CBC FOUR'S COMPANY
"THE ARTICULATION OF THE IMAGE:
THE MATURING OF YEATS'S POETRY"
CBL: TRANSCANADA
CBC: Saturday TBA 9.00-10.00 p.m.

SCRIPT: George Whalley
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PRODUCTION: John Reeves

[CHARACTERS: Yeats: John Drainie
Voice 1: Mavor Moore
Voice 2: Diana Maddox
Voice 3: Ruth Springford
Narrator: Guest]

YEATS: And as I look backward upon my own writing, I take pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I have found something hard and cold, some articulation of the Image, which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life, and all that my country is.

NARRATOR: So William Butler Yeats wrote in his *Autobiography* when he looked back over more than thirty years of his writing. Born in 1865 into the pre-Raphaelite world, Yeats lived until 1939, and died only a few months before the outbreak of the second world war. In the fifty-three years between his first book and his death, he published many volumes of poetry and of prose. He described himself as one of the last Romantics. Many of the Romantics died young or stopped writing long before they were old. But Yeats developed and matured to the end, as though at each crucial turning point in his artistic life some fantastic access of imaginative energy, some definitely concrete and subtle resource of language would come to his call. He was an incorrigible corrector of his own poems, revising some poems almost for each successive issue – not with the frenetic fussiness of the self-paralysing perfectionist but with the fervour of an artist who

insisted that every poem should match the order of wisdom to which at each successive stage he had grown –

YEATS: The friends that have it I do wrong
When ever I remake a song,
Should know what issue is at stake:
It is myself that I remake.

NARRATOR: With all that revising, many of the earliest poems in the collected edition have the savour of much later work. For example, a poem entitled *The Indian to His Love*, was first written nearly fifty years later. Some, however, were never revised. An early poem which he never altered afterwards, shows the languor of his early style.

The Falling of the Leaves.

VOICE 1: Autumn is over the long leaves that love us,
And over the mice in the barley sheaves;
Yellow the leaves of the rowan above us,
And yellow the wet wild-strawberry leaves.

The hour of the waning of love has beset us,
And weary and worn are our sad souls now;
Let us part, ere the season of passion forget us,
With a kiss and a tear on thy drooping brow.

NARRATOR: His later manner was more spare and laconic – and more lyrical. This is *Imitated from the Japanese*, written in January 1937 –

VOICE l: A most astonishing thing –
Seventy years have I lived;

VOICE 2: (Hurrah for the flowers of Spring,

For Spring is here again.)

VOICE 1: Seventy years have I lived
No ragged beggar-man,
Seventy years have I lived,
Seventy years man and boy,
And never have I danced for joy.

NARRATOR: In his last years some of his poems came to a whiplash spareness and supple violence never hinted in his early writing: as in *The Lady's First Song*:

VOICE 3: I turn round
Like a dumb beast in a show,
Neither know what I am
Nor where I go,
My language beaten
Into one name;
I am in love
And that is my shame.
What hurts the soul
My soul adores,
No better than a beast
Upon all fours.

NARRATOR: And in his last years he could find – or unfold – the apocalyptic terror of themes drawn from an old Greek myth – *Leda and the Swan* – making it suddenly immediate.

VOICE 2: A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed

By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

(PAUSE)

NARRATOR: In the last months of 1908, Yeats published his *Collected Works* in eight volumes: a lovely production in pale quarter vellum bindings with grey linen sides, and top edges gilt: the margins generous, the notes copious, the last volume containing a bibliography of Yeats's writings. This was an impressive performance for a man not yet forty-five.

YEATS: When I first wrote I went here and there for my subjects as my reading led me, and preferred to all other countries Arcadia and the India of romance, but presently I convinced myself, that I should never go for the scenery of a poem to any country but my own, and I think that I shall hold to that conviction to the end…When writing I went for nearly all my subjects to Irish folklore and legends.

NARRATOR: Between 1889, when Yeats published his first book *The Wanderings of Oisin*, and 1908, Yeats had published five separate volumes of poetry and five successive revised editions of his collected poems. Yet when the *Collected Works* came out, all the literary gossips of Dublin said that Yeats would write no more, or very little, or nothing of importance. But they were wrong. Many poets start strongly and stop early, if they have not died young; or like Tennyson, Wordsworth, and others – stop developing after they are thirty. Yeats – like Shakespeare, like only the very greatest poets – developed and matured steadily to the end of a long life, revising, rewriting, writing, changing his style, changing himself until from a distance his early work, though fully revised, seemed to him trifling.

YEATS: Many of the poems in (the section called) *Crossways*, certainly those upon Indian subjects or upon shepherds and fauns, must have been written before I was twenty, for from the moment when I began *The Wanderings of Oisin*, which I did at the age I believe, my subject-matter became Irish. Every time I have reprinted them I have considered the leaving out of most, and then remember an old school friend who has some of them by heart, for no better reason, as I think, than that they remind him of his youth.

