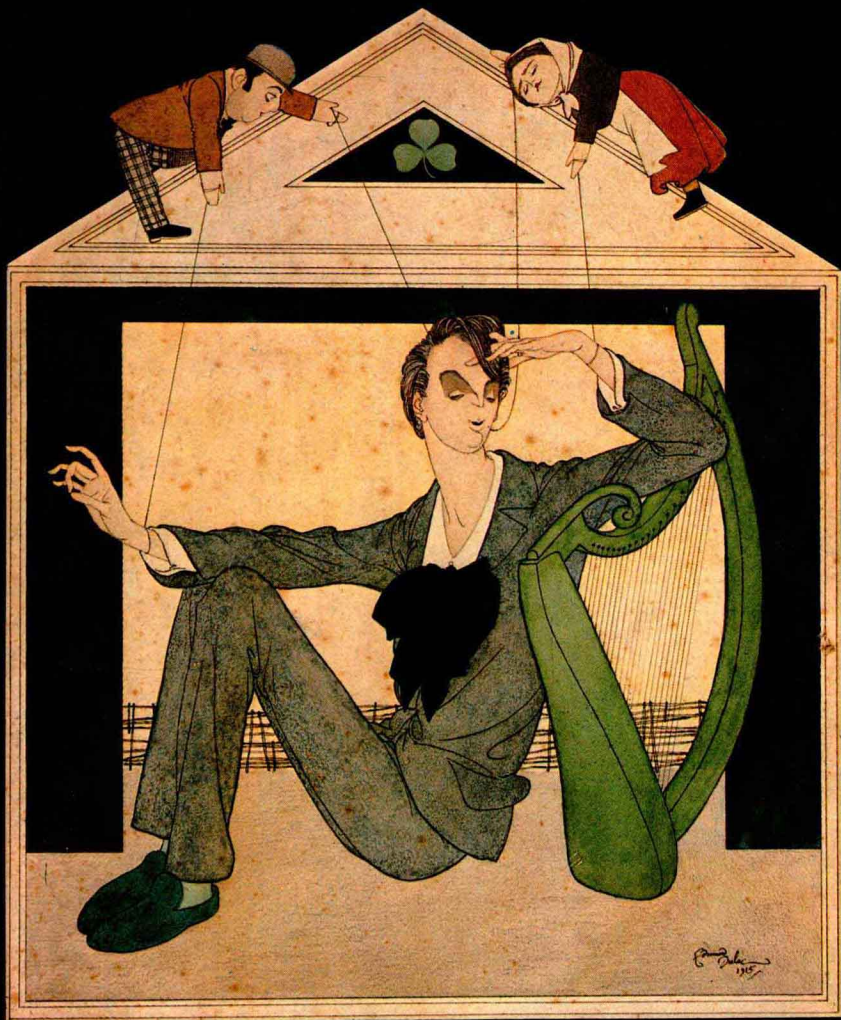


A VISION



W. B. YEATS

PAPERMAC

A VISION

BY

W. B. YEATS

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W. B. YEATS, 1907

From an etching by Augustus John, O.M., R.A.

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A PACKET FOR EZRA POUND

RAPALLO

I

MOUNTAINS that shelter the bay from all but the south wind, bare brown branches of low vines and of tall trees blurring their outline as though with a soft mist; houses mirrored in an almost motionless sea; a verandahed gable a couple of miles away bringing to mind some Chinese painting. Rapallo's thin line of broken mother-of-pearl along the water's edge. The little town described in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. In what better place could I, forbidden Dublin winters and all excited crowded places, spend what winters yet remain? On the broad pavement by the sea pass Italian peasants or working people, people out of the little shops, a famous German dramatist, the barber's brother looking like an Oxford don, a British retired skipper, an Italian prince descended from Charlemagne and no richer than the rest of us, a few tourists seeking tranquillity. As there is no great harbour full of yachts, no great yellow strand, no great ballroom, no great casino, the rich carry elsewhere their strenuous lives.

