

Yeats at Work

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ABRIDGED



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IN MEMORY OF
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AN INTRODUCTION

AMONG THE YEATS PAPERS IN DUBLIN are working or draft versions of a great many poems. The manuscripts of Yeats's earlier poems, up to the poems printed in *The Green Helmet* (1910), are usually late versions written into bound manuscript books. Few of the rough papers which preceded these versions seem to have survived. The situation is sometimes different with the poems Yeats wrote after 1908. From then on his rough papers were sometimes kept and filed, or he sometimes did all his work on a poem in a bound manuscript book. With many late poems it is possible to study the entire external process of composition, beginning with their prose sketches and continuing through successive drafts until Yeats corrects the final typescript. Chance more than any other factor seems to have governed what was kept and what thrown away.

From this material I have reproduced and analysed draft versions of the following poems: "The Hosting of the Sidhe" and "The Host of the Air," 1893; "The Lover asks Forgiveness because of his Many Moods," 1895; "Words," 1909; "The Wild Swans at Coole," 1916; "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"; section III of "The Tower," 1925; "Lullaby," 1929; "The Mother of God," 1931; section VII of "Vacillation," 1932; "Ribh considers Christian Love insufficient," 1934; "The Gyres," 1937; "The Circus Animals' Desertion,"

1937-38. This selection illustrates the normal process Yeats went through in composing poems. I have avoided on the one hand poems which Yeats largely composed in his head and then wrote down, such as "The Wheel," or poems which gave him particular trouble, such as "Parnell's Funeral." Yeats forced himself to write "Parnell's Funeral" at a time when he had not written a poem in over a year, using as his theme a passage from a lecture, "Modern Ireland," prepared for his last American lecture tour. When Yeats forced the creative process, for whatever reason, the work of composition was too long drawn out and complicated to be easily described.

i

Yeats almost always began work on a poem by composing what he called a "sketch" or "subject" in prose. These subjects state the content of the poems and note the principal images to be developed in them. They were often brief, though sometimes they were put through successive drafts. Some subjects are as long as the poems that grew out of them, some rough poems already. The subjects of section I of "The Tower" and of "Among School Children" are both short:

What shall I do with this absurd toy which they have given me, this grotesque rattle? O heart, O nerves, you are as vigorous as ever. You still hunger for the whole world, and they have given you this toy.

Topic for poem. School children, and the thought that life will waste them, perhaps that no possible life can fulfill their own dreams or even their teacher's hope. Bring in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens.

[Transcribed from a manuscript book begun at Oxford, April 7, 1921.]

Both these subjects, and indeed most others, show that while Yeats was actually composing poems they seldom worked out exactly as he had planned. The rattle became a kettle tied to a dog's tail in section I of "The Tower"; "Among School Children" loses its nostalgic tone during its course and becomes one of Yeats's most powerful statements of Unity of Being. The subject of "Among School Children" fails notably even to suggest the great poem that grew out of it.

Yeats put the "Creed" which is the subject of "Under Ben Bulbin" through three drafts. All three manuscripts are extremely difficult to read: the first, which is the longest, I was unable to transcribe; the second is a brief, summary version, perhaps the earliest of the three; the third draft, based directly on the first, went approximately as follows. (The title is taken from the head of the first draft.)

C R E E D

I

I believe as did the old sages who sat under the palm trees, the banyan trees, or among the snowbound rocks, a thousand years before Christ was born; I believe as did the monks of the Mareotic Sea; as do country men who see the old fighting men and their fine women coming out of the mountain, moving from mountain to mountain.

II

And this is what I believe: that man stands between two eternities, that of his race, that of his soul. Further I declare that man serves these sword in hand and with an armoured mind. That only so armed does man pick the right mate, and only in the midst of a conflict which strains all his mind and his body, and to the utmost, has he wisdom enough to choose his right mate. The wisdom I seek is written on a sword, mirrored on a sword, on Sato's sword, a sword wrapped in a woman's old embroidery.

III

I declare that no evil can happen to the soul except from the soul — that death is a brief parting and brief sickness. What matter though the skies drop fire — children take hands and dance.

[Transcribed from a late looseleaf manuscript notebook. This may be seen as Yeats left it in a microfilm copy at the Houghton Library. The materials in this notebook have now been distributed.]

The subject of "On Woman" anticipates the development of that poem very fully; that of "Lines Written in Dejection" is itself almost a poem [transcribed from the manuscript book begun Christmas, 1912]:

SUBJECT FOR POEM

I give God praise for woman, what is a man's friendship worth beside hers? I praise God because she is a woman, and in her our minds and our bodies find rest. I praise first for her mind where she covers our vague thoughts with the substance of her reverie, for Solomon grew wise in talking to her; and then for her body and the pleasure that comes with sleep; and because in her the vague desires of the dim sky meet the violent, and the curtain shivers: O God, grant me for my gift, not in this life for I begin to grow [old], but somewhere, that I shall love some woman so that every passion, pity, cruel desire, the affection that is full of tears, the abasement as before an image in a savage tent, hatred even it may be, shall find its prey. O God, it is a pity that even you cannot [grant] this to the old, in whom only the heart is insatiable.

No longer the moon
Sends me dark leopards
Green eyed, and wavering [?] in the body
Nor longer her white hares
And that holy centaur of the hills
And the young witches with lofty dissolute faces
Now that I grow old
I have nothing but the harsh sun
I no longer climb in the white mountain valleys
Our heroic mother the moon has vanished
I am alone with the timid sun.