NARRATOR: It is often said that Yeats did not become a mature poet until after publishing the *Collected Works* of 1908, that the authentic voice of the true Yeats was not heard until the 1914 volume called *Responsibilities*. And yet the change from the early poems to the late is not simply the change from bad or indifferent poetry to good poetry; nor is it an abrupt change. It is a change from one sensibility to another; a change in the order of desire, in the mode of vision; and all through the persistent, even ruthless, pursuit and development of

an appropriate style and of a manner of poetic thought relentlessly symbolic, he seems to have known early in the long struggle towards the fulfillment of his style what was useful to him and what was not. As early as 1906, when he was beginning to consider dramatic writing, he showed how his pursuit of traditional Irish themes was vital to his art …

YEATS: The extravagance, the joyous irony, the far-flying phantasy, the aristocratic gaiety, the resounding and rushing words of the comedy of the countryside, of the folk as we say, is akin to the elevation of poetry, which can but shrink even to the world's edge from the harsh, cunning, tradition-less humour of the towns.

NARRATOR: And in various ways, drawing upon the life of his own country, and upon his own life, he made of his early poems – though he later spoke of them with nervous qualification – many tender masterpieces, sometimes through successive revisions – little masterpieces that assumed almost the quality of ancient materials drawn from an indefinable past …

YEATS: I tried after the publication of *The Wanderings of Oisin* to write of nothing but emotion, and in the simplest language, and now I have had to go through it all, cutting out or altering passages that are sentimental from lack of thought…Upon the other hand, I cannot have altogether failed in simplicity, for these poems, written before my seven-and-twentieth year, are still the most popular that I have written.

NARRATOR: Here is a poem, now so commonly sung to the traditional tune it was written to, that many would not guess it was written by Yeats – *Down by the Salley Gardens*….

YEATS: ….an attempt to reconstruct an old song from three lines imperfectly remembered by an old peasant woman in the village of Ballysadare, Sligo, who often sings them to herself.

VOICE 1:

Down by the salley gardens my love and I did meet;
She passed the salley gardens with little snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy, as the leaves grow on the tree;
But I, being young and foolish, with her would not agree.

In a field by the river my love and I did stand,
And on my leaning shoulder she laid her snow-white hand,
She bid me take life easy, as the grass grows on the weirs;
But I was young and foolish, and now am full of tears.

NARRATOR: But Yeats, savagely insistent upon the integrity of the words of a poem or of a play, almost totally tone-deaf himself, was deeply suspicious of music as a companion to poetry. A traditional folk tune was the most he could tolerate…..

YEATS: If I had but music enough to make settings that had but enough music to adorn the words yet leave them natural and audible, I should have written lyrics to be sung (in these plays)…but lacking music but that of words I have chosen the lyrics from a little book published at Stratford-on-Avon, or in London…..

NARRATOR: Yet his early poems are coloured by that leaning towards a rich music of words which his pre-Raphaelite predecessors and many of his contemporaries prized almost above the thought. This quality – later renounced or transformed into a more rigorous and expressive music – is the mark of the best early poetry, such as *The Lake Isle of*

Innisfree. But even its fluency and harmony did not come readily. Here is an early draft of the poem:

YEATS: I will arise and go now and go to the island of Innisfree
And live in a dwelling of wattles, of woven wattles and wood-work made
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a yellow hive for the honey-bee,
And this old care shall fade.

There from the dawn above me peace will come down dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the household cricket sings;
And noontide there be all a glimmer, and midnight be a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

NARRATOR: Another famous poem – *When you are old and grey* – is at once personal and universal, tender and reticent, and not radically revised after its first publication in 1892.

But a poem called *The Sorrow of Love* shows in the difference between its first and last published versions that the excellence of the early style could become monotonous, and that in the end it would inhibit – if not paralyse – emotion and the unfolding of a more profoundly intellectual manner. This is the first version.

The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,
The full round moon and the star-laden sky,
And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves
Had hid away earth's old and weary cry.

And then you came with those red mournful lips,

And with you came the whole of the world's tears,
And all the sorrows of her labouring ships,
And all burden of her myriad years.

And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,
The crumbling moon, the white stars in the sky,
And the loud chanting of the unquiet leaves,
Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry.

And this the final version.

VOICE 3: *The Sorrow of Love*

The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,
The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
And all that famous harmony of leaves,
Had blotted out man's image and his cry.

A girl arose that had red mournful lips
And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,
Doomed like Odysseus and the labouring ships,
And proud as Priam murdered with his peers;

Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,
A climbing moon upon an empty sky,
And all that lamentation of the leaves,
Could but compose man's image and his cry.

