

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON AN ENGLISH POET

W. B. YEATS: POET AND CRANK

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I

I HAVE chosen to talk about the poetry of Yeats this evening for three reasons. The first, and in a sense the most important, is that I like it so much. We are often told that Yeats is the greatest English poet of this century, and to me this grey commonplace is continually coming to life in the form of the unforgettable lines that haunt all modern readers of poetry. Yeats is the man who, in imagining country-house life as a fountain, wrote of the fountain that

(It) rains down life until the basin spills,
And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains
As though to choose whatever shape it wills
And never stoop to a mechanical
Or servile shape, at others' beck and call.

These lines could be about his own poetry, choosing its shape to fit the strangeness of his experiences, the recklessness of his passions—never at the beck and call of tight metre or mechanical patterns, yet always magnificent in form. Yeats is the man who, in telling us that you cannot learn creative writing as you learn philology, put it in these two perfect and arrogant lines:

Nor is there singing school, but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence.

He is the poet whose terse violent love-lyrics burn with a blend of Blake, of the metaphysicals, and of his own crude hatred of old age and bodily decrepitude; the old man who concludes a dialogue of he and she by making her say

I offer to love's play
My dark declivities.

I can hardly hope to describe why Yeats seems to me the most eloquent, the most ecstatic, and the most splendid of modern poets; and I shall not try to—or not directly. The power and beauty of his poetry is a reason for reading it, for thinking about

it, and learning it by heart—but for talking about it? I realize, as I reflect, that my second reason is, in another sense, more important. This is that the poetry of Yeats raises with peculiar and agonizing neatness a central critical problem, perhaps *the* central problem in the criticism of poetry: the relation between the value of a poem and the value of its subject-matter. I can state this problem quite simply, though I cannot (alas) answer it simply. How is it that the greatest poet of the century, a poet of wisdom and understanding of the heart, a sage as well as a singer—how is it that he expounded in his poems such absurd, such eccentric, such utterly crackpot ideas?

II

Everyone knows that Yeats had a taste for queer religions, for Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, the Order of the Golden Dawn, Alchemy; that he attended seances, encouraged and studied the automatic writing of his wife, studied Plotinus, Cornelius Agrippa, Madame Blavatsky; and in the end wrote out his whole intricate system in his book *A Vision*. Further, that he continually incorporated into his poetry the fruits of these studies, even wrote some poems to illustrate points in his system. It seems to me astonishing that poetry as great as Yeats's should have emerged from all this; but it has not astonished everyone. It will not, for instance, astonish those who take the occult seriously and regard *A Vision* as a great book; and I would like first of all to say something to them. Mr. F. A. C. Wilson and Mr. Cleanth Brooks have been among the most influential of those who have made this claim: Mr. Wilson is more interested in the tradition, Mr. Brooks in *A Vision* proper, but they agree in their willingness to move behind the poetry for further illumination.

Now in discussing their case, I must admit to one initial disadvantage. I have struggled hard with *A Vision*, but I find it unreadable. I mean that literally—I cannot read the book because I cannot find it coherent, cannot find enough to tie one page to those that went before: reading it is simply not a continuous experience. The aim of *A Vision* seems to be to set forth a psychology and a theory of history. Both these are represented by means of a symbolism drawn from the 28 phases of the moon. There are two phases when (according to the psychology) human life is impossible, so we have 26 psychological types and presumably (this is not specified) 28 historical phases in our era. My first puzzle is to know why these two systems have both

