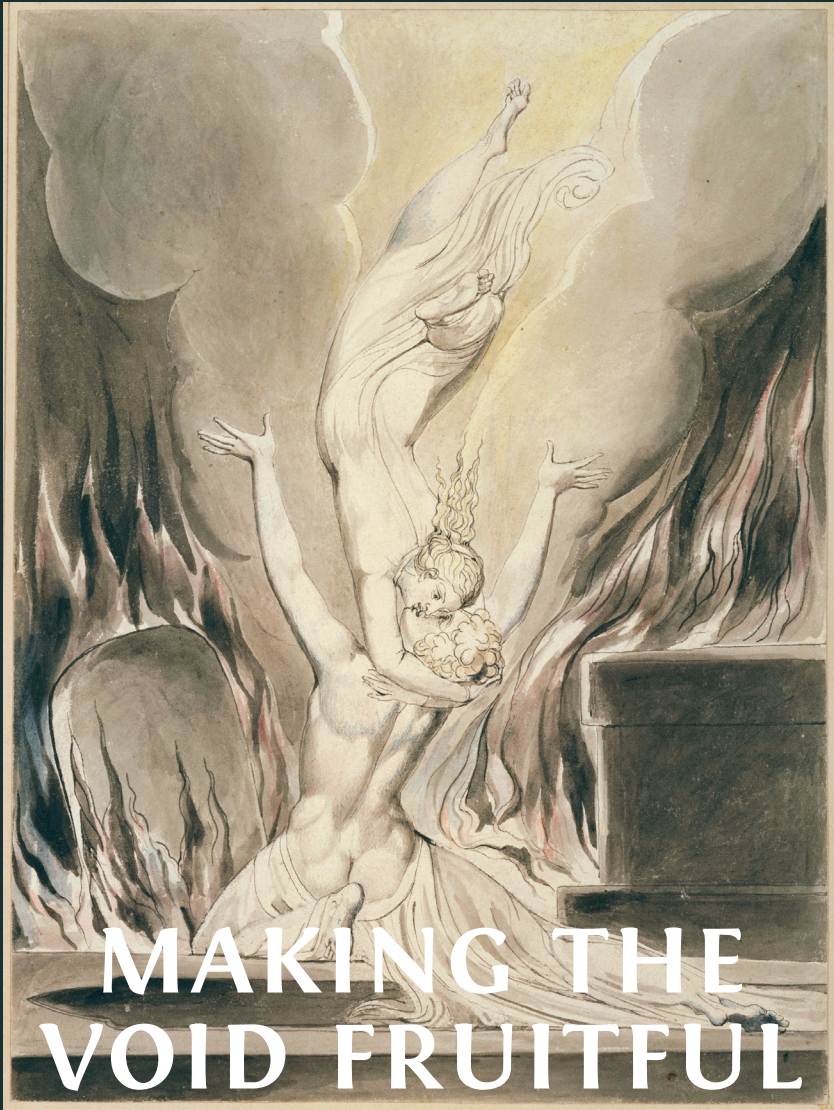


PATRICK J. KEANE



# MAKING THE VOID FRUITFUL

Yeats as Spiritual Seeker  
and Petrarchan Lover



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## 8. Poet and Muse

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Since my subject is W. B. Yeats's poetry to and about Maud Gonne, I use their names freely, though, as noted above, Yeats himself does not, preferring to cast the relationship as one of a Poet and a Beloved, who also happens to be his Muse. Since I feel some critical guilt about this forwardness in naming names, I'll begin by briefly discussing this issue, setting autobiography—as Yeats did, and as Joseph Hassett demonstrated in *W. B. Yeats and the Muses*—in the context of the Poet–Muse tradition. I'll then unpack my two epigraphs, which I see as intimately related. First, then, the issue of names.

