

WEBSTER YEATS: *A Psychoanalytic Study*

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YEATS

A Psychoanalytic Study

BRENDA S. WEBSTER



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In memory of my father
Wolfgang Simon Schwabacher

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Passages from the unpublished letters of W. B. Yeats to Mabel Dickinson are quoted with the permission of the Yeats estate and the director of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Material from the variorum editions of Yeats's works is quoted with the permission of the Yeats estate. Selections from the following published works are quoted with the permission of the Macmillan Publishing Company (New York): *Autobiography*, *A Vision*, *Collected Plays*, *Collected Poems*, *Letters of W. B. Yeats* (ed. Alan Wade), *Mythologies*.

B.S.W.

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Introduction

MY MAJOR AIM in this book is to follow as closely as possible the track of the creative process in Yeats's work, beginning with the germs embedded in fantasy and daydreams. How does Yeats first embody fantasies and daydreams in his poems and plays? How do they change and develop? How, finally, is Yeats's view of himself and his body related to his progress from the dreamy, highly stylized, and emotionally monotonic early work to the hard, concise richness and complexity of his late poems? While concentrating on the inner dynamics of his works and showing how details, symbols, and character fit various emotional patterns, I shall try to correlate such patterns with suggestive facts from Yeats's life.

Yeats's earliest work, with its themes of death and escape and its main symbol the garden island, reflects his characteristic early response to psychic conflict—a tendency to flee into dreams or illness, an almost paralytic passivity, and a sense of identification with his mother's weakness. Other early preoccupations—feelings of anger and deprivation—emerge in a series of plays with hunger as a central theme.

The 1890's represent a period of transition. Yeats's symbol-laden disembodied style reaches its apex in the obscure and dreamy mysticism of *The Shadowy Waters* and the *Rosa Alchemica* stories. The *Rosa Alchemica* stories, however, contain signs that Yeats is dissatisfied both with his style and with his self-representations. They give him a bad feeling about himself and increase his sense of dissolution and despair. In August 1896 Yeats met Lady Augusta Gregory, and in the early 1900's under her beneficent influence he began to reverse some of his negative feelings about

himself. With her support, he developed a new ideal of the poet-bard who created from joy and immersion in reality. He now saw the body as a source of sexual and creative energy, and his feelings about it stimulated a new aesthetic of organic form. At the same time, he began to clarify and harden his style.

In the first decade of the twentieth century Yeats ceased to obscure conflict with an embroidered style. As he wrote in his poem "A Coat," "There's more enterprise / In walking naked." He was able to admit more of reality into his work. This new self-confidence was made possible by his changing attitude toward himself and by his belief that he was protected by a benevolent force, conceptualized as *Anima Mundi*. Imagined contact with *Anima Mundi* made him feel loved, and also less responsible for the threatening material he now included in his work.

Equally significant was his recasting of impulsive material in a hard, beautiful, and acceptable form, as image or mask. One of the most striking of Yeats's new hard images was the virile unicorn. Identification with the unicorn permits Yeats to express violent aggression; at the same time, its qualities of coldness and hardness protect Yeats from feeling overwhelmed by his impulses. This unicorn, derived from unconscious fantasy, appears in several plays as an agent of destruction. In *Where There Is Nothing*, Yeats portrays a precursor of this beast engaged in Nietzschean violence. Destructive violence continues in *The Unicorn from the Stars*, and in *The Player Queen* destruction is joined to sexuality: the Unicorn is to mate with a Queen and initiate a New Dispensation. The theme of the mating of beast and queen undergoes many permutations, culminating in *Purgatory*, where a son watches the ghosts of his bestial father and aristocratic mother mate on their wedding night. Yeats's imagined participation in the unicorn's sexuality appears to be an attempt at active mastery of trauma. For reasons to be detailed later, both the content and the tone surrounding the unicorn and related figures—their bisexuality and awesomeness—suggest fantasies or impressions of parental intercourse derived from early childhood.

Yeats's middle years are characterized by an absorption in mask

and persona. He had noted earlier that when he created he entered a state in which his eyes did not "flinch before the bayonet."¹ With his theory of the mask he made an aesthetic of his introspective musings about the psychic origins of creativity in the transcendence of weakness and passivity. Cuchulain and other Yeatsian heroes embody his ideal state of "creative joy without fear," and through them he is able to release new emotions—while defining his own brand of stoicism. Mask-wearing is expressed by active striving, and through his heroes and beasts Yeats steadily increased his capacity to replay emotional traumas with himself in control, to turn passive suffering into active mastery. Later, in *A Vision*, Yeats schematized his feelings about his evolution from limp and dreamy aesthete to mask-wearing, powerful poet.