been described in the same terms. I am assured by Mr. Brooks that 'the phase of an age does not determine the phase of men living in that age', but I am not told, either by him or by Yeats, whether you *tend* to be born in your own phase—and if so, what significance attaches to those who are not; if not, why the terminology is the same. I can discover no resemblance between (let us say) 'the approach of solitude bringing with it an ever-increasing struggle with that which opposes solitude—sensuality, greed, ambition, physical curiosity in all its species—[and] philosophy return[ing] driving dogma out'—this is phase 14 of our Christian era—and the obsessed man of phase 14 in the psychology, whose true mask is Oblivion, his false mask Malignity, his true Creative Mind Vehemence, his false Creative Mind Opinionated Will, his Body of Fate None except Monotony, his Will obsessed. Actually, it's not quite clear if that first description was of phase 13 or phase 14, but when we look at phase 13 of the psychology, we find no greater resemblance there. Will, Mask, Creative Mind, Body of Fate. These are the four faculties into which Yeats analyses and classifies personality. Will and Mask are antithetical, Creative Mind and Body of Fate (which seem to mean Thought and its object) are primary. Innumerable diagrams, some quite complicated, show the relations of these faculties to one another and their place on the Great Wheel. Compare this scheme for a moment with another modern system, another mythology for explaining the mind and its workings—the Freudian terminology of id, ego, and superego, with its dynamisms of projection and introjection, reaction formation, repression, resistance, wish-fulfilment. . . . The Freudian system is at least as complicated as Yeats's, but every item in it was pressed upon its author by the evidence, was devised in slow and patient response to what Freud was discovering about dreams and neurotic behaviour. In contrast, what strikes us about Yeats's system is how arbitrary it all is. What do you *do* when your Creative mind is Transformatory, or your Body of Fate has the character of Tumult, or of Absorption? What have Shakespeare, Balzac, and Napoleon in common that makes them the examples of phase 20? or (an even odder grouping) Cardinal Newman, Luther, Calvin, George Herbert, and A.E., the examples of phase 25? I look in Mr. Cleanth Brooks's enthusiastic essay on *A Vision* to find the answers to such questions, and am told that the book contains 'the finest rhythmic prose written in English since that of Sir Thomas Browne'! When a shrewd or lively touch of observation crops up in the

character sketches (and how rare this is), it seems totally independent of the system it is illustrating. The illuminating concept of the anti-self, about which Yeats had written so well in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, developing a theory of artistic creation remarkably like Freud's, has been swamped and spun and disintegrated by the revolutions of the gyres and the lists of faculties.

When we turn to the section on history, with its discussion of the Great Year and the two ways of dividing it into phases, we are no better off. I will not linger on this part of *A Vision* except to say that it has, at any rate, one charm—the disarming frankness with which Yeats admits that he does not know what he's talking about. 'Of what followed from phase 17 to phase 21 [I can say] almost nothing, for I have no knowledge of the time', he writes; and even more revealing is this: 'Then follows, as always must in the last quarter, heterogeneous art; hesitation amid architectural forms, some book tells me.' Notice the order: it must have happened, because the system said so—what then does it matter what the book was which he opened to make sure that it did happen?

Now what are we to do, confronted with all this poppycock? Treat it with the contempt it deserves? How can we do that, when it is by the greatest of modern poets? If he took it seriously, should not we? But did he take it seriously? Yeats had a good deal to say about what we should think of his system: the trouble is he had too much to say, not all of it consistent. At one time he tells us that all symbolic art should arise out of a real belief; at another he hears the spirits who 'dictated' *A Vision* telling him that they have only come to give him metaphors for poetry, or blames himself for being fool enough to write half a dozen poems unintelligible without some part of his doctrine. There is no reason why we should take much notice of any of these remarks: Yeats was as full of blarney as any Irishman. We have to make up our own minds about his ideas, and work out our own answer to the question, how could such ideas give rise to such poetry?

There are two easy answers to this question, which I shall mention only to dismiss, since they do not solve the problem, they abolish it. One is that the poetry is no good anyway: for Mr. Yvor Winters, who maintains this, there is no problem. I shall not pause to refute him: I hope my occasional quotations from Yeats will do that unaided. The other is that there is no connexion between the ideas and the greatness of the poetry. Now since the poems are about the very things dealt with in

A Vision—the cycle of history, Byzantium, the phases of the moon, the Hunchback, and the Saint—you can only maintain this by denying any connexion between the subjects of the poems and their greatness. You have to say that it does not matter what a poem means, as long as it sounds beautiful. This view offends me as much as it would have offended Yeats: I care about, and I intend to discuss, the meaning of his poetry.

