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CHILDREN IN THE POETRY OF YEATS

YEATS' MULTIPLICITY OF POWERFUL POEMS about sexual love, old age, and Irish society has distracted attention from his poetic treatment of children. Apart from a number of articles and essays on "Among Schoolchildren", the subject remains literally unexplored. And yet four of Yeats' finest poems—"A Prayer for My Son", "A Prayer for My Daughter", and "The Dolls", and especially "Among Schoolchildren" (which many readers consider his greatest single poem)—are specifically about children, and there are many references to children and childhood scattered throughout his *Collected Poems*.

The strongest single impression with which one comes away from reading Yeats' poems on children, and his references to them, is of the consistency, clear-sightedness, and realism of his attitudes. Although he may have been, as he has said, a Romantic writing when Romanticism had reached its most extravagant phase, he is seldom if ever prone to Romantic exaggeration in his treatment of childhood—nor, for that matter, to any other exaggerations. Attitudes to children in literature—as they are intelligently discussed, for example in Peter Coveney's *Poor Monkey* (London: Rockcliff, 1957) or in Leslie Fiedler's essay "The Eye of Innocence" in his *No! in Thunder* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960)—have generally fallen into three groups: the eighteenth-century rationalist view, which saw the child as a small adult to be regulated as quickly as possible into rational and moral perfection; the Puritan Christian view, which saw the child as a miserable sinner in desperate need of salvation; and the Romantic view, expressed most clearly by Blake and Wordsworth but given premonitory utterance by Vaughan and Traherne in the seventeenth century, which saw the child as innocent, intuitively wise, spontaneous, happy, perceptive, sensitive, or "trailing clouds of glory". Of these three attitudes, it need scarcely be said, Yeats' comes closest to the Romantic, but he is singularly free from its more extreme manifestations.

This is the more remarkable when we recall that Yeats came to maturity when the Romantic cult of the child was at its apogee of decadence, the last

decades of the nineteenth century. Of those decades, Coveney writes: "Writers began to draw on the general sympathy for childhood that had been diffused; but for patently subjective reasons, their interest in childhood serves not as a means for integration of experience, but creates a barrier of nostalgia and regret between childhood and the potential responses of adult life. The child becomes a means of escape from the pressures of adult adjustment . . ." (*Poor Monkey*, p. 192). Marie Corelli, J. M. Barrie, A. E. Housman, and Hugh Walpole all provide examples of this escapist tendency; in Yeats—at least in the mature Yeats—it is found not at all. Where, as in "Among Schoolchildren", he is momentarily tempted into this self-pitying nostalgia, he rapidly overcomes it by self-depreciating irony, and goes on to one of the most triumphant examples in literary history of the "integration of experience", the famous final apostrophe of that poem.

As we might expect, it is in his early poems that Yeats most nearly approximates the stock Romantic attitudes towards children. Even here, however, the stress is not so much on the more doubtful of the Romantic concepts—innocence, wisdom, religious sensibility—as on the more observable, provable features of childhood: its fragility and vulnerability. The first reference is in the first poem in the first section of *Collected Poems*, and it is to "the stammering schoolboy" who awkwardly reads aloud in class some story of heroic adventure. This first reference is characteristic and indicative: Yeats was always aware of the pressures which orthodox systems of education impose upon the child. The boy's stammer is an objective correlative which sums up all his nervousness, his shyness, his sense of being entangled in some world he never made; and the emphasis is not on the boy's inherent superiority to adults but on his sense of inferiority, even if it is implied that that sense of inferiority is baseless. (In a late poem, "A Dialogue of Self and Soul", Yeats was to enshrine this same perception in the memorable phrase "the ignominy of boyhood".)

The next reference to childhood, however, is not so admirable, and is one of the few examples of Yeats' falling into the trap of Romantic exaggeration. The allusion occurs in that most awkward and ugly of all Yeats' poems, "Ephemera", and it reads "when the poor tired child, Passion, falls asleep". In the background of that line lie many of the clichés of Victorian poetry and fiction, those scenes in which pitiful children die or innocent children fall asleep while maternal tears cascade upon the pillowslip.

