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YEATS THE DANCER

INTEREST IN DANCING, natural to every Irishman, amounted in the case of William Butler Yeats to a veritable obsession. About that interest there was, admittedly, an element of paradox, as there was about almost every aspect of Yeats' life, his habits, his ideas, his craft. But to account for his obsession with the dance as somehow compensating for his physical disabilities is much too easy, and much too common. It is true that as a boy he was awkward at games, and it has been said of him that not one of his many years was spent in even relatively good health, yet I find myself unwilling to think of him as an ungainly bench-warmer or a chronic invalid. His tireless activity in numerous causes, civic or other, would of itself alone prevent me from entertaining either conception as reasonable. He went through the prescribed sequence of dancing lessons customary for youngsters of his family's social class, and no one has put it on record that he was unusually inept at them. He was an ardent mountain climber, at least of such mountains as are to be found along the west coast of Ireland. He was expert enough at fly-casting to be accepted as a trout-fishing partner by his friends among the Irish peasants. And Ezra Pound taught him to fence. In spite of his twice protesting that he knew nothing whatsoever about music, Yeats must have been more than ordinarily musical. (Frank O'Connor, who knew him personally, says that Yeats was "tone-deaf." If he was, he made up for it by being, in his own phrase, "rhythm-drunk.") The various auditory satisfactions afforded by his verse are surely sufficient evidence of that. They provide a clue too, perhaps, to what lay behind his persistent and, it may be, his prevailing interest. His auctorial development reveals a steady increase in his concern for the effects of combining music, speech, and the dance, with the result that during the period of his greatest productive maturity he wrote most of his plays in dance form. He investigated carefully the possibilities of having certain of his lyrics read to the accompaniment of a musical instrument which he specified as the bamboo flute. He had Arnold Dolmetsch work out arrangements of medieval airs for a psaltery with

the same possibilities in mind. He planned, but never wrote, a poem in which the lines of the chorus were to be sung and danced. And one of his death-bed undertakings was to outline a book on speech and music. I adduce these more or less relevant items of information not because I feel that in any sense they "explain" Yeats' delight in the dance (that, for all of me, remains a mystery), but because they point clearly to the fact that in the workings of his creative mind the two arts of dance and music were closely related.

Yeats turned his attention to the writing of dance-plays about half-way through his career as author. Previously he had written a number of plays in verse, but otherwise conventional in form, all of them intended for production at the Abbey Theatre, or its intermittently utilized predecessors, in Dublin. In Yeats' plans for it, the Abbey was dedicated to leading Dublin's play-going public away from devotion to the unlovely offerings of a so-called "patriotic" stage and music-hall turns to acceptance of a drama based on what was truly indigenous and beautiful in Irish life—most of it, by necessity, past and primitive. To that end he wrote his early plays about Ireland's history and legend, and promoted those of his friend John Synge about Ireland's peasantry. Though his success was considerable, he was not satisfied. The demand for propaganda and low-brow comedy continued. What was needed to fulfil his desires, he believed, was a drama still farther removed from realism, still farther advanced towards abstract beauty. The problem of how to create it seemed to be solved when he happened on Fenellosa's translations of the Japanese *noh* drama, a ritual art form which, as Ezra Pound told him, was contrived "of splendid posture, and dancing and chanting, and of acting that was not mimetic." Yeats was enthusiastic over the potentialities of his "discovery", and he began at once to fashion adaptations of it, employing music and dance, with figures for some of the latter copied from medieval puppet shows. The result was a type of play wholly, not half, symbolic, that for a time he hoped might eventually prove popular enough to help bring about a national unity in good taste, reaching even to the level of politics, and embracing in its appeal "artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer" alike.

Long before he found the inspiration for these plays, Yeats had felt, in seeming anticipation of his one day writing them, "something in myself compelling me to attempt creation of an art separate from everything heterogeneous and casual, from all character and circumstance, as some Herodiade of our theatre, dancing seemingly alone in her narrow moving luminous circle." As might be expected, the dialogue of the sort of plays here foreshadowed, and in due course written, reveals little more

