

## A NOTE ON “OF CORRESPONDENCES” AND “YEATS IN LONDON”

JAMES MATTHEW WILSON



These two sonnets come from a sequence of twenty-one poems entitled *La Rochefoucauld's Ghost*. The sequence as a whole explores the function of poetry and language in the spiritual and intellectual life, querying what it is that words may say to us or we with them: What is the horizon at which words give out to the ether? What is the proper attention of poetry? To that which is already known—commonplace—and *revealable* to all persons, after the fashion of a news article or a lab report by a young Chemist? Or may our language gesture beyond that which we may all know in common? Or, to reverse the orientation, may a poem reveal realities that are beyond the universally shared and the quotidian?

Such a broad set of questions on the relation of art and speech to reality raises still another clutch, more immanent to the practicing poet. What is the authorial source of art? Were the romantics correct to suggest that poetry not only speaks to what lies beyond

the painted veil of our daily delusions, but finds the source of its speech in the emotion of the poet? Or is poetry better understood as wit than emotional expression? And, if so, is it the wit of the Augustan age, which rests content as soon as it has fastened down the moral knowledge all men share into a dress of words all may approve as well suited? Or is it some more austere but penetrating form of reason—the reason of the Christian-Platonist tradition, wherein it is precisely insofar as we lay by our groping hungers in favor of a will deeper within us that the intellect may rise beyond its creaturely distractions and plodding mechanisms to touch the face of truth?

Yes, twenty-one poems, each trying out different answers to these questions and, I hope, revealing the attractiveness of their possibility as well as the limitations of their adequacy. I cringe to confess all this, but I would like the poems to be understood and even enjoyed. So, here I am.

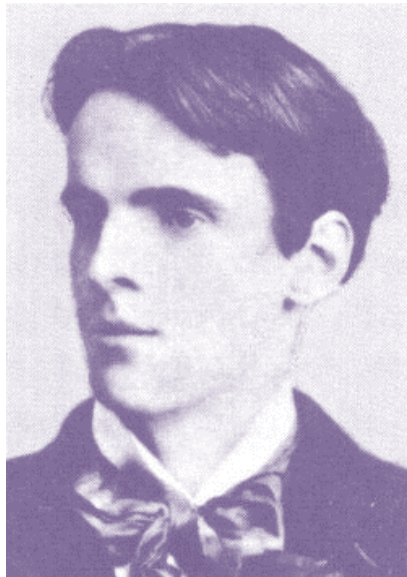
The young T.S. Eliot, in “The Boston Evening Transcript,” caught a glimpse of La Rochefoucauld standing at the end of his street in Boston. The gaze of that French wit, master of culture, decorum, and *real politick*, could not but dispraise the present for its failure to be formed upon the soul of wit. So these poems wrestle with La Rochefoucauld’s ghost at length, and do not allow his gaze to go unquestioned, his disapproval to rest in superior silence. To sustain my engagement with that ghost, many of the poems in the sequence are translations and versions from the French tradition. It has been the ghost of French symbolism, specifically as they clash with that of La Rochefoucauld, that has most evidently dominated the English lyric tradition these last hundred years. Each version or translation is accompanied by one or more poems in response to the problems it raises.



“Of Correspondences” was once a close translation of Baudelaire’s *Correspondences*; however, from the beginning I was driven to recover the rich significance of the phrase “*l’esprit et des sens*” with which the poem concludes. *L’esprit* above all means “soul,” here, and that is how most translators have given it. However, it is also “soul” in the sense of “wit” or “mother wit.” The soul is what is intellectual in man; it is what it is in virtue of the intellect, and does not the poem as a whole really set forth a scene that speaks of the fluency—the intelligibility—between the senses and the soul? Baudelaire, however emotional a poet he generally is, with his wallowing in the poetics of despair and damnation, in this sonnet sets forth quite clearly that the sensuous profusion of the world at once becomes knowable to us in its elements and as a unity. What makes the world correspond to the soul in the way it does is precisely that it gives itself to us—rather lushly and lustily—to be known by our intellects. The world could not be symbolic, if it were not written by an intellect prior to and before it, and if we were not first intellectual creatures, born to know that which has, along with us, been thought into being. This poem is followed by a trio on the “Book of Nature” and the experience of reality as sacramental, but in the course of working through the meaning of *l’esprit*, Baudelaire’s sonnet became something other than what it had been. It ceased to be a translation.



