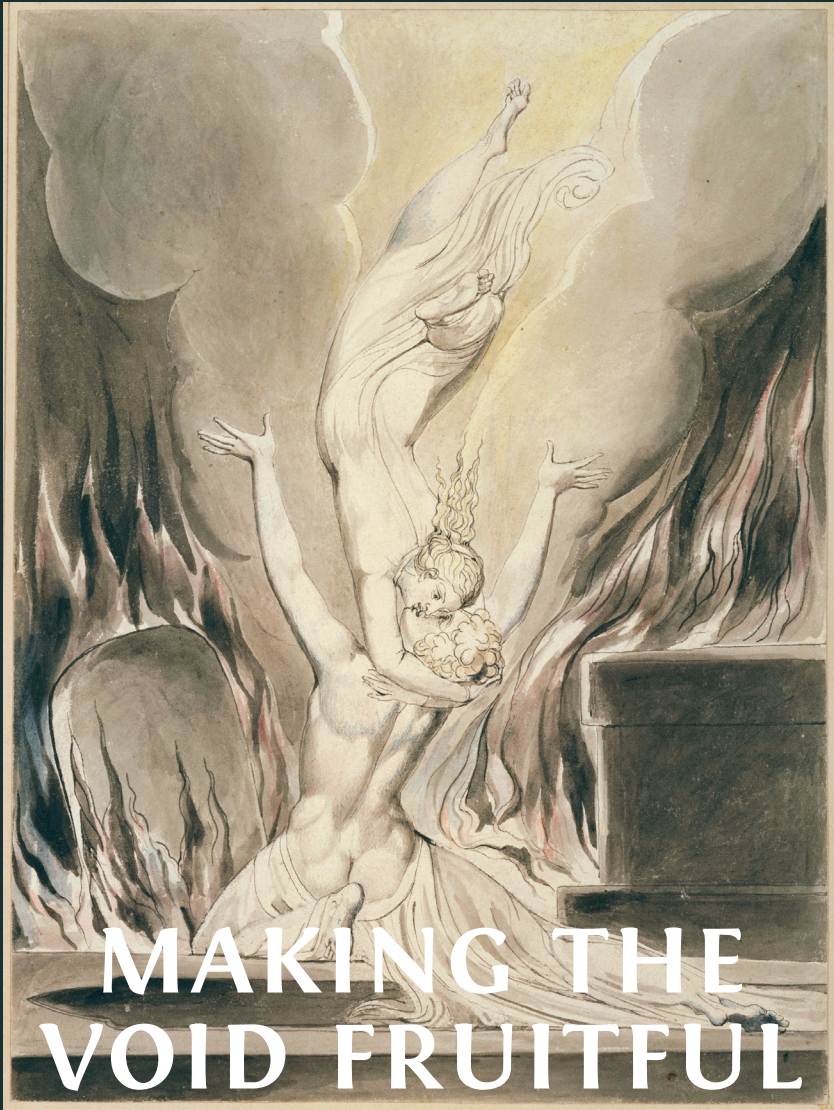


PATRICK J. KEANE



Yeats as Spiritual Seeker
and Petrarchan Lover



<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2021 Patrick J. Keane



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license (CC BY 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the text; to adapt the text and to make commercial use of the text providing attribution is made to the authors (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

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>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions.

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0275#copyright>. Further details about CC BY licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0275#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

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.

15. Thought Distracted: 'Man and the Echo,' 'Politics,' and Conclusion

We know, from a handwritten note discovered sixty years ago, the poem Yeats wanted to appear as his last word, the final poem in his canon.¹ It was not, despite decades of editions, 'Under Ben Bulbin,' an uneven (at its worst, obnoxious) poem saved by its resonant and influential final section enshrining Yeats's haunting epitaph: 'Cast a cold eye/ On life, on death./ Horseman, pass by!' That epitaph—by the poet's command, 'no conventional phrase'—is less enigmatic read as a heroic reversal of all those pious inscriptions admonishing grave visitors to 'stop' and brood, succumbing to the morbid thought that as the corpse below is, so shall we be. Instead, we are to look on life and death with equanimity, then 'pass by,' getting on with our own lives. That is an affirmation of life, even in death.

The same is true of the three final poems in the canon, 'Man and the Echo,' 'The Circus Animals' Desertion,' and, last and seemingly least, 'Politics.' Though all three return us to the creative imagination and the human heart, they may seem anything *but* affirmative. They were printed together in a January 1938 issue of *The Atlantic*. In 2014, marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of Yeats's death, an *Atlantic* writer reproduced the poems as they had first appeared, characterized as 'three of his most brutal,' 'bitter,' and 'deeply unsettling,' pieces in which we find the poet relentlessly 'shedding the last vestiges of his

1 See Curtis Bradford, "The Order of Yeats's *Last Poems*." *The Variorum* (pre-Bradford) ends with 'Under Ben Bulbin.' But all three of the major modern editions, Finneran's (1983), followed by Jeffares' (1989), and Albright's (1990, 1992), print 'Politics' as Yeats's final poem.

pride and dignity.² As Gloucester says in *King Lear*, 'and that's true, too.' But, as in Shakespeare's deepest tragedy, there is also a final, cathartic affirmation that rises out of undeniable darkness.

