

**'Now that my ladder's gone':  
From Romanticism to Verism in Yeats's Poetry**

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*Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.*

W. B. Yeats

At the beginning of his literary career, W. B. Yeats was clearly a self-conscious Romantic poet. A spiritual member of this "Church of Rebels" which included Blake as well as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats or Shelley, he certainly fancied himself as one of the new "unacknowledged legislators of the world" contributing to the age-old Poem of idealism. Like his precursors, he rejected the threats of modernity by glorifying, not reason or scientific explanation, but the natural world and the forces of imagination. In many respects, his affinity for Nature – and for the power he sensed behind Nature's visible forms – seems to have been generated by his never-ending quest for a lost harmony. For the history of Romanticism is, emphatically, the history of a separation, the history of a splitting apart that alienated man (the subjective "I") from the real object of his desire (the unattainable "Other"). In other words, at the heart of Romanticism lies the lingering mood of longing for something more complete than the modern world, and the Romantic poem, though a mere fabric of words, represents an attempt at recreating a link with the Beyond, that is, with Truth itself (be it a divinity, a female figure, or an idealized way of life in an idealized countryside) so as to achieve a form of Unity.

Born in 1865 in the Dublin suburb of Sandymount, Yeats was the son of a painter (John Butler Yeats) whose desire for fortune always remained unfulfilled. As a child, he therefore spent his time moving between Dublin (his birthplace), London (where his father thought he could find recognition) and Sligo (where he often spent his holidays with his maternal grandmother). And it was there, in Sligo, that Yeats inherited both a love for natural landscapes and a particular taste for strangeness or, more precisely, for the mystery which is always concealed in the familiar and the commonplace. Going around cottages to hear stories of the supernatural, he developed the ability to conceive of the "other world" folklores systematically fantasise. This logically led him, from the 1880s onwards, to discover the realm of hermetic societies<sup>1</sup>. One thinks therefore of such poems as "The Stolen Child," "The Song of Wandering Aengus," or "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" in which Ireland – as an *idealistic* spot combining the natural and the supernatural, the earthly and the metaphysical – clearly represents a refuge from modern England.

In "The Stolen Child," Yeats refers to wonderful creatures evolving in a dream-like and mysterious atmosphere ("frothy bubbles" (3), "ferns that drop their tears" (4)).

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<sup>1</sup> In 1890, for instance, he was initiated into the *Rosicrucian Order of the Golden Dawn*.

The poet leads us through an enchanted realm where playful faeries can be seen, as he has it, "Weaving olden dances / Mingling hands and mingling glances" (3). A literary ballad taking us back to the tradition of oral poetry (that is to say, an authentic and native poetic form perpetuated through the centuries by local storytellers), the poem locates in humble and rustic life the revelation of universal sentiments. By referring to common objects and ordinary places (at the cost of a certain childish simplicity), it paradoxically creates imaginary visions of half-remembered experiences and foiled desires; at times, it even reminds us of a tale told in simple rhyming verse:

Where dips the rocky highland  
Of Sleuth Wood in the lake,  
There lies a leafy island  
Where flapping herons wake  
The drowsy water-rats;  
There we've hid our faery vats,  
Full of berries  
And of reddest stolen cherries.  
*Come away, O human child!*  
*To the waters and the wild*  
*With a faery, hand in hand,*  
*For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.* (3)

Although the scene takes place in Sleuth Wood (near Sligo), the poem reveals Yeats's utopian tendency to create a twofold geography of his own. On the one hand, he describes real spots, spots that do exist in Ireland ("Sleuth Wood", "Glencar Lake", "Rosses point"), and, on the other hand, he imagines ethereal and invisible places which are to be found beyond the world of reason, intellect and scientific knowledge. This fantasised secret world is certainly strange and uncanny, but it is also alluring, as the refrain of the poem states it ("come away"), since it represents the possibility of a flight from the modern world, that is, a paradise momentarily regained, as the allusion to Milton's *Paradise Lost* suggests ("They, **hand in hand**, with wandering steps and slow / Through Eden took their solitary way." (313)). Strange as it seems, mere "berries" and "stolen cherries" become the focal point of the poet's dearest wishes, and we realise how strongly can be felt through them the appeal of seductive torpor.

