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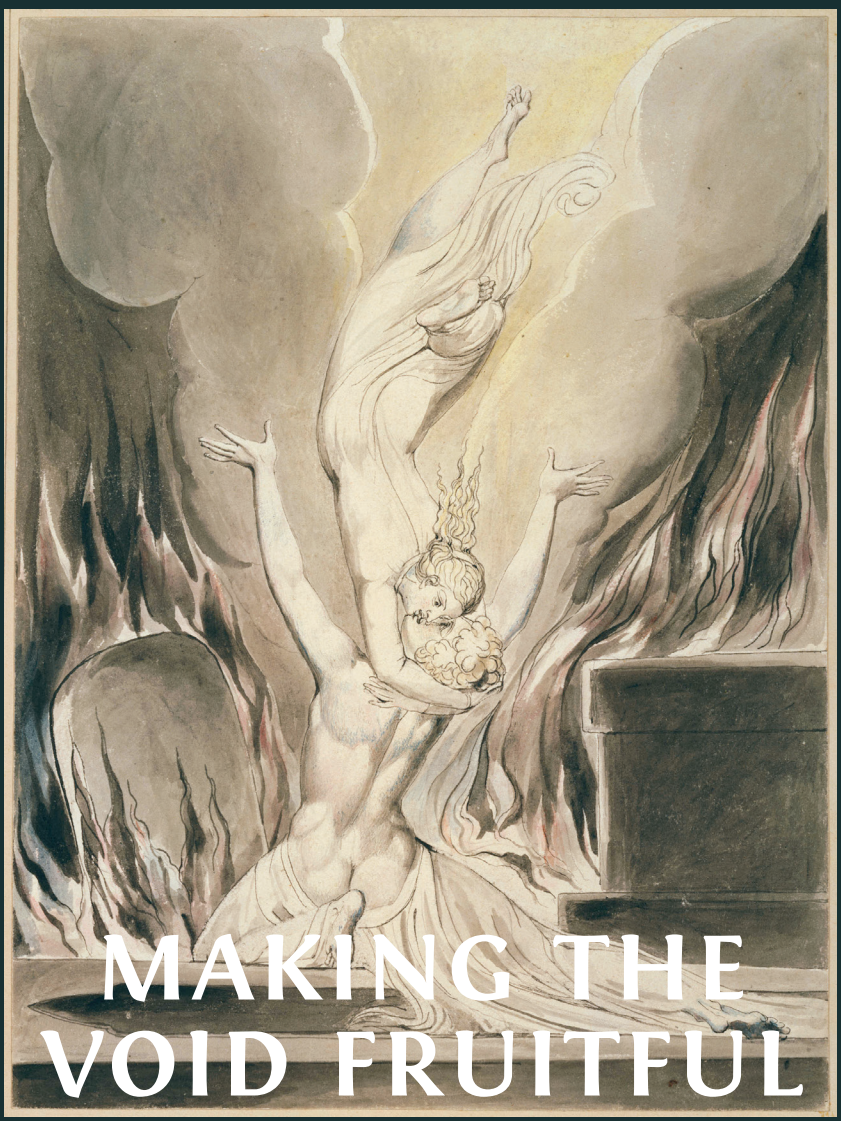

MAKING THE VOID FRUITFUL

Yeats as Spiritual Seeker and Petrarchan Lover

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12. Maud as Helen: The *Green Helmet* Poems

But if sexual intercourse could not resolve the eternal antinomy, it still had its consolations. Tired of Maud's 'bond of the spirit only,' Yeats, escaping the 'poison' of sexual repression, returned to the less mystical arms of his clandestine 'visiting' mistress at the time, the attractive Mabel Dickinson, who had become infatuated with him. He was no longer, he told Mabel, satisfied with a 'twilight of religious mystery'; he wanted instead to 'take pleasure in clear light, strong bodies.' He had come, temporarily at least, to the right place. His secret, 'purely amatory' relationship with Mabel, which began in April 1908 and lasted sporadically until 1913 when it ended in 'relief' after a pregnancy scare, was with a woman who practiced as 'a medical gymnast and masseuse.'[1]

