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The Mona Lisa and the Symbol of Ideas: Pater's Leda as Mother to Yeat's Helen

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She is older than the rocks among which she sits; 
Like the vampire, 
She has been dead many times, 
And learned the secrets of the grave; 
And has been a diver in deep seas, 
And keeps their fallen day about her; 
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: 
And, as Leda, 
Was the mother of Helen of Troy, 
And, as Saint Anne, 
The mother of Mary; 
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, 
And lives 
Only in the delicacy 
With which it has moulded the changing lineaments, 
And tinged the eyelids and hands.

This poem, the first in the 1936 Oxford Book of Modern Verse,¹ was originally 
a single sentence of Walter Pater’s prose, relineated as free-verse lyric by the 
anthology’s editor, W. B. Yeats. Yeats lifted the sentence from Pater’s famous 
homage to the Mona Lisa in the da Vinci essay of The Renaissance, and its 
curious placement at the head of a collection of modern poetry suggests that it 
either anticipated or introduced some essential quality that for Yeats distin­
guished modernity in verse. Appropriately, in his introductory essay to the 
Oxford anthology, Yeats claimed for the passage a “revolutionary importance” 
(OBMV viii).

The purpose of this essay is to argue that the “revolutionary importance” of 
Pater’s sentence was not due to its influence on modern poetry in general, as 
Yeats claimed, but to its influence on Yeats’s own conception and use of the 
symbol in his poetry and poetics. Yeats never directly acknowledged this debt, 
but there is sufficient evidence in his writings to believe that the extremely odd

¹. All subsequent notations to Yeats’s writings are abbreviated as follows: 
The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats—A 
The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats—P 
The Essays and Introductions of William Butler Yeats—E&I 
The Oxford Book of Modern Verse—OBMV.

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choice of Pater’s prose sentence as the first poem in an anthology of modern verse was itself an indirect acknowledgment. This evidence lies in Yeats’s articulation of what he called the “intellectual symbol” and particularly in his treatment of Maud Gonne as a poetic subject. I am not suggesting that Yeats’s complex theory and practice of symbolism was solely inspired by Pater, but the Mona Lisa passage may well have been one of the primary models for Yeats’s visionary, archetypical metaphors, especially those involving the feminine and the beautiful.\(^2\)

In the introduction to the Oxford anthology, Yeats defends his choice of the Pater passage as the first modern “poem” on the basis of its rhythm, but he does not specify what it was about that rhythm that proved so “revolutionary,” so distinctively modern.\(^3\) He promises to “presently discuss the meaning of the passage” (OBMV ix), but his discussion, when it comes, consists of a rhetorical question—“did Pater foreshadow a poetry, a philosophy, where the individual is nothing . . . ?” (OBMV xxx). The question is posed in reference to the poetry of Ezra Pound, particularly in reference to the *Cantos* and what Yeats calls their “flux” (OBMV xxx). Yeats stops short of actually identifying the relationship between the Mona Lisa passage and this modernist “flux,” and he withdraws momentarily to a discussion of the historical Lisa’s soul—a discussion that has nothing to do with the distinctive qualities of modernist poetry:

Somewhere in the middle of it all da Vinci’s sitter had a private reality like that of the Dark Lady [of Shakespeare’s sonnets] . . . but because that private soul is always behind our knowledge, though always hidden, it must be the sole source of pain, stupefaction, evil. (OBMV xxx-xxxi)

The Mona Lisa passage’s influence on Yeats, on Yeats’s own “private soul” perhaps, is of at least as much interest in this context as is his claim for its “revolutionary importance” to modernism in general. The general notion that Pater was one of the forefathers of British modernism has been widely accepted, just as the assertion that Pater’s writings serve as a “hinge” or turning point for

\(^2\) In *The Vast Design: Patterns in W. B. Yeats’s Aesthetic*, Edward Engelberg treats Pater as one of the most direct, significant influences not only on Yeats’s idea of the symbol, but on Yeats’s total aesthetic, early and late, repeatedly drawing connections between the two writers’ views of the history of art: [A] good part of [Yeats’s] curious self-division grows out of certain historical reassessments of Greece and the Renaissance, which Yeats found most obviously in Pater, though the whole nineteenth century was deeply involved. (xxvii)

