Images of Yeats

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Yeats was possessed of an almost supernatural vitality. Unlike his spiritual forbears—the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century—he was not condemned to stagger amid the ruins of his lost innocence, but rather to go on changing, growing, and developing in ways which his youthful self would never have foretold. In 1890 he was writing verse of a delicate Pre-Raphaelite wistfulness—remarkable in its way but, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot's remarks on William Morris, rather like an aura without a center. By 1914 and until his death in 1939, he was composing poetry of a substance so rich and a form of such chiselled perfection that he became, as Eliot again remarked, the most important poet writing in English in the twentieth century.

In the waning decades of that same century, Eliot's judgment is yet to be contested. Of what other modern poet can it be said that he never repeated himself but over the span of a long and eventful life continued to fashion his ever more complex and seemingly prosaic experiences into a verse of indisputable and enduring significance? Up to his seventy-fourth year Yeats was thoroughly and indefatigably engaged in extending the imaginative and experiential terrain of his poetry, creating himself anew in the manner memorably prescribed in "An Acre of Grass":

Grant me an old man's frenzy.  
Myself must I remake  
'Till I am Timon and Lear  
Or that William Blake  
Who beat upon the wall  
'Till Truth obeyed his call.

This capacity for self-renewal and rebirth resulted in a body of verse which never ceases to grow with us as we grow or to challenge us when we grow weary of growing. Age for Yeats was not to be exclusively consumed in backward looks at the past or baffled reprobations of the present, but more often defied in brutal and often irreverent celebrations of sexual energy and sensual appetite, or transcended in a sometimes poignant but always steadfast belief in the immortality of the human spirit. It is the oscillation between these conflicting extremes that gives his verse its peculiar sharpness and vigor as well as its irresistible note of all-too-human pathos. What, for example, could be more disarming than those defiant couplets with which Yeats punctures the stereotypical image of placid old age:

You think it horrible that lust and rage  
Should dance attention upon my old age;  
They were not such a plague when I was young;  
What else have I to spur me into song?

Yeats is a poet of tragic antinomies and compelling contradictions. Though un-
commonly credulous in his imaginative beliefs, he was also possessed of an unflinching and forthright honesty in the presence of hard and disagreeable truths. Both the pathos and the toughness of his verse lie in its tense conjunction of lyrical yearning and rough-edged realism. Throughout his life he was the most prodigal of mythographers—seeking in things as diverse as Celtic legend and table-rapping, occult mediums and historical cryptograms, Dionysian ecstasy and Byzantine stillness some abiding and universal essence from which he felt estranged since his childhood and for which he sought in vain throughout his maturity. Despite his spiritualistic system-building and eccentric myth-mongering, Yeats is most honest perhaps when he confesses, as in the poem "Meru," that

... man's life is thought,  
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease  
Ravening through century after century,  
Ravening, raging and uprooting that he  
may come  
Into the desolation of reality.

Though Yeats's occult pretentions have all been discredited, the poetry remains; and it is a poetry all the more eloquent when in its purely human appeal it recognizes the fictions that feed its life, subverts the systems that screen it from reality, and confesses that the shrine of its seeking is yet to be found. Yeats is never more poignant and impressive than when he falls from the refuge of the grandly universal into the dread of the isolated human heart: "Now that my ladder's gone, / I must lie down where all the ladders start, / In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." As Jacques Maritain has observed: "The effort of a poet to create new metaphysical myths of his own invention, for the sake of his work as a poet, is self-contradictory, since, having made them, he cannot believe in them." Yet Maritain further avers, "in his very failure or despair to create the new myth he looks for, a real poet may produce his most genuine poems." Nothing could be truer or better said of Yeats.

THE FOREGOING REFLECTIONS are occasioned by the recent appearance of two books, one by and the other about Yeats, which should happily encourage that task of periodic revaluation demanded by a poet of Yeats's stature.

The first in a projected twelve-volume series of Yeats's letters from Oxford University Press offers few surprises to the student of this poet. Nor will it greatly revise or extend Yeats's already considerable reputation. Its justification lies in Yeats's importance as a poet, but it seems obvious with perhaps a few exceptions, that letter writing was not high on this poet's creative agenda. (His poor spelling alone is enough to reveal to the most incorrigibly backward schoolboy that such a deficiency does not necessarily preclude the efflorescence of other talents!)

