

*Maria Camelia Dicu*

**THE WORLD IN ITS TIMES.  
A STUDY OF YEATS'S POETIC DISCOURSE VERSUS  
THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY**

European Scientific Institute



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Maria CAMELIA DICU

December, 2013



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## Introduction

William Butler Yeats is a renowned Anglo-Irish poet, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923 and a representative symbolist poet, who placed his love for his origins, literature, philosophy and history as a primary focus in his art and in his support of the Irish Revival. The world he presents in his work is a mixture of natural, human and cultural values, a cauldron of Anglo-Irish history expanding its essence towards universal history.

W. B. Yeats's concept of *history* is a subjective one, in which his origins of an Anglo-Irish individual, his family bonds, education and studies, as well as his spirituality are interconnected and come as whirls in his poems. This issue is articulated on the grounds of legends and Irish folklore, in some sort of archetypal presentations, in which sources have blended with his cultural studies, his friendship with great English poets and his duty of changing the poetic expression of the time into something very modern, and at the same time rooted in Ireland's mythological past, something personal, and yet national, which was not just a copy of the European poetic patterns. His entire poetical creation is delivered to the reader as an organized whole that combines Yeats's three great passions: the one for literature, the one for history and the one for philosophy. Other important elements in this framework are his interest in occultism, hermetic studies, theosophy, cabalistic teachings, Rosicrucian philosophy, alchemy, astrology, magic, spirituality, as well as his frustrated love for Maud Gonne. These elements from which Yeats has drawn his subject matter were kept and improved throughout his entire poetic creation, although he continuously perfected his poetic expression. From his first collection of poetry, *The Wanderings of Oisín* to *Last Poems*, one cannot help but notice the continuous evolution of his style and his poetic techniques, and the increasing intensity and vigour of his verse.

No other Irish poet of the twentieth century was so much engaged in keeping his work separate from the Irish political background, and yet no other poet managed to influence so much the social, cultural and historical realities of his time. Through his writing, he attempted to educate his people, to help Ireland achieve a sense of unity by

directing the Irishmen towards their country's mythical history, towards the values on which Ireland itself was founded.

The Anglo-Irish poet was defined by a three-stage career, the first one being characterised by a pre-Raphaelite tone, self-consciously ornate, which at times could also be considered stilted by the harsh critics of his generation. He began by dedicating his poems to love, esoteric practices, myths, history and mystical subjects. As time went by, Yeats continued to reinvent himself and his poetry until his verse finally began to acquire that quality of being able to shape the identity of an entire nation. Thus, a new stage of his development began and a new and improved artist was born.

As regards the poetry written in the second phase of creation, critics have formed two sides, which viewed the poet's work in very different manners: on the one hand, his poetry was considered rhythmic and muscular, with very modernist presentation, while on the other there was no power in the works and they seemed barren. Moving away from this period, Yeats came back to his interest in the mystical system and spiritualism analysing the worldly man and the spectral one in contrast, drawing upon their opposition. This return to spiritualism can be regarded as a cyclical enclosure of his career. By doing so, the poet manages to create a parallel between himself as an artist and his vision of historical cycles. Yeats found inspiration for the erotic poetry that deals with the frustration, the non-identification and the obsession of the fragmentary in Jung's demonism and archetypes. The Irish poet created his work relying on occult and astrological embodiment of the artistic human spirit, that of a genius – a daemon (the complex creative genius, which brings visions to the artistic universe called by the Renaissance artists *Summa*) which completely dominates the poetical work. Yeats intertwines time and space, having a combination of time and topos, resulting in portrayals of Byzantium, Egypt, or Thoor Ballylee. This haunting daemon is the all-encompassing inspiration, the artistic creator, having a bit of a devil in himself, a demonic creative drive drawn from the Romantic tradition, which included the extremes and identified with all humanly spiritual forces related to the positive and the negative and leading to the vegetal and even the animal life.

A poet of contrasting visions, Yeats places the human in the centre of existence, portraying a Druidic type of divinity, intersecting the human at his free will and creating

great cycles of human history. As Faulkner once said, “the past is not the past, it has not even passed. It is with us always because we are not what we are.” We cannot detach ourselves from the past. And as the past can be regarded as an equivalent to history, in order to give a proper interpretation to Yeats’s life and work, we cannot do it without situating the corpus of his creation into the context of Irish history, without trying to understand why his country’s historical context played such an important part in his creation.

When discussing William Butler Yeats’s poetry, Ricoeur’s performable and equilibrated endeavour that materialized itself from the blending between Cartesian transcendentalism and Nietzsche’s influence, is the one that brings life to the core of Yeats’s poetical discourse – a mixture of ancient myths, German expressionism and Nietzsche’s philosophy. In the light of Ricoeur’s study, *History, Memory, Forgetting*, the idea of history articulated in Yeats’s poetic discourse becomes more approachable.

The concept of double in literature appears to be more dominant with the Romantics who also developed a preference for introspections and self-awareness. The doubling falls into two categories: the classical forms in the poetic consciousness (that is the doubling between the poet’s being and its self) and the Romantic doubling (between its daemons as forces of creation). The Doppelgänger effect (found in Shelley’s or Blake’s poetry, but also in prose, where the double is expressed through characters) is actually the artist’s way of projecting his ego onto the work.

Yeats’s inclination towards psychoanalysis helps to refine his literature of doubling; speaking from a biographical point of view, the author presents a profoundly doubled personality mainly due to his Anglo-Irish linguistic and historical heritage. With the process of creativity, the doubling may be said to perceive the universe (nature, society, divinity) as a I-you/I-the other connection of otherness in a double sense: it both projects itself and include otherness. In the process of creation the poet perceives reality as a voyage of initiation in which he defines the self, the ego, the superego, the individual and poetic consciousness in the process of its becoming and that of writing itself. The self is a combination of the conscious and the unconscious, according to Carl Gustav Jung, or of the conscious and the psychosomatic component, in the Freudian approach. In point of artistic creation, the ego separates from the self only to return with a new and complete



identity. The poetic self is thus doubled in the work of art whereas the poetic egos start off as voices of the discourse and end up in a narcissistic manner as an aesthetically matured super ego. The level of doubling is reflected in the microstructure of the literary text as a link between the subject and the object, and the poet and poetic word.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the act of creation becomes a complex process by which words are shaped and given a new form, based on a classical cosmological system. In its mature period, Yeats's poetry begins to show a non-centred self and a confused hero in a mythical space and time, based both on fantastic and real coordinates created with an inner dimension and projected outside.

The first chapter entitled *Yeats's Biography as an Anglo-Irish Artist* reveals in its five subchapters a detailed biography of the artist by emphasising all the steps he had to undergo in his development as a poet. *The Artist Grows of Historical Extremes* tackles the formation of the author torn between two worlds, two countries, two identities that he continuously tries to combine in order to achieve the much desired unity of being. The second subchapter, *The Sign of a Father – an English Artist*, is dedicated to his relationship with his father, John Butler Yeats, whom he deeply appreciated, and to whom he owes much of his development as an artist, but who overwhelmed him with his desire to move back and forth between England and Ireland, and with his tendency to have a strong point of view on every matter and to impose it on everybody around him. Nevertheless, it was John Butler's lack of belief in something higher than science that pushed Yeats towards exotic religions, occultism and esoteric practices – fascinating domains that helped Yeats create his own vision of world and history, thoroughly described in *A Vision*, a study extended to philosophical, historical, astrological, and poetic topics, that Yeats assembled due to his wife's automatic writing.

The following subchapter portrays the bond that the poet had with his mother, whose songs and stories with fishermen, and whose profound love for Ireland, and especially for Sligo, her birthplace, where he and his brothers spent time as children, awakened the young child's interest in the local geography and folk tales, two central inspirational elements in the poet's subsequent creation.

One overwhelming element in the poet's artistic development is represented by the Irish Revival and Yeats's connection to Lady Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn,

with whom he founded the Irish Literary Theatre and the Abbey Theatre. Nevertheless, Lady Augusta was more than a business associate for him. She was the one who took care of him when he was in poor health, the one who brought him on the right path whenever his experiences with Maud left him completely disoriented and also the one who encouraged him to draw his subject matter from Irish folklore. Under her guidance, he began writing plays and he included folk-tales and folk-legends in his shaping of the unique cultural identity that Ireland needed.

The most haunting experience of Yeats's life can be considered his first meeting with Maud Gonne, the woman he was in love with for almost three decades. His constant obsession with her personality, and his admiration of her beauty and courage drove him to propose to her time and again, as if he could never get tired of her refusals. The more she drove him away, the more he kept coming back for more, as if every rejection only managed to reinforce his feeling for her. His unrequited love for her was the subject of many of his poems, in each and every one of them stating his devotion and admiration for her character and beauty. Even though time came when he felt frustrated by her actions, the charm he felt for her never faded away. Her refusal to marry him became a cyclic event in his existence, but he kept on *feeding* himself from frustration and grief to give birth to an incredible poetic imagery.

The impressive Irish movement, whose purpose was to create a national art, is the focus of our next chapter, *Yeats within the Irish Revival*. The first subchapter, *Yeats's Return to Tradition* exemplifies the ways in which the young poet was guided and influenced by Lady Gregory, who urged him to write about folklore and national myths. As we continue our research, we present Yeats in the position of a dramatist, focusing mainly on his years at the Irish Literary Theatre, when he realized the importance of formulating an Irish dramatic tradition.

The final subchapter, *In the Whirl of Local History Events*, underlines the fact that Yeats, even though young when the Irish struggle was at its highest points, felt the need to integrate himself in the fight in a more active manner, joined several literary organizations that supported the cause and befriended Fenian members. This experience made the poet conceive a carefully wrought concept of world history in its important moments and it stirred up his appreciation for Irish nationalism.

The following chapter, *Yeats's History as a Concept*, extends to the relation between the concepts we find in Ricoeur's *History, Memory, Forgetting* and Yeats's own concepts. While studying the phenomenology of memory, we realize that between Paul Ricoeur's treatise and W. B. Yeats's *Autobiographies* connections can be found. The theoretician lays the foundation for his theories on Socrates' philosophy, which in turn influenced both Plato and Aristotle.

Ricoeur expands on the idea that remembering something means remembering the self, mentioning the importance of individual and collective memory. The author draws the conclusion that the field of history is characterized through the polarity between the individual and collective memory but also through a treble/triple attribution of history: that of the self, of close people and the others. The second part of his study deals with history as the limit between lived past and present and highlights the opposition between the memory of the group and collective memory, suggesting that history belongs to everyone and at the same time to nobody, which makes it universal.

The second subchapter of our thesis links the poet to the national events which inspired his work. At the same time it points out that his poems were a type of propaganda for the Irish literature, not for the Irish politics. We also take into account his rise as a politician and his becoming a senator, when he militated for the minority he represented. His utmost desire was to understand the place of the Anglo-Irish in a community torn apart by the lack of unity.

As we move forward with our research, our intention is that of exploring Yeats's desire for the liberty to write Irish poetry in English and for the freedom one should feel in trying to define himself/herself as belonging to a community of multiple origins. He believed that a poem's Irish-ness does not lie in the language it was written in, but in the feelings it sends forth, which are able to trespass any barrier imposed by language. The present subchapter also examines Yeats's three stages of creation with an emphasis on the characteristics of his poetry in each of these stages: the romantic qualities of his first poems, the mixture of love, nationalism and symbolism in his subsequent poems, and the symbolism and modernity of his final poems.

The final subchapter, *Yeats vs. Imagism and the Haiku; Yeats and T.S. Eliot*, exemplifies the complexity of the author's poetry by contrasting its vivid language,

elaborate structure and its musicality with haiku and its characteristics, shows the relationship between haiku and Imagism and highlights Ezra Pound's influence on Yeats's style. The second part of the subchapter presents a parallel between the modern visions of Yeats and Eliot analysing the common, but mostly the antithetical elements of their literary legacy, one of them keeping in mind the idea that he wants to write as men have always written, while the other was trying to revolutionize poetic expression.

The fourth chapter, *Yeats's Historical Cycles in Poetic Representation*, consists of five subchapters, each covering various poems regarded as pinpointing elements that help sustain our research. *The Way to "The Tower" or Art is higher than life* exposes the poet's inspirational drive, together with society's decline, examines the steps he took in his development as a poet, and presents some sort of return to the Irish mythological past bearing in mind that art is higher than life. In the next subchapter, *The Tower – A Spiritual Travel into the European Past; Present Artistic Values and Higher Poetic Creation*, we analyze some of the most important poems included in the collection that marks Yeats's involuntary embracing of modernism. A special focus is laid on "Sailing to Byzantium", a poem in which Yeats creates an allegory for Ireland, with its present artistic values, and also on Yeats's movement towards a higher artistic creation, disregarding the literary trends. The following subchapter entitled *The Winding Stairs or Coming Back to the Human and Local History* presents references to the Thoor Ballylee, the castle that Yeats turned into his personal symbol, the bond between the human and divinity, immanent and transcendent. In the next subchapter, *Love Structuring Artistic Creation – from Love to Poetry*, we analyze Yeats's relationship with the other women he was in love with (Laura Armstrong, Olivia Shakespear, Margot Ruddock, Ethel Manin, etc.) and the impact these love affairs or, at least, feelings for these women had on his poetry. To round off our chapter we come back to the poet's works created between 1916 and 1923. Among these, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" gains an important role, as it represents a page of history, an artistic document that confirms the horrors of the civil war.

The fifth chapter, *Yeats's Celtic Heliolatry and/or Elitism*, moves towards the political preferences that the author shared with Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot for Fascism and Communism, forms of government that were not appreciated by the author for the

concepts they promoted in reality but for their idealised image, which he preferred. As an elitist, disappointed by the failure of his attempts to educate the Irish society starting from its basis, he reaches the conclusion that in order to create a unified Irish culture it was first necessary to educate the upper classes and then the masses.

*The Second Coming – a Poem on Gloomy Premonitions* explores Yeats's opinions related to historical cycles and the beginning of a new era, as he considered that each era lasts 2000 years, and then an antithetical era begins. As the end of the millennium was approaching, Yeats felt that it was compulsory to re-examine the old traditions and pay specific attention to the newly brought changes into the more contemporary society, which seemed to have lost most of the values on which it was founded.

The final chapter, *The Artefact and Artist in Yeats's Poetry*, brings forward in the first subchapter the poet's drive to find the ideal poetic form that haunted his imagination during his youth and which seems to have come into shape in the later years of his career, takes a closer look at the doctrine of the Mask, and examines at the same time the relationship between artefact and artist. The next subchapter, *The Artist – a Passionate Man Writing for Men and Praising Feeling*, comes back to Yeats's ideas that can also be related to Eliot, who believes that first and foremost it is utterly important to write for the intellectuals and the upper classes, which can grasp the meaning of symbols, tradition and individual talent. A special attention is given to "Parnell's Funeral", a poem which Yeats wrote three decades after the death of the nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell and in which the poet complains about the indifference and the superficiality of the Irish society.

The final subchapter, whose title is simply *The Dolls*, brings to light the idea of art and artefact above daily routine and reality. This display of an artificial arrangement where everything is meant to be perfect and in equilibrium versus the flawed real life of human beings emphasises the creation of both a doll, but a deeper level that of a child. The textual personification of the doll is secondary to the idea of a superior forged artificiality, important for the creation of poetry.

Yeats developed his style throughout his long poetic activity from a romantic sentimentalism to a highly concentrated modernism of essentialised expressions. The poet places the work of art as superior ideal of creative life above the earthly human existence, so his interest is represented by the artefact. He discusses about the faculties

and human powers acquired in the phenomenological existence, which are apparent and spring into consciousness, but the principles are acquired through birth and they remain immutable even in the afterlife. So Yeats believes that we know history because we have created it, just in the same way that God knows nature. We cannot know for sure, however, if W. B. Yeats was seeking a poetic formula or a philosophical truth. In his subjective reason the self begins a journey of knowledge and creation, looking for its antithetic, named by the poet as phantasmagoria. His development from the dreaming idealist to the sceptic and finally conserver makes him a blend of contradictions and antinomies of love and hate, hope and despair, joy and bitterness. The originality of his search for human love and spiritual connection provides uniqueness to his work, love and passion for people and respect for traditions.

History, nowadays, as theme and concept used by artists, writers, and creators is connected to the self-reassuring concepts of world and art. The post-modern reception of Yeats's work finds a correlation between his heliocentric views and his multicoloured perceptions, referring to multiple identifications of impersonality. And yet, one can state that W. B. Yeats saw history in a personal manner, exploring rather its subjective quality throughout his literary career. He was not admired, however, only for such views, but also for connecting and re-connecting with the establishing of a national literature, which in time could become entirely Irish.

**Motto:** “A poet is by the very nature of things a man who lives with entire sincerity, or rather the better his poetry, the more sincere his life; his historical cycles is an experiment in living and those that come after have the right to know it. Above all, it is necessary that the lyric poet's life be known that we should understand that his poetry is no rootless flower but the speech of a man. To achieve anything in any art, to stand alone perhaps for many years, to go a path no other man has gone, to accept one own thought when the thought of others has the authority of the world behind it, that it should seem but a little thing to give one's life as well as one's words which are so much nearer one's soul, to the criticism of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W.B.Yeats, draft of lecture *Friends of my Youth*, delivered 9 March 1910, quoted in R.F. Foster on copyright page of *W.B. Yeats. A Life I. The Apprentice Mage*.

# 1. Yeats's Biography as an Anglo-Irish Artist

Scholars have always been interested in William Butler Yeats's inner life, in the things he saw and the things he did because they are of paramount interest for the alchemical capacity to transmute the events of a crowded life into art, as Roy Foster puts it in his magisterial biography of Yeats written from the perspective of a historian. We deal here with a genius who was “a playwright, journalist, occultist, apprentice politician, revolutionary, stage-manager, diner-out, dedicated friend, confidant and lover of the most interested people of his day”<sup>2</sup>, a man who dedicated his life to art and to his country.

Born in Dublin in 1865, to John Butler Yeats, an artist himself, and an Irish mother, Susan Mary Pollexfen, a descendant of a wealthy Irish family, William Butler Yeats was the result of a union that brought together two clans of Irish Protestants. By the time the two were to be married, John Butler Yeats was a law student heading towards a promising future. However, he was not so much interested in the career that was marked out for him and soon after he married Susan Mary Pollexfen he left behind his law studies and decided to study art at Heatherley's Art School in London. This decision was not to be easily accepted by his wife who began to resent him for having carried off the entire family to a bohemian way of life. Thus, Sligo became her emotional pillar and she returned to her parents' house together with her children whenever it became too expensive for the Yeatses to live together.

The financial difficulties that the Yeatses had to endure have left their marks on every member of the family. They were forced to commute from one place to another because of John Butler Yeats's inability to act like a responsible head of the family. They frequently had to change houses when the father was no longer able to pay the rent or when he felt that he was underestimated as an artist, and thus the Pollexfens' home in Sligo became a reference point for the entire family. In that place, at his grandparents' gloomy house, the young William Butler Yeats discovered a whole new world, one full

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<sup>2</sup> Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats – A Life. I. The Apprentice Mage*. “Introduction” Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. xxvi.

of myths and tales and songs that would arouse his imagination and would later turn him into one of the greatest artists that Ireland ever produced.

### **1.1 The Artist Grows of Historical Extremes**

For William Butler Yeats both personal experience and national history were important coordinates of his life and work. Important historical events accompany his entire existence and therefore it is worth studying one in the context of the other or vice versa. Yet, the best way to find out about his inner life is through his *Autobiographies*, consisting of some sequences relating disparate memories of certain events of his life, a collection that can be considered a reinforcement of Yeats's belief that a "poet leads a life of allegory and that his works are comments on it."<sup>3</sup>

W.B. Yeats came from antithetical worlds. From the beginning, history did not represent a certainty for him. Though his parents were both born in Ireland, he claimed to be related to several Anglo-Irish Protestant families through both of them. Nevertheless he refused to correlate himself with any tradition available in Ireland at that time because he believed that Ireland should be represented by a spirituality that overpasses both the Catholic and the Protestant traditions. He was constant in his idea that Ireland's tradition is more related to its ancient beliefs and customs than to Christianity. However, the gap between his beliefs and the way society was built and the uncertainty regarding his ancestry awakened in him a certain anxiety. He did not know for sure whether he was Irish, English or Anglo-Irish, and he even started to wonder whom he must consider his friends and whom his enemies.

In the first pages of *Autobiographies*, in "Reveries of Childhood and Youth," the dreamy-minded poet begins to recollect fragmentary and isolated pieces of memories. Starting with Yeats's earliest remembrances uncertainty settles down. The first memory he writes in his *Autobiographies* describes him "sitting upon somebody's knees, looking out of an Irish window at a wall"<sup>4</sup> he did not remember, but he knew it once pertained to an Irish relative, because he was told so. The poet's memory immediately shifts to a

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<sup>3</sup> Editors' Preface to W.B. Yeats's *Autobiographies*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies*: "Reveries over Childhood and Youth", William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, p. 41.



moment when he was looking out of a window in London, watching some English boys playing in the road. Among the boys he sees somebody in a uniform and he is told that the boy wearing the uniform was going to blow up the city, an idea that induces terror in the young poet's mind. The way the author's memory passes from the recollection of an episode set somewhere in Ireland to one set in London hints at the idea that Yeats was caught between two different worlds, between Englishness and Irishness ever since childhood and perhaps it is this uncertainty that inspired him to create such great poetry.

It is well known that Yeats commuted between Sligo and London during his childhood. Between the two, we can say that Sligo was the place that offered him stability and peace, while in London he was often terrified and he never felt like belonging there. Apparently all the Yeatses were fascinated by the small town by the sea and Jack Butler Yeats, William's brother, managed to convey with words what Sligo had to offer to its inhabitants:

“I remember a small town where no one ever spoke the truth but all thought it. It was a seaport town, like all the best towns. But there was a lake very near to it. The cold brown bosom of the fresh water, and the blue steel verdigris green corsage of the salt water, and between the two the town was ever of the bland and sweet, and the air always smelling sweet. It should have been a rainy place, for it was in a cup of hills. But a rock island, a mountain island, in the sea, off the mouth of the bay before the town, collected all the heavier clouds and caused them to break and run foaming down the mountain side all among the green trees and the moss-covered rocks.”<sup>5</sup>

For Yeats the relatives he had in Sligo were completely different from the people he used to meet whenever he stayed with his father. John Butler Yeats, a man of ideas, was always surrounded by intellectuals, artists and all sorts of people who enjoyed debating on the subjects that interested John Butler Yeats. They used to spend hours talking about books, paintings, politics, religious belief or philosophy, without getting anywhere, because J. B. Yeats was a man that frequently changed his opinions. The

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted by Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats – A Life I. The Apprentice Mage*, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.18.

Pollexfens, on the other hand, were men of action. They were much more interested in doing what it had to be done than talking about it. They were the exact opposite of J.B. Yeats and apparently he had always admired them. He was aware of the differences between the Yeatses and the Pollexfens and he even attributed his son's propensity towards writing to this union between a Yeats and a Pollexfen: "By marriage with the Pollexfens I have given a tongue to the sea cliffs."<sup>6</sup>

Yeats began his education at home, in Sligo. His relatives tried to teach him to read, but they had no significant results and they suspected that the young Willie, as they used to call him, might have some intellectual disability. Soon after that he was sent to school in London where he made some progress, but he did not prove to have any exceptional ability. It was as if he were trapped into a place in which he knew he did not belong and he was not able to express what he had in mind. We find evidence of this matter in his *Autobiographies* where he states: "My thoughts were a great excitement, but when I tried to do anything with them, it was like trying to pack a balloon into a shed in a high wind."<sup>7</sup>

Yeats seems to have had difficulties integrating himself into the social mainstream whenever he was away from Sligo. According to David Perkins, Yeats was frequently fighting with his classmates because they considered him inferior for being Irish, while he believed that they were inferior because they were English.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the only place where he really felt safe was Sligo, at his grandparents' residence at Merville, which is beautifully described by Lilly, Yeats's sister, in a letter to Joseph Hone:

"In our day it was a solid house, big rooms-about 14 bedrooms, stone kitchen offices & a glorious laundry smelling of soap full of white steam & a clean coke fire with rows of irons heating at it. Our grandmother's store-room like a village shop- a place with windows and fireplace –

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<sup>6</sup> Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats – A Life. I. The Apprentice Mage*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.1.

<sup>7</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies*: "Reveries over Childhood and Youth", William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, pp. 64-65.

<sup>8</sup> David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: Modernism and After*. New York: St. Martin Press, 1928, p.567.

shelves & drawers & a delicious smell of coffee – the house was of blue grey limestone- the local stone- 60 acres of land round it – a very fine view of Ben Bulbin from the front of the house.”<sup>9</sup>

The superiority of the Irish race was something that all the Yeatses believed in. John Butler Yeats mentioned it several times and his children went even further and tried to justify their belief. Sligo was the indisputable evidence that all the things related to Irishness are far better than everything related to Englishness. They discovered superiority “not only in the scenery and climate but also in manners, conversation, artistic sensibility and gentlemanly behaviour.”<sup>10</sup> Sligo provided a sense of belonging for the Yeats children and their love for their mother’s birthplace grew stronger with every moment spent anywhere else. As Yeats states in his *Autobiographies*, “it was always assumed between her [the mother] and us [Yeats and his brothers] that Sligo was more beautiful than other places,”<sup>11</sup> and thus his hatred<sup>12</sup> for London and his longing for Sligo is somehow explained.

When he was eight or nine, Yeats found out abruptly the difference between Sligo and London: “You are going to London. Here you are somebody. There you will be nobody at all.”<sup>13</sup> For the Butler Yeats family, London was the setting of a cruel reality. Susan Mary never got used to living there and she gradually isolated herself from her husband. John Butler Yeats once declared that he knew that his wife was not a communicative person, but he never expected her to be as emotionless as she seemed to be. He even said that she often seemed to have withdrawn on an island of her own, constantly dreaming of Sligo. Her constant worrying about her children’s economic

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted by Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats – A Life I. The Apprentice Mage*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.19.

<sup>10</sup> Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats – A Life. I. The Apprentice Mage*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.19.

<sup>11</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies: “Reveries over Childhood and Youth”*, William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds, New York: Scribner, 1999, p.58.

<sup>12</sup> In *Autobiographies* Yeats remembers how he and his sister used to stay near a drinking fountain in Holland Park talking about their love for Sligo and their hatred for London.

<sup>13</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies: “Reveries over Childhood and Youth”*, William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, p.56.

future eventually caused a rupture between her and her husband and they never managed to get over it. Her disappointment and sadness got to an end after she had her second stroke. She spent her last years in cerebral disintegration, at last liberated “from financial worry, having found perfect happiness feeding the birds at a London window.”<sup>14</sup>

## **1.2 The Sign of a Father – An English Artist**

John Butler Yeats was the offspring of a family of Yorkshire background. According to some historians, the earliest known Yeats was called Jervis. He came to Dublin sometime in the seventeenth century and he seems to have had a successful life. Terrence Brown tells us that Jervis Yeats started his life in Ireland as a small trader, to eventually become a wholesale linen-merchant and freeman of the city. Due to his financial success, his grandson Benjamin Yeats managed to marry Mary Butler, the daughter of a wealthy and powerful Anglo-Irish family. The marriage between the two not only brought the Yeatses real power in Ireland, but also 560 acres of land in County Kildare and a pension from the War Office. Thus, they were able to send their son John to Trinity College, Dublin, although Benjamin Yeats’s business had already failed.

The first John Butler Yeats married Jane Taylor and became Rector in Drumcliff, in County Sligo, where he spent his entire life. His son William followed in his father’s footsteps and went to Trinity College. After his marriage to Jane Corbet of Sandymount, he settled in Tullylish, County Down, where he was appointed Rector. However, he did not like living in Northern Ireland because of the rapid changes that the society was undergoing and also because the religion favoured by the Reverend Yeats – Anglican evangelical orthodoxy - was quickly replaced by evangelical Presbyterianism. However the Reverend William Butler continued to live his life peacefully surrounded by his large family.

John Butler Yeats, the poet’s father, was born in 1839 at Tullylish. He was the eldest son of William Butler and Jane Corbet. His parents sent him to a puritanical school when he was ten years old. After two years he was sent to Athol Academy in the Isle of

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<sup>14</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies: “Reveries over Childhood and Youth”*, William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, p.78.

Man where he met Charles and George Pollexfen, two Irish boys who seemed to be less interested in studying than John Butler Yeats. As true Pollexfens, they were completely different from John Butler and his brother, who was also studying at the same school. They seemed grouchy and rather obnoxious, and yet John Butler discovered in them a certain magnetism and primitivism which he attributed to their closeness to nature.

John Butler Yeats's initial intention was to become a Reverend like his father. However, because he did not feel any connection with religion he decided to become a barrister. During college he spent most of his time at Sandymount Castle, his uncle's residence. After his father's death, in 1862, the young graduate decided to go to Sligo with his schoolfellow George Pollexfen. There he met Susan Mary, George's twenty-one-year-old sister, a girl that many people considered the most beautiful girl in Sligo. Apparently, the thing he liked the most about her was her "genius for being dismal,"<sup>15</sup> because he saw in her all the virtues that he was lacking, while her family encouraged their union because of his promising future as a barrister and the satisfying income he was left with, after his father's death.

The Yeatses had had money, social influence and a history in Ireland, but by the late nineteenth century history was all they were left with. After the marriage with Susan Pollexfen, John Butler Yeats moved in Dublin where he worked as a barrister for a year and a half. Despite his success as Auditor of the Law his attraction to his profession began to vanish and one day he decided to become a professional painter. This came as a shock for the entire family and his wife never managed to come to terms with his decision.

When Robert Corbet, John Butler Yeats's uncle, committed suicide because of his financial difficulties, the poet's father found it too difficult to live near Sandymount Castle that once belonged to his uncle. Thus, he decided to move to London. He left his wife and children in Sligo, at their Merville residence, and he enlisted at Heatherley's School of Art in 1867. His fresh start in London as a painter was also the family's financial decline. By the time Susan Mary joined her husband in London he had taken six-year lease of a house and he had become friends with John Trivet Nettleship and Edwin J. Ellis. Susan Mary was disturbed not only by her husband's inability to provide

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<sup>15</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares, *A New Biography*. London: Continuum, 1988, p. 4.

enough money for housekeeping, but also she could not stand her husband's obnoxious friend Edwin Ellis, who seemed to have had a special interest in making her feel uncomfortable around him.

The life as a painter was rather difficult for John Butler Yeats. By the time his pictures were denied from being exhibited at the Royal Academy he was well aware that his wife's family disagreed with his idea of becoming an artist. Nevertheless he did not pay much attention to their critical opinion and he pursued his passion. And yet it became harder and harder to provide for his family. All the income that he received was the one coming from the rent of the Kildare lands, but because his generosity often became recklessness, he started losing his lands. Soon the family's income was half diminished and it became almost impossible for John Butler Yeats to support his family.

In 1872, all the family moved back to Sligo and the children remained there for over two years. Meanwhile John Butler Yeats was still trying to develop as an artist. He spent some time in Dublin painting and turning down commissions and then he moved back to London, taking his entire family with him. By that time, the young Willie had already formed an opinion about the differences between his Sligo kinsfolk and the relatives on his father's side of the family. He preferred the talkative, funny and sociable Yeatses to the detriment of the serious, gloomy and proud Pollexfens. The reason for this matter is that the Pollexfens were always putting pressures on the young Willie. Even his mother was frequently complaining to his father about their son's behaviour. As Lilly Yeats recalls it, "it was always Willie" the subject of their mother's complaints.<sup>16</sup>

John Butler Yeats was not always a charming, gentle, and sociable man for his children; he had his moments of fury as well. For example, when he decided to teach his son to read he proved to be a very demanding teacher who would often punish his son for not complying with his demands. The young Willie was eventually sent to study grammar and learn spelling with an old woman, but the lessons did not prove to be very effective for the young poet because "he found it hard to attend to anything less interesting than his own thoughts."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> William Michael Murphy, *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats (1839-1922)*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978, p.46.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares, *WB. Yeats: Man and Poet*. London: Kyle Cathie, 1996, p.9.

Because his father failed in educating his son at home, Yeats went to London at Godolphin School, Hammersmith. Of that period, the poet recalls that he used to spend “longer than most schoolboys preparing for the next day work and yet learnt nothing, and would always have been at the bottom of my class,”<sup>18</sup> that his colleagues were at the top of the class, that he hated fools, and that he was fascinated by biology and zoology. His sister, Lily, remembered he started writing between fifteen and sixteen, when he began composing poems at Howth. Watching him closely his father discovered his son’s ability to write poetry and encouraged him in searching for a perfect pattern for his verse, something he would do for the rest of his life.

John Butler Yeats seems to have been the kind of father that would appreciate spending time with his children rather than working and providing for them. Although he loved all his children, Willie was the one to receive his father’s continuous attention and guidance. Ever since he was born, the little Willie gained his father’s love and he also awakened in him a sort of possessiveness that seemed rather unusual, as he never experienced the same emotions when his other children were born. Fifty-four years later, he let his son know the emotions he experienced when he was born:

“I think your birth was the first great event in my life. I was as surprised as if I had seen a house built up in the night-time by magic. I developed an instantaneous, [ ] for the professional nurse. I could not bear to see you lying on her knees. I was for the first time – I suppose – pure animal. I never felt like that afterwards at the birth of the others.”<sup>19</sup>

Yeats’s interest in literature was developed by his father, who always used to read him stories or poetry. In his *Autobiographies* he mentions his father’s readings of *The Lays of Ancient Rome*, the first poem that really impressed him, or *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, a poem that made him want to be a magician, a wish “that competed for years

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<sup>18</sup> Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats – A Life. I. The Apprentice Mage*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.25.

<sup>19</sup> Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats – A Life. I. The Apprentice Mage*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.15.

with the dream of being killed upon the sea-shore,”<sup>20</sup> another strange desire he started having after reading “Alastor”: a poem written by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

When Yeats discovered that he had the extraordinary talent to create poetry, his father became even more interested in his activities. His father’s intention was not to raise his son to be a poet, and yet it happened. It is known that when the poet was a child his father was the one who used to decide what the son should and should not read, and, as expected, John Butler considered he should interfere in his son’s writing as well. He believed it was his duty to help his son improve his talent and he used to come up with all sorts of ideas about poetry, ideas which may have been very useful for the young poet in search for an original form for his poetry.

Yeats was the product of two families with completely different personalities. He, nevertheless, took more after his father in becoming a man of thought than a man of action, and yet a man whose thoughts put on paper, were able to make the masses participate in action. Yeats however did not embrace his father’s agnosticism. If John Butler Yeats was against any religious belief, discovering faults in all of them, his son desperately needed to believe in something other than what could be rationally explained. In his youth his father had already instilled in him the idea that attending any church is useless, because no religion is flawless. He told his son that the Roman Catholic cult was “good for the heart, but bad for the brain”, emphasising that “had the Irish been Protestants they would long ago have thrown off the English tyranny.”<sup>21</sup> The Protestant religion also had its weak points and he considered it “broad and studied”: despite its tendency to encourage “freedom of thought and honest thinking.”<sup>22</sup>

Being left with almost no choice, Yeats was driven to other traditions. In the 1880s he turned his attention to occultism, hermetic studies, theosophy, cabalistic teachings, Rosicrucian philosophy, alchemy, astrology, magic and spirituality. He joined the Order of the Golden Dawn and he founded the Dublin Hermetic Society with George

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<sup>20</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies: “Reveries over Childhood and Youth”*, William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, p.68.

<sup>21</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*. London: Random House, 1995, p. 425.

<sup>22</sup> William Michael Murphy. *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats (1839-1922)*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978, p.137.



Russell. The year 1892 brought Yeats in contact with the members of The Dublin Hermetic Society, a branch of the Theosophical Society in London. Later on he collaborated with Madame Blavatsky, the founder of London Blavatsky Lodge of Theosophical Society. Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatski was a Russian theosophist and writer, and also a woman with a colourful existence. The society she initiated was based on occult knowledge and its members' main activity was to discover the nature of the universe. Supposedly, within this society there were individuals with special skills who could communicate at distance and Madame Blavatski was one of those privileged persons. Yeats became acquainted with this movement through A.P. Sinnett, an advocate of Madame Blavatski, whose book *The Occult World* represented the introduction to a "way of thinking about reality that retained the supernaturalism of Christian faith, but in a totally different context."<sup>23</sup> Sinnett's writing introduced him to India, a country that for Yeats became a version of his ideal Sligo, "a secret place apart, where, as on an island in a western lake, the modern world could be escaped in a transcendental eastern peace."<sup>24</sup> Terrence Brown also states that Yeats must have been very pleased when he found out that the Mahatmas<sup>25</sup> were the custodians of an unwritten tradition, one similar to the one Yeats attributed to Sligo.

