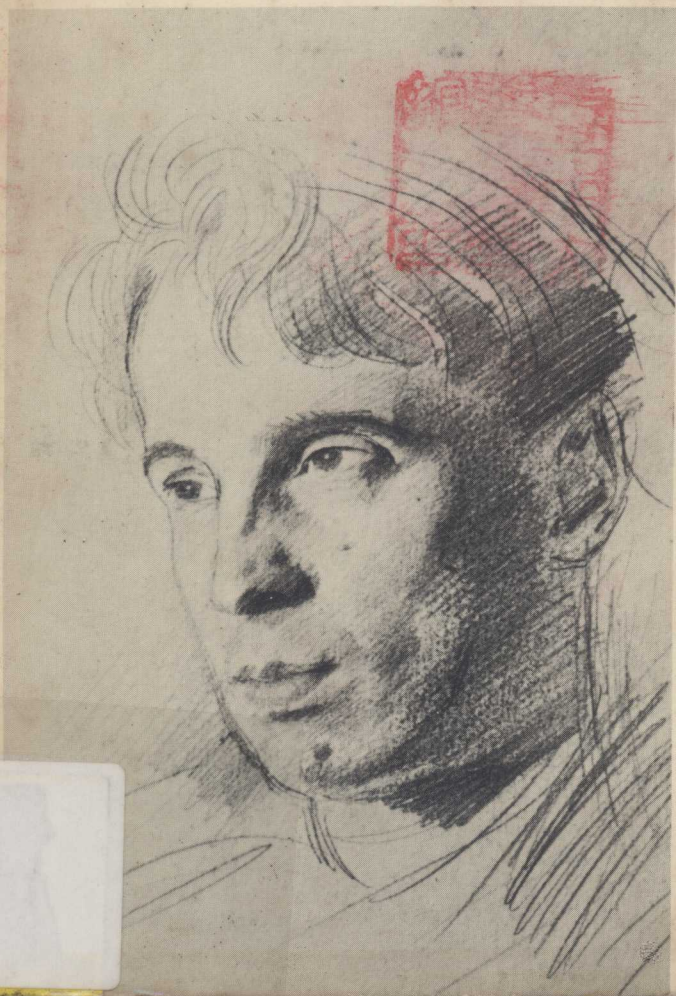


A. Norman Jeffares

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THE POETRY OF W. B. YEATS

by

A. NORMAN JEFFARES

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EDWARD ARNOLD

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General Preface

The object of this series is to provide studies of individual novels, plays and groups of poems and essays which are known to be widely read by students. The emphasis is on clarification and evaluation; biographical and historical facts, while they may be discussed when they throw light on particular elements in a writer's work, are generally subordinated to critical discussion. What kind of work is this? What exactly goes on here? How good is this work, and why? These are the questions that each writer will try to answer.

It should be emphasized that these studies are written on the assumption that the reader has already read carefully the work discussed. The objective is not to enable students to deliver opinions about works they have not read, nor is it to provide ready-made ideas to be applied to works that have been read. In one sense all critical interpretation can be regarded as foisting opinions on readers, but to accept this is to deny the advantages of any sort of critical discussion directed at students or indeed at anybody else. The aim of these studies is to provide what Coleridge called in another context 'aids to reflection' about the works discussed. The interpretations are offered as suggestive rather than as definitive, in the hope of stimulating the reader into developing further his own insights. This is after all the function of all critical discourse among sensible people.

Because of the interest which this kind of study has aroused, it has been decided to extend it first from merely English literature to include also some selected works of American literature and now further to include selected works in English by Commonwealth writers. The criterion will remain that the book studied is important in itself and is widely read by students.

DAVID DAICHES

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1. *The Wanderings of Oisín*

The first period of Yeats's poetry extends from early writings published in the *Dublin University Review* from 1883 to the poems included in *The Wind Among the Reeds* of 1899. Within these fifteen years he progressed from local poetry to national, from national to European. His first poems reflect a gentle dreaminess, a preoccupation with solitary figures—heroes, sages, poets, magicians; while melancholia enwraps the weakly limpid descriptions of scenery in *The Island of Statues*, an arcadian play full of Spenserian and Shelleyan touches. Dreaming, perhaps poetry itself, was a defence against the world for Yeats, who at eighteen 'lived breathed ate drank and slept poetry', and was sensitive and shy.