Nevertheless, when he put clarity and strength into words, he was back to his true Muse, opening the *Green Helmet* volume with a cluster (originally grouped under the title 'Raymond Lully to his wife Pernella') celebrating Maud as a newborn Helen of Troy. Though it did not keep her from correcting his medieval occult scholarship (it was not Raymond Lully but, as she reminded him, Nicholas Flamel who was married to Pernella), Maud responded with great enthusiasm to the 'music' of the poems in which Yeats had compared her to Homer's Helen. After acknowledging 'a danger of my growing very vain when I think of these beautiful things created for me,' she added a penetrating comment, contrasting the political 'hatred' that drove her fierce activism to the deep 'love' Yeats had given so 'generously and unselfishly.'

1 For Yeats's 1908 correspondence with Dickinson, see Cardozo, 259–61. For details on the ending of the affair, including the 'relief' of both Yeats and Lady Gregory (who thought it all 'unworthy,' of him and thanked God he was 'free'), see Foster, *The Apprentice Mage*, 488–89.

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Referring to the greatest of the poems in which he had compared her to Homer's Helen, 'No Second Troy,' Maud said she thought that 'of all my work & all my effort little will remain because I worked on the ray of Hate, & the demons of hate which possessed me are not eternal—what you have written for me will live because our love has always been high & pure' (G-YL, 294).

Maud evidently liked Yeats's comparison of her to Helen of Troy, though, thinking of 'The Arrow' and the best of these new poems, 'No Second Troy,' in which he compares her 'beauty' to 'a tightened bow,' she remarked, 'You are hard on poor Bow and Arrows!' (G-YL, 294). As early as 1891, Yeats had, in 'The Rose of the World,' associated his beloved with Homer's Helen, for whose red lips, 'Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam.' For Maud, Yeats tells us in that same poem, God himself 'made the world to be a grassy road/ Before her wandering feet,' those same feet beneath which he would later (in 'He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven') abjectly spread his dreams, hoping she would 'tread softly.' Thus, by April 1910, when he wrote 'A Woman Homer Sung,' in which he has her proudly treading as on a cloud, he could proudly but accurately claim that he has evoked so powerful an image

> That coming time can say,
> 'He shadowed in a glass
> What thing her body was.'
>
> For she had fiery blood
> When I was young,
> And trod so sweetly proud
> As 'twere upon a cloud,
> A woman Homer sung,
> That life and letters seem
> But an heroic dream.

Maud's palpable 'body' and 'fiery blood' are balanced by her role as a cloud-treading Virgilian goddess and the Helen Homer sang. But the dream, however heroic, had not, as the 'seem' suggests, quite extinguished 'life and letters.' The next poem in the sequence, 'Words,' composed closer to events in Paris, was sketched out in prose in a January 1909 diary entry. The thought had 'occurred' to him, says Yeats, that Maud never really understood his 'plans, or nature or ideas.' He continues: 'Then came the thought—what matter? How much of the

best I have done and still do is but the attempt to explain myself to her? If she understood I should lack a reason for writing and one can never have too many reasons for doing what is so laborious' (Mem, 141–42).

'Words,' the poem that resulted, consists of four iambic tetrameter *abab* quatrains, with every fourth line a more insistent trimeter. Yeats at first adheres to the emphasis in his diary entry regarding Maud's incomprehension of his work, but adds a confident claim that his rhetorical mastery had overcome even her politically obsessed resistance to poetry she felt was not propagandistic enough, poetry that he was not willing, after *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, to provide; and concludes with a dramatic but dubious assertion, an assertion that Yeats, as artist, wants us to challenge:

> I had this thought a while ago,
> 'My darling cannot understand
> What I have done, or what would do
> In this blind bitter land.'
>
> And I grew weary of the sun
> Until my thoughts cleared up again,
> Remembering that the best I have done
> Was done to make it plain;
>
> That every year I have cried, 'At length
> My darling understands it all,
> Because I have come into my strength,
> And words obey my call';
>
> That had she done so who can say
> What would have shaken from the sieve?
> I might have thrown poor words away
> And been content to live.