It is difficult to state exactly the role played by these "subjects" in the total economy of poetic composition as Yeats practiced this, difficult because the relations of subjects to finished poems differ greatly. The physical process of working out a poem through successive drafts usually began with these subjects, but it is clear that before writing the subject Yeats had carried the internal, mental aspect of composition much further with some poems than with others. The subjects of "Among School Children" and "Byzantium" illustrate extremes of preparation and lack of preparation. After writing the subject of "Among School Children" Yeats still had nearly everything to do: the poem's principal themes are not anticipated in the subject, among the correlatives used in the poem only the children and the schoolroom setting have been chosen.

In the subject of "Byzantium," on the contrary, the materials of the poem are almost all assembled, and are with one exception in the order in which they appear in the finished poem.

Describe Byzantium as it is in the system towards the end of the first Christian millennium. A walking mummy; flames at the street corners where the soul is purified. Birds of hammered gold singing in the golden trees. In the harbour [dolphins] offering their backs to the wailing dead that they may carry them to paradise.

[Transcribed from the ms. of the 1930 Diary.]

The question cannot be fully answered until all surviving "subjects of poems" by Yeats are collected and studied, including "subjects for poems" — and there are many such — which never developed into poems. Meanwhile here are some tentative conclusions based on such subjects as I have studied: (1) Yeats wrote subjects at various stages of his thinking about a poem; sometimes he had the poem rather fully formed in his mind, at other times he was only beginning to plan it. (2) A close relation of finished poem to subject does not indicate that Yeats found the actual writing of the poem easy. The subjects of "Coole Park, 1929" and "Byzantium" rather fully anticipate the poems that grew out of them. Jon Stallworthy has shown that Yeats had extreme difficulty composing "Coole Park, 1929"; in writing "Byzantium," as I have shown elsewhere,¹ his whole attack shows complete mastery of his ideas and of his technique. (3) Such subjects as I have studied do not by themselves indicate whether Yeats is recording a major or a minor inspiration; they do not even hint at the greatness or lack of greatness of the poems that will grow out of them. Until a full study is made we shall have to be content to conclude that these subjects were for Yeats a necessary beginning. Soon after composing a subject, at times on the same day, Yeats would start work on the poem.

ii

Once he had written his subjects, Yeats had "to find for them some natural speech, rhythm and syntax, and to set it out in some pattern, so seeming old that it may seem all men's speech" ("The Bounty of Sweden" — 1925). This involved great labor of which Yeats often complained. He had to develop a form suited to his particular subject, he had to find and invent descriptive detail and

correlatives that would put flesh on its bare bones, and he had — hardest of all — to make “some natural speech.” He accomplished this in stages when his poem was at all complex; in some short poems he seems to do everything at once. He always, I think, worked on the whole poem though sometimes he started in the middle or even at the end; he did not try to finish one part of it before moving on to the next. Sometimes he wrote drafts not governed by his intended form; these are always, I think, very early. Then he wrote a series of early drafts where everything he does is, after some experimenting, governed by the chosen pattern of line length and rhyme scheme. Then in intermediate drafts Yeats would assemble his whole poems; if these pleased him at all he would initial or sign them. He often made clean copies of such intermediate drafts so that his typist could transcribe them. Yeats then went to work on these transcriptions; he would improve his phrasing, make subtle metrical adjustments, and systematically punctuate his poem. Very often in these transcriptions various parts of a poem are in various stages of finish. When Yeats detected a bad spot, he would make further manuscript drafts until he had got the poem right. He carried on the process of revision in his proofs, and even after printing.

Yeats sometimes made drafts for parts of poems before he had decided on the form of the poem. Yeats probably wrote many such drafts, but very few have survived. Such as have survived are among his most interesting and tantalizing manuscripts; interesting because they record the earliest stages of Yeats at work, tantalizing because they are almost impossible to read. One draft of this sort has been printed three times, that of the first stanza of “Sailing to Byzantium.”² I print below an early draft of what is now stanza v of “Among School Children” as another illustration of what Yeats did in the early stages of forming a poem. Yeats began work on stanza v of “Among School Children,” perhaps on the whole poem, in this manuscript:³

lap	fears	<i>lap</i>
shape	tears	made
	years	<i>escape</i>
	forth birth	betrayed
	forth	shape
		head

An Introduction

- × What mother of a child shrieking the first scream
- × Of a soul

Of a soul struggling to leave

- × Degradation of the [word undeciphered]
 - × Still knowing that it is betrayed [?]
- Still half remembering that it [is] betrayed

What mother with a child upon her breast

Shedding there its tears, all the despair

Of the soul betrayed into the flesh

Would think — [if] it came before her in a vision

The image What the child would be at sixty years

A compensation for the

[There are some other jottings on this page which I cannot transcribe.]

Here the lines Yeats drafts are not governed by the stanza form of “Among School Children,” his adaptation of ottava rima. This was Yeats’s favorite eight-line stanza, and he used it for many of his most famous meditative and philosophic poems. Since almost the first thing Yeats did when starting to work on a poem was to establish his form, a practice illustrated by most of the manuscripts I reproduce, the fact that he had not chosen his form is a fairly certain indication that Yeats began “Among School Children” with what is now stanza v. It seems hardly possible that were he past the midpoint in composing the finished poem he would draft a stanza not governed by form.

There are other bits of evidence that Yeats began “Among School Children” with stanza v, these external. Shortly before writing out the “topic” from which the poem developed (already quoted), Yeats made this entry in the same manuscript book:

I think of my grandfather and grandmother, to whom I was so much, and as I look in the glass, as I look at old age coming, I wonder if they would [have] thought it worth the bother. What have I that they value? I think of my father and mother, and of my first coming to their house. What have I that they value, what would have seemed sufficient at the moment? My thoughts would have seemed superstition to the one and to the other a denial of God.