Another Victorian stereotype, that of the sensitive child who must escape

from the harsh world of reality to some land of faery or Treasure Island of romance, occurs in "The Stolen Child", with its monotonous, sentimental refrain:

*Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping
Than you can understand.*

Even in this weak poem, however, the sentimentality is checked by irony: Yeats makes the faeries faintly ridiculous by having them whisper in the ears of "slumbering trout" to "Give them unquiet dreams", by having them lean from ferns "that drop their tears/over the young streams", and by having them foolishly congratulate themselves on the fact that "The solemn-eyed" child will

... hear no more the lowing
Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal-chest.

This implied endorsement of the pleasures of the real world, indeed, transposes the whole effect of the poem, and what began as a piece of sentimental escapism ends in an acceptance of familiar, domestic reality.

The Romantic concept of the spontaneous, happy child finds expression in "The Meditation of the Old Fisherman", but here again it is decisively modified. The old fisherman who sees the waves "dance by my feet like children at play" and dreams nostalgically of the days "When I was a boy with never a crack in my heart", is guilty of the falsification of experience, of deliberate self-delusion. But the poem is a dramatic utterance: it is the fisherman, not Yeats, who asserts that "the waves were more gay", the Junes warmer, the herring more plentiful, and the girls more beautiful in the halcyon days of his boyhood.

Yeats himself came closer to falsification in "The Ballad of Moll Magee", one of the many Romantic and Victorian poems dealing with the death of a child and the woes of its grief-stricken mother. Perhaps it was a consciousness of this fact that led Yeats to dismiss this poem, in a letter to John O'Leary, as a "mere experiment". Once again, however, romantic illusions are not

allowed full play: the "little childer" to whom Moll tells her story are not romantic innocents but very real sadists—she has to begin and end her story by begging them not to throw stones at her!

In a rather similar fashion, Yeats manages to redeem "A Cradle Song" from the excesses of that popular nineteenth-century genre, the sentimental lullaby. Here, however, it is humour, rather than realism, which is the saving salt. The angels who stoop above the infant's bed are said to be doing so because "They weary of trooping/With the whimpering dead." Too charitably, perhaps, I take that as a bit of black humour—an attitude, however, to which Yeats himself lends some confirmation by the explicit humorous gaiety of the second stanza:

God's laughing in Heaven
To see you so good,
The Sailing Seven
Are gay with his mood.

After such comic relief, we are almost ready to swallow the unabashed sentimentality of the third and final stanza:

I sigh that kiss you,
For I must own
That I shall miss you
When you have grown.

There is a matter-of-factness about that stanza, a kind of honest platitudinousness, which does something to redeem it. We know it could be so much worse in, say, Coventry Patmore.

There is at least one instance, however, where Yeats is guilty of what Coveney calls the late nineteenth-century practice of drawing on "the general sympathy for childhood", or of what I. A. Richards might have called using the child merely to elicit a stock response. It occurs in one of Yeats' most flatulent poems, "The Lover Tells of the Rose in his Heart". There, declaring that "All things uncomely and broken, all things worn out and old" are "wronging your image that blossoms a rose in the deep of my heart", he suddenly, for no apparent reason except that the weeping child was a guaranteed source of facile emotion in the late Victorian period, brings in "The cry of a child by the roadway". The mature Yeats would never have allowed himself to indulge in such an unmotivated and unspecific allusion.

There are some other references to children in the early poems of Yeats,

but they add nothing to what we have said of his attitudes. In these early poems we see Yeats accepting in their main outlines the Romantic and occasionally even the Victorian attitudes towards children, but always modifying them to some extent and usually to a decisive extent. Irony, realism, and humour almost always are invoked, singly or in combination, to stop the poem short of the worst excesses of idealizing or sentimentalizing of childhood. In the poems of Yeats' maturity, the poems written after 1900, the relics of the Romantic or Victorian stereotypes are very rare indeed: there is a new honesty, a new realism, in both the content and style of his allusions to children. At the same time, the main ingredient of his attitude, his tender concern for childish fragility and vulnerability, persists and is indeed strengthened.

