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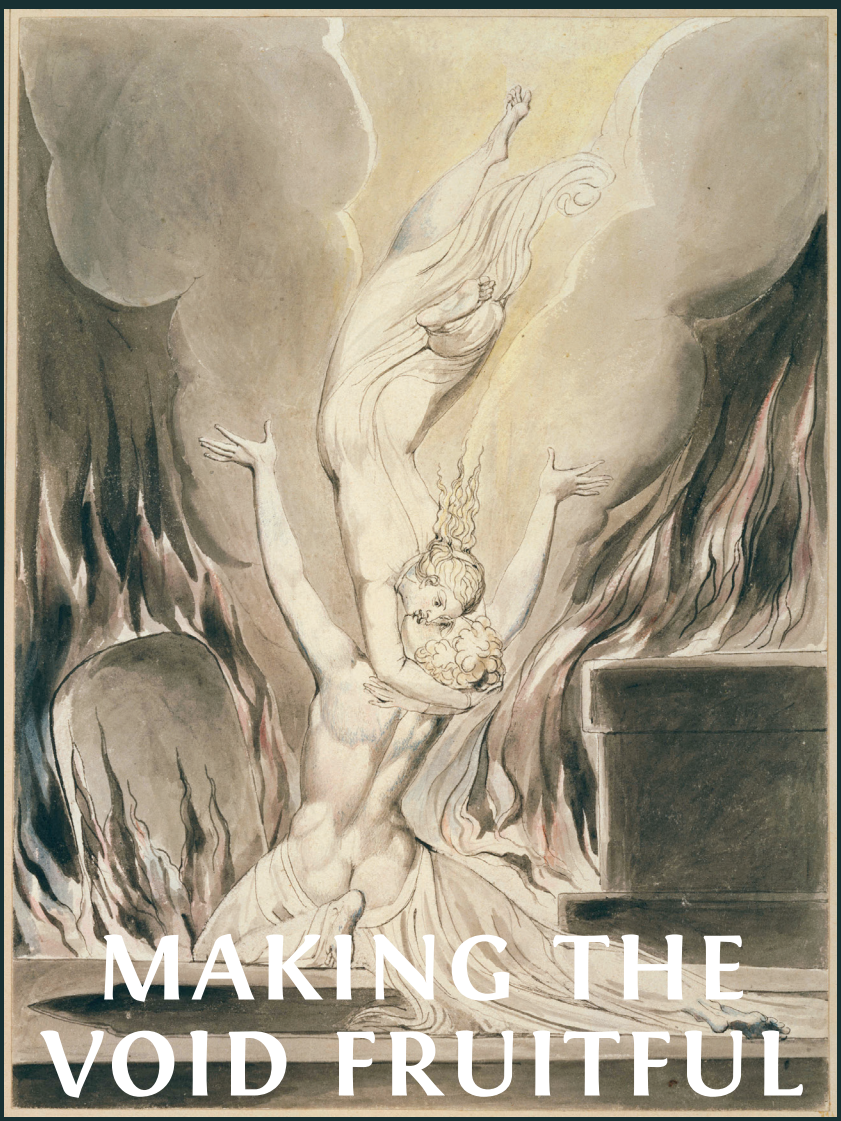

MAKING THE VOID FRUITFUL

Yeats as Spiritual Seeker and Petrarchan Lover

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

ISBN Paperback: 9781800643208
ISBN Hardback: 9781800643215
ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800643222
ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800643239
ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800643246
ISBN XML: 9781800643253
DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0275

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

Cover design by Anna Gatti.

13. *Responsibilities* and *The Wild Swans at Coole*

Yeats's next collection, *Responsibilities* (1914), far more focused on public issues, contains only a handful of Maud-related poems toward the end, with the dominant tone less heroic than elegiac. This pivotal volume is prefaced by intimately personal untitled lines directed to his ancestors, asking their 'Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,' he has no child, 'nothing but a book,/ Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.' If asked, Maud would have responded that while, in 1914, Yeats had no human offspring, 'our children were your poems,' spiritual-imaginative 'children' that she had fathered and that he had brought forth out of his suffering and creativity. And, unlike offspring of mere flesh and blood, 'our children had wings' (G-YL, 302). To counter Yeats's apologetic 'nothing but a book,' Maud might have cited the axiom of Hippocrates as famously translated by Seneca: '*ars longa, vita brevis*' [Art is long, life is short.] The Muse and her poet are gone; but as Yeats knew and Maud predicted, their poetic children would live forever.

