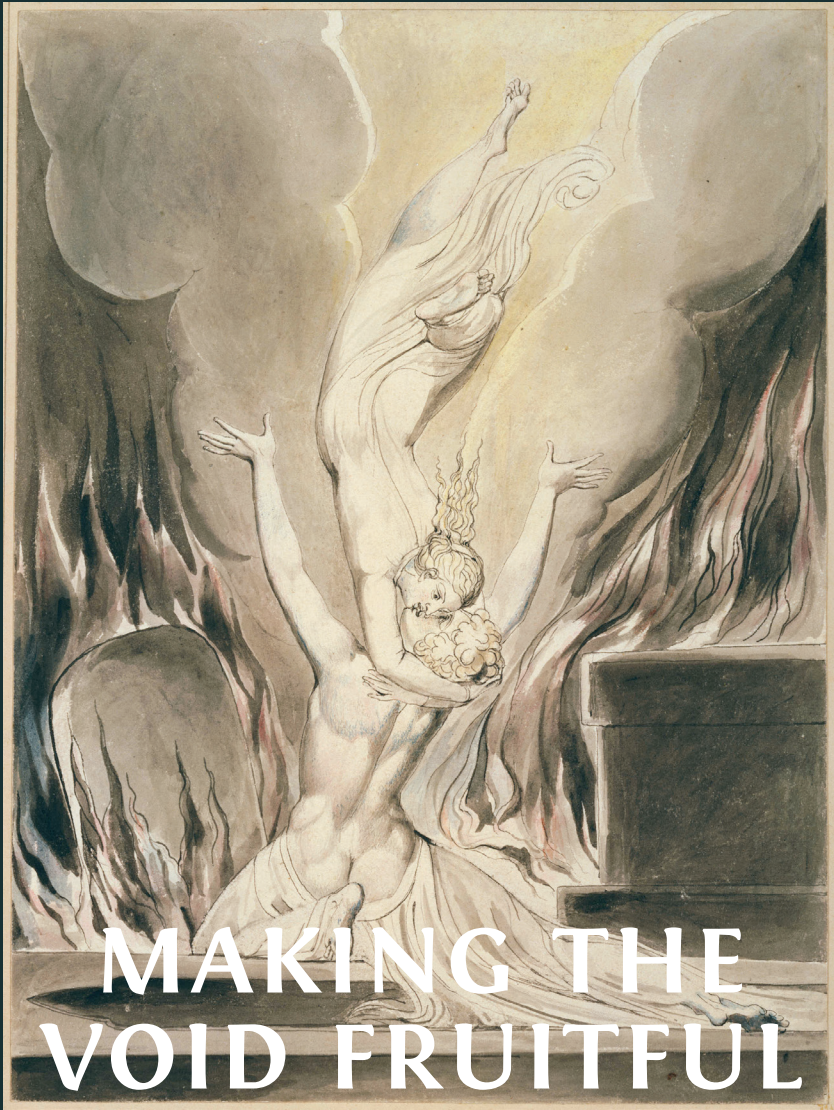


PATRICK J. KEANE



Yeats as Spiritual Seeker  
and Petrarchan Lover



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## II. Rose, Wind, and the Seven Woods

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Beautiful as many of them are, most of the poems to his 'Beloved' in *The Rose* (1895) and even in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899), are too 'heavy' with dream and dew, too perfumed with *fin-de-siècle* 'lilies of death-pale hope, roses of passionate dream' ('The Travail of Passion,' 1896), too filled with languor and dim hair, to move most modern readers; or, at least, *this* reader. My favorite poem in *The Rose*—an enthusiasm shared by James Joyce—is 'Who Goes with Fergus?', discussed in Part One. A year after writing the Fergus poem, which ends with those 'disheveled wandering stars,' Yeats had his young queen, a medieval version of Maud, place her lovelorn jester's cap and bells under 'a cloud of her hair,' while 'her red lips' would, as we just saw, sing 'them a love song/ Till stars grew out of the air.'