In "The Song of Wandering Aengus," the natural world is once again imbued with a significance beyond itself. Personified as Aengus, the Celtic god of Love and Music, Yeats penetrates the hazel wood where he is supposed to find some rest: "I went out to the Hazel wood, / Because a fire was in my head" (12). True enough, the wood is a well-known symbol of refuge for the romantic poets – it is enclosed, protective, damp, deep and dim (so many attributes betraying man's unconscious wish to return to the maternal womb) –, but, from a traditional point of view, the hazel tree is also said to be a magical tree, somehow related to the notions of incarnation and materialisation, that is, to the revelation of the invisible. And if we pay attention to the rhyming structure of the poem, we realise that the fish Aengus manages to catch in the water (*the trout*) is, by way of echoes and subtle repetitions, related to the Beyond (*out*), and therefore very likely to open up a breach into the other world, which is what the rest of the poem certainly confirms, since the trout instantly transforms itself into a beautiful girl before fading "through the brightening air" (12). Aengus is left only with

the vague remembrance of her magical presence. All he could make out of this mysterious woman is the glimmering "apple blossom in her hair" (12), but it is this apparently insignificant detail that turns him into a lonely wanderer who keeps pursuing an abstract and intangible object forever receding beyond his reach. Once again, we can but notice that ancient stories and myths guided the poet's imagination, for the apple is commonly considered to be the fruit of revelation both in the Celtic folklore and in the Christian tradition where it refers to the Tree of Knowledge, that is, to Adam and Eve's sinful behaviour which led to never-ending toil and infinite longing for a lost paradise. In other words, by trying to achieve the effect of wonder and mystery in the trivial and the lowly, Yeats is constantly reaffirming his belief in the fundamental division of existence into two parallel spheres: the real and visible world, and a derived world – the veiled dominion of the otherworldly, a dominion always to be missed by sense-perception.

In Yeats's poems, natural landscapes are depicted as possessing the features of some *mysterium fascinans*, and the poet always feels for nature the way people usually feel for a beloved or even for a God. If, to call Shelley's phrase, "the deep truth is imageless" (238), Yeats seems nonetheless to have caught a glimpse of that "deep truth" for, in his verse, he shows us the outlines of its hazy forms through his use of symbols and powerful images, but also of repetitions and sound-echoes that heighten the suggestive power of reduplicative language:

Though I am **old** with wandering  
Through hollow **lands and hilly lands**,  
I **will** find out where she has gone,  
**And** kiss her lips **and** take her **hands**;  
**And** walk **among long dappled** grass,  
**And** pluck **till time and** times are done  
The silver **apples** of the moon,  
The **golden apples** of the sun. (12)

By repeating and constantly reorganising the same sound-structures, Yeats proves that the finite has its own laws of profusion. In other words, mere phonemic patterns may represent a fundamental connection with the infinite. As the trout was first changed into a brightening girl and then into a bemusing transcendent entity, self-generating poetry lends a beguiling grandeur to the performative act of writing. Based on continuous variation, Yeats's language gains marvellous intensity. The energy of creation fixes and re-fixes meaning through the process of repetition so that the poem may reveal the ultimate Real the poet's desire is subordinated to. Like Blake, Yeats fancied that, by defamiliarising language, he could "cleanse the doors of perception" and make things appear as they are: infinite. As a Romantic poet, he could not help drifting towards the ideal of merging the material in the indeterminate.

It has often been argued – and rightfully so – that behind many natural landscapes (and any female figure) that are described in Yeats's poetry lies the haunting presence of Maud Gonne, the staunch nationalist he was desperately in love with. When he met her in 1889, his devotion to Ireland became much more intense than it used to be. And from this moment on, his verse actually began to display an overlap between personal and patriotic desire. For instance, the symbol of the Rose both refers to Maud Gonne and Ireland. Why the Rose? First of all, because Yeats was a

member of *the Rosicrucian Order of the Golden Dawn*, a secret hermetic society whose principles were based – as one can get from the word itself – on the two central symbols of the Rose and the Cross. Put together, they created a sort of mystic alliance announcing a rebirth, or a renewal – the rose representing the Gaelic and Celtic flower of Ireland blossoming on the sacrificial cross of Christian England. Another reason for the use of the Rose as a symbol is that, to Yeats, it was a figure of perfection, harmony and eternal beauty. In itself, the flower is a marriage, a perfect union possessing feminine as well as masculine sexual elements – it is both a delicate and welcoming crucible and a proud and powerful stem standing straight<sup>2</sup>. Finally, in Irish patriotic poetry, Rose is the name of a dark-haired girl (*Dark Rosaleen*), a well-known personification of Ireland. The symbol of the Rose is therefore the focus of nationalist as well as personal desire: the flower designates Yeats's desire for a free nation, a proud and independent "land of truth" eventually freed from modern England's oppression, and, at the same time, it is clearly invested with libido, the psychic energy of the sexual drive. "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time" is a good example of this kind of multilayered works:

*Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!  
Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways:  
Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide;  
The Druid, grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed,  
Who cast round Fergus dreams, and ruin untold:  
And thine own sadness, whereof stars, grown old  
In dancing silver-sandalled on the sea,  
Sing in their high and lonely melody.  
Come near, that no more blinded by man's fate,  
I find under the boughs of love and hate,  
In all poor foolish things that live a day,  
Eternal beauty wandering on her way.*

*Come near, come near, come near – Ah, leave me still  
A little space for the rose-breath to fill!  
Lest I no more hear common things that crave;  
The weak worm hiding down in its small cave,  
The field-mouse running by me in the grass,  
And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass,  
But seek alone to hear the strange things said  
By God to the bright hearts of those long dead,  
And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.  
Come near; I would, before my time to go,  
Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways:  
Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days. (5)*

In this poem, Yeats tells us of ancient beliefs and legends recorded in the oral tradition. In other words, he aspires to be seen as a national poet (he sings of "old Eire and the ancient ways," evokes "The Druid," and mentions "Cuchulain" and "Fergus," two heroes of Irish mythology). A brief analysis of the structure of the poem also reveals Yeats's willingness to remain true to his ancestries, for rhyming couplets (aa bb cc) as well as the circular effect of the epanadiplosis (the repetition of the very

<sup>2</sup> One should bear in mind that Maud Gonne herself was a staunch nationalist, very forward and masculine in her behaviour.

first line of the poem at the very end of the poem, which gives a sense of closure while suggesting that the story is about to be told again, that it has reached a new beginning) are specific features of old Irish ballads. As a Romantic poet, Yeats therefore fantasises a purer way of life by drawing on the memories of a long-forgotten glorious past. He wishes for another and better world. Yet, one cannot miss the obvious erotic dimension of the poem, since, according to Yeats's symbolism, the "Red Rose" in question represents the body of the desired other – namely that of Maud Gonne –, and the poet insists, throughout the two stanzas, that the beautiful woman should come closer to him (the phrase "come near" is repeated 6 times), or, to put it plainly, that she should even *come* in his presence. In other words, it is sexual pleasure that is at stake here. But beyond the fantasy of sexual satisfaction, the poem contains yet another unobtrusive meaning. Indeed, from a psychoanalytic point of view, Yeats is grappling with a much deeper desire and a much more fundamental want, for he is actually aspiring to the supreme Good. He is pursuing the ideal of absolute happiness Lacan named the "*jouissance* of the Other."

Let us be clear. Psychoanalysts suppose that desire is, in itself, incestuous. They postulate that when the subject desires, he desires to possess the entire body of the mother. Orgasm is a partial satisfaction, but the *jouissance* of the Other – which is impossible and will remain forever unsatisfied – would amount to achieving a state of absolute fullness, or unity, by reaching the point of rupture where the subject dissolves and melts with an all-inclusive abstract being. We, as human beings, are therefore mere bodies separated from the total and all-encompassing Body of the Other; but we are also speaking bodies, bodies subjected to language, inhabited by language. Consequently, every speech-act is an attempt at reaching this unattainable entity. From the first cries of the child (supposedly demanding milk) to the most elaborate poem, language is always aimed at bridging the gap between the "I" and the "Other." Once they are uttered, words open the path towards satisfaction, but, accurate as they might be, they open an *infinite* path along which the *jouissance* of the Other is constantly displaced. Being, in itself, the impossible, the latter is also fundamentally unutterable. This is the reason why Yeats experiences a sort of limit-situation at the heart of "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time":

*Come near, come near, come near – Ah, leave me still  
A little space for the rose-breath to fill!*

The repetition (loaded with sexual innuendoes) conveys to us the poet's desire to drive language to its limits and reach the unthinkable space of intensive paroxysm. Yeats seems to be hammering at the constraining walls of language on his quest for *jouissance*, as if he were eventually – to say it with his own words – to "chaunt a tongue men do not know." Through the exorbitance of emphatic utterance, we feel his urge to dissolve the subjective boundaries and become One with the Other; we feel his desperate will to "fill" the "little space" that keeps "eternal beauty" at a distance. Whatever their suggestiveness or their intensity, however, words can but point to an absence. The poem irrevocably remains the site of an elusiveness or a disappearance; paradoxically enough, it keeps expressing its refusal to express what it should really be about. Materialised in the poem by a sudden breaking off of speech (a dash, also called aposiopesis) immediately followed but a miserable cry of

despair (“– Ah!”), the object of Yeats's desire is an immaculate absolute, a pure silence entrenched forever beyond the contamination of linguistic signs.