The earliest encounter with this double revival was probably in Pater’s *Renaissance*, and for a time that book must have been for Yeats what it had been for Wilde: his “golden book.” (9)

Neither Pater nor Yeats would ever relinquish their veneration for form . . . but each was possessed of an historical consciousness that made “intellectual” not a term to fear but to require. (105)

Even Yeats’s “vague Grecian eyes gazing at nothing” find a precedent in Pater’s description of them as eyes “wide and directionless, not fixing anything with their gaze, nor riveting the brain to any special objects. . . .” (72)

\(^3\) “Pater was accustomed to give each sentence a separate page of manuscript, isolating and analysing its rhythm” (OBMV viii). The result of this practice, Yeats claims, was that Pater was able to “permit a poem to arise out of its own rhythm” (OBMV viii). Why Pater was then not a poet in the majority of his sentences, or why he chose this sentence of all the thousands in Pater’s prose, Yeats does not say. The implication of Yeats’s choice has more to say for the importance of this passage to Yeats’s own poetry and poetics than for Pater’s general compositional method as an anticipation of the techniques of modern verse.
the Victorian and modern eras has become a critical commonplace. However, Yeats’s transcription of a bit of Pater’s prose as the actual first example of modern verse has certainly not been embraced by subsequent editors and anthologizers of modern poetry, and the “poem” has to be seen as a highly idiosyncratic gesture on Yeats’s part. In a famous passage from The Tragic Generation, Yeats acknowledged that “we looked consciously to Pater for our philosophy” (A 201). And yet Yeats’s recasting of Pater as the first poet of modernism in English alerts the reader to the possibility that Yeats looked to Pater for more than style and philosophy. This alert sends the reader back to Yeats’s poetry and poetics in order to sound for echoes of Pater’s Mona Lisa not directly acknowledged in those texts.

In his essay “The Symbolism of Poetry” (1900), Yeats, then powerfully under the influence of Arthur Symons’ The Symbolist Movement in Literature, attempted the usual appropriation of literary tradition for the latest literary rage. Starting from Symons’ assertion that symbolism can be found “in every great, imaginative writer,” Yeats set himself the task of describing “the continuous indefinable symbolism which is the substance of all style” (E & I 155). And while he proceeded to find this symbolism in snippets of Burns (conveniently paraphrased), Blake, Nash, and Shakespeare, he meanwhile appropriated it for favorite causes as well: the justification of a poetics created by poets; the disqualification of empiricism as a means to the truth; the assertion of the solitary artist as a primary historical force; the explicating of “the purpose of rhythm” (E & I 159); and the demonstration of the transcendent significance of the occult.

In the fourth section of the same essay, Yeats makes a distinction in terms between “emotional symbols” and “intellectual symbols”—that is, between “symbols that evoke emotions alone” and “symbols that evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions” (E & I 160). As a literary movement, Symbolism seems always to have generated such binary distinctions almost spontaneously, with every theorist assuming the need to lay down some law dividing an ordinary from an extraordinary symbol. Yeats’s division of ordinary from extraordinary takes a typically Yeatsian form, with an emphasis first on an anima mundi—“beyond the threshold of sleep, casting lights and shadows”—then on the

4. Cf. Michael Levinson’s A Genealogy of Modernism and James Longenbach’s Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot and the Sense of the Past. Interestingly, these writers find related but different aspects of modernism to be significantly anticipated in Pater. Levinson reads a radical challenge to Victorian faith (cf. Arnold, Carlyle) in the individual subject’s ability to apprehend some measure of an objective reality “steadily, and see it whole.” Longenbach reads an aesthetics employing the existential-historicist principles of Dilthey and Croce, which he traces in the early poetry of Pound and Eliot. Engelberg has applauded Longenbach for pointing out Pater’s connection to the modernist historicisms but criticized him for “dealing almost exclusively with the early Yeats” and thus seeing Yeats also as a “bridge” and not as “the much more imposing gate” to the modernist sense of history (221).