than suggestions of the dance elements that are so integral a part of their structure. That feature in their making had to be left to choreographers and composers. Yet the former, and perhaps even the latter, were not allowed a wholly free hand. In both the songs and the stage directions of his dance-plays there are clear intimations of what Yeats wanted, and, presumably, of what he got. And there are sporadic comments in his reminiscences and correspondence of similar purport. In "The Dancing of the Bones," a play which the Abbey Theatre directors called "mainly ballet," for instance, while the actors circle the stage "in ceremonial movement" against a back-drop that "must only symbolize or suggest," a singing chorus explains that half-way round means a mountain climbed; and Yeats, writing to his long-time friend, Mrs. Olivia Shakespeare, about seeing the play produced, repeats the explanation, adding that the successive circlings "seemed to me very beautiful." A part of one of the stage directions in "The Only Jealousy of Emer," a play based on the legend of the Irish folk hero Cuchulain, reads as follows: "At moments [the Woman of the Sidhe, of the Irish fairy folk] may drop her hair about the ghost of Cuchulain's head . . . She is accompanied by string and flute and drum. Her mask and clothes must suggest gold or bronze or brass or silver, so that she seems more an idol than a human being. This suggestion may be repeated in her movements. Her hair, too, must keep the metallic suggestion." The stage directions of "The Herne's Egg," another of Yeats's dance-plays drawn from Irish mythology, indicates of the setting that "all should be suggested, not painted realistically," and of the action that it should disclose "many men fighting with swords and shields, but sword and sword, shield and shield, never meet." "The men move rhythmically as if in a dance: when swords approach one another cymbals clash; when swords and shields approach drums boom." And the dialogue in the second scene of the third act states of the leading woman player that she "moves / According to the notes of the flute" like "A doll upon a wire . . . in long loops / Like a dancer, like a hare." "Fighting the Waves" (which, for some reason not readily determined, was omitted from the *Collected Plays*) is the story of how Cuchulain, crazed with remorse over having unwittingly slain his son, and still laying about him with his weapons, wades into the sea to his death. Writing to Mrs. Shakespeare after seeing it staged in Dublin, Yeats tells her: "The dancing of the goddess in her abstract almost non-representational mask was extraordinarily exciting. The play begins with a dance which represents Cuchulain fighting the waves, then after some singing by the chorus comes the play [with] the dance of the goddess and the ghost of Cuchulain, and then after more singing is the dance of the goddess mourning among the waves. The waves are of course dancers." Of "The King of the Great Clock Tower" Yeats writes,

again to Mrs. Shakespeare, “. . . it is magnificently acted and danced. It was more original than I thought it, for when I looked up *Salome* I found that Wilde’s dancer never danced with the head [of John the Baptist] in her hands—her dance came before the decapitation of the saint and is a mere uncovering of nakedness. My dance is a long expression of horror and fascination. She [the Queen, who dances the part Yeats refers to] first bows before the head (it is on a seat) then in her dance lays it on the ground and dances before it, then holds it in her hands It has turned out to be the most popular of my dance plays.” If there appears to be a definite touch of ghoulishness in this comment, no trace of it shows in the play, though the stage directions include, and add to, all that Yeats says of the action. “The Death of Cuchulain,” the last of these plays, opens with an Old Man, plainly in the role of Yeats himself, speaking a prologue in the course of which he declares significantly, “I wanted a dance because where there are no words there is less to spoil.”

A more rewarding exhibition of the delights of dance than Yeats provides in his plays is discovered in his poems. There are as many as fifty-odd passages in the *Complete Poems* in which the word “dance”, or a derivative of it, is used. And in almost every case the word, in its context, is made one with the action it names—which is to say that the lines in which the word occurs are usually lines that dance, in varying tempos and poses, from the abandon of orgiastic revels to the flowing symmetry of arabesques. A notable instance of the former is the final stanza of the poem “Byzantium,” deservedly ranked among Yeats’s major achievements in verse, which presents a vision of man’s attainment of an ultimate condition of blessedness, as Yeats saw it at the period of writing. That much desired goal is to be reached with the transformation of our material and mortal selves into immaterial and imperishable shades, a unique state of undyingness, described by Yeats as “death-in-life and life-in-death,” a state, that is, in which our shades while dead to the evil of earthly life are alive to the good (specifically beauty) of spirit life. And that, for Yeats, meant our spending eternity as disembodied master artisans of supernatural skill creating, under royal (perhaps divine) patronage, artifacts of supernatural grace and charm—a symbolic projection of Yeats’ conception of existence in the Golden Age of fourth-century Byzantium. But instead of terminating in a scene of joyous serenity like an earlier poem, “Sailing to Byzantium,” on the same theme, Yeats’ maturer vision of enduring bliss culminates in a scene of unbelievable turbulence. After leaving behind them “all complexities of fury” (unlovely living) come the “blood-begotten spirits” (human beings) “Dying into a dance.” And what a dance! “An agony of trance,” the poet calls it, and well he might:

