Ethics and Aesthetics in W. B. Yeats's Poetry

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Abstract One of Yeats's most reliable biographers, Ann Saddlemyer, after spending years editing the letters of Yeats and his wife George, gives an insight into Yeats's character. When Yeats died in 1939, George was 46 and left alone to care for two teenage children. She would always miss Yeats, "the strange, chaotic, varied and completely unified personality," "with whom she had shared so much .... " It is a precise and definite character analysis.Yeats had had many Romantic involvements, and, like Picasso, his works change with different friendships with women: from early fairies to real women and to final fictional women; generally and chronologically, the thematic and technical aspects developingfrom the ethereal poetry to the symbolic, and to the realistic and post-Modernistic poetry. The paper will make an attempt to read some of his representative poems in order to know whether they are ethical, aesthetical, or both. This is not a simple question, because Yeats claims that poetry is to make things happen, whereas in fact they look pure for most readers. This reading will help define the nature of his poetry by studying his representative poems.[1]
Key words Maud Gonne; Yeats; form; complexity; simplicity; ethics; aesthetics

I

One day a Miss Maud Gonne arrived in a hansom at Bedford Park, where the Yeats family lived.[2] She visited John Yeats, father of W. B. Yeats, and was to remain a muse and love for the poet until he died in 1939. The poet seemed to fall in love with her the moment he met her, as described in his book *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922):

> [She] brought an introduction to my father from old John O'Leary, the Fenian leader. She vexed my father by praise of war, war for its own sake, not as the creator of certain virtues but as if there were some virtues in excitement itself. I supported her against my father, which vexed him the more, though he might have understood that, … , a young man … could not have differed from a woman so beautiful and so young. To-day, with her great height and the unchangeable

> lineaments of her form, she looks the Sybil …, but in that day she seemed a classical impersonation of the Spring, the Virgilian commendation "She walks like a goddess" made for her alone. Her complexion was luminous, like that of apple blossoms through which the light falls, and I remember her standing that first day by a great heap of such blossoms in the window. (Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* 82)

In fact, Yeats had been so enamored of Maud Gonne for such a long time that he could not find any other woman: for 29 years he had proposed to Maud Gonne many times until the age of 52, without success, and when he finally gave it up and proposed to her daughter, Iseult Gonne, who had earlier proposed to him but now rejected him, he turned to Georgie Hyde-Lees, 25 years younger than he. But even after he married Georgie, he could not forget Maud Gonne, and his newly wed wife George had to keep his attention away from her and onsomething else, and for seven years George (Yeats changed Georgie to George) performed automatic writing with her husband. Looking back upon the relationship between Yeats and Maud Gonne, Yeats seems to have been destined to meet her but never to marry her: it seems to have been Heaven's will to make him the greatest love poet of the 20th century. But the truth is the love poems are not simply love poems, but something bigger than that.

Yeats wrote more than 24 poems for Maud Gonne (1866-1953), not to mention the plays for her; and nine poems for her daughter, Iseult Gonne (1900?-1954); ten for Lady Gregory (1852-1932); seven for his wife George Yeats (1892-1968); six for Olivia Shakespear (1870?-1938); four for Margot Ruddock (Margot Collis) (1907-1951); three for Constance Gore-Booth (1863-1927). He wrote a total of 63 poems for the women he had relations with in his life. They may be compared with the portraits Picasso did in his life. If we analyze these "portrait" poems, we could understand not only what he thinks of the woman he is depicting and of what his notions of women are, and of the society he is in. More importantly, many of them are both about the specific women he was involved with and about something else: for example, a feminist critic, Elizabeth Cullingford, "notes that how many of Yeats's poems are simultaneously personal love lyrics and political treatises, citing 'Easter, 1916'" (Neigh 154).

This is the very thesis the present paper is to offer of Yeats's love poetry in general. Literature and art originate in human interaction with its environments, or its society and nature. They are the production of man, and therefore, it is not possible to imagine that his work is separate from the tradition of history. They are not only dependent on it, but also promote it. But for the Modernist Yeats, art is an expression, self-sufficient and fulfilling, similar to Walter Pater's notion of art for art's sake. But

if we look back, art has always been for practical purposes, while today's art and life stay separate. Yeats has worked throughout his life to resolve this contradiction. At age seventeen, Yeats said that a poet should have a new religion, poetry, which is a new dogma of poetry as religion, which Wallace Steven is also to declare later on. Yeats says:

> I was unlike others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 115-6)

We should first of all notice that Yeats did not mean to create a new religion *per se*, but new poetry, "a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression." What he means by the first expression is something that is original, constant, from generation to generation, which is to become the very backbone of his poetics.Then,we also need toknowwhoshould practice this "new religion": poets and painters, that is, he is talking about poetics and aesthetics in general. But Yeats's poetics is unique in that he has for a long time been immersed in mysticism and occultism, which is what we may call a religion of some kind, thus, religion serves as a metaphor for his poetry.

