

# **Virtues of Poetry**

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James Longenbach

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# The Virtues of Poetry



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# The Virtues of Poetry

*James Longenbach*

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The source of poetry is always a mystery, an inspiration, a charged perplexity in the face of the irrational—unknown territory. But the act of poetry—if one may make a distinction here—separating the flame from the fuel—is an absolute determination to see clearly, to reduce to reason, to know.

—Cesare Pavese

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## Preface

The best poems ever written constitute our future. They refine our notions of excellence but continue to elude them. Any utterance affords us an opportunity to think about diction, rhythm, structure, and tone, but by asking to be heard as well as understood, poems intensify our relationship with the medium, the medium we harness every day. No great poem ever stood in the way of the future, foreclosing imaginative possibilities by asking us to endorse a narrow vision of our past or a sectarian arrangement of our contemporaries.

But over the past fifty years, accomplishment in our poetry has been signaled most often by manner—as if it were the job of artists not to engage the most potent aspects of Dickinson or Eliot but to sequester themselves in one or another schoolroom, buoyed by the camaraderie with other students sitting obediently, if stylishly, in rows. Schoolroom for formalists, schoolroom for experimentalists—the degeneration of these terms, hijacked by the renegade engines of taste, would portend the degeneration of the medium, except that while fifty years is a long time in the life of an artist, it is the history of art nothing, the blink of an eye.

This is why the previous fifty years of poetry almost always seem mannered; they seemed so to Yeats a hundred years ago, they seemed so to Keats a hundred years before that. In the short run, the schoolrooms are driven by a mode of writing that can be learned from like-minded contemporaries, releasing poets from the work of learning from inimitable predecessors. But in the long run, Keats did not become Keats by hanging out with Leigh Hunt; he became Keats by spending long, rich hours with Shakespeare and Milton, poets whose virtues he dissected word by word.

This book proposes some of the virtues to which the next poem might aspire: boldness, change, compression, dilation, doubt, excess, inevitability, intimacy, otherness, particularity, restraint, shyness, surprise, and worldliness. The word *virtue* came to English from Latin, via Old French, and while it has acquired a moral valence, the word in its earliest uses gestured toward a magical, transcendental power, a power that might be embodied by any particular substance or act. With vices I am not concerned. Unlike the short-term history of taste, which is fueled by reprimand or correction, the history of art moves from achievement to achievement. Contemporary embodiments of poetry's virtues abound, and only our devotion to a long history of excellence allows us to recognize them.

Certainly there are more virtues than the ones I emphasize, nearly as many as there are poems. So while any of the book's chapters may be read on its own, the chapters are designed to be read in sequence, every poem both challenging and consolidating the embodiments of excellence surrounding it. Sometimes the chapters address each other explicitly, either by opposition (boldness and shyness) or by partially overlapping (boldness and excess). Implicitly the chapters address themselves. The same poet may embody virtues that initially seem unrelated (Shakespeare representing both dilation and surprise) or opposed (Yeats representing both change and inevitability), suggesting that our notions of excellence are not as stable as one might have imagined, also that the poets are themselves more various than any set of virtues may allow. How do we describe the allure of wild excess when we are confronted with the irresistible seduction of restraint? Why does the power of a great poem feel simultaneously unpredictable and assured?

No virtue may be assumed, except inasmuch as it is evinced in a particular way by a particular poem: my interest lies not in abstract notions of excellence but in the ways in which such notions are enacted in language. As Cesare Pavese says in my epigraph, the art of poetry is produced by an absolute determination to see clearly, to reduce to reason; even the thrill of disorder is produced in a



by exquisitely crafted means. But as Pavese also says, the source of poetry is an irrational mystery never to be reasoned, and I also spend some time examining, usually through letters, the lives that these poets have transmuted so painstakingly.

The poets I discuss are hardly unfamiliar; besides the ones I've mentioned so far, I'll also be talking about Donne, Blake, Whitman, Pound, Bishop, and Ashbery, among others. Some poets will be treated at length, and some will need to be discussed more quickly. But the relationships between the poems are as important to me as the poems themselves. Openness is everywhere assumed. That the poets are familiar is a mark not only of virtues we might take for granted but also of a future we might sidestep or dismiss, mistaking it for the past.