His father, J. B. Yeats the artist, influenced him greatly, read aloud his own favourite poems to him, encouraged him to write, taught him that a gentleman was not concerned with 'getting on' in life, and sent him to the School of Art in Dublin so that he could resolve his doubts as to whether his career should be that of artist or writer. His family friends were certain he was to be famous, and his father encouraged the idea most of all. But though J. B. Yeats, a forceful sceptic, was an impressive debater and talker, his son wanted to believe, and hurled himself headlong into the pursuit of truth. For Yeats this meant trying to find a substitute for religion, searching for a language of symbols, as he tells us in *Autobiographies*:

I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple minded religion of my childhood. I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians.¹

His search led him into forming a Hermetic Society in 1885 and there professing that the philosophy in poetry was the only permanent

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 1956, p. 115.

authoritative religion. In his adolescent loneliness he combined pre-Raphaelite weariness and a languorous delicacy of perception. All action and words leading to it seemed to him even more vulgar or trivial after a Brahmin, Mohini Chatterjee, had come to lecture about Theosophy in Dublin (an influence recorded in 'The Indian upon God'¹ and looked back upon in 'Mohini Chatterjee').² Instead he developed a plaintive belief that 'words alone are certain good' in 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd'³ and a dreaming of escape from life in 'The Sad Shepherd'.⁴

Yet at the same time, under the influence of John O'Leary, a former Fenian leader, Yeats developed an interest in Irish nationalism, read Irish patriotic literature and joined a Young Ireland society. He realised he must make himself a style and have 'things to write about that the ballad writers might be the better'. He formed an ambition to write a new kind of Irish literature, and came nearer to creating a style of his own when he began to write about what he knew: the scenery of Sligo where he lived as a child (for which he had longed when at school in the later 1870's in England) and the folklore to which his imagination responded when as a young man he spent later summers in Sligo with his uncle George Pollexfen. From Sligo and its stories of ghosts and fairies came characteristic cadences in 'The Stolen Child':

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim grey sands with light,
Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances,
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;
To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And is anxious in its sleep.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
*For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*⁵

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 1950, p. 14. Subsequent references to this volume are made as CP.

² CP, 279.

³ CP, 7.

⁴ CP, 9.

⁵ CP, 20.

His interest in the popular ballad form, sustained intermittently to the end of his life, appeared in 'The Ballad of Father O'Hart'¹ and 'The Ballad of the Foxhunter',² the first giving literary life to the places where 'the mountains and the rivers and the roads became a possession of your life for ever', the second attempting to build upon an incident from a literary source, Kickham's *Knocknagow*, a novel well known in Ireland but probably still unheard of by most English readers. 'The Ballad of Moll Magee'³ is mainly interesting as an early piece of characterisation based on a sermon delivered at Howth, then a fishing village outside Dublin. More successful is a memory of a snatch of song sung by an old woman at Ballisodare in Sligo which he made into 'Down by the Salley Gardens'.⁴

None of these poems, however, had fully released his imagination. He required the technique of symbolism for this: he needed the secrecy and the security that symbols would give him because he could hide his own insecurity behind them and could continue to remain, as it were, outside himself. Thus *The Wanderings of Oisín*,⁵ his first long poem, contained several things which he did not want his readers to find out: 'they must not even know there is a symbol anywhere'. The poem is founded on various translations of Gaelic legends—Yeats himself never learned Gaelic—contained in the *Transactions of the Ossianic Society*, particularly Michael Comyn's eighteenth-century poem on the story of Oisín and Niamh.

As Yeats tells the story it lacks the toughness and directness of the original: we can get these qualities in Sir Samuel Ferguson's more direct handling of the Gaelic legends, in an epic rather than romantic manner. Though Yeats echoes the speed of Swinburne in his metre, though he owes something to Tennyson's Arthurianism (and his assonance) and though he is still steeped in Shelley he has arrived at material which can carry his own delicacy, his own detailed imagery and his preoccupation with the passing of time, the shortness of life and love. His inventiveness blends successfully with the Gaelic details in a tapestry-like picture, a new kind of poetry in which the Gaelic story is converted into a dreamy, cloudy beauty:

Under the golden evening light,
The immortals moved among the fountains
By rivers and the woods' old night;

¹ CP, 23.² CP, 27.³ CP, 25.⁴ CP, 22.⁵ CP, 409.

