Bergmann: Yeats's Gallery

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Yeats's Gallery
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W. B. YEATS'S education in his father's studio where the great men of Ireland and the waifs off the street sat for their portraits taught him to perceive the world as a painter and inspired in him a lasting awareness of portraiture. Yeats himself recognized the debt, recalling in 1914 his frustrations as an art student: "I could not compose anything but a portrait and even to-day I constantly see people as a portrait-painter, posing them in the mind's eye before such-and-such a background." Yeats's use of portraits in the 1908 Collected Edition, in the Autobiographies and in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" illustrates his handling of the influence he attributed to his father and suggests its extent and variety.

John Butler Yeats's theories on portraits provide the assumptions underlying his son's use of them. After a short fling with Pre-Raphaelitism in the 1870's and a seven-year stint as a black and white illustrator, JBY settled upon a career in portraiture, declaring it his "salvation." Hampered by technical problems and curious about people of all sorts, JBY was, as James White notes, "always rather more involved with the psychological problems of conveying the spirit of his sitters" than with the physical difficulties of painting. A portrait, he wrote to WBY, must "preserve feeling" and capture the sitter's character. Technique of course mattered, but the portrait painter of genius would "find interest in his sitter his chief, his sole inspiration—to make his technique equal


4. James White, John Butler Yeats and the Irish Renaissance (Dublin: Dolmen, 1972), pp. 21-22. White further notes: "He was a portrait painter. All his life he was engaged in an encounter with the personality of his sitter. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. It was to capture the moment of illumination in a gesture or expression; to set down a glimpse of humanity in a smile . . . ." (p. 7).

5. JBY, p. 193. "Character" and "personality" are here used interchangeably without the Yeatsian distinction.

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to his thought will be his humble painter's hope" (JBY 100). JBY's own method reflected and contributed to his theories: he talked as he painted, some claimed more than he painted. The "genius of portrait painting is largely a genius for friendship,"6 he declared and Edward Dowden attests that as Yeats painted his picture he indulged "all the while . . . in endless gossip of the peculiar Yeatsian kind."7 Developing a personal relationship with his subject formed a necessary part of his method and, as a letter to Sarah Purser illustrates, he eagerly gathered from other painters "hints" "as to how sitters are managed."8 JBY's fame rests on his talent for capturing general character in a pose, and in a moment of unrestrained confidence he revealed the trust he placed in his method, proclaiming he could "beat" Augustus John and all the others because "I am a far more sensitive painter than any of them" (JBY 130).

The impact on WBY of having grown up among his father's portraits first clearly manifests itself in the importance he placed on selecting the right portraits for the expensive 1908 Bullen Collected Edition. That the portraits meant more than the routine frontispiece is evident: the letters from 1907-1908 are filled with analyses of the various portraits, with accounts of sittings for them and with concern and anxiety that the right choice be made by him and followed by Bullen. Having emerged from the 90s fragmented but wanting to hammer his thoughts into unity, Yeats had abandoned poetry for the theater. This new edition was to prepare both him and his audience for a return to poetry by creating a coherent and mature public image: "I know I must get my general personality and the total weight of my work into people's minds, as a preliminary to new work."9 Just as his revisions must correct all that was "immature or inexperienced" (L 487), the portraits must present to his specific audience a Yeats stripped of his 90s pose: he feared that "everybody" would think the Keatsian Shannon sketch "an affectation" (L 502), and he rejected Lafayette for the portrait's commission in favor of an artist "celebrated in our world" (L 504).

Choosing, and hence creating, the image that showed his new "self" constituted a process of discovering what that self was. Yeats's continual appraisals of the portraits reveal his attempt to sort out for himself the artist's biases (e.g., "my father always sees me through a mist of domestic emotion" [L 502]) from what was "really" there. His confidence

7. Quoted by Archibald, p. 51.

In June 1907 just before beginning the revisions Yeats, in a letter to Lady Gregory, attests to his need to recreate his self: "I feel that I have lost myself . . . " (Quoted in Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks [New York: Dutton, 1948], p. 186.)
that a portrait could reveal his self to him and his readers originated in childhood when, as a handy and frequent subject for his father, he surely based his self-concept in part on pictures JBY sketched of him. The practice found intellectual support in what he had learned in JBY’s studio: a successful portrait conveys character. In fact, JBY directly reinforced his son’s concept of what the Collected Edition’s portraits could and should do. He warned WBY against using the Mancini because “you are not a Caliban publishing a volume of decadent verse—nor are you in any movement of revolt that you should want to identify yourself in elaborate humility with the ugly and the disinherited” (JBY 102). Similarly, he was delighted with the Shannon and found it “miles ahead of the Sargent [who gives] people what they like—a vigorous, brilliant, above all clear statement of facts. . . . Corot, Shannon etc. gives us a statement of emotion and the facts suffer” (JBY 119–20).