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# The Virtues of Poetry

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## *The Various Light*

Celebrating the painter Elstir, the narrator of *In Search of Lost Time* suggests that for the great artist, the work of painting and the act of being alive are indistinguishable. “Certain bodies, certain callings, certain rhythms” may confirm our ideals so inevitably, says Proust, that “merely by copying the movement of a shoulder, the tension of a neck, we can achieve a masterpiece.” The implication here is that art is not the product of the will. More than lack of ambition, it is the inability to surrender to our inevitable callings and rhythms that keeps us from fulfilling our promise.

The word *surrender* makes this achievement sound easy, as if the victory of each day were to walk up looking exactly like yourself. But even if we all possess certain rhythms, certain callings, not everyone is able to sustain the simple act of recognizing them. The surrender of the will is itself impossible merely to will, and we may struggle with the act of surrender more deeply than we struggle with the act of rebellion. “Now I may wither into the truth,” said W. B. Yeats of this process of recognizing oneself, and the word *wither* seems just right, for the discovery does not feel like blossoming. Nor does it happen only once, like an inoculation. Proust’s Elstir does not inhabit his inevitable self truly until he has achieved great age.

Writers have withered into worldliness and excess; writers have withered into shyness and restraint. Why do the latter virtues so often receive bad press, even from artists who embrace them? In my own experience, plainness can be difficult to separate from dullness, restraint from lack of vision or adequate technique; a young writer may embrace the glamour of excess in order to avoid parsing the discriminations. What’s more, the association of artistic achievement with heroic willfulness is endemic, and it is clung to in twenty-first-century America with a fierceness empowered by its fragility: American artists are called great when they are at the frontier, taking the risk, disdaining the status quo, but also landing the movie deal. What happens to the poet who is destined to wither in restraint, the poet whose deepest inclination is to associate risk with submission?

Listen to “The Fish,” a poem written by Yeats in the final years of the nineteenth century.

Although you hide in the ebb and flow  
Of the pale tide when the moon has set,  
The people of coming days will know  
About the casting out of my net,  
And how you have leaped times out of mind  
Over the little silver cords,  
And think that you were hard and unkind,  
And blame you with many bitter words.

That’s one sentence made of sixty words. The sixty words contain seventy-one syllables, some of which receive more stress than others, and like every poet who has ever worked with the English language, writing either formal or free verse, Yeats wants us to hear the relationship of the stressed and unstressed syllables in a particular way; that is, he wants to add an unnatural pattern to the way we naturally pronounce the words. Yeats’s pattern rests on his decision to have every line of “The Fish” contain four stressed syllables.

~~Although you **hide** in the **ebb** and **flow**~~

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But having noticed the consistency of these tetrameter lines, we notice that the consistency exists in tension with an inconsistency. Often only one unstressed syllable precedes a stressed syllable. “**Although you hide.**” This is the iambic rhythm familiar to us from so many English poems, but not every line in Yeats’s poem is perfectly iambic. Sometimes two unstressed syllables intervene, making an anapestic rhythm: “in the **ebb.**” In the third line, the second metrical foot is anapestic (“-ple **com**”), and in the fourth line, the fourth is anapestic (“of my **net**”). In the second line, the first and third feet are anapests (“Of the **pale**”—“when the **moon**”), and the line is made even wilder by the lack of an unstressed syllable between “pale” and “tide.”

Of the **pale tide** when the **moon** has **set**

Why do these variations matter? One of the great advantages of the English language, as a medium for poetry, is its multiplicity of roots: we are used to hearing our original Anglo-Saxon words nestle against imported French or Latinate words in our poetry. Shakespeare: “seas incarnadine.” Blake: “invisible worm.” If we find this effect in English translations of Baudelaire or Dante we are hearing something that poems written in French or Italian cannot easily do, since those languages are derived more primarily from Latin alone. But while it’s difficult to write English poetry without taking advantage of contrasting roots, this is exactly what Yeats does in “The Fish.” The fact that the poem contains sixty words but only seventy-one syllables means that Yeats employs shockingly few multisyllabic words. Almost every word in the poem is derived from the language’s Germanic base (*ebb, flow, tide, moon, set*), and this restraint drives the poem’s rhythmic sophistication. Without the subtle variation of the metrical pattern through which the poem’s single sentence moves, the poem almost unrelievedly monosyllabic diction would fall flat.

Yeats was a great Victorian poet who happened to live long enough to become a great modern poet, so we tend not to think of his early verse as an achievement in its own right. But when Ezra Pound looked back over the history of modern poetry in *The Pisan Cantos*, remarking that “to break the pentameter, that was the first heave,” he was thinking of the rhythmic delicacy of the early Yeats. Notoriously, Yeats changed, but I hear that delicacy in middle-period Yeats.

