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‘Where All the Ladders Start’

W.B. Yeats, Maud Gonne and Others

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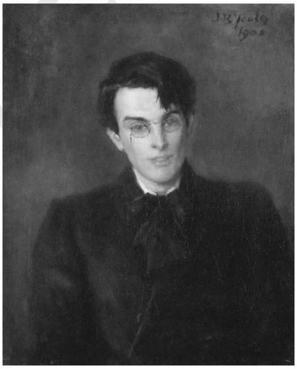

W.B. Yeats, 1900. Portrait by John Butler Yeats

In the introduction to *Where All the Ladders Start*, I referred to W.B. Yeats’s ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’ in which the speaker laments the fading of his creative power. The poem describes how a poet discovers his themes in ‘the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart’ and transforms them into ‘masterful images’, and in the preceding chapters I have attempted to show how the work of eight very different poets, from William Shakespeare to Thomas Hardy, has been inspired by particular people. Now, by way of conclusion, I am returning to Yeats who, as much as anyone, transformed the everyday – ‘Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut / Who keeps the till’ – into art. His poems are filled with places and, in particular, people – the heroes of Irish legend, Irish revolutionaries, friends and lovers. In his poem ‘Friends’ (1898) he describes three women to whom in different ways he was close. Typically of Yeats, the poem is for the speaking voice, its tone hovering between the conversational and the declamatory, the private and the public:

> Now must I these three praise –
> Three women that have wrought
> What joy is in my days:
> One because no thought,
> Nor those unpassing cares,

No, not in these fifteen
Many-times-troubled years,
Could ever come between
Mind and delighted mind;
And one because her hand
Had strength that could unbind
What none can understand,
What none can have and thrive,
Youth's dreamy load, till she
So changed me that I live
Labouring in ecstasy.
And what of her that took
All till my youth was gone
With scarce a pitying look?
How could I praise that one?
When day begins to break
I count my good and bad,
Being wakeful for her sake,
Remembering what she had,
What eagle look still shows,
While up from my heart's root
So great a sweetness flows
I shake from head to foot.[1]

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The first of the friends is Olivia Shakespear, the cousin of one of Yeats's literary contemporaries; the second is Lady Gregory, a wealthy widow some years older than Yeats, whose estate at Coole in County Sligo would become a sanctuary for him and with whom he would found the Irish National Theatre; and the third is Maud Gonne, the *femme fatale* who 'took / All till my youth was gone / With scarce a pitying look' (notice how the emphasis is thrown onto 'All') and from whom he would never be wholly free. To these we can add, among others, the sisters Constance and Eva Gore-Booth (the subjects of one of Yeats' finest poems), Iseult Gonne (Maud's daughter) and Georgie Hyde-Lees (who one day would become his wife).

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[1] Quotations from Yeats's poems in this chapter are from Edward Larrissy (ed.), W.B. Yeats, *The Major Works*, Oxford World's Classics series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

Yeats and Maud Gonne

Maud Gonne, 1896. Photograph by Reutlinger Studio.

Yeats was born in 1865 in Dublin. Two years later the family moved to London when his father, John, who had given up his career in law, decided to study as an artist. However, Yeats's mother, Susan, missed the comforts and company of home and she and the children spent much of their time with her parents back in County Sligo. There followed years of house moves for the family – back to London in 1873, to Dublin in 1880, and to London again in 1887, where a lease was taken on a house in Bedford Park, Chiswick, and they stayed until 1902. It was at Bedford Park in January 1889 that Yeats first met Maud Gonne, a beautiful English heiress and actress who had become involved in the Irish Nationalist cause and had been intrigued by his just-published *The Wanderings of Oisin* which delved into Irish mythology. He was aged an innocent 23, she an experienced 22. On the same afternoon he visited her in her rooms and he dined with her that evening. Yeats was smitten and remained under her spell for the rest of his life. He did not know then that she already had a lover, Lucien Millevoye, a French journalist and politician; her son by Millevoye, Georges, would be born a year later.

Yeats's love for Maud Gonne was unrequited. She had a lover in France and, although she was younger than Yeats, she found him immature and unworldly. Moreover, she was single-minded in her devotion to the Nationalist cause and her opposition to the British Empire, and she resented the fact that Yeats was lukewarm in his support. While he wanted to create an identity for Ireland through its legend and literature, he refused to condone Maud's incitements to violence. Although he could not help his obsessive feelings and was jealous of the attention

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she lavished on other men to win their support, he saw early on that her beauty was destructive. What he did not see was that she did not find him physically attractive. She was happy to use him and increasingly she valued his friendship but, for her, romance was out of the question. In July 1891, when Maud had argued with Lucien (of whom Yeats was still unaware) and was unhappy, Yeats loved her even more and proposed marriage. She declined, but they still enjoyed each other's company. After an expedition to the coast, Yeats wrote in 'The White Birds', 'I would that we were my beloved, white birds on the foam of the sea!' (we may be reminded of Keats's 'Winging along where the great water throes' in 'What can I do to drive away remembrance from my eyes?'). However, their time together was interrupted when Maud received news from Lucien that Georges was desperately ill with meningitis. She immediately returned to France, but Georges did not recover. She would tell Yeats that a boy she had adopted had died.