Clearly we have got to say that these crackpot ideas, when they are turned into poetry, are able somehow to slough off their eccentricity, to take on a form that bestows on them, or restores to them, a wisdom and seriousness they had lacked. In a sense, of course, this problem is not peculiar to Yeats: is it not the old problem of the unbeliever's appreciation of religious poetry? Not altogether: in this case the problem is sharper and more awkward. For the unbeliever who responds to holy sonnets or devout hymns does at least take Christianity seriously: he must, or he could not respond. You may reject all Christian beliefs, but unless you think that the experiences they describe in the believer are real experiences, which you might share, the poems will not speak to you. Two classes of reader are debarred from responding to religious poetry: the devout Christian who holds, with Dr. Johnson, that 'man, admitted to implore the mercy of his Creator, and plead the merits of his Redeemer, is already in a higher state than poetry can confer', and the happy atheist who finds that talk of sin, repentance, expiation, and conversion is a language he does not understand, about experiences he cannot conceive. Both classes are rare enough not to matter; but when it comes to *A Vision* I find myself (and I know I am not alone in this) very much in the position of that happy atheist. But when I turn to the poems—well, let us look at one, and one of the most famous.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
 The darkness drops again; but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Now the first thing to say is what you must all have felt, listening to the poem: it's impossible to make fun of *this*. We are in another world, now, hearing the true voice of prophecy: solemn, mysterious, terrifying. It's true that this is a poem about Yeats's theory of history, that there is a long note by Yeats himself explaining it—or rather, not explaining it. The Great Year which began with the advent of Christianity is running out, we are in a phase of violence, our civilization is on a widening gyre and will be replaced by one which will spring 'as in a lightning flash' from the contrary, narrowing gyre.

But who cares about all this? In the first place, Yeats has trimmed his system to make the poem. *A Vision* tells us that we entered phase 23 in 1927—it's still five phases too early to say 'its hour come round at last'. More important, what is this violence? Surely it is the violence of the world we know: the best do, alas, so often lack all conviction, the worst *are* full of passionate intensity. This opening stanza matters so much because, wherever Yeats got the idea from, it is *true*; and its power comes from itself—from the slow unleashing of its image of a flood, the growing sense of terror in rhythm and metaphor. As we repeat the poem over and over, only the opening image of the falcon remains puzzling, and perhaps this is the poem's weakness; yet without knowing that hawk and falcon are Yeats's images for the human intellect (and you could find that out from other poems), without speculating that the falconer is God, losing control of man, or the heart, losing control of the mind (for, of course, the interpreters do not agree)—without any of this we can feel, can't we, how just an image it is for the sense of growing chaos, or loss of control, that is the subject of the poem?

The strange image of the second stanza—the 'shape with lion body and the head of a man'—has a variety of origins—some biblical, some from Yeats's more esoteric reading. But what matters for Yeats as he writes the poem is the origin that

lies behind them all, the collective unconscious, the *spiritus mundi* (or *anima mundi*, as he more usually calls it), the 'great memory passing on from generation to generation'. And the poem tells us that this is where the image comes from: we cannot ask for fairer treatment than that. Now if such a theory is true, of a collective storehouse of symbols, then we can say that no intellectual assent is needed by the reader before he responds. I used the phrase 'collective unconscious', but I did not mean to imply any assent to the Jungian doctrine that goes by that name. A Freudian will explain the universality of symbols by the common element in individual personal development, not by any *supra*-personal pool of memory; someone else may explain them as the product of centuries of accumulating speculation about memory and the world soul—and a Jungian if he is consistent must grant that both these, and indeed the total sceptic, should be just as responsive as he is to these symbols. This is why scholarship and theories of the *anima mundi* are such odd, such unnecessary companions: if the images work, surely they do not select only believers to work on. You do not even have to realize that any particular image is symbolic for it to work on you. For a long time, before I had read Yeats's prose or his commentators, I thought *spiritus mundi* must be an old book where Yeats had found the image. I know better now, but I also know that I did not appreciate the poem any the less for this. If any of you have made the same mistake, do not worry. Why would such a book seem important to Yeats? Only because it embodied some very old and universal symbols whose power he would recognize, symbols that belong in the general storehouse of images. Or sound as if they would belong in it, if it existed (which, for poetical purposes, is the same thing).

