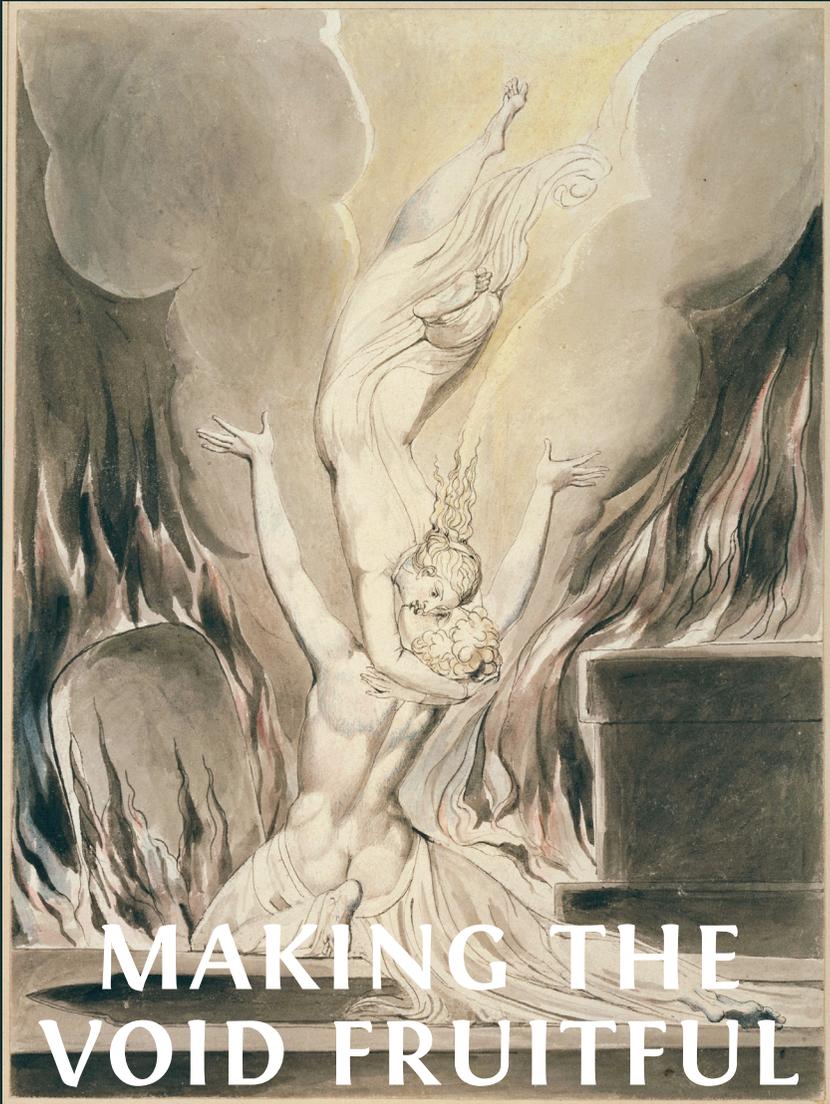


PATRICK J. KEANE



Yeats as Spiritual Seeker
and Petrarchan Lover



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General Prologue: The Thinking of the Body

Since the death of W. B. Yeats in 1939, something close to critical consensus has emerged. In W. H. Auden's image in his elegy, 'all' or at least most of the 'instruments agree' that Yeats was—as T. S. Eliot said in the first Yeats Memorial lecture, delivered a year after Auden's elegy—'the greatest poet of our time.' Attracted by the beauty and power of the poetry, readers have been seduced into engagement with the two subjects that, even more than aging and the Irish Troubles, dominate that poetry and most fascinated Yeats himself. First, his engagement, though it perplexed or repelled Eliot and Auden, with various forms of the occult; second, and more appealing to most readers, there is Yeats's fascination with his Muse, Maud Gonne, a romantic agony that resulted in the greatest body of love lyrics by a poet since the Laura-centered *Canzoniere* of Petrarch.

