"The Tradition of Myself": The Autobiographical Mode of Yeats

BY 1916, Yeats had written some of his most brilliant short poems: "The Fascination of What's Difficult," "No Second Troy," "The Cold Heaven," "A Deep-sworn Vow." The invention of suitable structures for the longer lyric—a lyric that would permit more extensive exploration and development of themes—now became a major concern. Unlike his contemporaries, who zealously followed Poe's dictum that the long poem was a contradiction in terms, that intensity could be achieved only within the compass of the short lyric, Yeats came to reject the poesie pure of the nineties. In 1906 he wrote, "Modern literature . . . is monotonous in its structure and effeminate in its continual insistence upon certain moments of strained lyricism"; and in an essay of 1913, he complained that "an absorption in fragmentary sensuous beauty or detachable ideas had deprived us of the power to mould vast material into a single image." "What long poem," he asks, "equals the old poems in architectural unity, in symbolic importance? The Revolt of Islam, The Excursion, Gebir . . . are remembered for some occasional passage, some moment which gains little from the context. Until very lately even the short poems . . . seemed accidental, so much the rule were the 'Faustines' and 'Dolores' where the verses might be arranged in any order, like shot poured out of a bag."

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Yet the longer lyrics that Yeats himself wrote prior to 1916 are often open to the same charge. The elegiac "Upon a Dying Lady" (1912-14),1 for example, is less an articulated whole than a series of short variations on the theme of Mabel Beardsley's extraordinary courage and gaiety in the face of death. "Broken Dreams," one of a number of longer lyrics written for Maud Gonne between 1914 and 1916, has an arresting opening:

There is grey in your hair.
Young men no longer suddenly catch their breath
When you are passing. . . .

but the poem's five stanzas repeat rather than develop the speaker's conviction that age cannot wither the beauty of his beloved, and when Yeats concludes with the refrain line, "Vague memories, nothing but memories," the cynical reader may feel that these words characterize not only the speaker's thoughts but the structure of the poem itself.

Viewed against this background, the two great poems that Yeats wrote during the autumn of 1916—"The Wild Swans at Coole" and "Easter 1916"—stand out as extraordinary achievements. Followed in 1918 by "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and in 1919 by "A Prayer for My Daughter," they herald a new mode in Yeats's poetry. In "The Wild Swans at Coole," for the first time a speaker, clearly designated as Yeats himself, speaks in the present tense from his vantage point in a specific landscape;4 the place is Coole Lake on Lady Gregory's estate, the month October, and nineteen years have elapsed since Yeats first visited this spot. Moreover, the "I" of "Wild Swans" does not exhort, persuade, or argue with his listener as did the Yeats persona of Responsibilities:

What need you, being come to sense. . . .
Hope that you may understand!
You gave, but will not give again. . . .
Toil and grow rich. . . .

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1 My dating of the poems is based on A. Norman Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats (Stanford University Press, 1968). Subsequently cited as Jeffares, CCP.

2 By contrast, the landscape in the earlier "The Cold Heaven" is visionary: it is the poet's imagination that transforms the cold grey sky into a mass of burning ice. Similarly, the title figures in "The Magi" appear only "in the mind's eye." On the other hand, "Adam's Curse," which is usually considered "realistic" in its presentation of actual conversation, has no setting at all; we do not know where the poet and the two women are sitting. Moreover, "Adam's Curse" uses the past tense only.
The protagonist of "Wild Swans" is no longer quarreling with others;5 his meditative speech is directed only at himself:

The leaves are in their autumn beauty  
The woodland paths are dry.  
Under the October twilight  
The water mirrors  
A still sky.  
Upon the brimming water among the stones  
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

This seemingly matter-of-fact description of setting introduces the central tension of the poem: the swans are part of a universe at once vitally alive and permanent—the "brimming water" "Mirrors a still sky"—but, as he is painfully aware, the poet is only mortal, the "October twilight" and dry paths symbolically forecast his own impending death. The poem moves full circle from the present to the past and back to a present that anticipates the future. Contemplating the landscape, the speaker recalls the first time he counted the wild swans at Coole, and, in measuring his own linear progress against their cyclic movement, he comes to understand that, unlike the swans who are at home in the "cold / Companionable streams," the man standing on the shore is outside the picture. Imperceptibly, the swans, drifting "lover by lover," on the "still water," have thus come to symbolize his own lost "passion and conquest," and in the epiphany of the final stanza, he wonders where they will build nests or "delight men's eyes" when he is no longer there to see them. The very posing of the question suggests that the poet can finally transcend his personal sorrow; he can accept the swans' imaginary flight into a future that will not include his presence.

"The Wild Swans at Coole" is the first of the great autobiographical poems in which Yeats's protagonist—a projection of the poet himself—recalls and implicitly judges those experiences in his past which reveal something essential about his personality as it responds to the outside world. Although the structure of "Wild Swans" is not the only one that Yeats devised for his longer lyrics (the débat structure, for example, is used in many poems

5 Yeats's famous statement, "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry," occurs in Per Amica Silentiae Lunae, written during the same months as "The Wild Swans at Coole." See Mythologies (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 331.
from "Ego Dominus Tuus" to "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" and "Vacillation"), it is the prototype of such famous poems as "The Tower," "Among School Children," "Coole Park, 1929," and "The Circus Animals' Desertion."

The autobiographical mode of "Wild Swans" clearly owes something to what Meyer Abrams has called "the greater romantic lyric"—its form resembles that of "Tintern Abbey" or "Frost at Midnight"—but, more immediately, it utilizes the techniques and conventions of Yeats's own prose autobiography which he had begun to write two years earlier. The first installment, Reveries Over Childhood and Youth, was written between January and December of 1914 (although not published until 1916), and for the next two decades Yeats worked intermittently on the sections that were to comprise Autobiographies. I would posit that the writing of autobiography taught Yeats two major things: how to invent an effective structure for the longer lyric poem, and how to make a drama out of his own personal life. Shortly before he began Reveries, Yeats wrote to his father, "I have tried for more self-portraiture. I have tried to make my work convincing with a speech so natural and dramatic that the hearer would feel the presence of a man thinking and feeling. . . . It is in dramatic expression that English poetry is most lacking as compared with French poetry. Villon always and Ronsard at times create a marvellous drama out of their own lives." The poems of The Green Helmet (1910) and Responsibilities (1914) are generally labelled "dramatic lyrics" in that they present a highly charged relationship between speaker and addressee and use the im-

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passioned, colloquial language of real conversation, but Reveries Over Childhood and Youth was Yeats's first attempt to build up a full-scale drama out of his own life. I propose in this essay to study the relationship between the poet's autobiography and his autobiographical poems. My emphasis will be less on the thematic parallels between the autobiography and the poems, which have been carefully documented by various Yeats scholars, particularly by A. Norman Jeffares in his indispensable Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, than on the "stylistic arrangements" Yeats gave to his experience both in prose and in poetry.

1 The Background

Yeats's growing interest in autobiography from about 1910 on can be traced in his letters. He began to think seriously about the problems of the genre when George Moore—friend, collaborator, rival, and finally enemy—published the first volume of Hail and Farewell in 1911. Moore's failure to distinguish between "public and private life" displeased Yeats but he admired the book's honesty: "the total impression," he wrote, "is more than usually sincere" (W, p. 564). In the following year, he urged his father to undertake his autobiography:

I have a great project, would you like to write your autobiography? . . . I suggest . . . that in your first chapter or chapters you describe old relations and your childhood. Then you could describe your school life and then weave a chapter round Sandymount. . . . You might do a wonderful book. You could say anything about anything, for after all, you yourself would be the theme, there would be no need to be afraid of egotism. . . . (W, p. 571)

The last sentence must be taken with a grain of salt. As Yeats's later references to his own autobiography make clear, he never believed for a moment that the autobiographer could "say anything about anything." But, wanting to involve his father in what seemed to him an exciting and profitable venture, Yeats continued to press him to work on the book. In 1919, he wrote, "I

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10 For example, on pp. 156–163 of CCP, Jeffares cites all the cross references between "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and The Trembling of the Veil.
hope you will come back [to Ireland] as soon as you can. You will be very comfortable with Lily and you can devote yourself to finishing your autobiography" (W, p. 655). But when J. B. Yeats died three years later, only a fragment of the projected work had actually been written. Under the poet's supervision, it was published in 1923 by the Cuala Press under the title *Early Memo-
ries, Some Chapters of Autobiography*.

*Early Memories* is an interesting book, if only because it teaches us what autobiography should *not* be. In his Preface, W. B. Yeats is understandably nervous about the book; although he insists that "this biographical fragment has its measure of wisdom and beauty," he admits that his father's letters were "more natural than this sketch." Beyond its topical interest, *Early Memories* has little literary value; it tends to be disjointed and inconsistent. For example, J. B. Yeats says on p. 2 that as a child he was always alone and consequently led a dreamy, isolated existence, but on p. 5 he asserts, "We were a large family, boisterous . . . sometimes very friendly together while at other times we would quarrel." His ac-
count of his early schooling is interrupted by digressions about poetic theory (p. 24) and about Rossetti's painting habits (p. 26). The autobiography jumps from a lengthy character sketch of George Pollexfen to J. B. Yeats's view of Catholicism, to a catalogue of the subjects taught at the university. There seems to be no unifying thread.

In short, *Early Memories* violates the fundamental requisite of autobiography: that it must be a *shaping of the past*. Most theorists who have discussed the genre have generally agreed with Northrop Frye that autobiography is "inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional, impulse to select only those events and experiences that go to build up an integrated pattern." In Roy Pascal's words, "Autobiography means . . . discrimination and se-
lection in the face of the endless complexity of life . . . Everything depends on the standpoint chosen." The trouble with *Early

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12 Design and Truth in Autobiography (Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 10. Pascal's study is the most thorough treatment to date of the aesthetic conventions governing autobiography, and I owe a great deal to it throughout this essay. One can argue that Pascal's definition is too prescriptive: this is the position of Francis R. Hart in "Notes for an Anatomy of Modern Autobiography," *New Literary History*, 1 (Spring 1970), 485-511, but in fact most theorists, Hart included, come very close to Pascal's position al-
Memories is that no standpoint is chosen. J. B. Yeats, from all accounts a charming raconteur and a correspondent of great interest and sensitivity, here records whatever memories occur to him without regard for pattern or larger meaning. One has no sense of a unique self, developing and unfolding before one’s eyes.

Unlike his father, who was not, after all, primarily a writer, W. B. Yeats had an instinctive understanding for the formal conventions that govern autobiography. In December 1914, he wrote to J. B. Yeats, “Yesterday I finished my memoirs (Reveries). I have brought them down to our return to London in 1886 or 1887. After that there would be too many living people to consider and they would have besides to be written in a different way. While I was immature I was a different person and I can stand apart and judge” (W, p. 589; italics mine). Here Yeats is not merely alluding to his habitual reticence; he also expresses the conviction that an autobiographer must present a judgment on his past self, that he must interpret the impact of his past experiences upon his present outlook. This is precisely the view of recent theorists: Pascal defines autobiography as “a judgement on the past within the framework of the present,” and Jean Starobinski writes, “Toute autobiographie... est une auto-interpretation.”

