WARTON LECTURE ON ENGLISH POETRY

W. B. YEATS AND THE POETRY OF WAR

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I

IN the Second Book of Blake's *Milton* there is a notable verse:

> Those Visions of Human Life & Shadows of Wisdom & Knowledge
> Are here frozen to unexpansive deadly destroying terrors;
> And War & Hunting, the Two Fountains of the River of Life,
> Are become Fountains of bitter Death & of corroding Hell.[1]

My subject today is the influence of war upon a poet's mind. Much has been written on the poetry of the two great wars of our century; and the pattern that it followed in 1914–18 is now, I think, sufficiently distanced to have taken shape in our minds. Perhaps it would not be too far from the truth to think of it as following the common trajectory of all war poetry; enthusiasm, disillusionment, cynicism, followed by the despair and horror of each battlefield of the fifth day. But in our European and Mediterranean wars the whole action seems to have been too vast, too impersonal (except perhaps in Spain) for the individual poet to attain to any kind of perspective, still less to shape from it even the fragments of an epic. It is true that from time to time a single event, perhaps a sea battle of small ships against great odds, has produced poetry of this nature; though not, I think, of the highest quality. Too often we return, for the satisfaction of our mood, to Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*, and the two recurrent themes.[2] And those of us who have seen Europe's ancient parapets in ruin are aware that no poet could do more than glimpse a fragment of that vision of human suffering. One was only aware of its frozen, unexpansive terror in the mass, and the pitiful goodness and charity of isolated men and women.

There is, I believe, no instance in literary history that allows us to study the effect of war upon a poet with the completeness and subtlety that we are offered in Yeats's poetry. The Easter

[1] 34, 35.

[2] 'All the argument is a cuckold and a whore'—'Wars and lechery, all incontinent varlets'.

Rising, and the Troubles that followed it, extend in Protean forms from Easter 1916 till about the beginning of 1923: their aftermath of violence continues till 1928; that of political bitterness and dissension for longer still. The abortive ten days' warfare in Dublin shades into the guerilla fighting and burnings, the atrocities and counter-atrocities of the British Irregulars, the so-called 'Black and Tans', the Treaty of 1921, the Civil War between Free State and Republicans. It ended, more or less, in the 'victory' of David over Goliath; it continued when David raised his armed insurrection against Saul.

If we stand apart and consider it dispassionately there were many factors that provided superb material and 'metaphors for poetry'; and, even more important, an utterly new range of experiences for an ageing poet of fifty-one. The Irish War was small enough, compact enough, to be 'perspicuous'; one man might hold in his mind many aspects of it together. The outbreak was the result of a long period of preparation—political, social, literary, ideological—from the middle of the nineteenth century on. It was born of an intensively fostered patriotism which, in a somewhat artefacted renaissance, found support in myth, legend, allegory, and the repeating patterns of history. It had even drawn on the mystical approach of 'A. E.' to Ireland's druidic past, her elder gods, and the sanctity of her soil and landscape. The very isolation of Ireland, the antiquity of her culture and religion, her ancient language that was to receive new life at a stage when English had exhausted its possibilities as a medium for poetry,[1] seemed to give form and energy to the vision of her as a bastion of the West; a strong tower against the commercial and philistine imperialism—this was Shaw's thought also—that had sought for four centuries to crush her, spiritually and physically. The fires of nationalism had been long-nursed, and fed with many leaves: the embers had been cherished, after each defeat, with the characteristic long-memoried bitterness of the Irish mind. Yet with the outward Aristotelian simplicity of the fable, there were factors of some complexity in the unravelling and reversals of the plot. These, in turn, provided the material for that intense irony without which, I believe, there cannot be poetic depth.