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

A difficult stanza, certainly—and that altogether apart from the problem of reconciling turmoil with placidity. That there is an orgy here is obvious, with enough riotous goings-on to confuse almost any attempt to “interpret” it. I remember one interpretation very well (meant more seriously than one would think) made by an acquaintance of mine. The whirling fragments of the marble dancing-floor reminded him, he said, of the place in the movie version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* where Eliza crosses the Ohio on the ice-cakes. The spirits clinging grimly to the back of the plunging dolphin proved a nearly irresistible temptation to shout, “Ride him, cow-boys, ride him!” And the gong? Probably its raucous clamor was turned loose by those spawning images just to add some noise to the general frenzy. Now that flight of nonsense arises from a number of misreadings. The mosaic pattern of the dancing-floor is not broken. Intact, it serves as a barrier against the threatening waters—flood control through the magic spell of special workmanship. The spirits are not really riding the dolphin; they are being taken for a ride. (The dolphin of classic myth was reputed to have carried lately departed souls from this world to the next. How that unusual ferry-service operated is amusingly implied in another of Yeats' poems, in the course of which Pythagoras and Plotinus, “Straddling each a dolphin's back, / And steadied by a fin,” are ignominiously dumped off to spend *their* eternity in contemplation, the kind of after-life for which Yeats, who preferred doing to thinking, had only contempt.) In “Byzantium” the crossing over is a purgatorial process, of which more in a moment. The images that “fresh images beget” represent the continuing appeal of the redeemed, or about to be redeemed, to the as yet unredeemed. And the gong is the symbol of time, in which, before redemption, we are caught and driven like slaves in a work-gang toiling to the insistent strokes of a speed-up bell. But why the “mire and blood,” the thronging spirits, the “bitter furies,” the raging waves, and all that begetting in the midst of that “dolphin torn” and “gong-tormented” sea—in short, why the orgy?

A passage in the late Ernst Cassirer's *The Myth of the State* supplies the clue to an answer. Regarding the Dionysian cult of violence, Cassirer writes: “What appears here is a fundamental feeling of mankind, . . . It is the deep desire of the

individual to be freed from the fetters of its individuality, to immerse itself in the stream of universal life, to lose its identity, to be absorbed in the whole of nature . . . ” Then, after quoting a Persian poet to the effect that “He that knows the power of the dance dwells in God,” he goes on: “The power of the dance is to the mystic the true way to God. In the delirious whirl of the dance and of the orgiastic rites our own finite and limited Self disappears.” During his middle years, or longer, Yeats seems to have sought release from the evils of every-day life through ritual, involving on occasion, if we may trust the hints in his stories, dance and orgy. As he grew older, he became convinced that any escape, save death, from the slings of fortune is impossible, that life’s torments are inevitable. Yet there was, for him, a factor of solace in that gloomy outlook: the evils of every-day life, in having to be undergone rather than overborne, are intended to prepare us for a better life to come. Later still, he doubted even the chance of a future life. The only good life there can ever be, he was persuaded, is the present, the evil, life. To seek to reject any part of it is to seek to live less than fully—the worst of evils in the Yeatsian code. Life as he found it, he finally, though intermittently and not without protest, accepted, and, at least in retrospect, relished, including—he went out of his way to stress the point—the ills or joys (take your pick) of sex. At the time of writing “Byzantium,” his drift of thinking had not carried him so far. He still believed in the chance of a future life. But readying ourselves to take advantage of it by freely exposing ourselves to the sensual and agonizing aspects of this life (apparently all he then admitted there were), he held to be more important than revelling in the aesthetic delights of the other. Hence the “mire and blood” of the dolphin, and the “bitter furies.” Hence his assigning the purification scene to the emphatic place in his poem. Hence his enacting that scene as an orgiastic ritual dance. In thus expressing himself, he escaped from himself—and so, whether he knew it or not, succeeded at last in turning, if only temporarily, his dream of, his desire for, release into reality.

I have mentioned arabesques as among the dance postures achieved, rather than simulated, in Yeats’s poems. That involves me, I suppose, in the necessity of putting one on display. Perhaps I can get myself most quickly off that hook by quoting three lines—the only three of much help, I am bound to confess, that I have been able to find in all the many that Yeats wrote. I quote them without annotation, for “where there are no words there is less to spoil.”

I know where a dim moon drifts, where the Danaan kind
 Wind and unwind their dances when the light grows cool
 On the island lawns, their feet where the pale foam gleams.