The little cluster of Maud poems begins with 'A Memory of Youth,' reminiscent of 'Adam's Curse,' but with a strikingly different final 'moon.' Yeats records moments of play and wit, until 'A cloud blown from the cut-throat north/ Suddenly hid love's moon away.' Praise of his beloved's 'body and her mind' brightened her eyes and brought a blush to her cheek. 'Yet we, for all that praise, could find/ Nothing but darkness overhead.' They sit in stony silence, knowing, 'though she'd not said a word,/ That even the best of love must die.' They had been 'savagely undone,' but for a sudden burst of emotion-revivifying illumination, when 'Love upon the cry/ Of a most ridiculous little bird/ Tore from the clouds his marvelous moon.' The re-emergence of Love's moon, violently torn (by Eros himself) from clouds formed by the 'cut-throat'

 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0275.14

north wind, is heralded, not by one of Yeats's numinous annunciatory birds, a peacock or that 'miraculous strange bird' that shrieks at the couple discovering true love in 'Her Triumph' (Poem IV of 'A Woman Young and Old'), but by an unlikely, even laughable herald, well down in the hierarchy. That 'ridiculous little bird' almost turns tragedy into comedy, or tragi-comedy.

In the next poem, 'Fallen Majesty,' the poet sees *himself* as ridiculous. As an aging Petrarchan poet, he is an inappropriate man in an unpropitious place: 'some last courtier at a gypsy camping place/ Babbling of fallen majesty.' But the fallen majesty itself is recorded with elegiac pathos and pride. In the heyday of Maud Gonne's youthful beauty and fiery political activism, when mesmerized 'crowds gathered' if she merely showed her face, 'even old men's eyes grew dim'—like those of the elders of Troy who might disapprove of Helen but had to concede her beauty (in Ezra Pound's wonderful rendering, 'Moves, yes she moves like a goddess/ And has the face of a god,' though 'doom goes with her in walking').[1] Maud's Homer, writing in hexameters a decade or more after her political apogee, memorializes 'what's gone':

> The lineaments, a heart that laughter has made sweet,
> These, these remain, but I record what's gone. A crowd
> Will gather, and not know it walks the very street
> Whereon a thing once walked that seemed a burning cloud.

Following 'Friends,' discussed earlier, come two mysterious, almost apocalyptic poems, 'The Cold Heaven' and 'That the Night Come.' The latter presents a woman who so 'lived in storm and strife,' that her soul, desiring what 'proud death may bring,' could 'not endure/ The common good of life,' seeming—like a king packing his 'marriage day' with banner, trumpet, kettledrum and 'the outrageous cannon'—'To bundle time away/ That the night come.'

The memorable and mysterious 'The Cold Heaven,' a visionary poem that has deeply affected other poets, including (by his own acknowledgement) Seamus Heaney, is thrilling but notoriously enigmatic. Maud Gonne herself wondered what it meant. Yeats told her it was his attempt to describe feelings evoked by a cold winter sky, a sense that he was alone and somehow 'responsible in that loneliness

1 Canto II, in T*he Cantos of Ezra Pound* 6. Cf. *Iliad* III.160–63.

for all the past mistakes that tortured his peace of mind.' Revisiting the poem as late as 2015, Denis Donoghue found it as unforgettable as ever but, despite an acute close reading, ultimately inexplicable. Though its ultimate question involves the afterlife, 'The Cold Heaven' is also a Muse-poem, pivotal, Hassett argues, in marking Yeats's shift from his 'acceptance of the failure of his relationship with Gonne,' to a new kind of poetry: a 'celebration or interrogation of the past rather than the work of a poet pursuing his Muse.'[2]

'The Cold Heaven,' like 'No Second Troy' and 'Reconciliation, is a twelve-line poem, but decidedly *not* written in familiar iambic pentameters. It begins, jarringly, with a metrically irregular, enjambed, obliquely-rhymed *abab* quatrain, and with a visionary abruptness anticipating both the opening eruption ('A sudden blow, the great wings beating still') of 'Leda and the Swan' and lines written a quarter-century after 'The Cold Heaven,' in which Yeats records a moment when the 'wildness' he saw in what he perceived to be Maud's 'vision of terror,' brought his own 'imagination' to such a 'pitch' that he had himself 'grown wild' ('A Bronze Head'). We begin staring at a winter sky, galactically cold yet exhilarating:

> Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
> That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
> And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
> So wild that every casual thought of that and this
> Vanished, and left but memories.