II

A fifty-year-old memory is notoriously treacherous; but since I have chosen to speak of the background against which I think

[1] Such was George Moore's view.

this poetry must be seen, I must appear for a moment to be personal. I was a schoolboy of fourteen at the time of the Rising. My brother had been wounded with the Munster Fusiliers at Gallipoli: one of the 400,000 Irishmen who were fighting England's wars. There was no virtue in that, as Kipling noted;[1] but we may remember that many of them had gone to war on the promise of the British Government that Home Rule, so nearly achieved in 1914, would be given in full after the war was over. But because some of us were serving, as also because of religion and ownership of land, one's family was suspect. Violence, even before the seemingly halcyon days of 1903–14, was never far from one's life: I remember that the horse and trap went through a pool of blood as we drove to the train that was to take me to my preparatory school, and that my Father covered my eyes as we passed. There were times when one did not sit, of an evening, between the window and the lamplight, particularly when the anonymous letters, signed with a red-ink coffin or 'Captain Moonlight', had been especially frequent. So in Yeats's *Beautiful Lofty Things*:

> Augusta Gregory seated at her great ormolu table,
> Her eightieth winter approaching: 'Yesterday he threatened my life.
> I told him that nightly from six to seven I sat at this table,
> The blinds drawn up.'

It was through such gestures that my Mother, widowed and alone, had kept the house intact through seventeen raids; from British, Republicans, and Free Staters who looted, with a fine impartiality, objects that they thought useful. Later, as an undergraduate, I returned for the Long Vacation of 1921 to what was virtually a state of siege, with bridges destroyed and roads barricaded. I remembered Spenser at Kilcolman, read all *The Faerie Queene*, and wrote of what I thought Spenser might have felt in those circumstances. Thirty miles to the north, and then infinitely isolated, were Lady Gregory at Coole, Yeats at Thoor Ballylee. By then three of my friends had been shot, one after torture, and a score of houses in the county had been burned.

III

This burning of the 'great houses' requires some momentary consideration. Agrarian troubles, murder, destruction of woods and landmarks, the 'driving' and maiming of cattle and

[1] See *The Irish Guards.*

horses,[1] had been the accompaniments of Irish land-tenure since the Norman occupation, and are perhaps endemic in any society in which that tenure has been arbitrary in its imposition, and inequitable in its maintenance. Yeats's *Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation* is a relatively early poem; it is only of interest as a statement of his admiration for that aristocratic life, and for the prophecy that was exactly fulfilled when the stones of Coole were carted to new housing estates in Galway to make

> mean rooftrees . . . the sturdier for its fall.

Even before 1914 the ruins were everywhere, though the systematic burnings belong mainly to the period 1917–23. But Yeats's imagery that is connected with them is of peculiar interest.

As a boy he had been greatly moved by a burning house: Castle Dargan, which is remembered in a song in *A Full Moon in March*.[2] The play *Purgatory* centres upon a house in which the ghosts re-enact their marriage (as in a Nōh play) in a blaze of light, while the son and grandson of that union watch them. *The Curse of Cromwell* also ends with that scene:

> I came on a great house in the middle of the night,
> Its open lighted doorway and its windows all alight,
> And all my friends were there and made me welcome too;
> But I woke in an old ruin that the winds howled through . . .

But the burning of Troy, its destruction for a woman's sake, became the symbol (turning many ways in the mind, between Leda and Helen and Deirdre) for his love for Maud Gonne. That in turn formed part of the repeating pattern of history, certified by the speech from Synge's *Deirdre* that lived with him:

> I see the flames of Emain starting upward in the dark night; and because of me there will be weasels and wild cats crying on a lonely wall where there were queens and armies and red gold, the way there will be a story told of a ruined city and a raving king and a woman will be young for ever.

Any military action that involves direct and necessary destruction brings in its train, both in war and in the uneasy peace that so often follows it, events which have no intrinsic connexion

[1] We may recall Synge's *Playboy*: . . . 'or Marcus Quinn, God rest him, got six months for maiming ewes, and he a great warrant to tell stories of holy Ireland . . .' .

[2]
> Castle Dargan's all on fire,
> Lovely ladies dancing in it.

with the main action. A house may be burnt because of a suspicion that it may be harbouring enemies, that munitions of war are concealed there, that the owner is a spy or informer. (I have instances of all three in mind, and by both protagonists in the Civil War.) But in all guerilla warfare there are actions which arise from very different motives; greed, revenge, racial hatred, religious bitterness. We were familiar with this in the invaded territories. A certain city in North Italy counted thirty murders nightly, long after the battle was over. The atrocities committed internally against the collaborators were often far more horrifying than those of the invaders against native suspects.