This is essentially the thought expressed in stanza v of the poem, which repeats one of Yeats's most repelling ideas, a young mother's prevision of her infant son as an old man, expressed earlier in the second stanza of the song that opens *At the Hawk's Well*. Here as so often with Yeats a new poem uses material found in an already finished poem. In stanza v of "Among School Children" it is content, not form, that governs the draft lines Yeats writes, though if we combine the last two words from the list of rhyme words in the middle of the manuscript page with the list on the right they point clearly to an ottava rima rhyme scheme and include all the rhyme words in the finished stanza except "decide." Choosing his rhyme words or rhyme sounds was a standard practice with Yeats when blocking out a stanza.

I reconstruct the order in which Yeats wrote the material on this manuscript page as follows: First he wrote the list of rhyme words in the center of the page which ends with the rhyme words of his closing couplet (birth, forth) carefully reversed from the order in which he originally wrote them down. Then I think he invented the fine couplet:

A compensation for the pang of his birth
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth.

Perhaps he wrote this down someplace else or was trusting his memory, for here he merely dubs it in by writing "A compensation for the." In the draft lines found on this page Yeats was trying to invent matter that might introduce this couplet and fill out his stanza. Yeats then went back to the top of the page and wrote the list of rhyme words to the right. This includes enough of the controlling words of the stanza to indicate that it was now rapidly shaping up in his mind.

A draft of stanza v from a manuscript of the whole poem finished June 14, 1926, makes it almost certain that Yeats worked with the above sheet of notes before him, for as we move back and forth from notes to draft we find that in the draft Yeats further explores nearly every detail found in the notes: the child's cries, its struggle to escape the degradation of incarnation, its recollections of immortality. Yeats slowly discards details that do not work as he finds the details he needs to fill out his stanza.

5

- What youthful mother, rocking on her lap
 × A fretful thing that knows itself betrayed
 × And struggles with vain clamour to escape
 × Before its memory and apprehension fade
 × Before its the memories of its freedom fade
 × Would think — had she ~~foreknown~~ foreknowledge of that shape
 × Would think her son could she foreknow that shape
 × Her son with sixty winters on his head
 × With maybe sixty winter ~~on~~ upon his head
 × With sixty or more winters upon his head

[The next twelve lines were written on the facing page.]

- A thing, the ~~oblivious honey has~~ generative honey had betrayed
 × And that shrieks out and struggles to escape
 35 And that must sleep, ~~or~~ shriek struggle to escape
 × As its drugged memories gleam or fade
 × As it
 × As still but half drugged memories decide
 × As its drugged memories may decide
 × Where some brief memories or the drug decide
 × ~~As flitting~~ As sudden memories or the drug decide
 36 As recollection or the drug decide
 37 Would think her son, ~~could she foreknow~~ did she but see that
 shape
 38 With sixty or more winters on his its head

[Returns to the principal draft.]

- 39 A compensation for the pang of his birth
 40 Or the uncertainty of his setting forth? *

Many early drafts controlled by a form Yeats had invented or was soon to invent have survived, though often they represent only parts of a poem. Apparently Yeats normally started without a fully set form. Indeed in only one manuscript known to me ("Byzantium") does Yeats set his rhyme scheme at the top of his first draft. Characteristically he feels his way into the form by experimenting with rhyme schemes and, especially, line lengths. In the early drafts of

section III of "The Tower" we will find Yeats trying lines with three or four stresses before deciding on three; in early drafts of "Lullaby" and "The Gyres" the stanza form emerges, so to speak. But the first thing Yeats did was to set his form; once he had set it he rarely changed. Rhyme words and rhyme sounds were also established very early in the process of composing and they will often stand firm while the entire context changes around them. They are abandoned only when Yeats has decided that a radical new beginning is needed to remove a bad spot from a poem.

In these early drafts Yeats slowly accumulates additional correlatives, that is the descriptive detail, objects, and images he needs to express the idea contained in his subject. With these change is constant; they come into a poem and go out of it through a long process during which Yeats will finally select those details that best serve his purpose. The multiple drafts of lines 9-32 of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" illustrate this refinement. As this process is going on Yeats will slowly — sometimes with agonizing slowness — find the words he wants, find that "natural speech so seeming old that it may seem all men's speech." The early drafts of "The Wild Swans at Coole" brilliantly illustrate this slow improvement of Yeats's diction.

Most of the surviving manuscripts of Yeats's poems are intermediate drafts, drafts that is of whole poems which are very often initialed or signed, and dated. (Incidentally, these are usually the dates given by Richard Ellmann and others for the composition of particular poems; Yeats rarely recorded the dates on which he actually finished a poem. Often many months elapsed between intermediate and final drafts.) These are always working drafts in which Yeats constantly revises as he goes along. In most intermediate drafts the various parts of the poem show various states of finish. There is no pattern I can discover in the occurrence of bad spots in particular poems. The first two stanzas of "Sailing to Byzantium" had to be rewritten; stanzas 2 and 3 of part I of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"; the last stanza of "The Circus Animals' Desertion." These intermediate drafts are fully illustrated in the discussion of particular poems which follows. Very often Yeats made a clean copy of such intermediate drafts so that a typist could transcribe it.

Yeats's poems were typed at this point, usually in multiple copies. Yeats preferred to have Mrs. Yeats transcribe his manuscripts, but

whether she or another made the typed versions, great care was taken not to add anything, particularly not to add any punctuation. When Yeats went to work on a typescript, he would first of all correct it, filling in blanks which the typist had left when unable to read his writing, improving spelling and capitalization. He would make careful adjustments of meter by dropping or adding syllables, usually one syllable words. Yeats's manuscripts are very lightly punctuated, and he often used one copy of a typescript solely for punctuation. A typescript of "News for the Delphic Oracle" with the punctuation Yeats added inserted in brackets illustrates this practice.