We recognise in such powerful outbursts (“spontaneous overflows of powerful feelings,” according to Wordsworth) the typically romantic wish to get to the unreachable incorporeal Double. In other words, by stressing his consciousness of a deeper reality than that of mundane existence, Yeats provides us with new versions of romantic failures for, to be sure, idealistic desires can never be satisfied. “Romantic poetry in general,” J. McGann writes, “is a poetry of ideas, of ideals, and – ultimately – of Ideology, which is why displacements and illusions are its central preoccupations and resorts” (132). One therefore thinks of Shelley's “Alastor; or, The Spirit of Solitude”, the protagonist of which desperately searches for a soul-mate to fulfil his unlimited desire until his death, or of Keats's famous “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in which the poet describes two characters painted on the work of art – one pursuing the other – and laments: “Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal” (345). Like that of his Romantic precursors, Yeats's idealism is an escape from the reality of the flesh. Hence, his reliance on dreams, symbols and imagination whose function is to expand material existence. Hence, also, the mistiness and the sense of lightness prevailing in his earlier works. Yet, if man idealises the object of his passion, the glories of the mind cannot make up for the weaknesses and impossibilities of the body. “The fury and the mire of human veins” (68), as he puts it in “Byzantium”, will always mar the pure substance of perfect unity. Minute by minute, the passing of time enslaves man and his hopes, it fastens his soul “to a dying animal” (43), and the crazy dream of sailing the seas “to the holy city of Byzantium” so as to be consumed and eventually gathered “into the artifice of eternity” (43) remains but a dream. Beyond its obsessive references to old age and the absurdities of decrepitude (notably at the beginning of “The Tower” (44)), it is one of the indisputable glories of Yeats's later poetry to have reflected upon art's actual achievements and benefits for a man whose days are unambiguously numbered.

Yeats seems to have lived with the despairing intuition that the dualities of existence (body / soul, want / satisfaction, life / death...) could never be overcome, and that Truth, being in itself an idealistic principle, would always remain unknowable. Quite remarkably though, he was able, from the early 1930s onwards, to deliver the powerful message saying that, if Truth cannot be attained by thought, it nonetheless can be *experienced* in the human flesh. In this respect, his late works display a clear shift from Romanticism to Verism: from the wish to be combined and intimately unified with the supreme Other of which nature is but the emblem to the consciousness – not to say the revelation – that art has value only if it helps us in the difficult task of *living* life, and not in that of escaping it. Art is the solution to want and pessimism then, but it cannot be so as long as it is subordinated to a transcendence. Simply put, Dionysian art only – which, contrary to Apollonian art, is the art of the immanent – can be the antidote to human suffering because it consists in *affirming* life in its most debasing aspects, because it amounts, so to speak, to revelling in what usually curbs man's desperate desire for some ethereal unity<sup>3</sup>. Consequently, poetry becomes the expression of things “learned in bodily lowliness” (74). One

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<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Yeats is very close to Nietzsche who writes in *The Will to Power*: “The demand for art and beauty is an indirect demand for the ecstasies of sexuality” (805).

therefore thinks of Yeats's "The Spur," a four-line poem in which the thesis of the exclusively sexual origin of art is clearly expressed:

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? (82)

Idealism irrevocably leads to dissatisfaction. As a consequence, the Platonic conception of the uplifting moment of perfect fusion with the Other has to be desecrated, profaned and lessened in favour of a life-affirming principle emphasising the degrading realities of human existence. In "Crazy Jane talks with the Bishop," we are struck by the impressiveness with which the poet utters his new message of truth: "Fair and foul are near of kin, / And fair is foul," he writes, "Love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement" (74). Even though they have no choice but to perform "their tragic play" (78) in the midst of the squalid aspects of human life, men must rejoice<sup>4</sup> and cry out their self-satisfaction to the world, they must have the strength to expend the forces of excitement, the feats of intensive affects, and the frenzy of an overcharged will to live that pretends to be no more than what it really is. Rid as it ought to be of any idealistic temptation, artistic expression becomes, in a sense, the great means of making life possible. And if mortal life has to be affirmed, if human feelings – ugly as they might appear – have to be perpetually enhanced through the work of art, it is because, as Yeats writes it explicitly, "no better can be had" (83).

