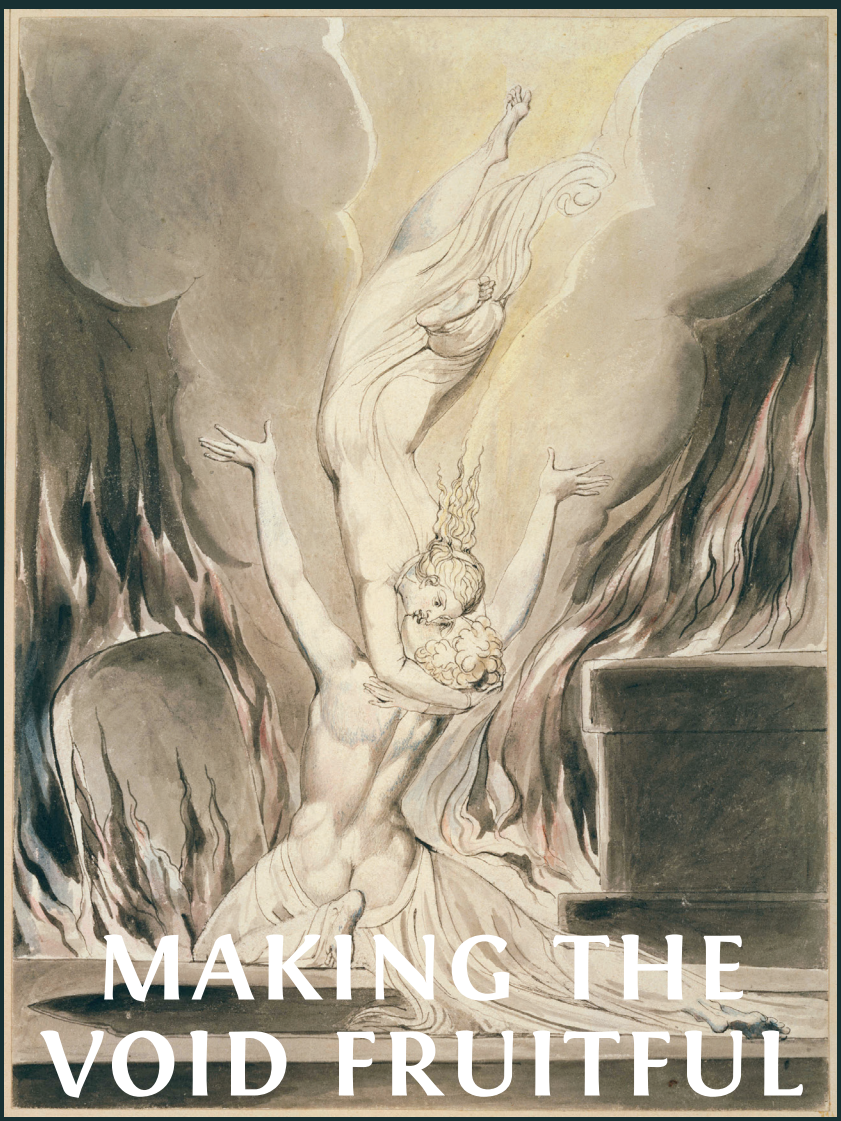
Patrick J. Keane



MAKING THE VOID FRUITFUL

Yeats as Spiritual Seeker and Petrarchan Lover

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10. The Poems: A Sampling

There are many Maud poems, in all but one of which ('Beautiful Lofty Things,' 1937) she is un-named; and some, perhaps including the short lyric Yeats intended to be his final word, in which she is a covert presence. She figures importantly in 'A Prayer for my Daughter,' 'Among School Children,' and 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' in which the battered Self affirms the most painful yet 'most fecund' experience of Yeats's life: his unrequited but poetically fertile love for that 'proud woman not kindred of his soul.' Concluding Part II of 'The Tower,' Yeats, insistent that only an aching heart conceives a changeless work of art, asks if the imagination dwells 'the most/ Upon a woman won or woman lost?' In Yeats's case, we know the answer, but, as we have seen, he at first surprises us by adding, 'If on the lost, admit you turned aside/ From a great labyrinth.' The path through that fascinating but troubling labyrinth is primarily poetic.

