

# Magical Romanticism: Yeats's absorption of romantic writers into fin-de-siecle Movements

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Placing Yeats upon any axis which divides poets between Romantics and Modernists (or in T.E. Hulme's terms, between Romanticism and Classicism), is fraught with difficulties, not least because he appears to have contributed so much to Modernism whilst professing to dislike the 'Ezra, Eliot, Auden school'<sup>1</sup> in letters written to Dorothy Wellesley and Olivia Shakespeare. While this active dislike of Modernist poetry is only enunciated in the 1930s, the problem of identifying him as either Modernist or Romantic is true for all eras in Yeats's poetic career.

We can divide Yeats's aesthetic development into roughly three main stages. Firstly, the early period of Aestheticism and Symbolism, culminating in Yeats's doctrine of 'the Moods' (1895) and the volume *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899). In this phase the essence or mood, as something beyond the writer's self, overcomes his personality to express itself in the purity of a lyrical poem. In the second phase, after the turn of the century, when Yeats wrote less poetry and appears to have been undergoing a crisis in his poetic self-belief, he briefly espoused the idea of the development of 'the habitual self'.<sup>2</sup> This was a shift towards expressing a heightened personality, and Yeats began to ground his poetry more in reality (declaring famously that his previous attempt to embrace immortal essences had been 'only one half of the orange'<sup>3</sup>). The third, and most enduring stage of his poetic development effectively begins in 1909 when he writes in his journal of the need to express a secondary self or 'personality'.<sup>4</sup> This idea grows through both *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* and *A Vision* into the doctrine of the *Mask*: a fusion of self and anti-self. In this theory the man struggles with his Daimon - a disembodied mind from the soul of the world which constitutes alternately both his complete opposite and his 'ultimate self'<sup>5</sup> - in order to embody finally an image or personality in his art which is entirely opposed to his habitual self.

All three theories involve problems for any critic who wishes to characterize Yeats as either Romantic or Modernist in the senses traditionally used. Despite the spiritualism of the first era, Yeats's doctrine involves a dissolution of the self through magical invocation and surrender before a disembodied essence, so that the emotion becomes separate or transcendent, which, as Allen Grossman has noted, is counter to the Romantic expression of personality.<sup>6</sup> The middle period also, in which he encourages the development of the habitual self and the expression of personality, actually involves a

1 *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Allen R. Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954; New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 833.

2 W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 269.

3 Yeats, *Letters*, p. 402

4 W.B. Yeats, *Memoirs: Autobiography - First Draft*, journal transcribed and edited by Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972; New York: Macmillan, 1973), p. 139

5 *Vision insert*

6 Allen R. Grossman, *Poetic Knowledge in the Early Yeats* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1969), p. 46 & 49.

denial of the self's powers which seems counter to the optimism of romanticism. On the other hand, this denial of self does not quite cohere with the denial of personality proposed by Eliot and T.E. Hulme. While poems like 'The Old Age of Queen Maeve' and 'Baile and Aillinn' (1904) juxtapose myth and reality in a way which led Eliot to describe him as the founder of the 'mythical method' in his famous article on Joyce's 'Ulysses',<sup>7</sup> awarding him as he did so a seminal role in the building of literary modernism, Yeats in fact used myth, as Michael J Sidnell has noted, to express a particular poetic personality through his verse rather than to avoid one, in a way wholly out of keeping with Modernist practice.<sup>8</sup> The third and enduring stage, when he believed in the fight with one's spiritual opposite to discover a Mask expressing an antithetical personality, is different from either Romantic egotism or the Modernist notion of dramatic medium, although can be argued to partake of both in different ways. Although the Mask is not an expression of self, it nevertheless posits a unitary personality rather than a dramatic medium as the poetic end, in keeping with the unitary personalities of romantic lyrics (as opposed to the abstract personalities of Augustan verse). On the other hand the characterization of the poet's struggle for expression as communing with a mind with access to an ancestral memory containing traditional images, actually has, when shorn of its spiritualist ontology, much in common with the view of poetry espoused by T.E. Hulme and T.S. Eliot, in the sense of difficulty, the use of tradition and escape from self which crystallizes in the poetic work.