“Yeats in London” is one of two poems that feature the young W.B. Yeats in this sequence. This stems not just from my interest in Yeats’s work and biography, or even from the way in which his poltergeist strode through my early poetry and besmirched, haunted, or otherwise harassed my lines. Tom Paulin more modestly referred to reading Yeats as akin to a “taste of garlic,” and that has been



the case with me. But, more fundamentally, Yeats has been our only real visionary poet in the last century, and the beauty and failure of his vision requires contemplation—in reverence and in rebellion alike. Never was a poet so keen on the visionary and unwilling to allow any vision actually to be *revealed*. In “Words for the Century’s End,” which is still unpublished, I put Yeats in debate with the friends of his youth—Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson—and, like Yeats himself in the *Autobiographies* position them all as symbols of different ways of living in the world. But, here, I return more obliquely to Yeats’s story of himself, alluding to his early efforts at constructing a religion—a vision—for himself out of parts and parcels he could dominate and repackage for his own purposes. One passage in particular is worth quoting:

‘That is the Greek Church, a triangle like all true religion,’ I recall her saying, as she chalked out a triangle on the green baize, and then as she made it disappear in meaningless scribbles, ‘It spread out and became a bramble-bush like the Church of Rome.’ Then rubbing it all out except one straight line, ‘Now they have lopped off the branches and turned it into a broomstick and that is Protestantism.’ And so it was night after night, always varied and unforeseen.

I have always thought this the central passage to the psychogenesis of Yeats the poet, and it explains several lines in the sonnet. But, of course, his father, that dry materialist in the tradition of Mill, will have none of it. The poem grapples with just that: *none* of us will have *all of it*, including Yeats's most sympathetic reader, or Yeats himself, as his poem "The Circus Animals' Desertion" makes brilliantly clear. So, what is it, these symbols that are not symbols? At any rate, they are not what Baudelaire says they are, in my now much modified version of his poem.

Two thirds of the *La Rochefoucauld* poems have found their way into print. Once six of the remaining seven have been published, I shall see them all to press as a collection. For the interested reader, here is a list of the poems that have appeared thus far, or are soon forthcoming: "Nevermore," "Lyric," and "Essay on Education" in *Think*; "Not Yet, Not Yet," and "To N.H." in *Lucid Rhythms*; "Beyond Gibraltar" in *The Dark Horse*; "Barnum" and "Dark Places" in *Dappled Things*; "Drink, Drink" and "Bunches of Blackberries" in *Measure*; "The Book of Nature I" in *Front Porch Monthly*; "Yeats in London" and "Of Correspondences" in *Notre Dame Review*; and "The Book of Nature II" in *Able Muse*. If I may indulge a little more my sense of embarrassment or perfectionism, I should note that all of these poems have been revised considerably since their publication—including even the two here in *NDR*. Print has a revealing and unforgiving glare.

That I should have spent so much effort on a lyric sequence of poems that is, in a sense, about the possibility of a lyric sequence of poems may require some explanation. I would note that, overall, I cannot entirely admire what modernist poetry did to our tradition, and yet, what it has done it has done to me as much as to anyone. These poems, begun more than a decade ago and still in process of revision, mark an effort to come to terms with that effect. The works of T.S. Eliot and Yeats, not to mention the friendship of John Matthias, had the more particular effect of prompting me almost always to think of my writing in terms of a coherent scattering. The great influence of Dana Gioia first touched me on account of his advocacy of the long poem.

My first book of poems, *Four Verse Letters*, was begun at the instance of Matthias and its publisher noted the impress of *Four Quartets* and of Louis MacNeice on its form. My second, which is forthcoming later this year, *The Violent and the Fallen*, collects lyrics written separately and with no view to their sequencing. Yet, when I sought to gather as many of my published short poems as I could into a new book, I found that they gathered themselves together like iron filings to a magnet, and the form was something like that of the *Vita Nuova*, or, perhaps more closely, the early life of St. Augustine. And so, *La Rochefoucauld's Ghost* may be distinct in my work to date in that it is less obviously coherent than the verse letters, but more deliberate and methodical than the new book. It has certainly taken me longer than any other project I have undertaken to get right. I have not yet given up hope.

