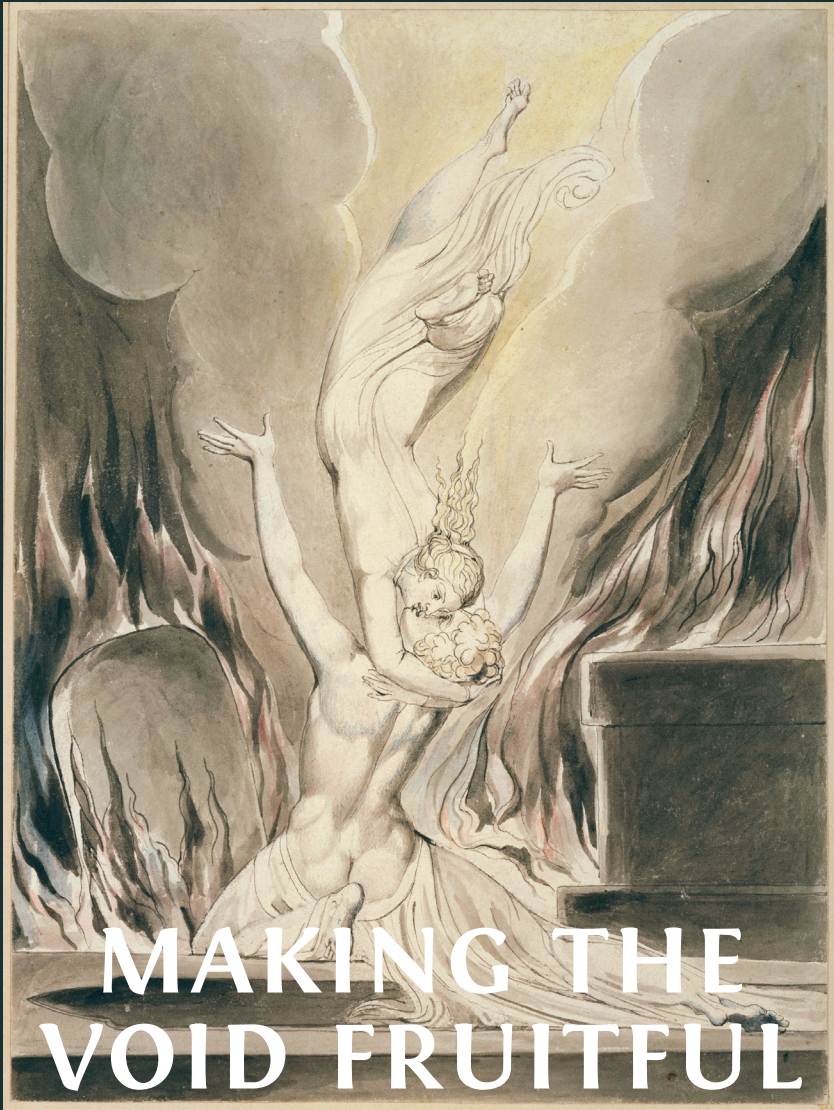


PATRICK J. KEANE



Yeats as Spiritual Seeker
and Petrarchan Lover



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2021 Patrick J. Keane



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text and to make commercial use of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Patrick J. Keane, *Making the Void Fruitful: Yeats as Spiritual Seeker and Petrarchan Lover*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0275>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions.

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0275#copyright>. Further details about CC BY licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0275#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 9781800643208

ISBN Hardback: 9781800643215

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800643222

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800643239

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800643246

ISBN XML: 9781800643253

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0275

Cover image: William Blake, watercolor illustrations to Robert Blair's 'The Grave', object 15: 'The Reunion of the Soul & the Body' (1805), Wikimedia, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Illustrations_to_Robert_Blair%27s_The_Grave,_object_15_The_Reunion_of_the_Soul_%26_the_Body.jpg.

Cover design by Anna Gatti.