It becomes clear then that between the spiritual egotism of the Romantic poet and the dramatic fragmentation of the Modernist - if we wish to characterize the poetry of these movements in such a way - Yeats, whether as young aesthete and Symbolist, disillusioned Edwardian ironist or Nietzschean hero, does not fit into any category with ease at any time in his life. This may be a result of his belatedness: reacting against both the sentimentality and scientific materialism of the nineteenth century, he develops his own peculiar occult aesthetic which suits neither camp, and as such allows a critic like John Harwood to read *The Wind among the Reeds* as an intimate record of his personal life, even though its Symbolist aesthetic contradicts that this should be possible.<sup>9</sup>

However, there is no doubt that Yeats saw himself as a Romantic poet, particularly by the end of his life, when he retrospectively reasserted his Romanticism as a heroic stance in the face of the 'filthy modern tide' of both crass materialism and the flux of Modernism, and interpreted his own poetic career as an attempt to reestablish its values. His controversial introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936), together with many of the essays he wrote in the 1930s, construed idealist philosophy and Romanticism in art as 'correspondential' movements,<sup>10</sup> opposed to both realist

7 T.S. Eliot, *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), p. 177.

8 Michael J. Sidnell, 'Yeats, Synge and the Georgians,' *Yeats Annual 3*, ed. Warwick Gould (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 105-23, at 121.

9 John Harwood, *Olivia Shakespear and W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), p. 66. Harwood notes the tension between the 'paralysed inner self' of Yeats's life in the 1890s, and the dramatized character of the poet.

10 Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 404-5.

philosophy and the 'naturalistic' movement in literature. For Yeats, Modernism, with its Bergsonian philosophy of 'flux',<sup>11</sup> was simply another form of realism and a movement away from both the life of the spirit and the expression of personality. Furthermore, Yeats increasingly identified heroic subject matter with imaginative endeavour, and delighted in the notion of the hero as Romantic quester. His refusal to include the work of the war poets in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* because 'passive suffering is not a theme for poetry'<sup>12</sup> contrasts with the heroic elegies he wrote on Major Robert Gregory and his praise for both the poetry and valour of Gogarty. Yeats's values remained self-consciously those of romanticism.

Quite apart from his avowed commitment to Romanticism and Romantic theme, the structure of his later poetry was in keeping with that of the Greater Romantic lyric - the out-in-out process described by M.H. Abrams - which had first been popularized in the conversation poems of Bowles, Wordsworth and Coleridge, in which the meditating poet moves from a landscape to his own thoughts and then back to a landscape.<sup>13</sup> This structure George Bornstein has shown to work through most of Yeats's later lyrics in a transformed version, which heightens the role of vision over nature. While the philosophy of Mask and antinomy is a long way from the Romantic egotism of Wordsworth and Coleridge, we could be forgiven for thinking this when observing the ruminations of the poet in 'A Prayer for my Daughter', which owes much to Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight'.<sup>14</sup>

The later Yeats, therefore, saw himself very much as a Romantic poet, and there is good evidence at a physiognomic level for our also seeing him as such - but only to a certain extent. The problematic way in which Yeats sees the self at all stages of his life, which in turn results from his continual obsession with magic and mysticism, makes his labeling as a Romantic unsatisfactory. The Occult Symbolist of the nineties seeks transcendent symbols which diminish the self, while the later antithetical hero sees personality as an escape from self: neither were romantic positions. Yeats may have shared this faith in mysticism and magic with Blake, who believed in the reality of visions and communicating with 'symbolic essences', but with no other Romantic poet, Shelley included. A belief in the spiritual did not, for them, mean a belief in ghosts or magic.

This does not mean, however, that Yeats himself read these poets in such a way. For what makes Yeats's 'Romanticism' - at all points in his life - so perplexing and contradictory for us now is that he read Coleridge, Shelley and Wordsworth totally differently to how modern readers would do so. For Yeats, the best Romantics - Shelley, Blake, Keats and Coleridge - were all writers who believed, to varying degrees, in magic and a neo-platonic universe, and whose purity of

11 W.B. Yeats, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1895-1935*, chosen by W.B. Yeats (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. xxviii

12 *Ibid.*, p. xxxiv

13 George Bornstein, *Transformations of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot and Stevens* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 50.

