Coming to Grips with Proteus

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William Butler Yeats once remarked, “Swift haunts me; he is always just round the corner.” I could very well say the same thing about Yeats himself. For most of my life he has been just round the corner. And although I am a poet of a very different kind and with not the slightest inclination to imitate and no hope to emulate him, he is rarely far from my mind. The nature of this haunting has never been clear to me. There are several contemporary poets to whom I feel more drawn than to Yeats, but I am free of their presences. Much as I admire them they do not lurk constantly “round the corner”, and I do not feel the urge to write to or about them as I have about Yeats in recent years, verses in tribute to him and poking a little harmless fun which come almost spontaneously into my mind. Most of these, fortunately, remain unfinished but the five which I have completed are the occasion of the present article and I have brought them together as a sort of homage to a poet I so greatly admire.

I should add that my knowledge of the man and his work is extremely scrappy. I have known several people who knew him but I never met him except once and that was in a dream. It was a rather curious dream and may perhaps shed some light on the haunting.

In the dream I am visiting my friend the poet David Campbell at his property in the country about twenty miles from Canberra where I live. It is a cold and stormy night in winter and a number of people have gathered in a large room as though for a party. I am sitting at one end of the long room facing the door. At the other end a big log fire is blazing. There are drinks but no one is drinking; most are sitting round the walls and seem to be waiting. I turn to a man sitting beside me and say “I don’t see David here; where has he got to?” “Oh, didn’t you know?” he answers, “He’s gone to the airport to meet W. B. Yeats and bring him here.” Almost immediately after, the door flies open letting in a blast of wind and a flurry of snowflakes and David Campbell ushers in Yeats. It is the Yeats of later years, the tall and distinguished smiling public man of “Among School Children”, his magnificent white hair blown about by the storm. David takes him round the room introducing him to the guests
and he pauses for some time by the fire chatting with people while drinks
are served, and finally David brings him up to me. "This is Alec Hope—"
he begins. "I know!" says Yeats, "I have been hoping to meet you. May
we sit down?" We sit and a long conversation about poetry ensues in
which we find ourselves in perfect agreement and Yeats makes many
interesting points which I recall when some time later I wake up.
Unfortunately I did not follow up the urging of my mind to put on the
light and make a note of the conversation and by morning it had all faded
away.

Well, it was merely a dream though an unusually vivid and detailed
one. I do not take it seriously but I recount it because I suspect Yeats
himself might have been inclined to take it quite seriously. Basically this
difference of attitude between us is the occasion of the present piece of
writing. Most of the things that Yeats took seriously, his engagements
with magic, theosophy, spiritualism, various forms of the occult,
automatic writing and so on, seem to me comic absurdities that could
only argue a mind credulous to the point of silliness. Yet I known that
Yeats was not silly. His avowed "monkish hatred" of science seems to me
merely perverse. I am bored by his politics and can work up no
enthusiasm for his theories of drama and find his plays dull and his
excursions into Irish mythology and legend artificial. I could easily think
of myself as his complete antithesis both as a man and as a poet. And yet
I am forced to acknowledge him as the greatest poet, writing in English,
of his day and perhaps the noblest mind of his time.

I have frequently tried to resolve the conflict of these attitudes by the
method most natural and most appropriate to a poet, that is, by writing a
poem about them. Most of these efforts came to nothing, were never
finished and ended in the waste-paper basket, but the five quoted here
have all been published before (except the last) and illustrate various
ways in which I have tried at various times to come to grips with different
shapes of this protean character. All five were written well after Yeats's
death in 1939.

The first of them dates from 1948 when I was lecturing in the English
department of the University of Melbourne, among other things on the
poetry of Blake. This had led me to Yeats's study of Blake which I found
quite fascinating despite the fact that I thought his theories and his
interpretation untenable. It was what it told me about Yeats himself that
interested me and led me to re-read the Collected Poems of 1939. These
things may have led to the following poem. But I was unaware of it.
What happened was that in the middle of a teaching term I suffered from
what I call a "feeling of having a poem coming on". The only trouble was
that in spite of all my encouragement it would not "come on", or even
manifest itself or its subject. Finally I took a week's leave and borrowed a
house by the sea where I sat for three mortal days in front of my blank
paper — as bad a case of poetic constipation as I have ever experienced.