7. Mountain Visions and Other Last Things

In Part Two, in dealing with ‘last things,’ I’ll focus on ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion,’ ‘Man and the Echo,’ and ‘Politics’ in the context of Maud Gonne and of Yeats’s final affirmation of life. Here, I’ll focus on ‘Lapis Lazuli,’ and on two death-poems, ‘Cuchulain Comforted’ and the colloquial debate-poem, ‘What Then?’ If I had to select one final testament of Yeats, the choice might narrow to ‘Among School Children,’ or Self’s chant at the end of ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul,’ or to the final movements of ‘Lapis Lazuli,’ ‘Cuchulain Comforted,’ and ‘Man and the Echo.’ Such deeply moving retrospective poems are the fully ripened fruit of an aged but major poet working at the height of his undiminished creative power. Each of these poems constitutes wisdom writing, a quest for *gnosis*, or the acknowledgment that it may not be attainable in this life. That is true as well of the more casual, but no less momentous, ‘What Then?’

Written in July 1936, ‘Lapis Lazuli,’ which Yeats himself recognized as ‘almost the best I have made of recent years’ (L, 859), was, like ‘Politics,’ published with war imminent. Yeats is annoyed by those who cannot abide the gaiety of artists creating amid impending catastrophe, unaware of the deep truth—known to Hindu mystics, to the Nietzsche of *gaya scienza*, and to Arthur O’Shaughnessy, whose creative artists ‘built Ninevah’ and Babel out of their own ‘sighs’ and ‘mirth’—that ‘All things fall and are built again/And those that build them again are gay.’ To counter the consternation of those who are ‘sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,/ Of poets that are always gay,’ women dismissed as ‘hysterical,’ Yeats presents Shakespearean figures who—like Ophelia, Cordelia, and (by implication) Cleopatra—‘do not break up their lines to weep.’ Above all, ‘Hamlet and Lear are gay;/ Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.’

Fusing Shakespearean heroism with Eastern serenity and Nietzsche's Zarathustrian joy ('Who among you can laugh and be elevated at the same time? Whoever climbs the highest mountains laughs at all tragic plays and tragic seriousness'),¹ the poem turns in its final movement to the mountain-shaped lapis lazuli sculpture given to Yeats as a gift, and which, in turn, giving the poet his title, serves as the Yeatsian equivalent of Keats's Grecian urn. 'Two Chinamen, behind them a third,/ Are carved in lapis lazuli.' Over them flies 'a long-legged bird,' a 'symbol' not of eternity but 'of longevity.' The third carved figure, though 'doubtless a serving man,' is the resident artist; like Keats's piper, he 'Carries a musical instrument.'

Aside from the obvious resemblance of the lapis lazuli sculpture to the Grecian urn, the repeated 'or' in the lines that follow seals the connection, with description yielding to a stunning exercise of the creative imagination, worthy of its precursor, the fourth stanza of Keats's ode. Since the place of origin of the figures in the sacrificial procession is not depicted on the urn, Keats speculates: 'What little town by river or sea-shore,/ Or mountain-built [...]?' Yeats ups the ante to four repetitions of *or*:

Every discoloration of the stone;
 Every accidental crack or dent
 Seems a water-course or an avalanche,
 Or lofty slope where it still snows
 Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch
 Sweetens the little half-way house
 Those Chinamen climb towards, and I
 Delight to imagine them seated there;
 There, on the mountain and the sky,
 On all the tragic scene they stare.
 One asks for mournful melodies;
 Accomplished fingers begin to play.
 Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
 Their ancient glittering eyes are gay.

Yeats turns every discoloration and 'Every accidental crack or dent' (damage I nearly added to in 1995 when, visiting Michael and Gráinne

1 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra,' I.7 'On Reading and Writing,' in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 153.

