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YEATS'S UNRECONCILED OPPOSITES

By JOSEPH LEONARD SCHNEIDER

Although Yeats's technical and visionary development between the publication of his first book of poetry in 1889 and his death in 1939 has made his one of the great literary figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the poet-playwright's growth is marred by one rarely noted ideological inconsistency. Both in his metaphysical sourcebook *A Vision*, and in many of his plays, poems, and essays, Yeats insists on every being's need to find his opposite, or daemon, in order to fulfill himself: queens need swineherds, mortals need immortals, objective needs subjective. Yet in another mood Yeats could damn rather than embrace his intellectual opposites, and condemn in both the essay and the dramatic portions of *On the Boiler* (1938) a marital "mesalliance" between aristocrat and commoner. These differing outlooks do not appear to be integrated within a vast design, but instead suggest that Yeats failed to leave an altogether orderly literary estate.

Included among the elitist chapters of *On the Boiler*, the drama "Purgatory" is both Yeats's valedictory statement on the cause of human anguish after death and an unconditional though apparently unconscious repudiation of his often-stated belief that only when "the contraries are united, the antinomies resolved," do we become complete. Differing with the Christian concepts of Hell and Purgatory, Yeats believed that purgation consists of the soul after death "dreaming back" to and reenacting "... over and over again the events that had most moved it" while alive. Unless he can come to terms with these events before death, the individual must live them over after death until he has resolved them, a process that after an especially turbulent life may result in centuries of agony. This pur-

2 Ibid., p. 226.
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gatorial suffering is far more intense than remorse during one's lifetime, for in death dream becomes reality.\(^3\) The old man of "Purgatory" explains this process to his son, noting that the souls in Purgatory

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\begin{align*}
\text{Re-live} \\
\text{Their transgressions, and that not once} \\
\text{But many times; they know at last} \\
\text{The consequences of those transgressions} \\
\text{Whether upon others or upon themselves;} \\
\text{Upon others, others may bring help,} \\
\text{For when the consequence is at an end} \\
\text{The dream must end; if upon themselves,} \\
\text{There is no help but in themselves,} \\
\text{And in the mercy of God.} \quad 4
\end{align*}
\]

In "Purgatory" the dead person caught in this net of remorse is an Irish noblewoman, the mother of the old man, who by marrying one of the servants on her estate brought about the downfall of her family. The play dramatizes the last phase of her once proud family's decline: her half-base son and three-quarters base grandson watch her purgatorial reenactment of the old man's begetting in the ruined house that her husband first indentured through gambling losses, then burned down in a drunken stupor. In an abortive effort to free his mother's soul from its agony, the old man who has years ago killed his father in the burning house, now murders his son. Although the old man has accurately defined the purgatorial state in lines 33-42, he fails to realize that when his mother married someone unequal to her, she committed a crime against herself as well as her descendants. Hence, she must find her own peace without the aid of an intercessor. Killing the only potential progenitor of the ruined family does not liberate the mother from her remorse, but only hastens the extinction of her line, an inevitability initiated when she conceived a child with a baseborn mate.

While the elitist message of "Purgatory" needs little clarifica-

\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 225-31.
\(^4\) The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats, ed. Russell K. Alspach and Catherine Alspach (New York, 1996), II. 33-42. All subsequent references to Yeats's plays are to this edition.
tion, the prose portion of *On the Boiler* serves as an ideological gloss to the play and to Yeats's thinking when he wrote it. In *On the Boiler* Yeats stresses the need for selective breeding—encouragement of large families among the intelligentsia, strict limitation of the number of progeny allowed less gifted couples—complaining with reference to the tendency of the lower classes to produce far more children than do persons whom he considered more fit to procreate, “Our representative system has given Ireland to the incompetent.”5 These thoughts on the necessity of preventing the lower classes from gaining an ascendancy that allows them to demean a democratic nation suggest that “Purgatory” is on one level a modern allegory in which the ruined house represents Ireland, the entrapped mother and her lowborn mate represent respectively the nobility and the lower class, and their offspring represent the downward spiral of modern civilization. In an interview in the August, 1938, *Irish Independent* Yeats further clarifies his anger at any highborn person who “has lost interest in the traditional sanctities,” then goes on to identify his inspiration for “Purgatory”: “In some few cases a house has been destroyed by mesalliance. I have founded my play on this exceptional case, partly because of my interest in certain problems of eugenics, partly because it enables me to depict more vividly than would otherwise be possible the tragedy of the house.”6