Though there were rumours regarding Madame Blavatsky's dishonesty in her practices and clear evidence that much of her work was plagiarized, Yeats was fascinated by her and described her as "a great passionate nature, a sort of female Dr. Johnson, impressive I think to every man or woman who had themselves any richness [...] full of gaiety that, unlike the occasional joking of those about her, was illogical and incalculable, and yet always kindly and tolerant."<sup>26</sup>

When Yeats met Madame Blavatsky he was vulnerable and felt the need to be under the authority of a powerful woman. Not even the report of Physical Research Society which decided that Madame Blavatski "was one of the most accomplished,

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<sup>23</sup> Terrence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats, A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.33.

<sup>24</sup> Terrence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats, A Critical Biography*, Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.33.

<sup>25</sup>"Mahatma" is the Sanskrit word for "Great Soul."

<sup>26</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies: "Four Years: 1887-1891"*, William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, pp. 154-155.

ingenious and interesting impostors of history;”<sup>27</sup> did not stop Yeats from falling under the spell of this woman. An American newspaper even called her the “pythoness of the Movement”: words that accurately described her character, since she eventually proved to be a fraud, but for the young and inexperienced Yeats, she was fascinating and he continued to trust her.

Eventually, Yeats’s confidence in Madame Blavatsky’s activities began to fade away. In January 1888 Yeats was attending an occult meeting when his “whole body moved like a suddenly unrolled watch-spring and thrown backward on the wall.”<sup>28</sup> Since this episode he became more circumspect concerning the trustworthiness of the occult society and in 1890 he was expelled from it.

Yeats’s interest in all sorts of exotic beliefs had a profound effect on his poetry. During his life he conceived an intricate symbolic system he made use of in poems. To find interpretation for the collection of symbols gathered under the name *A Vision* is not always an easy job. But Brenda Webster in her Introduction to *Psychoanalytical Study* states that in the above mentioned work, the poet schematized his feelings about his evolution from limp and dreamy aesthete to a mask wearing, powerful poet. *A Vision* offers some keys for decoding Yeats’s poetry, though not very explicit. As a scholar<sup>29</sup> at Yeats International Summer School said, *A Vision* states Yeats’s credo of *The Tower*.

*A Vision* was distributed to the subscribers on 15 January 1923. It was called occult mythography (Yeats: *Editors’ Introduction to A Vision*, London, 1925) and the poet himself did not know whether he should call himself a goose that hatched a swan or a swan that hatched a goose. Laurie, the publisher, answered him that he was rather a heron. Ultimately, *A Vision* is the product of two Yeatses, the poet and his young wife, Georgie Hyde-Lee. The critics categorize it as being a comedy and a tragedy at the same time. It is antithetical above all: serious and playful, poetic and geometric, concrete and abstract, earnest and slippery. It aims to represent at once a work of theoretical history, an esoteric philosophy, an aesthetic book of symbols, a psychological schema and a sacred book, as the editors characterize it.

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<sup>27</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats, A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.35.

<sup>28</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats, A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.37.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Paul, lecturer, 49 Edition of Yeats Summer School (28 July-8August 2008).

*A Vision* best illustrates the fact that the poet has forged his own symbolical system. The book revealing the intricate way of seeing things is the result of a combination between the poet's own occult enterprises, his beliefs, and his wife's automatic writing. Brenda Webster, the psychoanalyst, finds it full of obscurity and characterizes it as occult paraphernalia originated with his wife's automatic writing, which began four days after their marriage.

Yeats once stated that "young men might not read *A Vision*, but would be pleased it existed."<sup>30</sup> He was aware that there was no proof to attest that his creation was not just the product of someone's imagination, and yet he knew that there was something mythical in his creation that would make it last over the years. As a concerned writer, he was interested in the way the reader might perceive *A Vision*. In a letter to his friend, Olivia Shakespear, he wrote "reminds me of the stones I used to drop as a child into a certain very deep well. The splash is very far off and very faint."<sup>31</sup> The poet supposes the reader might be repelled by what might seem an arbitrary, harsh, difficult symbolism. About this symbolism he says that "has almost always accompanied expression that unites the sleeping and walking mind"<sup>32</sup> and that parts of it deserve gravity, while others must be taken with a grain of salt, because not even the most admiring critic can swallow it as a whole.

Yeats assumes the role of a teacher although he had some problems with learning when he was a child. So as a teacher, he himself learned a barbaric terminology which reluctantly teaches the others. Yeats hated examinations describing them as "parching" the thirsty minds of his schoolmates. He imagines his poetry as the subject of future examination and says justice will be done when they have become classics and are set for examinations. This habit of changing roles from student to teacher was confusing for the ones around him and his father even began to wonder whether his son was "a ne'er do well or a genius".

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<sup>30</sup> Alexander Norman, *A New Biography*. London: Continuum, 1988, p.248.

<sup>31</sup> Editor's Introduction to William Butler, *A Vision, The Original 1925 Version*, Eds. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper, Collected Works of W. B. Yeats 13. New York: Scribner, 2008, p.xxi.

<sup>32</sup> William Butler Yeats. *A Vision. The Original 1925 Version*. Eds. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper. Collected Works of W. B. Yeats 13. New York: Scribner, 2008, p. 23.

*A Vision* may also provide the answer for a question that haunts almost every critic: what is Yeats's idea on history? Daniel Albright in the sequence XI of his Introduction states on Yeats's *A Vision* that the entire participation in the world of images - the occult world represented by walking mummies, metal birds that scorn flesh, flames begotten of flame, the entire retinue of such poems like "Sailing to Byzantium" or "Byzantium" came from the trances of his wife or her automatic writing and speech. The fundamental principle is that of the double gyre, a model for interpreting various relationships. Yeats's spiritual reality was something conceived completely different from normal reality, as for instance the lamb of fairy land born in November, comparatively to the normal ones born in spring, or the bough that withered when told our dreams. The gyre of the spirit (fairyland, fantasy, art) represents the gyre of commonplace life contracts.

A favourite sentence of Heraclitus chimes through Yeats's text: "gods and men are always dying each other's life, living each other's death." This not only suggests that Yeats believed in a higher power that controls everything, but also that he was almost convinced that the man might be able to establish a connection with divinity. Furthermore, Albright suggests that the gyre could also be used to suggest the dynamic of human personality which is dualistic and based on opposing principles, according to western philosophy. The critic states also that *A Vision* was inspired by Plato's *Phaedrus*, where the Soul's chariot was pulled by two horses, a black horse longing for earthly pleasure, snorting, difficult to control and a white horse driving towards divine ideals. Yeats's model, dualistic as well, is represented by subjective (or antithetical) and the objective (or primary) principles which almost split us in two. Yeats's explanation on them is as follows: "The primary is that which serves, the antithetical is that which creates,"<sup>33</sup> therefore the two basic urges are one to fantasize, to wish, to celebrate wishes and the other to accept reality as it is and to be content with it. The equilibrium between them gives the identity of each of us.

Throughout his occult study, Yeats discovered 26 basic personality types, corresponding to the calendar of the lunar month, 28 days long. The explanation for the

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<sup>33</sup> William Butler. *A Vision. The Original 1925 Version*. Eds. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper. *Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* 13. New York: Scribner, 2008, p.85.

missing two days stands for the 15<sup>th</sup> night – Phase 15, which corresponds to the full moon, because it is impossible to find an absolute subjective personality on earth, as all of us are imperfect creatures. In the same way, a completely objective personality corresponding to the dark of the moon (Phase 1) does not exist. Yeats states that the soul reincarnates 28 times – it dies and is born 28 times, and then it returns to the starting-point on the Great Wheel of human personality. Therefore, each of us experiences everything: a politician, a hero, a poet, a preacher, a pedant, etc.

In *A Vision*, Yeats goes even further and assigns exceptional individuals to the phases of the moon. The objective gyre is at its maximum at Phase 1 and he places Queen Victoria at Phase 27, John Calvin at Phase 25 and cloddish farmers at Phase 2, because they submit themselves to external codes of behaviour or nature itself; the subjective gyre is at Phase 15 with Keats at Phase 14, Blake at Phase 17, and himself at Phase 17, among the ones who live in a “creative fury.”

In another part of *A Vision*,<sup>2</sup> Yeats describes history governed by a scheme which resembles the previous. Therefore in point of history, subjective and objective eras occur in turn. Each era lasts 2000 years and is inaugurated by the birth of a God. The Christian era has provided the mankind with 2000 years of objective virtues: obedience, pity, chastity, self-abnegation before an abstract and rigid God. As Yeats puts it, a millennium is: “the symbolic measure of a being that attains its flexible maturity and then sinks into rigid age. A civilization is a struggle to keep self-control, and in this it is like some great tragic person, some *Niobe*<sup>34</sup> who must display an almost superhuman will or the cry will not touch our sympathy. The loss of control over thought comes towards the end; first sinking in upon the moral being, then the last surrender, the irrational cry, revelation – the scream of Juno’s *peacock*<sup>35, 36</sup>”.

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<sup>34</sup> In Greek mythology Niobe had seven sons and seven daughters. For boasting to Leto about the size of her brood, her children were killed by Leto – Apollo and Artemis. The grief caused by the loss of her children made her turn into a weeping stone and she continued to cry even after she had lost her human shape.

<sup>35</sup> The idea that the cry of the peacock produces terror comes from the bestiary tradition: see for example, the Aberdeen Bestiary: “The peacock, as Isidore says, gets its name from the sound of its cry. For when it starts, unexpectedly, to give its cry, it produces sudden fear in its hearers. The peacock is called pavo, therefore from pavo fear, since its cry produces fear in those who hear it” (2008 edition of *A Vision*, edited

According to *A Vision*, before the birth of Christ there was a subjective era – the Greek antiquity – which was the opposite of Christian era. Accordingly, people cherished opposing virtues: beauty, aristocracy, sexual expertise, and heroic splendour of conduct. Yet, both of them begin when a half human and half divine person is born. The Christian era began by Immaculate Conception (Virgin Mary), while the classical era began by a swan’s rape of a girl, a myth which Yeats incorporates in his poem “Leda and the Swan.” Yeats goes even further with his predictions regarding the future and boldly asserts that in 2000 the subjective age will annihilate Christian virtues. He hypothesised that the end of the objective era will begin when a rough beast will slouch towards Bethlehem to be born, a prediction he uses in his poem “The Second Coming”.

At the beginning of any era the new force is intense and it rapidly conquers the world, as it happened with Christian age, but Yeats assumed that by the end of the twentieth century Christianity will lack strength, because every civilization consumes itself by reducing the capital of fantasy and force that inspired it:

“Each age unwinds the thread another age had wound, and it amuses one to remember that before Phidias, and his westwards moving art, Persia fell, and that when fool moon came round again, amid eastward moving thought, and brought Byzantine glory, Rome fell; and that at the outset of our westward moving Renaissance Byzantium fell; all things dying each other life, living each other’s death.”<sup>37</sup>

It is worth mentioning the way in which Yeats defines human identity and human history using terms from literary criticism. Albright states that both terms, ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’, come from Browning’s essay on Shelley, describing literary history as a cyclical pattern. The creative energy of subjective artists in the form of established concepts turns into stock truth which is eventually discovered by other subjective

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by Catherine Paul and Margaret Mills Harper, launched at 49<sup>th</sup> edition of Yeats International Summer School).

<sup>36</sup> William Butler. *A Vision. The Original 1925 Version*. Eds. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper. Collected Works of W. B. Yeats 13. New York: Scribner, 2008, p.150

<sup>37</sup> William Butler. *A Vision. The Original 1925 Version*. Eds. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper. Collected Works of W. B. Yeats 13. New York: Scribner, 2008, p. 152.

visionaries and used to refresh the world's image. Yeats's gyres represent ideas about historical surges of creativity of the nineteenth century, but behind the poet's system Pound's Vorticism is to be found, as Daniel Albright asserts. What Pound called a vortex is "the image [the poet's pigment] [...] it is what I call a vortex, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing."<sup>38</sup> No wonder why then Yeats's poetry strives to embody the processes through which imagination receives images as if symbols from Anima Mundi. The poet tried, as Albright assures us, to transform all his poems into gyres. In "A Dialogue to Self and Soul" the antithetical gains strength as the primary grows weak. The poet even set his home into a gyre, the critic continues, for as he shows in "Blood and the Moon," the tower where he lives has a winding stair, the spiral motion that governs all things.

As we have noted so far, Yeats's complex system of symbols is a result of his continuous ventures in all sorts of activities and studies he undertook his entire life. The astonishing aspect about all this is that Yeats probably owes everything to his father. If it had not been for his dependency on his father and his need to escape this dependency, Yeats probably would not have been so interested in psychical research, the symbolism of his poetry would not have been so complex and sophisticated and he would not have been considered one of the most important writers of the twentieth century.

By the end of his life, John Butler Yeats felt that his career in Dublin was not giving him any satisfaction. He considered his work was underestimated by his contemporaries and decided to leave Ireland. A visit to New York that was supposed to be brief turned into a self-imposed exile, as he refused to return to Dublin on several occasions. However, the communication between the poet and his father was never interrupted and, although he was far away, he would continue to exert a tremendous influence on his son his entire life. From his father Yeats got the idea that literature needs to be personal in order to be great, because one cannot write about something he had never experienced, and with it, he also got a series of aesthetic principles that he would later turn into the fundamentals of his entire creation. This idea is certified by Yeats himself who acknowledged his father's merit in one of the letters he wrote to him in

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<sup>38</sup> Quoted by Daniel Albright in *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporations, 1980, pp. 203-207.

1910: “In the process of writing my third lecture I found it led up to the thought of your letter which I am going to quote at the end. It has made me realize with some surprise how fully my philosophy of life has been inherited from you in all but its details and applications.”<sup>39</sup>

John Butler’s eloquent and stimulating speeches made his son believe that he would easily become a successful writer if he had chosen to give up painting for literature. In 1912, Yeats even proposed to his father to start writing his autobiography, considering that the result would not have been just an extraordinary book, but also a profitable business that would solve his financial difficulties. However, John Butler enjoyed the life he had in New York as an artist and he had no intention to give up on it. He was satisfied with his erratic lifestyle, he adored the freedom to do whatever he pleased, and he definitely would not have abandoned the appreciative audience in New York for the judging people in Ireland who would have instantly made him acknowledge his failure.

New York did not bring John Butler any more financial stability than Dublin. His hopes of making a living from his paintings did not materialize and he depended on his son’s generosity and the help of John Quinn, a lawyer and collector of original manuscripts, who was a close companion and supporter of John Butler his entire life. Quinn made an agreement with Yeats to buy his manuscripts and use the money to support his father in his extended visit to New York. Quinn was also the one who had unwillingly provided John Butler the perfect excuse to refuse returning to Dublin. He asked him to make a self-portrait, for which he offered to pay as much as John Butler wanted. His plan was to help him pay off some of his debts and also have enough to return to Dublin, but instead John Butler just used the commission as an excuse for his permanent staying in New York.

Though unhappy with John Butler’s decision to remain in New York, the poet and his father kept writing to each other. In their letters they would debate on many subjects that aroused the interest of both of them: “art, literature, and human personality with a blend of tolerant wit and a sharp critical outlook.”<sup>40</sup> John Butler continued to stimulate

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<sup>39</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Letters of W.B. Yeats*. Allan Wade, Ed. New York: Macmillan, 1955, pp.548-549.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares. *A New Biography*. London: Continuum, 1988, p. 142.



his son's poetic genius his entire life and the influence he had on his son persisted even after his death, as the poet admitted that he would often find himself dreaming of him. He considered him a passionate man who chose to live by his own standards, and years after he died he even attributed his lack of determination to finish what he had started to his need to find perfection. Any resentment he might have felt towards him for having refused to return to Ireland vanished after John Butler died. Yeats finally understood that his father only lived to follow his dream, and he "died as the Antarctic explorers died, in the midst of his work and in the middle of his thought, convinced that he was about to paint like never before."<sup>41</sup>

### **1.3 Imaginary Background in his Mother's Irish Family**

Susan Mary Pollexfen, William Butler Yeats's mother had one significant role in the development of her son – she infused her own profound love for Sligo into her son's soul. Born and raised in Sligo, Susan Mary proved to be a true Pollexfen her entire life. Sensitive and serious, but extraordinarily beautiful, she immediately gained John Butler's heart and they were soon to be united in "one of the most frustrating and fruitful marriages in the history of Ireland."<sup>42</sup> When she accepted marrying John Butler Yeats, Susan believed she would spend her life with a strong-minded, articulate and determined future barrister with a good financial situation, who would be able to offer her everything she needed, just like her father. However, her expectations did not come true and she was seriously disturbed by her husband's sudden decision to abandon his promising career in order to become an artist.

Caught in an unhappy marriage, forced to change her lifestyle because of her husband's inability to support his family and taken away from her beloved Sligo, Susan Mary became the exact opposite of the wife her husband wanted her to be. John Butler expected her to be a source of comfort and tranquillity for him, but instead she became a frustrated woman, unresponsive and emotionless, who was often unkind not only to her

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<sup>41</sup> Ann Saddlemyer, *Becoming George: The Life of Mrs. W.B. Yeats*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p.315.

<sup>42</sup> William Michael. *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats (1839-1922)*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978, p. 35.

husband, but also to her children. They all felt their mother's frustration and they were all affected by her behaviour, but the young Willie was the one who felt it the most and this would leave serious marks on his personality.

The familial conflict and constant changes of residence were the ingredients of Yeats's unhappy childhood. Lacking maternal affection, the poet developed a sort of existential anxiety with which he fought his entire life. Perhaps this is the reason why he barely mentions his mother in his *Autobiographies*. He only has a few memories of her and even those are vague and almost insignificant:

“My memory of what she was like in those days had grown very dim, but I think her sense of personality, her desire for any life of her own, had disappeared in her care for us and in much anxiety about money. I always see her sewing or knitting in spectacles and wearing some plain dress.”<sup>43</sup>

During her lifetime, Susan Mary gradually turned into an almost ghostlike figure, a woman who endured everything in silence, asked no sympathy and gave none, as her daughter Lily puts it. However, she was very much appreciated by her husband who specifically required his children to choose their words carefully when they talked about their mother. He knew what he was embarking upon when he chose her as his wife and he learned to accept her as she was, because she was probably the ideal woman for him – one that would not complain about her husband's faults even if she found them.

Murphy tells us that Susan Mary's unfulfilled expectations have caused a great deal of frustration that affected the entire family. However, her life seemed traumatic because of her own imposed standards. Having married a landlord and a man of law, she expected her life to be peaceful and conventional. She planned to live in Dublin, not far away from her beloved Sligo, so when she saw herself dragged to a city she despised, married to a man she could not agree with and forced to live almost as a pauper, her world fell apart. She was unable to establish any contact with any one she considered sophisticated, she longed for Sligo and she wished to be able to spend time among common people.

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<sup>43</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies*: “Reveries over Childhood and Youth”. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, p.58.

Nevertheless, Yeats admits that his mother had a significant role in his developing sense of the world as a child. She not only made him love Sligo, but she also kept this love alive. The Sligo she portrayed for her children was a land of fairy, an archaic, immemorial world. She introduced her son to a “sacral, magical, mythic consciousness of its [Ireland’s] traditional life” and she was “intimate in her memories of place and custom, with a primal Irish sense of things which modernity sought to efface.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore we can say that the poet owes to his mother the discovery of a reality different from his father’s rationalism and positivism. This world she described for him was full of tradition, myths, tales, customs and beliefs, and it is to this world that the poet marches in his poetry.

Yeats described his mother as “intense,” but able to express this intensity only when she was talking about her love for everything related to Sligo: its people, its places, its customs, the natural phenomena, and especially the stories about the fishing-villages in the area. Because of Susan Mary’s incapacity to express her love for her children, the mother-son relationship was not an ideal one, and this might have been a strong enough motivation for William Butler Yeats to confess to the white pages rather than to people. However, the poet says little about his relationship with his mother, and the best words to describe their relationship, as well as Susan Mary’s most obvious personality traits, belong to her husband:

“There is a good deal of his mother in Willie. I often said to her these words: ‘You know I have to take your affection for granted, for I never saw the slightest sense of it.’...I knew and never doubted that, more than most wives, she was ‘wrapped up’ in her unworthy husband. She was not sympathetic. The feelings of people about her did not concern her. She was not aware of them. She was always in an island of her own.”<sup>45</sup>

As a young boy, neglected by his mother and her relatives and sometimes even by his own father because of his sensitivity and both mental and physical weakness, he embraced solitude and reverie. Sligo became his refuge, the place where he dreamed to be whenever he felt overwhelmed by everything around him and also the place where he

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<sup>44</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.16.

<sup>45</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares. *A New Biography*. London: Continuum, 1988, p. 127.

started discovering the world and searching for answers to questions that nobody could answer. At the age of nine or ten he convinced himself there was a God using an almost illogical rationalization. Since nobody could tell him what religion do the ants have or how calves were born, he concluded that only God understood these mysteries, and therefore he must exist. About that period he wrote to his dear friend Katharine Tynan:

“The place that has really influenced my life most was Sligo. There used to be two dogs there – one smooth-haired, one curly-haired – I used to follow them all day long. I knew all their occupations, when they haunted for rats and when they went to the rabbit-warren. They taught me to dream maybe. Since then I follow my thoughts as I then followed the two dogs – the smooth and the curly – whenever they lead me.”<sup>46</sup>

Speaking about the place that influenced Yeats the most – the “classic Irish soil,” Sligo – county and town, Terence Brown tells us that it has become “as famous in the literary firmament as Scott’s Highlands.”<sup>47</sup> In his childhood, Sligo was the place where Yeats stayed most and although he did not feel very comfortable among the gloomy Pollexfens, the young Willie found his atonement in the natural surroundings. The poet’s future source of imagery is the place where “land and sea are intimate in a county which faces the Atlantic on a wild western shore.”<sup>48</sup> A large garden with ships’ figure-heads, places in which to hide away, two dogs that he chased rabbits with and a pony, were the elements that constituted the microcosm in which Yeats’s imagination had fallen under the spell of mythology combined with folklore, country wisdom and history.

If as an adult Yeats’s attraction to Sligo was reinforced by the discovery that it was a site of Celtic legendry and Gaelic tradition, in his childhood he was attracted by it because, despite being a small and busy port, Sligo “was also touched with romance of the mysterious of the exotic”<sup>49</sup> and with stories about monsters and marvels heard from the sailors.

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<sup>46</sup> Quoted by Richard Ellmann in *The Identity of Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1954, p.24.

<sup>47</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.1.

<sup>48</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.2.

<sup>49</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.2.

From Deidre Toomey we find out that it is his mother that we have to be grateful to for the development of the Irish poet: “literary scholars and admirers should be thankful for Yeats, as an Irish poet and a poet of Irish place, landscape and legend of the cairn-heaped grassy hill/ Where passionate Maeve is stony still... we can thank Susan Pollexfen...She gave value to folklore, legend, country wisdom, the irrational, traditional, unthinking lunar side of life – all that J.B. Yeats rejected.”<sup>50</sup> She introduced him to the magic world of story and oral tradition and taught him to appreciate everything written in verse.

W. B. Yeats loved Sligo not only due to the stories he could find out from sailors or common people exercising their expertise in storytelling, but also because of its magical power that was amplified by the family’s romantic shipping tradition. As part of the Protestant bourgeoisie, his grandparents were known and respected by the entire community, and the young Yeats liked his statute as the grandchild of William Pollexfen. The old Pollexfen was the owner of ships, a legend among the local people, a man who did not enjoy speaking and induced fear in those around him. Yeats recalls that one day a man came at their door and recounted for the family a heroic episode from his grandfather’s youth and the young Willie was surprised to discover that not even his wife knew about it. He was known as an honest man of great physical strength who would not ask anyone to do something he would not do. His grandchildren liked him and feared him at the same time, and they always tried to spend as little time as possible around him. For the Young Willie he was a God-like figure, and in his adulthood he always thought of him whenever he read *King Lear* and asked himself whether the heroic figures in his work were nothing more than transpositions of his own grandfather.

In Sligo there was another figure known for helping out in the development of the young poet. Yeats and one of his uncles, George Pollexfen, found common interests in mystical issues. He was the one able to help Yeats with his studies whenever his father could not do it. Occult studies were not among the subjects that aroused John Butler Yeats’s interest, and thus, he could not help his son regarding this matter. His uncle was the one who enabled Yeats to perform cabalistic experiments and the time spent with him

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted by Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001 p.16.

made the poet regard him as an unforgettable figure whose personality combined with his father's could have created "the impossible man he wanted him to be: an intellectual of feeling, an isolated man whose intense friendships suggest to him patterns of order for his artistic creation."<sup>51</sup> His uncle procured him a horoscope from a friend in which we now find some resemblances with what the personality of W.B. Yeats was:

"Dry and cold, a dark swarthy complexion, black hair and dark eyes . . . thin nose inclined to bend down over the lips, nostrils closed, chin long and rather large . . . head held slightly forward in stooping [...] profound in imagination, reserved, patient, melancholy, in arguing and disputing grave and austere in manner . . . a lover of all honest sciences, and a searcher into, and delighter in, strange studies and novelties. . . very imaginative, subject to see visions, and dream dreams."<sup>52</sup>

The obvious contrast between Yeats's mother and father is associated by Richard Ellmann with places. The sensitive person that Susan Mary was, a woman that hardly talked, embodies the romantic and beautiful Sligo, while the image of the communicative John Butler Yeats is associated with the noisy Dublin or London. But while John Butler was by his son's side whenever he needed him, his mother was not. She was emotionally unavailable not only to her husband, but also to her children, and this would leave its marks on the poet's personality. Being forced to cope with his abandonment issues, he began identifying himself with his mother, a fact that would later affect his relationships with women.

Critics often discover in Yeats's writing an image of himself, because the poet believed that his genius lay in personal experience. However, he was aware that personal utterance was not enough to create good poetry and thus he sought to discover a technique that would allow him to turn his personal truths into impersonality, the subjective into objective, withholding any excessive sentimentality that would turn his poetry into means of dealing with his self-pity and self-deception. The Doctrine of the

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<sup>51</sup> John Unterecker, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Michael MacLiammoir and Eavan Boland. *WB Yeats and his World*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1977, p.11.

Mask, Yeats's solution for his poetry, enabled the poet to hide his almost woman-like weakness behind a mask that was the opposite of him, one derived from some sort of private mythology that he embraced as a child in Sligo.

As we have previously mentioned, Yeats's troubled relationship with his mother caused him a great deal of problems with the women in his life. He constantly needed a feminine figure in his life and sought maternal affection in each one of them. One of the most important feminine figures in the poet's life was Katharine Tynan, whom he met in 1885, when he was supposed to discuss with C.H. Oldham plans for the recently founded Dublin University Review. He met her at the residence of her father, a prosperous Catholic farmer in Clondalkin, who had taken care that his daughter, one of his twelve children, be educated properly in a convent. The girl that was seven years older than the poet shared her father's political support of Parnell and also displayed some literary gifts. The acquaintance with her meant for Yeats the introduction to Irish-Catholic middle class and she immediately became a friend with whom the poet corresponded for a while.

Katharine Tynan was Yeats's first substitute for a mother. Besides offering him the emotional support he needed, she was also a source of inspiration. In his only novel, *John Sherman*, Yeats used her as a model for the protagonist's childhood sweetheart. As expected, the novel incorporates elements of its author's biography. The action in the novel takes place in Ballah, a substitute for Sligo, and London. John Sherman, the protagonist, leaves his birthplace and his childhood sweetheart, Mary Carton, and moves to London. There he meets Margaret Leland, a shallow but wealthy woman to whom he plans to marry, because she would offer him the means to escape financial worries. However, this marriage would also push him into a world he considers completely wrong for him, and would deprive him of the things he always enjoyed. Thus, when he finds out that his former sweetheart still loves him, he cancels his engagement with Margaret and returns to his birthplace. He marries Mary Carton although she is more a mother-like figure for him than a lover. He plans to support his family by farming and thus accepts and enjoys his place in the world.

The female characters in Yeats's novel are transpositions of the women in his life. Mary Carton is a transposition of Katharine Tynan, the motherly presence in his life at the time the novel was written, while Margaret Leland's model was Laura Armstrong, a

distant cousin of Yeats whom he met in 1882 and to whom he was attracted. The protagonist's mother, though ambiguously described, somehow resembles Yeats's own mother. Unsympathetic, emotionless, she never knew what was on inside her son's mind, but he could not abandon her despite all her faults. Unlike his mother, Mary Carton truly wishes what is best for him and encourages him to leave for London although she knew she might lose him. She offers him the support that a mother would offer to her son, but he is unable to relate to her on an adult level.

In a letter to Katharine Tynan, Yeats confessed that *John Sherman* contained more of himself than anything he ever wrote, therefore when he portrays his protagonist as a man aching for his birthplace in a city in which he simply cannot integrate, he did not only charge his literary creation with his own feeling, but also with his mother's, who was a constant reminder of his devotion to everything related to Sligo. By implementing his mother's features into his protagonist, Yeats finally gave a voice to his unresponsive and inarticulate mother who would spend the last years of her life in complete silence, as a consequence of the stroke she suffered in 1887.

With the publication of *John Sherman* Yeats hoped to set out the features of an Irish culture in which folk imagination and the tradition of the Irish countryside would prevail. He wanted his novel to be seen as one written by an Irish novelist, "not English or cosmopolitan one choosing Ireland as a background."<sup>53</sup> As a man of letters he spent the last two decades of the nineteenth century working on *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* and *The Celtic Twilight*, collections that consists of personal versions of a series of folk narratives. His collections were followed by essays and articles in which the poet tried to revive critics' and writers' attention on the mythical world that the Irish countrymen and women celebrated in their songs and tales.

In the modern, sceptical world of the twentieth century the poet's task to revive an old tradition was difficult to accomplish. He was well aware of the fact that the beautiful world of romance inhabited by goblins and ghosts was still alive in the imagination of many Irishmen, and yet it was rather difficult to convince anyone that there are still people who believe in such childish stories. By the end of the century his focus on Irish

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<sup>53</sup> Phillip L. Marcus, *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.40.



folklore intensified. His research on folk-customs and beliefs brought him in the wild districts in south County Galway, where he found enough material to revive his fascination for an idea that haunted him during his childhood: the motif of the changeling.

The first poem in which Yeats used the motif of the changeling was “The Stolen Child”, published in 1886, when the poet was only twenty-one years old. In this poem Yeats creates an imaginary world in which fairies lure children away into a beautiful, wild world in which they could keep their innocence forever. Though we do not know for sure, Yeats’s obsession with the motif of the changeling might have been caused by the sudden death of his little brother Robert, of which he writes in his *Autobiographies*: “I heard people telling that my mother and the servants had heard the Banshee crying the night before he died.”<sup>54</sup> Perhaps this was his way of coping with such an unfortunate event and perhaps it is precisely this tragedy in his childhood that made him write such beautiful lines:

“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.”<sup>55</sup>

Yeats’s second endeavour with the motif of the changeling was the play *The Land of Heart’s Desire* in which a young bride is lured away by the fairies. The exchange is presented through the perspective of her relatives-in-law who complain that their daughter-in-law is dull and lethargic. While the priest believes that she will settle down, her relatives are sceptical, and she eventually dies in her husband’s arms, abandoning domesticity and social constraints for a world of wilderness and endless joy.

At this point, it is not far-fetched to say that the fate of the protagonist of this play bears traces of his mother’s life. The young bride abandons her future for the appealing promise of the fairies, just like Yeats’s mother has to abandon her dear Sligo in order to

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<sup>54</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies*: “Reveries over Childhood and Youth”. William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, p.55.

<sup>55</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.20.

be by her husband's side. Generally, the motif of the changeling implies that sometimes fairies lure away human children and they leave behind one of their own. However, an extension of this motif says that even an adult can be taken away by fairies, and perhaps this is the sacramental dimension to which Yeats wished to attribute his mother's unnatural behaviour that came as a result of her removal from the Sligo of her childhood.

#### **1.4 At Lady Augusta Gregory's Estate**

Yeats's first encounter with Lady Augusta Gregory took place at Coole Park near Gort in County Galway in 1894. She was an aristocrat who shared his fascination with the primal Irish sense of things that was quickly dissolving in modernity. After her husband's death in 1892, she took over his estate, being left thus with a considerable fortune that allowed her to dedicate the rest of her life to writing. Lady Augusta's ancestors had been soldiers, churchmen and government officials, members of the ruling elite in Ireland since the seventeenth century. The marriage to Sir William introduced her to circles of intellectuals and men of politics, to which she established close connections. As a young girl she embraced the political opinions of her class that were similar to the British rule. However, her developed sense of morality that took over her personality since she was a teenager turned her to a life of strong moral and religious conviction that she would not abandon for the rest of her life.

Married to an elderly man who could sustain her in all her actions due to his social status and financial situation, Lady Augusta Gregory became an emblematic figure for the political and cultural stage in Ireland. Her husband shared her interest in literature and arts and they both enjoyed spending time among the most prominent literary and artistic figures of the day. However, the age difference between her and her husband, as well as her developed spirit of adventure and her weakness for poets, made her indulge for a while into a romantic affair with the poet Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, with whom she had in common the support for the Egyptian Nationalism, a political movement that fought against the British rule. Though her love for him seems to have been intense (she wrote twelve love sonnets for him) they broke up when her husband discovered her affair. Nevertheless, their feelings for each other remained until the day she died, when she was buried with the bible he had left for her when he died.

The Egypt situation made Lady Gregory understand the problems of her own country and got involved into the Irish Nationalist movement. She, like Yeats, attempted to establish a new and original Irish culture by returning to tradition. During her literary career she wrote over forty plays that draw on Irish folklore and mythology, a great number of poems and essays, and also several collections of folk tales. Her main goals were to create a national theatre and to awaken Irishmen's interest in Irish language and national folklore. She wanted to be a part of the changes Ireland was going through and together with Yeats and other prominent literary figures of her time, she founded the Abbey Theatre, where she worked as a manager until her bad health forced her to retire.

Yeats's friendship with Lady Gregory started while he was taking a trip to the Aran Islands with his friend Arthur Symons, a British poet. When they met, she was a forty-five-year old widow working on her husband's autobiography. They talked about her work, her intention to be a part of the Irish movement, and her plans to collect Irish folk tales and publish them in a few volumes. Yeats was delighted to discover they had common interests and helped her with her work and, thus, a long and supportive relation began. Soon her house would turn into a meeting place for the literary figures of the day, but also the place where Yeats would find his peace whenever he was overwhelmed by the events in his life.

Yeats was not the only who would gain a lot from his friendship with Lady Gregory. She was an ambitious and intelligent woman and she indulged in her own literary endeavours. In 1902, she published *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* and two years later *Gods and Fighting Men*, two works resulted from her translation of ancient Irish legends which are sometimes recognized as her most important creations. Yeats was deeply impressed with Lady Gregory's work and accepted to write the Preface to *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, calling it "the best book that has ever come out of Ireland; for the stories which it tells are a chief part of Ireland's gift to the imagination of the world."<sup>56</sup>

At Lady Augusta's Yeats finally found a home. She had literary plans for him and soon they developed a relationship which was mutually advantageous for each of them. Lady Augusta had found an Irish poet she could use to promote Irish folklore, whereas

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<sup>56</sup> Yeats's Preface to Lady Augusta Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster*. Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Limited, 1970, p. I.

Yeats had found some sort of surrogate mother, a woman to whom he could recount all his sorrows and disclose every emotion. She told her about his troubling relationship with Maud Gonne, and she was always there for him whenever he needed advice or emotional and physical comfort.

When Yeats started his relationship with Olivia Shakespear, Lady Gregory was very delighted that he had finally moved on from Maud and she offered them all her support. She sent them all sorts of things to make their life together easier, but this was not a relationship that was meant to last. He admired Olivia for her beauty, he enjoyed their romantic relationship and he appreciated her for being a good listener, and yet he was still in love with Maud and at her first signal he broke up with Olivia. Soon after, his hopes and dreams would be destroyed once again by Maud and he would return to Lady Gregory's estate for consolation. This time his pain seemed greater than any other time. He suffered because of his unrequited love for Maud, and his misery was so great that it made Lady Gregory quote an old Irish saying when referring to Maud: "God is unjust if she dies a quiet death". She believed that Maud did not deserve his love and one day Lady Gregory even went to her and asked about her intentions towards Yeats. Yeats was very grateful for everything she did for him, but no matter how much she would try to help him forget Maud, his love for her would not just go away.