I intend to say something about almost all of the poems written to and about Maud Gonne, placing most of them in biographical and thematic context. After discussing a few representative poems, beginning with 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' and 'The Cap and Bells,' and ending with 'A Prayer for my Daughter' (three beautiful Maud Gonne poems clothed in Celtic and Greek myth), I will discuss, in Yeats's own thematic order, several specific 'clusters' of lyrics to or about her, including the splendid 'No Second Troy' and the enigmatic 'The Cold Heaven.' After paying particular attention to the last and most somber of the Maud poems, 'A Bronze Head,' I'll devote time to 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' and 'Man and the Echo,' and end, like Yeats himself, with 'Politics,' the little poem he chose as his final word, the culmination of his *Collected Poems*, and which, I will suggest, may be a Maud Gonne lyric in disguise.

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§

Since, as Maud Gonne herself demonstrates, beauty has its privileges, we may begin with the meticulously crafted yet almost miraculously beautiful 'The Song of Wandering Aengus' (1897), an early mythological poem in which Maud's not-so-covert presence is revealed by the reference to 'apple blossom.'

The poem (three 8-line stanzas of fused *abcb* quatrains) is cast in the old Irish lyric-form of an *aisling*, in which a seeker is granted a magical vision of a beautiful woman. In this case, the Muse-possessed seeker, impelled 'because a fire was in my head' (the poem was originally titled 'A Mad Song'), is the Celtic god of poetry, love, and youth. Here, however, he ages in his quest of the transfigured beauty, fleetingly visible but elusive, he had once glimpsed in the evanescent form of one of the shape-changing women of the Celtic *Sidhe.* We begin with Aengus preparing to fish in a stream in flickering pre-dawn starlight:

> I went out to the hazel wood,
> Because a fire was in my head,
> And cut and peeled a hazel wand,
> And hooked a berry to a thread;
> And when white moths were on the wing,
> And moth-like stars were flickering out,
> I dropped the berry in a stream
> And caught a little silver trout.

Maud has not yet come into the poem, but her entrance has been prepared for by 'The Fish,' a self-pitying poem which precedes the Aengus poem in *The Wind Among the Reeds*. The fish-woman of that poem may 'hide in the ebb and flow' of the tide, but people in time to come will know how the poet cast his net, 'And how you have leaped times out of mind/ Over the little silver cords,/ And think that you were hard and unkind,/ And blame you with many bitter words.' In the Aengus poem, the magical transformation is about to take place. Once he had laid the little silver trout on the ground,

> I went to blow the fire a-flame,
> But something rustled on the floor,
> And someone called me by my name:
> It had become a glimmering girl,
> With apple blossom in her hair

Who called me by my name and ran
And faded through the brightening air.

The stages of transformation are as delicately handled as everything else in this exquisite poem: some*thing* rustled, some*one* called him by name; before we know it, the 'little silver trout' has 'become a glimmering girl' who again calls him by his name, but runs and fades in dawn's 'brightening air.'

She had become not merely a 'glimmering girl,' but, with that telltale 'apple blossom in her hair,' had metamorphosed into *that* one, as Maud Gonne herself recognized. A third of a century after he first laid eyes on Maud, he described her complexion as 'luminous, like that of apple-blossom through which the light falls, and I remember her standing that first day by a great heap of such blossoms in the window.'[1] Given that it was January in London, they must have been almond rather than apple blossoms. But the latter had occult as well as poetic significance for Yeats. In July 1899, he described a dream invoked by thinking of apple blossoms, adding, 'The apple-blossoms are symbols of dawn and of the air and of the east and of resurrection in my system and in the poem.'[2] Though referring to the dramatic poem he was working on at the time, *The Shadowy Waters*, in which Dectora imagines a stream that disappeared when 'a kingfisher/ Shook the pale apple-blossom over it' (274–5), he may also have been glancing back two years, to Aengus's glimmering girl. And two or three years *on* from 1899, he would describe Maud in a poem, 'The Arrow,' as 'Tall and noble but with face and bosom/ Delicate in colour as apple blossom.'