The trees 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.

And I hear it in later Yeats as well.

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?

From the beginning until the end of his career Yeats delighted in stanzas (or complete poems) constituting one syntactical swoop. While the stanza from the later "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" obviously two sentences, the final one-liner alerts us to the length of the sentence preceding it, highlighting its elegant attenuation. And while the stanza is cast in ottava rima (the stanza Byron used for *Don Juan*, rhymed *abababcc*), Yeats's syntax retains the clarity of discursive prose. It travels through the intricate stanza as effortlessly as the underground river it describes.

In the stanza from "The Wild Swans at Coole" Yeats cheats a little, since the punctuation joins what could be independent clauses—clauses in which the syntax is shockingly mundane: *the trees are, the paths are, the swans are*. What's more, Yeats is working not with a highly literary stanza like ottava rima but with our most predictable stanza: the first four lines are cast in common measure, the stanza we associate with ballads and hymns—iambic tetrameter lines alternating with iambic trimeter lines. No great poem in the language begins by so dramatically relinquishing the means of verbal power.

The **trees** are **in** their **autumn beauty**;  
The **woodland paths** are **dry**.

After hearing these two lines, you expect something like "This poet will write poetry / Until the day he dies."

The third line disrupts our expectations. Yeats flips its initial iamb into a trochee ("**under**"), then follows this inverted foot with an anapest, giving us three unstressed syllables in a row ("**Under** the **October**"). The final foot is also larded with unstressed syllables, making the whole line feel weirdly flat in a different way—not rhythmically predictable but lacking in tension: "**Under** the **October twilight** the **water**." The next line begins again with a trochee and ends with a spondee ("**Mirrors** **still sky**"), but the stanza concludes with lines that return to the mostly iambic regularity (and flaccid predication) with which the stanza began: "**Upon** the **brimming water among** the **stones** / Are **ninety** and-**fifty swans**." Why did Yeats go to such lengths to keep the language of "The Wild Swans at Coole" from taking flight?

The poem's diction is not as resolutely Germanic as that of "The Fish," but reinforced by the bland syntax, the bald repetitions, and the lost opportunities for rhythmic variation, it creates a soundscape in which even the smallest disruption will feel like a thunderclap. The storm breaks loose in the second line of the poem's final stanza.

But now they drift on the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful.

These Latinate words—*mysterious, beautiful*—are not in themselves terribly unusual or challenging

but the poem makes them feel that way. The sound of these two words, wedged together to make one elegant trimeter line, feels incantatory, revelatory, a release from the poem's almost relentlessly stolid verbal landscape. Yeats achieves the same effect in "The Tower," a sudden intrusion of Latinated diction conspiring once again with a trimeter line: "being dead, we rise, / Dream and so create Translunar paradise."

When I was a student, I was taught to think of the plain style in English poetry as something epitomized in the Renaissance by Ben Jonson and championed more recently by poets like Yvor Winters and Thom Gunn. I was taught to think of Yeats as a poet of large-scale rhetorical effects. But no matter how arcane his cosmology, no matter how wild his thought, Yeats's sentences exhibit a restraint related to but different from the plain style. So do William Blake's.

O Rose, thou art sick.  
The invisible worm,  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm:

Has found out thy bed  
Of crimson joy:  
And his dark secret love  
Does thy life destroy.

So do Andrew Marvell's.

What wondrous life in this I lead!  
Ripe apples drop about my head;  
The luscious clusters of the vine  
Upon my mouth do crush their wine;  
The nectarene, and curious peach,  
Into my hands themselves do reach;  
Stumbling on melons, as I pass,  
Ensnared with flowers, I fall on grass.

What exactly do these poems have in common?

The poets I've invoked were influenced by the plain style, but each of them sits uncomfortably on the side of that tradition. Rather than fostering a poetry of direct statement, they employ extreme restraint in order to suggest something other than what the language of the poem actually denotes, something spooky or mythic. Reading "The Sick Rose," we know immediately that this rose is an emblem for certain notions about human sexuality, though we also know it is a rose. Reading "The Wild Swans at Coole," we feel that the woods, the path, and the swans are luring us into a landscape at once physical and spiritual. The poems don't require any allegorical machinery to establish this effect: the restraint of the language itself—the immediate sense that we are being told far less than we could be told—establishes a decorum in which the clear sense of *what* is being said raises the mysterious specter of *why* it is being said.

