

Our Life in Six Lyrical Poems: William Butler Yeats

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7:00 PM

The Philoctetes Center

Levy: Welcome to the final episode of *Our Life in Six Lyrical Poems*, which was scheduled to coincide with the final episode of *the Sopranos*. That's said for the benefit of Tara Moran, who is a great friend of ours and a great fan of *the Sopranos*. I'm very happy to introduce Mike Braziller, who will in turn introduce our distinguished guest, who is returning to the final session of the Philoctetes *Our Life in Six Lyrical Poems*. He also presided and was a guest at the first session on the poems of Hardy.

Braziller: Thanks. That's a perfect symmetry, beginning with Hardy and now—actually, when I envisioned this whole program, I was thinking Hardy, Yeats, Hardy, Yeats. We're planning an ambitious schedule for next year. I will introduce Eamon now and he will read, I believe, two of his own poems at the end of the evening. I'm definitely looking forward to that.

Eamon Grennan is from Dublin. He was educated at the University College in Dublin and Harvard, where he received his PhD. He has taught for many years at Vassar College, where he is the recently retired Dexter M. Ferry Jr. Professor of English. He's published seven volumes of his own poetry, both in Ireland and the US. His *Leopardi: Selected Poems* won the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation in 1997. He has published numerous essays and reviews. His poems appear regularly in magazines on both sides of the Atlantic, including *Poetry*, *Poetry London*, *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *New Republic* and many others. He's received rewards from the NEA, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Guggenheim Foundation. *Still Life with Waterfall* received the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize in 2003, and his most recent collection of poems is *The Quick of It*. He recently publishes a translation, with his partner Rachel Kitzinger, of *Oedipus at Colonus*. He lives in Poughkeepsie and the west of Ireland.

Okay, William Butler Yeats.

Grennan: Okay. They're waiting. People are waiting. Everybody got seats? Okay, so this is going to be a little while, because trying to pack Yeats into an hour and a half—you know, Yeats is like trying to pick up dust with a fork. He's impossible to contain. The tiny piece of life I might offer just as a sort of brief introduction—you probably know the trajectory of Yeats's life and work, and the extraordinary richness and vitality and variety which it represents both on the Irish stage, first, of course, and then the larger European stage, and then the world stage. Given Yeats and his occult engagements, the other world stage, which he's no stranger to at all, as you probably know from reading things like *A Vision* and many of the poems themselves.

Born 1865, became a poet, became passionate about his poetry very, very early. His landscapes are Sligo in the west of Ireland, London, and Dublin. His father was a painter, J.B. Yeats—John Butler Yeats. His brother was a painter, Jack B. Yeats. He learned an awful lot from his father's impassioned aesthetics and his resistance to forms of tired Victorianism. Yeats himself began as a pre-Raphealite in some ways. You know, a lot of those poems had been written in the '80s. His first book is in the '80s, and his last book is in the late '30s. So he spans a good 50 years of

active, productive life with his work. And it moves, and we'll talk a little bit about this as we go, because that's part of the point when you get to Yeats. You talk about changes, and you talk about a poet engaged to the degree he is with, as he says himself, remaking himself constantly, never standing still. For me, certainly, Yeats is a kind of model of the poet career, as he is for lots of other people, not that you want to imitate him. His voice is entirely his own, and if you did try you'd fall on your face, among other things. He's not to be imitated, but he is to be admired, up close and from far off. As well as his landscapes, there were his loves. Maud Gonnethe commitment of a lifetime passion beginning in 1889 and ending in 1939. He also loved, incidentally, as we will hear in one of the poems, Maud Gonnethe daughter, whom he also asked to marry him. And another great love of his was, early on, Olivia Shakespeare, who became the mother of Dorothy Shakespeare, who married Pound. And then of course Yeats lived with Pound for a while, and the whole interaction of Pound and Yeats is a fascinating topic in itself. One could go on about it.

Aside from the poetry and all the books—I'll just name the books and then I'll end this little introduction. *Crossways* in 1889; *The Rose* in 1893. *The Wind Among the Reeds* was a kind of major step forward beyond, one would call it, the kind of high aestheticism, the rather '90s aestheticism of *The Rose* and *Crossways*. *Wind Among the Reeds* is a book of love poems, kind of like a Petrarchan book. It's amazing—1899, so it's a '90s book too, but it's the end of something clearly. He has a couple of what we'd call transitional books in 1904 and 1910, full of dejected love poetry among other things. In 1903 Maud Gonnethe got married, and not to Yeats, but to a man called John McBride, whom Yeats politely called a drunken, vainglorious lout in verse. And then McBride had the good manners to be shot in 1916, as one of the leaders of the revolution. Yeats had to alter himself a little bit and sing him into the story as well. Yeats' capacity for change is one of the things we may talk about, I think—change of attitude, change of understanding, change of vision, and, of course, change of form, change of language, really. The great transition book, or the great breakthrough book, is probably in 1914, and remember what happened in 1914, so it's a pre-war book, or a wartime book—just as the war starts. It's called *Responsibilities*, and you can hear from a poem—titans like *The Wind Among the Reeds* or *The Rose*, and then *Responsibilities*—that you're going to be dealing with a very different poet. You're going to be dealing with a very different language. We'll see a little bit of that. *The Wild Swans at Coole* dates 1919. And then the great other, probably the pinnacle, the summit, the battlements of Yeats's work is *The Tower*, of which we'll do the central poem, the title poem, which appeared in 1928.

The next book is also connected with *The Tower*, which Yeats bought—we'll go on about that—in the 1920s. No, in 1917 he bought the tower, but the next book is called *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, and that was the stair inside the tower, and I might have something to say about that, too, later. Then *The Wild Old Wicked Man* becomes in the later poems at points writing of extraordinary radical passion and indifference and anger, and then in books like *Words for Music*, perhaps, or *A Full Moon in March*, and then, finally, *Last Poems*, which he lived to finish the poems, but not to see the final organization, because it comes out in '39.

The other thing that he was involved in, obviously, is that he wrote theater. I mean he started in the theater, and Yeats is at the heart of what's called the Irish Revival, the Irish sort of Renaissance, the Irish Literary Renaissance or Irish Literary Revival. And in some ways he's it.

And in some ways it is a movement that takes place parallel to the great movement in Ireland at the time for a national identity.

So here is this cultural force establishing cultural identity, while political identity is trying to be established, and it's finally established in 1922, when Yeats becomes, after the treaty, after the civil war, a senator. Around the time of the civil war he becomes a senator. So he straddles worlds—theater, poetry, the occult. The book called *The Vision*—we won't go into it very much, but it's fascinating, and he says it's a metaphor for his poems and it's connected with his wife's habit of manic writing. He is in the political realm. But above all he's a lyric poet. I think that's what we love about Yeats, what we find enduring about Yeats, aside from the playwright, aside from the political force, aside from the cultural energy, aside from the occult magician.

A couple of great biographies, or volumes of biography, by Roy Foster—one called *The Apprentice Mage*, and *The ArchPoet*, and you can hear in those too the kind of feel of Yeats as a supremely hieratic figure. For me, however, it isn't so much the hieratic as the fact that this is a poet whose poetry kept pace with his life at every inch of the journey. And the few poems we're doing will show tiny elements of that. The model is that he kept pace, that here's poetry, language, keeping pace with experience, mapping the world of fact and of feeling with language that is adequate to it in some way. So that's quite interesting.

Braziller: And, of course, as he changed he also remained the same.

Grennan: Yes. He grew like a tree, round and round, yeah.

Braziller: Yeah. We'll get into the poems now, but I mentioned on the way over that we selected these—really the major poem is *The Tower*. It's the great poem. It's about the psychological crisis of old age. It's just an absolute masterpiece. And beyond that we selected a few favorites that we both liked or we thought were really great lyrical shorter poems. But I mentioned on the way over that just as I was looking at all these poems together I noticed that in the very first poem the first four words are “When you are old.” And the last poem ends, “Would that I were young again.” And then *The Tower* is about aging. So there was, from the very first early volume, this concern with age.

Grennan: Those of you who've come to these before know the format. We'll talk poems. I mean we'll read and talk a poem. Michael and I have said we might take a question at the end of each poem, if you have a question that's utterly urgent and needs to break windows, or to counteract some terrible heresy. But we will leave time at the end for questions.

Braziller: Because we want to share these poems, but the real poem is *The Tower*. That's what we're trying to get to, and after that we'll ease up. Okay, so how about if I read *When You Are Old*?

Grennan: Yeah, read away.

Braziller: Okay. This is a very early one from *The Rose*.