That degree of stateliness is not Yeats' usual preference in dancing. What he more often made first choice of was something better suited to a scene where he could hear

The playing upon pipes . . .
And learn that the best thing is
To change my loves while dancing
And pay but a kiss for a kiss,

or where, like the fairies who told him about it,

We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances,
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight.

Folk dance, round or square, surely. And folk dance that, as he recorded it, went back to a time "before music grew too proud to be the garment of words," and to "the quicker rhythms of the verse-interwoven" pantomime of earlier days. The varied "footing it" such dances called for may be felt in these lines from a light fiddling song:

When I play my fiddle in Dooney,
Folk dance like the wave of the sea;

.

For the good are always the merry,
Save by an evil chance,
And the merry love the fiddle,
And the merry love to dance:

.

And dance like the wave of the sea;

or in these from a less lilting song, about the old gambler who dreamed that

. . . he saw young men and young girls
Who danced on a level place,
And Bridget his bride among them,
With a sad and a gay face.

.

He played with the merry old men
And thought not of evil chance
Until one bore Bridget his bride
Away from the merry dance.

The liveliest stepping that Yeats ever put into a folk-dance poem is word-scored in "A Drunken Man's Praise of Sobriety":

Come swish around, my pretty punk,
 And keep me dancing still
 That I may stay a sober man
 Although I drink my fill.
 Sobriety is a jewel
 That I do much adore;
 And therefore keep me dancing
 Though drunkards lie and snore.
 O mind your feet, O mind your feet,
 Keep dancing like a wave,
 And under every dancer
 A dead man in his grave.
 No ups and downs, my pretty,
 A mermaid, not a punk;
 A drunkard is a dead man,
 And all dead men are drunk.

When, "lifting his delicate feet," Minnaloushe, the cat,

. . . went here and there
 And the moon spun round like a top,

Yeats, noting that the light of the one was reflected in the eyes of the other, inquires,

When two close kindred meet
 What better than call a dance?

and suggests that

Maybe the moon may learn,
 Tired of that courtly fashion [of spinning around],
 A new dance turn.

Whether learned from Minnaloushe or not, there's nothing courtly, or folksy either, about the dance that the moon, as the silver lady, dances with the sun, as the golden king, on the spiral staircase that winds up and up inside the round tower, but it is most diverting none the less. If I thought there were such a thing I would call it a hesitation Viennese waltz, though like as not someone will tell me, in spite of my denying the folk any share in it, that it is a cake-walk. My dance consultant, disdainfully ignoring both suggestions, and after executing several levitating gyrations across her living-room floor, pronounced the dance pattern employed by the

radiant couple a running one-two-three step, followed by a turning stop and a skip. That, of a certainty, would take the royal dancers where they wish to go, but I mistrust they would get there more than a little out of breath. Anyhow it is only a dream—so what difference would their being winded make?—a dream

Of sun and moon that a good hour
Bellowed and pranced in the round tower;

(Yeats does not write “billowed,” and I am sure he does not mean “bellered.”)

Of golden king and silver lady,
Bellowing up and bellowing round,
Till toes mastered a sweet measure,
Mouth mastered a sweet sound,
Prancing round and prancing up
Until they pranced upon the top.

And what do you think they did when they arrived there? You've guessed it: they kept right on singing. And they kept right on dancing, too.

That golden king and that wild lady
Sang till stars began to fade,
Hands gripped in hands, toes close together,
Hair spread on the wind they made;
That lady and that golden king
Could like a brace of blackbirds sing.

The last of the dance steps in Yeats' verse to which I should like to invite attention is of an order wholly different from any I have previously been spotlighting. It might have come out of a tap-dancing school, though it did not—at least not directly. It is the sort of thing Fred Astaire used to do in his “Sand Man” number, and is not, as one of my former students tabbed it, the Lambeth Walk. And it is essayed by, of all persons, Helen of Troy, a recurrent heroine of Yeats'. There is nothing heroic, however, about the image of her he evokes in “The Long Legged Fly.” The Trojan's chief trouble-maker is presented there as perhaps a little older than an adolescent flapper, long before her beauty ever came under the appraising eye of Paris, completely, and ironically, unaware of the topless towers and the launched ships for which she will some day be held to blame. But she is not unaware, I'll venture, of the mirror in front of which, if I have her setting right, she surreptitiously follows the promptings of her errant feet, that must, on some recent night have led her, unchaperoned, outside whatever palace walls:

She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,
That nobody looks; her feet

Practice a tinker shuffle
Picked up on a street.