The older he got, the more Yeats revealed a mischievous sense of humor, a penchant for 'simplification through intensity,' and sexual candor, especially when it came to his most sacred subjects. In 1927, the sixty-two-year-old 'Mage' and Muse-poet announced in a letter, 'I am still of opinion that only two topics can be of the least interest to a serious and studious mind—sex and the dead' (L, 730). In thus reducing his very serious interest in the mingling of the erotic and occult, Yeats was exaggerating to amuse. He was writing, after all, to Olivia Shakespear, his first lover (half a lifetime ago, Yeats being then thirty-one), and later most intimate correspondent. But he was also serious. At the time he wrote this letter, his version of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* was being performed at the Abbey Theatre, and some inexplicable occurrences caused him to describe the play to Olivia as 'haunted.' He was also working, he told her, on new poems intended for the 1929 Fountain Press edition of *The Winding Stair*. He mentions specifically 'a new Tower poem "Sword and

Tower," which is a choice of rebirth rather than deliverance from birth,' a theme reflecting his interest in both reincarnation and the idea of Eternal Recurrence as presented by 'that strong enchanter, Nietzsche' (L, 379).

The eventual title of 'Sword and Tower' would be 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul,' for me not only the central poem in both editions of *The Winding Stair*, but, in many ways, the central poem in the Yeatsian canon, and one to which I devote considerable attention in the pages that follow. As he informed Olivia, 'I make my Japanese sword and its silk covering my symbol of life.' And he ended the letter, after referring to 'sex and the dead' as the 'only two topics' that mattered, by telling Olivia that these 'new poems interrupted' his rewriting of *A Vision*. 'Perhaps were that finished,' he concludes jocosely, 'I might find some third interest' (L, 730).

It would take a decade to rewrite his major occult text, first published in January 1926 (though dated 1925), a volume reflecting his own esoteric preoccupations but also based on years of collaboration with his wife in transcribing the 'automatic writing' at which she became adept. *A Vision* is dominated by Yeats's driving dynamic, in both his thought and his poetry: the perpetual tension between apparent opposites, or Blakean Contraries, the polarity between what he calls (always employing italics), the *primary* (or 'objective') and the *antithetical* (or 'subjective'). Many of his central concepts—this *primary-antithetical* dualism, Mask, Will, the Daimon, Unity of Being, the two-thousand-year cycles of history, the posthumous process labeled the Dreaming Back—receive their fullest exposition in *A Vision*. But they only come to life for most readers in the poetry and plays, where (in Wallace Stevens's phrase from 'Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction') these concepts become 'abstractions blooded.'

For that reason, even in Part One of the present volume, I will have little to say of *A Vision*, and even of 'The Phases of the Moon' (1918), the engaging poem in which Yeats foreshadows, synopsisizes, and dramatizes the 'system' of lunar phases later elaborated in prose. Since I neglect it later (unfairly, since it is much more fun than *A Vision*), I will say here that 'The Phases of the Moon' takes the form of one of Yeats's many dialogue-poems—in this case, between Owen Aherne and Michael Robartes, Yeatsian personae who first appeared in the 'nineties.' They now reappear at night outside Yeats's Tower, an austere 'place set out for wisdom,'

where, according to Robartes, the poet-mage, burning the midnight oil, 'seeks in book or manuscript/ What he shall never find.' At the end of the poem, mischievous Aherne, having been rehearsed in the details of the system by his companion, thinks to cross the Tower threshold and 'mutter' just enough of Robartes' 'mysterious wisdom' to torment Yeats, who would

crack his wits
 Day after day; yet never find the meaning.
*And then he laughed to think that what seemed hard
 Should be so simple—a bat rose from the hazels
 And circled round him with its squeaky cry,
 The light in the tower window was put out.*

But the last laugh may not be Aherne's. As I read that final line, the light in the tower window has been put out, not because Yeats the 'Apprentice Mage,' as R. S. Foster described him, has given up in frustration, but because Yeats the Poet has finished writing his poem, the creator having triumphed over the personae he himself created.