Of the poems I've mentioned so far, Yeats's "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" is most self-conscious

about this procedure: the one-line sentence that concludes its opening stanza is almost sly (“What water but the generated soul?”), since by the time we’ve reached this line we’ve realized that, however brilliantly the poem is describing the intricate pathway of water, it’s also conjuring a world elsewhere. The word *soul* rhymes tellingly with *hole*: the language of the poem rises to heaven because it cleaves to the earth.

Marvell’s “The Garden” is more subtle, since its language accomplishes this heavy lifting without seeming not to flex a muscle. The very title of the poem feels at once satisfyingly concrete and at the same time immensely suggestive, and in the stanza I’ve quoted from the middle of the poem, we are treated to a cornucopia of sensuous detail—ripe apples, vines, nectarines, the curious peach—all of it delivered to us in lapidary couplets of seemingly effortless simplicity. But while we feel seduced by this sensual world, just as the speaker of the poem is treated to its solitude, we feel simultaneously that we are entering translunar paradise. The wonder of the world’s solitude is unexplained, as if such gratification of our desires were utterly commonplace, and, as a result, the physical act of falling on the grass, sinking into its lusciousness, feels curiously evocative of a spiritual threshold.

The next stanza confirms this feeling.

Meanwhile the mind, from pleasures less,  
Withdraws into its happiness:  
The mind, that ocean where each kind  
Does straight its own resemblance find,  
Yet it creates, transcending these,  
Far other worlds, and other seas,  
Annihilating all that’s made  
To a green thought in a green shade.

The syntax of this poem could not be more perspicuous, the diction could not be more precise. But in the lines by Yeats and Blake, the language feels inexplicably complex by virtue of its restraint, by virtue of implications the language raises but does not acknowledge having raised. The fifth and seventh lines are dominated by complex Latinate words (*transcending*, *annihilating*) while the sixth and eighth lines are made exclusively of simple Germanic words, the most important word in each line used twice: “Far other worlds, and other seas”—“To a green thought in a green shade.” The diction of the final line is relentlessly monosyllabic, but its meaning feels at least as complex as the more obviously rich line preceding it. To be asked to consider the relationship of a “green thought” and a “green shade” is to feel the simple word *green* grow thick with connotation; the meaning of the line feels at once utterly plain and endlessly elusive. So does the sound. For while the Latinate words dominating the penultimate line nestles comfortably into a regular tetrameter (“**Annihilating all that’s made**”), the final line’s monosyllables disrupt it—not “To a green **thought** in a green **shade**” but “To a **green thought** in a **green shade**.” Like the soul, to which the poem turns in the next stanza, this line luxuriates in the “various light.”

Recently, when I happened to return to “The Garden” after many years, I discovered that everything I love about poetry is epitomized by this poem. It was as if the poem were a house I’d lived in all my life without knowing it. It was as if the poem (along with the poems I’ve associated with it) had determined the satisfaction I derive from poetry that the deepest act of artistic originality was inevitably an act of recapitulation, an embrace of otherness. If we all possess, as Proust suggests, Elstir, our inevitable callings, our particular rhythms, they are not original to us. The world makes us

but until we're able to wither into the limitations of ourselves, we cannot see the world.

~~Some of the poems that shaped me are metered and rhymed, while others are written in free verse~~ various kinds. In each case, what captured me was a quality of diction and syntax, a quality that of commonplace vocabulary of innovation and tradition is not well equipped to describe. In the wake of the various modernist disruptions of poetic decorum, stillness and restraint often became associated with the kind of poems we call traditional, while energy and excess were claimed by the poems we call innovative. Today, ambitious young poets write snap-crackle prose poems, while twenty years ago they wrote mordant quatrains. It's only a matter of moments before the pendulum swings back.

How crucial, then, the unprescribable exception, the poem that serves language rather than playing to taste.

Mary in the noisy seascape  
Of the whitecaps

Of another people's summer  
Talked of the theologians so brave  
In the wilderness she said and off the town pier

Rounding that heavy coast of mountains  
The night drifts  
Over the rope's end

Glass world

Glass heaven

Brilliant beneath the boat's round bilges  
In the surface of the water

George Oppen's diction is severely winnowed: only a handful of words derived from French or Greek (*brilliant, barnacle, theology*) disrupt this English seascape, which is dominated by nouns and phrases that sound like spondaic Anglo-Saxon kennings or compound words (*seascape, whitecaps, rope's end, glass world*). The syntax is similarly plain, its difficulties a matter not of subordination but of compression and juxtaposition. Prepositions direct us up or down. Mary is in a boat talking about theologians in the wilderness. Over the boat drifts night. Beneath the boat lies heaven. Over the land floats the breath of barnacles, and over the sea float hen coops—or at least we're tempted to see the floating there by the accumulation of unpunctuated prepositional phrases with which the poem concludes.