Yeats, I almost dropped the piece of lapis I'd been invited to examine) into a feature of the mountain landscape. But the even greater creative leap in this marvelous final movement is the setting of those sculpted figures, frozen in lapis as Keats's were on the marble urn, into motion, with the poet *delighting* to 'imagine' them having attained the prospect of the gazebo half-way up the mountain. That the perspective is not quite *sub specie aeternitatis*; that the 'little half-way house' is situated at the midpoint rather than on the summit, makes this a human rather than divine vision. To that extent, the Chinese sages' mountain vision may not achieve the *gnosis* attained by the naked hermits cavered on another Asian mountain, in Yeats's 1933 sonnet, 'Meru.' Those hermits, aware of the 'manifold illusion' of one passing civilization after another, 'know/ That day brings round the night, that before dawn/ [Man's] glory and his monuments are gone.' Yet the affirmation of the Chinese sages of 'Lapis Lazuli' is also registered in full awareness of 'all the tragic scene.' The eyes of these Yeatsian visionaries, wreathed in the wrinkles of mutability, glitter with a tragic joy lit by the poet's own creative 'delight,' and by something resembling the Gnostic 'spark.'

The end of mutability is death. The ancient Chinese sages' gaiety in the face of tragedy recalls Yeats's central mythological figure, Cuchulain. Yeats's ultimate 'Swordsman' and the epitome of tragic joy, Cuchulain, the great warrior of Irish myth, is the hero of several Yeats poems and a cycle of five plays, ending with *The Death of Cuchulain*. Though indebted to the translations of Celtic mythology by Standish O'Grady and Lady Gregory, Yeats's Cuchulain also reflects his reading of Nietzsche, who, though 'exaggerated and violent,' had 'helped me very greatly in building up in my mind an imagination of the heroic life.'²

The poet's final encounter with his Celtic Achilles takes place in a ghostly poem completed on 13 January 1939, two weeks before his death. 'One of the greatest ever death-bed utterances,' in the discerning judgment of Seamus Heaney, the eerie and magnificent 'Cuchulain Comforted' is composed, appropriately, in Dante's *terza rima*, Yeats's sole

2 In 'The Phases of the Moon,' after eleven phases pass, 'Nietzsche is born,/ Because the hero's crescent is the twelfth.' In a September 1902 letter to John Quinn, who had sent him copies of *Zarathustra*, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Case of Wagner*, Yeats wrote: 'I don't know how I can thank you too much,' reporting that he and Nietzsche 'had come to the same conclusions on several cardinal matters,' including the 'heroic life.' Cited by William Murphy, *Prodigal Father*, 596n69.

venture into the form Shelley too had chosen for his final masterpiece.³ Yeats's poem finds the nameless hero, wounded in battle and slain by a blind man, in the Underworld among 'Shrouds that muttered head to head,' and 'Came and were gone.' He 'leant upon a tree/ As though to meditate on wounds and blood.' The newcomer is among his polar opposites—'convicted cowards all,' according to one 'that seemed to have authority/ Among those birdlike things,' and who informs the still armed hero: 'Now must we sing and sing the best we can.' The poem ends with the hero's apotheosis imminent. Having set aside his warrior's sword and taken up a tailor's needle, he has joined these spirits in a communal, almost emasculating sewing-bee, making shrouds, his own included. He is soon to undergo their transfiguration, described in haunting final lines reminiscent of Zarathustra's vision of evil absolved by its own bliss so that all that is 'body' becomes 'dancer, all that is spirit, bird': 'They sang but had nor human tunes nor words,/ Though all was done in common as before./ They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.'

That uncanny final line (an alexandrine which Conor Cruise O'Brien once remarked to me in conversation seemed to him 'to have been written on the moon') is also a final fusion. Marrying the posthumous continuation, in 'Sailing to Byzantium,' of a bird-like poet's need to sing with the transformation and liberation of the soul, it should thrill Romantics and Gnostics alike. Valentinus insists, 'what liberates us is the *gnosis* of who we were, what we became; where we were, whereunto we have been thrown; whither we hasten, from what we are redeemed; what birth is, and what rebirth.'⁴ This formula of salvation, now famous but unknown to Yeats, is cited by Harold Bloom as a 'good motto' for 'Cuchulain Comforted,' which he considers 'Yeats's finest achievement in the Sublime.'⁵ The triumph of this mysterious, yet confessional death-poem is that, like 'Man and the Echo,' it discloses—along with an

3 Heaney's comment was made in *The Irish Times* on 28 January 1989, the fiftieth anniversary of Yeats's death. The Shelley poem, earlier discussed, is *The Triumph of Life*, interrupted by the poet's drowning while sailing during a storm: a death eerily anticipated on what became the last page of the MS, filled with Shelley's sketches of a sailboat.