When you are old and gray and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Grennan: That's great. 1891, very early, but Yeats had already fallen in love with Maud Gonne in 1889. And it's a gorgeous love poem. What we know about it is it's also a kind of very free translation of Ronsard, which I've given you on that little sheet with the Tower picture on it. Two of you have it. But it's a Ronsard sonnet. It's a lovely poem. I'm not going to try abusing it in my French. But it's a very different poem, and it's very interesting to see what Yeats does as a translator. He just takes control. He's one of those translators, like a great pirate, who just simply claims the poem for his own. For Ronsard, the sonnet is a sort of carpe diem sonnet, because he says in the sonnet, since you're going to be old and since you're going to look at my book and so forth, well, then why don't we do it today? It's a sort of Andrew Marvell "gather ye rosebuds." In fact, he says at the time, "come pluck now, today, life's so quickly fading rose." So it's one kind of poem for Ronsard. It's a poem by a young man trying to persuade the woman—it's a very conventional thing. It's all over the Renaissance, isn't it—trying to persuade to pluck life's rose.

Yeats is full of a kind of '90s moody—it's almost as if it's an old man talking. He doesn't dare say let's pluck the rose today to Maud Gonne. I don't know why. Maybe she was taller than he was. But she was an extravagant woman. It's a very mannerly thing. It's a different kind. It's not carpe diem. Yeats is a kind of mood maker for it's own sake. This is what this poem is clearly doing. The thing that I love about it is that there's a kind of fluent lyrical ease, even then. Yeats is—I mean he's not that young, mind you. In 1890 he's—well, he is. He's 26 years old. So it's an early poem, but you can already see what a great ear he has, and you can hear, too, in that poem, the extraordinary sentence. It's a single sentence, but it's a sentence orchestrated, and metrically, by those iambics, line by line by line by line. He worked according to line. Yeats hardly punctuated, by the way, himself. A lot of editors had to punctuate for Yeats, because there's a lovely story about Yeats and punctuation, which is he's giving dictation, and after 25 minutes he raises his head and he says, "comma." That's a Yeats story—here are lots of those. But Maud Gonne, of course, is the subject of the poem, one presumes. But it's full of the gestures of age already. It's an interesting poem. Yeats is so obsessed as a young man by aging, and there are a whole heap of poems in the early books about aging. There's a poem called *Ephemera*. Do you remember that poem?

Braziller: No. How does it go?

Grennan: Well, yeah, no, I won't bother, but it is—that's a terrible thing to ask me. But it's full of gestures of aging.

Braziller: Yeah, and also it seems a premonition of what we're going to be reading later—the sense of unfairness. You know, he loved her with more complexity and with more truth and with a greater intimate knowledge of her than all the others. But he lost her anyway. And this is very, in every way, Yeatsian.

Grennan: Absolutely. It's the endlessness of desire. I mean Yeats makes his living on the endlessness of desire, fundamentally, particularly in the early poems.

Braziller: We're going to talk about *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, but on the way up I was looking at one of my favorite lines in there, "A living man is blind and drinks his drop." That's how part two begins of *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, and there's this idea that it all doesn't make sense. It isn't fair. We can't see the whole picture. And yet the potential for joy is enormous in the middle of all of that.

Grennan: Yeah, I think that's right. I think the crux in Yeats is how to celebrate what's awful. I think the business of lyric poetry is, fundamentally, how to sing in spite of—I mean, I think that's what great lyric poetry is probably always attempting, and I think Yeats is one of the great exemplars of that. It's also "man is in love, and love is what vanishes." That's from another poem.

Braziller: Yeah, and the unfairness of love. One other thing, and I raise this as a question, at the ending he says, "Where love fled in haste upon the mountains overhead." Does this remind you of different nodes he touches upon in *Wild Swans at Coole* and elsewhere, this idea where this deep passion, this tremendous life force or memory, can move on?

Grennan: Yes.

Braziller: It can be turned over to others. Is he touching this here?

Grennan: I think he touches that, and I think he also touches the fact that he can finalize something in an image. That great last image of the end, those two and a half lines—pure syntactical gorgeousness about love, straight out of Dante, I suspect. Yeats loved Dante, and in *La Vita Nuova* you have love eating the heart of the poet. And I'm sure Yeats loved *La Vita Nuova*.

Braziller: In *The Wild Swans at Coole*, and particularly in the short poem *Memory*, he tells us what the poem is through an image.

Grennan: That's right.

Braziller: He tells us his deepest theme through a picture.

Grennan: That's right. And I mean in that sense Yeats is a kind of architectural imagist, because he mixes architecture and image so beautifully.

Braziller: And, as you point out, the music here too—

Grennan: Yeah. There's a very early sketch that Yeats did when he was a kid. He was nine years old or ten years old. I just came across it there in the biography. And it's of a church and a little cottage—and there are pictures by his brother and his two sisters as well in there all over the place, but Yeats' is fantastically organized. And what I loved in some ways is the architectural power within which he has a great deal of fluent movement. In many ways at the heart of Yeats stylistically or technically is a mastery of syntax—his muscularity of syntax. He said himself that he has only tried to revise towards a more impassioned syntax, always. He's always looking. And syntax is that which contains. I mean it's that in which an enormous amount of stuff is being held. Yeats' syntax, which he learned from people like John Donne and so on, is remarkable, and you can see in this poem, even that early, how syntactically it's elegant.

Metrically it's much simpler than poems we're going to see. And the whole thing is going to be rather simpler. But the other thing that we'd say, and then we'll move on to the next poem, because we can't exhaust this, is that it's an almost impersonal voice. It doesn't give biographical data. It gives feeling, and so he manages to, from very early on—and it becomes more extravagant, more elaborate and more powerful later—but he manages to find a way to deliver private emotion in a public voice. He was pleased by some critic in America saying that his was a public manner. Indeed public manner—not as a rhetorician, but as an orator, there's a curious mix of the private dilemma being given oratorical, operatic almost, embodiment in some ways. I think we'll see that in other ones.

Braziller: Now, this is a very early one. Remarkable for when he wrote it—a very famous poem, a poem many people memorize and never forget. But now suddenly we'll jump forward to some real masterpieces. Would you like to read *The Wild Swans at Coole*?

Grennan: *Wild Swans*, yeah. I'll read *The Wild Swans*. Okay. This is—well, I won't say it until after I've finished it. Well, I will say a little bit about it, in so far as Coole is where his great patron and friend Lady Gregory had her big house. She was—and this is something to remember—Anglo-Irish, and Yeats came from the Anglo-Irish. So in Ireland there is the native Irish and the Anglo-Irish, and the attempt at reconciliation of the two in the new state. Coole was the place Yeats went as his haven and his retreat. There was a lake. It's an odd lake, because it disappears and then it comes back. It's called a turlough. They're all over the west of Ireland because it's a certain kind of landscape, which may account for the fact that in the early draft of the poem the lake is dry, but in the later draft it's brimming. So that's a curious fact as Yeats changes and he sees it in two different ways.

So the other thing to remember is that he's written it in 1917, not long after he proposed for the 100th time to Maud Gonne—and then not long after that he proposed to her daughter. Both of them said no. I mean, she said no, and then the daughter, Iseult Gonne, whom he was passionate about for many years, led him on to a certain degree, but not to the point of marriage.

Braziller: Yeah, that's a very important point. I was going to mention it afterwards—the poem does not say directly what it's about. To know this little biographical piece helps us appreciate the poem, even though we'll see that it's completely within the poem. It'll make it quicker.

Grennan: Yeah. I think it's important, too, because a certain kind of lyricism uses a subject or an image charged with feeling that isn't part of the literal element in the poem. So you get this feeling for something and say, why is that feeling there? Anyway, *The Wild Swans at Coole*:

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine and fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me
Since I first made my count;
I saw, before I had well finished,
All suddenly mount
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,
And now my heart is sore.
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,
Trod with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,
They paddle in the cold,
Companionable streams or climb the air;
Their hearts have not grown old;
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water
Mysterious, beautiful;
Among what rushes will they build,
By what lake's edge or pool
Delight men's eyes, when I awake some day
To find they have flown away?

We'll talk. Michael will say things about it, too, but to me it's an impeccable poem, metrically, acoustically. It's one of the most gorgeous acoustic performances of such patent simplicity and

pellucid qualities. It's beyond criticism in many ways. But we'll have a go anyway. Well, we'll talk about it anyway.

Braziller: Is it a ballad?

Grennan: I think he made up this—actually, one of the first things to notice is the stanza. It's five beat, three beat, five beat, three beat. But that's not a ballad stanza, which is four and two, I guess. Or whatever the ballad stanza is. It's his own—

Braziller: And this long fifth line.