Breath of the barnacles  
Over England

over ocean

breakwaters hencoops



Like “The Seafarer,” the Anglo-Saxon poem that Oppen inevitably invokes, “Inlet” is about finding the earth in the sky, the spiritual in the physical, and the poem’s language embodies the discovery the poem describes. Working in the opposite direction from Yeats, Oppen makes the most ordinary Anglo-Saxon words sound like revelation.

breakwaters    hencoops

The poet who rounds the “heavy coast of mountains” to see “heaven / Brilliant beneath the boat round bilges” knows that the words *heavy* and *heaven* are derived from the same word, that *heaven* is an archaic past participle of *heave*. With its multiplicity of roots, English is one of the few European languages with different words for heaven and sky: in English, whatever is in heaven has been heaved there from the world below.

Each poem I’ve discussed has enacted this heavy lifting. Precision, these poems suggest, is not opposed to mystery. In fact, mystery depends on our attention to the particular nature of particular English words—on the way in which our language permits us to hear one kind of word (*big, small*) or a strategically plainer and possibly even less interesting than another kind of word that means about the same thing (*immense, minute*). These kinds of choices are made in all English poems, not to mention everyday speech; but not all poems take strategic advantage of those choices, making what might otherwise seem like a retreat to stillness and restraint feel laden with connotation. “Shepherds are good honest people; let them sing,” said the seventeenth-century poet George Herbert, Marvell’s contemporary. Misquoting this line in “Inlet” (“Shepherds are good people let them sing”), Oppen knew as well as Herbert did that rustic shepherds are notorious for saying elaborate things whenever they show up in poems. Plainness, these poems suggest, is never simple.

Neither is the road on which a poet travels to this realization, inevitable as it might seem. Although he ended his life with the dignity of Proust’s Elstir, Oppen waited half a lifetime to wither into the truth of himself. As a young man, he published the preternaturally sophisticated *Discrete Series* in 1934. Then commenced a silence that didn’t end until almost three decades later with the appearance of Oppen’s second book, *The Materials*, in 1962. Exactly what made poems return to him seemed obscure; even the explanations Oppen himself provided strike me as insufficient, and I suspect that his late withering seemed as mysterious to him as it does to anyone else. Less obscure to me is the sense that Oppen’s career magnifies what is at stake when any writer faces the empty page, then finds it full. More threatening is my suspicion that Oppen’s complete surrender of the will to write was itself the fuel for his achievement.

Not everyone is by nature so stoic, nor does anyone need to be—unless stoicism distinguishes him truly. My point is not that anyone ought necessarily to strive to write like Oppen or Marvell or any other writer. Nor is it my intention to hold up the virtues of restraint as inevitably superior to any other virtues. “Idolatry of the forms which had inspired it,” says Proust, “a tendency to take the line of least resistance, must gradually undermine an Elstir’s progress.” Which is to say that the virtue of restraint (or anything else) cannot be guaranteed, and neither may its inevitability be assumed in a poem that does not yet exist. Restraint will move you if such values distinguish the poems you must write—against your own will. Yeats, Oppen, or Marvell will matter if you learn to hear yourself by listening to them. The greatest poems we will write already exist, and the work of a lifetime is to recognize them as our own.

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## *Best Thought*

The time is 1917, the place London. The war is on. You are a young woman, attractive, well-off, fluent in French, German, and Italian. Since no adequate translation of Pico della Mirandola exists, you translate the Renaissance Neoplatonist's Latin yourself. But while your interest in esoteric philosophy leads you to become a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, your eyes are wide open. You volunteer for the Red Cross. You are immersed in London's literary avant-garde. After all, your best friend is married to the American poet Ezra Pound. Your friend's mother was once the lover of W. B. Yeats, whom Pound considers the greatest living poet—hardly an idiosyncratic opinion.

You yourself have had no love affairs of consequence. When Yeats, a fifty-one-year-old bachelor, once again proposes to Maud Gonne (the Irish actress and political activist with whom he'd fallen in love as a young man), she declines. When Yeats then proposes to Maud's daughter Iseult, she also declines; Iseult would later have an affair with Pound. A month later, when Yeats proposes to you, you accept. At 11:20 in the morning on October 20, 1917, you are married in the Harrow Road Register Office; the witnesses are Pound and your mother.

