

Amanda French. "A Strangely Useless Thing": Iseult Gonne and Yeats. *Yeats Eliot Review: A Journal of Criticism and Scholarship* 19.2 (2002): 13-24.

Unlike her more famous mother, Iseult Gonne seems actively to have sought the supporting role of muse, which is of course one reason why she has never had a biography of her own. Even with that willingness, she never gained the kind of immortality Maud Gonne did through Yeats's poetry--yet the history of Iseult's relationship with the poet is interesting. Yeats had a front-row seat for Iseult's maturation, and evidently perceived her in several ways over the course of her life: as an archetype of the compromised innocence of childhood, as a mirror image of Maud, and as the quintessence of wasted potential.

Almost all published descriptions of Iseult Gonne portray her less as a personality than as an embodiment of some abstraction, some constant companion to other, more vivid human lives. This quality of her character--or perhaps of her fate--is somehow emblemized in the story of her conception. In 1890, Maud Gonne had a son with the French journalist and agitator Lucien Millevoye. The child died a year later.¹ Yeats wrote in his autobiography that "The idea came to her that the lost child might be reborn, and she had gone back to Millevoye, in the vault under the memorial chapel. A girl child was born, now two years old" (Memoirs 133). Yeats both doubted and disapproved, but to Maud Iseult at first represented the child she had lost.

Although her date of birth is misreported as 1895 in Nancy Cardozo's biography of Maud Gonne, and in the index to Yeats's Memoirs, Iseult was actually born on August 6, 1894 (Balliett 29). She was educated at a Carmelite convent in France, in Laval, but was probably never as innocent as that fact might sentimentally imply. For one thing, she was almost certainly aware from the beginning of her illegitimacy. Although Maud passed her off to the respectable world at large as her niece--or, as in her autobiography, A Servant of the Queen, as "a charming child I

had adopted" (Servant 296)--Iseult was known to be Maud Gonne's natural daughter by a great many people. Many Dubliners suspected that Yeats was the father, but Iseult herself was acquainted with Lucien Millevoye and knew that he was her father.² Discussing Maud Gonne's life circa 1900, Nancy Cardozo writes that "Iseult was aware that Millevoye, who came for a visit now and then with gifts and a kiss, was her father. Later she considered him licentious, vaguely threatening" (197). When and why Iseult vouchsafed this opinion of her father Cardozo does not say, but it is interesting to note that there were at least two intimidating father figures in Iseult's childhood--another factor mitigating against innocence.

John MacBride, too, was a disturbingly unstable father figure. Shortly after severing her connection with Lucien Millevoye, Maud met and then toured the United States with Major John MacBride, veteran of the war in South Africa and exile from Ireland. Maud married him on February 21, 1903 (Cardozo 229). Maud later asserted that Iseult, eight years old at the time, had immediately disliked MacBride: "She was such a beautiful and such a strangely wise child. She had cried when I told her I was getting married to MacBride and said she hated MacBride. I had felt like crying, too. I told her I would send her lovely things from Spain, where we were going for our honeymoon, but she was not consoled" (Servant 348). This story, from Maud's 1938 autobiography, is very probably inflected with all the retrospective prophecy of hindsight, for Maud's marriage to MacBride had ended in a nasty and very public separation in 1905. In her petition for divorce, Maud had charged MacBride with intemperance and cruelty, and worse. A French newspaper reported the accusation:

"That Mr. M'Bride even went so far as to compromise a young girl who was under the protection of Mrs. M'Bride, and in the absence of the latter at Colleville in the summer of 1903 he had adulterous relations with her." At the time, Maud had two "young girls"

living with her. Iseult would have been nine years old; Eileen Wilson [Maud's illegitimate half-sister], sixteen. . . . Gossip still current in Dublin, and in academic circles, indicates an incident that involved Iseult. (Balliett 36-37)

Whether the incident involved Eileen, as Cardozo claims; or Iseult, as a comment in an autobiographical novel by Francis Stuart suggests; or whether MacBride accosted both (or neither) of the girls, it is clear that MacBride was not a benevolent presence in the family.