Of this period of great spiritual turmoil Yeats wrote: "I was tortured by sexual desire and disappointed love. Often as I walked in the woods at Coole it would have been a relief to have screamed aloud."<sup>57</sup> Besides, his love disillusionment was not the only thing he had to endure. He was at the same time torn apart by guilt for having split up with Olivia, the woman who had done nothing wrong in her relationship with him. One of his poems of that period shows that he blamed himself for not being able to forget Maud and get involved in a romantic relationship with a woman who really loves him and wants him by his side:

"I had a beautiful friend  
And dreamed that the old despair  
Would end in love in the end:

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<sup>57</sup> Roy Foster, *W.B. Yeats – A Life. I. The Apprentice Mage*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998, p.20.

She looked in my heart one day  
And saw your image was there;  
She has gone weeping away.”<sup>58</sup>

Lady Gregory came to Yeats’s rescue whenever he experienced a problem. When they met, Yeats was unhappy with the direction his work was going, but with her help he started to feel more secure and soon he would be able to put on paper the turmoil of his soul. She offered him literary advice whenever he had reached an impasse and she also granted him access to the materials gathered by her – a direct inspirational source that proved to be very valuable. She did not just want to protect him, but also to bring him on a straight path. She wanted to make sure he would not waste his talent, he would manage to fulfil the great destiny she was born to and he would become a successful writer that would praise Irish folklore in his work.

In order to make sure that Yeats’s visits at Coole Park would be effective Lady Gregory always set up a perfect environment for Yeats, hoping that a regular schedule and a peaceful atmosphere would be enough for his writing to be as fruitful as possible. She would solve his health problems with healthy food served at regular hours outdoor to fixed destinations and she would always provide him with everything he need for his writing. She was a dominating woman with great expectations, just like Yeats’s father, but the difference between the two was that she actually managed to achieve her goals.

Lady Gregory’s help came at the time when Yeats most needed it. He had always had problems with money, but now the situation was even more critical. Because Maud had confessed to him that she loved someone else, he felt he lacked the inspiration to write any more poetry. He felt at a deadlock, and thus he would only remain to writing articles for a while, although poetry was much better paid than anything else. At the same time he also gained some money from literary journalism and reviews, but the amounts he made were not enough for a decent life, and besides these activities occupied a great deal of his time, so he was no longer able to dedicate much time to his work. With Lady Gregory’s help he had managed to get rid of these problems as well. During their collaboration she invested in him about 500 pounds, a considerable amount if we take

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<sup>58</sup> Yeats, William Butler. *Autobiographies*. William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, p.68.

into account that Yeats's income before he met Lady Gregory was somewhere around ten pounds per month. By the end of the decade Yeats was affording to be very selective in choosing the literary activities he would do and in 1991 he even hired a literary agent to deal with all the details regarding the publishing of his work.

Under Lady Gregory's patronage Yeats was able to have the life he had always wished for. He had experienced poverty ever since childhood, and because of that he was never able to set roots anywhere. He was forced to move from place to place, from house to house, but now he was a respectable man of letters who was able to settle down to one place and call it a home. He rented a place in London, and although the rent was quite low, he was considered one of the wealthy men in the building. There he would have his regular meetings with his fellow artists and would keep pace with London's literary and social scene. Back in Ireland, at Lady Gregory's estate, he would keep his eye on Ireland's political and cultural direction and he would expand his imagination by maintaining his connections with the landscape and the Irish countryside.

At the beginning of their friendship, Lady Gregory had taken Yeats with her "to gather folk-belief, tales of the faeries, and the like, and wrote down herself what [they] had gathered, considering that this work, in which one lets other talk, and walked about the fields so much, would lie [...] very light upon the mind."<sup>59</sup> This experience had reinforced Yeats's belief in the supernatural, as he came to think that Irish peasants were in possession of some sort of ancient knowledge, and thus his interest in folk material was revived. In 1898, when he was a member of the Golden Dawn, he dedicated most of his time to Celtic mysticism and in 1899 he published *The Wind among the Reeds*, the first volume of poetry in which signs of his reading of Irish legendry can be noticed. The volume contains love poems written for Maud Gonne, all of them charged with melancholy and expressing the tumult of unanswered love and emotional distress, but also poems in which passion and chagrin prevail, inspired by the poet's relationship with Olivia Shakespear. The collection is rich in carefully constructed symbolism and, as Terence Brown puts it, "the territory this volume occupies is a landscape of the

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<sup>59</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares. *A New Biography*. London: Continuum, 1988, p.84.

unconscious, appropriated for consciousness in a poetic which seems to demand of symbolism its ultimate revelatory powers.”<sup>60</sup>

Lady Gregory also awakened Yeats’s interest in the theatre. In his youth he had written a play for Laura Armstrong – *Vivien and Time* – but ever since he paid much more attention to poetry than to drama. Talking with Lady Gregory about his unfulfilled wish to create a national theatre, he was delighted to discover that she considered his idea brilliant. Right after that, she decided that Ireland needed a national theatre to promote a true Irish culture, and thus, she, Yeats, Edward Martyn and George Moore founded the Irish Literary Theatre, which would later become The Abbey Theatre.

*The Countess Cathleen* was the first of Yeats’s plays to be played at the Gaiety Theatre, in Dublin. The play tells the story of a countess who sells her soul to the devil in order to save her people from starvation. The story is set in Ireland in a period of great poverty, reminding of the Great Famine of the nineteenth century, when one million people died from starvation and another one million emigrated. At the end of the play, the countess gains redemption because her reasons were altruistic and her soul goes to heaven. Such a story would not please the ecclesiastical authorities of the day and it would be considered unorthodox. However, the play was staged, and although it received some positive critical reception, it also caused controversy because of the first act of the play in which a peasant destroys a Catholic shrine. As Norman Jeffares argues, the audiences’ reaction to this particular episode in the play made Yeats realise that “he had been mistaken in using traditional symbols without realising that such symbols possessed a reality of their own in Ireland.”<sup>61</sup>

Yeats knew all along that he needed to find a perfect pattern for his drama, as well as for his poetry. In his quest, he was deeply influenced by two plays: Villiers de l’Isle Adam’s *Axel* and Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*. The first play is considered Villiers’s masterpiece and combines symbolism and occult themes. The story follows Sara de Maupers, a young heiress who decides to give up her plans to become a nun and runs away to the castle of Axel d’Auersperg, a distant relative of hers. As they discover that a secret treasure lies beneath the castle, they become romantically involved and once they

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<sup>60</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p. 110.

<sup>61</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares. *A New Biography*. London: Continuum, 1988, p. 93.

find the mysterious treasure, they just decide to drink poison and contemplate their moment of perfect happiness, considering that trying to fulfil their dreams in the real world would not be as extraordinary as just thinking that their dreams could now be fulfilled. The most memorable line of the play, which probably concentrates the meaning of the entire play, belongs to Axel who says “Living? The servants will do that for us.” Inspired by Villiers’s play, Yeats embarked upon writing his own “work of symbolist world-rejection”<sup>62</sup> and he created his dramatic poem *The Shadowy Waters*, a work in which symbols and motifs play the leading role, while the action is minimal.

The second play that affected Yeats’s opinions on the theatre was Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, a play in which the author presented an absurd version of the real world, one led by chaos and irrationality. The main character is a king who lives only for killing others. He has a toilet brush instead of a sceptre and does not seem to notice anything happening around him. Yeats, who attended the opening night of the play, was horrified by the actors’ performance, and yet he understood that the vulgarity of the language and the anarchistic tone were instruments used by the author to subversively mock the bourgeois principles and moral values. He appreciated Jarry’s audacity and realised that drama would be an effective way to present his work to large audiences. He knew he would need to adjust his plays in order to achieve the electrifying effects of the ones seen in Paris, therefore he would soon start working on them and in time he would give Ireland a national theatre of international renown.

Yeats wanted a national theatre ever since his play *The Land of Heart’s Desire* was produced in London. However, he did not want in Ireland the kind of commercial theatre that was so popular in England. He hoped that Irish people would be open to the idea of a theatre that would promote an ancient idealism and yet, in a politically divided country, his vision would not be so easily embraced. In 1901 the Gaiety Theatre produced for the first time a play in Irish. The name of the play was *Diarmuid and Grania*, a play written by Yeats and George Moore under the strict guidance of Lady Gregory. Despite the critics’ lack of enthusiasm, the audience enjoyed it and Yeats was encouraged to continue writing drama. Soon he would turn his interest in theatre into a career that would occupy many of his following years.

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<sup>62</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p. 119.



Yeats's climax in theatre was with his famous play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Inspired by Lady Gregory's folk material, Yeats got the idea of writing it in a dream. However, because his intention was to create a simple, but effective play that would manage to carry the audience into the mythical landscape of Irish countryside, Yeats needed Lady Gregory's help. He was not familiar with the language of the traditional peasants, and because he wanted his characters to use "the country speech," Lady Gregory had to be always by his side while he was working on it. As a sign of his appreciation he later wrote to Lady Gregory:

"One night I had a dream almost as distinct as a vision, of a cottage where there was well-being and firelight and talk of a marriage and into the midst of that cottage there came an old woman in a long cloak. She was Ireland herself, that Cathleen Ni Houlihan for whom so many songs have been sung and about whom so many stories have been told and for whose sake so many have gone to their death. I thought if I could write this out as a little play I could make others see my dream as I had seen it, but I could not get down out of that high window of dramatic verse, and in spite of all you had done for me I had not the country speech. One has to live among the people . . . before one can think the thoughts of the people and speak with their tongue. We turned my dream into the little play, 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan,' and when we gave it to the little theatre in Dublin and found that the working people liked it, you helped me to put my other dramatic fables into speech..."<sup>63</sup>

In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* Yeats identifies Ireland with an old woman who convinces a young man to abandon his plans of marrying the woman he loves for a destiny higher than marriage – dying for his beloved country, Ireland. The role of Cathleen Ni Houlihan was offered to Maud Gonne, to both hers and Yeats's delight. As a true patriot, she identified with the part she was offered to play, so her performance was a true success. He had often thought of her as the most beautiful woman in Ireland, but now

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<sup>63</sup> Quoted in A. Norman Jeffares and A.S. Knowland's *A Commentary on the Collected Plays of WB. Yeats*. London: Macmillan, 1975, p.29.

“her great heights made Cathleen seem a divine fallen into our mortal infirmity.”<sup>64</sup> The impact her acting had on the audience was greater than Yeats would have ever imagined. Very soon he would be considered a patriotic hero and his play would be seen as a desperate call for action to obtain the much desired independence from England.

Lady Gregory’s friendship and collaboration with Yeats lasted for many years. With her help, he had a career that would bring him a great personal satisfaction, despite the occasional annoyances, as well as partial financial independence. In 1907 Yeats was truly disappointed to find out that the Nationalists considered the production of *The Playboy of the Western World*, a three-act play written by his friend John Millington Synge, a mockery of the Irish people. This drove him to believe that the Nationalists were not able to appreciate true art and he, Lady Gregory and Synge, would soon lose the appreciation of the crowd. Deeply disappointed by the unexpected turn of events, Yeats was taken to Italy by Lady Gregory and her son.

On his return from Italy, Yeats’s life seemed to have become even more complicated. Besides being forced to deal with the audiences’ lack of understanding of his work, Yeats was also caught up in the dispute between Lady Gregory and Miss Annie Horniman, the main patron of the Abbey. The two disliked each other from the start and they would often share their opinions with Yeats. While Miss Horniman would express her concerns regarding Lady Gregory’s ability to occupy a leading role in the Irish Literary Revival, and consider her relationship to Yeats similar to the one between a master and his slave, Lady Gregory would disapprove of Yeats’s subservience to Miss Horniman. Obviously, this frustrating situation needed to come to an end, so Miss Horniman decided to end any involvement with the Abbey theatre and establish a repertory theatre in Manchester. In her quest, she would have wanted Yeats by her side, so she invited him to work with her in England, hoping that Yeats’s disappointment with the Irish audiences would determine him to accept working for her in England. However, Yeats denied her offer, because his work was not only meant to entertain the public, but to awaken people’s interest in a true Irish culture, and if he could not do that through the theatre, he could always return to poetry: “I understand my own race and in all, my work,

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<sup>64</sup> David A. Ross, *A Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File Inc., 2009, p. 316.

lyric or dramatic, I have thought of it. If the theatre fails I may or may not write plays – but I shall write for my own people – whether in love or hate of them matters little...”<sup>65</sup>

When Yeats’s uncle died, the poet’s financial situation worsened. George Pollexfen gave most of his fortune to other relatives, so Yeats needed to find other sources of income. Lady Gregory came to his rescue once again and she worked with Edmund Gosse to get Yeats a pension given by royal favour, which he only accepted on the condition of being granted the right to deny any political commitment. Hereinafter they both worked for raising funds for the Abbey theatre. Yeats gave many lectures and Lady Gregory managed to collect money from donations. The theatre started to become successful and the company would soon go on tour in America. On this occasion, Yeats visited his father, who was now happily living in New York. He found him working on a self-portrait commissioned by John Quinn, an old acquaintance of Lady Gregory. They spent a short time together and soon they would both return to their usual activities, Yeats to his lectures and John Butler to his self-portrait, which he never finished, despite working on it until he died, almost twelve years later.

The American tour of the Abbey stirred a lot of controversy. On opening night in New York, the audiences were horrified by Synge’s play *The Playboy of the Western World*. Police were often needed to repress the sometimes violent waves of protests and in Philadelphia the actors were even arrested. Nevertheless, the protests only managed to increase the Abbey’s popularity in both America and Europe and attracted public support in Dublin. Intellectuals all over the world found their work very challenging and although newspapers discussed the actors’ deficient professional performance, the plays they presented would soon be considered fine art. Thus, Lady Gregory and Yeats were entitled to consider this experience a victory, because they did not only manage to raise a lot of money for their theatre, but they also brought Irish drama to people’s attention.

The relationship between Lady Gregory and Yeats was not always considered a typical relationship between friends. Maud Gonne was the first to assert that Lady Gregory was in love with Yeats, recalling the grudge between her and Annie Horniman, with whom Lady Gregory had to share Yeats’s attention. However she was deeply

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<sup>65</sup> Quoted by John Unterecker in *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p. 103.

mistaken in thinking that Lady Gregory would fall for a disconcerted, insecure man like Yeats.<sup>66</sup> All she wanted was to put him on the right path, and this is why she strongly disliked Yeats's love for Maud or his temporal allegiance to Miss Horniman. She realized that he needed a regular pattern of life in order to become the great artist he was supposed to become so she somehow took charge of his life. When he married Georgina Hyde-Lees, also known as George or Georgie, she was very happy that he had overcome his love for Maud. She believed that Georgie was a suitable match for him, despite the age difference, and she was confident that Yeats would have a nice, peaceful life by her side.

Indeed, Georgie was the kind of woman Yeats needed in his life. In a letter to Lady Gregory he wrote: "... my wife is a perfect wife, kind, wise and unselfish. I think you were such another young girl once. She has made my life serene and full of order."<sup>67</sup> By her side he managed to put his life in order. He was enjoying the small pleasures of domestic life, but he was also working on improving his writing through his wife's automatic writing. However, their peaceful life was suddenly interrupted by the death of Lady Gregory's son, Robert. He had been accidentally killed in action, during the First World War, while he was returning from a mission in Northern Italy. Yeats and his young wife were also devastated by the terrible news and decided to go to County Galway to present their condolences. However, Lady Gregory did not want them there. Maud Gonne had already visited her and she had realized that her grief was so big that she would not have been able to deal with any more visitors.

The separation between Yeats and his old friend would not last very long. Soon Yeats and his wife took a trip to Coole Park so that Yeats would introduce his wife to his precious friend. Lady Augusta was still in mourning after her son, but she found the resources to welcome them properly. On this occasion, Yeats also wanted to show his wife Thoor Ballylee, a Norman castle from the sixteenth century that he had recently bought. The castle, which once was a part of Lady Gregory's estate, was purchased by Yeats from the Congested District Board with the intention of settling there as a married man, and now that George had accepted his proposal, he was planning to restore it and move in with his lovely wife.

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<sup>66</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares. *A New Biography*. London: Continuum, 1988, p. 143.

<sup>67</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Letters of W.B. Yeats*. Allan Wade, Ed. New York: Macmillan, 1955, p.643.

Georgie, despite being very young and remotely naïve, became the dominant figure in their relationship, not because she was the kind of woman that would spend her time finding arguments to counter-attack her husband's decisions, but because Yeats always sought for her approval before taking any decision. Thus, she had somehow replaced Lady Gregory, who had been Yeats's main advisor and confidant for so many years, and although Lady Gregory did not enjoy being replaced, she did not turn her back on him or his wife. Though it must have been incredibly difficult for her to no longer be "at the centre of his creativity,"<sup>68</sup> she carried on with her mission of making Yeats's life easier and she offered the newly-wed couple a house nearby to live in while the restoration of their tower was complete.

Lady Gregory's connection with Yeats and George lasted until the day she died. Despite the occasional quarrels between Yeats and his benefactor, the irritation the two women felt whenever they stayed around each other for too long, or the long periods when they did not see each other because of various reasons, they always communicated through letters. Yeats always reported to her whenever something good or bad happened in his life and she would always be involved in the major events in his life. She cared for his children like a grandmother and she would often have them over at Coole, looking after them just like she once looked after their father. The children enjoyed spending time in her company and they would always gladly return to Coole during holidays. She had become a precious member of the family and, when she got really sick, Yeats was there to look after her just like she did when he most needed it. Of that moment in 1909 when Yeats was informed by Robert that Lady Gregory had suffered a cerebral haemorrhage he wrote in his diary: "I thought my mother was ill and my sister was asking me to come at once; then I remembered my mother died years ago and that more than kin was at stake. She has been to me mother, sister and brother. I cannot realise the world without her – she brought to my wavering thoughts steadfast nobility."<sup>69</sup> His shock was even greater when she died in 1932. She had been fighting cancer for a long time and Yeats could watch her health deteriorating as days went by. He knew she was approaching her final

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<sup>68</sup> Ann Saddlemyer. *Becoming George: The Life of Mrs. W.B. Yeats*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p.193.

<sup>69</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares. *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet*. London: Kyle Cathie, 1996, p. 131.

moments and so he left his family in Dublin and he tried to spend as much time as possible by her side, but because of some urgent affairs in Dublin he was not there when she passed away. The news of her death caused him a lot of pain and after her funeral he never returned to Coole or Ballylee again.

### **1.5 Maud Gonne**

On 30 January 1889 Yeats would have the encounter that would change his entire life – he would meet Maud Gonne, a twenty-two- year-old woman with red-golden hair and hazel eyes. She was a young Irish Nationalist with strong convictions who had recently befriended Ellen O’Leary, the sister of John O’Leary, the famous Irish Nationalist who would later be sentenced to prison because of his involvement in the Irish Republican Brotherhood - a secret organisation that fought for an independent Ireland. From the moment she appeared at their door, the Yeatses were fascinated by her. The poet’s sisters were mostly intrigued and they were wondering why she would have left a social life to the detriment of politics, while John Butler Yeats and the young Willie, who was twenty-three years old, were charmed by her engagement in the nationalist struggle for independence.

By the time the two met, the young poet had already published *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*, so Maud was already familiar with his work. Yeats’s collection of poetry was an expression of Ireland’s culture and Maud, though she considered that even violence was acceptable as long as her country would gain its independence, confessed to him that she was deeply touched by his work. Her words and also her beauty must have caused a storm into the young’s poet mind because this first encounter made him realise that she was the love of his life, and although she would never share his feelings, Yeats would always remember their first as an event of mythological import.

“I was 23 years old when the troubling of my life began... she drove up to their house in Bedford Park with an introduction from John O’Leary to my father. I had never thought to see in a living woman so great beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past. A complexion like the blossom of the apples, and yet the face and body had the beauty of lineaments which Blake calls the highest beauty because it

changes least from youth to age and a stature so great that she seemed of divine race. Her movements were worthy of her form, and I understood at last why the poet of antiquity where we would but speak of face and form, sings, loving some lady, that she paces like a goddess.”<sup>70</sup>

Though Maud Gonne was considered a very beautiful woman, perhaps the most beautiful woman in Ireland, she was arguably a model of beauty. Nevertheless, the poet considered her appearance to be divine, and because she gradually showed him that her intelligence was to be admired too, a long and troubled relationship with her began. In one of his letters to John O’Leary, Yeats named her Diana of the Crossways after Meredith’s novel with the same title, as she was Irish just like the heroine of the novel, the modern incarnation of the huntress goddess. His infatuation with her was so deep that he confessed he would follow her lead no matter what she would tell him to do. He created an idealized image of a strong and beautiful woman and turned it into an object of worshipping that he could transform into myth and symbol for his creation. Thus Maud’s image replaced Laura Armstrong, the woman who influenced him the most in his early years and served as a model for one of his characters in *John Sherman*. Nonetheless, Maud was not the kind of woman that would fall helplessly in love with him, as her heart already belonged to someone else, and in his relationship with her Yeats would assume the role of John Sherman – the protagonist of his early novel – a wild yet timid dreamer.

Ireland and its problems were the main things that brought Maud and Yeats together. She had come to their house to talk about the British domination over Ireland, issues related to political prisoners and British landowners, but they soon discovered they have much more in common. They both had English roots and their families were both commercially-minded. In both cases, the father was the one to step away from the family tradition. John Butler abandoned a promising career to become an artist and Maud’s father, gave up the family business for a career in the military service. They were both the dominant figures in their family, and their children both lacked maternal affection, Yeats because of his mother’s mental illness, and Maud because of her mother’s premature death.

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<sup>70</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, pp. 47-48.

Maud Gonne, who was only one year younger than Yeats, fell in love with Ireland in her early years, when her father, a British-army officer, was posted in Ireland, in a period when the risk of a new Fenian rebellion was very high. In county Kildare, Maud realised how much she loved animals and birds and in Howth, near Dublin, she listened to stories about the heroes of the 1798 Rising. The local tales would later awaken in her the desire to fight for Ireland's rights, which is not exactly what one might expect from the daughter of a British army officer. Captain Gonne, who later became Colonel, was widowed when his daughter was only five years-old. From that moment, he took very good care of his daughters' education. He taught them that they should not be afraid of anything and did his best in raising them to become two beautiful, educated women, the kind that any young man would want as his wife. He hired a governess to help with the girls' education and when he realised that it was quite difficult to control two lively little girls, he sent them to London to live with an aunt, an elderly woman, hoping that she would be able to turn them into fine, young ladies with good social behaviour. However, this was quite a difficult task, and since no obvious progress was made, the girls were sent to Europe. Ever since she was ten, Maud spent her time commuting between France, Switzerland and Italy, a fact which made her become a very independent woman who had difficulties in settling down.

When she returned to Ireland, Maud served as a hostess for her father in the social circles. Their connection had always been very special, but when he realised what a fine young lady she had turned into, he became very proud of her and introduced her to many important people of the day. One day, she even caught the attention of the Prince of Wales, but her father quickly took her away to Bayreuth, knowing that if some royal invitation should arrive, she could not refuse it. She was by his father's side at any important social event and sometimes, when her father could not join her, she would just go by herself. At such an occasion, she had come to realise how desperate the situation of the Irish peasants was. When she returned to Dublin, she had already witnessed an oppressed rebellion of the Fenians, but she just was not mature enough to understand the political issues of the times. At a party she heard the host complaining about the Land League, an organisation that fought against British landowners. On this occasion, she also found out that the Irish peasants who refused to pay rent to their landlords were being



banned from their own homes and left to die from starvation or imprisoned if they refused to comply with their landlords' requests. She was outraged by what she had heard and decided that something needed to be done for those oppressed by British governing. Her father shared her view and decided to follow a political career so that he could change the way the things work in Ireland, but unfortunately he died in November 1886, leaving two grieving daughters behind.

If for Yeats the lack of maternal affection was quite disturbing, causing difficulties in all his subsequent relationships with women and making him feel insecure, for Maud it was quite the opposite. Because she grew up without a mother who could have taught her that she must pursue a life as the wife of some Victorian man, she turned into an ambitious woman who wanted more than a peaceful life and followed her purpose disregarding any social convention. After her father's death, when she was left to believe that her father's fortune was not that big, she and her sister decided to make a living on their own, despite their guardian's advice to accept being adopted by their aunt Augusta Cook. Living in London, she became interested in theatre and she was offered to perform as a leading actress in a play. She accepted the role although her uncle William completely disapproved with her decision. However, her lung problems made her collapse right before the opening, and so she was forced to abandon her acting career.

While she was recovering from her illness, Maud met Lucien Millevoye, a journalist and a lawyer who was fifteen years older than her. He was an admirer of General George Boulanger, an ex-minister for war, who was fighting for the cause of Alsace and Lorraine, two French regions which were under German domination. Maud identified Ireland's problems with those of France and joined the movement at Lucien's request. She learned from him that she must follow her ideals and by the time she became old enough to take possession of her father's estate she realised that she was financially secured and she can dedicate all her time to the Irish cause. In Paris she offered her help to the Boulangist party and she was even sent to Russia with some papers that proved France's allegiance to Russia. In her journey, she realized that politics was more suitable for her than the theatre, so when she returned to Ireland she dedicated herself to the Irish cause.

Back in Dublin, Maud visited the founder of the Irish Land League, Michael Davitt and expressed her opinions regarding the means that needed to be used in order to escape British rule. According to her, violence was more effective than any other means of fighting against England, but neither Davitt, nor John O’Leary, whom she later met, agreed with her methods. And yet, she was invited at the male club founded by Charles Hubert Oldham – the Contemporary Club – and soon pictures of her would hang all around club walls. There she met all the important figures that would later participate to the Celtic Revival and through them she met Ellen O’Leary, the one responsible for awakening Maud’s interest for poetry, which would later bring her and Yeats together.

Although Yeats and Maud Gonne fought for the same cause, their means were slightly different. While Yeats was attempting to make a change through his literary work, Maud started giving passionate speeches in order to stop the evictions of Irish peasants from their homes. In her opinion, Yeats was merely a boy, although she knew he was one year older than her, and despite his visible admiration for her, she would not pay much attention to him, as her heart already belonged to her mature lover, Lucien Millevoeye, to whom she had also bore a son. Thus, while Yeats was hopelessly in love with her and spent his time writing poems for and about her, she gave all her attention to the Irish cause, to Lucien and to their child.

Yeats’s feelings for Maud were troubling from the beginning. It is known that he did not confess his love for a long time, but because they gradually developed a beautiful friendship, Yeats knew about all the men in Maud’s life, except Lucien. Since everybody saw her as an incredibly beautiful woman, there were always suitors fighting for her heart, and although she did not pay much attention to any of them, the young poet felt jealous and sad at the same time, as if he had anticipated that they would never share anything more than friendship. He knew she was not the kind of woman that would accept marrying a young poet who had nothing but his dreams, and his poem “He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven” accurately describes his thoughts:

“Had I the heaven’s embroidered cloths,  
Enwrought with golden and silver light,  
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths  
Of night and light and the half-light,

I would spread the cloths under your feet:  
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.”<sup>71</sup>

Despite Maud’s connection to various men who were charmed by her beauty, she always remained faithful to her lover. She enjoyed being his mistress rather than his wife because this position offered her the freedom she needed to keep fighting for the Irish cause. Her actions over the years prove that her country’s situation was more important to her than anything else. She willingly used her beauty to charm powerful men who could offer her some support, and though there were many who never took her seriously, there were also others who offered valuable help. One of them was John Morton, a young barrister who helped her in her attempt to free the Donegal prisoners, although his relationship with her affected his career.

Maud’s involvement in politics was meant to bring her “the status of an Irish Joan of Arc,”<sup>72</sup> but also a lot of troubles. Yeats’s perceived her commitment to politics as his major rival to her heart, but soon he would not be the only one disturbed by her political activism. The authorities considered her responsible for preventing the eviction in Donegal and she was about to be arrested. However, she left the country very quickly in order to escape prison and continued her work in France. Because she could not return and be part of the action, Maud began writing about Ireland’s situation. She published many articles in French newspapers and soon all the European countries discovered the problems that Ireland was facing. This might not have been a solution to the desperate situation of Irish people, but it definitely left a stain on Britain’s reputation. Soon enough Maud would return to Ireland and continue her political activities even though many of the Nationalist leaders turned their back on her once she was in danger to be taken to prison.

Meanwhile, Yeats was engaged in his occult studies and he would soon discover that Maud shared his interest. She would call on him whenever she needed a friend and

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<sup>71</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p. 81.

<sup>72</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.52.

he would always be by her side to offer her protection if she needed it. When he had finally found the courage to propose to her she refused to marry him, and yet their friendship continued to gain strength. They took a trip together to Howth, a place of great significance for both of them and here they spent a lot of time talking about his work, her life, and everything they had in common. However, she never told him that she had a child with the man she loved, maybe because she wanted to keep her reputation or maybe because she enjoyed Yeats's attention and unconditional love, which might have diminished if he had known that her heart already belonged to someone else.

Their trip to Howth was suddenly interrupted by a tragic event. Lucien was calling her to Paris because their child was suffering from a terrible illness – meningitis. Unfortunately, when she arrived, the small baby was too seriously ill and he passed away shortly after. Consumed with grief, she started feeling guilty for not spending enough time with her son. The pain she felt amplified when other important people to her died and it probably reached climax with the death of Parnell, the man she considered to be a true hero.

Tragedy and death had deepened Maud's interest in the occult and strengthened her friendship with Yeats. She knew he believed in reincarnation and she confessed to him that a little boy she had adopted had died, hoping that he would be able to offer her some closure. There was nothing much that Yeats could do for her, but she managed to find her solace in an idea she heard from George Russell according to which a child could reincarnate and return to his parents really soon after he dies. Soon enough, she would join the Order of the Golden Dawn, where Yeats was already a member, and together they would turn their attention to magic and they would engage in all sort of occult, spiritual and magical practices.

Despite having similar purposes, Maud and Yeats's ways to achieve their goals were quite different. She would put herself in the middle of the events, she would spend time among common people, she would raise funds for the evicted people, she would support the political prisoners and she would give long, vivid speeches every time she had the chance. Yeats, on the other hand, believed that he would be able to make a difference through his work. In 1892 he founded the National Literary Society in Dublin and through it he hoped to create and spread an original Irish culture, one that would find

its roots in mythology and history, and everything else that belonged to Ireland. Maud often considered him a snob because he wrote about Ireland, but never really met any common people, so she believed he was not entirely aware of the peasantry's desperate situation. Besides, she considered that common people had neither time, nor money to read poetry, so his efforts were directed towards the upper-classes, whereas the lower classes left to suffer in silence.

Their contradictory opinions persisted even though they worked together for their common cause. They used to make a very good team, so many people thought of them as a couple, although Maud had overtly told Yeats that she needed him to be her friend, not her lover. However, the young poet believed that if he would persist in his wooing, she would finally accept him as her husband. Right after she had refused his proposal once more, she became seriously ill and returned to Paris, where she was reunited with her lover, to whom she would bore another child. Again she hid her relationship with Lucien from Yeats and although she told him about her pregnancy, in her biography she said that her daughter, Iseult, was adopted.

Soon after the birth of her daughter, Maud would leave Paris again. Yeats had rented a castle and invited her to spend some time with him in the place he believed to be filled with invisible spirits. There they performed all sorts of rituals that apparently allowed them to communicate with ancient Irish people who could help them in their quest for Irish independence. And yet, despite spending so much time together, Maud was unable to offer Yeats anything more than friendship. Soon enough, Yeats would try to move on to another woman – Olivia Shakespear – with whom he had a love affair that lasted until Maud started giving him hope again.

Though in the real world Maud would never become his wife, they were reunited in a spiritual marriage. One day, when Yeats visited her, she recounted to him what she had dreamed that night. In her dream she was taken away by a spirit and carried to a place where there were many other spirits. Among them she recognized his face and she was told that she had become his wife. Because of her belief in occult and spiritual practices, she did not interpret her dream as a projection of her most intimate thoughts and desires, but rather as a confirmation of the special bond between them. She felt that they did not need to be husband and wife because on a spiritual level they already were,

so she kissed him to seal their union. Soon she would feel embarrassed for what she did and she apologized, maybe because she must have realised that for Yeats – who was still deeply in love with her – that episode must have been very confusing. On this occasion she found the courage to tell him about Lucien and the children they had together. Thus Yeats had finally come to realise that he must move on with his life, and yet, the pain he felt was even bigger than before she had told him the truth about her. Nevertheless in his unconsummated love for Maud Gonne, Yeats found the resources to survive and become a mature man and artist. He took his sorrows and pains and transformed them into beautiful poems that would sometime serve as a source of spiritual comfort for the generations yet to come.

Having disclosed the truth about her private life, Maud was now able to continue her romance with Lucien. However, their romance ended soon after she had revealed her affair to Yeats because she discovered that Lucien had been unfaithful to her. Yeats renewed his proposal again, suggesting her that she should give up politics and spend a quiet life by his side, surrounded by artists and literature. Of course she would decline his offer because now, when the man she had loved for thirteen years had left her for another woman, politics was her only refuge.

Soon after she broke up with Lucien, Maud met the Irish Republican John MacBride, whom she married although everybody considered they would not make a good couple because of their contrasting personalities. Marrying him, she had accomplished her goal to become the wife of a politician, but she had also embarked on a dysfunctional relationship that would not bring her any happiness and would break Yeats's heart once again. He had imagined that Maud would finally accept him now that Lucien was no longer a part of her life, so the news that Maud had married someone else soon after she had rejected his proposal came as a shock. In his grip of sadness he returned to poetry and produced a beautiful poem that closely expresses how he felt at that time:

“Never give all the heart, for love  
Will hardly seem worth thinking of  
To passionate women if it seem  
Certain, and they never dream

That it fades out from kiss to kiss;  
For everything that's lovely is  
But a brief, dreamy, kind delight.  
O never give the heart outright,  
For they, for all smooth lips can say,  
Have given their hearts up to the play.  
And who could play it well enough  
If deaf and dumb and blind with love?  
He that made this knows all the cost,  
For he gave all his heart and lost.”<sup>73</sup>

The only good thing that came out of Maud's marriage to John MacBride was their son Sean. Soon after his birth, Maud could no longer stand her husband's physical and verbal violence and she decided to divorce him. However, because she had married him in Catholic Church, she could not get the divorce, but she was granted a separation and the custody of their son. And yet, her misery did not end when she had finally escaped her violent and drunk husband. During her first trip to Dublin after she was separated from her husband, she realised that she had lost the sympathy of the Irish people, which must have made her very unhappy, since she had spent her entire life fighting for her people. Though she still had Yeats and some of her closest friends by her side, she felt betrayed by her own people and decided to spend some time away from Ireland. Thereafter Yeats frequently visited her in France, but he gradually lost any hope that she would ever become his wife.

When World War I broke out, Maud had already returned to her usual activities. In Ireland she had helped in the school meals campaign and in France she enlisted in the Red Cross to help the soldiers wounded on the battlefield, while Yeats had abandoned his political activities and focused more on writing. At the time when the 1916 Easter Rising took place, both Maud and Yeats were away from Ireland. The news came as a surprise for both of them, but Yeats was even more surprised than her. He had always hoped to establish a new cultural identity for his country through his work, not through the use of

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<sup>73</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.87.

violence, and yet, when the Eastern Rising leading figures were executed, he started wondering whether his methods will ever be effective. He felt sorry for the ones who have lost their lives for their country and yet he realised their sacrifice turned them into martyrs, and soon the Irishmen's hatred for Ireland would reach a whole new level.

John MacBride was one of the leaders of the Easter Rising so when he died for his country, Maud became the proud widow of one of Ireland's heroes, a status which pleased her a lot. Despite the problems she had had with her husband while they were together, she now wanted to honour his memory and, above all, she wanted to return to Ireland and be seen as the widow of one of those people who have sacrificed their lives for their country. Yeats too had changed his opinion about John MacBride and praised him in his poem "Easter 1916":

"I write it out in a verse –  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born."<sup>74</sup>

Since Maud was now a widow and Yeats was assuming that her Catholicism was the main factor that prevented her from marrying him, he proposed to her again. He was refused, as always, and he now turned to Maud's daughter, Iseult, who had grown up as beautiful as her mother. She rejected his proposal as well, and he would soon be married to Georgina Hyde-Lees, a wealthy young woman who shared his interest in literature and the occult and would help him with his work through her automatic writing. Meanwhile, Maud was experiencing many difficulties. She had been taken to a military prison at the request of the chief secretary for Ireland to arrest all known Nationalist Leaders,<sup>75</sup> her sister Kathleen had died, her half-sister's husband had been put in prison without a trial

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<sup>74</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.202.

