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To Erwin

YEATS: THE MAN AND THE MASKS

Professor Richard Ellmann, one of the most distinguished writers on modern English and Irish literature, was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1918, and graduated from Yale University in 1941. During the war he served in the US Navy and the Office of Strategic Services. After demobilization he went to Trinity College, where he wrote *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, his first great biographical work on the poet. It was published in 1948 and was well received. He returned to America to Harvard University, where he was Briggs–Copeland Assistant Professor of English Composition from 1948 until 1951. In that year he joined the North Western University, Illinois, as Franklin Bliss Snyder Professor and remained there until 1968. His outstanding biography of James Joyce was published in 1959 and won the National Book Award. A revised edition appeared in 1982 and received the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize and the James Tait Black Prize for 1983. From 1970 until 1984 he was Goldsmiths' Professor of English Literature at Oxford, and from 1982 he was Woodruff Professor at Emory University in Atlanta. Professor Richard Ellmann died in Oxford in 1987.

His many other books include *The Identity of Yeats* (1954), *Eminent Domain* (1967), *Golden Codgers* (1973), *Four Dubliners: Wilde, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett* (1986), as well as critical studies of Yeats's poems and of Joyce's *Ulysses*. He edited a number of books, including the *Selected Writings of Henri Michaux* (1960), which he also translated, and the *New Oxford Book of American Verse* (1976). His last work, a major biography of Oscar Wilde, was completed shortly before his death and published posthumously. Anthony Burgess said of him 'He wrote nothing that was dull, inelegant, or lacking in profound humanity . . . At Oxford he brought American common sense and a European sensibility to his teaching, and, in his public lectures everywhere, a clarity of exposition and an unfailing humour when expounding his literary insights'.

PREFACE

THIS book is based in part on published materials and in part on some 50,000 pages of unpublished manuscripts of W. B. Yeats which Mrs. Yeats, unbounded in her generosity, permitted me to examine in Dublin. The manuscripts include autobiographical notes, drafts of poems, letters, diaries, and other papers. I am indebted to the Rockefeller Foundation for a Post-War Fellowship in the Humanities which enabled me to spend thirteen months in Ireland and England.

I have had the privilege, too, of talking with many of Yeats's friends, acquaintances, and relations, and among these I must mention my special gratitude to Frank O'Connor for constant help, to Sean O'Faolain for many important suggestions, to Jack B. Yeats and Lily Yeats for their reminiscences, and to the following: Clifford Bax, Professor Thomas Bodkin, Professor C. M. Bowra, Austin Clarke, Sir Sydney Cockerell, C. P. Curran, Edmund Dulac and Mrs. Dulac (Helen Beauclerk), T. S. Eliot, Norman Haire, Edith Shackleton Heald, Joseph Hone, Madame Maud Gonne MacBride, Sir Eric MacLagan, H. M. Magee, W. K. Magee ('John Eglinton'), Ethel Mannin, John Masefield, Mrs. T. Sturge Moore, Professor Gilbert Murray, P. S. O'Hegarty, Lady Elizabeth Pelham, Dr. Edith Sitwell, Sir Osbert Sitwell, John Sparrow, Dr. James Starkey ('Seumas O'Sullivan'), James Stephens, L. A. G. Strong, Mrs. Iseult Stuart, Ninette de Valois, Allan Wade, Ernest Walsh, and the Duchess of Wellington (Dorothy Wellesley). Norman Holmes Pearson, then my commanding officer in the Office of Strategic Services in London, made it possible for me to go for the first time to Dublin in 1945. Peter Allt, Gerard Fay, Ellsworth Mason, and Roger Manvell have also put me under obligation. Diarmuid Russell has kindly permitted me to quote from some unpublished letters of his father.