Of course Yeats realized that the Irish people would not accept *On the Boiler* as enthusiastically as they had received his patriotic “tour-de-force” *Kathleen ni Houlihan* thirty-six years earlier. “Half my friends may never speak to me when it comes out,”7 he writes to Ethel Mannin in August, 1938. Certainly his suggestions that “the caste system...has saved Indian intellect,” that the gelding of undesirables be employed as an aid in restoring a proper balance of talents in our posterity, and that

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a "just war" is the most efficacious way of reminding Ireland's divergent classes that they all belong to one nation, rank amongst the most unpalatable statements he ever made. In fact, On the Boiler contradicts many of the principles Yeats championed in print and stood for in person during the years preceding and five months following On the Boiler. Nowhere else but in On the Boiler does the mature Yeats suggest that war might benefit Ireland, an idea that he had condemned on many earlier occasions, including his well-known letter to Henry James of August 20, 1915, in which he describes World War I as "bloody frivolity" and encloses his antiwar poem "On Being Asked for a War Poem." Moreover, in his last play, "The Death of Cuchulain" (1939), he again repudiates through Cuchulain's quietistic death the idea of a justifiable war.

Even more surprising, in "Purgatory," in the passages of On the Boiler quoted above, and in the interview with the Irish Independent, Yeats contradicts his belief that the search of every human being is for those things most unlike him. Although "Purgatory" condemns the old man's highborn mother for marrying a servant, one who "... was not her kind" (1. 174), another part of On the Boiler defends just such a mutual attraction of opposites: "When a man loves a girl it should be because her face and character offer what he lacks; the more profound his nature the more should he realize his lack and the greater be the difference. It is as though he wanted to take his own death into his arms and beget a stronger life upon that death."

The marked difference between this passage reaffirming Yeats's belief in the interdependence of opposites and the contrary theme of "Purgatory" exemplifies Yeats's inconsistent treatment of the theme of reconciliation of opposites. Although "Purgatory" succeeds brilliantly as dramatic art, its logic directly contradicts Yeats's many statements at all periods of his de-

8 Explorations, pp. 424, 418-20, 441-42.
9 Wade, Yeats's Letters, p. 563.
10 Explorations, p. 420.
development on the mutual fulfilment achieved only through the embracing of opposites. While many examples could be cited of Yeats's utilization of the reconciliation of opposites theme in his poetry and drama, his use of it in two late plays provides an especially revealing contrast with "Purgatory."

Analogous to the attraction that united the old man's parents in "Purgatory," in both "The King of the Great Clock Tower" (1935) and the reworked version of the same play, "A Full Moon in March" (1935), a queen finds fulfilment by returning the affection of a lowborn suitor. In both plays Yeats combines a folklore theme, that of the woman who cannot escape a destructive enchantment until the right man arrives to liberate her, with his dictum that the right man must be someone very unlike her. Apparently Yeats considered even the stroller of "The King of the Great Clock Tower" too genteel to function as the opposite of a queen, for in "A Full Moon in March" the beautiful queen finds liberation from her "virgin cruelty" (l. 157) by embracing the severed head of the repulsive swineherd whom she has had beheaded for his audacity in presenting himself to her as a suitor. Yet in "Purgatory" Yeats denounces the mother of the old man for having accepted the love of another lowborn tender of livestock, a groom in her stable.