For Yeats, dancing, almost invariably, signifies happiness, but happiness of a kind to be attained only in fairy-land or the legendary realms of the past, where

Boughs have their fruit and blossom
At all times of the year;
Rivers are running over
With red beer and brown beer.
An old man plays the bagpipes
In a golden and silver wood;
Queens, their eyes blue like the ice,
Are dancing in a crowd.

or in "the predestined dancing-place" of the future, "where only the blessed dance,"

Or, as the great sages say,
Men dance on deathless feet.

His nostalgic yearning for the past of the Irish legends reaches its most sustained utterance in the first section of "The Wanderings of Oisín," with its "merry couples dancing in tune" and its

. . . hundred youths, mighty of limb,
.
And a hundred ladies, merry as birds,
Who when they dance to a fitful measure
Have a speed like the speed of the salmon herd,
.
And in a wild and sudden dance
We mocked at Time and Fate and Chance
.
For neither Death nor Chance comes near us,
And all listless hours fear us,

until while

The Immortals moved among the fountains
.
Some danced like shadows on the mountains,
.
And sang, and with a dreamy gaze
Watched . . . the sun in a saffron blaze
.
And, as they sang, the painted birds

Kept time with their bright wings and feet;
 Like drops of honey came their words,
 But fainter than a young lamb's bleat.

By contrast, the thought of the present, with or without dancing, usually plunged him into sadness. From his earliest verse on, he writes of modern Ireland, as he knew it, as a place of "many changing things / In dreary dancing past us whirled." "Who will go drive with Fergus [another ancient Irish hero] now, . . . And dance upon the level shore?" he inquires, and reports no reassuring answer, though apparently he hopes (but feebly) to receive one. Totally depressed, in his more constant mood, he reminds his readers that in pre-historic days

When time began to rant and rage
 The measure of her flying feet
 Made Ireland's heart begin to beat;
 And Time bade all his candles flare
 To light a measure here and there;

but no measure that "the dim coming times" are likely to tread.

Ah, faeries, dancing under the moon,
 A Druid land, a Druid tune!

While he exults in memories of the time when the moon, the Irish moon,

. . . in all her virginal pride
 First trod on the mountain's head
 What stir ran through the countryside
 Where every foot obeyed her glance!
 What manhood led the dance!

he concedes that his plea to

Pour wine and dance if manhood still have pride

.
 Pull down the blinds, bring fiddle and clarinet
 That there be no foot silent in the room
 No mouth from kissing, nor from wine unwet,

is made "In vain, in vain." The legacy of Cromwell's "murderous crew" has assured that:

The lovers and the dancers are beaten into the clay,
 And the tall men and the swordsmen and the horsemen, where are they?

A singer's invitation,

Come out of charity
And dance with me in Ireland,

is rejected by her auditors. They might have been thinking of the words of another singer: "Those dancing days are gone."

In his poem "A Prayer for my Daughter," during a moment of "excited reverie," Yeats foresaw, with prophetic fear, that in her (and in our) time "the future years had come / Dancing to a frenzied drum." But whatever the fear, or hope (he had both), basically he believed that man's fate, whether happy or not, at all times—past, present, and future—was determined. Witness these lines:

When Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound
A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,
It seemed that a dragon of air
Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
Or hurried them off on its own furious path;
So the Platonic Year
Whirls out new right and wrong,
Whirls in the old instead;
All men are dancers and their tread
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.

(Three other professional dancers are named in Yeats' poems—Ruth St. Denis, Gaby Deslys, and Pavlova—but the performance of none of them touched off, as did Loie Fuller's, a venture in "philosophy.")

Yeats, as paradoxically as you please, believed also in the possibility of escape from determinism. I am not thinking now of the pseudo-mystic catapulting off the Great Wheel expounded in "The Phases of the Moon," but rather of the several other possibilities suggested in his poems. Three of these are related to the dance, but two of them are of such restricted practicality that I shall have to deny them any, save dubious, validity (which is not, however, to deny that they have their special appeal): first, the hallucinations of the slightly deranged, as in the case of

That crazed girl improvising her music,
Her poetry, dancing upon the shore,
Her soul in division from itself
• • • • •
A beautiful lofty thing, . . .
Heroically lost, heroically found.

No matter what disaster occurred
 She stood in desperate music wound,
 . . . and made in her triumph

 No common intelligible sound;

or of

The girl [who] goes dancing there

 Escaped from bitter youth,
 Escaped out of her crowd,
 Or out of her black cloud.