Going beyond Yeats's desire to write a poem 'cold and passionate as the dawn,' these lines recall the oxymoronic opening lines of the Thomas Wyatt sonnet in which the conflicted Petrarchan lover cries out, 'I burn and freeze in ice.'[3] Yeats's lines also forecast, along with that moment in 'A Bronze Head,' the moment in 'Among School Children' when Yeats conjures up an image of Maud, 'and thereupon' his 'heart is driven wild.' As we would expect from everything we have read thus far, and from

2 For Yeats's remark to Maud, see Hassett, *Yeats Now: Echoing into Life*, 111. Donoghue, 'Reading "The Cold Heaven",' in *Yeats 150*, 171–88. Hassett, *Yeats and the Muses*, 95–98.

3 Yeats borrowed (for his poem 'The Fisherman') his father's 'cold-and-passionate' oxymoron. Wyatt's oxymoronic sonnet begins, 'I find no peace,' and ends 'And my delight is causer of this strife.'

the resemblance to the later lines cited from 'Among School Children,' and 'A Bronze Head,' the vision fusing ice and fire, driving heart and imagination wild, issues in a painful looking-back leaving behind only memories

> that should be out of season
> With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
> And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
> Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
> Riddled with light.

The reaction is extreme; the speaker is left crying, trembling, rocking back and forth, pierced with light, either lacerated with remorse or 'riddled' with bullet-like shafts of epiphanic illumination. Making its sole appearance in Yeats's poetry and plays, the violent participle 'riddled' seems both contextually and punningly appropriate to 'The Cold Heaven,' itself 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma' (to recall Churchill's definition of Stalin's Russia). Unlike the nonce 'riddled,' 'blame' shows up repeatedly in the Maud poems. Here, coupled with a doubled appearance of 'all' (Yeats's most frequently used word), 'blame' for what he described to Maud as 'all the past mistakes' is accepted as his sole 'responsibility.' He claims the failure of that 'love crossed long ago' is his fault exclusively, even as he simultaneously acknowledges that to 'take *all* the blame' is extreme, an emotional over-reaction, '*out* of *all* sense and reason.'

The poem's extraordinary energy is sustained throughout. The final lines, though they also seem 'out of all sense and reason,' are undeniably powerful—and appropriately haunting, coming from a ghost-haunted man:

> Ah! When the ghost begins to quicken,
> Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent
> Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
> By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

Roy Foster ends the chapter of his biography covering the years 1911–13, a chapter he titles 'Ghosts,' by printing the poem in full, as it happens, the only words on the page. He does preface the poem by observing that here, 'the lacerating memory of his failure with Gonne and his theories of death, ghosts and dreams come together in a passionate fusion.'

He relegates these theories to a lengthy endnote, gathering together what Yeats had to say (in commentary he supplied to the stories Lady Gregory and he compiled in *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*) about what Ovid and Cornelius Agrippa had to say about the fate of ghosts, depending on whether the person had done 'good' or 'ill' on earth, with the speculations of the Roman poet and the German occultist buttressed by the Indian theosophist Rama Prasad's ideas about posthumous punishment.[4]

I may seem to be making fun of that long note (which also directs us to a relevant November 1898 letter Yeats sent to Edward Clodd on the subject of ghosts) as obscurantist pedantry, justifying its semi-burial among some eighty pages of closely printed endnotes. But, in fact, that note is genuinely illuminating. The problem is that it makes for a heavy lift in trying to explicate four lines of poetry. In fact, these concluding lines have struck many commentators as requiring such glosses, especially from *A Vision*, in order to be fully unpacked. In particular, there has been much ado about the posthumous 'Dreaming Back' stage of the 'Spirit'—which would seem anachronistic since *A Vision* was, when this poem was written, still a dozen years in the future, though Yeats may have sensed what he would later say about the life after death.

In the poem itself, to return to *that*, even the poet falls back—a characteristic ploy, as in 'For Anne Gregory'—on 'what the books say.' They must be paradoxical tomes since what they say (despite the terminal question mark, the final line seems less query than declaration) is that the naked ghost *is* 'stricken/ By the injustice of the skies for punishment.' *In*justice, defying commonsense in this world or the next, returns us to that self-contradictory line where Yeats 'took all the blame out of all sense and reason.' If he deserved to take all the blame for the failed relationship with Maud, if he did 'ill,' then he might well expect, especially in a book titled *Responsibilities*, to be stricken by the '*justice* of the skies for punishment.' But if he did 'good,' or if he did not deserve to bear *total* responsibility (if that would be 'out of all sense and reason'), then his posthumous fate—to be, as the poem says, 'stricken/ By the *in*justice of the skies for punishment'—would be a fate both wrong and, in any moral calculus, *un*-reasonable.

