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DISSOCIATION IN SHELLEY AND YEATS

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## DISSOCIATION IN SHELLEY AND YEATS

In an observation that is at least as well known for the dissension it has aroused as for its usefulness in helping us to understand a central problem in modern literature, T. S. Eliot spoke of the dissociation of sensibility, the separation of thought and feeling, that has taken place in poets since (and including) Milton. Frank Kermode has noted the problems with Mr. Eliot's assumptions about history but generally concurs with Mr. Eliot's analysis and points to the modern interest in the image as a means of bridging the gap between feelings and ideas or experience. I too am very interested in this problem which I believe is a factor in the relationships between earlier and later poets. And I find it helpful to bring to bear the findings of classical and modern psychoanalysis on any such dissociation. Having said this, and before going further, I feel I should say what this paper is not as well as what it is. It is not an attempt to analyse the personalities of any poets -- Shelley or Yeats, in this case. For this reason I don't think it is necessary to bring in extensive biographical support; though I hope that you will not find my arguments inconsistent with the personal development of either poet. What I would like is to contribute to an understanding of what I think is perhaps the single most important question about Romantic and later poetry, that is, what is the relationship between emotion and experience as the poets understand it? And I bring in psychoanalysis not to contradict that understanding, but for two especial reasons:

first, that the relation of affect to idea or experience lies at the heart of psychoanalysis as both theory and therapy, and second, that the terms of psychoanalysis may well be enriched by being brought into relation with the poems.

Once the factual basis of one poet's influence upon another has been established, it seems inevitable that a more-or-less oedipal paradigm for the form of the influence will be proposed. This has of course occurred in the last few years, and has resulted in some very rich and suggestive readings of Romantic and later poetry. You are all familiar with the basic structure of such readings: the precursor or parental poet by his achievement threatens the later poet, whose work we can view in terms of oedipal victory or defeat. Without detracting from the usefulness to literary criticism of this approach, I would like to suggest that the issue of oedipal conflict is not so clearcut as this; that a successful passage through the oedipal stage is dependent upon the child's earlier developmental experiences; and that the actual relationship between two poets may well depend upon developmentally earlier and psychologically more basic experiences. At least I feel this to be true of Shelley and Yeats.

I'll begin, then, with a brief consideration of the way in which the individual responds to trauma. This is one of the most basic situations that psychoanalysis has illuminated. Here is Freud, writing in 1938, near the end of his career, of the mechanism of dissociation or splitting: "I find myself for a moment," Freud begins, "in the interesting position of not knowing whether what I have to

say should be regarded as something long familiar and obvious or as something entirely new and puzzling." Freud was "inclined to think the latter,"<sup>1</sup> and analysts reading "The Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defence" would doubtless agree, for the simultaneous knowing and not knowing, without repression, is a new idea in Freud. But the reason for Freud's momentary hesitation is important. In fact the term "splitting" (spaltung) has a long history in Freud's writing -- and can be found in the work of Janet as well. In 1894, in his seminal paper, "The Neuropsychoses of Defence," Freud suggested that the etiology of both hysteria and obsessional neuroses included a defensive "splitting of consciousness" in the face of a psychic trauma. "For these patients whom I analyzed had enjoyed good mental health up to the moment at which an occurrence of incompatibility took place in their ideational life -- that is to say, until their ego was faced with an experience, an idea or a feeling which aroused such a distressing affect that the subject decided to forget about it because he had no confidence in his power to resolve the contradiction between the incompatible idea and his ego by means of thought-activity."<sup>2</sup>

You can see that the idea of the unconscious still lay before Freud. But the basic mechanisms of the formation of symptoms in hysteria and obsessional neurosis remains the same. "Both the memory-trace and the affect which is attached to the idea are there once and for all and cannot be eradicated. But it amounts to an approximate fulfillment of the task if the ego succeeds in turning

this powerful idea into a weak one, in robbing it of the affect. . . ."3

In hysteria the affect is converted to a somatic symptom, in obsessional neurosis it is attached to a substitute idea (which then becomes the well known obsessional idea). What matters for students of literature is that Freud from the beginning proposes as the basis for the onset of neurotic illness a splitting of affect or emotion from idea or experience. Probably at this point you will think of the Romantic poets' interest in internal division: I too would like to consider this, but first it might be useful to follow a bit further the development of the concept of splitting in psychoanalysis.