And the second coming itself? No historian takes historical cycles very seriously nowadays, certainly not in the detailed form Yeats gave them. But what we must take seriously is our impulse to see recurrences and phases in history: not the system, but the urge towards formulating it. And it is to this urge that this poem speaks, for it is about the violence, the distress, that forces us towards the wild speculation of the end. The poem ends not on an assertion, but on a shock. An ambiguous shock, too. Are we being told that the new era will be one of violence, contrasting with the two thousand years of Christian love; or are we being given a shocking suggestion about the true nature, or at least the true effect, of Christianity? I do not see how we can fail to take it, at least partly, as the second; and I do not care what

unpublished notes a critic digs up to tell us that Yeats meant, or claimed to mean, only the first. This is a great poem because it exploits and offends the fears and the prejudices we all have.

That is why I think *The Second Coming*, though it is written to illustrate the system, has a meaning and a power almost completely independent of it. So has *Leda and the Swan*. The annunciation that founded Greece, and began the cycle immediately before Christianity, was made to Leda: her swan corresponds to Mary's dove. This sonnet is meant to describe the first movement of that Great Wheel. But all you have to know is the story of Troy, and that Leda gave birth to Helen.

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

These wonderful lines are not about the Great Wheel. They show, opening out from Leda's violent personal drama, a famous event still in the future then, though long in the past for us; their excitement comes from the fame and antiquity of that event, not from its place in any cycle of twenty-eight phases.

I will choose one more example. In 1885 a Brahmin visited Dublin as representative of the Theosophical Society. Yeats asked him if he believed in prayer, and was told:

No, one should say before sleeping 'I have lived many lives, I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees, and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved. Everything that has been shall be again.'

Many years later, Yeats turned this into his poem *Mohini Chatterjee*:

I asked if I should pray,
But the Brahmin said,
'Pray for nothing, say
Every night in bed,
"I have been a king,
I have been a slave,
Nor is there anything,
Fool, rascal, knave,
That I have not been,
And yet upon my breast
A myriad heads have lain."'

That he might set at rest
A boy's turbulent days
Mohini Chatterjee
Spoke these, or words like these.

I add in commentary,
 'Old lovers yet may have
 All that time denied—
 Grave is heaped on grave
 That they be satisfied—
 Over the blackened earth
 The old troops parade,
 Birth is heaped on birth
 That such cannonade
 May thunder time away,
 Birth-hour and death-hour meet,
 Or, as great sages say,
 Men dance on deathless feet.'

We can notice, to begin with, that the poem does not assert that the doctrine of reincarnation is true. It is asserted by the Brahmin, and 'in commentary' the poet adds his reaction. What he gives us is an account of what it feels like to believe in it, or perhaps simply to be attracted by it—an account of what human attitudes and wishes it expresses.

Above all, there is the wish to glory in human achievement. Man's great enemy, the one enemy he cannot defeat, is time; therefore the supreme assertion of the human spirit is to fight time.

I have been a king,
 I have been a slave,
 Nor is there anything,
 Fool, rascal, knave,
 That I have not been.

What is the name for this emotion? Pride, surely—even arrogance, if we can purge that word of all distasteful associations. It is a common emotion in Yeats—even the rhythm is found in other poems:

I choose upstanding men
 That climb the streams until
 The fountain leap, and at dawn
 Drop their cast at the side
 Of dripping stone; I declare
 They shall inherit my pride. . . .

The need we feel for reincarnation is a need that human achievement shall not be crushed. As an example, as the supreme example, Yeats mentions love, our greatest achievement, and the one most subject to time. The Brahmin offered a way to believe that the great lovers would get a chance to build their

love into a lasting monument: as lasting as the carving of the old Chinamen in *Lapis Lazuli*, another symbol of man 'thundering time away'.

And some of the images of *Mohini Chatterjee* go further than reincarnation:

Over the blackened earth
The old troops parade.