Stars reappear in the most familiar poem in *The Rose*, 'When You Are Old' (1891), a Muse-poem echoing the opening of a well-known sixteenth-century sonnet by Pierre Ronsard, which also reminds the beautiful woman (in Ronsard's case, his mistress, Hélène de Surgerès) that she will not always be so. Ronsard's opening line, *Quand vous serez bien vieille, au soir à la chandelle* [When you are very old, in the evening by candle-light], is duplicated by Yeats: 'When you are old and grey and full of sleep,/ And nodding by the fire.' As Maud grew older, Yeats, in poem after poem, obsessively summoned up her youthful beauty; here, conversely, he imagines her old, though Maud was only twenty-five when the poem was written. He is following Ronsard; but only up to a point, and the divergence is worth emphasizing, not least because of the way these obviously intimately related sonnets play tonal variations on both the Petrarchan and *carpe diem* traditions.

Now a spirit 'beneath the earth,' the French poet imagines the old woman 'singing his verses' while saying to herself in amazement: 'Ronsard used to celebrate me when I was young.' Yeats, too, wants his beloved to read his poems; but Ronsard says of his aged woman, 'hunched at the fireplace,' that she will then feel regret regarding his love and her proud disdain ('*Regrettant mon amour et vostre fier desdain*'). So, abruptly reverting to the present, he urges her to live now, 'gathering the roses' of her 'life.' Ronsard's direct if derivative invocation of the *carpe diem* theme is softened and romanticized by Yeats. When his woman is old and nodding by the fire, he gently urges her to take down 'this book,' written by the 'one man' who, seeing beneath the beautiful surface to her inner, spiritual being, 'loved the pilgrim soul in you.' And yet, even in that projection into the future, we are left with nostalgia for an elusive love that was never to be fully, physically and spiritually, consummated. 'Bending down beside' the fireplace's 'glowing bars,' she will have no choice, in Yeats's beautiful but decidedly Celtic-Twilight rhetoric and personification, but to 'Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled/ And paced upon the mountains overhead/ And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.'

The poem immediately following, 'The White Birds,' was inspired by a specific incident. As Yeats and Maud Gonne were resting after walking on the cliffs at Howth, two seagulls flew over and out to sea, prompting Maud to casually remark that if she had a choice to be any bird, it would be her favorite, a seagull: 'in three days, he sent me the poem with its gentle theme, I would we were my beloved white birds on the foam of the sea.'<sup>1</sup> She is quoting the poem's opening line; Yeats goes on to describe himself as 'haunted by numberless islands, and many a Danaan shore/ Where Time would surely forget us, and Sorrow come near us no more.' He depicts Maud as sharing in his own weariness and sorrow: 'We tire of the flame of the meteor,' and 'the flame of the blue star at twilight, hung low on the rim of the sky,/ Has awakened *in our hearts*, my beloved, a sadness that may not die.'

But Maud is unlikely to have shared, anywhere nearly as intensely as he, the feelings he attributes to her. *He* certainly was sorrowful, having,

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1 For Maud's remark, see Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, 32. When, eleven years later, in 1903, Maud purchased a summer home in Normandy, she named it *Les Mouettes*, 'The Seagulls.'

just the day before, made his first marriage proposal, and been rejected. It's not surprising that he would contrast transient seafoam and flaming meteor to the dream of a permanent haven for lovers on the shore of the Celtic paradise, Tir na nOg. If we are reminded of *The Wanderings of Oisín*, so was Yeats; the anapestic hexameter meter employed in Part III of that epic poem is repeated in 'The White Birds.' And Yeats appends to the poem a note emphasizing, despite its natural setting at Howth, a place loved by Yeats and Maud, his immersion in Celtic mythology: 'The birds of fairyland are white as snow. The "Danaan Shore" is, of course, Tier-nan-oge' (VP, 799).

It wasn't until 1912, at the end of *Responsibilities*, that Yeats announced the casting off of his early poetry's myth-embroidered Celtic 'coat': 'Song, let them take it,/ For there's more enterprise/ In walking naked.' The first poem celebrating his Muse's beauty in a stripped rhetoric less languid than lean came three years earlier, epitomized in his revision of lines 5–6 of 'The Arrow.' The original, 1901, version of these lines read, 'Blossom pale, she pulled down the pale blossom/ At the moth hour and hid it in her bosom.' This Celtic Twilight imagery was hardened in the revised version, which now opens the Maud Gonne cluster in *In the Seven Woods*, launching a series of love poems addressed to a Muse now in her thirties. Spare as it is, the poem is based on a traditional image with an elaborate poetic lineage. Cupid's arrow is a metaphor for the potent glance of the unattainable lady of the courtly love and *dolce stil novo* tradition, a shaft that pierces the lover's heart, inspiring him to sing even as he suffers.