But Yeats was uneasy about the character his portraits conveyed; he could not so simply dismiss what he found unattractive. Augustus John’s portrait particularly disturbed him. When John arrived at Coole to paint Yeats, he charmed everyone: “He is himself a delight, the most innocent-wicked man I have ever met. He wears earrings, his hair down over his shoulders, a green velvet collar. . . . He climbed to the top of the highest tree in Coole garden and carved a symbol there” (L 496) and that seemed an auspicious beginning. Yeats knew from JBY that charm could establish the painter-sitter relationship necessary for a fine portrait, but he nervously confided to John Quinn, “I don’t know what John will make of me” (L 496). The painting of the picture was in effect a creation (“make”) of the self and the anxiety over the picture, surfacing again and again in the letters, shows that he feared not just for his public image. Sitting for John Yeats felt “rather a martyr” (L 496), afraid not only that his self would be sacrificed to John’s “savage imagination” (L 497), but that John would disclose a hitherto unknown self.

Yeats’s fascination with John’s preliminary sketches reveals itself in the self-betraying bravado with which he dismisses them: “He exaggerates every little hill and hollow of the face till one looks like a gypsy, grown old in wickedness and hardship. If one looked like any of his pictures the country women would take the clean clothes off the hedges when one passed, as they do at the sight of a tinker” (L 496). In 1907 Yeats was not yet ready to be that wild old wicked man. He had neither the reputation nor the self-confidence for such abandon. John’s etching was clearly dangerous for him and his public image and its danger lay in its power. Like JBY, WBY understood the force of technique; John was a “great etcher” and Yeats found the sketches “all powerful gypsy things” (L 493). That power was capable of impressing people and hence convincing them of the image’s truth: the country women might indeed take the clean clothes off the hedges, and Yeats’s anxiety suggests his fear that he might really be an ugly gypsy thing. In two letters
written the same day he reveals his ambivalence: in one he concedes the portrait’s beauty but declares it “useless for my special purposes” (L 502); in the other he assumes its inclusion in the edition (L 502). Later in the negotiations with Bullen he replaced the John with a Sargent (L 507), but at the last minute instructed Bullen “to put in the Augustus John after all” (L 511).

Yeats finally decided to include not only John’s, but all of them, thereby confessing the futility of “trying to get a suitable portrait” (L 502). His father warned him against the Mancini and Sargent; the John was too gypsyish, the JBY too sentimental. Yeats soon recognized that no single portrait would do and he retreated uneasily from a concept of a single “general personality” to one familiar from The Wind Among the Reeds where he claimed in a note that his poetic characters were used “more as principles of the mind than as actual personages.” He now resolved to handle his portraits in the same way. All were to be placed together in one volume “for comparison and completeness”:

“my father’s emaciated portrait beside Mancini’s brazen image, and Augustus John’s tinker to pluck the nose of Shannon’s idealist” (L 502). Each image could balance the next and in case the reader misunderstood, Yeats was to provide an essay describing them “as all the different personages that I have dreamt of being but have never had the time for” (L 502). The off-handedness of his precis belies his confidence in the solution: he surely recognized that it put him back in the 90s faced not merely with a fragmented self, but with a fragmented vision of what the self would like to be.

In adopting this attitude, however, Yeats had begun to work out a successful resolution. He had not simply departed from his original plan, he had modified his own and JBY’s theory of portraiture: the pictures, he now saw, did not reveal his “general personality” as already established, but rather the various characters he had “dreamt of being.” The portrait, removed from “reality,” no longer conveys some real self. With this view Yeats was only one step away from a complete reconciliation of portrait and self via the concept of the mask. The letters do not show how Yeats finally selected the portraits or explain why he abandoned the plan to place them together. It is clear only that pictures by Sargent, Shannon, Mancini and JBY appeared, each at the beginning of a volume, and that Yeats was pleased with the result. The essay was


11. L, p. 506. Again, the John particularly disturbs Yeats: “I also want Augustus John’s emphasis to be balanced by emphasis in other directions.”

12. Yeats’s last minute request to include the John was apparently too late, but the portrait appeared in later works.
never written, perhaps indicating that he had found a solution comfortable enough to make explanations unnecessary. Yeats was at this time developing his theory of the mask and it explains his sudden change in attitude: he made the leap from portrait as principle of mind (or dreamt-of self) to portrait as mask. Such a reconciliation allowed that the self could be (not simply dream of being) that gypsy, and resolved the differences, as Ellmann notes the mask does, between “one’s own and other people’s conception of one’s personality.”