The first hint of the mature manner comes in that poem which in so many ways marks a turning-point in Yeats' poetic career, "Adam's Curse". It comes as a mere aside, when the "beautiful mild woman" replies:

"To be born woman is to know—
Although they do not talk of it at school—
That we must labour to be beautiful."

The hint is not so much in what is said—although the reference to the obliviousness of orthodox education to the real conditions of human life reflects one of Yeats' deepest convictions, and points forward to "Among Schoolchildren"—as in the tone and manner of expression. The tone is no longer rhetorical, nostalgic, or sentimental: rather it is sarcastic, off-hand, mordant, and dry. The words are not richly sensuous nor in any sense ornamental—they are the words of ordinary speech, in the order and rhythm of speech. There is implied a whole effort to get away from conventional attitudes and opinions, and to see things as they really are. The mood is closer to Swift than to Tennyson.

This far more thoroughgoing realism, verging now towards bitterness as in the early poems it had sometimes come dangerously close to sentimentality, is found in "The Coming of Wisdom with Time". In this poem it is implied that, if childhood is indeed a time of relative happiness, its happiness is deceptive and treacherous:

Though leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
Now I may wither into the truth.

We have here a strong premonition of the danger against which Yeats was to

struggle—but struggle successfully—in all his late, great poems about childhood: the danger of exaggerating the tragic dimension of human experience, of indulging in easy cynicism.

The balance tips ominously towards facile cynicism in the pair of poems "To a Child Dancing in the Wind" and "Two Years Later". Here the innocence of the child is seen rather as ignorance: the vulnerable child can dance and tumble out her hair in spontaneous joy only because she does not recognize her own vulnerability and the power of the destructive forces which surround her. To accept life, to see the world as ultimately beneficent, is to indulge in dreams; the reality is suffering and the end is tragedy:

O you will take whatever's offered
 And dream that all the world's a friend,
 Suffer as your mother suffered,
 Be as broken in end.

Yeats, however, recognized this danger of facile cynicism in one of the best stanzas of one of his best poems, "A Prayer for my Daughter":

My mind, because the minds that I have loved,
 The sort of beauty that I have approved,
 Prosper but little, has dried up of late,
 Yet knows that to be choked with hate
 May well be of all evil chances chief.
 If there's no hatred in a mind
 Assault and battery of the wind
 Can never tear the linnet from the leaf.

This poem illustrates how Yeats did succeed in making his best poems about children a means to the integration of experience. His sense of the little girl's vulnerability, so powerfully expressed in the early references to a howling storm, the levelling wind, the screaming Atlantic gale, the flooded stream, the frenzied drum and "the murderous innocence of the sea", is complemented by his later affirmation of the values which can cushion her against the shocks of disaster: modest beauty, natural kindness, courtesy, self-reliance, custom, ceremony, and the "radical innocence" of the human soul. Here Yeats, in his emphasis upon order, discipline, and self-restraint, comes closer to the eighteenth-century conception of the child than to the Romantic conception: the child is seen as a delicate growth which needs the shelter of social and

civilized values, rather than as a beautiful blossom which society will warp and wither.

