TOWARDS ARISTOCRACY

Frustration in politics and the controversy over *The Countess Cathleen* prompted Yeats to look for an enduring ideal, an ideal that could provide him with order in the world of confusion. Aristocracy gave him all that he badly needed - defence of his own poetry and plays against clerical criticism and popular propagandist verse, strength to fight for the Abbey Theatre against the mob, and patronage of a sympathiser who encouraged him in his creative activities.

While Yeats was consulting the magical symbols for his future action, he was advised by a symbolic personality, who called herself Megarithma, to "live near water and avoid woods because they concentrate the solar ray." Yeats interpreted this enigmatic message that he was advised by his Daimon to fill his imagination with country stories and popular tradition. In the *Autobiographies*: Yeats gives his interpretation: "I believed that this enigmatic sentence came from my own Daimon, my own buried

self speaking through my friend's mind. "Solar", according to all that I learnt from Mathers, meant elaborate, full of artifice, rich, all that resembles the work of a goldsmith, whereas "water" meant "lunar", and "lunar" all that is simple, popular, traditional, emotional. But why should woods concentrate the solar ray? I did not understand why, nor do I now, and I decided to reject that part of the message as an error. I accepted the rest without difficulty, for after The Wanderings of Oisin, I had simplified my style by filling my imagination with country stories.¹

A couple of weeks after his vision Lady Gregory, now intimate to him, drove him to Tulira. He stayed at Coole where there was a forest, called the Seven Woods, beside the lake. Advised by his Daimon Yeats decided to stay at Coole. Probably the greatest influence on him, during the period 1898-1910, was that of Lady Gregory whose care, sympathy and patronage gave a new life to him as, at that time, he was in poor health, exhausted by bitter experiences in politics and love. Lady Gregory, seeing him ill, brought him from cottage to cottage to gather folk-beliefs, fairy-tales, and legends. She invited him to come again next year.

¹ Autobiographies, pp. 371-72.
Lady Gregory was the widow of Sir William Gregory, a former governor of Ceylon. She was a plainly dressed woman of forty-five when Yeats met her for the first time. She had given up her London house after the death of her husband and devoted herself to her estate and her son, Robert Gregory. She had little knowledge of the struggle between the landlords and the tenants in the eighteen-seventies as she had been far away from Ireland in her youth. She never lost her sense of feudal responsibility. Yeats quotes the saying of an old man: "She has been like a serving-maid among us. She is plain and simple, like the mother of God, and that was the greatest lady that ever lived."¹

Later, Yeats visited Coole regularly and it became his second home. In his Autobiographies Yeats writes his feelings about Coole: "Certain woods at Sligo, the woods above Dooney Rock and those above the waterfall at Ben Bulben, though I shall never perhaps walk there again, are so deep in my affections that I dream about them at night; and yet the woods at Coole, they do not come into my dream, are so much more knitted to my thoughts that when I am dead they will have, I am persuaded, my longest visit."² A long vista of trees over an undergrowth.

¹ Autobiographies, p. 395.
² Ibid., pp. 377-78.
of clipped laurels, the wild swans at the lake and the clear autumn water always remained vivid in his memory. How passionately Yeats loved this place is evident from the poem The Wild Swans at Coole which vividly paints the sense-impressions:

"The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are dry,  
Under the October twilight water  
Mirrors a still sky  
Upon the brimming water among the stones  
Are nine-and-fifty swans"!

It is at Coole that Yeats developed love for aristocracy. Earlier, under the influence of Morris, he had been a socialist. But frustration in active politics made him aware of his own limitations as a politician; and he came to realize that poetry was the only means by which he could serve his motherland. The patronage and help of Lady Gregory and the idea of aristocracy gave him the support he needed; his admiration for aristocracy, therefore, was limited to poetry and certain qualities essential for the "Unity of Being" and the "Unity of Culture". He explored every region for poetry; occultism, philosophy, art, politics and religion were all sub-servient to poetry.