In 'The Song of Wandering Aengus,' the glimmering girl with apple blossom in her hair is no sooner glimpsed than she vanishes 'through the brightening air.' No less predictably, Aengus, a remarkably human god, pursues her, even envisioning, after much wandering, a projected reunion in an earthly paradise, its sexuality celestially sublimated:

1 Au, 123. Maud's daughter inherited her mother's beauty, including that lovely apple-blossom coloring. On meeting Iseult in 1917, Lady Cunard pressed Yeats as to who she was, adding, 'Never in my life have I seen such a complexion.' Meeting her at the same time at Stone Cottage, Ezra Pound, who later had a brief affair with Iseult, pronounced the young beauty worthy of a troubadour's romance. See Cardozo, 310.

2 Yeats, '*Vision Notebook*,' transcribed by Warwick Gould and Deirdre Toomey; cited by Foster, *The Apprentice Mage*, 219, 575n70.

Though I am old with wandering
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,
I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

In the passage in which he associates Maud with the luminousness of apple blossom through which the light falls, Yeats also described her—in keeping with his symbolic association of apple blossoms with renewal (dawn, the east, and resurrection)—as seeming to be 'a classical impersonation of "the Spring," the Virgilian commendation "She walks like a goddess" made for her alone' (Au, 123). This image is not only Virgilian since Dante, in *La Vita Nuova*, echoed his Master in having Love himself tell the poet of his beloved: 'She is Spring [*Primavera*], who springs first, bearing herself the name of Love [*Amor*].'[3]

Despite these Celtic and courtly love connections with Maud Gonne, the enchanting 'Song of Wandering Aengus' remains cloaked in mythology, and those final lunar and solar images—'The silver apples of the moon,/ The golden apples of the sun'—drawn from Deuteronomy and alchemy, would seem to transcend any projection of a fruitful union between Yeats and his vernal goddess. Still, those final celestial images *do* seem to deliberately echo the evolution of the longed for woman—from a little '*silver* trout' to that Maud-like 'glimmering girl,/ With *apple* blossom in her hair.'

An earlier, even more covert Maud poem, 'The Cap and Bells' (1893), was accompanied by an evasive note when it was published in *The Wind Among the Reeds*. Describing it (as Coleridge had described the genesis of 'Kubla Khan') as coming to him in a dream or vision, Yeats concludes, 'The poem has always meant a great deal to me, though as is the way with symbolic poems, it has not always meant quite the same thing.

3 Dante, *La Vita Nuova*, chapter XXIV, describes, to cite the chapter title, how 'I felt my Heart Awaken' [*lo mi senti' svegliar dentro a la core*]. The final stanza of the poem I am quoting begins, '*Amor mi disse; quelle Primavera*.' Yeats read *La Vita Nuova* as translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Another major modern poet, Wallace Stevens, also admired Dante's account of his 'new life.'

Blake would have said, "The authors are in eternity," and I am quite sure they can only be questioned in dreams.'[4]

He had reason to deflect the curious. For him, 'The Cap and Bells' was, in retrospect, a counter-poem to the beautiful but abject 'He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven,' which he described as 'the way to lose a woman.' Being 'poor' (the nonce word in this poem 'Enwrought with golden and silver light'), he cannot afford 'the heavens' embroidered cloths,' and so says, 'I have spread my dreams under your feet;/ Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.' This is to invite the female response threatened a half-century ago by Nancy Sinatra, whose boots were made for walking, 'and that's just what they'll do./ One of these days these boots are gonna walk all over you.' If he was not engaging in massive repression or sardonic irony in describing the no less beautiful *and* even more masochistic 'The Cap and Bells' as 'the way to win a woman,' Yeats must have believed that Maud Gonne was to be won only through total sacrifice.