The relevant passage from Black List, Section H, a late novel by Iseult's husband Francis Stuart, is somehow convincing in its offhandedness; though at second-hand, in a novel written fifty years after the incident, it can hardly be cited as evidence:

H [Francis Stuart] saw she would have haggled over it at the shop while preserving her cool, rather disdainful composure, in the way that she could relate intimacies about her father or Yeats; there was also an anecdote about how her stepfather, John MacBride, had made advances to her as a child, with the same detached air. Whereas he realized that he couldn't argue over money or talk of sex without personal involvement. (Black List 34)

An interesting point about this passage is that it contains the barest suggestion that there were "intimacies," perhaps sexual in nature, with Yeats and even with Millevoeye for Iseult to tell. Cardozo's unelaborated comment that Iseult regarded her father as "licentious" and "vaguely threatening" takes on a new aspect in the context of possible abuse by her step-father, and certainly adds a new dimension to Yeats's later proposal of marriage.

While Iseult was growing up, then, Yeats was probably the closest person to a benevolent, encouraging father in her life, nurturing her especially in poetic and artistic pursuits. Ella Young described this tutelage, which she had observed on a visit to Maud's house in Passy in 1908:

Iseult, Maud Gonne's adopted daughter, has taken it upon herself to instruct Shaun [sic] in Art, Poetry, and Literature. She, herself, is being instructed in these branches by William Butler Yeats who is in Paris just now and comes to the house in Passy every day. Iseult, a beautiful dark-eyed dark-haired girl of twelve or thirteen, can hold her own in every discussion. She has a lovely voice, and the Poet is teaching her to chant verse as he thinks it should be chanted. He is desirous of chanting verse to the sound of a plangent string, a note now and then for accompaniment or emphasis. . . . Maud Gonne is rather in favor of the voice alone. (Young 102)

Throughout her life, both Yeats and Maud Gonne would encourage Iseult to use her intellectual and artistic capacities, but despite (or because) of this, she never managed to sustain any significant literary output. She had told Yeats that "she preferred the Iliad to any other book"; this preference may have been the cause of Yeats's interest in her, as Hone asserts, but it may also have been the result of that interest (Hone 253). Interestingly, her young brother Séan MacBride would grow up to be a major political figure in Ireland: first as a lieutenant, at the age of sixteen, in the newly-formed IRA, and then eventually as a senator and Nobel prize winner. In him seemed to be concentrated all Maud's political talent, while Iseult was earmarked to take after Yeats, her spiritual father, although she ultimately failed or refused this task.

At the age of fourteen Iseult asked Yeats to marry her, with what degree of gravity we cannot know. He refused "because there was too much Mars in her horoscope" (Jeffares MP 190, Cardozo 275); which would mean that she was overly aggressive, quick-tempered, and/or prone to self-destruction. The planet Mars also controls sexual initiative, so this may have been Yeats's way of reprimanding the young girl for such a proposition. As a Leo, Iseult was already ruled by a particularly ambitious and arrogant sun sign. Portraits and some prose descriptions of her

suggest, by contrast, that she was ethereal, melancholy, exotic, slightly nervous--one of Maud Gonne's biographers, Samuel Levenson, favors the term "pre-Raphaelite" (Levenson 333).

Yeats often spent summers with Maud Gonne and her family at Les Mouettes (The Seagulls), Maud's villa in Normandy, in the town of Colleville.³ In August of 1912, when Iseult was barely eighteen, Yeats and Iseult cemented their relationship. Joseph Hone describes Iseult's voluntary apprenticeship:

While with the Gones in Normandy in August 1912, he wrote his Rosicrucian 'Mountain Tomb' and a poem for Iseult Gonne, and worked at intervals on a preface for a book of Lord Dunsany's stories, and on an introduction to Gitanjali, Rabindranath Tagore's translations from his own Bengali. . . . The poems deeply moved the heart of the young and lovely Iseult, who asked Yeats to get her a Bengali grammar and dictionary so that she might read Tagore in the original. (Hone 281, see also Jeffares MP 167, 183)

The poem Yeats wrote to Iseult, "To a Child Dancing in the Wind," appeared in Responsibilities (1914). "Dance there upon the shore;" the poem counsels: "What need have you to care / For wind or water's roar?" (Poems 122, lines 1-3).⁴

Interestingly, the image of the shore appears and reappears in writings about or by Iseult, probably at least partly because of her name, which suggests the medieval lover of Tristan waiting on the grey coast of Normandy. In this poem, this Iseult dances lightheartedly rather than waiting yearningly, even though the shore is represented as an intrinsically dangerous, elemental space. Still, the fact that the shore is the shore of Normandy and that the dancer is named Iseult evokes a potentially tragic future for the carefree child. The poet understands the message of "the monstrous crying of wind" as the dancer cannot: "Being young you have not yet known / The fool's triumph / Nor love lost as soon as won." Yet the final question is not merely sour; the poet

asks himself and the reader with high seriousness, "What need have you to dread / The monstrous crying of wind?" (Poems 122, 11-12). There is a joy, even a wisdom, in the dancer's pure expression of trust in the elements that is not quite eradicated by the poet's knowledge that frustration and loss of faith are inevitable.