NARRATOR: The principal poem in Yeats's first volume – the poem that gave the volume its name – *The Wanderings of Oisin* – was a heavy elaborated exploration of Celtic mythology. Yeats's father might argue with point that among his immediate predecessors the young

poet could find no master: Tennyson had dissipated his virtuosity in nagging generalisations – Browning's muscular beliefs and historic naturalism left no penumbra of mystery – Rossetti's sensuality was a substitute for exhausted passion. Yet Swinburne, though far removed from anything that might be mistaken for common experience, sang a beguiling rhapsody.

And in the firm masculine tread and heraldic working of William Morris's verse, Yeats – still standing his own ground resolutely – heard suggestions.

But none of these manners gave to experience – he felt – a habitation or a home. Ireland was to be *his* heart's home.

The Wanderings of Oisin was his first sustained exploration of that country – a trial flight corresponding to Keats's *Endymion*.

And from the moment of that decision Yeats thought and wrote, not as a sentimental nationalist, but as a symbolist with access to a rich and deep store of traditional legend which – if all when well – would flower into a gemlike flame, achieve the condition of music, and inundate the straight paths of will and the conscious reason.

YEATS: To the greater poets everything they see has its relation to the national life, and through that to the universal and divine life: nothing is an isolated artistic moment; there is a unity everywhere; everything fulfils a purpose that is not its own; the hailstone is a journeyman of God; the grass blade carries the universe upon its point. But to this universalism, this seeing of unity everywhere, you can only attain through what is near you, your nation, or, if you be no traveller, your village and the cobwebs on your walls. You can no

more have the greatest poetry without a nation than a religion without symbols. One can only reach out to the universe with a gloved hand – that glove is one's nation, the only thing one knows even a little of.

NARRATOR: From 1886 to 1888 he worked at *The Wanderings of Oisin*, convinced that the shape of the received legend reflected its hidden mythological scheme; treating each detail as though, in fostering it in the soil of his attention, it would flower to disclose its concentric configuration of significance. So, he felt, the old legends would as objective and independent, with an independent life, the correspondences between the old mythology and modern life would be established, a dead mythology would become a living myth – a pattern of the moral universe. The first products of this scheme were stiff, hieratic, statuesque, exalted for how could he at first avoid the rich colour, the heraldic texture, the languorous definiteness of the pre-Raphaelites.

VOICE 2: But now the moon like a white rose shone
In the pale West, and the sun's rim sank
And clouds arrayed their rank on rank
About his fading crimson ball:
The floor of Almhuin's hosting hall
Was not more level than the sea,
As, full of loving fantasy,
And with low murmurs, we rode on,
Where many a trumpet-twisted shell
That in immortal silence sleeps
Dreaming of her own melting hues,
Her golds, her ambers, and her blues,
Pierced with soft light the shallowing deeps.

But now a wandering land breeze came
And a far sound of feathery quires;
It seemed to blow from the dying flame,
They seemed to sing in the smouldering fires.
The horse towards the music raced,
Neighing along the lifeless waste;
Like sooty fingers, many a tree
Rose over out of the warm sea;
And they were trembling ceaselessly,
As though they all were beating time,
Upon the centre of the sun,
To that low laughing woodland rhyme.
And, now our wandering hours were done,
We cantered to the shore, and knew
The reason of the trembling trees:
Round every branch the song-birds flew,
Or clung thereon like swarming bees;
While round the shore a million stood
Like drops of frozen rainbow light,
And pondered in a soft vain mood
Upon their shadows in the tide,
And told the purple deeps their pride,
And murmured snatches of delight;
And on the shores were many boats
With bending sterns and bending bows,
And carven figures on their prows
Of bitterns, and fish-eating stoats,
And swans with their exultant throats:
And where the wood and waters meet
We tied the horse in a leafy clump,
And Niamh blew three merry notes

Out of a little silver trump;
And then an answering whispering flew
Over the bare and woody land,
A whisper of impetuous feet,
And ever nearer, nearer grew;
And from the woods rushed out a band
Of men and ladies, hand in hand,
And singing, singing all together;…

YEATS: All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their preordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound and colour and form are in a musical relation, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion.

NARRATOR: Which was sound theory enough; but the practice in *The Wanderings of Oisin* was not yet ripe, nor was to ripen fully for some years to come. Much of the symbolism was merely decorative and moody; and most of the functional symbolism was pretentious and private –

YEATS: Under the disguise of symbolism I have said several things to which alone I have the key. The romance is for my readers. They must not know that there is a symbol anywhere.

NARRATOR: In a poem from this volume in which *The Poet Mourns for Change that has come upon Him and His Beloved, and Longs for the End of the World*, he had written these lines…

VOICE 1: I know not if days passed or hours,
and Niamh sang continually
Danaan songs, and their dewy showers
Of pensive laughter, unhuman sound,
Lulled weariness, and softly round
My human sorrow her white arms wound.
We galloped; now a hornless deer
Passed by us: chased by a phantom hound
All pearly white, save one red ear …

YEATS: My deer and hound are properly related to the deer and hound that flicker in and out of the various tellings of the Arthurian legends, leading different knights upon adventures, and to the hounds and to the hornless deer at the beginning of, I think, all tellings of Oisin's journey to the country of the young. The hound is certainly related to the Hounds of Annwn or of Hades, who are white, and have red ears, and were heard and are, perhaps, still heard by Welsh peasants, following some flying thing in the night winds.