This wonderful and obstinate image—what is it an image of? Perhaps the continuing individual life, but perhaps also the tread of the generations, the mere persistence of man. And the last couplet

Or, as great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet

seems as proud of the sages as of the dance itself: proud of the creation of the image, of the conception man has devised to describe (perhaps even to persuade himself of) the Brahmin's doctrine. In short, this is a poem about man's indomitable spirit. I can think of no doctrine in which I disbelieve with more confidence than in reincarnation, yet I should have been proud to have written this poem, and I would not have wanted to write it any different.

I have tried to show how Yeats's system, when turned into poetry, widens its significance and sheds its eccentricities: how the symbols, freeing themselves from an arbitrary and detailed magical meaning, become no more (and no less!) than the great universal symbols of the poetic tradition. The universal quality of these symbols—moon, tower, darkness, great year, or Babylonian starlight—is after all embedded in the language itself. Out of half-forgotten doctrine and repeated powerful use, these images have acquired a power deeper and wider than the particular meaning that any occult system can throw on them (though the occult has contributed its mite, no doubt, to such wider power). This is the power that is available only to Yeats the poet, not at all to Yeats the crank.

III

I will not linger more on this because I want to use what time I have left to say the things about Yeats's poetry that need nothing but the poetry to say. I said when I began that I had three reasons for talking about Yeats; and though I have left so little time for it, the third is really the most important reason

of all. My second reason raised an issue that is central for the criticism of poetry: my third raises one that is central for discussing the poetry of Yeats. When you read Yeats's poetry, purely as poetry, what is it about? Is it about anything coherent? Did he write a lot of individual poems merely, or did he create a poetic world?

I am sure he did: as coherent and valuable a world as any modern poet. It's true that his poems occasionally contradict one another: total consistency is an appalling virtue. In particular, he varies between the joyous view that 'everything we look upon is blest', and the bleak view that love is a consolation in a world

[Where] the crime of being born
Blackens all our lot.

But a lot of what may look like inconsistency is simply the evidence of the ceaseless dialogue that he held with himself. More than once he held the dialogue out loud and explicitly, most notably in his *Dialogue of Self and Soul*. I believe that this poem lies at the very centre of Yeats's work. If I was forced to name his best single poem I'd be tempted to choose it; if I had to name the most typical of his best poems, the one with most repercussions in his other work, I'd choose it without hesitation. It is in two parts, and I'd like to read the first with you (the *Dialogue proper*) as carefully as time permits.

The *Soul* begins, exhorting to withdrawal, solitude, study (study of Plotinus, perhaps, or of *A Vision*).

I summon to the winding ancient stair;
Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,
Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,
Upon the breathless, starlit air,
Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;
Fix every wandering thought upon
That quarter where all thought is done:
Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?

'Wandering' had been a favourite romantic adjective of the early, undisciplined Yeats, where hair strays and stars wander the sky. Now such fancies are to be kept sternly in order: *set all your mind* upon the steep ascent. Only the last line of the stanza seems puzzling: 'Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?' It suggests to us how total is the austerity, the withdrawal from common life, that is being urged; and by the end of the poem its significance will have become clearer.

Then comes one of those touches of genius that never fail Yeats. The Self does not even answer. So absorbed is the Self in living, so uninterested in withdrawal and in pure thought, that it stares at the blade on its knees, too fascinated to do more than murmur to itself:

The consecrated blade upon my knees
Is Sato's ancient blade, still as it was,
Still razor-keen, still like a looking glass
Unspotted by the centuries;
That flowering, silken old embroidery, torn
From some court lady's dress and round
The ancient scabbard bound and wound,
Can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn.

The Self does not even say that the sword is a symbol: the Soul does that, in a moment. It was, as a matter of fact, a real sword, given to Yeats by a Japanese admirer; and the intricate, meditative lines about it make it seem real to us, and the memories real that it calls up.

Soul speaks again:

Why should the imagination of a man
Long past his prime remember things that are
Emblematical of love and war?
Think of ancestral night that can,
If but imagination scorn the earth
And intellect its wandering
To this and that and t'other thing,
Deliver from the crime of death and birth.