14 Bornstein, *Transformations*, pp.68-9

verse depended upon this belief. Aestheticism and Symbolism were not, as they were for T.S. Eliot and Hugh Kenner, prefatory pages in the large book of Modernism, but were in fact reprisals of an earlier Romantic purity, a purity that for Yeats involved the mystical and the occult.

Frank Kermode wrote in *Romantic Image* that in Yeats's ideas the doctrine of symbol was a natural continuation from Blake to Mallarme, showing that many fin-de-siecle trends were in fact a derivation of Romanticism.<sup>15</sup> In the rest of this article we shall see how Yeats, both as a young man, aesthete and Symbolist, and as a much older man, fresh from reading philosophy, interpreted many more Romantic writers as forerunning 'fin-de-siecle' trends because he saw them as governed by mysticism and magic, aesthetics he espoused at both these points in his life. Further to this, we shall observe how this interpretation of Romanticism affected his understanding of recent literary history, leading him to read Georgian and Edwardian poets as being decidedly more 'fin-de-siecle' than Modernist writers and critics would have allowed.

## II

Although Yeats later came to see Paterian Aestheticism as harbingering the flux of Modernism, as a young man he considered this philosophy as furthering a transcendental view of the spiritual. Pater's aestheticism was not entirely new, in Yeats's opinion, being the continuation of a tradition first promulgated by Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833, in his famous essay on Tennyson. Hallam had divided poets into two classes, those of sensation and those of reflection. While poets of sensation reacted in strange and original ways to the world and created a poetry that is 'a sort of magic', like Shelley and Keats, the poets of reflection instead chose to betray their vision with imported ideas.<sup>16</sup> Neither Hallam nor Pater explicitly linked this search for aesthetic purity in 'exquisite passions'<sup>17</sup> and 'exalted moments' to the occult or mystical, but Yeats, fresh from his work elucidating the symbolism of Blake, understood the 'sort of magic' described by Hallam, a phrase he quoted in his own reviews,<sup>18</sup> as resulting from 'disembodied ectac[ies]'<sup>19</sup> or the 'moods' of *Anima Mundi*. Throughout the nineties Yeats understood the work of fellow aesthetes as involving, consciously or unconsciously on their part, an apprehension of *Anima Mundi*, in which poems become the correspondences for intuited spiritual essences.

While the literary views of Blake clearly cohered with this understanding of poetic practice - the imagination mirroring the pure shapes of Los, or Urizen, before they were distorted by nature, and the doctrine of correspondence - Yeats read Shelley in a similar way. This is despite more sober evidence that his real views were to the contrary. Admittedly, Shelley's descriptions of poets as 'mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the

15 Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957), p. 65.

16 *The Poems of Arthur Henry Hallam, Together with his Essay on the Lyrical Poems of Alfred Tennyson, 1893* (YL 830), pp. 91-4. Hallam had originally published his essay on Tennyson in the *Englishman's Magazine* (August, 1831)

17 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, 4th edn (London and New York: Macmillan, 1888), p. 252.

18 *Review of Lionel Johnson's Ireland for the Bookman* (February 1898), UP2 88-9.

19 Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 194.

present'<sup>20</sup> is avowedly neo-platonic in the way in which it depicts the imagination, but the extent to which the spiritual element here is metaphorical can be debated. After all, Shelley had already written his unashamedly atheistic 'On A Future State' in which he denied the existence of the spiritual soul and hence its continuation after a physical death,<sup>21</sup> and was preparing his highly skeptical philosophical work 'Speculations on Metaphysics' in 1821, the same year as he wrote the *Defence*. Part of the argument of 'Speculations' is that the falsity of the distinction between imagination and sensation confounds the possibility that we can ever declare that the mind can transcend an external reality, material or spiritual, in any way.