That the "child" of the title was eighteen at the time of the poem's writing is perhaps surprising, though of course Yeats himself was well into his forties: certainly old enough to consider her childish. Maud, too, still perceived a childishness in Iseult, writing to Yeats in September of 1912 that "the thunderclap of Iseult's growing up has not come yet" (G-Y 310). The combination of childishness and maturity in Iseult's character (or, perhaps, in the character of most eighteen-year-olds) is reiterated in a letter Maud Gonne wrote to Yeats in December of 1913: "Iseult was very proud of your idea of her wisdom--She is a strange mixture almost like two people, one, the embodiment of youth & childhood almost, the other one full of old wisdom & often cynical. The OLD Iseult disconcerts and alarms me though I have to admire her. She has intense imagination but lacks the energy and will to use it, & it often makes her sad and restless" (G-Y 331).⁵

In another poem, "Presences," written in 1915, Yeats again named Iseult "a child / That never looked upon man with desire" (Poems 155, 12-13). Iseult would at that time have been at least twenty. The form of the last lines of that poem, however, suggest that Yeats intended a more complicated characterization. The poet sets a scene in which three archetypes of the female gather to pose for a moment:

They had read

All that I had rhymed of that monstrous thing

Returned and yet unrequited love.

They stood in the door and stood between
 My great wood lectern and the fire
 Till I could hear their hearts beating:
 One is a harlot, and one a child
 That never looked upon man with desire,
 And one, it may be, a queen. (Poems 155, 6-14)

All three women are referred to with the collective pronoun "they" for several lines, becoming distinguishable only in the last three lines. Yet even then they are not truly distinct: their hearts beat with one pulse, suggesting that the harlot is also a child and a queen, that the child is also a queen and a harlot, and that the queen is also a harlot and a child. The essential point Yeats probably wanted to make was that Maud Gonne, overtly the queen, also had elements of the harlot and the child in her makeup, but in the process of so doing he also indicates that Iseult at twenty is fundamentally compounded of harlotry and queenliness as well as childishness. In both this poem and "To a Child Dancing in the Wind" Yeats displays an awareness of Iseult's sexual potential; she never represents an absolute innocence.

The poem "Two Years Later," printed as a companion piece to "To a Child Dancing in the Wind," suggests that the child has undergone at least a preliminary form of emotional disillusionment:

Has no one said those daring
 Kind eyes should be more learn'd?
 Or warned you how despairing
 The moths are when they are burned?
 I could have warned you; but you are young.

So we speak a different tongue. (Poems 122, 1-6)

Here we see that the poet's question, "What need have you to dread / The monstrous crying of wind?" had not been posed to the dancer, but had instead been posed to the poet himself and had resulted in his giving no warning. Remembering that the title of the work is Responsibilities, we see that these poems are meditations on whether the aged and disillusioned have a duty to prepare the young for future disappointments. The poet concludes not only that it is not his responsibility to do so, but also that it is an impossible task. Yet the poem is still a warning to Iseult that she should think more, perhaps feel less.

"Two Years Later" implies that the child / dancer has encountered initiatory obstacles of some kind; many such obstacles confronted Iseult Gonne in 1914, when the poem was presumably composed. In that year, Iseult--age 19--had broken her foot in three places, and had been diagnosed with a weak heart and ordered "to give up smoking, to eat meat, and to keep her window open, all of which she refuses to do," as Maud wrote to Yeats (G-Y 344). Also, after repeated requests from Maud that he do so, Yeats recommended to Rabindranath Tagore that he use Iseult's translation into French of "The Gardener," but Tagore did not. At Maud's insistent urging and with help from Yeats, who would send books on India and perform other tasks of encouragement, Iseult began to study Bengali with a young Brahmin, Devabrata Mukerjee, and to translate some Indian works into French and English. This was off-and-on work, however, and Maud could not make Iseult stick to it.