In keeping with that priority, the present volume engages in close reading of selected poems. Part One, examining Yeats as spiritual Seeker and Romantic Poet, focuses on the attractions of the Otherworld (whether Fairyland, Byzantium, or the Christian Heaven) and the gravitational pull of *this* world, with the focus always on the poetry itself, including Yeats's remarkable mastery of a wide range of lyric forms. Throughout, I attempt to unfold the latent processes of Yeats's thought. In engaging the creative tension between spiritual Seeker and Romantic Poet, which plays out in the polarity between soul and body (the latter 'embodied' in the most crucial debate-poems as Self or Heart), I follow Yeats, both in maintaining the polarity and in emphasizing the claims of the body, even in texts which, like the 'Byzantium' poems, seem soul directed.

Though Aherne is *primary* and Robartes *antithetical*, they agree, in conversing in 'The Phases of the Moon,' that 'All dreams of the soul/ End in a beautiful man's or woman's body' (62–64). By 1918, when he wrote these Robartes poems, Yeats's old 1890s character had become something close to a stand-in for the poet himself. The mask is dropped toward the end of the occult poem 'The Double Vision of Michael Robartes'—centered on a sphinx, a Buddha, and a girl dancing between them—that closes *The Wild Swans at Coole*. In the third and final movement, Robartes

knows that he has 'seen at last/ That girl' he dreams of, and even if his dreams fly, they 'yet in flying fling into my meat/ A crazy juice that makes the pulses beat,' as though he had 'been undone/ By Homer's paragon/ Who never gave the burning town a thought.' That is to say, Yeats's Helen of Troy, Maud Gonne.

The very next poem, the opening and title poem of the volume following *The Wild Swans at Coole*, presents Robartes in dialogue with a dancer, though a girl based not on Maud Gonne—paramount among those 'beautiful women' who, like Helen of Troy, 'eat/ A crazy salad with their meat'—but, according to Yeats's wife, on Maud's daughter, Iseult. 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer,' a sophisticated variation on the *carpe diem* theme, emphasizes the body in so intriguing a way, at once seductive and chauvinistically off-putting, that it compels one to engage in the debate.

§

Robartes is 'He,' lecturing 'She,' that Iseult-like Dancer. He begins by asserting that 'Opinion is not worth a rush.' Two years earlier, in the 1916 poem 'The Dawn,' Yeats himself had wished to 'be—for no knowledge is worth a straw—/ Ignorant and wanton as the dawn': a parallel that helps, along with this dialogue-poem's urbane playfulness, to save 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer' from being a misogynistic tract against female education. 'Opinion,' this poem's first word; 'knowledge' in 'The Dawn'; accused 'opinion' in 'A Prayer for my Daughter,' where Maud Gonne, 'because of her opinionated mind,' bartered away the Horn of Plenty 'For an old bellows full of angry wind': all are forms of what Yeats most dreaded: abstract, opinionated, disembodied thought.

That is the enemy targeted throughout by Robartes, who is, of course, patronizingly opinionated himself and something of an intellectual show-off. Drawing the Dancer's attention to a Renaissance painting featuring a dragon-slayer, a dragon, and a lady, he offers an allegorical interpretation of the altar-piece:

the knight,
Who grips his long spear so to push
That dragon through the fading light,
Loved the lady; and it's plain
The half-dead dragon was her thought.

Though half-dead, draconic 'thought' is, like most dragons, difficult to permanently subdue; 'every morning [it] rose again/ And dug its claws and shrieked and fought.' This dragon of thought comes between not only the lady and the knight who desires her, but between the lady and her own physical beauty. Robartes informs the Dancer that the lady's 'lover thought' that if his beloved would but look in her mirror, she 'on the instant would grow wise': a carnal knowledge Yeats repeatedly terms 'the thinking of the body' (E&I, 292). This integrated, instinctive, intuitive form of thought is closely aligned with what Wordsworth called (in 'The Tables Turned') 'spontaneous wisdom,' in contrast to mere intellection and book-learning. Lovers, Robartes continues, 'turn green with rage/ At all that is not pictured' in the looking glass, which reflects of course only a woman's body, not 'her thought'—that abstract intellect the knight opposes with his own 'thought,' not to mention 'his long spear.'

