

YEATS

at work

The woods are in their autumn colours

But the lake waters are low

~~And all~~ The paths ~~dry~~ hard under the footfall

The pathways hard under the footfall

~~And I when~~ In the pale twilight I [go]

× In the half dark I ~~will~~ go

× Indolently among the shadow of the grey stones

× And number the swans

× Indolently among the stones and number the swans

Among the shadow of grey stones, and number the swans

Floating among the stones.

CURTIS B. BRADFORD

YEATS *at work*

A B R I D G E D

CURTIS B. BRADFORD



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YEATS
at work

IN MEMORY OF
Professor H. O. White
1885-1963

PREFACE

WRITING WAS ALWAYS DIFFICULT for Yeats. When he began in the 1880's he was prolix. The manuscripts of such unpublished apprentice works as have survived show little revision, but these plays, stories, and verses are loose, thin-spun, tedious. Yeats began to publish in 1886, but only a few of the works published before 1895 seem to have satisfied him; these early published works were either abandoned or carefully rewritten before they were included in the various collected editions. By 1895 Yeats had developed more effective habits of work; he now began to put both prose and verse through many drafts, to stick with poem, play, story, or essay until much hammering had worked it into shape.

Yeats's apprenticeship as a poet ended, as Thomas Parkinson has shown in *W. B. Yeats: Self-Critic*, when he revised his early verse for *Poems*, 1895. The legends and lyrics printed with *The Countess Kathleen* (1892) are clearly the work of a man who is forming a style whereas the poems collected in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) display one of Yeats's styles fully formed. Yeats himself must have felt that this was so, for he continued to revise his early poems through many successive editions; the text of *The Wind Among the Reeds* remained, to the contrary, remarkably stable. During these same years Yeats completed his apprenticeship as a prose writer. For me, the stories included in *The Celtic Twilight* (1893) show an apprentice hand whereas parts of *The Secret Rose* (1897) do not. "Rosa Alchemica" is a finished work and, again, Yeats must have felt that this was so, for during the course of many reprintings he made very few changes in its text.

The road to a master's certificate as a playwright was both longer and harder: Yeats's whole practice of playwriting shows him intent on developing antirealistic dramatic modes. He achieved the first of these in his early heroic plays based on traditional Irish themes, but it took him more than twenty years to do it (he began planning *The Countess Cathleen* in 1889 and he finished the rewriting of *The Hour-Glass* in 1913; by that time all his early plays except *The King's Threshold* had reached pretty much the form in which we know them). He invented

a second mode, the heroic farce, while at work on *The Green Helmet*, and in the version of that play published in 1910 we reach the moment of relative textual stability which Yeats had reached in his poetry with *The Wind Among the Reeds*. He went on to invent a third mode, the most successful of all, when he completed and produced in 1916 *At the Hawk's Well*, his first play for dancers.

Even though Yeats achieved mastery of the technical means of his art rather early in his career, he at no time found the act of writing easy. It was for him always an "unnatural labour." Yeats worked as hard at his writing in the 1920's and 30's as he had in the 1890's. Up to about 1920 his method of composing was physically tedious. He wrote always in longhand, very slowly, revising as he went along. Before his marriage he wrote usually in bound manuscript books, often cheap copy books intended for school exercises. He never at any time in his life produced a prose manuscript that could be transcribed by a secretary so Yeats's customary practice was to dictate from his manuscripts. Only two of all the prose manuscripts I have examined have been transcribed ("The Speckled Bird," and parts of "The Tragic Generation" and "The Stirring of the Bones"), and both transcriptions are extremely inaccurate. Verse manuscripts were, I believe, usually transcribed because of the difficulty of indicating line ends during dictation. When the manuscript on which he was working became nearly illegible because of overwriting and cueing in from the margins and the opposite page, Yeats would either copy it out, dictate it to a secretary, or have it transcribed. He always introduced further changes while rewriting or dictating. If Yeats had dictated or had a work transcribed, he would go to work on the manuscript or typescript his secretary had produced, carrying on in his own hand the process of revision. There was much work to be done on such a draft. Since Yeats was thrown off completely if interrupted while dictating, his secretaries had to write what they thought they heard; when transcribing they sometimes misread his writing. There are still many places where Yeats's printed texts inaccurately represent his original intention because his various secretaries misheard what he said or misread his hand, and Yeats happened to miss the mistake while correcting.

After his marriage Yeats worked out with Mrs. Yeats's help a method of composition that was less demanding physically. Now he usually wrote in looseleaf notebooks, except when he was away from his Dublin study, at Coole, for instance, or in Italy. When away from

home he continued his earlier practice of writing in bound manuscript books. Looseleaf notebooks had one great advantage. Throughout his life Yeats continually rearranged the order of his material while composing, especially when he was writing prose. When he wrote in a bound manuscript book, he had to indicate by notes the order he wanted, or tear out or cut out the pages (Yeats did this even with books, including his own books) he wished to put earlier or later. Loose leaves were more easily rearranged. Often a looseleaf manuscript page will have at the top a series of page numbers indicating the various places it has occupied in a work.