5. This holds true as late as the 1960’s: in 1964, for instance, in his essay “Two Kinds of Symbols,” William Wimsatt attempts to distinguish between the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary” symbol (Hateful Contraries 317). Engelberg, however, holds that Yeats proposed not a dichotomy of symbols but a triad. “Strictly speaking, there are . . . three—not two—kinds of symbols which Yeats distinguishes in his essay ‘The Symbolism of Poetry’: those which evoke pure emotion, or pure ideas, or both emotions and ideas” (107). But the distinction seems forced, as Yeats’s definition of the “intellectual symbol” is that it can either “evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions” (E & I 160), thus leaving us once again with “emotional symbols” and “intellectual symbols” as the basic, opposed categories.
visionary—“the soul moves among symbols and unfolds in symbols [in] trance, or madness, or deep meditation”—and finally on the search for the sacred—“the new sacred book, of which all the arts . . . are beginning to dream” (E & I 161-62). More strikingly, Yeats’s division seems also to take a Paterian form and does so at the most crucial point of Yeats’s essay, when he gives us the moon as his exemplum for an “intellectual symbol.” To demonstrate the marked similarity that his sentence on the moon as symbol shows to Pater’s sentence on the Mona Lisa, I reprint Pater’s sentence first, here with virgules to indicate the line breaks that Yeats made when presenting it as a poem:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits;/ like the vampire,! she has been dead many times;/ and learned the secrets of the grave;/ and has been a diver in deep seas;/ and keeps their fallen day about her;/ and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;/ and, as Leda, I was the mother of Helen of Troy;/ and, as Saint Anne,/ the mother of Mary;/ and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes;/ and lives/ only in the delicacy/ with which it has moulded the changing lineaments;/ and tinged the eyelids and the hands. (Renaissance 80)

Now, for comparison, here is part of Yeats’s sentence on the symbolism of the moon, to which I have added virgules to suggest how alike are the two sentences in structure and rhythm:

but if I look at the moon herself/ and remember any of her ancient names and meanings,/ I move among divine people,/ and things/ that have shaken off our immortality,/ the tower of ivory,/ the queen of waters,/ the shining stag among enchanted woods,/ the white hare sitting upon the hilltop,/ the fool of Faery/ with his shining cup full of dreams,/ and it may be/ “make a friend of one of these images of wonder,”/ and “meet the Lord in the air.” (E & I 161-62)

In addition to the stylistic echoing of Pater’s sentence in the way that Yeats also piles up dependent clauses, each referring back to the object of the primary clause, several other interesting parallels appear. First, both Pater and Yeats have taken the perspective of an interpretive observer of an object with whose features they assume their readership to be familiar. Second, the objects of their observations are in both instances feminine and commonly associated with notions of ideal, inscrutable beauty. Third, both Pater and Yeats use the object of contemplation as an occasion for projecting their own associations upon the image, almost immediately leaving behind its actual visual characteristics and making of it a palimpsest of memory. Fourth, and finally, each of the projected images from memory is itself a complex cultural icon with its own range of associations: “the vampire”; Leda; Saint Anne; “the tower of ivory”; “the queen of the waters”; “the shining stag”; “the white hare”; “the fool of Faery.”

Although Yeats’s choices of resonant images run in a different vein than Pater’s, they bear a similar relation to the central object of contemplation, which in Pater’s case is da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, in Yeats’s case the moon. In both cases each additional image is appended to a succession of parallel clauses that cumulatively assert that whatever the observer sees in the object is real and that the visionary rather than the visible stimulus of the object is the measure of its great and invaluable beauty. As feminine symbols, the moon and the Mona Lisa provoke the complexes of associations that the observer details. Furthermore, that Yeats offered his sentence on the moon to illustrate his notion of the “symbol
of ideas” (for him the highest form of symbolization) makes the parallels with Pater’s sentence suggestive of a programmatic influence of Pater on Yeats’s idiosyncratic version of Symbolism. What at first seems a bizarre choice by Yeats for pride of place in a collection of modern verse might thus make sense—provided that we now assume that the “revolutionary importance” which Yeats ascribed to this one sentence lay in the sentence’s impact on Yeats’s own theory and practice of the symbol and not in its instigation of Ezra Pound’s modernist “flux.”

