



W.B. YEATS: THE POET OF PASSION

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ABSTRACT

Passion was a central theme in the work of the beloved and Nobel Prize winning Irish poet 1923 William Butler Yeats born in 1865. Yeats' passion for Maud Gonne was beautiful but futile. Yet the poetry that such passion generated, in particular this love poem has an eternal value for those who know the depths of passion, of love that needs no use but its purpose of loving. While most of Yeats' poems are complex, filled with symbolism and structural variance, "When You Are Old" seems relatively simple and straight-forward. Yet, this small poem continues to resonate with readers who feel a deep human connection to either a lost loved one or the process of aging, or both. Yeats expresses what draws him to a poet, perhaps giving some insight into why this little poem was made and continues to move people, despite its simplicity

KEYWORDS :

The seventeenth century Italian scholar Vico fascinated William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) because of his insistence that the earliest and most primitive force in human history is the imagination; the language of poetry, of myth, is much older than the language of law and reason and debate. Throughout his career Yeats exploited the resources of his rich imagination using the language of poetry and indulging in myths. I. A. Richards did not like at least Yeats's early poetry and declared that his early poetry was in the same line with the poetry of Walter De la Mare for both the poets reflect a general tendency to escape from the central issues of contemporary life. Richards comments: "A weakness of the modern Irish School (even at its best, in Mr Yeats) or of the exquisite poetry of Mr. De la Mare, may be that its sensibility is a development out of the main track. It is this which seems to make it minor poetry in a sense in which Mr. Hardy's best work Mr. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is major poetry."¹ Richards is severely critical of Yeats's later attitude towards the most active contemporary interests. After playing an active role to promote the Irish Literary Renaissance in the shape of developing a national Irish theatre, Yeats, writes Richards, "made a more violent repudiation not merely of current civilization, a favour of a supernatural world."² Richards further observes that Yeats turned to a world of symbolic phantasmagoria, about which he was desperately uncertain. Richards is critical of Yeats; or his resort to trance and the effort to discover a new world-picture to replace that given by science. He finds Yeats's poetry written before the publication of *The Tower* as unsatisfactory. Ezra Pound however is not critical of the romanticism in Yeats' early poems. He observes that it is perhaps the highest function of art that it should fill the mind with a noble profusion of sound and images, that it should furnish the life of the mind with such accompaniment and surrounding. However, he too appreciated Yeats's poems of 'Responsibilities' more who, in his view, had at last become a modern poet. Eliot too did not acknowledge the young Yeats. Eliot shrewdly observes, "The kind of poetry that I needed, to teach me the use of my own voice, did not exist in English at all; it was only to be found in French. For this reason the young Yeats hardly existed for me until after my enthusiasm has been won by the poetry of the older Yeats."³ It was, in fact the integrity of Yeats's passion for his art and craft which impressed Pound, Eliot and Richards to pronounce Yeats's later poetry as unquestionably great. However, the reader who can appreciate Milton's or Tennyson's poetry or the poetry of the great Romantics or the poetry of Tagore can hardly find fault with Yeats's poetry and even his early poems which only Yeats could have written. Evaluating Wordsworth's 'Lucy' poem 'Strange fits of passion have I known', F. R. Leavis writes, "It seems to come close to his characteristic faults, but it has his characteristic virtues. It is of its essence to be in a mode remote from any form of 'wit'. It is completely successful, yet we feel that its poise is an extremely delicate, almost a precarious one, and our sense of its success is bound up with this feeling."⁴ There can be division of opinion whether Yeats' early poems and many of his other poems too which came to be recognised as modern poems succeed or not for these

poems, like those of Wordsworth, are not written to display wit but this much is sure that the poems will continue to enthral sensitive readers.