In a chivalric scenario set in the evening in a garden beneath the palace window of a young, beautiful, and aloof queen, a lovelorn jester bids his blue-garmented soul, 'grown wise-tongued by thinking' of her 'light footfall,' to rise upward to her windowsill. Unresponsive, she decisively 'drew in the heavy casement/ And pushed the latches down.' He then sends her, in a 'red and quivering garment,' his heart, 'grown sweet-tongued by dreaming/ Of a flutter of flower-like hair.' It 'sang to her through the door.' But the dismissal of the heart is even more painful because so nonchalant: 'she took up her fan from the table/ And waved it off on the air.' With soul and heart, thought and dream, both rejected, he sends the young queen what is at once the symbol of his occupation, of his role in the Poet–Muse drama, and (at the risk of invoking reductive Freudianism) of his manhood: '"I have cap and bells," he pondered,/"I will send them to her and die."'

> And when the morning whitened
> He left them where she went by.
> She laid them upon her bosom,

4 For Yeats's note on 'The Cap and Bells,' see VP, 808. In a letter of 6 July 1803 to his friend Thomas Butts, Blake said he was able to praise his epic poem *Milton*, 'since I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary; the Authors are in Eternity.' *The Letters of William Blake*, 69.

Under a cloud of her hair,
And her red lips sang them a love-song
Till stars grew out of the air.

In the original draft, 'She took them into her chamber/ Her breast began to heave,' less in grief than triumph. Though Yeats deleted these tone-disturbing lines, their morbid eroticism (which would flower perversely in his late dance plays where lowly fools are decapitated to appease haughty queens) offers a glimpse into the poem's psychological origins. When, at last, the queen lets in soul and heart, they set up a 'chattering wise and sweet,/ And her hair was a folded flower/ And the quiet of love in her feet.' But it seems too little too late. Soul and heart had *grown* through suffering. Now her 'red lips' sang his final offering 'a love-song/ Till stars *grew out of the air*.' *Grew,* because, in a variation on the mythic origin of the constellation Coma Berenices, *her* star-making song's genesis lies in *his* lethal self-sacrifice. Here as 'always' in Yeats, a 'personal emotion' has been 'woven into a general pattern of myth and symbol.'[5] But on the 'personal' level of this medieval Poet–Muse drama, the *belle dame sans merci* to whom the lowly jester gives 'all' is unmistakably Maud, 'that one' who (in 'Friends') 'took/ All till my youth was gone/ With scarce a pitying look.' Though 'The Cap and Bells' ends with 'the quiet of love in her feet,' they are the very feet under which he had 'spread my dreams' in the subservient poem supposedly rebutted in this ballad of terrible beauty, lyrically lovely but psychologically rooted in a symbolic act of self-castration.

Positioned between 'The Cap and Bells' and 'He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' in *The Wind Among the Reeds* we find 'The Lover pleads with his Friend for Old Friends' and 'He wishes his Beloved were Dead,' a poem as strange as its title. The first poem was written in 1897, when Maud was at the height of her public fame, giving speeches and working with Yeats, whom she'd enlisted in the cause, on what would be the Centennial celebration of the 1798 United Irishman rebellion led

5 Yeats, Au, 151. These 'stars,' like the 'disheveled' stars of 'Who Goes with Fergus?,' play on the Berenice-myth via Milton and Pope. The myth is adopted by name in a much later Yeats poem in *Words for Music Perhaps*, in the 1933 *Winding Stair*. A woman dreams 'That I had shorn my locks away/ And laid them on Love's lettered tomb:/ But something bore them out of sight/ In a great tumult of the air,/ And after nailed upon the night/ Berenice's burning hair' ('Her Dream,' 1929).