What, then, were the characteristics of Pater’s “Lady Lisa” that so impressed Yeats? In The Vast Design, Edward Engelberg argues that

in Greek and Renaissance art and history—and in his own time—Yeats discovered a striving between vast conceptions of the imagination and a form that would contain them, what Pater had described in Greek Studies as a “struggle, a Streben . . . between the palpable and limited human form, and the floating essence it is to contain.” (xxvii)

According to Engelberg, Yeats conceived of this Renaissance struggle in terms of passion versus stillness, historical resonance versus private significance, the “Many” versus the “One”:

Yeats’s conception of the Renaissance, and his frequent habit of paralleling that period to his own time, seem to offer the most effective approach to evaluating his always vacillating attitude toward personal utterance and general myth, subjective and objective. In Yeats’s scheme of history, the Renaissance figured crucially both as a culmination and as a seedbed, a grave and a cradle, a time of unity and of dispersal. . . . From Dante . . . through Botticelli, Da Vinci, and Raphael, there appears to be a striving for unity, a confluence of passion and thingness. Soon, however, their intense quietness is disturbed by the awakening “sexual desire” in the art of Michelangelo and Titian. (13-14)

From this Renaissance “confluence of passion and thingness,” Yeats came “to see that the Many can become the One, that ‘congeries,’ assembled in the proper design, assume the shape of a ‘single being’” (186). And in fact the most striking aspect of the Mona Lisa, at least as “she” exists in Pater’s extended sentence, is her enduring singleness in spite of all the mythological and historical characters that she contains and sums up in her image.

It is just this capturing of the illusion of multiple characters and narratives in the single, timeless image that Yeats aspired to in his own poetry. “Yeats came to call this illusion the ‘emotion of multitude,’” writes Engelberg, “though he first had to work through what he meant by ‘Symbolism’; and to check that multitude from overflowing beyond the frontiers of form, he would find ways of recalling that resonance to the centre, to its ‘still intensity’” (94). The way that Yeats found to explain what “he meant by ‘Symbolism’” and to control, or edit, his symbolic associations was through the concept of the “intellectual symbol.” History and myth, not merely multiplicity, make an image or symbol an “intellectual symbol,” while an image that simply sets off scattered associations in the thoughts of the beholder without revealing any pattern within them is by Yeats’s terms “an emotional symbol” only:
It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession. (E & I 161)

Engelberg seizes upon the word “procession” and its implication of continuous, unbroken sequence, pointing out that a “symbol (or image) was only autonomous by being attached to a lineage, in the same manner that an aristocratic family would conceive of its offspring’s independence as consisting in the degree to which they were able to carry on the family traditions” (107). Again, the connection to Pater’s description of the Mona Lisa seems clear. The Mona Lisa is a kind of family tree, and her features are inherited: “She has been dead many times . . . and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary.” The Mona Lisa is one face in an unbroken succession, or “procession,” of fated women who were both individual and archetypical, the same procession in which Yeats placed Maud Gonne, “Ledaen,” one of the “daughters of the Swan.” It is her place in this procession that gives her image both multiplicity and stability, evoking “both emotions and ideas” (E & I 160).

Surprisingly, although he writes much of Pater’s influence on Yeats, and although he cites Yeats’s introduction to the Oxford Book of Modern Verse (xxxvn, 11, 22, 158n, 167, 170n), Engelberg has little to say about Pater’s passage on the Mona Lisa and makes no comment at all on the strange fact that Yeats called it a poem and placed it at the headwaters of modernist poetry. His only direct reference to the passage is in reference to Yeats’s reevaluation of the Pre-Raphaelite painters:

In 1913 Yeats was rediscovering the Pre-Raphaelites, seeing in Rossetti’s faces the same power that had occasioned him to remark in 1898 that they made “one’s thought stray to mortal things, and ask . . . ‘What predestinated unhappiness has made the shadow in her eyes?’” the kind of questions Pater had asked of the Mona Lisa. There was, after all, history in this Pre-Raphaelite art, fullness, resonance. (101)

The connection between the images of the Pre-Raphaelites, images that Yeats grew up with, and Pater’s Mona Lisa is significant because it points out yet another echo of Pater in Yeats’s prose and because all the images in question are of women. However, it does not entirely explain what Yeats found to be so powerful about Pater’s description.