Having come into his strength, with 'words' at his command, he briefly hopes that Maud at last 'understands it all.' But what if she had? He 'might' have 'thrown poor words away/ And been content to live.' But Yeats does not really believe that the poetry was a mere substitute for life and sex. Even if it *is* in part sublimation, the poetry itself matters. As Helen Vendler remarks, in concluding her exhaustive study of Yeats and lyric form, and in direct reference to the final lines of 'Words': 'But of course it was not only to explain himself that Yeats composed poetry; it was to satisfy his ardor for the permutations and combinations of

shaped and musical language, the desire [as he says in 'Adam's Curse'] to "articulate sweet sounds together." The resulting strong and decisive poems of formal mastery appeared and kept appearing, throughout his fifty years of writing.'[2]

In the specific case of 'Words,' what is obvious but needs to be said is that it is *in a poem*, after all, that he speculates that, had his love been requited, he 'might' have 'thrown poor words away' and been 'content' to 'live.' It wasn't, he didn't. But the alternative is not between a lyric poet's 'poor words' and rich, vital life. He speaks of being 'content' to live, and mere contentment is hardly an aspiration of Romantic poets. In any case, Maud did *not* fully understand what Yeats wanted to do in Ireland. Gradually, the poet in him 'turned aside' from Maud and back to 'words.' Of course, given the letter she had sent him following the physical consummation of their love the previous month, he may have had little choice. Physically at least, Maud had preceded Yeats in 'turning aside.'

§

'Words' is followed by the more famous 'No Second Troy,' composed within days of Maud's letter, and probably the signature Maud Gonne poem. With the exception of the magnificent opening movement of his sequence, 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,' juxtaposing ancient and modern barbaric assaults on civilization, there is no better example than 'No Second Troy' of Yeats's deployment of what T. S. Eliot called (in his 1923 *Dial* review, '*Ulysses*, Order and Myth') 'the mythical method.' Though perfected by Joyce in *Ulysses*, the method had been 'adumbrated by Mr. Yeats,' the first modern poet, Eliot thought, to be 'conscious' of the need to parallel 'contemporaneity and antiquity.' Implicit in the title, the parallel in 'No Second Troy' is not completed until the final explosive line.

A masterpiece of form writhing with power, 'No Second Troy'—three *abab* iambic pentameter quatrains fused into a single 12-line unit—consists of two 5-line rhetorical questions, followed by two more, each distilled to a single line. We are initially seduced into sharing the poet's complaint; he had abundant reason to 'blame' her, she having 'filled' his days less with joy than 'with misery.' But Yeats is setting us up; his

2 Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, 376.

rhetorical strategy reveals *our own* pettiness faced with a Helen born out of phase, a Homeric figure living in a modern age unworthy of her.

> Why should I blame her that she filled my days
> With misery, or that she would of late
> Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
> Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
> Had they but courage equal to desire?
> What could have made her peaceful with a mind
> That nobleness made simple as a fire,
> With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
> That is not natural in an age like this,
> Being high and solitary and most stern?
> Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
> Was there another Troy for her to burn?

There is empathy but no sentimentality; the heroine's path may be destined, but she is, despite this poem of questioning, unquestionably destructive. That her nobility made her 'mind [...] simple as a fire,' seems both compliment and criticism. As we know from such major poems as 'Byzantium' and 'Vacillation,' the 'simplicity' of fire is opposed to and spiritually superior to the 'complexity' of mere mire and blood. But it is hard to simply dismiss the secondary implication, that Maud was also somewhat simple-minded. While, as we have seen, some British journalists in the 'nineties' thought Maud's 'mysterious eye' foreshadowed 'battles yet to come,' Yeats was uncertain whether her mysteriously vague eyes suggested 'wisdom' to accompany her 'beauty,' or simple 'lack of any thought' (Mem, 60). Fire is not always attended by light; and there is a certain irony in Maud Gonne's Golden Dawn pseudonym, P.I.A.L., often used by Yeats. It stands for the Latin *Per Ignem ad Lucem*, but Maud's own progress was seldom 'Through Fire to Light.' Still, such quibbles, though registered, seem beside the principal poetic point. As Yeats asks in the prose note that evolved into 'Words,' a rhetorical question repeated in 'The Mask' (discussed below), 'What matter?' In the case of the masked woman, 'What matter, so there is but fire/ In you, in me?'