by Wolfe Tone, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, and others. The lover's plea, a petition that, at this zenith of her fame, she not forget such old friends as himself, is mingled with a reminder of the transience of beauty, which will be remembered and recorded only by her devotee, *her* loyalty rewarded by *his*. The usual paradox, of course, is that memory of Maud will *not* perish because of poetry as unforgettable as this poem's final three lines, with that wonderful repetition of 'eyes,' ensuring the opposite of what is asserted, since what Yeats saw is now seen by 'all' of us:

> Though you are in your shining days,
> Voices among the crowd
> And new friends busy with your praise,
> Be not unkind or proud,
> But think about old friends the most:
> Time's bitter flood will rise,
> Your beauty perish and be lost
> For all eyes but these eyes.

In the second poem, it is not only her 'beauty' that will perish; he imagines the beloved herself 'lying cold and dead,' yet mysteriously able, while 'lights were paling out of the West,' to 'come hither, and bend your head,'

> And I would lay my head on your breast;
> And you would murmur tender words,
> Forgiving me, because you were dead:
> Nor would you rise and hasten away,
> Though you have the will of the wild birds,
> But know your hair was bound and wound
> About the stars and moon and sun:
> O would, beloved, that you lay
> Under the dock-leaves in the ground,
> While lights were paling one by one.

Whatever her reaction to this morbid-ecstatic poem, Maud would have been in a better position than most readers to *understand* it, having attended, in Paris with Yeats, a five-hour 1894 production of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axël*, in the final scene of which the heroine, Sarah, comes to the Black Forest castle of Count Axël, described by Yeats as 'a wizard ascetic of the Rosy Cross.' Together they drink poison, the

ultimate renunciation of the common world of action, thought, and temporal love itself. Yeats, who was, like many major modernists affected by *Axël*, approved of this combination of spiritual renunciation and a Romantic voluptuousness that summons up Keats, who remarks in one of his letters (25 July 1819) to his beloved, Fanny Brawne: 'I hate the world…would I could take a sweet poison from your lips to send me out of it.'[6]

In his 1894 review, 'A Symbolical Drama in Paris,' Yeats observes of this 'marvelous scene' in *Axël* that 'the infinite alone is worth attaining, and the infinite is the possession of the dead. Such appears to be the moral. Seldom has the utmost pessimism found a more magnificent expression.'[7] Many of Yeats's love poems, early and late, envisage reunion beyond the grave; hence his fascination, early and late, with Blake's illustration of 'The Reunion of the Soul & the Body.' At the conclusion of *The Shadowy Waters*, a dramatic poem largely completed by 1899 (though not staged till 1906), Dectora puts her arms around Forgael, and says, in final lines combining Yeats's desire for extraterrestrial consummation and his obsession with his beloved's Pre-Raphaelite mane of tenting hair: 'Bend low, that I may cover you with my hair,/ For we will gaze upon this world no longer.'[8]

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These poems and others like them, in which the beloved is anonymous and the speaker either a figure from Celtic myth or a nameless 'He,' are, however transparent to the informed reader, more or less covert Maud poems. The most *overt*, the only poem in which Yeats claims, in

6 *Letters of John Keats*, 2:133.

7 For the Paris viewing of the play by Yeats and Maud, see Hassett, *W. B. Yeats and the Muses*, 75. For his praise, and criticism, of *Axël*, see Yeats's April 1894 *Bookman* review, in *Uncollected Prose*, 1:323–24. Yeats was not alone in being affected by this play. Edmund Wilson's first book—his 1931 study of French and English literature from 1870–1930, covering Yeats, Valery, T. S. Eliot, Proust, Joyce, and Gertrude Stein—is titled *Axël's Castle*.