Perhaps Soul's tone is pitying as well as scornful in the beginning, shaking his head sadly as he says 'Why should the imagination of a man . . .' But scorn imposes itself, and the contemptuous word 'wandering' appears again, this time more contemptuously still. Then in the last line, with its fierce opening verb like a loud chord, scorn transforms itself to dignity and massive movement:

Deliver from the crime of death and birth.

The Self is still staring at the sword:

Montashigi, third of his family, fashioned it
Five hundred years ago, about it lie
Flowers from I know not what embroidery—
Heart's purple, and all these I set
For emblems of the day against the tower
Emblematical of the night,
And claim as by a soldier's right
A charter to commit the crime once more.

I picture the Self looking slowly up during this stanza, as his lines slowly turn into a reply to the Soul: looking up and perhaps raising the sword as he announces, with a completely decisive rhythm,

and all these I set
For emblems of the day against the tower.

Taking over the Soul's metaphor of a crime, Self glories in it: he is as firm and as fierce as Soul was in the last stanza. Of course he will go on committing the crime: for

Over the blackened earth
The old troops parade.

And then, in its final proud verse, the Soul announces its own defeat. Where does its winding stair lead to? To a state of contemplation in which the senses will be suspended, personality will no longer exist:

Such fullness in that quarter overflows
And falls into the basin of the mind
That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,
For intellect no longer knows
Is from the *Ought*, or *Knower* from the *Known*—
That is to say, ascends to Heaven;
Only the dead can be forgiven;
But when I think of that my tongue's a stone.

Why does the Soul feel itself undone by the consummation it seeks? I suppose because it is not offering a religious dogma or religious hope. Detached from the body, the Soul may have no existence, or none worth having: so the path of withdrawal, the ascent to the tower, is one which you destroy yourself by following. When the Soul has ascended to Heaven, no one can distinguish it from darkness.

Why is this such a great poem? For one thing, because neither of the speakers is a puppet. The Soul was not put up simply to be knocked down, it offers what Yeats had given many years of his life to. If you read the essays that Yeats collected under the title *The Cutting of an Agate*, you can see the theme of this dialogue beginning to take shape. You can see him losing some of his old confidence in essences, in 'mysterious wisdom won by toil', and gaining a new wish for a 'delight in the whole man—blood, imagination, intellect, running together'. This is a contrast that runs right through the later Yeats, and takes many forms. It is the contrast between the musician and the orator, between 'the

way of the bird until common eyes have lost us' and that of the market cart, between the learned man and the girl who goes to school to her mirror only, between the Soul and the Self. Partly, it is the contrast between the Bishop and Crazy Jane. The Self represents the totality of living, accepts 'the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch'; the Soul chooses—abstracts—from life one thing, usually one intellectual thing, and pursues that only. What the Soul stands for we may therefore name abstraction.

This theme, of abstraction versus the fullness of living, ties in very naturally with the other great theme of the later Yeats, his hatred of old age. Here is the opening section of *The Tower*:

What shall I do with this absurdity—
 O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature,
 Decrepit age that has been tied to me
 As to a dog's tail?
 Never had I more
 Excited, passionate, fantastical
 Imagination, nor an ear and eye
 That more expected the impossible—
 No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly,
 Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulbin's back
 And had the livelong summer day to spend.
 It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,
 Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend
 Until imagination, ear and eye,
 Can be content with argument and deal
 In abstract things; or be derided by
 A sort of battered kettle at the heel.

The contrast here is between philosophy and fishing. Philosophy is done sitting at a desk; it is done with the intellect only; it is abstract. Fishing is a bodily activity, it is done by the whole man, it is done by young men, the young men of the third section of the poem:

I leave both faith and pride
 To young upstanding men
 Climbing the mountain-side,
 That under bursting dawn
 They may drop a fly.

Yeats is a poet. Poetry is like philosophy in that it is a 'sedentary trade'; but it is also like fishing, for it is not abstract, it demands the whole man. But fishing is for the young, and the bitterness of this verse results from the conflict between what the poet wants and what would be appropriate to his age. It is this

which gives such withering force to the image of the kettle when it reappears at the end, or such contempt to

It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend

(and how fortunate for Yeats that these two symbols of abstract thought begin with such a scornfully plosive sound as *pl*). What Troilus said of love, Yeats is here saying of age:

This is the monstrosity in love, lady, that the will is infinite and the execution confined, that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit.