F. C. McGrath has made a fuller consideration of Pater’s comments on the Mona Lisa in the process of tracing and analyzing Pater’s modernist legacy. While his analysis of Hegelian dialectic and idealism in Pater and the moderns seems to be an overreading, his discussion of the Mona Lisa passage produces several insights. In the framework of a chapter on unified sensibility, McGrath

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argues against the effectiveness of Pater's marriage of the sensuous to the spiritual and, interestingly, compares him to Yeats:

Like Yeats, Pater vacillated between the poles of sense and spirit; notwithstanding his polemic emphasis on sensation, Pater portrays in his writing a sensibility that exists on a level of rarefied contemplation several times removed from concrete, sensuous experience. (170)

McGrath even turns to Pater's consideration of the Mona Lisa for evidence of this sensibility:

Pater claims to have discovered in Leonardo another manifestation of the unified sensibility because his painting "pleases the eye while it satisfies the soul." A close examination of his passages on Leonardo's masterpiece, however, reveals very few eye-pleasing details and a very generous portion of soul-satisfying speculation. (175)

McGrath's observation of a dichotomy between "sensation" and "speculation" in Pater suggests a resemblance to Yeats's "emotional" vs. "intellectual" distinction, which favors the "intellectual" symbols "that evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions" (E & I 160). Of the Mona Lisa, McGrath notes that "what Pater finds in Leonardo's 'ideal lady' is not a woman but an essence or abstraction of the ages" (176). Later, he adds: "Pater's Mona Lisa combines the corruption and worldliness of prostitutes with the ideality of the virgin" (270). Most notably, he also asserts that "the Mona Lisa in the end symbolizes an idea" (177). Although McGrath does not consider Yeats's re-presentation of Pater's sentence in the Oxford anthology, the three general characteristics of Pater's Mona Lisa that McGrath has distinguished are all evident in that one sentence: 1) the palimpsest of mythology that suggests an "abstraction of the ages"; 2) the mix of corruption and saintliness in the virgin/harlot paradox; and 3) the sense that, transcending the historical woman who modelled the part, Mona Lisa (the work of art) evokes "ideas alone." With these three thematic elements in mind, we turn to Yeats's poetry, keeping an ear tuned for echoes and an eye out for Yeats's own "ideal lady."

Maud Gonne, of course, was that "ideal lady," the historical referent for much of Yeats's verse, his own "sitter" with her "private reality," her "private soul." Therefore it should come as no surprise that the echoes of Pater's Mona Lisa in Yeats's verse are largely to be found in the Maud Gonne poems. In these poems we can see the "intellectual symbol" developed in relation to its external, mythologically resonant cultural references (the Virgin Mary, the phoenix, and especially Helen of Troy) as well as in relation to its historical referent (Maud Gonne). Maud Gonne makes her first appearance as Helen of Troy in "A Woman Homer Sung":

7. One major exception is "The Secret Rose." The rose of course is a fully developed symbol of ideas in Yeats's _The Wind in the Reeds_, just as the Helen/swan symbolism is in later poems. However, the echoes of Pater's Mona Lisa in that volume seem to be much vaguer than those in _The Wild Swans at Coole_, perhaps because Yeats's crucial articulation of the symbol of ideas was not made until after the publication of _The Wind in the Reeds?_
Whereon I wrote and wrought,
And now, being grey,
I dream that I have brought
To such a pitch my thought
That coming time can say,
"He shadowed in a glass
What thing her body was." (P 88)