Teaching poetry, we remind students of the difference between the author and the 'speaker' in a poem. There are obvious cases in which speakers are personae quite different from their authors: dramatic monologues, for example; or, a more complicated case, dialogue poems, of which Yeats wrote over thirty, with debates between, say, *Hic* and *Ille*, He and She, Michael Robartes and Owen Aherne, Robartes and the Dancer, Crazy Jane and the Bishop, Self (or Heart) and Soul—parceling out contrasting aspects of the poet himself, the man and his various masks. And there are the two female sequences, 'A Woman Young and Old' and the 'Crazy Jane' poems, lyric experiments in which he explored what he described to Dorothy Wellesley as 'the woman in me.' There can be multilayered distinctions even within a poem. In his book on *The Tower*, discussing 'Among School Children,' David Young writes, 'The smiling public man can maintain his façade masking his wild thought and in the process reflecting the poet who stands outside the poem.'<sup>1</sup> In the case of even the most 'personal' lyrics, there is *some* distinction between author and speaker; as Emily Dickinson warned Thomas Higginson in a letter of July 1862, 'When I state myself, as the

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1 Young, *Troubled Mirror: A Study of Yeats's The Tower*, 90.

Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—Me—but a supposed person.’ But it is also true that, in such intimate lyrics, we are often invited to attribute the voice we hear, and the thoughts and feelings uttered, to the poet in his or her own person.

In 1937, Yeats began what was intended to be ‘A General Introduction’ to a projected 1940 *Collected Works*, by making two points: first, that ‘a poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, lost love, or mere loneliness’; but, second, that ‘he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete’ (E&I, 509). So, there are distinctions to be made between that bundle at the breakfast table, the man who lived the life, the maker of the poems, and the poet who appears in them or stands just outside them. Yeats also insisted, in ‘Friends of My Youth,’ a lecture intended to be delivered on 9 March 1910, that a poet’s ‘life is an experiment in living and those that come after have a right to know it. Above all, it is necessary that the lyric poet’s life be known that we should understand that his poetry is no rootless flower but the speech of a man.’ That is the justification for Yeats’s own autobiographical texts (shaped for a purpose), and for biographies by others, from the first, by Joseph Hone in 1940, through Richard Ellmann’s permanently valuable *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (1948), A. Norman Jeffares’ *W. B. Yeats: A New Biography* (1990, a thoroughly revised version of a volume originally published in 1949), Terence Brown’s critically astute *The Life of W. B. Yeats* (1999), and culminating in the completion, in 2003, of the magisterial two-volume study by R. F. Foster, who cites this ‘no-rootless-flower’ passage as one of two epigraphs to his first volume—a dictum also cited early on in their books by both Ellmann and Hassett.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, there is an argument to be made, one brilliantly embodied in Hazard Adams’s *The Book of Yeats’s Poems*, that what is most ‘important is to recognize that the poet’s making is *other* than his historically recoverable self,’ and that, ‘with a great poet like Yeats, it is likely to prove less valuable that we recover what he did and the relationship between what he did and what he made’ than that we engage endlessly in the critical study of the *Collected Poems* as an integrated, carefully arranged, progressive text. It is not quite what

2 Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*, 5. Hassett, *W. B. Yeats and the Muses*, 2.

Hugh Kenner called (in an early essay Adams rightly praises) a 'sacred book,' but what Adams insists is an 'antithetical and secular' book in which mere autobiography is a 'lower-court' affair to be subordinated to a poetic canon organized by the poet to tell a dramatic-mimetic story (what Wallace Stevens termed a 'Supreme Fiction').<sup>3</sup> In using Yeats's and Donne's actual names, I am registering the fact that a rooted poet writes always of his personal life, with lost love, remorse, and loneliness present, but capable of being absorbed and transcended. In also recognizing the poet being reborn as an 'idea,' I try in what follows to keep Yeats's supreme if reality-based fiction—the Poet–Muse story—at the vital center.