Maud's letters to Yeats circa 1913-1917 frequently discuss her worry over Iseult. The energetic Maud could not approve of Iseult's self-neglect (that Mars in her horoscope) and lack of drive; it seemed to Maud that if only Iseult could find active employment, a cause, a purpose--as she herself most single-mindedly had--then she might become less nervous. Maud seemed

naturally to turn to Yeats as the best person to help her manage Iseult. Maud's letters concerning Iseult are crucial not only for understanding Iseult's personality and behavior and for understanding Maud's relationship with her daughter, but also for understanding Yeats's relationship with Iseult. In particular, Maud's urgent desire that Iseult should work, should keep busy, preferably at literary pursuits, might be considered as one factor in Yeats's ultimate proposal to Iseult. In June of 1914 Maud wrote to Yeats:

Iseult who has continued NOT to take care of her foot has been a great worry. In spite of her & of the Masseur I got in another doctor, a specialist. He at once said what I had said from the first & which the doctor first denied that there was a fracture. We then had her foot radiographed which showed 3 fractures. The doctor was most urgent & told her that if she will not rest the foot entirely then she will be lame for life. In spite of this she continues just as when you were here. I am worn out trying to persuade her to keep quiet. She is really a little mad. I hope now Thora has left she will take to writing again, if she would it would fill her time & keep her quiet. (G-Y 297)

In her letters to Yeats, Maud frequently expressed both the wish that Iseult would write and praise for the works she did write. But despite all the efforts of both, Iseult wrote (and translated) only desultorily. After the war began, Maud hoped that the nursing Iseult had undertaken would work some change, temporary or permanent, in Iseult's state of mind if not in her character.

Maud wrote Yeats in the summer of 1915, "I was worried seriously about Iseult but now that she is keenly interested in nursing & is fully occupied worry has gone for the present" (G-Y 359).

In October Iseult took a secretarial job with an aviation society, a position probably obtained for her by her father (G-Y n310 514). Millevoeye's son, Iseult's half-brother, was killed in battle at around the same time; curiously, although Maud writes to Yeats the news of Iseult's

new position and the news of Henri Millevoeye's death in the same letter, she mentions nothing about how Henri's death affected Iseult. It is likely Iseult was not much acquainted with her half-brother, and by this time both Maud and Iseult had become all too accustomed to the deaths of friends and acquaintances, so perhaps Maud did not think her half-brother's death would adversely affect Iseult. Maud's letters to Yeats indicate that she was far more concerned to keep Iseult productively occupied than to look after her emotional life; Maud had great faith in the healing powers of labor. Iseult gave up nursing early in 1916, but Maud was more pleased than not, writing that

it was too hard for her. . . . true she has been brought into contact with a nasty side of life & has had some nasty moral shocks--on the whole I think they have done her no harm, & it has given me great confidence in her, for she has shown great moral dignity combined with tact and gracefulness--a really rare combination & quite surprising in anyone so young & in some ways such a child as Iseult. (G-Y 367)

The "moral shocks" Maud alludes to may have had something to do with aggressive admirers; certainly, at this point Iseult (however childish) had had verses written to her by a M. Pelletier, been proposed to by a Mr. Malya, and inspired the affections of the Brahmin Devabrata Mukerjee, with whom she had been studying Bengali (G-Y 310, 340, 350). There is also some speculation that she might have had an affair with Ezra Pound circa 1917, and both Arthur Symons and Lennox Robinson admired her.

With the Easter uprising of 1916, Maud suddenly had new and urgent employment for Iseult. In May she dispatched Iseult to London to try to get a passport for Maud and a lawyer for Maud's revolutionary friend, Helena Moloney (Jeffares MP 189, Cardozo 310). Despite the seriousness of her mission, however, Iseult was something of a social success in war-time

London. Lady Cunard admired her complexion, and Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory that "She looks very distinguished and is now full of self-possession. She is beautifully dressed, though very plainly. I said, 'Why are you so pale?' and she said, 'Too much responsibility'. She makes me sad, for I think that if my life had been normal I might have had a daughter of her age. That means, I suppose, that I am beginning to get old" (qtd. in Hone, 322-23). If Iseult said she was overburdened with responsibility, she doubtless meant the responsibility imposed by Maud's determination to free Ireland; Maud was at this time determined to get back to crisis-stricken Ireland despite the danger. We see here of course the repetition of the idea that Yeats was a spiritual father to Iseult, as well.