Like Pater observing the Mona Lisa, Yeats considers his lady as a work of art—
his own. This conflation of the role of Pater with the role that Pater ascribed to
da Vinci, this collapsing of the role of beholder and hermeneut with the role of
creator, is intrinsic to the Maud Gonne poems. Maud Gonne rarely enters Yeats’s
verse except as an aesthetic and emotional complex seen only through the
mediation of the deliberately transforming craft of the poet and interpreter of
symbols. The historical Maud must be replaced by the complex symbol that
Maud suggests to Yeats; this second Helen must be more than an individual
“bundle of contradictions.” Yeats, like Pater’s da Vinci, aims to create a woman/
symbol that transcends “all tainted experience by composing it . . . into a work
of art” (McGrath 177). Hence, in “No Second Troy,” the woman as intellectual
symbol stands above and apart from all the accidents of her environment in a way
no historically determined woman of flesh and blood could:

That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern. (P 89)

According to the Greek myth, Helen was the daughter of Zeus and Leda, and
we recall that Pater’s Mona Lisa, “as Leda, was mother to Helen of Troy.” In
time, as Yeats continued to dwell upon the obvious association of Maud with
Helen as a great, noble beauty, his symbol was enriched by the further associa-
tions, not merely with deity, but with deity in the form of a bird, the swan.
Beginning with “The Wild Swans at Coole,” Yeats uses “paddler” and “padd-
dling” metonymically to allude to Helen of Troy and hence to Maud. In “The
Wild Swans at Coole,” the swans “upon the brimming water” “paddle in the
cold” (P 129). In “Broken Dreams,” the poet’s lost love is seen to “paddle” her
wrists in “that mysterious, always brimming lake” (P 151). And, in “Among
School Children,” again transmuting the memory of Maud into the symbol of
Helen, Yeats writes that “even daughters of the swan can share/ Something of
every paddler’s heritage” (P 213). Additionally, the wild swans at Coole take on
the undead-like characteristics of Pater’s Mona Lisa:

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. (P 129)

8. The allusion to Pound’s famous definition of the image is intentional and intends not so much to suggest Yeats
as imagist as it does to suggest a degree of the unacknowledged debt of Pound’s imagisme to Yeatsian symbolism.
In the suite of Maud Gonne poems in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, the immortal phoenix, in fact, briefly challenges the swan as the bird of choice for Yeats’s symbol of ideas. In “His Phoenix,” Yeats makes of Maud Gonne, all the beautiful queens, mistresses, and larger-than-life idols that she rises gloriously above and sums:

And who can say but some young belle may walk and talk men wild
Who is my beauty’s equal, though that my heart denies,
But not the exact likeness, the simplicity of a child,
And that proud look as though she had gazed into the burning sun,
And all the shapely body no tittle gone astray.
I mourn for that most lonely thing; and yet God’s will be done:
I knew a phoenix in my youth, so let them have their day.

(P 150)

A telling passage earlier in the stanza seems almost to debate with Pater (and da Vinci) about the Mona Lisa herself:

And there’s a score of duchesses, surpassing womankind,
Or who have found a painter to make them so for pay
And smooth out stain and blemish with the elegance of his mind.

(P 149)

Ironically, this smoothing out “with the elegance of his mind” is precisely what Yeats is striving to do for Maud Gonne. By laboring to make of her a more than merely emotional, personal symbol, he hopes to bring her into eternity as an intellectual symbol, and thus to make of her, like the Mona Lisa, one of the undead. Years later, thinking of the aged Maud Gonne, the poet will make this suggestion of ghostly, immaterial existence more concrete:

Her present image floats into the mind—
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?

(“Among School Children” P 213)

The conflation of mythological and occult associations in Pater’s vision of the Mona Lisa foreshadowed Yeats’s use of the same technique in his poetry’s symbols. Certainly, Yeats’s description of the moon as archetypal symbol of ideas seems to display a working understanding of Pater’s method, making of the moon a palimpsest that calls to mind Pound’s phrase about ghosts “patched with histories” (*Three Cantos* 1). And although the element of the “hidden” “private soul” of the historical human referent does not trouble the moon as a symbol, it haunts the Maud Gonne poems as surely as it haunted Pater’s Mona Lisa. In “A Thought From Propertius” Yeats muses that