Demonstrating the intimate relationship between my two epigraphs, especially placing the stanza from 'The Tower' in its full Yeatsian and Muse-tradition context, will take some doing. I hope that in the process, I will not put a dragon at the mouth of the cave by being as garrulous as Yeats seems to be in this section of 'The Tower'—which *appears* to ramble, but is always directed toward that final question: one crucial to Yeats and at the heart of the whole history of love poetry in the Petrarchan tradition.

In the first passage, Petrarch is responding to the charge—by his close friend and confessor, Cardinal Giovanni Colonna—that the 'Laura' of his love poems (destined to become the most influential collection of such poems in the literary history of the West)<sup>4</sup> is a poetic fiction; that the name is a mere pun on the 'poetic Laurel' Petrarch had aspired to and worked so hard and successfully, to achieve; and that 'Laura' herself is no more than an 'invented' symbol for the Muse. Would that it were so, cries Petrarch, who proudly acknowledges his relentless toil as a poetic craftsman, but also insists on an attendant 'madness'; that beneath the artifice of those ornate and endlessly inventive poems (the

3 R. F. Foster, *The Apprentice Mage*, vii. Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats's Poems*, 11–12, 253–54. The reference to Stevens is mine, but Adams does see the Yeatsian 'Book' as a sustained fictive performance.

4 There is an irony here. Critical of Dante for writing the *Commedia* in the ephemeral vernacular, Petrarch staked his claim to future fame on his epic poem *Africa*, written in immortal Latin. Instead, that fame rests on the lyrics to Laura, written in—the vernacular. The hero of Petrarch's almost unreadable epic was the great Roman general Scipio Africanus, whose admonishing spirit had engaged in dialogue with his grandson, a younger Scipio, in Cicero's famous *Somnium Scipionis* [The Dream of Scipio], which, as we've seen, plays an unexpected but highly significant role in Yeats's pivotal 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul.'

sonnets and *ballatas* that constitute his *Canzoniere*), his ardent though never consummated love of an actual, 'living Laura,' participated in that Corybantic 'madness' said, or conceded, by Plato in the *Ion*, to inspire poets, when they are not merely masters of their art [*technē*], but possessed by the Muse. In fact, Plato-Socrates tells us, there is no genuine 'invention' in the poet 'until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him.'<sup>5</sup>

This wary view of poetic inspiration is ambivalent, even hostile, as we might expect coming from rational philosophers like Socrates and Plato. Nevertheless, the image persists: that of the enraptured poet, his 'eye in a fine frenzy rolling,' and, like 'lovers and madmen,' able 'to apprehend more than cool reason ever comprehends.' This is, of course, Shakespeare's Duke Theseus, holding forth at the start of the final act of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For Theseus—a man as skeptical of the irrational as Socrates and Plato, and therefore dubious of the lovers' reports of enchantment in the moonlit forest—'the lunatic, the lover, and the poet' are alike, their 'seething brains' all fired by 'imagination.'<sup>6</sup> The image of transported poets, their imaginations Muse-maddened, their music attuned to the harmony of the spheres, has proven powerful over the ages.<sup>7</sup> Coleridge, familiar with the *Ion*, gives us, at the climax of his visionary poem 'Kubla Khan,' an iconic image of the vatic bard, with his 'flashing eyes, his floating hair,' who, having 'fed' on 'honey-dew' and 'drunk the milk of paradise,' evokes among rational folk 'holy dread,' knowing that they are in the presence of a poet possessing the power of 'music' and possessed by semi-divine inspiration akin to 'madness.'

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5 Plato, *Ion*, 523–534b. This short dialogue is named for the *rhapsode* with whom Socrates is conversing.

6 *A Midsummer Night's Dream* V.i.4–8. The dismissive skepticism of Theseus is of course memorably refuted by Hippolyta, the woman he is about to marry, who finds 'great constancy' in the lovers' wondrous accounts.