I wish to thank Dean William C. DeVane of Yale University for his guidance and encouragement when I submitted this book, in another form, as a doctoral dissertation at Yale, where it received the John Addison Porter Prize in 1947; Professor H. O. White of Trinity College, Dublin, for his help on the early chapters which, also in another form, were prepared for a degree there; my brother, Erwin B. Ellmann, for his most generous and most valuable criticism of all the drafts of this book; Charles N. Feidelson, Jr., for aiding me with difficult problems of revision; Andrews Wanning, John V. Kelleher, and Mary Donahue, for reading the manuscript and preserving me from many inaccuracies; Dr. R. J. Hayes, Director of the National Library, and his able and cooperative staff, for facilitating my work in Ireland; and the United Arts Club, where I lived in Dublin, for hospitably admitting me to membership.

R. E.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
April 2, 1948

PREFACE TO THE 1979 EDITION

Yeats: The Man and the Masks was completed eight years after the poet's death, a time when many of his friends were alive, and above all, his wife. George Yeats has since died, on 23 August 1968, and it seems an appropriate moment to think back on that distinguished woman. I should perhaps explain how we first met. The fortunes of the Second World War had propelled me to England, where I was serving in the Navy with a temporary assignment to the Office of Strategic Services. After V-E Day the neutral Irish government relaxed their restriction on visits by American servicemen, and the moment seemed propitious for me to write to Mrs Yeats, asking if she would see me about a study of her husband which I had begun three years previously. Fortunately I knew nothing of her well-earned reputation for never replying to letters. She answered yes. I then, in September 1945, went to the head of my section of the O.S.S. in London: this was Norman Holmes Pearson, once a fellow graduate student at Yale and later to be a professor there. I requested a week's leave, and he replied, "Take two."

At 46 Palmerston Road, Rathmines, the first sight of Mrs Yeats's study, which had been her husband's, was astonishing. There in the bookcases was his working library, often heavily annotated, and in cabinets and file cases were all his manuscripts, arranged with care by his widow. She was very good at turning up at once some early draft of a poem or play or prose work, or a letter Yeats had received or written. When complimented, she said she was just a hen picking up scraps. Among the scraps were all Yeats's letters to Lady Gregory, doné up in innumerable small bundles according to year, with ribbons to hold them together. I asked her about Yeats's first meeting with Joyce, and she showed me an unpublished preface to *Ideas of Good and Evil* (1903) in which Yeats described that singular occasion. I evinced a perhaps unexpected interest in

the magical order to which Yeats belonged, the Golden Dawn; she opened a chest and took out his implements and regalia and rituals. Agape at such profusion, I could only say that I would like to return after the War, and she replied, 'I hope you will.' So it came about that I spent the year 1946–7 in Dublin, working with these books and papers.

It was obviously impossible for me to knock every day at her door, but Mrs Yeats was equal to the problem of logistics. She produced an old suitcase and filled it with the manuscripts that I wanted to examine. At the beginning she was anxious about one of them, the unpublished first draft of Yeats's autobiography, and asked me to return it speedily. I felt that I must make a copy of it at once, but found Yeats's handwriting very difficult to decipher. There was nothing for it but to stay up all night, and towards dawn I discovered that during this vigil I had begun to sense his rhythm and to recognize his characteristic turns of phrase, so that I was able to allay her disquiet by returning the manuscript on time.

I can hardly express adequately my gratitude for Mrs Yeats's kindness, which extended not only to the loan of the manuscripts, but sometimes to their interpretation. For example, I once suggested to her that the 'Old Rocky Face' in Yeats's poem, 'The Gyres,' might be the moon, presiding there over the ages of human history. But she remembered that, at the time he composed the poem, her husband had been reading up on the Delphic oracle, and was excited by the image of the oracle speaking through a cleft in the rock. She felt sure that it was the oracle who was being described, and not the moon. No doubt she was right. Another day, I asked her with some embarrassment whether she thought that the outburst of blood, which in several poems Yeats associated with the end of each 28-phase lunar cycle, might not be based on the menstrual cycle. After all, Freud had for a time indulged his friend Fliess in the theory that the basic numbers of the universe were for the same reason 23 and 28. But on this matter Mrs Yeats was firm. 'W. B. knew very little about all that when we married,' she said, 'and in fact until well after that part of *A Vision* had been settled.' Some thirty years later, I can see that Yeats had in mind a blood-

letting like sexual violation rather than the habitual process I had proposed.