He could accept the artists’ conceptions of him as masks and by presenting a number of well-wrought masks he could let his readers choose the Yeats they preferred. He no longer feared the effects of fragmentation as much as he had, for he had created a new kind of unity: although he wore only one mask at a time he conceded the necessary and desirable existence of all the masks in his psychic wardrobe. His new theory banished anxiety and allowed him to admit the Augustus John comfortably.

Yeats continued to reassemble his past and his efforts culminated in the *Autobiographies* where his life as a portrait painter’s son tells in another way. The previously quoted declaration, “even today I constantly see people as a portrait-painter, posing them in the mind’s eye before such-and-such a background” (A 83), whether true for his vision of people in general or not, aptly describes his method in the *Autobiographies*. There, Yeats saw people not only with the portrait painter’s eye but as portraits. Whether actually or imaginatively present to him, portraits provided access to the personalities of his past and to personalities who helped him understand his past, and the portraitist’s technique (capturing character in a precisely observed pose, placing the subject before a particular background) became his method of examining and evaluating the people he had known.

As portraits provided Yeats with a self-concept, so they provided him with a concept of others. In the *Autobiographies*, miniatures of ancestors (A 21–22) reveal their character and hence the nature of his heritage, and portraits hanging over the mantle as he writes help focus his memories of Henley and Morris. So intimate is the connection between person and portrait that at times memory of person becomes memory of portrait: remembering JBY’s portrait of Standish O’Grady blots out his own recollection of him (A 425). The portraits that appear to Yeats are often of ancestors or Irish leaders, and one must keep in mind that JBY not only incessantly sketched his family but also, commissioned by Hugh Lane as part of the effort to revitalize the Irish tradition, painted the men of the Irish Renaissance. These were among his best works, and portraits associated with tradition both personal and national came readily to his son’s mind.

The portraits Yeats summons in the *Autobiographies* supply him with

concrete details which either confirm general character, or, more often, from which general character can be inferred and then meditated upon. Again JBY’s teaching is evident: the importance of a portrait lies primarily in what it tells about the subject’s psychology. By providing concrete details as a basis for generalizations the portraits offer Yeats a solution to his oft-bemoaned tendency toward abstraction which he was in 1914 trying to solve. His thoughts could be directed by the “facts” of a picture and because they are “external” evidence the portraits supply the reader, and perhaps more importantly Yeats, with an authority for generalization greater than mere memory. Henley’s portrait shows “his heavy figure and powerful head, the disordered hair standing upright, his short irregular beard and moustache, his lined and wrinkled face, his eyes steadily fixed upon some object”; all these specifics convey to Yeats Henley’s “complete confidence and self-possesion” paradoxically combined with his air of “half-broken reverie” (A 124). Morris’s “grave wide-open eyes” remind him of Titian’s Ariosto, a symbol of unity of being, and “the broad vigorous body suggests a mind that has no need of the intellect to remain sane” (A 141). Like one of Yeats’s esoteric symbols, Henley’s portrait initiates memory and discussion; Morris’s supports Yeats’s admiration of him by revealing his charming character, while O’Grady’s confirms Yeats’s estimate that “his element burned or ran pure” (A 424): the portrait shows a “robust normal” body and eyes “dim” and “obsessed” (A 425).

Yeats does not, however, restrict selection of portraits to those of people he knew. His most famous discussion of pictures compares Strozzi’s unidentified Venetian gentleman and Sargent’s President Wilson. Again following JBY, Yeats ignores the possibility that Wilson’s stiffness results from inadequate technique, and generates from the two portraits not only an abstract conception of each man’s personality, but a characterization of each man’s era (A 292). The Venetian, representative of the Renaissance’s Unity of Culture, possesses the attendant unity of being—Yeats gathers from his “dark eyes” and his pose that his is the thinking body. Wilson, on the other hand, with his stiff clothes suggesting no movement “but that of the valet” and “intent” eyes, is the divided man—living “only in his eyes,” internally, externally “dead” and “mechanical,” an example of the modern dilemma. Here the portraits, introduced in the middle of an account of the Rhymers and their associates, are not methods for direct exploration of individuals important to Yeats’s past. He has no personal interest in what they tell about Wilson and the Venetian, as he does with the pictures of Henley and Morris; rather, he derives from these portraits of

14. Finding “inspiration” in an art object was not new to Yeats. One of his early plays was based on a picture by his father and “On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac” is only one of the most obvious examples of a poem based on a work of art.
15. See also Edward Engelberg’s discussion of these portraits in The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats’s Aesthetic (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1964), pp. 85–86.
men, whose distance from his own life makes them seem fit subjects for unclouded scrutiny, abstractions about human life in general which he then turns to tools for analyzing the failure of the tragic generation.

