WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS: PERSONALITY

LENNOX ROBINSON

The scene is Walla-Walla, a small town in the extreme north-west of the United States. I arrived there early after travelling all night. I had to lecture to its college in the morning, then there was an official lunch, another lecture in the afternoon (I was advance publicity man for the Abbey Theatre Company), there was to be an evening reception and then a midnight train to Denver. I snatched an hour in the late afternoon and rested on my hotel bed. The inevitable telephone rang; a young man from the college wanted to see me. He appeared, the editor of the college magazine. He wrote poetry and he left with me a few good poems. But he said:

'Have you ever met Mr. Yeats?'

'Yes, he has been my best friend for twenty years or more.'

'You have spoken to him?'

'Of course.'

The young man was speechless, captured by an emotion. How obviously the Browning poem springs to mind:

Ah, did you once see Shelley plain,
And did he stop and speak to you
And did you speak to him again?
How strange it seems, and new!

I, too, have ‘seen Shelley plain’.

I met Yeats first when I was twenty-two and he was just twice my age. I suppose it was only a young man’s impression (I was very inexperienced for my age), but he seemed to me then to be a middle-aged, if not almost an old man. This is
William Butler Yeats: Personality

strange, for he kept his appearance as a young man well into middle-age — perhaps he had suddenly put on maturity. At any rate by the time I met him he had an air of great authority and dignity, a poise, not a pose. He was often, all through his life, accused of being a poseur. It was not the case. He had mannerisms of movement and speech as every person of great individuality is bound to have; his pose would have been to try and pass himself off as an ordinary person. He was extraordinarily striking in appearance, tall, slim, and his hair quite black — the beard of earlier years had disappeared. His eyes were strangely placed, one of them was always weak and by the end of his life its sight had gone. This fact made it forgivable in him to pass a friend in the street without recognition or to fail to identify an acquaintance in a crowded room. He has talked to me for an hour about the Abbey Theatre calling me by the name of a previous Manager — as unlike in appearance from me as it is possible to imagine — then he suddenly stopped and looked at me as if he had only just realized my identity and appearance. There followed an apology which did away with any feeling of hurt on my part, for he was always gentle and courteous save when roused to vehemence — and no one could be more vehement — on some matter which he thought of vital importance.

I have written that when I met him first he was slim; that was not always the case. He could vary, and very rapidly, from leanness to stoutness. I used to tell him he was like the moon, waxing and waning. He was a very moderate eater and drinker (the most rapid eater I have ever known) and took pains about his figure, doing exercises of some sort to keep himself trim. Up to a few years before his death he could look, on occasion, extraordinarily young, look like that lovely Sargent drawing done just about the time I met him first, and his appearance at the end of his life can only be described by the one word — noble.

In some obituary notice — St. John Ervine's I think — he