He took them with all seriousness as and when he found them best suited to his purpose. He were the masks of the occultist, philosopher and politician either to defend the kind of poetry he was writing or to enrich the imagery, argument, phraseology and subject matter of his poetry. Professor Melehiori rightly says in the book *The Whole Mystery of Art*: "This is typical of Yeats: when he has an idea or a theory he would try to work it out to the end, to ride it to the death, as it frequently turned out. It is significant that, though borrowing ideas and beliefs from any quarter, he never really belonged to any party or church or society: he founded many of the latter, occultist or nationalist or literary, but never completely shared in the convictions of his fellow-members or even of his follower. His individuality would always affirm itself, by making him take a different road from the one intended or understood by his companions. This is why his political attitude appears so irritantly elusive and at times suspect; and his philosophy could make no disciples".¹

The controversies, raised by the church and its people, over the plays staged by the Abbey and the support given by Lady Gregory made Yeats look to aristocracy. He had already faced a lot of adverse criticism of his play *The Countess Cathleen*. The play *The Hour Glass* was

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¹ *The Whole Mystery of Art*, p. 11.
criticised on heretical grounds. It was a mild criticism
to which Yeats answered: "Every generation of men of
letters has been called immoral by the pulpit of the
newspaper, and it has been precisely when that generation
has been illuminating some obscure corner of the conscience
that the cry against it has been more confident".¹ After
this everything went quietly for some time. He thought
that the people of Ireland had come to know the difference
between a good play and a bad play and, so, when a controversy*
arose over Synge's great play The Playboy of the Western
World, he was deeply shocked. He criticised the people
for the lack of understanding of Synge's play:

"The failure of the audience to understand this
powerful and strange work (The Playboy of the Western World)
has been the one serious failure of our movement, and it
could not have happened but that the greater number of those
who came to shout down the play were no regular part of our
audience at all, but members of parties and societies whose
main interests are political".²

¹. Explorations, p. 111.
². The audience broke in a great fury at the word "shift"
meaning chemise.

₂. Explorations, p. 229.
In April 1907 Yeats visited Italy. The reading of *The Courtier* by Castiglione and visits to Milan, Urbino, Ferrara and Ravenna planted the idea of aristocracy deep in him and he came to believe that only aristocracy could save art and literature. "The tour (of Italy)" writes J. Hone, "helped to give a further aristocratic turn to Yeats's mind, and he came home to lecture at the National Literary Society on the "immoral Irish bourgeoisie" without past and without discipline, to which Ireland was surrendering her soul".¹

II

Now the question arises: how many books on political theory did Yeats study to form his opinions on the forms of the government? Did he study the *Republic* of Plato or the *Politics* of Aristotle? Yeats, in fact, never used the word aristocracy in the Greek sense - the rule of the best. He admired aristocracy not because he had read books on political theory to point out the demerits of democracy but because he found the mob hostile to poetry and art, and the aristocratic houses patronizing them.

¹ J. Hone, *W.B. Yeats*, pp. 219-20.
In his youth Yeats had visited the Gore-Booth house and the beauty, courtesy and gentle behaviour of Eva Gore-Booth and her sister impressed him very much. The eighteenth century-houses, their large demesnes, and their tenantry, presented before Yeats the unity in society which he later called the "Unity of Culture". With these houses and their people were associated pride, recklessness, bravery and generosity which Yeats held in high esteem. He felt that these aristocratic houses preserved the ancient Irish tradition: "Three types of men have made all beautiful things; Aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life and the Countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose and so do not fear, and the artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness. All these look backward to long tradition, for, being without fear, they have held to whatever pleased them".¹

Yeats hated the middle class, called by him "merchants" and "the new rich class" also, because, he thought, it went against the Irish tradition on which he tried to found the Irish dramatic movement, and literature.

