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Recalling All the Olympians:
W. B. Yeats's "Beautiful Lofty Things,"
On the Boiler and the Agenda of
National Rebirth¹

ABSTRACT

While it has been omitted by numerous critics in their otherwise comprehensive readings of Yeats's *oeuvre*, "Beautiful Lofty Things" has been placed among the mythical poems, partly in accordance with Yeats's own intention; in a letter to his wife, he suggested that "Lapis Lazuli, the poem called 'To D. W.' 'Beautiful Lofty Things,' 'Imitated from the Japanese' & 'Gyres' . . . would go well together in a bunch." The poem has been inscribed in the Yeats canon as registering a series of fleeting epiphanies of the mythical in the mundane. However, "Beautiful Lofty Things," evocative of a characteristically Yeatsian employment of myth though it certainly is, seems at the same time to fuse Yeats's quite earthly preoccupations. It is here argued that the poem is organized around a tightly woven matrix of figures that comprise Yeats's idea of the Irish nation as a "poetical culture." Thus the position of the lyric in the poet's *oeuvre* deserves to be shifted from periphery towards an inner part of his cultural and political ideas of the time. Indeed, the poem can be viewed as one of Yeats's central late comments on the state of the nation and, significantly, one in which he is able to proffer a humanist strategy for developing a culturally modern state rather than miring his argument in occasionally over-reckless display of abhorrence of modernity.

ABSTRACT

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Published in the 1938 edition of *New Poems*, “Beautiful Lofty Things” has never been awarded a place among W. B. Yeats’s prime achievements. The poem is often only briefly mentioned as a supporting piece to the better-known elegy “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” that comes as the penultimate poem in the volume and has compelled more critical attention. While it has been omitted by numerous critics in their otherwise comprehensive readings of Yeats’s *oeuvre* (it is not mentioned in Ellmann, Brown or Foster), “Beautiful Lofty Things” has been placed among the mythical poems, partly in accordance with Yeats’s own intention; in a letter to his wife, he suggested that “Lapis Lazuli, the poem called ‘To D. W.’ ‘Beautiful Lofty Things,’ ‘Imitated from the Japanese’ & ‘Gyres’ . . . would go well together in a bunch” (Yeats and George Yeats 479). The poem has indeed been inscribed in the Yeats canon as registering a series of fleeting epiphanies of the mythical in the mundane (Vendler 354). However, “Beautiful Lofty Things,” evocative of a characteristically Yeatsian employment of myth though it certainly is, seems at the same time to fuse Yeats’s quite earthly preoccupations. It is here argued that the poem is organized around a tightly woven matrix of figures that comprise Yeats’s idea of the Irish nation as possessed of “poetical culture,” an ability to understand and follow the subtle beauty of language (*Autobiographies* 118). Thus the position of the lyric in the poet’s *oeuvre* deserves to be shifted from periphery towards an inner part of his cultural and political ideas of the time. Indeed, the poem can be viewed as one of Yeats’s central late comments on the state of the nation and, significantly, one in which he is able to proffer a humanist strategy for developing a culturally modern state rather than miring his argument in occasionally over-reckless display of abhorrence of modernity.

“Beautiful Lofty Things” has been shown to have been contemporary with the writing of “General Introduction for my Work” that Yeats worked on since spring 1937 for the projected “Edition Deluxe” of his collected works (Jeffares 460). Having finished his intensive revisions of the Introduction by mid October 1937 (Yeats, *Later Essays* 484), Yeats had recalled many of his earliest memories; in the Introduction he briefly discusses the influence of O’Leary, “His long imprisonment, his longer banishment, his magnificent head, his scholarship, his pride, his integrity” (*Later Essays* 205), O’Grady and his “extravagance” (*Later Essays* 206) and Lady Gregory’s “heroic legends” (*Later Essays* 207) on his own poetry and on the shaping of Irish culture in general. The laudatory phrasing of his descriptions in the Introduction evokes the tonal quality of “Beautiful Lofty

Things.” In view of that similarity the poem’s composition date could be set on the period following the thematically related “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” that was finished by September 1937 (Yeats, *Letters* 897; Foster, *Arch-Poet* 596; Jeffares 482) and the final corrections of the Introduction. The process of writing the poem therefore coincides with Yeats’s renewed concentration on the social and political state of Ireland and the Western world in general. It was between December 1937 and late January 1938 that Yeats devoted himself to writing down his long-pondered appraisal of the young Republic, which resulted in the infamous *On the Boiler* that was published posthumously in autumn 1939 by The Cuala Press together with several poems and the play *Purgatory*.