"I think [this] girl both friendly, serviceable & very able," writes Yeats to an old friend. "She is under the glamour of a great man 30 years older than herself & with a talent for love-making," reports your mother. Honeymooning in the Ashdown Forest Hotel in Sussex, the discombobulated Yeats is writing letters to Iseult, he is writing poems: "O but her heart would break to learn my thoughts are far away." You cast a horary (an astrological chart designed to answer a particular question at a particular place and time). "Per dimandera [domandare] perche noi siamo infelice," you write in a language you know your husband does not understand—"to ask why we are unhappy."

This is one way of describing the early life of Bertha Georgie Hyde Lees Yeats, a life that would soon change dramatically. "The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work," wrote Yeats in "The Choice," and at times it seemed that, for him, the choice was clear. He could be an arch, distant father ("Who is it you are looking for?" he once asked his own daughter when meeting her at the family gate), a husband expert at affecting incompetence at simple everyday tasks so that his purchase on greatness might be presumed. Once, when she was worried about his eyesight, George sent him a new lamp. "What oil do I put in it?" he asked. "The lamp of course consumes lamp oil," she wrote back. "You could surely not have imagined that it demanded Sanctuary oil, or olive oil?" Easily, as George knew well, her husband could have imagined that it demanded Sanctuary oil. When she was asked how it felt to "live with a genius," George replied, "Oh alright, I never notice."

There is something wrong, something too ingeniously self-forgiving, about Yeats's distinction between perfection of the life and perfection of the work. Yeats lived in a medieval tower, he talked with dead people, he wrote some of the most beautiful lyric poems in the language. But every life enriched by disappointment, driven by compromise, and to suggest that one might have been a good person if only one had not been a great artist is to diminish the integrity of art. It is to suggest that art is not fueled by human experience—from the aesthetic to the political to the apocalyptic—but somehow transpires beside or beyond it.

Yeats knew this couldn't be the case.

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A living man is blind and drinks his drop.  
What matter if the ditches are impure?  
What matter if I live it all once more?  
Endure that toil of growing up;  
The ignominy of boyhood; the distress  
Of boyhood changing into man;  
The unfinished man and his pain  
Brought face to face with his own clumsiness.

These lines from “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” celebrate the imperfect life, and through the effortless inhabitation of a complicated meter and rhyme scheme, they show that the most exquisite kind of artistic achievement is fueled by such imperfections. The Self speaks here, and while the Soul would argue otherwise, the Self has the last word—except inasmuch as “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” appears in *The Winding Stair* only pages away from “The Choice.” Yeats arranged his poems carefully so that we might hear them doubting themselves, doubting one another, and of one thing about Yeats one may be sure: if he states a position strongly in a particular poem, he will somewhere else contradict it. Not that Yeats was facile with his thinking; far from it. In order to speak as one person, Yeats needed to be two people—in dialogue with others so that he might be in dialogue with himself.

Think back to the autumn of 1917. Stuck in the Ashdown Forest Hotel, her four-day-old marriage disaster, George began (by her own admission) to “fake” automatic writing in order to entertain her despondent husband: she then felt her hand seized by an unseen power. Yeats described what happened next in the revised edition of *A Vision*, the esoteric account of human history and personality that the automatic writing ultimately made possible.

What came in disjointed sentences, in almost illegible writing, was so exciting, sometimes so profound, that I persuaded her to give an hour or two day after day to the unknown writer, and after some half-dozen such hours offered to spend what remained of life explaining and piecing together those scattered sentences, “No,” was the answer, “we have come to give you metaphors for poetry.”

The first few days of automatic writing have not been preserved, so there is no record of Yeats being assured that the spirits had contacted him to further his poetic career. George remembered the initial contact differently: “What you have done is right for both the cat and the hare,” she scribbled confident that her husband would understand the hare as Iseult Gonne and the cat as herself, which he did. In the approximately 3,600 pages of automatic script that followed, the intimate sex life of George and Willy Yeats looms as prominently as metaphors for poetry, and while the script calls on vast reserves of esoteric knowledge, one theme is constant: if the conversations are to continue, the medium (or “interpreter,” as George preferred to be called) must be satisfied. And when the interpreter is not satisfied, the script shouts it out loud and clear.