Christos E Pulos argued that Shelley was a sceptic by reason, a Platonist by faith, for whom poetry and imagination, and not religion, offered the only possible bridge to a spiritual world. But even if Shelley was a Platonist in some way, to say that he had 'a strong fascination [in] the traditions of magic' and 'their doctrine of symbols or signatures'<sup>22</sup> and then proceed to find in Shelley's 'ruling symbols' certain cabbalistic images from 'some great Memory that renews the world and men's thoughts age after age'<sup>23</sup> was asking a lot of him. Nevertheless, in his essay 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry', which he first published in *The Dome* in July 1900, Yeats did just that, even though he admitted to having no evidence for this assumption. Yeats believed Shelley to have been acquainted with magical practice, even if only peripherally, and this allowed him to see in his poetry various traditional magical symbols, including the morning star and the fountain and cave. These last two he elucidated by reference to Porphyry's neo-platonic essay 'On the Cave of the Nymphs', about the cave in Ithaca in Homer's *Odyssey*, which Porphyry considered to mean the generation of new life by spirit - water - emanating into bodies in the imperfect world of the cave.<sup>24</sup> This links Shelley to mystical - as opposed to magical tradition - but the implication of the essay is that Shelley's knowledge of the images was from more than simply the study of Porphyry's essay, which Shelley had certainly conducted,<sup>25</sup> as but an awareness and apprehension of the ancient memory. For Yeats this would have taken on further, magical and thus invocational possibilities given that water, Shelley's constant image for life, is a symbol related to the moon meaning soul, femininity and passivity, the cabbalistic yesod on the tree of life. It is no accident that after Yeats had abandoned his fin-de-siècle trends, he identified Shelley with Verlaine, Mallarmé and Maeterlinck as a poet who sought expression of the intellectual essences, for whom 'what seems literature becomes religion'.<sup>26</sup> His poetry does not merely record these copies, but invests them with the power of transformation.

Yeats portrayed Coleridge in a similar light in essays of the 1890s. In 1896 he is compared to Blake and Villiers de L'Isle Adam as an

20 Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *Essays and Letters*, ed Ernest Rhys (London: Walter Scott, 1886), p.40

21 Shelley, *Essays*, p. 82

22 Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 78.

23 *Ibid*, p. 79

24 Bornstein, *Yeats and Shelley* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 83-4.

25 He had met the same translator Yeats was to use, Thomas Taylor - Bornstein, Shelley, p. 81.

26 Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 267 [1907]

'exalted spirit' who 'half lives in eternity' and endures 'a rending of the structure of the intellectual body',<sup>27</sup> although is later accused of abusing his vision in 1898 by 'mix[ing] up' with poetry religious and political opinions'.<sup>28</sup> The view of Coleridge as a 'weird unearthly dreamer' and possible proto-Symbolist was one held by Swinburne and Symons, and gained increasing currency at the end of the nineteenth century, fuelled as it was by knowledge of his opium addiction. Yeats shared their view that *Kubla Khan* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, with their dreamlike qualities, were Symbolist poems,<sup>29</sup> but he also seems to have been aware of Coleridge's writings on Swedenborg, which he used to elucidate certain of the Scandinavian mystic's ideas and to interpret his own relations with the cabbalistic sephiroth. In 1917 Yeats quoted his poem 'Phantom' to elucidate his understanding of the purified minds in the soul of the world that communicate to both mystic and poet in symbolic form (this was despite not realizing that Coleridge himself considered 'Phantom' to be a psychological poem, and that he did not take Swedenborg's supernatural illuminations literally at all). In his first public profession of the lunar system of *A Vision*, in 1922, Yeats portrayed Coleridge as a forerunner of his own 'aesthete' or Tragic Generation, who sought a 'new, pure beauty' but was tragically tormented by his Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

Even Wordsworth, whose self-absorption and obsession with his moral life Yeats condemned, he considered to believe in the disembodied minds and traditional symbols existing in the Ancient Memory of Henry More's 'Soul of the World', the 'immortal sea which brought us hither' of which our own consciousness is merely 'foam at the shallow edge':<sup>31</sup> a notion far more traditionally neo-platonic and magical than the pantheistic 'sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused', expressed in 'Tintern Abbey'.

We see, therefore, that Yeats understood Shelley, Coleridge and Wordsworth as having leanings towards both *Anima Mundi*, and the idea of an Ancient Memory with traditional symbols which may be invoked by communing with the disembodied souls in the *Anima Mundi*. In this they were forerunners of the same fin-de-siecle poets whose mystical leanings foreran Modernism.