In the preceding chapter, I discussed 'The Circus Animals' Desertion,' and will return to it in my conclusion. I also discussed 'Man and the Echo,' and revisit it at this point in order to prepare for the affirmation to be found in the final poem, 'Politics.'

In the most memorable lecture in the superb series given during his tenure as Oxford Professor of Poetry, Seamus Heaney—expanding on remarks by Polish American Nobel laureate, Czeslaw Milosz—contrasted Philip Larkin's unflinching but hopeless death-poem, 'Aubade,' to 'Man and the Echo,' another confrontation of death by an aging poet lying awake at night. Though he admired 'Aubade,' Milosz protested its adoption of a purely rational-scientific assessment of death. Heaney cites with approval Milosz's assertion that 'poetry by its very essence has always been on the side of life,' expressing a 'faith' that is 'larger and deeper than religious or philosophic creeds,' which are 'only one' of faith's many 'forms.' Both Larkin and Yeats face death; but whereas 'Aubade' is, despite its wit, almost unrelievedly bleak, 'Man and the Echo' manages, despite its own opening bleakness, to endorse precisely what Larkin's brilliant but defeatist and wholly negative poem 'reneges on'—what Yeats calls, in resisting the temptation to 'lie down and die,' the 'spiritual intellect's great work.' Above all, Heaney notes, 'Man and the Echo' demonstrates that 'the consciousness of the poet is in full possession of both its creative impulse and its limiting knowledge,' limits rebelled against by the vitality of fully achieved poetry, able to partially 'redress' the harsh necessities of life.

The Yeatsian Man has two final questions: 'O rocky voice/ Shall we in that great night rejoice?/ What do we know but that we face/ One another in this place?' Though part of the interrogation, the option to 'rejoice' resonates, recalling the 'tragic joy' of 'The Gyres' (1936/37), where 'out of Cavern comes a voice,/ And all it knows is that one word "Rejoice".' But in the later poem both the Self and its cavernous Echo are told to 'hush.' Confronting his own death and possible afterlife, the poet has 'lost the theme,/ Its joy or night seem but a dream' because of a sudden, violent intervention from the natural world:

2 Gritz, 'The Deathbed Confession of William Butler Yeats.'

Up there some hawk or owl has struck
 Dropping out of sky or rock,
 A stricken rabbit is crying out
 And its cry distracts my thought.

Heaney ended his Oxford lecture by focusing on Yeats's final couplet, noting that the yoking of 'crying out' and 'thought' is not a perfect rhyme; 'nor should it be,' for there is 'no perfect fit between the project of civilization represented by thought and the facts of pain and death' represented by the rabbit's 'crying out.' What 'holds the crying out and the thought together is a consciousness which persists in trying to make sense of a world where suffering and violence are more evidently set to prevail than the virtue of being "kind".'³ The final rhyme, and the poem in general, Heaney concludes

not only tell of that which the spirit must endure; they also show *how* [Heaney's italics] it must endure, by pitting human resource against the recalcitrant and the inhuman, by pitting the positive effort of mind against the desolations of natural and historical violence [...] Where Larkin's 'Aubade' ended in entrapment, 'Man and the Echo' has preserved a freedom, and manages to pronounce a final *Yes*. And the *Yes* is valuable, [possessing] a weight and significance because it overpowers and contains a *No*.

As Heaney observes, much more could be said about this deeply moving poem; but his focus on the final couplet, his concluding reflection, and his emphasizing, as Auden had before him, of Yeats's verb 'rejoice,' help us see that, for all its incertitude, 'Man and the Echo' is to be read as an affirmation of life. In that emphasis, Heaney is doubtless recalling one of the quatrains in what he called 'the best-known section of Auden's elegy for Yeats,' written in the trochaic tetrameters Auden borrowed from the sixth and final movement of 'Under Ben Bulbin,' the funereal drumbeat section that constitutes Yeats's elegy for himself, including his epitaph. Auden invokes Yeats's ghost:

3 'Joy or Night,' in *The Redress of Poetry*, 162–63. One recalls the unexpectedly gentle reverence for life recorded by Yeats in 'Reveries over Childhood and Youth.' As a boy, he tells us, he fished and 'shot at birds with a muzzle-loading pistol until somebody shot a rabbit and I heard it squeal. From then on I would kill nothing but the dumb fish (*Au*, 55). We find the same 'kindness' in that iconic moment in January, 1889, when Nietzsche, spurner of 'pity,' famously collapsed in tears in Turin, embracing a carthorse being brutally flogged, a manic but revealing breakdown from which he never recovered.

Follow, poet, follow right
 To the bottom of the night,
 With your unconstraining voice
 Still persuade us to rejoice.⁴

Here we have another valuable yes containing and overpowering the no. Though in the final paragraph of his Oxford lecture, Heaney cited Karl Barth on the 'enormous *Yes* [Heaney's italics] at the centre of Mozart's music,' he might have quoted the opening of Wallace Stevens's 'The Well Dressed Man with a Beard': 'After the final no there comes a yes/ And on that yes the future world depends./ No was the night. Yes is this present sun.' In 'Man and the Echo,' which begins with the Man descending to 'the bottom of a pit/ That broad noon has never lit,' the final affirmation, rising above that darkness and its necessarily tragic context, surmounts inevitable suffering, violence, and death itself—everything great and small, from the hatreds bred by politics and the desolations of history to the pitiable, compassion-inducing death cry of a rabbit struck down by a predatory bird.