I came to know Mrs Yeats well during this year, and to apprehend that, with all her self-effacement, she had played a great role with aplomb. Once I quoted to her a remark in a letter from Yeats's father, written while she was ill with influenza and in danger of death in 1918. J. B. Yeats said that if she died, Willie would fall to pieces. 'I haven't read the letter,' she said, 'and anyway, it wasn't true.' All she would admit was that it was useful for Yeats to have someone so much younger than he with whom he could converse. But he himself wrote, with greater accuracy, 'For how could I forget / The wisdom that you brought, the comfort that you gave?' She provided him with a tranquil house, she understood his poems, and she liked him as a man. She could also offer help. For example, it was she who suggested that the medium in his play, *The Words upon the Window-Pane*, should count the money paid her for the séance—just the realistic scrap that he needed.

She talked to me with candour about 'the marriage,' as—to her amusement—I pedantically found myself calling it, perhaps in unconscious response to her own objectivity about it. She had met Yeats in 1911, when she was eighteen, having been born on 17 October 1892. If he noticed her then, it was simply as 'a girl / Perched in some window of her mother's house.' By that time she had already spurned her mother's wish for her to lead an upper middle-class life of balls and parties, on the grounds that she wished to become an artist. Her artistic career did not get far, but she used her freedom to look into subjects her mother considered unwomanly, such as philosophy and occultism, just as earlier she had read the 'forbidden' novels of George Moore. The interest in occultism was one she shared with Yeats; he encouraged her to join the Golden Dawn in 1914, and at her initiation acted as her Hiereus or sponsor. She quickly passed through the early stages and was initiated into the Inner Order, which he himself had reached only a little time before. Then, with the outbreak of war, she had to shift her interests, and became first a hospital cook—which she enjoyed, and then a nurse, which she liked less.

Yeats was well acquainted with her mother and their friends, but some years passed before he took a stronger interest in her. It was known that one of his reasons for attending seances so diligently at this time had to do with matrimonial plans: he would ask the mediums first the secrets of life after death, and then the likelihood of his marrying his old sweetheart Maud Gonne during his present life. Since Maud Gonne was already married, and had been converted to Catholicism, this question was academic until 1916. Then the Easter Rebellion brought about her widowhood: her husband John MacBride, from whom she had long been separated, was one of those executed. To Yeats MacBride had appeared to be 'a drunken vainglorious lout,' and when he heard that MacBride had refused a blindfold, saying, 'I've been staring down rifle butts all my life,' he remarked that MacBride might better have said that he had been staring down pintpots all his life. His antipathy to MacBride at first made him see the rebellion as all wrong, and he and Maud Gonne had—according to her daughter Iseult—a furious argument on the subject. Then he brought himself to recognize the importance of the blood sacrifice that had been made, and even MacBride's part in it. The poem he wrote, 'Easter 1916,' did not give up his reasons for opposing the rebellion, or his dislike of MacBride, but he now attributed the rebels' 'bewilderment' to 'excess of love,' a malady with which he could thoroughly sympathize, and one appropriate to Easter in any year.

Yeats seems to have felt honourbound to propose marriage to Maud Gonne, though he knew well enough the difficulties that might ensue. As Iseult (Gonne) Stuart remarked to me, 'My mother is not a woman of much discernment, but she had enough to know better than to marry Yeats, to whom she wasn't suited.' It was then that Yeats considered for a time the possibility of marriage to Iseult, whom he had known since childhood, and whose severe beauty he greatly admired. (In the characterology of *A Vision*, she is one of the denizens of the sixteenth phrase, where beautiful women foregather.) Iseult was quite different from her mother. At that period of her life she was bored by Maud Gonne's politics, though she came to share them; many years later she would