She might, so noble from head
To great shapely knees
The long flowing line,
Have walked to the altar
Through the holy images
At Pallas Athene’s side,
Or been fit spoil for a centaur
Drunk with the unmixed wine. (P 150)
The individual soul, the historical “sitter” for the portrait, is as lost in “A Thought From Propeltius” as in Pater’s description of the Mona Lisa. Throughout the poems dealing with Maud Gonne, Yeats veers between portraits that seem pure symbol and portraits that seem drawn from life. “Broken Dreams,” for instance, begins quite humanly, touched by ordinary mortality: “There is grey in your hair” (P 151). Even so, the woman praised transcends life or is made transcendent by the poet’s portraiture:

But in the grave all, all, shall be renewed.
The certainty that I shall see that lady
Leaning or standing or walking
In the first loveliness of womanhood. (P 151)

In themselves, these lines do not overstep the bounds of pious Christian hopes of “the still bye-and-bye,” and we are not led to believe that the lady already knows “the secrets of the grave.” But the poem ends by mixing the intimate, personal act of remembrance with the artistic evocation of a transcendent symbol:

You are more beautiful than any one,
And yet your body had a flaw:
Your small hands were not beautiful,
And I am afraid that you will run
And paddle to the wrist
In that mysterious, always brimming lake
Where those that have obeyed the holy law
Paddle and are perfect. Leave unchanged
The hands that I have kissed,
For old sake’s sake.

Yeats forms the poem’s final closure from a self-referential disclosure of the visionary, trance-like labor of re-creation:

The last stroke of midnight dies.
All day in the one chair
From dream to dream and rhyme to rhyme I have ranged
In rambling talk with an image of air:
Vague memories, nothing but memories. (P 151-52)

The role of the artist as it appears within the text of this poem is worth remarking on here because in creating that role Yeats again seems to echo Pater. That is to say, he echoes Pater’s re-creation of Leonardo the artist, the maker of the undead Mona Lisa. Whether this echo was conscious or unconscious at the time of the composition is unknowable, but certainly Yeats would have reason to cast himself into a role similar to that into which Pater cast Leonardo. According to Pater, Leonardo had been defining an ideal lady from childhood, long before meeting his historical subject; his vision had been all that time “defining itself on the fabric of his dreams” (79). Thus, da Vinci’s meeting with the historical Lisa was in fact a fortuitous miracle, the apparition of his ideal clothed in the flesh of a neighbor. Pater justified his description of the painting by placing the image’s origins in the artist’s dreams, which long preceded the
apparition of the lady in his studio. Yeats similarly made Maud Gonne an avatar out of the *anima mundi*, fated to be the subject of his art and not merely a beautiful woman he happened to know and admire. In a fascinating line in “Two Songs From a Play,” Yeats wrote that “the painter’s brush consumes his dreams” (*P* 211), with an obvious play on “consumption,” as by fire in the case of the phoenix or Troy, and “consummation,” which is exactly what Pater considered the Mona Lisa to be for da Vinci. Wherever Yeats seems to echo Pater’s Mona Lisa, one also finds the ghost of Pater’s da Vinci, the artist now cast in the figure of the dreaming, visionary poet:

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From going-down of the sun I have dreamed
    That women laughing, or timid or wild,
    In rustle of lace or silken stuff,
    Climbed up my creaking stair. They had read
    All I had rhymed of that monstrous thing
    Returned and yet unrequited love.
    They stood in the door and stood between
    My great wood lectern and the fire
    Till I could hear their hearts beating:
    One is a harlot, and one a child
    That never looked upon man with desire,
    And one, it may be, a queen. (“Presences” *P* 152)
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Here the poet’s craft—“all I had rhymed”—becomes subject matter, and the work’s symbolic subject, in the trinity of whore/virgin/queen, becomes the immortal audience for that work. This play on subject and object, viewer and viewed, has no precedent in Pater, yet the relationships of the artist to the work of art and to the feminine subject of the work of art were prefigured in the da Vinci essay, particularly in the discussion of the Mona Lisa. McGrath has noted that “Pater’s own passage, like the Mona Lisa itself . . . is a concurrence of forces that momentarily produce . . . his own ‘dream of a world’” (178). Moreover, Pater’s conception of da Vinci as artist is the model for Pater’s own relationship to this passage, and it is hard to distinguish Pater’s relation to the Mona Lisa as work of art from the relation of Pater’s da Vinci to that work. Yeats’s recasting of Pater’s piece of prose art into Yeats’s greatest medium, the lyric poem, only serves to underscore what Yeats’s poetry itself suggests—that, beyond style and philosophy, we can find in Pater’s essay the prefigurations of Yeats’s “symbol of ideas,” of his “ideal lady,” and of the paradigmatic relationship of the artist to his work that Yeats embraced. Pater’s da Vinci carries within him, all his life, the image of an ideal lady who is his “dream of a world.” The discovery of the physical embodiment of that ideal precipitates the work of art, which in turn transcends the woman who was its historical subject. That transcendence, a triumph of immortality, cannot be achieved, either by a da Vinci or a Yeats, without extracting its mortal price:

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Both nuns and mothers worship images,
    But those the candles light are not as those
That animate a mother’s reveries,
    But keep a marble or a bronze repose.
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And yet they too break hearts—O Presences
That passion, piety or affection knows,
And that all heavenly glory symbolise—
O self born mockers of man’s enterprise;

How can we know the dancer from the dance?
(“Among School Children” P 214)

These multiple layers of signification in “Among School Children”—the symbol, the work, the text, the subject, the artist—all knot in that final line: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” Applying Yeats’s comment on Pater’s da Vinci’s Lisa to Maud Gonne, “somewhere in the middle of it all” Yeats’s “sitter had a private reality” (OBMV xxx-xxxi). But “time cannot be divided,” and the private reality as such can only be the “source of pain, stupefaction, evil” (OBMV xxx-xxxi). In other words, Yeats the poet was prepared, in theory at least, to sacrifice the private reality of both Yeats the individual and of his beloved, to turn away from the symbols of “emotions alone,” from the “eye-pleasing details,” from the moon’s reflection on a mere pond where ordinary lovers tryst.

I must stress that Yeats freely acknowledged Pater’s influence. However, taken individually, these acknowledgments can be misleading. In Yeats’s manuscript notes for Four Years we find him writing that

it was hard to believe, after I had heard somebody read out let us say Pater’s description of the Mona Lisa, that “Can you direct me to St. Peter’s Square, Hammersmith” was under the circumstances the best possible prose. (Ellmann 250)

That phrase “let us say” is too studiedly casual, as if of all Pater’s many like passages, Yeats just happened to pull the Mona Lisa out of his cap. Commenting on this same reminiscence, Robert and Janice Keefe have observed that

the writers of William Butler Yeats’s generation always distanced themselves in one way or another from Pater. Soon after the turn of the century, it would have been thoroughly unfashionable to admit to an unqualified admiration for the man. (1)

By 1936, however, Yeats’s sense that Pater had somewhat faded from memory made such “unqualified admiration” at last safe to express, and the casualness of “let us say” was replaced by the forceful claim for “revolutionary importance.” When Yeats acknowledges Pater as a vague, general influence on style, as a youthful rage and philosophical mentor, and when he ascribes to Pater an equally vague, if revolutionary, influence upon modern poetry in general, he is simultaneously revealing and misleading. The fact that in both places he refers to the passage describing the Mona Lisa, and the fact that he goes so far as to recast that passage in lyric form, instead of leaving it in its original prose form, suggest that this particular passage especially influenced Yeats and did so in fact throughout his entire poetic career.

We find the strongest stylistic echo of the Mona Lisa passage in Yeats’s poetics in his articulation of the intellectual symbol, of “the symbol of ideas.” Yet Yeats’s poetic practice also, especially in the poems dealing with Maud Gonne, suggests that Pater’s influence was more than stylistic. Pater may have started Yeats on the way to Yeats’s particular method of symbolization, a method that
envisioned myth, history, and occult legend all vibrating within a present image. It is possible that Pater may even have put the term “symbol of ideas,” as well as a conviction of that term’s modernity, into Yeats’s mind by concluding his essay on da Vinci and the Mona Lisa with the paradoxical double assertion that the Mona Lisa represented both “the embodiment of the old fancy” and “the symbol of the modern idea” (80).

Works Cited

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