In the pamphlet, which he planned as the first in a series to be modelled on John Ruskin’s *Fors Clavigera*, Yeats wanted to “curse my enemies and bless my friends. My enemies will hit back, and that will give me the joy of answering them” (*Letters* 900). The pamphlet proved of immediate importance to Yeats, who read and discussed it with unflagging zeal. At one time, as John Kelly reports, having finished reading from it to Lady Elizabeth Pelham and her sister, he “remains talking for five-and-a-half hours” (308). Despite such enthusiasm, he knew full well that should he “lay aside the pleasant paths I have built up for years and seek the brutality, the ill breeding, the barbarism of truth,” he would estrange many a friend, as he confessed in a letter to Ethel Mannin, “Half my friends may never speak to me when it comes out” (*Letters* 903, 914). There is universal agreement among critics as to two things concerning *On the Boiler*. Firstly, its harangues against masses and support of eugenics reached an unparalleled pitch among the poet’s writings, although the tone may have been so barbaric not only due to Yeats’s violent opposition to modernity but also to his desire to boost sales in order to help the always nearly insolvent Cuala (Foster, *Arch-Poet* 612). Secondly, when read in a broader context of Yeats’s output, the ideas of *On the Boiler* seem less shocking than the violent language in which they are set down; moreover, in no way does the pamphlet express any approval of either Fascists or, for that matter, Communists, both of whom are inveighed against as much as the democratic politician, for, as Yeats mockingly put it, “any hale man can dig or march” (*Later Essays* 230; see also Cullingford 117).

For Yeats, the principal problem of modern Ireland is the proliferation of the unskilled and “unintelligent classes” (*Later Essays* 232). Therefore according to the poet, the fact that everybody is allowed to marry whom-ever they desire has resulted in the general debilitation of the race,

For now by our too much facility in this kind, in giving way for all to marry that will, too much liberty and indulgence in tolerating all sorts,

there is a vast confusion of hereditary diseases, no family secure, no man almost free from some grievous infirmity or other. (*Later Essays* 228)

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Because of the laxity in marriage law, and especially in permitting the Ascendancy to intermarry with peasants, “it comes to pass that our generation is corrupt, we have many weak persons, both in body and in mind” (*Later Essays* 228). In order to tackle the insidious degeneration Yeats urges his particular version of eugenic family planning. He believes that only in such a way can the crisis be prevented and a new civilization may come, literally treading on the bones of the present one. His condemnation of the contemporary Irish as bodily and intellectually feeble takes its most radical form when, led by his abhorrence of the “docile masses,” he asserts that “[t]he danger is that there will be no war, that the skilled will attempt nothing, that the European civilisation, like those older civilisations that saw the triumph of their gangrel stocks, will accept decay” (*Later Essays* 213). It may be observed, after Donald Torchiana who tries to alleviate the horrific implications that the pamphlet must stir in the reader, that Yeats’s trenchant criticism of the contemporary society, especially in Ireland, derives from his long-held belief in “[a]ble men, a unified Ireland, a country based on the soil, the intellectual and literary contributions of famous men” (Torchiana 343). It may thus be argued that the poet radicalizes his anticipation of the collapse of civilization that he brilliantly evoked in “The Second Coming” and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.” As a result, in the context of his other writings, Yeats’s stance, though incredibly anti-humanist at times, appears significantly less shocking.

However, in *On the Boiler*, Yeats seeks not only to give vent to his fury at what he deems to be the deterioration of modern society but also proposes an agenda of changes to remedy the situation. Apart from the compulsory acceptance of eugenics, Yeats focuses on education. What may be surprising is that he no longer recommends that the entire nation be taught, like he did for many years. Now it is only the select few that must be schooled to be prepared for taking over the country’s leadership. Yeats advises that “nothing but Greek, Gaelic, mathematics, and perhaps one modern language” (*Later Essays* 239) should be taught at schools, while “those pleasant easy things” like English, history, and geography “should be taught by father and mother” (*Later Essays* 241). This is a marked change in Yeats’s conception of nationalism, for he no longer believes that even reading and writing ought to be generally learnt as forcing them “on those who wanted neither was a worst part of the violence which for two centuries has been creating that hell wherein we suffer” (*Later Essays* 223). Whereas in the past he used to insist time and time again that the path to an independent Ireland lay in the revival of the myths and legends of the

heroic period among the people that could offer them a model to follow, in the late 1930s