7 But the original harmony of the spheres is often diminished or distorted in the process of transmission, as in the stanza of Yeats's 'Among School Children' that begins, 'Plato thought nature but a spume that plays/ Upon a ghostly paradigm of things.' Within a few lines we are told that Pythagoras 'fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings/ What a star sang and careless Muses heard.' These casual Muses, carefree but imperfect auditors, pass on a distorted version of the celestial harmony to mortal poets. Spiritually aware of our failure to hear the harmony of the spheres, Shakespeare's Lorenzo directs Jessica's gaze to the star-paved heavens: 'there's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st/ But in his motion like an angel sings,/ Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;/ Such harmony is in immortal souls,/ But while this muddy vesture of decay/ Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.' *The Merchant of Venice*, V.i.58–65



The sources of inspiration in 'Kubla Khan' are benign and barbarous, divine and demonic. As it happens, the topography of Coleridge's Xanadu is reproduced and naturalized by Yeats in 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931,' where the waters racing past Yeats's tower, 'Run for a mile undimmed in Heaven's face/ Then darkening through 'dark' Raftery's 'cellar' drop,/ Run underground, rise in a rocky place/ In Coole demesne, and there to finish up/ Spread to a lake and drop into a hole.' In Xanadu, the river meandered for five miles through wood and dale until it 'reached the caverns measureless to man,/ And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean.' That 'sacred river' had its source in a 'mighty fountain' hidden in 'a deep romantic chasm'—a 'savage place! as holy and enchanted/ As e'er beneath a waning moon was haunted/ By woman wailing for her demon lover!' But there is also a benign Muse in 'Kubla Khan': that 'damsel with a dulcimer' the enraptured speaker once heard and 'saw' in a 'vision,' and whose 'symphony and song,' if he could only 'revive' it 'within' himself, would empower him, 'with music loud and long,' to create a paradise of the imagination superior even to Kubla's Xanadu.

The mad, and maddening, power of Muse-inspired poetry provides the immediate context of my second epigraph: the final and climactic stanza of Part II of 'The Tower,' which had begun with Yeats summoning forth, through the power of imagination, various 'images and memories' of figures from Irish history and myth, associated with the local area surrounding Yeats's Tower. The most important is none other than 'dark' Raftery, the blind nineteenth-century Gaelic poet Anthony Raftery. He is joined by one of Yeats's own creations, Red Hanrahan, whose 'Song about Ireland' was Maud Gonne's favorite Yeats poem, though Hanrahan is presented here with a sexual frankness that would have distressed Maud, who disliked the 'coarseness' of some of Yeats's later poetry. Though the poet 'would ask a question of them all,' we will focus, as Yeats does, on Raftery and Hanrahan, both song makers.

Raftery's Muse, 'a peasant girl commended by a song,' was local beauty Mary Hynes, and 'So great a glory did the song confer' that 'certain men, being maddened by those rhymes,' rose up from their tavern table and set off to 'test their fancy by their sight.' The upshot was tragic for at least one, who 'drowned in the great bog of Cloone.' Their wits driven 'astray' by drink but more by the 'music' of Raftery's Muse-poetry, these Seekers had mistaken 'the brightness of the moon/ For

the prosaic light of day.' Even Yeats, seemingly garrulous but actually artfully rambling, professes at first to find this local anecdote

Strange, but the man who made the song was blind;  
Yet, now I have considered it, I find  
That nothing strange; the tragedy began  
With Homer that was a blind man,  
And Helen has all living hearts betrayed.

By 1928, when this poem was published, most readers of poetry were aware that Nobel Laureate W. B. Yeats had conferred glory on his own Muse, Maud Gonne, by repeatedly identifying her, most splendidly in 'No Second Troy,' with Homer's beautiful, destructive and heart-betraying Helen. That Yeats, despite the camouflage and distancing, wants us to know who his 'beloved' was in 'real' life, partially excuses my indiscretion in cutting to the chase by actually naming her, as Yeats does only once in a poem. Taking the same shortcut, I also refer, for the most part, to 'Yeats' rather than the 'speaker,' for reasons given in addressing the issue from the outset.