We have discussed the hawk as symbol, Yeats's 'gloomy bird of prey' as emblematic of abstract thought and intellectual hatred. The hawk's prey in 'Man and the Echo' is a rabbit, an animal that, as we've seen, appears in two Maud-associated poems. In the first, the titular memory of his elusive Muse was impressed in crushed grass, a hollow left by the now fled 'mountain hare.' In the other, 'The Death of the Hare,' the Man's empathetic 'heart is wrung' by the thought of 'wildness lost' in the hunting down of a rabbit pursued to the death by a 'yelling pack': a displaced image of Maud set upon by the mob, identified by Yeats in 'The People' as those ingrates she had helped but who turned on her after her separation from John MacBride. But the cruelty of the hunt is *directly* connected to Maud in a striking remark Yeats confided in his unpublished memoir. By 1891, he imagined that Maud had come to 'have need of me,' a fact that evolved into wishful, then aggressive thinking: 'I had no doubt that need would become love [...] I had even as I watched her a sense of cruelty, as though I were a hunter taking

4 'In Memory of W. B. Yeats,' lines 66–69. The same meter was employed by Joseph Brodsky in his elegy for T. S. Eliot, and by Heaney himself in his elegy for his friend Brodsky: 'Joseph, yes, you know the beat,/ Wystan Auden's metric feet/ Marched to it, unstressed and stressed,/ Laying William Yeats to rest.' As Heaney reminds us, Brodsky died in 1996 on the same day, January 28, as Yeats had in 1939.

captive some beautiful wild creature,' and he deleted, even from papers meant to be private, the uncharacteristically forceful assertion: 'I wished now to make her my lover' (Mem, 49).⁵

These Maud-related images of the cruelty of the hunt return us to 'Man and the Echo,' to the poignant death cry of the rabbit, which confirms the radical finitude shared by man and beast, and simultaneously 'distracts' Yeats for the moment from thoughts about his own death. We cannot prevent or alleviate such suffering—the suffering, to a remarkable degree in poetry, of animals and even, in Wordsworth and Emily Dickinson, of flowers.⁶ But we can register it in poetry evoking 'heart'-felt 'Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.' These final words of the 'Intimations' ode, like the final reverence for all living things expressed by Coleridge's repentant Mariner, seem immediately pertinent to the conclusion of 'Man and the Echo.' Wordsworth's deeply

5 Here, with Yeats at his most cruelly if secretly aggressive, Maud at her most unknowingly vulnerable, we may be reminded for an instant of Nabokov's equally obsessed Humbert Humbert and of *Lolita*, specifically of them together, Lolita on his lap, on the davenport in the Haze home. In this, the most explicit sexual scene in the novel, Humbert 'watched her, rosy, gold-dusted, beyond the veil of my controlled delight, unaware of it, alien to it [...] In my self-made seraglio, I was a radiant and robust Turk, postponing the moment of actually enjoying the youngest and frailest of his slaves.' (*The Annotated Lolita*, 60). However 'cruel' and lascivious Yeats might appear in this private fantasy, he is not, of course, to be compared with the morally grotesque Humbert. Yet this pedophile is also an artistic celebrant of his Muse and Beloved. In his prison cell with death imminent, Humbert affirms that, in his fleeting time and through the power of his language, he has made Lolita—as Yeats has made Maud Gonne—'live in the minds of later generations.' The novel ends as it had begun, with the word, 'Lolita,' and with a final rhetorical flourish, beneath the opulence of which we find both genuine feeling and a celebration of perdurable art, from cave paintings, through Medieval and Renaissance religious art, to 'sonnets,' Petrarchan and Shakespearean. 'I am thinking,' says Humbert, his theme perhaps merging with Nabokov's, 'of aurochs and angels, the secrets of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita' (309). Maud said much the same of Yeats's poems for her.

6 I am about to cite Wordsworth's empathetic response to the 'meanest flower that blows.' Though examples are legion in Dickinson, consider no more than the 'happy flower' struck down by the 'blonde Assassin,' Frost, in her 1884 poem, 'Apparently with no surprise.' A striking example of non-human pain, a half-century later, is Samuel Beckett's moving 'Dante and the Lobster.' Assured that boiled lobsters feel no pain, the narrator, Belacqua, concludes otherwise: from 'the depths of the sea it had crept into the cruel pot [...] going alive into scalding water. It had to. Take into the air my quiet breath.' As in 'Man and the Echo,' abstract questions are made explicit in the suffering of the seemingly least human of creatures (as in David Foster Wallace's brilliant 2004 article, 'Consider the Lobster'), justifying Beckett's allusion to Keats's musing on his own death in the 'Ode to a Nightingale.'

felt response, 'thanks to the human heart by which we live,' to even 'the meanest [or, as he first wrote, 'humblest'] flower that blows,' was test run in the moral imperative of divinized Nature at the end of 'Hart-Leap Well,' his 1800 take on the killing of the albatross in his friend's *Rime*: 'Never to blend our pleasure or our pride/ With sorrow of the meanest thing that feels' (II.179–80). Wordsworth's two-part tale tells of a cruel hunter who takes sadistic joy in the death of a pursued hart who made a fatal leap from a cliff in a desperate attempt to return to the well it was born near. The eventual ruin of the pleasure-house the arrogant hunter built on the site illustrates the poem's 'hart'-felt moral.

