

W.B. Yeats, romantic and modern: a paper by Dan Mulhall, on the occasion of the opening of an exhibition on W.B. Yeats at the University of Freiburg, 9 May 2011

I would not normally begin a talk about W.B. Yeats's poetry with a quote from a contemporary novel, but I will make an exception on this occasion. Joseph O'Connor's 2010 novel *Ghost Light* tells the story of the playwright John Millington Synge's relationship with the Abbey actress, Molly Allgood. The book is set in the first decade of the 20th century and W.B. Yeats, who founded the Abbey Theatre in 1904, naturally appears as one of the supporting characters in the novel.

Joseph O'Connor, who stresses that his book is a work of fiction inspired by the Synge-Allgood relationship, imagines a conversation after the playwright's death in which Synge's uncle offers Molly a collection of Yeats's poetry that had belonged to Synge. The uncle, a man of conservative mind, records his own difficulties with Yeats's poems, confessing that he cannot understand them. He comments: 'Some of the earlier ones are melodious enough. ... He is clearly a gifted rhymers. The music, I mean. But I confess that I have little feeling for these modern complexities in verse.'

Yeats is undoubtedly one of the best-loved poets in the English language. In polls that ask the public to name their favourite poets, Yeats invariably features in the top 10.¹ For most casual readers, it is Yeats's early poems, with their romantic sentiments and melodious tones, that tend to epitomize his work. In another poll conducted in 1999, *Poetry Ireland* asked its readers to pick their favourite (Irish) poems of all time. This magazine's readers would, perhaps unlike Synge's uncle, presumably be regular and committed readers of poetry. Yeats has five poems in the top ten. All five are the kind of poems that Synge's uncle, as portrayed in *Ghost Light*, clearly preferred to the ones dealing with 'modern complexities'. To my mind, however, it is primarily as a poet of 'modern complexities' that Yeats is to be admired. My question is: how did Yeats become a poet of 'modern complexities'?

One of Yeats's great achievements as a writer was the fact that he remained intensely creative until the last years of his life. This is not always the case. For

¹ For example, Yeats came 7th in a BBC poll of favourite poets. See www.bbc.co.uk/poetryseason/vote_results.shtml.

example, Wordsworth's finest poems were all published before he was 40 years of age. In Yeats's case, however, his later works are very different in tone, content, technique and complexity from his earlier poetry.

At least in the English language, Yeats was one of the few 19th century writers (born in 1865) to flourish in the period after the First World War. It is interesting to reflect on how Yeats went from writing early lines like:

And walk among long dappled grass
And pluck till time and times are done
The silver apples of the moon
The Golden apples of the sun

to producing a poem at the end of his life like 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' containing such lines as:

A mound of refuse or the sweepings of the streets,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all ladders start,
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

The voice and attitude that runs through these last lines are unmistakably from the 20th century. They could easily have come from the pens of those modern masters, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. The purpose of this talk is to examine Yeats's evolution from the late romanticism of the 1890s to the distinctively modern poetry he wrote in the period between say 1910 and his death in 1939.

I believe it is fair to say that Yeats's early work was part of the tradition of English language romantic poetry that stretches back to Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and Shelley. Let us look at some examples of Yeats's early work. The first poem in my well-thumbed edition of Yeats's *Collected Poems* is 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd.' It is almost as if it is a caricature of poetic romanticism with its 'woods' and 'antique joy', its 'sick children of the world,' its 'hapless faun' and its 'grave where daffodil and lily wave'.

While this is not the place for an exhaustive discussion of the nature of romanticism, perhaps a few German attempts at definition, and a French one for good measure, may be helpful. For example, I like Hegel's idea of romanticism as 'absolute inwardness.' I would say that Yeats in his youth came close to that kind of position. In an effort to define romanticism, the historian Tim Blanning quotes Lytton Strachey's description of Jean Jacques Rousseau as belonging to a world of 'self consciousness, and doubt, and hesitation, of mysterious melancholy and quiet intimate delights, of long reflections amid the solitudes of Nature, of infinite introspections amid the solitudes of the heart.'²

Tim Blanning also quotes Goethe's views on poetry as an example of the romantic 'sacralisation' of art.