harbor a Nazi espionage agent at her house in Glendalough. As a young woman, her interests were literary and artistic. She and Yeats read some French writers such as Péguy together, and she took great interest in what he was composing. In 1916 he remarked to her, as she recalled to me, that he had been rereading Keats and Shelley, and now thought it strange that he had ever seen anything in them. The poem which he wrote to her, entitled 'To a Young Beauty', bids her attend not to these poets but to Landor and Donne. At the age of fifteen, she confided to her diary (as she told me) that she was in love with Yeats, and asked him to marry her, only to be rejected. Now he bethought himself, and said to her that he would take her away from her mother's atmosphere of extremist politics; though he was an old man, he would give her a life among agreeable people. 'You wouldn't say you loved me, would you?' she asked. Being uncertain, he would not. Iseult Stuart told me that she had thought to keep Yeats about as her mother had done, but he became very decisive. They met by arrangement at a Lyons Corner House in London, to discuss the matter. She tried to equivocate, but he said, 'Yes or no?' At this she could only say no. Years afterwards he said to her nostalgically, 'If only you and I had married,' and she caught him up with, 'Why, we wouldn't have stayed together a year.'

At this time Yeats began to think seriously about Georgie Hyde-Lees. She was more intelligent than Maud Gonne or Iseult, and more companionable, with a sense of humour that was lacking in them. If she had not the 'beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught', she was attractive, with bright, searching eyes and a high colour which gave her, as he described her to a friend, a barbaric beauty. She was interested in his subjects; she had the virtue of being in love with him. Yeats had felt for some years that he must marry. An incident in 1914, when a woman with whom he had been having an affair thought she was pregnant, had alarmed him, and though she proved to be mistaken, Lady Gregory advised that marriage would be a good idea. (Dorothy (Shakespear) Pound told Mrs Yeats that at one time Yeats and Lady Gregory had planned to marry, but Mrs Yeats never had the courage to ask him if this were true.) To Lady Gregory the best candidate was Iseult: she liked Iseult's

unworldliness, and thought she would be easier to control because of it. But Dorothy Pound's mother, Yeats's friend Olivia Shakespear, preferred Georgie Hyde-Lees, in part because she saw a wildness or strangeness in her. Yeats was open with Miss Hyde-Lees about his previous attachments; he described himself as a Sinbad who after many misadventures had at last found port. Their intimacy blossomed. In August 1917 she gave up her job as a nurse. When he confided to Lady Gregory that he and Georgie (whom he would soon rechristen George) were to be married, he asked if he should bring her to Coole for a visit. Lady Gregory replied, 'I'd rather you didn't come till you were married and nothing could be done about it.'

Under such unpropitious auspices Yeats and Miss Hyde-Lees were married on 17 October 1917. But during the first days following the ceremony, Mrs Yeats saw, as she told me, that her husband was 'blue'. They were staying at the Ashdown Forest Hotel. She knew his situation and understood that he felt he might have done the wrong thing in marrying her rather than Iseult, whose resistance might have weakened in time. Mrs Yeats wondered whether to leave him. Casting about for some means of distraction, she thought of attempting automatic writing. Yeats was familiar with this procedure although it was disapproved of by the Golden Dawn. Her idea was to take a sentence or two that would allay his anxieties over Iseult and herself, and after the session to own up to what she had done. Accordingly on 21 October, four days after their marriage, she encouraged a pencil to write a sentence which I remember as saying, approximately, 'What you have done is right for both the cat and the hare.' She was confident that he would decipher the cat as her watchful and timid self, and the hare as Iseult—a fleet runner. ('Two Songs of a Fool' offers a similar bestiary.) Yeats was at once captured, and relieved. His misgivings disappeared, and it did not occur to him that his wife might have divined his cause of anxiety without preternatural assistance.

Then a strange thing happened. Her own emotional involvement—her love for this extraordinary husband; and her fears for her marriage—must have made for unusual receptivity, as she told me

later, for she suddenly felt her hand grasped and driven irresistibly. The pencil began to write sentences she had never intended or thought, which seemed to come as from another world. As images and ideas took pencilled form, Yeats went beyond his initial relief about his marriage. Here were more potent revelations: he had married into Delphi. To Maud Gonne and her daughter he appeared to be buried in what they always referred to as 'the prosaic marriage'. But nothing could have been less prosaic than what he was experiencing. His excitement entered into a long epithalamion he now wrote, 'The Gift of Harun Al-Rashid'. In it he continued the Arabian imagery initiated by his image of Sinbad, this time casting himself as the court poet Kusta Ben Luka.