Yeats's early poems many of which reveal the unhappiness of his defeatist, unrequited love affair are ignored but these are still captivating and sustain the nineteenth century tradition of poetic creation. The poems like *Dawn by the Salley Gardens*, *When You are Old*, *He Wishes for the cloths of Heaven*, *Never Give All the Heart*, *No Second Troy* and several other poems which he wrote remembering Maud Gonne, the superbly beautiful woman with whom he fell in love when he first met her at the age of twenty three, remind the reader of the great poets like Shelley and Spenser. Yeats makes the best possible use of rhetoric in these poems and proves that being rhetorical or conventional does not essentially make you write bad poems. For example, a poem like *No Second Troy* which appeared in *The Green Helmet And Other Poems* (1910) and which Yeats wrote likening Maud Gonne to Helen of Troy amply suggests that rhetoric has its place in poetry: "Why should I blame her that she filled my days / With misery, or that she would of late / Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways, / Or hurled the little streets upon the great, / Had they but courage equal to desire? / What could have made her peaceful with a mind / That nobleness made simple as a fire, / With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind / That is not natural in an age like this, / Being high and solitary and most stern? / Why, what could she have done, being what she is? / Was there another Troy for her to burn?"⁵

Yeats was deeply hurt when Maud Gonne married John Mac Bride, another revolutionary but *No Second Troy* is not all about dejection in love. The poem indicates Yeats's dislike for violence which finds its best possible expression in *The Second Coming*.

According to Andrew Sanders, "Yeats always professed to see the world as in a state of perpetual flux. He also suggested that poets should share that flux by recognizing that poetic language was shaped and adapted by the shifting structures of culture and society."⁶ In the poems which Yeats wrote after 1900, he expands the range of his subject-matter to embrace these 'shifting structures of culture and society'. He repudiated all the Celtic Twilight's 'embroideries out of old mythologies' in *A Coat (Responsibilities)* (1914). However, his constant praise of Maud Gonne's beauty and her love of the people whom he had begun to distrust continues; it spills over into poems published some years later in *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919). In the *James* entitled *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and other poems* (1933), the poems range in subject-matter from revolutionary politics to personal regret, from an evocation of an ideal past to prophecy, from private agonising over the process of ageing to a celebration of cultural history. The Easter Rising of 1916 took Yeats by surprise. The revolutionaries he had come to despise attained heroic stature and it seemed to him that a terrible beauty was born. In

Easter 1916 he wrote: All changed, changed utterly: /
A terrible beauty is born.

* * *

In the casual comedy;
He, too, has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

* * *

I write it out in a verse- Mac Donagh and Mac Bride And Connolly
and Pearse Now and in time to be, Whenever green is worn, Are
changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.

"ne sacrifices of the revolutionaries forced Yeats to write Easter 1916
though he still doubted the wisdom of the readers of the Easter
Rising of 1916 for the Irish cause and the phrase 'terrible beauty' that
he coined was meant to express his this ambiguity regarding
revolution and sacrifice.

The poem A Prayer For My Daughter foreshadows the grim mood of
Yeats's The Second coming. There is a great gloom in the poet's
mind. His prayer for his daughter gains in strength against the
threatening background which makes the appeal to custom and
ceremony something more than mere nostalgia for an aristocratic
past: "How but in custom and ceremony/Are innocence and beauty
born ?/ Ceremony's a name for the rich horn,/ And custom for the
spreading laurel tree."⁸

According to A. Norman Jeffares," In such poems as In Memory of
Major Robert Gregory, Easter 1916 and A Prayer for my Daughter,
Yeats is able to write with authority, to blend his appreciation of
beauty with a sense of the tragic rather than the pathetic elements
of life, to give a significance to the ordinary events of life which his
earlier poetry avoided, and to attain in the process a personal means
of achieving public speech in poetry."⁹

Yeats's sincerity finds scorching expressions further in The Tower. As
in Sailing to Byzantium, in The Tower too Yeats celebrates the glory
of soul accepting at the same time the infirmity of old age He
questions: "What shall I do with this absurdity- / O heart, O troubled
heart-this caricature./Decrepit age that has been tied to me/ As to a
dog's tail ?" ¹⁰ Yeats finally resolves to acknowledge the power of the
soul: "Now shall I make my soul /Compelling it to study/ In a learned
school /Till the wreck of body / Slow decay of blood,/ Testy delirium /
Or dull decrepitude,/ Or what worse evil come."¹¹