True poetry identifies itself as such by knowing how to liberate us from the earthly burdens that oppress us, by being a secular gospel, by creating inner cheerfulness and outward contentment. Like a hot-air balloon, it raises us into the higher regions and gives us a bird's-eye view of the confused labyrinths of the world.³

Elsewhere, Goethe has Faust urge his interlocutor to 'speak as you feel' with 'an art deeper than words' and in 'the language of the soul'.⁴

The young W.B. Yeats would certainly have agreed with those sentiments, as would many other late 19th century poets. What distinguished Yeats from his fin-de-siècle contemporaries was his immersion from a young age in the affairs of his native Ireland. He developed an enchantment with Ireland and its ancient traditions. As a young man, he conceived the idea of creating a national literature for Ireland that would be thoroughly Irish in spirit while being written in the English language. This was a novel, even radical, idea in the world of the late 19th century. Yeats's near contemporaries, Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw, adopted a different approach, moving to London and producing works with, for the most part, no distinctive Irish flavour.

Yeats threw himself with great gusto into this ambitious attempt to create a new Irish literature in English, devoting large amounts of time and energy to propagating this fledgling literary movement. He had great hopes for Irish literature. He wanted it to

² Tim Blanning, *The Romantic Revolution* (London 2010), p. 9.

³ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴ From Goethe, *Faust*, Part 1 quoted in *ibid.*, p. 50.

draw inspiration from Ireland's ancient past. Yeats saw ancient Ireland and its sagas as one of the seven great fountains in the gardens of the world's imagination, the others being the Indian, the Homeric, the tales connected with Charlemagne, the Spanish ('the Cid'), the Arthurian and the Scandinavian cycle of legends.⁵

Through literature, he wanted to bring forward 'living waters for the healing of our nation, helping us to live the larger life of the spirit and lifting our souls away from their selfish joys and sorrows to be companions of those who lived greatly among the woods and hills when the world was young'. Ireland could, he hoped, bring forward 'the new great utterance for which the world is waiting.' These were lofty claims for a small country struggling to assert its identity under the shadow of the world's most powerful Empire.

While Yeats immersed himself in the affairs of the National Literary Society and supported a range of national causes, he wrote some wonderful late romantic poems as good as any in the English language, *The Stolen Child* ('Come away, O human child!/To the waters and the wild/With a faery hand in hand/For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand'), *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* ('I hear it in the deep heart's core') and *When you are old* ('But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,/And loved the sorrows of your changing face.').

Had Yeats died in the year 1900, when he was 35 years of age, he would have been regarded as a highly talented writer who had written a significant number of memorable, well-loved poems. His works would still have topped polls of favourite poems in the English language, but an academic industry devoted to his work would probably not have emerged.

Early in the 20th century something in Yeats's work began to change. He began to find a new voice, with a more modern air. For example, in *Adam's Curse*, he takes aim at 'the noisy set /Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergyman/The martyrs call the world'.

The background to this poetic transformation was the fact that in the first decade of the 20th century, Yeats began to feel uncomfortable with developments in Ireland. He complained about what he saw as a narrow definition of Irish nationalism asserting itself in Ireland to the detriment of his own ideals for Ireland's future. He developed a

⁵ John P. Frayne (ed.), *Uncollected Prose by W.B. Yeats* (London 1970), p. 81

haughty disdain for 'the merchant and the clerk' and 'what the blind and ignorant town/ Imagines best will make it thrive'.⁶