So it was in the burnings and murders of the 'Troubles'. Behind many of them, whatever the ostensible pretext, there was the hunger for the land of the demesnes; looking no further than squatters' rights, or the building of squared stones into byres, once the owners had gone. There was in fact a rationalized and heaven-sent projection of the land wars of the nineteenth century.[1] The religious fanaticism, which divided the priests when the Civil War came, might partake on occasion of the character of a holy war; forgetting that the great leaders of past rebellions had been mainly Anglo-Irish and Protestant.

Yet here again there were paradoxes. The memories of the peasantry were often long and warm, much concerned with ancestry, and with the virtues, real or imagined, of aristocracy. Here as elsewhere Yeats is completely faithful to experience. One's own people, within, say, a ten-mile radius, would not, as a rule, combine to burn or murder; but unlike a Highland clan they would not move to save you, being easily frightened (as Synge had noticed) of their own people in conspiracy. So in *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*:

> But is there any comfort to be found?
> Man is in love and loves what vanishes,
> What more is there to say? That country round
> None dared admit, if such a thought were his,
> Incendiary or bigot would be found
> To burn that stump on the Acropolis,
> Or break in bits the famous ivories
> Or traffic in the grasshoppers and bees.

Lorry-loads of Republicans would arrive, brought from a

[1] Now, in 1964, beginning to flame up again against the German 'occupation'.

neighbouring county. Two quotations, long separated in time, will serve. The first is from Spenser:

> But what could he 'gainst all them do alone?
> It could not boot; needs mote she die at last.
> I only 'scaped through great confusion
> Of cries and clamours, which amongst them past
> In dreadful darkness, dreadfully aghast;
> That better were with them to have been dead,
> Than to see all so desolate and waste . . .[1]

I saw such a burning, through a summer's night, two miles away across the valley. Those who burnt it were too drunk to come on to burn my home as they intended. So one walked the demesne woods at night, with all the folly of a boy, waiting for

> armed men
> Who'd ring the house before the lorries came
> Laughing, a little drunk, their rifles blessed from the altar
> To pay three conquests, hunger of the hill fields.

Yet that war, like all wars, had its comic side. I still have the photograph of a firing party who came to shoot me, early one summer's morning; and who, after we had given them breakfast, posed for me in the inner courtyard.

IV

From a military point of view the Easter Rising was a gallant farce; 'that crazy fight' as Yeats calls it in *The O'Rahilly*. It was ill prepared and ill armed; its organization was rudimentary. Too many Irish volunteer armies had been the subject of Gilbertian comedy for them to be taken quite seriously. Yeats has noted this with precision; as well as giving us his relationship to the leaders:

> I have met them at close of day
> Coming with vivid faces
> From counter or desk among grey
> Eighteenth-century houses.
> I have passed with a nod of the head
> Or polite meaningless words,
> Or have lingered a while and said
> Polite meaningless words,

[1] *Faerie Queene* VI, 11, xxxii.

And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

There were mocking tales in plenty; of the travesties of military rank, of the route-marches to the public houses; of that officer who shot himself when he dragged a loaded rifle after him by the muzzle through a quick-set hedge near my house; more bitter, of the British troops who sold their opponents ·303 cartridges to kill them at the price of one pint of porter for each round. The 'Crazy Fight' was precipitated by British political ineptitude. As a concerted plan it depended, on the Irish side, on a number of wished-for but unlikely possibilities. A country-wide rising in sympathy, a massive reinforcement of weapons from Germany, the arrival from that country of an Irish Brigade composed of renegades from the prisoner-of-war camps—all these were hoped for, but were mere fantasies. So in *The Stare's Nest by my Window* Yeats pondered on the meaning of the idealism that lay behind the wars:

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.

Again and again he expressed the thought; as in *Easter 1916*:

We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead.

When the Rising broke out one was aware first of a stunned silence, as communications were cut and rumours began to spread. There followed the politically inept executions, which seemed to confirm so clearly the patterns of 1798 and 1848. A year later came the reprisals of Bloody Sunday, the murder of British officers in their beds. The chain-reaction had begun; 'the blood-dimmed tide' was loosed, though it was little enough in comparison with the slaughter in France.

