Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more.
For Lucidas your sorrow is not dead.

THE CONSOLATION THEME IN YEATS'S
"IN MEMORY OF MAJOR ROBERT GREGORY"

By Marjorie Perloff

In its conventional form, the elegy is characterized by a temporal movement from lament to consolation. Yeats's first elegy on Robert Gregory, "Shepherd and Goatherd," written in March, 1918, on the model of Spenser's pastoral elegy "Astrophel," follows the convention closely; the consolation motif appears near the close of the poem in the Goatherd's Song (lines 89-112), which is the verse equivalent of Yeats's description in Book III of A Vision of the "dreaming back" process that the spirit must undergo after death. Gregory's soul must "live over and over again the events that had most moved it," purging itself.

"Of all 'twas pain or joy to learn. . . .
Till, clambering at the cradle-side,
He dreams himself his mother's pride,
All knowledge lost in trance
Of sweeter ignorance" (98, 109-12)

Marion Witt has argued convincingly that this concept "of the life of the soul after death, without the consolation that Spenser or Milton

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offers, is coldly theoretical. . . .”4 The philosophical system is given straightforward exposition; it is not absorbed into the concrete substance of the poem.

No one has accused Yeats's second Gregory elegy, “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” (June, 1918), of being “coldly theoretical,” even though this poem seems to dispense completely with the consolation theme, along with the other formal conventions of elegy. “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” contains no reference to any kind of immortality, whether of Gregory himself, as in classical and Christian elegy, or of his work and thought, as in a secular variant such as Arnold’s “Thyrsis.” Curiously, however, despite the absence of any overt consolation for Gregory’s death, the tone of the elegy is neither respondent and gloomy on the one hand, nor coldly indifferent and cynical on the other. Amy G. Stock calls it “the most genuinely commemorative of all the great English elegies.” She observes that “Yeats maintains his aristocratic composure,” whereas Milton, Shelley, and Arnold in their elegies are full of grief and “the dead friend dissolves into a symbol of sorrow.”5 Peter Ure has commented on the elegy's tone of “proud self-involvement” (p. 66), and Marion Witt praises its balance of the “intimate” and the “heroic” (p. 116).

How does Yeats manage to infuse this “heroic” tone and “aristocratic composure” into an elegy which ends on the note of pure grief (“but a thought / Of that late death took all my heart for speech”) and which makes no claims for the permanence of Gregory’s artistic legacy? If there is no consolation in contemplating Gregory’s death, why is the speaker neither overcome with sorrow nor coldly hostile toward a universe that kills its most brilliant young men?

In order to answer these questions, we must consider an oddly neglected facet of the poem—its dramatic structure.6 It is my contention that “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” has an interesting variant on the consolation theme, contained not in the last few stanzas or lines of the elegy, as was customary in the conventional form, but in its total rhetorical framework. The speaker or persona of the poem is consistently presented as one who has heroically survived the turmoil

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6 Although Yeats's handling of the “dramatic lyric” is one of the main concerns of Thomas Parkinson in W. B. Yeats: The Later Poetry (Berkeley, 1964), he does not discuss “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory.” Nor does George T. Wright allude to the elegy in his discussion of Yeats's personae in The Poet in the Poem (Berkeley, 1960).
and temptations of the fledgling artist to achieve the Unity of Being denied to Robert Gregory in his lifetime.

Since my interpretation runs counter to the only two full-scale explications of the poem to date—Witt's "The Making of an Elegy" and Frank Kermode's chapter on "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" in Romantic Image—I must begin with a summary of the arguments contained in these closely related essays. Kermode calls the elegy "Yeats's first full statement of what he took to be a complex and tragic situation: the position of artists and contemplatives in a world built for action, and their chances of escape, which are in effect two: the making of Images, and death" (p. 30). "The main theme of the elegy," says Kermode, is "the significance of Gregory's death as the artist's escape." Since it is impossible to live both the life of action and the life of the artist, Gregory escapes the dilemma by dying; in death, "He transcends all partial, divided men. and becomes himself a radiant symbol, measuring and illuminating the whole collapsing world, and the artists who struggle to work in it. He becomes Yeats's victory" (p. 41).