Yeats returned to Paris with Iseult in June, and they retreated to the peaceful villa in Colleville. Yeats proposed to Maud again on July 1, but this time with a proviso, which Lady Gregory had suggested but which he endorsed: that Maud give up all politics absolutely. Not surprisingly, Maud refused him (Hone 323, Cardozo 312). Nevertheless Yeats spent the summer at the villa, resuming his encouragement of Iseult's artistic and intellectual capacities, and learning from her in his turn. During the summer of 1916 in Normandy it was her copy of the Doré edition of Dante that Yeats read, giving rise to the passages on Dante in Per Amica, and Yeats recounted the reading they had done in the 1917 epilogue to the same work:

Last summer you, who were at the age I was when I first heard of Mallarmé and Verlaine, spoke much of the French poets young men and women read today. Claudel I already somewhat knew, but you read to me for the first time from Jammes a dialogue between a poet and a bird, that made us cry, and a whole volume of Péguy's Mystère de la Charité de Jeanne d'Arc. (Myth 368)

Maud Gonne--Ireland's Joan of Arc, some called her, though Yeats tended to characterize her as

the Helen of Ireland--had always been almost exclusively an aesthetic inspiration to him, and he deplored her ways of thinking on many occasions even while he admired her antithetical heroism. Iseult, it is clear, was in her own mind, in Yeats's mind, and in Maud's mind a poet; in the introduction to Per Amica, moreover, Yeats implies that Iseult may one day be as great a poet as he is now, since he places her in comparison with himself at the same age.

Yeats asked for and received Maud's permission to court Iseult before he went out to Normandy again in the summer of 1917, but she warned him that Iseult was not likely to take him seriously. He proposed to her repeatedly throughout the summer, but she could or would not give him a decisive answer. In August Maud learned that she would be allowed an exit visa for England only, not under any circumstances for Ireland, and that if they left France they might not be allowed back. Yeats obtained passports through the War Office for them to enter the United Kingdom, however, and in September Yeats, Maud, Iseult, and Séan all departed for England (Cardozo 314-15, Elborn 23, Hone 325, Jeffares MP 190, Levenson 311-13). Yeats wrote that "Poor Iseult was very depressed on the journey, and at Havre went off by herself and cried because she was so ashamed 'at being so selfish' in not wanting me to marry and so break her friendship with me" (qtd. in Hone 326). On the boat going over, Yeats had evidently presented Iseult with an ultimatum: if Iseult wouldn't marry him, he would ask someone else--Georgie Hyde-Lees. They agreed to meet to discuss Iseult's answer at a Lyons Corner House or an A.B.C. in London, and when they did, she refused (Elborn 25-26; Jeffares MP 190). Francis Stuart was later to report that Iseult neither felt so badly nor had so much trouble making up her mind as Yeats's account implies, writing in his essay "The Yeats I Knew," "Even when Iseult told me how . . . he had proposed to her, it was impossible for her to treat the episode seriously and she related it in a tone of banter" (Mikhail 365).

This incident has naturally been of some interest to Yeats's biographers and commentators. Harold Bloom, who alludes to "the poet's brief, strange, quasi-love for Iseult Gonne," clearly finds the episode peculiar, an emotional anomaly (Bloom 198). Bloom rejects the "cold" and "deliberate" explanations put forth by Joseph Hone, who suggests a more pragmatic, conscientious motive: "It was Iseult's prospects that now most afflicted his thoughts, and he repeated a proposal of marriage to the young girl. He was more heart-smitten than he quite realised" (Hone 324). Richard Ellmann, like Hone, characterizes the proposal as essentially practical, though he points out that Yeats may have been thinking of his own situation as well as (or instead of) Iseult's: "Marriage seemed the solution to many problems: it would give him a family, a home, and peace of mind in which to work" (Ellmann 221). Certainly, Yeats seemed determined to wed, *n'importe qui*; he was married to Georgie Hyde-Lees less than two months after Iseult's final refusal.