Yeats mirrored faithfully the period of numb horror of 1917–21:

> Now days are dragon-ridden; the nightmare
> Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
> Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
> To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;
> The night can sweat with terror as before
> We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,
> And planned to bring the world under a rule,
> Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

In times of war certain incidents, terrible or comic, etch themselves on the mind. One of these occurred when a lorry full of Black and Tans fired a burst from a Lewis gun down the village street at Kiltartan, and killed a woman. The lorries, protected by wire roofing against grenades, roamed the countryside at high speed, with the avowed and militarily senseless object of terrorizing the people. The pattern is a familiar one in France, Italy, Greece. I have memories of being machine-gunned by a lorry-load of Auxiliaries as they passed below a wooded hill where the main road ran through our demesne. This was nothing but sheer nerves; the place was an attractive one for an ambush, and raw troops will spray fire aimlessly under such conditions. More significant is an incident which Yeats never made into a poem, although it might have offered certain of the historical alignments (such as 'Hector, tamer of horses') that were so dear to him. I quote from one of his letters to H. J. C. Grierson:[1]

> I think what I say of Ireland, at least, may interest you. I think things are coming right slowly though very slowly; we have had years now of murder and arson in which both nations have shared impartially. In my own neighbourhood the Black and Tans dragged two young men, tied alive to a lorry by their heels, till their bodies were rent in pieces. 'There was nothing for the mother but the head'[2] said a countryman and the head, he stated, was found on the roadside. The one enlivening truth that starts out of it all is that we may learn charity after mutual contempt. There is no longer a virtuous nation, and the best of us live by candle-light.

But the episode of the murdered woman was complicated by Yeats's *pietas* towards Major Robert Gregory, the 'Irish Airman',

[1] 21 Oct.? 1922.

[2] Consider the symbolism of *A Full Moon in March*; and the episode of Hector outside the walls of Troy.

who was killed in action over Italy on 23 January 1918. The familiar poem was written that year. Of it I would only draw attention to the manner in which Yeats isolates Gregory's service with the Royal Flying Corps from political considerations; there is, I believe, a back-handed reference both to Redmond's recruiting campaign of 1914–15, and to the threat of conscription for the Irish which followed:

> Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
> Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
> A lonely impulse of delight
> Drove to this tumult in the clouds.

Because of the Kiltartan shooting Yeats's mind swung violently towards nationalism; Robert Gregory's death had been rendered futile by the betrayal of the loyalist element among the gentry. (The same thought was in my mind when, under sentence of burning by the Republicans, we were refused military protection by the British.) And since the poem is not easily available, and is of some importance in relation to Yeats's attitude to war, you will forgive me if I quote it in full. I use the American Variorum text.

In the opening lines Yeats picks up the thought of 'The Irish Airman . . .', the exaltation of the fighting man which we shall see later in *Under Ben Bulben*; and a kind of Celtic saga-ecstasy, that recalls the description of Cuchulain in battle:

> Some nineteen German planes, they say,
> You had brought down before you died.
> We called it a good death. Today
> Can ghost or man be satisfied?
> Although your last exciting year
> Outweighed all other years, you said,
> Though battle joy may be so dear
> A memory, even to the dead,
> It chases other thought away,
> Yet rise from your Italian tomb,
> Flit to Kiltartan Cross and stay
> Till certain second thoughts have come
> Upon the cause you served, that we
> Imagined such a fine affair:
> Half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery
> Are murdering your tenants there.
> Men that revere your father yet
> Are shot at on the open plain.
> Where may new-married women sit

And suckle children now? Armed men
May murder them in passing by
Nor law nor parliament take heed.
Then close your ear with dust and lie
Among the other cheated dead.[1]

It is violent and rhetorical, and Yeats could be both; but it emphasizes from yet another angle the dichotomy in Yeats's mind, loyalty to the Gregorys and what they stood for in the aristocratic tradition, set against the death to which the aftermath of war had lent this bitter irony.