Proudly and querulously Yeats says, over and over, that he will not accept his limits, that he will not give up the Muse, his lust, the boundlessness of his desire: he will not be an old scarecrow, a 'tattered coat upon a stick'.

There are other forms of abstraction besides study. To abstract is to take one thing only from life's complexity:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.

These are the hearts of the men of 1916, the leaders of the Easter Rising, who wrung a reluctant tribute from Yeats—his poem *Easter 1916*. This poem tells how the men were transformed under the spell of violence, how they 'resigned their parts In the casual comedy' of everyday living, how a terrible beauty was born, a beauty that the poem celebrates. But in the middle of this hymn Yeats put a section that tells of the price they paid for their greatness. It is by far the best thing in the poem:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horse that comes from the road,
The rider, the birds that range
From cloud to tumbling cloud,
Minute by minute they change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
Changes minute by minute;
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
And a horse plashes within it;

The long-legged moorhens dive,
 And hens to moor-cocks call;
 Minute by minute they live:
 The stone's in the midst of all.

The stone is the symbol of the dedicated man, the man who sacrifices himself for political action and by his narrowness, his intensity, becomes 'a bitter, an abstract thing'. Even in this poem, the finest tribute that Yeats ever paid such men, he puts a picture of their limitations right in the centre: the stone is surrounded by the restlessness and variety of life. Nothing in *Easter 1916* is so moving as this varied and subtle evocation of change, movement, and process, the rhythms and the rhymes shifting delicately to mirror the elusive life that washes against the stone. And when the section is over, the next, before moving to its conclusion of praise, lingers a moment to remind us bluntly how very limiting it is to call something a stone.

Too long a sacrifice
 Can make a stone of the heart.

The stone ceases to be an image and becomes a mere idiom, so that there shall be no mistake.

But there is one form of abstraction that Yeats does defend: this is Art. Art too is out of living, it too is something frozen, something motionless, even (like the golden nightingale Yeats loved to refer to) something dead. But when the artist abstracts, he does so on a paradoxical principle: he is in search of just that essence which makes life full, rich, and changing. He seeks the very quality that Plato and Plotinus miss. This, I take it, is the theme of *Sailing to Byzantium* (Yeats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*). Because he is old he must withdraw from nature, from the mackerel-crowded seas, from the welter of living that belongs to the young. It is now the turn of Soul: but in this poem Soul has a new function—not to climb the winding stair, but to sing. Its function now is to celebrate the Self. The figures on Keats's Grecian Urn were likewise frozen in a moment of change, and remain as permanent symbols of the most transient thing we know, youthful love. This underlying paradox gives such power to Keats's cry 'More happy love . . .

. . . For ever panting and for ever young'

and to Yeats's golden nightingale, that has been gathered 'into the artifice of eternity', and yet sings

Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

Sailing to Byzantium is a poem about art. Yeats wrote poem after poem in praise of art, and some of them are his finest. The very first poem in his first volume says 'words alone are certain good'; and though he learned to understand more and more fully what this meant, and what difficulties it implied, he never forsook the theme, or ceased to believe in words. In old age he praised art as the one form of abstraction that did not involve a rejection of the salmon-falls, the young men fishing, the pride like that of the morn. And all through his life he praised it for another reason that widens beyond a theory of art, and becomes a philosophy of living.

Let us divide theories of art, crudely, into two: those that stress the artistic experience itself, and those that stress its consequences. If you value art because it brings wisdom and understanding, because it broadens the sympathies and stimulates the imagination, because it leads to the love of God, or the dictatorship of the proletariat, or a sharpening of the moral sensibilities, your theory of art can, in general, be called didactic. If, on the other hand, you value it because the actual experience of hearing the Ninth Symphony or reading the Odes of Keats is uniquely precious, and would be worth having even if it left no trace, even if you dropped down dead the next moment, if you dislike talk about the moral and social importance of art because that seems to come from those to whom the poems themselves do not matter enough, then your theory of art can, in general, be called aesthetic. Crude as this distinction is, it is not too crude for Yeats: for all his life he belonged quite firmly to the second camp. He was always impatient of attempts to put art to the service of something else; and because it is mainly the early Yeats we think of as an aesthete, I will illustrate with one of his last poems. I should like to read you the first part of *Lapis Lazuli*:

I have heard that hysterical women say
 They are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow,
 Of poets that are always gay,
 For everybody knows or else should know
 That if nothing drastic is done
 Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out,
 Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in
 Until the town lie beaten flat.