<sup>75</sup> Margery Brady. *The Love Story of W.B. Yeats and Maud Gonne*. Dublin: Colour Books, Ltd. 1990, p.108.



for the third time and her health had deteriorated so much that she would not have survived if she had not been allowed to receive proper medical care at a sanatorium in England. However, she would soon discharge herself and return to Dublin with both of her children, although she was not allowed to do that. Yeats and Georgina, who was seven months pregnant at that time, were living in Maud's house, but when she arrived at their door Yeats would not let her in, fearing that the police might come after her and such a situation would hurt his wife.

During the following years Maud and her son Sean involved in many political activities that would often put them in jail. Yeats, on the other hand, became a Senator of the Irish Free State, which in Maud's opinion was a compromise solution to Ireland's problems. Though she did not speak to him for ten years, he was the one who put her out of jail. Their political differences kept them apart for the rest of their lives and they only met on few occasions. The last time they visited each other, they reminisced about the past and Yeats left her with the impression that he still regretted they were never together. Though he enjoyed the life he had with his beautiful wife and their two children, Maud was the woman he appreciated and loved the most. She was his source of happiness and misery at the same time, his inspiration, his devoted friend, his "spiritual wife", and maybe his soul mate. She was the one for whom he wrote many of his most brilliant poems, and though there may be many poems that express the range of emotions that Yeats felt for Maud Gonne, there is one that sums up all his feeling:

“When you are old and grey 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.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.46.

## 2. Yeats within the Irish Revival

### 2.1 Yeats's Return to Tradition

By 1895 Yeats's personal and professional life had been shaken by a series of conflicts and unfortunate events. His Pollexfen grandmother and grandfather died in 1892, he was still forced to live on a bare minimum, Maud Gonne was still unresponsive to his love, and the plans he had regarding an Irish literature did not materialize. And yet, despite the great disillusionment he felt when he realized that Irish literature could not free itself from the political ramifications of the day, Yeats did not renounce the idea of creating and promoting a true Irish culture. By then he had understood that in a divided and demoralized country his goal would be unattainable if he would simply try to promote it among the masses. Having realized that in order to push the literary trends in a certain direction he needed to educate the elites first, he wrote to Alice Milligan:

“My experience of Ireland, during the last three years, has changed my views very greatly, & now I feel that the work of an Irish man of letters must not be so much to awaken or quicken or preserve the national idea among the mass of the people but to convert the educated classes to it.”<sup>77</sup>

Through his decision to carve a new literature for his country by coaching the intellectuals first, he dismissed the writers of the Young Ireland, whose main concern was to please the masses. In his occasional disputes with his opponents he had often advocated for his cause by criticising the weaknesses of a literature created for political purposes. He argued that the work of those artists affiliated with the Young Ireland often exposed a biased image of an Ireland inhabited “entirely by noble heroes, stalwart peasants, and virtuous maidens, enchained by bloodthirsty English oppressors but full of a latent power ready at any time to burst forth.”<sup>78</sup> He too shared their ideologies and became politically active on various occasions, but he put his art beyond anything else.

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<sup>77</sup> William Butler. *The Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats*. Ed. J. Kelley / E. Domville. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, p.399.

<sup>78</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.9.

He realised his most important duty was that of finding a perfect pattern for his verse, and thus he chose to create art for art's sake, not for comforting a demoralised people or serving political purposes.

At some point in his quest to reinvent Irish literature by coming back to ancient traditions Yeats realized that cosmopolitanism was the main issue that caused the writer's alienation from Irish values<sup>79</sup>. He argued that a writer could remain faithful to his nationality and his identity only if the country in which he was born had found a "perfect expression to itself in literature" and has "carried to maturity its literary tradition."<sup>80</sup> Obviously, it was exactly this perfect expression and this maturity that Yeats wanted to attain through his work. He sustained Douglas Hyde's urge to bear away from what is genuinely related to Englishness without returning to Gaelic language, because, he argued, Ireland's literature should be Irish in spirit, not in language. What people needed to do in order to preserve their nationality was to stop imitating the English and to claim for themselves a distinct nationality rooted in Ireland's history, landscape and values.

As we have previously stated, Yeats never abandoned his literary endeavours that would bring him closer and closer to a true Irish literature. While anguishing over the political practices of the day he continued to collect and edit poem, and in 1895 he published *Poems*, as well an anthology of Irish poetry – *A Book of Irish Verse*. Nevertheless, a return to tradition is traceable even in the poems he published in 1888 as part of *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*. "The Madness of King Goll" and "The Stolen Child" are the first of his poems that prove his craftsmanship in writing poetry. Despite being written by a young poet still in search for a perfect poetic expression, the poems prove Yeats's superiority to his young contemporaries. They depict a mysterious reality which Yeats created by combining a mystic vision with the Irish flavour and very subtle political echoes to unroll images that "haunt the memory like a subtle, intellectual perfume."<sup>81</sup> His love for the Gaelic past of Ireland led him to myths and legends that

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<sup>79</sup> See Phillip L. Marcus, *Yeats and the Beginning of Irish Renaissance* (Syracuse and New York: Syracuse University Press. 1987) pp.14-15

<sup>80</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p. 14.

<sup>81</sup> Ernest Augustus Boyd. *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*. Dublin: Dublin Maunsel. 1916, p.124.

were long forgotten by the modern world and with these poems published in *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* he managed to bring to people's attention the ancient creation of Irish imagination.

"The Stolen Child" plays an important role in Yeats's poetry because it was in this poem that Yeats favoured for the first time Irish scenery to the detriment of Arcadian and Indian settings used in his previously published works. The poem betrays Yeats's tendencies to draw away from modernity and seek refuge in a world dominated by fantasy, simplicity and supernatural forces. When the poem was published, Yeats publicly expressed his belief in supernatural phenomena: "the places mentioned are round about Sligo. Further, Rosses is a very noted fairy locality. There is here a little point of rocks where, if anyone falls asleep, there is danger of their waking silly, the fairies having carried off their souls."<sup>82</sup> Having that in mind, we are entitled to assert that "The Stolen Child" is an expression of Yeats's own dissatisfaction with the real world, but also of his longing for Sligo – the place that influenced him most in his childhood.

"The Madness of King Goll" and "The Stolen Child" established the direction of Yeats's following poems, and they are quite different from his previously published works – "Mosada" and "The Island of Statues". The latter were written when the poet had not been yet completely familiarised with his country's mythical past. He was still under the spell of famous English poets, and he even admitted that he had Spenser's and Shelley's poetry in mind when he had written these poems. And yet, they were not a cheap imitation, because even in those poems the reader notices the musicality and the beauty that characterize the poems written by the time Yeats had already had realized that Ireland's mythology and history are inexhaustible sources of inspiration.

"The Madness of King Goll" is based on an ancient legend according to which Goll was a king who went mad and hid himself in a valley near Cork. As expected, the young poet found some resemblance between king Goll's insanity and his own youthful burden. By the time he wrote the poem he was "insane with youth, but looking very desirable – alas no woman noticed it at that time – with dreamy eyes and a great mass of black hair."<sup>83</sup> At that time his father drew a picture of him as King Goll and many years

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<sup>82</sup> William Butler Yeats, Ed. *Irish Fairy and Folk Tales*. New York: First Touchstone Edition, 1998, p. 192.

<sup>83</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Letters of W.B. Yeats*. Allan Wade, Ed. New York: Macmillan, 1955, p.705.

Yeats would call his father's drawing a "pathetic memory of a really dreadful time."<sup>84</sup> King Goll is presented in the first two stanzas of the poem as successful ruler praised by his people for having brought peace and prosperity in their lives:

"I sat on cushioned otter-skin:  
My word was law from Ith to Emain,  
And shook at Inver Amergin  
The hearts of the world-troubling seamen,  
And drove tumult and war away  
From girl and boy and man and beast;  
The fields grew fatter day by day,  
The wild fowl of the air increased;  
And every ancient Ollave said,  
While he bent down his fading head.  
'He drives away the Northern cold.'  
*They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter round me, the beech  
leaves old.*  
I sat and mused and drank sweet wine;  
A herdsman came from inland valleys,  
Crying, the pirates drove his swine  
To fill their dark-beaked hollow galleys.  
I called my battle-breaking men  
And my loud brazen battle-cars  
From rolling vale and rivery glen;  
And under the blinking of the stars  
Fell on the pirates by the deep,  
And hurled them in the gulph of sleep:  
These hands won many a torque of gold.  
*They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter round me, the beech  
leaves old.*"<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Letters of W.B. Yeats*. Allan Wade, Ed. New York: Macmillan, 1955, p.705.

The king cannot however enjoy his peaceful reign because of the voices that warn him that everything was about to change. He struggles to grasp some sort of mystical message coming from the spirit of the world. The wind and the waters all whisper to the king and give him a glimpse at the future that lies ahead. He is supposed to spend the rest of his life wandering around aimlessly in the wilderness, in the middle of a nature that Yeats masterfully depicts in a true Celtic spirit:

“But slowly, as I shouting slew  
And trampled in the bubbling mire,  
In my most secret spirit grew  
A whirling and a wandering fire:  
I stood: keen stars above me shone,  
Around me shone keen eyes of men:  
I laughed aloud and hurried on  
By rocky shore and rushy fen;  
I laughed because birds fluttered by,  
And starlight gleamed, and clouds flew high,  
And rushes waved and waters rolled.  
*They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter round me, the beech  
leaves old.*”<sup>86</sup>

In Yeats’s poetry, myths are reflections of a different kind of reality, one that modernity sought to efface. He had come to know the “mythic world of the Celtic sagas”<sup>87</sup> through Standish James O’Grady’s *History of Ireland*, through the folklore and the story-telling of the countryside and through the songs and tales of his childhood. In his early years he read everything that he could find, and books like *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland* written by Lady Francesca Speranza Wilde, *The Fireside Stories of Ireland*, as well as the works of Ferguson, Robert Dwyer Joyce

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<sup>85</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, pp. 17-18.

<sup>86</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.18.

<sup>87</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.67.

and Katharine Tynan played a significant part in his development as an artist. His first published articles were about writers whose works had been inspired by Celtic mythology, and soon he had come to realise that Irish legendry would offer him astonishing new means for self-expression. By the time he had set his mind to include in his writing myths and legends of Celtic origin he had already realized that Ireland needed to be reinvented, and with the publication of “The Wanderings of Oisín” in 1889 the resurrection of the great heroes and major events of Irish antiquity began.

According to Phillip Marcus<sup>88</sup> “The Wanderings of Oisín” was the result of Yeats’s reading of a poem written by Michael Comyn in the eighteenth century. Yeats discovered a translation of the poem in *Transactions of the Ossianic Society*, a collection of Fenian poems edited by John O’Daly, one of the founding members of the Ossianic Society. In Comyn’s version, Oisín visits two places: the Land of Virtues and the Land of Youth, while in Yeats’s poem, Oisín is taken to three places: the Island of the Living, the equivalent of the Land of Virtues, the Island of Victories, the substitute for the Land of Virtues, and the Island of Forgetfulness. In his restructuring of the material, Yeats did not only make significant changes in structure, but he also altered the meaning of the poem. By changing the order in which Oisín visits the two places and by eventually bringing him to a place of forgetfulness, Yeats managed to create an allegory that represented the “three incompatible things man is always seeking – infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose,”<sup>89</sup> and suggested man’s vacillation between a life of contemplation and a life of action.

“The Wanderings of Oisín” is delivered in the form of a dialogue between the Irish hero Oisín and Saint Patrick, patron of Ireland who converted Irish people to Christianity. The main theme is the clash between Pagan beliefs and Christianity and it is reinforced by the overt conflict between Oisín and Saint Patrick. The poem begins with Saint Patrick condemning Oisín’s adventures of his last three hundred years:

“You who are bent, and bald, and blind,  
With a heavy heart and a wandering mind,

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<sup>88</sup> Phillip L. Marcus, *Yeats and the Beginning of Irish Renaissance*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987. pp. 243-244.

<sup>89</sup> Yeats, William Butler. *Letters of W.B. Yeats*. Allan Wade, Ed. New York: Macmillan, 1955, p.111.



Have known three centuries, poets sing,  
Of dalliance with a demon thing.”<sup>90</sup>

Next, Oisín begins relating the story of his departure for the fairy land where he remained for three centuries with the fairy princess Niamh, who was desperately in love with Oisín’s poetry and insisted he come with her to a land of dream and immortality:

“O Oisín, mount by me and ride  
To shores by the wash of the tremulous tide,  
Where men have heaped no burial-mounds,  
And the days pass by like a wayward tune,  
Where broken faith has never been known  
And the blushes of first love never have flown;”<sup>91</sup>

They dwell on the Island of Dancing for one hundred years, hunting and dancing and listening to songbirds, until one day he remembered his times with the Fenians. Seeing him anguish over the past, Niamh led him to the Island of Victories where he lived for another one hundred years fighting to release a woman who was being held captive by a demon. Once he had completed his task they moved on to the Island of Forgetfulness where they slept for another one hundred years, until Oisín felt the need to return to Ireland. Niamh granted his wish and Oisín returned to Ireland to find out that all his comrades were long dead and Christianity had replaced Paganism. Though Oisín was still young when he returns to Ireland, once he touches the ground he instantly becomes three hundred years old – “A creeping old man, full of sleep, with the spittle on his beard never dry.”

In *Yeats: The Man and the Mask*, Richard Ellmann argues that the three islands on which Oisín is taken can be also interpreted on a personal level. The Island of Dancing may represent Yeats’s idyllic childhood in Sligo; the Island of Victories may refer to his school years in London when he confronted the English boys who despised him for being Irish, while the Island of Forgetfulness may symbolize his adolescence, when he spent all

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<sup>90</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p. 409.

<sup>91</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, pp.411-412.

his time dreaming of Howth. In the same way, the three islands may stand for the main periods in a man's life: the innocent childhood, the aggressive maturity and the old age.<sup>92</sup>

In the end of the poem *Saint Patrick*, feeling that Christianity had completely taken over Ireland, suggests to Oisín to turn to God and embrace Christian values:

“On the flaming stones, without refuge, the limbs of the  
Fenians are lost;  
None war on the masters of Hell, who could break up the  
world in their rage;  
But kneel and wear out the flags and pray for your soul  
that is lost  
Through the demon love of its youth and its godless and  
passionate age.”<sup>93</sup>

And yet, Oisín chooses the Pagan values, considering that the heroes of the old age are still alive and waiting for the moment when they will be summoned to return. Thus, the poem depicts a man who witnesses the transition between two antithetical eras, a pagan and a spiritual one, a cycle that it is believed to repeat itself over and over again until the end of time. The alternation between these eras would later become the theme of historical cycles and Yeats would make extensive use of it in many of his subsequent poems.

Bearing in mind the idea that symbols are the elements that turn literature into art, Yeats included in his poems a variety of symbols for which he did not want any profound interpretation. He believed his readers should take the story as it is and not look for any special meaning in the lines of his poems. And yet, because the early reviews of the poem were unsatisfactory, he suggested that there are three incompatible things hidden in the lines of the poems, challenging thus the critics to interpret the poem and its symbols in many different ways.

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<sup>92</sup> Richard Ellmann. *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. London: Macmillan, 1949, pp.51-53.

<sup>93</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p. 446.

“The Wanderings of Oisín”, despite telling a story very similar to that in Comyn’s poem, was greatly modified with the introduction of new elements with symbolic value. Saint Patrick and Oisín themselves stand as symbols for Christianity and Paganism. Whether in Comyn’s poem the conflict between the two was almost nonexistent, in Yeats’s poem the tension between the two becomes more virulent. The way in which Saint Patrick seeks to convince Oisín to follow his lead and embrace Christianity somehow resembles to the way in which England sought to impose its values on Irish people. Another difference that led to a similar interpretation is the replacement of the Fomorian giant that lived on the Land of Virtues with a demon of unknown origin. The demon that holds the woman captive might be a transposition of England, while the maiden might be Ireland. In Comyn’s version Oisín defeated his enemy in only three days and nights, while in Yeats’s poem the battle is reinitiated over and over again for a hundred years and it only ends when Oisín departs. Since Oisín and the demon correspond to Ireland and England respectively, the recurrent collision between them is actually a reference to the repeated disputes between Ireland and its dominator.

For Yeats, working with folklore material was far more than changing the form of a poem or including a moral message in it; it was an act of personal interpretation combined with the fire of imagination, a mixture that ultimately led to the creation of a work that really managed to convey the true Celtic spirit. His ambition was to reconnect Irish people with their heritage, and through his poetry not only did he contribute to the creation of a literature that outlines the spirit of an entire nation, but he also preached his own sense of nationalism. If in the previously published works the poet did not try so hard to express a profound interest in his country, the collection *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*, published in 1892, shows a significant change therein. Even if some of the poems in this collection reflect the author’s preoccupation with occult studies, alchemy and esoteric beliefs, every line in this collection is an expression of his country. These poems were written when Yeats was a member of the Young Ireland Society. Influenced by the success of his contemporaries who were writing patriotic verse, Yeats convinced himself for a while that patriotic poetry is not any less valuable than the one he wanted to write. He decided to bring his contribution to this

tradition and thus poems such as “Father O’Hart”, “Father Gilligan”, and “The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner” were written.

In the “Preface” of *The Countless Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* Yeats wrote:

“The great numbers of poems in this book, as also in *The Wanderings of Oisín*, are founded on Irish tradition. The chief poem is an attempt to mingle personal thought and feeling with the beliefs and customs of Christian Ireland, whereas the longest poem in my earlier book endeavoured to set forth the impress left on my imagination by the Pre-Christian cycle of legends.”<sup>94</sup>

Quite different from the poems that bear upon mythology, the ones inspired by country lore give the impression of spontaneity – a quality resulted from Yeats’s direct contact with the country people. And yet, all of them manage to reflect a deep sense of nationalism that continued to grow inside him ever since he had met Maud Gonne. Despite using both Christian and Pagan sources for his poems, it is clear that Yeats focused more on the thematic elements belonging to Celtic folklore and myth, shaping thus a distinctive Irish literary tradition.

Very often in Yeats’s work the reader discovers Cuchulain, a character belonging to an ancient Irish legend. He is said to have lived before Christianity was even a religion and the first legends of him appeared in the Ulster Cycle of stories. Like many other heroes who live for adventure, Cuchulain had a divine origin and a short and tragic life. He was the son of Dechtire and Lug, the sun god. Apparently, Lug turned into a fly and kidnapped Dechtire on her wedding night. She swallowed the fly and got pregnant. Her son – whom she named Setanta – possessed supernatural qualities ever since he was born. As a child he possessed the ability to swim like a fish and in his early years he defeated one hundred and fifty warriors of Conchubar. He is said to possess an incredible strength that made him invincible in battle. However, he was always caught up in the frenzy of war and whenever that happened, he was not able to recognize his friends and foes. Because of that, many of his allies became his victims. In a such a moment of madness, he killed the dog who was watching Cullan’s property, and in order to pay for his

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<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Alexander Norman Jeffares ‘ *WB. Yeats: Man and Poet*. London: Kyle Cathie, 1996, p.61.

mistake, he offered to defend the property until Cullan could find another dog, gaining thus the name Cuchulain, which means dog of Cullan.

Yeats exploits in his poetry the relationship between Cuchulain and his uncle, Conchubar, to whom he had sworn allegiance. According to the legend, Conchubar asks Cuchulain to kill his son in battle, and, bound by the oath he took, he complies with the King's request. However, after completing the task, Cuchulain becomes insane because of remorse. He runs towards the ocean and, in an attempt to liberate himself from pain, he starts hitting the tides with his sword, a scene which Yeats describes in "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea":

"Cuchulain stirred,  
Stared on the horses of the sea, and heard  
The cars of battle and his and own name cried,  
And fought with the invulnerable tide."<sup>95</sup>

The aimless battle with the sea becomes here a dynamic representation of man's frustration when, overwhelmed by emotions, he rebels against everything that stands in front of him. The sea becomes in this poem an "emblematic figure of fecund destructive life,"<sup>96</sup> and with "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" the poet began working on that unity of culture he wanted for his country and which he hoped to achieve by making Irish people aware of their own legendry. Later on, Yeats revisited the legend of the Irish hero who is most representative of Ireland and its troubled history and used the many legends of Cuchulain as themes in many of his subsequent poems and in one of his plays - *On Baile's Strand*. Daniel Albright mentions that Yeats might have been fascinated by the legend of Cuchulain mostly because of the conflict between the Irish hero and his son, whom he eventually kills in battle. He further suggests that Yeats might have found Cuchulain's relationship with his son similar to that between the poet and his father, since it is known that at least on one occasion, when the two argued over John Stuart Mill's philosophy, John Butler Yeats became violent. Unterecker goes even further and argues

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<sup>95</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.40.

<sup>96</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.77.

that Yeats discovered in Cuchulain a Mask for both himself and Ireland and he continued to draw upon it because he believed that “if he could make the virile lineaments of the ancient hero sharp enough, he and Ireland might be able to put on necessary Masks of courageous, reckless gaiety.”<sup>97</sup>

Yeats’s final revision of the Cuchulain theme was for “Cuchulain Comforted”, a poem which may be considered the most important of the Cuchulain series. In this poem Yeats describes the death of the hero:

“A man that had six mortal wounds, a man  
Violent and famous, strode among the dead;  
Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.

Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head  
Came and were gone. He leant upon a tree  
As though to meditate on wounds and blood.

A Shroud that seemed to have authority  
Among those bird-like things came, and let fall  
A bundle of linen. Shrouds by two and three.”<sup>98</sup>

The lines present a dying man waiting for his death and burial, but the "shroud that seemed to have authority" seems inappropriate in this picture. If we follow Unterecker’s theory according to which Cuchulain can be identified with Ireland, then the shroud carrier or the shroud itself can be interpreted as symbols for the hostile forces within Ireland that detain the progress of Irish culture by altering the country’s system of values. With this idea in mind, we are entitled to say that the poet may have wanted to sound the alarm on the lack of solidarity of Irish people, which was a main factor in preventing Ireland’s escape from British domination.

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<sup>97</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.78.

<sup>98</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.395.

For Yeats plunging into the Gaelic past of Ireland was like drinking from an endless well of inspiration. He took myths and legends of Celtic tradition and he revised them again and again until they reached Yeats's idea of perfection that would allow him to use them in his poetry as means for expressing his own vision of the world. In "The Old Age of Queen Maeve" Yeats sought to reproduce both the heroic spirit of his country and the temper of ancient Irish literature. The poem tell the story of Queen Maeve who faces the spirits that were meant to distract her from her work when Aengus, the god of love, asks her to help him search for the woman he was in love with. The myth of Aengus is later modified and used in "The Song of Wandering Aengus," a poem about longing and searching, but if "The Old Age of Queen Maeve" tells the story of a young Aengus who eventually finds his young maiden, the later poem is focused more on the protagonist's search of his beloved and in the end it presents a mature Aengus who still dreams of finding the woman he loves:

"Though I am old with wandering  
Through hollow lands and hilly lands,  
I will find out where she has gone  
And kiss her lips and take her hands;  
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."<sup>99</sup>

In "Fergus and the Druid" Yeats proved his craftsmanship in turning an ancient myth into an artistic expression of his own point of view. According to the legend, Fergus Mac Roich was an ancient king who was forced by the men of Ulster to give up his throne. Yeats, however, brought his own contribution to the legend and in his poem he suggested that Fergus deliberately chose to give up being a king so he could escape the responsibilities of his position for a life of dreaming wisdom:

*"Fergus: A king and proud! and that is my despair.  
I feast amid my people on the hill,*

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<sup>99</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.66.

And pace the woods, and drive my chariot-wheels  
In the white border of the murmuring sea;  
And still I feel the crown upon my head  
*Druid:* What would you, Fergus?  
*Fergus:* Be no more a king  
But learn the dreaming wisdom that is yours.”<sup>100</sup>

Unlike the other writers of the day who used folklore as a source of inspiration for their work, Yeats was not that interested in keeping the original framework of a legend. Although a good subject would have captivated his readers’ attention, he was more interested in the expressiveness of his verse, managing thus to create memorable lines that could not have been written by any other writer:

“*Fergus:* A king is but a foolish labourer  
Who wastes his blood to be another’s dream.  
*Druid:* Take, if you must, this little bag of dreams;  
Unloose the cord, and they will wrap you round.”<sup>101</sup>

From 1892 until 1899 Yeats apparently took a break from writing poetry and dedicated most of his time to prose work. Nevertheless, he did not seem to have taken a break from Irish tales and legends and most of the work he wrote in these seven years draws heavily on folklore and Irish mythology. An ample analysis of the plays he wrote in this period will be given in the following section of this paper, but until then it is worth bringing into discussion the collection *The Wind among the Reeds*, published in 1899. Often considered Yeats’s most serious lyrical work, this collection is a combination of mystical speculation and ancient Gaelic myths. Several characters of mythological origin, such as Aedh, Michael Robartes or Hanrahan, already used in previous works, are reinstated and they become the protagonists of many of the poems published in 1899.

*The Wind among the Reeds* was only one of his early collections that did not go through significant changes in its following publications; therefore we are entitled to say

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<sup>100</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.36.

<sup>101</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.36.



that this is the first collection that may have satisfied the author's literary ambitions. The poems included in it prove that the author had finally discovered the perfect expression for Irish literature. Written under the influence of Blake, this collection shows the direction in which Yeats's symbolism went and confirmed Yeats's identity as a mystic poet. Although it contains several poems that belong to that period in his career when Yeats wrote mainly lyric poems, *The Wind Among the Reeds* is the first refined expression of the poet's mysticism and marks the beginning of a new phase in his literary career – one in which he seemed to have completely forsaken the beauty of lyric poetry.

## **2. 2 The Irish Literary Theatre**

As we have discussed in the previous section of this paper, Yeats's role in the Irish Literary Revival was crucial. Through his poetry he managed to initiate the movement that would revolutionize the literary scene of Ireland. By establishing his own literary ideals, by promoting them through his poems, his lectures and journalistic activities, and by actively propagandizing for them, Yeats not only succeeded in discovering a perfect Irish formula for his poetry, but he also influenced his contemporaries to return to the traditional values of their native Ireland. Soon enough a series of works inspired by peasants' life, Irish customs and traditions, myths and legends related to the glorious, ancient past of a Gaelic Ireland would become the subject matter of many Irish artists.

And yet Yeats was not satisfied with just waiting to see the results of a movement he initiated. He needed to make sure that Irish literature and culture would continue to develop according to his design, and he began working on another daring project he had had in mind for a long time – the foundation of an Irish national theatre. For a young poet still struggling to make a career for himself as an influential man of letter in a country in which people were becoming more and more profession-oriented, working on the materialization of such a project would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible. And yet, after he met Lady Augusta Gregory, his plan no longer seemed an unattainable endeavour. The idea of a national theatre came to him after the production of his play *The Land of Heart's Desire* in London, but it was not until later that he realized how a theatrical performance could influence the audience. While visiting Maud Gonne in

France he had watched the performance of Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Axel* and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* and, deeply impressed by the plays, he decided Ireland really needed a national theatre.

In 1897 Yeats, Lady Gregory and Edward Martyn joined their forces to create what would later be recognized as the greatest achievement of the Irish Revival. Martyn, like Yeats, believed that the foundation of such theatre was absolutely necessary in Ireland, because he thought of it as a vehicle that they could use in order to promote a true Irish culture. The two managed to attract George Moore into their project and together with Lady Gregory they created a new theatre company whose main purpose was sketched in the manifesto sent to various people in order to obtain financial support:

“We propose to have performed in Dublin in the spring of every year certain Celtic and Irish plays, which whatever be their degree of excellence will be written with a high ambition, and so to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature. We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted and imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory, and believe that our desire to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland will ensure for us a tolerant welcome, and that freedom to experiment which is not found in theatres in England, and without which no new movement in art and literature can succeed. We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.”<sup>102</sup>

With this manifesto they hoped to reinforce the idea that a national literature should be separated from any political implications. They asserted that political relevance in a national literature would not only prevent the creation of a dramatic tradition, but it would also interfere with the recognition of Ireland's “ancient idealism” and Irishmen's “deeper thoughts and emotions”. With these ideas in mind, the group began working on

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<sup>102</sup> Lady Augusta Gregory. *Our Irish Theatre: A Chapter of Autobiography*. New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, The Knickerbockers Press, 1913, p. 20.

the project and soon they would manage to find the financial support they needed for the foundation of the theatre. The drama that they wanted for their theatre was one that managed to combine Ireland's rich cultural background with the latest European techniques. Thus, the subject matter of the plays would still be drawn from Irish folklore and mythology, while the way in which they would be presented would draw upon European theatrical methods. Yeats had no intention to follow the current trends in contemporary drama, as he believed that the successful plays of the day were performed mainly for commercial purposes, although they did not present any artistic value. And yet, Martyn and Moore showed more cosmopolitan ideas. They were not interested in creating drama that would bring immediate success, but they were however interested in using the social reality of their country as source of inspiration for their plays. They were united in their rejection of theatrical conditions in London, but while Yeats's intention was to create plays inspired from folk and mythological themes, Martyn and Moore were planning to create and promote a body of Irish drama similar to that of Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright whose work was often considered scandalous, and yet it had a significant value because of its exposure of a reality that many people tried to hide. Because of these different opinions their collaboration would not last very long and after only three years they would end their partnership and continue to work for the conception of a national drama through different channels.

Although we cannot say that Yeats deserves all the credit for the foundation of the Irish Literary Theatre, he was the one who initiated this ambitious project. Due to his ability to recognize in people the qualities that were needed for such a project to materialize, Yeats quickly realized that he and Lady Gregory needed men like Edward Martyn and George Moore as their associates. It was however Lady Augusta Gregory the one who made it all possible. While Yeats's talent was to provide valuable ideas, her job was to make them happen. Because of her particular interest in Yeats's verse plays she decided she should involve in his project to found an Irish theatre, and soon she managed to obtain the financial support of many influential people of the day. Nevertheless, her contribution did not limit itself to providing the necessary funds for the movement, and very quickly she began writing her own plays and learned to produce and direct very competent work. Her ability to turn into a prolific writer for the theatre was mainly

indebted to her early manifested interest in folklore that made her spend a lot of time among the peasants of her native Galway. There she gathered an impressive amount of folk material that would later become a valuable source of inspiration, not only for her, but also for Yeats.

Edward Martyn was Lady Gregory's neighbour and the owner of the other "big house" in the West of Ireland. Though he became famous through his association with Yeats, at the time they began working on creating a dramatic tradition for Ireland he was already an experienced and ingenious writer. He was a charming and eccentric man, deeply religious, who had chosen to make austerity a way of life, despite the significant proportions of his wealth. He was born in Ireland, in County Galway, but he was educated in England, at Oxford, and after completing his studies he decided to establish himself in London. By the time he was presented as one of the founding members of the Irish Literary Theatre he was an unknown figure among the intellectuals of the day, and yet he had already written and published a collection of poetry and a satirical work under the pseudonym of Syrius. His prose work – *Morgante the Lesser* – gives a glimpse of the principle by which Martyn lived and wrote. The lengthy narrative, written in the eighteenth-century style, proves that Martyn had no interest in becoming a successful writer and professes supremacy of idealism over materialism, of the artistic over the utilitarian – a theme that would prevail in his entire artistic creation. Unlike Yeats or Lady Gregory, he had no interest in improving his literary skills, learning the new techniques in drama from other people, or creating a pure Irish drama that would exclude everything related to other cultures. Instead, he would advocate for receptiveness to all that was best in Europe.

George Moore was the only one of the four founding members of the Irish Literary Theatre who had some experience in working in a theatre. He joined the movement at the request of his friend and cousin, Edward Martyn, although he shared neither Lady Gregory's profound appreciation for Irish folklore, nor Yeats's ideals for a national theatre. After spending his adulthood in France and London, he seemed to have lost some of his Irishness. He showed no interest in the political struggle of his country and the literature he wanted to create was neither nationalist, nor political. He accepted Martyn's proposal not because he wanted to help at the creation of a distinctive Irish

drama, but because he felt that English drama was at an impasse because of its propensity towards commercialism. Obviously, a conflict arose because the four could not agree on what kind of plays should be performed. Lady Gregory suggested that an Irish drama should be an expression of the peasant world of Ireland, Edward Martyn was a devoted Ibsenite and believed Irish drama should pursue the course of Norwegian plays, while Yeats was mainly interested in poetic drama. But because Lady Gregory was the type of woman that always obtained what she wanted, she managed to convince Yeats that a national drama should be based on traditional Irish customs, just like she had managed to convince him that an Irish National Theatre should be in Dublin, not in London. Consequently, a disruption between the four was most likely to occur and after only three seasons George Moore completely gave up working for the Irish Theatre, while Edward Martyn continued to bring his contribution through different other activities, even after he separated himself from Yeats and Lady Gregory because of their contrasting opinions about the nature of theatre itself.<sup>103</sup>

The Irish Literary Theatre officially opened its doors on May 8, 1899, with the production of *The Countess Cathleen* and Edward Martyn's *The Heather Field* – an event that marks the beginning of a new phase in Irish drama. Until that day, Irish theatre completely depended on English touring companies and most of the plays produced in Dublin were performed with English actors. Under these circumstances, Irish theatre was also forced to work on principles borrowed from the English theatre. Nevertheless, if the English theatre promoted anglicised versions of European plays, the Irish theatre needed to turn to politics in order to be successful – a condition not so much tolerated by Yeats, who believed that a national drama should be apolitical. And yet, as we shall see, *The Countess Cathleen* may not have been an explicitly political play, but it has, however, its own Nationalistic resonance.

Before dealing with some of the plays in detail, by examining Richard Allen Cave's *Introduction (Cave: xi-xliii)* to *W. B. Yeats - Selected Plays*, we ought to say that as Yeats himself stated, the feature of his plays was the simplicity of setting with little decoration and also the handling of stage-space. Hence his ambition to challenge the British drama was fulfilled through performing the plays in random venues,

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<sup>103</sup> Terence Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats. A Critical Biography*. Blackwell Publishers, 2001, p.122.

professionally known as fit-up conditions. Also simplicity of staging is to be remarked since complexity and richness of the turns should be the result of players and audience's imagination. In 1904 the enthusiasts obtained the Old Mechanics Institute in Dublin which they converted into a permanent base as the Abbey Theatre.

Throughout the existence of Irish Literary Theatre (1899), then Irish National Society (1904), Yeats had the opportunity to observe his work in performance and became more and more interested in controlling the look and sound of a production so as to avoid unnecessary distractions on the stage. So, he decided to start publishing a theatre publication in which he and his fellows dramatists should state their position and justify their practice: *Beltaine* (May 1899-April 1900, then *Sauhain*, that included text of plays or articles (October 1901-November 1908). These two publications contained different array of subjects and can be considered as manifestos about Yeats's desire to revolutionize the Irish Theatre, all the more to inscribe it in the contemporary European innovation.

Yeats first need was for performers who had to be Irish above all and of nationalist sympathy and willing to dedicate themselves to innovation. In these circumstances he found Frank Fay who had a group in training and they formed the nucleus of Abbey Company. Fay as a director tried to draw attention on spoken text and musical deliver, on vocal riches of a performance, he evolved a mode of acting with overtly theatrical gesture, movement was spring, simple and rarely timed to coincide with speech. Under these circumstances, delivery had to be worth listening, hence Fay's concern with musicality and rhythm. This kind of theory of performance matched Yeats's ambitions.

The style of acting required certain style of stage design about which all the people involved believed theatre design to be an art and considered stage-settings should not only inform the audience on the place and time of the play and lead them in the visual stimuli of the poetic dimension of the play. The audience was encouraged to inhabit the play (Cave: xxi) as a symbolic entity.

Another attitude of Yeats' concept/ vision on staging a play is the mask, which has long fascinated him as a metaphor through which to define psychological duplicities. When Yeats's personality began to develop, the age was under the influence of two

books, Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and of the concept propagated by them: that a man is in fact two men, the splitting of a mind into two parts. In Yeats's case he was such a timid person that he hid himself under the mask of arrogance.

On the other hand, he had the opportunity to meet Ezra Pound and Michio Ito that enabled him to know the Japanese Noh Theatre "a kind of drama which in the staging became a kind of living poetry, where all the arts together constituting performance were stylized to such an extreme degree that they become charged with profound metaphorical resonances. Crucially, Noh was a theatre where the abiding focus was on the dynamic potential of masks" (Cave: xxv).

