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“Where All the Ladders Start”
The Conduits of Art in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats

In his “Ego Dominus Tuus,” W.B. Yeats reaches a crucial moment as a character named Hic questions the origin of art:

Yet surely there are men who have made their art
Out of no tragic war, lovers of life,
Impulsive men that look for happiness
And sing when they’ve found it (lines 41-44)

In short, Hic asks his companion, Ille, if Art can only be born of turmoil; does the creation of beauty require conflict and disorder to succeed? Throughout his poetry and over the course of his life, Yeats attempts to answer Hic’s – and his own – question.

Although his poems continually discount what Hic asserts in those lines, Yeats’ definition of this “tragic war” becomes multidimensional and complex. With “Ego Dominus Tuus,” the earlier “Words,” and one of his final poems, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” Yeats explores some of the varied categories of turmoil that shape “Miracle, bird, or golden handiwork” – exalted artistic creation.

It becomes crucial, in order to examine the turmoil of “Ego Dominus Tuus,” to create a contextual picture of the poem or, more specifically, defining the veiled role Yeats plays in the piece. In his book *Yeats*, Harold Bloom explains that Hic’s contrapuntal foil, Ille, “has inherited the magic book of Michael Robartes” (198), a character Yeats uses often as a spiritual representative. Even more interestingly, Ille resides under an “old wind-beaten tower” (line 2), a reference to Thoor Ballylee, where Yeats lived at the time of the poem’s writing; he has passed “the best of life,” just as

Yeats has gone “over the hill” (he would be around 52 at this point); and, incriminatingly, his name itself, “Ille” is a play on “Willy” or “William.” Therefore, it makes sense to operate under the assumption that Ille is Yeats himself, simply speaking through a creation – just as he does with Michael Robartes.

Given this information, Ille’s perspective in the poem, as well as his response to Hic’s aforementioned statement, becomes the viewpoint that needs to be more carefully examined in regards to Yeats’ fecund turmoil. The question is, cannot there exist men who create their art without strife? Ille’s – Yeats’ – response overwhelmingly denies such a claim. He insists that artists create out of “action” (line 48), which alludes to something that cannot be sedentary or comfortable – it must be tumultuous, chaotic, “the struggle of the fly in marmalade” (line 49). As a response to Hic’s question, Yeats makes a general statement that characterizes Art’s womb as a state of discord.

However, Yeats does not allow his answer to be so simple; “Ego Dominus Tuus” provides a specific type of turmoil that bears artistic creation – *metaphysical* dissonance. In the poem, Ille mentions the rhetorician who “deceives his neighbors,” a line that, given the context of the poem, connects to a quote Yeats would publish one year after “Ego Dominus Tuus,” in the essay *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*: “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.” Clearly, Yeats’ later sentiment functions perfectly with the poem and the type of tension he defines here. The metaphysical strife Yeats portrays involves the quarrel with the self, as Ille calls to his own “opposite” (line 9), his anti-self, and seeks duality to gain harmony, “the old nonchalance of the hand” (line 14) – in essence, Art.

Bloom suggests that the poem's theme "is mastery...the successful quest for the image, an image looking like oneself, but proving of all imaginable things, to be the most unlike, or the anti-self" (198). This attempt at "mastery" makes up the metaphysical conflict that Yeats sees as the conduit to Art. Ille explains that instead of artists, modern creators have become "but critics...timid, entangled, empty and abashed," only half creating (lines 16-18). It is Ille's assumption, then, that creation can only be achieved by reaching toward the other half, gaining the mastery over this "image," this anti-self.

To further illustrate his metaphysical strife, Yeats gives the example of Dante Alighieri, who hungered "for the apple on the bough / Most out of reach" (lines 27-28). Amidst derision, Dante "fashioned from his opposite / An image that might have been a stony face" (lines 30-31) – he approaches the anti-self, experiences a metaphysical turmoil, and thereby creates, leading him to "the most exalted lady loved by a man," or his Beatrice (line 40). Beatrice in this case represents beauty, Dante's body of work, and Art itself – she is a symbol of the creation and artistic achievement only allowed through the metaphysical dissonance that Yeats portrays in "Ego Dominus Tuus." The poem's title, which means literally "I master you," accentuates what needs to be noticed in the work – Art cannot stem from "a book," "sedentary toil" and "imitation of the great masters" (lines 71-73); Art comes only from turmoil, a turmoil characterized by the search and mastery of the "image," the anti-self.