Yeats had earlier, and peripherally, associated Maud with Helen, for whose beauty 'Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam.' In 'No Second Troy,' with no ancient city to burn, Maud's incendiary energy had to be directed to what was at hand in the local, contemporary

world: whether the all-talk, no-action Irish, or Yeats himself, both, perhaps, lacking 'courage equal to desire.' Despite some later theatrical, loose and semi-Fascist talk about 'war,' the poet who wrote 'No Second Troy' would himself hardly condone inciting the 'ignorant' to violence, especially against the 'great' streets of Ascendancy Dublin. But Maud was not Yeats; and even she, for Yeats, was not only Maud but Helen as well, and even more destructive since Maud was a physical-force activist while Homer's Helen was a passive and contrite witness of the violence she had caused. But Maud, like Martin Luther, could do no other. In *acting* as she did, she was, Yeats insists, being true to her quintessential being: 'what she *is*.'

What is to 'blame,' outrageously enough, is not the terrible beauty of Yeats's magnificent and fiery heroine, 'high and solitary and most stern,' but the low, gregarious, and ignoble modern world itself, for not being (as Richard Ellmann once wittily remarked) 'heroically inflammable.' In 1917, looking back with the judgment of a perceptive critic backed by the experience gained in having shared Stone Cottage with Yeats, Ezra Pound said of his friend around the time he wrote 'No Second Troy,' that he was in transit from the '*dolce stile*' to the '*stile grande*'.[3] Having wearied of Yeats's nostalgic, romanticized celebrations of his Muse as she had been, Pound made an exception for *this* Maud Gonne poem. A tough-mindedly realistic poem filled with feeling but stripped of sentimentality, its syntax taut as that tightened bow, 'No Second Troy' embodied the transition from the sweet style of the Italian sonneteers to the style of later, greater Yeats. From the lofty height of the grand style, to assign 'blame' would be to lower oneself from the noble to the level of the proletarian, all-too-censorious 'little streets.'

'Blame' recurs in the opening line of the next poem in the sequence, but shifted to others. During a public lecture in 1903, Yeats had been suddenly informed of Maud's marriage. The news struck him like a

3 Pound, 'The Later Yeats,' 66. Ellmann's remark that the modern world lacked heroic inflammability (*Identity of Yeats*, 112), is matched by his equally witty remark on the final lines of the final poem in *Responsibilities*. Various attacks, especially the mischievous and unforgettable deflations of Yeats's new chinchilla-coated aristocratic pomposity by George Moore, had made him 'Notorious/ Till all my priceless things/ Are but a post the passing dogs defile.' Pound was delighted that Yeats had finally become a 'modern' poet. In Ellmann's summation (*Eminent Domain*, 67), 'An image of urination had finally brought Pound to his knees.' For his part, Yeats was gratified to have made it to modernism, even if he *was* adapting an old metaphor, from Erasmus.

thunderbolt. 'Reconciliation,' the poem immediately following 'No Second Troy,' records that reaction. The background includes her subsequent separation from MacBride, and the reunion of Maud and Yeats, at long last sexual. Like 'No Second Troy,' 'Reconciliation' is twelve lines of iambic pentameter, though this time in conversationally enjambed couplets:

> Some may have blamed you that you took away
> The verses that could move them on the day
> When, the ears being deafened, the sight of the eyes blind
> With lightning, you went from me, and I could find
> Nothing to make a song about but kings,
> Helmets, and swords, and half-forgotten things
> That were like memories of you—