When Yeats had achieved something of the order and style he wanted, he would, as he had earlier, dictate the work to a secretary or have it transcribed — he greatly preferred to work with Mrs. Yeats. He had by now developed a truly remarkable ability to improve both his prose and verse while working on these typed versions. Sometimes successive typescripts were needed, each dictated as the preceding script grew illegible: this happened with *A Vision* and *On the Boiler* (1939). But often in the 1920's and 30's Yeats finished his writing on the first typescript.

We have seen that Yeats nearly always wrote in a book either bound or looseleaf; apparently he liked the two-page spread each opening provided. He usually started on the right-hand page; when this became too overwritten, he would move over to the left-hand page and continue his revision there, cueing the passage into its proper place on the right-hand page by drawing arrows. Another aspect of Yeats's practice is worth noting, since it is often a source of confusion. When Yeats wrote in a bound manuscript book, he rarely used the sheets in order. He would move from place to place in the book, or both forward and back from the page on which he had begun to write. This means that the order of drafts, particularly drafts of poems, often cannot be determined by the order in which they occur in the book. When, finally, Yeats felt reasonably satisfied with a work, he would usually initial it, or even sign it in full, "W. B. Yeats," and often add the date. When a manuscript written in a looseleaf notebook had once been dictated or transcribed, Yeats would remove the sheets and put them into a file envelope. He would sometimes note the principal contents on the flap of the envelope, and the date of filing.

Yeats's manuscripts and typescripts are extremely interesting to any student of the writing process, for it is nearly always possible to

reconstruct from them at least the external aspects of how a poem, play, or essay was put together. One can also watch lines of poems and single sentences of prose emerge from the inchoate as Yeats achieves with immense labor the expression he wants. For Yeats the construction process usually meant adding on; his works accumulated slowly, as a coral reef accumulates. The "First Draft," for instance, of the *Autobiographies* is a manuscript of about 42,000 words. The material in "First Draft" parallels "The Trembling of the Veil" (1922) and parts of "Dramatis Personae" (1938); these run to nearly 100,000 words. In poem or play as well as prose work, such a result is typical. The things added were usually detail, incident. Though some early drafts are too encumbered with detail, most of them show, as Yeats often complained, that his writing at the outset of a work tended to be abstract. In a lyric the rich fabric of metaphor and symbol as well as Yeats's characteristic staging of a poem builds up slowly through many drafts. This was notably true of "Sailing to Byzantium." In his play *The Resurrection*, what was little more than a dialogue on the nature of God slowly becomes a play with dramatic tension and climax. In "The Trembling of the Veil" Yeats slowly envelops certain personal reminiscences with the rich fabric of his System.

Yeats's characteristic styles were also achieved with difficulty; this is equally true of the hushed, autumnal tone of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, the splendid baroque diction of the great poems of the 1920's, and of the crackling, slashing sentences of the late prose works. In plays the adjustment of word and phrase to the actor's speaking voice was given minute attention, and plays were seldom printed until after production. After a certain point in the composition of nearly all his works, Yeats's revisions are largely concerned with improving the style.

There were exceptions to these usual procedures: During the many years he spent working on *The Player Queen*, Yeats accumulated a great deal of material he had to discard, including many pages of verse and much hard-worked-for incident. Yeats wrote many conclusions to *A Vision* in which he projected his System into the future before he finally decided to avoid the prophet's role and print none of them. In style, too, a particularly happy phrase would sometimes occur early and persist through many drafts while the context of the phrase changed out of all recognition.

A TYPICAL YEATS MANUSCRIPT seems on first examination to resemble the daw's nest Yeats described in "The Tower"; it appears to be a jumble, a mere heap of confusion. If the work was of any length, it would have been put together slowly. This means that the paper is often of various sizes, the inks of various colors. Revisions in pencil were always done with soft pencil in a very light stroke, so they are now nearly indecipherable. Yeats's hand, in spite of the fact that it was remarkably uniform, is very difficult to read. The writing, especially when intended for Yeats's eye alone, is in very rough state. The spelling is atrocious.

My editing of the manuscripts of poems is conservative, though I have not attempted to produce a diplomatic text. Jon Stallworthy did attempt this when he printed manuscripts of Yeats's poems in *Between the Lines*, and David Hayman has carried the effort even further in *A First-Draft Version of Finnegans Wake*. I have not tried to produce a diplomatic text of Yeats's manuscripts because I do not think it can be done, and because such a text makes a reader's already hard task even harder. Nothing that typography can do will actually reproduce the peculiarities and difficulties of Yeats's manuscripts; even photographic reproduction does not always do this very well because of the varieties of inks used and the frequent intermixture of ink and pencil.

In my editing I have expanded abbreviations and silently corrected obvious misspellings, but I have not added any punctuation. I have used the following devices in reproducing manuscripts of poems. An X before a line means that Yeats has cancelled it; revisions within a line are printed in cancelled type, as in this example:

~~Why dost thou breed~~ Linger no more where the fire burns bright

The original reading is followed immediately by the revised reading. This practice is followed even when Yeats eventually abandoned the whole line, cancellations and all. When alternate readings occur and Yeats has allowed both of them to stand, they are printed in this way, separating these readings with a slant sign:

For hands wave to them / are waving and eyes are a gleam.