NARRATOR: Of this kind of work George Russell wrote to Yeats in a mood of testy but exact exasperation: "Your detestable symbols too get a reflected light from the general twilight luminousness and beauty which does not belong to them by right, just as moonlight makes an ugly scene beautiful. I suppose you calculated on this."

YEATS: When I had finished *The Wanderings of Oisin*, dissatisfied with its yellow and its dull green, with all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement, I deliberately reshaped my style, deliberately sought out an impression as of cold light and tumbling clouds. I cast off traditional metaphors and loosened my rhythm, and recognizing that all the criticism of life known to me was alien and

English, became as emotional as possible but with an emotion which I described to myself as cold…And as I look backward upon my own writing, I take pleasure alone in those verses where it seems to me I have found something hard and cold, some articulation of the Image, which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life, and all that my country is…

NARRATOR: If nothing in Yeats's work or thought ever escaped without revision, nothing was ever wholly abandoned. The Cuchulain myth, first touched upon in *The Wanderings of Oisin* was to haunt him to the end, attracting poems and a whole cycle of symbolic plays to its exploration. In the remaking of his style he had a double task – two aspects of the same problem to resolve. He had to purify and toughen his language: he had to clarify and find the power of his symbolism. The single problem was the articulation of the image: the profound clarity of symbols, the integrity of the word.

YEATS: When a man writes any work of genius, or invents some creative action, is it not because some knowledge or power has come into his mind from beyond his mind? It is called up by an image, as I think… but our images must be given to us, we cannot choose them deliberately….

(But) You cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the sense, unless your words are as subtle, as full of mysterious life, as the body of a flower or of a woman.

NARRATOR: As early as 1896 a mysterious force was beginning to concentrate behind his images. Here is a poem called *The Valley of the Black Pig*, for example. Yeats himself explains the images…..

YEATS: The Irish peasantry have for generations comforted themselves, in their misfortunes, with visions of a great battle, to be fought in a mysterious valley called “The Valley of the Black Pig,” and to break at last the power of their enemies. A few years ago, in the barony of Lissadell, in county Sligo, an old man would fall entranced upon the ground from time to time, and rave out a description of the battle; and I have myself heard said that the girths shall rot from the bellies of the horses, because of the few men that shall come alive out of the valley.

VOICE 1: The dews drop slowly and dreams gather: unknown spears
Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes,
And then the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries
Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears.
We who still labour by the cromlech on the shore,
The grey cairn on the hill, when day sinks drowned in dew,
Being weary of the world’s empires, bow down to you,
Master of the still stars and of the flaming door.

NARRATOR: A poem in which *He Bids his Beloved be at Peace* combines such a use of symbol with a theme leading to the heart of Yeats’s change, and ultimately to the source of his poetic power – the theme of love.

VOICE 1: I hear the Shadowy Horses, their long manes a-shake,
Their hoofs heavy with tumult, their eyes glimmering white;
The North unfolds above them clinging, creeping night,
The East her hidden joy before the morning break,
The West weeps in pale dew and sighs passing away,
The South is pouring down roses of crimson fire:
O vanity of Sleep, Hope, Dream, endless Desire,
The Horses of Disaster plunge in the heavy clay;

Beloved, let your eyes half close, and your heart beat
Over my heart, and your hair fall over my breast,
Drowning love's lonely hour in deep twilight of rest,
And hiding their tossing manes and their tumultuous feet.

NARRATOR: But that poem was written to a woman fictitiously referred to as Diana Vernon – not to the cause of his love, nor the instigator of that constantly bleeding wound of unrequited love that humbled and dazed him, and fertilised the earth and loam of his poetry. Maud Gonne had first met Yeats in January 1889 – the year *The Wanderings of Oisin* was published – when she called ostensibly on Yeats's father with an introduction from John O'Leary. An intense, passionate nationalist – beautiful, eloquent, and domineering – she swept Yeats off his feet.

YEATS: Her complexion was luminous, like that of apple blossom through which the light falls, and I remember her standing that first day by a great heap of such blossoms in the window…..If she said the world was flat or the moon an old caubeen tossed up into the sky I would be proud to be of her party.

NARRATOR: Yeats courted her, tried to please her by entering into the revolutionary politics that were her whole life, cultivated Irish themes in a more nationalistic mood than he ever intended, and wrote his first play for her to act – *The Countess Kathleen*: she rejected his addresses and in 1903 married Major John MacBride, – the "drunken inglorious lout" of *Easter 1916*; – she abruptly left MacBride a year later, but drew only tantalizingly close again to Yeats. The volume called *In the Seven Woods*, published in 1904, shows the strenuous sorrow of this vexatious and unrequited love and in a poem called

Adam's Curse Yeats speaks of the new discipline that his work demands.