Grennan: And the fifth line is longer, although “upon the brimming water among the stones” is still a pentameter line. “Are nine and fifty swans”—it's a pentameter and a trimeter line I suppose, the five beats, three beats. Roughly. Because the lovely thing is the fluency with which he moves, and you hear it as meter, but it ain't meter. It's not a meter you can actually fix. It's fundamentally a kind of iambic, but it's not fixed. But it's gorgeous. To me, to hear a poem like this is to hear the way speech and song are actually porous to one another, because it becomes so metrically, so lyrically fluent, and at the same time it is somebody talking. “The trees are in their autumn beauty.” It's simple, it's straightforward, it's idiomatic, and yet it's beautiful in its fluency and in its lyrical kind of containment. The other thing that I notice, by the way—Michael, I don't know if you noticed when you were doing it—it's a six line poem, but there's a missing rhyme in each stanza.

Braziller: Yeah.

Grennan: There's only two—it's a, b, c, b, d, d. Isn't it? Dry and sky, beauty and water. And me, finished, creatures and twilight, sore and shore. Do you see?

Braziller: Right, right.

Grennan: It's a, b, c, b. So you expect—he used the six line stanza often, but usually he'd be a, b, a, b, c, c, or something like that. But this is curious. And everything about this poem is about odd man out. And then you think of the emotional stuff. I mean swans mate for life. If there are 59, use your ability—

Braziller: Yes.

Grennan: So that's one thing to think about. But also I looked at some of the drafts of the poem, and it is quite amazing, because the swans were five and 40 dream creatures at one time. Five and 42, he had another time. He got them married. And another time was 59, and then it was nine and 50. And there's something wonderfully plangent about nine and 50. But, one other thing quite amusing to say about it was Yeats wasn't a great describer. He's a great evoker. But there's a very amusing story about Stephen Spencer going to Coole, knocking on the door and asking for Lady Gregory, and the servant says, “Oh, she's down by the lake counting the swans for Willie.” So he got 59. My point is that, as Yeats himself would say, out of such things this great lyric evolved, is generated. I'm sure there are other things to say. Michael?

Braziller: No, I'd just point out how the poem begins with this beautiful description and gradually grows, and by stanza two begins to get slightly more personal.

Grennan: Yes. He sets the landscape, and then it's the self, right?

Braziller: Yeah. But it not only gets descriptive, it gets very personal. He turns to a kind of mournful nostalgia for his early years, but then something else. He throws out something else. His heart is sore and "all's changed."

Grennan: Yeah.

Braziller: Now, what is that about? What in the last 19 years—what is he talking about? "All's changed/my heart is sore." He doesn't say what it is.

Grennan: Right. Right. One presumes it has to do with his passions, his love. He was a young man in 1898. He wasn't all that young. He was over 30, but 1898 is 19 years back, is that correct?

Braziller: Yes.

Grennan: Right. So in the '90s he's thinking of himself as a young poet. He is in 1917, he is 50, 52. I mean it is age.

Braziller: But isn't what's changed the sort of optimism, hopefulness about a certain condition—

Grennan: Absolutely.

Braziller: That he might have had as a young man, he doesn't feel now.

Grennan: That's right.

Braziller: But isn't the secret to it in the next stanza? Is there sort of an envy of the swans?

Grennan: Yeah, absolutely.

Braziller: Is he beginning to compare certain qualities in his description of them to his own—

Grennan: No question. Yeah, he sees this image in the natural world. And I would say one of the poems that stands behind it—I think there's Wordsworth, there's a bit of Shelley. There's a famous picture of a swan in Shelley's poem called *Alastor*, which I won't bother you with, but it's there, as they say. Anyway, it's a very famous description of the swan, and I think he takes it from there as he takes it in *The Tower*. There's another swan in *The Tower*, remember.

Braziller: Yes, that swims out upon the—that's great. Yeah. The swan song, almost.

Grennan: The image of the swan for Yeats—yes. And in this case, unwearied still is that sense of love. The other poem, I should say, that stands behind this is surely Keats's *Nightingale*, in which the bird becomes the eternal recurrence of possibility.

Braziller: Right.

Grennan: Whereas the natural man, the ordinary guy, the human person exists in a linear way in which all gets changed. Remember that great third stanza in the Keats poem—oh, what is it? “The weariness, the fever and the fret, here where men sit and hear each other groan.” The bird is free of all that, and these birds are also free of the feeling of the poet that he has changed in time and time has changed him. And they are unwearied still. I love that word “still” in this poem. It occurs a number of times. Still water. Still as a temporal thing—it’s kind of like the birds are frozen in time or they’re outside time on this stilled water, and they can still be lovers, for example, is what he says here.

Braziller: I think the key thing is loved by lover. So that is a comparison to his grief and disappointment, I think, as you pointed out originally. And it’s done all through tone and the musicality and his great syntax and all the things you’re talking about. It can almost easily be missed, and yet it’s central to the poem.

Grennan: It seems so simple to start with, and yet it’s a poem of profound feeling and, when you look at it, it talks about the present, the past, and the future. It’s interesting to see what he does in drafts, because in one of the drafts—the poem that was published in the magazine first, in *Poetry* or somewhere—what is now the last stanza used to be the third stanza. And the last stanza was “unwearied still, lover by lover.” And the third stanza ended with that slightly melancholy feel of the swans as full of passion and conquest and forever young, you might say.

Braziller: Right, because in a way the final stanza is a little bit more conventional, or a little less interesting, than the “lover by lover” stanza.

Grennan: I agree. Except for the fact that it points to the future. It opens the poem at the end, rather than closing it off, which the other ending would be. That’s why drafts are interesting to look at.

Braziller: Yeah.

Grennan: Right? To see what are the choices. It’s a time you can get behind the poet and say, what choices are being made and why? It’s one of the few times you can actually say the poet’s intention is such and such. He changed that in order to end on this peculiar note—will they build when I’m not around to see them anymore?

Braziller: Yeah.

Grennan: But it is projecting into the future, and in that sense the poem opens up instead of closing down at the end, which I find in a five stanza poem to treat past, present and future so

simply and so compressed. I think it's the condensation in Yeats that I love, among other things—that sense of lyrical compression.

Braziller: And, again, tonally, that last stanza reminds me even of the previous poem, when you have “how love fled in haste upon the mountains.” That’s another feeling of flight, of this tremendous dynamic, this passionate dynamic of “we have it only so long.”

Grennan: That’s right.

Braziller: And then in *The Tower* we’ll discuss how he deals with that problem.

Grennan: That’s right. No question.

Braziller: When the body hangs around and the—

Grennan: To mention *The Nightingale*—at the end of *The Nightingale*, remember, “Fled is that music, do I wake or sleep”? Bang. The bird is gone, over the hills, through the valleys, to the next glade and so on. It’s a bit like Yeats devoured, digested and made his influences invisible. I mean he digests them so well, but Keats, the Romantics and Wordsworth and Shelley are all over Yeats when you start to pick at it in some ways. But they’ve been digested to such a degree that you’d hardly know they were there. And he wouldn’t want you to know they were there, I think, in some ways.

Now we’re doing *Memory*, aren’t we?

Braziller: Yeah, *Memory*. This is an absolutely—I mean this is one of the greatest short poems, at least in my opinion. It’s incredible. *Memory*.

I’ll just throw out, too, so I don’t forget—in *The Tower* one of the central questions he asks himself is does the imagination dwell the most upon a woman won or a woman lost? It’s one of the great questions. I throw that out because here we have similar tonalities and a different view of a similar profound emotional feeling.

One had a lovely face,
And two or three had charm,
But charm and face were in vain
Because the mountain grass
Cannot but keep the form
Where the mountain hare has lain.

Now, immediately I’ll say we saw with *The Wild Swans at Coole* that through images and through all of his genius he states the most powerful issue, and really the most deeply intimate issue in the poem, and he does it again here magnificently. “One had a lovely face/And two or three had charm,” sounds almost like a cavalier or a calloused sort of lover, or a womanizer. The implication is that he had more than one or two. “One had a lovely face/And two or three had charm.” But then the poem begins to change dramatically towards this final image. “But charm

and face were in vain/Because the mountain grass cannot but keep the form/Where the mountain hare has lain.” Now, obviously what he’s saying—I mean I’ve read this over the years many times and I don’t know how obvious it is. But it’s one of the most brilliant descriptions of the impact a strong personality can make upon another person. So from this cavalier kind of beginning it turns to the most deeply loving—it’s about the enormous impact and impression, almost sensuous or sexual, of the hare lying, making a nest. It’s felt so physically, but it’s about the impression, the unforgettable impression, presumably a woman had upon him, and that nothing will ever compare. That certainly is biographical.