¹. Essays and Introductions, p. 251.
"I could not foresee that a new class, which had begun to rise into power under the shadow of Parnell, would change the nature of the Irish movement, which, needing no longer great sacrifices, nor bringing any great risk to individuals, could do without exceptional men, and those activities of the mind that are founded on exceptional moment".¹

Yeats's inclination to aristocracy, therefore, in the beginning of the twentieth century, was less political and more literary. Aristocracy meant much for Yeats as, in his opinion, it patronised the artists and the poets; and when he saw its decline in the beginning of the twentieth century, he viewed it with grave concern. In the poem Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation,² he expressed his grief at the decline of aristocracy.

"How should the world be luckier if this house
Where passion and precision have been one
Times out of mind, became too ruinous
To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun";

In this poem Yeats never speaks of the material loss; all that he is worried about is the loss of the noble qualities—heroism, passion, boldness and subjectivity which he saw in

1. Essays and Introductions, p. 259.
his grand-father, Pollexfen, and later, in the Gore-Booth and the Gregory families. The prose draft of the poem explains Yeats's ideas more clearly: "How should the world gain, if this house failed, even though a hundred little houses were better for it; for here power has given poetry or legend, giving energy, precision, and it gave to a far people beneficial rule, and still under its roof the living intellect is sweetened by old memories of its descent from far off. How should the world be better if the wren's nest flourish and the Eagle's house be shattered"? 1

The poem These are the Clouds 2 is a consolation to Lady Gregory, and indirectly to the poet also, that the value of her work and the intrinsic greatness she had created in life are assured. The aristocratic virtues are nicely compared to the fallen sun surrounded by clouds:

"And therefore, friend, if your great race were run
And these things came, so much the more thereby
Have you made greatness your companion,
Although it be for children that you sigh:
These are the clouds about the fallen sun
The majesty that shuts his burning eyes". 3

1. Quoted by J. Hone in W. B. Yeats, p. 22.
3. Ibid., p. 108.
These poems on Lady Gregory are great because, though written on ephemeral occasions, they uniquely combine the public and personal experiences and have their foundation in personal relationship which the Bloomsbery group advocated. Lady Gregory had been Yeats's life-long friend and the symbol of aristocracy as well and, therefore, the feelings expressed here are genuine, sincere and personal.

III

Though Yeats devoted more time to literature and less to active politics, he remained a true nationalist. His play Cathleen-ni-Houlihan thrilled the Irish audience. In his old age Yeats wrote, recollecting the memory of this success, in the poem The Man and the Echo:

"Did that play of mine send out, 
Certain men the English shot". ¹

The theme of the play, according to A.N. Jeffares,² was suggested by James Clarence Mangan's Kathleen-Ny-Houlihan, a Jacobite relic translated from the Irish of William

¹. Collected Poems, p. 393.
². A.N. Jeffares, Yeats : Man and the Poet, p. 139.
Heffernan, called William Dali, or blind William. Yeats used some of the thoughts in Mangan's poem.

The story of the play is about Michael Gillane who gives up his nuptial bed to join the Irish patriots for the defence of his country. Michael is to be married to Delia Cahel. His father is very happy and counts the money offered by the bride's father. Michael and the members of his family hear a noise of cheering, outside in the street, but cannot decipher what it is about. In the meantime they see an old woman going on the road. She looks at Michael as she passes. Michael has no desire to allow the old woman to come to his house the night before his wedding but has to open the door as Bridget, his mother, does not want it to be shut for an old woman, waiting outside. The old woman, Cathleen-ni-Houlihan, comes and talks to Michael about her trouble which Gillane family does not understand; they offer her money, food and drinks which she declines and says that if anybody is ready to help her, he must give her himself and all. Michael is moved and he becomes ready to go with her for the recovery of her green fields usurped and ravaged by the strangers. Bridget does not want Michael to go with an old woman as he has to welcome the new bride that very night. Later, Cathleen-ni-Houlihan confesses, to the great surprise of Bridget, that she is not talking of ordinary things and that she is Ireland herself.
"It is a hard service they take that help me.
Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many
that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the
rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries;
many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered
money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born
and there will be no father at its Christianing to give it
a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks
for my sake, and, for all that, they will think that they
are well-paid". The song of Cathleen-ni-Houlihan has a
magic effect on Michael. Now he is completely metamorphosed,
and changed from what he has been. He ignores the words of
his mother and says: "What wedding are you talking of?
What clothes will I be wearing tomorrow?" The old woman,
Cathleen-ni-Houlihan, changes herself into a young woman
and Michael breaks away from Delia to follow Cathleen-ni-
Houlihan and sacrifice his life for her sake.