YEATS: We sat together at one summer's end,
That beautiful mild woman, your close friend,
And you and I, and talked of poetry.
I said, "A line will take us hours maybe;
Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.
Better go down upon your marrow-bones
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather;
For to articulate sweet sounds together
Is to work harder than all these, and yet
Be thought an idler by the noisy set
Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
The martyrs call the world."

NARRATOR: The counter-love for Diana Vernon calls forth an agonised languor…..

YEATS: Pale brows, still hands and dim hair,
I had a beautiful friend
And dreamed that the old despair
Would end in love in the end:
She looked in my heart one day
And saw your image was there;
She has gone weeping away.

NARRATOR: The thought of Maud Gonne brought forth a tone more bitter and for all its desolation… more triumphant.

YEATS: I thought of your beauty, and this arrow,
Made out of a wild thought, is in my marrow.
There's no man may look upon her, no man,
As when newly grown to be a woman,
Tall and noble but with face and bosom
Delicate in colour as apple blossom.
This beauty's kinder, yet for a reason
I could weep that the old is out of season.

NARRATOR: He wrote out the "Folly of being Comforted" and could cry out in weary bitterness – *Never give all the Heart* …

YEATS: Never give all the heart, for love
Will hardly seem worth thinking of
To passionate women if it seem
Certain, and they never dream
That it fades out from kiss to kiss;
For everything that's lovely is
But a brief, dreamy, kind delight.

O never give the heart outright,
For they, for all smooth lips can say,
Have given their hearts up to the play.
And who could play it well enough
If deaf and dumb and blind with love?
He that made this knows all the cost,
For he gave all his heart and lost.

NARRATOR: Between 1903 and 1910, as though from the shock of Maud's rejection of him, her marriage and separation, Yeats wrote practically

no lyrical poetry. But the love poems in the 1910 volume – *The Green Helmet* – shows a colloquial, and at times even insolent, firmness of speech. The personal has now become transfigured into the universal; Maud is a symbol, identified with Helen of Troy – beautiful, feckless, stupid perhaps, faithless certainly in her own way, yet magnificent – the woman for whom in Homer's story Troy was burned and so many men destroyed.

YEATS: Why should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire?
What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern?
Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?

NARRATOR: Yeats had his moments of inward perception which show from what soil this bitter-triumphant fruit had sprung.

YEATS: Though leaves are many, the root is one;
Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun;
Now I may wither into the truth.

NARRATOR: When *The Green Helmet* was published in 1910, Yeats had been in love with Maud Gonne for more than twenty years; it was seven

years since she had married. But the development of Yeats's style turned upon other considerations. It was almost fifteen years since Yeats had first met Lady Gregory, had been fascinated by her factitious use of peasant dialects, had been drawn to write and work for the Irish theatre, and had long enjoyed the benison and peace of her great country house at Coole. Soon after the first meeting with Lady Gregory, Yeats had also met John Synge and in his work picked up not only the vigor and variety, but the "gaiety and tragedy and profound monotony of the Irish peasant lives, the loneliness of the farmsteads in the West, and the lonely Wicklow glens where a woman may sit 'hearing nothing but the wind crying out in the bits of broken trees were left from the great storm, and the streams roaring with the rain.'" But Synge showed Yeats something else: a "hunger for harsh facts, for ugly surprising things, for all that defies our hope."

YEATS: Synge wrote these words to me:
"In these days poetry is usually a flower of evil or good, but it is the timber of poetry that wears most surely, and there is no timber that has not strong roots among the clay and worms. Even if we grant that exalted poetry can be kept successful by itself, the strong things of life are needed in poetry also, to show that what is exalted, or tender, is not made by feeble blood. It may almost be said that before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal."

NARRATOR: To make over his poetry from the roots had been a long hard struggle, a struggle that had no single turning point, and yet was never finished. By the time Yeats prepared the volume called *Responsibilities* in 1913 the dim pre-Raphaelite world of *Oisin* was no longer the centre of his work. His afflictions had brought him for

a time to silence; now he was beginning to speak in a different voice. The volume opens with a laconic tag from the Chinese.

YEATS: How am I fallen from myself, for a long time now
I have not seen the Prince of Chang in my dreams.

NARRATOR: Then there are verses dedicatory in which Yeats recalls his ancestors, meditates upon his responsibilities to them and to life and to the continuity of life, and ends on that moment of ironic despair that becomes the source of his gaiety.