4 Valentinus, *Excerpts from Theodotus*. Theodotus was a leading Valentinian of the Eastern school. The second century *Excerpts* were quoted and thus unintentionally preserved by the Christian theologian, Clement of Alexandria.

5 Bloom, *Poetry and Repression*, 230, 228.

unexpected aspect of the solitary Cuchulain, 'a heroic figure because he was creative joy separated from fear' (L, 913)—Yeats himself: the man under the many macho-heroic masks. He is neither fearful 'coward' nor stricken rabbit, but still 'one that,' in yet another bird image, 'ruffled in a manly pose/ For all his timid heart' ('Coole Park, 1929'). No wonder Yeats, shortly before his death, referred to the self-revealing 'Cuchulain Comforted,' a poem in process at the time, as 'strange' and 'something new' (L, 922).⁶

§

In the spring of 1936, not quite three years before that death, Yeats received a request for a 'representative' poem for *The Erasmian*, the magazine of his old Dublin high school. He selected 'What Then?,' which lays out for the Erasmus Smith students a planned life of disciplined labor, aimed at achieving what Yeats's 'chosen comrades' at school believed to be his destiny: the conviction, in which he concurred, that he would 'grow a famous man.' Writing intimately though in the third person, 'he' tells the young students and us that he 'crammed' his twenties 'with toil,' and that, in time, 'Everything he wrote was read.' He attained 'sufficient money for his need,' true 'friends that have been friends indeed,' and that predestined yet industriously sought-after fame. Eventually—fulfilling his deliberate 'plan'—'All his happier dreams came true': house, wife, daughter, son; 'Poets and wits about him drew.'

But this self-satisfied rehearsal of accomplishment has been challenged by the italicized refrain ending each stanza: "*What then?*" *sang Plato's ghost*, "*What then?*" As in 'Man and the Echo' ('what do we know?'), despite best-laid plans, an ultimate uncertainty attends the certainty of death. In the fourth and final stanza, as the litany of achievement mounts in passionate intensity, the opposing challenge from the world beyond earthly accomplishment also reaches a crescendo:

'The work is done,' grown old he thought,

6 Unfortunately 'Cuchulain Comforted' was not Yeats's last poem. A week later, he dictated to his wife on his deathbed 'The Black Tower,' in which he resumes the heroic mask shed in 'Cuchulain Comforted' and 'Man and the Echo.' 'The Black Tower,' with its 'oath-bound men' valiantly defending a lost cause, has its own merits, but we are right to regret its place of honor as Yeats's very last poem.

'According to my boyish plan;
 Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
 Something to perfection brought';
But louder sang that ghost, 'What Then?'

In 'The Choice,' written a decade earlier, Yeats had declared that 'the intellect of man is forced to choose/ Perfection of the life, or of the work.' The 'something' brought to 'perfection' in 'What Then?' is clearly the second choice. Must 'he' therefore, as in 'The Choice,' 'refuse/ A heavenly mansion, raging in the dark'? Momentous in import despite its casual tone, 'What Then?' revisits 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' with the spiritual spokesman, despite being restricted to two words, at last mounting a potent challenge. The refrain Yeats places in the breathless mouth of that formidable ghost—'What then?'—fuses the Idealism of that 'Plato,' who (in 'Among School Children') 'thought nature but a spume that plays/ Upon a ghostly paradigm of things' with the 'Plato' who, as the principal 'advocate of the "Beyond," the greatest slanderer of life,' Nietzsche said presented 'the complete, the genuine antagonism' to Homer, the 'instinctive deifier, the *golden* nature.' In 'What Then?' the ghost of Plato, linking West and East, reiterates the question raised in the synoptic gospels—what do you profit if you gain the whole world but lose your immortal soul?—and couples it with the Hindu '*tatah kim*' [What's the use?]; to quote the hermit-poet Bhartrihari: 'you may by your good fortune have gathered friends about you: *what further?* You may have gained glory and accomplished all your desires: *what further?*'⁷