In the same letter, Yeats observes that “the book is... less an objective history than a reverie over such things as the first effect upon me of Bedford Park” (W, p. 589). Here Yeats shows his understanding of a second major convention of autobiography stressed in most definitions of the genre: namely, that its domain is...
not external reality, as in the memoir or social document, nor the isolated self, as in the diary or journal, but the intersection of self and world, of the subjective and objective—"the effect upon me of Bedford Park."

Yeats also understood that the autobiographer must sometimes distort events or characters in the interest of narrative design. In the Preface to Reveries he wrote, "I have changed nothing to my knowledge and yet it must be that I have changed many things without my knowledge; for I am writing after many years and have consulted neither friend, nor letter, nor old newspaper, and describe what comes oftenest into my memory." This statement is not exactly candid: what Yeats means is that he does not wish his autobiography to be tested against the "actual facts" as other people might see them. In a less guarded remark to his father, Yeats defended his highly critical portrait of Edward Dowden because "he was helpful and friendly when I began to write and I give him credit for it. But in my account of Dublin I had to picture him as a little unreal, set up for contrast beside the real image of O'Leary" (W, p. 606). The character of Dowden is, in other words, purposely fictionalized in order to create an interesting contrast to that of the nationalist John O'Leary. "The element of pattern in every part," Yeats wrote his father in his next letter, "is, I think, the part that is not imitative"; the artist must consciously and deliberately arrange his subject" (W, pp. 607–608).

Accordingly, when, after the completion of Reveries, Yeats went on with his autobiography, writing the highly personal manuscript of 1915–1917 generally known as the "First Draft" and only recently published as Memoirs, he intended the book to be "for my eye..."
alone” (W, p. 603). This decision was not merely a matter of discretion; the poet must have perceived that the “First Draft” lacked form; that its narrative was excessively sequential and anecdotal. For in 1921, when he recast the material of Memoirs into The Trembling of the Veil, he thought in terms of pattern and drama. “I study every man,” he wrote to Olivia Shakespear, “at some moment of crisis—I alone have no crisis” (W, p. 675). His new strategy is, in other words, to present his friends in climactic, dramatic moments, revelatory of character, while he himself remains in the background—the calm, mature observer who ponders the crises in the lives of his friends. Yeats understood that the autobiographer, like the poet, “is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea” (E & I, p. 509). In 1934, when he began to work on Dramatis Personae, he wrote, “I do nothing all day long but think of the drama I am building up in my Lady Gregory.... My first fifty pages... begin where my old autobiography ends. It is curious how one’s life falls into definite sections—in 1897 a new scene was set, new actors appeared” (W, p. 820).

Increasingly, then, Yeats thought of autobiography as a dramatic construct. But despite his repeated stress on the artistry involved, the fictional impulse behind Yeats’s autobiography has received little attention. The book has been treated, on the one hand, as a source of information about the poet’s life, and, on the other, as a philosophical essay on the achievement, despite great difficulties, of Unity of Being, a kind of footnote to A Vision. Leaving aside

and kept intermittently until 1930. But to avoid complication, when I refer to Memoirs from now on, I refer to the draft autobiography only.

17 Discretion does, of course, play a big part: Yeats did not want the world to know about his pursuit of Maud Gonne, his affair with “Diana Vernon” (Olivia Shakespear), or his close ties with numerous Theosophical groups. See Ronsley, Yeats’s Autobiography, pp. 22-23; Bradford, Yeats at Work, pp. 346-348; Donoghue, Introduction to Memoirs, p. 13. For a good general comparison of Memoirs to Autobiographies, see the anonymous lead essay, “Yeats’s Quest For Self-Transparency,” Times Literary Supplement, 19 January 1973, pp. 53-55.

18 Both Joseph Hone in W. B. Yeats, 1865–1939 (London: Macmillan, 1965) and A. N. Jeffares in W. B. Yeats, Man and Poet (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) generally read the autobiography quite literally. In Yeats, The Man and the Masks (1948; reprinted E. P. Dutton, 1965), Richard Ellmann notes that “Because he (Yeats) was a myth-maker, his autobiography was never pure” (p. 3), and he compares it to Goethe’s Dichtung und Wahrheit. Nevertheless, Ellmann’s third chapter is largely based on information derived from Autobiographies. In general, the book has been used as a quarry for factual information about Yeats’s life.

Ronsley’s argument represents the opposite extreme. To summarize briefly, since the 1938 Macmillan edition called The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats (the text is identical to that of the
the three diaries included in the authorized edition of *Autobiographies*, as well as the “First Draft” and Journal included in Denis Donoghue’s edition of the *Memoirs*, I wish to discuss the literary devices that the autobiography proper—*Reveries Over Childhood and Youth* (1916), *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), and *Dramatis Personae* (1935)—shares with such major autobiographical poems as “A Prayer for My Daughter” and “The Tower.” These devices may be grouped under three headings: (1) temporal and spatial perspectives, (2) the Yeatsian masks, and (3) narrative structure.

II Time, Place, and Person in Yeatsian Autobiography

The discontinuousness that characterizes the structure of *Reveries* has often been noted. The book has thirty-three sections of varying length, each of which records a key moment—a “spot of time”—in Yeats’s past, and these spots of time are not closely related to one another. Joseph Ronsley observes, “Yeats’s early life is recalled in isolated fragments. . . . The disjointedness of images, diversity of their recall, and range of clarity combine to display a dream-like view of the world that defies the order in which we are accustomed to experience it” (pp. 35–36). Ian Fletcher similarly

Macmillan *Autobiographies* although the page numbers are different) is the last edition of Yeats’s autobiographical writings supervised by the poet himself, he must have intentionally arranged the separate pieces in their existing order. Although “Estrangement” and “The Death of Synge” were published in 1926 and were based on diaries of 1909, while “The Bounty of Sweden” was written in 1924 and originally published in 1925, Yeats, Ronsley argues, purposely placed these three pieces after *Dramatis Personae* (1935) in order to create a pattern that would dramatize “his struggle for unity in both his own life and in that of his country” (p. 33). The earlier sections of the autobiography present those divided beings like Lionel Johnson or Oscar Wilde who could not attain Unity of Being; *Dramatis Personae* presents a closer approximation in the person of Lady Gregory and the world of Coole Park; “Estrangement” and “The Death of Synge” show what happens to a country—in this case, Ireland—that fails to achieve Unity of Culture; and finally “The Bounty of Sweden” is an image of the Yeatsian ideal.

Whether or not Yeats had any such clear-cut evolution in mind (and it seems doubtful that he did since he rearranged these works so frequently), Ronsley’s argument reduces the narrative itself to a purely subordinate level, a mere peg upon which to hang Yeats’s theories. As such, the rich detail of *Autobiographies* would hardly be necessary and it would not be a very interesting book. If we accept Ronsley’s argument, the autobiography is in fact no more than a footnote to *A Vision*. On this point, see Wulf Künne, Chapter 1: “Die Autobiographies in her Sicht Ronsleys,” in his *Konzeption Und Stil*.

19 Here I follow Ian Fletcher, who writes, “The title of *Autobiographies* is accurate. The single volume contains approaches to the past made at distinct times in differing modes, ranging from the mosaic of *The Trembling of the Veil* to the journal intime structure of *Estrangement*. . . . I want to touch only on *Reveries, Trembling of the Veil*, and *Dramatis Personae* . . . because they (the diaries) are less consciously historical, more disjointed, aphoristic, the raw material for composed autobiography.” See “Rhythm and Pattern in ‘Autobiographies’,” in *An Honoured Guest* ed. Denis Donoghue, p. 165. Fletcher’s reasoning would, of course, also rule out consideration of the *Memoirs.*
speak of the "dissolution of events" in Reveries and says that their arrangement "is intended to enact discontinuousness."\(^{20}\) Although The Trembling of the Veil and Dramatis Personae are less "dream-like" than Reveries, they exhibit a similarly fragmentary quality: Yeats introduces new characters and events abruptly in condensed images, and often the connection between successive sections seems highly tenuous.

On closer inspection, this discontinuity is seen to result from Yeats's singular treatment of time, place, and person. All references to time are purposely vague and blurred while those to place and to person are specific and concrete. The reader always knows where he is and with whom, but he rarely knows when a certain incident takes place. The autobiographer's sense of an indistinct past, impossible to categorize or to define realistically, is conveyed in the opening sentences of Reveries: "My first memories are fragmentary and isolated and contemporaneous, as though one remembered some first moment of the Seven Days. It seems as if time had not yet been created, for all thoughts are connected with emotion and place without sequence" (A, p. 5).

This statement is somewhat misleading for the basic time sequence of Reveries is perfectly straightforward. The autobiography begins with dim memories of early childhood and concludes with the publication of Yeats's first book, an event that took place in 1886, although Yeats, as is his common practice, does not mention the date. But despite this basic chronological progression, the individual memories are impossible to date without external knowledge. "Presently," Yeats writes in Section V, "my elder sister came on a long visit and she and I went to a little two-storyed house in a poor street where an old gentlewoman taught us spelling and grammar" (p. 25). The reader cannot tell whether Yeats was five or eight when this happened. The transition "presently" is used consistently in Autobiographies to indicate an immeasurable lapse of time:

> Presently, a hansom drove up to our door at Bedford Park with Miss Maud Gonne. . . . (p. 123)

\(^{20}\) Fletcher, p. 173; see also Wulf Künne, pp. 64–69. In his fourth chapter, Künne has an interesting discussion of the specific rhetorical devices—polysyndeton, apposition, word pairing—in Reveries.
Presently, perhaps after Arthur Symons had gone, Lady Gregory called. (p. 388)

The word "now" similarly functions as a deceptive time cue; one never knows when "now" is in relation to past and future:

I had now met all those who were to make the nineties of the last century tragic in the history of literature. . . . (p. 170)

He had a house now at Mortlake on the Thames. . . . (p. 298)

I came now to be more in London. . . . (p. 299)

Dowson was now at Dieppe. (p. 327)

A third "pseudo-time signal" frequently found in Autobiographies is "I began to . . .:"

I began to make blunders when I paid calls. . . . (p. 66)

I began to feel that I needed a hostess more than a society. . . . (p. 230)

The Rhymers had begun to break up in tragedy. . . . (p. 300)

There are many other recurrent phrases that create temporal displacement: "Sometimes I would . . .," "One day I met . . .," "Once when I was going . . .," "I no longer cared for . . .," "Another time . . .," "Two or three years later. . . ." Perhaps the most disconcerting grammatical device is the use of the simple past or the past progressive tense without further specification. Section XV of Reveries, for example, opens with the sentence, "My father's influence upon my thoughts was at its height." Yeats is referring to an important stage in his development, but when did it occur? Or again, Section IV of "The Tragic Generation" begins, "Henley's troubles and infirmities were growing upon him." These words have a sense of doom, of something ominous about to happen, but this painful phase of Henley's life is not related to his past or his future.