I don't like you  
You neglect me

Did George and Willy really believe they were talking to dead people? Yeats began the revised version of *A Vision* by reporting a friend's comment that he seemed much better educated than he had a decade earlier; he went on to attribute this change to his and George's communications with the spirit world. Really, he ought to have attributed the change to George, whose early years of study at the British Museum fueled their conversations. George's favorite philosopher was William James, the American pragmatist who defined truth as what "works," and after Willy's death, when a scholar asked George point blank if she believed in the spirits with whom they'd conversed, she paused carefully, then said, "We thought they were expressing our best thought."

Willy's relationship to psychic phenomena alternates between a similarly tough-minded pragmatism ("metaphors for poetry") and a more tender-minded longing for a world that W. H. Auden once dismissed as "Southern Californian." Unlike his wife, Yeats could at times seem merely otherworldly, yet this quality makes his moments of direct engagement with daily life all the more moving when they do occur. "I am greatly stirred by your letter," he wrote when he learned from George that their daughter had admitted she'd neglected her schoolwork. "Most by what you quoted from Anne. She could not have written like that if she was afraid of you, or if she did not want to please. There was nobody I could have written to like that. I would have been afraid to tell of my shortcomings."

This is the kind of thoughtful embrace of the imperfect life that one would expect of the author of poems like "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," poems that challenge their own best thinking. In the opening poem of *Responsibilities*, published three years before he married George, Yeats declares that he has "no child . . . nothing but a book" to present to his ancestors; the closing poem laments that all his "priceless things / Are but a post the passing dogs defile." Deprivation was Yeats's midlife muse, and I suspect he believed it would continue to be so. His fate seemed certain. But while he wanted a wife and child, he never imagined that this commitment to domestic life, however mediated by the assumption of male privilege, would so utterly change his thinking. The author of poems written in discouragement was liberated to doubt himself more strenuously, and he became the author of poems written in ecstasy, poems borne of an uncanny imaginative confidence unseen in English poetry since Blake.

The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

It wasn't just the automatic writing that made these concluding lines of "The Second Coming" possible; the sensibility of the later poems feels more like George than Willy—fascinated by the world beyond the senses, but also skeptical, tough-minded, embedded in the earth.

The final sentence of "The Second Coming" is a question: just as the shape of twenty centuries was determined by the birth of Jesus, so will the tenor of the next age be determined by a similar momentous birth—but of what? The uncertainty is riveting, and the temptation to read the poem as prophetic condemnation is intense. But when we turn the page to "A Prayer for My Daughter" in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, the book in which "The Second Coming" was carefully placed

Yeats asks us to doubt the metaphors that constitute the prophecy.

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Once more the storm is howling, and half hid  
Under this cradle-hood and coverlid  
My child sleeps on.  
There is no obstacle  
But Gregory's wood and one bare hill  
Whereby the haystack-and roof-leveling wind,  
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;  
And for an hour I have walked and prayed  
Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

With these lines we are suddenly dropped from prophetic to domestic utterance: the apocalyptic cradle of "The Second Coming" becomes the simple cradle in which a particular child, Anne Yeats, is sleeping. There is no violence in the street; the weather is bad. A father is worrying about the safety of his child. Does the future look grim simply because a sleeping baby looks vulnerable, because a storm is blowing off the Atlantic? Or does the future look grim because the human mind, trapped in its own "great gloom," imposes immense metaphorical significance on these ordinary events, events that happen every night, not just at the inauguration of a new age?

The questions provoked by "A Prayer for My Daughter" send us back to "The Second Coming." Notice how its final stanza begins: having declared so charismatically in the first stanza that "things fall apart," the prophetic voice begins to interpret its own declarations—but not very carefully.

Surely some revelation is at hand;  
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.  
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out  
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*  
Troubles my sight.

These lines embody the slippery process by which observation becomes prophecy. In the first line the voice insists that "surely" these events portend "some" revelation—it doesn't know what revelation. In the second line the voice suddenly suggests that this revelation must be the Second Coming, and the reiteration of the syntactical pattern ("surely . . . is at hand") makes this quick association sound considered. The voice even registers its own surprise at this association ("The Second Coming!")—if the poem doesn't actually consider its titular subject until it's half over. After these words tumble from the mouth of the speaker, as if from the mouth of a medium unworthy of the title interpreter, the stanza abandons its shaky logic for a confident vision of the world's fate.