In old age, I will argue, Yeats's earlier fears of castration and loss of integrity were reawakened by declining potency and approaching death. The heroic mask no longer sufficed, and Yeats increasingly turned to other means of dealing with his fears. The most important of these means, the use of a talismanic object, can be observed in his great poems "Sailing to Byzantium," "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," and "Byzantium." Talismanic objects had played a role in Yeats's work as early as *Oisín*; in these late poems he uses them in a more inclusive way to hold intact his body image. With the help of these objects he can entertain fantasies of fusion and loss of self and come to terms with concomitant feelings of anger and hostility. Throughout these poems, Yeats attempts to make death less fearful by regarding it and the afterlife it leads to as an extension of artistic creation. In the artifice of eternity, the dead self is recreated in a more beautiful and permanent form, as Yeats's golden bird.

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), "Anima Hominis," p. 325. Hereafter cited as *Mythologies*.

ONE

Islands

FEW POETS have been so acutely aware of dreams and their importance to art as William Butler Yeats. Late in life, Yeats theorized about the nature of dreams and their importance to creativity as a gateway to images stored deep in the self. But it is in his earliest work that we see most clearly how images from his unconscious or buried self, after passing through the medium of daydream, are transformed into poetry and fiction. The early work has certain dreamlike qualities—as if the psychological substance of daydreams were translated with little change into poem or story. Much of this work can, in fact, be described as an extended daydream, which lessened the weight of “youth’s dreamy load” that “none can have and thrive.”

In this chapter we will examine a number of related images and emotions that appear both in Yeats’s daydreams and in his earliest works (through 1891). The principal theme of the daydreams seems to be escape from reality at any cost, whether by retreat to an island or by death. The island retreat, however, proves to be a place not only of peace and joy but also of danger and temptation. Other images to be discussed here—the garden, the waterfall—similarly express conflict severe enough to paralyze a man, while at the same time representing elements of an imagined paradise that is a source of creative energy.

The characters associated with these ambivalent images, particularly the women, seem at first to be categorizable as either good or evil: the goddess Niamh and Dhoya’s spirit mistress, or the paralyzing Enchantress and the bearded witch. But on closer inspection the personae moving through these ambiguous symbolic land-

scapes prove equally ambiguous: Niamh is in some respects a demon, and the bearded witch an aspect of the poet's image of perfect love.

Yeats represented himself in this symbolic world, with fair consistency, as a dreaming, passive hero who is either paralyzed or in some other way unable to function as a man. As we shall see, this passivity was a response to Oedipal conflict, which was a source, too, of the creative energy on which Yeats drew. This point will emerge most clearly in the discussion of *Oisín*, but all the works discussed in this chapter—and in particular their symbolic settings and the relationships between the characters in them—throw light on the forces driving the poet to seek refuge and on the significance of the refuges he created for himself.

In the section of the *Autobiography* titled "Reveries over Childhood and Youth," Yeats relates several daydreams of his childhood. The first, a very early one, seems to have been stimulated by a rumor of a Fenian rising:

When I had begun to dream of my future life, I thought I would like to die fighting the Fenians. I was to build a very fast and beautiful ship and to have under my command a company of young men . . . brave and handsome . . . and there was to be a big battle on the sea-shore . . . and I was to be killed.¹

What is striking about this daydream is its intense combination of grandeur and masochism, a combination that reflects Yeats's early attitudes toward death.

In his first reported memory Yeats recalls going to bed in terror when a servant tells him that someone "is going to blow the town up." His second memory is of Sligo days, when, he says, he was "very unhappy." After praying for death for several nights, "I began to be afraid that I was dying and prayed that I might live" (*Autobiography*, p. 3). Neither of these memories speaks of death as beautiful or glamorous, the qualities stressed in the daydream. On the contrary, they reveal great anxiety about being killed or blown up or about dying, a fear resulting from a feeling of guilt,

¹ *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 9; hereafter cited in the text as *Autobiography*.

from the thought he had sinned and deserved punishment. In the reminiscence of Sligo days Yeats goes on to say that he was miserable, out of both loneliness and fear of his grandfather, a stern and famous sea captain. "I think I confused my grandfather with God, for I remember in one of my attacks of melancholy praying that he might punish me for my sins" (*Autobiography*, p. 5). This grandfather-God is replaced by a voice in his head that is "sudden and startling" (*Autobiography*, p. 7) and often reproves him. Yeats calls it his conscience; in his writings of this period it alternates with external images in chastising him for sin, the exact nature of which will become clear later in this chapter.