8 *The Shadowy Waters*, lines 429–30. The hair-tent image recurs in two mid-nineties back-to-back poems in *The Wind Among Reeds*: 'Let your eyes half close, and your heart beat/ Over my heart, and your hair fall over my breast' ('He bids his Beloved be at Peace'); and in 'He reproves the Curlew,' he bids the bird to cry no more, 'Because your crying brings to my mind/ Passion-dimmed eyes and long heavy hair/That was shaken out over my breast.'

his own name, that his passion for Maud (un-named, of course) was reciprocated, is 'To a Young Girl,' written in 1915 but not published until *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917, 1919). The girl addressed is Maud's then twenty-year-old daughter, Iseult, the fruit of the old liaison with Lucien Millevoye, one aspect of which was, as we've seen, as weirdly morbid as anything in 'He wishes his Beloved were Dead.' Like many of Yeats's middle poems, 'To a Young Girl' consists of a single syntactical unit spun out over eleven mostly 3-beat lines. Ironically, Iseult had come to Yeats for advice in love! His response, presumably accurate if boastful, contains perhaps more than Iseult needed to know—unless her mother had already confided in her that she and Yeats had finally, seven years before this poem was written, physically consummated their then- two-decade-long Muse and Poet relationship:

> My dear, my dear, I know
> More than another
> What makes your heart beat so;
> Not even your own mother
> Can know it as I know,
> Who broke my heart for her
> When the wild thought,
> That she denies
> And has forgot,
> Set all her blood astir
> And glittered in her eyes.

He acknowledges his own intensity in 'Friends,' written four years earlier. 'Now must I these three praise—/ Three women that have wrought/ What joy is in my days.' He names no names, but we know who the three are, even if, from their depictions, the order is uncertain; plausible cases can be made that Olivia Shakespear, his first lover, comes first, Lady Gregory, his friend and patron, second – or vice versa. Whatever the 'correct' order, the first friend (Olivia?) is praised because, over fifteen often 'troubled years,' no thought 'Could ever come between/ Mind and delighted mind'; the second because her steady 'hand' (suggesting Augusta Gregory) had the strength to unbind (as Augusta had practically and Olivia sexually) 'Youth's dreamy load, till she/ So changed me that I live/ Labouring in ecstasy.'

Yeats may have *intended* ambiguity in his depictions of the first two friends, in order to emphasize, as he always does, the uniqueness of the

third and climactic figure to be praised, who promptly proceeds to take over the poem. There is of course no question as to *her* identity, even though the double challenge she presents is introduced by the posing of two questions: 'And what of her that took/ All till my youth was gone/ With scarce a pitying look?/ How could I praise that one?' His answer, as so often in the Maud poems, incorporates and transcends pity for himself and accusation of the woman who both tormented and inspired him, all resolved in bittersweet affirmation:

> When day begins to break
> I count my good and bad,
> Being wakeful for her sake,
> Remembering what she had,
> What eagle look still shows,
> While up from my heart's root
> So great a sweetness flows
> I shake from head to foot.

Writing sixty years ago, the acute but too severely scrupulous poet-critic Yvor Winters, notoriously hostile to Yeats, found in these final lines behavior unseemly for a grown man. He may have a point, but it is not one likely to catch on with admirers of the poem responsive to its compression and syntactical momentum, *and* to its emotion. Ezra Pound realized that Yeats knew 'what violent emotion is really like' and could see and write 'from the centre of it.' Samuel Beckett 'would read "Friends" aloud and stand up as he repeated the three final lines in amazement, exclaiming, "Imagine such feeling".'[9] And the final image of 'Friends' would not be forgotten by Yeats. That sweet flow associated with Maud Gonne was to be memorably and even more movingly reprised a decade and a half later in the major poem, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' which culminates in an ecstatic affirmation that 'we are blest by everything' precisely because 'So great a sweetness flows into the breast' of the lover who has plunged into 'that most fecund ditch of all,/ The folly that man does/ Or must suffer if he woos/ A proud woman not kindred of his soul.'

9 Winters, *The Poetry of W. B. Yeats*. Pound, December 1915 letter to Harriet Monroe, cited in Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, & Modernism*, 183. For the Beckett anecdote, see Hassett, *Yeats Now: Echoing Into Life*, 60.