Almost thirty years later, in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion,' Yeats would flesh out the admission here that his early mythological plays were sublimations, 'emblems of' his unrequited love for Maud Gonne. 'Reconciliation' ends with the breach healed between Maud and Yeats, the two 'out' publicly and the poet himself out of hiding behind his archaic-heroic props, theatrical trappings camouflaging his cold and 'barren thoughts' in her absence:

> but now
> We'll out, for the world lives as long ago;
> And while we're in our laughing, weeping fit,
> Hurl helmets, crowns, and swords into the pit.
> But, dear, cling close to me; since you were gone,
> My barren thoughts have chilled me to the bone.

The world of the theater illuminates the curious title of the next poem, 'King and No King,' which begins by rehearsing the brother-sister incest theme in Beaumont and Fletcher's play of that title. Halfway through its sixteen *abba* lines, the congested poem comes to emotional life with the application of that theme to the hopeless love of Yeats and Maud: a union supposedly 'defeated by that pledge' Maud gave 'long ago' never to marry, and even now (December 1909), though she was separated from MacBride, barred from divorce by her Catholicism. Yeats has a poignant question, unresolved by the promise of a Catholic heaven, a Swedenborgian vision of an incandescent reunion in eternity, or the glimpse of domestic bliss, a never-to-be-attained conventional happy ending here on earth:

> And I that have not your faith, how shall I know
> That in the blinding light beyond the grave
> We'll find so good a thing as that we have lost?
> The hourly kindness, the day's common speech,
> The habitual content of each with each
> When neither soul nor body has been crossed.

That celestial light 'beyond the grave' was reserved for other poems, and no contented domestic idyll was ever on offer from the mercurial Maud. We seem left with a negative answer to the question: these star-crossed lovers would never 'find so good a thing as that we have lost'—unless, of course, we count the poetry that loss produced—as Maud Gonne most definitely did in that remarkable acknowledgement that 'what you have written for me will live because our love has always been high & pure' (G-YL, 294).

The sequence ends with 'Peace,' 'Against Unworthy Praise,' and, given the context in which they were deliberately placed by Yeats, who thought of his lyrics as tiles in a mosaic, 'A Drinking Song' and 'The Mask.' In the first poem, 'Peace,' Yeats describes, yet again, Maud's fascinating and oxymoronic mixture of 'charm' and 'sternness.' His reference to 'all that sweetness amid strength' alludes, as he will more momentously in the climactic lines of 'Vacillation' (1933), to Samson's riddle (Judges 14:14) of the lion and the honeycomb. He concludes by acknowledging something he had been reluctant to concede in 'The Folly of Being Comforted': 'Ah, but peace that comes at length,/ Came when Time had touched her form.'

Picking up on the word 'peace,' the poem that follows, 'Against Unworthy Praise,' begins, 'O heart, be at peace.' No matter if his work as poet and playwright is misconstrued by the public: 'Nor knave nor dolt can break/ What's not for their applause,/ Being for a woman's sake.' It is all a strength-renewing 'dream' and 'secret between' Maud and himself, between 'the proud and the proud.' The second and final stanza moves from the artist to his Muse, from self-chastisement for stubbornly seeking applause from the unworthy ('What, still you would have their praise!'), to 'a haughtier text': a celebration of that proud woman who, in the aftermath of her legal separation from Boer War hero MacBride, endured 'slander, ingratitude,' and even 'worse wrong,' from 'self-same dolt and knave.' Yeats is no doubt recalling how Maud, an activist who 'gave' all to the people, had been hissed at when he escorted her one

evening from the Abbey Theatre. Yet this most public woman, internally secreted in a mental 'labyrinth' that 'her own strangeness perplexed,' persists, achieving the 'peace' Yeats sought in his own heart. That calm may be beyond his grasp; but, though, in 'No Second Troy' he had famously wondered 'what,' given her nature, 'could have made her peaceful,' in this poem at least tempestuous Maud, 'singing upon her road,/ Half lion, half child, is at peace.'