The characteristics of Noh Theatre comprise elegant, gliding movements of the body, the fan used evocatively; the head has to be carried in a certain way when wearing a mask, Here the drama may be taken as a ritual; wearing masks enable that the performer to lose his subjective self; the voice and the movement of the performer makes appeal to the spectator's imagination whereas the mask is the mediator and the of the "the shaper of meaning" (Cave: xxvi); song, dance and stillness communicate more than words the meaning; ghosts and gods, daimones and demons mix with human characters without use of special effects; the action on stage is psychological above all and focuses/is cantered upon the main character which is "caught in a crisis of identity and is searching for the innermost truths", his/her self being tormented by doubts; in this case ghosts and gods become aspects of questioning self, projections of fears, hopes, unconscious and conflicting impulses that keep the mind in a continuous uncertainty; in Noh theatre there are rhythms of drums and flute "to induce trance", a chorus that evoke the atmosphere of the scene; Noh theatre is addressed through the agency of a series of strategies to the "eye of mind" of the spectator where masks are the main means of communication.

Yeats's desire for the plays to be characterized by Irish vein materialized by particular feature that concerned handling of stage-space. We refer here specifically to focus the audiences' attention on the doorway, more particularly on the threshold. The threshold represents a concept which appeals to Gaelic sensibility. According to a Celtic belief, the threshold symbolizes states of "in-between-ness", physical and temporal read

as gaining or losing personal powers. Cave asserts that “the threshold” with its Celtic reading enabled Yeats the context for “achieving what under his father’s guidance he had long considered the primary objective of theatre: the staging of moments of intense life, ‘passionate action or somnambulistic reverie’ “(Cave: xvi).

Following our endeavour, *The Countess Cathleen* and *The Heather Field* were two equally interesting plays, and yet completely different. The subject matter of the two was similar, as they were both reflections of Irish culture, but their design seemed to belong to different schools. Yeats’s *The Countess Cathleen* is set in a medieval Ireland and draws heavily on ancient symbolism, while Martyn’s *The Heather Field* is set in contemporary Ireland and applies Ibsen’s methods in an Irish setting. *The Countess Cathleen* was scheduled to be performed with Dorothy Paget in the role of Cathleen. Yeats had been impressed with her previous performance as fairy child in his play *The Land of Heart’s Desire*, and he considered her the best actress for such a role, although it is often suggested that Yeats had written the play for Maud Gonne. However, during rehearsals George Moore was not convinced by her acting and he chose Miss May Witty to play the part of Cathleen despite Yeats’s protests. Moore chose English actors to perform the play for the Dublin audiences and he actively participated in their rehearsals, despite his scepticism regarding the success of the play. Nevertheless, a controversy was born right before the opening night. The play was said to be unorthodox and this might have been a serious issue for Edward Martyn who was an extremely religious man. It is well known that Martyn’s religious sense was often taken to extremes, so it is not surprising that he asked a monk to analyze the play and decide whether it is heretical or not. Moore, on the other hand, was horrified by the idea that a priest should decide upon the morality of Yeats’s play. His liberal ideas caused a huge argument between him and Martyn, and because of that Martyn decided to resign. He was convinced by Lady Gregory and Yeats to change his mind and the play was eventually presented at the Ancient Concert Rooms in Dublin.

*The Countess Cathleen* is a modified version of a dramatic poem Yeats published in 1892. Set in “Ireland in old time,” the play focuses on a beautiful woman who sells her soul to the devil. The event happens during a period of great famine when demons come to earth and offer poor people gold in exchange for their souls. The Countess Cathleen,



who is the landlord of the region, is deeply touched by her people's desperate situation and does everything in her power to help the peasants. However, the demons block all her attempts to help them and when they steal all her wealth she decides to sell her own soul to provide food for the starving poor. By sacrificing herself, she manages to save the lives of her subjects. She gives up her own salvation for her people, but when she dies she is also saved and her soul goes to heaven, because God analyzes the intention, not the deed. It is precisely the ending of the play that was considered heretical. In a country with a Catholic majority such a play was considered an insult to the church. The public hostility towards the play was stirred up by a pamphlet written by Frank Hugh O'Donnell and because of that the Church decided that no Catholic should see such a play. Students signed a manifesto against the play, but there were also others who supported the play. Fearing that the performance of his play might cause confrontations between his supporters and his opponents, Yeats brought the British police force into the theatre on the opening night. If because of the Church Yeats lost many of his Catholic friends and supporters, because of his decision to involve the British police he also lost the admiration of many nationalists.

Despite the problems caused by the production of *The Countess Cathleen*, Martyn's more realistic play *The Heather Field* was a true success and received a good deal of favourable criticism. The play tells the story of Carden Tyrell, an Irish landlord who is forced to choose between pursuing his ideals and providing for his family. The struggle makes him obsess over turning a heather field into a productive parcel, and when he discovers that the heather is back, he loses any contact with reality and retreats into an imaginary world of ideas. Such a play immediately impressed the audiences. Some appreciated the application of Ibsen's methods to an Irish play, while others were impressed by Carden's torment, which was similar to that of all Irish people who were ready to follow their ideal at any cost.

In January 1900, the Irish Literary Theatre announced its programme for the new season: Alice Milligan's *The Last Feast of the Fianna* and Edward Martyn's *Maeve* and George Moore's *The Bending of the Bough*. The last play was in fact a rewritten version of *The Tale of a Town*, but because of the changes made by Moore, Martyn considered it "too ugly to claim as his own" (Foster: 225) and allowed Moore to claim authorship of

the play. The season was pretty successful but it also had its share of controversy. Though *Maeve* and *The Last Feast of the Fianna* were appreciated by the audience, Moore's play received some negative criticism. Although it focused on local politics and even promoted unanimously accepted political ideals – a necessary condition for a play to be tolerated – the play was interpreted as a satire on the recently reunited Irish Parliamentary Party. Though there was no obvious evidence in the play of any political preference, Yeats considered his intervention was necessary in order to prevent any misjudgement of the play and publicly announced that the company's future production would be equally patriotic in intention.

The third season presented *Diarmuid and Grania* and Douglas Hyde's *Casadh an t-Sugain* or *The Twisting of the Rope* – the first Gaelic play ever presented in a theatre. *Diarmuid and Grania* was an interesting experiment resulted from collaboration between Yeats and Moore. The play was a reworking of a Fenian tale translated by Lady Gregory. According to the story, Grania is forced to marry Fionn, the elderly leader of the warrior band Fianna. However, she falls in love with Diarmuid and elopes with him on her wedding night. The role of Yeats and Moore was to turn this tale into a drama, but their collaboration would prove to some sort of unsuitable marriage that “went through various stages of storm, stress, sulks and strained silences.”<sup>104</sup> Initially Moore was supposed to write Grania's part and create the structure of the play, while Yeats's role was to write Diarmuid's part and put style on it. However, despite Yeats and Moore's respect and appreciation for each other, their association in this project was disastrous and marked the end of their friendship. Because of their inability to stick to their part of project, they kept interfering in each other's business. Moore influenced the way Yeats was writing the dialogue, while Yeats gave his opinions regarding the construction of the play. However, they managed to finish the play and it was staged in October at the Gaiety Theatre with English actors whose voices just did not seem suitable for Irish idioms. Consequently, critics were not enthusiastic and neither the play, nor the performance received much praise.

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<sup>104</sup> Michael MacLiammoir and Eavan Boland. *WB Yeats and his World*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1977, p. 65.

The third season of the Irish Literary Theatre was not however a complete failure. Hyde's play *Casadh an t-Sugain* was a true success. Besides being the first play in Irish language that it was ever produced in a theatre, its author suggested that the entire production should be Irish. The main character was played by Hyde himself and for the other parts they contracted Dublin amateurs, marking thus the end of English actors' performance in the new Irish theatre. This was not an unexpected decision considering that Douglas Hyde was the president of the Gaelic League. He found Irish speakers among the members of the Gaelic League to serve as actors in his play because, he believed, a weak performance of Irish amateur actors was preferable to a good performance of English actors. The play was decided to be produced by William and Frank Fay, two amateur actors and producers who were very fond of the theatre and had good reputation in the theatrical circles. This decision would eventually prove to be very inspired, because the Fay brothers did not only manage to successfully produce an impressive number of Irish plays, but they also gave some valuable advice to those who wanted to write drama.

Despite the success of Hyde's play, the members of the Irish Literary Theatre did not take the credit for it, because the play was more a triumph of the Gaelic League than of the Irish Literary Theatre. Yeats understood that the Irish drama could not be forced to follow the path that he had paved for it and he realized that it should be left to develop on its own, even if that meant taking an example from the tropes that performed for the nationalist movement. However, the existence of conflicting aims among the founding members of the Irish Literary Theatre, as well as the disappointment caused by the lack of success of most of the plays they produced led to the end of the Irish Literary Theatre after its third season. And yet, this did not mean that the four had lost any interest in creating a national drama. Lady Gregory began writing and producing her own plays, Edward Martyn completely separated from the others, but maintained his devotion to modern drama and continued to collaborate with amateur organizations, George Moore became involved with Douglas Hyde in the production of *The Thinker's Wedding*, Hyde's last play, while Yeats began working on *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, which would be produced seven months later in collaboration with the Fay Brothers. Because *Cathleen Ni*

*Houlihan* is the most obvious proof of Yeats's commitment to nationalism, a detailed analysis of this play will be given in the following section of this paper.

### 2.3 In the Whirl of Irish History

The history of Ireland begins in the Boyne Valley where there are the passage graves<sup>105</sup> of Knowth<sup>106</sup> and Dowth<sup>107</sup>, the hill of Tara where St. Patrick preached Christianity to the political and religious centre of the pagan system, and above all, the site of the Battle of 1690, when Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland won over the Catholic Gaelic civilisation. Ever since in the country there has been the belief that once a traditional society was destroyed by foreign interferences, it was difficult for it to recover its independence and unity, though it has to be stated that Ireland had never been a political unity. In the nineteenth century the desire to become a political unit awakened, establishing a connection between the Celtic tradition and the idea of a United Ireland. It was then that a new theory of continuity arose. According to this theory, the ancient German tribes, the Etruscan and the Celtic, preserved under foreign civilization their people, their land and language, becoming the keepers of tradition.

In the same context the first Irish Revival occurred in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, even if it was a confusion of Teutonic Celtic and 'old British elements'. The appearance of Paul Henri Mallet's *Introduction a l'Histoire du Danemark*, translated in 1770 by Percy as *Northern Antiquities* advanced the idea that Norse, Scottish and Welsh landscapes were synonymous with wilderness, loneliness and spontaneity.<sup>108</sup> Macpherson increased popularity with Oisín forgeries in 1760. Unfortunately famine and the death of O'Connell in 1847 brought the first Irish revival to an end. At that time, the second Irish Revival had already begun, with the writings of Sir Samuel Ferguson, William Carlton and James

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<sup>105</sup> Narrow passage made of large stones and one or multiple burial chambers.

<sup>106</sup> Neolithic passage grave and an ancient monument in the Valley of the River Boyne.

<sup>107</sup> The oldest of the Neolithic passage tombs.

<sup>108</sup> Seamus, *Celtic Revivals - Essays in Modern Irish Literature – Joyce, Yeats, O'Casey Kinsella, Montague, Friel, Mahon, Heaney, Beckett, Synge*. Winston Salem, North Carolina: Wake Forest University Press: 1985, p.20.

Clarence Mangan, the essays of Davis, the balladry of the Nation and, above all, the appearance of Standish James O'Grady's *Bardic History of Ireland* in the front lines. The second revival was different from the first in that it brought scholars and literature together to revive the civilization of a generation that witnessed its destruction.

William Butler Yeats asserted his identity as a famous poet when Ireland's voice began to be heard. As a product of Victorian Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, during his childhood and youth he was forced to witness the major events that registered its decline. He was four years old when Gladstone disestablished the Church of Ireland, he was five when the 1870 Land Act interfered with the Landlords' control over their property and Isaac Butt, a friend of Yeatses, founded the movement of Home Rule. He was seven when the Secret Ballot Act liberated tenant voters and dealt a major blow to landlord political power. He was twelve when Parnell began to dominate the Irish Parliamentary Party, fourteen when the Land War broke out and tenants began withholding their rents in the long campaign towards a peasant proprietorship, and seventeen when Parnell and Gladstone began the rapprochement between the Liberal Party and the Irish Nationalists which would produce a failed Home Rule bill in William Butler Yeats's twenty first year. And yet, despite being young when the crisis of Irish Protestant Ascendancy reached its peak, his contribution to local history events is far from being insignificant. During his youth and adulthood he was often an active member in the Irish political background, and even if there were periods when his concerns were more related to his development as an artist, his interest in the political and historical particularities of his countries never ceased.

Meeting John O'Leary, the Irish patriot recently returned from a forced exile and imprisonment in 1885, and influenced by his statement that "there is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature,"<sup>109</sup> W.B.Yeats made the decision to become an Irish writer. This decision was enabled by the premise of 1840's writers of the Young Ireland who created a national image for their country. However, Yeats confronted himself with two questions, namely to what extent the national literature had to be politically nationalistic and which were the boundaries of Irish

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<sup>109</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.1.

National literature. The answers were provided by Samuel Ferguson who believed that a non-Nationalist, somebody with no connections with the Nationalist movement, could write national poetry bearing “the true Celtic note” in mind and being “lofty and moral and distinctively Irish”. He stated that it was “the poets who will save the people.”<sup>110</sup> Yeats agreed with the statement which is to be found in the poem “The Statues”: artists embodying desired ideals in their work can shape the nature of their society. According to him, a true national literature would stir the sensibilities of Irishmen, strengthen their love for and loyalty to their country and make them wish its growth. Consequently Yeats became the most prolific of the Irish writers in the years 1886-1892. His ideals towards Irish literature concerned form, subject-matters and style. Therefore he urged his fellow-writers to strive to become masters of their craft<sup>111</sup>, to be careful with their rhetoric, and to think of audience, disregarding the political matters. He was assertive in that a great literature must be a national literature and the writers should be loyal to his country, because “the cradles of the greatest writers are rocked among the scenes they are to celebrate.”<sup>112</sup> Concerning the Irish problem whether Irish literature should be in Irish or English, he supported a national literature in English, considering that a national literature could not be less Irish if it were in English, and claiming that Gaelic could be preserved among them as “a fountain of nationality”<sup>113</sup>, but under no circumstance should they base their hopes of nationhood on it.

Another literary point in Yeats’s agenda was that the writers should study writers of any country in order to learn from them “the secret of their greatness.”<sup>114</sup> And yet they should not imitate those great writers, and they should not use foreign literatures with the

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<sup>110</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.5.

<sup>111</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.12.

<sup>112</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.14.

<sup>113</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.17.

<sup>114</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.18.

aim of developing the literature of Ireland. In response to O'Leary criticism of his involvement with occult philosophies and Oriental systems of belief, Yeats said that "mystical life is in the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write,"<sup>115</sup> considering himself a voice of the soul that rebels against the intellect. As to his subject-matters, when asked why he did not write a truly national poem or romance, he answered that poetry and romance could not be made by studying famous moments but by giving importance to what was called one's self and that the Celtic spirit was endowed with a gift of vision. In a more or less direct manner, it was Yeats who encouraged his contemporary fellow-writers to make use of the spiritual, the visionary and the occult as subjects of concern for Irish writers, these subjects being related to "the true Celtic nature."<sup>116</sup>

In an article in 1895, Yeats dealt with the quest for subject-matters suggesting "an experimental literature, a literature preoccupied with hitherto un-worked material."<sup>117</sup> Through this he referred primarily to Irish myth, legend and folklore and he declared that he was not the first to use it, but he surely was the first who saw the potential of it, both for subject-matters and "serving as correction to the modern condition."<sup>118</sup> Speaking of style, his standpoint was towards a non-English style, but all the more musical and full of colour. He worked at adapting to Irish needs, to the modes of expression that were not "intrinsically the property of any nation."<sup>119</sup> He was very fond of the idea of putting aside all empirical approaches to history in creation, and yet, his entire work is weaved with some sort of subversive political and historical details and somehow manages to transmit

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<sup>115</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.21.

<sup>116</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.25.

<sup>117</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.27.

<sup>118</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.28.

<sup>119</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.33.

the author's own opinions on history without professing any authorial control over the readers.

Yeats's awareness regarding the lack of significance of politics in Ireland became more powerful after the death of Charles Stewart Parnell. As a young man of Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy, he was expected to sympathize with the pro-British and pro-Unionists movement, and yet he was more attracted by the nationalist movement of the Fenians, for he believed Anglo-Irish tradition should play an important part in the establishment of a pure Irish culture. As a devotee of the revival of Irish heritage, but also under the influence of Maud Gonne and John O'Leary, Yeats even became politically active. He joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood and he was even involved in the protests against the Queen's Golden Jubilee. Nevertheless, his most significant contribution to Irish political beliefs was his writing, through which he attempted to create a national literature by returning to Irish tradition and heroic past.

In 1902, with the performance of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* most of his goals were achieved. The audiences were deeply touched by the idea of self-sacrifice for the country and the play received much public acclaim. The action of the play happens in 1798 and celebrates the rebellion of the United Irishmen against British rule. The play presents an episode in the life of a peasant family who is making the preparations for the wedding of their son. The marriage, however, never happens because of an old lady who comes at their house and tells the young man that a great destiny awaits him –he is supposed to sacrifice his life for Ireland and forever be commemorated as a hero by his people. With Maud Gonne in the role of Cathleen the play was quickly interpreted as a powerful political allegory. Her magnificent performance, as well as her renown as a nationalist activist, triggered fiery emotions in people's mind and transformed Yeats into a national literary figure. And yet, Yeats's intention was to never use his writing as a political tool, but with *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* he managed to awaken people's sensibility regarding their identity, and although he claimed that the message of his play might have been misunderstood, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* set the tone for many of his subsequent plays and poems in which a true Irish spirit would prevail.



### 3. Yeats's History as a Concept

#### 3.1 Paul Ricoeur's Treatise *History, Memory, Forgetting* in a Most Actual Interpretation of History as a Concept

With Yeats the concept of history articulated in the poetic discourse achieves a distinctive quality based on a certain subjectivity in which we can trace the elements that define the author's own personality: his Anglo-Irish origins, his family background, his education, his political creed, his literary aspirations and his spirituality. In his work he gives a personal interpretation of history, displaying its transcendental origins rather than the historical realities, creating thus an original perspective which can be better understood through Paul Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* – a treatise that also provides a new framework on the idea of history. For a better understanding of history, memory and forgetting as concepts, it is necessary to begin our study with the definition of these three concepts. In *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* 'memory' is defined as "the power or process of reproducing or recalling what has been learned and retained, especially through associative mechanisms, 'history' as "a chronological record of significant events (as affecting a nation or institution) often including an explanation of their causes," and 'forgetting' or oblivion as the fact or condition of losing the remembrance of something or being unable to think of or recall it.

Paul Ricoeur's work *Memory, History, Forgetting* consists of three parts, each of them dealing with the concepts or processes proposed in the title. In analyzing memory, Ricoeur poses two questions: What do we remember and whose is the memory? From the standpoint of Husserl's phenomenology, Ricoeur answers the two questions by asserting that each consciousness is the consciousness of something, and given the reflexive nature of the question in French – *se rappeler* – he suggests that the things we remember are possibly connected to the human self. Next, the theoretician explains that there are two Greek words for recalling: *mneme*, which refers to "something which emerges in a passive way," and *anamnesis*, which represents "the object of a search."

The English equivalents for these two words describe pretty much the same thing. For *mneme* there is *memory*, which describes the “process of reproducing or recalling what has been learned through associative mechanisms,” and for *anamnesis* there is *remembrance*, which refers “to something that serves to keep in or bring to mind,” and it is the result of a process of seeking.

In his treatise, Ricoeur argues that people’s memory is the thing that builds a nation’s history, and since memory is often subjective, the history itself is a sequence of events that are presented in a subjective manner. The author talks about three kinds of memory: an individual memory, a collective one, and also a third kind of memory – that of a group that shares the same set of memories. And because of this connection between history, memory and subjectivity, the author raises the question of the verisimilitude of historical knowledge, and yet he also asserts that there can also be objective historical knowledge despite the major role of memory in shaping a nation’s history.

The phenomenology of memory was also one of Spinoza’s preoccupations and in the second part of *Ethics* we find out that if two or more objects have once impressed the human mind at the same time, in trying to remember one of them, we will also remember the other one at once. This is exactly what happens with Yeats when, walking through Fleet Street in London very homesick, during his schooling years, at a given moment he heard a twinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop window, which balanced a little ball upon its jet. That twinkle made him remember Laugh Gill and the island in the middle of it back in Sligo and this inspired him to write “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”:

“I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
Will I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey  
I hear it in the deep heart’s core.”<sup>120</sup>

Ricoeur calls this a short circuit between memory and imagination which produces an association of ideas. In *Ethics*, there is also an explanation which puts it

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<sup>120</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.44.

that the intertwining takes place in conformity with the impressions on the human mind, thus differentiating from the intertwining of ideas, which follows an intellectual order. There is a difference between two purposes: on the one hand that of imagination directed towards fantastic, fiction, unreal, possible and utopia and on the other that of memory directed towards the previous reality. The quality of being previous is the temporal mark of the thing we remember or the problem of the memory intertwined with the imagination and it is as old as western philosophy. Socrates' philosophy left us two philosophical opinions, one belonging to Plato and the other to Aristotle. The former speaks about the present representation of an absent thing and the latter pleads for including the problem of memory into that of imagination.

To begin with, Plato asserts that the concept of *eikon* accompanies that of *phantasma* in Socrates' dialogues, which discuss the problem of the sophist and the problem of error. From the beginning, the problem of *eikon* is associated with that of the imprint just to make things more complex. The imprint represented by the metaphor of a piece of wax, the error being considered either that of wiping the tracks or that of following some false tracks. Implicitly the problem of forgetfulness appears as a wiping of tracks or mismatch of the wax image with the original model. Following this, Socrates suggests a phenomenology of error in saying that supposing that our souls contain a wax layer, in some cases, the wax is purer than in other cases, and in other cases softer. This is the moment when Mother of Muses, Mnemosyne prints in it whatever it is worth being remembered. Thus the metaphor of the wax imprint connects the two problems, that of memory and forgetfulness. There are also cases when, in conformity with Socrates, one of the signs accompanies the sensation, while the other does not, the memory becoming thus easier to be evoked. Ricoeur finds this kind of soul equal with the 'tough hearts and kind hearts' in Homer's *Iliad*.

The metaphor of the wax imprint is similar to the metaphor of the cage and refers to that situation when we possess some knowledge and we use it – as if one has a bird in a cage and knows for sure that he has it. This soon raises an epistemological question: the distinction between a capacity and its performing allows you to reason that something that you have learned and know it is actually something with which you are familiar. The question relates with our approach to the extent that a bad learning of rules

means a mistake in counting. At this point, exploring Yeats's first part of his *Autobiographies*, "Reveries over Childhood and Youth" is not only interesting in itself, but it also throws a useful light on the poet's work as a whole and above all on his desire to re-make himself. In his study *Tragic Knowledge. Yeats's Biography and Hermeneutics*, Daniel O'Hara comments on this aspect and quotes Nietzsche, who renders in a few words the problematic form of modern form of autobiographical reflection:

"But in order to endure this type of pessimism and to live alone "without God and morality," I had to invent a counterpart for myself. Perhaps I know why man alone laughs: he alone suffers so deeply that he had to invent laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy animal is, as fitting, the most cheerful."<sup>121</sup>

Daniel O'Hara continues by suggesting that the result of this solitary creative act of self-reflection is what Nietzsche discloses to himself as the tragic nature of man's laughter (its awful necessity) and its daimonic power of (self-) invention. The poet, namely Yeats, feels the need to make use of history in order to reduce the pretensions of the contemporary scene, and through this antithetical design he manages to recreate past origins in the interest of future generations.

To sum up Plato's approach, Ricoeur quotes Marc Bloch<sup>122</sup>'s definition of history as 'the science of tracks'. He finds three uses of the word 'track'. First there are the written and eventually archived tracks of which Plato speaks in the Phaidros myth, narrating the invention of writing. In this respect Socrates in his dialogue with Protarchos poses the following problem: what happens when the self is asked questions? Socrates answers that every moment marked in our soul is like a book. When it meets sensations and affects, memory seems to write words in our souls. Second

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<sup>121</sup> Daniel O'Hara. *Tragic Knowledge. Yeats's Biography and Hermeneutics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1981, pp.7-8.

<sup>122</sup> Marc Leopold Benjamin Bloch (July 6, 1886 in Lyon – June 16, 1944 in Saint-Didier-de-Forman) was a medieval historian, University Professor and French Army officer. Bloch was a founder of the Annals School. He was shot by the Gestapo during the German occupation of France for his work in the French Resistance.

utilization of tracks refers to Socrates' comparison of painting to writing or graphic representation. The third utilization is the body imprint, mental imprint or cortical imprint in the way it is discussed by neurosciences.

We find Aristotle's opinion in the treaty *Parva Naturalia*, a research that begins with the key-sentence: "Memory has as an object the past only". The past is opposed to the future of presupposition and the present of sensation. It is also considered a language and Ricoeur calls the temporal mark declarative memory. He emphasizes that we remember things "when time has elapsed."<sup>123</sup> In this case there is a similitude between people and animals as they possess a simple memory, and yet, people are superior to animals because they have a sensation or perception of time and of anteriority, and they also distinguish between 'before' and 'afterwards' – 'earlier and later', as categories of time.

The second question concerns the relation between memory and imagination and this relation is based above all on the fact that they belong to the same part of a sensitive soul, as Plato has already divided them. However, the real problem is different. What is the explanation for the situation when the affection is present but the thing that stirred it is not, and despite all this we still remember the thing that is not present? Aristotle responds to this aporia through something that seems obvious to him: the affection produced because of the sensation in the soul or in that part of the body that keeps it has to be thought of as if it were a picture or a painting named memory. We find here a connection with the imprint but the difference is that Aristotle associates the body with the soul. Again, an aporia emerges. If this is the case what do we really remember? If it is a thing how can we remember anything connected with it in its absence and if it is an image how can we remember anything, which is distinct of it? Aristotle explains this taking as an example the image painted of an animal. There are two ways of reading this image: one is to consider it a mere drawing, and the other is to see it as an *eikon*, a copy. Both are possible, and since they are both representations of the same thing, Aristotle names the image in itself a 'phantasm', and uses 'eikon' to refer to something other than the inscription.

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<sup>123</sup> Paul. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p.32.

Another problem is that remembering takes place after some time and the interval between the first impressions and going back to the initial thing is that in which remembering takes place. The essence of memory is the temporal distance and furthermore it is the distinction between memory and imagination. From this point of view, there are many interpretations: it is the 'ars memoriae', which is a form of exercise of the memory, where memorizing is performed before remembering of events. Second it is the association of the modernists finding solid arguments in Aristotle's text. Third is the dynamism, inventing the connections, as Bergson will do in analyzing the effort of re-memorization.

When we speak about memory we also speak about remembrances, we have memory in the singular and remembrances in the plural. Remembrances are perceived as discrete forms having precise or imprecise contours. Ricoeur speaks about Bergson's analysis of the thing remembered and identified with a single event, unrepeated, for example the reading of a memorized text. The event occurs and then it passes. In the phenomenological context, we say that we remember something that we did, felt, or learned in a certain circumstance. Between the singularities of events, there are others, which Ricoeur calls 'state of things'. We remember the things as we do because they happened this way and not in another way. This is because we know them. In this case, 'to remember' is synonymous with 'to know'. The remembrances become possessions. The events tend to meet the states of things in the context of the historical knowledge. Ricoeur proposes some opposed pairs towards the semantic field of remembrances. The reason is the interpenetration of the preverbal and language, which eventually allows for the existence of different interpretation. The first pair of opposed terms are 'habitude' and 'memory'. In philosophy, it is expressed through the well-known distinction between memory as habitude and memory as remembrance. This opposition is analyzed in the context of time. In both cases the experience acquired is emphasized, but in the case of habitude the thing is integrated within the lived experience, unmarked and unstated as a past. In the other case, its anteriority is acknowledged. In both cases memory has the past as an object but it is performed in two different ways: unmarked and marked.

The second pair is 'evocation' and 'quest'. Evocation is the occurring of a remembrance called by Aristotle 'mneme' while 'anamnesis' is the term used to describe a remembrance that comes as the result for quest. 'Mneme' is described as pathos, as affection by him, since it is something similar to remembrance, and implicitly evocation is an affection opposed to quest. Ricoeur focuses on Aristotle's emphasis on the anteriority of the thing remembered in connection with its present evocation and analyzes it in opposition with Plato's theory, in which 'anamnesis' is an antenatal knowledge. Nevertheless, he puts himself in the category of Socrates' followers, because he describes re-remembering through the emblematical term of quest. The breach is not total since the term 'ana' in 'anamnesis' signifies return, revival, rediscovery of something that was seen, felt or learned before. Forgetfulness is thus indirectly designated as being that against which the effort of remembering is directed.

Next, Paul Ricoeur deals with different aspects of memory as practiced memory or impeded memory, manipulated memory or abusively commended memory, where the approach is more or less pathological. Nevertheless, the most interesting sequence for our study is that concerning personal memory and collective memory. Ricoeur begins his approach from the premises that the real subject of the operations that take place in the memory is the main problem. The endeavour is proper for the philosophers' field of investigation since it is important for the historians to know with what they deal, with the memory of the personae taken one by one or with the collective memory. The philosopher has two hypotheses. One refers to the things responsible for the 'pathos', corresponding to receiving the remembrance, and the other for the 'praxis', the endeavour of the quest.

At this point, it is of an utmost importance to examine who is the subject of the processes that occur in the memory, and in order to do that the author discusses the three features underscoring the individual character of the memory. First, the remembrance belongs to one individual, not to many. Second, there is a connection between consciousness and past, a feature that enables the temporal continuity of the individual. Their continuity allows the individual to move between the living present and the moments in the past childhood. Third, memory connects with the passing of time, and has a double orientation: first it moves from the past to future and then from

the future to the past, each of them in the living present. This is called inwardness, a term and a tradition initiated by Augustine, who connected the analysis of memory and time in his work *Confessions*, Books X and XI. According to his theory, remembrances are received and processed by memory whenever it is necessary. Paul Ricoeur carries on his research by stating that the remembrances of the things might coincide with the remembrances of the ego, the memory thus becoming the soul itself. Then he speaks about happy memory and about the threatening of forgetfulness. Nevertheless, the remembrance of a thing forgotten is likened to a victory upon oblivion.

The genuine and primordial character of the individual memory has its roots in the use of common language and in concise psychology. Speaking of the use of the word 'self' when remembering something, man remembers himself. In addition, there are three important characteristics of memory. First, memory is singular; the remembrances belong to the one who remembers them, not to someone else, because we cannot transfer somebody's remembrances onto another memory. Second, memory is directly connected to consciousness and the past. The past belongs to someone's impressions; therefore the past belongs only to one person. Nevertheless, memory is the only way to return to the past, to travel through time without any difficulty. Third, memory is connected with the sense of orientation, more specifically a double orientation, since the movement is from the past to the future following the arrow of changing, and from the future to the past towards remembrance. This is the device of the tradition of 'inwardness' originated by Augustine in the late Antiquity in the wake of Christian religion. In his *Confessions* he accomplishes a eulogy of the memory, of 'the vast palaces of memory', and of 'the large storehouses of memory'<sup>124</sup> and he also suggests that memory of things is equal with the memory of the self.

Augustine is not the only one who dealt with the concept of 'inwardness', but he is the precursor of this tradition. His followers are John Locke and Husserl. The English philosopher discusses three main concepts: identity, consciousness and the self. Locke's view lies in that the certitude of existence suggests a new philosophy of substances. He considers that a person is identified only through a consciousness identical with the self.

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<sup>124</sup> Paul Ricoeur. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp.122-123.



In addition, consciousness includes language, and finds in itself “operations of our mind, either passive when we deal with signals from our senses or active when we deal with powers of the mind”. John Locke gives the definition of identity in that “it spreads as long as consciousness may comprise any past activity or thought”; in both cases, the self remains the same. The personal identity is a temporal identity. From this standpoint, the objection concerning sleep and forgetfulness are perceived as substance to fill the breaches in the consciousness. Locke assumes that identity and consciousness form a circle and postulates that “the same consciousness united the removed actions in the same person, whatever substances took part in producing them.” He also finds that consciousness and memory are the same. Surprisingly enough, the actions of the same person are determined by two different consciousnesses with no common point, one of them taking the actions at night, while the other acts in the daylight. In this situation, can one say that the man of the night and the man of the day are two different individuals?

In the same debate, John Locke also includes the wakeful state, the sleep, and the phases of memory and forgetfulness into a philosophy of life, and underneath he finds a philosophy of consciousness where the identity of the person is articulated with the identity of the self. Afterwards Locke suggests a double reading of ‘the self and the other’. The question arising here refers to who will be the judge and who will be judged. The answer is that only on the Doomsday, will every person be endowed with a consciousness. Though Paul Ricoeur asserts that the double reading is not initiated by Locke, Ricoeur is still interested in the philosophy of the ‘same’ suggested by the English philosopher.

The third approach on inwardness belongs to Husserl. The problem is dealt with in *Lectures about the Phenomenology of the Internal Consciousness of the Time*. As Paul Ricoeur embarks on Husserl’s approach, he realizes that the problem with memory is so fundamental that he takes the risk of dealing with it in two different chapters. On the one hand, he takes into consideration what really concerns the phenomenology of remembrance from the point of view of its connection with a thing that lasts (the sound and the tune, for example) and on the other, from the point of view of its difference comparatively to the image. Nevertheless, the concept of inwardness does not represent

the centre of our research; instead, it represents the starting point to demonstrate the thesis of memory, history, and forgetfulness.

The reverse side of the coin is 'outward-ness'. Regarding our thesis, the discussion on the 'outward-ness' and the 'collective memory' will be dealt with through Maurice Halbwachs'<sup>125</sup> study *La Memoire collective*. Paul Ricoeur introduces the philosopher's work by saying about it that the audience received it with a huge success. Ricoeur states that the only way in which history supports, corrects, criticizes and includes the memory is through the agency of the collective memory, which alone deserves to face the history. Maurice Halbwachs, Ricoeur states, had the avant-garde idea of attributing the memory directly to a collective entity, which he calls group or society. Along the same line, he forges the brilliant concept of social frameworks of the 'memory' before that of 'collective memory'. By then he had thought of the memory as the third person and it was subject to objective observation. On the contrary, in *La Memoire collective* he simplifies the reference to collective memory by using as a starting point the personal memory able to recall its remembrances. In order to recall we need the others. Yet the debate consists in the fact that our type of memory cannot derive from this one, but the order of the derivation is another.

Our analysis starts with the point of view that the individual memory is its own master beginning with a subtle analysis of individual experience of pertaining to a group and based on the experience received from the others. We meet the others' memory on the way of recalling and of recognition, two important mnemonic phenomena for the typology of remembrance. We consider the confession received from somebody else as a piece of information on the past. The first remembrances are those shared and the common ones. They allow us to ascertain that we have never been alone. The most remarkable remembrances are those that refer to places visited in common. We pass from confession to recalling the remembrances we have as members of a group and in this context a change of the point of view takes place.

In the following lines, the thesis deals with individual memory as a necessary and sufficient condition of recalling and recognizing the remembrance. It focuses on the

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<sup>125</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *La memoir collective*, published by Mrs. Jeanne Alexandre, born Halbwachs in 1950, work quoted by Paul Ricoeur on page 147.

central mnemonic phenomenon with a negative argument: when we are no longer in the group that shares a certain memory, our own memory gets thinner, since it loses the external support. Therefore we remember more efficiently when the remembrance is common to one or more groups, and according to Halbwachs, the remembrances in childhood are a good reference in this sense (Yeats's *Autobiographies* is a good example). They usually occur in places that are very well marked, such as the garden, the house, the cellar, places that are dear to Bachelard<sup>126</sup>: "the image moves in the context of the family because they occur from the beginning into this context and never get out of it". Alternatively, "for the child, the world is never empty of human beings, of good and evil influences."<sup>127</sup> What is even more interesting is that the process of remembering pertains to more than one individual, and because in this case we are dealing with a collective memory, the originality of our thoughts or impressions can be questioned, but not their objectivity. According to Ricoeur, memory can be attributed to three subjects: the own self, the collective memory and the memory of those who are close to us. In this case, neither the sociology of the collective memory, nor the phenomenology of individual memory contributes to the coherence of the self-consciousness and to the capacity of collective entities to preserve and recall common memories. But because all types of memory can be subjective, history, as the result of these three types of memory, often loses its objectivity and acquires a more personal aspect. This is exactly what happens with Yeats, who in his representation of history often foregrounds his own interpretation of it.<sup>128</sup>

Ricoeur focuses on the concept of history from the perspective of epistemological knowledge. He starts his analysis with the rule that everybody learns history by memorizing dates, facts, important events, important people, or important

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<sup>126</sup> **Gaston Bachelard** (June 27, 1884, Bar-sur-Aube – October 16, 1962, Paris) was a French philosopher. His most important work is on poetics and on the philosophy of science. To the latter he introduced the concepts of *epistemological obstacle* and *epistemological break* (*obstacle épistémologique et rupture épistémologique*). He rose to some of the most prestigious positions in the French academy and influenced many subsequent French philosophers, among them Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser and Jacques Derrida.