As he wrote in 1903, 'I have listened to a kind of thought to which it is customary to give the name obscurantism among some of those who fought hard enough for intellectual freedom when we were a few years younger.'⁷ Political debate in Ireland became more belligerent during these years with the emergence of polemicists like Arthur Griffith and especially D.P. Moran whose crusading magazine, *The Leader*, became a sharp critic of Yeats and the Irish literary movement he personified. Moran believed that proper Irish literature could only be written in the Gaelic language. Yeats's mood was also darkened by his beloved Maud Gonne's marriage to the Boer War veteran and nationalist icon, John MacBride ('a drunken vainglorious lout' as Yeats later described him), and their ensuing bitter divorce.⁸ Ironically, these opening years of the century saw the appearance of Yeats's most unequivocally nationalistic piece of writing, *Kathleen ni Houlihan*. Such was the impact of this work that Yeats would in the wake of the Easter Rising ask 'did a play of mine send out certain men the English shot'?

The negative reception for Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, which produced disturbances when it premiered at the Abbey Theatre in 1907, deepened Yeats's disenchantment. He declared that 'the old Puritanism and the old bourgeois dislike of power and reality have not changed, even when they are called by some Gaelic name'.⁹ This increasing disappointment with developments in Ireland produced some fine poems, for example 'No Second Troy' with its wonderful description of political agitation 'hurled the little streets upon the great'.

The poem that best captures this period of Yeats's work is the poem *September 1913*. It is a poem with what might now be termed 'attitude'. It comes out fighting.

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108 and p. 119.

⁷ John P. Frayne (ed.), *W.B. Yeats: Uncollected Prose, Vol. 2*, p. 306.

⁸ See Caoimhe Nic Dhaibhéid, 'This is a case in which Irish national considerations must be taken into account: the breakdown of the MacBride-Gonne marriage, 1904-1908' in *History Ireland Vol. XXXVII No. 146*, pp. 241-264.

⁹ Speech by Yeats printed in *The Arrow* 23 February 1907.

You have dried the marrow from the bone?

It represents Yeats's lament for romantic nationalism.

Romantic Ireland's dead and gone

It's with O'Leary in the grave.

This is a reference to the old Fenian, John O'Leary, who inspired Yeats when they met during the 1880s. Yeats saw him as an epitome of the noblest strain in nationalism. He remained a key figure in Yeats's poetry, as evidenced by a line from one of his later poems – 'Beautiful lofty things: O'Leary's noble head'.¹⁰

'September 1913' prefigures Yeats's later work with its combative tone and its meditative passages such as when he reflects on the tradition of Irish nationalism.

Yet they were of a different kind,
The names that stilled our childish play,
They have gone about the world like wind ...
All that delirium of the brave.

'Easter 1916' is a pivotal poem in the Yeats canon. It is also a pivotal poem for Ireland, in that it relates to the seminal event in modern Irish history, the Easter Rising of 1916, in the wake of which everything in Irish political life 'changed utterly'. The poem conjures up a significant historical event and then embarks on an extended reflection on the Rising's significance.

Its opening verse describes how dismissive he was of the 'vivid faces' of the Rising's leaders, the 'casual comedy' of their lives and how he had greeted them with 'polite meaningless words'. He then moves up a gear to deliberate about how

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart

and how it may have been, in the case of the 1916 leaders, that

¹⁰ 'Beautiful Lofty Things' from Yeats's *Last Poems*.

Excess of love

Bewildered them till they died.

The poem anticipates by almost half a century the historical revisionism that emerged during the 1960s, which questioned the need for the Easter Rising.

Was it needless death after all?

For England may keep faith

For all that is done and said.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Yeats went on to write many more poems in the manner of 'Easter 1916', grand ruminations triggered by events in Ireland or in his own lifetime – 'A Prayer for my Daughter', 'The Tower', 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', 'Among School Children', 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931 and so forth. 'The Second Coming' published in 1921 – 'the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity' – could be seen as a poetic premonition of the terrible turbulence of the 1930s and 1940s.