Though written to be sung by an innkeeper in Lady Gregory's adaptation of *La Locandiera*, a play by Italy's great eighteenth-century comic dramatist, Carlo Goldoni, 'A Drinking Song' (based on Goldoni's '*Viva Bacco, e Viva Amore*') inserted by Yeats at this point in *The Green Helmet*, becomes another tile in the Maud Gonne mosaic. In fact, it introduces the six-line form employed (though with a different rhyme-scheme) five years later for two Maud poems, 'A Deep-sworn Vow' and 'Memory.' The 'Drinking Song' is both charming and poignant:

> Wine comes in at the mouth
> And love comes in at the eye;
> That's all we shall know for truth
> Before we grow old and die.
> I lift the glass to my mouth,
> I look at you, and I sigh.

Similarly, 'The Mask,' though at first apparently unrelated to Maud, by its very placement in this sequence, enters the Maud Gonne orbit. Originally titled 'A Lyric from an Unpublished Play,' it was retitled 'A Mask' three years later, first in the Cuala Press publication *A Selection from the Love Poetry of William Butler Yeats*, then in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems.* This marks Yeats's first *public* use of what will become in his lexicon a crucial term. His concept of the mask is derived not only from his esoteric thoughts about Daimon and anti-self, but, in large part, from his reading of Wilde and Nietzsche, and his agreement with the theories of anti-naturalistic theater innovator and mask-enthusiast, Edgar Gordon Craig, who had designed several of Yeats's own mask-plays at the Abbey Theatre.[4]

The first speaker in this three-stanza dialogue is anxious to discover whether his beloved's dazzling 'mask of burning gold/ With emerald

4 For details, see my essay 'Blake, Nietzsche, Wilde, and Yeats: Contraries, Anti-Selves, and the Truth of Masks.'

eyes' conceals 'love' or the 'deceit' of an 'enemy.' Her reply is firm: 'It was the mask engaged your mind,/ And after set your heart to beat,/ Not what's behind.' First worn by Decima in Yeats's *The Player Queen*, this mask was initially inspired by his amatory visitor at the time, Mabel Dickinson. But since the poem appears in the Cuala Press edition of his 'Love Poetry'and, in *The Green Helmet*, deliberately placed among lyrics to and about Maud Gonne, Yeats seems to want us to identify the masked figure with his Muse. To the male speaker's anxious inquiry as to whether she *is* his enemy, the woman responds, 'What matter, so there is but fire/ In you, in me?' Playing with fire is exciting but dangerous, especially if we are dealing with Maud Gonne, political activist, actress, and *femme fatale.*

The *Green Helmet* volume ends with two poems, originally coupled under the rubric 'Momentary Thoughts,' that glance at Maud. The first, in iambic pentameter couplets, takes its title from the opening line:

> All things can tempt me from this craft of verse:
> One time it was a woman's face, or worse—
> The seeming needs of my fool-driven land;
> Now nothing but comes easier to the hand
> Than this accustomed toil.

In reasserting the priority—over politics, even over love—of his proper labor, the 'craft' of poetry, Yeats seems to turn aside, at least momentarily, from Maud Gonne, whose beautiful 'face' tempted him from his 'toil.' The poem's original title, 'Distraction,' highlights the underlying paradox: the very 'things' that, when he 'was young,' supposedly hindered his poetry—the needs of Ireland, the beauty of Maud Gonne—were, and in fact remain, the major subjects of that poetry.

I will not lay a thematic burden on the final poem of *The Green Helmet*, the light and charming 'Brown Penny.' But when the poet (in a lyric originally titled 'Young Man's Song') describes himself as 'looped in the loops of her hair,' and as 'thinking of love/ Till the stars had run away/ And the shadows eaten the moon,' we find ourselves, again momentarily, back in the Celtic Twilight and the Maud Gonne poetry of *The Wind Among the Reeds*, with the beloved's Pre-Raphaelite hair falling over her passive lover's breast.