Sultan Harun Al-Rashid is exhilarated because with spring he has as usual taken a new bride, and he urges the ageing and celibate Kusta Ben Luka to marry too. Kusta is anything but eager. For him, he says, if not for the sultan, love is not a matter of seasons, and he despairs of finding a lasting love. The sultan—who represents Yeats's more worldly and promiscuous aspect—maintains that an unlasting love is the better, something transitory and animal, because it is man's mockery of the changeless soul. Knowing Kusta's opposite mind, however, he has found for the poet a woman who shares the 'thirst for those old crabbed mysteries,'

> And yet herself can seem youth's very fountain,
> Being all brimmed with life . . .

If that be true, says Kusta, 'I would have found the best that life can give.' He marries her and soon after the marriage she sits bolt upright in bed and speaks of mysteries, not so much in her own person as in the voice of a Djinn.

He is at once delighted yet anxious, as Yeats must have been, for fear that she should suppose he loves her only because of 'that midnight voice'—like the automatic script—and all it reveals. No, he insists,

> The voice has drawn
> A quality of wisdom from her love's
> Particular quality. The signs and shapes;
>
> . . .
>
> All, all those gyres and cubes and midnight things
> Are but a new expression of her body
> Drunk with the bitter sweetness of her youth.

The preternatural drew its power from the natural and affirmed that.

Along with intellectual excitement and emotional involvement there came to Yeats a great serenity of spirit, which lasted until the Irish Civil War broke out five years later. He liked being husband, and he liked being father; they soon had a girl and then a boy. The volume he published in 1919, *The Wild Swans at Coole*, contained a number of poems about his new life and thought, and in 1921 another volume, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, formed an elaborate tribute to his wife. The title poem and the one that followed it, 'Solomon and the Witch,' celebrated with urbanity their matrimonial conflation of wisdom and love. Several of the poems following these dealt in one way or another with gleanings from the automatic script. The birth of Anne Yeats was heralded in 'A Poem for My Daughter'. The final poem, 'To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee', proudly associated husband and wife,

> I, the poet William Yeats,
> With old mill boards and sea-green slates,
> And smithy work from the Gort forge,
> Restored this tower for my wife George . . .

Changing her name had been rewarded with this magnificent line.

In the meantime he had an opportunity to demonstrate his freedom from his old life. Maud Gonne had rented her house at 73 Stephen's Green in Dublin to him in 1918. She herself had been forbidden by the British authorities to enter Ireland. But she smuggled herself in, disguised as a beggar woman, and presented herself at Yeats's door asking to be taken in. At this point George

Yeats was extremely ill with influenza. Yeats knew that Maud Gonne's presence in the house was bound to create turmoil, and he refused to admit her. She refused to leave, it being her own house, even when the doctor advised her that her presence might endanger his patient. Yeats became quite fierce until Maud Gonne gave in and decamped. He knew where his true loyalty lay.

He worked passionately to embody in systematic form, for which *A Vision* offered an appropriate title, the fragmentary revelations in the automatic script. He was in hot pursuit of a much more complete symbology than he had achieved in his earlier efforts to compound the poetic and mystical traditions. He asked his wife about the books she had read before their marriage—William James, Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, Croce—and read them himself to see if the automatic writing unconsciously reflected them. Happily it was independent of them:

> Truths without father came, truths that no book
> Of all the uncounted books that I have read,
> Nor thought out of her mind or mine begot,
> Self-born, high-born, and solitary truths,
> Those terrible implacable straight lines
> Drawn through the wandering vegetative dream . . .