In addition to using actual portraits, Yeats employed the portrait painter’s technique to approach the past. He posed his subjects in revealing attitudes “before such-and-such a background.” Although Yeats claimed the practice derived from his father’s, and the notion of capturing a pose certainly did, JBY rarely paid attention to background, most often simply painting it black. The interest in background originated, in fact, in the Pre-Raphaelites, idols of Yeats’s youth. His combination of their technique with his father’s is at once a denial (although perhaps subconscious) that JBY ever left the Pre-Raphaelite school Yeats so admired, and an acknowledgment of the other formative influence in his early years.

By capturing a pose and arranging it against a particular background Yeats provided himself with portraits, like the actual ones he used, to help focus the direct memory. Oscar Wilde, Maud Gonne, Lionel Johnson, Florence Farr, George Pollexfen are set against the surface of Yeats’s past. He remembers Wilde in his white drawing room and poses him there, as in a family portrait, “with his beautiful wife and his two young children” (A 134–35). To Yeats Wilde’s life “suggested some deliberate artistic creation” (A 135) and Yeats sees him appropriately in a formal picture, that picture forming his own deliberate creation. Maud Gonne, the mysterious legendary goddess whose mind lay hidden to Yeats “under so much beauty and so much energy” (A 124) appears in his first description of her in a railway carriage incongruously, and so appropriately, surrounded by “cages full of birds, canaries, finches of all kinds, dogs, a parrot, and once a full-grown hawk from Donegal” (A 123). This was how Yeats “always” saw her in the first few years of their acquaintance; it is the image he held then and now of the Maud of the early 90s. At times the images Yeats conjures up overpower all others as O’Grady’s portrait eclipsed memory. Using the same words with which he had described the O’Grady phenomenon, Yeats recalls Lionel Johnson in Dublin: “One image of that stay in Dublin is so clear before me that it has blotted out most other images of that time” (A 223). He then paints a portrait of Johnson in a pose which captures his general character (“he is looking straight before him with head erect, and one hand resting on the table” proclaiming in a “clear, unshaken voice, ‘I believe in nothing but the Holy Roman Catholic Church’”) and sets him against the lodging house background (“around him lie or sit in huddled attitudes half a dozen men in various states of intoxication”).

16. Here, as elsewhere, Yeats’s background is not incidental. As in Pre-Raphaelite paintings it reflects or contributes to the depiction of character. Marjorie Perloff also notes that Yeats is scrupulous in locating his subjects (“‘The Tradition of Myself’: The Autobiographical Mode of Yeats,” Journal of Modern Literature, IV [1975], 542–43).
Similarly, in “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” 17 Yeats calls up portraits of his past, particularly his Irish past. Once again they provide a way to assess that past by offering details for generalizations. Griffith’s stare shows “hysterial pride,” Kevin O’Higgins’ countenance “/ A gently questioning look that cannot hide / A soul incapable of remorse or rest,” John Synge’s face is “grave” and “deep,” and at the end of the poem Yeats exhorts his readers to view the pictures for themselves and “Ireland’s history in their lineaments trace.” Even more than in the Autobiographies, Yeats here uses the portraits to induce reverie. His practice recalls and follows literally JBY’s 1914 pronouncement “all art begins in portraiture. That is, a realistic thing identified with realistic feeling, after which and because of which comes the Edifice of Beauty” (JBY 192). By meditating on actual portraits Yeats generates the Edifice of Beauty, the poem. While the portraits evoke both individually and collectively the “glory” of Ireland’s “passions” (V 839), they also recall Yeats’s own works. The close connection he had always felt between picture and word (reminiscent of JBY’s illustrated book margins and letters) 18 here manifests itself in his selection of pictures, and his judgments on their successes become judgments on the adequacy of his poems and on the limitations of art in general.

The “images of thirty years” Yeats chooses from the walls of the Municipal Gallery are often of men or incidents he has imaged in his own poems. Casement’s portrait recalls “Roger Casement” and “The Ghost of Roger Casement” both written the previous year, Griffith’s “On Those that Hated ‘The Playboy of the Western World’ 1907,” O’Higgins’ “Death” and more indirectly “Blood and the Moon” inspired by his death (V 831), Robert Gregory’s “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” Hugh Lane’s “To a Wealthy Man who Promised . . . . ,” Lady Gregory’s “Beautiful Lofty Things” and the Coole Park poems, John Synge’s “Coole Park, 1929” and again “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” and “a woman’s portrait” although probably not of Maud Gonne deliberately echoes in the description’s tone Yeats’s numerous evocations of her. Although he has not, until the writing of this poem, used them, the other pictures Yeats selects might also serve his poetry. In this way he stands among the images which he has captured (“permanent”) or which he could have captured (“impermanent”) in his own work.