I could go on. What intrigues me is how did Yeats evolve into the poet that wrote such complex, beautifully-crafted works as 'Among School Children' – 'O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,/How can we know the dancer from the dance?'. In 'Coole Park and Ballylee', Yeats asserted that he and his associates 'were the last romantics – chose for theme/Traditional sanctity and loveliness' in a world where 'the swan drifts upon a darkening flood'. A 'last romantic', yes, but Yeats was in many ways also the first great modern poet in English.

In trying to explain this transition from the 'romantic' to the 'modern', it seems to me that part of the explanation rests with Yeats's engagement with Irish affairs between the 1890s and the 1930s, or as he himself put it, 'the seeming needs of my fool-driven land'. Disenchantment hardened his poetry and caused him to evolve into a poet with a modern tone.

Yeats's poetry allows us to plot his changing responses to Irish developments. He was a great poetic chronicler of Irish history in the decades before and after Independence. His words still shape how we Irish see our national past. One could write a history of Ireland (from Yeats's own perspective of course: there could be no presumption of studied objectivity that would be expected from a historian). As the

critic Denis Donoghue put it many years ago, 'Yeats invented a country, calling it Ireland.'¹¹

In his book, *The Pursuit of Glory*, Tim Blanning quotes some lines from Goethe about the tension between his engagement in everyday affairs on the one hand and his yearning for higher meaning on the other.

Two souls, alas, dwell within my breast, and their
Division tears my life in two.
One loves the world, it clutches her, it binds
Itself to her, clinging with furious lust;
The other longs to soar beyond the dust
Into the realm of high ancestral minds.¹²

The same tensions affected Yeats throughout his life. He was as his biographer R.F. Foster an 'Arch Poet.'¹³ He was, as Molly Allgood puts it in the novel *Ghost Light*, 'never done howling for solitude in his poems' while at the same time forever 'manoeuvring himself onto committees ... and writing letters about important matters to the newspapers.'¹⁴ It seems to me that his involvement in, as he wrote, 'theatre of business and the management of men' helped keep Yeats's imagination fresh to the end of his days. W.H Auden once wrote that 'Ireland hurt Yeats into poetry'. This seems to me to be a valid assessment, but I would add the word 'modern' to Auden's statement.

I possess a collection of Yeats's plays bought in New Delhi in the early 1980s from an Indian woman whose father had known the poet while a student in Britain during the 1920s. The book is inscribed with Yeats's signature and the lines:

For wisdom is a butterfly
And not a gloomy bird of prey.

This couplet seems to me to capture an important aspect of Yeats's achievement. Like a butterfly, he moved from metaphorical flower to flower during his lifetime in search of

¹¹ Denis Donoghue, *Yeats* (London 1971), p. 14.

¹² Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory, 1648-1815*, p. xxvii.

¹³ R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats, a Life, Vol. 2: the Arch Poet* (Oxford 2003).

¹⁴ Joseph O'Connor, *Ghost Light*, p. 196.

inspiration and fulfillment – including literary nationalism, Indian mysticism, the occult, founding the Abbey Theatre, serving in the Irish Senate, dabbling in right-wing politics, and creating a personal mythology peopled by his own heroes, Synge, Lady Gregory, John O’Leary and Maud Gonne. This journey, which was shaped to a substantial extent by the cultural and political evolution of the Ireland of his time, carried Yeats successfully, across the great cultural chasm produced by the First World War, from the romantic to the modern. Yeats’s identity as an Irish poet and his engagement with Irish affairs helped to sustain his creativity into old age. Thus, in his poetic obituary, ‘Under Ben Bulbin’ he would insist that ‘ancient Ireland knew it all’. The poem recalls the ‘seven heroic centuries’ prior to Irish Independence and urges his contemporaries to

Cast your minds on other days
That we in coming days may be
Still the indomitable Irishry.

Daniel Mulhall is Ireland’s Ambassador to Germany. The views expressed in this paper are personal, based on years of private research and reflection on modern Irish history and literature.