Yeats seems resigned to the loss of peasant culture, and his program for education is a way to regain the benefits that he saw derived from a close connection with the earth. Education then can partner with eugenics to represent the balance in a new form of cultural nationalism. (McKenna 86)

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It is the new breed of “men of action” that are to espouse the rebirth of civilization, “not from a void, but out of our rich experience” (*Later Essays* 238). The richness of experience is a running theme throughout Yeats’s writings on nationalism and culture. For him, such wealth can be won from literature, which in the future is bound to become the unifying centre of the nation and, like the Abbey Theatre has already done in some measure, will take “the place of political speakers . . . in holding together the twenty scattered millions conscious of their Irish blood” (*Later Essays* 225). Similarly to the early essay “Symbolism of Poetry,” where Yeats suggested that the nation’s culture is created and held together by art (*Early Essays* 116), in *On the Boiler* it is literature, particularly poetry and drama wrought to the utmost limits of “tragic ecstasy” (*Later Essays* 226), that is to help the Irish civilization of able few “retain unity of being, mother-wit expressed in its perfection” (*Later Essays* 234). The delineation of the idea of unity of being, which appears by name only once in *On the Boiler* but which underlies the entire argument of the pamphlet, goes back to its first appearance in print at the end of “If I were Four-and-Twenty,”² where Yeats also promotes eugenic ideas, stating at the end that, “I would begin another epoch by recommending to the Nation a new doctrine, that of unity of being” (*Later Essays* 46).

The doctrine of unity of being returns several times in Yeats’s writings but perhaps most tellingly in *Autobiographies* where he reminisces that “I thought that in man and race alike there is something called ‘Unity of Being,’ using the term as Dante used it when he compared beauty in the *Convito* to a perfectly proportioned human body” (164). In his occult treatise *A Vision* unity of being becomes one of ruling concepts. Yeats explains that “He who attains Unity of Being is some man, who, while struggling with his fate and his destiny until every energy of his being has been roused, is content that he should so struggle with no final conquest” (*Vision* 28); it is the realization that man’s struggle with fate is doomed to

² With a hindsight it turns out that the term first appeared in the automatic script that Yeats and his wife George worked on ever since the beginning of their marriage. The entry that mentions it is for 13 September 1918 (see also Mills Harper 302).

failure that creates the necessary conditions for the attainment of the highest passionate ideal and so “the greatest beauty of literary style becomes possible” (*Vision* 61). Such a passionate ideal that represents a momentary apprehension of unity of being may be traced in lots of Yeats’s poems from “An Irish Airman Foresees his Death,” both Byzantium poems and “Among School Children” to “The Statues.” It is in the last one, written just a few months after *On the Boiler*, that the “formless spawning fury” (Yeats, *Variorum* 611) may be taken to represent fall from unity of being that Ireland has suffered along with the whole world. The image of degradation, evoked in *On the Boiler* (*Later Essays* 249), is deeply rooted in Yeats’s poetry, relating primarily to “That insolent fiend Robert Artison” from “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” who “lurches past, his great eyes without thought” (*Variorum* 433). In the poem, according to Michael Wood’s thorough reading, Yeats “tells two stories, the first about loss, the second about the folly of our believing we ever had what he think we have lost” (Wood 36); it is the latter that seems more troubling, for in it Yeats laments the entire Western world, himself included, “a now-defunct club to which anyone who was wrong about the world can claim to have belonged” (Wood 43). In this light, a reference to “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” serves to further emphasize the fact that the poet of “The Statues” counts himself complicit in the crime of submitting to the “formless spawning fury.” Yet, he also asserts at the end that “We Irish . . . // Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace / The lineaments of a plummet-measured face” (*Variorum* 611). The reclamation of the ideal passionate state is only possible in art, particularly poetry, as Yeats explains in section V of “Under Ben Bulben,” the most famous of poems directly referable to *On the Boiler*:

Irish poets, learn your trade,
Sing whatever is well made,
Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds. (*Variorum* 639)

Only provided Irish poets manage to revive the ancient passionate and tragic art, can unity of being be regained. In the same section of “Under Ben Bulben,” more directly didactic, for all its sheer abomination of the contemporary world, than “The Statues,” the poet underlines the key features of the now-tarnished ideal, demanding that the lyricists to come:

Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard-riding country gentlemen,

The holiness of monks, and after
 Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;
 Sing the lords and ladies gay
 That were beaten into the clay
 Through seven heroic centuries. (*Variorum* 639–40)

The motifs enumerated in “Under Ben Bulben” have obviously been employed throughout Yeats’s work, from the earliest lyrics of *Crossways* all the way to “Cuchulain Comforted” that he revised literally on his death-bed. It is especially the peasantry, “Hard-riding country gentlemen” and “the lords and ladies gay” that constitute for Yeats the perfect embodiments of unity of being due to their ability to fuse all the yearnings and ambitions into a single tragic and passionate expression.

Throughout his *oeuvre*, Yeats focused on several figures from among his immediate friends and associates to fashion them into figures of unity of being. The best-known examples are “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” “Easter 1916,” in spite of its somewhat problematic nature due to the poet’s ambiguity of the presentation of the rebels that Maud Gonne called neither “sincere enough” nor “worthy of the subject” (Gonne and Yeats 384), and “The Municipal Gallery Revisited.” Each of these lyrics evokes a certain aspect of unity of being that is identified in the person conjured up. Thus Robert Gregory, depicted as a larger than life character with a propensity for recklessness, displays an aristocratic audacity and defiance of danger that make the speaker wonder “What made us dream that he would comb grey hair?” (*Variorum* 327); while in “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” the focus of stanza VI is directed onto the nobleman, the peasant and, obliquely, the artist, here represented by a composite-figure of “John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory.” Yeats stresses that all that an artist does “Must come from contact with the soil, from that / Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong” (*Variorum* 603). Therefore what these poems have in common is their insistence that there were among Irishmen and women of the time people who embodied some aspects of unity of being and it is they who should have been popularly accepted as central figures in a nationwide cultural revolution. According to Yeats, the eventual failure to mould the cultural life of Ireland in accordance with the standards set up by passionate ideals such as Lady Gregory, her son (despite the fact that he was incorporated into the clique of passionate men only after his death; when alive, Robert Gregory would occasionally take issue with Yeats over his proprietorial approach to Coole Park) or John Synge resulted in the deterioration of the nation that he exposes and rages against in *On the Boiler*.

Composed when Yeats was at his most truculent and bellicose, “Beautiful Lofty Things” might have been an attempt to recall the past when the

glorious rebirth of the nation was still feasible; or to escape the rancour that the poet was unleashing in himself towards the end of 1937, which would not be an unheard-of example of vacillation between love and hate on his part. Similarly, the poem's mood and tone alter radically from line to line, ostensibly in response to the variety of characters that the compact lyric tries to put forth. No other lyric in the entire Yeats *oeuvre* is so packed with names of people who played an outstanding role in shaping his cultural ideals. It is by the very choice of the five characters whose images comprise the poem that Yeats puts his idea of a passionate society at the forefront.

The opening line introduces the figure of John O'Leary, the Fenian leader who was Yeats's mentor ever since their meeting in 1885. In the poem, it is only "O'Leary's noble head" (*Variorum* 577, l. 1) that is conjured up. This homage-toned invocation may be due to the fact that Yeats associated him with exquisite beauty (*Autobiographies* 100) and "Roman virtue" (*Autobiographies* 177; *Memoirs* 42), as Ross has suggested (53). However, the statuesque image of O'Leary may also derive from an attempt to fashion him as an exemplary figure that represented the perfect political leader, "courteous and noble in demeanour" (Brown 29) and a gifted scholar who "had great numbers of books, especially of Irish history and literature" (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 177). Moreover, the sculpture-like image transports O'Leary from the earthly plane in which he failed to assert his ideals, in the words of "September 1913": "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave" (*Variorum* 289), to the level of perfected image like the "plummet-measured face" of "The Statues." Thus O'Leary is shown as an embodiment of unity of being that can inspire the whole nation to labour to achieve similar nobility. Furthermore, O'Leary's bust summons the hopes of the unity of culture that the country could attain "if [it] had a national literature that made Ireland beautiful in the memory, and yet had been freed from provincialism by an exacting criticism, a European pose" (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 105). By the 1930s Yeats had long realized that the notion would never come true and, as has been argued above, it was in *On the Boiler* that he trumpeted his disillusionment with that early ideal. Still, in "Beautiful Lofty Things" the image of O'Leary helps the poet revive those long-gone thoughts of a national unity of being to be achieved via a unity of culture.

