

**Adam's Curse': Labor, Truth and Beauty in Yeats's Autobiographical Poems**  
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VADAM'S CURSE': LABOR, TRUTH AND BEAUTY IN YEATS'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POEMS Yeats's growth towards maturer concepts of "truth" and "beauty" is perhaps more noticeable in his laborious "stitching" and "unstitching" than in his finished poems, which seem but "a moment's thought." "No poet has so changed his meanings as he stitched and unstitched," T.R. Henn says of Variorum Edition, noticing the "successive re-drafts of the events that rushed upon him [Yeats] like waves." One such event seems to have occurred that "one summer's end" in "Adam's Curse." The recognizable biographical connections in this and in some related poems, as well as Yeats's revisions aimed at making the poems seem impersonal, reveal a conscious effort to design a fictive poetic autobiography: an autobiography that traces the laborious growth of the poet/woman/lover/persona out of a world of fantasy, dream and ideal beauty and leading toward a world of truth, reality, and sober beauty. The revisions reveal what Louis A. Renza has termed the autobiographer's (St. Augustine, in particular) "occasion to apprehend the silent or private identity of his own soul."<sup>2</sup> As Peter Abbs remarks<sup>of</sup> autobiography in general<sup>revisions</sup> (such as Yeats's) unveil the author's extraction of the "truth of experience" from the "linear chronology"<sup>3</sup> of events.

"Adam's Curse" is a poem born out of an incident belonging to the "linear chronology" of Yeats's biography. Yet it exists as a poem in its own right, independent of biographical facts. Within its comprehensive span, "Adam's Curse" explores the theme of beauty (of a woman, of a poem), the theme of love, the suffering and labor out of which true beauty is born, and the sorrow inherent in love. This span gathers and includes within its scope other poems, among them "He Tells of the Perfect Beauty," "The Lover Pleads with His Friends for Old Friends," and "Two Years Later," for in them Yeats made similar kinds of alterations<sup>what</sup> he called in "Adam's Curse," "much labouring"<sup>forming</sup> in their "successive re-drafts" an inner link. Not only did Yeats "stitch and unstash" these poems individually; he also seems to have stitched them together into patterns of timeless impersonal "truth[s] of experience" in their essence. He achieves this simply by unstitching the voices from the "linear chronology" of personal events and then weaving them together into an impersonal and overarching design. This is done typically by erasing personal pronouns, sometimes by making clever changes in tense and sometimes by making the narrative more terse and cryptic. The voices blend in essence, and the temporal boundaries of events and situations melt away. A voice in "He Tells of the Perfect Beauty" had originally cried, in the 1896 version of the poem: We poets labour all our days To build the Perfect Beauty in Rhyme" T.R. Henn, "George Daniei Peter Allt," in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (1957, rpt: Macmillan, 1968), xiii. The texts of the poems from this edition are hereafter cited in the text as Variorum. Louis A. Renza, "Veto of the Imagination," *New Literary History*, IX: 1 (Autumn 1977), p. 8. Hereafter cited as Renza. 3 Peter Abbs, "Autobiography: Quest for Identity," in *The Present: The New Pelican Guide to English Literature*, Vol. 8, ed. Boris Ford (Penguin, 1983), p. 522. I use his phrases from recent theories regarding forms of autobiography only to show that they could be applied to the poetry of Yeats, although Yeats's work is not considered in the discussion.

This was the voice of a dreamy-eyed poet laboring to love in the "old high way of love" ("Adam's Curse"). The beauty it told of was ethereal and unattainable; it

described "cloud-pale eyelids" and "dream-dimmed eyes." In a later revision from 1949, the voice has changed. It now states: The poets labouring all their days To build a perfect beauty in rhyme [all italics added]<sup>5</sup> From the particular, the voice has evolved into part of a universal situation in romantic poetry. Later in the poem, it promises that the "heart will bow" for the beauty of the silent "you." But by this time the "my" and the "you" have become a part of a vaster pattern of reality. A voice in the 1897 version ("Song") of "The Lover pleads with his Friend for Old Friends" (Variorum, No. 71, 172-173) had once pleaded: But think of your old friends the most [italics added].<sup>6</sup> The speaker here has been hurt by the "unkindness" and "pride" of a beautiful woman who was moved by the public flattery of her beauty by new friends. Only old friends, he feels, know the secret beauty of her soul. The voice tells the woman: Time's bitter flood will rise, And your high beauty fall and be lost For all eyes but these eyes (Saturday). He cannot hide his bitterness and jealousy and so says: And of the tongues of the crowd And of new friends are glad with your praise [all italics added] (Saturday). Later, Yeats had apparently decided that the present tense could be embarrassingly personal, and thus he changed it to the elevated and elegant: Voices among the crowd And new friends busy with your praise (Poems, p. 68).<sup>5</sup> The Poems of W.B. Yeats, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan [Definitive Edition], 1949), p. 64. YEATS' AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POEMS 185