4 Foster, *The Apprentice Mage*, 491, 490, 620n159.

In the end, Yeats seems to be saying that, while he momentarily thought that, in chivalrously or masochistically shouldering *all* the blame, he was being just, he was actually being doubly extreme; and (to cite a Roman of my own) Cicero reminds us, in his compendium of moral obligations, that '*Summum ius summa iniuria*,' [Extreme justice is extreme injustice.][5] Yeats acknowledges responsibility for the failure of the relationship with that 'woman lost,' only to immediately retract it as being excessive, as 'all' almost always is. His admission here is significant, but his acceptance of responsibility is more plausible in the stanza from 'The Tower' excerpted as my second epigraph, where he acknowledges his own over-intellectualized 'conscience' and 'cowardice' in 'turning aside' from the 'great labyrinth' that was Maud Gonne.

§

In 'The Cold Heaven,' Yeats was haunted by 'memories' of that 'love crossed long ago.' The volume following *Responsibilities*, the autumnal *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917, 1919), is again haunted by memories, now of a man in his fifties, but feeling older. He is thinking of Iseult in 'The Living Beauty' ('O heart, we are old;/ The living beauty is for younger men:/ We cannot pay its tribute of wild tears'); but the heartache in the volume's beautifully elegiac title poem mingles thematically apt echoes of Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' and Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' with memories of Maud and of his own lost youth. In autumn, at twilight, he has looked on the swans, paired lovers, 'And now my heart is sore.'

> Unwearied still, lover by lover,
> They paddle in the cold
> Companionable streams or climb the air;
> Their hearts have not grown old;
> Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
> Attend upon them still.

Like the Wye landscape in 'Tintern Abbey' and the 'immortal Bird' not 'born for death' in the 'Nightingale' ode, the swans are unchanged. But, as with mutable Wordsworth and Keats, 'All's changed' with the poet—in Yeats's case not only because the 'nineteenth autumn has come upon'

5 Book I of *De officii*s, Cicero's gathering together of many venerable examples of moral wisdom.

him since he first counted those wild and 'brilliant creatures,' but because he is writing in the immediate aftermath of Maud's recent rejection of yet another (and his final) proposal of marriage. Perhaps that is why (more counting) there are 'nine-and-fifty swans,' one unpaired and solitary.[6] Despite this one last marital attempt, these Maud-poems are, as Hassett remarks, less about Yeats's continued pursuit of an unattainable woman than a celebration of his Muse, and a recording, and interrogation, of his memories.

Five poems in *The Wild Swans at Coole* focus on Maud herself: 'Her Praise,' 'The People,' 'His Phoenix,' 'A Thought from Propertius,' and 'Broken Dreams.' And the 'Solomon and Sheba' poem preceding them, 'On Woman'—despite seeming to be associated with Yeats's wife, as are the other two 'Solomon and Sheba' poems—is a Maud Gonne poem in biblical disguise.

The first two honor her work on behalf of the Irish people. In 'the old days,' we are told in 'Her Praise,' because of her beauty and revolutionary energy, 'she had young men's praise and old men's blame,' an extension of the contrast between wary parent and smitten son on the momentous occasion of Willie's and John Butler Yeats's first encounter with Maud Gonne, when 'she vexed' his 'father by praise of war.' Now, writing in 1915, and wanting 'to talk no more of [...] the long war' actually in progress, a war condemned by Yeats and Maud alike, he returns to the past, concluding with an exception to 'old men's blame': 'Among the *poor* both old and young gave her praise.'