The young Dancer, artistically aware of her own body, has a mind as well. Mingling seriousness and wit, she asks, 'May I not put myself to college?' Robartes responds with an imperative: 'Go pluck Athena by the hair.' The point of this reversal of those two dramatic moments in the *Iliad* (Books I and XXII), when the goddess of reason and wisdom, Athena, yanks impetuous Achilles by his hair, is that the young Dancer, perhaps all women, should seize wisdom boldly, physically, rather than submit passively to the sort of book-centered education Robartes claims destroys Unity of Being, cleaving body and mind:

Go pluck Athena by the hair;
 For what mere book can grant a knowledge
 With an impassioned gravity
 Appropriate to that beating breast,
 That vigorous thigh, that dreaming eye?
 And may the Devil take the rest.

In his daughter-maddened misogynistic rant King Lear consigned to the Devil all that is below a woman's waist; here, what is dismissed as the damnable 'rest' is what is above the neck. The Dancer, perhaps teasing, perhaps annoyed, persists: 'And must no beautiful woman be/ Learned like a man?' In 'real' as opposed to fictive life, Yeats encouraged Iseult's study of Dante, even of Sanskrit. But since, in the poem, He and She are discussing art, Robartes—who believes as Yeats did that 'all art is

sensuous,' and that 'no painting could move us at all, if our thought did not rush out to the edges of our flesh' (E&I, 293, 292)—turns to the last of the great sixteenth-century Venetian painters who succeeded in unifying mind and body, intellect and the senses: 'Paul Veronese/ And all his sacred company/ Imagined bodies all their days [...] /For proud, soft, ceremonious proof/ That all must come to sight and touch.'

Yeats is putting in his alter ego's mouth that 'doctrine of Nietzsche' he himself had quoted in his 1912 Introduction to Tagore's *Gitanjali* 'that we must not believe in the moral or intellectual beauty which does not sooner or later impress itself upon physical things' (E&I, 389). Robartes continues his obviously Yeatsian art lesson on the physical embodiment of the spiritual by turning to Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel paintings, and his 'Morning' and 'Night' Medici Chapel sculptures, which 'disclose/ How sinew that has been pulled tight,/ Or it may be loosened in repose,/ Can rule by supernatural right/ Yet be but sinew.' Repeating hearsay, the Dancer responds, playfully but also reflecting conventional pieties learned by rote at home, in church, and in school: 'I have heard said/ There is great danger in the body.'

Faced with religious admonitions about the sinful flesh, Robartes cunningly gets God on his side, posing a rhetorical question: 'Did God in portioning wine and bread/ Give man his thought or his mere body?' Yeats had recently, in a 1916 essay, answered that question: 'The Deity gives us not His thought or His convictions but His flesh and blood' (E&I, 235). Jesus portioned out in the Eucharist what was, in himself, integrated (what Yeats elsewhere praises as 'blood, imagination, intellect running together'). This Donne-like mixture of sacramental seriousness, sex, and wit is too much for the Dancer. She cries out, 'My wretched dragon is perplexed.' As is 'plain,' that dragon is 'her thought.' Dryden famously said of Donne that, even in his 'amorous verses,' he 'affects the metaphysics' and '*perplexes* the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy'; and, as Keats reminds us, imagination can be hindered when 'the dull brain *perplexes* and retards.'¹ Such echoes remind us that, like Pope's, Yeats's is a poetry of allusion.

In the poem's final turn, Robartes, having dismissed book-learning as nonchalantly as had early Wordsworth, cites an abstruse text—as

1 Dryden, *A Discourse Concerning the Original and Progress of Satire* (1693). Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale.'