The enjambed lines of 'The Arrow,' in tension with its taut couplets, end in 'feminine' or double rhyme, a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable. This falling pattern is established with the title itself. That 'arrow' is forged in part by the beloved's beauty (in the revised version, she is heroically 'Tall and noble,' though her flesh is, as always, the color of apple blossom), and in part by the 'wild thought' that now-fading loveliness continues to engender in her worshiper, who still laments the loss of her original if less gentle beauty:

I thought of your beauty, and this arrow,  
 Made out of a wild thought, is in my marrow.  
 There's no man may look upon her, no man,  
 As when newly grown to be a woman,

Tall and noble but with face and bosom  
 Delicate in colour as apple blossom.  
 This beauty's kinder, yet for a reason  
 I could weep that the old is out of season.

In the next poem, 'The Folly of Being Comforted,' written not long after, and a companion to 'The Arrow,' a 'kind' friend (in fact, Lady Gregory), sounding like Petrarch speculating that Laura's aging might diminish her beauty and thereby alleviate his pain, suggests that 'time' and the diminution of Maud's extravagant youthful beauty should 'make it easier to be wise.' Yeats was well aware of that diminution, much of which he attributed to Maud's exhaustive activism as a political agitator. But the lover, far from being a patient man guided by common sense, is not only a poet, but a poet committed to the Platonic or Neoplatonic belief that, beneath surface appearance, Maud possessed a permanent beauty, archetypal and unalterable. Furthermore, like the Shakespeare who writes, in Sonnet 116, of an abiding love that 'alters not' with the passage of time, Yeats reinforces his Muse's immortality through the very poems in which he celebrates her beauty and nobility of spirit.

Petrarch imagined his lady in her 'later years,' the 'light extinguished from your lovely eyes,/ your head of fine gold hair transformed to silver' (Sonnet 12). The 'ever kind' friend in Yeats's poem, offering well-intended but misplaced consolation, may be accurate in pointing out that 'Your well-belovéd's hair has threads of grey,/ And little shadows come about her eyes.' (Yeats originally had the friend refer to 'crowsfeet,' to which Maud objected; this was 'the first time,' Yeats claims, that he 'realised that she was human.') 'Though now it seems impossible,' counsels the friend, 'Time can but make it easier to be wise,' and so 'All that you need is patience.' But reason is no match for emotion. Recalling Shakespeare's insistence, in Sonnet 116, that 'Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks/ Within his bending sickle's compass come,' the lovelorn poet adamantly dismisses his friend's proffered patience and practical if pedestrian wisdom:

Heart cries, 'No,  
 I have not a crumb of comfort, not a grain.  
 Time can but make her beauty over again:  
 Because of that great nobleness of hers  
 The fire that stirs about her when she stirs,

Burns but more clearly. O she had not these ways  
When all the wild summer was in her gaze.'

O heart! O heart! If she'd but turn her head,  
You'd know the folly of being comforted.

In Yeats we always return to the heart. As Pascal says in the *Pensées*, 'the heart has reasons of which reason knows nothing.' Focused on how we perceive God, Pascal was speaking of a spiritual, not a temporal love. The two often merge in Yeats's Muse-poems, where Maud's phoenix-like beauty incorporates but transcends the physical and the temporal, burning spiritually and thus even 'more clearly' on emerging from the re-creative 'fire that stirs about her when she stirs.' The poet ends by telling his Heart what the Heart already knows: that wisdom would be exposed as folly if his beloved would 'but turn her head.' That minute but momentous gesture recalls a similar 'turn' in Petrarch, when 'Love' made Laura 'pause her foot/ and turn those holy lights in my direction,' a gaze and 'gracious turn' enshrined in his heart: 'a solid diamond statue would wear out/ before I could forget her deed, so sweet/ that it has filled my mind till now/ and never will desert my memory.'<sup>2</sup>

The Maud Gonne cluster in *In the Seven Woods* continues, speaking of memory, with 'Old Memory.' Though not a particularly distinguished lyric, it is notable as the first poem that Yeats—who had escaped to America for what became a profitable and confidence-restoring lecture tour—found himself able to write after the tongue-numbing despair he fell into in the immediate wake of Maud's marriage. I have already referred to this poem in terms of Yeats laying claim to at least partial ownership of the 'Maud Gonne' image, which he described to her in a letter as only 'half yours,' with the other half created by himself, the product of both his suffering and skill as a poet. This is the one letter, rather shocking in itself, that has survived of the three he wrote to