To be sure, the letters confirm what we have already found elsewhere, in more polished form, among the Autobiographies or essays. In the main these are slapdash affairs which scintillate in moments of occasional and self-revelatory candor but remain on the whole preoccupied with the politics of publishing. This in itself is perhaps of significance, for it shows that, notwithstanding the rather mysterious and otherworldly persona which Yeats affected in his youth, he had, at bottom, a hard-nosed business sense about puffing his own books and insuring that they got the hearing they deserved. Of the famous or rather infamous "Rhymers Club," of which he was a member in his youth, it is not surprising, after reading some of these letters, that he was virtually the only one among that rather bemused, besotted, and bohemian lot to survive as both a man and an artist. Even when he seemed most threatened with dissolving in the otherworldly mists that rise from the golden dawn of his early poetry, Yeats was no recreant when the hard, bright light of day demanded that he act in his own interests.

If the first volume of the letters is repre-
sentative of those to come, we may safely assume that Yeats will not emerge as a letter writer in the tradition of Keats, Lamb, Byron, Flaubert, or James. Still, there is enough here to warrant our attention and to add to our understanding of Yeats in what may be termed his Pre-Raphaelite period. Indeed, the letters that involve us most in this regard are those which Yeats addressed to the Irish Catholic poet and belletrist, Katherine Tynan. To her, almost alone at this stage of his career, Yeats confided his most intimate and self-revealing thoughts. Underlying their exchange it is possible to trace a muted and implicit love story—certainly nothing as dramatic or decisive as that which would evolve from Yeats's meeting with Maud Gonne, but piquant in its nebulous adolescent or post-adolescent charm.

In one of his earliest letters composed at the age of twenty-one, Yeats defines his poetic enterprise in conscious opposition to the Victorian emphasis on rational morality divorced from supernatural belief. His nemesis in this instance is George Eliot, whom he censures for only considering "the conscious nature of man." Inheriting the Victorian split between ethics, aesthetics, and religion, Yeats incessantly strove for a holistic attitude toward life in which no human faculty is denied at the expense of the other. As a youth, however, Yeats felt that the only way to achieve this balance was to restore to its primal importance the poetic or imaginative faculty: "[The only business [sic] of the head in the world is to bow a ceaseless obeisance to the heart.]" This Pascalian formula would eventually prove inadequate to the poet but it already shows Yeats endeavoring to achieve a living and sacerdotal wholeness or "unity of being" that he expressed most consummately forty years later in "Among School Children": "Oh body swayed to music, oh brightening glance / How can we tell the dancer from the dance?" Such an affirmation of life's unity and continuity was nevertheless far from the dream-dimmed eyes and cloud-pale imaginings of the youthful poet.

If it took Yeats's poetry awhile to catch up with his critical sense, the letters allow us to eavedrop on the development of that sense in its embryonic stages. As he writes to Katherine Tynan in March 1888, "I have noticed some things about my poetry, I did not know before . . . for instance that it is almost a flight into fairy land, from the real world, and a summons to that flight. The chorus to the 'stolen [sic] child,' sums it up—that it is not the poetry of insight and knowledge but of longing and complaint—the cry of the heart against necessity. I hope someday to alter that and write poetry of insight and knowledge." This is bravely and tellingly said, though, again, the process of molting would be prolonged for almost two decades. Still, Yeats has precisely adumbrated the nature of his subsequent development.

As one would expect, too, the early letters are rife with a certain tendency toward self-dramatization verging on the histrionic. But it is not histrionic, after all, for Yeats's dilemma is not manufactured—it is the dilemma of every artist who stands aloof from life even as he experiences it at a depth from which the majority of his fellow mortals would recoil. "My life," he writes again to Katherine Tynan, "is in my poems. To make them I have broken my life in a mortar as it were. I have brayed it in youth and fellowship . . . I have buried my youth and raised over it a cairn—of clouds." Hindsight allows us to see that this youthful ruefulness was unwarranted. Instead of drifting into insubstantiality, Yeats's "cairn of clouds" would materialize before long into those "monuments of unaging intellect" that constitute a permanent legacy for the human spirit.