All perform their tragic play,
 There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
 That's Ophelia, that Cordelia;

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.
 All men have aimed at, found and lost;
 Black out; Heaven blazing into the head:
 Tragedy wrought to its uttermost.
 Though Hamlet rambles and Lear rages
 And all the drop-scenes drop at once
 Upon a hundred thousand stages,
 It cannot grow by an inch or an ounce.

This poem was written in the thirties, the great decade of political art; and I take it that the hysterical women of the first stanza are those for whom art is a luxury which, at times like these, must yield to politics: because the world is in a mess, we shall have no more poems, or at any rate none that do not aim to cure the mess.

Yeats was never one to deny that the world was in a mess: just before this poem comes *The Gyres*, with its terrible vision of how 'irrational streams of blood are staining earth'. What he denied was that art should aim to cure it. Art was not to be beautiful by ignoring suffering and turning its back on the real world: that had been the fault of his early poetry. But, having faced that world, it was to use it as material for tragedy. The artist should feel the troubles of his time as intensely as the actor must feel the sufferings of Lear; but if he feels them with an intensity that deflects him into a didactic purpose, he is like an actor who 'breaks up his lines to weep'. The poet builds his poem out of his feelings of compassion and urgency, but he does not sacrifice the poem to them. To make the point Yeats chose the most tendentious word he could to describe the experience of watching, or creating, a tragedy; and to shock the hysterical women, he called it gaiety. The true artist, worthy of his part, the true musician, of the 'accomplished fingers', do not run away from the mess the world is in, but they do turn it into a beauty that is gay. Many years before he had made the same point even more wildly, through the mouth of one of his many personae, Tom O'Roughley. Tom is talking of personal, not public sorrow, and so perhaps shocks us even more:

And if my dearest friend were dead
 I'd dance a measure on his grave

(which was just what Yeats was doing, in that volume, in the very next poem in fact, to his friend Robert Gregory).

Lapis Lazuli states, then, that art offers an experience to be taken for its own sake only: that out of tragedy comes tragic joy. It is not only art that offers this. I suggested that this was a theory of art that widens into a way of living. To lose oneself in an experience so fully that one no longer cares about the consequences is to live as fully as possible: to respond in this way to art, is a type of responding in such a way to all experience. I will therefore quote, as a parallel to *Lapis Lazuli*, a poem that is not about art at all; and I will end with this poem, for the very good reason that my time is up. I am glad to end on this theme, and on this poem. On this theme, because on the whole I am not of Yeats's camp on this matter. I believe in literature that does care about its consequences, and my admiration for those poems that state Yeats's aesthetic view is therefore wrung from me by the sheer splendour of the poems themselves. To confess to this admiration is, to me, the finest tribute I can pay Yeats the poet; and I can see that it is, in a sense though not a fatal sense, to yield to his position. And I am glad to end with this poem—*An Irish Airman foresees his Death*—for a whole lot of reasons. It was written near the middle of Yeats's career, and it resembles both his early and his late work: it is therefore an illustration of what I have been assuming through most of this talk, the continuity between the early and the late Yeats. It describes a delight that has many parallels, among them the pleasure I take in Yeats's poetry. And—if I may finish on the note of simple praise on which I began—it is one of my favourite poems:

I know that I shall meet my fate
Somewhere among the clouds above;
Those that I fight I do not hate,
Those that I guard I do not love;
My country is Kiltartan Cross,
My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
No likely end could bring them loss
Or leave them happier than before.
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;
I balanced all, brought all to mind,
The years to come seemed waste of breath,
A waste of breath the years behind
In balance with this life, this death.