Yeats will have his woman do in 'Chosen' and as he himself does in 'For Anne Gregory.' In having him turn to a book to prove his argument, Yeats reminds us that Robartes is, after all, an occultist, and a pedantic one at that. And yet, Robartes' position, though mildly parodied, is, of course, Yeats's as well: an argument for a Unity of Being in which (as in the conclusion of 'Among School Children') 'the body is not bruised to pleasure soul,' but incorporates soul, achieving a secular blessedness which is 'uncomposite,' rather than composed of divided parts. Half tongue-in-cheek, but only half, Robartes asserts that he has 'principles to prove me right':

It follows from this Latin text
That blest souls are not composite,
And that all beautiful women may
Live in uncomposite blessedness,
And lead us to the like; if they
Will banish every thought, unless
The lineaments that please their view
When the long looking-glass is full,
Even from the foot-sole think it too.

'And lead *us to the like*.' That is the final saving grace in Robartes' playful but apt if overbearing lecture on 'the thinking of the body': the one form of thought he endorses, but the only one that unites rather than divides the normally denigrated body and privileged soul. Robartes' pivotal conjunction, 'unless,' anticipates its more famous appearance in 'Sailing to Byzantium,' where, reversing Robartes' emphasis on the body, 'an aged man is but a paltry thing,' an old scarecrow, 'unless/ Soul clap its hands and sing' as the tattered body decays. Though the Latin text Robartes cites may be Marsilio Ficino's Latin translation of Plotinus, Yeats seems to be thinking more of John Donne, whose work he had been studying for a half-dozen years before he drafted this poem. Writing to H. J. C. Grierson to thank him for the gift of his 1912 edition of Donne (which 'has given me and shall give me I think more pleasure than any other book I can imagine'), Yeats emphasized the mixture, in Donne's poetry, of pedantry and sexuality, 'the rock and the loam of his Eden.' The 'more precise and learned the thought the greater the beauty, the passion; the intricacies and subtleties of his imagination are the lengths and depths of the furrow made by his passion' (L, 570).

In 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer,' Yeats may be thinking, as Seamus Heaney was in a moving late poem, of Donne's lines, in 'The Ecstasy' (71–72), on the soul's need to express itself through the body: 'Love's mysteries in souls do grow,/ But yet the body is his book.'² Like Yeats's poem, 'The Ecstasy' is addressed to a woman and written in alternately rhymed tetrameters, but the conclusion of 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer' recalls in particular the elegiac lines on Elizabeth Drury, the daughter of Donne's patron, dead at fifteen: 'She of whose soule,' if we may describe it as gold, 'Her body was th'Electrum.' Her 'pure and eloquent blood/ Spoke in her cheeks and so distinctly wrought/ That one might almost say, her body thought.'³

That thinking of the body is a pre-eminent Yeatsian ideal, quarried from Blake, Nietzsche, and, most recently, Donne. Responding to Robartes, the Dancer concludes: 'They say such different things at school,' a line recalling the less playful observation made a decade and a half earlier by Maud Gonne's sister in 'Adam's Curse': 'To be born a woman is to know—/ Although they do not talk of it at school—/ That we must labour to be beautiful.'

§

If 'All dreams of the soul/ End in a beautiful man's or woman's body,' many of Yeats's dreams, spiritual and erotic, began and ended with that woman whose 'face and body had the beauty' and nobility of a classical 'goddess' (Mem, 40). The second part of this book, subtitled 'Love's Labyrinth,' explores the 'great labyrinth' that *was* Maud Gonne, Yeats's Homeric paragon. Though I discuss the actual woman who inspired Yeats, I will, again, be occupied primarily with the poems produced by that obsessive and unrequited love: bittersweet fruit which were also,

2 Used as epigraph to 'Chanson D'Aventure,' Heaney's love poem to his wife in the immediate aftermath of his 2006 stroke. The opening section, set in the ambulance, ends: 'we might, O my love, have quoted Donne/ On love on hold, body and soul apart.'

3 Lines embedded in *The Second Anniversary*, 'Of the Progress of the Soul,' 241–46. Coleridge, the one Romantic who appreciated Donne's metaphysical poetry (wreathing 'iron' into 'true love-knots' in 'Wit's forge'), may echo those final lines in the conclusion of 'Phantom,' his dream-vision of the woman he loved, Sara Hutchinson: 'She, she herself and only she/ Shone through her body visibly.' Yeats quoted the Coleridge poem in full in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (Myth, 347).

in Maud Gonne's own striking and gender-bending description in 1911, 'children' *she* had 'fathered' and *he* 'mothered'—and of whom she said, 'our children had wings' (G-YL, 302).