In her essay, which is mainly a study of the poem's sources, Witt agrees with Kermode that "the basic division in Gregory between the absorbing inner dream and the easier external action... made his early death inevitable... Yeats saw Gregory's death as a kind of self-immolation, to which the young man moved as he increasingly realized that the disparate elements of his being could never form a final unity" (p. 120). Gregory's victory in death over his "disparate elements" is then, the consolation given to those who mourn for him.

These comments must seem puzzling to the literal-minded reader. for the elegy itself contains no references at all to a "basic division," a conflict between action and contemplation in Gregory's nature. On the contrary, as the refrain repeatedly tells us, Gregory did all things well ("And all he did done perfectly"). The Kermode-Witt reading seems so remote from the poem because both commentators take as their starting point not the text itself, but the obituary notice of Gregory that Yeats wrote for the Observer shortly after the young aviator was killed in World War I. In this essay, reproduced in its entirety in Romantic Image, Yeats concentrates on Gregory's accomplishments as a painter, placing him in the tradition of Blake, Calvert, and Palmer. In the final paragraph he raises the question of the conflict between artistic creation and action in Gregory's life:
I have noticed that men whose lives are to be an ever-growing absorption in subjective beauty . . . seek through some lesser gift, or through mere excitement, to strengthen that self which unites them with ordinary men. It is as though they hesitated before they plunged into the abyss. Major Gregory told Mr. Bernard Shaw, who visited him in France, that the months since he joined the army had been the happiest of his life. I think they brought him peace of mind, an escape from that shrinking, which I sometimes saw upon his face, before the growing absorption of his dream, as from his constant struggle to resist those other gifts that brought him ease and friendship. Leading his squadron in France or in Italy, mind and hand were at one, will and desire. (pp. 33-34)

Here indeed is the subject of the artist's self-division. Kermode and Witt use this prose passage as a gloss for Stanza XI of the elegy:

Some burn damp faggots, others may consume
The entire combustible world in one small room
As though dried straw, and if we turn about
The bare chimney is gone black out
Because the work had finished in that flare.
Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,
As 'twere all life's epitome.
What made us dream that he could comb grey hair?

"In the teeth of the fate that was visibly overtaking him," writes Kermode, "he [Gregory] was able to achieve, in the life of action, that Unity of Being which is the ideal of the personal life, and which the present age denies. Even so, it was only at the cost of immediate extinction that Gregory achieved it, triumphantly consuming his dream . . ." (p. 41). To "consume / The entire combustible world in one small room" is, in other words, regarded by Kermode as Gregory's triumph; it is a moment of "delight," of "life in death" (p. 41). This "triumphant" consumption, the intensely brilliant but brief "flare" of Gregory's life, sounds very fin de siècle: one is immediately reminded of Pater's "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." Kermode's reading of Stanza XI is the generally accepted one; Ure, for example, writes, "Robert Gregory was represented as an artist who, by the intensity and unity of his life, escaped from self-division and the curse of old age" (p. 66).7

The Yeats who wrote "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" however, was no longer the Yeats of the Yellow Nineties. He was the fifty-three-year-old poet on the brink of his great decade, a newly married man who had, according to his biographer Richard Ellmann, finally "emerged from the isolation and eccentricity of bachelorhood into peace and harmony," and who felt that the marriage bed was "the symbol of the solved antinomy." In glossing Stanza XI, Kermode, Witt, and Ure immediately assume, using the Observer obituary as evidence, that Yeats is full of admiration for Gregory's solution and that he has nothing but contempt for those ninnies (like Yeats himself) who grow old enough to "comb gray hair." This assumption not only ignores the matrix of the poem: it is also called in question by a passage in "The Tragic Generation," which was written shortly after the Gregory elegy and published in The Trembling of the Veil in 1922. Contemplating the fate of the poets of the Rhymers Club, the tragic dissipation of their talent in drink and debauchery, Yeats writes:

They had taught me 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, be content even to have little life outside our work, to show, perhaps, to other men as little as the watch-mender shows, his magnifying glass caught in his screwed-up eye. Only then do we learn to conserve our vitality, to keep our mind enough under control and to make our technique sufficiently flexible for expression of the emotions of life as they arise.10

The imagery of the above paragraph closely resembles that of Stanza XI: in both cases the "fire of straw," which symbolizes the life of "violent energy" of those who "consume / The entire combustible world in one small room," is contrasted to a second, slower-burning fire, which represents the opposite mode of existence. But, whereas the speaker of the elegy makes no explicit judgment as to the relative value of these two ways of life, in "The Tragic Generation" Yeats emphatically rejects the "fire of straw" as "useless in the arts" and chooses the other as the poet's fire. It is, of course, conceivable that, despite the similarity of imagery and phrasing, Yeats is saying one thing

2 According to Ellmann (p. 238), it was written between 1919 and 1921.
in the poem and another in the prose passage. We must examine the whole elegy before we can determine the precise relevance of Yeats's statement in "The Tragic Generation" to the meaning of the poem.

In any case, can we assume that "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" is closely related to the Observer obituary? Kermode says that the "almost casual magniloquence" of the essay "conceals a series of assumptions which were of extraordinary importance to Yeats" (p. 34); he argues that the first Gregory elegy, "Shepherd and Goatherd," is a failure because "the rich possibilities of the Observer obituary remained unrealised" (p. 36). This argument seems oddly unconvincing when one considers that the Observer piece is a public essay, written mainly, no doubt, to please and console one of Yeats's oldest and dearest friends, Robert Gregory's mother. "I hope," he wrote to Lady Gregory on February 22, 1918, "you thought my little essay on Robert was right" (Letters, p. 647). For her sake, he wishes to find meaning in the young man's premature death, just as he hopefully tells her in the same letter that "there should be some essay on his work with reproductions of some of his pictures"—an essay which was, in fact, never written.

The obituary essay can be understood only in the context of Yeats's letters, in which he expresses himself much more spontaneously and openly than he could in a newspaper article. The references to Gregory in the Wade edition are found almost exclusively in the letters to Lady Gregory; the first of these, a brief mention of "Russell, Robert's Oxford friend" (p. 347), occurs in 1900, four years after Yeats's first meeting with Lady Gregory. Most of the nineteen references made to Gregory between 1900 and 1918, the year of his death, concern the young man's role as sometime set designer and general factotum to the Abbey Theatre. The following comments to Lady Gregory are typical:

(December 9, 1902) Sturge Moore has done me some designs for The Hour-Glass working out Robert's sketch into practical detail. (p. 387)

(November 24, 1904) Robert's wing will be very good for a remote play like The Shadowy Waters but it is too far from realism to go with comedy or with any ordinary play. . . . I have found out that the exact thing I want is the sort of tree one finds in Japanese prints. If Robert could find time to look up some prints and to
make me a wing of this sort in the next three or four days I would be very glad. (p. 445)

(January 5, 1910) I am inclined to get his [Laurence Binyon's] advice on all our scenic difficulties—perhaps to come to Dublin for the purpose. It would be a fine new start for us and put a new force in much that we do. It would not prevent Robert designing but would give us all the mechanism—a mountain to put our mountain on. (pp. 545-46)

(March 5, 1913) There is to be a refurbished edition of my collected edition. . . . I am anxious to get into it some of Robert's designs. (p. 578)

(September 8, 1917) My only doubt about your dragon play is who, Robert being away, is to stage it. (p. 631)

One gathers from these letters that Yeats regarded Gregory with a mixture of affection and condescension. He hopes to use some of Robert's designs to enhance his book of poems; he admires Robert's "wing," but wants an even better one for his play; he wants to keep Robert on as set designer, but feels that an outsider must be brought in to solve "all our scenic difficulties." The letters hardly give the impression, which most commentators seem to have, that Yeats identifies with Gregory. Thus the famous letter to John Quinn, written shortly after the death of Gregory, is exceptional in tone; because he died in battle, Gregory becomes a hero:

News will have reached you before this of Robert Gregory's death in action. I feel it very much for his own sake, still more for his mother's. I think he had genius. Certainly no contemporary landscape moved me as much as two or three of his, except perhaps a certain landscape by Innes, from whom he had learnt a great deal. His paintings had majesty and austerity, and at the same time sweetness. He was the most accomplished man I have ever known; I mean that he could do more things well than any other. (pp. 645-46)

Certainly, the tone of this letter is one of unqualified admiration, love, and sorrow. But, having completed "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," and having written to his father that the poem "is among
my best works” (p. 650), Yeats rapidly forgets his young friend. After 1918, there is only a single reference made to Gregory in the *Letters*: Yeats tells Edith Shackleton Heald on November 28, 1937: “All round the study walls are book-cases but some stop half way up and over them are pictures by my brother, my father, by Robert Gregory” (p. 901).

Nowhere does Yeats suggest that Gregory’s fate is symbolic of the fate of The Artist in Our Culture, or that Gregory’s dilemma, the division between “the absorbing inner dream and the easier external action” (Witt, p. 120), is his dilemma as well. If Gregory achieves Unity of Being only in the moment of his death, Yeats places himself along with Dante, Shelley, and Landor at Phase 17, in which “Unity of Being . . . is now more easy than at any other phase” (*Vision*, p. 141).

It seems impossible, one concludes, to read the elegy as a poetic analogue of the *Observer* obituary and to assume that its main theme is “the significance of Gregory’s death as the artist’s escape.”

I have talked at such length about the external evidence furnished by Yeats’s *Autobiography* and *Letters* only because this is the sort of evidence on which the available explications of “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” are based. It is time now to look at the poem itself.

Everyone has spoken of the personal, intimate tone of the elegy, of its colloquial, conversational, deliberately informal idiom. A. Norman Jeffares, for example, writes, “The great quality of this poem is its directness. . . . We are allowed to overhear Yeats thinking aloud, yet retaining his intense privacy.” But what is the real bearing of this “directness” on the relationship between the speaker (who is not necessarily Yeats himself) and the Robert Gregory of the elegy? Ure gives us a hint when he says, “There is a proud self-involvement that organises all the parts of the poem and sounds in all its stresses and accents; we see the man making the song, drawing us into his place and time . . .” (p. 66).

The first stanza immediately presents us with “the man making the song” and does a great deal more than create an “informal” mood or introduce the imagery of the house and the house-warming:

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Now that we're almost settled in our house
I'll name the friends that cannot sup with us
Beside a fire of turf in th' ancient tower.

The three first-person plural references in the first two lines immediately convey the speaker's sense of security, of belonging. Whether or not we wish to read this stanza in the light of Yeats's life, recalling the fact that, at the time of writing the elegy, the perennial bachelor had recently married Georgie Hyde-Lees, and that together they were refitting an ancient tower near Lady Gregory's estate as their home, it is immediately apparent that the "I" of Stanza I feels a sense of fellowship, of communion, with his unnamed marriage partner. Together they sit "Beside a fire of turf" and at "some late hour" they will "Climb up the narrow winding stair" (the winding stair is always an emblem of spiritual ascent in Yeats's poetry) to the "bed" which, in this context, can be none other than the marriage bed. The first stanza thus establishes a contrast between "the friends that cannot sup with us" because, as we learn in line 8, they are dead, and the "we" who are "almost settled," who "sup," "talk," and "climb"—who are, in other words, intensely alive.

In the second stanza, the focus continues to be personal: the first-person plural pronoun is used four times and the first-person singular twice:

Always we'd have the new friend meet the old
And we are hurt if either friend seem cold.
And there is salt to lengthen out the smart
In the affections of our heart.
And quarrels are blown up upon that head;
But not a friend that I would bring
This night can set us quarrelling.
For all that come into my mind are dead.