If "A Prayer for my Daughter" illustrates the greater balance and profundity of the mature Yeats' treatment of the child, it also illustrates the advances in his mature style. The predominantly run-on lines of the first two stanzas create an effect of frightening speed; then the poem, as if by a supreme effort of will, a deliberate refusal to be stampeded into panic, slows down to a grave and dignified pace. The image of the wind, introduced in the first line, recurs several times in the first and second stanzas, in the "assault and battery of the wind" in the seventh stanza, in the "old bellows full of angry wind" in the eighth, in the "every windy quarter howl" in the ninth—and is conspicuous by its absence in the tenth and last, where the laurel tree of custom spreads its branches in a windless sky. Thus the wind, which in the first stanza was seen as all powerful and triumphantly destructive—what protection is there in a cradle-hood and coverlid against a wind that can level haystacks and roofs?—is gradually cut down, first, to the figure of an angry but impotent boxer or blustering petty criminal, next to the ridiculous form of an old bellows, then to a silly howler that can frighten no one, and finally is stilled altogether. Counterpointing the diminishing image of the wind is the steadily enlarging image of the tree: in the first stanza "Gregory's wood" is dismissed as "no obstacle" to the wind; in the second stanza the branches of the elm scream and dance in agony; in the sixth stanza the growing girl is seen as "a flourishing hidden tree" and as "some green laurel/Rooted in one dear perpetual place"; in the seventh stanza, the tree has become a safe refuge for the linnnet, which the wind cannot dislodge; and in the final stanza the laurel tree, proudly spreading its branches, has defeated the wind entirely. The poem, like all Yeats' greatest poems, is a profoundly humanistic, life-affirming document. The wind, by the end of the poem, has come to symbolize all those evil forces which assault humanity, the tree to symbolize all the human values which staunchly withstand them; and there is no doubt which has triumphed.

"A Prayer for my Son" is at first glance less humanistic and more religious. Again an infant is being threatened by evil forces, but this time the forces are supernatural—"devilish things"—rather than natural, and, accordingly, supernatural powers are invoked to protect the child. "A strong ghost" is bidden to stand at the head of his bed, and Christ, the all-powerful God who has nevertheless known what it is to be a helpless infant, is asked to do the bidding.

The religious figures of the poem, however, are very human persons, and the poem is at least as much a tribute to the fidelity of human love as a plea for divine intervention. Christ, "wailing upon a woman's knee", is said to have known "All that worst ignominy/Of flesh and bone", and His parents are deliberately referred to as "a woman and a man", who, when He was hunted by Herod's servants, protected Him "with human love."

This poem is a further instance of the tact and skill with which Yeats manages his material, so disposing and modulating it that it is saved from excess. The experience upon which the poem is based, detailed by Yeats on page 16 of the 1962 edition of *A Vision*, is, to say the least, bizarre, and to a sceptical mind plainly incredible:

A little after my son's birth I came home to confront my wife with the statement "Michael is ill". A smell of burnt feathers had announced what she and the doctor had hidden. When regular communication was near its end and my work of study and arrangement begun, I was told that henceforth the Frustrators would attack my health and that of my children, and one afternoon, knowing from the smell of burnt feathers that one of my children would be ill within three hours, I felt before I could recover self-control the medieval helpless horror at witchcraft. I can discover no apparent difference between a natural and supernatural smell, except that the natural smell comes and goes gradually while the other is suddenly there and then as suddenly gone.

This does not seem a very promising basis for a tolerable twentieth-century poem, but Yeats brings it off. He does so by introducing into the strange episode so much of the familiar world. The references to the child turning in bed, to his morning meal, to the mother's very human need of sleep, to Christ's wailing upon His mother's knee, to Joseph and Mary hurrying like any anxious parents "through the smooth and rough"—these references anchor the poem in the ordinary world and give credibility and human relevance to an experience which we might otherwise reject as utterly fantastic.

Contributing to the same effect is the diction of the poem. Throughout, with one or two conspicuous exceptions to act as foils, Yeats uses the simplest, strongest, most familiar words. Think, for example, of what a subtle but fatal alteration of effect would have resulted from the use of "mighty" rather than "strong" as the adjective for the ghost, of "wail" rather than "cry", of "need of sleep" rather than "fill of sleep". Words like "fist", "devilish things", "simplest want", "knee", "flesh and bone", "servants", "a woman and a man" all humanize and domesticate the otherwise *outré* situation.

Indeed, the more closely one examines this poem the more one is im-

pressed by its subtlety, ambiguity, and profundity. It is called a prayer, and apostrophizes Christ, but it ends by praising human love and by affirming that it was by the patient fidelity of his human parents that Christ himself was saved. It is, thus, a prayer that provides its own answer: we are left with the clear implication that the child's strongest defence against whatever devilish things assail him is not any strong ghost nor supernatural agent but his own natural, human parents. "A Prayer for my Son" is only an apparent exception to Yeats' persistent humanism.