As you are probably aware, Freud's original and necessary emphasis on the unconscious and on drives yielded some importance to the ego when his structural theory was announced in 1923. The work of Anna Freud, Hartmann and others strengthened this movement, in which the individual was still more-or-less considered in isolation, though now from the point of view of the vicissitudes of the ego. With the announcement, in 1941, that "the ultimate goal of libido is the object,"4 Fairbairn announced a movement in British psychoanalysis toward a theory of development based upon object-relationships. We develop because of and under the influence of our relationships with significant people. Our drives toward sexuality or aggression are actually drives toward relationships without which we cannot develop. These are vitally important additions to psychoanalysis, and find empirical support in the work of Mahler. Moreover, the work of Heinz Kohut and others in Chicago, which constitutes a

psychoanalytic psychology of the self, shares a major premise with the object-relations analysts: both models, like Freud's, assume that the fundamental factor in development is a form of splitting. Let us recall that Freud posited a trauma that forced the individual to split off emotion from the experience as a way of neutralizing it. The consequence would be a symptom -- as in the cases of hysteria and obsessional neurosis. For the object-relations people, the trauma is a longer process of early childhood experience, and what is split off is not just feeling, but a feelingful self, a primary and natural ego. The consequence here is not only an hysterical or obsessional symptom, which may indeed be present as an overlay, but a regression of this feelingful or affective ego, and a withdrawal of this part of the self to the safety of interiority. "The split in question," Fairbairn insists, "is fundamentally a split in the ego. What manifests itself on the surface as a divorce between thought and feeling must accordingly be construed as the reflection of a split between (1) a more superficial part of the ego representing its higher levels and including the conscious, and (2) a deeper part of the ego representing its lower levels and including those elements which are most highly endowed with libido and are hence the source of affect."<sup>5</sup>

It is important to keep in mind that we are discussing a range of reactions of this type, from observable tendencies to withdraw to pathological regression: we are not doing a full

differential diagnosis of Shelley or Yeats. With this disclaimer, one or two points may nevertheless be underlined. The split-off part of the self, which is protected at the cost of deep inwardness, retains the libidinal or affective qualities. It is for this reason that Harry Guntrip, who was trained by Fairbairn, observes that introversion diminishes the capacity to love, and that a reversal of the regression renews this capacity.<sup>6</sup> It is probably past the time I should have indicated my assumptions about the relationship between Shelley and Yeats. I believe that a number of the central poems of the Romantic period, including some of Shelley's major poems, represent attempts by the poet to free the capacity to love, which is a property of what I have called a deeper part of the ego. These romantic poems are not expressions of feeling, they are expressions of the desire to feel, the deep wish that is frequently discovered even in a pathologically regressed patient. One of the most often encountered defences of inwardness is intellectualization, whereby processes of thought act as a screen for the vulnerable, withdrawn emotions. One has only to think of the complicated but ubiquitous interplay of the "heart" and "thoughts" in the major romantic poems to see this at work. But what happens to the repressed, separated affective part of the self while the outer, everyday portion deals with the world in an essentially unlibidinal way? Observers tend to agree that it maintains relations to outer things in an imaginary way -- not the things but their images become so-called "internal objects" to which love becomes attached.

Let me set out, then, the way in which I view the changing relationship between Shelley and Yeats. During the early part of his career, as several critics -- Bornstein, especially<sup>7</sup> -- have noted, Yeats was delighted to find in Shelley a powerful representation of the intellectual ideal. Or as we might view this period, which would extend to shortly after 1900, Shelley served to strengthen and maintain the defensive structures in Yeats that helped to maintain the isolation and protection of a feelingful self. I will assume that you are familiar with the change in sensibility that Yeats underwent in the early part of this century -- a change he wrote about in the essay called Discoveries and in his autobiography. Briefly, Yeats recalls that he had earlier come to care for nothing but "impersonal beauty," and that he now recognized that his proper goal lay in seeking a Unity of Being that included earthly as well as intellectual elements. This seems straightforward enough, but of course it raises many questions: how accurate was Yeats's understanding of Shelley's "intellectual beauty"? why did Yeats part company from Shelley? how successful was Unity of Being as a means of fulfilling Yeats's aspirations?