Here the "we" unit is slightly enlarged: it no longer includes only the speaker and his wife, but refers to a larger, as yet unspecified group to which the speaker belongs. a group that is likely to argue amicably but passionately about certain topics. Although one cannot tell at this point just who the "we" are, the speaker constantly reminds both himself and his audience that he is a member of a larger community

\(^{1}\) See Ellmann, p 239
The remembered dead, who are introduced with a touch of irony in Stanza I as "Discoverers of forgotten truth / Or mere companions of my youth," come into the foreground in Stanzas III, IV, and V in a sequence that resembles the procession of the mourners in conventional elegy. Each of the three men described—Lionel Johnson, John Synge, and George Pollexfen—exemplifies one facet of Gregory's personality: Johnson is the scholar-artist, Synge the lover of nature in its most rugged and desolate aspect, and Pollexfen the horseman, the man of action.\textsuperscript{15} Gregory sums up these three virtues: he is "soldier" (like Synge),\textsuperscript{16} "scholar" (like Johnson), and "horseman" (like Pollexfen). But Stanzas III-V do not simply present personifications of these three distinct virtues; the meaning of these stanzas is complicated by the fact that each talent described is a tarnished one:

Lionel Johnson comes the first to mind,
That loved his learning better than mankind,
Though courteous to the worst; much falling he
Brooded upon sanctity
Till all his Greek and Latin learning seemed
A long blast upon the horn that brought
A little nearer to his thought
A measureless consummation that he dreamed.

Johnson, the minor \textit{fin-de-siècle} poet,\textsuperscript{17} who is depicted as renouncing life for the sake of his art, is a tragic figure because, even as an artist, he is ultimately a failure. The ironic rhyme "falling he" / "sanctity" epitomizes the painful irresolution of Johnson's life. Longing for "sanctity," the alcoholic poet is always "falling" off his bar stool. The word "falling" also refers, in a broader sense, to the fact that Johnson was repeatedly sinful: his own poem, "Mystic and Cavalier," which Yeats quotes in his \textit{Autobiography} (p. 150), opens with the line, "Go from me: I am one of those, who fall. . . ." His impeccable Greek and Latin scholarship, which he prefers to "mankind," ultimately fails to bring him the "measureless consummation that he dreamed."

Synge's fate is equally ironic. He does not discover his true métier,

\textsuperscript{15} In \textit{The Lonely Tower}, Henn explains that horsemanship is, for Yeats, always a symbol of aristocracy, breeding, strength, and virility (pp. 319-20). Cf. "On a Political Prisoner," "The Gyres," and "Under Ben Bulben."

\textsuperscript{16} The meaning of the word "soldier" throughout the elegy is evidently "one who serves his country." Synge was a "soldier" in this sense since his plays celebrated the native Irish peasant rather than the dandy of the French drawing room.

\textsuperscript{17} Yeats alludes to Johnson continually in \textit{The Trembling of the Veil}. See especially \textit{Autobiography}, pp. 200, 203, 207-209.
an art that is rooted in a life shared with the "Passionate and simple" peasants who inhabit "a most desolate stony place," until it is too late. Only in "dying" does he learn to choose "the living world for text." 15
The last member of the triad, George Pollexfen, the man of action, is gently ridiculed in Stanza VI for his astrological pursuits: he tries to cure horses by conjuring:

[He] could have shown how pure-bred horses
And solid men, for all their passion, live
But as the outrageous stars incline
By opposition, square and trine. 16

In these three stanzas, then, the speaker is anything but sentimental about his "close companions." His tone is at once judicious and sympathetic; the good and bad qualities are carefully weighed: Johnson, although he "loved his learning better than mankind," was "courteous to the worst"; Pollexfen's "muscular youth" is praised, but the speaker also recalls that in old age this athlete grew "sluggish and contemplative." His honest and objective appraisal of his dead friends has two effects. First, it establishes the speaker as one who will not let emotion cloud his reason. Therefore, the encomium of Gregory which begins in Stanza VI does not seem excessive: we are ready to believe all the speaker's superlatives since he has won our complete faith in his powers of discrimination. If the celebration of Gregory as "Soldier, scholar, horseman, he. . . And all he did done perfectly" came near the beginning of the poem, it would no doubt have an exaggerated, bombastic ring. But, coming upon these lines after reading the ironic account of Johnson, Synge, and Pollexfen, we are quite ready to suspend our disbelief—Gregory is now our hero.