At the same time, he had decided to drop the personal allusion, so that the line now reads: But think about old friends the most (Poems). In the original version of "Two Years Later," (Variorum, No. 139, 312-313) a voice warns an adolescent girl not to repeat her mother's mistakes. The mother had thought that "all the world's a friend" and so had "suffered."<sup>7</sup> The speaker here includes himself, along with the mother, as an example: I have found out how despairing The moths are when they are burned Later, Yeats erased the personal allusion and made the voice assume the role of an experienced and wise old man advising a young girl entering womanhood: Has no one . . . \* \* \* . . . warned you how despairing The moths are when they are burned? (Poems, 120). Although this poem has clear connections with specific incidents in Yeats's relationship with Maud Gonne and her daughter, Iseult, we can see how, through "much labouring" ("Adam's Curse") the poet distills the pure "truth of experience" (Abbs, p. 522) from the event. We also notice the maturing of the theme of beauty and love. From the ethereal, romantic, and ideal picture (of the original versions) we move to a more realistic portrayal. "Adam's Curse" (Variorum, No. 86, 204-206) is a kind of time capsule that contains within itself all of these themes and techniques. It too is self-contained, so that we do not need to know the biographical facts in order to understand the poem. Still, we cannot help but note the controlled passion in the voice and the obvious reference to some event that had occurred "one summer's end." In an earlier version of the poem from 1902, a woman's voice says, in a casual colloquial manner: "There is one thing that all we women know Although we never heard of it at school . . ." [all italics added]<sup>8</sup> In the final version, however, this claim has been subsumed into the dignified, well framed truth of <sup>7</sup> This poem was originally published in Poetry (Chicago) May 1914, LXXXVII<sup>59</sup> as the second stanza of "To Child Dancing in the Wind." Only in later publications did Yeats designate it as a complementary poem by the roman numerals "II" and the individual title. To be born woman is to know? Although they do not talk of it at school? . . . ' [italics added] (Poems, 78-79). Another curious change occurs in the voice of the narrator. It had earlier been caught up in the casual informality of the incident as it might have occurred: That woman then Murmured with her young voice . . . (Monthly). This is later changed by Yeats to suit the high tension of the crossfire of

ideas: And thereupon That beautiful mild woman . . . (Poems). The line now has that delicate balance of pause that precedes an important statement. This woman, whose voice is described as "sweet and low," knows of a beauty that may be achieved: That we must labour to be beautiful (Poems). This is a beauty different from the "cloud-pale eyelids" and "dream-dimmed eyes" of "He Tells of the Perfect Beauty." The lover/poet is also no longer the same. In "Adam's Curse," . . . time's waters as they rose and fell About the stars and broke in days and years (Poems). made the poet and the woman "weary-hearted" through experience. "The old high way of love" (Poems) with its "high courtesy" and "precedents out of beautiful old books," to which the earlier poetry and beauty belonged, has now become redundant. The silent and beautiful woman addressed in the poem evidently plays a pivotal role in this change. She had inspired the earlier poetry and love, and now, through her and with her, the poet/lover realizes the futility, the weariness and hollowness of it all. But a newer, maturer beauty and love have been born. They contain and subdue within themselves the anguish, jealousy, bitterness, despair, and suffering that "time's waters" introduced into the life of a dreamy-eyed poet/lover. Through the "labour" of Yeats, as he subdues and contains these travails of passion, grows a realistic and mature love poem such as "Adam's Curse," in contrast to the romantic, other-worldly "He Tells of the Perfect Beauty." Thus, in "Adam's Curse," (Poems) a line of poetry takes "hours maybe" of "stitching and unstitching." On the one hand, the poet has to "articulate sweet sounds together," to make the poem beautiful in its own impersonal, universal way?to construct the perfect design. On the other hand, it should seem the result of "a moment's thought," so that it not lose its spontaneity and thus sacrifice the essential "truth of experience" (Abbs). This content downloaded from 42.110.151.77 on Mon, 27 Jul 2020 07:43:11 UTC All use subject to [http://www.jstor.org/terms](#) YEATS' AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL POEMS 187 The biographical connection of "Adam's Curse" with Kathleen and Maud Gonne is well known. But the greatness of the poetry can be noticed in the way Yeats extricates the voices and the "truth of experience" from the personal and temporal and places them in a higher, timeless, and impersonal order. In this, perhaps, Yeats is able to achieve a perfection of a certain kind of autobiographical writing that few have been able to attain.<sup>9</sup>

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