To return to the passage from 'The Tower': Yeats has other questions to ask (prominent among them, 'do all in public or in secret rage/ As I do now against old age?'); but he eventually dismisses everyone from his phantasmagoria but Hanrahan, left behind because the poet needs 'all his mighty memories.' Yeats has a particular memory in mind, repressed even in evoking it. It was he who 'drove' Hanrahan 'drunk or sober through the dawn,' a bewitched man who 'rose in a frenzy,' led on a strange quest 'towards—//O towards I have forgotten what—enough!' What Yeats represses is Hanrahan's discovery (related in the first of six of *Red Hanrahan's Stories*) of a palatial house, lit from within by sunlight though it is night-time. There he encounters, surrounded by mystical symbols borne by four grey old women, an enthroned figure, pale with 'long waiting.' It is a 'woman, the most beautiful in the world': the fairy queen, Echtge. But Hanrahan, too tongue-tied and 'weak' to address her, is unable to break the spell she is under. Following her 'very sad sigh,' the scene dissolves. In the end, Hanrahan, who had (Yeats later remarked) 'gone into some undiscoverable country' (E&I, 298–99), loses both Echtge and his earthly sweetheart, Mary Lavelle. When, after a distraught year's absence, a transformed Hanrahan returns to find her,



Mary is gone; in the final sentence of the story, 'he never met with her or with news of her again.' (Myth, 220–21, 224)

Having abandoned his human sweetheart and lost what fleeting contact he had with the faery queen, blighted Hanrahan 'became a half-mad rhapsodic poet, a seer of visionary women, and a failed seducer of real women.'<sup>8</sup> It is to that 'old lecher'—'lured by a softening eye,/ Or by a touch or a sigh,' to 'plunge' into the 'labyrinth of another's being'—that Yeats poses the crucial question he has been headed toward all along, however casual the journey has seemed: 'Does the imagination dwell the most/ Upon a woman won or woman lost?' The question is answered in the very asking, and not only because 'I myself created Hanrahan.' Centuries of poetry in the Petrarchan tradition, reincarnated in Yeats's own Petrarchan poems of obsessive and unrequited love, make the answer obvious; but not what immediately follows: 'If on the lost, admit you turned aside/ From a great labyrinth' out of 'pride' (usually praised by Yeats but here, a less commendably stubborn independence), or 'cowardice,' or out of 'some silly, over-subtle thought / Or anything called conscience once.' That 'over-subtle thought' probably refers to a difference Yeats specifically acknowledges in the Maud Gonne poem, 'The People': his overly analytical mind, diametrically opposed to Maud Gonne's spontaneous, instinctual nature, that 'purity of a natural force' that attracted *and* profoundly disturbed him.

The middle and related charge, 'cowardice,' would apply not only to Hanrahan, intimidated in the presence of Echtge, but to Yeats as well. When in 1898, Maud opened up to him the secrets of her life, and even kissed him on the mouth, Yeats, who had hitherto avoided any physical advance, may have reacted less with what he called 'high scruple' than from what Deirdre Toomey, in an essay whose title is drawn from this passage of 'The Tower,' has described as 'psychic impotence' brought on by fear of seeing a woman he had idealized as almost supernaturally 'virginal' dragged down into 'sexuality' and even motherhood.<sup>9</sup> That fearful reaction is one form of cowardice. Maud herself had leveled that charge in a *political* context, though she acknowledged that his behavior was intended to protect her.