The references to the future are equally vague. In the brief portrait of Maud Gonne in "Four Years," Yeats concludes with the sentence, "It was years before I could see into the mind that lay hidden under so much beauty and so much energy" (p. 124). This particular construction is found repeatedly: "Years afterwards, when I had finished 'The Wanderings of Oisin' . . .," or "For years afterwards I would not go to a seance." In the case of the latter example, the reader cannot tell whether five or twenty years are involved.

The imprecision of time references does not mean, however,
that Yeats obliterates all distinction between past, present, and future. On the contrary, the Yeats of the present is always with the reader as a fixed point of reference, a helpful guide. "I remember" (or "I cannot remember") is the narrator's favorite phrase; he also uses such related expressions as "Two pictures come into my memory . . .," "I do not know how old I was when . . .," "Looking backwards, it seems to me that I saw. . . ." Yeats is always comparing his past selves to his present one. "I now can but share with a friend my thoughts and my emotions," he writes in Reveries, "and there is a continual discovery of difference, but in those days, before I had found myself, we could share adventure" (p. 48, italics mine). He frequently judges his early literary work as in the following example: "When I re-read those early poems which gave me so much trouble, I find little but romantic convention . . ." (p. 103). The reader is never allowed to forget the distinction between the mature, successful poet and the child or adolescent whose past is recaptured. In discussing the role of masks in Autobiographies, I shall have more to say about this distinction, but for the time being, let us try to discern its general implications.

It seems to me that Yeats purposely confuses our sense of past time because implicitly he rejects the notion of a linear time sense, an historically evolving past. Childhood stands for a distinct complex of feelings and thoughts and must therefore be viewed as a whole: whether the child is four or nine when something decisive happens is, Yeats implies, beside the point. Again, adolescence, which coincides with the formation of the poet's unique personality, is a symbolic time-span: whether Yeats began to write poetry when he was fourteen or seventeen is again regarded as an irrelevancy. The past is past—that is its quality. Autobiographies is not a realistic but a highly patterned account of Yeats's past. Events are recalled because they taught something to the autobiographer; he has profited from their recapitulation. Instead of being at the mercy of memory, he rigidly controls the stream of memory itself, invoking only those images from the past that have symbolic import.

Place is treated in the opposite way. Opening Autobiographies at random, one finds sentences like the following, "Some six miles off towards Ben Bulben and beyond the Channel, as we call the tidal river between Sligo and Rosses, and on top of a hill there was a little square two-storeyed house covered with creepers" (p. 19).
Although Yeats never gives a concrete visual image of the Sligo landscape, he is carefully precise about names, distances, and directions. Peter Ure has observed that it is worthwhile to make a pilgrimage to the Yeats country "if only to see how closely Yeats's descriptions correspond to the facts." Proper names—Sligo, Rosses Point, Ballisodare, Round Pond, Ben Bulben—gain resonance from their repetition in slightly altered contexts. For example, in describing the tragic downfall of Oscar Wilde, the narrator says, "I was at Sligo again and I saw the announcement of his action against Lord Queensberry" (p. 284). Why, one wonders, does it matter where Yeats was when he heard the news about Wilde? The point is that the autobiography has already established Sligo as a world of Edenic innocence, and so this particular reference detaches Yeats himself from the sordid and pathetic conflicts of Oscar Wilde's London.

In Reveries, a tension is established between the Sligo—Knocknarrea—Ben Bulben complex on the one hand and that of London—Bedford Park—North End—Hammersmith—Holland Park on the other. The first symbolizes freedom, mystery, beauty, strangeness; the second, constriction, ugliness, vulgarity, insecurity, bad taste. Dublin, the locale of the last third of Reveries, is somewhere in between these two poles; it is a neutral setting for Yeats's apprenticeship as poet, theosophist, and Irish nationalist.

In The Trembling of the Veil, places are subordinated to persons; here Yeats mythologizes his friends rather than the sacred places of his childhood. The poets of the "Tragic Generation," the theosophists, the nationalists of the nineties—all pass slowly over the Yeatsian stage, frozen in their respective moments of "crisis"; the emphasis is on the typical gesture, verbal expression, or action. But even in Trembling, Yeats is scrupulous in his attention to setting; as he says in Reveries, "I constantly see people as a portrait-painter, posing them in the mind's eye before such-and-such a background" (p. 83). Thus he carefully locates the Yeats family in a "red brick house with several mantelpieces of wood" in Bedford Park, Oscar Wilde in his white drawing-room in Chelsea, William Morris in Kelmscott House, Hammersmith, the

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Rhymers in Fleet Street, Madame Blavatsky at Norwood, and himself in the Reading Room of the British Museum, in Ely Place, Dublin, where the Theosophists met, in the cottages of Sligo, and finally in Coole Park. \textit{A Doll's House}, the narrator informs us, opened at the Royalty Theatre in Dean Street, London; \textit{Ubu Roi} had its first performance at the Theatre de l'Oeuvre in Paris—the theatres are carefully designated but the performance dates, which any historian would consider much more significant than the theatres, are not mentioned.

The repeated evocation of persons and places against the backdrop of a shifting time perspective creates what is perhaps a uniquely Yeatsian atmosphere as places take on a timeless, mythical importance. Sligo is not just a village in the west of Ireland; it becomes one of Yeats's "masterful images," a symbolic locale having its own set of values. In \textit{Dramatis Personae}, Yeats uses the same technique to mythologize Coole Park; by contrasting Coole with another great country house, Tulira Castle, and with the everyday world of Dublin, and by describing only certain climactic events that took place during his long periods of residence at Coole, he invests Lady Gregory's estate with the spirit of culture and aristocratic grace.

The autobiographical poems of Yeats's last two decades exploit similar temporal and spatial perspectives. As in \textit{Autobiographies}, the essential distinctions between past, present, and future are carefully preserved, but within each poem the basic present—past—present structure is offset by a blurring of specific time relationships. "A Prayer for My Daughter" is a case in point. It opens with the lines:

\begin{quote}
Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
Under this cradle-hood and coverlid
My child sleeps on.
\end{quote}

The scene is clearly set in the present—the poet watches his baby daughter sleeping in her cradle—but the phrase "Once more" immediately creates a sense of mystery because the reader does not know when, where, or why the "storm" howled before. Again, in "The Circus Animals' Desertion," the relationship between "first" in line 10, "then" in line 17, and "soon enough" in line 23 is not at all clear, nor does it need to be for it is enough that all these references are to the poet's past, a past he finally puts behind him in the grand assertion of the last stanza:
In “The Tower,” it is impossible to tell whether Mrs. French had the “insolent farmer’s ears” cut off before the peasant drowned “in the great bog of Cloone” or after. And when did the “ancient bankrupt master of this house” occupy the tower which is now Yeats’s home? The incidents recalled in the poem—the yarn about Mrs. French, the tale of the men maddened by Raftery’s song about Mary Hynes, the story of Red Hanrahan (a very different sort of memory from the others since Hanrahan is Yeats’s own poetic invention), the historical account of those who occupied Thoor Ballylee in the dim past—all merge in the poet’s memory. As in Autobiographies, the pastness of the past is what is emphasized, and more precise temporal relationships are purposely not established because realism would destroy the mythic quality of the scene.

Persons and places, on the other hand, are endowed with magical significance; here as in his autobiography Yeats uses names to build up his mythology of self. One must, however, distinguish between the earlier and later autobiographical poems, for Yeats’s poetry moves in the direction of ever increasing specificity in the use of proper names. In “The Wild Swans at Coole,” for example, the locale is mentioned only in the title. “A Prayer for My Daughter,” written two years later, has direct references to “Gregory’s wood” and the “one bare hill / Whereby the haystack-and roof-levelling wind, / Bred on the Atlantic can be stayed.” By the time that Yeats wrote “Coole Park and Ballylee” in 1931, he created a geographical setting that can be verified on the map:

Under my window-ledge the waters race,
Otters below and moor-hens on the top,
Run for a mile undimmed in Heaven’s face
Then darkening through ‘dark’ Raftery’s ‘cellar’ drop,
Run underground, rise in a rocky place
In Coole demesne, and there to finish up
Spread to a lake and drop into a hole.
What’s water but the generated soul?

Coole River flows for about a mile from Thoor Ballylee, then dips underground, forming the pool known as Raftery’s Cellar, and finally rises again in Coole Park, emptying into the lake which, according to the accounts of both Lady Gregory and Yeats, doubles or trebles its size in winter since there is no escape for its
water except by a narrow underground passage. Yeats uses these data not for the sake of description but to symbolize the journey of the soul in its cycles of rebirth; nevertheless, his symbolism is grounded in the actual geography of the region.

Just as the later poems treat place names with increasing specificity, so the names of Yeats’s friends, acquaintances, and relatives are found more and more frequently in the poems of his last two decades. Often there are direct parallels between poetry and autobiography: the gently ironic portrait of George Pollexfen in Stanza V of “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” for example, is a condensed version of Part XVII of Reveries, which gives a detailed account of the poet’s favorite uncle, a lovable hypochondriac and “inactive man,” in whom “the sap of life seemed to be dried away,” although in his youth he had been the “best rider” in Connacht and had “cured horses by conjuring” at Ballina. Again, the portraits of Florence Farr Emery and MacGregor Mathers in “All Souls’ Night” (1920) have parallels in “Four Years,” written a year later, and the recreation of Lady Gregory’s cultural ambience found in the two Coole Park poems is echoed throughout Dramatis Personae.

Despite the prevalence of proper names in his poetry, Yeats rarely refers by name to those who are still alive at the time of writing and almost never to the women in his life, particularly not to Maud Gonne. Of course, even in his autobiography Yeats is peculiarly reticent. The intimate portrayal found in Memoirs of his tempestuous relationship with Maud Gonne, and of his brief, unsuccessful affair with “Diana Vernon” (Olivia Shakespear) is carefully omitted in The Trembling of the Veil. And while writing “Four Years,” Yeats wrote to his old friend George Russell (AE), “I shall insert a study of the Ely Place group, and of your ascendancy there, but I will submit to you whatever I write about yourself and publish nothing that you dislike. I wish to be able to say in my preface that wherever I have included a living man I have submitted my words for his correction” (W, p. 670). The fact remains that

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23 At least half of the draft autobiography (see Memoirs) is taken up with these matters. See also Ronsley, pp. 22–24; Bradford, pp. 349–356; “Yeats’s Quest for Self-Transparency,” TLS, 19 (January 1973), pp. 53–55.
Yeats did see fit to describe Russell in his autobiography, whereas, with very few exceptions, only the dead are commemorated by name in the poems.