Some danced like shadows on the mountains,
 Some wandered ever hand in hand;
 Or sat in dreams on the pale strand,
 Each forehead like an obscure star
 Bent down above each hookèd knee,
 And sang, and with a dreamy gaze
 Watched where the sun in a saffron blaze
 Was slumbering half in the sea-ways;
 And, as they sang, the painted birds
 Kept time with their bright wings and feet;
 Like drops of honey came their words,
 But fainter than a young lamb's bleat.¹

The dream turns to nightmare in the second section of the poem, the Island of Victories, but the admixture of Coleridgean supernaturalism and Tennysonian lotus-eating is not as successful as the previous section, closer as it was to the concrete Gaelic originals:

We galloped over the glossy sea:
 I know not if days passed or hours,
 And Niamh sang continually
 Danaan songs, and their dewy showers
 Of pensive laughter, unhuman sound,
 Lulled weariness, and softly round
 My human sorrow her white arms wound.
 We galloped; now a hornless deer
 Passed by us, chased by a phantom hound
 All pearly white, save one red ear;
 And now a lady rode like the wind
 With an apple of gold in her tossing hand;
 And a beautiful young man followed behind
 With quenchless gaze and fluttering hair.²

The symbolism was not very profound. The three islands of Living, of Victories, of Forgetfulness, may perhaps, as Ellmann suggests,³ refer to Yeats's life in Sligo, London and Dublin. Oisín is a projection of aspects of his own life, and once he finished the poem he realised the symbolism needed interpretation. Though he could disguise his own incompleteness through the secrecy of such symbolism, he also saw virtues in the method

¹ CP, 421.

² CP, 413.

³ R. Ellmann, *Yeats: the Man and the Masks*, 1949, p. 521.

because it was used by the mystical writers and poets he was beginning to admire fervently, and because it had a poetic validity of its own which had allowed him to break away from his early harmonious response to 'the more minute kinds of natural beauty' into a state of having something to say, however inarticulately.

2. *The Countess Cathleen*

Yeats was beginning to use a vocabulary freshly minted from the treasury of Gaelic literature, and many of the shorter poems in *The Countess Cathleen*¹ and *Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892) deal with a mythology Ireland had well nigh forgotten and England never known. For Arthur and his Round Table Yeats substituted the very different Conchubar and his Red Branch Warriors, and Finn and his Fenians. The Red Branch cycle of legends included Fergus, whom Ness had tricked out of his kingdom so that her son Conchubar could rule over Ulster in his stead, and in 'Fergus and the Druid' Yeats makes him avid for dreaming wisdom. Fergus was the unwitting agent of the doom of the Sons of Usna, Naoise the lover of Deirdre and his brothers Ardan and Ainle, who had accompanied the lovers to Scotland when they fled from Conchubar's wrath, for Deirdre was Conchubar's intended bride. Fergus had persuaded them to return against the wishes of Deirdre and had been tricked out of acting as their safe conduct. He joined with Maeve, Queen of Connaught, after this, in her raid on Ulster, in which Cuchulain achieved his great fame as Ulster's champion. Cuchulain is the Achilles of the Irish Saga, and he appears throughout Yeats's plays and poems, as warrior, as husband of Emer, as lover of Eithne Inguba, and of Aoife, as the unknowing killer of his own son and finally as victim of the sea.

In addition to drawing on the richness and strangeness of the saga material and making it part of his personal poetic language and mythology Yeats was carrying out his ambition of writing, like Allingham, poetry redolent of 'Munster grass and Connemara skies', about the places he knew in Ireland—Innisfree, Lissadell, Dromohair, Scanavin and Lugna-

¹ Yeats used an initial 'C' after 1895, and this spelling is subsequently used here except for one further reference to this particular volume.

Gall—and of transmitting, like the country story-tellers from whom he had collected them, Irish fairy and folk tales. His rhymes were 'Danaan' (after the Tuatha da Danaan, the legendary fairy folk who succeeded the Milesian invaders of Ireland) and their scope had suddenly enlarged. He had written *The Wanderings of Oisín* in 1887, the year his father moved his family back to London again; it was published in 1889, in the spring of which year Maud Gonne came into his life and he fell in love with her:

I had never thought to see in a living woman so great beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past. A complexion like the bloom of apples and yet the face and body had the beauty of lineaments which Blake calls the highest beauty because it changes least from youth to age, and stature so great that she seemed of a divine race. Her movements were works of grace and I understood at last why the poets of antiquity, where we could but speak of face and form, sing, serving some lady, that she seems like a goddess.¹