This was his view of them some time before reading Coleridge's philosophical work, or taking another look at Shelley's 'Speculations on Metaphysics', around 1930 - a time which coincided with his rewriting of *A Vision* and his attempt to find a new philosophy of Romanticism in keeping with the doctrine of mask and antithetical struggle. At this juncture Yeats became heavily interested in the work of George Berkeley, whose proposition *esse est percipi* - to be is to be perceived - promoted immaterialism and a spiritual view of reality, in which sensory images are no more than a 'language' for spirits. Although Berkeley - unlike the skeptic David Hume - distinguished between imaginary and ghostly phenomena - which

27 Yeats, 'William Blake and his Illustrations to the Divine Comedy', *The Savoy* (July 1896), III, 57.

28 *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, vol 2, ed. John P. Frayne (London: Macmillan, 1975; New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 88-9.

29, *Poems of Coleridge*, selected and arranged by Arthur Symons (London: Methuen, 1905), p. xxxviii

30 W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 313-4.

31 W.B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (London and New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 346

are unreal - and sensory perceptions - which correspond to spirits - Yeats saw in idealism a sanction for his own ontological theories in communication with spirits, or daimons, and a new philosophy for Romanticism which maintained the magical and mystical elements he had seen before.

Coleridge, in particular, took on the mantle of sage in Yeats's 1930 diary, and was portrayed as fighting 'sword-in-hand' to find 'oneness with some spiritual being or beings' in order to make philosophical abstractions concrete.<sup>32</sup> Shelley too, however, was recast in a near contemporary essay of 1932 on 'Prometheus Unbound' which argued for a similar Berkeleianism in his philosophical view. Even the Coleridgean nature philosophy which Yeats noted (from reading Crabb Robinson's famous literary diary) that Blake had called 'pagan nature worship',<sup>33</sup> and which Yeats further considered to have been Coleridge's gift to Wordsworth, he now understood as a doctrine of Divine immanence in nature, the spirit made concrete, facilitated by Coleridge's 'Berkeleianism'. Yeats began to celebrate this philosophy of divine immanence in nature through poems like 'Vacillation' and 'Stream and Sun at Glendalough'. On more than one occasion Yeats wrote about the 'magical' and 'concrete' qualities of 'the Rime of the Ancient Mariner' 'Kubla Khan' and 'Christabel' in the light of Berkeleian idealism, although he specifically saw Shelley's Ahasuerus and Wordsworth's wanderer as articulating this new idealist and magical spiritualism: the 'sage' in literature.

All in all, Yeats in 1930 saw in Coleridge's, Shelley's and Wordsworth's work, for the first time, a Berkeleian immaterialism (aligned with Zen Buddhism) underpinning their magical leanings as he recast Romanticism. This also explains why Coleridge's and Shelley's poetry reemerges in Yeats's poetry of the thirties. In poems like 'Blood and the Moon' and 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931' and 'Vacillation', echoes from 'Kubla Khan', 'Prometheus Unbound', 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel' are all manifest, and express, whether with the Shelleyan tower or Swan, or with the gushing water and magic forests of 'Kubla Khan' and 'Christabel', the belief in an incarnatory Romanticism: 'wisdom, magic sensation'.<sup>34</sup>

### III

'Christabel' above all appears to have influenced his poem of 1935 'To Dorothy Wellesley', and there are many parallels between the two. Briefly, Christabel, the daughter of Sir Leoline, leaves her castle at midnight in full moon in search of a distant lover, and discovers the unfortunate lady Geraldine beneath an oak, who has been kidnapped and left in the forest (or so she says) by a group of knights who have pledged to return and finish her off. Geraldine begs Christabel to 'Stretch forth thy hand'<sup>35</sup> something Christabel

32 W.B. Yeats, *Explorations*, sel. Mrs W. B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1962; New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 301.

33 Yeats, *Explorations*, p. 308.

34 Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 433.