Maud serves as warning and counterexample in the conservative but too facilely criticized 'A Prayer for my Daughter.' Alternately casual and ceremonious, and always beautiful, this poem is composed in a stanza (eight lines, pentameters with an unusually effective embedded tetrameter couplet), adapted from Abraham Cowley, and previously employed in Yeats's elegy, 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,' another sustained poem centered, as is this 'Prayer,' on 'courtesy,' the virtue in which Yeats would have his daughter 'chiefly learned.'

We begin with the poet's infant, Anne, 'half-hid/ Under this cradle-hood and coverlid,' and so necessarily still half-*exposed*, born as she is into the violent world and 'rocking cradle' evoked in the immediately preceding, apocalyptic poem, 'The Second Coming,' destined to become the most frequently cited poem of the century to come. Pacing the battlements of the Tower while his child 'sleeps on,' the anxious father listens to the 'sea-wind' bred on the Atlantic, at once an actual storm and a politically 'levelling wind' that 'scream[s] upon the tower,' under 'the arches of the bridge,' and in 'the elms above the flooded stream.' He imagines 'in excited reverie/ That the future years had come,/ Dancing to a frenzied drum,/ Out of the murderous innocence of the sea': lines of terrible beauty preparing us for the silent entrance of Maud, a woman Anne's protective father prays his daughter will not emulate:

> May she be granted beauty and yet not
> Beauty to make a stranger's eye distraught,
> Or hers before a looking-glass, for such,
> Being made beautiful overmuch,
> Consider beauty a sufficient end,
> Lose natural kindness and maybe
> The heart-revealing intimacy
> That chooses right, and never find a friend.

As he emphasizes at the end of the poem, projecting her happily 'rooted' future, 'in one dear perpetual place,' the poet-father wants his daughter's eventual bridegroom 'bring her to a house/Where all's accustomed, ceremonious,' a conservative but hardly misogynistic wish in 1919, and given the alternative: 'For arrogance and hatred are the wares/ Peddled in the thoroughfares.' This Anglo-Irish conservatism, however snobbish, is to be understood rather than glibly condemned, especially in light of the examples of bad marriages Yeats had summoned up earlier in

the poem. Thinking of Maud's catastrophic marriage to the boorish John MacBride, Yeats camouflages biography, however transparently, by repairing to Greek mythology; to Maud's precursor, Helen (and her boorish husband Menelaus, along with Paris, her loving but foolish abductor), and to foam-born Aphrodite, who could pick for husband anyone she wished, having no father to please, yet chose Hephaestus, lame weapon-maker to the gods:

> Helen being chosen found life flat and dull
> And later had much trouble from a fool,
> While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray,
> Being fatherless, could have her way
> Yet chose a bandy-leggèd smith for man.
> It's certain that fine women eat
> A crazy salad with their meat
> Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone.

The father prays that his daughter be granted, along with moderate rather than excessive (troubled and troubling) beauty, a 'natural kindness' free of rancor, the 'worst' form of which is 'intellectual hatred,' attended by 'opinion,' always in Yeats, as here, 'accursed' because mechanical and political rather than organic and autonomous.

> Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
> Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn,
> Because of her opinionated mind
> Barter that horn and every good
> By quiet natures understood
> For an old bellows full of angry wind?

Here as so often, Maud is front and center, in all but name, though there may be another, more deeply hidden female presence in this poem.[10] The degeneration of life's overflowing cornucopia into an old bellows 'full' only of 'angry wind' parallels other images conveying Yeats's

10 Uncharacteristically departing from the text, Helen Vendler has argued that the truly hidden presence here is Yeats's mother, another victim of a bad marriage and improvident husband. While 'Maud Gonne is the chief overt exemplum of a woman making a wrong marital choice, her disastrous marriage to John MacBride was public and could be commented on, as Yeats's mother's marriage could not.' Vendler's five moving pages on the subject have convinced me that, were it not for the tragic examples of *both* his mother and Maud Gonne, Yeats's 'prayer for his daughter might have been different.' *Our Secret Discipline*, 297–302.