At this juncture, another Modernist poet, T. S. Eliot's position on poetics and aesthetics may be comparable:

> Walter Pater's doctrine of art for art's sake drew his [Eliot's] attention because it was a doctrine of ethics as well as of aesthetics. Indeed, in its own domain alone it was remarkably weak, expressing either a truism (writers must be committed to their craft) or else a patent falsehood (readers must read only for aesthetic effect). The minute it became a statement about life, however, Pater's doctrine gained a cogency that at least lent it a certain dignity. Eliot wished, of course, both to contest this doctrine and to demote its influence…. (Kearns 78)

Eliot takes up Walter Pater's position to develop his own idea of ethics and aesthetics by "differ[ing] from a preceding position in matters cultural" (Kearns 78). In Yeats's case, he takes up poetry that is constant from generation to generation. It is certainly "a patent falsehood." But Yeats is to overcome this falsehood, writing poetry that not

only makes sense but is supremely beautiful based on what looks like an untenable position on poetry.

II

Two companion poems are founded on this poetics, a theory that embraces both ethics and aesthetics: "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium." In ancient Byzantium, to Yeats, art aims at religion and practicality, so the poet now as an old man longs to sail to Byzantium where art and life are one and the same: art is at once self-sufficient and practical in Byzantium, whereas art is in conflict with life in this world, or in Ireland. The two poems:

> Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Ofhammered gold and gold enamellings.
> ("Sailing to Byzantium," qtd. in Albright 240)

Yeats's Byzantium is where …"I could find in some little wine-shop some philosophical worker in mosaic who could answer all my answers, the supernatural descending nearer to him than to Plotinus even, for the pride of his delicate skill would make [religious truths] show as a lovely flexible presence like that of a perfect human body" (qtd. in Albright 629). So, what he wants to be is a form (golden bird) which Grecian goldsmiths make: metaphorically, he wishes to be a poet like that goldsmith, who can both be a poet and philosopher, and a practical mosaic maker. He wants to be a poet who is like the Byzantine mosaic maker that is more like a philosopher than the great philosopher, Plotinus, and who is more a religious man that is near to the supernatural.

But in "Byzantium" the poet goes further than being in Byzantium, scorning all that is natural:

> Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
> More miracle than bird or handiwork,
> Planted on the starlit 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 and blood. (qtd. in Albright 298)

Here Yeats is not just a Romantic poet singing the beauty of the world. He deals with the world in his poetry, in a different way than other poets. His poetry is both on poetry and on the poetics of poetry at the same time.

Yeats hardly states in his poetry (in prose he talks about political issues as senator, for example) his views of the current political situations directly. "Easter, 1916" is probably one of the strongest statements of his political views, but even in this poem, it is not clear what he is saying; not only that, he is talking about a woman he has long loved: Maud Gonne. The poem is enabled to achieve a new dimension by way of a stone metaphor in the river. It is strategically located in the middle of the poem, between the second and the fourth stanzas, except the first introductory stanza. The poem's central imagery hinges upon the depiction of the natural phenomena, indirectly saying first that "Hearts with one purpose alone/ Through summer and winter seem/ Enchanted to a stone/ To trouble the living stream." Definitely this stone metaphor refers to the woman, Maud Gonne, who has fought for Ireland, and to the patriotic fighters who rose against Britain; at the same time he is calling to the universal law of nature: whatever it is in Nature, it is to repeat itself[3]:

> The horse that comes from the road,
> The rider, the birds that range
> From cloud to tumbling cloud,
> Minute by minute they change:
> A shadow of cloud on the stream
> Changes minute by minute;
> A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
> And a horse plashes within it;
> The long-legged moor-hens dive,
> And hens to moor-cocks call;
> Minute by minute they live:
> The stone's in the middle of all. (qtd. in Albright 229).

"The stone's in the middle of all, as in the river, in your/ our heart hardened like a stone." This poem is one example that succeeds in realizing in it the typical ethics and aesthetics of Yeats. In this respect, he is both a Romantic and (post-)Modernist poet as well.

III

Likewise, "Leda and the Swan," one of Yeats's best poems, is so complex a poem,

though it looks straightforwardly simple and clear at a glance. For some it is certainly unethical; for some it is not, because the poet makes full use of mythology. Ethics and mythology are values and norms of tradition; if it is seen as unethical, all mythological poetry could be thought of as unethical, disregarding and not recognizing mythology. Mythology is based on human values and norms, and Yeats relies on it, not simply to avoid criticism, but he has used it from the very beginning of his poetic career, under the influence of William Blake and occultism he was involved in. The origin of the poem is politics; an editor asked Yeats to write a poem on the current political situation:

> [Yeats] thought "after the individualist, demagogic movement, founded by Hobbes and popularized by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries." Then I thought "Nothing is possible but some movement, or birth from above, preceded by some violent annunciation." My fancy began to play with Leda and the Swan for metaphor and I began this poem; but as I wrote, bird and lady took such possession of the scene that all politics went out of it, and my friend tells me that "his conservative readers would misunderstand the poem."[4]

Usually Yeats begins a poem at a personal level — another poem is "The Sorrow of Love" — and elevates it to a universal dimension. This is another instance of how he treats ethics, morals, values, norms in his poetry. I am about to discuss two readings of the poem by two critics. One reads it from a Feminist perspective; another reads it by reading sources of the idea of power versus knowledge Yeats may have been exposed to in his time.