YEATS: Pardon, old fathers, if you still remain
Somewhere in ear-shot for the story's end,
Old Dublin merchant "free of the ten and four"
Or trading out of Galway into Spain;
Old country scholar, Robert Emmet's friend,
A hundred-year-old memory to the poor;
Merchant and scholar who have left my blood
That has not passed through any huckster's loin,
Soldiers that gave, whatever die was cast:
A Butler or an Armstrong that withstood
Beside the brackish waters of the Boyne
James and his Irish when the Dutchman crossed;
Old merchant skipper that leaped overboard
After a ragged hat in Biscay Bay;
You most of all, silent and fierce old man,
Because the daily spectacle that stirred
My fancy, and set my boyish lips to say,
"Only the wasteful virtues earn the sun";
Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,
Although I have come close on forty-nine,

I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.

NARRATOR: This is a different tune from the verses with which, twenty years before, he had addressed certain poems to his Beloved.

YEATS: I bring you with reverent hands
The books of my numberless dreams,
White woman that passion has worn
As the tide wears the dove-grey sands,
And with heart more old than the horn
That is brimmed from the pale fire of time:
White woman with numberless dreams,
I bring you my passionate rhyme.

NARRATOR: But now the steely suppleness uncoils itself in a fluency almost insolent in its felicity – as in these lines *To a Friend whose work has come to nothing* – Lady Gregory …

VOICE 1: Now all the truth is out,
Be secret and take defeat
From any brazen throat,
For how can you compete,
Being honour bred, with one
Who, were it proved he lies,
Were neither shamed in his own
Nor in his neighbours' eyes?
Bred to a harder thing
Than triumph, turn away
And like a laughing string
Whereon mad fingers play

Amid a place of stone,
Be secret and exult,
Because of all things known
That is most difficult.

NARRATOR: And Maud Gonne, still haunts his mind, grown now to fall symbolic stature – as in the poem, *Fallen Majesty*

YEATS: Although crowds gathered once if she but showed her face,
And even old men's eyes grew dim, this hand alone,
Like some last courtier at a gypsy camping-place
Babbling of fallen majesty, records what's gone.

The lineaments, a heart that laughter has made sweet
These, these remain, but I record what's gone. A crowd
Will gather, and not know it walks the very street
Whereon a thing once walked that seemed a burning cloud.

NARRATOR: His vision now encompasses, beyond splendour, *The Cold Heaven*.

VOICE 1: Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice,
And thereupon imagination and heart were driven
So wild that every casual thought of that and this
Vanished, and left but memories, that should be out of season
With the hot blood of youth, of love crossed long ago;
And I took all the blame out of all sense and reason,
Until I cried and trembled and rocked to and fro,
Riddled with light. Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken,
Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent

Out naked on the roads, as the books say, and stricken
By the injustice of the skies for punishment?

NARRATOR: Recognising the change in his own way of writing – a change that could not now be reversed – he set at the end of the *Responsibilities* volume, with savage delight, a poem called *A Coat* …

YEATS: I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it,
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked.

YEATS: A girl made profound by the first pride of beauty, though all but a child still, once said to me, "Innocence is the highest achievement of the human intellect," and as we are encouraged to believe that our intellects grow with our years I may be permitted the conviction that – grown a little nearer innocence – I have found a more appropriate simplicity.

NARRATOR: The *Responsibilities* volume of 1914 confirmed rather than announced a change…

YEATS: "Though to my feathers in the wet
I've stood as I were made of stone
And seen the rubbish run about,

It's certain there are trout somewhere
And maybe I shall take a trout
If but I do not seem to care."

NARRATOR: The rich symbolic densities of earlier poems, though enlivened and transfixed by a sharp running rhythm, are not renounced: and in the end they represent some of Yeats's greatest poems. But the lean laconic colloquial manner is clarified almost to the point of terror in a sequence of terse poems of 1933 called "Words for Music Perhaps": 25 dramatic lyrics on the theme of physical love. Some readers were offended and said so, but Yeats stood his ground – as he had always done.

YEATS: Why does the struggle to come at truth take away our pity, and the struggle to overcome our passions restore it again?… A good writer should be so simple that he has no faults, only sins.

You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attention upon my old age;
They were not such a plague when I was young,
What else have I to spur me into song.

NARRATOR: *Crazy Jane and the Bishop*:

VOICE 3: Bring me to the blasted oak
That I, midnight upon the stroke,

VOICE 1: (*All find safety in the tomb*.)

VOICE 3: May call down curses on his head
Because of my dear Jack that's dead.
Coxcomb was the least he said:

VOICE l: *The solid man and the coxcomb*.

VOICE 3: Nor was he Bishop when his ban
Banished Jack the Journeyman,

VOICE 1: (*All find safety in the tomb*.)

VOICE 3: Nor so much as parish priest,
Yet he, an old book in his fist,
Cried that we lived like beast and beast:

VOICE 1: *The solid man and the coxcomb*.

VOICE 3: The Bishop has a skin, God knows,
Wrinkled like the foot of a goose,

VOICE 1: (*All find safety in the tomb*.)

VOICE 3: Nor can he hide in holy black
The heron's hunch upon his back,
But a birch-tree stood my Jack:

VOICE 1: *The solid man and the coxcomb*.