Central to the correspondence as it was to Yeats's life is the subject of magic. The extent to which Yeats's pronouncements in this area should be credited has been of puzzling concern to his critics. Was all the hocus-pocus intended to provide metaphors for the poetry or did Yeats actually believe in this stuff? Certainly one of the singular anomalies in modern letters is the
spectacle of this great poet being duped and virtually dominated by the tinsel-cheap charlatantry of Madame Blavatsky. Yeats's interest in magic was in part based on a need to give rational structure and order to the visionary gleams he had inherited from the Romantics—to provide a durable and systematic context, "a tradition of belief," as he wrote in the Auto-biographies, "older than any European church," for those moments of insight when he saw a world in a grain of sand or a heaven in a wildflower. It is precisely this need that was to issue years later in that magisterial piece of historical mythography, A Vision. It was also, as he confessed in the Auto-biographies, a reaction against the positivistic world view of the Victorians: "I am very religious and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories . . . passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians"—and, one might add, spiritualistic mediums.

While we may sympathize with Yeats's will to believe and his need to ground the Romantic urge for transcendence in the heritage of Irish legend or gnostic tradition, there is still something not a little bizarre in Yeats's pronouncements on this subject. In 1892, for example, he writes to Richard Le Gallienne: "Last night I had a rather interesting magical adventure. I went to a great fairy locality—a cave by the Rosses sand. . . . I made a magic circle and invoked the fairys [sic]. [I saw] a bright light and multitudes of little forms clad in crimson [and heard] music . . . and far voices. . . . The Queen of the troop came then—I could see her—and held a long conversation with us and finally wrote in the sand 'be careful [sic] and do not seek to know too much about us!' " The letter is with some relief that we find that Yeats on other occasions of equal uncanniness could record his impressions with his tongue indisputably in his cheek and a note of waggishness that is unmistakable. On showing up at a Blavatskian seance after having shaved the beard which he sported in his early twenties, Yeats reports that Madame Blavatsky "promised me a bad illness in three months through the loss of all the mesmeric force that collects in a beard. . . . When she sees me, she professes to wonder at my being still on my legs." And on another occasion Yeats reports with heavy heart to Katherine Tynan of a most unfortunate incident that transpired at the Blavatsky sanctum: "a sad accident happened at Madame Blavat-skys [sic] lately I hear. A big materialist sat on the astral double of a poor young Indi-an. It was sitting on the sofa and he was too material to be able to see it. Certainly a sad accident!"

How does one harmonize Yeats's wry drolleries on these occasions with the ardent credulity he demonstrated at other times? Not being an adept at these mysteries is doubtless a drawback in estimating the precise degree of discrimination which Yeats brought to bear on matters of this arcane sort. Whatever touchstones Yeats used to distinguish between truth and counterfeit in these cases, they were evidently apparent enough to him. But however far-fetched or grotesque the particulars of Yeats's occult experiences may be, the general thrust of Yeats's interest is symptomatic of a search that has serious ramifications—for it is nothing less than a search for the lost path to a lost paradise, that "Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose," the memory of which seems to have faded from modern consciousness. As Yeats wrote to John O'Leary in July 1892, "the mystical life is the center of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write. It holds to my work the same relation which the philosophy of Godwin held to the work of Shelley and I have all-ways [sic] considered myself a voice of what I believe [sic] to be a greater renaissance [sic]—the revolt of the soul against the intellect now beginning in the world."
Though Yeats would not continue to see that revolt in such simplistically dichotomous terms, he maintained to the end of his life an unshaken belief in the supernatural destiny of the human soul: “Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by!”

Perhaps, moreover, it was precisely the far-flung nature of Yeats’s occult concerns that enabled him, when the occasion demanded, to contest, nobly and tactfully, the sometimes bitter and bruising actualities of this life. Nowhere is this more evident than in that exquisite letter which Yeats addressed to the poet Richard Le Gallienne whose wife died at the age of twenty-seven in May of 1894:

My dear Le Gallienne

I have heard with the deepest sympathy of your great sorrow and for some days the desire to write and tell you has competed in my mind with the fear that you might not think me sufficiently intimate a friend and find my words intrusive. When we are in the presence of death there is nothing to be said except what has been said from the beginning of the world; our new philosophies, our new sureties leave us and we have nothing but the old faith that the dead are happier than the living and that they are always somewhere near us.

Believe me yours
with utmost sympathy
W. B. Yeats.

There are few writers, even among poets, capable of composing a letter so moving in its dignity, eloquent in its restraint, and consoling in its conviction.