The catalogue of names in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" (1937), for example, includes many figures who played a decisive role in Yeats’s life: Arthur Griffith, Kevin O’Higgins, John Synge, and Augusta Gregory, whose name appears for the first time in this poem, but none of them was still alive at the time of writing. Maud Gonne, who appears in every possible disguise in the poems—she is Venus in "A Prayer for My Daughter," a "Ledean body" in "Among School Children," and Helen in "The Tower"—is named for the first and only time in a poem contemporaneous with "Municipal Gallery"—"Beautiful Lofty Things":

Beautiful lofty things: O'Leary’s noble head;
My father upon the Abbey stage, before him a raging crowd:
‘This Land of Saints,’ and then as the applause died out,
‘Of plaster Saints’; his beautiful mischievous head thrown back.
Standish O'Grady supporting himself between the tables
Speaking to a drunken audience high nonsensical words;
Augusta Gregory seated at her great ormolu table,
Her eightyeth winter approaching: ‘Yesterday he threatened my life.
I told him that nightly from six to seven I sat at this table,
The blinds drawn up’; Maud Gonne at Howth station waiting a train,
Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head:
All the Olympians; a thing never known again.

This poem is peculiarly modern in its realistic documentation; each image refers to an actual incident: the fiery address given by J. B. Yeats in Dublin after the Playboy controversy, the drunken but eloquent nationalist speech given by Standish O'Grady at a Dublin dinner in honor of Yeats and Edward Martyn, Lady Gregory's account of a threat to her life during the Civil War, and finally the image of Maud Gonne at Howth station. But interestingly, even here Yeats transcends realism. After naming Maud Gonne and placing her against the backdrop of a railway station, he immediately transforms her into Pallas Athene and refers to all the

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24 I have found only three exceptions: in "A Prayer for My Son," Yeats refers to his son Michael by name; in "Coole Park, 1929," he refers to Douglas Hyde in lines 9–10; in "Parnell's Funeral," he mentions De Valera in II, line 2. Yeats is much more straightforward in what we might call his epitaph poems. In "To Be Carved On A Stone At Thoor Ballylee," he refers to himself as "I, the poet William Yeats," as well as to "my wife George." And in "Ben Bulben," he writes, "Under bare Ben Bulben's head / In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid."

25 For the background of these images, see Jeffares, CCP, pp. 460–462.
characters in the poem as "Olympians." Moreover, although "Beautiful Lofty Things" contains such vivid images of other people, the poet's ubiquitous "I" is notably absent.

This raises a related question: what image of himself does Yeats project in his autobiography, and how does this persona compare to the "I" of poems like "A Prayer for My Daughter" or "The Circus Animals' Desertion"? I wish to consider next the means Yeats uses to create what he called a "marvellous drama" out of his own life.

III The Masked "I" in Yeatsian Autobiography

Because so much has been written about Yeats's use of the Mask, it is no longer necessary to point out that in his poems Yeats assumes all sorts of roles, presenting a highly selective image of himself, by no means equivalent to the personality of the "real" W. B. Yeats. Autobiographies, however, has usually been read quite literally; the assumption is that the "I," unlike the persona of the poems, is simply Yeats himself and that the book gives a reliable account of the poet's childhood and adolescence. Statements of belief or opinion in the autobiography are consistently used by Yeats scholars to buttress their interpretations of a given poem or to prove that Yeats adhered to one or another school of thought.

In a brief but extremely suggestive essay, Hazard Adams has argued that we must be wary about the "I" of Autobiographies, particularly in the case of Reveries:

The Yeats of that book is well masked, indeed twice masked. He is masked first by the "confessional" nature of the work, which invites us by its own inner form to neglect judging it on the basis of biographical veracity and to remember as we read that the speaker himself is part of the construction. In this case he is a character thinking, and the book as a whole is the familiar romantic monologue of a created voice. But because the character is speaking of his past there is a further removal. The character re-created by the monologist is in turn the child, the young man, and the dramatist of about 1900. All of these, it is well to remember, are creations from a point of view. . . . the Yeats recalled is a child, the Yeats speaking an adult.


These are important distinctions. The Yeats of Reveries is no more the real W. B. Yeats than is the "I" of the lyrics. Like the "sixty-year-old smiling public man" of "Among School Children," this is an invented or phantasmagoric Yeats; he emerges as a reflective, mature man of the world who can contemplate the past with a mixture of wonder and equanimity. The calm self-possession of the autobiographer is frequently deceptive, as in the following passage:

All the names and faces of my schoolfellows have faded from me except one name without a face and the face and name of one friend, mainly no doubt because it was all so long ago, but partly because I only seem to remember things dramatic in themselves or that are somehow associated with unforgettable places. (A, p. 32)

This sounds candid enough but the reader cannot take it seriously. Of course Yeats could have supplied the names of some of his former classmates if he had wanted to! The point is that specific references to these middle-class, pedestrian schoolboys would detract from the presentation of Yeats's central theme: like Wordsworth's Prelude, Reveries might be subtitled "The Growth of a Poet's Mind." In depicting the classroom atmosphere in general terms only, Yeats makes sure that the reader will not side with anyone except young Willie; Yeats's point of view becomes ours and when the athletes bully him, we naturally take his side.

To take another example, after relating how, as a small child, he was terrified of his Pollexfen grandfather, the narrator says, "Even today when I read King Lear his image is always before me, and I often wonder if the delight in passionate men in my plays and in my poetry is more than his memory" (p. 9). Implicitly, Yeats is reminding his reader that, awkward and inept as he may have been as a child, he is now an established poet and dramatist. Seen in this perspective, his former superstitious fears of William Pollexfen seem comical and even charming.

Throughout Autobiographies, Yeats scatters reminders that he is an established poet, and that he can therefore define the limitations of his fellow poets from a special point of view. After criticizing the poetry of his friend George Russell (A.E.), Yeats generalizes, "We are never satisfied with the maturity of those whom we have admired in boyhood; and because we have seen their whole circle—even the most successful life is but a segment—we remain to the end their harshest critics. One old
school-fellow of mine will never believe that I have fulfilled the promise of some rough unscannable verses that I wrote before I was eighteen” (p. 246). There is not a moment’s doubt, the passage suggests, that Yeats has in fact fulfilled his early promise and that accordingly he has the right to discriminate between Russell’s accomplishments and failures.

The “I” of the present is always poised, calm, reflective, mature. But despite his sometimes severe judgments on others, Yeats’s persona does not come across as an unpleasantly arrogant figure. The strategy, as Hazard Adams and Ian Fletcher have noted, is to establish an ironic distance between the mature Yeats and the child or adolescent whose irrational behavior and exasperating habits alternately amuse and dismay his grown-up counterpart. Yeats is, for instance, severe in his judgement of his poetic beginnings:

I began to make blunders when I paid calls or visits, and a woman I had known and liked as a child told me I had changed for the worse. I wanted to be wise and eloquent . . . and when I was alone I exaggerated my blunders and was miserable. I had begun to write poetry in imitation of Shelley and of Edmund Spenser . . . and I invented fantastic and incoherent plots. My lines but seldom scanned, for I could not understand the prosody in the books, although there were many lines that taken in themselves had music. I spoke them slowly as I wrote and only discovered when I read them to somebody else that there was no common music, no prosody. (pp. 66–67)

This apparently sincere self-judgement is very appealing. In another similarly self-deprecating passage, Yeats gently pokes fun at his childhood conviction that a new-born calf is a gift of God, and that surely, if he stayed up late enough on a night that a cow was due to calve, “there would be a cloud and a burst of light and God would bring the calf in the cloud out of the light.” The narrator adds wryly, “That thought made me content until a boy of twelve or thirteen, who had come on a visit for the day, sat beside me in a hayloft and explained all the mechanism of sex” (p. 26).

In the later segments of Autobiographies, which deal with the poet’s adult life, the distance between the two Yeatsses inevitably decreases and the tone is less ironic, but the poet continues to judge his former self. Talking of The Countess Cathleen in Dramatis Personae, for example, he says matter-of-factly, “it was not, nor is it now, more than a piece of tapestry. The Countess sells

her soul, but she is not transformed. If I were to think out that scene today, she would, the moment her hand has signed, burst into loud laughter . . .” (p. 417). Or, reviewing his quarrels with George Moore, he describes, with a nice ironic edge, his youthful attitude toward love: “I disliked Moore’s now sentimental, now promiscuous amours, the main matter of his talk. A romantic, when romanticism was in its final extravagance, I thought one woman, whether wife, mistress, or incitement to Platonic love, enough for a lifetime: a Parsifal, Tristram, Don Quixote, without the intellectual prepossessions that gave them solidity” (p. 431).

The masking process is often extremely complex, as in Yeats’s treatment of Maud Gonne. Here a comparison between Memoirs and The Trembling of the Veil is particularly interesting. In Memoirs, Yeats introduces Maud Gonne with the words, “I was twenty-three years old when the troubling of my life began” (p. 40). In what follows, he refers to the scandalous gossip circulating about her, to her girlhood affair with the French radical Millevoye, to whom she bore two children—a little boy who died in infancy and a girl who became her so-called adopted daughter Iseult. We learn of Yeats’s repeated proposals of marriage, his resentment of “My one visible rival” (p. 63)—her politics—and his unbearable sexual frustration which resulted in frequent masturbation: “It filled me with loathing of myself; and yet at first pride and perhaps, a little, lack of obvious opportunity, and now love kept me in unctuous celibacy” (p. 72). This “unctuous celibacy” lasted until Yeats’s thirtieth year when he finally had his affair with “Diana Vernon” (Olivia Shakespear). The image of the poet that emerges from Memoirs is thus not exactly flattering; all his energies seem to be diverted to a fantasy love affair that could never be consummated and that was sublimated in the elaborate astrological conjunctions and occult games Yeats played with Maud Gonne.