Grennan: Yeah, one presumes. Again, like Michael says, it’s the ability to generalize his particular experience. And yet not be autobiographical in some factual way, because he explodes it into an image. The image is all of ours. We hold, we all possess the image, and his experience has been distilled and then released into the image. It’s the way his manner can be both intimate and at the same time have this sort of dignity of the impersonal. Patrick Cavanaugh, an Irish poet after Yeats, said that poetry is the only place a man can confess with dignity. I think Yeats might have been thinking about it in that way to some degree—

Braziller: Well you could call it universality.

Grennan: Yeah.

Braziller: It’s the emotional power to deal with our most personal experiences, and I would even say the psychological, developmental experiences and the crisis of development. It’s unparalleled, his humanism—he’s like a friend of the reader.

Grennan: Yeah.

Braziller: He reaches out in a way that, and maybe this is close to what you’re saying. It’s not confessional or personal. He’s talking of a large feeling he may be having, but he’s telling us, not that it’s all right, but that it’s—he makes us a friend.

Grennan: Yeah, I think that’s true. He’s entirely solipsistic in certain ways. He’s entirely self-possessed and self-referential, but not self-regarding. He is able to generate images that are shared. Like you were saying, he shares them with us. There is that ability to generalize and not be autobiographical. It’s poetry of emotional revelation, but it’s not confessional—compare it to Plath, compare it to Lowell or Berryman, all of whom are influenced by Yeats, one might add. You’re working in a different zone, I presume, of utterance, but you’re working in recognizable biographical matter, particularly with Lowell, let’s say. Yeats has digested it and then he gives it back as image in some way. His imagination is the mountain grass. I love the way he uses the word “form” there, which actually is the technical word for the nest of a hare. But, of course, it’s so many other things too. I mean Yeats isn’t one for puns much of the time, except maybe in one of the poems in *The Tower*, because a pun might be seen as cheap. But in this case he is actually using a pun, because the mountain grass cannot keep the form where the mountain hare has lain. The hare was terribly important. The Irish hare, by the way, is a unique creature. It’s a leftover of the ice age. It’s different form other hares. So I insist on the Irish hare’s uniqueness. But for Yeats it is also a mythic creature. It’s big in Celtic mythology. And the hare was a goddess, and a

woman shape changer became a hare very often. I think there's a tiny kind of specific density here that's wonderful. Who is he talking about? Is he referring to Iseult Gonne as a hare—the daughter? One had a lovely face—he was in love with Olivia Shakespeare, who had a gorgeous face, like a Renaissance medallion, he says. I don't know what the two or three with charm had. God knows—maybe two or 300. Charm and face were in vain. Again, it's Yeats' ability to generalize and to be what I would call courtly in the exposure of his own vulnerability. Because it's about vulnerability. It's about being impressed—

Braziller: Yeah, but I mean in a certain way this could be treated as a tragic episode. This was devastating to him. And he makes it—

Grennan: He stamps it.

Braziller: He stamps it, and shares it. And shares it without solipsism.

Grennan: That's right. Because this poem is also written around 1917, when *Wild Swans* and all that emotional stuff is taking place. Incidentally, that's also when he got married, neither to Maud Gonne nor her daughter, but to Georgiana Hyde-Lees. Is she the hare? I don't know. She's probably not, because in another poem he has her as a speckled cat and Iseult Gonne as a hare. I think the word wild is terribly important in here, too, isn't it? No, it's not in here. Sorry, it was in the *Wild Swans*. But the wild hare—the hare as a sort of untrammelled creature.

Braziller: And it's also this sense that a living man is blind and drinks his drop, this sense of we're animals.

Grennan: Creatures.

Braziller: We're creatures, and when she is old and gray, she might have made a mistake, but she followed her creature.

Grennan: There's a kind of gesture-y quality about Yeats that's utterly fatal if you try to get it as a poet. "One had a lovely face." Imagine someone saying that. Imagine John Ashbury saying that.

Audience: What makes it so great is, what is that hare? What's he talking about? In every one of his poems, he's saying something that you really can't figure out. It's so deep. It's symbolic. It's real, it's concrete, and yet what is it?

Grennan: What's the exact nature? That's what I was saying about the charge of feeling, that you can feel and a certain kind of ponderous—not ponderous—but the depth of the poem, like you say.

All right, I suppose we should move on—

Braziller: Yeah, and then paradoxically he was so versatile that in a poem like *The Tower* and *Dialogue of Self and Soul* we begin to hear rhetoric, we begin to hear ideas, we begin to hear theories, and yet mixed in with all of—

Grennan: Is the real stuff just like this. Yeah, I mean we see *The Tower* now, but the three poems we've just done are a kind of prologue because in *The Tower* something very different is going to happen. One of the things that happens—well, maybe we'll read it first.

Braziller: Let's just read it. You were going to do one. I'll do the long two and you do the long three, okay?

Grennan: Okay. So we'll start *The Tower*. That was the cover of the book *The Tower*, just so that you know what he was talking about, or where he was. He's up in the battlements. He bought it in 1916, and he bought it to be a kind of symbol of his work, interestingly enough, so that he could live in a symbol. That was Yeats all over. The whole landscape is a mass of symbols and images. And he was big enough to be able to manage that.

Anyway, we'll read it, and then we'll talk about it. It's in the west of Ireland. *The Tower*:

What shall I do with this absurdity –
O heart, O troubled heart – this caricature,
Decrepit age that has been tied to me
As to a dog's tail?
Never had I more
Excited, passionate, fantastical
Imagination, nor an ear and eye
That more expected the impossible –
No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly,
Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulbin's back
And had the livelong summer day to spend.
It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend
Until imagination, ear and eye,
Can be content with argument and deal
In abstract things; or be derided by
A sort of battered kettle at the heel.

Braziller: *II*:

I pace upon the battlements and stare
On the foundations of a house, or where
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;
And send imagination forth
Under the day's declining beam, and call
Images and memories
From ruin or from ancient trees,

For I would ask a question of them all.

Beyond that ridge lived Mrs. French, and once
When every silver candlestick or sconce
Lit up the dark mahogany and the wine,
A serving-man, that could divine
That most respected lady's every wish,
Ran and with the garden shears
Clipped an insolent farmer's ears
And brought them in a little covered dish.

Some few remembered still when I was young
A peasant girl commended by a song,
Who'd lived somewhere upon that rocky place,
And praised the colour of her face,
And had the greater joy in praising her,
Remembering that, if walked she there,
Farmers jostled at the fair
So great a glory did the song confer.

And certain men, being maddened by those rhymes,
Or else by toasting her a score of times,
Rose from the table and declared it right
To test their fancy by their sight;
But they mistook the brightness of the moon
For the prosaic light of day –
Music had driven their wits astray –
And one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone.

Strange, but the man who made the song was blind;
Yet, now I have considered it, I find
That nothing strange; the tragedy began
With Homer that was a blind man,
And Helen has all living hearts betrayed.
O may the moon and sunlight seem
One inextricable beam,
For if I triumph I must make men mad.

And I myself created Hanrahan
And drove him drunk or sober through the dawn
From somewhere in the neighbouring cottages.
Caught by an old man's juggleries
He stumbled, tumbled, fumbled to and fro
And had but broken knees for hire
And horrible splendour of desire;
I thought it all out twenty years ago:

Good fellows shuffled cards in an old bawn;
And when that ancient ruffian's turn was on
He so bewitched the cards under his thumb
That all but the one card became
A pack of hounds and not a pack of cards,
And that he changed into a hare.
Hanrahan rose in frenzy there
And followed up those baying creatures towards –

O towards I have forgotten what – enough!
I must recall a man that neither love
Nor music nor an enemy's clipped ear
Could, he was so harried, cheer;
A figure that has grown so fabulous
There's not a neighbour left to say
When he finished his dog's day:
An ancient bankrupt master of this house.

Before that ruin came, for centuries,
Rough men-at-arms, cross-gartered to the knees
Or shod in iron, climbed the narrow stairs,
And certain men-at-arms there were
Whose images, in the Great Memory stored,
Come with loud cry and panting breast
To break upon a sleeper's rest
While their great wooden dice beat on the board.

As I would question all, come all who can;
Come old, necessitous, half-mounted man;
And bring beauty's blind rambling celebrant;
The red man the juggler sent
Through God-forsaken meadows; Mrs. French,
Gifted with so fine an ear;
The man drowned in a bog's mire,
When mocking muses chose the country wench.

Did all old men and women, rich and poor,
Who trod upon these rocks or passed this door,
Whether in public or in secret rage
As I do now against old age?
But I have found an answer in those eyes
That are impatient to be gone;
Go therefore; but leave Hanrahan,
For I need all his mighty memories.