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2 Sonnet 108. Laura also turns her eyes to him in the three sonnets that follow. In 110, those 'rays that melt me were unleashed in full;/ the way that thunder comes along with lightning/ that's how those eyes, so brilliant, hit me.' If we think the imagery hyperbolic and out of date, consider 'the fireworks that go off' in Chrissie Hynde's 'Don't Get Me Wrong,' the hit song recorded by The Pretenders in 1986. Her best lines, sung with mounting excitement, recreate Petrarch: 'Once in a while two people meet,/ Seemingly for no reason, they just pass on the street;/ Suddenly thunder, showers everywhere;/ Who can explain the thunder and rain,/ But there's something in the air.'

Maud after recovering from the initial shock of learning of her intended marriage to MacBride.

In that letter, the possessive and class-conscious poet seems less disturbed by losing Maud as the woman he loved than as his carefully curated and very public Muse: a 'proud haughty' woman resembling not only a Greek goddess, but, crossing genders, 'one of the Golden Gods.' Though a populist revolutionary, Maud was also representative of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. Now she was *descending*, spiritually and socially, into the gutter. As he would later record in bitter, unpublished lines echoing Tennyson's 'Locksley Hall': 'My dear is angry that of late,/ I cry all base blood down/ As if she had not taught me hate/ By kisses to a clown' (Mem, 145). In the letter, Yeats does not state the obvious: that she was not only violating their 'mystical' or 'spiritual marriage,' but removing any chance that they might *actually* wed. Worse yet, by choosing instead the vulgar John MacBride she was desecrating the image he had created: 'Maud Gonne is about to pass away.'<sup>3</sup>

Now, in 'Old Memory,' having suffered during those long years as an unrequited lover, and having labored, far more successfully, as a Muse-poet, he is writing in the immediate aftermath of that appalling 1903 marriage. Rhetorically and understandably, he asks, 'who would have thought' it would all have 'come to naught,/ And that dear words meant nothing?' Yet he ends by blaming no one: 'But enough,/ For when we have blamed the wind we can blame love;/ Or, if there needs be more, be nothing said/ That would be harsh for children that have strayed.' He might admonish Maud in a letter, but not in the poetry, where she is worthy of blame, yet never blamed. As for the 'children' remark: MacBride was no child; but Maud, in Yeats's poems, was always 'half child,' even if the other half was alternately eagle or lion or even identified, as in 'A Bronze Head,' with the Celtic death-crow, the Morrigu.

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3 G-YL, 164–65. Yeats's lines about 'crying base blood down' because Maud had taught him 'hate/ By kisses to a clown,' recall those in which Tennyson's jilted Locksley rebukes his cousin Amy not only for not marrying *him* but for degrading herself in the process: 'As the husband is, the wife is; thou art mated with a clown,/ And the grossness of his nature will have weight to drag thee down' (lines 47–48). Though the preceding couplet ('thou shalt lower to his level day by day,/ What is fine within thee growing coarse to sympathize with clay') might also seem apropos, the full forecast does not apply to Maud Gonne, saddened but not coarsened by her mating with MacBride.

The poem immediately following, 'Never give all the Heart,' written while Yeats was in New York City visiting John Quinn, who had arranged his 1903 American tour, combines Quinn's worldly advice about women with recollection of a poignant little lyric from William Blake's 1791–92 Notebook, 'Never pain to tell thy love,' in the central stanza of which the speaker laments, 'I told my love, I told my love, / I told her all my heart; / Trembling cold, in ghastly fears— / Ah, she doth depart!' In Yeats's poem both parties 'give their hearts,' but in very different ways. Aware of play-acting on the stage and in affairs of the heart, Yeats, also reflecting the attitude toward women of the sexually sophisticated bachelor Quinn (who kept a copy of the poem for life), advises us to 'never give the heart outright' to passionate women of a theatrical bent, for they

Have given their hearts up to the play.  
And who could play it well enough  
If deaf and dumb and blind with love?  
He that made this knows all the cost,  
For he gave all his heart and lost.