Having reached his sixties, Yeats suddenly banished the human act of fantasising shadows from his own creative process to favour the principle of solipsistic satisfaction. In "An Acre of Grass," he unsurprisingly comments upon this decision of his by referring to William Blake for whom "Energy is the only life, and is from the body" (149):

Here at life's end  
Neither loose imagination,  
Nor the mill of the mind  
Consuming its rag and bone,  
Can make the truth known.

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. (80)

Yeats's late poetry no longer displays a sense of endless distances. The poet seems to evolve in a region of proximity with himself. He has become the poet of affirmation (rather than the poet of idealistic contemplation), a poet asserting the co-presence of

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<sup>4</sup> In "The Gyres," he writes for instance: "Out of Cavern comes a voice, / And all it knows is that one word 'Rejoice!'" (77).

the self and the object of his desire. The concluding lines of the famous "Among School Children" obviously come to mind:

O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (58)

It has often been said that this passage can be considered Yeats's greatest attempt at redefining selfhood and, ultimately, the human act of creation. The metaphor of the chestnut tree, to begin with, represents life as "an ongoing organic process that continues, always, even in age, to bear the blossoms of perpetually efflorescing inner energy" (Vendler, 84). Far from the irreconcilable diptychs of existence, roots, bole, leaves and blossoms – all indistinguishable from the larger entity of the tree – are seen as an ever-intensifying unity combining both the producer and its production. But it is the second metaphor – that of the dancer – which best exemplifies Yeats's re-conceiving of the notions of individuality and creativity. In the original draft of the poem, two dancers were engaged in a sensual intercourse so as to symbolise the perfection of the romantic moment of fusion, but Yeats changed his mind and decided to describe a single dancer carrying out his own choreography *in solitude*. He too is indistinguishable from his creation ("How can we know the dancer from the dance?"), he too has reached a state of unity, because his art (his dance) is the result of a powerful drive to affirm life *bodily*, to bring out and body forth its main features unconditionally, and dance to the music of human emotions as long as life endures.

In "The Circus Animals' Desertion" – a poem about his lack of inspiration ("I sought a theme and sought for it in vain" (88)) – Yeats summed up his new ambition with concision: "I must be satisfied with my heart" (88). Such self-satisfaction however obviously implied that he, as a poet, also had to be satisfied *with his art*. As we saw it, the Romantics assumed that the ultimate Real was concealed beyond mundane existence, and that language – or, to be precise, poetic language – revealed or uncovered it. To them, poetry was discovery; it was a fundamental unveiling, a way of arriving at Truth. Significantly enough, Yeats progressively realised that poetry could also be seen as mere creation, that, in the end, nothing stimulates the creative act but the powerful will to affirm life. The object of the poet's desire is therefore absorbed into the words interacting on the page. The work of art is characterised by the materials it is concretely made of, and the transcendent principle of referentiality is almost abolished in favour of a Dionysian expression of life's overwhelming energies embodied by repetitions, digressions, accumulations, zones of vibration and stuttering, as in the final lines of "Lapis Lazuli":

...and I  
Delight to imagine them seated there;  
There, on the mountain and the sky,  
On all the tragic scene they stare.  
One asks for mournful melodies;  
Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay. (79)



The “tragic scene” of human existence is a sight that can certainly be lamented over (“mournful melodies”), but the whole point of life is precisely to transfigure that dread by affirming oneself and one’s own limitations and flaws through art. In a radically un-Romantic way therefore, Yeats’s “accomplished fingers” begin to re-enact the dance of life’s energies on the stage of the page, and the repetitions and postponements they imply prove to be nothing short of felicity. For if “Energy is Eternal Delight” (149), as William Blake believed, Yeats chooses to prolong its lifespan through the poem; he chooses to produce an ever-intensifying work of art. Hence the deliberate destruction of the syntax which somehow refuses to fix meaning, as if gaiety (“are gay”) was to be found in one’s capacity for delirium, in the process of launching forth into sounds and carrying out, by so doing, a systematic exemption of signification – in a word, in a way of expressing oneself profusely for affirmation and expression’s sake only. No longer a Romantic poet wishing to utter the unutterable, Yeats ended his career seeking to re-conceive the poetic act by reaching down to the very sources of selfhood, far from the idealistic realm of dreams and sublimations he was so attached to in his youth:

Those masterful images because complete  
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?  
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,  
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,  
Old Iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut  
Who keeps the till. 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. (89)

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