In the second poem, 'The People,' for Yeats a relatively rare (aside from 'The Second Coming' and his narrative poems) exercise in blank verse, the poet / playwright, defending art from philistine attacks and wishing he lived in Castiglione's courtly Urbino rather than 'unmannerly' Dublin, complains of being unappreciated by the Irish people. But then he recalls a 1906 conversation in which Maud had told him, after her 'luck changed' (referring to the hostile public response

6 From the time of his first visit to Coole Park, in 1897, Yeats had associated Maud with swans. He told her in an unpublished poem written that year, 'it is/ of you I sing when I tell/ of the swan in the water.' In this volume, even a creature of change—the charming replicator of the lunar phases who, in 'The Cat and the Moon,' creeps through the grass, 'Alone, important and wise,/ And lifts to the changing moon/ His changing eyes'—is related to Yeats's lunar Muse. Referred to by name, Minnaloushe was Maud's black male Persian cat.

to her legal separation from MacBride), that even when the 'dishonest crowd' she 'had driven away' set upon her those she had 'served' and sometimes 'fed,' she had 'never [...] now nor any time,/ Complained of the people.' He responds (in appropriately taut diction) that she has 'not lived in thought but deed,' and so has 'the purity of a natural force,' while he, a man of words rather than action, finds it hard to keep his critical 'tongue from speech.'

Maud had made a related point back in June 1897, in that earlier-mentioned letter to Yeats combining reprimand and recognition. The occasion of her reprimand was the memorable moment of conflict when Yeats had locked Maud inside the National Club, preventing her from joining the crowd during a particularly violent demonstration. That episode and Maud's response are sufficiently crucial to warrant stepping back from the poem for a few moments.

It was Maud, invited to speak by James Connolly himself, who had incited the crowd. The day before—Wolfe Tone's anniversary and the national day set aside for the decoration of patriot graves—Maud had sent a wreath to Tone's grave in Bodenstown, Co. Kildare, and gone herself to the cemetery adjoining St. Michan's Church in Dublin to lay a wreath in honor of Robert Emmet. But the 'great tomb-haunter' (as Yeats later called her in 'A Bronze Head') had been denied admission by the cemetery's custodian 'because it was Queen Victoria's Jubilee.' The next day, the crucial day, she roused the crowd: 'Must the graves of our dead go undecorated' because of the Jubilee of a queen during whose reign many Irish rebels were 'hanged for treason?' She then followed Connolly in a mock funeral procession down Dame Street behind a coffin labelled 'The British Empire' and festooned with black flags with the names of the martyrs on them. Unsurprisingly, as Yeats reports, 'the whole crowd went wild.' Maud's face, he adds, was 'joyous'; she was in her element. No sooner had she and Yeats paused for tea at the National Club than the protest turned into a full-scale riot, with an assault on window-breaking protesters by baton-wielding police. Maud was about to join the crowd, when Yeats, fearing she would be 'hurt' (some two hundred people *were*, according to the next day's *Irish Times*), insisted that, unless she explained what her intentions were, the door would be locked 'to keep her in.' His anything-but-fragile Muse bitterly resented his protective interference as she made clear in a letter written from London a few days later:

> Our friendship must indeed be strong for me not to hate you, for you made me do the most cowardly thing I have ever done in my life. It is quite absurd to say I should have reasoned & given explanations. Do you ask a soldier for explanations on the battlefield of course it is only a very small thing a riot & a police charge but the same need for immediate action is there—there is no time to give explanations [...] I less than any others, would be capable of giving lengthy explanations of what I want and I intend to do, as my rule in life is to obey inspirations which come to me & which always guide me right.

Yeats would have been moved by the Romantic appeal to intuitive inspiration, and he might have been recalling this paragraph of Maud's letter and her rhetorical questions when, later and repeatedly, he singled out as his favorite saying of Nietzsche's Zarathustra: 'Am I a barrel of memories that I can give you my reasons?'[7] But Maud is not finished. 'For a long time,' she continues,

> I had a feeling that I should not encourage you to mix yourself up in the *outer* [Maud's emphasis] side of politics & you know I have never asked you to do so. I see now that I was wrong in not obeying this feeling more completely & probably you were allowed to hinder me on that comparatively unimportant occasion to show me that it is necessary you should not mix in what is really not in your line of action. You have a higher work to do—With me it is different I was born to be in the midst of a crowd.

