THE EARLIER POEMS: SOME THEMES AND PATTERNS

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The greatness and originality of Yeats's middle and later poems have led to the dismissal of his earlier poetry by most critics as of merely biographical interest, illustrating the morass of late nineteenth-century romanticism from which the poet's developing genius eventually rescued him. There is of course some justification for this. The moaning self-indulgence of such a poem as 'The Sad Shepherd', the meretricious Orientalism of 'Anashuya and Vijaya', and what he himself later called 'all that overcharged colour inherited from the romantic movement' found in so many of the poems in his first three collections, are not really worth serious critical attention. Nevertheless, there is much of interest in these early poems, some of which at least are of value in their own right. It is true that when we find ourselves arrested by a particular early poem it will generally turn out to be a drastically revised version that we are looking at, and if we turn to the original version in an early volume or in Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland or in the indispensable Allt-Alspach variorum edition we may well find something much vaguer in expression and much less striking in imagery. Even so, the original version sometimes achieves a sufficiently arresting presentation of a theme to make clear that a real poet is at work here. And even where it does not, there may be in the nature of the theme itself or in the occasional line or phrase something that stirs the reader to attention. I do not want to make too great a claim for the quality and interest of Yeats's earlier
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poetry; but I believe that a fair amount of it is of real interest, not simply to the pedant interested in charting a map of development or a researcher trying to classify themes and techniques, but to the reader and critic concerned with the kinds of imagination and the uses of language out of which poetry develops and indeed to (dare I use such an old-fashioned phrase?) the lover of poetry.

As I have already suggested, we are not very interested in the 'inarticulate moan' of 'The Sad Shepherd', which when originally published in the Dublin University Review in October 1886 bore the unpromising title 'Miserrimus'. Nevertheless, the theme of the poem is worth some attention. The sad shepherd tries in vain to arouse the sympathy of nature, but the natural world is unconcerned with him and makes no response:

Then cried the man whom Sorrow named his friend:
'Oh sea, old sea, hear thou my piteous story';
The sea swept on and cried her old cry still,
Rolling along in dreams from hill to hill;
And from the persecution of her glory
He fled . . .

(Original version)

The poet here is not employing the conventional romantic device of allowing nature to become a sounding-board for human feeling. Man fools himself if he thinks that nature exists to respond to his emotional needs. The poet, said Wordsworth, 'considers man and nature as essentially adapted to each other, and the mind of man as naturally the mirror of the fairest and most interesting properties of nature'. So for Wordsworth the key word is relationship. But for Yeats, even in his early romantic phase, it was a conviction of the essential dichotomy between man and nature that most possessed him. Not relationship but difference was what haunted Yeats. Further, a sense of this difference can become intolerable. The shepherd fled 'from the persecution of her glory'