NEWS FOR THE DELPHIC ORACLE

I

There all the golden codgers lay[,]
 There the silver dew[,]
 And the great water sighed for love
 And the wind sighed too[.]
 Man-picker Niamh leant and sighed
 By Oisin on the grass[;]
 There sighed amid his choir of love
 Tall Pythagoras.
 Plotinus came and looked about[,]
 The salt flakes on his breast[,]
 And having stretched and yawned awhile
 Lay sighing like the rest.

II

Straddling each a dolphin's back
 And steadied by a fin
 The Holy Innocents re-live their death[,]
 Their wounds open again[.]
 The ecstatic waters laugh because
 Those cries are sweet and strange[,]
 Through their ancestral patterns dance
 And the brute dolphins plunge
 Until in some cliff-sheltered bay
 Where wades the choir of love
 Proffering its sacred laurel crowns[,]
 They pitch their burdens off.

III

Slim adolescence that a nymph has stripped[,]
 Peleus on Thetis stares[,]
 Her limbs are delicate as an eyelid[,]
 Love has blinded him with tears[;]
 But Thetis' belly listens[.]
 Down the mountain walls
 From where Pan's cavern is
 Intolerable music falls[.]
 Foul goathead, brutal arm appear,
 Belly, shoulder, bum
 Flash fishlike[;] nymphs and satyrs
 Copulate in the foam.

This is an excellent example of rhetorical as opposed to grammatical punctuation; it suggests to us, if we remember that in his own readings Yeats always paused at line ends whether there was a mark of punctuation or not, how Yeats heard the poem and how he wanted us to hear it.⁵

If Yeats became seriously dissatisfied with some section of a poem that had already been typed, he would usually start work on the offending lines in the margins and between the lines of typing. When he had used up the available space, he would begin again in manuscript. This process is illustrated below in the drafts of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" and "The Circus Animals' Desertion." These new manuscripts were in their turn typed and corrected until Yeats was satisfied with a poem. A final typescript was made from which the poem was printed. Yeats continued correction in proof, though in later years he made few changes. Even this was not the end, for Yeats continued to improve his poems after he had had them printed; he used successive editions for such improvement. Here again in his later years his practice grew more conservative. Readers of the *Macmillan Wild Swans* (1919), *Michael Robartes* (in *Later Poems*, 1922), *The Tower* (1928), *The Winding Stair* (1933), and *A Full Moon in March* (1935) generally found the final versions in these books.

iii

Yeats's revisions move in three directions, though the third is not operative in his early poetry. The first is toward correctness, toward an effort to make a poem in process, say a ballad such as "The Hosting of the Sidhe," conform more fully with Yeats's abstract ideal or norm of what a ballad should be. A second type of revision, which might be called mimesis or imitation — though given the long history of these words in literary criticism one would like to find a fresh word — involves an effort to make the imagined scene or action of a poem increasingly vivid sensuously. Both types of revision involve primarily meter and diction, both are illustrated in the revisions of "The Hosting of the Sidhe" and "The Host of the Air." A third type of revision is concerned with the management of the personae invented or being invented for a particular poem; such revisions demonstrate Yeats's effort to control the expressiveness of these personae, to properly modulate the voice speaking the poem.

The personae of most of Yeats's early poems are so vague and abstract that they have almost been refined out of existence. And herein, I think, we find one source of the limitation of Yeats's poetry up through *The Wind Among the Reeds*. The vagueness and abstractness of the personae of Yeats's early poems will be discussed in the following chapter. Here it is enough to say that because Yeats often failed to define sharply the personae of his early poems his revisions of them are two dimensional only, involve what we have called correctness and mimesis. But singsong, however subtle and refined it may become, is good only in limited contexts, and realism is not the goal of a lyric poet.

Wordsworth defined the poet as a man speaking to men, and, however much Yeats disliked Wordsworth's moralizing and didacticism, he came fully to agree with his definition of a poet. Yeats came into his own as a poet when he developed and then made operative a belief that a poem must be a personal utterance, though the phrase "personal utterance" may easily mislead us unless we define it by observing how it worked in Yeats's own poetry and the various ways in which he qualified it by later observations, as in his description of an effective poetic persona in "The First Principle"

quoted below. Certainly Yeats at no time in his life regarded poetry as a mode of what is loosely called "self expression"; the very complexity of his concept of the self as involving the "mask" and the "anti-self" make us sure of this. And in the same essay from which "The First Principal" is quoted Yeats wrote "I knew . . . that I must turn from that modern literature Jonathan Swift compared to the web a spider draws out of its bowels; I hated and still hate with an ever growing hatred the literature of the point of view."

Still Yeats did believe that the voice of a poet is the voice of a man, that this must be so because poetry is memorable speech and speech comes from a man. Beginning with "Adam's Curse" most of Yeats's poems are personal utterances, and because they are Yeats is constantly involved in managing the personae he has invented to speak them. This is particularly true of poems using an I-persona. This is Yeats's favorite; sixty-two of Yeats's poems begin with the word "I" to count those instances alone. Much of Yeats's revision of his later poetry is concerned with developing and controlling the expressiveness of his personae. Such revisions are both more important and more revealing than revisions made in the interests of correctness and mimesis. Three dimensional revision will be found at work in the successive drafts of "The Wild Swans at Coole."