The three explanations fall rather neatly into Freudian divisions of the psyche: Yeats's id would generate Bloom's "brief, strange, quasi-love"; Yeats's superego would generate Hone's anxious responsibility for Iseult's prospects; and Yeats's ego would generate Ellmann's determined self-interest. Biographies, of course, are perhaps inescapably psychological, and Bloom's debt to Freud is well-established. But this, I believe, is ultimately an inadequate approach to the study of Yeats, who was convinced that human affairs are ordered by forces greater than human drives, whether conscious or unconscious. Bloom reports that there are no references to Freud in Yeats's writings, strengthening the suspicion that for Yeats psychology was essentially irrelevant. During the period in which Yeats courted Iseult, he was engaged in developing A Vision, taking small steps toward it in such works as "Ego Dominus Tuus," "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," and Per Amica Silentia Lunae. It stretches credulity to

suppose that Yeats would not apply to his life the philosophies he was developing: it would have been positively un-Yeatsian for him to have kept a strict division between the metaphysical and the real. All the critics I have mentioned, especially Bloom, do of course recognize this in most cases, developing astute analyses of the relationship of Yeats's philosophy to his poetry and his life.

In the case of Yeats's proposal to Iseult Gonne, Monk Gibbon perhaps comes closest to the truth when he observes, facetiously but shrewdly, "That he should have been in love with the mother, and wished, years later, to marry the daughter, has almost the tang of a Maupassant story" (Gibbon 33). Although Gibbon does not draw this conclusion, it is surely likely that Yeats himself not only perceived this fearful symmetry, but was at least as attracted to it as to Iseult herself. To marry Iseult would have been a declaration of independence from Maud, yet one that would color and justify the long years of devotion with a retroactive vindication. In other words, to marry Iseult would be to affirm Yeats's ability to identify the will of the spirits; he had always believed Maud to be his destined bride, his spiritual mate, his anti-self and thus his truest self, but her continued refusals might finally be explicable if Yeats's destined bride was not (quite) Maud, but Maud's daughter. Yet Iseult was in certain ways her mother's opposite: she was not political, she was poetic. Yeats's notion of marrying her can thus be seen as an experimental embrace of what he was later to call the "primary" (the inclination of like to like), rather than his usually preferred "antithetical" (the most difficult and aversive necessity).

The events of 1916 must have strengthened, at least at first, Yeats's belief in a world ordered by other-worldly plans: Maud Gonne's husband not only conveniently and heroically dead, but dead by the kind of irresistible combination of human will and natural circumstance that could only be termed fateful. King's Counsel T. M. Healy described the purposive

mischance of MacBride's death in his memoirs, published in 1929:

McBride's [sic] speech was related to me by the Crown Prosecutor something as follows:

'I was never a Sinn Feiner. I knew nothing of the plan to start an insurrection. I came into Dublin on Easter Monday from Kingstown to attend the wedding of a relative. Finding a rebellion on, I decided to take part in it, as I always detested British rule. I thank the officers of the Court for the fair trial I have had, and the Crown counsel for the way he met every application I made. I have looked down the muzzles of too many guns in the South African War to fear death, and now please carry out your sentence.'

Had he remained silent he would have been spared. The officers of the Courts-Martial hated their task. (Healy 563-4)

Healy's account is anxious to clear the British of accusations of imperial tyranny, so he claims that MacBride "wished to die."⁶ But despite its bias, the account still evokes what must have been a common perception: that all occasions informed against MacBride. Even if his involvement was not as accidental as Healy suggests, he was certainly not one of the primary conspirators--yet he was executed. Surely, to Yeats, it must have seemed like a token from the spirits that Maud would finally be his, and like further confirmation that politics was a fatal preoccupation.

When she refused him, and he turned to Iseult, who also refused him, he underwent a well-documented and much-examined crisis which was resolved by his wife Georgie's automatic writing. He had not only felt responsible for Iseult, he had felt as though he might be opposing the will of destiny in not choosing a Gonne for his life-mate. Fortunately, he was able to resolve this crisis once the spirits, communicating through George, had assured him that "what you have done is right for both the cat [Georgie] and the hare [Iseult]" (Elborn 23).

Iseult met her future husband Francis Stuart, seven years younger than herself, at George Russell's (AE) house in Dublin in the winter of 1918 (Elborn 32-35). They began to meet secretly in London, since Maud disapproved of Francis. Yeats was not enthusiastic, either. Francis Stuart's biographer Geoffrey Elborn writes, "As late as November 1919, [Iseult] was apparently uncertain what to do about Stuart. A letter from Yeats of 17 November suggests that Iseult had confided some of her difficulties to him, for he suggested she should marry Lennox Robinson, whose earlier proposal she had refused" (Elborn 35).