If strange men come from the house
 To lead her away, do not say
 She is happy being crazy;
 Lead them gently astray;
 Let her finish her dance;
 Let her finish her dance;

and, second, the innocence of youth:

Dance there upon the shore
 What need have you to care
 For wind or water's roar?

 Being young you have not known
 The fool's triumph, nor yet
 Love lost as soon as won,
 Nor the best labourer dead
 And all the sheaves to bind.

The third of these dance-related possible ways of escape from the bonds of determined existence is the perhaps scarcely more practical, though for Yeats quite other than theoretical, way through a prolonged, or even unending, state of trance, closely resembling the death-in-life and life-in-death of "Byzantium," but unlike it being induced solely by immersion in art. The trance state and its effect are symbolized by the dancing girl seen between the figures of a Sphinx and a Buddha in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes":

. . . a girl at play
 That, it may be, had danced her life away,

For now being dead it seemed
That she of dancing dreamed.

.
O little did they care who danced between,
And little did she by whom her dance was seen
So she had outdanced thought.
Body perfection brought,

.
Mind moved yet seemed to stop
As 'twere a spinning-top.

. . . those three so wrought
Upon a moment, and so stretched it out
That they, time overthrown,
Were dead yet flesh and bone.

One of Yeats' characters most well worth knowing is Crazy Jane, that bawdy old harridan (drawn from life) whose principal diversion, after all her years of sin, was to bait the local bishop by comparing his claims to virtue with those of her one-time lover, now hanged. But there was an occasion when her disdain was directed at claims to professional virtue of another sort. She had watched the stage performance of a pair of dancers enacting a tragic scene, the conclusion of which seems to have been left in doubt—not that she much cared. She remembered a better dance than theirs, the dance of the sheets:

I found that ivory image there
Dancing with her chosen youth,
But when he wound her coal-black hair
As though to strangle her, no scream
Or bodily movement did I dare.

.
Did he die or did she die?
Seemed to die or died they both?
God be with the times when I
Cared not a thraneen for what chanced
So that I had the limbs to try
Such a dance as there was danced.

With so extensive a display of Yeats' interest in the dance, and his employment of it, as has here been spread out, it is somewhat disconcerting to come across this confession:

Seventy years have I lived
 No ragged beggarman,
 Seventy years have I lived,
 Seventy years man and boy,
 And never have I danced for joy.

And it is the more disconcerting after one has found, only thirty pages earlier in the *Collected Poems*, this statement:

I, proclaiming that there is
 Among birds or beasts or men
 One that is perfect or at peace,
 Danced on Cruachan's windy plain,
 Upon Cro-Patrick sang aloud;
 All that could run or leap or swim
 Whether in wood, water or cloud,
 Acclaiming, proclaiming, declaiming Him.

Bringing the evidence of that first person pronoun in the proclamation into line with its denial in the confession is a considerable chore in biographical untangling that I have no intention of undertaking.

The supreme example of Yeats' success in verbal dance creation is the last stanza of "Among School Children," in which, to borrow an opinion about another of his last stanzas (that might better, I feel, have been about this one), "the poet . . . becomes what he creates." "Among School Children" had its genesis in the unwelcome realization by its author that the beauty of Maude Gonne, his early love, showed traces of the ravages of time, and that he too was showing the effects of advancing age. After detailing, with sympathetic touch, the incident and awakened memories that led to that realization, Yeats, who resented even the thought of decrepitude, enters a passionate demurrer against the humiliation of our inescapably growing old and having to face life's major irony, the discrepancy between our accomplishments and the ambitions and aspirations that our parents, our instructors, and we ourselves had had for us in our youth. Then comes the climactic reversal of his mood of bitter protest, and with it, once more a vision of existence made perfect. Again we learn, as twice previously, that that state of longed-for beatitude will be reached through our complete and joyous absorption in the activities of creative living (or art) and, now for the first time, creative love. The worker in his job, the scholar in his thesis, the mother in her child, the teacher in her pupil, the leader in his cause, the singer in her song—in the harmonious fusing of the gifts and calling of such, the doer at one with the doing, Yeats saw humanity redeemed. "What is

Paradise," he asks in another place, "but fulness of living?" Gloss it in literal terms, and, no doubt, his vision looks absurd. But absurdity is what always results when you try to decode a dream. Attempts like these of mine to convey the import of his ideal, Yeats renders supererogatory with the indirection of inspired word and symbol. His final triumph is a miracle of triple identification, of the image with the action, the verse with the meaning, the poet with the poem:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?