Adapting that imperative and the moral of the chastened Mariner regarding 'all things both great and small,' Yeats's Man experiences a pang of empathy at the death of the rabbit. In a final parallel with Wordsworth, Yeats's thought-distracting response to the stricken creature's anguished cry from the mountainside—'But hush, for I have lost the theme'—resembles the moment in *The Excursion* (IV. 402–5), when the Wanderer's intellectual discourse is interrupted by a monitory 'voice' (anticipating the 'rocky voice' of 'Man and the Echo') emanating from Nature: 'List! I heard,/ From yon huge breast of rock, a voice sent forth/ As if the visible mountain made the cry.'

§

In 'Man and the Echo,' the pathos of mutability in the death cry of a stricken rabbit 'distracts' Yeats's thought. There is a similar distraction in the short lyric with which Yeats intended to end his *Collected Poems*. He might have concluded with, say, 'Cuchulain Comforted,' but Yeats chose to end, though it took editors almost a half-century to comply, on a still affirmative but lighter, ostensibly minor note. Casual, even unseemly on its surface, the little poem 'Politics' (May 1938) was written in response to its epigraph, a comment by Thomas Mann made during the Spanish Civil War and, as with Yeats's poem, with World War II looming on the horizon: 'In our time,' Mann insisted, 'the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms.' Yeats's response is an imaginative cry to make love not war:

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix

On Roman or on Russian
 Or on Spanish politics,
 Yet here's a traveled man that knows
 What he talks about,
 And there's a politician
 That has both read and thought,
 And maybe what they say is true
 Of war and war's alarms,
 But O that I were young again
 And held her in my arms.

Why would Yeats, with other major candidates for the honor at hand, choose to end his canon with a *seemingly* slight, even ribald little poem, which rejects its titular subject in the opening lines? In part, I think, for that very reason, and because, under its colloquial surface, 'Politics' resonates with poetic tradition. Even in the midst of political turmoil and impending war, Yeats is affirming the primary theme of lyric poetry, epitomized in the anonymous medieval *cri de coeur* petitioning the 'Western Wind' to blow so that separated lovers might reunite: 'Christ, that my love were in my arms/ And I in my bed again!' Yeats concedes that traveled pundits and politicians have 'read and thought,' and 'maybe what they say is true/ Of war and war's alarms,/ But O that I were young again/ And held her in my arms.' In 'Politics,' selected by Yeats as his final word, the poet, dismissing war actual and potential, embraces the immemorial theme of lyric poetry—the longings of the heart, which have no enemy but time.

In doing so, Yeats almost replicates a move he had made when, in the midst of the *First World War*, he had disappointed two ardent American expatriate supporters of the Allies, Edith Wharton and Henry James, and angered a third, his friend John Quinn, by refusing to contribute a poem to the cause. Writing to Yeats in the very month of the 'Guns of August,' Maud Gonne, relieved that he 'seemed to have escaped the obsession of this war,' described the conflict as 'an inconceivable madness that has taken hold of Europe' (G-YL, 347–48). Precisely a year later, in August 1915, Yeats responded to a request from Henry James, Wharton's emissary, for a poetic contribution. Referring to the war as this 'bloody frivolity' (L, 600), and reducing requested support to intrusive 'meddling' in other people's business, Yeats had only this to offer 'On Being asked for a War Poem':

I think it better that in times like these
 A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
 We have no gift to set a statesman right;
 He has had enough of meddling who can please
 A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
 Or an old man upon a winter's night.⁷

In maintaining a Cistercian silence on the war as a 'subject,' Yeats, while seeming to fiddle while Europe burned, was casting a wide *human* net—addressing as audience female and male, the young and the old. In asserting that the poet's function is to 'please,' Yeats was also obeying the Horatian dictum that poetry must not only instruct, but 'delight,' intensified by Wordsworth in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* ('The Poet writes under one restriction only, namely, that of the necessity of giving immediate pleasure') and by Wallace Stevens as the climactic requirement of poetry in his 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction': 'IT MUST GIVE PLEASURE.' In both 1915 and 1938, Yeats was positioning himself against what we have come to call in our own hyper-polarized world 'interventionism' and the 'politicization' of art. Leon Wieseltier has recently launched some blunt Nietzsche-like aphorisms in favor of the first and against the second. In a 2021 essay, he poses a rhetorical question: 'Who ever did the right thing without intervening? Ethical action is always an intrusion,' especially when 'doing nothing' is to 'stand idly' by when the 'blood of others' is being spilled. He goes on, in effect, to turn Yeats's own word, 'meddling,' against him: 'Morality is a theory of meddling.'

