

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

1865-1939

ARNOLD WHITRIDGE

Three types of men have made all beautiful things. Aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life, and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose and so do not fear, and the artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness.

THESE words, written by Yeats nearly twenty years ago, might well stand for his own epitaph. An aristocrat, a countryman and an artist, Yeats managed to play all these rôles at once, and out of his intense enjoyment he certainly made beautiful things. A good many poets of to-day, terrified at being thought "stuffy", have definitely abandoned their singing robes, but Yeats was always proud of his mantle. He was the last of the seers, the prophets of the race, and as such he occupied a position in poetry that no one else has approached.

The aristocrat in Yeats has not always been popular even in his own country. When he complained that "Ireland has grown sterile because power has passed to men who lack the training which requires a certain amount of wealth to insure continuity from generation to generation, and to free the mind in part from other tasks," he was writing as a member of that privileged Anglo-Irish stock which has always been suspect among out-and-out republicans. His family was not rich, but they enjoyed a certain position of ascendancy in the community from being the gentry, and from having inherited a tradition of leisure. His father began life as a Pre-Raphaelite painter, and though for many years he was not successful, he transmitted to his son a strong feeling of superiority to all phases of human activity except "the arts." The family came from County Sligo. As a child, Yeats was taken to London and put in a school in Hammersmith—the kind of school where boys are forbidden to play marbles because it is a form of gambling—but fortunately the holidays were spent in the wildest part of western Ireland. Here he became steeped in the legends and folklore of County Sligo. Of formal education he had very little. John Eglinton, whose *Irish Literary Portraits* should be far better known than they are, remembers Yeats at school in Dublin as a yellow-

skinned, lank, loose-coated figure, strong in algebra and euclid, but unexpectedly weak in Demosthenes. Even at that early age he seems to have cast a spell upon his companions. "We all felt it a kind of distinction to be seen walking with him." He was one of those boys, mysteriously favored by fortune, who if they borrow a book manage to make the lender feel that he is under an obligation.

This native dignity, often amounting to aloofness from the work-a-day world, is a curious trait for a national poet to possess, but no one can read far in Yeats without being aware of it. He never paraded this quality of distinction, and he never denied it. Once in discussing his plays he pointed out as one of his defects in drama the fact that normal people did not interest him. It is impossible to conceive of a Walt Whitman or a Robert Burns making any such admission. If they had been indifferent to their fellow men, they could never have become national poets, and yet Yeats's position in Ireland was equivalent to theirs in America or Scotland.

Yeats the poet was always followed by a host of enthusiasts, but as a dramatist he stands alone. His countrymen admired him, but as far as his drama was concerned, they did not follow in his footsteps. Those who really love the theatre have never cared for his plays, for he does not give us, as Synge does, characters of flesh and blood. His characters are almost always shadowy, and what we see happening on the stage is a small thing compared to what we do not see. As one of his friends says, he wrote for the stage rather from the desire to hear his lines spoken aloud than from any strong dramatic instinct. In Yeats's plays the conflict is too impalpable to be dramatic. It is the conflict between the spiritual and the material world.

His one great popular success was *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, a play which excited audiences to a pitch of frenzy, and sent them home wondering whether such plays should be produced unless one were prepared for people to go out to shoot and to be shot. Yeats was not alone responsible; for years he had been in love with Maude Gonne, a great actress who had inspired some of his most exquisite lyrics. Maude Gonne was the very incarnation of Irish nationalism, and when she appeared on the stage as an old crone lamenting the loss of her four green fields, there was no mistaking the significance of her lament:

"It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk

hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid."

This is very different from the usual rhetoric about the woes of Ireland, and no one could have written it except Yeats.

In another of his early plays, *The Land of Heart's Desire*, the conflict between the spiritual and the material world is much more startling, for here the material world means home, family life and the Church; while the spiritual life means what would seem to most of us a very uncertain existence with fairies, leprechauns and little people. Mary, the young wife, is not interested in keeping house; she yearns for an existence

Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue.

In the long run, the call of the spirit world proves the stronger. Mary starts to follow the strange elfin child, and as she does so she dies. It is obvious that the poet's sympathy goes out to the beautiful girl who could not resign herself to settling down into the common rut of peasant life, with its humdrum duties and obligations. For that reason, the Church objected to the play, just as it had objected two years before to Yeats's first venture, *The Countess Cathleen*, in which the Countess saves her country from starvation by selling her soul to the Devil. Such extravagances the Church could not condone. It asked only two questions of a play: Is it an insult to the Faith, and is it an insult to the people of Ireland? Yeats certainly had no desire to insult either the Church or his own country, but his conception of the world "insult" was not identical with that of the hierarchy.