VOICE 3: Jack had my virginity,
And bids me to the oak, for he

VOICE 1: (*All find safety in the tomb*.)

VOICE 3: Wanders out into the night

And there is shelter under it,
But should that other come, I spit;

VOICE 1: *The solid man and the coxcomb*.

NARRATOR: *Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgment*

VOICE 3: Love is all
Unsatisfied
That cannot take the whole
Body and soul:

VOICE 1: *And that is what Jane said.*

VOICE 3: Take the sour
If you take me,
I can scoff and lour
And scold for an hour.

VOICE 1: *"That's certainly the case," said he.*

VOICE 3: Naked I law,
The grass my bed;
Naked and hidden away,
That black day;

VOICE 1: *And that is what Jane said.*

VOICE 3: What can be shown?
What true love be?
All could be known or shown

If Time were but gone.

VOICE 1: *"That's certainly the case," said he.*

NARRATOR: *Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman*

VOICE 3: I know, although when looks meet
I tremble to the bone,
The more I leave the door unlatched
The sooner love is gone,
For love is but a skein unwound
Between the dark and dawn.

A lonely ghost the ghost is
That to God shall come;
I – love's skein upon the ground,
My body in the tomb –
Shall leap into the light lost
In my mother's womb.

But were I left to lie alone
In an empty bed,
The skein so bound us ghost to ghost,
When he turned his head
Passing on the road that night,
Mine must walk when dead.

NARRATOR: *Crazy Jane on God*

VOICE 3: That lover of a night
Came when he would,

Went in the dawning light
Whether I would or no;
Men come, men go;
All things remain in God.

Banners choke the sky;
Men-at-arms tread;
Armoured horses neigh
Where the great battle was
In the narrow pass:
All things remain in God.

Before their eyes a house
That from childhood stood
Uninhabited, ruinous,
Suddenly lit up
From door to top:
All things remain in God.

I had wild Jack for a lover;
Though like a road
That men pass over
My body makes no moan
But sings on:
All things remain in God.

NARRATOR: *Her Anxiety*

VOICE 2: Earth in beauty dressed
Awaits returning spring.
All true love must die,

Alter at the best
Into some lesser thing.
Prove that I lie.

Such body lovers have,
Such exacting breath,
That they touch or sigh.
Every touch they give,
Love is nearer death.
Prove that I lie.

NARRATOR: *A Last Confession.*

VOICE 2: What lively lad most pleasured me
Of all that with me lay?
I answer that I gave my soul
And loved in misery,
But had great pleasure with a lad
That I loved bodily.

Flinging from his arms I laughed
To think his passion such
He fancied that I gave a soul
Did but our bodies touch,
And laughed upon his breast to think
Beast gave beast as much.

I gave what other women gave
That stepped out of their clothes,
But when this soul, its body off,
Naked to naked goes,

He it has found shall find therein
What none other knows,

And give his own and take his own
And rule in his own right;
And though it loved in misery
Close and cling so tight,
There's not a bird of day that dare
Extinguish that delight.

(*PAUSE: then with a fresh attack, though the end of section*)

YEATS: If you express yourself sincerely I don't think your moral philosophy matters at all. The expression of the joy or sorrow in the depth of a spiritual nature will always be the highest art. Everything that can be reduced to popular morality, everything put in books and taught in schools can be imitated. The noblest art will be always pure experience – the art that insists on nothing, commands nothing – an art that is persuasive because it is almost silent, and is overheard rather than heard.

NARRATOR: In place of the embroidery of old mythologies, and the tapestry of legendary decoration, Yeats had established – over the years – an order of symbols that brought together into one structure what he had found resourceful in the Celtic myth, symbols taken from classical and esoteric sources, and yet other symbols taken from his own life. But the growth of his symbolism, like the development of his style, was not accidental or without deliberation and effort.

YEATS: Day after day I have sat in my chair turning a symbol over in my mind, exploring all its details, defining and again defining its

elements, testing my convictions and those of others by its unity, attempting to substitute particulars for an abstraction like that of algebra.

There is for every man some one scene, some one adventure, some one picture that is the image of his secret life, for wisdom first speaks in images, and…this one image, if he would but brood over it his life long, would lead his soul.

Take some line that is quite simple, that gets its beauty from its place in a story, and see how it flickers with the light of the many symbols that have given the story its beauty, as a sword-blade may flicker with the light of burning towers.

It is only by ancient symbols, by symbols that have numberless meanings beside the one or two the writer lays an emphasis upon, or the half-score he knows of, that any highly subjective art can escape from the barrenness and shallowness of a too conscious arrangement into the abundance and depth of nature. The poet of essences and pure ideas must seek in the half-lights that glimmer from symbol to symbol as if to the ends of the earth, all that the epic and dramatic poet finds of mystery and shadow in the accidental circumstances of life.