Yet the candor of Memoirs is appealing, and many readers will miss it in Autobiographies. The problem of sexual frustration is now couched in generalities: “I was in poor health, the strain of youth had been greater than it commonly is . . .” (p. 376). Honesty gives way to dramatic design. In the famous Paterian set-piece in “Four Years” which introduces Maud Gonne (pp. 123–124), Yeats is, in Adams’ words, “twice masked.” The young poet is remembered as generic “likeable young man,” who cannot help
taking the side of such a beautiful young woman against his father. Maud is endowed with mythical dimensions: "in that day she seemed a classical impersonation of the Spring, the Virgilian commendation 'She walks like a goddess' made for her alone. Her complexion was luminous, like that of apple-blossom through which the light falls, and I remember her standing that first day by a great heap of such blossoms in the window" (p. 123). Neither here nor later does Yeats refer to her earlier affairs, her pregnancies, her irrational behavior. Even the portrait of her political leadership in "The Stirring of the Bones" is stylized and ritualized:

Her power over crowds was at its height, and some portion of the power came because she could still, even when pushing an abstract principle to what seemed to me an absurdity, keep her own mind free, and so when men and women did her bidding they did it not only because she was beautiful, but because that beauty suggested joy and freedom. Besides, there was an element in her beauty that moved minds full of old Gaelic stories and poems, for she looked as though she lived in an ancient civilization... her whole body seemed a master-work of long labouring thought, as though a Scopas had measured and calculated, consorted with Egyptian sages, and mathematicians out of Babylon, that he might outface even Artemis's sepulchral image with a living norm. (pp. 364–365)

The "I" of the present is equally masked. "Today," says Yeats in the "Four Years" passage, "with her great height and the unchangeable lineaments of her form, she looks the Sybil I would have had played by Florence Farr" (p. 123). These words imply that the poet can now admire her objectively, purely from an artist's point of view. The ominous concluding sentence, "It was years before I could see into the mind that lay hidden under so much beauty and so much energy," is particularly deceptive because all external evidence suggests that Yeats never did come to "see through" Maud Gonne.29 But because he is playing the role of the temperate, reflective man in Autobiographies, the poet must convey the impression that he was, all alone, moving toward the wisdom of maturity. The treatment of Maud Gonne in Trembling is thus an excellent example of the degree of fictionality autobiography can attain. For although the autobiographer cannot alter the

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basic facts of his life, he can, as Yeats does here, reduce their specificity and particularity, all the while enhancing their mythic, universal quality so that the balance shifts from true confession to artistic design.

It is interesting to compare the prose treatment of Maud Gonne to “A Prayer for My Daughter,” which antedates *Trembling* by two years. The “I” of the poem is at once more and less masked than the persona of “Four Years.” Although there are no direct references to Maud Gonne in “A Prayer for My Daughter,” she is the dominant figure in a poem ostensibly about the poet’s infant daughter. In his “excited reverie,” the poet bitterly recalls:

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Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty’s horn,
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good
By quiet natures understood
For an old bellows full of angry wind?
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This is the most open reference to Maud Gonne in the poem, but Yeats has, of course, referred to her all along. She is the great beauty of Stanza III who has lost “natural kindness” and the “heart-revealing intimacy / That chooses right.” She is Helen, the most beautiful but most destructive of women, who “had much trouble from a fool”—the reference is to Major John MacBride, whom Maud Gonne married in 1903 and from whom she separated less than two years later. In Stanza V, Yeats elliptically refers to himself:

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Yet many that have played the fool
For beauty’s very self, has charm made wise,
And many a poor man that has roved,
Loved and thought himself beloved,
From a glad kindness cannot take his eyes.
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Having worshipped at the altar of Maud Gonne, Yeats has now turned from her destructive beauty to the “charm” and “glad kindness” of Georgie Hyde-Lees who became his wife in 1917.

“A Prayer for My Daughter” is only peripherally concerned with the future; its real focus is on the poet’s past. Gradually, without accusing her directly, he exorcises the spirit of Maud Gonne. The technique of the poem is to juxtapose two contrasting sets of images: the “horn of plenty” vs. the “old bellows full of angry wind”; the “flourishing hidden tree” vs. “the wares / Peddled in the thoroughfares”; the “linnet,” firmly planted on the leaf, vs. the
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screaming “sea-wind” and “flooded stream”; the “magnanimites of sound” vs. the “howl” from “every windy quarter”—in short, “radical innocence” vs. “murderous innocence,” and “custom” and “ceremony” vs. “arrogance” and “hatred.” These contrasts are so carefully developed that the speaker’s choice between two kinds of women appears as a universal human choice, not just the poet’s own. “A Prayer for My Daughter” seems almost impersonal, and yet line after line obliquely refers to Yeats’s love for Maud Gonne. Circumspectly and indirectly, it refers to emotions and events carefully omitted from Autobiographies. In both cases, the “I” of the poet is elaborately masked, but the masking necessarily varies according to the demands of each genre. If Maud Gonne were to be mentioned at all in the autobiography, she would have to be called by name and treated as a real person—not as Helen or Venus. On the other hand, the autobiographer is not, as we have seen, bound by the actual facts. He can choose his stance, inventing or distorting his reactions to events and subtly transforming his “characters.”

At the end of the preceding section, I argued that Yeats’s autobiographical poems move in the direction of greater realism in their documentation of actual persons and places. This is equally true of Yeats’s self-presentation. In “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” for example, Yeats does not disguise himself as a “poor man that has roved” as he did in “A Prayer for My Daughter,” or as Hanrahan, his alter ego in “The Tower.” The poet, judging his past self from his standpoint in the present, admits that in his youth he was “starved for the bosom of his (Oisin’s) faery bride,” and that as dramatist, “Players and painted stage took all my love, / And not those things that they were emblems of.” He admits too that the “dream” of reclaiming Maud Gonne (still circumspectly called “my dear”) from fanaticism and hate became a fatal preoccupation. Like The Trembling of the Veil, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” presents the poet as a wise, reflective man, who can judge his past follies and struggles, having learned to accept the “foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart” for what it is.

IV Narrative Structure in Yeatsian Autobiography

I wish now to consider the larger structural patterns characteristic of Yeats’s autobiographical mode. Here I must deal with
the three parts of the autobiography—Reveries Over Childhood and Youth (1916), The Trembling of the Veil (1922), and Dramatis Personae (1935)—separately since notable changes in narrative structure occur between 1916 and 1922, and between 1922 and 1935. But since an analysis of the structure of The Trembling of the Veil would require an essay in itself, I will only take one part of Trembling, "The Tragic Generation," as representative of the whole.

(a) Reveries Over Childhood and Youth

Reveries Over Childhood and Youth begins with an account of Yeats's Pollexfen grandparents as they appeared to the young child; it ends, significantly, with their death. The poet is depicted as gradually freeing himself from the restrictions imposed upon him by the adults who dominate his childhood world. It is not coincidental that the penultimate section of Reveries, which records the death of Yeats's grandparents, begins with the sentence, "I had published my first book of poems by subscription. . . ." Their death symbolically spells the birth of W. B. Yeats as poet. No longer obliged to fear that passionate but ignorant old man, William Pollexfen, the poet can begin to celebrate him. So, at least, the structure of Reveries implies.

The whole book is thus framed by two contrasting images of the Pollexfen grandparents. Within this framework, two narrative patterns can be discerned. The first is the poet's movement toward and away from his father's influence, a movement which charts Yeats's discovery that only by judging his father can he ultimately judge himself.30 In Section XV, almost exactly at the midpoint of Reveries, Yeats writes, "My father's influence upon me was at its height" (p. 64). This is the climax of the first movement; from then on, J. B. Yeats's domination begins to decline.

The second narrative pattern, which sometimes crosses the first, is suggested by Hazard Adams' observation that throughout Reveries Yeats stresses "the irrationalities of his intercourse with

30 Cf. Richard Ellmann, Man and Masks, p. 21: "the theme that forces its way through the fragmentary pictures in his (Yeats's) dependence upon his father and his constant efforts to escape from that dependence."
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irrationalities that are partly bound up with his own peculiarities and partly indigenous to his world. As the boy grows up, he becomes more and more convinced that the universe is essentially mysterious and cannot, accordingly, be understood from the standpoint of scientific rationalism. Only by disciplining himself, by assuming a mask, a glorious, theatrical gesture of carelessness abandon, can the poet come to terms with his world. The discontinuous "spots of time" that make up Reveries can thus be seen as a series of images in which the poet's actions, or the effect on him of the actions of others, are revealed by the mature narrator in all their absurdity, pathos, and cruelty.

Let me begin by charting Yeats's "drama of the absurd" since the father-son tension is best viewed against this larger background. Yeats's first memory, he tells us, is the following:

I remember sitting upon somebody's knee, looking out of an Irish window at a wall covered with cracked and falling plaster, but what wall I do not remember, and being told that some relation once lived there. I am looking out of a window in London. It is in Fitzroy Road. Some boys are playing in the road and among them a boy in uniform, a telegraph-boy perhaps. When I ask who the boy is, a servant tells me that he is going to blow the town up, and I go to sleep in terror. (p. 5)

Immediately, the book's polarities—Ireland and England—are introduced, but Yeats does not, as he will later in the book, oppose a hateful England to an idyllic Ireland. In the young child's mind both are associated with disillusion: Ireland is seen as an ugly wall of cracked plaster, while London evokes terror—it is a city that unidentified boys try to blow up. The next paragraph gives us a third image—this time of Sligo—which intensifies the sense of frustration Yeats finds typical of childhood: "I am sitting on the ground looking at a mastless toy boat with the paint rubbed and scratched, and I say to myself in great melancholy, 'It is further away than it used to be.'" The toy boat becomes a symbol of all the things children want and cannot have. At the end of Section I, Yeats writes, "I remember little of childhood but its pain. I have grown happier with every year of life as though gradually conquering something in myself, for certainly my miseries were not made by others but were a part of my own mind" (p. 11).

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The “something” that the growing boy must gradually conquer is his childish expectation that the world makes sense. No one is unkind to him, but wherever he turns, he discerns a gap between appearance and reality. For example, Yeats recalls that, as an extremely devout boy who fretted over his sins, he was “full of wonder” when one day he accidentally hit one of the ducks in the barnyard with a stone only to be told “that the duck would be cooked for dinner and that I should not be punished” (p. 6). Is it sinful to kill ducks or not? Again, what can a sensitive little boy think of a grandfather who is so pig-headed that, when the crew of his ship refuse to dive into the icy waters near Rosses Point in order to inspect the condition of the rudder, he dives down himself and comes up “his skin torn but well-informed about the rudder” (p. 7)? What is even stranger: this same grandfather of whom the little boy is mortally afraid is the comic butt of his servants, who happily pull the wool over his eyes.

The memories associated with Yeats’s childhood are often ones of comic futility. He recalls that he judged people’s social importance mainly “by the length of their avenues” and was accordingly ashamed that the “avenue” of his grandfather’s house “went from the hall door through a clump of big trees to an insignificant gate and a road bordered by dirty cottages” and was “but two or three hundred yards” long (p. 14). Again, the child adores “a beautiful silver cup that belonged to my great-great-grandfather,” which graces his Aunt Micky’s mantelpiece, a cup at least three-hundred years old and marked with the family crest. “All its history for generations was rolled up inside it upon a piece of paper yellow with age, until some caller took the paper to light his pipe” (p. 20). Yeats makes no comment on this incident but the implication is again that the world is absurd: why preserve family heirlooms and record family history when a moment’s carelessness can reduce all to ashes?

In depicting his schooldays, Yeats dramatizes similarly absurd incidents; he makes no attempt to give an objective account of his studies. School, for this child, means dutifully memorizing a song and repeating it to his father only to have the latter wince at his son’s delivery and inform the schoolmistress to discontinue Willie’s singing lessons. School means walking with his sister under a large umbrella, “both gripping the handle and . . . guiding
ourselves by looking out of a round hole gnawed in the cover by a mouse” (p. 25). School—most amazingly—means a library without books. An archaic encyclopedia, one of its only volumes, yields such wonderfully useful bits of information as the following “fact” which the poet was to remember for over forty years: “fossil wood despite its appearance might . . . be only a curiously shaped stone” (p. 25).