8 This concise and accurate synopsis is by Daniel Albright, in his Notes to *W. B. Yeats: The Poems*, 636.

9 Toomey, 'Labyrinths: Yeats and Maud Gonne,' in *Yeats and Women*, 1–40.

The occasion (more fully described in my discussion of the poem just referred to, 'The People') was her first major public speech, on 22 June 1897, part of a patriotic counter-demonstration protesting Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, which happened to conflict with Ireland's national celebration of the executed heroes of the 1798 United Irishman Rising. When, electrified by Maud's speech, the crowd turned violent, violence exacerbated by a charge of baton-wielding police, Yeats prevented Maud from joining the melee, fearing she would be injured (as hundreds were). In her letter of reprimand, Maud accused him of having 'made me do the most cowardly thing I have ever done in my life,' a charge she turned back on him: 'Do you know that to be a coward for those we love, is only a degree less bad than to be a coward for oneself. The latter I know well you are not, the former you know well you are.'<sup>10</sup>

This was just the most dramatic example of Yeats's protective fear, for he was far more often troubled than he was thrilled by the impassioned political activism of his equivalent of Hanrahan's 'most beautiful woman in the world': Maud, 'the loveliest woman born/ Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn.' Related to that cornucopia (degraded in 'A Prayer for my Daughter' to 'an old bellows full of angry wind'), the fascinating, complex and dangerous 'labyrinth,' the maze of the Muse, through which Yeats must remorsefully wander, rather than heroically 'plunge,' armed only with memory and imagination, is symbolically coterminous with his personal Muse, Maud Gonne. And if *that* 'memory recur, the sun's/ Under eclipse and the day blotted out.' These final two lines of the stanza I chose as epigraph, confusing but explicable, are immediately germane to the Muse-inspired 'madness' to which Plato and Petrarch refer.

Yeats had begun this question-asking movement of 'The Tower' by sending 'imagination forth/ Under the day's declining beam,' anticipating this final day-blotting eclipse. The poetry-intoxicated men riding to compare the actual Mary Hynes with Raftery's glory-conferring praise of his Muse, 'being *maddened* by those rhymes [...] mistook the brightness of the *moon/ for the prosaic light of day—/ Music had driven their wits astray.*' No sooner had Yeats mentioned Homer's heart-betraying 'Helen,' triggering memories of his own Helen, than he had cried out, 'O may the moon and sunlight seem/ One inextricable beam,/'

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10 G-YL, 72–73. For details, see discussion below of 'The People.'

For if I triumph I must make men *mad*.' Combining his occult studies in alchemy with his 'excited' reading of 'that strong enchanter, Nietzsche,' Yeats, adopting that enchanter's distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian (L, 403), attributed 'to the sun all that came from the high disciplined or individual kingly mind,' while 'to lunar influence belong all thought and emotions that were created by the community, by the common people, by nobody knows who' (Ex, 21–24).

Robert Graves makes a similar contrast: between inferior Apollonian poets of male intellect and order and genuine Muse-poets, who all, whether they know it or not, are in thrall to the lunar Muse he labelled the 'White Goddess.' This does not imply, in Graves any more than in Yeats, an abandonment of Apollonian order and poetic craftsmanship. As the best of Graves's poems, including the 'White Goddess' poems, amply demonstrate, he was obsessed by *techné*, craftsmanship and verbal precision. The sacred duty of the 'true poet' is to tell the Muse-goddess 'the truth about himself and her in his own passionate and peculiar words.'<sup>11</sup>

Though Graves considered himself a poet antithetical to Yeats, they have more than lunar Muse-ship in common. Whatever his attraction to the mysteries and primitivistic rites surrounding his White Goddess, Graves had, like Yeats, a post-Renaissance mind and a skeptical Anglo-Irish temperament that combined to keep his magical-shamanistic tendencies in balance. Concluding his Introduction to the second (1937) edition of *A Vision*, Yeats acknowledges that some may 'ask whether I believe in the actual existence of my circuits of sun and moon.' To such a question, he can only answer that, while 'sometimes overwhelmed by miracle' while in the midst of it, 'my reason has soon recovered.' He realizes, now that 'the system stands out clearly in my imagination,' that his circuits of sun and moon are not to be taken literally but 'regarded as stylistic arrangements of experience' that 'have helped me to hold in a single thought reality and justice' (Vis, 24). This is what Nietzsche meant by simultaneously recognizing the tumult of the actual and the aesthetic need to 'organize the chaos,' with the tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian, as laid out in *The Birth of Tragedy*, resolved in what later Nietzsche called a new and improved Dionysianism: one example of the fusion referred to as 'wild civility', as used in the title of my 1980s