35 *The Poetical Works of S.T. Coleridge*, ed. James Dykes Campbell (London: Macmillan, 1925), p. 117, l. 102.

had already asked her new acquaintance). Being of a charitable disposition Christabel 'stretched forth her hand'<sup>36</sup> and takes her back to her own home, making sure that she does not wake anyone, although the mysterious 'mastiff bitch'<sup>37</sup> which lies outside the walls, and has the ability to see the shroud of Christabel's dead, guardian mother, lets out an 'angry moan'<sup>38</sup> in sleep. Then, having crossed the hall 'silent as the cell',<sup>39</sup> they climb 'stair by stair' to her bedchamber, which Coleridge's narrator then describes as 'Carved with figures strange and sweet', but specifically barring the thick moon beams outside from entering.<sup>40</sup> Christabel then relates to Geraldine the story of how her mother died when she was born.<sup>41</sup> Geraldine secretly asks the mother to leave off and allow her to have her daughter for the night and then begins to work her spell through her breast, leaving the unsuspecting maiden in a trance.

If we now turn to the short poem 'To Dorothy Wellesley' we will see that there are many parallels with the forest and chamber scenes in Coleridge's poem. Both poems take place at midnight. Dorothy Wellesley moves from a forest in which she is urged to 'Stretch' her hand and to a chamber for her revelatory consummation.<sup>42</sup> Like Christabel, Lady Wellesley is pointedly protected from the moon by intricate designs: not by carvings, 'strange and sweet', but by the 'moonless midnight of the trees'<sup>43</sup> which she is urged to grasp and treat like 'upholsteries/ Delightful to the touch',<sup>44</sup> as though moving imaginatively to the chamber, and has a sentinel dog which is 'sunk in sleep' and thus cannot break the silence (although there is no 'angry moan' from Lady Wellesley's Brutus). Further, the awaiting of the 'Furies' 'Some ancient famous authors misrepresent'<sup>45</sup> recalls both the female-to-female nature of the illumination: especially relevant given that Lady Wellesley was a lesbian.

The changes from poem to poem reflect Yeats's understanding of Coleridge both as Berkeleyan idealist, and as philosopher who condoned the occult and also sought union with some spiritual being or beings: i.e. a philosopher who was also a passionate poet and sought his Mask through Daimonic struggle. In this poem Lady Wellesley conflates the forest and moonless chamber scenes of 'Christabel' to one action in which she turns the moonless forest of her mansion into patterned furniture, reflecting Yeats's Berkeleyan belief that the material world is simply a sensory language for the spiritual, and that it is further synonymous with imaginary experience: the 'figures strange and sweet/All made out of the carver's brain' become all part of Lady Wellesley's brain. The ambivalent sexual communication of Geraldine with Christabel becomes in Yeats's new poem a fight with the furies, battle of self and anti-self: woman and Daimons. The Daimon in Yeats's philosophy

36 Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, p. 117, l. 104

37 *Ibid.*, p. 118, l. 149.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 117, l. 148.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 118, l.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 118, ll. 175-83.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 118, ll. 200-1.

42 *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed.

Peter Allt and Russell K.

Alspach (London and New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 579, l. 1.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 579, l.1.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 579, ll. 3-4.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 579, ll 15 + 16.



is considered to be the opposite sex of the person, but since Lady Wellesley was a lesbian, this could not be the case for her.

The suggestive symbolism of *Christabel* becomes literal symbolism for Yeats, both for occult ideas and philosophical idealism. Coleridge was, therefore, not only a forerunner of dream poetry, the poetry of Symbolists and Aesthetes, but was also someone whose Gothic poetry Yeats was capable of interpreting in a literally supernatural way. The fact the Coleridge himself did not believe in the occult, and merely intended his reader to suspend disbelief was unimportant to the later poet, who saw in his romantic forebear a sanction for his own belief in magic.

#### IV

'To Dorothy Wellesley' was written as Yeats was preparing his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, which constituted an attempt to illustrate the various phases of recent intellectual and literary history. Lamenting the rise of the passive and mechanistic poetry of T.S. Eliot (whom he damns with faint praise for mimicking the life that 'has lost heart' by rejecting 'all rhythms and metaphors used by the more popular romantics'<sup>46</sup>), and condemning, although with far more respect, the flux theme of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, Yeats describes the movement of mind from the late seventeenth century onwards as being towards passivity 'before a mechanized nature'.<sup>47</sup> The Romantic movement was a brief struggle against this trend in both science and art, but the struggle was effectively doomed: the 'mirror dawdling down a lane' of Stendhal's novel was to replace the burning brazier of *Christabel* and Milton's lamp in *Il Penseroso*. At the end of this lamentation, Yeats provides the clearest indication of how he sees the various movements in his own modern era between 1892 and 1930.