<sup>127</sup> Paul Ricoeur. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p.150.

<sup>128</sup> Finneran, Richard J. *The Yeats Reader*. New York: Scribner, 2002, p.60.

holidays that have to be celebrated. In the student's opinion, history represents the past, and it is seen as external and dead. Consequently, Ricoeur attempts to reduce the distance between the taught history and the lived memory. He talks about a "historical memory" that he defines as an external non-culture – the result of the combination between the uncanny, restless past and the lived memory, which is only possible when generations of different ages interact.

In his approach to the process of history, the philosopher makes use of three visions. One belongs to Maurice Halbwachs and lies in that the major reference of the historic memory is the nation and that, generally speaking, history begins where tradition stops. Writing about past events is the instrument to diminish the distance in time and to deposit history; in other words, memory and history are compelled to co-exist.

Next, Yerushalmi refers to a resistance of memory to its historiography treatment. Here Ricoeur emphasizes that the work of the Jewish writer offers access to a universal problem given by the singularity of Jewish existence. This problem refers to the tension between the Jewish memory and writing history. The author observes the lack of historic distance in connection with the collective memory, and because personal or collective memory refers by definition to a past kept alive by word of mouth, by directly transmitting it to the next generation, a resistance of memory against historiography record is created. The third vision used by Ricoeur is that of Pierre Nora, who invented the concept of places of memory. He is famous for essays on restless and uncanny history. According to him, the past is connected to the present, and our memory is nothing else but history, track and selection. As soon as meditation is involved, the living memory becomes history. Memory is perceived as absolute, while history, as the result of a metamorphosis of memory, is only relative.

In the third part of his treatise Ricoeur approaches two interconnected concepts: forgiveness and forgetfulness. The author here questions the existence of sensible politics without a certain censorship of memory. He argues that political prose begins where revenge stops, history being at risk to permanently alternate between eternal hatred and absent-minded history. And yet, because a society cannot be at bad terms with itself, poetry becomes a powerful tool. Knowing that the political is based on

“forgetting the unforgettable,”<sup>129</sup> poetry becomes the keeper of un-forgetting. In this equation, amnesty plays a significant part – that of “silencing the non-forgetting of memory.”<sup>130</sup>

On the other hand, forgetfulness has its own dilemmas concerning forgiveness. Memory has to do with historical events with all its forms: retribution, healing, forgiveness and forgetfulness. Forgetfulness hinders the action from continuing either through impossible parts to play or through conflicts impossible to solve or through irretrievable mistakes dating far back in history. To end this study on forgetfulness, Paul Ricoeur embraces Marc Auge’s view in *Les Forms de L’Oubli*. Her vision on forgetfulness puts us in a conflicting situation, because in order to go back to the past, we have to forget about the present, in order to find the connections with the present we have to cancel the connections with both the past and the future, and in order to embrace the future, we have to forget about the past.

### **3.2 The Poet’s Involvement in Local and European History**

In the light of Paul Ricoeur’s *History, Memory, Forgetting*, the analysis of Yeats’s idea of history becomes now easier to embark upon. Nevertheless, it is of utmost importance for us to examine the Irish history first, since it represents the context that enabled Yeats to write such great poetry. Nicholas Drakes states in *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* that the Irish history is one of invaders who ended up in adapting to native circumstances and stretches far back into the depths of time. The first inhabitants of Ireland were hunters and fishers travelling short distances from Scotland. The megalithic remains on the territory of Ireland are similar to others at Stonehenge in England or Carnac, France. In about 350 BC, the Gaels of Central European origin came over Ireland, which then they called Eriu (Erin). The Gaels founded the Bronze Age culture and a superior state: ‘Tuatha De Dannan’. At the beginning, the ‘tuatha’ (small clans) were united by the Cormac Mac Art. The sacred hill of Tara became the

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<sup>129</sup> Paul Ricoeur. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p.501.

<sup>130</sup> Paul Ricoeur. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, p.501.

capital of Ireland and was ruled by a warrior aristocracy, the ‘Fianna’<sup>131</sup>. The ‘Fianna’ supported the ‘filli’, druids or ‘poeteers’ known to have been capable of prophecy and divination. Beneath the caste of Druids, the administrative ‘fies’ including scholars, clergy, historians and ordinary poets – the bards – were, whose main occupation was to record and recite history and genealogy in verse.

Saint Patrick (389-461), a Romanized British Celt, who, as the Irish legend reports, has chased the snakes of Paganism out of Ireland, converted Ireland to Christianity. Due to the Christian religion, direct links were established between Ireland and the Continent. As a consequence, hundreds of monasteries were founded in the sixth and seventh centuries. In his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, the Venerable Bede (673-675) described how Irish Monastic School attracted English students “both of noble and of lesser rank” (Drake: 2).

Undoubtedly the most significant influence of European Christianity in Ireland was the Latin alphabet. Meanwhile the Celtic writing (ogham) was used only for tombstones. Apart from this, no other written tradition was known. Nonetheless, the ‘Great Tradition’, which was a compilation of ancient Irish law, speaks of Latin as of a sacred ‘white language’. The following centuries, the eighth and the ninth, were a dark age for Ireland. During the raids, the Vikings partially destroyed the rich monastic culture. In this period, Dublin was founded as a stockade port. The Norse were in turn partially suppressed by the powerful Gaelic king Brian Boru, ‘Emperor of the Irish’ in the battle of Clontarf in 1014. His death, in that year, brought about a collapsing unity. Dermot Mac Murrough, King of Leinster called to Henry II, for military aid. The Norman invasion led by Earl of Pembroke (also known as Strongbow) undertaken as a crusade was blessed by the Pope as it was seen to civilize the barbarians. Despite the established Norman administration, the northern regions Tyrone and Donegal remained independent whereas the whole country was difficult to rule.

Another important event took place in the sixteenth century when a brutal colonization policy of Protestant plantations was installed. The policy did not only establish some kind of English order and authority, but it also made possible the

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<sup>131</sup> In Celtic mythology, the Fianna were Irish warriors who served the High King of Ireland. Their adventures were recorded in the Fenian Cycle. Their last leader was Finn mac Cumhil.

confiscation of land from its rightful owner, and some landowners were simply disposed of their properties. Despite the fact that James I restored the earls of Tyrconnell and Tyrone in 1603, they soon quarrelled with him and left Ireland together with one hundreds chiefs. The event is known in the history as the Flight of the Earls, which weakened Gaelic Ireland and allowed the English to occupy more lands. On the other hand, they established businesses, which made poor landowners become very rich (for example the first Earl of Cork). Catholics owned only a small fraction of the land, their elite had banished themselves into permanent exile and their religion was barely tolerated. Protestants held the best land, had access to the wealthy English financial and trading markets, had proved their loyalty to the Crown and occupied all the positions of political and judicial power. Ireland was a changed nation, yet it continued to transform itself.

England's Civil War represented an opportunity for Ireland to win back the planted territory. Nevertheless, the rebellion of 1641 was only an attempt of the Catholics in Ulster to regain the possession of their lands since many colonists were murdered and some left the country. Oliver Cromwell, a militant Presbyterian, thought it was his divine duty to destroy the Royalist cause in Ireland and revenge the Protestants. He slaughtered the population of Drogheda and Wexford. Under the Settlement Acts of 1652 and 1653, all 'transplantable persons' were obliged to resettle in the western counties of Connaught and Clare. Yet the scheme failed as it proved impractical. Poor Irish were sold as slaves. Famine, plague and war contributed to reducing the Irish Catholic population.

During the restoration of the English monarchy, Charles II protected the Catholics from religious prosecution, but there was little improvement of Catholic fortunes under James II, who came to the throne in 1685. On the contrary, the English Parliament was encouraged to offer a Protestant throne to William of Orange. William of Orange defeated James in the Battle of the Boyone on 12 July 1690 and this date is still celebrated by the Orangemen in Ulster.

The Penal Laws in 1695 - 1704 - 1728 confirmed the Authority of Protestant Ascendancy and dispossessed the Catholics of the rights to enter the Parliament, the army or the law. They were forbidden to buy or inherit land. Catholic bishops and

monks were outlawed and masses were conducted in secret. Edmond Burke described the peace achieved by the repression of a majority: “The Protestant Ascendancy is nothing more or less than the resolution of one set of people to consider themselves as the sole citizens of the Commonwealth and to keep a dominion over the rest by reducing them to slavery under a military power”(Drake:2-3)

During the last fifteen years of the eighteenth century, the Irish Parliament of Henry Grattan, ‘Patriot Party’, sought to establish free Constitution and freedom of trade. Under the influence of American and French republicanism, the party struggled to obtain concession on trade and restrictions and on the civil status of Catholics. In 1791, Ulster Protestant radicals led by Wolfe Tone formed the United Irishman, a secular independence movement. Despite the fact that he was a Protestant, he advocated Catholic emancipation and an Irish Parliament independent of Westminster. In May 1798, a group of revolutionaries rose up, but unfortunately, they were disarmed and defeated by the English General, Gerard Lake. French help arrived too late and Wolfe Tone committed suicide while waiting to be executed. In 1801, William Pitt unified Ireland and England through the Act of Union. It conferred Ireland representation at Westminster, but Catholics still did not have the right to stand as Members of Parliament. Henry Grattan, in his final speech, talked of the fate of independent Ireland under the Union: “I see her in a swoon, but she is not dead.” In the nineteenth century, the history of Ireland was a ‘chaotic renaissance’ of Irish nationalism. Ultimately, it led to the Easter rebellion of 1916 and the ‘brutal’ Civil War. The remarkable figure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was Daniel O’Connell, nicknamed ‘the Liberator’ who restored Catholics’ trust and above all a sense of unity and power. He was known through his great achievement, the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, which made the public office open to all Catholics except the poor ones. In 1843, his mass public meetings were banned because of his call for a new independent Irish Parliament. Engels wrote of Connell’s movement in 1842, “If I had 2,000 Irish, I could overthrow the whole British monarchy.”<sup>132</sup>

As we find out from Nicholas Drake, the Great Famine in 1845-1849 meant a social calamity and a step backward for the independence movement. The potatoes were

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<sup>132</sup> Nicholas Drake. *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats*. Penguin Critical Studies, 1991, p.4.



the main food for most Irishmen. In that period, the potato crops were blighted. At first, England seemed to offer some help, but the Liberal government of 1846 imported no further supplies of grain, yet the consequences were terrible. Because of the poverty everywhere in Ireland, except for the Protestant 'big houses' one million people emigrated to America and nearly a million were killed by starvation. On this topic, Marx, quoted by Drake, wrote in 1853, "England has destroyed the conditions of Irish society."<sup>133</sup> Ulster was able to sustain relative prosperity while the rest of Ireland remained in rural poverty.

Drake also ascertains, in the quoted book that in 1858, the Irish Republican Brotherhood was founded as a revolutionary force. Afterwards it became the Irish Republican Army. It found powerful support in America, in the 'Famine-embittered' emigrants. The reforms of Gladstone relatively disarmed it since their mission was apparently to pacify Ireland. His reforms included disestablishing the Protestant Church of Ireland in 1869 and with the support of Charles Stewart Parnell, 'the uncrowned king of Ireland, the 1881 Land Act reduced rents and gave tenants certain rights. The Home Rule Bills of 1886 and 1893 were defeated and caused opposition in Gladstone's Liberal Party itself. Gladstone retired in 1894 and Parnell lost the leadership of the Irish Parliamentary Party in 1890.

The next period, 1890-1910, is characterized by historians as a period of tranquillity, though it was one marked by profound changes for Ireland and its people. World War I, the Easter Rising, Sinn Fein's revolutionary government, the Anglo-Irish guerrilla war and the Treaty in 1921 bewildered the Irish. On 6 December 1921, in London, an agreement was signed, known as the Treaty of 1921, through which Ireland became at last a Free State. The treaty brought the partition of Ireland and the Irish Civil War. The Treaty, bringing the partition of Ireland into two entities, was the most controversial of the Irish history. Six counties remained attached to England as Northern Ireland whereas the other 26 formed a semi-autonomous state in which Britain controlled harbours in time of emergency and whose elected officials were required an oath of fidelity to the Crown. The one-year Irish Civil War brought about the Irish Free State and in 1923 the elected government was in a position to function. Yeats served as

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<sup>133</sup> Nicholas Drake. *The Poetry of William Butler Yeats*. Penguin Critical Studies, 1991, p.5.

senator for the newly installed Irish state from 1922 to 1928, and became a public presence in the Irish political and social life. But because he often disagreed with the norms imposed by the new government, he did not enjoy complete public acclaim and appreciation.

From Terence Brown (Terence Brown: *Ireland a Social and Cultural History, 1922-1979*) we find out that the economy inherited by the newly born state was predominantly agrarian and there were few native industries productive of primary commodities. The most serious handicap for Irish economy was the proximity with the United Kingdom with its advanced industrial economy. Politically speaking, the newly independent Irish Free State was characterized by conservatism of the predominantly rural Irish electorate. The party was composed mainly of the members of the Sinn Fein party who had accepted the Treaty of 1921 and won the support of those people in the Irish community, who could benefit from stability. Businesspersons and merchants, larger farmers and shopkeepers, the remnants of Anglo-Ireland and members of the middle class, they all put their trust in politicians of the Irish parliamentary party.

On the same line, the government committed itself to a revolutionary policy of language revival explainable from the point of view of nationalist authenticity. The core, so to say, lies in the Gaelic League that has been a 'nursery' for active members of Sinn Fein of Irish Volunteers of 1916. The Free State Government itself contained members of the Gaelic League and individuals sympathetic with its aims. The State's first Minister of Education had been the chief of staff of the Irish Volunteers and professor of Early Irish History at University College, Dublin. However, little change in the Irish educational system took place. In contrast, the education was attempted to become Gaelic. The teachers were expected to have knowledge of Irish, therefore preparatory boarding school were established to train young people for teaching profession. Some subjects were eliminated from the programme in favour of the language. Then they even proposed that the first two or infant grades should be in Irish. Their efforts were based on Douglas Hyde's speech delivered in the face of National Literary Society in Dublin on November 25, 1892, concerning the necessity to stop England to be the standard in everything. Douglas Hyde's speech referred to Ireland of the seventh century, then the 'school of Europe and the torch of learning', even if

several invasions brought about ‘a composite civilization’. Moreover, Hyde recognizes that the contemporary Irish experience demonstrated not the assimilative power of Irish reality but the assimilation of Ireland by the English-speaking world.

The revivalist activity in the first three decades of the century had an idealistic and humanistic aspect. Among those who supported the revival, some had chauvinist motives to do so. On the other hand, for others, language was a distinctive imprint of the new state and their writings had influenced the interest in the language. At the same time, they were aware of the psychological distress suffered by many Irish people because of the colonial oppression. The great names of the day D. P. Moran and Eoin Mac Neil were aware that the people that have their national tradition, their customs, their own industry, a language to bind them together and a national personality would contribute to develop any political movement. Irish nationality meant for them leading their own life style, thus developing ‘their own distinctive species of civilization’.

Under these circumstances, the writers of Irish Ireland attempted to propose a ‘genuinely’ Irish philosophy of national life, seeking to protect the language without any broad social vision on how this should be done. It was done, though, in two directions, one venerating the national life at the ‘expense’ of literary quality and one in the sense of Irish identity. Daniel Corkery, an Irish novelist and short story writer and a professor of English at University College, Cork, is an exponent of humanistic ideals of Irish Ireland. Thus, he attempted to direct the course of Irish writing and education into properly national channels:

“In a country that for long has been afflicted with ascendancy, an alien ascendancy at that, national movements are a necessity: they are quickest to become conscious of how far away everything has strayed from the natural and native. They search and search after that native standard that has been so long discarded; they dig and dig; and one may think of them as beginning every morning’s work with...’I invoke the land of Ireland.’”<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Quoted by Terence Brown in *Ireland, a Social and Cultural History, 1922-1979*, Fontana Press, Dublin, 1985, p. 64

On the same line, Corkery discovered what the Irish identity needed – a fertile soil in which to flower. He identified the main issues that were to define an Irish mind: religion, nationalism and the land. For him, the real Irish writer must express a clear-sighted sanity, intelligence, wit, intensity of feeling, realism, a temperate imagination, and must exhibit the virtues of classicism. On the other hand, in the Irish Ireland movement there was a counterpart of the political doctrine of Sinn Fein in the intellectual motif of historical accounts of Ireland's European 'uniqueness' and in the belief that history enabled a certain protection from alien influences. Unfortunately, not all the people associated with Irish Ireland movement were satisfied with this issue; there were some that understood protectionism as a censorship for literature. Thus, a Bill to censor certain obscene publications was enacted. There were even people who demanded instituting a certain fee for imported publications. Father Devane, a Catholic Dublin priest, advocated for this demand and claimed that national culture cannot be revived without a cheap, healthy and independent native press. Father Devane soon found his supporter in the person of the editor of Dominican magazine who was against Evil Literature and demoralizing publications. The only ones who could challenge their position were the writers themselves, but their opposition had little effect. Besides, other critics believed that the writers should be silenced forever. This attitude was to be seen in the Catholic Bulletin, a periodical that militated against the writers' 'alien immorality and pagan un-Irish philosophy'. It suggested that the Irish Ireland enthusiasm was not generated by idealistic cultural imperatives, but by a desire to advance Catholic social power and politics in the country through the defeat of Protestant Ireland. Terence Brown says that "the periodical, edited by Sean Ua Ceallaigh, ex president of Gaelic League between 1919 and 1923, combines much anti-Protestant bigotry and hatred of Freemasonry (it was also frankly anti-Semitic and pro-Mussolini) with a celebration of an Irish Ireland life that comprises staunch Catholic as well as Gaelic elements."<sup>135</sup>

Among those writers who were condemned by the Bulletin were Yeats, Russell, Joyce and Gogarty, as 'machinations of the new ascendancy exploiting Ireland for

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<sup>135</sup> Terence Brown. *Ireland, a Social and Cultural History, 1922-1979*. Dublin: Fontana Press, 1985, pp.71-72.

squalid foreign gold'. The periodical greeted the receipt of the Nobel Prize by Yeats with the xenophobia that then fuelled the demand for censorship:

“The Nobel Prize in Literature is the occasion. Senator Gogarty directs attention to the fact that on this issue there was recently a tussle between the English colony in Ireland and the English of England, for the substantial sum provided by a deceased anti-Christian manufacturer of Dynamite. It is common knowledge that the line of recipients of the Nobel Prize shows that a reputation for paganism in thought and word is a very considerable advantage in the sordid annual race for money, engineered as it always is, by clubs, coteries, salons and cliques. Paganism in prose or in poetry has, it seems, its solid cash value: and if a poet does not write tawdry verse to make his purse heavier, he can be brought by his admirers to where the money is, whether in the form of an English pension, or in extracts from the Irish taxpayer’s pocket, or in the Stockholm dole.”<sup>136</sup>

So far, we have pointed out the historical circumstances, the context in which W.B. Yeats lived and created – a context in which he found the flight of imagination that made him write a unique oeuvre, rich in Celtic symbols and Irish meaning. As Roy Foster writes in *W.B. Yeats - A Life (Introduction, xxvii)*, Yeats was a man involved in the life and history of his country, and through his work he brought significant changes to his country’s biography. We may state without being afraid of any exaggeration that he was the voice of his people, the spokesman of a nation, the witness and the actor of many troubles, and his biography is directly interwoven with the history of his country.

As a senator, Yeats was an influential political figure on both the national and the international stage. During these years he advocated for his literary career in political terms. He presented himself as an agent of Irish nationalism and on various occasions he claimed that his poetry was a powerful tool in the battle for Irish independence. Contrary to his youthful opinions, when he repeatedly rejected any connection between a national literature and politics, in his mature years he had come to

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<sup>136</sup> Terence Brown. *Ireland, a Social and Cultural History, 1922-1979*. Dublin: Fontana Press, 1985, p.72.

believe that literature may serve for patriotic purposes even if this was not the author's initial intention.

### **3.3 Yeats and the Doctrinaire Point. Reinventing the Modern English Verse**

The early 1890's found Yeats living in a country desperately needing for an intellectual movement that would not only revitalise Irish literature and carry on the ancient Irish tradition, but would also become a conscious expression of the spirit of an entire nation struggling against her assimilation by England. As a young writer living in a country where literature was frequently used for political purposes, Yeats found himself compelled to formulate his own literary principles, which would not only stand at the core of his literary creation, but would also become the ideals that would lay the foundation of the Irish Literary Revival. Through this literary movement he wanted to promote national literary values by returning to Celtic sources, and yet, the purpose of the movement was not to discover a strict scheme and an original structure for Irish literature, but to renew "the substance which was to be poured into the existing moulds."<sup>137</sup>

Yeats's need to redefine his country's literary consciousness was the result of a long struggle for self-definition. As a writer, he identified himself with his country and at some point he realised that he no longer wanted his poetry to follow the pattern that was so fashionable among the English artists. Inspired by John O'Leary's assertion that "there is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality without literature,"<sup>138</sup> Yeats set his mind to become an Irish writer, and in order to achieve this status he needed to discover indisputable Irish features for his creation that would assert an Irish identity for both himself and his writing. His idea came in a moment of great national turmoil, after the death of Parnell, when people's disappointment in politics had reached its peak. In this environment of great exhaustion, Yeats felt that a return to early Irish myths and legends would not only revitalize Irish literature, but it would also restore people's faith in Ireland's ancient values and tradition.

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<sup>137</sup> Ernest Augustus Boyd. *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*. Dublin: Dublin Maunsel. 1916, p.28.

<sup>138</sup> Declan Kiberd. *Inventing Ireland*. London: Random House, 1995, p.162.

The idea of a literary revival for Ireland came into existence long before Yeats was even born. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the intellectuals of that period sensed the lack of a true Irish literature and the decay of Irish language. Many of them acknowledged that Ireland needed to be de-anglicised and embraced “the idea of a distinctive essence of Irish-ness.”<sup>139</sup> The precursor of this movement were Thomas Moore, who attempted to bring the Irish spirit in English literature, Jeremiah Joseph Callanan, whose work achieved value mostly because of his translation of Irish verse, and James Clarence Mangan, whose work burst of nationalist propaganda. Their work was continued by Charles Gavan Duffy, founder of *The Nation*, a newspaper that would promote the idea of national unity and would try to bring an ignorant nation closer to its Gaelic heritage.

The role of *The Nation* in urging the establishment of national literature in Ireland was enormous. The newspaper was supported by writers of the *Young Ireland* – a political, cultural and social movement whose purpose was to encourage patriotism and create a national image for Ireland. As a consequence of this association, Irish national literature was closely related to political nationalism and soon their work would become less valuable in point of literary value and more politically oriented, a direction that Yeats would later reject with the utmost fervour. His ideals of a national literature were more similar to those of Sir Samuel Ferguson, a distinguished Gaelic scholar who is frequently recognized as the forerunner of both Yeats and the Irish Literary Revival. He, as well as other artists of his generation, did not consider that promoting a fierce political nationalism through his poetry would make his work any more valuable and had no intention of influencing public opinion in terms of political beliefs.

Samuel Ferguson, the man who was able to “free the Celtic spirit, imprisoned in the shell of an almost extinct language and obscured by the dust of political turmoil”<sup>140</sup> was the writer who would influence Yeats the most in his early years. Nevertheless, in a country in which people’s appreciation of literature depended on the political and patriotic ideas a work expressed, Ferguson’s creation did not enjoy great popularity,

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<sup>139</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.1.

<sup>140</sup> Ernest Augustus Boyd. *Ireland’s Literary Renaissance*. Dublin: Dublin Maunsel. 1916, p.25.

mostly because of the absence of Nationalistic premises. This might have been a problem for Yeats, because he needed his work to be read in order to achieve his goal – that of promoting a true Irish spirit independent of political ambitions. Nevertheless, as a writer who sympathised with the Nationalist movement, but did not enjoy writing about current events, Yeats found a way to reconcile the two. He came to believe that a national literature might as well be considered Nationalistic, because both national literature and the Nationalist movement have the same mission – to awaken people’s interest in the ancient Irish tradition, to regenerate and reinforce their love and devotion to their country and to stir up their desire to escape British domination.

In the 1890’s Ireland’s literature entered a new phase of evolution. O’Grady’s *History of Ireland*, which according to Boyd should be considered the starting point of the Literary Revival,<sup>141</sup> had made many writers reconsider the ideals that would lay the course of a national literature. In his work legendry and history intermingle to create an astonishingly vigorous narrative that carries the reader to a world of myth and fantasy that can only be re-created by a “mind stored up with a wealth of romantic vision,”<sup>142</sup> a quality which Yeats definitely possessed. With the publication of his dramatic poem *Mosada* and the collection of poems “The Wanderings of Oisín” Yeats achieved popularity among the intellectuals of the day. His poetry contained little or no political propaganda, a fact which would later cause a conflict between Yeats and the Nationalist Party, whose members believed that a national poetry should follow the pattern established by the writers of a *Young Ireland*.

Yeats was familiarised with the literature produced by the writers of *Young Ireland* through John O’Leary, a member of the Nationalist party who strongly appreciated patriotic literature. However, O’Leary did not manage to convince Yeats that poetry and politics should go hand in hand. He believed that non-political literature was far more valuable than any of the writers associated with the Young Ireland movement, whose work lacked spiritual insight. He criticised the writer’s tendencies to present an idealised image of Ireland and Irishmen in their works and he attributed this kind of exaggerations to their need to create literature for political purposes.

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<sup>141</sup> Ernest Augustus Boyd. *Ireland’s Literary Renaissance*. Dublin: Dublin Maunsel. 1916, p.27.

<sup>142</sup> Ernest Augustus Boyd. *Ireland’s Literary Renaissance*. Dublin: Dublin Maunsel. 1916, p.32.



The movement known as the Irish Literary Revival matured with the foundation of the Irish Literary Society in London and the Irish National Society in Dublin, two organizations in which Yeats played a leading role. In the spring of 1892, Yeats, T. W. Rolleston and Charles Gavan Duffy established the Irish Literary Society in London. Soon afterwards he would see himself caught in the middle of a controversy. The officials in London saluted his idea to form an Irish society in London, considering that London should be the cultural capital of both Ireland and England, since English was the official language in both of these countries. And yet, Yeats disagreed with this opinion. The Irish Literary Society was established in London not because Yeats and his fellow intellectuals considered London more inclined towards cultural values, but because Dublin did not have the means to foster a cultural life.

Nevertheless, in June 1892 Yeats founded the Irish National Society in Dublin, with Douglas Hyde as its president. The organization's purpose was to create the proper environment to promote the true Irish spirit. A circulating library was founded in order to facilitate people's access to books and soon a series of literary creations were chosen for republication. The members of these societies were focused on increasing the degree to which literature appealed to Irish people, but they also worked on restoring the Celtic spirit in the literature that was yet to be written. With Thomas William Rolleston as secretary of the London-based society lectures on Celtic subjects were encouraged, collections of Irish literature were published and works neglected up until then were being reconsidered. Young poets whose work showed promising aspects were being promoted and Irish literature was intended to be spread as widely as possible.

The two societies to which Yeats dedicated a lot of time and energy were a continuation the Southwark Irish Literary Club founded in London in 1883 and the Pan-Celtic Society founded in Dublin in 1888. While the former was pretty much interested in promoting the goals that would eventually be adopted by the Irish National Society and the Irish Literary Society, as well as in providing a proper education for the Irish children in London, the latter worked on more restrictive principles and accepted as members only writers with a substantial contribution to Irish literature. Some of its most important members were Douglas Hyde, who would later become president of the Irish National Society, John Todhunter, John O'Leary and his sister Ellen O'Leary. Writers

of the younger generation such as W. B. Yeats, Katharine Tynan, John Todhunter, and Douglas Hyde were attracted by both of these societies and frequently attended to their meetings. More impressed with the intentions of Southwark Irish Literary and Pan-Celtic Society than with their actual accomplishments, the younger generation sought to find more efficient ways to promote and encourage Irish literature. The two societies founded in 1892 were to accomplish this purpose and everything went well until the nomination of Sir Charles Gavan Duffy as president of the London society. As a man belonging to the older generation, he believed that literature should be more akin to the national Irish cause and he sought to continue what he had started as a founder of *The Nation*. Soon a conflict between him and Yeats was born. They could not agree on the writers that should be supported by the organization and Yeats would soon lose control of the entire situation. Duffy would choose to publish the works he considered most valuable and Yeats would feel his plans had been crushed. Despite the success of his lectures in Ireland, Yeats did not enjoy the political ramifications of the societies he founded. He felt betrayed by his own people and he came to believe that Dublin was not the place in which he could become an influential man of letters who would be able to set the tone in Irish literary circles.

Because of his disappointment with the Irish literary stage, Yeats felt compelled to exert his influence on London as well. Although he believed London is the place where people appreciated books but never actually read one, he was convinced that by educating his London audience he would also change the Irish people's taste for literature. As an Irish poet, he was expected to embrace the nationalist approach in his creation, yet for Yeats, who was determined to reinvent his country's literary tradition, to limit to writing patriotic poetry was not an option, and his modernity comes precisely from his tendency to ignore the literary trends of his time. Though interested in Irish politics and advocating for his country whenever he had the chance, he was often at odds with the Irish literary intellectuals, mostly because of his visionary approach to Irish history.

In Yeats's early writing, the reader easily recognizes a sort of romantic idealism. As an Anglo-Irish descendant, he grew up with poems written by Shelley and Spenser and his first poetical endeavours were essentially lyrical. His verse shares the colouring

of pre-Raphaelites' poems and are full of themes belonging to romanticism. As a young artist, he believed in the theory of art for art's sake, and he gracefully combined it with romantic themes such as love, loss, nature, and Irish myths and folklore. Escape from the reality, self-revelation, a sense of nostalgia, melancholy and disappointment are often identified as main themes in Yeats's poems, but because of his interest in mysticism, occult studies, philosophy and spirituality, as well as his personal history and his need to constantly reinvent himself, Yeats's writing became edgier, more complex, more aggressive and more politically-oriented, and although he never really gave up the pattern of his early poems, the shift in style and tone is obvious and allows us to consider Yeats a modern writer.

Yeats's first source of inspiration was Sligo, his mother's hometown, which becomes the setting of many of his poems and also of his novel. In his later poems he takes his scenery from the country round about Coole, and even when he stayed away from his homeland, his dear Ireland was always in his thoughts, as well as in his poems. However, in order to understand Yeats's desire to create a new literary style in his writing, we need to consider Margaret Fogarty's essay "It is myself that I remake': The Shaping Self of W.B. Yeats's *Autobiographies*". In her reading of Yeats's *Autobiographies* she argues that for Yeats, art is an "endless access to revelatory states of mind."<sup>143</sup> In her opinion, his occultism is actually an attempt to alleviate his soul from the surplus of inward feelings and thoughts, in order to obtain a purer "mysterious Other", which he considered to be the "architect of the work" itself<sup>144</sup>, ready to accomplish the mission of his life: "I shall, if good luck or bad luck make my life interesting, be a great poet; for it will be no longer a matter of literature at all."<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Fogarty, Margaret. "It is myself that I remake': The Shaping Self of W.B. Yeats's *Autobiographies*" in *Critical Approaches to Anglo-Irish Literature*. Eds. Michael Allen and Angela Wilcox. Barnes and Noble Books, 1998, p.76.

<sup>144</sup> Fogarty, Margaret. "It is myself that I remake': The Shaping Self of W.B. Yeats's *Autobiographies*" in *Critical Approaches to Anglo-Irish Literature*. Eds. Michael Allen and Angela Wilcox. Barnes and Noble Books, 1998, p.77.

<sup>145</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies: "Reveries over Childhood and Youth"*. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, p.127.

It is not only from biographers' works, from *Autobiographies* or *Letters*, that the reader finds out about Yeats's states of mind and life experience. Yeats's poetry itself is autobiographical, as the writer himself states in a letter to Katharine Tynan: "my life has been in my poems; to make them I have broken my life in a mortar."<sup>146</sup> In order to underpin my statement, an examination of Joseph Ronsley's essay "Yeats as an Autobiographical Poet" is undoubtedly useful. Ronsley asserts that Yeats's poetry is completely autobiographical, because all his poems express the author's feelings and thoughts and mirror his life experience. The poetry written before the turn of the century, namely "The Wanderings of Oisín", is an allegory whose symbolism conceals autobiographical elements; the poems in *Crossways* bear testimony on him growing into adulthood, although Yeats states in letter that it is "a flight into fairyland from the real world," and not exactly the type of poetry he dreamed of, "a poetry of insight and knowledge."<sup>147</sup> Some of the poems immortalize landmarks of County Sligo, while some mirror Yeats's love for Maud Gonne, which is to be found in a disguised shape in the poems in *The Rose*. The love poems in *The Wind among the Reeds* reveal a Yeats wearing the mask of universal lover. His love no longer addresses to a particular woman, but it is depicted only for the sake of experience. The volume *The Seven Woods* carries forth his preoccupations to found a National Irish theatre, Abbey Theatre, his anger against the hostility of middle class to the plays performed in the theatre, and his intense recognition to his mentor, Lady Augusta Gregory. In *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* the reader begins to discover new proofs of his love for Maud Gonne, now separated from her husband. The volume *Responsibilities* introduces "a more aggressive art", "a triumph of self-assertion."<sup>148</sup> He initiates a portrayal of himself as a descendant of distinguished, heroic ancestors, but at the same time he asks for forgiveness for not having children, but a book. Other poems are bitter and they illustrate the poet's

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<sup>146</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Letters to Katharine Tynan*. Ed. Roger McHugh. New York: McMullen Books, 1953, p.64.

<sup>147</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Letters to Katharine Tynan*. Ed. Roger McHugh. New York: McMullen Books, 1953, p.47.

<sup>148</sup> Eliot quoted by Ronsley in *Yeats's Autobiography; Life as Symbolic Pattern*. Harvard University Press, 1968, p.134.

disillusionment for the Irish people, while others are clear allusions to people next to him along his life. That Yeats arrived at a desire to display more facts of his life is also revealed in the poems *The Wilde Swans at Coole* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, although they are not “so aggressively self-assertive as some poems in the preceding volume.”<sup>149</sup>

Critics argue that Yeats’s autobiographical prose was his way to overcome inhibition. Thus Lady Gregory’s estate becomes the symbol of “an ideal culture uniting the best qualities drawn from all elements of Irish life.”<sup>150</sup> The poems on Easter Rising contain allusive verses to friends and acquaintances directly involved in the event and the volume ends with the poem “To be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee” whose last two lines contain a statement on “the permanence of art.”<sup>151</sup> In the volume *The Tower* the poet feels profoundly the old age but at the same time “Yeats draws his life and art together [...] into the unity he sought,”<sup>152</sup> the tower symbolizing “home and art.” The following volume, *The Winding Stairs and other Poems*, is autobiographical through the symbols it proposes – the winding stair of his Thoor Ballylee, now turned into a gyre to suggest the “destructiveness of time,”<sup>153</sup> while the next volumes are born from personal experience with those who had a contribution to the mission of his life. Through this personal collection of pictures turned into poetry, the reader has the opportunity to re-create W.B. Yeats’s life, a life that can be considered an important chapter in the history of his country.

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<sup>149</sup> Joseph Ronsley. *Yeats’s Autobiography; Life as Symbolic Pattern*. Harvard University Press, 1968, p.138.

<sup>150</sup> Joseph Ronsley. *Yeats’s Autobiography; Life as Symbolic Pattern*. Harvard University Press, 1968, p.139.

<sup>151</sup> Joseph Ronsley. *Yeats’s Autobiography; Life as Symbolic Pattern*. Harvard University Press, 1968, p.142.

<sup>152</sup> Joseph Ronsley. *Yeats’s Autobiography; Life as Symbolic Pattern*. Harvard University Press, 1968, p.143.