Somewhere in sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,  
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,  
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it  
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know  
That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

No longer is this voice speculating that “some” revelation is at hand. “Now I know,” says the voice, but what exactly does it know? On what evidence does this knowledge depend? The phrase “rough beast” is powerfully suggestive because it is also (as I’ve suggested of Yeats’s diction at large) strategically plain, provocatively monosyllabic, and our attitude toward this obscure apocalyptic figure is largely determined by the brilliantly precise verb *slouches*. To imagine that our unknowable fate “slouches” toward us suggests a great deal more about our state of expectation than about future events.

“The Second Coming” was provoked by Yeats’s acute sense of the violence and uncertainty of Europe during the First World War and the subsequent civil war in Ireland, but the poem does not simply render a judgment (though it is often quoted as if it did). “The Second Coming” is a dramatization of the route through which a mind might come, responsibly or irresponsibly, to apocalyptic conclusions in response to violence and uncertainty. Yeats was at times attracted to the rhetoric of apocalypse, but in “The Second Coming” he is as troubled by the need to leap to conclusions as he is by a chaotic world that may (or may not) support them. To read the poem in conjunction with “A Prayer for My Daughter,” as Yeats asks us to do, first allows us to see that the poems question each other. Then we may see that “The Second Coming” doubts itself, turning again to what might initially seem to be its own best thought.

This is how Yeats’s poems work. Often he rewrote his poems long after they were initially published, but he was not a compulsive reviser like Auden or Marianne Moore, poets who tried over their lifetime to get the poem right; Yeats wanted to discover something unprecedented, something that could never merely be willed, in the act of remaking his language. And neither did the poems settle easily into themselves once Yeats was finished with them. His goal was to make the poems embody the dialectical process by which they were made. Interrogating each other, the poems interrogate themselves, making individual poems feel double.

All that I have said and done,  
Now that I am old and ill,

he wrote in “Man and the Echo,” one of his last poems,

Turns into a question till  
I lie awake night after night  
And never get the answers right.

These lines sound frustrated, but they are driven by joy, the joy of having more to say, the language of each conclusion transformed into a fresh question.

Yeats's language seems to me as challenging today as it was a hundred years ago, but recently, in a review of one American poet by another, I found this sentence: "Yeats may be a distant and unlikely model for contemporary poets." Why? Because he arranged syllables into rhythms? Because he doesn't live in Brooklyn? Yeats did not write poems by attempting consciously to distinguish himself from his forebears. Nor did he write poems because he married a complicated, intelligent woman because he engaged in psychical research. Many people might find satisfaction in such things. Others might find them quaint.

A few people might also take hard-won satisfaction in rhyming their own name with the word "slates," in rhyming their wife's name with the word "forge," in arranging a single sentence into four iambic tetrameter lines whose rhythmic density asks (as the title of the poem suggests) "To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee."

I, the poet William Yeats,  
With old mill boards and sea-green slates,  
And smithy work from the Gort forge,  
Restored this tower for my wife George.

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## *Less Than Everything*

What did Chinese poetry sound like to speakers of English at the end of the nineteenth century when Yeats was

O fair white silk, fresh from the weaver's loom,  
Clear as the frost, bright as the winter snow—  
See! friendship fashions out of thee a fan,  
Round as the round moon shines in heaven above,  
At home, abroad, a close companion thou,  
Stirring at every move the grateful gale.  
And yet I fear, ah me! that autumn chills  
Cooling the dying summer's torrid rage,  
Will see thee laid neglected on the shelf,  
All thoughts of bygone days, like them bygone.

This translation, by Herbert Giles, sounds like a mockery of Chinese poetry. But when the translation was made, a poem needed to be metered if it was going to be recognized by most people as a poem. Giles's march of iambs is a far cry from the rhythmical delicacy of early Yeats.

In 1914 Ezra Pound made what seems like a translation of the same poem. In fact, it is an adaptation of Giles's translation. Without any knowledge of Chinese, without any literal text, with nothing but Giles's clumsy pentameters to work from, Pound produced this poem, called "Fan-Piece for Her Imperial Lord."

O fan of white silk,  
Clear as the frost on the grass-blade,  
You also are laid aside.

If this translation does not sound to us like a mockery of Chinese poetry, it is because Pound invented the poetic idiom with which we now associate Chinese poetry; if the poem is in any way more scrupulously attuned to the letter or spirit of the original poem, the accuracy is purely an accident. As T. S. Eliot once remarked, Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry in the English language. How and why did that invention take place?

Recall Pound's three famous principles for writing an imagist poem.

1. Direct treatment of the "thing" whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.



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