Old lecher with a love on every wind,
Bring up out of that deep considering mind
All that you have discovered in the grave,
For it is certain that you have
Reckoned up every unforeknown, unseeing
Plunge, lured by a softening eye,
Or by a touch or a sigh,
Into the labyrinth of another's being;

Does the imagination dwell the most
Upon a woman won or woman lost?
If on the lost, admit you turned aside
From a great labyrinth out of pride,
Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought
Or anything called conscience once;
And that if memory recur, the sun's
Under eclipse and the day blotted out.

Grennan: *III*:

It is time that I wrote my will;
I choose upstanding men
That climb the streams until
The fountain leap, and at dawn
Drop their cast at the side
Of dripping stone; I declare
They shall inherit my pride,
The pride of people that were
Bound neither to Cause nor to State,
Neither to slaves that were spat on,
Nor to the tyrants that spat,
The people of Burke and of Grattan
That gave, though free to refuse –
Pride, like that of the morn,
When the headlong light is loose,
Or that of the fabulous horn,
Or that of the sudden shower
When all streams are dry,
Or that of the hour
When the swan must fix his eye
Upon a fading gleam,
Float out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream
And there sing his last song.
And I declare my faith:
I mock Plotinus' thought

And cry in Plato's teeth,
Death and life were not
Till man made up the whole,
Made lock, stock and barrel
Out of his bitter soul,
Aye, sun and moon and star, all,
And further add to that
That, being dead, we rise,
Dream and so create
Translunar paradise.
I have prepared my peace
With learned Italian things
And the proud stones of Greece,
Poet's imaginings
And memories of love,
Memories of the words of women,
All those things whereof
Man makes a superhuman,
Mirror-resembling dream.

As at the loophole there
The daws chatter and scream,
And drop twigs layer upon layer.
When they have mounted up,
The mother bird will rest
On their hollow top,
And so warm her wild nest.

I leave both faith and pride
To young upstanding men
Climbing the mountain-side,
That under bursting dawn
They may drop a fly;
Being of that metal made
Till it was broken by
This sedentary trade.

Now shall I make my soul,
Compelling it to study
In a learned school
Till the wreck of body,
Slow decay of blood,
Testy delirium
Or dull decrepitude,
Or what worse evil come –
The death of friends, or death

Of every brilliant eye
That made a catch in the breath –
Seem but the clouds of the sky
When the horizon fades;
Or a bird's sleepy cry
Among the deepening shades.

Right. Do you want to say something first?

Braziller: Okay.

Grennan: Shall I? The poem's such a journey, isn't it? And one of the things we were talking about—you say it just to say it. It's a poem unlike any of the poems we've read so far because of its parts, because of its fragmentariness, because of its randomness almost, the way it encloses randomness, and because of its meandering. The winding stair inside the tower seems to me a good image for what Yeats is at. The meander of the stair and the fixity of the tower are two images that are bound in a poem like this, you might say, formally, as the poem meanders. I love that moment where he says, "Towards—o towards I have forgotten what."

Braziller: Yeah.

Grennan: And it's a perfect example that the poem—

Braziller: Well he's just asked one of the longest questions in English literature.

Grennan: Exactly.

Braziller: Actually, there are two questions.

Grennan: That's right. He just goes on. But it's a lovely example, isn't it, of the poem as the process of making the poem, and making the poem brings him from being afraid that he'll have to deal with Plato and Plotinus to mocking Plato and Plotinus. And finding a way to turn age into something, right?

Braziller: Yeah. You could say it's a journey of sensibility, where it begins with a certain problem and he has to grow into or sail into—

Grennan: That's right. That's interesting you say sail, because this poem in the collection called *The Tower* takes place after *Sailing to Byzantium*, which is the point in which he steps out of history. The first four poems in *The Tower* are dated, and Yeats didn't do that before. It's very interesting. There's 1928, 1927, or '26, and then 1919, so they're in reverse order. So he's doing something very curious about art and history. But *Sailing to Byzantium* has established the golden bird outside history singing of what is past and passing and to come. And the next thing, *The Tower*, plunges him back into personal history—

Braziller: Right.

Grennan: Into aging, into process, into decay, into his own life, I suppose.

Braziller: Well why don't we try to go through it the best we can? Let's try to characterize—I'll throw out a characterization of Part I.

Grennan: All right.

Braziller: As a passionate, spirited person in the humiliating predicament that he must contemplate putting away earlier forms of pleasure and—

Grennan: And poetry. I mean he's really thinking of putting away poetry, lyricism. And instead of lyricism, he's going to get philosophy. A terrible exchange, one would say.

Braziller: Yeah. "Pack the muse"—you're absolutely right. But he comes back to the muse again in the last section—

Grennan: Exactly, that's the whole thing—

Braziller: What does he say—"the sedentary trade"?

Grennan: That's right. Yeah. You're absolutely right about that.

Braziller: So, yes, he's contemplating, because of age, giving up all the pleasures and reading Plato.

Grennan: That's right.

Braziller: And then Plotinus.

Grennan: Abstractors, he would say. Idealists, he would say. He's not right, necessarily, right? But that's Yeats. He doesn't have to be right. He just has to be Yeats.

Braziller: Now, Part II is an abrupt change in tone.

Grennan: That's right. But before you leave Part I, don't leave the absurdity of the beginning, which is the heart and the caricature, and the abstraction—decrepit age tied to him like the dog's tail.

Braziller: Yeah, yeah.

Grennan: Which comes out again with the battered kettle at the heel.

Braziller: Right.

Grennan: You know, it's wonderful how what seems casual because of the speech of the poem, and it's again an extraordinary example because it's in a, b, a, b, a, b, a, b, and so it's down the line formally, but at the same time it's just like speech. What'll I do with this absurdity? It's so idiomatically colloquial—not really colloquial, but idiomatically forceful. And the way, again, he explodes an abstraction into an image—age becomes a battered kettle at the heel. And by the way, he's only 60. He felt things deeply. I believe he's only 60 when he's writing this poem. It's terrifying to think.

Audience: That was a lot older then.

Grennan: Ah, yes. That's what they say, right?

Braziller: But he maintains this wonderful colloquial kind of intimate tone through the more regular stanzas.

Grennan: Yes, I agree.

Braziller: That come next, and that's one of the great achievements of them, that he's talking person to person and yet maintaining regular rhyme and line length and so forth.

Grennan: Oh, yeah, and you can see these eight line stanzas—I think they're eight lines. Three and five are eight. And it's a sort of octava rima, so it's a, a, b, b, c, d, d, c, so it's two quatrains.

Braziller: Now, he begins in part II a kind of a nest building—actually, we have the nest, the hare's nest, and then we have the daw's nest at the end—

Grennan: Jackdaws, those are—you know the jackdaws, right? A jackdaw is a kind of crow. It's a small crow. In Ireland there are jackdaws and—what's the other one?

Audience: Ravens.

Grennan: Well, ravens, yes.

Audience: Rooks.

Grennan: Rooks, thanks. It takes a poet. So nest-building is dead on. That's what this poem is about, I suspect.

Braziller: And identity building, which is an extension of that. But from this immediate Part I, this statement of what he considers to be a humiliating crisis, he begins a shift in tone in Part II, and he begins, I guess, to summon up, or to bring close to him into consciousness, the things that he holds most dear and perhaps give him the greatest sense of identity and strength to deal with this crisis. That's what we were talking before, this movement.

Grennan: Right.

Braziller: I love the line, “Beyond that ridge lived Mrs. French.” If you talk of a colloquial—

Grennan: That’s right.

Braziller: It’s so simple, but within it he is saying, “My answer to this crisis of identity is to look right down the street.” It’s just in the very simplicity of beyond that ridge, as if he’s pointing. It’s the familiarity, the sense of community, and this is where he turns first, the sensibility turns first.

Grennan: It’s trying to summarize his life, too, in its landscape, I suppose. And he’s built this tower—he hasn’t built it, he has bought it. It was built in the 12th century, or the 13th century. But he is trying to establish some solidity of presence that will counteract the decay process, which he feels in the first beat of the poem. And it’s interesting to look at, because you could hear from what Michael is saying and from what he was reading, Mrs. French belongs to the Anglo-Irish.

Audience: Double “f” French?

Grennan: It would have been double “f,” but there is another kind. There is a double “f” French, too, but in this case there wasn’t. She was 18th century Anglo-Irish. Next stanza is the peasant—Raftery was a poet writing in Irish who wrote about a woman called Mary Hines, and Mary Hines is a peasant. So you have the two cultural icons for Yeats—the Anglo-Irish and the peasantry, each of which he thought could be established as the ground for the new culture. Of course, he’s missing a little bit, namely the Catholic middle class, for one thing, which he doesn’t try to include. But it’s a very Yeatsian thing to establish as his nest the Anglo-Irish on one hand and the peasants on the other—the poor Irish, all of them in this place in East Galway. That’s the song. And there is some talk about poetry again, isn’t there? Mary Hines was the kind of Helen of Irish poetry, of Gaelic—Raftery was a peasant poet. He was a singer. He was a blind man, and he wandered around, and Lady Gregory collected him, but she was the Helen of Troy of Irish peasant poetry. And you can see she’s driven men to die. They go off into the bog and they drown.