She was the incarnation of the Shelleyan heroines who had filled his dreams, wild and beautiful. He did not speak of love and intended not to, but he could offer poetic devotion in defeatist adoration. Maud is his Helen and his Deirdre:

Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?
For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,
Mournful that no new wonder may betide,
Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,
And Usna's children died.²

This devotion follows upon the Thoreau-like dream of living a solitary life on an island in Lough Gill, Sligo, a dream immortalised in 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree',³ a poem inspired by home-sickness in London for the scenery of Sligo. It became his best-known early poem, an anthology piece which celebrates the loneliness of adolescence. His poems now begin to deal with the pity and sorrow of love; he wishes he and Maud Gonne (for she is the 'beloved' of these poems) were white birds; he dreams of her death and carves a tribute to her beauty on a cross above her grave; he alone loved her pilgrim soul. This is sad, pre-Raphaelite devotion: 'What wife would she make, I thought, what share could she have in the

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Unpublished Autobiography*.

² 'The Rose of the World', CP, 41. ³ CP, 44.

life of a student?' Shortage of money was indeed a hindrance (he was extremely poor until he was about forty); but in 1891 he asked her to marry him and was refused; he continued to propose to her at intervals and was always told that they should not marry but remain friends.¹

It was to impress Maud Gonne that he offered to write *The Countess Cathleen* based on a story he had come across while collecting material for his *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888); this was to be a play in which she could act the role of the Countess who is tempted to sell her soul to provide food for her peasants in a famine. Yeats wanted to convince Maud Gonne of his ability to play a public part, a popular part in the movement for Irish independence, to which she had given herself with fantastic zeal. But he also wrote the play as a warning to her that she was in danger of losing her own soul through this immersion in political activity. His role, he thought, was to reshape Ireland's literature, an aim deliberately put in 'To Ireland in the Coming Times':

Know, that I would accounted be
True brother of a company
That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong,
Ballad and story, rann and song.²

His patriotic impulse was different from that of the nineteenth-century Irish nationalist poets, as this poem makes clear:

Nor may I less be counted one
With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,
Because, to him who ponders well,
My rhymes more than their rhyming tell
Of things discovered in the deep,
Where only body's laid asleep.

His rhymes carried more than their surface meaning because he had begun to add to the local descriptions and Gaelic material a symbolism which he had been learning through his steadily increasing interest in the mystics, in heterodox religion, in the occult, in Rosicrucianism, in Theosophy and in magic. This had begun in his teens in Dublin when he sought authority for his thesis that legends, beliefs and emotions handed on by poets, painters, philosophers and theologians are the nearest approach we have to truth.

¹ See J. Hone *W. B. Yeats 1865-1939*, 1942, pp. 84, 111, 124 and 194, and A. Norman Jeffares, *W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet*, 1949, pp. 39 and 40.

² CP, 56.

From reading A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* it had been an easy step to form the Hermetic Society in order to discuss Theosophy and Oriental religion generally. After that he had joined the Dublin Theosophical Lodge. In London he had subsequently found a sage in Madame Blavatsky and was admitted to the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society. There his desire for experiment—his wish to believe was mingled with a healthy scepticism—had resulted in a request that he should resign. Then he discovered a magician, the author of *The Kabbalah Unveiled*, MacGregor Mathers, through whom he joined the Order of the Golden Dawn. This was a society of Christian cabbalists through which he learned a good deal about alchemy. His interest in the *Kabbalah* (these are Hebrew writings treasured by occultists since the Middle Ages, which blend cosmogony with explanations of Biblical material) led him to collaborate with Edwin Ellis in an explanation of Blake's symbolism which resulted in the publication of a three volume edition of Blake's works 'Poetic, symbolic and critical' in 1893. This contained an interpretation and paraphrased commentary, and Blake's ideas and his private language continued to have a strong effect on Yeats's practice.

Partly because of his belief that poetry should consist of essences, partly because of his innate liking for mystery and secrecy, partly because he was still feeling his way into a symbolist technique, many of the poems included in *The Countess Kathleen* (first grouped together under *The Rose* in *Poems* of 1895) are still decorative in effect. But Yeats was using the symbol of the rose to carry an increasingly complex meaning. The Rose stood for Ireland in the work of several Irish poets; it had, of course, its traditional meanings in the work of contemporary English poets, though some of them were extending the range of these meanings; the conjunction of four-petalled rose and cross was fundamental in the Rosicrucian system, and symbolised a fifth element, a mystic marriage—the rose being a feminine symbol, the cross masculine. The rose also symbolised spiritual beauty, an idea derived from Blake; in 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time'¹ the rose is eternal beauty. And it also symbolised Maud Gonne's beauty and, again through her, Ireland.