When the family moves to London, Yeats attends a school that is more advanced academically than the Irish dame-school, but whose pedagogy is hardly more reasonable. Crossing one’s legs in class is forbidden as is playing marbles, which is considered a form of gambling (p. 40). The one memorable teacher—“a fine Greek scholar”—is dismissed for alleged homosexual behavior (p. 42). Later, when the family returns to Dublin, Yeats is sent to the local high school in a “bleak eighteenth-century house” (p. 56). Here Shakespeare is “read for the grammar exclusively,” and so literature quickly becomes the future poet’s worst subject. Nor can he concentrate on the correctness of his Latin translations because he is “trying to find out what happened in the parts we had not read” (p. 57). All schools, Yeats concludes from his own experience, are somehow absurd if not overtly cruel institutions—he remembers the fellow art student in Dublin who introduced himself with the words, “I don’t care for art . . . I am a good billiard player . . . but my guardian said I must take a profession, so I asked my friends to tell me what I could do without passing an examination and here I am” (p. 79).

Other incidents are less amusing. The autobiographer does not minimize the cruelty of childhood; he recalls, for example, how on the night that his baby brother died, he and his sister, “sat at the table, very happy, drawing ships with their flags half-mast high. We must have heard or seen that the ships in the harbour had their flags at half-mast” (p. 27). When he goes to London, he has his first experience with the cruelty of other children: the boys taunt him for his Irishness and for having dark skin; they victimize him for his clumsiness at sports. He learns that there is a perverse pleasure in abusing others. At art school, for example, the young men love swearing “violent and fantastic oaths” at a certain “pretty gentle-looking girl” in the class and call her vile names. At first Yeats is shocked but then he learns that she is totally deaf and that actually
the boys are kind to her, "carrying her drawing boards... and putting her into the tram at the day's end" (p. 80).

This is the sort of incident for which nothing in Yeats's formal education or family upbringing has prepared him. How does one make sense of a world where people derive pleasure from calling a deaf girl ugly names? If the adolescent turns to the study, first of local faery lore and then of mystical philosophy, it is, at least in part, to come to terms with the irrationalities of his world. In the penultimate section of Reveries, which relates Grandfather Pollexfen's death, Yeats recalls, "Before he was dead, old servants of that house where there had never been noise or disorder began their small pilferings, and after his death there was a quarrel over the disposition of certain mantelpiece ornaments of no value" (p. 106).

Growing up in an absurd world is complicated by the tension between father and son. Reveries charts Yeats's movement toward and away from his father, and again the seeming discontinuity of the narrative is deceptive for each incident or image has a function in the larger structure.

The depiction of the poet's relationship with his father expresses a similar sense of the strange dichotomy between appearance and reality. Although Yeats is not overtly critical of his father, the portrait that emerges from the narrative is something less than flattering. The first memory recorded is that of the famous reading lesson J. B. Yeats gave the seemingly backward Willie in order to keep him from going to church. Although the father manages to teach his son how to read, his success is an ironic one: the boy would, after all, have learned how to read sooner or later, and it turns out to be J. B. Yeats's hostility to religion that Willie remembers.

"My first clear image of him," the narrator recalls, "was fixed on my imagination, I believe, but a few days before the first lesson. He had just arrived from London and was walking up and down the nursery floor. He had a very black beard and hair, and one cheek bulged out with a fig that was there to draw the pain out of a bad tooth" (p. 24). Why does Yeats remember this odd detail? Possibly the bulging cheek symbolizes J. B. Yeats's persistent sense of inadequacy as an artist and his financial unrest—a condition no "fig" can cure. A second childhood memory reinforces this image of futility: in London, a stranger, learning that J. B. Yeats was the lit-
tle boy's father, "laughed and said, 'O that is the painter who scrapes out every day what he painted the day before'" (p. 31). This might be no more than malicious gossip but Yeats corroborates it: "He [J. B. Yeats] is never satisfied, and can never make himself say that any picture is finished" (p. 28).32

On the whole, however, the first half of Reveries presents an image of a father whose devotion to his son's education is admirable and touching. The little boy is proud to think that he is "an artist's son" who "must take some work as the whole end of life and not think as others do of becoming well off and living pleasantly" (p. 42). He admires the pre-Raphaelite salons of his father's friends and shares J. B. Yeats's cult of style. Together they read Sir Walter Scott, Shelley, Byron's Manfred, and Coriolanus, and the boy agrees that "All must be an idealization of speech, and at some moment of passionate action or somnambulistic reverie" (p. 65). It is while Yeats attends art school in Dublin, travelling into the city with his father every day, that J. B. Yeats's influence is "at its height" (p. 64).

According to the narrator's analysis, this influence inevitably began to wane, however, because J. B. Yeats's noble efforts to prepare his son for an artistic career were vitiated by a certain lack of commitment, a habitual inconsistency. For example, the father who introduces his son to the refined peacock-blue decor of the pre-Raphaelites sends the boy to the Godolphin School in Hammersmith, a school designed, Yeats acidly observes, "for the sons of professional men who had failed or were at the outset of their career" (p. 40). The very air of its ugly buildings seems to be made of hideous "yellow brick" (p. 32). Or again, the father who fills his son's mind with romantic fantasies of an ideal dream world insists that the boy be an excellent horseman, evidently to make up for his own deficiencies in sports: "He himself," the poet recalls, "... rode very badly" (p. 52). More important, after preaching the pre-Raphaelite gospel to Willie for years, J. B. Yeats begins to paint realistic portraits. Exposed to these conflicting values, the boy becomes confused and insecure: "My thoughts were a great excite-

32 Yeats makes the same point in Dramatis Personae: "Instead of finishing a picture one square inch at a time, he kept all fluid, every detail dependent upon every other, and remained a poor man to the end of his life, because the more anxious he was to succeed, the more did his pictures sink through innumerable sittings into final confusion" (p. 436).
ment, but when I tried to do anything with them, it was like trying to pack a balloon into a shed in a high wind” (p. 41). The image recurs in a poem written at about the same time as Reveries, entitled “The Balloon of the Mind”:

Hands, do what you’re bid:
Bring the balloon of the mind
That bellies and drags in the wind
Into its narrow shed.

According to Reveries, the “balloon” of Yeats’s mind first comes to rest in the “shed” of occultism and magic. “It was only when I began to study psychical research and mystical philosophy,” Yeats declares, “that I broke away from my father’s influence” (p. 89). The latter part of Reveries dramatizes the poet’s search for “meaning.” While at art school, he begins to rebel against his father’s insistence that the artist must depict what he sees:

I had come to think the philosophy of his fellow-artists and himself a misunderstanding created by Victorian science, and science I had grown to hate with a monkish hate. . . . My father was painting many fine portraits . . . but all displeased me. In my heart I thought that only beautiful things should be painted. . . . And I almost quarrelled with my father when he made a large water-colour . . . of a consumptive beggar-girl. . . . I did not care for mere reality and believed that creation should be deliberate, and yet I could only imitate my father. . . . I had as many ideas as I have now, only I did not know how to choose among them those that belonged to my life. (pp. 82-83)

This is the climax of the narrative, the epiphany toward which the autobiography has been moving. Although the poet does not yet know how to choose among his “many ideas”—his mind is still a balloon—he has now put “mere reality” behind him. The rest of Reveries follows naturally from this illumination. Section XXVII brings the lesson home. “We lived in a villa,” the narrator recalls, “where the red bricks were made pretentious and vulgar with streaks of slate colour, and there seemed to be enemies everywhere” (p. 83). This unpleasant setting is the backdrop for the rising tension between father and son. The following incident seems trivial but epitomizes the basic difference between father and son:

One morning when my father was on the way to his studio, he met his landlord and they had this conversation: ‘Do you think now that Ten-
nyson.’ There was a silence and then: ‘Well, all the people I know think he should not have got it.’ Then, spitefully: ‘What’s the good of poetry?’ ‘O, it gives our minds a great deal of pleasure.’ ‘But wouldn’t it have given your mind more pleasure if he had written an improving book?’ ‘O, in that case, I should not have read it.’ My father returned in the evening delighted with his story, but I could not understand how he could take such opinions lightly and not have seriously argued with the man. (p. 84, italics mine)

The import of this anecdote is that J. B. Yeats likes playing the role of artist better than he likes his art; he loves to shock the bourgeois landlord by asserting that any “improving” book would bore him. But for Willie this distinction between beauty and truth is facile; his father’s conviction that the work of art must have nothing to do with ideas no longer seems sufficient. Perhaps, after all, poetry should have meaning. “I was constantly troubled,” Yeats recalls a page or two later, “by philosophic questions. . . . I would have a week’s anxiety over the problem: do the arts make us happier or more sensitive and therefore more unhappy?”

It is here that his father fails him. When George Eliot, a novelist who disturbs and alarms Willie because he is repelled by her didacticism and scientific realism and yet knows that her work cannot simply be dismissed as unimportant, comes up in conversation, J. B. Yeats shrugs her “aside with a phrase, ‘O she was an ugly woman who hated handsome men and handsome women’” (p. 88). And he begins to praise Wuthering Heights. Because his father cannot understand his problems, Willie turns more and more to Irish Nationalism and occultism and begins to have a life of his own. He makes every effort to overcome his insecurity, to become “self-possessed, to be able to play with hostile minds as Hamlet played, to look into the lion’s face . . . with unquivering eyelash” (p. 93). He forces himself to attend social functions, to assume masks, to create a new image of himself.

At the end of Reveries, the young poet’s victory is only partial, but there are many hints as to his future development. “I was about to learn,” the narrator recalls, “that if a man is to write lyric poetry he must be shaped by nature and art to some one out of half a dozen traditional poses, and be lover or saint, sage or sensualist, or mere mocker of all life . . .” (p. 87). It is in the context of statements such as this one that we must understand the puzzling conclusion of Reveries, in which Yeats asserts that “all life . . . seems to me a preparation for something that never happens”
I do not think that Yeats wants this statement taken literally; what he means is that the trouble taken by his fond relatives—especially by his father—was probably wasted, for the result has not been commensurate with the efforts of these well-meaning people. The birth of a poet, in other words, is mysterious and ultimately inexplicable.

One must stress that Yeats's account of his relationship to his father is not necessarily "true." Perhaps he would have been a poor student regardless; perhaps he is only trying to rationalize his interest in magic and the occult. But in creating a coherent work of art, Yeats cannot retain all the possibilities; thus he focuses on the central tension between the poet and a world that is kind, decent, honorable—but essentially absurd. The poet's shifting perspective on this world is the basis of the narrative; the seemingly fragmentary images coalesce to produce what Yeats called "architectural unity."