I think the psychological explanation helps somewhat in answering these questions, though it does not do so fully and of course does not help us to interpret all of the poetry. Given these limitations, let us see what it will do. The problems center, I believe -- and I think Bornstein would agree<sup>8</sup> -- on the vicissitudes of the capacity to love and to feel. Shelley's essay On Love provides

a well-known image for the locus of the loving part of ourselves: this is "a soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise which pain and sorrow and evil dare not overleap. To this we eagerly refer all sensations, thirsting that they should resemble or correspond with it. The discovery of its antitype," Shelley writes, "this is the invisible and unattainable point to which Love tends; and to attain which, it urges forth the powers of man to arrest the faintest shadow of that, without the possession of which there is no rest or respite to the heart over which it rules."

Among the many fascinating aspects of these thoughts is that they already represent a split in the self, a remove to deep within of the affective part of the self. And yet Shelley tells us that this center of love, which he conceives as a soul within a soul, exists "within our intellectual nature." The translation of affect to idea here suggests the larger problem of the imaginary form of the kind of love Shelley discusses, for this is purified to such an extent that it can never be adequately represented by a real person -- any more than Yeats's image of Maude Gonne could be equalled by her reality. In Shelley's life Harriet and Mary quickly moved from idealized to actual woman, thus causing Shelley to turn to other women to satisfy the need for idealization. Maude Gonne's refusals to join Yeats, one might say, kept his idealization more consistent. But what is similar is the intrinsic opposition between intellectualized and actual love objects.

I am not implying that Shelley erred in this kind of love, for one has only to think of Alastor or the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" to realize how powerfully libidized these objects were -- and how important to the existence of the poet. For one of the things we learn from the latter poem is that in addition to consecrating human thought with its own hues, Intellectual Beauty stabilizes Shelley's otherwise tempestuous existence:

there is a harmony  
 In autumn, and a lustre in its sky,  
 Which through the summer is not heard or seen,  
 As if it could not be, as if it had not been!  
 Thus let thy power, which like the truth  
 Of nature on my passive youth  
 Descended, to my onward life supply  
 Its calm -- to one who worships thee . . .  
 Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind  
 To fear himself, and love all human kind. [74-81, 83-84]

What I am suggesting is that we err if we construe this relationship to Intellectual Beauty as a sufficient solution to the problem of division. What does Intellectual Beauty actually provide for Shelley? It elides the present: there is only the past and the future ("As if it could not be, as if it had not been!") and the identity between the two brings "calm" and self-regard ("fear"). That Shelley longs for the "harmony" and sense of an admirable self that only the Spirit of Beauty brings implies an early experience of

maternal insufficiency that would lead to the kind of splitting or dissociation I have described. One can discern the effect of such insufficiency in Shelley's repeated desire to be absorbed into the idealized object, regardless of its specific identity. In discussing the Provençal Trouveurs, who in their verses "wrote of the delight which is in the grief of love," Shelley concludes that "it is impossible to feel them without becoming a portion of that beauty which we contemplate."<sup>9</sup> This fusion is quite similar to Shelley's repeated references to a general absorption of the individual into the one mind or the one man: in the essay "On Life," for example, Shelley denies that his is the single, universal mind -- "I am but a portion of it." It is to this recognition, Shelley writes, that "the intellectual philosophy has conducted us. We are on that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy. . . ."<sup>10</sup> I think it is this dizzying fusion, in which the self is drawn into an idealized entity, that represents one goal of Shelley's poetic quest. And it may also be, as Yeats noted in his essay on "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry," that this is the reason that Shelley identified the discovery of the idealized object and death, for fusion is a form of death, as is a regressive symbiosis.