Yet the criticism of the three dead companions also has a second effect. If Gregory combines the virtues of Johnson, Synge, and Pollexfen, and if these men display talents that are botched or at least unrealized, what is the ironic implication about Gregory's own accomplishments? Is he really "Soldier, scholar, horseman." or is he amateur explorer, second-rate painter, and daredevil athlete? The passionately warm praise of Gregory is undercut by a slight tinge of skepticism. The tone of the elegy is thus very complex; the speaker's sympathy and judgment are held in balance.

15 Cf Autobiography, pp 229-31
16 Cf Autobiography, pp 44-46
The first-person plural pronoun, which is notably not used in the "objective" portraits of Stanzas III, IV, and V, reappears in Stanza VI:

I am accustomed to their lack of breath,
But not that my dear friend's dear son,
Our Sidney and our perfect man,
Could share in that discourtesy of death.

It is no coincidence that Yeats writes "Our Sidney and our perfect man" rather than "A Sidney and a perfect man" or "That Sidney and that perfect man." The use of the possessive pronoun implies that there is nothing objective about Gregory's status. The speaker is saying something like this: "It is not, of course, a fact, but to us, to our charmed circle, Robert seemed to be another Sidney, a perfect young man." And who are the "we" who are able to judge Gregory's qualifications as Renaissance courtier-poet? The pronoun "our" evidently includes more than the speaker, his wife, and his close friends; it refers to the cognoscenti, the artists and poets who are able to say confidently, "Why he's another Sidney!" If the speaker does not hesitate to use the label, it is because his position enables him to assess Gregory's place in society.

Stanzas VII and VIII have been either ignored or misunderstood by commentators. Since Witt believes that the central concern of the elegy is with Gregory as an artist, she argues that Stanza VII "leads directly to a consideration in stanza nine of the great painter and the secret of art" (p. 117); it describes the primitive landscape typically painted by Gregory and by Palmer and Calvert, the painters who influenced him. As for Stanza VIII, both Witt and Kermode dismiss it as an artistic flaw. Witt establishes the fact that this stanza was not in the original version of the poem, for Yeats wrote in the margin of the final draft, "The following stanza was added in proof as Mrs. Gregory did not think I had said enough of Robert's courage" (p. 117). "Fortunately," says Witt, "the emotional flow of the poem is so strong . . . that the unhappy eighth stanza is only a ripple in the current" (p. 117). Kermode agrees that these lines "about Gregory's foolhardy horsemanship" are extraneous, and he says, "The omission of that stanza leaves us with a clearer development from the landscape of Thoor Ballylee to the greatness of the painter of cold Clare rock, stern colour and delicate line" (p. 40).

This argument strikes me as a prime example of the intentional
fallacy. After all, even if Stanza VIII did not appear in the original version of the poem, the fact remains that Yeats saw fit to add it, and that it is a structural component of the finished elegy. Kermode and Witt are so anxious to make the poem square with the obituary notice that anything irrelevant to the theme of the artist's self-division and escape through death must be explained away. I think that, on the contrary, the unity of the poem depends upon the fact that Stanzas VII-X are the counterpart of Stanzas III-V, except that the three virtues, those of scholar, soldier, and horseman, are now presented in a different order.

Stanza VII obviously relates Gregory to Synge, its subject matter is not landscape painting but landscape. Gregory resembles Synge in that his natural habitat was not green lawn or formal garden, but wild, untrammelled nature. One may compare the reference in line 30 to the "desolate stony place" that Synge loved, to a remark made by Yeats in a letter to his father on July 17, 1909: "We have come down to a desolate, windy spot on the coast of Clare, where Robert Gregory is sketching..." (p. 332). Like Synge, Gregory prefers a landscape characterized by "storm-broken trees" and a lonely "tower set on the stream's edge," a landscape peopled by the "drinking cattle" and the "water-hen."