Those who did not 'go out to the rescue of the people' being beaten by the police 'ought to feel ashamed' of their 'inaction.' And she seems really to have believed that the worst incident, the death of 'that poor old woman Mrs. Fitzsimmons' who was 'allowed to fall' from the car

7 L, 650. The context has its own interest. In this June 1918 letter to his father, Yeats distinguishes between mere 'pietists' like Bunyan and the genuine seventeenth-century 'mystics,' who have also 'been great in intellect.' He was referring to Pascal and, especially, Spinoza, whose intellect he ranked even above 'the more merely professional intellect of the Victorians, even that of Mill.' Having demoted the favored thinkers of his positivist father, Yeats tells him: 'You should not conclude that if a man does not give his reasons he has none. Remember Zarathustra's 'Am I a barrel of memories that I can give you my reasons?' The passage Yeats is recalling is from Part II, §17 ('On Poets'). Asked by a disciple why he had said that 'poets lie too much,' Zarathustra responds: 'Why? You ask, why? I am not one of those whom one may ask about their why. Is my experience but of yesterday? It was long ago that I experienced the reasons for my opinions. Would I not have to be a barrel of memory if I wanted to carry my reasons around with me?' *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 238–39.

taking her to the hospital 'would not have happened if I had been able to do my duty.' Having, in effect, accused Yeats of complicity in a police murder, she levels that charge mentioned earlier in connection with Yeats's admission that one of the reasons he 'turned aside' from labyrinthine Maud was 'cowardice.' Maud herself mitigates the charge with a distinction: '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' (G-YL, 72–73).

There could not be a more dramatic example of her realization that their natures were antithetical; but that was hardly news to Yeats. Maud was, as she said, 'born to be in the midst of a crowd,' while he had 'a higher work to do,' and, as she added, whatever his nationalist commitment, he should not become involved 'in the *outer* side of politics.' She ended her letter by saying that, while they should not work together again 'where there is likely to be excitement or physical danger,' his speech to the Convention gathered together that June 22 (Yeats proposed that the Convention should declare 'its beliefs in the right of the freedom of Ireland' [G-YL, 466n]), was 'quite the best I have ever heard you make, it was magnificent,' capping his 'splendid work' during the centennial celebration of the 1798 Rising. In short, *his* medium was 'words,' not physical action. Though Yeats conceded that 'she was perhaps right to be angry when I refused to let her out unless she explained what she meant to do,' he also knew that, on 'principle,' she would not 'interfere' to stop the violence, in fact, would be far likelier to exacerbate it. 'She had taken all those people into her heart.'[8]

And these were the very people who, within a decade, in the wake of her legal separation from MacBride, had turned on her. In 'The People,' to return to the poem itself (an example of that 'higher work' he had to do), after recording Maud's insistence that, even after they had abandoned and attacked her, she never 'Complained of the people,' Yeats responds, at first and at some length, self-defensively, only to end in humbled yet excited silence:

8 Maud devoted much of chapter 10 of *A Servant of the Queen* (272–77) to these events. For Yeats's vivid remembrances, see Mem, 111–14, and Au, 366–68. When, in 'He wishes his Beloved were Dead,' Yeats depicts Maud 'murmur[ing] tender words,' and 'forgiving me,' it is to his intervention and Maud's reprimand that he refers.

> All I could reply
> Was: 'You that have not lived in thought but deed,
> Can have the purity of a natural force,
> But I, whose virtues are the definitions
> Of the analytic mind, can neither close
> The eye of the mind nor keep my tongue from speech.'
> And yet, because my heart leaped at her words,
> I was abashed, and now they come to mind
> After nine years, I sink my head abashed.

Like 'Her Praise,' this poem reassesses Yeats's resistance to, or condemnation of, Maud's fierce political activism, which he always considered his 'one visible rival' (Mem, 63) for her love. In 'The People,' though his position is articulated in a lucid syntax worthy of an analytic mind, there is still that 'And yet,' compelling the man of disciplined *intellect* to bow, abashed, because, as a reluctant admirer and last Romantic, his '*heart* leaped at her words.'

The next poem, the lengthy but lighthearted 'His Phoenix,' ticks off, in jaunty hexameters, a procession of stunning women, starting with an unnamed 'queen in China, or maybe it's in Spain,' whose beauty rivaled that of Leda, 'that sprightly girl trodden by a bird.' He goes through 'a score of duchesses, surpassing womankind,/ Or who have found a painter to make them so for pay,' and dancers, including the famed performers Ruth St. Denis and Pavlova, all 'breakers of men's hearts or engines of delight.' Maud was, as she herself said, 'born to be in the midst of a crowd.' So, too, with these acclaimed performers, though his 'heart denies' exact resemblance:

> There'll be that crowd, that barbarous crowd, through all the centuries,
> And who can say but some young belle may walk and talk men wild
> Who is my beauty's equal, though that my heart denies,
> But not the exact likeness, the simplicity of a child,
> And that proud look as though she had gazed into the burning sun,
> And all that shapely body no tittle gone astray.
> I mourn for that most lonely thing; and yet God's will be done:
> I knew a phoenix in my youth, so let them have their day.