These may have been some of the underlying reasons for Shelley's commitment to intellectual beauty and intellectual philosophy. But to Yeats Shelley's example validated his own attraction to the beauty that would provide the inward freedom of faeryland or Innisfree, let us say, for the inwardness of the deep

heart's core. What I am referring to is also what Thomas Whitaker calls a desire in the early Yeats for "a transcendence of all limiting earthly form."<sup>11</sup> Yet Yeats could have found such aesthetic idealizations elsewhere, and we might ask why he felt so strongly about Shelley in his early career. Several reasons might be advanced, but in the context I am developing I would say that Yeats sympathized with an air of exclusion that surrounds Shelley: by this I mean that Shelley at times seems to feel himself excluded from an active involvement in life. What, for example, does it mean to hear Shelley cry out that he has loved Intellectual Beauty "only" and "ever"? Among other things it means that he has found the love he speaks so eloquently of in the Defense -- a love that is the "sublimist victory over sensuality and force."<sup>12</sup> Yet this sublime passion is less a sublimation than a compensation, and without integration this is only an intellectual victory, as if the sensuality and force of the parent were always a blocking element. The self that remains in opposition to idealization in Shelley -- as in the "little world of self" that opposes love in the Defense -- is usually merely a shell, the dry husk that remains when love has fled. Life has to be gotten through by this self, though only in the limited way that Yeats implies when (after de Lisle Adam) he says that our servants will do our living for us. The real covering cherub does not block the gates of paradise -- it blocks the gates of life, as though inspiration were always necessarily and inevitably insufficient. Yeats, after all, invented his

phantasmagoria partly to deny his own fear of living. As he writes in 1917, "when I came home after meeting men who are strange to me, and sometimes . . . women, I go over all I have said in gloom and disappointment. Perhaps I have overstated everything from a desire to vex or startle, from hostility that is but fear. . . . But when I shut my door and light the candle, I invite a Marmorean Muse. . . ."13

Yeats's great honesty here should not keep us from appreciating the depth of his fearful exclusion from men and women, much as Shelley sought to overcome sensuality and force. Early shocks to the affective ego create inhibitions, dissociation and a sense of outsideness that reflects a fear of involvement, as though the outer ego would be consumed by relationship.

As we move into Yeats's middle and later periods we find Yeats adopting Unity of Being, daemonization and dramatic -- even violent -- characters as means of evading what he took to be Shelley's unwavering commitment to the intellectual philosophy. As Guntrip observes, the withdrawal of the affective ego inhibits the capacity to love. Yeats's antimonies or contraries seek to merge the affective and intellectual portions of the self so as to avoid the fates of Athanase and the Alastor poet. "The other self," Yeats writes, "the anti-self or the antithetical self . . . comes to those . . . whose passion is reality." The Daemon comes seeking its opposite, but only when the man has found "a mask whose lineaments permit the expression of all the man most lacks, and dreads." Did such a difficult unity resolve the problem of Yeats's identification

with Shelley? Did Yeats find his way back to life? And did he misread Shelley in any event? These questions deserve fuller answers than I can provide here. We can say, though, that the adoption of a compensatory mask ironically parallels a commitment to an intellectual philosophy. Both approaches distance and diminish an emotional self that is already interiorized and frail. Yeats writes that in ancient days the blind man became a poet in opposition to everything his inner self cried out for. This is Yeats's method as well, but it does not allow that childlike, vulnerable self to live -- it keeps it suppressed. We don't often hear in Yeats's poetry, powerful and compelling as it is, what Keats called "the true voice of feeling." The Yeatsean ideal of a poem "cold and passionate as the dawn" maintains a lack of integration.

And yet this compensation and the intellectual philosophy are not exactly the same. Yeats sensed in Shelley what he may have feared in himself: a projected nightmare that was a corollary to the quest for an ideal. In the late essay "Prometheus Unbound," written in 1932, Yeats states that Demogorgon is the product of "that something which again and again forced him to balance the object of desire conceived as miraculous and superhuman, with nightmare." This is very close to a psychoanalytic explanation: Shelley's withdrawal necessitated a division between negative and idealized introjects -- that is, a difficult relationship forces the child to divide the image of the parent, which is then projected as nightmare or terror and idealized image.