V

We make poetry, not out of the experiences which we go out to seek, but of those 'events which come upon us like waves'. The dualism which Yeats uses, Chance and Choice, will serve as well as any to express the patterning of a poet's life. At isolated moments the two had appeared to converge. Some of them are clear: the long love-affair with Maud Gonne, the death of O'Leary; the engagement (I use the word deliberately) with the Abbey and its affairs; the death of Synge, and the 'dark period' that followed it; the Lane pictures, the friendship with Ezra Pound, the reading of Grierson's Donne; the chance that gave him a home at Coole, and the love and encouragement that all poets seek from women; the revelation of Italian and Byzantine art on the journeys with Lady Gregory. All these events faded before the Easter Rising.

He had no part in its planning. It is said that he was disappointed because he was not consulted as to the date. He had founded the Irish Literary Society. He was a member, though not an active one, of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. His association with Irish nationalism went back to his early years

[1] I am not satisfied with the text of this, which is the one given in Allt and Alspach, p. 791. This in turn is taken from *Rann*, 1948. But I have a version taken down from Allt himself, in 1947, which seems to me far more Yeatsian. I give the variants:

1, 2 Although you had shot down, they say / Some nineteen planes before you died.
5, 6 I had more happiness in a year / Than in all other years, you said.
7 And battle joy.
9 It chases common thoughts away.
13 Upon the cause that you and we / Imagined such a fine affair.
23 Nor parliament nor law.
24 Then stop your ears . . .

in London; and in particular to the sense of isolation, of mixed shame and pride, that is a not uncommon experience of the Irish schoolboy in England.[1] In the guerilla and civil wars he had played the part only of spectator. From 1918 the Tower has given a multiplex symbol of the past and of the present; an alignment at once with 'Milton's Platonist', with the poet's defence, with the imagined continuity of Irish history from the Norman invasion onwards, with its domination of the countryside as well as the protection of the storm-beaten cottages beside it. As the spectator in the Tower there lingered a sense of disappointment at his inactivity. One of his chosen masks was that of the Swordsman who had repudiated the Saint; in his private myth he had thrown in his lot with Oisin rather than St. Patrick. In *The Road at my Door* he talks with Irregular and Free State Soldiers; then—

> I count those feathered balls of soot
> The moor-hen guides upon the stream,
> To silence the envy in my thought;
> And turn towards my chamber, caught
> In the cold snows of a dream.

Who could resist the thought that he launched the only Irish insurrection that had been successful?

After an event of magnitude the resultant poetry seems to be generated in several waves. One is immediate, the poem written within weeks or months after the event: the imagination may be stirred by some phrase—such as 'A terrible beauty is born'—or by a rhythm, or a phrase from Shakespeare. Round them the images cluster and thicken. Of this kind are the *Elegy* on Major Robert Gregory, *The Irish Airman, Easter 1916*. These were the first fruits; *Easter 1916* is in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* of 1921, together with *Sixteen Dead Men* and *The Rose Tree*. These last are, I think, overrated.

Then the experiences seem to lie fallow for a time. *The Tower* in 1928 is, by common consent, the summit of Yeats's poetic achievement. Here the poems directly concerned with the War and the Troubles are *Ancestral Houses* and *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen*. Afterwards we have a more mature and meditative movement. There are changing perspectives of politics, national aspirations, responsibilities, friendships. It is pertinent to suggest

[1] Such as Kipling's McTurk in *Stalky & Co.*

some aspects of their particular combinations of Choice and Chance.

By 1921 the burning of the great houses appeared complete; yet they carried over into the Civil War, when twenty-three houses of Senators, most of them from the landed gentry, were burnt by the Republicans. Expropriation in various fields had driven others out. The returned ex-soldiers of the British Army were often widely and violently persecuted. By the middle twenties it was clear that a particular aspect of the Anglo-Irish tradition had been destroyed.

