The Two Lives of W. B. Yeats

I was confirmed in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem . . .

- Milton

Perhaps it is a part of Yeats' modernity that, in contrast to the visionary poets studied in earlier chapters, it proves impossible to understand his poetry except as an aspect of his life's work. It is not only that much of his poetry springs from occasions, places, people, possessions and events. His poetry is the record of his struggle to be a particular kind of man: to make his own personality. It acquires greater depth when seen alongside Yeats' other activities, which were many. He was an agent in the birth of Ireland as a nation and as a cultural force in the twentieth century, indeed a Senator of the Irish Free State who looked one day and found himself 'a sixty-year-old smiling public man'. This was the more surprising since he was always painfully shy, and since he was temperamentally inclined to solitude and inner work. He would for much of his life have rejected the approach to his verse proposed here, feeling that

The intellect of man is forced to choose
Perfection of the life, or of the work.

But in the last analysis it is Yeats' striving for what he would later term 'Unity of Being' which works like a submerged force in his artistic development and eventful outer life alike. And it was, I think, his sense of that concealed force which best explains his other great interest: magic and occultism. The powers hindering his way toward 'Unity of Being' were formidable, and though they figure in his biography under various
guises they can be grouped according to what are recognizably the 'daemonic' tendencies of Luciferic and Ahrimanic, dream and reality, temptation and power. They met him with especial intensity through his sustained and unsatisfied longing for Maud Gonne, the Irish patriot and beauty whom he never married, his Helen of Troy who filled his soul with yearning images and made him dream of The Land of Heart’s Desire; and through his father J. B. Yeats, a painter but a sceptic and rationalist, an enormous influence on his son yet impatient of his son’s religious and emotional nature, a constant challenge to Yeats’ self-confidence and so one source of his painful self-consciousness, an attendant spirit whom the poet found it extremely hard to exorcize. Yet the dichotomy can be traced back still further into the realm of Yeats’ origins. For he was descended on his mother’s side from the Pollexfens of County Sligo, where he spent much of his childhood, and they were a family rooted in the traditional Irish past with all its legendry and its mystic sense of the holiness of the land. Richard Ellmann, to whom everyone who wishes to know of Yeats’ life is deeply indebted, points the contrast between the restless intellectual talk and constant unproductive work of J. B. Yeats and the quiet mother who, he says, ‘is difficult to describe. She had few opinions about anything, but liked best of all to exchange ghost and fairy stories with some fisherman’s wife in the kitchen. Sensitive and deep-feeling but undemonstrative, she always considered her birthplace, the romantic country of Sligo, the most beautiful place in the world.’

Thus Yeats grew up with a sense of incompatible yet coexistent values, of belief and scepticism, unity and personality, natural and mystic. It is scarcely to be wondered at that as he grew to a young man he felt a kind of strange detachment: known to many in modern life but experienced with painful force by the poet. His friend Katherine Tynan recalled that ‘he had an uncanny faculty of standing aside and looking on at the game of life as a spectator.’ He himself later described the labyrinthine self-doubt and paralysing effect of his perpetual self-distancing consciousness. Ellmann connects this with his ‘premature decrepitude’, or early tendency to imagine himself an old man, his race already run and pondering a long life. But it is also a source of Yeats’ awareness of the problem to be solved, the need to attach himself to life and community. He was always to retain a critical, sceptical portion of his father’s mind. But he regained too his lost youth and flaunted it as a victory