What further? What then? That relentless question also tallies with the Gnostic insistence that the liberating spirit within, the 'divine spark,' was the sole agent of salvation. That spark, once ignited, redeems 'inner' spirituality, freeing us from all Archon-imposed limitations, especially enslaving attachment to earthly things. However, powerful though the Otherworldly challenge is in 'What Then?,' here as always—from 'To the Rose upon the Rood of Time' on—dialectical Yeats is not quite succumbing to the spiritual, a realm at once alluring, demanding, and life-denying. 'His' litany of achievements, in the poem Yeats himself chose to represent his life-work to the students of his former high school, are triumphs of the imagination even more than they are flauntings of

7 Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, III.25. *The Satakas, or Wise Sayings, of Bhartrihari, Vairagasataka* §71 (italics in original). In 1913, J. M. Kennedy translated both Bhartrihari and Nietzsche's *Die Morgenröte* (Dawn or Daybreak).

material success; *and*, given the massiveness of the poetic achievement of Yeats, awarded the 1923 Nobel Prize in Literature, 'his' is far from empty boasting.

As Nietzsche concluded after asserting his crucial *agon*, 'Plato versus Homer': to place himself 'in the service' of ascetic Platonism is 'the most destructive *corruption* of an artist that is at all possible.' In 'What Then?' the ghost of Plato gets the last word, but the poem consists of more than its refrain. Taken as a whole, 'What Then?' shows us an artist once again vacillating 'between extremities' ('Vacillation,' I), and, in the process, making poetry of the quarrel with himself. Yeats was reading at this time Nietzsche's *Genealogy* and *Daybreak* (the latter translated by the same man who had, speaking of extremities, translated Bhartrihari), and it was Homeric Nietzsche—Yeats's chosen counterweight to Plato and Christianity, that 'Platonism for the people'—who said, in the *Genealogy* (III.3), 'It is precisely such "contradictions" that seduce us to existence.'

Nietzsche's prophet famously advises us, at the outset of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, to 'remain faithful to the earth, and do not believe those who speak to you of otherworldly hopes.'⁸ In 'What Then?,' Yeats seems in part to be following Zarathustra's imperative; but he had not yet been introduced to Nietzsche when, almost a half-century earlier, he wrote 'The Man who Dreamed of Faeryland,' a poem to which 'What Then?' responds almost point for point. As we have seen, in that earlier poem every earthly pleasure and achievement had been spoiled by a repeated, cruel 'singing' whose theme was a golden and silver Fairyland, an Otherworld of immutable, but unattainable beauty. Everything lost in the early poem, including the 'fine angry mood' required to rebut mockers, is re-gained in this late poem, where the speaker, his work done, cries out, 'Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,/ Something to perfection brought.' The mature, accomplished man has 'succeeded' beyond his dreams, and thus exposed the folly of the man who wasted his life away by fruitlessly dreaming of Fairyland.

And yet, that 'singing' from the Otherworld continues: "'What then," sang Plato's ghost, "What then?"'—an amplified, more insistent 'singing' from the 'Beyond' that grows 'louder' the more the speaker rehearses his accomplishments. Seven years earlier, in his 1930 diary, Yeats had set out 'two conceptions' of reality that 'alternate in our emotion and in history,' and are not reconcilable. 'I am always in all I do, driven to

8 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra,' I.3, 'Zarathustra's Prologue' (*Portable Nietzsche*, 125).

a moment which is the realization of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is the surrender to God of all that I am [...] Could these two impulses, one as much a part of truth as the other, be reconciled, or if one could prevail, all life would cease' (Ex, 305). It is hardly unique thematically, but 'What Then?' in its very simplicity as a text suitable for high school students, offers us a late and almost uniquely accessible example of a recurrent phenomenon in Yeats: evidence that the tension between the temporal and the eternal, the pagan and the Christian, the Homeric *antithetical* and the Platonic *primary*, persists, as both challenge and imaginative stimulus, to the very end.