This was not, I think, the dilemma; but rather the great instrument that strung and tensioned Yeats's mind. If indeed he had been, however remotely, responsible for the Rising and what followed, then he had destroyed the civilization which had made possible his poetry; into whose ancestry he had aligned himself in imagination, whose personalities, men and women, he had celebrated and valued. If he had not been responsible, then the whole heroic aspect of the Rising was empty; his own vanity appalled or ridiculed. It was now clear that the maintenance of an aristocratic tradition was impossible:

> Many ingenious lovely things are gone
> That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,
> Protected from the circle of the moon
> That pitches common things about . . .[1]

and

> But he killed the house; to kill a house
> Where great men grew up, married, died,
> I here declare a capital offence.[2]

It did not matter that his vision of the country houses was idealized in the extreme; that for every family with pretensions to culture there were many whose Philistinism was as blatant as anything in Victorian England. They could decay from many causes: drink, women, gambling, idleness,

> Through too much business with the passing hour,
> Through too much play, or marriage with a fool.[3]

VI

There was to be a third phase, from the early nineteen-thirties onwards. Again it is complex. By 1934 Coole and Lady

[1] *Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.* [2] *Purgatory.* [3] *My Descendants.*

Gregory were dead, and Yeats was beginning to seek the company and encouragement of Lady Dorothy Wellesley. A kind of malaise, something like the onset of Jacobean melancholy, seemed to have descended on Ireland. It seems possible that Yeats believed that a gyre, a great movement of history, had ended. There was the rise of the Nazis, the Spanish Civil War, the preparations for rearmament. In 1932 de Valera returned to power; Yeats and many of his friends regarded him as responsible for the Civil War:

> Had de Valéra eaten Parnell's heart
> No loose-lipped demagogue had won the day,
> No civil rancour torn the land apart.

One of his first acts was to bring forward a Bill for the Abolition of the Irish Senate, and the seats of the University Representatives: both containing elements which might have moderated political opinion and given much stability and wisdom to the Government. Yeats's term of office as a Senator had expired. An abortive Fascist movement, led by General O'Duffy, was a counter-protest against authoritarianism; for it, Yeats wrote the somewhat disjointed *Marching Songs*. Into one of them is incorporated (strangely, but a sign of factitious composition) a phrase of Mrs. Yeats's, when a neighbour's dog was supposed to have killed her chickens:

> *'Drown all the dogs', said the fierce young woman.*

But violence still continued. De Valera did not finally outlaw his former comrades of the I.R.A. till he came to power. Of the episodes in that 'warfare' the one which horrified Yeats above all others was the murder, in 1927, of Kevin O'Higgins; his lifelong friend, shot in the back by five men as he was going to Mass. The death is mourned twice; once in that most noble poem, *Death*:

> Nor dread nor hope attend
> A dying animal;
> A man awaits his end
> Dreading and hoping all;
> Many times he died,
> Many times rose again.
> A great man in his pride
> Confronting murderous men
> Casts derision upon
> Supersession of breath;
> He knows death to the bone—
> Man has created death.

It is recalled in *Parnell's Funeral*:

> Had Cosgrave eaten Parnell's heart, the land's
> Imagination had been satisfied,
> Or lacking that, government in such hands,
> O'Higgins its sole statesman had not died . . . .

In the same poem we have the full and bitter indictment of the wars, of which these senseless violences seemed the culmination:

> Come, fix upon me that accusing eye,
> I thirst for accusation. All that was sung,
> All that was said in Ireland is a lie
> Bred out of the contagion of the throng,
> Saving the rhyme rats hear before they die. . . .

'A. E.', perhaps the only saint of the Irish Literary Revival, left Dublin in disgust to die (so inappropriately) at Bournemouth. A new and more stringent censorship was driving the poets and writers abroad. There was left for Yeats litttle but a proud and formal withdrawal, as he thought of Berkeley's phrase:[1]

> We Irish, born into that ancient sect
> But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
> And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,
> Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
> The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.[2]

VII

So the 'casual comedy' that preceded *Easter 1916* had passed through a 'terrible beauty', to become embodied in a government that was the anti-type of all that he had valued. Coole was desolate; most of the great houses of the south and west were in ruins. Even Gogarty's house at Renvyle had been wantonly burned, and Gogarty had been something of a hero in Dublin. All that was left was an Ireland which might one day be educated into an alignment with the European tradition; which might achieve the Greek virtues of proportion, symmetry, control. So in *The Gyres*:

> . . . Things thought too long can be no longer thought,
> For beauty dies of beauty, worth of worth,
> And ancient lineaments are blotted out.
> Irrational streams of blood are staining earth . . .