The vocabulary of the script included unusual words for grand discourse, such as 'funnel' and 'spiral' (which he altered to gyre) and names of household pets (the Yeatses had a great many) that the communicating voices took over for themselves. He insisted that his wife keep up the automatic writing for two or three hours a day, usually from three to six in the afternoon. It was a great strain for her. She feared as well that it might become simply a new obsession for him, like the obsession with 'spooks' that he had had before his marriage. That one had alienated old friends from coming to his Monday evenings at Woburn Buildings. A reluctant Sybil, she therefore broke off the communication several times, and insisted that he return to writing verse. Yet the verse began to register its effect, too. Not only were there explicitly symbological poems like

'The Phases of the Moon,' but he would scarcely have conceived of 'The Second Coming' as the extinction of rationality, she felt, if it had not been for the automatic script. His daily behaviour was also affected: to place people in their appropriate phases of the moon, as the script required, entailed listening to what they said and watching the way they behaved, and for the purpose he took a much greater interest in the outside world. This interest proved surprisingly congenial to him.

For a time he accepted without qualification the messages that came through the automatic writing. The fact that his wife could answer during sleep by word of mouth, without the need of writing, made him try that method of communication as well, though much less frequently than the other. Some matters did not seem capable of resolution by either method. For example, as Mrs Yeats informed me, he was never sure how much control the daimon had of the self; and while he sometimes thought of the antiself as a spirit, at other times he did not.

That all this revelation must some day come to an end in a book was Yeats's idea from the start. The method of presentation worried him. Mrs Yeats wished him to present the material directly, without introduction, but Yeats's mind was too modulated and subtle for that. After all, he had spent most of his writing life couching in gracious terms conceptions that would otherwise have made his audience recoil. He therefore began within weeks of the start of the automatic script to concoct a transmission myth. This was the elaborate fable in which Giraldus Cambrensis, the historian of England, joined forces with Kusta Ben Luka. (Two characters from the early stories, Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, were also incorporated.) To Giraldus he attributed—much to the amusement of better Latinists—the *Speculum Angelorum et Hominorum* (for *Hominum*), to Kusta the dance which choreographed the principal symbols of the automatic script. He got his friend Edmund Dulac to carve a woodcut portrait of Giraldus, obviously modelled on Yeats's face, and since this was completed by January 1918, the primary fable must have been constituted in the first two months of his marriage.

The first edition of *A Vision* did not appear until early 1926. Soon after, Yeats realized that much of it was too close to the original automatic writing, and that further elucidation was necessary. He decided to do a second edition of the book, and this time to tell about the automatic writing. Mrs Yeats was absolutely opposed to this, and they had then, as she told me, the first and only serious quarrel of their marriage. Yeats prevailed, but included his mythical variations as well as his realistic account. The second edition of 1937 made room for many second thoughts and also for many doubts. When Allan Wade asked him if he believed in *A Vision*, he said evasively—though accurately, 'Oh, I draw from it images for my poetry.' The book hovered between philosophy and fiction, bread and cake.

Yeats heard that Ezra Pound had commented, after the first edition of *A Vision* was published, that no one should be allowed to read the book before he was forty. The implication was that it would go well with senescence. As Yeats knew, the book contained exactly the sort of abstract schematizing that Pound disliked. In riposte he decided to dedicate the book to his friend, and wrote 'A Packet for Ezra Pound' for the purpose. Willynilly, Pound would be obliged to have his part in the book, for *A Vision* comprehended all possible opponents of itself within its scheme. Once Yeats had revised the book, he was free to do other work, though a surviving document called 'Seven Propositions' indicates that during his last decade he pushed his speculations about final matters even further. He also did a good deal of reading in philosophy with the hope of confirming and enlarging his theories. Sometimes he joked about mysticism, but as his wife pointed out, one can do that and still be serious about it. My own attitude toward automatic writing, and indeed toward spiritualist phenomena in general, seemed too sceptical to Mrs Yeats. 'Do you not believe in ghosts at all?' she asked me. 'Only in those inside me,' I replied. 'That's the trouble with you,' she said with unexpected severity.

I still know very little about ghosts. But I can see that the metaphysical urge in Yeats was inseparable from his greatness as a poet. Were it removed, there would be few poems left. He regarded