Equally humanistic in its effect is "The Dolls". Here again is a poem which far transcends the occasion (the rumoured pregnancy of a mistress) which is said to have prompted it. It is a satire on those who prefer the deadly perfection of dolls to the lively imperfection of children, and it is closely related to one of the themes of "Among Schoolchildren": that true meaning is to be found in organic growth rather than in static perfection. The dolls, because they do not decay with age (one of them, "being kept for show", has "lived" for many generations), and because they do not cry and defecate, think that they are superior to the human baby which their makers have suddenly produced in their midst: one of them calls the infant an insult, another calls it "a noisy and filthy thing" which will disgrace them. With a beautiful twist of irony, Yeats has the mother of the human child accept the view of the dolls, and humbly apologize to her husband for her fecundity: "My dear, my dear, O dear,/It was an accident." This, of course, suggests another of Yeats' persistent themes, that many good things come by chance, that wisdom is a butterfly and not a gloomy bird of prey.

This poem is so full of irony and ambiguity that it is odd that recent critics, so fond of these qualities in an age made tolerable only by ironic ambiguity of vision, have not paid more respectful attention to it. The proud dolls are "in the doll-maker's house": in other words, for all their pride they are only creatures of a creature, occupants of a house only on the sufferance of its rightful owners. Although they accuse the infant of being noisy, one of them bawls and the other "out-cries the whole shelf"; although the dolls accuse the child of filthiness, they are "kept for show" and thus owe any cleanliness they may claim to the efforts of those who keep them; although they feel superior to humanity, their proudest boast is that "There's not a *man* can report/Evil of this place"; and although they think they are so very knowing, they have no knowledge of the generation of children and think that the man and woman have merely *brought* the child here. The woman, instead of being

proud of her capacity to generate true life, allows the dolls to convince her that her child is somehow disgraceful, and apologizes to her equally troubled husband. The relevance of all this, at a time when some people are ready to elevate the computer over the human brain, or the electronic media over the humanly imperfect book, scarcely needs pointing out. Nor do I need to describe in any detail how the poem illustrates the balanced nature of the mature Yeats' attitude to childhood: children *are* noisy and filthy, but they are also alive, and thus can grow as dolls can not.

If "The Dolls" has suffered undue neglect at the hands of the critics, "Among School children" has suffered the opposite fate. So many essays in exegesis have been devoted to it that, if it were not so central to my theme, there would be a temptation to omit it altogether. Discussion, however, will be comparatively brief.

With all due deference to the insights of Cleanth Brooks, John Wain, Frank Kermode and Thomas Parkinson, I believe that the single most illuminating essay on this poem is "'Among Schoolchildren' and the Education of the Irish Spirit" by Donald T. Torchiana in the book *In Excited Reverie* (New York: Macmillan, 1965). By proving that Yeats was endorsing the system of education practised and promoted by Maria Montessori, Professor Torchiana has disposed of many misinterpretations of the poem, and has permitted us to see its structure in a new light.

John Wain (in *Interpretations*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955) asserts that "the poem breaks into two halves", that Yeats "abandons the circular technique; after the halfway mark, there is no recurrence of the school-room, the children, the nun, the personal situation." He concludes: "Instead of circling back on itself, the poem moves forward, in the form of a bridge, then suddenly stops with no opposite shore in sight. It is not a bridge after all but a pier. It leads nowhere; its purpose is to afford us, before we turn and retrace our steps, a bleak and chastening glimpse into the deep waters." Almost every clause in the above series can be factually refuted. What has led Mr. Wain astray, perhaps, is that he has too narrowly conceived the subject of the poem, which he begins his essay by declaring to be "the relationship or interpenetration of matter and spirit." If one looks for a straightforward analysis of such an abstract problem as that, the poem may seem to break into two, or to lead nowhere.