"The Second Coming" was written in 1919; the lines "The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity," might almost be merely a comparison of the languid Iseult to her Francis (Poems 187, 7-8). Iseult, whom he had thought one of the best of women, whom he had tried to make a poet, had published only a couple of poems, a short play, and a few studies and translations of Eastern literature, and showed no signs of pursuing a poetic career with full steadfastness. Stuart, on the contrary, was obsessed with literature and determined to become the new literary voice of Ireland. His connection with Iseult was an entrée into the literary circles he urgently desired to patronize. Yeats never liked Stuart, although he sometimes praised Stuart's works so as to ensure some financial security for Iseult. After meeting with the couple again in July of 1929, Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory that Francis Stuart "is silent unless one brings the conversation around to St. John of the Cross or a kindred theme. They dined with me here and are convinced they ate one of their own chickens" (qtd. in Hone 438). Yeats thus conveyed his disdain for the banality of Iseult's interests and for the narrowness of her husband.

It is worth reprinting here one of Iseult's poems in full. In 1918, two of her pieces were published in the English Review: "Landscape," a short prose reverie in the first person, and "The Shadow of Noon." The latter is as follows:

The Shadow of Noon

I thought this book in my hand
 When walking by the water
 On the sun-delighted strand,
 This grey pictureless book,
 This book of weighty thought,
 This so elaborate book
 That some slow mind has wrought
 A strangely useless thing.

The hours of noon are done,
 My shadow is twice my length
 This violet afternoon
 As I in my indolence
 Tread on the delighted strand.
 And yet when all is said,
 The beauty of the place
 Seems like the words I read,
 A strangely useless thing.

But even the sun-flecked blue
 And this elaborate book
 Have got a work to do:
 Not to be out of place,
 To be eager, solemn and gay,
 Solemn to run their race.
 I neither rule nor obey
 A strangely useless thing.

Two points obtrude. First, the technique of the poem, with its simple diction and rhyme scheme and its use of refrain, shows Yeats's influence clearly. Second, and in contrast, the poem dramatizes and even defends a state of mind that was surely quite foreign to Yeats: that of "indolence," even apathy. The poem's conclusion identifies a "work to do" that is essentially passive; "not to be out of place" was all that Iseult could compass, and all, frankly, that she wished to. Her sense that the glare of noon had passed into a "violet afternoon" where all the world seems to be a setting for a siesta suggests that she herself saw her lethargy as general and generational--a not unreasonable point about the post-Great War atmosphere--while Maud and

Yeats almost always attributed it simply to Iseult's own character. Even if this lassitude was a personality trait rather than a *zeitgeist*, it is perhaps difficult to blame Iseult for it--she who had been raised in the shadow of two personalities who possessed the brilliance of absolute midday. Other comments on the poem, including judgments of whether Yeats was justified in his feeling that Iseult had potential as a poet, must be left for other readers.

In 1932, in a letter to Olivia Shakespear, Yeats, having read and admired Francis Stuart's novel The Coloured Dome, expressed more satisfaction with Iseult's choice of life and mate:

What a strange thing sexual selection is! Iseult picked this young man, by what seemed half chance, half a mere desire to escape from an impossible life, and when he seemed almost imbecile to his own relations. Now he is her very self made active and visible, her nobility walking and singing. If luck comes to his aid he will be our great writer. (Qtd. in Elborn 91-2)

In this passage Yeats has managed to convince himself that Iseult's potential had not after all been wasted; that she had made the right decision when she married Francis Stuart, and that her poetic capacity required an antithetical mate to become manifest. This, it may as well be said, strongly resembles the expensive fantasy that women have tried so long to make true: that one human life can be lived through that of another. It is unclear whether Iseult herself saw her life in these terms--it may well be that she did, perhaps later rather than sooner. To Yeats's credit, he was not able to maintain this interpretation of her marriage, however. In 1936, in the poem "Why Should Old Men Not Be Mad?" he was to characterize their marriage with renewed disgust: "Some have known / A girl who knew all Dante once / Live to bear children to a dunce" (qtd. in Elborn 79).