Formal and verbal echoes strengthen those created by the portraits


18. In the context of the poem itself he makes the connection: a speech delivered to the Irish Academy of Letters calls the Ireland evoked by the pictures “that great pictured song” (V, pp. 839-40); in the second stanza of the poem he views the portraits and sees in them the Ireland “the poets have imaged”; and the two portraits of Hazel Lavery in stanza III present “that tale / As though some ballad singer had sung it all” (V, p. 602).
themselves. The ottava rima calls up memory of "Among School Children," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen, I," "Meditations in Time of Civil War, I&IV," and "Sailing to Byzantium," while "The dead Ireland of my youth," "terrible," "gay" recall "September 1913" and "Easter 1916" among others. "No fox can foul the lair the badger swept" is not just "an image out of Spenser" but an image out of Yeats's essay on Spenser. Thomas Parkinson has noted the poem's "sense of quotation" but finds it a disagreeable example of the egotism Yeats himself disliked. Egotism may underlie the assumption that the reader will recognize the quotations, but such echoing is not mere self-aggrandizement: it serves to underscore the relation between picture and poem. The placement of the poem further argues the point. Flanked by "Those Images" and "Are You Content?", both about the imagination’s conjuring of images, it forms part of a meditation on the poet’s craft and creations, and in this context Yeats’s seemingly melodramatic reaction to the pictures is comprehensible:

Heart-smitten with emotion I sink down,  
My heart recovering with covered eyes

He has "looked upon" not simply the people of his past, but the creations of his past, and the "my" of "my permanent or impermanent images" acquires poignancy. The reaction is powerful, however, not only because the pictures call up his poems, but because they question the adequacy of those poems. Have his images succeeded in becoming "permanent," or, "impermanent," will they fade with time? Meditation on the portraits' triumphs merges with meditation on his poems' ability to also create that grandeur of Ireland and her leaders.

After an initial glance around the gallery, Yeats suddenly recognizes the pictures’ transcendence of his own earlier pessimism ("Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone / It’s with O’Leary in the grave" [V 289]) and in doing so celebrates the success of his poems (stanza II). What he sees on the walls becomes not an Ireland the painters, but one the "poets," have imagined. But confidence in art’s ability to transcend the dead Ireland is countered (stanza IV) by the uncertainty of Mancini’s success with Lady Gregory. Although Synge thinks the portrait "Greatest since Rembrandt," Yeats is unsure: his "certainly" indicates his doubt, and "ebullient" is hardly what Yeats would want Lady Gregory’s portrait to be. The uncertainty leads him to question art’s capacity to ever capture what is most noble in man ("But where is the brush that could show anything / Of all that pride and that humility?") and to fear not only that men will fall into "patterns" (a word Yeats used constantly in relation to art and poetry), but that art will lose its flexibility, adopt

21. The original ordering of the poems for New Poems (1938) is retained in Collected Poems.
"approved patterns" and never be able to image forth a Lady Gregory. He despairs that at 72 his poems will take on the rigidity of old age: his medieval knees lack health. But by following his meditations on Mancini's portrait and remembering what he and Lady Gregory and John Synge sought to do, and by bowing to that, he regains health and confidence: his knees bend in homage and assent to the dream Coole fostered, the "dream of the noble and beggar-man" (stanzas V&VI).

The meditation culminates in an affirmation of art's success. He turns to his father's portrait of John Synge, declaring "And here's John Synge himself." Man and portrait become one. This identification goes beyond the conflated memories of O'Grady and of JBY's portrait in the Autobiographies. Here in seeing the portrait Yeats sees Synge before him. But the poem immediately falls away from the moment of revelation into self-consciousness. The glory of Synge, of the portrait, prompts new doubt and Yeats, with false humility, tries to allay his fear of judgment. It is perhaps no coincidence that a portrait by his father prompts that fear. The final, hollowly grand lines betray his awareness that he avoids confronting the doubts. Adopting the mask of Mancini's poseur, he proclaims

You that would judge me, do not judge alone
This book or that . . .
Think where man's glory most begins and ends,
And say my glory was I had such friends.

The lines, however, open the way for the next poem where he bravely calls upon those ancestors he addressed in the Autobiographies "To judge what I have done," and he admits with true humility, "But I am not content."

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