The "unhappy eighth stanza" also turns out to be integral to the poem, for it describes the Pollexfen aspect of Gregory, thus carrying us back to the fifth stanza. Witt and Kermode seem to forget that it would be structurally impossible for Yeats to announce this motif in the first half of the poem only to drop it completely in the second. If we eliminate Stanza VIII, we must eliminate Stanza V as well. Actually, both these stanzas round out our image of Gregory. Like Pollexfen, Gregory was a horseman of great brilliance, but both were amateurs, performing for the limited audience of Mooneen or Esserken. The last line of Stanza VIII, "And yet his mind outran the horses' feet," is, on the surface, a purely laudatory statement, but it can be read as an ironic variant on the theme of Stanza V, for, in its astrological fantasies, Pollexfen's "mind" also "outran the horses' feet."

It is not until Stanza IX that Gregory emerges as an artist:

We dreamed that a great painter had been born
To cold Clare rock and Galway rock and thorn,
To that stern colour and that delicate line
That are our secret discipline
Wherein the gazing heart doubles her might.
Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,
And yet he had the intensity
To have published all to be a world’s delight.

In this stanza the "we" unmistakably emerges as the inner circle of established artists to which the speaker belongs. The "stern colour" and "delicate line" are the "secret discipline" not only of the painter Gregory, but of the speaker himself. He too is an artist, an older practitioner who searches the local scene for new talent ("We dreamed that a great painter had been born") and is delighted to find it in the work of his "dear friend’s dear son." What Witt and Kermode fail to see here is that the speaker regards Gregory’s achievement in painting as potential, not actual. The first line of the stanza defines the speaker’s hope that Gregory will turn out to be a "great painter," but the last line suggests that his potential was never fully realized: "he had the intensity / To have published all to be a world’s delight." "Have" is the key word here: the sad fact is that Gregory did not "publish" his work before his death.

On closer inspection, Stanza IX is seen to deal not with one but with two artists: Gregory, whose potential genius has been destroyed by death, and the speaker, who is alive to practice his "secret discipline," to create compositions using "stern colour" and "delicate line." Despite the refrain praising Gregory, it is the speaker who now moves into the foreground, and he remains there in Stanza X. In this stanza, Gregory’s artistic talents continue to be considered, but he is now regarded not as a painter, but as an artistic adviser, a glorified interior decorator. The "we" of line 73, who are now once more the husband and wife of Stanza I, miss Gregory because he had such good taste; he "could so well have counselled us / In all lovely intricacies of a house. . . ." The tone, reminiscent of Yeats’s letters to Lady Gregory, is affectionate but also patronizing. It is difficult to agree with Kermode’s assertion that "the poem treats its subject virtually as a painter only" (p. 40), when, even in Stanza X, the implication is that Gregory is less the true artist than the gentleman of impeccable taste upon whom one calls when designing one’s home.

If we come to Stanza XI with the previous stanzas in mind, we are less likely to find a "triumphant victory" in Gregory’s death than if the stanza is treated (as is, unfortunately, frequently the case) in isolation. The natural connotations of the words themselves have probably
made commentators jump to the conclusion that burning "damp faggots" and combing "grey hair" are somehow despicable, at least when measured against Gregory's accomplishment: "Soldier, scholar, horseman, he, / As 'twere all life's epitome. . . ." But the speaker, the confident and proud artist who has evidently survived the "nervous vitality" of youth, is one who, far from consuming "The entire combustible world in one small room," is sitting "Beside a fire of turf in th' ancient tower" (line 3). Whereas Gregory's work, still in its immaturity, "had finished in that flare," the speaker has managed to follow the creed presented by Yeats in "The Tragic Generation:" that is, "to conserve our vitality, to keep our mind enough under control and to make our technique sufficiently flexible for expression of the emotions of life as they arise." The speaker, it turns out, is himself a burner of "damp faggots"; the "secret discipline" of his art involves a fire that burns slowly.