'The Two Trees',² however, is more esoteric than any of the Rose poems; it marks the beginning of Yeats's increasingly dramatic use of the opposites of subjectivity and objectivity; it draws upon the Kabbalistic tradition, and its trees bear an obvious relationship to the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Biblical tradition; and, of course, as Yeats

¹ CP, 35.

² CP, 54.

tells us himself, to Blake. The elements from Blake have been well explained by Professor Kermode,¹ and Dr. F. A. C. Wilson has written an elaborate exegesis of the poem, relating it with an instinctive rather than authoritative reconstruction to Yeats's working 'backwards from Blake to Blake's sources in myth'.² What we see, however, is the poem, and if it is to be judged successful it must act on us as a poem *per se*. The beauty or the menace of an iceberg should be obvious without the experts' information about the five-sixths invisible under the surface. It is very useful indeed to know of the existence of the subsurface meaning if we are to comprehend the totality of a complex symbolic poem, but we must beware of critics aqualunged with inspiration who may spend so much time in the depths that we forget we are concerned with the poetry. 'The Two Trees', for instance, works without our knowing about the Kabbalistic Tree; it was meant to do so. We can recognise the symbolic value of the tree image implicitly without Yeats's particular insistence on its archetypal meaning; we realise, as he intended us to, its affirmative and negative values as we get to know the whole of his poetry because, as he continued to make his way into his own symbolic technique, he learned from Shelley's habit of continually repeating symbols. The poems in *The Rose* do not attain the power of those written subsequently because the process of establishing symbolic meaning must be cumulative. (This is where Dr. Wilson's explanations, extremely enlightening as they often are, sometimes mislead, because he has no evidence that Yeats's meanings were initially as explicit, as cut and dried, or as complex as he is able, through critical hindsight, to make them appear.) Yeats had to push his work further than an art for art's sake theory of poetry: literature had, for him, to have conviction. 'A symbol,' he wrote in an essay on Blake, 'is indeed the only possible expression of some invisible essence', and again, after describing how he lost the desire of describing outward things, took little pleasure in books unless they were 'spiritual and unemphatic', and came to realise that his change of attitude was part of a large movement of European thought, he wrote in 'The Autumn of the Body':

The arts are, I believe, about to take about their shoulders the burdens that have fallen from the shoulders of the priests, and to lead us back upon our journey by filling our thoughts with the essence of

¹ F. Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 1957, p. 96.

² F. A. C. Wilson, *Yeats's Iconography*, 1960, p. 251.

things, and not with things. We are about to substitute once more the distillation of alchemy for the analyses of chemistry and for some other sciences; and certain of us are looking everywhere for the perfect alembic that no silver or golden drop may escape.

He thought that

the more a poet rids his verses of heterogeneous knowledge and irrelevant analysis, and purifies his mind with elaborate art, the more does the little ritual of his verse resemble the great ritual of Nature, and become mysterious and inscrutable.

3. *The Wind Among the Reeds*

Yeats's own poetry became more refined and more complex. He had learnt elaboration from Wilde and Pater. His technique benefited by discussions with poets of the nineties, the craftsmen who were members of the Rhymers' Club, in the founding of which Yeats played a major part in 1891. Its members, whom Yeats described later as 'the Tragic Generation', included Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, John Davidson, Richard de Gallienne, Ernest Rhys, Arthur Symons and others. They all admired pre-Raphaelite work, especially that of Rossetti and Pater, and they met regularly to discuss literature in the upper room of 'The Cheshire Cheese', an ancient eating house in Fleet Street. But it was Arthur Symons who taught him most; he introduced him to the practice and the ideas of the French Symbolist poets. From the examples of Villiers de L'Isle Adam, Maeterlinck and Mallarmé he formed an idea of a more select audience, to which he addressed most of the poems of *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899).

Though *The Wind Among the Reeds* contains such simple, ballad style poems as 'The Host of the Air'¹ and such deceptively simple, gay, lilting lyrics as 'The Fiddler of Dooney',² the majority are far from the style of his first poems, all that he had copied from the folk art of Ireland. As he wrote the Rose poems he thought he was becoming unintelligible to the young men who had been in his thought, but he continued to move farther in the direction of a 'pure' poetry, which does not reflect

¹ CP, 63.

² CP, 82.