[1] 'We Irish think otherwise' (of a mathematical proposition).
[2] *The Statues.*

He thought of the women he had loved, whose voices had grown shrill in the politics which he detested, their bodies bent in old age:

> Dear shadows, now you know it all,
> All the folly of a fight
> With a common wrong or right.[1]

Yet the country might be unified, and a golden age return—he had used Virgil's thought before[2]—with the returning gyre. The tones are resonant and prophetic, as if they had been borrowed from that favourite poem, the *Nocturnall* of Donne:

> . . . shall,
> From marble of a broken sepulchre,
> Or dark betwixt the polecat and the owl,
> Or any rich, dark nothing disinter
> The workman, noble and saint, and all things run
> On that unfashionable gyre again.

It must be a terrible thing, when one is old, and the tomb round the corner, to think of all the ambitions one has put aside; to think perhaps, a great deal about women.

I have quoted this out of context from *The Resurrection*; but I think it is relevant to this phase of *Last Poems*. Women move, in painting or statuary, as queens or harlots, or dancing girls, through its pages. They are, in a sense, part of the gaiety of mood. The volume is in a sense a gathering up of what had gone before; and a return (this is the normal cycle) to the experiences of his boyhood.

VIII

By 1935, and in his seventieth year, the Rising and the Civil War have turned a little on their axes. The first had lost, except for a spasmodic and I think forced celebration in strong and coarse balladic rhythms, all epic and bardic quality. There is little imagery of the heroic battle. The legendary heroes have long been discarded in favour of Parnell, The O'Rahilly, Roger Casement. Only Cuchulain remained as a symbol, embodied in the true faith of statuary, for the last stand in the Post Office, and for himself in old age:

> Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
> He stood where they had stood?

[1] *In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz.*
[2] *Two Songs from a Play.*

Oedipus had failed to answer the riddle of the Sphinx,[1] on the Rock of Cashel or elsewhere. Perhaps he was now passing to an Irish Colonos.

So, 'I count the links in the chain of responsibility, and wonder if any of them end in my workshop.' More concisely, in *The Man and the Echo*,

> All that I have said and done,
> Now that I am old and ill,
> Turns into a question till
> I lie awake night after night
> And never get the answers right.

Yet there is pride as well as bewilderment in the tone:

> Did that play of mine send out
> Certain men the English shot? . . .
> Could my spoken words have checked
> That whereby a house lay wrecked?

They could not; and in this was the central conflict in Yeats's mind as he 'meditated on wounds and blood', the wars and their result. With 'fashion changed, that high horse riderless', there was little left but a strange tragic exaltation, such as that which Shakespeare makes his characters speak under the pressure of coming death or of achieved despair. There is now much of *Hamlet* and *Antony and Cleopatra* in Yeats's verse. He had written of a Nietzschean 'tragic joy' as early as *The King's Threshold*:

> And I would have all know that when all falls
> In ruin, poetry cries out in joy,
> Being the scattering hand, the bursting pod,
> The victim's joy among the holy flame,
> God's laughter at the shattering of the world.

In this new tragedy he finds both an assertion of courage, an aristocratic pride and calm in the face of defeat. *Lapis Lazuli* begins colloquially, almost cynically, with the Siege of Drogheda and the Zeppelin raids of the first war: then—

> Yet they, should the last scene be there,
> The great stage curtain about to drop,
> If worthy their prominent part in the play,
> Do not break up their lines to weep.
> They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
> Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.

[1] *The Double Vision of Michael Robartes.*

In a new gyre, with 'workman, noble and saint', reunited in that impossible Byzantine hierarchy, war might yet unify the nation:

> Desire some just war, that big house and hovel, college and public house, civil servant—his Gaelic certificate in his pocket—and international bridge-playing woman, may know that they belong to one nation.[1]

It was not clear where that war might be fought; South against North to abolish Partition? (this seemed possible in 1937) or against England if she attempted to reoccupy the Treaty Ports when de Valera had broken the agreement? (this again was a possibility in 1941). More likely—there are other indications in *Last Poems* and *On the Boiler*—he thought that the exaltation that only the fighting man knew might be recovered in war:

> You that Mitchel's prayer have heard,
> 'Send war in our time, O Lord!'
> Know that when all words are said
> And a man is fighting mad,
> Something drops from eyes long blind,
> He completes his partial mind . . .
> Even the wisest man grows tense
> With some sort of violence
> Before he can accomplish fate,
> Know his work or choose his mate.