But that is not the only table-turning. Toward the end of the essay, targeting today's activist artists, including, by name, the acclaimed creator of the hit musical, *Hamilton*, Wieseltier retrospectively attacks the position once espoused by Maud Gonne and Arthur Griffith when it came to the Abbey Theatre; even perhaps the position of James and Wharton in pressing Yeats to write a poem cheering on the Allies. Though supportive of moral interventionism, Wieseltier insists that,

7 The poem was published, retitled 'A Reason for Keeping Silent,' in *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), a volume to benefit war refugees organized and edited by Wharton. Of the many distinguished contributors, as Hermione Lee reports in *Edith Wharton*, Yeats alone 'refused the conventions of war writing.' Though she felt she had to include the poem, Yeats's decision to keep 'silent' was, as Lee adds, obviously 'not Wharton's view' (497). I am indebted here to my colleague, Wharton expert Julie Olin-Ammentorp.

when we politicize art, the 'first casualty' is 'our culture, just about all of it. Art is now politics by other means [...]' "All art is political," says Lin Manuel-Miranda. Bullshit.⁸

Yet one understands the distress of John Quinn, another ardent supporter of the Allies, who, in a letter to Yeats, pronounced the lines in which the Irish poet refused to contribute a war poem to the Allied cause 'unworthy of you and the occasion,' adding 'I do not believe in divorce between letters and life or art and war.'⁹

In 'Politics,' Yeats makes that 'divorce' his theme. Four years later, in a note appended to *Parts of a World*, a volume published in 1942, in the midst of the war that had been on the horizon when Yeats wrote 'Politics,' Wallace Stevens (once again surprisingly relevant) insisted that 'The immense poetry of war and a poetry of the work of imagination are two different things.' That volume includes a poem, 'Contrary Theses (I)' the title of which, as has been recently noted, 'invokes Yeatsian antinomies,' while the 'scenario of the poem itself—the intrusion of the soldier upon the poet's domain—restages, in abbreviated form' Yeats's 'The Road at My Door,' Poem V of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War.'¹⁰ Stevens's soldier who walks or stalks 'before, before, before my door,' certainly resembles the soldiers on both sides of the Irish Civil War who, at different times, 'stand at my door' in Yeats's poetic sequence.

Stevens was probably unaware of the little poem 'Politics,' but his 'Contrary Theses' are at work there as well. From the outset, we have another contrast between public and private, between the 'immense' but still extraneous 'political' and the life-affirming human and erotic, with, given Yeats's penchant for embodiment, vital life taking the form of an imagined young woman instead of Stevens's sensuous but sublimated 'grapes plush upon the vine' and 'hives heavy' with honey. That last image suggests another Stevensian recollection of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War,' this time of the next and most moving poem in the sequence, 'The Stare's Nest by my Window,' quoted in full by Seamus Heaney

8 Wieseltier, 'Some Possible Grounds for Hope,' 364, 378.

9 *The Letters of John Quinn to William Butler Yeats*, ed. Humber, 192. Having nursed for two years in a French military hospital, Maud wrote to Quinn: 'You, I believe, still see beauty in war, I did once but hospital and broken hearts & the devastation & destruction of all art and beauty have changed me and I bow to any peace advocate.' *Too Long a Sacrifice: The Letters of Maud Gonne and John Quinn*, ed. Janis and Richard Londraville, 206.

10 Lee M. Jenkins, 'Atlantic Triangle,' 17–30.

in his 1995 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, linking the Irish Civil War with the Troubles in the North a half-century later. Yeats's poem about honeybees building in crevices of the Tower walls, now emptied of the starlings who had housed there, ends with a no absorbed by a final yes, a dark lament regarding destructive internecine hatred followed by a life-affirming invocation of constructive, re-creative sweetness and light:

We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare;
More substance in our enmities
Than in our love; O honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

'Politics,' which ends with another heart-felt and life-affirming 'O,' began with a question: 'How can I, that girl standing there,/ My attention fix/ On Roman or on Russian/ Or on Spanish politics?' Beneath its jauntiness, this echoes and refutes (for readers recalling their great 'Dialogue') Soul's demand that the erotically distracted Self '*fix*' his thoughts on what supposedly matters most, there the spiritual realm, here the political. For readers attuned to canonical reverberations, the seemingly minor 'Politics' echoes, verbally and thematically, that major poem at the center of Yeats's canon, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul.'

In their debate, Soul had commanded Self to 'Fix every wandering thought upon' the spiritual; to keep the mind, which should be focused on the One, from 'wandering/ To this and that and t'other thing'—especially (in the case of 'a man/ Long past his prime,' who should 'scorn the earth') to things emblematic 'of love.' As earlier discussed, his unpublished notes to the poem reveal that Yeats was echoing Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*, the dream of Scipio, whose ghostly grandfather had asked rhetorically, 'Why not *fix your attention* upon the heavens and condemn what is mortal?' But young Scipio 'kept turning my eyes back to earth,' just as the Yeatsian Self turns his eyes down to the blade 'upon my knees' wound in female embroidery, choosing, not to be delivered from 'the crime of death and birth,' but to plunge into life's ditch, especially '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.' Which is to say: Maud Gonne.

In 'Politics,' in a variation on Soul's imperious command that Self 'Fix every wandering thought' on the One rather than wander to the

Many, the restrictive one ('politics') is actually many (Roman, Russian, Spanish),¹¹ while the One is 'that girl' upon whom the aged, lovelorn poet—'distracted' from supposedly more momentous but still merely topical issues—cannot help but 'fix' his 'attention.'