This second section of the book offers a guide to readers navigating the poetry Yeats wrote to and about her. Not since Keats and Fanny Brawne and the Brownings has there been a poetic love affair this engaging. The difference is that the poetry inspired by Maud Gonne is, as Joseph Hassett, author of *W. B. Yeats and His Muses*, has said, 'the most sustained and fully developed tribute to a Muse in the history of literature in English.' Conceding Yeats's greatness as an 'arch-poet,' Harold Bloom, resistant to aspects of Yeats's thought, acquiesces when it comes to Yeats as a love poet, doubting that 'any poet of our century enters into competition here with him.'

As many have lamented (Bloom prominent among them), the number of common or general readers of demanding literature, and of poetry in particular, has steadily diminished, becoming, to a degree unimagined by Milton, 'fit audience though few.' But readers are also human beings, and as such retain interest in experiences in any way spiritual, and in human love, with all its mingling of ecstasy and anguish. No one has exceeded Yeats in bringing these perennial subjects to vivid, aesthetic life through the power and beauty of poetry. In lieu of that vanishing common reader, I hope to interest readers intrigued, as I am, by two phenomena: first, Yeats's vacillation in engaging the spiritual, the pull between Body (or Heart) and Soul, between flesh and spirit and second, the related tensions in the Gonne-Yeats relationship—a relationship at once erotic and spiritual, for Yeats was writing in the Petrarchan tradition and his Muse was both aloof and herself an occultist.

Serious Yeatsians will find here much that is new, and even the familiar presented in unexpected ways. One surprise involves a modest proposal I make about Yeats's intended final poem. His 'last word,' the little lyric titled 'Politics' but about love, is, I suggest, yet another poem about Maud Gonne—a 'last kiss given to the void' (LTSM, 154). Part Two now seems to me a companion piece to a short book written half a lifetime ago: *A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves*. There, I addressed the conflict, at least on Graves's part, with Yeats, his obvious and more successful rival among twentieth-century poets devoted to a lunar Muse. The conflict this time is between what

Yeats hoped for and what his Muse felt she could offer, resulting in the sublimation of thwarted desire into poetry: 'all I had rhymed of that monstrous thing/ Returned and yet unrequited love.' That was in 1915, in 'Presences,' a poem in which Maud appears as a 'queen,' a woman who relished her role as Muse to a great poet, who cared for 'Willie' but did not love him as he did her, and who never fully understood his plans for them, or for Ireland.

In the same year he wrote 'Presences,' the poet anticipated books like this one, and indeed the labors of the whole Yeats industry. In 'The Scholars,' in the course of mocking passionless pedants laboring over the codices of 'their Catullus,' including those poems of 'hate and love' inspired by 'Lesbia,' Yeats slips in a reference to his own plight as a poet of passionate but tormented and often unhappy love. The 'scholars' are respectable old baldpates who, forgetful of their own youthful sins, 'cough in ink' as they

Edit and annotate the lines
That young men, tossing on their beds,
Rhymed out in love's despair
To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.

Maud Gonne was hardly 'ignorant,' but, contemplating the mysteriously 'vague look' in her eyes, Yeats, writing privately between 1915 and 1917, acknowledges that he 'often wondered at its meaning—the wisdom that must surely accompany its symbol, her beauty, or lack of any thought' (Mem, 60). It would seem that the lack of 'thought' and 'knowledge' advocated two or three years later as an ideal for 'beautiful women' in 'Michael Robartes and the Dancer' is not always to be desired. And yet Yeats was also, like Robartes, aware of a potentially negative consequence of knowledge. If it were actually true, as he momentarily imagined in the poem 'Words,' that 'My darling understands it all'—that Maud Gonne fully comprehended his love for her, his poetry, and his vision for Ireland—who 'can say/ What would have shaken from the sieve?/ I might have thrown poor words away/ And been content to live.'