The next poem, 'The Withering of the Boughs,' breaks away from direct focus on Maud, reverting to a moonlit Celtic fairyland. Asleep beneath a 'honey-pale moon,' the dreamer, hearing the sound of coupled swans flying (referring to the coupled swans, Baile and Aillinn, in Yeats's narrative poem of that title) as well as the cry of peewit and curlew, longs for their 'tender and pitiful words.' The thrice-repeated italicized refrain echoes the warning against sincerity in 'Never give All the Heart' (and in the related poem a few pages later, 'O Do Not Love Too Long,' which also advises against emotional openness): the boughs have not withered because of the wintry wind; *'The boughs have withered because I have told them my dreams.'*

Next comes the plangent and justly celebrated 'Adam's Curse,' revealing a passion more obliquely disclosed but no less unrequited, with the 'withered' boughs replaced by a 'hollow' moon, again reflecting the weary-heartedness of a beautiful but frustrated love. The two speakers and the auditor are nameless; but we know who they are, not only intuitively but because Maud provided in her autobiography her own account of this conversation, which followed another of Yeats's marriage proposals. She repeated what she had told him a decade earlier: that 'poets should never marry,' once again asserting her indispensable role

as unattainable Muse: 'you make beautiful poetry out of what you call your unhappiness.'<sup>4</sup>

In the poem, written in the conversationally enjambed heroic couplets Browning perfected in 'My Last Duchess,' Maud sits silently by while, on a late summer evening, her sister Kathleen and the poet discuss various forms of 'labour,' which is, after all, the bitter fruit of God's curse against a disobedient Adam and Eve. There is, to begin with, the labor involved in the poet's quest, even if a line 'takes hours,' to 'make it seem a moment's thought,' an illustration of *sprezzatura* followed by the insistence that 'to articulate sweet sounds together' is 'to work harder' than kitchen-scrubbers and stone-breakers 'and yet/ Be thought an idler.' Kathleen, her voice 'sweet and low' as Cordelia's, adds her intuitive knowledge that a woman 'must labour to be beautiful.' It's certain, he responds, that 'there is no fine thing/ Since Adam's fall but needs much labouring.' There have been, he continues—invoking the elaborate decorum of the courtly love tradition of Dante's *La Vita Nuova* and Petrarch's *Canzoniere*—

lovers who thought love should be  
So much compounded of high courtesy  
That they would sigh and quote with learned looks  
Precedents out of beautiful old books;  
Yet now it seems an idle trade enough.

So, the poet turns out to be an 'idler' after all! Familiar with the art-of-love tradition from his reading of D. G. Rossetti on Dante and his circle, and of Dante's own *La Vita Nuova*, Yeats was aware, like all love poets in English, of Petrarch's inventive sonnets and songs of obsessed and unrequited love, at once erotic and spiritual. He was also familiar with the English Petrarchan sonneteers from Spenser to Shakespeare, including Sir Thomas Wyatt and, especially, Sir Philip Sidney, to whom Yeats, in 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,' would later compare Lady Gregory's airman son, shot down over Italy (by friendly fire, as it ironically turned out). By then, having been introduced to the book by Augusta Gregory, Yeats could draw on his enthralled immersion in Castiglione's *The Courtier* to present a highly refined setting in which Lady Gregory's Coole Park, which Robert Gregory would have

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4 A *Servant of the Queen*, 328–30.

inherited, was an Irish version of the Duchess's Urbino. Yeats had, he says in the poem, grown accustomed to the 'lack of breath' of the other friends memorialized in this decorous group-elegy, 'but not that my dear friend's dear son,/ Our Sidney and our perfect man,/ Could share in that discourtesy of death.'

Reading the lines in 'Adam's Curse' about love 'compounded of high courtesy,' it is hard not to think, as Yeats doubtless did, of the famous opening poem (written in rare hexameters) of Sidney's sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*. 'Loving in truth' and hoping to show his love in 'verse,' so that the beloved 'might take some pleasure of my paine,' win her pity, 'and pitie grace obtaine,' he sought, Philip / Astrophil tells us, 'fit words' to depict his woe. Though his emotion was sincere, he found himself 'Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertaine,' often 'turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow/ Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunne-burn'd braine.' His fevered brain is burnt by light beams streaming from his lady's eyes, a courtly and recurrent Petrarchan metaphor played on by Yeats in 'The Arrow.' That particular stereotype had been brilliantly mocked by Shakespeare in Sonnet 130, 'My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun,' but even Shakespeare, though he ridiculed some now-hackneyed courtly imagery, absorbed and continued, if less overtly than Sidney, the resilient Petrarchan tradition.