The dream of death on the seashore is a fantasy of atonement, in which the hero voluntarily accepts punishment for guilty wishes. By depicting himself as a hero dying for a noble cause, he made the underlying self-destructiveness more acceptable. Yeats seems to be combining here two of his most characteristic methods of dealing with anxiety. Throughout his life, whenever he greatly feared something, he either denied his fear by a show of gaiety or heroic nonchalance, or presented the feared event as something wished for. Thus his earliest remembered fantasy, "I thought I would like to die," shows the same method of dealing with fears of death and punishment as his great late poem "Sailing to Byzantium," where the hero prays for death with more eloquence but for similar reasons.

The unhappiness to which death seemed at times the only alternative is illustrated by a memory that contrasts strongly with the daydream of the fast and beautiful ship: "I am sitting on the ground looking at a mastless toy boat with the paint rubbed and scratched, and I say to myself in great melancholy, 'it is further away than it used to be,' and while I am saying it I am looking at the long scratch in the stern" (*Autobiography*, p. 3). The explicit sexual connotations of the image—with the female nature of the ship underscored by the scratched stern and missing mast—as well as the intense emotions associated with it, suggest that we are dealing here with a screen memory, in which the receding ship represents a longed-for woman. When Yeats was a child, he spent much time

with his stern, eccentric relatives at Merville, in County Sligo, and even when he was with his parents, he felt that his mother was emotionally unavailable to him. Mrs. Yeats was continually in low spirits because of her husband's poverty and her own ill health.² She shared the "strain of depressive melancholia" so marked in the Pollexfen family, and, according to her husband, was "not at all good at housekeeping or child-minding."³ It seems likely, then, that the longed-for person represented by the scratched and mastless boat was Yeats's despondent mother.

One obvious way in which Yeats could try to solve the problem of feeling abandoned by his mother was to identify with her (a solution that was to cause many problems in his later relationships with women), even at the cost of seeing himself as broken and worthless. This interpretation will be borne out by our analysis of the plays, when we see how closely at times Yeats identified with female weakness. If the toy ship represents his feelings about himself as broken or worthless, the fast and beautiful ship is his effort to construct a new self-image.

In its purest state, the daydream of death does not appear in the earliest work. By extending the fantasy to dreams of ships and faraway places, Yeats shifts the focus from death to escape, bravery, adventure. The thought of death has not left him ("I often said to myself how terrible it would be to go away and die where nobody would know my story" [*Autobiography*, p. 11]), but it is connected now with the desire to be remembered, the desire to achieve something memorable in real life, not just in fantasy.

Yeats began to develop alternatives to death-wish fantasies as means of dealing with his terrors of death and his loneliness: he dreamed of himself as a magician, capable of bringing the crea-

² W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 47; hereafter cited as *Memoirs*.

³ William M. Murphy, *The Yeats Family and the Pollexfens of Sligo* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1971), pp. 34-35, 53 (Yeats's sister Lily supported this charge of her father's). John Butler Yeats wrote his brother Isaac, "Susan could not have boiled an egg. I never left home without wondering what would happen in my absence" (p. 48). According to Murphy (p. 49), Susan's incompetence and her hostility toward her husband's career strained the marriage to the breaking point. This work is hereafter cited as Murphy, *Yeats Family*.

tures of his imagination to life, and he dreamed of escaping to an island paradise from which all fear and sorrow would be banished.

The magician dream, which was to compete for many years with the dream of death on the seashore, took shape in adolescence, when the physical signs of maturity began to correspond to long-established desires, and Yeats became, as Richard Ellmann has pointed out, more deeply involved in daydreams.⁴ Scientific interests served as a pretext for evening trips to a cave above the sea, where he played "at being a sage, a magician or a poet." His earlier idol, Hamlet, is joined by Manfred on his glacier, Prince Athanase with his lamp, and particularly Shelley's melancholy Alastor, who disappears, drifting slowly away on a river between great trees. Yeats notes that his father's influence was at its height during this period, and he reacted in part by daydreaming of isolated and melancholy heroes (*Autobiography*, p. 39). In addition, the works he admires contain many hints of forbidden or incestuous passion and hostility toward a father or father-figure. Hamlet murders his uncle, Manfred has probably committed incest, and Alastor is suffering from extreme melancholia; the women chosen to accompany these heroes are "lawless women without homes and without children." (The fact that these women have no children means that they can devote their love completely to the young heroes, and suggests that in Yeats's fantasy they represent their opposites, i.e. ideal mothers.)