In the earlier plays the aristocrat in Yeats is always in evidence. To be sure there are other forces at work, but before we examine the countryman or the artist let us surrender ourselves once more to the aristocrat. In *The Unicorn from the Stars* surely it is Yeats himself who is speaking through the lips of Martin!

"Father John, Heaven is not what we have believed it to be. It is not quiet, it is not singing and making music, and all strife at an end. I have seen it, I have been there. The lover still loves, but with a greater passion, and the rider still rides, but the horse goes like the wind and leaps the ridges, and the battle goes on always, always. That is the joy of Heaven, continual battle."

Now that Yeats is dead, there is no one left capable of producing that particular blend of simplicity and nobility; but such writing, exquisite as it is, could never have launched the Irish Theatre. It was the countryman in Yeats who excited the imagination of his compatriots, who called a theatre into being and taught amateur actors how to speak their lines. But even that would have been insufficient unless he had first convinced them that literature "dwindles into a mere chronicle of circumstances" if it is not constantly flooded with the passions and beliefs of ancient times.

Whenever a claim to complete self-government is advanced by any nation, it usually seeks to strengthen that claim by producing proof of a distinctive culture and literature. No one was more zealous in producing the proof than Yeats, though he did not belong to the extreme left wing which included such men as Dr. Douglas Hyde, now President of the Free State, who abjured English and insisted on reintroducing the Irish language. Yeats was not interested in studying Gaelic, or in translating old Irish manuscripts. He wanted to build up a national literature in English, but in a more flexible, vivid English than was being used across the Channel, a literature moreover founded on exclusively Irish sources. As a young man he spent a good deal of his time in literary circles in London and Paris, but beneath the cosmopolitan veneer that he very quickly acquired there was always a genuine enthusiasm for Irish culture. The admirable advice that he gave to Synge, who had left Ireland like so many others in search of a richer artistic life, was characteristic of his whole philosophy. "Give up Paris; you will never create anything by reading Racine. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves. Express a life that has never found expression." The result of Yeats's advice was *Riders to the Sea*, *In the Shadow of the Glen*, and *The Playboy of the Western World*, plays which he compelled audiences to accept and ultimately to admire.

The story of the origins of the Irish Theatre has now passed into history, but Yeats's share in the success can hardly be over-emphasized. Without him there would have been no Abbey Theatre, which means that the Irish literary movement would have been deprived of its most effective medium of expression. To have produced in the first year of its existence the vivid, concrete plays of Synge and the remote, spiritual drama of Yeats was an achievement of which any national theatre might be proud. Yeats himself in his plays is always hovering in an ethereal no-man's land between the actual world and the world

of spirits, but at the same time he was a successful and an intensely practical organizer. One of the most amazing features of his career was that his organization of the theatre and his whole-hearted devotion to Irish culture, which involved founding innumerable societies in England as well as in Ireland, were never incompatible with his artistic development. He belongs to the great company of Chaucer and Shakespeare and Milton, poets who were not ashamed of being practical men of affairs.

He is like them too in that he was never content to stand still and repeat himself. No other poet has travelled in the realms of gold as extensively as Yeats. As a young man, he was known as the poet of the Celtic Twilight. Arthur Symons, Aubrey Beardsley, Ernest Dowson, all the fraternity of the Yellow Book, recognized in him just those qualities of verbal magic which seemed to them the only thing in poetry that mattered. In their eyes he was the lineal successor of the Pre-Raphaelites, and they admired him not only for the sheer loveliness of his verse, but also for his engaging freedom from the high moral sentiments of the Victorians. His own countrymen were not convinced. They criticized his poetry for its lack of rhetoric, and for "its refusal to preach a doctrine or to consider the seeming necessities of a cause," but Yeats was not willing to degrade his talent into an instrument of propaganda. Ireland he would gladly serve, but he must serve it in his own way. "We sought to make a more subtle rhythm, a more organic form, than that of the older Irish poets who wrote in English, but always to remember certain ardent ideas and high attitudes of mind which were the nation itself, to our belief, as far as a nation can be summarized in the intellect."

At the same time that he was striving to do for Irish what William Morris had done for Scandinavian myths, he was developing a note of wistful suggestiveness that for many ardent lovers of poetry still remains the essential thing in Yeats:

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet;
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Anyone else would have been content to linger in a country that offered such charms, but having once established his reputation as the poet of romantic nostalgia, Yeats pushed forward into

more difficult territory. With the publication of *Responsibilities* he discards the bright tapestries of legendary figures, together with his yearnings for a simpler civilization, and adopts a more austere note. The explanation for the change is simple enough. Imitators had stolen his song:

Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies...