The celebration of the unique beauty of his phoenix is followed by 'A Thought from Propertius.' Echoing one of the Love Elegies of Sextus

Propertius (Book II, 'Her Beauty'), Yeats imagines Maud 'fit spoil for a centaur/ Drunk with the unmixed wine,' yet 'so noble from head' to foot that she might have 'walked to the altar/ Through the holy images/ At Pallas Athena's side.' (In the 1937 'Beautiful Lofty Things,' listing momentary images of 'Olympian' nobility permanently impressed on his memory, Yeats concludes with 'Maud Gonne at Howth station waiting a train,/ Pallas Athena in that straight back and arrogant head'—the single reference to her by name in his poetry.)

The short, tight Propertius poem is followed by 'Broken Dreams,' forty-one lines of artfully rambling reverie, rhymed but loose, to match its free associations. Maud was now fifty, a fact registered in the poem's opening lines: 'There is grey in your hair./ Young men no longer suddenly catch their breath when you are passing.' Yet

> For your sole sake—that all heart's ache have known,
> And given to others all heart's ache,
> From meager girlhood's putting on
> Burdensome beauty—for your sole sake
> Heaven has put away the stroke of her doom,
> So great her portion in that peace you make
> By merely walking in a room.

He imagines some young man asking an old man, 'Tell me of that lady/ The poet stubborn with his passion sang us/ When age might well have chilled his blood.' In a desperate certainty reflecting his reading of Plotinus and Swedenborg, he is confident, as he was *not* in 'King and No King,' that 'in the grave all, all, shall be renewed,' and that he would 'see that lady/ Leaning or standing or walking/ In the first loveliness of womanhood,/ And with the fervor of my youthful eyes.' Though 'more beautiful than anyone,' Maud Gonne had a flaw, her small hands, and he is afraid that she will run, and 'paddle to the wrist' in 'that mysterious, always brimming lake' where the blessed 'Paddle and are perfect.' A true lover, he has a final plea: 'leave unchanged/ The hands that I have kissed,/ For old sake's sake.' The 'last stroke of midnight dies,' ending a day in which he has 'ranged' from 'dream to dream and rhyme to rhyme,' in 'rambling talk with an image of air:/ Vague memories, nothing but memories.'

This Maud-cluster is preceded by 'On Woman' and framed by two short lyrics, 'Memory' and 'A Deep-sworn Vow,' to be discussed in a moment. 'On Woman' (1914) anticipates the 1918 'Solomon to Sheba'

and 'Solomon and the Witch,' post-marital poems addressed to his wife. But the Sheba in this poem is allied with Maud. Solomon 'never could,' although 'he counted grass,/ Count all the praises due/ When Sheba was his lass.' If the sexual 'shudder that made them one' anticipates the 'shudder in the loins' in 'Leda and the Swan,' the concluding lines anticipate Self's choice, in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' of eternal recurrence, with its 'fecund' intermingling of joy and pain. The question posed by Nietzsche's demon, introducing the thought-experiment or ordeal of Eternal Recurrence in *The Gay Science* §341, is a weighty one: 'Do you want this once more and innumerable times more?' The very thought, Nietzsche claims, might make you 'throw yourself down and gnash your teeth.' But, he continues, have you, 'even *once*,' experienced a 'moment' so 'tremendous' that you 'fervently craved' it 'once more' and 'eternally'? The speaker in 'On Woman' prays that God grant him, not 'here,' for he is 'not so bold as to 'hope a thing so dear/ Now I am growing old,'

> But when, if the tale's true,
> The Pestle of the moon
> That pounds up all anew
> Brings me to birth again—
> To find what once I had
> And know what once I have known,
> Until I am driven mad,
> Sleep driven from my bed,
> By tenderness and care,
> Pity, an aching head,
> Gnashing of teeth, despair;
> And all because of some one
> Perverse creature of chance,
> And live like Solomon
> That Sheba led a dance.

Here, as in 'Broken Dreams' and, a decade and a half later, in 'Quarrel in Old Age,' Yeats invokes renewal beyond the grave. 'All lives that has lived,' he announces in 'Quarrel' (1931); 'Old sages were not deceived:/ Somewhere beyond the curtain/ Of distorting days/ Lives that lonely thing/ That shone before these eyes': Maud Gonne, who seemed armed like a goddess and 'trod like Spring.' It is a recurrent hope, compounded of Plotinus, Swedenborg's vision of frustrated lovers posthumously united, and the embrace, by Nietzsche's Zarathustra, of the eternal

recurrence of passion and joy, no matter the attendant and inevitable suffering. And, as in 'On Woman,' 'all because of some *one*/ Perverse creature'—'*that* one.'