Yeats stated his concept of an effective persona far better than I can state it in the opening sentences of "A General Introduction for My Work" written in 1937 and recently printed for the first time in *Essays and Introductions*. He called this part of his essay "The First Principle":

A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria. . . . Even when the poet seems most himself, when he is Raleigh and gives potentates the lie, or Shelley 'a nerve o'er which do creep the else unfelt oppressions of this earth,' or Byron when 'the soul wears out the breast' as 'the sword outwears its sheath,' he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete. A novelist might describe his accident, his incoherence, he must not; he is more type than man, more passion than type. He is Lear, Romeo, Oedipus, Tiresias; he has stepped out of a play, and

even the woman he loves is Rosalind, Cleopatra, never The Dark Lady. He is part of his own phantasmagoria and we adore him because nature has grown intelligible, and by so doing a part of our creative power.

Yeats sometimes had difficulty achieving this ideal; there is always a danger when using an I-persona that too much of his accident will creep into a poem, and we will find that this indeed happened in early drafts of many of the poems studied below. Yeats's principal problem in revision was then to control this accident. This was particularly difficult when the persona was Yeats himself, for Yeats had then to invent a phantasmagoric Yeats, had to refine the accident of a particular man involved in an actual situation in the alembic of his imagination. Perhaps the greatest paradox in Yeats's development as a poet was that he became truly a public poet only after he had become a private one; eventually he came to express whatever was nearest to hand, say a statuette carved in lapis lazuli standing on the mantel in his study, in the mode of public speech for which he has so justly been praised.

Eight of the later poems studied use variations of the I-persona, though sometimes only incidentally: "Words," "The Wild Swans at Coole," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," section III of "The Tower," section VIII of "Vacillation," "Ribh considers Christian Love insufficient," "The Gyres," and "The Circus Animals' Desertion." In "Words," "Vacillation," "Ribh considers Christian Love insufficient," and "The Gyres" Yeats had little or no trouble managing his personae, and it is, I think, because their personae came right from the start that Yeats appears to have written these poems with relative ease. In the others Yeats had trouble managing the personae, sometimes serious trouble. When the trouble is serious Yeats will write draft after draft until he has transmuted accident into permanence. In "Lullaby" and "The Mother of God" Yeats invents more objective personae, the mother who speaks the lullaby, and Mary. But even in these poems Yeats's belief that a poem should be in some way a personal utterance controls what Yeats writes, indeed enables him in the later poem to use material he might not otherwise have managed.

21-24, even in their detail, as when in line 24 he replaces "unfashionable gyre" with "old forgotten gyre."

Yeats accomplishes some of the necessary repairs in his revision of rs. 1. He begins these by inventing a new seventeenth line which still stands: "Conduct and work grow coarse and coarse the soul." This at once summarizes the situation described in stanzas 1 and 2, and points toward the need to disinter "the three" who will demonstrate right conduct, work, and soul. Yeats then tries the effect of naming the three both at line 20 and line 23, with very awkward results. His syntax no longer works, but he has somehow got the three back into his penultimate line where they need to be. A few more changes, the most important being the return to the text of the felicitous epithet "unfashionable," and lines 23 and 24 are done. Yeats has still to rework his syntax and further adjust lines 18, 20, 21, and 22.

In the revised rs. 2 Yeats solves all his remaining problems. He first writes a new and final eighteenth line which begins by repeating the phrase "what matter" for the fourth time. He drops the "dark and bright that Rocky Face holds dear" and fills out the line with "those that Rocky Face holds dear," a reworking of line 18 in the dated manuscript. He finishes lines 20-22 by spreading open still further the two parts of his verb "shall disinter" so that they now frame these lines. Within this frame Yeats rearranges his detail: he revises what had been line 22 to make his now finished twentieth line, and invents new matter for line 22, matter which further describes the enigmatic dark from which "the three" are to be disintered. Stanza 3 is done; the poem is done save for a little touching up of stanza 2.

v

"The Circus Animals' Desertion"

YEATS WROTE the first complete draft of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" in London during November 1937. In this manuscript the first four stanzas are very like the poem we know, save that the key or theme word of the poem, "heart," does not occur at lines 4, 13, and 27. The fifth stanza is quite different from that found in the finished poem. A typescript was made from this manuscript, and though this was corrected the poem remained pretty much as in the manuscript until September 1938 when Yeats went to work on it again and created the poem we know. It was among the last to be finished of his

major poems and shows Yeats at work during his last year. The drafts show that Yeats's discipline, his ability to keep at a poem until it came right never deserted him. Since this whole study of Yeats at work on poems is a record of his craftsmanship, a demonstration that he did not write his poems in a trance though some of them began in dream visions, an analysis of the composition of "The Circus Animals' Desertion" brings it to an appropriate close.

Below is a list of the drafts of "The Circus Animals' Desertion," arranged in what I believe to be the order they were written.

- MS. 1a. An early draft of stanza 1 and part of stanza 2.
- MS. 1b. Another draft of stanza 1.
- MS. 1c. Another draft of stanza 2.
- MS. 2. A manuscript of the whole poem, dated "London November 1937."
- MS. 3. Another draft of stanza 5, later than MS. 2 but earlier than rs. 1.
- TS. 1. A transcription of MSS. 2 and 3, with corrections in WBY's hand.
- TS. 2. A copy of the corrected rs. 1, with further manuscript corrections. Either WBY or George Yeats has written on it, "corrected Sept. 15."
- TS. 3. A transcript of TS. 2 as corrected, with new and very important manuscript changes.
- TS. 4. Another copy with further manuscript corrections, and a draft of a new fifth stanza in Yeats's hand. WBY has dated it "corrected Sept 23," and opposite the new draft has written "insert slip X."
- MS. 4. Has the heading "Slip X." Two further drafts of stanza 5.