II

DEVOTEES OF YEATS will be equally delighted by the readable and always engaging study of Elizabeth Loizeaux: Yeats and the Visual Arts. Her thesis is a sound one and surprisingly not fully explored until the appearance of this handsome and visually sumptuous volume. Yeats was born and bred in the midst of painters and artists and was himself undecided for a time whether or not to pursue an artistic vocation. Throughout his life Yeats consciously or unconsciously expressed his sense of technical and thematic affinity with the tapestry makers, artists, and workers in wood, metal, bronze, or marble who engrossed his imagination. His earliest and most perduring affection was for the Pre-Raphaelites whose works in their rich mingling of high ritual, poetic symbolism, exotic beauty, and literary allusion expressed for Yeats that search for a lost unity of being that never ceased to preoccupy his thought.

Yeats’s friendship with William Morris, devotion to D. G. Rossetti, and ardor for Burne-Jones have been well documented. Professor Loizeaux takes things further, however, and demonstrates with precise and canny analogies the extent to which Yeats’s own poetry derives as much from visual prototypes as literary ones. Though Yeats would later come to regard the Pre-Raphaelites as escapist, he could not but share in the visionary goals of their original enterprise, namely, to restore to modern life and urban technical society some of the grace, style, enchantment, and hieratic dignity of pre-Renaissance Christendom. The lofty ambitions of the Pre-Raphaelites could not square, however, with their egalitarian and socialist sympathies. The result was that instead of transforming the lives of the laboring classes, their works and household crafts became exclusively affordable and appealing to the rich. Their prophetic and programmatic zeal soon devolved into a patina of painterly effects and extravagant illusions that hid rather than harrowed the hell of modern industrial society. Still, Yeats joined in this enterprise, giving it his own peculiarly Irish flavor and expressing in verbal form that look of “longing and complaint” that one reads in the eyes of Burne-Jones’s models and Rossetti’s damozels.

Loizeaux plausibly argues that Yeats’s early poems—especially the long, waver- ing narrative of The Wanderings of Oisin—provide a kind of verbal counter-
part to the effect of Morris's tapestries. Not only images associated with weaving but also the descriptive passages themselves are rendered in a style that recalls the cunning thread-work of Morris's filigreed designs. For Yeats repetition of line and form in the visual arts was analogous to the patterning of rhythm and sound in poetry. Yeats's poetic landscapes seem woven of the same luxurious materials as Morris's ornate tapestries of fruits, flowers, and mannered female forms, while his image of the Irish goddess of love, "man-picker Niamh" (as Yeats would later come to call her with brusque pointedness), seems to have blossomed forth from those floral adjuncts that twine about the ceremonial robes of Rossetti's somnolent stunners:

Her eyes were soft as dewdrops hanging
Upon the grass-blades' bending tips,
And like a sunset were her lips,
A stormy sunset o'er, doomed ships.
Her hair was of a citron tincture,
And gathered in a silver cincture;
Down to her feet white vesture flowed,
And with the woven crimson glowed
Of many a figured creature strange,
And birds that on the seven seas range.

Yeats's strategy here is more self-conscious and complex than at first appears. The remote, flat, two-dimensional world of Yeats's "Oisin" deliberately emulates the effects of Rossetti and especially Morris so as to suggest "that despite [the poet's] desire for regions into which one could wander or his desire for Pre-Raphaelite women, Yeats knew (as did, perhaps, Morris) that attainment would slake desire, and he preferred to see them from afar." Loizeaux rightly observes that Yeats soon became discomfited with these rather febrile visions and after a period of sleeping upon hard boards (in the hopes that this practice would toughen his verse) came to realize that "we should make poems on the familiar landscapes we love, not the strange and glittering scenes we wonder at." In consequence, Yeats's palette of colors began to change. The exotic blues and golds and reds give way to the muted tones of the Irish terrain—varying shades of gray trailing into white nebulosities or green shadowy semi-tones.

Working against the Pre-Raphaelites, too, at this early stage were the designs of William Blake, on whose work Yeats in collaboration with Edwin Ellis was preparing an extended commentary. "The hard and wiry line of rectitude" that Blake extolled in both life and art served to counterbalance the sensuous ripeness and languorous raptures of the PRB. In Blake's followers also—Calvert and Palmer—Yeats discovered another medium serviceable to his needs: the woodcut. For these artists the image of a lost pastoral ideal is not the opalescent never-land that it sometimes was for Yeats, but a substantial solid blocked in bold outline and graven with compelling authority. As Loizeaux writes, "the immediacy of the physical world as directly experienced always entered Calvert's art"—a physical directness which Yeats would himself achieve in "The Song of the Wandering Aengus."