What he’s also referring to is his *Celtic Twilight* book from the 1890s, I guess, which has to do with that—Hanrahan and so on. So those are his cultural references, I suppose, yeah?

Braziller: Yeah, and there are these joyous associations and comic tales, filled with magical power of historical personal memory. There’s sort of a hierarchy of Mrs. French that he found very appealing, and a certain balance of the common and the more refined.

Grennan: That’s what he hoped for, to reconcile the two zones of Irish culture.

Audience: Well there’s hardly room for reconciliation when the butler cuts—

Grennan: Exactly. I love that. Well, don’t use reconciliation. Use cohabitation. These conditions exist, and for Yeats the contradiction is perfectly easy.

Braziller: And if they generate tales that are told down through the years then they’ve accomplished a great deal, because his major concern of the poem is the fading of identity and

the fading of people and the fading of memory. So if these tall tales and these meanderings or wanderings, as you call them, result in some exaggerations, at least it gives him a sense, it gives the entire community a sense of identity and a sense of memory.

Grennan: In a certain way, too, Yeats was indifferent to exactitude, and what he wanted was things to make a certain kind of sense. The butler cutting the ear off—I love the line, “gifted with so fine an ear,” which is, again, Yeats being unlikely, Yeats being funny. But the movement between Anglo-Irish, Normans, who founded it, the peasant landscape around the peasant cultural landscape, or the human landscape around it, and then that old man, the bankrupt. It’s a funny presence, kind of like a ghost of decay and degeneration, which he also includes.

Braziller: You’re talking about the bankrupt—

Grennan: Yeah, the bankrupt master of the house.

Braziller: I think that’s so important.

Grennan: Yeah.

Braziller: That’s near the end of the question. You’ve skipped ahead a few stanzas.

Grennan: That’s right.

Braziller: “There’s not a neighbor left to say/Where he finished his long day/And ancient bankrupt—” I think that’s the fear of what might happen—not the fear, but it’s a tone that runs throughout the poem of this fading away of identity, this rune.

Grennan: I agree.

Braziller: And that people can be harried and talked about one minute, and then several decades later forgotten about entirely.

Grennan: The poem kind of, in saying things like, “enough! I must recall—” and “O towards I have forgotten what,” is itself an image of decay, of dwindling. But it’s lovely, for me anyway, the way what Yeats achieves as a modernist here is to include the negative in the process of making this very powerful architecturally composed piece out of bits and scraps, almost. That seems to me to be a modernist possibility that he has achieved on his own terms. I mean Yeats and modernism are a vexed kind of question, but that would be part of it. And then we get on to the questions. What are the questions basically?

Audience: He feels, well, maybe I should no longer be this great poet and become wise like Plato.

Grennan: Yeah, right.

Audience: And yet he’s still this great poet.

Grennan: Yeah, and he's making stories.

Audience: Not only that, he's a great poet, and whether I have the wisdom that, say, Plato has, this is who I am and I am the poet.

Grennan: Yeah, well, I am the poet—at the end he kind of ends up in Zen land after a fashion, doesn't he? He moves east from Plato and Plotinus. But you're right in the assertion. Let's go from those actual questions, "Did all old men and women, rich and poor/Who trod upon these rocks or passed this door/Whether in public or in secret rage/As I do now, against old age?" That's the question.

Braziller: "But I have found an answer."

Grennan: That's right. What is the answer, do you think?

Braziller: Yes. The answer is yes.

Grennan: The answer must be yes. And so okay, the answer is yes, let's move on.

Braziller: It's a simple one.

Grennan: That was a simple question.

Braziller: And what a profound answer it is. If you think he's summoned up every neighbor and every precious memory, and he says, did they all go through it too? Did they rage also? And then he says, yes, obviously they did.

Grennan: There's no double entendre here. It's just—old age is bad. Not to use the colloquialism, which we would say—

Braziller: And maybe there's a Yeatsian humility here too in the sense that as even the great poet he's telling us that no one can escape—he's certainly not escaping it.

Grennan: So here's old age. Yes, bad news. He gets the answer.

Braziller: Right.

Grennan: He gets the answer and he doesn't even bother telling us. I have got my answer, he says. "But I have found an answer in those eyes/That are impatient to be gone." They're gone. The ghosts go. Yeats is a great summoner of ghosts, and this is a poem about ghost summoning, clearly, too. And then he dismisses them—"But leave the one I created."

Braziller: Oh, God. Now, this—it's like things aren't bad enough. Old age isn't bad enough, raging against it, but there's something else that goes on all the time anyways. It's an enduring mystery of love's uncertainty, the travails, the questions, opportunities missed. You know, we've

seen them introduced in the earlier poems. They continue throughout life, and they make it rather a humiliating—

Grennan: Up to a point—he's angry, he's bitter and he's still a randy old man, too. "Old lecher with a love on every wind," he says about Hanrahan. And he starts to talk about himself here too, because I always thought that the next stanza was, "admit you turned aside"—funny I thought he was talking to himself.

Braziller: Sure.

Grennan: So the poem is full of swerves—swerves of subject, swerves of addressee. He's talking to Hanrahan, "Old lecher with a love on every wind," but then he says, "Does the imagination dwell the most...admit you turned aside." Who? Hanrahan? No, Yeats.

Braziller: And what is he saying about himself? He's saying that it wasn't just fate or it wasn't a woman that did something to him. It was something within him that brought this loss about.

Grennan: It's probably the most humiliating thing he says about himself.

Braziller: Yes, and the most solipsistic.

Grennan: Yeah.

Braziller: The most genuine—I mean not genuinely solipsistic, but it universalizes a solipsistic question that many of us ask ourselves many times.

Grennan: Yes. Did you turn aside "from a great labyrinth out of pride?" And he talks about the labyrinth of another's being. It's an extraordinary image, isn't it?

Grennan: To inhabit the labyrinth of another's being—that's what love is, presumably.

Braziller: Of course, he doesn't repeat the word accidentally, because the labyrinth, in Hanrahan, is the delight of another's being—the pleasure of being lured towards another. He turns away from a great labyrinth and that's a disappointment. It's a different usage of the word and he emphasizes the difference.

Grennan: That's right. Were you afraid? Were you too proud? Yeats is a great one for self-flagellation. And that's probably what enhances his greatness for us—the degree to which he is so honest about himself. He is so unsparing, and yet he can do it and not lose status or stature in our eyes because he does it in this manner that is itself a form of oratorical public display. There's drama in Yeats all the time. He is always, in a certain sense, on stage, even at his most private, as here, and "under eclipse and the day blotted out." You get that kind of ringing, operatic kind of conclusion.

Braziller: And coming at this stage of life for him this is a pretty despondent kind of state of awareness.

Grennan: But then this is where it began, right?

Braziller: Next, in Part III, the nest building, he tries to fight back.

Grennan: Yeah. Well he does it very powerfully. “I declare, I declare, I proclaim, I declare.”

Braziller: Right.

Grennan: “I make my will,” “I make my soul.” I mean when you consider the verb forms in the last part, you’re in the presence of somebody of extraordinary willpower. He’s making his will; that’s a pun, too, presumably. It’s his will making, as well as making a will. And then in the end he says not only will I make a will, I’ll make my soul. And do you remember Keats, who talks about the veil of soul making—that’s what man has to go through, that’s what a human being has to go through in order to become human? He says it’s not a veil of tears; it’s a veil of soul making. That’s where we live. And Yeats is making a soul here. Others have said it’s a phrase, an Irish phrase, but I think the Keatsian reference is certainly there. And he makes his soul the way the bird makes a nest, out of all that stuff.

Braziller: But then at the end something else begins to happen. He really, I think, begins to offer a solution. And it’s a very interesting one. Really from where he begins to talk of the daws’ chatter there seems to be the beginning of a distancing. The ending is so powerful, but it’s as if he’s letting go and as if his solution seems to be a kind of a detachment.

Grennan: Surrender, I suppose, of a kind. Psychologically, it’s very Zen, it seems to me. That’s what that last moment is—a kind of eastern quietude, almost, in that last image. When you hear that, you know, “the bird’s sleepy cry among the deepening shades.”

Braziller: But that follows right on the heels of that incredibly warm, incredibly felt thing that he’s dealt with his own crisis and predicament, but then he says there’s even worse evil will come. This is just the warmth of the man. “The death of friends, or death/Of every brilliant eye/That made a catch in the breath.” That’s the most unbearably tragic note in the poem.