YEATS AT WORK

Actually Yeats's revisions were written above and below as well as at the side of the words he first wrote. When lines of poetry are printed without normal spacing between them, this indicates that Yeats has tried various versions of a single line but has cancelled none of them. Whenever a line of verse reaches the form in which it was first printed, I place before it the number assigned to it in the *Variorum Edition*. Whenever I have been unable to decipher a word or group of words, I have indicated my failure and the length of the undeciphered passage. I have nowhere used the word "sic," and have tried to reduce to a minimum editorial queries indicating doubt of the accuracy of my reading. I have many doubts, but in the interests of a clean page use a query only when I cannot reduce Yeats's hieroglyph to any word which fits the context.

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My work on this book was done at the libraries of Harvard University (particularly Houghton and Widener), at the library of Trinity College, Dublin, at the National Library of Ireland, and at Burling Library, Grinnell College. I wish to acknowledge the unfailing kindness of the staff members of all these libraries, especially of the staff of the Houghton Library Reading Room, which is presided over by Shannon's portrait of Yeats.

My greatest debt is to Mrs. W. B. Yeats, who first in 1954-55 and again in the summer of 1960 made Yeats's manuscripts available to me, and who has placed no restrictions on my quotations from them. Next this is my debt to Sheldon P. Zitner, who encouraged my enterprise from the start, who has read the whole work twice and parts of it more often, and whose advice has been invaluable. The late Professor H. O. White of Trinity College, Dublin — "HO" to his innumerable friends — to whose memory I have dedicated this book, introduced me to Mrs. Yeats and never failed to be interested in and helpful to my work. Dublin cannot be the same without him. A Ford

Preface

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Faculty Fellowship made possible my year in Dublin in 1954-55; a grant from the Lilly Endowment enabled me to return to Dublin in the summer of 1960.

C. B. B.

Grinnell, Iowa
June 1964

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YEATS *at work*

AN INTRODUCTION

AMONG THE YEATS PAPERS IN DUBLIN are working or draft versions of a great many poems. The manuscripts of Yeats's earlier poems, up to the poems printed in *The Green Helmet* (1910), are usually late versions written into bound manuscript books. Few of the rough papers which preceded these versions seem to have survived. The situation is sometimes different with the poems Yeats wrote after 1908. From then on his rough papers were sometimes kept and filed, or he sometimes did all his work on a poem in a bound manuscript book. With many late poems it is possible to study the entire external process of composition, beginning with their prose sketches and continuing through successive drafts until Yeats corrects the final typescript. Chance more than any other factor seems to have governed what was kept and what thrown away.

From this material I have reproduced and analysed draft versions of the following poems: "The Hosting of the Sidhe" and "The Host of the Air," 1893; "The Lover asks Forgiveness because of his Many Moods," 1895; "Words," 1909; "The Wild Swans at Coole," 1916; "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"; section III of "The Tower," 1925; "Lullaby," 1929; "The Mother of God," 1931; section VIII of "Vacillation," 1932; "Ribh considers Christian Love insufficient," 1934; "The Gyres," 1937; "The Circus Animals' Desertion,"

1937-38. This selection illustrates the normal process Yeats went through in composing poems. I have avoided on the one hand poems which Yeats largely composed in his head and then wrote down, such as "The Wheel," or poems which gave him particular trouble, such as "Parnell's Funeral." Yeats forced himself to write "Parnell's Funeral" at a time when he had not written a poem in over a year, using as his theme a passage from a lecture, "Modern Ireland," prepared for his last American lecture tour. When Yeats forced the creative process, for whatever reason, the work of composition was too long drawn out and complicated to be easily described.

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Yeats almost always began work on a poem by composing what he called a "sketch" or "subject" in prose. These subjects state the content of the poems and note the principal images to be developed in them. They were often brief, though sometimes they were put through successive drafts. Some subjects are as long as the poems that grew out of them, some rough poems already. The subjects of section 1 of "The Tower" and of "Among School Children" are both short:

What shall I do with this absurd toy which they have given me, this grotesque rattle? O heart, O nerves, you are as vigorous as ever. You still hunger for the whole world, and they have given you this toy.

Topic for poem. School children, and the thought that life will waste them, perhaps that no possible life can fulfill their own dreams or even their teacher's hope. Bring in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens.

[Transcribed from a manuscript book begun at Oxford, April 7, 1921.]

Both these subjects, and indeed most others, show that while Yeats was actually composing poems they seldom worked out exactly as he had planned. The rattle became a kettle tied to a dog's tail in section 1 of "The Tower"; "Among School Children" loses its nostalgic tone during its course and becomes one of Yeats's most powerful statements of Unity of Being. The subject of "Among School Children" fails notably even to suggest the great poem that grew out of it.