IX

The two final poems, written just before his death, are concerned with war. *The Black Tower*, perhaps on some Sligo or Galway headland, has ironic overtones from *King Lear* and Browning and Malory. It concerns the poet in his last defence; it is the successor to Thoor Ballylee. In it the King waits for the horn of Charlemagne or Arthur, who sleeps surrounded by his men and his hounds, under the castle of Sewingshields in Northumberland.[2] But it also contains, I believe, the sharp Yeatsian precision of allegory. When de Valera came to power he brought in a Bill for the Removal of the Oath of Allegiance, which he himself had signed, explaining his action with some naïveté: 'I signed the Oath in the same way as I sign an article for a newspaper.' To this Yeats's friend Oliver Gogarty retorted: 'I uphold it because I signed it.' A sequel three years later was de Valera's

[1] *On the Boiler.*

[2] I am indebted for this suggestion to W. J. Keith.

attempt to reconstitute the Senate; but on a very different basis from that in which Yeats had served with some distinction.

He and his friends were isolated in the Black Tower. 'The wine gone sour' was a phrase he had used earlier for disappointment in politics. The new order, the 'base-born products of base beds',[1] wished for his support:

> Those banners come to bribe or threaten,
> Or whisper that a man's a fool
> Who, when his own right king's forgotten,
> Cares what king sets up his rule.
> If he died long ago
> Why do you dread us so?

The strange incantatory refrain shifts and modulates as he remembers the ancient battlefields between Knocknarea and Ben Bulben, the warrior buried upright that guards Queen Maeve's tumulus:

> *There in the tomb stand the dead upright,*
> *But winds come up from the shore:*
> *They shake when the winds roar,*
> *Old bones upon the mountain shake.*

Against a rising storm the Black Tower stands ironically, stubborn in defiance of his last values.

The other war poem is *Cuchulain Comforted.* The legendary fighting man comes fresh from his last battle into a Dantesque valley of the shadows. We remember the multiplicity of the Cuchulain images: the fighter of 'the ungovernable sea'; the slayer of his own son, begotten on that fierce woman, Aoife; the lover of Emer and Fand of the fairy world (I do not press the parallels); the heroic ghost that 'stalked through the Post Office' to hearten Pearse and Connolly in their last stand.[2] Now the phantom is among the shrouds or shades. The warrior terrifies them. He must forsake the violence and blood by which he had lived. He must learn to co-operate with the dead, to unite with them in sewing a shroud; Yeats remembers Blake's image for the spiritual body. The soldier is accepted, after knowledge of those two fountains of the river of life, war and hunting. But the visions of human life and shadows, of wisdom and knowledge, were to be transfigured into the bird-spirits of the Celtic myth in the country Tir-na-n'Oge when the preparations for death are completed, and they have learned to sing in unison.

[1] *Under Ben Bulben.*

[2] *The Statues.*

They had changed their throats and had the throats of birds.

So the 'casual comedy' and the 'terrible beauty' end. As in all tragic plays the resolution must be through lyric speech. We might return to a play written for the beginnings of the Abbey,[1] to find a fitting epitaph for the poet of the wars:
The first is spoken by the Youngest Pupil:

> O silver trumpets, be you lifted up
> And cry to the great race that is to come.
> Long-throated swans upon the waves of time,
> Sing loudly, for beyond the wall of the world
> That race may hear our music and awake.

The second is spoken by the Oldest Pupil, and will better serve for Ireland and for Yeats:

> Not what it leaves behind it in the light
> But what it carries with it to the dark
> Exalts the soul; nor song nor trumpet-blast
> Can call up races from the worsening world
> To mend the wrong and mar the solitude
> Of the great shade we follow to the tomb.

[1] *The King's Threshold*, 1904.