The poet leaves this brief evocation of O'Leary to go on to a memory of his father, John Butler Yeats, and, indirectly, of J. M. Synge. The scene that Yeats calls to mind in the best imagist fashion, no prolixity admitted, is the speech his father delivered in defence of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* when "no man in all literary Dublin dared show his face" (Yeats, *Autobiographies* 356). The play opened on 26 January 1907 and immediately

incited riots and protests among people on the grounds of immorality and indecent portrayal of Irish women (Foster, *Apprentice Mage* 360–61).

My father upon the Abbey stage, before him a raging crowd:
 “This Land of Saints,” and then as the applause died out,
 “Of plaster Saints”; his beautiful mischievous head thrown back. (ll. 2–4)

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In the poem, the transition from the late 1880s to 1907 is instantaneous but in life the twenty-odd years marked a change in Yeats’s attitude and demeanour, as Ellmann puts it, “he became a terrible man in combat” (179) and he fought for Synge unwaveringly. In his speech during the meeting of 4 February, the same in which his father spoke the line repeated in “Beautiful Lofty Things,” Yeats maintained that the generation of artists that Synge and himself represented “wish again for individual sincerity, the eternal quest of truth” (qtd. in Foster, *Apprentice Mage* 365). His determination to assert that Synge’s *Playboy* was a masterpiece was partly motivated by the idea that true critical literature should expose the provincialism of Irish mentality, thereby bringing the country closer to Europe. It is this point that the image of J. B. Yeats in the poem seems also to evoke. Yet the poet is careful to capture not only the mischief that his father displayed but also the impassioned intensity, what J. B. Yeats in a letter to his son once called “distinction and rarity of feeling” (1). In *Autobiographies*, Yeats recalls that “at breakfast [his father] read passages from the poets, and always from the play or poem at its most passionate moment” (80). It is in such a passionate moment that J. B. Yeats is captured in the poem. By perfectly calculating the highest point of mischievous intensity Yeats creates another image of passionate unity of being that is fleetingly achieved by his father. The “raging crowd” is deprived of any clearly negative qualification, unlike in many of his other writings of the time. Rather than through an acrimonious attack, in the poem the people’s provincialism and lack of education are exposed by being set against a skilfully arranged image of artistic sovereignty and superiority.

In this way, the passage plays a subtle variation on the much earlier “On those that Hated ‘The Playboy of the Western World,’ 1907,” where the speaker says, “Eunuch ran through Hell and met / On every crowded street to stare / Upon great Juan riding by” (*Variorum* 294). In a letter to Lady Gregory, Yeats mentioned that “I wrote a note a couple of days ago in which I compared [Arthur] Griffith and his like to the Eunuchs in [Charles] Rickett’s picture watching Don Juan riding through Hell” (*Letters* 525). Back in 1909, that mockery of the founder of the *United Irishman* and its later successor *Sinn Fein* and the future president of the Republic of Ireland was an extension of a long dispute that Yeats engaged

in with Griffith. Writing to Lady Gregory of his literary ideals several years before the *Playboy* riots, Yeats observed that Griffith and himself supported divergent policies: “[Griffith’s] that literature should be subordinate to nationalism, and mine that it must have its own ideal” (*Letters* 422). This context shows that the evocation of J. B. Yeats defending Synge’s play in “Beautiful Lofty Things” seeks to restate that aesthetic position. The embodiment of an artist at his most intense (see J. B. Yeats 4) re-asserts the absolute primacy of art in the formation of an unbiased society.