NARRATOR: The way Yeats's symbols accumulate meaning, dispose their meanings like the changes of light on the faces of a turning stone, "flicker with the light of burning towers," can be seen by tracing one of the many sequences of images that cluster in his mind about the memory of Maud Gonne and her beauty. First, *Presences* …

YEATS: This night has been so strange that it seemed

As if the hair stood up on my head.
From going-down of the sun I have dreamed
That women laughing, or timid or wild,
In rustle of lace or silken stuff,
Climbed up my creaking stair. They had read
All I had rhymed of that monstrous thing
Returned and yet unrequited love.
They stood in the door and stood between
My great wood lectern and the fire
Till I could hear their hearts beating:
One is a harlot, and one a child
That never looked upon man with desire,
And one, it may be, a queen.

NARRATOR: *Long Legged Fly*

VOICE 1: That civilisation may not sink,
Its great battle lost,
Quiet the dog, tether the pony
To a distant post;
Our master Caesar is in the tent
Where the maps are spread,
His eyes fixed upon nothing,
A hand under his head.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

That the topless towers be burnt
And men recall that face,
Move most gently if move you must
In this lonely place.

She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,
That nobody looks; her feet
Practise a tinker shuffle
Picked up on a street.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
Her mind moves upon silence.

That girls at puberty may find
The first Adam in their thought,
Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,
Keep those children out,
There on that scaffolding reclines
Michael Angelo.
With no more sound than the mice make
His hand moves to and fro.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

NARRATOR: In the end his symbolism, as can be seen in these poems, had become a strong structure of curious elements …

YEATS: I must leave my myths and symbols to explain themselves as the years go by and one poem lights up another. Tragic art, passionate art, the drowner of dykes, the confounder of understanding moves us by setting us to reverie, by alluring us almost to the intensity of trance….We feel our minds expand convulsively or spread out slowly like some moon-brightened image-crowded sea…..

NARRATOR: … and in doing so, embrace in a single self-disclosing system of reference the antique and the current, the legendary and the personal, the amorous, the political, the hermetic; all coming to "The integrity

of five," the terrible blaze of prophetic vision as in *The Second Coming*.

VOICE 2: Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

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: 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 toward Bethlehem to be born?

NARRATOR: *Sailing to Byzantium*

VOICE l: That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees

– Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-master of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

Once out of nature I shall never take
My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
Or set upon a golden bough to sing

To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

NARRATOR: *Byzantium*

VOICE: The unpurged images of day recede;
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song
After great cathedral gong;
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the star-lit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.

At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames that no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,
Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.

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.

NARRATOR: And finally *The Mother of God*

VOICE 3: The threefold terror of love; a fallen flare
Through the hollow of an ear;
Wings beating about the room;
The terror of all terrors that I bore
The Heavens in my womb.

Had I not found content among the shows
Every common woman knows,
Chimney corner, garden walk,
Or rocky cistern where we tread the clothes

And gather all the talk?

What is this flesh I purchased with my pains,
This fallen star my milk sustains,
This love that makes my heart's blood stop
Or strikes a sudden chill into my bones
And bids my hair stand up?

NARRATOR: In 1893, when he was not yet thirty, Yeats had dedicated his volume *The Rose* with lines addressed *To the Rose upon the Rood of Time*.

YEATS: Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!
Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways:
Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide;
The Druid, grey, wood-nurtured, quiet-eyed,
Who cast round Fergus dreams, and ruin untold;
And thine own sadness, whereof stars, grown old
In dancing silver-sandalled on the sea,
Sing in their high and lonely melody.
Come near, that no more blinded by man's fate,
I find under the boughs of love and hate,
In all poor foolish things that live a day,
Eternal beauty wandering on her way.

NARRATOR: In his last volume there is a poem called *High Talk*, as fast talking and sure-footed as a snake-charm salesman, as bitterly mocking of the poet's need for metaphor as a rake talking of puppy love. Yet it comes to rest in a blaze of symbolic force.

YEATS: A barnacle goose
Far up in the stretches of night; night splits and the

dawn breaks loose;
I through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk on;
Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the dawn.

NARRATOR: And where had all that strength and certainty come from – the clear line, the resonant undertow of the inexpressible? On some occasion near the end of life Yeats reflected – with a sort of broken gaiety – upon the way sometimes the words had refused to come to his call, and brooded upon the lifelong struggle to articulate his images: and called the poem *The Circus Animals' Desertion*.

I

YEATS: I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

II

What can I but enumerate old themes?
First that sea-rider Oisin led by the nose
Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows;
But what cared I that set him on to ride,
I, starved for the bosom of his faery bride?

And then a counter-truth filled out its play,
The Countess Cathleen was the name I gave it;
She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away,
But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.
I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
And this brought forth a dream and soon enough,
This dream itself had all my thought and love.

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea;
Heart mysteries there, and yet when all is said
It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love,
And not those things that they were emblems of.

III

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.