§

On 14 October 2019, Harold Bloom passed away, in his ninetieth year and having just taught two classes at Yale. He was on the verge of completing yet another book, this one exploring 'the figurations we term immortality, resurrection, and redemption' (published posthumously as *Take Arms Against a Sea of Troubles: The Power of the Reader's Mind Over a Universe of Death*, a titular fusion of *Hamlet* and *Paradise Lost*). My own book is dedicated to Bloom, a eulogy for whom may be found at the end. However inadequate as a token of my admiration and personal affection, I add to the present essay this brief coda, commemorating Harold Bloom, but also disagreeing with him.

Having come to half-accept the Gnostic vision he harshly rejected in his 1970 book *Yeats*, as a pessimism alien to the affirmative vision of Blake and Shelley, Bloom ended the essay he wrote a half-dozen years later—'Yeats, Gnosticism, and the Sacred Void'—by positing Romanticism as allied with, rather than a deviation from, Gnosticism. Indeed, it 'could be argued that a form of Gnosticism is endemic in Romantic tradition without, however, dominating that tradition, or even that Gnosticism is the implicit, inevitable religion that frequently informs aspects of post-Enlightenment poetry.' But he also contrasted Yeats to one of the Irish poet's own formational precursors, Shelley, and to Schopenhauer. Though Bloom doesn't get into the lineage, Schopenhauer, fusing blind 'will' and clear-eyed pessimism, was an 'educator' of Nietzsche, whose 'curious astringent joy' allied him in Yeats's mind with Blake, and so helped transform the Irish poet from a lyricist of the Celtic Twilight into the most powerful poet of the twentieth century. But here is Bloom: 'Shelley and Schopenhauer were questers, in their very different ways,

who could journey through the Void without yielding to the temptation of worshipping the Void as itself being sacred. Yeats, like Nietzsche, implicitly decided that he too would rather have the Void as purpose, than be void of purpose.⁹

Though Bloom does not mention it, Yeats seems to have been thinking of the Gnostic vision when he ended one of his final letters by declaring, 'The last kiss is given to the void' (LTSM, 154). No more a believer in linear progress than Nietzsche (for whom the 'theory of progress' was a 'modern' concept, 'and therefore vulgar'), Yeats, under Indian influence, the Hindu mysticism he first imbibed from Mohini Chatterjee and to which he returned in his final decade, came to consider cultures and civilizations a succession of provisional illusions: that 'manifold illusion' or *maya*, seen through by those who, in 'Meru,' realize that 'man's life is thought,' its ultimate destructive / creative goal to 'come/ Into the desolation of reality.' Such seers as the ascetic hermits cavered on Mount Meru or Everest, 'know/ That day brings round the night, that before dawn/ [Man's] glory and his monuments are gone.'¹⁰

Those who have, after 'Ravening, raging, and uprooting,' finally 'come/ Into the desolation of reality,' have come far, but—despite the gay farewell to civilizations, 'Egypt and Greece good-bye, and good-bye, Rome!'—they may not have attained the state of 'bliss' achieved by Bhagwan Shri Hamsa, who describes climbing Meru in *The Holy Mountain*, read and introduced by Yeats shortly before writing 'Meru.' In that Introduction, Hamsa is quoted describing his attainment of indescribable 'bliss [...] all merged in the Absolute Brahma!' (E&I, 479, 481). Yeats's sonnet registers the strenuous mental steps to the Absolute, but, reflecting his unwillingness to surrender the individual self to the divine Self of the *Upanishads*, does not culminate in the merging joy expressed by Hamsa. Nevertheless, Yeats's hermits, by coming to 'know' the truth underlying illusions, have achieved a considerable degree of *gnosis*.