In the poem, J. B. Yeats’s passionate challenge to the intellectually-calcified Irish crowd evokes by analogy Standish O’Grady’s speech at the end of a dinner organized by the *Daily Express* (Foster, *Apprentice Mage* 211–12). A famous historian of ancient Ireland and author of the influential histories of the Irish heroic period, O’Grady comes as an embodiment of a scholar whose knowledge opens new fields of inspiration before the creative artist. It was O’Grady’s *History of Ireland*, along with selections from the poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson and James Clarence Mangan, that Yeats intended as the vital books to be re-published so as to further the process of cultural unification of the country that the poet took on himself in the early 1890s (*Autobiographies* 296). However, the invocation of O’Grady’s “high nonsensical words” (l. 6) in “Beautiful Lofty Things” indicates a marked change in both the attitude and tone of the poem. So far rather deferential to the figures of passion and authority from the past, the speaker’s voice now registers bitterness and an admission of incipient failure of what, in reference to O’Grady’s retelling of the Cuchulain cycle of legends, Yeats called the “heroic ideal” (*Wheels and Butterflies* 70). This transition from political nobility and artistic mischief to scholarly disenchantment informs the development of the poem as much as the last thirty years of the poet’s life, at least as he saw it in late 1937. The initial hopes that he would manage to create a unified culture gathered about “A little lyric [that] evokes an emotion . . . and melts into their being in the making of some great epic” (*Early Essays* 116) slowly faded, as the elites capable of composing such “little lyrics” eventually passed away. What Yeats was left with was his “philosophical mind” (*Later Essays* 233) that increasingly often saw reeling shadows of “indignant desert birds” (*Variorum* 402).

O’Grady’s bitterness at the failure of the heroic ideal and indignation at the erosion of landlords’ importance (see Yeats, *Autobiographies* 314–15) leads the poet’s thoughts to Augusta Gregory. This is another attempt at pitching an ideal figure against what he would scathingly call “this filthy modern tide” in “The Statues.” Lady Gregory’s importance to Yeats cannot be overstated, as he confessed in his *Memoirs*, “She has been to me mother, friend, sister and brother” (*Memoirs* 160–61), adding in the later *Autobiographies* that when she showed him her translations of the

Cuchulain stories in 1901 “all in a moment, as it seemed, she became the founder of modern Irish dialect literature” (*Autobiographies* 335). A devoted helper and an artistic partner, she was a living embodiment of Yeats’s hopes harboured all the way until *On the Boiler* of what the new, restocked ascendancy should become in the future. The poem evokes a dispute that she engaged in with one of her tenants:

Augusta Gregory seated at her great ormolu table,
Her eightieth winter approaching: “Yesterday he threatened my life.
I told him that nightly from six to seven I sat at this table,
The blinds drawn up” . . . (ll. 7–10)

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Lady Gregory described the episode in her journal, “When one of my tenants threatened me with violence, I showed him how easy it would be to shoot me through the unshuttered window of this room. I told him that nightly from six to seven I sat at this table” (Gregory 337). She dates that event on 10 April 1922, which would suggest that Yeats was imprecise, putting her age at eighty in the poem, while she was in fact seventy. Yet, it may not have been so much an example of blatantly fallible memory of a man who at his most vengeful professed that “Now . . . I live in the past” (*Later Essays* 233), as his deliberate wish to emphasize the fact that Gregory managed to retain her equipoise even in the throes of breast cancer and only days before her death. It is probable that Yeats would have used a different moment from Gregory’s extraordinary life had she decided to send him a note she jotted down in February 1931 when she thought her end was close:

I don’t feel very well this morning, rather faint once or twice—It may be that the time has come for me to slip away—& that may be as well—for my strength has been ebbing of late—& I don’t want to become a burden or give trouble. (qtd. in Foster, *Arch-Poet* 437)

Nine days after her death, writing to another of his life-long friends Olivia Shakespear, Yeats confided, “She was her indomitable self to the last but of that I will not write, or not now” (*Letters* 795). Indeed, in the weeks following Gregory’s demise he found himself unprecedentedly “barren; I had nothing in my head. . . . Perhaps Coole Park . . . when it was shut, shut me out from my theme; or did the subconscious drama that was my imaginative life end with its owner?” (*Variorum* 855). With a figure of such prominence in his life there could have been no simple error in dating.

Whether or not Yeats chose to make Lady Gregory older in the episode that he focuses on in “Beautiful Lofty Things,” the image of the senile

