read to him as a boy by his mother, or whether he

Colby Library Quarterly 335

reread the story some time between then and the experience described in the poem, are questions to which no emphatic answer is possible. Nevertheless, the correspondence between the two works in tone, imagery, and attitude is perhaps too pronounced to be dismissed as simple coincidence. It appears likely that Yeats's boyhood recollection of "The Ugly Duckling" did, in some indefinable manner, enter the poet's mind many years later when his imagination was bringing into being "The Wild Swans at Coole."



SHAW REVIEWS SATAN THE WASTER

By RICHARD CARY

BY 1893 GEORGE BERNARD SHAW'S conversion to Socialism was more than a decade old. He had spent the intervening years doggedly espousing its virtues from every available podium, and had made some public impress with his edition of *Fabian Essays* (1889) before he passed under the chill, assessing eye of Vernon Lee.<sup>1</sup> By now also a veteran of the London literary arena, she had achieved a not inconsiderable reputation as essayist, novelist, and redoubtable foe in verbal or epistolary clashes.<sup>2</sup> On July 3rd of 1893 she wrote to her mother: "Yesterday Miss Newcomb . . . made me meet Bernard Shaw, a young socialist,<sup>3</sup> who despite (I think) his socialism, is one of the most really brilliant writers & thinkers we have, paradoxical wrongheaded & perhaps a little caddish, but original."<sup>4</sup>

For Vernon Lee, a tendentious iconoclast, this alloy of praise

1 Pen name of Violet Paget (1856-1935), Englishwoman born in France and resident of Italy, who came to London in 1881 and quickly settled into the esthetic-literary milieu. Already the author of several precocious essays in periodicals, a notable book of criticism, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, one of fairy tales, and a third in press, she eventually proliferated some two-score volumes of fiction, drama, and philosophic travel sketches, as well as hundreds of articles, book reviews, and multilingual letters to editors. An outspoken proponent of often unpopular causes, a fascinating, quixotic personality, her career is ably delineated by Peter Gunn in *Vernon Lee* (London, 1964).

2 For a selection of her acidulous appraisals of noteworthy contemporaries, see Richard Cary, "Vernon Lee's Vignettes of Literary Acquaintances," *Colby Library Quarterly*, IX (September 1970), 179-199.

3 Shaw was in fact close upon his 37th birthday, July 26, as was Miss Lee, October 14, a scant two and a half months younger. Her attribution of "young" in apposition to "socialist" must be taken as pejorative.

4 Irene Cooper Willis, editor, *Vernon Lee's Letters* (Privately printed, 1937), 349.