All of these drafts are printed below, and I follow each of them with my comments.

[MS. 1a]

- × For some
I have sought a theme and sought for it in vain
And sought for it daily for some five weeks ~~now~~ or so
- × I that/ perhaps
I am too old — old men alter
- × Something resembling happiness they know

- × If not happiness itself a show
- × Of happiness because do not show
As much of happiness as a man can know
- × Their minds are full and they no longer strain
- × Like drowning men and [two words undeciphered] strain
- × Their minds are too full now for pain and strain
- × They have no [two words undeciphered] but the care to sow
For their full minds ~~have~~ may put off pain and strain
And all poetic themes are plants that grow
Out of the necessity of a mind
That were they lacking were but burning sand

[From the verso of this sheet the beginnings of stanza 2.]

- A poem that no matter where it goes seems
Is ~~but an allegory~~ allegorical like those ancient shows
Of wretched life, but I set Usheen ride
- × And I starved for the bosom of his bride
- 16 ~~And~~ I starved for the bosom of his faery bride.

[ms. 1b]

[From the back of one of the pages of the ms. of "The Municipal Gallery Revisited."]

- I have sought a theme and sought for it in vain
I have [sought] it daily for five weeks or so
Perhaps I shall not find it an old man
Perhaps I am [at] last too old a man
~~And~~ I must be ~~content~~ satisfied with fact although
Last winter dream or theme before me ran
My As traveling circus all the my beasts on show
- × Giraffe and men on stilts or in a chariot
 - × Woman and lion and the Lord knows what
Giraffe, men on stilts, a high chariot
Giraffe, men upon stilts, or a high chariot
Lion and woman and Lord knows what

[ms. 1c]

[Another page of jottings for the second stanza.]

Through those three isles that are in all men's dreams

- Through those three ~~islands~~ isles, or ~~allegoric dreams~~ three
~~perfect dreams~~ or allegoric dreams
- × A journey dance insatiable [?] blows
 - × Peace ending wretchedly
Of insatiable [?] joy, insatiable [?] blows
Insatiable [?] peace, ~~three allegoric themes~~ one of those
themes
- The middle ages put into their shows
Or so I think that set on the ride

[All the above cancelled.]

- Yet images were more than life it seems
- 10 First that sea rider Usheen led by the nose
- 11 Through three ~~allegorical~~ enchanted islands, allegorical
~~dreams~~
- Of the emptiness of joy, battle and repose
- × One of those
A summing up of life — one of those themes
The middle ages put in songs and shows
Or so I thought [that] set him on to ride
Starved for the bosom of his faery bride.

Manuscript 1 is, I believe, a very early draft, indeed it may be Yeats's first draft. It resembles other first drafts in its not quite certain exploration of materials and structure, in consisting mostly of cancelled lines, and in being extremely difficult to decipher. Already the stanza pattern of the poem has been determined (ottava rima) and governs what Yeats writes. He has set the a and b rhyme sounds of the finished poem (vain, strain; so, know, show), though only "vain," "so," and "show" persisted. Yeats later abandoned the c rhyme used here (mind, sand). Of the matters explored in the finished first stanza we find only the search for a new theme and Yeats's fear that he is too old to find one. The circus animals are notably absent. In their place we find a statement that poetic themes grow out of the necessity of a mind, which without such growth would be a veritable desert. In the draft on ms. 1b Yeats makes definite progress. The circus animals arrive: Yeats has assembled his materials, and he fills out, though in places rather hurriedly, his intended form. Seven line ends are in place (vain, so, man, although, show, chariot, what), and although no lines are quite finished 1, 2, 3, 7, and 8 are nearly so. Two details in this

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- × Why brood upon old triumphs? Prepare to die
 × For all those burnished chariots are in flight.
 × O hours of triumph come and make me gay;
 × Even at the approach of/ For even on/ For on the edge of
 the unimagined night
 × Man has the refuge of his gaiety;
 But lonely to the lone; ~~the~~ tents blown away
 Women and stilts and chariots all in flight
 Man makes a refuge of his gaiety
~~Mocks the approach~~ Even at the approach of unimagined
 night
 O hour of triumph come and make me gay
 A dab of black enhances every white
 Tension is but the vigour of the mind,
 Cannon the god and father of mankind.

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November 1937

[MS. 3]

[On a separate sheet WBY wrote another draft of the final stanza which is later than the complete ms. but earlier than TS. 1.]

- Why brood upon old triumphs, prepare to die
 × Renounce immortality learn to die
 The burnished chariot is wheeled away from sight
 O hour of triumph come and make me gay
 × For though the black velvet of unimagined night
 × Comes I have still my gaiety
 Even at the approach of unimagined night
 Man has the refuge [of his] gaiety
 A dab of black enhances every white
 Tension is but the vigour of the mind
 Cannon the God and father of mankind

Yeats made several interesting changes in this draft of stanza 1 and nearly completed his first eight lines. In line 2 "five weeks" becomes "six weeks," perhaps an indication that draft 1b had been written some days before. Line 3 was greatly improved:

- ms. 1b Perhaps I am [at] last too old a man
 ms. 2 Maybe at last being but a broken man.

In line 4, when Yeats wrote and cancelled "contented with this heart," he began to explore the central theme of the finished poem, but for some reason backed away from it. "Satisfied with life," which Yeats allowed to stand, is an advance over "satisfied with fact." Line 5 in ms. 1b read

Last winter dream or theme before me ran

when Yeats finished line 5 here he has generalized his statement, removed the accident of the moment from it

Winter and summer till old age began.