Stanza XII is the elegy's lament; the first-person plural pronoun is dropped, and the tone becomes very personal as the isolated "I" comes to the fore:

I had thought, seeing how bitter is that wind
That shakes the shutter, to have brought to mind
All those that manhood tried, or childhood loved
Or boyish intellect approved,
With some appropriate commentary on each.
Until imagination brought
A fitter welcome; but a thought
Of that late death took all my heart for speech.

The "bitter wind" of line 89 announces the note of personal grief with which the elegy concludes after a brief recapitulation of "All those that manhood tried" (Synge), "or childhood loved" (Pollexfen), "Or boyish intellect approved" (Johnson). The speaker wishes to make an "appropriate commentary" on all his dead friends, but the memory of Gregory's death, a memory made painful by the recognition of the young man's enormous unrealized potential, silences all speech in a final moment of grief without comfort.

The poignant sorrow of the concluding lines is tempered by the consolation, implicit throughout the elegy and coming to a climax in Stanzas IX-XI, that it is possible for the artist to overcome that self-division from which Gregory suffered and to attain at least a
measure of Unity of Being. If the theme of the poem were the tragedy of the modern artist in a hostile world, Yeats could easily have omitted Stanzas I-V, VII, and VIII—almost two-thirds of the elegy. The structure of the finished poem implies that, on the contrary, its real center is the relationship between great poet and artist manqué—a relationship that always fascinated Yeats.20 It is the speaker's victory, not Gregory's, that gives the elegy its "aristocratic composure," its "heroic" tone. But this victory is presented so quietly, so unobtrusively, that no one could accuse Yeats of boasting in the elegy. It is unlikely that Lady Gregory herself noticed anything except the warm praise of her son's various accomplishments and the poet's intense grief at his death. Perhaps it is the exquisite manipulation of tone—the balance of sympathy and judgment—that has made "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" a poet's poem; Allen Tate, for example, writes, "I would select this poem out of all others of our time as the most completely expressed: it has a perfect articulation and lucidity which cannot be found in any other modern poem in English."21

The writing of elegy has posed peculiar problems for the modern poet who, like Yeats, no longer believes in immortality in an orthodox sense, for the form must, by definition, contain both lament and consolation.22 Shelley in Adonais could write of the dead Keats, "He lives, he wakes—'tis Death is dead, not he. . . ." Yeats, despite his devotion to Shelley's poetry and philosophy, could not have written such a line about Robert Gregory. Yet he succeeds in writing one of the great elegies in English literature because he discerns the possibilities of adapting the conventional form to his purpose. Just as the elegy's stanza form is a brilliant variation on Cowley's stanza in the "Ode on the Death of Mr. William Harvey,"23 so the structure of "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," seemingly the loose and rambling structure of the occasional poem, actually retains, in altered form, the traditional components of elegy. The first two stanzas con-

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20 For example, Yeats describes the disappointment he felt when he realized that Oscar Wilde was not a poet of the first rank: "I think . . . that because of all that half-civilised blood in his veins he could not endure the sedentary toil of creative art and so remained a man of action, exaggerating, for the sake of immediate effect, every trick learned from his masters . . . He was a parvenu . . ." (Autobiography, p. 98).


22 In the recently published Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Alex Preminger (Princeton, 1965), Stephen F. Fogle defines elegy as "A lyric, usually formal in tone and diction, suggested either by the death of an actual person or by the poet's contemplation of the tragic aspects of life. In either case, the emotion, originally expressed as a lament, finds consolation in the contemplation of some permanent principle" (p. 215).

tain the invocation to the Muse in the person of the speaker himself as source of poetic inspiration. In Stanzas III, IV, and V, the procession of mourners files across the stage. The death of Gregory is announced in Stanza VI; the fame of the dead man is the subject of Stanzas VII-XI, and Stanza XII contains the lament. The consolation theme however, runs through the whole elegy, beginning with the "we who are "almost settled in our house," and ending with the poet's ability (line 93) to make "some appropriate commentary" on his dead friends, an ability demonstrated by the poem itself. The "delighted eye" that still sees the beautiful forms of nature (line 49) is the eye of an artist less versatile but infinitely greater than Robert Gregory.

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