Change has come suddenly, the despair of my friends in the nineties part of its preparation. Nature, steel-bound and stone-built in the nineteenth century, became a flux where man drowned or swam; the moment had come for some poet to cry 'the flux is in my own mind'.<sup>48</sup>

The despair of the nineties typifies the doomed nature of the aesthete's struggle to restore the spiritual and the imaginative to art, the reprisal of romanticism; the realism of the earlier nineteenth century becomes instead the organic realism or flux of Bergson, in which the self is impressed by a continually moving nature, and this in turn is replaced by the cry of a new poet - Walter J Turner - that the flux of organic realism is in fact ideal, as it is for Hegel and McTaggart. We fluctuate between naturalism and romanticism, and between idealist and realist views of ontology in the view of literary history which Yeats describes here, although in each case there is never a complete return.

Against this vacillation, in which 'an age is a reversal of an age',

46 W.B. Yeats, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1895-1935*, chosen by W.B. Yeats (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. xxi.

47 *Ibid.*, p. xxvii.

48 *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.

one group of poets has a peculiar position. These were those poets who, rather than turning to France and the work of Walter Pater for inspiration in their fight against materialism, were decidedly more conservative in their tastes. Yeats delighted in these poets from the vantage point of 1936, saying that 'England has had more good poets from 1900 to the present day than during any period of the same length since the early seventeenth century'<sup>49</sup>, and then gives a list of poets whose practice was anathema to the Modernists:

During the first years of the century the best known were celebrators of the country-side or of the life of ships; I think of Davies and of Masfield; some few wrote in the manner of the traditional country ballad. Others, descended not from Homer but from Virgil, wrote what the young communist scornfully calls 'Belles-lettres': Binyon when at his best, as I think, of Tristram and Isoult: Sturge Moore of centaurs, amazons, gazelles copied from a Persian picture: De la Mare short lyrics that carry us back through *Christabel* or *Kubla Khan*.

Through what wild centuries  
Roves back the rose?<sup>50</sup>

All of these poets remind Yeats of earlier poetic forms or subject matters. As he goes on to write: 'None of these were innovators; they preferred to keep all the past their rival'<sup>51</sup>, and while this mimicry of older forms seemed like a form of crude bourgeois sentimentalism to the modernist, he clearly found the anachrony charming.

In fact, if we look at his comments and some of the poems he includes more closely, we will see that Yeats appears to have seen in these poets not just forms, but specific content, which comes very close to the practice, and even the beliefs, of the earlier Romantic poets and which, further, align them closer to the practice of Fin-de-Siecle writers like Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson who had been his intimate fellows in the 1890s. I would like to single out two poets in particular, Masfield and de la Mare, to examine the Coleridgean influence which endears their work to Yeats.

Masfield was a poet whom Yeats had known as a friend for many years, and whose work he had encouraged. His liking of many of his poems, however, perhaps shows the stamp of a purer perception. Yeats had an abiding love of balladry and popular poetry, but had changed his views as to both what it was and why he liked it over the years. In 1897, Yeats had praised the work of the old bards and popular poets of medieval through to Renaissance Ireland, like Raftery and O'Rahilly, and had singled out expressions from such verses which seemed opaque, rather than popular. But he simultaneously condemned the pseudo-folk poetry tradition which he found in the work of Burns and others like Macaulay and Scott,

49 Ibid, p. xvi.

50 Ibid, p. xvi.

51 Ibid, p. xvii

which he saw as a fake mechanism for relaying common-places.<sup>52</sup> The real folk imagination of earlier eras was in as bizarre and rarefied as that of the aesthetes, who were natural successors to the Bards but who, alas, lived in an era where the culture was more diverse.