The two short framing lyrics I referred to both consist of six trimeter lines rhymed *abcabc*, and both emphasize the indelible imprint of the unique among the many. There are all the 'others,' and then there is Maud. The title of the mini-lyric, 'Memory,' could refer to all the Maud Gonne poems:

> One had a lovely face,
> And two or three had charm.
> But charm and face were in vain
> Because the mountain grass
> Cannot but keep the form
> Where the mountain hare has lain.

What better image for the impress of memory than the crushed grass where the elusive mountain hare has lain, a hollow enshrining an absent presence? She is gone, but the 'form,' at once palpable and Platonic, remains forever.

Maud had told Yeats she would never marry him, and that he should be 'glad,' since 'you make beautiful poetry' out of what you call your 'unhappiness.' But she also swore she would marry no one else. She did. 'A Deep-sworn Vow' registers that broken oath and its sexual consequences for him. Yet he has been faithful in his fashion; for 'always,' at intense moments of truth—the imagining of one's death, at the height of visionary dream, in the *veritas* of wine—when the defense mechanisms are down, there is a sudden return of the repressed:

> Others because you did not keep
> That deep-sworn vow have been friends of mine;
> Yet always when I look death in the face,
> When I clamber to the heights of sleep,
> Or when I grow excited with wine,
> Suddenly I meet your face.

The opening 'others,' the ostensible subject of this sestet, are swiftly dismissed as of no intrinsic value; they exist solely to be differentiated from 'you,' the vow-breaker. This is typical of the much-admired economy and mounting excitement of the poem. That astute close reader, R. P. Blackmur, memorably observed that 'possibly all poetry should be

read as this poem is read, and no poetry greatly valued that cannot be so read. Such is one ideal standard toward which reading tends.'[9] He added that 'to apply that standard of judgment one should first have to assume for the poetic intelligence absolute autonomy and self-perfection for all its works.' I'm tempted to quibble with that 'absolute autonomy' by suggesting that this poem, like 'Her Triumph,' in 'A Woman Young and Old,' has a precursor in the break-out poem that first revealed the genius of John Keats: 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer.'

In 'A Deep-sworn Vow,' though expected ('always'), the revelation is *sudden*. As in the discovery of true love in 'Her Triumph' ('And now we stare astonished at the sea'), Yeats seems to me, thematically and phonetically, to be recalling the sestet of the sonnet in which Keats compared his discovery of Homer to the awed moment when the ocean's Spanish discoverers 'star'd at the Pacific,' and the conquistador and his men looked at each other 'with a wild surmise—/ Silent, upon a peak in Darien.' In 'A Deep-sworn Vow,' Yeats does not *fall* asleep; he vigorously 'clambers' to its visionary 'heights.' He repeats ('heights,' 'excited,' 'wine') the long *i* of Keats's 'wild,' 'surmise,' 'silent.' And both poems end with a double caesura preceding the abrupt revelation. When Maud's 'face' looms up from the subconscious, it is a chthonic apparition, the rare exact rhyme making *her* 'face' indistinguishable from the 'face' of *death*, as befits a *femme fatale*. It took the subconscious breakthrough of a poem for Yeats to acknowledge the revelation that had come to Lady Gregory intuitively on first being introduced by Yeats to the object of his obsession. Maud was ill at the time, which may explain in part why that first meeting, Lady Gregory reports, was a 'shock' to her, continuing that: 'instead of beauty I saw a death's head.'[10]

In the next chapter we will begin with Maud Gonne, in her own name, depicted as a death's-head. In both Byzantium poems and 'Lapis Lazuli,' Yeats, like Shelley in 'Ozymandias' and Keats in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' wrote about sculpted art; but his most terrifying exercise in *ekphrasis* is his sustained contemplation of the bust of Maud Gonne in 'A Bronze Head.'

9 Blackmur, 'The Later Poetry of W. B. Yeats,' 48.

10 *Lady Gregory's Diaries, 1892–1902*, 197. Though wary of her besotted friend's Muse, the 'ever-kind' Lady Gregory was legally of great help to Maud, protecting her money during her marriage to MacBride.