This contrast between the two fairy-tale plays of 1935 and the more naturalistic and contemporary "Purgatory" demonstrates that Yeats subscribed to a literary double standard. When writing plays that deal with historical, mythological, or fairy-tale figures, he dramatizes his perennial point that opposites fulfill one another. But in a manner disturbingly similar to the actions of a stereotyped liberal who argues for the concept of racial equality in other parts of the world but becomes alarmed should a nonwhite family attempt to move into his neighborhood, Yeats communicates a very different message when his art deals with a contemporary issue and setting.

By contradicting his own theory of daemonic fulfilment, Yeats in On the Boiler also weakens his claim to be one of the
Tales of love between members of different classes have abounded from the earliest myths to modern fiction, and lie at the heart of the Romantic Movement’s emphasis on the primacy of Nature. Yeats’s knowledge of literary tradition makes it virtually certain that he knew the stories of Ruth and Boaz, Troilus and Criseyde, and Crichton and Lady Mary, to cite but three examples in which natural attraction occurred despite societal taboos. Unlike Barrie, who reiterates the age-old contention that the servant may be more capable than the master, Yeats in “Purgatory” argues that he who violates a man-made caste system violates universal law. It is hard to conceive of a more antiromantic bias around which to create a drama.

Although Yeats’s most striking inconsistencies occur during his On the Boiler period, we find traces of the developing dichotomy between myth and reality even before public vilification of Synge’s “The Playboy of the Western World” in 1907 ended his flirtation with the common man. In Dramatis Personae (1902), Yeats says of Edward Martyn, a cofounder of the Abbey Theatre, that the divergent backgrounds of his parents, an aristocratic father, and a mother “but a generation from the peasant . . . destroyed one another,” producing in Martyn “the sterility of a mule.”11 Conversely, during the same period Yeats makes the peasants and other common people the supporters of Seanchan and Deirdre, and thus the foes of the tyrants Guaire and Conchubar.12 Even at this early stage of his development, he seemed unaware of this thematic inconsistency. On one occasion the lower classes might be all virtue and common sense; on another they might be unworthy of union with the aristocracy. Unfortunately for the logic of his system, Yeats was capable of writing at one point, “Fair and foul are near of kin/And fair needs foul, I cried” (“Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop,” l. 11-12), and on other occasions condemning inter-

12 These characters appear respectively in “The King’s Threshold” (1904) and “Deirdre” (1906).
marriage between persons of different socioeconomic classes. Yet although we see instances of this double standard at various times during Yeats's lifetime, this inconsistency becomes most pronounced, most indefensible, and most disturbing in *On the Boiler*.

Although Yeats's metaphysical conclusions are clearly not reconcilable with his sociological ideals, he gives no indication in any of his published writings of having accepted this fact. Perhaps Yeats could not bear to acknowledge how thoroughly his elitist attitudes contradicted his ideal of uniting all antinomies, including those between servants and noblewomen. Sadly enough, Yeats had justification for denouncing the people of Ireland. Living through periods of intolerance toward great art and a religious civil war that is still marked by atrocities on both sides, Yeats retreated into literary austerity, writing as time went on for smaller and smaller well-read audiences. Yet in all but his sociological pronouncements, he held to the belief that "Fair and foul are near of kin," a concept that he had found inoperative during the "Playboy" riots, and argued against in *On the Boiler*.

While Yeats was less consistent than scholars have generally believed, this shortcoming detracts but little from his standing as one of the world's most insightful transformers of modern life into timeless art. In Yeats's ambivalence toward the common people we see foreshadowed the dilemma of many people today who in theory feel attracted to the idea of associating with members of the lower classes, but who in practice cannot stand them. For this reason T. S. Eliot may have been more correct than he realized forty years ago when he argued that Yeats's attraction lies in the fact that his understanding of timeless issues makes him the perpetual "contemporary" of later generations. At any rate, Yeats's inability to feel about the lower classes as such representative works as "The King's Threshold".

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(1904), *A Vision* (1925), and "A Full Moon in March (1935)
indicate that he wanted to feel about them, makes him a far
more complex figure than even his warmest admirers might
care to admit.

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