Like Yeats, laboring over precedents, Sidney, too, had set himself to 'studying' old books, Italian and French, in the courtly love tradition of worshipping devotee and distant lady. Finally, emulating woman's biological labor, 'great with child to speake' but helplessly burdened with the derivative rhetoric of the 'art' of love rather than pregnant with 'Nature's child,' and biting his idle 'pen,' he stops reading and ranting and listens: "'Foole," said my Muse to me, "looke in thy heart and write"'.' Yeats will echo and intensify that emotional imperative a quarter-century later, in the final line of 'The Circus Animals' Desertion,' with high artifice, at once concealing and revealing his love of Maud Gonne, yielding to the passionate origin of all art: 'the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.'

But in 'Adam's Curse,' the very mention of 'love,' ideally but idly 'compounded of high courtesy,' puts an end to all conversation, which yields, like the dying daylight, to a beautiful but elegiac moon:

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;  
 We saw the last embers of daylight die,  
 And in the trembling blue-green of the sky  
 A moon, worn as if it had been a shell  
 Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell  
 About the stars and broke in days and years.

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:  
 That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
 To love you in the old high way of love;  
 That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown  
 As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

So much for the exalting and yet humiliatingly painful travails of the courtly love tradition: that 'old high way of love' Yeats had pursued on the chivalric and virginal high-road leading from Petrarch to Sidney and beyond—beginning with Dante, that love-famished 'hollow face of his' in 'Ego Dominus Tuus' anticipated by 'that hollow moon' symbolic of Yeats's own frustrated, desolate love in 'Adam's Curse.'

In the same year he wrote 'Adam's Curse,' Yeats put Maud on stage as Ireland herself in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. That 'Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland' was Maud's favorite Yeats poem is unsurprising. Written in 1894 but now incorporated in this sequence, it makes Maud indistinguishable from Cathleen as Ireland. We may be thrilled by the couplet on one queen's mountain cairn: 'The wind has bundled up the clouds high over Knocknarea,/ And thrown the thunder on the stones for all that Maeve can say.' But it was surely this stanza's final lines—echoing 'the quiet of love in her feet' from the finale of 'The Cap and Bells,' written a year earlier—that appealed to Maud, servant of another queen: angers like 'noisy clouds' may have 'set our hearts abeat;/ But we have all bent low and low and kissed the quiet feet/ Of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.' While Maud relished the poem, Yeats must have had mixed feelings, perhaps in writing it in the first place, but certainly in including it *here*, where it emphasized the self-abasing politics he hated yet succumbed to under the intense influence of Maud Gonne. Five years later, in 'He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven' (the more abject lyric supposedly countered by 'The Cap and Bells'), a submissively foot-conscious Yeatsian speaker, addressing his beloved, says, 'I have spread my dreams under your feet;/ Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.'

## §

Between *In the Seven Woods* and his next collection of lyric poetry, *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910), there was a six-year hiatus, during which Yeats, for the most part stunned into poetic silence by Maud's marriage, was also, as a co-manager of the Abbey, preoccupied by 'theatre business, management of men.'<sup>5</sup> But much else had happened in the interim. The tragic death, in March 1909, of Yeats's friend and the Abbey's greatest early playwright, John Millington Synge, had been preceded by the long-delayed, briefly ecstatic, and ultimately unsatisfactory physical union of Poet and Muse, in December 1908.<sup>6</sup> After that night of lovemaking in Paris, Maud had quickly put the relationship back on its old non-physical basis. Earlier synopsized, Maud's letter should be quoted more fully. Though reflecting genuine tenderness, it is firm in its conviction:

Beloved I am glad & proud beyond measure of your love, & that it is strong enough & high enough to accept the spiritual love & union I offer—

I have prayed so hard to have all earthly desire taken from my love for you & dearest, loving you as I do, I have prayed & I am praying still that the bodily desire for me may be taken from you too. I know how hard & rare a thing it is for a man to hold spiritual love when the bodily desire is gone & I have not made these prayers without a terrible struggle—a struggle that shook my life though I do not speak much of it & generally manage to laugh.

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5 Such business, and cursed 'plays/ That have to be set up in fifty ways,' has 'rent/ Spontaneous joy and natural content / Out of my heart,' and made Pegasus 'shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt/ As though it dragged road metal.' (The title of the poem in which he registered these complaints, 'The Fascination of What's Difficult,' was employed by Kim Bendheim as the title of her 2021 biography of Maud Gonne.) While she didn't want to 'under rate' the Abbey, Maud (writing in the summer of 1911) considered it 'as NOTHING in comparison with your poems & while you are absorbed in the management of the theatre, you won't write a line of poetry' (G-YL, 301).