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11 Graves, *The White Goddess*, 444.

book on Graves. Though I was borrowing the famous oxymoron from the 1630 lyric 'Delight in Disorder' by Robert Herrick, I was conscious of the Nietzschean creative tension between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, and its subsequent merging.<sup>12</sup>

What Yeats wants, yet fears, is the Dionysian poetic power, primordial or Druidic in intensity, exercised by the blind itinerant Raftery, like him, a singer born and a celebrant of the beauty of a woman. Of the 'early poets' Yeats says: 'Instead of learning their craft with paper and pen' (the *techné* Plato and Petrarch agree is necessary but not sufficient for the Muse-inspired poet), 'they would sit still' until 'imagination' brought forth 'images so vivid' and contagious that passers-by became 'part of the imagination of the dreamer, and wept, or laughed, or ran away as he would have them' (E&I, 43). To again quote Seamus Heaney, born in the year his predecessor died, 'true poetry' like Yeats's, tapping into a deep and mysterious consciousness, requires 'more than the artful expression of daylight opinion and conviction.' As Yeats himself says in this section of 'The Tower,' if he succeeds in fusing solar/Apollonian craftsmanship with the imaginative yet maddening power that derives from the lunar influence of the Muse; if he can make sun and moon seem 'one inextricable beam,' his ambiguous triumph, like that of Gaelic Raftery and his ancient predecessors, 'must make men *mad*,' though hopefully in a way more creative than destructive.

### §

But when one is actually in love, not merely penning love poems to an 'invented' lady, Muse-inspired madness becomes almost indistinguishable from the near insanity to which one can be driven by love unrequited. To the amused friend who charged him with concocting a poetic fiction and calling it 'Laura,' Petrarch cries out that he wishes it *were* all a joke and a pretense and not what it actually is: 'a

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12 Yeats was first attracted to Nietzsche by the Apollonian-Dionysian tension, which Yeats connected with two movements: the Dionysian urge 'to transcend forms, the other to create forms' (L, 403). Even in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche imagined Dionysus harnessed by Apollo. In his later thought, what he calls the 'Dionysian' subsumes the Apollonian. The Greeks, we're told in *Untimely Meditations* 2.1, 'gradually learned to *organize the chaos*, a parable for each of us.' But the chaos must be organized, not extirpated in what he depicts as Platonic-Christian 'castratism' (*Twilight of the Idols* 5.1). As Zarathustra puts it (*Zarathustra* 1, Prologue 3), 'One must still have chaos within oneself to be able to give birth to a dancing star.'

madness.' Yeats's Muse and Beloved were one and the same, a woman who inspired her devotee to create beautiful lyrics but also left him sex starved and half-mad. In the first draft of his autobiography, completed by the beginning of 1917, but too candid for publication, he looked back twenty years to 1897, when, he says, 'I was tortured by sexual desire and disappointed love. Often as I walked in the woods at Coole, it would have been a relief to have screamed aloud. When desire became an unendurable torture, I would masturbate,' which left him ill. He 'sought no other love,' and, falling back on chivalric Arthurian romance, would repeat to himself 'again and again the last confession of Lancelot, and indeed it was my greatest pride, "I have loved a queen beyond measure and exceeding long." I was never before or since more miserable.'<sup>13</sup> In 1914, he described himself, in 'On Woman,' the first 'Solomon and Sheba' poem focused, not on George but on that 'perverse creature of chance,' Maud Gonine, as so sexually frustrated that he was 'driven mad,/ Sleep driven from my bed.'