Yeats's uncle, unlike his father, was melancholy and devoted to magic, and under his approving eye Yeats "nursed" a new ambition: to live on a little island called Innisfree, opposite a wood. This ambition is not wholly new. Instead of death, it presents both an alternative form of escape and Yeats's first attempt to work his fears and guilt feelings into a traditional framework. The island, he explains, is a refuge from sexual temptation: "I thought that having conquered bodily desire and the inclination of my mind towards women and love, I should live, as Thoreau lived, seeking wisdom" (*Autobiography*, pp. 43-44). Innisfree was par-

⁴ Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York: Dutton, 1958), p. 28; hereafter cited as Ellmann, *Man and Masks*.

ticularly appealing, he tells us, because of its connection with an Eden myth—"a story in the county history." On the island there had once been a tree, guarded by a monster, that bore the fruit of the gods. A young girl asked her lover to get some of the fruit for her. He complied with her wish, but tasted the fruit and died of its "powerful virtue" after reaching the shore, whereupon "from sorrow and from remorse she too ate of it and died" (*Autobiography*, p. 44). Thus the island provides an escape from "bodily desire" and guilt, but at the same time harbors something forbidden, the desirable but dangerous god food. Yeats says he was twenty-two or -three before he gave up this dream, which appears in a variety of forms in his early poetry and prose.

The daydream of escape to an island paradise first takes literary form in *The Island of Statues*, a verse play written in August 1884 and described by Yeats as "An Arcadian Faery Tale." The island here is paradoxically a place of intense joy and acute danger, and the play's "savage and decadent theme," as Harold Bloom points out in his recent work on Yeats and poetic influence, "is curiously Yeats's own."⁵

As the play opens, two shepherds are having a singing contest for the love of the shepherdess Naschina. Their rival and the play's hero is Almintor, a hunter whose outstanding characteristic is ineffectuality. His arrows, representing his desire, twice miss the mark. When we first see him he has just missed a heron (which symbolizes beauty), and at the end of Act I he misses the flower of wisdom. When Almintor speaks of his love, Yeats defines it as being like the love of Paris for Oenone "long ere an arrow whizzed or sword left sheath,"⁶ i.e., long before the siege of Troy precipitated by Paris's abduction of Helen; the contrast is between innocent love (Arcady is the world before the Fall) and sexual passion.

Naschina is as bored with Almintor's innocent love as Paris was

⁵ Bloom thus at one stroke dismisses, correctly I think, two outworn critical notions about *The Island of Statues*—that it is innocent (a "picture play with Spenserian shepherds," as Ellmann calls it in *Man and Masks* [p. 37]), and that it is derivative. *Yeats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 53.

⁶ Russell K. Alspach, ed., *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 1229; hereafter cited as *Variorum Plays*. All citations of the plays, unless otherwise noted, are from this volume.

with Oenone's. She wants action even if the consequences are tragic. Her desire for the combative masculinity of a dragon-killing knight, rather than the "song" and "toys" of innocent children, shatters Arcady and sends Almintor on a quest not for a dragon but for a forbidden "goblin flower." The flower grows on an island isolated by the sea and guarded by an Enchantress. The Enchantress turns the unlucky seekers of the flower into "moon-white stone." Almintor is called to the island by a maiden's voice; her song links the flower to Eden's forbidden fruit:

Voice. When the tree was o'er-appled
For Mother Eve's winning,
I was at her sinning.

. . .

And I sang round the tree
As I sing now to thee:

. . .

From the green shaded hollow
Arise, worm, and follow!

(pp. 1233-34)

Yeats's hero Almintor is committing the original sin, goaded on by a woman. The epithet "worm" suggests both sexuality and weakness.⁷ Yeats identifies Almintor with the childlike innocence of unfallen nature, but also, I think, with a kind of passive femininity. Yeats's discussion of Blake's worm symbolism is enlightening in this respect. After listing the worm's symbolic possibilities, he concludes that "viewed as a worm, male is female."⁸ Certainly Almintor as worm is far from the dragon-killing knight Naschina yearns for. Even when he shoots his arrow at the goblin flower, he relies for success not on his own powers but on the will of the gods. He misses and is turned to stone.

⁷ In his old age, Yeats gave "worm" an explicitly sexual meaning in "The Chambermaid's Second Song," where the phallus with its "butting head" is "limp as a worm" after the sexual act. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, eds., *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 575; hereafter cited as *Variorum Poems*. All citations of Yeats's poetry refer to this edition unless otherwise noted.

⁸ Edwin J. Ellis and W. B. Yeats, eds., *The Works of William Blake* (London: Quaritch, 1893), vol. 1, p. 4. Yeat's interpretation of Blake's worm symbolism occupies pp. 413-20.