The old man may seem to be cavalierly abdicating his responsibilities in a world of war and war's alarms, but his instinctual and poignant cry from the heart is a hard-to-resist affirmation of life and an acknowledgement that Eros can still spur him into song. For Yeats, as for the enthralled warrior in *Antony and Cleopatra* and Thomas Hardy in 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"', star-crossed romantic love is simply a more profound poetic theme than 'war's annals' and politics: a theme that had haunted him from *The Wanderings of Oisín* on, certainly as meditated on in retrospect. And, whether or not we see the last line of 'Politics' as looking back to *The Wanderings of Oisín* and so 'giving' (as Warwick Gould once surmised) 'a circular, reincarnative shape to the "book" of Yeats's poems,'¹² the opening and closing lines of 'Politics' may bring us, in Yeats's version of Joyce's inevitable vicus of recirculation, back to Maud Gonne, who always tends to make Yeats end where he began.

For even here one wonders if 'that girl standing there' is not one more 'form' of Maud ('Which of her forms has shown her substance right?' he had asked in 'A Bronze Head'). In 'Among School Children,' having just recorded that 'tale' his 'Ledaean' Maud 'Told of a harsh reproof or trivial event/ That changed some childish day to tragedy,' the poet and senatorial school inspector looks out at the Many, one child or the other in the classroom, wondering 'if *she stood* so at that age—/ For

11 'Roman [...] Russian [...] Spanish.' Did German politics (even responding to Thomas Mann, a prominent opponent of Nazism) play no part in Yeats's 1938 thoughts about impending war? In a draft-version, he wondered 'if war must come/ From Moscow, from Berlin, or Rome?' Two years earlier, having declined to nominate for the Nobel Prize in Literature an anti-Nazi German writer, Yeats explained to Ethel Mannin why, despite her urging, the prize should not be politicized. He cited 'The Second Coming,' which 'foretold what is happening' now, in the late 'thirties, as evidence that 'he has not been silent,' and that he is not now 'callous'; that 'every nerve trembles with horror at what is happening in Europe, "the ceremony of innocence is drowned".' (L, 851)

12 Suggested by Gould in his appendix to *Yeats's Poems*, ed. Jeffares, 749n76. It may be 'too neat,' as Gould suspects; but, as evidenced by the rondural design of *The Winding Stair* and the chiasmic-concentric structure of 'A Woman Young and Old,' Yeats was fascinated by such rondural circularity.

even daughters of the swan can share/ Something of every paddler's heritage'; and 'thereupon my heart is driven wild:/ She *stands before me as a living child.*'

It was Dorothy Wellesley who brought to Yeats's attention the Thomas Mann quote, embedded in a 1938 *Yale Review* essay by Archibald MacLeish titled 'Public Speech and Private Speech in Poetry.' Yeats was pleased by the praise of his work; and the immediate stimulus of his poem 'Politics' was MacLeish's remark that because of his age and relation to Ireland, Yeats was unable to use 'public' language on what was 'obviously considered' the right public material, 'politics.' I'm suggesting that Yeats's 'private' speech reverted to Maud. As it happens, it was to Dorothy that Yeats confided that the poem's subject matter—the distraction from discussion of potential war caused by 'that girl standing there'—was 'not a real incident, but a moment of meditation' (LDW, 163). Who better to meditate on than 'that one'? If 'that girl standing there' in 'Politics' is in any way a 'form' of Maud—who had told Yeats long ago that while she was 'born to be in the midst of a crowd,' he had 'higher work to do' and should not involve himself 'in the *outer* side of politics' (G-YL, 72)—it would clarify both the old man's distraction from war and war's alarms, and the climactic placement of the anti-political 'Politics' as Yeats's poetic farewell: a final endorsement of the universal theme of love and of its particular incarnation in the woman and Muse who inspired virtually all of Yeats's love poetry.

In this reading, Yeats's intended 'last words' are neither 'tawdry' nor 'disgraceful' (as poet Don Share charged in an online *jeu d'esprit* of February 2013), but a final registration and rejection of the titular 'politics' that had been his 'one visible rival' (Mem, 63) in his obsessive love for Maud Gonne: his ultimate affirmation, even if he can no longer hold a young woman in his arms, of the overflowing cornucopia of life Maud had bartered away for that old bellows full of angry wind. Citing a travelled man that 'knows,' and a politician that has 'read and thought,' Yeats, once again pitting the wisdom of the body and of the heart against thought, book-knowledge, and politics, acknowledges and spurns their worldly expertise. The disdainful dismissal of the world of intellection and politics is arch and impertinent, yet vital and instinctual. As he insisted in this same letter to Dorothy Wellesley, 'No artesian well of the intellect can find the poetic theme,' the source of which, by implication,

is deeper than mere intellect: a *natural* spring, even if, in this late case, it is less passionately asserted than poignantly reaffirmed.

When, in the 1983 Finneran edition of the *Poems*, 'Under Ben Bulbin' was replaced by 'Politics' as the final poem, the command from beyond the grave—'Cast a cold eye, on life, on death'—yielded to something still elegiac but no longer oracular, moving rather than marmoreal: 'But O that I were young again/ And held her in my arms.' Commenting on Finneran's edition in a review titled 'A New and Surprising Yeats,' Seamus Heaney noted the dramatic change:

A far cry from 'Cast a cold eye/ On life, on death'; equally histrionic, but implying a radically different stance in the face of death. It is as if we were to learn that Sir Walter Raleigh's last words had not been his famous shout to the reluctant executioner—'What dost thou fear? Strike, man!'—but that instead he had repeated the name of the maid of honor he was rumored to have seduced in the grounds of Hampton Court Palace years before.