In the letter I began with, Yeats insists that there is 'no improvement, only a series of sudden fires,' each fainter than the one before it. 'We free ourselves from delusion that we may be nothing. The last kiss is given to the void.' In early Yeats, lured by Fairyland, it is an apocalyptic 'God'

9 Bloom, 'Yeats, Gnosticism, and the Sacred Void,' in *Poetry and Repression*, 234, 212.

10 See Charles I. Armstrong, "'Born Anew": W. B. Yeats's "Eastern" Turn in the 1930s,' in Gibson and Mann.

who is said to 'burn nature with a kiss'; at the end, that divine yet erotic and liberating act becomes human. Glossing this letter, the Irish critic Declan Kiberd, in 'W. B. Yeats—Building Amid Ruins,' perceptively observed that, for Yeats, 'the only hope of humanity was to break out of this diminishing series of cycles by recasting life on an altogether higher plane of consciousness.'¹¹ Kiberd (whose title echoes that favorite Blake saying of both Yeats and Joyce) does not dwell on the 'void,' or connect this 'higher plane of consciousness' with *gnosis*, but those familiar with Gnosticism well might. I believe Yeats himself did.

The memorable paragraph in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* that begins, 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry,' ends: 'I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful, when I understand that I have nothing; that the ringers in the tower have appointed for the hymen of the soul a passing bell' (Myth, 332). Most are committed to the world and to social conventions symbolized by the marriage bell. By contrast, the soul of the poet achieves its 'hymen' or marriage when it forsakes the gratifications of a merely material world, a forsaking symbolized by death's 'passing bell,' though a 'last kiss' is given to the void. A lifelong Seeker, Yeats, though his imagery remains fecund and erotic, seems at times as much a Gnostic Quester as he is a Romantic Poet. In his very last letter, written to Elizabeth Pelham on 4 January 1939, three weeks before his death, Yeats concluded:

I am happy, and I think full of an energy, an energy I had despaired of. It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put all into a phrase I say, 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.' I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence. (L, 922)

It had been thirty-seven years since Yeats, annotating Nietzsche, had scribbled in the margin his polar contrast between 'denial of self,' the soul 'seeking *knowledge*,' and 'affirmation' of a self that energetically 'seeks *life*.' In that diagram, Yeats was, under the auspices of Nietzsche, refuting Plato's Socrates, who, in his advocacy of mind and knowledge, famously insisted, in the face of imminent death, that 'the unexamined

¹¹ In Kiberd's *Irish Classics*, 454.

life is not worth living' (*Apology* 38a5–6). Anticipated by others, including Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde, William James responded that, while that was perfectly true, it was equally true that the 'unlived life was not worth examining.' In the October 1938 letter to Ethel Mannin in which he described his 'idea of death' as best depicted by Blake's *Grave* illustration of 'the soul and body embracing,' Yeats immediately added: 'All men with subjective natures move towards a possible ecstasy, all with objective natures towards a possible wisdom' (L, 917). It was the old *antithetical-primary* polarity once again, with Yeats presenting both sides, but making his intuitive preference clear. Happy even on the threshold of his own death, the 'completion of my life,' Yeats had not forgotten the vital affirmation he embraced in his 1902 marginalia; and I for one have no wish to resist let alone refute his gay farewell, celebrating both *primary* and *antithetical*, Saint and Song.

Not so Harold Bloom; in his 2004 book *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* Bloom resisted that Yeatsian emphasis on embodiment by choosing, in keeping with his title, to focus on wisdom rather than that 'truth', which Yeats said could not be 'known' but could be embodied. 'Of wisdom,' writes Bloom—who thought his reversal of Yeats important enough to place in splendid isolation on his book's back cover—'I personally would affirm the reverse. We cannot embody it, yet we can be taught how to learn wisdom, whether or not it can be identified with the Truth that might make us free.' His final, skeptical allusion is to the Gospel of John (8:32), but Bloom's emphasis on being taught how to learn wisdom would appeal to all Seekers, certainly Gnostic Seekers. And yet Harold Bloom—critical, as we saw at the outset, of Yeats's emphasis on 'the wisdom of the body'—is not William Butler Yeats, a 'singer born,' whose poetry and vision, however drawn to the spiritual, remains life-affirming and perpetually 'embodied'—a poet who, to 'put all into a phrase,' finds even the 'void fruitful.'



Fig. 1 Maud Gonne, 19 November 1897; inscribed by Maud: 'Onward always till Liberty is won!' Negative: glass. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maude_Gonne_McBride_nd.jpg.