Yet for Yeats full authority did not come before his theatrical rite of passage at the Abbey Theatre. The exigencies of the stage are a powerful ballast to the balloon of fancy, and the need to create convincing theater—in the company of set designers (including the redoubtable Gordon Craig), scene painters, and costumers—gave Yeats a strong sense of the palpable as performable. Loizeaux writes: "Yeats found himself with the realm of conventional theatre on the one hand and the distant dream world of his early poetic regions on the other." In any case, the theater certainly facilitated Yeats's growing preference for "manful energy . . . cheerful acceptance of whatever rises out of the logic of events . . . clean outline instead of those outlines of lyric poetry that are blurred with desire and vague regret," as the poet himself wrote.

It was Yeats's disenchantment with the restrictions of conventional theater—the prevalence of stage effects over poetic substance—that led him, under the influence of Ezra Pound, to adapt the man-
nerisms of the Japanese Noh play with its intimate and chamber-like effects to the telling of his immemorial Irish tales. The characters in these plays abandon all attempts to gesture, move, or act according to naturalistic principles, but instead aspire in their highly stylized gyrations to achieve an effect like that of a rotating piece of sculpture. The whole body becomes expressive, then, of psychological conflict and individual character—a strategy further reinforced by the use of ceremonial masks and the chant-like recitative of Yeats's verse. The sense of the body as a solid object in three-dimensional space becomes a patent feature of Yeats's later poetry—a feature susceptible of a two-fold significance. On the one hand, it enabled Yeats to express the imperiousness of bodily desire and the Dionysian interdependence between sexual energy and human finitude; on the other hand, it lent itself to the evocation of those Apollonian shapes with which the poet held "the fury and the mire of human veins" at bay.

This is not to say that Yeats ever abandoned his early loyalty to the Pre-Raphaelites. Virtually all of his subsequent artistic enthusiasms—from Phidian Greece to the Italian Quattrocento—were construed by Yeats as a deeper and more satisfying application of Pre-Raphaelite principles, "a more profound Pre-Raphaelitism," as he termed it, the intention of which was to transform and consecrate human life in its multiple activities and manifold dimensions. In the 1920s Yeats became convinced that the nearest civilizational approximation to such an ideal was achieved in Byzantium—the glorious fourth-century seat of eastern Christianity. As Loizeaux declares, "where the arts and crafts movement failed, Byzantium succeeded in uniting art to the daily life of the people because the community, so important to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, included not only artists and their few admirers but society at large."

Byzantium itself became for Yeats emblematic of a contemplative state and imperishable ideal that he increasingly saw as the only recompense for the progressive ravages of age. But it was, finally, not that simple. The golden bird of Yeats's poem can only sing of "what is past, or passing, or to come," tacitly suggesting that while art may create the illusion of timelessness its thematic substance ineluctably arises from the world of natural process. Hence, as Loizeaux remarks, "the ultimate value for Yeats must finally be not in the work of art but in the dignity and courage of creating despite the leveling wind." It is the counterpoint of these twin realizations that gives Yeats's later poetry its note of contained pathos.

But Yeats was destined to give this dilemma an even more pointed, heroic, and excruciating emphasis; and Byzantium with its geometrical abstractions and hushed enclosures was no longer a serviceable image for this purpose. Instead, Yeats turned to the great sculptors and artists of the High and Late Renaissance—Giotto, Michelangelo, Raphael, Titian, and Poussin. In their works the passing pleasures of the body are arrested in the immutable designs of art; and the difference between carnal desire and spiritual delectation dissolves in their mutual subservience to the requirements of the artist's brush and the dexterity of the sculptor's hand. Eros and Agape, Dionysus and Apollo, the uncontrollable mystery and the bestial floor meet and mingle in an ecstatic celebration of the stasis of art and the fever of life. "All things fall and are built again," cries Yeats in "Lapis Lazuli," dithyrambically affirming and unhesitatingly embracing the repeated, doomed, and, therefore, heroic process of artistic creation as it annuls the pain and transfigures the dread of life.

Loizeaux's exploration of Yeats's indebtedness to the plastic arts goes further in both detail and depth than any commentary hitherto devoted to this subject. Her understanding of the ways in which Yeats altered his technique to give his verse the kind of tactile, physical presence that we associate with sculpture is especially intelligient in its sensitivity to verbal effects and poetic strategies. Her book will assume a permanent place in that formidable canon of critical works devoted to this poet.