It seems apparent that "Ego Dominus Tuus" follows the opinion that Brenda Maddox offers in *Yeats' Ghost*: "Yeats made no apology for giving precedence to the personal over the political. War was the way of forgetting the self; art was the way of facing it" (22). Given the content of "Tuus," Yeats appears to relegate his definition of

turmoil or tension to the realm of the internal and personal. However, whatever “precedence” the personal might have had in his work was un-despotic – in no way did his political biography disappear when he set to pen. Yeats’ involvement with the political was inexorably tied to his poetry, as can be seen with poems such as “Easter 1916,” which involved Ireland’s Easter Uprising, or “Upon a House Shaken by Land Agitation,” written in response to the possible forced unmaking of the Irish landed aristocracy estates. These examples, among others, offer a second possible type of tension – a *political* dissonance – that leads to the creation of Art.

Although not one of Yeats’ most heralded poems, “Words,” delicately addresses this type of political tension. As with “Ego Dominus Tuus,” it has the underlying theme of Art’s birth from turmoil, while also further clarifying the type of turmoil it considers. “Words” addresses Yeats’ lifelong love, Maud Gonne, a characteristic of many of his early works. He makes a bold hypothesis: if Gonne had understood it all – accepted him, loved him, thrown out or reconsidered political values – the poet “might have thrown poor words away / And been content to live” (lines 15-16). Yeats admits that without problems, conflict, or turmoil, his art would be unneeded and without Muse.

However, this poem carefully specifies political discord as a key tension that motivates Yeats’ art. Yeats’ main problem in “Words” is that Gonne fails to “understand / What [he has] done, or what would do / In this blind bitter land (lines 2-4). A. Norman Jeffares explains, in *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, that “Words” was largely a product of “Maud Gonne...always reproaching Yeats for not making his art into Nationalist propaganda” (102). Yet Yeats’ poetry often directly connects to political strife he experiences and, consequently, he believes that he adequately addresses political

issues. In short, the best he has done “was done to make it plain” (lines 7-8) or expose the political matters of Ireland through his artistic creation. The poem’s conflict, and Maud’s admonishment, largely stems from the fact that Yeats – despite his care for Ireland – criticizes his country, that “blind bitter land” (line 4). Yeats’ body of poetry contains many jabs at Ireland – take his dislike for the commercial spirit of the country’s ruling class in “September 1913,” for example – and the continuing political conflict he (or others) experienced led to some of his most successful poems. Perhaps his views fail to live up to the unwavering Nationalism someone like Maud Gonne lays claim to, but the political dissonance he undergoes creates Art. There comes great internal and external conflict when political issues are made “plain,” but Yeats accepts the turmoil as a necessary gateway to the artistic.

Although “Words” focuses on political turmoil, Yeats’ involvement with Maud Gonne tends to dominate much of the general themes. Yeats spends most of the four quatrains explaining his development of art through political discord, but given his relationship with Gonne, the poem itself feels as if it stems from a third category of Yeats’ turmoil: *romantic* dissonance. “Words” functions mostly as a rhetorical question for Yeats: “That had she done so who can say / What would have shaken from the sieve” (lines 13-14). Had Gonne “understood” his work to make political matters “plain,” accepted his feelings toward Ireland, allowed herself to love him despite his insufficient Nationalism – would Yeats have lost the catalyst for his art? Amidst his explanation of the political strife, Yeats gives a perfect and powerful example of how romantic turmoil can become the underlying conflict that bears forth Art. Despite political or metaphysical

turmoil, resolution of a romantic disharmony might be enough for Yeats to throw “poor words away,” thereby abandoning Art for the contentment of the soul.

The romantic turmoil Yeats explores in “Words” also carries over to aspects of “Ego Dominus Tuus.” As with “Words,” “Tuus” examines the broad idea of conflict becoming Art, generally exploring the realm of metaphysical discord as opposed to political discord. However, the romantic aspect provides a bit of an overlap between the two poems. The story of Dante Alighieri in “Ego Dominus Tuus” has, as mentioned before, a clear discussion of the *Divine Comedy* writer’s journey through metaphysical strife and toward Art. The poem mentions that this conflict led to Dante’s discovery of Beatrice, “the most exalted lady loved by a man” (line 40). Dante’s involvement with Beatrice – a woman he loved passionately, over many years and without reciprocation – inevitably can draw parallels to Yeats’ feelings toward Maud Gonne. Regardless of the similarities between the two relationships, the key common ground is the conversion of romantic turmoil into artistic endeavor. Although “Ego Dominus Tuus” does not explicitly spell out the connotations of mentioning Beatrice, the connotations remain. Dante’s unreturned love for Beatrice became a center of inspiration for him and led to the creation of much of his poetry, therefore the allusion to him and his beloved conjures up Yeats’ category of romantic disharmony.