The diction of line 6 has improved amazingly:

- ms. 1b As travelling circus all my beasts on show
 ms. 2 My circus animals were all on show.

Knowing that the "stilted boys" of line 7 derived from "men upon stilts" adds a new dimension to the meaning of Yeats's epithet. Oisín and Forgael walk upon stilts, so to speak, but they are also stilted in the more usual, metaphoric sense. Lines 1, 3, 5-8 are done, line 2 nearly done, all the line ends are established.

In stanza 2 Yeats also made great progress. In line 9, "more than life" (1c) becomes "more grand than life," then "outglittered life," "counted more than life," "Those tragic toys were more than life." It was no doubt after he had written the phrase "tragic toys" that Yeats tried at the head of this draft the title "Tragic Toys." Yeats finally dropped all of these descriptions of his emblems in order to express again his lack of a new theme. The line, "What can I but enumerate old themes," is a happy introduction to section 2 of the poem. At line 14 the reference to the Middle Ages in the earlier drafts is absorbed in the epithet "old." All the line ends are set; three additional lines are finished (9, 14, 15); line 16 has again the form of the 1a draft.

Since no earlier drafts of stanzas 3 and 4 have come to light, no study of Yeats's progress is possible. Stanza 3 is finished save for one word in line 24; stanza 4 nearly as far along. I have marked line 26 finished, for I feel certain "Cuchulain fought the invulnerable sea" is

the reading Yeats intended. His manuscript is unusually clear at this point; there can be no doubt that he wrote "invulnerable." ⁴ It is inconceivable that Yeats would consciously back off from this into "ungovernable," though that does fill out the meter and works after a fashion. His typist made the mistake, and Yeats may never have noticed it, given the eye's uncanny ability to see what it expects rather than what is on the page. Here and elsewhere, as I show, Yeats's text could be considerably improved by a study of his manuscripts.

Neither in ms. 2 nor 3 does Yeats achieve even an adumbration of his splendid final stanza. In ms. 2 he recapitulates details from earlier parts of the poem, then goes on to introduce a recollection of "Lapis Lazuli" in the play on "gay" and "gaiety." One is reminded by this typical event of how "The Fisherman" haunted section 3 of "The Tower" many years before. Yeats's anticipation of his own death is too baldly expressed, and the last two rather cryptic lines add little to what he has said elsewhere about the role of violence in human life. In ms. 3 Yeats slightly rearranged his materials and even his lines (3 to 5, 5 to 3), but makes no significant progress. He still has trouble managing his persona, and he has not got rid of echoes from earlier poems.

Typescript 1 was transcribed from mss. 2 and 3. Then Yeats corrected it, particularly the pointing, in his own hand. I print below this characteristic rs. as corrected.

[rs. 1]

THE CIRCUS ANIMALS' DESERTION

- 1 I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
- 2 I ~~have~~ sought it daily for six weeks or so.
- 3 Maybe at last being but a broken man
I must be satisfied with life, although
- 5 Winter and summer till old age began
- 6 My circus animals were all on show,
- 7 Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
- 8 Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.
- 9 What can I but enumerate old themes,
- 10 First that sea-rider Oisín led by the nose
- 11 Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
- 12 Vain ~~exaltation~~ gaiety, vain battle, and vain repose,
A summing up of life, or so it seems,

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- 14 That might adorn old songs or courtly shows;
- 15 But what cared I that set him on to ride;
- 16 I, starved for the bosom of his faery bride.

- 17 And then a counter truth filled out its play,
- 18 "The Countess Cathleen" was the name I gave it,
- 19 She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away
But masterful heaven intervened to save it.
- 21 I thought my dear must her own soul destroy
- 22 So did fanaticism and hate enslave it
- 23 And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
The dream itself had all my thought and love.

- And then when Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
- 26 Cuchulain fought the [ungovernable] sea;
Great mysteries there, and yet when all is said
 - 28 It was the dream itself enchanted me:
 - 29 Character isolated by a deed
 - 30 To engross the present and dominate memory.
The players and the painted stage took all my love
 - 32 And not those things that they were emblems of.

- × Why brood upon old triumphs, prepare to die
- × For all those burnished chariots are in flight,
- × What if burnished chariots are put to flight,
- × O hour of triumph come and make me gay.
O hour of triumph come and make me gay.
If burnished chariots are put to flight
Why brood upon old triumph; prepare to die
Even at the approach of un-imagined night
Man has the refuge of his gaiety,
A dab of black enhances every white,
Tension is but the vigour of the mind,
Cannon the god and father of mankind.

Yeats finished lines 2 and 12 by correcting rs. 1; the change in line 12 from "exaltation" to "gaiety" is certainly a preparation for stanza 5 of this version. The slight rearrangement of the first three lines of stanza 5 was written out by Yeats and cued into its proper place. Typescript 2 is a copy of rs. 1 as corrected, except that again Yeats has written out the revised beginning of stanza 5 and cued it

into place, evidence that those lines were changed after rs. 2 was typed. There is one other manuscript correction: in line 25 "And then when" becomes "And when." With the cancellation of "then" line 25 is finished. More important than these minor changes is the annotation "corrected Sept. 15," probably by George Yeats. (I don't remember Yeats ever putting a period after the abbreviation of a month.) This must mean that rs. 2 represents the state "The Circus Animals' Desertion" had reached in September 1938, ten months after ms. 2 was written.