II

I shall not lack conversation. Ezra Pound, whose art is the opposite of mine, whose criticism commends what I most condemn, a man with whom I should quarrel more than with anyone else if we were not united by affection, has for years lived in rooms open-

ing on to a flat roof by the sea. For the last hour we have sat upon the roof which is also a garden, discussing that immense poem of which but seven and twenty cantos are already published.¹ I have often found there brightly printed kings, queens, knaves, but have never discovered why all the suits could not be dealt out in some quite different order. Now at last he explains that it will, when the hundredth canto is finished, display a structure like that of a Bach Fugue. There will be no plot, no chronicle of events, no logic of discourse, but two themes, the Descent into Hades from Homer, a Metamorphosis from Ovid, and, mixed with these, mediæval or modern historical characters. He has tried to produce that picture Porteous commended to Nicholas Poussin in *Le chef d'œuvre inconnu* where everything rounds or thrusts itself without edges, without contours—conventions of the intellect—from a splash of tints and shades; to achieve a work as characteristic of the art² of our time as the paintings of Cézanne, avowedly suggested by Porteous, as *Ulysses* and its dream association of words and images, a poem in which there is nothing that can be taken out and reasoned over, nothing that is not a part of the poem itself. He

¹ There are now forty-nine.

² Mr. Wyndham Lewis, whose criticism sounds true to a man of my generation, attacks this art in *Time and Western Man*. If we reject, he argues, the forms and categories of the intellect there is nothing left but sensation, "eternal flux". Yet all such rejections stop at the conscious mind, for as Dean Swift says in a meditation on a woman who paints a dying face,

Matter, as wise logicians say,
Cannot without a form subsist;
And form, say I as well as they,
Must fail, if matter brings no grist.

has scribbled on the back of an envelope certain sets of letters that represent emotions or archetypal events—I cannot find any adequate definition—A B C D and then J K L M, and then each set of letters repeated, and then A B C D inverted and this repeated, and then a new element X Y Z, then certain letters that never recur, and then all sorts of combinations of X Y Z and J K L M and A B C D and D C B A, and all set whirling together. He has shown me upon the wall a photograph of a Cosimo Tura decoration in three compartments, in the upper the Triumph of Love and the Triumph of Chastity, in the middle Zodiacal signs, and in the lower certain events in Cosimo Tura's day. The Descent and the Metamorphosis—A B C D and J K L M—his fixed elements, took the place of the Zodiac, the archetypal persons—X Y Z—that of the Triumphs, and certain modern events—his letters that do not recur—that of those events in Cosimo Tura's day.

I may, now that I have recovered leisure, find that the mathematical structure, when taken up into imagination, is more than mathematical, that seemingly irrelevant details fit together into a single theme, that here is no botch of tone and colour, all *Hodos Chameliontos*, except for some odd corner where one discovers beautiful detail like that finely modelled foot in Porteous' disastrous picture.

III

Sometimes about ten o'clock at night I accompany him to a street where there are hotels upon one side, upon the other palm-trees and the sea, and there, taking out of his pocket bones and pieces of meat, he begins to call the cats. He knows all their histories—the brindled

cat looked like a skeleton until he began to feed it; that fat grey cat is an hotel proprietor's favourite, it never begs from the guests' tables and it turns cats that do not belong to the hotel out of the garden; this black cat and that grey cat over there fought on the roof of a four-storied house some weeks ago, fell off, a whirling ball of claws and fur, and now avoid each other. Yet now that I recall the scene I think that he has no affection for cats—"some of them so ungrateful", a friend says—he never nurses the café cat, I cannot imagine him with a cat of his own. Cats are oppressed, dogs terrify them, landladies starve them, boys stone them, everybody speaks of them with contempt. If they were human beings we could talk of their oppressors with a studied violence, add our strength to theirs, even organise the oppressed and like good politicians sell our charity for power. I examine his criticism in this new light, his praise of writers pursued by ill-luck, left maimed or bedridden by the War; and thereupon recall a person as unlike him as possible, the only friend who remains to me from late boyhood, grown gaunt in the injustice of what seems her blind nobility of pity: "I will fight until I die", she wrote to me once, "against the cruelty of small ambitions". Was this pity a characteristic of his generation that has survived the Romantic Movement, and of mine and hers that saw it die—I too a revolutionist—some drop of hysteria still at the bottom of the cup?