Of course, “romance” does not necessarily mean love between two people, but a general concept of passion, zeal, exoticism, and heart. Therefore, Yeats’ conception of a romantic aspect in his myriad art-inducing conflicts encompasses more than simple man-woman relationships. In particular, “Ego Dominus Tuus” contains a discussion of John Keats that illustrates the more complex qualities of the romantic discord. While Hic

believes that Keats represents a situation in which contentment begot Art, Ille explains that Keats was “a school boy...with face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window, / For certainly he sank into his grave / His senses and his heart unsatisfied” (lines 60-63). Ille – and therefore Yeats – believes that Keats made song because he faced romantic conflict; he was separated from luxury, experience, life-moments, passions – and thereby turned this separation between he and the “sweet-shop” into beautiful Art. While this broad romantic ideal inevitably includes person-to-person relationships, it expands the romantic dissonance category that Yeats sees as one connection between man and Art.

Yeats’ definition of these separate types of Art-creating conflict continued until his final pieces. As his death approached, many of Yeats’ poems dealt with taking inventory of his life. Over the course of his work, he evolved an incredibly complex system of symbolic imagery: gyres, birds, the moon’s phases, spiritual doubles – all of which Yeats’ addresses in one of his final poems, “The Circus Animals’ Desertion.” Here, the “circus animals” of the title represent all the pieces and themes of his old symbolic framework. Considering this, Section I contemplates Yeats’ earlier years where “Winter and Summer till old age began / My circus animals were all on show” (lines 5-6). In Section II, Yeats catalogues these “old themes,” calling up “that sea-rider Oisín” (line 10) and Cuchulain (line 25) – figures from Irish mythology that Yeats used in many pieces – as well as Maud Gonne (lines 18-23). Ultimately, this figurative parade serves not as a reunion for his symbolic feats, but as a way for Yeats to ask the question that ties this poem, “Ego Dominus Tuus,” “Words,” and many other pieces together: “Those masterful images because complete / Grew in pure mind but out of what began?” (lines

33-34). More directly than ever, Yeats asks where, exactly, does this Art come from, what is the source of his creations?

His answer, after long years and many poems, is that “all the ladders start / In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (lines 39-40). Essentially, the source of Art comes from the conflict within the heart itself. Yeats establishes the heart as dirty, ugly, complex, riotous, chaotic, and “foul,” but the seeming ugliness of “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” (lines 35-38) is startlingly wonderful. It feels fantastic *because* it is ugly, because it is foul, because it is complex. Whereas before Yeats characterized Art-bearing conflict as metaphysical, political, or romantic, he now establishes a new type of conflict that feels similar *and* dissimilar to his previous conception of motley turmoil. In a way, this heart-contained turmoil encompasses and changes all three; “the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” leads to Art because of the multitudinous discords it contains; it is the complex mediator through which all things are filtered. At a period where Yeats reflects on those that have made his life unique (“Beautiful Lofty Things”), accepts death, and tries to resolve some of his extended conceits, it seems fitting that he finds a way of condensing and addressing the varying conflicts he examined before. Although, in some ways, Yeats makes the imagery more complex and intricate – he *is* Yeats, after all, even at the twilight of his life – the idea of Art born from the “bone shop” feels clearer, as it is a conflict that encompasses and unites his divisions of disharmony.

Although the evidence in his poems would clearly point to Yeats overwhelmingly dismissing what he had Hic naively suppose in “Ego Dominus Tuus,” his answer contains

no simplicity or concreteness. For Yeats, Art comes from conflict, but not just simply turmoil or a “tragic war.” The sources are metaphysical, political, romantic, and – finally, beautifully, maddeningly – of the heart. Despite the dissonance caused by the many sources he describes, the “struggle of the fly in marmalade” becomes something greater; the catalysts strangely become incomparable Art, “gaiety transfiguring all that dread.”

Works Cited

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