Although Yeats rejected much of the new philosophy of the
centuries which his life spanned, his later poetry proclaims the
independence of the artist who creates and expounds a new
spirituality References to mythology and Christianity, to Homer and
Dante, to Rome, Byzantium, or the Quattrocento stand as points of
reference within a new unity of vision which projects emblems of
perfection and of perfectibility of the soul. His visions are not always
serene. In the tense sonnet, Leda and the Swan, for example- the
rape of Leda by a superb, mastering bird- he transfers the sense of
violation from the half-willing woman to the long-term
consequences of the rape: the future ruin of Troy and the murder of
Agamemnon. Sexist and phallogocentric the poem may be, but for
Yeats the enactment of the joining of the human and the divine
transforms the intimate into the public, the woman's violation into
a wider human tragedy.

In Among School Children which gives us a brief vignette of Yeats as
a 'sixty year-old smiling public man', the poet deals with the subject
of the relationship of matter and spirit. The poet is in complete
control of the speaking voice, dictating its pace and pitch: "Labour is
blossoming or dancing where / The body is not bruised to pleasure
soul,/ Nor beauty born out of its own despair, / Nor bleary-eyed
wisdom out of midnight oil./ O chestnut-tree, great-rooted
blossomer, / Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole ? O body
swayed to music, O brightening glance,/ How can we know the
dancer from the dance ?"¹²

As a craftsman, Yeats proves himself vigorously in such poems.
Appreciating the poem John Wain talks of the questions raised in
the poem and writes, "This series of questions is arranged as a
movement away from the immediate and personal, towards the
universal."

Yeats talked of the changeless permanence of art, as Shakespeare
too had discussed it in some of his immortal sonnets, in Sailing to
Byzantium. Yeats' another poem Byzantium also focuses on the
immortality of art which is contrasted with the gross sensuality of
our physical existence. T. R. Henn writes that at the last the spirits
unified and made triumphant by the art of the goldsmith or worker
in mosaic, triumph over the limitations of the body, the Dolphin's
mire and blood.

The lines read : " Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood, /Spirit
after spirit! The smithies break the flood,/ The golden smithies of the
Emperor !/ Marbles of the dancing floor/ Break bitter furies of
complexity,/ Those images that yet/ Fresh images beget/ That
dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea."¹³

Yeats' poems are to be understood and enjoyed as all other poems
are to be understood and enjoyed without adhering to any
particular critical principle pertaining to ideas and images and
music. We cannot despise him simply because he did not write like
Pound and Eliot. Graham Martin observes that "Like any great poet,
Yeats offers many satisfactions, but there seem to me good grounds
for rating the simple direct centrality of much of his work as the most
lasting."¹⁴ It was W.H. Auden who rightly understood the centrality
of Yeats' work and the quality of his poetry to generate joy out of
tragic situations. In Auden's view, Yeats' achievement is a tribute to
the essential free spirit of man. His poetry, as in the case of all great
poetry, enlarges our sensibility and enables us to live as sensitive
human beings. Auden writes: " Follow, poet, follow right / To the
bottom of the night,/ With your unconstraining voice/ Still persuade
us to rejoice;/ With the farming of a verse/ Make a vineyard of the
curse,/ Sing of human unsuccess/ In a rapture of distress;/ In the
deserts of the heart/ Let the healing fountain start,/ In the prison of
his days/ Teach the free man how to praise."¹⁵

References:

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4. F. R. Leavis: Revaluation, p. 168
5. W. B. Yeats: Selected Poetry, edited by A. Norman Jeffares, p. 44-45
6. Andrew Sanders: The Short History of English Literature, p. 504
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9. Ibid, p. xix
10. Ibid, p. 105
11. Ibid, p. 111
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