He dismisses them with the significant comment:

Song, let them take it
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

No one can pass from the cloudy beauty of Yeats's early poetry to the terseness and simplicity of *The Green Helmet* and *Responsibilities* without being conscious that the poet has acquired a new vigour. Something, no doubt, has been lost:

The fascination of what's difficult
Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
Spontaneous joy and natural content
Out of my heart.

The gaiety^m and the wistfulness of such poems as *The Fiddler of Dooney* and *Innisfree* have never been recovered, but the twentieth century admires a more sinewy poetry, and it is on the strength of his later verse that Yeats is now hailed as the greatest poet of our time. When Yeats says that there is more enterprise in walking naked, he means that by denying himself the full resources of the language, the vivid epithets and haunting rhythms he always had at his command, he came to depend entirely on the sincerity and dignity of his emotion. The lament for Lady Gregory's son, the Irish airman who foresees his death, is intensely moving, all the more so because it does not rely for its effect upon those elements of sensuous beauty which Yeats knew so well how to use:

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love.

This poem must have been written when Yeats was at least fifty years old, but once again with the careless prodigality of genius he abandoned his treasure as soon as he had found it, and started off in pursuit of a new style. Symbolism beckoned to

him, an attitude of mind in which he had become interested as a young man in Paris, though it came to mean something very different to him from what it meant to Mallarmé and Verlaine. Dr. Johnson defines symbolism in his dictionary as that which comprehends in its figures a representation of something else, and that is precisely the meaning the world always held for Yeats. In Mallarmé's mind the physical world did not exist at all except as a symbol for ideas. It was only a gigantic stage set which could be put up and taken down at the will of the poet. Yeats never for a moment ignored the physical reality of the world as did Mallarmé. On the contrary, he revelled in it. As he says in his essay on the symbolism of poetry:

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, . . . and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion.

The more vividly we are impressed by the external world, the more likely is it to evoke precise emotions. When he writes of "the round green eyes and the long wavering bodies of the dark leopards of the moon", we may be puzzled by the significance of the image, but of one thing we can be quite sure—whatever emotion he is striving to express has been evoked by the moon and by nothing else.

The attempt to achieve a fusion of the arts, which was one of the main purposes of the earlier symbolists, has certainly attracted him, but he never went as far in that direction as Rimbaud, who insisted that each of the vowel sounds possessed a definite colour of its own. The qualification of the experience of one sense by that of another has been one of the recognized tricks of modern poetry. Edith Sitwell, for instance, speaks of "clucking flowers" and of "shrill grass". Other poets have found it necessary to dislocate the language in order to express the confusion of their emotions, but Yeats will have nothing to do with such devices. His syntax is always clear. The difficulties that he offers the reader, and very real difficulties they are, can be traced to the obscurity of his symbols. When he wrote in one of his recent poems,

Seek those images
That constitute the wild,
The lion and the virgin,
The harlot and the child,

we can only guess at the thought or the emotion he wishes to convey, because we do not know what the images represent. They may be taken from Irish mythology, with which Yeats assumes we are just as familiar as with the mythology of Greece and Rome, or from the prophetic books of William Blake, or from some obscure work of occultism. The future biographer of Yeats will have to hack his way through a jungle of magic, astrology and theosophy, which will require a curious mind as well as infinite patience. Up till now it has defied the efforts of even his most ardent admirers. Many critics have written on Yeats, but no one has yet grappled with the mass of his esoteric learning. Even when that work is accomplished, as eventually it must be, it will probably not alter very materially the popular estimate of him.

First and foremost he is an Irishman, and an Irishman whose personality combines the three types of men who have made all beautiful things—the aristocrat, the countryman and the artist. Nationality is sometimes of no importance in a poet. It makes no difference whether we consider T. S. Eliot an American or as a naturalized Englishman, but with Yeats the question of nationality overshadows everything else. No other nation but Ireland could have produced him. The very fact that he lacks moral profundity is in itself significant. The Anglo-Saxon genius, Whitman and Emerson as well as Browning and Matthew Arnold, gravitates towards an ethical view of the universe. The Irish genius does not. What Yeats has written belongs to the world of those who have sought refuge in their own souls. In spite of his aloofness from mundane things, he really is "Heaven's answer to Ireland's demand for a national poet." Heaven does not often give us just what we ask. In this case it provided an aristocrat rather than a man of the people, an agnostic instead of a Catholic, and a poet who expressed national character and feeling without any deliberate political aim.