woman, remaining “her indomitable self to the last,” speaks powerfully in the poem. After the bitterness, it seems, dignity returns. However, it is dignity on the verge of disappearance. The conflation of Gregory’s final days with the danger-defying pride that she displayed on various occasions prior to her illness brings Yeats to his erstwhile muse, the last figure to be named a beautiful lofty thing:³ “Maud Gonne at Howth station waiting a train, / Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head” (ll. 10–11). Maud Gonne’s record in the poem harks back to her walk with the poet at Howth where, most likely on 4 August 1891 (Kelly 22), he first proposed to her and was rejected (Jeffares 462; see also Brown 51). It is the only time in Yeats’s *oeuvre* that he conjures up Gonne by name, rather than referring to her through the mythical figure of Helen of Troy or the poet’s nameless beloved. There is also a vital change in his attitude to her. No longer besotted as in the days of the proposal alluded to in the poem, Yeats depicts Gonne with unmistakable appreciation, verging on extolment, but also at a distance, solitary and remote “waiting a train.” This is the poet who has already exorcized Gonne’s demonic haunting, which seems to be an underlying motif in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, and can appraise her almost dispassionately. There is still the old fury lying dormant inside the statuesque figure but now Gonne seems tamer and more reasonable, Pallas Athene having replaced the symbolic Helen of “A Prayer for My Daughter” who has eaten “A crazy salad with [her] meat / Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone” (*Variorum* 404).

Significantly enough, Gonne is stripped of all her fanaticism, “one-ideal’ness” as she herself called it in her autobiography (124), and unaccompanied by those for whom she exerted herself so tirelessly and without complaint, “Yet never have I, now nor any time, / Complained of the people” (*Variorum* 352). Yeats attempts to freeze Gonne in a mythical moment before her nearly divine beauty has been squandered in futile political struggles. Beautiful and mysterious like Helen of “No Second Troy” (Hassett 68), it is the perfect muse who stands at Howth station both on 4 August 1891 remembered by the aged man and in the timeless moment of the poem, one thinks of an inflection to the famous “now and in time to be.” Gonne is therefore inscribed in the mythical plane of poetry, she is “set upon the golden bough” or like the Chinamen, staring “On all the tragic scene” (*Variorum* 567), who are gay “not just because they are ancient and up high . . . but also because they are in art—literally—rather

³ In “A Crazy Girl,” which in *New Poems* directly followed “Beautiful Lofty Things,” Margot Ruddock, whom the poem celebrates (Hassett 178–79), is also declared “A beautiful lofty thing” (*Variorum* 578) but in this case the effect bears none of the emotional and intellectual complex of the earlier lyric.

than in life” (Bell 108). In this way, Yeats turns her into an image of inspiration and, at the same time, a finished symbol of poetic achievement; she is recorded in a moment of unity of being and herself becomes a symbolic representation of the “little lyric” that could gather the people and lead them to form “some great epic.” In the poem, Yeats tries to rework the past, making Gonne become the unifying aristocratic figure in line with the frenetic appreciation he wrote in a letter to her when he learnt that she was to marry John MacBride, “You possess your influence in Ireland very largely because you come to the people from above. You represent a superior class, a class whose people are more independent, have a more beautiful life, a more refined life” (Gonne and Yeats 165). Despite the fact she declined his proposal in 1891 and on several other occasions, for “there were reasons—she would never marry” (Yeats, *Memoirs* 46), Yeats sees in that potent moment from the past a germ of possibility that was eventually lost but for a while seemed like a chance for all his youthful dreams to come true.

A noble politician, two fearless, mischievous artists, an enraged and bitter scholar, a dignified landlady and a perfect beauty—this is the matrix of survival that Yeats proffers against the debilitation of the best stocks not only of Irishmen and women but also of the whole Europe. The eugenic programme that he so vehemently promoted in *On the Boiler* but considered deeply throughout his writing life (Childs 170), when it is seen against the context of “Beautiful Lofty Things,” seems to respond to the celebratory and simultaneously disappointed last line of the poem: “All the Olympians; a thing never known again” (l. 12). The ending of the poem emphasizes Ireland’s unprecedented fortune of having had such outstanding figures work for it all at the same time. Read in the light of *On the Boiler*, the poem voices a coherent agenda for both preserving what is best in the Irish nation and developing it into a powerful unified country in the future. The five figures, as embodiments of unity of being in their most intense moments that are recorded in the poem, focus on what ideals ought to be promoted. This positive message of “Beautiful Lofty Things” stands at odds with the dissatisfied “wild old wicked man” of the pamphlet and its companion piece *Purgatory*; instead of the unfortunate inroads into eugenics that by the late 1930s was in decline, evocative as it was of “new Nazi-inspired images of racial tyranny” (Soloway 72), in the poem Yeats focuses on what he knows to have been the ideals that at one time promised freedom and prosperity but can now be recalled like the gods and fighting men that once proved so important to a budding lyricist.


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