Had Yeats's Muse—the extravagantly beautiful, occasionally half-mad and certainly maddeningly elusive Maud Gonine—never existed, Yeats *would* have 'invented' her.<sup>14</sup> But she *did* exist. Maud exploded into the young poet's life in 1889, but even then her future as a Muse was doubly predestined. First, like most love poets in the Romantic and Celtic traditions, Yeats required an enchantress, a destructive yet life-giving lunar goddess and *femme fatale* (the Celtic *Leanhaun Shee*), who also inspires creativity. Second, he was, early on, writing in the erotic-spiritual tradition of obsessive and unrequited love established six centuries earlier: in Dante's mixed-genre *La Vita Nuova* (1294), and in the lyric sequence of Petrarch, its earliest poems dating to 1327, the year he fell in love with 'Laura,' the latest to the final year of his life, 1374.

However idealized, Dante's Beatrice was real, even to the name, Beatrice Portinari. Petrarch's *Rime in vita e morte di Madonna Laura* was also inspired by an actual woman—from Avignon, blond, brilliant-eyed, probably swept away by the Black Death in 1348. There was

13 Mem, 125. This misery is recalled in Poem II of 'A Man Young and Old,' where the victim of a lunar Muse thinks, 'I could recover if I shrieked/ My heart's agony/ To passing bird, but I am dumb/ From human dignity.'

14 Lady Gregory confided in her 1898 diary that Yeats once told her that Maud might be 'locked up as mad,' since her political activity was guided by 'visions'—an odd accusation coming from a fellow occultist.

most certainly a 'real' Maud Gonne, well known to be the inspiration of Yeats's love poems. Readers of those poems will find little reason to doubt—though she was as 'unattainable' as Laura and Beatrice—that Yeats was as deeply and painfully in love with Maud as his predecessors had been with *their* Muses. Like Petrarch, Yeats, despite Plato's relative dismissal of *techné* in the *Ion*, devoted sustained labor to perfecting the craftsmanship that produced lyric forms varied enough to allow him to express his love in all its ecstasy and anguish. In fact, I will be arguing, it was the very art she inspired that allowed Yeats (in *this* case, at least, without cowardice or intellectual over subtlety) to 'turn aside' from the 'great labyrinth' that *was* Maud Gonne. Not even *she* could triumph over the poems she helped generate. That would please her since, as we know, she thought of those poems as the 'children' of their otherwise childless union, herself the Father, Yeats the Mother! And, as she added, 'our children' will have 'wings.'

The volatile, recklessly heroic Maud Gonne was wrong in many of her actions and judgments, but not in her assessment of the poetry she had inspired, even co-created. Yeats had other sexual relationships over the years—the liaison with Mabel Dickinson actually flanking his brief physical intimacy with Maud—and his marriage to Georgie Hyde-Lees ('George') was important to him, both personally and esoterically. But it was Maud—'that one'—who broke the poet's heart, simultaneously fascinating, obsessing, and inspiring him. One can admire the verse and be dismissive of the Muse. Thomas Flanagan, critic and author of a famed trilogy of Irish historical novels, observed in 1997, casting a cold eye on Maud Gonne: 'Some of Yeats's most magnificent poetry was inspired by this addlebrained zealot.' The formidable Harold Bloom, hardly an uncritical admirer, has said of Yeats as a love poet: 'one can wonder if any poet of our century enters into competition here with him.' In *W. B. Yeats and the Muses*, Joseph M. Hassett has pronounced the poetry to and about her 'the most sustained and fully developed tribute to a Muse in the history of literature in English.' Whatever one makes of Maud herself, and it is hard to overlook her flaws, especially her life-long anti-Semitism, those informed literary judgments seem incontrovertible.<sup>15</sup>

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15 Flanagan, 'A Terrible Beauty is Born,' 10. Bloom, *Yeats*, 459.