First, Janet Neigh reads this poem from a feminist and Deconstructionist perspective.[5] She thinks "The Tower[, in which this poem is included,] provides an excellent symbolic context that has the tower representing, among other things, civilization, monument, structure, loss, and the phallus" (149). The poem itself has a crucial image of the tower, as an image of manhood and as an image of civilization being ravaged by war:

> A shudder in the loins engenders there
> The broken wall, *the burning* roof and *tower*
> And Agamemnon dead.(italicsmy emphasis; qtd. in Albright 260)

What is interesting in this reading is that the poem being highly visual and concrete, this reading makes the poem highly abstract and fluid to such an extent that she

concludes her reading as follows:

> I suggest a politics of reading from the drop where one pursues the fluidity of one's identification with texts. A drop is momentary, like a drop of water, which collects for a moment before it falls. For an instant new ways of being hold together before they splatter on the ground and we attempt to trace the memory of the drops' fleeting holding pattern. (Neigh 158)

The reading of which is certainly that of a Decontructionist reading.

The last concluding three lines have been hotly discussed by critics:

> 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?(qtd. in Albright 260)

The readers are fascinated by the poem's clarity and power, which excite them, making them read in their own ways: so simple a poem stirs so complex an imagination in the readers, making them respond so differently. Many of his poems have this profound dual aspects: ethics and aesthetics in them, which find superb expression in poems, to cite a few poems, "The Sorrow of Love," "The Cap and Bells," "The Wild Swans at Coole." The poems' simple beauty is not that simple, and each is, like Yeats the man, a "strange, chaotic, varied and completely unified personality." All of the poems here resulted from his relations with women, generally and chronologically the thematic and technical aspects developing, from the ethereal poetry to the symbolic and to the realistic and post-Modernistic poetry.

Whether it is his early or late poetry, what is common is that there is complexity beneath the simplicity of it, not only in form but in substance. It is so complex. In today's world, people claim that ethics has little to do with art or poetry. But Yeats was one of the first poets to point out that it is certainly wrong to say that ethics and aesthetics are two different things. But it is also true that Yeats was not a priest of religion but an artist. Although he was deeply concerned with moral or ethical ways of life, he was an artist, who was sincere, devoting himself to seeking truth in poetry. A poem is, however, a work of art made by a man, and Yeats is a product of an age, his work also resulting from his age.

IV

Considering his attitude to his poetry, it seems to be paradoxical that his poetry shows

values, norms, truths, though at first glance it looks neither concerned with morals or ethics. As poet, he follows his instinct and conscience: his work is always serious, for instance, even when a play of his arouses the audience's laughter. Not interested in making people laugh, he was dead serious; he was deeply interested in uncovering human nature in a perfect form of art and making us identify with his work. To exemplify this, we can look at "The Sorrow of Love." Bloomfield, in his review of a monograph by Roman Jakobson and Stephen Rudy, says:

> The simpler the surface of a complex poem, the greater the class between inner and outer, and the greater the joy. Jakobson is perfectly justified in regarding complexity a major (although not the only) value in itself, especially a complexity which is not perceived at first sight and which needs a keen eye, ear and intelligence to discover. (409)

Not only the form of this poem, but also the content looks simple. Let us look at the poem itself to see how simple it is at first glance, though Jakobson uses a space of 77 pages. Here is the poem:

> 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 laboring 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.(October 1892; 1925; qtd. in Albright 61)

This is both a poem of Maud Gonne, a poem of mythology, and human history and nature as well. How simple and how complex it must have been to Jakobson.[6]

Thus, by reading another poem, we can conclude that Yeats is a great artist, making his own kind of poetry, both ethical and aesthetical, serve as a model for later

writers and artists.

Notes

1. This work is supported by the research fund of Hanyang University [HY-2013-N].

2. See Albright, lv-lvi. The meeting took place on 30 January 1889, when he was 23 (He was born in Sandy mount Avenue, Dublin, on 13 June 1865).

3. See Young Suck Rhee, "Multifariousness in Form and Substance of 'Easter, 1916.'" *The Yeats Journal of Korea* 41 (2013): 145-161.

4. See Giorgio Melchiori, *The Whole Mystery of Art*, 73-114 and Norman A. Jeffares, *A New Commentary on The Poems* of W. B. Yeats, 247.

5. See Janet Neigh, "Reading from the Drop: Poetics of Identification and Yeats's 'Leda and the Swan.'"

6. I also deal with this poem in depth. See "The Sorrow of Love," treated as one of "Maud Gonne Poems" in my dissertation "The Poetics of Etherealization: Female Imagery in The Work of W. B. Yeats. " Ph. D Dissertation, University of Nebraska, July 1985, 81-96.

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