<sup>153</sup> Joseph Ronsley. *Yeats’s Autobiography; Life as Symbolic Pattern*. Harvard University Press, 1968, p.145.

captivated by peasant beliefs and practices, and initiated in astrology by his maternal uncle George Pollexfen, Yeats developed his own system of symbols that he would make use of as a primary source in his poetry. His most important quality at the beginning of his literary career might be that of being able to turn into good, even exceptional poetry everything around him. His curiosity, his need to discover new things, new subject-matters for his writing, led him to exoteric practices that modified his perception of reality. As a young boy he was often inconsistent in his studies, mostly because of his extreme shyness and his tendency to day-dreaming. Nevertheless, later in his life, his fascination with dreams and visions would become important sources for poetry and would bring him around interesting characters who would influence him to believe that reality is more than one can see at first glance.

Meeting John O'Leary, Yeats turned his attention to Irish sources for subject matters in his poetry. Influenced by the idea that a nation must have its own literature and that literature should express the vibration of the entire nation, Yeats took a special interest in Gaelic topics and Gaelic writing, and although he did not exactly support the idea that Ireland's national literature should be written in Gaelic, he condemned England's attempt to eradicate native Irish literature by forcing English language on Irishmen and suppressing Gaelic language.

As we have already discussed, personal experience played an essential role in Yeats's writing. After meeting Maud Gonne, a strong supporter of the nationalist cause, Yeats's poetry took a different turn, not as much in style and structure as in theme and tonality. From the poems that praise her great beauty, to the ones that condemn more or less her reckless political actions, she became a constant presence in his verse. Helplessly in love with her, he was both intrigued and exasperated by her behaviour, by her repeated refusals to marry him, and yet he was most of the time by her side in her political efforts. Although he often considered her tactics rather extremist, and never agreed that violence should be used whenever needed, as Maud believed, they had a common ideal – that of living in an independent Ireland, and because he was deeply impressed by Maud's ardent nationalism, she became a great presence in both his life and poetry. Sometime a reason for happiness, sometimes for extreme misery, because his love for her remained

unfulfilled, she remained the subject of his love poetry for almost three decades, until Yeats finally decided to move on and marry Georgina Hyde-Lees.

As a married man, Yeats's literary activity took yet another turn. His young wife's automatic writing allowed him to gather enough material to write *A Vision*, an occult mythography in which he talks about historical cycles and presents a theory on human personality based on the phases of the moon. Whether or not the theories presented in *A Vision* are valid is not very important. However, the book was a great achievement because it contained the material used by Yeats in most of his subsequent poetry. Following the evolution of Yeats's poetry from "The Wanderings of Oisín", his first major collection of poetry, with its vivid imagery, and infused with Irish myth and culture, to the aggressive, dark and somewhat cynical lines of *Last Poems*, the reader discovers traces of occultism, magic, and esoteric theories. For example, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time", besides relying on Irish myths and folklore, it also incorporates Rosicrucian imagery. Other poems describe some sort of rituals whose purpose is either to enable a communion between the material and the spiritual world or to simply invoke the spiritual condition.<sup>154</sup>

The interest in mythology is obvious in Yeats's entire creation. Nevertheless, if in his early writing the poet was more captivated by Greek mythology, as we can notice in *Mosada*, the encounter with O'Leary made him turn to Irish mythology. "The Wanderings of Oisín" is the first long narrative poem in which Yeats makes important use of Irish legendry. The poem describes a dialogue between two antithetical characters, Oisín, an Irish hero and Saint Patrick, the one who brought Christianity in Ireland, and despite the simplicity of the theme – the contradiction between two characters with different opinions – and the similitude with pre-Raphaelite verse, the poem in itself is essential for a better understanding of the dichotomy in Yeats's subsequent poems – the conflict between vision and reality.

As it may often be the case, the greatest art of all times was the result of the artist's impossibility to adjust to or to accept reality as it is. In a world in which he felt he did not belong, Yeats used his imagination to make his world more acceptable, more enduring. Industrialization, the ugliness of the modern society, the social reality made

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<sup>154</sup> Jacob Korg, *Ritual and Experiment in Modern Poetry*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995, p.32.

him turn to myths and legends to create an alternate reality, but because an escape into such a reality was impossible, poems such as “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium” often express the poet’s wish to escape into a mythical, ideal world, away from the horrors of reality:

“Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmith make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.”<sup>155</sup>

As the years went by, the political climate of Ireland became more and more tormented. Despite Yeats’s opinion that literature and politics should be kept separate, in such a tumultuous political environment as that of Ireland it was impossible for Yeats to remain aloof. As a sympathizer of the Irish Nationalist Party and as a strong supporter of Irish Independence, his poetry could not remain completely detached from politics. Though quite different from the poems of the writers of Young Ireland, whose writings were mainly used for political propaganda, Yeats’s poems also evoke important political events of Ireland. The most famous poem of this category is probably “Easter 1916”, in which the writer commemorates the Easter Rising that took place in Ireland in 1916. Yeats was not actually involved in the rising, since he was not in Ireland at that time and also he strongly disapproved of violence, but, as any other Irishman, he was deeply affected by the dramatic turn of events. Several leaders were charged with treason and publicly executed, in an attempt of the British rule to repress any other subsequent rising, and yet, all they managed to do was to turn them into martyrs and to reinforce Irishmen’s struggle for independence.

Yeats’s perfect poetic expression came with the passing of time. Under Ezra Pound’s guidance, Yeats started writing dramatic lyrics. This shift was not as much in

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<sup>155</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.217.



substance as it was in technique. The poems of this category express the same passion, the same “lyric ecstasy and the storm of feeling that carries one beyond the limits of circumstance,”<sup>156</sup> but they have a more common diction, a more simplified syntax, following thus the construction of the common speech. His new technique reached its peak in *Responsibilities, and Other Poems*, *The Wild Swans at Coole*, and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, poems in which the writer manages to create the illusion of spontaneity without losing the rhythmic regularity and the musicality. As a poet, he became a master of his craft, and once he considered his technique perfected, he began re-writing some of his early poems. Though not many critics appreciate the changes he had done to some of his early poems, since the tone of his mature verse became more rhetorical, and slightly lofty, the reader should acknowledge and praise Yeats’s lifelong quest to reinvent himself, to discover a perfect poetic expression that would manage to solve the perpetual conflict between the personal and the impersonal, between subjectivity and objectivity.

### **3.4 Yeats vs. Imagism and the Haiku; Yeats and T.S. Eliot**

Imagism, like any other literary movement, was a reaction against the tradition of the immediate past based on the ancient literature belonging to Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Chinese, and Japanese civilizations. The principles that define imagism are harmony, clarity of image, brevity, expressiveness, and freedom from metrical regulation. The predecessor of imagism was symbolism, a literary movement in which Yeats occupies a distinctive position. The name imagism derived from “image”, which is the focal point in an imagist poem, and it was first used in writing by Ezra Pound, although he was not the one to initiate the idea of an image as a focal point in a poem. The idea that was first introduced by T.E. Hulme’s as a set of theories was rapidly adopted by Pound who was particularly interested in creating a new literary tradition.

Yeats came in contact with the imagist movement through Ezra Pound, who came to London in 1908 to meet Yeats. Pound was a very strong admirer of Yeats’s poetry and

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<sup>156</sup> Thomas Francis Parkinson. *W. B. Yeats, Self-Critic: a Study of his Early Verse, and the Later Poetry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p.128.

soon the two would develop a beautiful friendship that would later become a fruitful collaboration. The moment the two met, Yeats was already an important figure on the literary map, while Pound was a young artist striving to make a name for him. Their collaboration began in 1913 when Pound served as Yeats's secretary and advisor. At first, Pound's duty was to check the spelling and the punctuation of Yeats's poems, but soon he started giving his opinion regarding Yeats's choice of words. A situation that first enraged Yeats gradually turned into a beautiful collaboration, Pound managing thus to awaken Yeats's interest in modernism and imagism. Initially a symbolist poet who was trying to bring his dreaming to reality, Yeats's passing from symbolism to imagism came naturally, and the poetry he wrote after 1914 is an irrefutable evidence of his growing interest in imagism. "A Coat" is probably the best example for this situation, for it shows how Yeats's system of symbols became more and more focused on the external world rather than the internal.

At first, Yeats refused to embrace the principles on which Imagism functions. He was not a big fan of free verse and he continued writing rhymed poetry, despite the obvious growing interest of critics in the poetry written by Eliot or Pound who became famous for their extensive use of free verse. Nevertheless, the poet's constant need to reinvent himself and to create original poetry eventually made him experiment with less traditional forms.

In Imagism, all theories evolve around the "thing", the outward object or image that serves to express an inward emotion. Pound thinks of the "thing" not as "a material image to be visually represented", but as the "poetic fact in which the poem is deemed to originate."<sup>157</sup> He believed that free verse should be favoured if the lack of metrical regulation is necessary to obtain greater expressiveness. For Pound, poetry captures and expresses the exact instant when an external object naturally becomes internal, subjective. In this respect, poetry follows the conventions of Japanese haiku, which was the main source from which Pound drew his images. The three essential laws of Imagism enunciated by Pound are: "direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective", "to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation", and

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<sup>157</sup> Alex Davis and Lee Margaret Jenkins. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.57.

“as regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not the sequence of a metronome.”<sup>158</sup>

During the winters spent together in a stone cottage in Sussex, Pound familiarized Yeats with these laws above-mentioned and taught him to use precision as a main characteristic for his poetry and a more colloquial language. Yeats, in turn, introduced Pound to his occult studies, which would later reflect themselves in the later sequence of poems *The Cantos*. As we have mentioned before, the collaboration between the two was beneficial to both parties. Apparently, when the partnership between the two began, Yeats confronted with an inspirational impasse, while Pound needed Yeats to make him more famous through the association with one of the greatest living poets. Together they took a special interest in Chinese poetry and Japanese Noh theatre, in which Yeats would discover the thing that a new kind of theatre needed: “gestures immemorially old, at once intimate and eerie, a passion wordlessly raised to new pitches of intensity, the anti-self of the talky realistic hateful theatre made manifest.”<sup>159</sup>

The Noh theatre was the element Yeats needed to create a different tradition in drama. He had already tried to do that when he wrote and staged plays for the Irish Literary Theatre, but with the discovery of the Noh he was convinced that he would manage to do what plays like *The Countess Kathleen* or *The Land of Heart's Desire* could not do. He saw in the Noh the kind of theatre that the Irish literary stage needed, one in which every emotion is expressed not so much through words as through body language. This kind of theatre, however, was not meant for large audiences, but rather for the elites, for the Noh was Yeats's idea of aristocratic theatre. The result of his interest in Japanese drama was *At the Hawk's Well*, a one act play with supernatural resonance that ignores the conventions of staging and relies on dancing and masks. The play was not meant to become popular, for it was conceived to express that side of the world long-forgotten by the pragmatic Occidental society. And yet, it relied on myth, magic and the supernatural just as much as Yeats's previous plays, but the difference is that in this play

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<sup>158</sup> Alex Davis and Lee Margaret Jenkins. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 56-57.

<sup>159</sup> Daniel Albright, “Pound, Yeats, and the Noh Theater” *The Iowa Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Spring - Summer, 1985), pp. 36-37.

words matter much less than puppet-like movement of the actors, the ritualistic atmosphere, and the sounds accompanying the actors' performance. These three elements added to a minimalist play managed to create something very different from the commercial theatre of the day.

By the time Yeats began his collaboration with Pound, it was well known that he had begun writing for the aristocracy rather than for the common people. Pound as well despised "the bourgeois state of mind,"<sup>160</sup> and obviously the two were more than once attacked by those who did not share their values. George Moore was one of them and he publicly accused Yeats of having aristocratic pretensions. Pound himself had noticed Yeats's pretensions, and yet they both aimed for an aristocracy of art, and thus Moore's attack only made them more involved in their study of Japanese drama. They continued to do that until the day World War I broke out. If in the beginning Pound made no commentary regarding the war, considering politics should not be on the list of any poet, in time he completely changed his mind. Yeats's opinion was pretty much the same. Being asked by Henry James to write a war poem, Yeats wrote "On Being Asked for a War Poem":

"I think it better that in times like these  
A poet keep his mouth shut, for in truth  
We have no gift to set a statesman right;  
He has had enough of meddling who can please  
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,  
Or an old man upon a winter's night."<sup>161</sup>

Obviously, the poem is more like a piece of advice for poets to stay out of politics and to focus on the more traditional topics. However, just like Pound, Yeats would change his mind as soon as the Anglo-Irish war of 1919 began. If until 1919 he managed to preserve a detached attitude towards the war, although he was wondering in the privacy of his home "if history will ever know at what man's door to lay the crime of this

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<sup>160</sup> James Longenbach. *Stone Cottage, Pound, Yeats and Modernism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.63.

<sup>161</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.175.

inexplicable war,”<sup>162</sup> the Black and Tan war made him develop a sort of “wartime consciousness”<sup>163</sup> that is noticeable in many of his subsequent poems. Pound, on the other hand, kept his opinion to himself until the 1920’s, but in the meanwhile he wrote many war-related poems that were never published and struggled between his desire to follow Yeats’s advice and his urge to react against the inexcusable loss of life during World War I. He even tried to enlist in the British Army to help ending the horrors that had taken over Europe, but he was rejected for being American.<sup>164</sup> When his friend Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, a French sculptor, was killed in war, Pound could no longer remain indifferent to politics. By the time World War II broke out, Pound was already a fanatic supporter of Fascist party and a strong admirer of Mussolini, and the dream of an aristocracy of art was long gone.

Despite Pound’s choice in point of politics, his contribution to Modernism and Imagism cannot be ignored just as much as one cannot neglect his influence on Yeats. The Noh theatre experience only confirmed Pound’s theories regarding poetry. Thus, under Pound’s guidance, Yeats wrote the poems included in *The Wild Swans at Cool* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in which a shift in style can be noticed. Though the symbols he used remained the same, the reader can see that Yeats tried to create a purer poetry, one liberated from prosaic convention, one in which the accent is put on the “thing” (Pound’s word for the focal point of imagist poetry). A good example is “Broken Dream”, a poem written after Yeats’s last marriage proposal to Maud Gonne:

“There is grey in your hair.  
Young men no longer suddenly catch their breath  
When you are passing;  
But maybe some old gaffer mutters a blessing  
Because it was your prayer

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<sup>162</sup> David A.Ross. *A Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File Inc., 2009, p.196.

<sup>163</sup> James Longenbach. *Stone Cottage, Pound, Yeats and Modernism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.112.

<sup>164</sup> James Longenbach. *Stone Cottage, Pound, Yeats and Modernism*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.123.

Recovered him upon the bed of death”<sup>165</sup>

As one can notice, the poet uses a more colloquial language, adjectives only appear when they are needed to change the sense of a word, the image it creates is simpler and yet more accurate, and no adornment is added. The transition towards Imagism is now visible. Yeats had left behind the Victorian conventions and embraced the literary trend that he once condemned. And yet, though Imagism left some marks in his style, Yeats remained until the end a master of symbols.

T.S. Eliot was another Modernist writer who made extensive use of symbols in his poetry. Despite the interesting, or maybe awkward relationship between T.S. Eliot and Yeats, many critics argue that the latter may have exerted a great influence on the former, while others consider it might have been the other way around too. The interaction between these two poets is quite controversial. The first public statement Eliot made about Yeats was in 1919 when he severely criticized Yeats’s “The Cutting of an Agate” yet he ironically praised the author for being able to become one of the greatest living poets and to keep his status despite his old-fashioned way of writing. Obviously, Eliot, a true Modernist poet, felt that Yeats was merely an imitation of his predecessors, a poet stuck in the nineteenth century literary tradition who did not deserve his fame.

The main cause of dispute between the two seems to have been Eliot’s inability to understand the way Yeats’s mind functions. In his review he claimed that Yeats might have been out of touch with reality, for the way he perceives everything around him is different from anybody else’s. Speaking as if representing the voice of an entire nation, Eliot stated that Yeats “is not ‘of this world’ – this world, of course being our visible planet with whatever our theology or myth may conceive as below or above it.”<sup>166</sup> Thus he places himself at the centre of this world, while Yeats seems so far removed from the surrounding reality. Eliot continues by asserting that Yeats’s world is populated with “ghosts, mediums, leprechauns, and sprites” and he eventually asserts that Yeats’s world was so real to him as the surrounding world is to any of us. And yet, by the 1940’s he reaches the conclusion that Yeats played a major part in the history and the consciousness

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<sup>165</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.172.

<sup>166</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares, Ed. *W.B. Yeats*. London: Routledge, 1977, p.231.

of his own time, although he did not always approve of his literary technique or the sources he had drawn upon.<sup>167</sup>

Eliot's adversity towards Yeats might be the result of Eliot's need to separate himself from Yeats, to show that their writing follows completely different paths, although both of them originated in symbolism. Eliot's appreciation for Yeats seems to begin with the publication of *Responsibilities* and *At the Hawk's Well*, works on which Pound's influence on Yeats and the experiment with the Noh theatre are perceptible. One of the things for which Eliot was thankful to Yeats was his struggle to create an Irish drama and to keep poetry in theatre. Yeats, on the other hand, might have been thankful to both Eliot and Pound for their objective aesthetic, which he did not really like, but he considered it quite interesting since he started to believe that objectivity should become a quality of his own system of thought.<sup>168</sup>

The relationship between Eliot and Yeats was quite interesting, but the interaction between Eliot, Yeats and Pound was even more interesting. First of all, although Pound stated on several occasions that he considered Yeats the greatest living poet, he also believed that any venture in symbolism of Eliot's has better results than Yeats's. Next, Yeats liked Pound's poetry better than Eliot's, Pound's poetry did not appeal to Eliot at all, and Eliot's later poems were a complete disappointment for Pound. Finally, both Eliot and Pound found things to be appreciated in Yeats's later poetry, but whether Pound appreciated more the clarity and precision of Yeats's mature verse, Eliot was more impressed by Yeats's moral achievement over the years.<sup>169</sup> The reason for this topsy-turvy situation is probably that all of them had different personalities, different systems of thought, different techniques, and yet, they were all great artist with a strong impact on the twentieth century literary style.

Ironically, Eliot accused Yeats of writing about the past and also belonging to it, while he (Eliot) was also thinking of himself as a man living in the present, writing in and

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<sup>167</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares, Ed. *W.B. Yeats*. London: Routledge, 1977, p.231-232.

<sup>168</sup> Daniel Albright. *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism*. Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.71.

<sup>169</sup> William Pratt. *Singing the Chaos: Madness and Wisdom in Modern Poetry*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996, p. 68.

about the present. And yet, if there is no past, the present does not exist either, but if they both exist, it is only natural that the present surpasses the past. Despite the great differences between Eliot and Yeats, in point of themes and images used in their poems, they have a lot in common. First of all, the poetry of both of them denotes a sort of tension between division and unity. In Eliot's poetry, this tension manifests itself in urban life, while in Yeats's early poetry the tension occurs either in a mythical setting, or in a rural one. In Yeats's mature poetry, however, the tension occurs on a supernatural, spiritual or even personal level and extends to the social one, as it can be noticed in "The Second Coming". In this poem the speaker presents an apocalyptic image of a world that is about to undergo a huge transformation, one that will destroy and reinvent everything we know. In Eliot's poem "The Waste Land", the speaker also presents an ominous image of reality, but this time the setting is either the modern city, or it alludes to it, as if Eliot tried to warn us about the dangers of civilization. Yeats does pretty much the same in many of his poems, for he also disapproves of urbanism and fears the consequences of continuous technological progress. Both of the poems mentioned above give the impression of destruction, and yet, both of them imply that rebirth follows destruction. The difference between the authors of these two poems is that one of them considers art to be a mimetic process of reality (Yeats), while the other (Eliot) thinks of the poet, in general, as an impersonal and objective composer of reality. Curiously enough, they both reach the same conclusion, the inspiration to write these poems came from the surrounding reality for both of them, although the way in which they chose to tell the same story is quite different, and both of them rely on the myth of death and rebirth.

The next source of tension relies on the conflict between reality and fantasy. In Yeats's poems, the two intertwine quite often, as it is the case with "September 1913", a poem that presents the social realities of the day. Set in Ireland, the poem is a manifestation against materialism and a response to the General Strike in 1913. Obviously, the poem deals with real social issues and shows Ireland's need for a renewed spirituality, since the nationalism previously embraced by every Irishman seems to have failed to fulfil its promise. The last two lines of the first stanza become the refrain of the poem, and with the nationalist leader O'Leary as the historical figure to be mentioned in



this refrain, the poem can be seen as a sort of prediction for the end of nationalism as the official “religion” of Ireland:

“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  
You have dried the marrow from the bone;  
For men were born to pray and save;  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave.”<sup>170</sup>

For Yeats, O'Leary was a model of patriotism, bravery and determination. He fought for his country, he gave away his freedom for his conviction and he maintained his ideals until he passed away. But with his death, Ireland seems to have forgotten the true meaning of nationalism, of Irish identity, and seems to have entered an era of materialism that brought with it disillusionment and despair. By conjuring up the names of important figures in the history of Ireland, Yeats tries to remind people that the current state of Irish society is not what “the names that stilled your childish play” (“September 1913”) fought for. Once again, the author’s use of history is different from the usual formulae existing in the literary canon in which the author praises the hero for having dedicated his life to his country. Instead, the author hopes the names of those brave men would have the effects of a sort of divine intervention that would change the disturbing reality:

“Was it for this the wild geese spread  
The grey wing upon every tide;  
For this that all that blood was shed,  
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,  
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,  
All that delirium of the brave?  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave.”<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.120.

In Yeats's poems the thin line between reality and fantasy often disappears. By using mythology in its purest form and by populating his poems with supernatural creatures (ghosts, fairies, leprechauns, witches, etc.), Yeats manages to create magnificent poems that sometimes might seem to tell just another long-forgotten story, and yet, one cannot deny their allegorical value. Yeats may often cross the border between reality and fantasy, but almost always his poems have an impact on reality itself. The difference between him and Eliot is that, while in some poems Yeats chose to build on mythology, to take a myth and present it in its complete form, Eliot's use of myth is more fragmentary. Instead of using mythology as basis for his poetry, he seeks to bring myth in the flux of consciousness by moderately referring or alluding to it. His poems develop in an urban framework and carry forth pieces of the present reality while Yeats very often chooses to lay out pieces of the past. Nevertheless, the intention of both of them was to expose the faults of the society we live in and to warn people that, unless no changes are made, humanity will have to suffer the consequences:

“What is that sound high in the air  
Murmur of maternal lamentation  
Who are those hooded hordes swarming  
Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth  
Ringed by the flat horizon only  
What is the city over the mountains  
Cracks and reforms and bursts in the violet air  
Falling towers  
Jerusalem Athens Alexandria  
Vienna London  
Unreal”.<sup>172</sup>

Many similarities as well as striking differences between Yeats and Eliot can be discovered in their use of language. Very often in his poems Yeats made use of poetic devices, such as repetition, alliteration, assonance, personification, rhythm, rhyme and

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<sup>171</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.120.

<sup>172</sup> T. S. Eliot. *The Waste Land and Other Poems*. New York: Harcourt, Inc. 1962, p.42

metaphors to create clear visual images that would emphasize the meaning of a poem. For example, in “Easter 1916” the line “polite meaningless words” appears twice in the first stanza, while the line “A terrible beauty is born” appears three times and becomes the poem’s refrain. The purpose of the first repetition is to show the initial remoteness between the poet and the 1916 insurrection, while the second repetition suggests a dramatic change of opinion, as well as the idea that even though the rebellion was suppressed, the unnecessary loss of life has only augmented Irish people’s thirst for freedom. In “The Waste Land”, Eliot uses repetitions as well: “unreal city”, “if there were water”/ “only water”, “hurry up please its time”, several words with onomatopoeic effect, etc. Some of these repetitions are used to explore the power of rhythm in poetry, to create musicality, while others are used to emphasize various manifestations such as obsession or despair, or to present something in terms of irony.

Both Yeats and Eliot believed that poetry should be musical and both of them made extensive use of poetic devices in order to achieve the so much needed musicality. However, their opinions regarding on how to obtain musicality were completely different, even antithetical. In the 1942 lecture, “The Music of Poetry”, Eliot stated that the music of poetry is related to the poem as a whole. In 1945 he asserted:

“The quality of our poetry is dependent upon the way in which the people use their language: for a poet must take as his material his own as it is actually spoken around him. If it is improving, he will profit; if it is deteriorating, he must make the best of it.”<sup>173</sup>

His opinion was almost unanimously accepted by the twentieth-century writers. Yeats, on the other hand, believed that language can be an effective way to revive Ireland’s ancient traditions, therefore he was in favour of a poetical language different from everyday speech,<sup>174</sup> although later in his life he would apply Eliot’s suggestion himself under the guidance of Ezra Pound. Despite their methods, it is clear that both of them are extremely valuable writers and that their works stand proudly among the masterpieces of the

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<sup>173</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot. “The social function of poetry” in *On Poetry and Poets*. New York: Farrar and Cudahy, 1957, pp. 9-12.

<sup>174</sup> Christian Mair, ed.. *The Politics of English as a World Language: New Horizons in Postcolonial Cultural Studies*. Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2003, p.354.

twentieth century, despite one's tendency to continue to write as poets have always written, and the other's efforts to push language to the extremes.

## 4. Yeats's Historical Cycles in Poetic Representation

### 4.1 The Way to *The Tower* or Art is Higher than Life

Yeats's life-long doctrine thoroughly described in *A Vision* is based on the idea that history comes in cycles and patterns. However, with Yeats, this idea of repetitive patterns crosses the boundaries of history and reflects itself in the artist's poetic creation. Yeats's poetical career can be divided into three main stages that also coincide with the evolution of any man: youth and its innocence, maturity and the struggle that comes with it, and the serenity and acceptance of old age. The first stage fell under the spell of Aestheticism and Symbolism, with strong influences of English Modernism and perceptible resemblances to the poetry of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This period started with the publication of Yeats's first volume of poetry, *The Wandering of Oisín*, in 1889, a collection that reflects the poet's interest in Celtic legendry and sustains his ambition of creating a literary tradition for Ireland that would take its essence from its mythical past and would manage to awaken people's interest in the long-forgotten values that governed Ireland in the past. Back then he believed that the past could serve as a tool to change the present. He was attracted by the purity of lyrical poems and he created many beautiful lyrical poems that allow critics to compare Yeats with Blake, Keats, Shelley and other Romantic poets. The most famous poem in this series is "The Wanderings of Oisín", which is delivered in the form of a dialogue between Saint Patrick, the man who converted Ireland to Christianity, and Oisín, an Irishman who spends three hundred years in the isles of Fairies and then returns to Earth where Saint Patrick advises him to pray for his soul, but instead he chooses to join the Fenians:

"Put the staff in my hands; for I go to the Fenians,  
O cleric, to chant  
The war-songs that roused them of old; they will rise,  
making clouds with their Breath,  
Innumerable, singing, exultant; the clay underneath  
them shall pant,  
And demons be broken in pieces, and trampled

beneath them in death.  
And demons afraid in their darkness; deep horror of  
eyes and of wings,  
Afraid, their ears on the earth laid, shall listen and  
rise up and weep;  
Hearing the shaking of shields and the quiver of  
stretched bowstrings,  
Hearing Hell loud with a murmur, as shouting and  
mocking we sweep.  
We will tear out the flaming stones, and batter the  
gateway of brass  
And enter, and none sayeth 'No' when there enters  
the strongly armed guest;  
Make clean as a broom cleans, and march on as oxen  
move over young grass;  
Then feast, making converse of wars, and of old  
wounds, and turn to our rest.”<sup>175</sup>

The collaboration with Lady Gregory turned him to Irish folklore, which would become the subject matter in many of the poems and plays written in this period. The poems written after the introduction to occult studies and after the meeting with Maud Gonne reflect his deep interest in the matters discovered under Madame Blavatsky guidance or during the experiments performed with the members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, as well as his passionate feelings for the woman that would dominate his love life for almost three decades.

During the second period of creation that began with the publication of *The Green Helmet*, Ireland remained at the core of Yeats's poetry. Nevertheless, if during the first stage he considered he should write about his country's mythical past, during this stage he chose to focus more on national issues. Poems such as “Easter 1916” and “September 1913” are relevant for this period. Instead of focusing on mythical heroes and legends,

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<sup>175</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, pp.445-446

Yeats, guided by his increasing nationalist spirit, now takes his subjects and his themes from real people, real events, for it seemed nothing mattered more than the problems Ireland dealt with during that period. The need for freedom and unity became Ireland's most important matter, and a poet who had chosen to dedicate his life to his country could not have neglected this issues. Though he considered poetry and politics should not interfere, as a strong supporter of nationalism, as a patriot, he could not have just remained indifferent to the oppression the Irish society was facing. Indeed, he did not actively participate in any physical manifestation against the British Empire, but he did commemorate in his poems those people who had sacrificed their lives for their country ("Easter 1916"). He had never been in the middle of the fight, but when he wrote, he had always had Ireland in his mind, as he suggests very early in his life in "To Ireland in the Coming Times":

"While still I may, I write for you  
The love I lived, the dream I knew.  
From our birthday, until we die,  
Is but the winking of an eye;  
And we, our singing and our love,  
What measurer Time has lit above,  
And all benighted things that go  
About my table to and fro,  
Are passing on to where may be,  
In truth's consuming ecstasy,  
No place for love and dream at all;  
For God goes by with white footfall.  
I cast my heart into my rhymes,  
That you, in the dim coming times,  
May know how my heart went with them  
After the red-rose-bordered hem."<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.56.

The Ireland Yeats depicted in this poem is a glorious and romantic whole led by the desire for freedom. Of course, he would later be disappointed by the social realities in Ireland. The workers' riots from September 1913 would prove to him that unity was no longer a characteristic of the Irish people and he would show his disillusionment in the poem "September 1913" in which he accuses middle-classes of being led by materialism and contrasts them with Ireland's brave men who fought for their country and who should be the model of any Irishman. The tone of the poem is pessimistic, as if the poet tried to suggest that there is no hope for Ireland anymore, for the country is now led by people who think of their own welfare instead of their country:

"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  
You have dried the marrow from the bone?  
For men were born to pray and save:  
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave."<sup>177</sup>

Things change when in 1916 the poet realizes Ireland's dream of independence is as strong as always. The Easter rebellion determines him to believe again in the Irish spirit and makes him feel that Ireland is once again united by a common goal. In the poem "Easter 1916" he praises those who fought for their dream, he condemns the authorities' way of suppressing the rebellion, and he predicts that the unnecessary loss of human life would only increase Irish people's desire to escape British domination:

"Too long a sacrifice  
Can make a stone of the heart.  
O when may it suffice?  
That is Heaven's part, our part  
To murmur name upon name,  
As a mother names her child

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<sup>177</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.120.



When sleep at last has come  
On limbs that had run wild.  
What is it but nightfall?  
No, no, not night but death;  
Was it needless death after all?  
For England may keep faith  
For all that is done and said.  
We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse –  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.”<sup>178</sup>

This second period of creation is marked by Yeats’s determinism to design a new aesthetic for himself. In the poems written during this stage there is a mixture of love and hate, of personal and national, as if Yeats’s personal history had somehow been driven by the history of his country. Love also occupies an important position, with Maud Gonne at the centre of all the poems written mostly at the beginning of this period. Love matters are treated differently though, for the poet is no longer a young man dreaming of his beloved, but rather an adult with gray hair who contemplates the idea of love and for whom the woman he loves becomes an emblematic figure, a woman of great beauty and virtue, “a woman Homer sung”:

“For she had fiery blood  
When I was young,

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<sup>178</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, pp.204-205.

And trod so sweetly proud  
As 'twere upon a cloud,  
A woman Homer sung,  
That life and letters seem  
But an heroic dream.”<sup>179</sup>

Evaluation and re-evaluation seem to be Yeats's main preoccupations during this period.<sup>180</sup> By that time, the author felt compelled to reorganize the poems written in the past, and with them, reorganize the past itself. His entire work was meant to become an organized whole, and in order to do that, he had to begin with the evaluation of his first poems. This action allowed him to reinvent himself, gave him the possibility to start over, to approach new subjects that would widen his horizons and would help him reach perfection in point of artistic creation.

In point of symbolism, Yeats maintains his fascination with the occult, the supernatural, mythology and folklore. And yet, there is a shift in style that makes his verse more vigorous, more masculine, and more profound. He embraces a more colloquial language and adopts a simpler syntax that allows the themes of these poems to become more obvious. Symbols become more powerful and poetry itself seems to become a distillation of Yeats's own thoughts. Gradually, he adopts the theory of the Mask, for he becomes aware that personal utterance is susceptible of falling under an excessive sentimentality that would draw him away from reality. This theory helps the author to build an antithetical image for himself, one that represents the man he could never become. Thus, reality becomes the product of the conflict between the self and the anti-self that occurs once the Mask is on, and the tension caused by this conflict produces the greatest artistic creation.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.100.

<sup>180</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.113.

<sup>181</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.16.

Yeats did not stop at just using the doctrine of the Mask for himself. In his poetry Ireland itself falls under the same theory. The Mask he created for Ireland was inspired by this nation's glorious history, for he hoped that Irishmen might achieve that so-much desired unity by simply looking at an idealized version of Ireland. Although in point of national history the Mask did not fulfil Yeats's expectations, in point of personal history it helped him reinvent himself, evolve and become the artist he wanted to be. But because evolution seemed to be the only constant in his life, Yeats would continue to gather material from different sources and would assemble a new theory. *A Vision*, the name he chose for this new theory, is the result of his life-long quest for something to believe in. As a child, he was taught by his father to distrust any religion, and yet, he became aware of the importance of religion, and started searching for something to believe in. Whether or not *A Vision* was the result of his impossibility to embrace any known religion we cannot know for sure, but we do know that his interest in occult, esoteric practices, spirituality and everything that can be put under the name of 'magic' led to the creation of this theory. In fact, *A Vision* is an enlargement of the idea used for the doctrine of the Mask. He explained the notion of reality as the result of the combination between two cones, or gyres, a primary and a subjective one. The idea of antithetical gyres that can be found in everything produces yet another theory, that of cyclical patterns. Of course, it was not Yeats who invented the idea of cyclical patterns, but rather he borrowed it from ancient traditions and applied it to history.

It is interesting how Yeats managed find a connection between real social events and the mystical theory of the universe and how he managed to expose one through the other. In fact, mysticism might be his way of coping with reality, with tragedy, with injustice, with life itself, for it is precisely this theory that convinces him that nothing is ever lost, that everything transforms and comes to life over and over again under a different shape. As a man, he might have realized that his existence is almost insignificant, but as an artist he did everything in his power to make a difference. He realized that immortality can be achieved through art, and thus he dedicated his entire existence to it. He was led by the idea that art is higher than life, and we might even say that he tried to become his art. He lived for it and through it, and everything he ever did was in the name of art. At some point, he may have wished for a normal existence next to

the woman he loved, but since that did not happen thanks to Maud, as she herself stated, art remained his only reason to live for, though there was a time when he apologized for having nothing but a book:

“Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,  
Although I have come close on forty-nine  
I have no child, I have nothing but a book,  
Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine.”<sup>182</sup>

Of course, that changed when he married Georgie Hyde-Lees, the woman who bore his children, who helped him in his occult endeavours and who showed him the beauty of marital life without taking him away from his art. Next to her, he had finally reached that state of complete peacefulness he needed in order to perfect his craft. Already in his mature years, Yeats was ready to settle down, and for that he needed a place to call his own. But, as expected, the place he would choose to settle down would have to resonate with his spirit, would have to bear the touch of history, and Thoor Ballylee fulfilled this condition.

We cannot tell for sure whether Yeats's third period of creation began with the purchasing or the restoration of Thoor Ballylee, but we can safely assert that the symbolic value of this place had a great influence on him. For Yeats, this tower was a connection between the past and the present, but also between the human and the divine. It was a place for retreat, a place where he could settle down without forgetting his duty as a poet, a place that would become a great source of enchantment, a place whose architecture would revive and reinforce Yeats's appreciation for history and would inspire him to create some of his most appreciated poetry.

Apparently, Yeats had Maud Gonne in mind when he purchased the tower, for as soon as he became its owner he went to Maud to propose one last time. As always, she refused to marry him, although at that point nothing but her feelings would have prevented her from accepting his marriage offer. Sadly, his feelings for her were meant to remain unrequited until the end, but at that point Maud's rejection did not seem to be a great tragedy, as it used to be in the past when he had more than once been left alone to

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<sup>182</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.113.

deal with both the physical and the emotional pain caused by Maud's refusal. Now, he felt somehow confident, maybe, for he then asked Maud the permission to marry her daughter instead. It is quite difficult to understand why he would do such a thing. Maybe because this might have seemed a twisted way to be united with Maud in more than a spiritual marriage, maybe because he sympathized with the dreamy, young woman who was nothing like her mother and wanted to protect her, or maybe simply because he felt it was now time for him to get married. Anyway, Iseult refused him as well, for Yeats had been for a long time the father figure in her life and she probably wanted him to remain the same.