In rss. 3 and 4 and in ms. 4 Yeats finished his poem. In rs. 3 Yeats introduces the modal or thematic word of his finished poem when he makes the following changes in his own hand:

- 4 "satisfied with life" becomes "satisfied with my heart"
- 13 "A summing up of life" becomes "Themes of the embittered heart" (Yeats first tried another phrase, which I cannot decipher.)
- 27 "Great mysteries there" becomes "Heart mysteries there"

Yeats then went on to cancel stanza 5, an event for which these changes prepare. He wrote one line of a possible substitute stanza:

Animals and chariots ~~are~~ be still poetic themes.

He also inserted Roman numerals I and II before stanzas 1 and 2 where they are still to be found. Lines 4, 13, and 27 are now finished.

Yeats wrote all the changes noted above into another copy of the poem, which I call rs. 4. At the head of the sheet he experimented further with his title. He cancelled "The Circus Animals' Desertion"; wrote and cancelled "Despair"; wrote "On the Lack of a Theme" and let that stand. He finished line 31 by cancelling "the" before "players" and "painted." He again cancelled stanza 5, wrote a new version of it into the margins of the sheet, and dated it "corrected Sept 23." Here is the new version of stanza 5:

- × The faery woman, Cathleen, Fool and Blind Man
- × Their cousins and their brothers because complete
- 33 ~~These processional forms~~ Those masterful images
because complete
- 34 Grew in pure mind but out of what began? intellect but
how began
- Out of From the inanimate sweepings of the street,

- Bits of old newspaper, that broken can?
- × Or from old rag and bone, that raving slut
From rag and bone, that raving slut
Called Heart and Company. My ladder's gone
And I lie down where all the ladders start
- 40 In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

I think Yeats had invented his splendid final line before he began this draft; the handling of detail in the middle of the stanza seems to point toward it unmistakably. He began by direct allusions to stanzas 2, 3, and 4, then decided to remind his readers of them by two phrases which begin with the demonstrative "those": "Those processional forms/ Those masterful images." No English poet after Spenser has used the allegorical procession so frequently as Yeats; such processions flourish in his poetry from beginning to end. The phrase does evoke *Oisín*, so full of processions, more clearly than *Cathleen* or *On Baile's Strand*, and this may account for the changed reading. Yeats hesitates between "mind" and "intellect" to state the contrast between art and its emotional source, then goes on to explore detail that may be used to describe the rag and bone shop, a process he continues through two later drafts. Yeats in this first draft involves the heart in the rag and bone shop less successfully than later, but his "that raving slut/ Called Heart and Company" does explain what I should have guessed but never had, that the heart keeps the till in the heart's rag-and-bone shop. The ladder that follows, apparently struck off at white heat, is one of Yeats's more complex images. Surely the ladder stands for the pure mind or intellect, the fusing-all-to-one imagination, the faculty which invents the art work. Yeats's splendid final couplet reminds him and us that this art, though a product of pure mind, began of necessity in the accident of feeling.

Typescript 4 had become so written over that Yeats put in the margin "insert from slip X." I next print Slip X, containing the two final drafts of stanza 5.

[MS. 4]

SLIP X

III

- 33 Those masterful images because complete
- 34× Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?

Grew in pure intellect, but ~~where~~ from what began?
 In ~~this and that~~ ~~Old orange peel,~~ ~~dirt~~ Dirt, orange peel, the
 sweepings of the street
 Bits of ~~old~~ Old bits [of] newspaper, a broken can,
 37 Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
 38 Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
 39 I must lie down where all the ladders start
 40 In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart

[WBV cancels the above entire.]

III

33 Those masterful images because complete
 34 Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
 35 ~~Dirt, orange peel~~ A mound of refuse or the sweepings of ~~the~~
 a street,
 36 Old ~~whiskey bottles~~ kettles, old bottles and a broken can
 37 Old iron, old bones, old rags, ~~that~~ the raving slut
 38 Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone
 39 I must lie down where all the ladders start
 40 In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

In these final drafts Yeats's progress seems inevitable. He hesitated still between "pure mind" and "pure intellect," finally deciding on "pure mind." He decided also that a general statement followed by detail would put the rag-and-bone shop before us most vividly, and finished line 35 when he wrote "A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street," then went on to selected detail. He prepares us for the final line by "old bones, old rags," which will be reversed in "rag and bone shop," a device Yeats uses very frequently, and his poem is done except for one word. In line 24 "The dream" became "This dream" sometime before the poem was printed. The new stanza is free of unwanted echoes of his recent work, and Yeats now manages his I-persona in such a way that our thought is transferred from the man Yeats to a phantasmagoric Yeats.

We began to watch Yeats at work upon his poems in 1893; we end in the fall of 1938. In 1893 Yeats's apprenticeship was nearly over; he meticulously completed it shortly after when he reworked his early verse for *Poems*, 1895. Yeats's poetic powers were still as brilliant as ever in September 1938 when he completed "The Circus Animals'

Desertion," though the circle of his activities had necessarily grown narrower.

Yeats was already fully equipped for his sendentary trade when he wrote *The Wind Among the Reeds*, and he never allowed his equipment to rust unused. Early and late he worked at his art strenuously. It is this continued faith in works that in part distinguishes him from lesser poets, that and an unusual ability to stay at a poem until it came right. Yeats himself put it nicely when he quoted from Balzac's *Les Comédiens sans le Savoir* in a little essay which he omitted from *Discoveries*:

Here in Paris, only too often will some artist, seeking Fame that he may have Fortune, seek out some royal road and think to enlarge his stature by identifying himself with some cause, or advocating some system. . . . But while opinion cannot give talent, this mentality spoils it. An artist's opinion ought to be a faith in works.

Such a faith in works Yeats never lost; he made an intense effort, an almost unnatural effort, always to write well.