'The Sorrow of Love' (written in 1891, published in *The Rose*, 1893, and later heavily revised into this final iteration) describes the turmoil Maud Gonne caused in both Yeats's own life and in Ireland:

> The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,
> The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
> And all that famous harmony of leaves,
> Had blotted out man's image and his cry.
>
> A girl arose that had red mournful lips
> And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,
> Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships
> And proud as Priam murdered with his peers;
>
> Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,
> A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
> And all that lamentation of the leaves,
> Could but compose man's image and his cry.

The poem begins gently with a picture of the perfect evening: the 'brawling' sparrow, the 'brilliant moon', the 'milky' sky and 'that famous harmony of leaves' (which emphasises the oneness of nature) are able to blot out the innate sadness of life. However, in the second stanza the harmony is destroyed: isn't there a suggestion in 'arose' of Aphrodite

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herself, goddess of love, rising from the sea?[2] There is a sensuality in 'red mournful lips', but also a sadness picked up in 'tears'. Then a new note creeps in: 'proud' – a trait which is equally admired and despised. Maud Gonne, like the wandering Odysseus and the 'murdered' Priam, is doomed, and the world with her. In other poems, Maud is compared directly to Helen of Troy, adulteress and bringer of catastrophe, over whom the Trojan War was fought. Perhaps that is hinted at here, but this poem compares her more generally to male heroes as, in her political activism, she tramples on the female stereotype. In the final stanza, which begins with the isolated 'Arose', the idyll of the opening is shattered. The picture is almost the same, but 'brawling' becomes 'clamorous', 'milky' becomes 'empty' and 'harmony' becomes 'lamentation'. Under the spell of Maud Gonne, harmony vanishes and the sadness of life returns.

Also in *The Rose* is 'When You Are Old', based on a sonnet by the medieval French poet, Pierre de Ronsard (1524-85), which imagines Maud Gonne in old age, regretting her spurning of Yeats's love:

> When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
> And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
> And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
> Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;
>
> How many loved your moments of glad grace,
> And loved your beauty with love false or true,
> But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
> And loved the sorrows of your changing face;
>
> And bending down beside the glowing bars,
> Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
> And paced upon the mountains overhead
> And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

The first stanza contrasts the old woman of the future ('old', 'grey', 'full of sleep', 'nodding', 'slowly') with the mysterious young beauty of the present ('soft look', 'shadows deep'), immortalised by the poet in 'this book' which one day will bring back memories of her youth. The second stanza develops the description of the young Maud Gonne ('glad grace' and 'beauty'), but in old age she will realise too late that not all (if any) of her admirers were sincere ('love false or true'). Only the speaker loved

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[2] Cf. Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*, chapter four.

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her whole self, in bad times as well as good. So the final stanza is suffused with regret but not with bitterness. Everything is gentle, as befits old age ('glowing bars', 'murmur', 'a little sadly'). The old woman recalls how 'love fled' – how in the end the speaker deserted her – though if the images are dreamlike, they are also somewhat banal. The irony of the poem is that in old age and real life it was Yeats and not Maud Gonne who would always be haunted by the saddest of memories and thoughts of what might have been.

Little of the correspondence between Yeats and Maud Gonne survives from this period, but how different it is from the correspondence between Keats and Fanny Brawne, and between Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett. The letters from Maud Gonne are about her political engagements and addressed to 'My dear Mr Yeats'. It is not until 1899 that she begins 'My dear Willie', though the content is rarely romantic and only once (in May 1909, when rejecting a physical relationship) does she address him as 'Beloved'. It is difficult to understand how utterly Yeats continued to misread the situation. For the moment Lucien remained Maud's secret lover in France and, even when their daughter Iseult was born in August 1894, Yeats seems not to have accepted that her heart lay elsewhere. As with Georges, motherhood would not be allowed to curtail Maud's political activities and Iseult was looked after in France by Lucien and a nurse.

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Olivia Shakespear

Yeats first met Olivia Shakespear at a literary lunch in 1894. She was unhappily married and the two shared their misery. They kept in touch when Yeats travelled to County Sligo that winter and it was after a miserable holiday with Maud the following summer that he returned to London and invited Olivia for tea. Although his planned seduction was thwarted (he lost the key to his rooms and had to break in ignominiously), Maud heard of their liaison and, in a strange letter from a Dublin hotel, claimed he had appeared to her in a vision:

> Yesterday evening however somewhere about 9 o'clock I was sitting in the drawing room of this hotel with several persons when suddenly I became conscious that you were there, standing near a table on which your book which I had been reading lay. … So mentally I gave you rendezvous for