hatred of life-destroying political abstraction. It anticipates Maud's voracious yet famished image in old age, 'Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind/ And took a mess of shadows for its meat' ('Among School Children'), as well as the 'dark tomb-haunter' of 'A Bronze Head,' reduced—by abstract politics, and by a sculptor who read those passions well and stamped them on a lifeless bust—to 'a bird's round eye,/ Everything else withered and mummy-dead.' In 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz,' an elegy as beautiful as those aristocratic and revolutionary sisters themselves, Eva, dreaming of 'some vague Utopia,' seemed, 'When withered old and skeleton-gaunt,/ An image of such politics.'[11]

And then there is Constance (Con) herself, a commandant in the Rising, whose activist days had been 'spent/ In ignorant good-will,/ Her nights in argument/ Until her voice grew shrill.' That judgmental misogyny occurs in the group-elegy, 'Easter, 1916.' We also have, written like 'A Prayer for my Daughter' in 1919, the splendid 'On a Political Prisoner.' With time to be uncharacteristically 'patient,' Con drew to her cell a grey gull, who 'endured her fingers' touch/ And from her fingers ate its bit.' Yeats wonders if, in 'touching that lone wing,' she recalled the years when—'The beauty of her country-side/ With all youth's lonely wildness stirred'—she herself 'seemed to have grown clean and sweet/ Like any rock-bred, sea-borne bird,'

> before her mind
> Became a bitter, an abstract thing,
> Her thought some popular enmity:
> Blind and leader of the blind
> Drinking the foul ditch where they lie?

Reading 'On a Political Prisoner,' we can hardly avoid thinking of Maud Gonne, who was also imprisoned at this time. In fact, Yeats had intended to write a poem about Maud, but instead wrote 'one on Con,' as he told his wife, precisely 'to avoid writing one on Maud.'[12] Con was, said Maud, 'like a sister to me,' and Yeats himself always associated the two

11 Yeats chose this haunted and haunting elegy to open both editions (1929, 1933) of *The Winding Stair*. Back in the mid-nineties, he had briefly considered proposing to the beautiful Eva, before realizing that the aristocratic Gore-Booths of Lissadell House 'would never accept so penniless a suitor.'

12 Jeffares, *A New Commentary on The Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 195.

women: both beautiful and both political revolutionaries who had long devoted themselves to the Irish poor, the starving and evicted. While he admired their heroism, from his conservative perspective, they had traded their Anglo-Irish birthright and palpable life itself—symbolized in his secular prayer for his daughter by the cornucopia and the Tree of Life in the form of 'the spreading laurel tree'—for a mess of shadows in the unceremonious form of often vague, hate-choked, embittering political abstractions. Patronizing and judgmental, to be sure; and yet the harshness of his political critiques of both women, and of Eva, are usually tempered by tenderness. He contemplated what he perceived as their tragic fates with compassion and love as well as condemnation: a mixture, elevated and intensified, at the heart of almost all the Maud Gonne poems.

I have been ranging freely among a number of illustrative poems, most with special appeal to me. But it seems time, at this point, to step back and browse through, in roughly chronological but primarily thematic order, a fairly full sample of the earlier Maud poems. I will begin with a discussion of two lyrics from the poetry grouping later published separately (in *Poems,* 1895), as *The Rose.* A third—'Who Goes with Fergus?,' excerpted from a play and subsequently added to *The Rose*—has already been discussed in Part One, though it should be mentioned that the final stanza seems to evoke that 'troubling' of his life that began in 1889. The other two, 'When You are Old' and 'The White Birds,' are directly addressed to Maud Gonne.

I will then focus on those earlier-mentioned clusters of poems to and about Maud Gonne in *In the Seven Woods* (1904) and *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910); then turn to poems about Maud in *Responsibilities* (1914) and *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917, 1919). When I get to those clusters, I will discuss them sequentially, since Yeats wanted his poems read, not in the order he wrote them but in the mutually illuminating order in which he arranged them.