In the Zoroaster passage in Prometheus (I, 191-207) the Earth ("a venerable mother") tells the god of a world beneath the grave where the "shadows" or shades of all of us live -- till death unites us. Structurally this is very close to Yeats's notion of the daemon or antiself, and one might propose that the antiself represents a swerve from Shelley's shades. But it is also disturbingly close to a characteristic dream of withdrawn patients -- the discovery of a dead child that is also themselves. That childlike part of the self is split off and deadened, and the genuine and ever present danger is that it will draw the rest of the personality to it, like a black hole, leading to greater withdrawal or suicide. I said before that Shelley served to strengthen the division between selves in the early Yeats; but the important defenses keep the personality from further regressing, and as if to preserve his own increased involvement in life Yeats rejected Shelley as one who only "sang of something beginning." If there is a swerve involved here it seems to have more to do with this fear for the self than with oedipal strivings.

Nevertheless, I think that Yeats was wrong about Shelley, who I think clearly and strongly seeks to integrate the self. The great emphasis in Shelley is on the desire to love -- I am thinking among many texts of the young Shelley learning "to love all human kind" in the "Hymn"; of much besides Demogorgon in Prometheus; and of that extraordinary phrase in the Defense which states that poetry "compels us to feel that which we perceive," as fine an epitome of a major portion of the Romantic enterprise as we can find,

and one which if Shelley could have extended to the intellect would have been a reconciliation worthy of Prometheus. The need to love and the importance of feeling are both powerfully reflected in his writings; that Yeats did not recognize these along with the idealization-nightmare dyad implies his own defense against identification.

I have already suggested that Yeats's adoption of an antithetical poetic could not solve the need for self-integration, for if we invoke an opposite to ourselves, whose unity of being are we creating? Shelley had his terrors, but the dissociation of sensibility that Eliot wrote of can be seen even in such a grand late poem as "The Circus Animals' Desertion," in which the poet claims to still be a "broken" man, by which he means not only aged but incapable of combining Shelley and Dickens in one man. As Yeats enumerates his "old themes" in a vain search for a new one it is clear that what had been cathected in each case was a dream, the "dream itself had all my thought and love":

But what cared I that set him on to ride,  
I, starved for the bosom of his faery bride?

The commitment to libidized fantasy is so extraordinary in this poem that we should not fail to hear the horror when Yeats concludes that

Now that my ladder's gone,  
I must lie down where all the ladders start,  
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

All withdrawals are effected out of a fear of vulnerability and I think it is this that the disgust with the heart is masking and defending against.

A different and more explicit fear informs "Cuchulain Comforted." We earlier noted Yeats's apparent sympathy for Shelley's sense of exclusion or ostracism as well as his own sense of social inhibition. This very late poem seems to suggest that the lifelong division between self and anti-self in Yeats persisted to the end. Cuchulain, you recall, is placed in a twilight world similar to Dante's inferno, where he meets Shrouds who inform him:

'first you must be told our character:

Convicted cowards all, by kindred slain

Or driven from home and left to die in fear.'

When we remember that Yeats wanted Maud Gonne to be "kindred of his soul" we may hear an acknowledgement in these lines that the need for such a version of kinship is itself fatal; and that the accurate image of the affective self is that it was early driven away and left in fear -- not to die in fear but to dissociate, in a radical defense that may seem like death and is not easily reconciled.

## Notes

1. Standard Edition, vol 23.
2. Standard Edition, vol 3, p. 47.
3. Ibid, vol 3, p. 48.
4. W. Ronald D. Fairbairn, Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality (London, 1976), p. 3]. Hereafter cited as Fairbairn.
5. Fairbairn, p. 2].
6. See Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self (New York, 1969), especially the third chapter, "The Regressed Ego, The Lost Heart of the Self, and the Inability to Love."
7. George Bornstein, Yeats and Shelley (Chicago, 1970). Hereafter cited as Bornstein.
8. Bornstein devotes his sixth chapter to a comparison of the representations of love and also the biographical experiences of love of Shelley and Yeats.
9. The Defence of Poetry in Shelley's Poetry and Prose ed. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York, 1977), p. 497. Hereafter cited as Reiman.
10. Reiman, p. 478.
11. In Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History (Chapel Hill, 1964), p. 59.
12. Reiman, p. 497.
13. Essays, p. 485.
14. Essays, p. 493.