Absolutely right about 'Man and the Echo,' Seamus Heaney seems to me at least partially wrong about 'Politics.' His witty Raleigh analogy registers the cavalier aspect of the poem, and mirrors what he and Milocz had to say in contrasting negative Philip Larkin, in 'Aubade,' to an affirming Yeats's 'radically different stance in the face of death' in the case of *both* 'Man and the Echo' and 'Politics.' But Heaney misses, I think, the full poignancy of that sincere rather than 'histrionic' cry from the heart in Yeats's final poem. To my ear, that 'O' conveys, as in the wartime invocation to the 'honey-bees' and to 'love,' an emotion deeper than casual lust, and implies a considerably longer stretch than a rumored seduction mere 'years before.'

To me, at least, it suggests a memory of Maud, and therefore memory stretching back a half-century. To be young again and imagining holding *her* in his arms combines two of Yeats's most fervent desires. Taken together, they would account for Yeats's otherwise inexplicable choice of 'Politics,' this almost flippant dismissal of war, to be his final poetic statement, a last farewell to his lifelong Muse and Beloved. In the 'gay goodnight' that ends 'A Man Young and Old,' Yeats 'celebrates,' with the chorus from Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, 'the silent kiss that ends short life or long.' Shortly before his own death, combining spiritual

renunciation with sublimated eroticism, Yeats announced: 'the last kiss is given to the void' (LTSM, 154).

James Joyce would have approved of the old man's arch disdain for war and war's alarms, a dismissal of 'politics' he rightly thought had infected *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, and he would of course have agreed with Yeats's choice to end his canon by affirming human love, *Ulysses*' 'word known to all men.' For Yeats to end on that note, and perhaps imagining himself 'young again,' and holding a fantasized Maud Gonne 'in my arms,' would have seemed not only right but inevitable to the lover of Nora who gave Molly Bloom the final word and 'affirmation of life' shared by Yeats and Joyce. In the final passage of *Ulysses*, Molly and Leopold, sixteen years younger, are 'lying among the rhododendrons on Howth head,' a place loved by Yeats and Maud, and where he first proposed marriage to her. In her famously unpunctuated reverie, Molly first drifts back to her days in Gibraltar, when she wore flowers in her hair and was herself 'a flower of the mountain,' and remembers how she had been first kissed by a young man 'under the Moorish wall' (643:1604). And then we are back, in Molly's stream of consciousness, to that day when she was lying with Bloom among the flowers on Howth Head, where

I got him to propose to me yes first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth and it was leapyear like now 16 years ago my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath yes he said I was a flower of the mountain yes so we are flowers all a womans body yes that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today yes that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is and I knew I could always get round him and I gave him all the pleasure I could leading him on till he asked me to say yes and I wouldnt answer first only looked out over the sea and the sky [...] and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes. (*Ulysses*, 643–44:1573–1609)

Though he is an execrable poet, Bloom does have, as one of the Dubliners rightly noted, 'a touch of the artist about him.' But even if, lying in bed with her, head to toe, Leopold was able to overhear Molly's erotic reverie, her memory of their first act of lovemaking, he could hardly find better words to capture his own elegiac feelings than those with which

the aged Yeats, looking back, ended his Maud-evoking final poem: 'But O that I were young again,/ And held her in my arms.'

§

Yet, to draw to our own close, it must be said that the lovelorn heart, the 'rag and bone shop [...] where all the ladders start,' is not where they all *end*. For *in* the end, as Yeats also says in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion,' the poem immediately preceding 'Politics,' it was the playwriting and the poetry that 'took all my love,/ And not those things that they were emblems of,' those masks concealing yet revealing the 'Heart-mysteries' of his unrequited love for Maud Gonne. Even that was not the *whole* truth, and nothing but the truth. But it was in this sense, even more than in his marriage and intimate relationships with 'others,' that Yeats 'turned aside'—as he said in the lines from 'The Tower' cited in my epigraph—from the 'great labyrinth' of Maud Gonne. Fergus had falsely promised a forest haven where frustrated lovers would 'no more turn aside and brood/ Upon love's bitter mystery.' But Yeats could turn aside from Maud Gonne only, paradoxically, through the power of his own words written for her: not even *she* could triumph over the poetry she inspired and which then absorbed its biographical genesis.

Unsurprisingly, given that Yeats intensified polarities for dramatic effect, 'all' is by far the most frequent word in his vocabulary, appearing over a thousand times, doubling its nearest competitor, 'old.' 'All' is also the most frequent word in the vocabulary of Yeats's mentor, Blake, for whom 'without Contraries' there could be 'no progression.' I've noted the double extremity in 'The Cold Heaven': 'And I *took all* the blame out of *all* sense and reason.' (In fact, Yeats's double 'alls' are usually Maud-related; for example, 'Never give *all* the Heart' ends: "He that made this knows *all* the cost,/ For he gave *all* his heart and lost.") A year earlier, in 'Friends,' Yeats had asked, 'What of her that *took/ All* till my youth was gone?' In old age he counters with another hyperbolic *more than* half-truth: the poems and plays '*took all my love,*' not those things that they were emblems of. These assertions embody the Blakean Contraries. Nietzsche—whose thought, Yeats believed, 'completes Blake and has the same roots' (L, 379)—insisted that 'oppositions' need not be 'arguments against existence,' but should be perceived instead as 'one more stimulus to life. Just such "contradictions" seduce us to

existence.¹³ Such dialectical thinking illuminates the power-producing tension at the heart of Yeats's best poetry, most notably for our present purposes, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' and the Maud Gonne poems, tense with Contraries, yet riddled with the light of affirmation, tragic joy, and, ultimately, a secular beatitude incorporating and resolving all the antinomies, including 'love's bittersweet.' To quote the rhapsodic conclusion of the great poem acknowledging, absorbing, and incorporating 'the folly that man does/ Or must suffer' if he loves a woman like Maud Gonne:

When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

'I have,' says the Lord God (Deuteronomy 30:19), 'set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live.' As woman and Muse, Maud Gonne was both blessing and curse. But she and 'life' are affirmed when, with remorse cast out, sweetness flows into the breast, and we respond with joy, assured that we 'are blest by everything.' The 'seed' that lived, in lieu of their childless union, were the poems Maud inspired. In the same year (1911) that Yeats told us how, at the mere thought of Maud, 'so great a sweetness flows' from his 'heart's root,' his Muse (in that earlier-cited gender-reversing letter) wrote of their physically frustrating but imaginatively fruitful relationship: 'Our children were your poems, of which I was the Father sowing the unrest & storm which made them possible & you the mother who brought them forth in suffering & in the highest beauty & our children had wings—' (G-YL, 302).

Four years later, Maud wrote to Yeats, thanking him for sending her his just-written poem 'The People,' the very poem in which he most clearly distinguishes between them: she as the beautiful but terrible

13 *Genealogy of Morals*, III.2. Nietzsche's 'contradictions' and 'mask' tally with another Yeatsian mentor. In 'The Truth of Masks' (1885), Wilde tells us that 'A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.' *The Artist as Critic*, ed. Ellmann, 432. Nietzsche's theory of the 'mask' (described at length in *Beyond Good and Evil*, written in the same year as Wilde's 'The Truth of Masks'), added, for Yeats, heroic virility to the theatrical mask of Wilde.

embodiment of that 'purity of a natural force,' that unrest and storm, that impelled her fierce commitment to activist politics; he as a man and writer 'whose virtues are the definitions/ Of the analytic mind,' yet a proud mind so humbled by her loyalty to the people, even after they had turned on her, that he is abashed, 'because my heart leaped at her words.' In her 1915 letter Maud was also recalling his gallant if resisted attempt to protect her during that 1897 Dublin riot. 'I have never thanked you for the poem,' Maud ends her letter. 'To me you are too kind—You have often tried to defend & protect me *with your art*—& perhaps when we are dead I shall be known by those poems of yours—.' She had been even more candid five years earlier, with the *Green Helmet* poems, especially 'No Second Troy,' in mind: 'The demons of hate which possessed me are not eternal—what you have written for me will live' (G-YL, 356–57, 294).

Her heart leaping at his 'words,' she projects into the future, affirming his seemingly hopeless dream, as expressed in his poem 'Words,' of a Muse and beloved who at last 'understands it all,' and who would be, as they both expected, forever known to the world by 'those poems of yours.' Anyone reading, as we have, the best among Yeats's many poems to and about Maud Gonne—including 'No Second Troy,' 'Words' and 'The People,' the latter at once a 'debate-poem' and a 'magnificent instance of artistic self-transcendence'¹⁴—is bound to concur in her judgment: 'our children had wings—.'

14 'The People' as aptly described by M. L. Rosenthal, *Running to Paradise*, 17, 178.

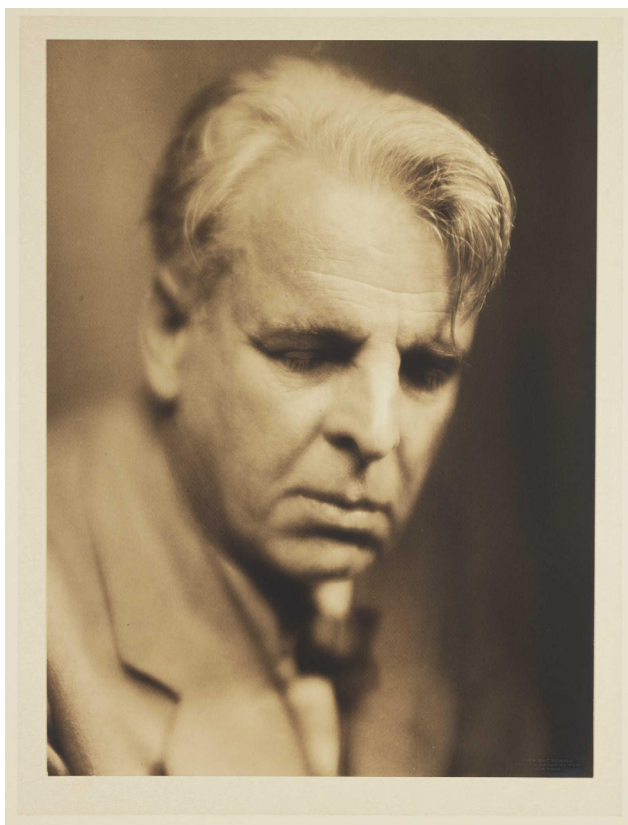


Fig. 3 William Butler Yeats, photo by Pirie MacDonald (1932), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:W._B._Yeats,_1932._\(7893552556\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:W._B._Yeats,_1932._(7893552556).jpg).