The subject of "Among Schoolchildren" is what its title leads us to expect it will be: a series of observations, memories, and meditations of the

poet on finding himself among a class of schoolchildren. The schoolroom, the nun, the children, the classwork, the singing and the "smiling public man" are there all the time; if we are in any danger of forgetting that, Yeats jogs our memory by mentioning or alluding to one or other or several of them at intervals throughout the poem. The schoolroom, for example, is described in the first stanza, is implied in the second by the "harsh reproof", is referred to in the "there" of the third stanza, is implied by the "old scarecrow" of the fourth and "that shape with sixty or more winters on its head" in the fifth, is suggested by the reference to Aristotle birching Alexander in the sixth and to the nuns and mothers in the seventh, and is quite clearly present by contrast in the references to labour and "blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil" in the eighth and last. It would be possible, but impossibly tiresome to do the same kind of analysis for all the major ingredients of that first stanza. The poem is very intricately integrated.

Its structure *is* circular, but circular in a somewhat unusual way. The first stanza is the hub of the wheel; the succeeding stanzas are spokes radiating from this hub; the connections between the stanzas form the rim of the wheel; the final stanza returns to the hub. The middle six stanzas of the poem do indeed fall into two linked sequences, but the poem does not break in half. Stanzas II to IV relate to the particular case of Maud Gonne, who was once a child like these but is now an ageing woman; stanzas V to VII generalize this problem of change and decay and refer it for possible solutions to theories of reincarnation, philosophy, and religion; but there is no abrupt break between stanzas IV and V, since the "comfortable kind of old scarecrows" of IV is obviously "that shape/With sixty or more winters on its head" of V.

There is not space in this essay for a detailed explication of "Among Schoolchildren", but its implications for Yeats' attitude towards children may be briefly summarized. That an orthodox and repressive educational system was destructive of childish joy and spontaneity was a commonplace of Romantic discussions of childhood, perhaps the most memorable expression of it being Blake's "The School Boy":

I love to rise in a summer morn,
When the birds sing on every tree:
The distant huntsman winds his horn,
And the skylark sings with me.
O! what sweet company!

call everyone to see, and if there were some who did not go, he ran to take hold of their clothes, forcing them to come and see. We all had to go and stand about the written work to admire the marvel, and to unite our exclamations of surprise with the joyous cries of the fortunate author.

Such are the ideas that underlie "Among Schoolchildren", which is primarily, although by no means exclusively, a poem about the education of children. Yeats begins the poem by describing, approvingly, an ideal form of education in a model school; then, realistically, he is struck with the realization that no system of education can save us from the process of ageing; he glances at theories of reincarnation, speculations of philosophers, and the consolations of religion, only to dismiss them as inadequate attempts to find permanence amidst flux; and then in the final triumphant stanza he accepts and glories in the fact of flux, seeing the cycle of spontaneous life itself as the one permanent and self-sufficing thing. Work becomes joy when it is performed voluntarily, spontaneously, and rhythmically; life becomes joyful when body and soul function in harmony; true beauty is a spontaneous development and not something to be desperately sought after; wisdom arises from our normal, free involvement with our environment rather than by other- or self-imposed discipline; human life is not a long slow descent from childish innocence to senile despair but a cycle like the life-cycle of a tree, with each segment of the cycle having its own rightness, its own function; we cannot abstract that which performs the cycle from the cycle itself, any more than we can have a true dance without a dancer or a dancer without a dance. "Among Schoolchildren" is a poem of humanistic affirmation, but it is an affirmation made only after all the negative factors have been looked at squarely and long.

Another facet of Yeats' humanistic affirmation which is involved with his treatment of children is his concern with the continuity of a human tradition. We have already glanced at this concern in reference to "A Prayer for my Daughter", but it is a quite frequent theme in his later poetry. In the introductory poem to *Responsibilities* he movingly regrets his own failure, up to that time, to produce offspring: "I have no child, I have nothing but a book,/Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine." But perhaps the most poignant and powerful passage on this matter occurs in the fourth section of his "Meditations in Time of Civil War". There he does not suggest, as the lines just quoted from *Responsibilities* may be felt to suggest, that the mere generation of children is a guarantee of continuity. Yeats' dominant attitude, for all his occa-

sional descents into bleak despair, is affirmative, but it is by no means a facile affirmation:

Having inherited a vigorous mind
 From my old fathers, I must nourish dreams
 And leave a woman and a man behind
 As vigorous of mind, and yet it seems
 Life scarce can cast a fragrance on the wind,
 Scarce spread a glory to the morning beams,
 But the torn petals strew the garden plot;
 And there's but common greenness after that.