The Yeats of some ten years later had a slightly different view, in that rather than promulgating popular poetry, he wished to see popular language, or the language of country peasants, a language where 'nothing is common or threadbare',<sup>53</sup> in the work of the artist. But despite believing that such a language could conjure raw and vivid emotions, as it did in the work of Synge, he did not believe that this language was as exotic as the vision of Maconglinne or the poetry of Lionel Johnson, but that it should be more concrete. This concreteness in the popular idiom he continued to see after his middle period in the work of Synge's translations from Petrarch: a simplicity that is apposite and not ostentatious.<sup>54</sup>

One ballad of Masefield that Yeats included in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* was the poem 'Sea-Change', which is a mariners ballads, which tells of the transmigration of sailor's souls into birds after death:

'Goneys and' gullies an' all o' the birds o'the sea  
They ain't no birds, not really,' said Billy the Dane.  
'Not mollies, nor gullies, nor gooneys at all,' said he,  
But simply the sperrits of mariners livin' again.<sup>55</sup>

It is fair to say that the poem's mimicry of a kind of fictional mariner's language makes it seem more like a popular Newbould ballad than the kind of poem whose language should ever endear itself to Yeats. However, the subject matter itself, talking as it does of the metempsychosis of sailors into birds, is a rare occultist thought, which recalls the Gothic splendour of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (Billy the Dane finishes the poem by expressing the desire to come back as an albatross), and the matter-of-fact style with which he himself had treated fairy beliefs in 'The Celtic Twilight'. The juxtaposition of the two clearly holds a charm for him, which he identifies with an earlier romantic poetry, and in which he found a modern corollary in the work of Synge.

'All That's Past' by Walter De La Mare, better known in his day as a writer of childrens poetry, also clearly reminds Yeats of those two magical poems, 'Christabel' and 'Kubla Khan'. By the thirties Yeats considered these poems to express the Berkeleyian ontology and magic in nature which he thought was also a result of Eastern influence impregnating western form,<sup>56</sup> giving a spiritual delicacy to the natural world which made obvious the immanence of divinity, and was reminiscent of the artistic endeavours of the Zen monk.<sup>57</sup> Echoes of the forests from both poems were clearly present as an influence:

52 Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 6

53 Yeats, *Explorations*, pp. 94-5 (1902).

54 *Ibid*, p. 300 (1930)

55 Yeats, *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, p. 186.

56 Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 432.

57 Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, p. 410.

Very old are the woods;  
 And the buds that break  
 Out of the brier's boughs,  
 When March winds wake,  
 So old with their beauty are -  
 Oh, no man knows  
 Through what wild centuries  
 Roves back the rose.

Very old are the brooks;  
 And the rills that rise  
 Where snow sleeps cold beneath  
 The azure skies  
 Sing such a history  
 Of come and gone,  
 Their every drop is as wise  
 As Solomon.'

The 'sinuous rills' and 'forests ancient as the hills' in 'Kubla Khan' are recalled in Walter de la Mare's vision of the forest with old brooks and 'rills that rise'. The comparison of the wood with mens dreams, however, and the recollection of Eden recalls instead the qualities of 'Christabel's' enchanted wood, where Christabel first tastes the possibility of sin in the form of Geraldine. As well as mimicking the older forms, the poem clearly imitates some of the content and ideas of the earliest manifestations of romanticism.

For Yeats 'The Ancient Mariner' and 'Christabel' were more than just ballads, but possessed mystical, dreamlike qualities: poems which, originally, he had seen as approaching poesie pure, but now as the flower of an idealist romanticism, articulating an incarnatory view of nature. Yeats quotes De La Mare's literal lines on the rose in a context which equates it more with the metaphorical qualities which it later gains (the continuance of wisdom and dreams) as though its meaning were already symbolic, like the rose of intellectual beauty which had dominated his own poetry of the nineties. The magic of 'Kubla Khan' and 'Christabel' clearly resided in these reprises of earlier romanticism, meaning that despite the more familiar rhythms and conventions which his own fellows in the rhymers club had tried to expunge in their own quest for purity, they were effectively on the same side: the inheritors of the visionary and revelatory romanticism which modernism denied through interesting themselves with obscure and often occult ideas and emotions