

ESSAY ON YEATS

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Author's Note: This essay was published in 1995 in *Psychological Perspectives* under the title of "A Sudden Flaming Word." It was, in looking back, too effusive. So, I've culled out the overly dramatic and much of the excess. It has taken me years to corral my wild horses. The writer, sometimes, needs to look back with cool objectivity.

Musical Strings

In an unpublished lecture on "*Modern Ireland*," Yeats wrote: "And style, whether of life or literature, comes, I think, from excess, from something over and above utility which wrings the heart." Yeats's proclivity for writing was derived from his obsessive concern with time, with how quickly it catapults one into old age. In "The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water," he says: "I heard the old, old men say, /Everything alters, /And one by one we drop away. /They had hands like claws, and their knees/Were twisted like the old thorn-trees/By the waters. /I heard the old, old men say, /All that's beautiful drifts away/Like the waters."

In "Lamentation of the Old Pensioner" Yeats shows a similar concern: "My contemplations are of Time/That has transfigured me.../I spit into the face of Time/That has transfigured me." Here he has capitalized time, thereby giving it significance. This keen sense of time's passage leads the poet into what this writer calls a temporary stay against death.

With a sense of fleeting time, Yeats wrote "Hearts are not had as a gift/ but hearts are earned." In his introduction to *Yeats*, Rosenthal says: "Byzantium became for Yeats the purest embodiment of the union and subsequent transfiguration through art of the fleshly condition and the ideal of holiness." Writings like "Sailing to Byzantium" achieves its symbolic scope, first by Yeats's quest for earthly knowledge, then by his quest for signs of soul. In the city of Byzantium, the center of European civilization, Yeats searches for his much sought-after Unity of Being. He knows that without it: "An aged man is but a paltry thing, /A tattered coat upon a stick, unless/Soul clap its hands and sing." The flame within Yeats becomes the illuminator of the pen.

"When composing a poem in a manuscript book, Yeats often established a center and then worked out in both directions," wrote Bradford. This defies logic, but logic is poor measure of the artistic process. What's important to note in the previous quote is that Yeats established a center from his desire for unity within himself. The center is a place of concentrated activity, the porthole of focus. Out of need for a central point in his own life, Yeats worked from the center outward, aware that the circumference of possibility was larger by doing so. From the middle all directions become options.

Yeats keenly knew that poetry demands one to feel intensely and employ discipline as though it were a governing hand. In his 1909 diary Yeats reveals how he entered such moments: "Every note must come as a casual thought, then it will be my life." The work, as musical notation, played its notes through him.

His seventh entry in the same diary: "It seemed to me that true love is a discipline, and it needs so much wisdom that the love of Solomon and Sheba must have lasted, for all the silence of the *Scriptures*. Each divines the secret self in the other, and refusing to believe in the mere daily self, creates a mirror where the lover and the beloved sees an image to copy in life."

Northrop Frye says in *Fables of Identity*: "In the highest phases love is a spiritual education and a discipline of the soul, which leads the lover upward from the sensible to the eternal world." Allen Tate says in his essay: "The lesser poets invite the pride of the critic to its own affirmation: the greater poets—and Yeats is among them—ask us to understand not only their minds but our own." To address others from the "foul rag-and-bone shop" of one's heart is a powerful example of devotion resulting from a life lived with emotional intensity." Clearly, emotions are the music the body plays—art, the furthering of that music.

What's truly admirable in Yeats is that he shared his journey as an artist, daring to reveal the early juvenilia poems. Because of that we have the documentary of a writer's progress through his diaries, poetry, worksheets and letters. Such strength taken to strip in public—to leave behind the worksheets, the embarrassment of one's struggles. This requires not only an adventurous nature, but also trust that what one reveals will not be used against one. That type of trust eventually leads to a greater ability to pare away all extraneous material—for trust acts as a psychic opening, revealing more to the poet. Bradford says in *Yeats at Work*: "Part of the greatness of Yeats's later poetry comes from his paring away of everything that can be pared away, revealing by that paring the stark, inevitable outline."

Yeats rewrote his poetry throughout his life and was satisfied with only a small number of poems—thus the dilemma of the mature eye looking back, desiring perfection. In his introduction to the collected essays, John Unterecker says: "Yeats's idea of craft was a very old-fashioned one of technique that in final draft conceals itself in the appearance of effortless, casual speech."

A writer can sometimes inspire others to engage in their own acts of courage. Writing that corresponds to the reader's experience becomes another rung in the ladder of transcendence. When this happens, words gain a sacred and magical quality, for the magical is the sacred unrecognized. The poet not only converses with angels, but also frequents the disruptions of the underworld and this requires strength and determination. Devotion to one's art drives the poet on. In Latin *devo* means to vow, to pledge, to give one's life to a particular end. "Turning and turning in the widening gyre/The falcon cannot hear the falconer. /Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." What held the center for Yeats was his foothold in the sacred.

For Yeats the poet is an amalgamation of everything, a strange hodgepodge of conflicting paradoxes. It is from such conflict that he sought harmony. In "Vacillation" he says: "Between extremities/Man runs his course." To maintain equilibrium amid duality over a long period of time is no simple feat. In "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" there is a clue to what kept Yeats in balance.

"What matter if the ditches are impure?
What matter if I live it all once more?

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch . . .

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;

. . . We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest."

Yeats was well read in sacred texts as well as in philosophical ones. This quote in his notes at the back of his collected work might very well say more about Yeats than he himself consciously knew: "Has not Plotinus written: 'Let every soul recall, then, at the outset the truth that the soul is the author of all living things . . . itself formed and ordered the vast heaven and conducts all that rhythmic motion.'"

Many of Yeats's lesser poems bear witness to the strident steps he took towards maturation of his art. Soul lives in a house of heart and Yeats furnished his rooms with courage and a great adoring love. If sound is a magical equivalent that sets off heavenly movements, then surely Yeats was a master of such evocation. Just as the sun conducts the rhythmic motion of the universe, so too does good singing.

His life was no more or less tragic than any other human life, for all feel pangs of love and loss, all are eventually visited by death. Suffering is just more evident in an artist's life because there lingers documentation. And life in choosing us at this moment in time, cares neither whether we choose it or art, but in choosing both simultaneously, we as writers perhaps enable others a glimpse of transcendence.

The soul is not a mere chapter, nor even a single book, but is entire volumes bound by heaven's breadth, instructing us towards higher realms of being. If the earth herself is a sudden flaming word, how great the song within the vast universe as it pulsates with the breath of carefully wrought gifts from those who said: "It is as though we touched a musical string that set other strings vibrating."

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