Grennan: Yeah.

Braziller: But he pulls back at the end to almost a new perspective—almost seeing it all, or the need to see it all; the need to deal with it all. Not to embrace Plato, but to put it into a perspective of history maybe, or to detach himself from it in some way.

Grennan: Detachment. “Now shall I make my soul/Compelling it to study/In a learned school/Till the wreck of body.” I will study. Okay, I’ll study, but the study is on his terms. He is embracing what he rejected at the start, or what he was afraid of at the start. He’s embracing that. That’s what seems to me to be happening here. He’s embracing that, but on his own terms. And those terms are to transform that kind of abstraction of Plato and Plotinus into this kind of surrender to what is. There’s that moment at the end, “the bird’s sleepy cry” is almost Basho. It’s almost like just a normal ordinary fact being acknowledged and letting it be.

Audience: A necessity of acceptance.

Grennan: Yeah, I think that's absolutely there. Yeah.

Braziller: But it's like the opposite—all of the nest building that he does, everything that he brings to him throughout the poem, everything he summons up to give himself strength and purpose with this crisis, at the very end he realizes it's to see it from a distance, it's to realize that it's almost a fiction.

Grennan: Yeah. "Seem but the clouds of the sky."

Braziller: Yeah. It's almost a fiction, and that, in reality, is what it is. Well, not quite a fiction, but in reality it's as minor, in a certain perspective, as all of our lives.

Grennan: Yeah. I think what's lovely too about Yeats is a poem isn't summed up in its end. A poem isn't its ending. A poem is the whole of the thing, and what we have gone through. You don't read poems; you experience them. What you go through here in the experience of this poem, the happening of this poem, is an extraordinary account of a consciousness coming to terms with age and process and decay and all of those things. It's so inclusive, rather than exclusive. So we could spend another hour. We won't, but—

Braziller: Let me read—

Grennan: Yeah, go ahead.

Braziller: How about if I read *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*, Part II.

Grennan: Just Part II, right.

Braziller: And then we are definitely are going to leave time. Last time Eamon rushed his own poems, and we won't have that. We do want questions and answers. Why don't we just read these next two with a few little notes? Then you're going to read your poems.

Grennan: Yeah, right.

Braziller: And then we're going to have questions.

Grennan: Why don't we have questions, and I'll end with a couple of poems.

Braziller: Okay.

Grennan: So the second part of *Self and Soul*—just listen, those of you who are here, to how far it is removed from the end of the last poem. The last poem we've just read is the end of quiet acceptance, surrender—the necessity of acceptance, as somebody said. This one isn't going to be

like that. It's a different kind of thing. If the last is kind of surrender, this is much more taking it, coming to grips with—

Braziller: But, again, I would just stress too that his psychological insights and his awareness of the different stages of development is really a very remarkable thing.

This is Part II, and there's just one short poem after this, so bear with us.

My Self. A living man is blind and drinks his drop.
What matter if the ditches are impure?
What matter if I live it all once more?
Endure that toil of growing up;
The ignominy of boyhood; the distress
Of boyhood changing into man;
The unfinished man and his pain
Brought face to face with his own clumsiness;

The finished man among his enemies? –
How in the name of Heaven can he escape
That defiling and disfigured shape
The mirror of malicious eyes
Casts upon his eyes until at last
He thinks that shape must be his shape?
And what's the good of an escape
If honor find him in the wintry blast?

I am content to live it all again
And yet again, if it be life to pitch
Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,
A blind man battering blind men;
Or into that most fecund ditch of all,
The folly that man does
Or must suffer, if he woos
A proud woman not kindred of his soul.

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse
So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

Grennan: It's an amazing movement, isn't it, from the quietude of the last poem to this absolute need to embrace, to be content, to take everything? Everything—to take it, not to let it be, but to

actually take it. The words, “I am content,” are repeated, and it’s an extraordinary affirmation. I guess that’s the point. They are such complex affirmatives that Yeats ends in. This poem is in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, so it’s the next book. And it’s a very different tone, isn’t it?

Braziller: He looks so honestly at life. He begins by saying life is essentially—if we drop pretense, if we drop idealization—a humiliating experience, of blind men battering blind men. But yet, look at this joyous ending that he finds space for—again, almost sort of out of our control. There are two different states and they coexist, and we can drift in one and then, if we’re lucky—I’d also point out that the end has a sort of forgiveness or catharsis of one’s self.

Grennan: Doesn’t it just?

Braziller: It reminds me of the language of *Benediction*. Did you ever see that? The poem is a heavily religious poem and it’s a dialogue—it’s not by accident that he’s blessed, or everything he looks upon is blessed, or a casting out of remorse. It’s in keeping with the religious diction and situation of the poem, and it’s really, I think, brilliant. It also reminds me of those moments of getting off the analyst’s couch when it’s been one of those rare successful sessions, because it really captures sort of the capacity to forgive one’s self for the humiliating guilt trip that life often is, and to see one’s self in a fresh light. Or actually to forgive one’s self. To bless one’s self. It’s a deeply psychological poem.

Grennan: Oh, yeah. Psychological. “When such as I cast out remorse.” Because remorse was one of the—what does he say at another point? “The day’s vanity, the night’s remorse.”

Braziller: Yeah.

Grennan: I mean it’s a famous line as well in the poem. Yeats was given to remorse. It’s odd, because in Joyce, Stephen Dedalus talks about *Agenbite of Inwit*, which is remorse of conscience. And, of course, when Yeats says, “I cast out remorse,” he’s acting in an entirely un-Christian way, because remorse is one of the ways you get forgiven, right? So it’s a wonderful un-Christian moment. Yeats is, of course, a non-Christian. He’s a Pagan of his own kind. But we must laugh—I love the fact that it’s another autobiography, encapsulated in bad stuff. The ignominy of boyhood—oh, dear! The distress of boyhood changing into man—oh, my! You know?

Braziller: There it is again—you don’t stand a chance. Even if you master all the parts, you’re going to see yourself the way your enemies do; even if you can overcome the ill will of enemies, then honor can find you in a wintry blast, which means life can—what’s the expression?

Grennan: Don’t believe in muses, I think.

Braziller: Yeah.

Grennan: What I love, too, is the way, in *The Tower*, he writes one kind of autobiography—a cultural autobiography in the second part—and in this it’s a very personal autobiography. His life, his boyhood, his ignominy, all that stuff. But again, notice it’s not particular. It’s kind of

general. The ignominy of boyhood—yeah, well, I’ve had it, you’ve had it, we’ve all had it. It’s a generalization, once again. But Yeats manages to invest his generalizations with such personal passion that we feel they’re ours, but they’re also his. First of all they’re his, and then they can go on to being ours. Again, I would say this poem, in both of its parts—but in the second part in particular—is an example of what the later Yeats is: poem as thinking through. The poem isn’t the finished product of thought. The poem is the enactment of the thinking through of something. That’s what makes them great to me. We are in the presence of process, and process is what they’re about, as well as how they become to be. So it’s that feeling, when he says, “When such as I cast out remorse”—the whole sense of standing at a very different point. “Everything we look upon is blest.” Everything, we must bless, we must sing, everything. Notice it’s we.

Braziller: Yeah.

Grennan: “Such as I,” “we.” He dissolves the self, which has been so aching throughout that poem, into a communal feeling.

Braziller: Well, he writes out of, among many other things, a tremendous courage.

Grennan: That’s right.

Braziller: It’s tremendous courage to state what many people think or experience, but might not have—

Grennan: The courage, or the language, to say. Again, it’s kind of something to do with language being capable of being adequate to an occasion of extraordinary complexity, and to follow to its source. That’s what he’s done, basically.

And then the last poem is *Politics*, which we’ll just read. This was the poem Yeats chose as the last poem, but when the editors got around to it in *Last Poems*, they put *Under Ben Bulbin* at the end because it ends with his epitaph, and it was a very nice close to the book and get him under ground. But it’s very interesting, because just the day after he died, a big chunk of that poem appeared in *The Irish Times*. “Irish poets learn your trade.” From the grave you hear Yeats telling the younger poets to get on with it—but in my way. And, of course, they didn’t do that.

This is like a little coda, which he wanted to put as the very last poem as a little stamp, and it goes back to all the stuff we’ve just been saying about aging, because it says, “even so.” “I would be content to live it all”—that’s what he’s saying in this poem.

Braziller: Yeah. Cast a cold eye on life, on death—don’t take it all too seriously.

Grennan: That’s right. Plus, don’t cast a cold eye—want. You know, the last image is one of desire.

Braziller: Yeah, yeah.

Grennan: *Politics*. This is '39 he's writing this—'38, I think. So you can imagine what Europe is like in '38, right? Russia and Germany, et cetera. America, too.