6 Sworn to secrecy during her husband's lifetime, George Yeats revealed the facts in 1947, confiding in Richard Ellmann, during his visits when he was working on *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. The date when Yeats and Maud became physical lovers has been confirmed by Elizabeth Heine, 'Yeats and Maud Gonne: Marriage and the Astrological Record, 1908–09,' 3–33.

That struggle is over & I have found peace. I think today I could let you marry another without losing it—for I know the spiritual union between us will outlive this life, even if we never see each other in this world again (G-YL, 258–59).

In a journal entry the following month (21 January 1909), Yeats referred despairingly but realistically to the ‘return’ of Maud’s ‘old dread of physical love,’ which has ‘probably spoiled her life [...] I was never more deeply in love, but my desires must go elsewhere if I would escape their poison.’ They did.

Maud had anticipated her letter of spiritual renunciation of the body with an earlier account, sent to him in late July 1908 (G-YL, 257), of a ‘wonderful’ dream she had had, an astral projection resulting in a ‘union’ in which, suspended in space between ‘starlight’ and ‘the sea,’ she and a serpentine Yeats ‘melted into one another till we formed only *one being, greater than ourselves* [italics in original] who felt all & knew all with double intensity’—a vision, she says, ‘like in the picture of Blake the soul leaving the body.’ Blake’s ‘The Soul Hovering over the Body Reluctantly Parting with Life’ is the second most-striking of his illustrations to Robert Blair’s *The Grave* (1808). The most vivid of the *Grave* illustrations, ‘The Reunion of the Soul & the Body,’ notable for the passionate intensity of the embrace of the (female) soul and (male) body, was chosen by Yeats for all three covers of his and Edwin Ellis’s 1893 three-volume edition of Blake, and it was still vivid in Yeats’s imagination when he described it as the image of ‘true death’ in a 1938 letter to Ethel Mannin (L, 917). A dozen years earlier he had verbalized Blake’s design in ‘A Last Confession,’ the ninth and most ecstatic poem in his sequence, ‘A Woman Young and Old.’ The old woman who is the speaker of ‘A Last Confession’ also recaptures Maud’s spiritual yet erotic vision of lovers ‘who felt all & knew all with double intensity.’

when this soul, its body off,  
Naked to naked goes,  
He it has found shall find therein  
What none other knows,

And give his own and take his own  
And rule in his own right;  
And though it loved in misery  
Close and cling so tight,

There's not a bird of day that dare  
Extinguish that delight.

But when Yeats, in Maud's 1908 dream, understandably interpreted her vision as intensifying rather than diminishing 'physical desire,' she predictably, even in the dream, responded: 'this troubles me a little, for there was nothing physical in that union—Material union is but a pale shadow compared to it' (G-YL, 257). As demonstrated by her insistence on a spiritual or mystical marriage with Yeats, and by much else, Maud Gonne combined her dread of physical intimacy with a serious attraction to spiritualism. Maud's interest in mysticism, developed in London in 1890, had been encouraged by Yeats, who brought her to meet the celebrated Madame Blavatsky, and arranged for her initiation into his esoteric Order, the Golden Dawn, in November 1891. Predictably bored by what she called the 'British middle-class dullness' of its members, she stayed for just three years, leaving the Order in December 1894. But that she remained engaged by spiritualism and occultism is evident in the mystical marriage and in many of her letters to Yeats.<sup>7</sup>

In any case, after that December in Paris, Yeats's own position was hopeless. He must have intuited in advance the truth of what, as we have seen, he would later call the 'finest description of sexual intercourse ever written,' introduced, in John Dryden's translation of Lucretius, 'to illustrate the difficulty of two becoming a unity': 'The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul.' Copulation was an 'attempt to solve the eternal antinomy, doomed to failure because it takes place only on one side of the gulf.'<sup>8</sup> That gulf, between spirit and flesh, would forever frustrate Yeats's desire for a full union with Maud Gonne.

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7 On the Gonne-Yeats spiritual / sexual correspondence, Blake's illustrations for Blair's *Grave*, and 'A Last Confession,' see my 'The Human Entrails and the Starry Heavens,' 366–91.

8 As earlier discussed in connection with the 'Woman Young and Old' and 'Crazy Jane' sequences, Yeats was referring to Lucretius' long passage on sexual love, the conclusion of Book IV of *De rerum natura*.