The Cathleen-ni-Houlihan is the expression of
Yeats's love for his motherland. It can be compared to
Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon*. In the beginning
we are not aware of the intensity of dramatic action that
is going to take place at the end of the play. There are
the father, the son, the mother and others who are quite

ignorant of the troubles of Ireland. It is the arrival of
the woman (Ireland herself) that changes the whole scene.
The metamorphosis of Michael Gillane and his last words to
his mother lead to tragic sublimity. The play proved a
great success\(^1\) and once Yeats calmed an agitated crowd by
saying that he, the author of Cathleen-ni-Houlihan was
speaking. Recollecting the effect of the play Stephen
Gwynn writes: "The effect of Cathleen-ni-Houlihan on me
was that I went home asking myself if such plays should be
produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to
shoot and he shot. Yeats was not alone responsible; no
doubt that Lady Gregory had helped him to get the peasant
speech so perfect; but above all Miss Gonne's impersonation
had stirred the audience as I have never seen another
audience".\(^2\)

The same nationalist feelings are expressed in the
title poem of the volume In the Seven Woods. The Seven
Woods (a symbol of Ireland) has been damaged by the great
wind (meaning the political storm raised by the quarrel

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1. Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory: "Last night was the most
enthusiastic of all. The audience now understands
Cathleen-ni-Houlihan and there is no difficulty in
getting from humour to tragedy". Autobiographies,
pp. 450-51.

2. Stephen Gwynn, Irish Literature and Drama, p. 158.
between the Parnellite and the anti-Parnellite factions). The King of England is also a "new commonness" who will do no good to the Irish people and their country. Yet, the poet is full of hope as he hears the pigeons and bees, the symbols of peace and harmony, sing. Their "faint thunder" restores harmony and he forgets for a while the sad plight of Ireland and the coronation of Edward VII.

"I have forgot a while
Tara uprooted, and new commonness
Upon the throne and crying about the streets
And hanging its paper flowers from post to post".  

The poem ends with a prophetic note that a time will come when Ireland will gain her independence from England, and peace and harmony will be restored:

"I am contented, for I know that Quiet
Wanders laughing and eating her wild heart
Among pigeons and bees, while that Great Archer, Who but awaits his hour to shoot, still hangs
A cloudy quiver over Pairc-na-lee".  

In Yeats's early poetry the cause of grief is something mysterious, vague and incomprehensible. Here we find that

2. Ibid., p. 85.
the cause of his grief is real, concrete and quotidian. The line "And hanging its paper flowers from post to post", indicating the posters, festoons and paper flowers hung on the posts at the time of Edward's coronation, is a new thing in Yeats's poetry and it marks the break from his early poetry.

Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland shows the same awareness of bitter realities. The poet, of course, has a great faith in the ultimate victory of Ireland, yet he realizes that the troubles that his country faces are not ordinary:

"The old brown thorn-trees break in two high over Cummen Strand
Under a bitter black wind that blows from the left hand;
Our courage breaks like an old tree in a black wind and dies".

Echoing the words of Cathleen-ni-Houlihan in the play Cathleen-ni-Houlihan the poem ends with a prophetic note:

"The yellow pool has overflowed high up on Cloothna-Bare,
For the wet winds are blowing out of the clinging air;
Like heavy flooded waters our bodies and our blood;
But purer than a tall candle before the Holy Rood
Is Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan". ¹