And what if my descendants lose the flower
 Through natural declension of the soul,
 Through too much business with the passing hour,
 Through too much play or marriage with a fool?
 May this laborious stair and this stark tower
 Become a roofless ruin that the owl
 May build in the cracked masonry and cry
 Her desolation to the desolate sky.

A similar realism is found in Yeats' reminiscences of his own boyhood. The reminiscences in his poetry are few, and he never indulges in the facile nostalgia which was so common an ingredient in Romantic and Victorian literature. Instead of idealizing his childhood associates or himself as a child, he gives us specific memories, portraits which show the warts and all. In "Under Saturn", for example, he writes:

. . . . my horse's flanks are spurred
 By childish memories of an old cross Pollexfen,
 And of a Middleton, whose name you never heard,
 And of a red-haired Yeats whose looks, although he died
 Before my time, seem like a vivid memory.
 You heard that labouring man who had served my people. He said
 Upon the open road, near to the Sligo quay—
 No, no, not said, but cried it out—'You have come
 again,
 And surely after twenty years it was time to come'.
 I am thinking of a child's vow sworn in vain
 Never to leave that valley his fathers called their home.

Instead of looking back to his childhood regretfully, as did so many of

the Romantics, and using nostalgia as an evasion of adult responsibilities, Yeats in his sixties declares that he has still all the faculties he had as a boy: uses his own youth, in other words, not as a saddle but as a spur. In "The Towers" he declares:

Never had I more excited, passionate, fantastical
 Imagination, nor an ear and eye
 That more expected the impossible—
 No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly,
 Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulbin's back
 And had the livelong summer day to spend.

Rather than as a source of boasting, he is inclined to use memories of his boyhood as a means to humility, as in the self-depreciation of the middle stanza of "At Algeciras":

Often at evening when a boy
 Would I carry to a friend—
 Hoping more substantial joy
 Did an older mind commend—
 Not such as are in Newton's metaphor,
 But actual shells of Ross's level shore.

This note of self-depreciation, balanced it is true with a certain measure of self-approbation, is also struck in "What Then?" the poem Yeats as an elderly man wrote for the boys of the high school he had attended. In its irony and ambiguity, the fine balance it strikes between humanistic affirmation and an awareness of the possible ultimate futility of all human effort, its realistic clear-sightedness and yet its persistent refusal to be fully daunted, this poem makes a fitting conclusion for this essay:

His chosen comrades thought at school
 He must grow a famous man;
 He thought the same and lived by rule,
 All his twenties crammed with toil,
'What then?' sang Plato's ghost. 'When then?'

Everything he wrote was read,
 After certain years he won
 Sufficient money for his need,
 Friends that have been friends indeed;
'What then?' sang Plato's ghost. 'What then?'

All his happier dreams came true—
 A small old house, wife, daughter, son,
 Grounds where plum and cabbage grew,
 Poets and Wits about him drew;
'What then?' sang Plato's ghost. 'When then?'

'The work is done;' grown old he thought,
 'According to my boyish plan;
 Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
 Something to perfection brought';
But louder sang the ghost, 'What then?'

To sum up, as is proved by this and the other poems that have been quoted or alluded to, Yeats' attitude towards children was not rationalistic, or Puritan, or romantic, but profoundly humanistic and realistic. Aware of human strength, he was also aware of human weaknesses; aware of our reach for perfection, he was also aware of the limitations of our grasp of perfection when seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. He saw the child not as a species apart, but as one who shared the constant vulnerability and the occasional splendour of the whole human race.

THE FALL

Diane McLaren

Slicing in from an east wind
 The knife edge of snow pared days
 From a late March calendar.
 Winter held its yearly wrestling match
 With spring, nearly routing her
 In his frigid holds until the fall;
 The count acknowledged crocuses to come.