(b) "The Tragic Generation"

Unlike Reveries, The Trembling of the Veil deals with Yeats's personal crises only implicitly; the autobiographer is well masked. Ian Fletcher has objected to the book's structure as being "circular" and "deterministic," and it does seem that Yeats here subordinates character and action to ideology: every poet or artist described in "The Tragic Generation," for example, is presented as a divided self, an incomplete human being who fails to come to terms with his anti-self and with the objective civilization (Yeats designated it as Phase 22) into which he was born.

Yet I would argue that it is neither necessary nor even particularly desirable to know the system of A Vision when reading "The Tragic Generation." For although Yeats does assign his fellow

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33 Adams gives a slightly different interpretation of the last section: "... the statement is meant to reveal that there is a possible contrary to its speaker: a masked figure who cares not a fig for 'preparation' or for some great day, a figure who believes in the 'now' of things, in momentary gay gesture and in drama, a figure who believes that there are things more important than all that is laboriously achieved by material effort" (p. 169).

34 "Rhythm and Pattern," p. 185. One should note that Memoirs represents the opposite extreme: there is no real organizing principle in this first version of Trembling. Yeats begins by describing a particularly painful fight with his father and ends with the image of his near collapse at the news that Maud Gonne could not love him physically. Events and ideas follow one another in fairly random fashion.

35 On this point, see Ronsley, pp. 83–100.
artists of the nineties to particular phases of the moon according to his system, the real concern of the book is the impact that the "tragic generation" had on him. The key to its structure is its framing device, in many ways similar to that of Reveries. The book opens with an account of the first London production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and ends with the opening performance in Paris of Alfred Jarry's violent farce, *Ubu Roi*. *A Doll's House* epitomizes everything the young Yeats hated about the realist theatre: its dialogue was too "close to modern educated speech" (p. 279); it lacked music, style, and art and paved the way for Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, which Yeats compares to a sewing-machine he saw in a nightmare, a machine that "clicked and shone" and "smiled perpetually" (p. 283). Jarry's *Ubu Roi* symbolizes what Yeats considers the opposite excess: the overly stylized, surrealistic puppet play, totally divorced from life.

Between these two extremities, the Yeats of "The Tragic Generation" runs his course. In *Reveries*, the poet learned to free himself from his father's domination and from the absurdities of his childhood world; now he must learn to overcome the aestheticism of the Yellow Nineties, a movement of which he was very much a part. "The Tragic Generation" is, then, another chapter in the history of Yeats's growth as a poet. By observing the tragedy of the Decadent poets, he learns what pitfalls to avoid himself.

Despite their individual differences, Wilde, Johnson, Dowson, Symons, Beardsley, and Yeats himself had one thing in common: all believed, according to Yeats's account, in cultivating beautiful sensations for their own sake; they longed to "burn with a hard gem-like flame." Their "insistence upon emotion which has no relation to any public interest," the divorce between art and life, the fracture between external politeness and inner turmoil, between ceremoniousness and moral anarchy was, the mature Yeats reflects, an unfortunate distortion of the philosophy of Pater: "Three or four years ago I re-read *Marius the Epicurean* . . . it still seemed to me . . . the only great prose in modern English, and yet I began to wonder if it, or the attitude of mind of which it was the noblest expression, had not caused the disaster of my friends. It taught us to walk upon a rope tightly stretched through serene air, and we were left to keep our feet upon a swaying rope in a storm"
Paterian aestheticism, Yeats maintains, produced a generation who “spoke their opinions in low voices, as though they feared to disturb the readers in some ancient library,” but lived disordered lives, escaping into the world of alcohol, homosexuality, drugs, and harlots. In Section IX the narrator explicitly rejects this cult of “pure beauty,” recalling that the great classical poets “lived public lives” and were not afraid of “propaganda or traditional doctrine” (p. 313).

Yeats judges his former self candidly: “I have felt in certain early works of my own which I have long abandoned, and here and there in the work of others of my generation, a slight, sentimental sensuality which is disagreeable, and does not exist in the work of Donne, let us say, because he, being permitted to say what he pleased, was never tempted to linger . . . between spirit and sense” (p. 326). Here Yeats puts his finger on the so-called “dissociation of sensibility” of the nineties, the split “between spirit and sense,” art and life.

The last fragmentary images of “The Tragic Generation” present young Yeats in Paris, very much part of the general Decadent scene, taking hashish, and sitting in cafes with Strindberg and the German poet Dauthendey, who “explains that all his poems are without verbs, as the verb is the root of all evil in the world” (p. 348). As a young man, Yeats admires Dauthendey’s “scorn for reality,” but in retrospect his judgement on the poets of the Yellow Nineties is rather severe: “They had taught me,” Yeats concludes, “that violent energy, which is like a fire of straw, consumes in a few minutes the nervous vitality, and is useless in the arts. Our fire must burn slowly, and we must constantly turn away to think, constantly analyse what we have done. . . . to conserve our vitality, to keep our mind enough in control and to make our technique sufficiently flexible for expression of the emotions as they arise” (p. 318).

This is the climactic insight which the poet of “The Tragic Generation” attains. The “I” of the opening sections is a faithful disciple of Pater, an aesthete who loathes Ibsen and Shaw and yearns for style. But style—the cult of beauty, of violent energy and momentary burning passion—is as dangerous as scientific realism and didacticism. At the end of “The Tragic Generation,” the poet, attending the performance of Ubu Roi, is already learning that
such pure stylization, such grotesque distortion of life is no more artistic than the Shavian drama of ideas. The primitive violence of *Ubu Roi* looks forward to "the Savage God" (p. 349). Although the Yeats of the nineties cannot quite verbalize this discovery, the autobiographer of 1922 knows that "our fire must burn slowly."\(^{36}\)

(c) *Dramatis Personae*

*Dramatis Personae*, the third installment of Yeats's autobiography, is altogether shorter and less complex than his previous autobiographical writings, and its structure is readily discerned. The first sentence establishes the scene: "When I was thirty years old the three great demesnes of three Galway houses, Coole House, Tulira Castle, Roxborough House, lay within a half-hour or two hours' walk of each other" (p. 385). Yeats juxtaposes two sets of values associated with these great houses. Coole Park, the estate of Lady Gregory, and Roxborough House, her girlhood home, symbolize all that is noble, magnanimous, aristocratic; Tulira, the home of the dramatist Edward Martyn, whose uneasy collaboration with George Moore and Yeats led to a series of sometimes comic, sometimes painful quarrels described in *Dramatis Personae*, stands for an ingrained vulgarity, a lack of real style, and a persistent ineffectuality. The decor of Tulira, the narrator recalls, was "among the worst inventions of Gothic revival" (p. 386). Coole House—the house Yeats came to love "more than all other houses" (p. 389)—was, by contrast, "plain and boxlike" (p. 391); like Lady Gregory herself, its keynote was simplicity.

*Dramatis Personae* presents the poet at the apex of a triangle with Lady Gregory on one side and George Moore on the other. Moore’s affectations, his vulgarity, and his artistic incompetence are presented in a series of biting vignettes, but there is very little real narrative in *Dramatis Personae*, for it is apparent from the beginning that Yeats is on Lady Gregory’s side. Ian Fletcher is undoubtedly right when he says that, after judging Moore and Martyn, Yeats implicitly judges himself;\(^{37}\) the poet recalls, for

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example, that it was from his own overwrought dramatic style that Moore "learnt those long, flaccid, structureless sentences" (p. 438). But despite such occasional self-insight, there is little dramatization of the self in Dramatis Personae; the book is more properly a memoir than an autobiography for its focus is on other people rather than on their influence on the poet.

Dramatis Personae is, in fact, a rather static though very eloquent memorial to Yeats's patronness Lady Gregory. As a testimonial to Lady Gregory and a witty, malicious attack on George Moore, the memoir is charming, but it lacks the thematic range and structural complexity of either Reveries or The Trembling of the Veil. The very fact that Yeats intersperses in the text quotations from his correspondence with Lady Gregory suggests that this is not as organic a fictional construct as were his earlier autobiographical writings. If Yeats fails to "create a marvellous drama out of his own life" in this book, it is perhaps because, as in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited," written two years later, he depends too heavily on the reader's stock response to certain persons and places. In the poem, the mere mention of Mancini's portrait of Lady Gregory is supposed to make the reader understand why the speaker, "Heart-smitten with emotion," sinks down and covers his eyes. The conclusion of Dramatis Personae seems equally sentimental: Grania's highly rhetorical song over the sleeping Diarmuid does not seem to resolve the poet's conflict with George Moore, nor does it clarify his own position in Lady Gregory's very special circle.

It seems that by 1935 Yeats was beginning to exhaust his autobiographical impulse, although the few autobiographical poems written after 1935—"The Circus Animals' Desertion," "Beautiful Lofty Things," "A Bronze Head," and "The Municipal Gallery Revisited"—are perhaps more "confessional" than anything Yeats had written earlier. Yeats's great achievement in the genre was, however, over by 1935. To illustrate what Yeats could do with the narrative structure of a long autobiographical poem, I turn to "The Tower" of 1925.

(d) "The Tower"

In 1925, Yeats was sixty. In the opening lines of "The Tower," the speaker, who is clearly identified with the aging poet himself,
states his dilemma:
What shall I do with this absurdity—
O heart, O troubled heart—this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?

Although his vitality, his sexual energy, his "Excited, passionate, fantastical / Imagination" have never been more powerful, it is fitting that, because he is old, the speaker should "be content with argument and deal / In abstract things." Against his will, the poet and passionate man must, it seems, turn philosopher.

In Part II, the central section of the poem, the speaker's conflict is slowly resolved, not by any kind of reasoning process or new event, but by the meaning he derives from a series of memories of past events. As he paces on the battlements of his tower, surveying the stark landscape where "Tree like a sooty finger, starts from the earth," the poet invokes "images and memories / From ruin or from ancient trees / For I would ask a question of them all."

But the question is not asked until 72 lines later, and by that time it is anti-climactic. Coping with old age is no longer the poet's major concern, and his second and central question, "Does the imagination dwell the most / Upon a woman won or woman lost?", is posed and answered in the final stanza of Part II. Meanwhile, the poet meditates on past events that seem at first, like the memories in Reveries, random and unconnected. None of the persons summoned from the dead is the poet's friend, relative, or sweetheart. Yet Yeats has carefully assembled a cast of characters that can most adequately answer his "question" about the relationship of imagination to the painful realities of life.

In the first place, all those invoked are associated with the landscape near Thoor Ballylee: Mrs. French lived "beyond that ridge"; Mary Hynes "somewhere upon that rocky place"; the blind poet Raftery wrote songs about the region; the maddened peasant "drowned in the great bog of Cloone"; Hanrahan, Yeats's invented character, wandered from cottage to cottage in the neighborhood of Ballylee; the "ancient bankrupt master" owned the tower which is now the poet's home; the "Rough men-at-arms" climbed its narrow stairs.