IV

I have been wondering if I shall go to church and seek the company of the English in the villas. At Oxford I went constantly to All Souls Chapel, though

never at service time, and parts of *A Vision* were thought out there. In Dublin I went to Saint Patrick's and sat there, but it was far off; and once I remember saying to a friend as we came out of Sant' Ambrogio at Milan, "That is my tradition and I will let no priest rob me". I have sometimes wondered if it was but a timidity come from long disuse that keeps me from the service, and yesterday as I was wondering for the hundredth time, seated in a café by the sea, I heard an English voice say: "Our new Devil-dodger is not so bad. I have been practising with his choir all afternoon. We sang hymns and then God Save the King, more hymns and He's a Jolly Good Fellow. We were at the hotel at the end of the esplanade where they have the best beer." I am too anaemic for so British a faith; I shall haunt empty churches and be satisfied with Ezra Pound's society and that of his travelling Americans.

V

All that is laborious or mechanical in my book is finished; what remains can be added as a momentary rest from writing verse. It must be this thought of a burden dropped that made me think of attending church, if it is not that these mountains under their brilliant light fill me with an emotion that is like gratitude. Descartes went on pilgrimage to some shrine of the Virgin when he made his first philosophical discovery, and the mountain road from Rapallo to Zoagli seems like something in my own mind, something that I have discovered.

March and October 1928

INTRODUCTION TO "A VISION"

"This way of publishing introductions to books, that are God knows when to come out, is either wholly new, or so long in practice that my small reading cannot trace it."—SWIFT.

I

THE other day Lady Gregory said to me: "You are a much better educated man than you were ten years ago and much more powerful in argument". And I put *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* into evidence to show that my poetry has gained in self-possession and power. I owe this change to an incredible experience.

II

On the afternoon of October 24th 1917, four days after my marriage, my wife surprised me by attempting automatic writing. What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences. "No," was the answer, "we have come to give you metaphors for poetry." The unknown writer took his theme at first from my just published *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*. I had made a distinction between the perfection that is from a man's combat with himself and that which is from a combat with circumstance, and upon this simple distinction he built up an

elaborate classification of men according to their more or less complete expression of one type or the other. He supported his classification by a series of geometrical symbols and put these symbols in an order that answered the question in my essay as to whether some prophet could not prick upon the calendar the birth of a Napoleon or a Christ. A system of symbolism, strange to my wife and to myself, certainly awaited expression, and when I asked how long that would take I was told years. Sometimes when my mind strays back to those first days I remember that Browning's Paracelsus did not obtain the secret until he had written his spiritual history at the bidding of his Byzantine teacher, that before initiation Wilhelm Meister read his own history written by another, and I compare my *Per Amica* to those histories.

III

When the automatic writing began we were in a hotel on the edge of Ashdown Forest, but soon returned to Ireland and spent much of 1918 at Glendalough, at Rosses Point, at Coole Park, at a house near it, at Thoor Ballylee, always more or less solitary, my wife bored and fatigued by her almost daily task and I thinking and talking of little else. Early in 1919 the communicator of the moment—they were constantly changed—said they would soon change the method from the written to the spoken word as that would fatigue her less, but the change did not come for some months. I was on a lecturing tour in America to earn a roof for Thoor Ballylee when it came. We had one of those little sleeping compartments in a train, with two berths, and were somewhere in Southern California. My wife, who

had been asleep for some minutes, began to talk in her sleep, and from that on almost all communications came in that way. My teachers did not seem to speak out of her sleep but as if from above it, as though it were a tide upon which they floated. A chance word spoken before she fell asleep would sometimes start a dream that broke in upon the communications, as if from below, to trouble or overwhelm, as when she dreamed she was a cat lapping milk or a cat curled up asleep and therefore dumb. The cat returned night after night, and once when I tried to drive it away by making the sound one makes when playing at being a dog to amuse a child, she awoke trembling, and the shock was so violent that I never dared repeat it. It was plain therefore that, though the communicators' critical powers were awake, hers slept, or that she was aware of the idea the sound suggested but not of the sound.

IV

Whenever I received a certain signal (I will explain what it was later), I would get pencil and paper ready. After they had entranced my wife suddenly when sitting in a chair, I suggested that she must always be lying down before they put her to sleep. They seemed ignorant of our surroundings and might have done so at some inconvenient time or place; once when they had given their signal in a restaurant they explained that because we had spoken of a garden they had thought we were in it. Except at the start of a new topic, when they would speak or write a dozen sentences unquestioned, I had always to question, and every question to rise out of a previous answer and to deal with their