'In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms'
—Thomas Mann

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics,
Yet here's a traveled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms!

Hello! I mean here's a man, a voyeur, looking out at the woman at the bus stop, basically. I mean to think of Yeats ending on that note is to see his stature is so human—

Braziller: And he's a Nobel Prize winner at this stage—long before—and to take himself so unseriously in a way—

Grennan: Oh, yeah. And the little piece I gave you on that, besides the French poem, it was an earlier thing. It just shows you how Yeats revised. You know, "Beside the window stands a girl/I cannot fix my—" it's a much lesser thing. And he revised towards music and speech and organized expression. That's enough of that.

Braziller: Questions, please? Thank you for your patience.

Grennan: If there are questions, let them fall upon not deaf ears.

Audience: What amazes me is his freedom.

Grennan: Right.

Audience: That he can use, "We are blest by everything/Everything we look upon is blest." He can say anything and it's right.

Grennan: Yeah. I think there's always that sense of power in Yeats.

Audience: A sense of power, and the ability to put it there and it's right.

Grennan: Yeah. Oh, yeah, but he gets there through drafts. If you look at his work, he revised and revised, and he was asked, why do you do revising so much? And he says, “It is myself that I remake.” There’s a great story of him and A.E.: they’re living in houses on the same street in Dublin, walking by, and A.E. says to him, “What sort of a day did you have, Willie?” And Willie says, “Great day, George, great day. Remember that line I was really working with and I couldn’t get right?” And George says, A.E. says, “Yeah, of course I remember it. It was terrifying. It was really giving you a lot of trouble.” “Well, I spent the morning getting it right. I got it right. It was just right.” “And what did you do in the afternoon?” “I changed it back.” So that was a good day’s work, right?

Audience: I’ve always wondered about the lines in *The Tower*. Is he playing on music?

Grennan: Absolutely, yeah. And dissolving, too, the most potent images we have into one—“to make men mad.”

Audience: Or maybe avoiding making men mad by printing some salutary lines.

Grennan: Yeah, that’s also a possibility. He keeps pushing us so that we can’t quite figure in a completely rational way what’s going on there. “For if I triumph I must make men mad.” What’s that mean exactly? Well, it presumably means you’ve got to escape from the rigors of the rational mind. That was his father’s notion, and that was his—to kill the rational. Not to kill it entirely, but that’s his whole engagement with the occult and with the religious possibilities and the next life and all. They were all against 18th century rationalism of a certain kind, so I think that’s part of that, too.

Braziller: I think there’s also—isn’t there the idea that if I succeed I’ll make men—that through his art he may hold out certain pleasures or possibilities that when we come back from them we can lose our minds.

Grennan: Yeah, lose our minds. Well there’s a Dionysian side of this. He wants to be Dionysian in certain ways.

Audience: Well, of course—we are not blessed by everything.

Grennan: No, no. I mean we know that, but Yeats didn’t. And he thought everything he looked on—

Braziller: But when we forgive ourselves—

Grennan: Great lies are what make great poetry.

Audience: But we’re not blessed by everything.

Braziller: No, but when we bless ourselves and we forgive ourselves, it’s such a jarring experience that we feel that we are blessed by everything.

Grennan: That's *your* poem, Samuel. But for Yeats, we are blessed by everything. Of course it's an exaggeration. But there is a sufficient amount of truth in it that says even the worst is possible. *King Lear*, you know? What's *King Lear* about? It's about those who've been blessed by nothing in the end. But the play, of course, blesses us. There is no rational answer to that, of course.

Braziller: Now Eamon is going to read a couple of his poems. We can just go on and on, but I want him to read his own work.

Grennan: Okay, I'm going to read three wee poems. One is a hare. I thought I'd read a poem that's set in the landscape of Yeats, and it has a hare. It's called *Beholding the Hare*, though it's just a description. Yeats rarely described; this is a description.

Beholding the Hare:

In the gale that's trying to take the roof off this small house,
shaking it to its rocky foundation,
the hare is making his rounds of the garden.
Slight morning light shows me ears hemmed in white,
their black points, how they flatten when the wind roars,
rise and swivel when he hunkers under the shelter of hedges
or against the dredged stones of the wall.
All he knows is the way the weather is,
how it wraps him in its fits and starts,
a sort of swirling whirly-god whose breath he must turn and turn about,
huddle from or bask in.
Now he stretches to get at a dark green leftover bramble leaf,
all else bare as sea-beaten stone,
and showing to the wind and rain its skin and bone,
tree bark bright as those black current eyes that read the world like a book,
each page changing the story, no matter what we, or the hare,
or the one ruffled chaffinch balancing between red and yellow pegs
on the clothesline can make of it.
Right now what I'm struck by is the hare's articulate singularity,
the way he's all of a piece, every particle precisely in the present moment,
from the ink tip of each ear to the chalk tuft under his raised tail,
from the fur coated ripple that's all muscle when he tenses a haunch,
to the delicate tremor his nose makes as it fetches
the rest of the world into the realm of his understanding,
that many scented evanescence in the wind of things,
what his eye can't find, nor his tongue touch,
nor the soft fingers of his fur make sense of,
nor his quick ears swiveling to every whisper,
but which the snub brown shiver button of his nose finds,
filling out his feeling for the world,
any minute of which would take me an age of translation
to carry over even a glimmer, knowing no words for his wholeness,
for all the stuff of sense registering at once on the shell of him,

how he's the kernel of its kinetic wheeling
by just being there, free of memory and forecast,
being at one with possibility like that, and not at odds,
not split in the middle and out of focus,
not feeling the very ground nerved and veined with tremor cords,
fault lines branching every which way from the lost center,
the heart itself out of tune, unable to contain itself.
Not, that is, one of us, soul searching in our skin of reason.

So I'll end with this one, because it has Yeats in it. It's the only poem of mine that has Yeats in it. But Yeats has a number of wild things. We've read some of them already. But, among other things, he says, "A poet writes always of his personal life and his finest work out of his tragedies, whatever it be, remorse, lost love or mere loneliness. He never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table. There's always a phantasmagoria. He is never the bundle of accidents and incoherence that sits down to breakfast. He has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete." That's very like the stuff we've just heard—that intended, complete thing. But I always thought, given what Yeats says there, that it'd be great to think what a sight Yeats must have been at breakfast. I thought I'd write a poem about Yeats at breakfast, but I didn't actually get him to breakfast. But I got him into the kitchen, which he probably didn't do much of. So this is called *In the Kitchen with Yeats*, and it came out, I mean it was written just when I'd gotten a new collected edition of his poems and I was trying to learn *The Wild Swans at Coole* by heart, so that comes into it, too, as a couple of lines.

Audience: Did you learn it by heart?

Grennan: I did, of course, yeah. I won't try to say it, obviously. So here we go. And it's about, for me, you know, being influenced. Harold Bloom talks about the anxiety of influence, but really influence is food. We eat our ancestors. And I think there's a part of that gets in here.

In the Kitchen with Yeats:

Since the poet is never the man who sits down to breakfast,
never that bundle of fragments, but the composed whole bloke,
buzzing iambics behind a closed door,
I suppose he wasn't one to linger if ever he visited the kitchen.
His sense of smell confined to incense, honey, wine and other emblematic fragrances.
So what will he make of me in this cottage kitchen on his birthday,
stirring a sauce for pasta, one hand holding a wooden spoon,
the other his collected poems, a fresh edition?
With one ear, I listen to the homely little splutter of tomatoes,
spices, garlic and diced onion as they bubble towards their unity of being,
and with the other I can hear the clear austere music of *The Wild Swans at Coole*,
the ache of its defeat beating through that one lost rhyme each stanza,
and through those clean life lines of his that keep cheating us out of ease,
but lead to grace.
Wooden spoon tapping the skillet, I close my eyes to get the poem by heart,
making its cold companionable manners my own as long as that music lasts,

while all the while the cottage fills to steamy brimming
with smells that distill into the air some vegetarian notion of the soul,
and fills with the ceremony of sound he stirred
into the stock of his own marrow bone soup to keep us even in lean times warm.
When I close the book and leave the sauce to simmer,
the whole place breaths a single compound smell of garlic, tomatoes, onions, oregano, pepper,
cinnamon, wild thyme, all in a base of olive oil and crowned with a leaf or two of bay.
Later, wondering how he might have relished the scent of his own ascending dinner
winding up the winding stairs, I'll spoon the wine-dark mixture over fettuccine,
sprinkle parmesan, aged nine months, prop up his book against the bowl and eat.

Braziller: Great, great. That's terrific. Are those recent?

Grennan: That one is. No, that one's quite old. Thanks.