Secondly, the incidents recalled build up an integrated pattern. As in Reveries, they all involve some form of absurdity, of irrational behavior. Mrs. French, an aristocratic lady of the eighteenth
century, behaved irrationally when, in a fit of anger at a local farmer, she expressed the desire that his ears be cut off. Her careless remark was taken literally by a devoted "serving-man," who, only too quick to oblige, brought her the "insolent farmer's ears . . . in a little covered dish."38 The men who took the words of Raftery's song so literally that they set out in quest of the real Mary Hynes were equally absurd: "Music had driven their wits astray—/And one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone." Hanrahan's fateful moonlight chase of the pack of hounds, represents the triumph of irrationality. In submitting to the "old man's juggleries" in the peasant cottage, Hanrahan lost his sweetheart, "And had but broken knees for hire /And horrible splendour of desire." Even the life of the "ancient bankrupt master" was essentially absurd. Harrassed by his creditors, and yet refusing to leave the tower, he was finally beyond reclamation: nothing in the world could "cheer" him.39 It was irrational, finally, that the poet himself, as he confesses to Hanrahan, "turned aside / From a great labyrinth" of love, "out of pride, / Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought / Or anything called conscience once." Was his renunciation worthwhile in view of the fact that his imagination still continues to "dwell the most / Upon a woman . . . lost"?

Yeats's *dramatis personae* are related on still another level. In her excellent analysis of "The Tower," Sarah Youngblood has observed that "All the characters invoked in section II are selected for their emotional kinship to the poet. Because, like him, they are gifted with an "excited, passionate, fantastical imagination," it is of them in particular that he must ask his question."40 Mrs. French's wild imagination brings her the ironic gift of "so fine an ear";

38 For the background of the poem, see Jeffares, CCP, pp. 159–160. An even fuller treatment of the myths behind the poem is found in Daniel Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge. Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* (Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 60–83. Hoffman's focus is on the conjunction of peasant and aristocrat in creating the Unity of Culture which "The Tower" celebrates.

39 In his own note to "The Tower," Yeats writes, "... the old bankrupt man lived about a hundred years ago. According to one legend he could only leave the Castle upon a Sunday because of his creditors, and according to another he hid in the secret passage," *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (Macmillan, 1957), p. 825.

Raftery’s song invests Mary Hynes with special magic; the drunken admirers dream of possessing her; Hanrahan’s “deep considering mind” has made exciting discoveries “in the grave”; the sleep of the “ancient bankrupt master” is broken by visions of “Rough men-at-arms,” beating on a board with “their great wooden dice.”

Yet, after the poet asks his first question: “Did all old men and women, rich and poor, / Who trod upon these rocks or passed this door, / Whether in public or in secret rage / As I do now against old age?”, only Hanrahan is summoned back. “All the others,” Sarah Youngblood writes, “have used the imagination to gain something from the actual world, as does Mrs. French; or are imaginative without creation and so are betrayed, as the admirers of the peasant girl are; or are not creative at all as the ‘harried’ former master of the tower . . .” (p. 82). Unlike these personages, Hanrahan has Unity of Being. An “old lecher with a love on every wind,” a passionate man who has tasted every pleasure of life, he also has a “deep considering mind” and “mighty memories.” It is he who understands the mystery of sexual love:

\[
\ldots \text{it is certain that you have} \\
\text{Reckoned up every unforeknown, unseeing} \\
\text{Plunge, lured by a softening eye,} \\
\text{Or by a touch or a sigh,} \\
\text{Into the labyrinth of another’s being.}
\]

In the “Stories of Red Hanrahan,” Yeats calls him “the learned man and the great songmaker,” and when the Red Man dies, he is given a burial “worthy of so great a poet.”41 Hanrahan is, in other words, the poet’s idealized image of himself—his alter ego—and when the protagonist poses his crucial question, “Does the imagination dwell the most / Upon a woman won or woman lost?”, he is, of course, simply addressing himself. The question is, for that matter, purely rhetorical for the poet immediately answers it: he admits that he “turned aside” from the “great labyrinth” of love. The last two lines of Part II are central:

\[
\text{And that if memory recur, the sun’s} \\
\text{Under eclipse and the day blotted out.}
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This passage takes us back to the fifth stanza, in which the poet

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41 Mythologies, pp. 216, 261. See also Hoffman, Barbarous Knowledge, pp. 79ff.
declared, "O may the moon and sunlight seem / One inextricable beam, / For if I triumph I must make men mad." Since the sun is now "Under eclipse," the implication is that the poet has not succeeded in attaining Hanrahan’s Unity of Being. His "triumph" is thus qualified, but "memory" does "recur" in the antithetical moonlight, as the poet suddenly recovers the experience of his lost love.

This "shock of recognition" is the terminus of the poet’s meditation. In repossessing the past, he enlarges its dimensions so that the heritage of Burke and Grattan—those heroes of eighteenth-century Ireland—is now his. The tone of Part III is thus confident and assertive. "It is time that I wrote my will," the poet proclaims, now looking toward the future. No longer afraid that he must "bid the Muse go pack," he recaptures his faith in the imagination, rejecting Plato and Plotinus. Like the Self of "Dialogue of Self and Soul," he is "content to live it all again," to "make Death and life . . . lock, stock and barrel / Out of his bitter soul." Death can hold no terror for this visionary poet who can create a "superhuman dream" out of the "memories of love, / Memories of the words of women."

The imagery of Part III is one of intense upward motion. In Part I, the poet recalled that as a young man he "climbed Ben Bulben's back"; now he chooses for his heirs "upstanding men / That climb the streams until / The fountains leap." Just as the daws build their nest upwards "layer upon layer," so by analogy the poet himself builds his "tower"—his created universe—rooted in earth, but reaching upward toward heaven.

In autobiography, says Roy Pascal, "each circumstance, each incident, instead of being an anomalous fact, becomes a part of a process and a revelation of something within the personality. Experience acquires a symbolic value."42 This would be an accurate description of the structure of "The Tower." All the seemingly unrelated memories of Part II are symbolic of various facets of the protagonist’s personality: his sense of belonging to a particular countryside, his dislike of the merely rational, his active

42 Cf. Jean Starobinski: "c'est parce que le moi révolu est différent du je actuel, que ce dernier peut vraiment s'affirmer dans toutes ses prérogatives. Il ne racontera pas seulement ce qui lui est advenu en un autre temps, mais surtout comment, d'autre qu'il était, il est devenu lui-même," Poétique, p. 261.
imagination. His essential uniqueness, on the other hand, is dramatized in terms of the exchange with Hanrahan, the poet's idealized image of himself. His lifelong dream has been to achieve Unity of Being—to be poet, scholar, fisherman, lover—and yet in the sphere of love he has admittedly failed. In confessing to "pride," "Cowardice," "silly over-subtle thought," and too nice a conscience, the poet comes to terms with his past and casts out remorse. "The Tower" is thus what Pascal calls "a judgement on the past within the framework of the present" (p. 19).

Critics generally agree that the original sin of autobiographers is to make the line linking past and present too exactly continuous and logical. If, in other words, the autobiography is the exposition of something understood all along, the reader misses the sense of discovery, the gradual unfolding of the personality. Here again "The Tower" illustrates Yeats's successful manipulation of the autobiographical convention. The "I" of Part I does not know how to cope with "Decrepit age"; he is in a complete quandary until he has invoked the memories of Part II. And even here his path is not straightforward: he dismisses Hanrahan only to call him back a moment later. The poem thus reenacts the process of meditation itself; it does not merely summarize its conclusions.

V

"The Tower" is one of Yeats's longest lyric poems. In adapting autobiographical conventions for the lyric, Yeats was able to write a long poem that has what he called "architectural unity" and "symbolic importance." In connecting past, present, and future, he avoided the "absorption in fragmentary sensuous beauty or detachable ideas" that he found so objectionable. Quite possibly, the writing of Reveries and The Trembling of the Veil taught Yeats how to arrange a sequence of memories so that they would culminate in a moment of self-insight, an epiphany in which the speaker suddenly "sees" his present situation because, like the Self in "Dialogue of Self and Soul," he has been "content to follow to its source / Every event in action or in thought."

In the preceding section, I have concentrated on the narrative

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43 See Pascal, pp. 15-16; Gusdorf, p. 117.
structure of "The Tower," but the poem might just as easily be used to illustrate the generalizations made in sections III and IV. "The Tower" is, for example, richly documented with the names of persons and places—Ben Bulben, Plato, Plotinus, Mrs. French, Cloone, Hanrahan, Burke, Grattan—but the individual memories, vivid as they are, are patently unrealistic; they have a quality of mythological timelessness for there is no reference to their temporal relationships to one another. Again, although the images of the past merge and overlap, the distinction between past and present is carefully maintained throughout. The poet's present situation ("I pace upon the battlements and stare . . .") leads naturally to the recollection of the past ("Beyond that ridge lived Mrs. French"), and in Part III the poem rounds upon itself to return to the present: "It is time that I wrote my will." At the end of the poem, the speaker's eye is on the future; he compels his soul "to study / In a learned school / Till the wreck of the body . . . Or what worse evil come . . . Seem but the clouds of the sky."

Like the persons of Autobiographies, the "I" of "The Tower" is an elaborate contrivance, a wise man who "must make men mad." He is the noble creator, impatient with trivia, who dismisses Hanrahan contemptuously ("O towards I have forgotten what—enough!")], only to call him back just as arrogantly a moment later. The following passage illustrates Yeats's use of the mask in "The Tower":

I leave both faith and pride
To young upstanding men
Climbing the mountain-side
That under bursting dawn
They may drop a fly;
Being of that metal made
Till it was broken by
This sedentary trade.

Anyone who has read Yeats's Memoirs or any of the Yeats biographies knows that in fact he was not "of that metal made." He was never the simple, passionate, energetic man. The proud fisherman is the Mask or Anti-Self of the timid, self-conscious young poet that Yeats once was. The speaker who complains that only "This sedentary trade" of writing poetry has "broken" his masculine virility is an invention, not the real Willie Yeats.

One concludes that Yeats's autobiographical poems are intimately related to the poet's autobiography. Yet quite aside from
Monsieur Jourdain's very basic distinction between prose and verse—a distinction which creates, of course, entirely different demands for the two genres—Yeats is much more oblique in his autobiographical poems than in the autobiography. "Hanrahan" in "The Tower" is a case in point. In Autobiographies, Yeats could not discuss his painful relationship with Maud Gonne without referring to the actual facts; the solution was, as we have seen, to omit the affair altogether. But in poetry there is a way out: the mythological figure Hanrahan is invoked in place of the "real" Willie; the poet's double can return from the grave with newly found wisdom. Such paradoxical exploitation of self and transcendence of self seems to me uniquely Yeatsian. Surely no other poet of our century has been at once so present and so absent in his poems.

"On the prose-version distinction in autobiography, see Philippe Lejeune, "Le Pacte Autobiographique, Poétique," p. 138."