The first of those children died, however, just as Maud's first child had died. Iseult's

daughter Dolores died of spinal meningitis in 1921 at the age of three months (Cardozo 344, Levenson 331). Also like her mother, Iseult went on to have two more children, a boy and a girl. The rest of Iseult's life was full of the age-old feminine tasks: child-rearing, housekeeping, keeping faith with a faithless husband. She did flick a finger toward a Maud-like notoriety when she went on trial for harboring a German parachutist during the Second World War, a crime of which she was acquitted and to which she confessed. Even in this escapade, however, she maintained her right to undermine the intellectual, the rational, the political aspect of her actions--everything that smacked of "weighty thought"--by falling in love with the fugitive she had protected (Elborn 220-5).

In 1953, Iseult shared a profound moment with her mother, who was on her deathbed: "She asked Iseult to give her the booties from her handbag, which went everywhere with her. They had belonged to her first-born son, George, who had died tragically as a baby. Then, looking radiant, she passed away" (Jordan 143).⁷ Maud may have asked Iseult in particular to hand her the booties partly because of the old idea of Iseult as the reincarnation of that dead child, but probably also because both had undergone that terrible experience of losing their first baby. Iseult no doubt felt a strong affinity with her mother at that moment on another count: Iseult was dying, too, and she knew it. She passed away less than a year later, in March of 1954, aged fifty-nine, of the heart disease that had been diagnosed in the same summer Yeats published "To a Child Dancing in the Wind."

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1. Conrad Balliett clears up numerous inaccuracies and disagreements regarding this and other episodes in his 1979 article "The Lives--and Lies--of Maud Gonne," published in Eire--Ireland.

Unfortunately, at least two books that post-date his article repeat errors that Balliett had corrected: Margery Brady's sentimental 1990 work, The Love Story of Yeats and Maud Gonne reproduces the incorrect story of George Gonne's brief life that appears in Samuel Levenson's 1976 biography of Maud Gonne; and Francis Stuart's biographer, Geoffrey Elborn, reports that the child "died, it is believed, in 1893" (Elborn 23). Balliett's projected biography of Maud Gonne seems never to have been completed.

2. Throughout, having been unable to devise a wholly satisfactory system of reference to distinguish mother from daughter, I refer to "Yeats," "Iseult," and "Maud"—the customary though imbalanced appellations.
3. This villa, where Yeats and the Gones spent so many pleasant holidays, was supposedly given by Lucien Millevoye to his daughter. Geoffrey Elborn, Francis Stuart's biographer, indicates that Lucien bought the villa for Iseult at her birth (Elborn 23), but Conrad Balliett writes that the deed of 1904 was signed over to "M. Gonne, of Passy," showing that the villa was never officially Iseult's (Balliett 35). Still, it is likely that there was a verbal understanding between Lucien and Maud that the villa was to be held in trust for Iseult; years later Maud sold the villa and gave Iseult the proceeds.
4. In a letter to Dorothy Shakespear dated "Sunday 3 August 1913," Ezra Pound mentioned that "The Eagle [Yeats] is burning tapers to some new scion or scioness of the house of Gonne on Monday" (Pound EP and DS 238). This may indicate that Yeats read "To a Child Dancing in the Wind" at one of "his 'Mondays,' " which were salons at Yeats's apartment in Woburn Buildings. Jeffares reproduces Douglas Goldring's description of one of these gatherings (Jeffares MP 167).
5. By Yeats's "idea of [Iseult's] wisdom" Maud may in fact have been referring to "To a Child Dancing in the Wind" itself, but this cannot be ascertained from her letter.
6. Cardozo records that Maud objected strenuously to an earlier, similar account of MacBride's participation in the uprising: "She collected evidence disproving the story that MacBride had joined MacDonough as a lark on his way home from a wedding. For Seagan's sake she showed that the contemptuous Tim Healy was lying when he reported that MacBride's behavior was cowardly and opportunistic at his court-martial" (Cardozo 309).
7. Balliett reports this incident as follows: "Maud, near death, had asked a friend to slip the child's [George's] booties in her coffin before it was closed, a request the friend granted" (Balliett 27-28). Balliett's source for this story preferred not to be named, and evidently also preferred not to identify the "friend." It is true that Iseult's 1953 letters to her estranged husband Francis Stuart describing Maud's death do not mention the booties; but then Francis had been present at neither his daughter's christening nor her death, and he had been rather indifferent to both Iseult and the child (Elborn 48-52). Iseult, who despite much provocation was still attached to Francis, would probably not have chosen to remind him of her own sorrow on that occasion.