With Thoor Ballylee in his mind, Yeats was not at risk to succumb to any sadness. After being rejected by both Maud and Iseult, he proposed to Georgie Hyde-Lees who accepted becoming his wife. Thus, at the age of fifty-two he became the husband of a twenty-six year old woman who would take good care of him and would support him in all his artistic endeavours for the rest of his life. By her side, he would enter the most successful period of his life and he would manage to complete his task as both a poet and a man.

The transition between Yeats's second stage of creation and his third started very early though. We might even say that "The Dolls" and "A Coat" are the first poems that indicate a change in style that would become more and more obvious in *The Wild Swans at Coole* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. The volume containing the first two poems mentioned earlier focuses on a poet's responsibilities regarding the past, the present and the future and it can be considered a résumé of Yeats's entire creation. If his first collections of poetry were more related to the past, but were meant to influence the present, those that follow *Responsibilities* are rooted in the present. *The Wild Swans at Coole*, for example, deals with the disastrous events that marked the period between the publications of the two volumes: the First World War, the death of Robert Gregory, the Easter rebellion, the unnecessary loss of human life, and Lady Gregory's difficult situation. And yet, although being very much rooted in reality and seeking to somehow correlate order and chaos, these poems also express Yeats's attempt to discover a correspondence between the ideal and the physical world, and by mentioning Thoor

Ballylee, his tower, in two of the poems of this volume (“Ego Dominus Tuus” and “The Phases of the Moon”) Yeats made the first steps in this direction:

“On the grey sand beside the shallow stream  
Under your old wind-beaten tower, where still  
A lamp burns on beside the open book  
That Michael Robartes left, you walk in the moon  
And though you have passed the best of life still trace  
Enthralled by the unconquerable delusion  
Magical shapes.”<sup>183</sup>

The introduction of the symbol of the tower in “Ego Dominus Tuus”, a poem that focuses on the theory of the Mask, with its *Hic* representing the primary, the objective and the solar, and *Ille* representing the antithetical, the subjective, the lunar<sup>184</sup> proves that Yeats was actually trying to use the tower in creating a Mask for himself. *Hic* and *Ille* represent in this poem the antithetical nature of modern world itself. *Hic*, standing for the past, confronts *Ille*, the exponent of present. The dialogue between the two follows the path that humanity itself seems to embrace: forgetting about the past and looking forward towards the future. This conflict had occupied a great deal of Yeats’s thoughts for a long time, and as we will soon discover, he finds a resolution to this conflict in his tower, a symbol of the past that still seems to dominate the present, a link between ancient traditions and future hopes, between what is below and what is above.

Yeats’s next volume of poetry *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* follows pretty much the pattern of his previous volume. However, the themes that are to be explained in *A Vision* are more obvious here. Also, we finally discover between the lines of the poems an artist that has finally reached a state of happiness and calm despite the external turmoil, as if he had detached himself from the surrounding realities. The collection combines poems that commemorate subjects of national interest as well as poems that have a more personal touch, all of them infused with that ‘magic’ he was talking about

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<sup>183</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.180.

<sup>184</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.147.

when he was justifying his interest in occult studies in front of O'Leary. Since we have already discussed some of the poems in this collection in other sections of this paper, we will not proceed with a detailed analysis of the poems in this collection. However, it is worth mentioning the poem that concludes this volume – “To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee” – for it is the poem that introduces the author's next volume of poetry, *The Tower*, which marks the beginning of Yeats's third and final phase of poetic creation.

#### **4.2 *The Tower* – A Spiritual Travel into the European Past; Present Artistic Values and Higher Poetic Creation**

Unlike Yeats's other collections of poetry that seems to have a circular pattern and give a sense of completion, *The Tower* seems more like one half of a pattern that becomes a whole only when it is put together with the volume he published five years later, *The Winding Stair*. Of course, by now we are already used to Yeats's technique of introducing a subject, a symbol or a theme in one collection and elaborating upon it in the subsequent one, as he did with the symbol of the tower in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* and *The Tower*, or with the theme of the double vision that appears in *The Wild Swans at Coole* and it is applied again in the following volume. However, *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair* do not comply with this rule, for now Yeats poses all the questions that torment him in *The Tower* and seeks to find answers for them in its counterpart.

In applying Yeats's theory of the Mask to the two collections of poetry that originated in the poet's fascination with his Thoor Ballylee, the critics noted that the first collection – *The Tower* – represents the primary, the masculine, the solar, and the political, while the second collection – *The Winding Stair* – stands for the antithetical, the feminine, the lunar and the aesthetic. *The Tower* deals with Yeats's disillusionment with the evolution of nationalism following the Irish independence, celebrates his creative drive, and brings forth Yeats's life-long obsession with the past. This time, however, he does not limit himself to the Irish past and he plunges into the European one, using it to point out aspects of the Irish society. The bitterness that seems to come out from every line of this collection is the result of an increasing anxiety regarding old age, life and death, and the role of art in people's lives. And yet, despite the obvious bitter tone, there is also a feeble trace of idealism, for Yeats had never forgotten his duty of reinventing his

country's cultural values. As his father told him in a letter in 1906, he was an important pillar of the Irish nation while his main obligation was to maintain this position:

“Only I think whatever you do it should not be done hastily and you should not forget that you are a public man in the Irish movement – and its leader in all literary and philosophical movements and that your influence here is really more important to you than anything else, and dearer to you – and more important than anything else to other people as well.”<sup>185</sup>

After several years he spent commuting between London and Ireland where he supervised the restoration of his tower, in 1919 Yeats finally moved with his family to Ballylee. From that moment, a period of tremendous success and appreciation began. In 1920 his reputation crossed the European borders and 1922 his importance in the Irish society was confirmed as well. Though he spent much time in London working on his poetry and looking for new ways of spiritual rejuvenation, when he returned to Dublin, he found out he was a famous man. Queen's University in Belfast gave him an honorary degree in July and Trinity College in Dublin gave him another in December. This period marked by “a new burst of intellectual vigour and material success”<sup>186</sup> was followed by other even more important event. Towards the end of the year, he was appointed to the Senate of the newly formed Free State for his services brought to Ireland and in 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. However, he also had to deal with tragedy, for in 1922 his father died in New York. Another disappointment came with the Irish Civil War that broke out in June 1922 and lasted until 1923. This war seemed to have been a source of great distress for Yeats, who felt that the Irish Free State needed unity more than ever.

Old age was another reason for misery, for he felt his health was quickly deteriorating. He had already been blind in one eye for many years and now he feared deafness might be coming on too. In addition, he also experienced what any aging man does – the feeling he still has so much to say and to do and so little time left. However, he feared the illnesses associated with old age more than anything else, as it can be observed

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<sup>185</sup> Benedict Kiely. *Yeats's Ireland: an Illustrated Anthology*. Tiger Books International PLC, 1994, p.6.

<sup>186</sup> Richard Ellmann. *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. London: Macmillan, 1949, p.24.



from a letter he wrote to Mrs. Shakespear in June 1922: “I am all I ever was and much more but an enemy has bound and twisted me, so I can plan and think as I never could, but no longer achieve all I plan and think.”<sup>187</sup>

As a Senator, he became surprisingly involved in the affairs of the Free State despite his different political opinions. He could not agree with the liberal principles that were meant to govern the newly formed state, for he believed the state should be governed by the elites, and yet he somehow managed to combine the liberal values with his elitist opinions, for otherwise he would have attracted overwhelming criticism not only from his colleagues, old and confident bankers, but also from every man who believed in individual freedom. Despite managing to profess a liberal ideological orientation, his political beliefs are clearly stated in *A Vision*, which he finished in 1925. His ideas on politics, however, despite looking perfect in theory, as any other political doctrine, would prove to be as faulty as any other regime if they were applied to the contemporary Irish scene. Yeats eventually realised that no political regime would manage to satisfy the needs of every individual, but there is clear evidence that he might have suspected that very early in his political career. For example, though he had an opportunity to produce a great oration when a bill was introduced to make divorce illegal, for he could have defended divorce on the grounds of established, traditional practice or he could have claimed that the divorce was human and natural and opposition to it was “clerically fostered superstition and a restraint on individual liberty”. And yet, his speech on June 11, 1925, was that of a man of the world and an Anglo-Irishman rather than that of a man with his own convictions, and the only burst of eloquence was when he extolled the Protestant minority.

Proceeding now to the main aim of this study, we can safely assert that Yeats’s personal, social, cultural and political backgrounds reflect themselves in his poetry, therefore there is no wonder that the poems in *The Tower* are full of bitterness, a bitterness that comes from the death of his father, from his horror of old age, but also from Ireland’s troubles that became more that once his own. In *General Introduction for my Work* he stated:

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<sup>187</sup> Richard Ellmann. *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. London: Macmillan, 1949, p.241.

“A poet writes always of his personal life; in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a Phantasmagoria...Even when the poet seems most himself, when he is Raleigh and gives potentates the lie, or Shelley ‘a nerve o’er which do creep the else unfelt oppressions of this earth’, or Byron, when the soul wears out the breast’ as ‘the soul wears out the breast’ as ‘the sword outwears its sheath,’ he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete.”<sup>188</sup>

Yeats’s poetry is highly personal, but the author’s real intention was to turn it into a general truth that would define the nature of an entire nation. As an Anglo-Irish, he had always been proud of his origins and his ancestors, and in his later years he even came to believe that the Anglo-Irish minority could be taken as a model of Irish-ness. However, in his youth, his racial identity was more like a dilemma difficult to decode, therefore throughout his life he sought to create a solid identity for himself and for the minority he represented, although sometimes artificiality and theatricality became the main tools of his self-presentation. The conflict between personal identity and the image he wanted to create for himself follows the fundamentals of the doctrine of the Mask, for Yeats was not the kind of man or artist that would keep his personal and his professional life apart. He explicitly states that the poet is never isolated in his entity as a creator, but he is part of an imaginative and psychological history, and although the dimension of the Yeatsian poetry can be measured by legendry, mythology, the occult, the supernatural and mysterious personae, his poetry is always meant to influence the present reality, not necessarily people’s perception of the past. He became the spokesman of his nation, or at least the spokesman of the kind of nation he wanted to discover in Ireland. His vision of it was highly romanticised, and although sometimes his depiction of it is not very accurate, his commitment to his nation and to tradition cannot be challenged:

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<sup>188</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Essays and Introductions*. “A General Introduction for my Work.” London: Macmillan, 1961, p. 509.

“If I wrote of personal love or sorrow in free verse, or in any rhythm that left it unchanged, amid all its accident, I would be full of self-contempt because of my egotism and indiscretion, and foresee the boredom of my reader. I must choose a traditional stanza even what I alter must seem traditional. I commit my emotion to shepherds, herdsmen, camel-drivers, learned men, Milton’s or Shelley’s Platonist, that tower Palmer drew. Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am a nothing. Ancient salt is best packing.”<sup>189</sup>

In other words the poet takes the task of translating the biographical particularities of his personal life into durable art. He needs to transform the everyday realities into an everlasting material, and in order to do that, he puts on the Mask that he carefully constructed for himself as a means of self-protection. Without protection strategies the poet remains merely a man, and he can no longer be perceived as an intended artificial concept, the imperative of sincerity and self-expression, which sometimes may be difficult to understand and to accept. He defends this idea of creating an artificial image for himself in his *Autobiographies*, where he asserts that “Art is art because it is not nature.”<sup>190</sup> Thus, it becomes obvious that Yeats’s major concern is on the artfulness of art, and that he puts art’s value beyond the value of life itself. The use of the art for art’s sake doctrine gives Yeats’s poetry a high level of expressiveness and transparency, qualities that allow the readers to feel the beast underneath the poetry, as Timothy Webb puts it in the “Introduction” to *Selected Poems*.

Coming back to *The Tower*, it is important to say that this collection is probably Yeats’s most carefully constructed project. By that time, he must have realised that he had reached the apex of artistic creation, and thus everything related to the publication of *The Tower* needed to be perfect. As always, the poems included in the collection follow a logical, consistent pattern, but this time Yeats was also interested in the physical appearance of the volume. He asked T. Sturge Moore to design the front cover,

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<sup>189</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Essays and Introductions*. “A General Introduction for my Work.” London: Macmillan, 1961, p.522.

<sup>190</sup> William Butler Yeats, *Autobiographies*: “Reveries over Childhood and Youth”. William H. O’Donnel and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, p.185.

instructing him to take Thoor Ballylee as model, for this collection was meant to operate with the symbol on which Yeats constructed all his aesthetic principles:

“I need not make any suggestions, except that *The Tower* should not be too unlike the real object. I like to think of that object as a permanent symbol of my work plainly visible to the passer-by. As you know all my art theories depend upon just this – rooting of mythology in the earth.”<sup>191</sup>

The most representative poems that are going to be analyzed in this section may be divided according to their themes into three categories: war poems, poems that deal with the regrets of old age, and poems that criticize the decay of the world. They represent the work of a mature poet who chose the image of the tower as a unifying element for his work. The structure of the volume *The Tower* harmonizes with the structure of *A Vision*, as Daniel Albright suggests. The first book of *A Vision* describes the Great Wheel and the twenty eight reincarnations of the soul. The opening poems in *The Tower* follow the same scheme and present a sort of flight of Yeats’s soul from Ireland to Byzantium, from rural harmony to the chaos produced by war. The third book of *A Vision* gives a detailed presentation of historical cycles and tells how each era begins with the birth of a new half-human, half-divine leader. Following the same theory, the next section of this collection includes poems that draw on historical gyres, as in “Two Songs from a Play”, which opens with a reference to Dionysus: “I saw a staring virgin stand/ Where holy Dionysus died”, or in “Leda and the Swan”, a poem that presents the violent way in which a new era begins:

“A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.”<sup>192</sup>

The closing section of both the fourth book of *A Vision* and *The Tower* is the poem “All Souls’ Night”, in which Yeats describes the flight of the soul after death. In both of them there is the idea that the falling into oblivion is preceded by a contemplative

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<sup>191</sup> Timothy Webb. *W.B. Yeats, Selected Poetry*. London: Penguin Books, 1991, p.267.

<sup>192</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p241.

glimpse into the past that prepares the soul for its assimilation into the spiritual world, as Daniel Albright puts it. Besides the obvious connection with *A Vision*, with mysticism and mythology, *The Tower* also incorporates Yeats's reflections on modernity and on the bleak and desolate atmosphere that has taken over the world in the aftermath of national and international conflicts. The first poem to sustain this claim is "Sailing to Byzantium", the opening poem of *The Tower*. Written when Yeats was sixty-three years old, in the autumn of 1926, when he felt both great power and bitterness, as he confessed to Mrs. Shakespear, "Sailing to Byzantium" sets the tone for the entire collection. His fascination with Byzantium came after a long visit to Sicily, where he was taken by Mrs. Yeats to recover from poor health. During his stay in Italy he visited the Norman-Byzantine mosaics and the Capella Palatina at Palermo and at that point he realized Byzantium may stand for that world emptied from the usual sadness of life that he dreamed of his entire life.

Byzantium, which is the modern Istanbul, "is a holy city, because it is the capital of Eastern Christendom, but it is also Yeats's holy city of the imagination as Golgonooza was Blake's."<sup>193</sup> Its symbolic value is tremendous, for as a symbol of Christianity fallen into ruin it actually confirms Yeats's theory of historical cycles. After almost 2000 years, it is only natural that the art associated with Byzantium should be almost completely lost. And yet, there is also another reason for Yeats's fascination with Byzantium, and that is his own perception of this holy city, which is clearly stated in *A Vision*:

"I think that in early Byzantium, may be never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers-though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract- spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual designs, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people. They could copy out of old Gospel books those pictures that seemed as sacred as the text, and yet weave all into a cast design, that work of many that seemed

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<sup>193</sup> Richard Ellmann. *Yeats: The Man and the Masks*. London: Macmillan, 1949, p.257.

the work of one, that made building, picture, pattern, metal-work of rail and lamp, seem but a single image;”<sup>194</sup>

Byzantium is thus perceived as the place where his desire to join the individual and the society becomes possible, the place where the artist manages to reflect “the vision of a whole people”, something he had always tried to accomplish through his work. “Sailing to Byzantium” is thus a spiritual journey into a long-forgotten world where art, joy, and peace reside. Obviously, this kind of world stands in opposition with the modern times, therefore sailing toward such a place can also be interpreted as an attempt of escaping the violence of the present reality. However, we cannot give an accurate interpretation for this poem unless we take into account Yeats’s own commentary of it:

“Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts upon the subject I have put into a poem called “Sailing to Byzantium”. When Irishmen were illuminating the Book of Kells (in the 8<sup>th</sup> century) and making the jewelled crosiers in the National Museum, Byzantium was the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolize the search for spiritual life by a journey to that city.”<sup>195</sup>

This journey can be nevertheless interpreted as a transition from an ephemeral existence to immortality, even if this would be possible only in point of artistic creation. Even the first lines of the poem “That is no country for old men. The young / In one another’s arms, birds in the trees, / -Those dying generations- at their song” suggest the existence of a conflict between the ageing, mortal body and the young, eternal soul, between the material and the spiritual world, and even between modern times and ancient past, if we apply them to examine the Irish social reality. The Ireland the poet depicts in this poem is so absorbed in the trivialities of everyday life that it neglects the eternal represented by “monuments of unageing intellect”.

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<sup>194</sup> William Butler Yeats. *A Vision. The Original 1925 Version*. Eds. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper. Collected Works of W. B. Yeats 13. New York: Scribner, 2008, p.280.

<sup>195</sup> A. Norman Jeffares. *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of WB. Yeats*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968, p.255.

Byzantium is here Oisín's *Tir na nÓg*, an ideal place the poet was searching for his entire life. In translation *Tir na nÓg* is the Country of the Young, the Celtic name for Paradise, a spiritual realm that Yeats conveys through concrete images. The first line of the poem "That is no country for old men" suggests that the speaker had already left the material confinement of his previous life to now enjoy the spiritual enlightenment of Byzantium and that he has already reached his destination. The journey itself is not presented in the poem, but instead Yeats points out the differences between the two antithetical worlds involved. The modern world is submerged in sexual desire, degradation and selfishness, while Byzantium is characterized by purity, perfection and immortality.

In a prose draft of "Sailing to Byzantium", Yeats wrote: "For many loves I have taken off my clothes / for some I threw off in haste, for some slowly and indifferently...but now I will take off my body." What initially appears to be a poem about love and sexual desire becomes thus a poem of ultimate sacrifice. The speaker is ready to give up his physical form – a necessary condition for entering the holy city. Obviously, he refers here to a transition from life to death, and since the speaker is actually the poet who is now "a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick [...] – a caricature of a man who now can afford studying 'monuments of its own magnificence' and who 'has sailed the seas' and reached to the wholly city of Byzantium", we can assert that Yeats's supreme love is art itself and that his ultimate sacrifice is in the name of art, for it seems only art is eternal.

The third stanza suggests that the speaker finds in Byzantium what he was looking for and wishes to become a part of it as well: "O sages standing in God's holy fire/  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall, / Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre, / And be the singing-masters of my soul." He is aware of the sacrifice he has to do in order to enter the eternal world of pure truth and complete self-knowledge and he is ready to give up everything to fulfil his wish: "Consume my heart away; sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal / It knows not what it is; and gather me / Into the artifice of eternity."

In the last stanza the speaker, already aware of his inevitable death, hopes his next reincarnation will be "a monument of unchanging intellect": "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing". By now, he already knows that

every living thing eventually dies, therefore he wants to take the shape of a bird “of hammered gold and gold enamelling [...] to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium / Of what is past, or passing, or to come”. Undoubtedly, the speaker’s wish to be a part of Byzantium comes from his obsession with old age, and since the speaker is in fact Yeats, who was already experiencing the disadvantages of ageing, we can consider this poem a manifesto of Yeats’s idea that the artist becomes the art itself, and even though the artist’s physical body is prone to death, he continues to live through his art, for art is everlasting.

Brooding over old age is also the poem *The Tower* that gave the title to the volume published in 1928. The tower as a symbol usually refers to a refuge, a place that separates the people living in it from the others. For Yeats, however, the ancient Norman tower that he acquired at Ballylee is the symbol of a world that no longer exists, a link between the past and the present, but also some sort of refuge that gave him the freedom to voice his deep regrets for his long gone youth:

“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?”<sup>196</sup>

The absurdity he talks about is, of course, his inability to do whatever he plans to do. As in *Sailing to Byzantium*, where the poet presents himself in the form of bird that is no longer able to sing, in *The Tower* he seems to be writing about the impossibility to write, although it is obvious that he did write. The poet urges the Muse to go pack and choose to study Plato and Plotinus until something happens, either he finds imagination, or he is derided by “a sort of battered kettle at the heel.” Then he gets out and sees the foundations of a house, then a “tree, like a sooty finger”, which he associates with imagination that calls images and memories from old and forgotten thought, “from ruin or from ancient trees.” Being up on the battlements gives him the opportunity to remember episodes in his youth, precisely one about a girl that sang a song so beautifully that drove the men astray – “and one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone.” At first, he is amazed by the fact that the man who wrote the song was blind, but then he

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<sup>196</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.218.



remembered Homer and his Helen who betrayed “all living hearts”. Then again, reflecting on his own poor health and his eye condition, he includes himself among the blind artists that hammered immortal pieces (“for if I triumph I must make men mad”), and then he speaks of his immortal hero Hanrahan who was the subject of many of his early poems.

The ninth stanza of the second part of the poem introduces the concept of Great Memory – “ And certain men-at-arms there were/ whose images, in the Great Memory stored” – a concept that can be better understood in the light of three doctrines explained in an essay on Magic, “Ideas of Good and Evil”: “The borders of the mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy”; “That the borders of our memory are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself”; and “That the great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbolism...”<sup>197</sup> This essay was written as early as in 1901, twenty-five years earlier than the poem “The Tower” and what the author is saying in this essay is that even if people forget about events, facts, there is this Great Memory that stores everything that has ever happened.

The entire poem seems to be a meditation upon the poets’ artistic creation. It starts with a lament for old age, when the poet feels the urge of creating an art that will remain even after his death, it continues with a reconsideration of the past and of the subject matter of his early poetry, and it ends with a message for the Irish society and with a reinforcement of the idea that a poet’s duty is to create durable artwork through which he will continue to live even when his physical form is long gone. We find a suggestive image in the eleventh stanza: “Did all old man 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 these eyes / That are impatient to be gone.” The poet anticipates his own death here, for he knows this earthly world is only a stage for the soul that is meant to fly towards the other life, and although he feels rage against old age, he ends up by accepting his fate, knowing that his existence will not have been in vain: “But leave Hanrahan / For I need all his might memories.” Hanrahan is the

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<sup>197</sup> William Butler Yeats. “Ideas of Good and Evil”, *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan, 1961, p.28

hero who haunted his thoughts for a long time, and just as Yeats turned him into an immortal hero by making him a character in his lyrical poem, so Yeats's poetry will make the author himself immortal.

The third part of the poem is an elegy: "It is time that I wrote my will." As his heirs he chooses "upstanding men": "...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". These heirs he talks about are brave people who were neither slaves, nor tyrants, but simple people who merely lived their lives, and almost always died unknown. He refers here at the people who fought in all the events that happened between 1921 and 1927 and sacrificed their lives for their country's independence. The next interesting image is that of the swan that sings "his last song", transcending with it the temporal limits<sup>198</sup>: "Pride, like that of the morn, / When the headlong light is loose, [...] 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."

Undoubtedly the swan singing his last song is the poet himself who, as an ordinary man, did nothing other than singing about life, and now, when the end is near, he feels he has fulfilled his task and he is ready to move to the realm of the immortals:

"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."<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Thomas Francis Parkinson. *W. B. Yeats, Self-Critic: a Study of his Early Verse, and the Later Poetry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p. 135.

<sup>199</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, pp.223-224.

He imagines himself in his last moments seeing the film of his life, with all the women and all the things that were once part of it. He looks at his life with mature eyes and he realizes he is now ready to pass his “faith and pride” to “young upstanding men”, to leave the tower (the symbol of his entire work) behind, and let his soul fly towards Byzantium.

The sequence “Meditations in Time of Civil” War contains, as the title suggests, glimpses from that period in the history of Ireland when, as a consequence of the 1921 Treaty that brought the so-called independence of Ireland, a Civil War broke out. The first poem in the section is “Ancestral Houses” where Yeats meditates on the decline of aristocracy: “Surely among a rich man’s flowering laws, / Amid the rustle of the planted hills / Life overflows without ambitious pains.” The man who lives “without ambitious pains” is Yeats himself who, even if he dreams of a better world, he cannot find the means and power to fulfil his dream.

It is interesting to notice how “Meditations in Time of Civil War” carries the reader through order, then chaos, to finally reach the emptiness that follows the Civil war. The opening poem provides the general setting for the subsequent poems that introduce the poet’s personal surroundings: his house, his table, the road at his door, the view from his window and eventually the ancient tower, with its winding stair and the bridge. In “My House” he visualizes the houses on his street, which will never be the same as before the war. The “acre of stony ground” where “the symbolic rose can break in flower” suggests that Yeats saw his surroundings as expressions of Irish-ness, for in his poetry the rose had always been a symbol of Irish culture.

From John Unterecker we find out that this sequence was written in 1922, when the tower itself was at risk. These poems do not focus that much on personal tragedy, but rather present the author in the middle of a collective, historical trauma. Although Yeats was living in a rural area when the war broke out, that did not prevent him from witnessing the clashes between the supporters and the opponents of the Irish Free State. In his poems he even recalls talking to soldiers about trivial moments of his existence, trying thus to keep himself apart from the horrors that have taken over his country:

“A brown Lieutenant and his men,  
Half dressed in national uniform,  
Stand at my door and I complain

Of the foul weather, hail and rain,  
A pear-tree broken by the storm.”<sup>200</sup>

In *My House* the poet presents his tower and highlights the impact that “the sound of the rain or sound / Of every wind that blows” have on it. But since the tower and its surroundings are a symbol of Ireland, the natural forces that act upon it become images of the destruction caused by the war. This poem is thus an expression of the continuously changing social realities of Ireland, while the next poem, “My Table”, focuses more on the importance and the continuity of art. The poet introduces here the “changeless sword” as a symbol of the work of art and analyzes the relationship between the artist, with his ephemeral existence, and the work of art, as an eternal entity: “only an aching heart / conceives a changeless work of art.”

“My Descendants” continues to operate on a personal level. Here, Yeats, who “inherited a vigorous mind” from his ancestors, asks himself whether his descendants will “lose the flower / Through natural declension of the soul / Through too much business with the passing hour / Through too much play, or marriage with a fool.” The flower suggests here the artist’s power of creation, and although Yeats cannot find the answer to his question, he ends the poem on an optimistic note, for he remembers “love and friendship is enough” and continues to enjoy the comfort of his tower, a monument that will ensure the continuity of his descendants and of himself as well: “And know whatever flourish and decline / These stones remain their monuments and mine”.

The next two poems, *The Road at my Door* and *The Stare’s Nest by My Window*, take the reader in the middle of the incidents related to the war. The first one focuses more on the poet’s interaction with fighters from both sides and introduces an episode that might have deeply disturbed the poet: “a Falstaffian man / comes cracking jokes of civil war/ as though to die by gunshot were/ the finest play under the sun”, while the second is a clear reference to the devastations brought about by the civil war:

“We are closed in, and the key is turned  
On our uncertainty; somewhere  
A man is killed, or a house burned,

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<sup>200</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, pp. 229-230.

Yet no clear fact to be discerned:  
Come build in the empty house of stare.

A barricade of stone or of wood;  
Some fourteen days of civil war;  
Last night they trundled down the road  
That dead young soldier in his blood:  
Come build in the empty house of stare.”<sup>201</sup>

The tower is here Yeats’s safe place, and yet, it cannot keep him completely separated from the external violence. He tries to block away the negative emotions that seem to take control of his thoughts by paying much attention to nature: the pear-tree broken by the storm or the bees that keep performing their tasks despite the general unrest. However, the last poem of this section, “I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness”, which brings back some images presented in the previous poems, suggests that the poet cannot escape reality. He reflects on his condition as a poet and realizes that it was not his duty to prevent war. Although he may have wanted to be able to do something about it, by shutting the door to his tower, he liberates himself from any responsibility to the external world and decides to remain faithful to his art: “The abstract joy, / The half-read wisdom of daemonic images, / Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy.”

“Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” carries the reader through different eras and points out that destructiveness is an intrinsic part of human nature and that since ancient time mankind keeps destroying what was once built. This poem comes as a sort of justification for the poet’s attitude at the end of “Meditations in Time of Civil War”, and, as we will see in one of the following sections of this paper, draws heavily on both *A Vision* and the violence caused by the guerrilla war against the British.

In “The Wheel”, “Youth and Age”, and “The New Faces” the poet seems to have accepted death as a natural part of human existence. However, in “A Prayer for my Son”

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<sup>201</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.230.

he celebrates the triumph of life over death.<sup>202</sup> *Two Songs from a Play* reiterates the theme of historical cycles and carries the reader through the age of Christianity, from its beginning until its end, when a new God will be born. The poem “Fragments” continues on the same note, it shows how modernity takes over Christian values and opens the path for one of the most important poems of this collection – “Leda and the Swan”.

The classic Greek myth of Zeus turning into a swan and possessing Leda is delivered to us in the form of a sonnet. Apparently, the poem was inspired by Michelangelo’s painting and it encompasses an ancient Greek legend whose protagonists were Zeus and Leda. It was known from legends that Zeus had many children from young immortal maids and that he used some tricks to be with them. He did the same thing with Leda, whom he raped as a swan. After that, she gave birth to two pairs of children: Castor and Pollux, and Helen and Clytemnestra, all of them becoming famous characters of Greek myths. Helen, for example, was the cause of the Trojan War; Clytemnestra killed her husband Agamemnon, while Castor and Pollux were engaged in a series of adventures, one of them being Helen’s rescue from Theseus.

Some versions of the myth tell us that Leda was more likely a participant in Zeus’s game of seduction, and not the victim of a rape. However, the version that Yeats chooses to present in this poem is the violent one, and by doing so he actually allows the reader to see beyond the familiar story that has served as a source of inspiration for many artists of all times. The poem opens abruptly with the actual moment of the rape, and despite the violence of the scene, it does not become difficult to read due to Yeats’s masterful choice of words: “A sudden blow: the great wings beating still / Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed / By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill, He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.”

The poem continues with the depiction of Leda unable or maybe even unwilling to defend herself: “How can those terrified vague fingers push / The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?” For a reader who does not know the legend of Leda and the Swan, the poem might easily be just a depiction of a scene that abounds with eroticism and passion. And yet, the following lines: “A shudder in the loins engenders there / The

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<sup>202</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p. 184.

broken wall, the burning roof and tower / And Agamemnon dead” tell us there is more to it than just another love poem. The images of the “broken wall”, “the burning roof and tower” and “Agamemnon dead” predict upcoming disasters, and even though Yeats does not insist on what happens after this episode, these images are enough to send the reader to Greek mythology, which is so much needed to decode the message.

It is quite difficult to believe that Yeats wrote this poem simply because he needed to present his own version of it, which is why many critics believe that there may be a connection between “Leda and the Swan” and the situation of Ireland and England. If the myth of Leda and Zeus is applied to modern times, Leda becomes the personification of Ireland, and the Swan is the British Empire itself. The rape alludes to England’s forced domination over Ireland, while the images of the “broken wall”, “the burning roof and tower” and “Agamemnon dead” may refer to the violent clashes between the Irish and the British. On the other hand, “Leda and the Swan” continues the sequence of poems that draw heavily on the material used by Yeats in *A Vision*. There is first the union between a mortal and a god, then the birth of an antithetical leader<sup>203</sup>, then the symbols that suggest a major change is about to happen, the poem becoming thus another reiteration of the theme of historical cycles that seems to have greatly impressed Yeats.

The next poems of *The Tower* follow the direction indicated in “Sailing to Byzantium”, often combining social realities with the spiritual world of Byzantium, or using one to depict the other and vice-versa. “On a Picture of a Black Centaur by Edmund Dulac” is based on two paintings and focuses more on abstraction, “Among School Children” synthesizes “the sixty-year-old smiling public man” (Unterecker: 191), “The Hero, the Girl, and the Fool” is again based on the theory of the Mask, and the volume continues on the same note until the sequence of poems in “A Man Young and Old”, a sort of autobiographical piece that explore aspects of Yeats’s love life. The ending poem, “All Soul’s Night”, praises all those people who influenced the poet in creating his mystical philosophy and prepares the reader for Yeats’s next collection of poetry – *The Winding Stair*.

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<sup>203</sup> In this case, both Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra may be seen as antithetical leaders, for one’s actions leads to the destruction of Troy, while the action of the other leads to the end of Greek era.

### 4.3 The Winding Stair or Coming Back to the Human and Local History

If the poems in *The Tower* were written when Yeats's public career reached its climax (the period when he was appointed a senator, won the Nobel Prize and wrote much of his autobiography), the poems in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) were written when Yeats was fully experiencing the annoyances of old age. However, whether in *The Tower* the poet anguishes on his inability to accept old age, focuses more on the external events in order to cope with his situation and he gradually starts to accept his fate, in *The Winding Stair* he "swings back to an acceptance of life" (Unterecker: 201) and focuses more on the inward problems.

Starting with the writing of the final poems for *The Tower*, the poet's health began to seriously deteriorate. In 1927 he collapsed from lung congestion and influenza for the first time, which is why he gave up his political career and moved to Spain to recover. Then, in 1929, in Italy, a severe bout of Malta fever made him write an emergency will, witnessed by Ezra Pound. Nevertheless, he continued to write despite doctors' orders to rest. He felt death may be closer than expected, but he could not allow himself to leave the questions in *The Tower* without an answer. As we have previously discussed, the poems in *The Tower* and those in *The Winding Stair* are part of a complete circle, and one without the other fails to create that perfect pattern that is to be found in Yeats's previous collections.

The shadow of death lies over many of the poems of *The Winding Stair*, and yet, they counterbalance the bitterness of *The Tower*. On the same note, the political pessimism in *The Tower* is appeased by the aesthetic optimism of *The Winding Stair*, and the images of sterility and decay are redeemed with those of regeneration and serenity. Metaphorically speaking, if in the poems of the previous volume the moment is midnight, pitch dark, with few dazzling flashes that intensify the darkness, in the poems of this volume the moment is a sunny, peaceful evening, suggesting the "sweetness and light" that "befits old age", as he confessed to Mrs. Shakespear in a letter, long before the publication of *The Winding Stair*: "Once out of Irish bitterness I can find some measure of sweetness and light, as befits old age – already new poems are floating in my head,



bird songs of an old man, joy in the passing moments, emotions without the bitterness of memory.”<sup>204</sup>

At this point we can safely assert (Albright: 692) that the two volumes accompany each other. In *The Winding Stair* some of the poems are twins of those in *The Tower*, as it is the case of “Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium”, “The Tower” and “Blood and the Moon”; “My Table” and “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”, and, of course, “A Woman Young and Old” and “A Man Young and Old” from the end of *The Tower*. Yet, what is essential to emphasize is that both volumes also speak of Irish history, despite their seemingly anchoring in personal experience. With these two volumes the contrary occurred of his enterprise in 1920. It was then that he revised his youthful work and tried to suppress the surplus of detail that might have made the reader’s task to discover the true meaning of the poems more difficult. This time, he simplified the structure and at the same time he intensified the meaning of his poems. Of course, we do not deal here with a sudden transformation, but rather with a gradual one that begins in *The Tower*, where the symbols are - tower, sword, flame, metal bird, and ends in *The Winding Stair*, where symbols are no longer necessary. Metaphorically speaking, *The Tower* is full of images that seem to be taken from oil paintings, while *The Winding Stair* is filled with black and white drawings. The gyres that appear in both of them pass from a point of maximum tension to a state of relaxation, while the mood shifts from bitterness to calmness and acceptance.

When Yeats was contracted by William Edwin Rouse to write another collection of poetry, he already had in mind the sequence of poems of “A Woman Young and Old”, to which he added other memorable poems, such as “In Memory Of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz”, “Death”, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”, “Blood and the Moon”, “Oil and Blood”, or “Byzantium”. Nevertheless, the complete collection of *The Winding Stairs and Other Poems* also includes the poems of *Words for Music Perhaps*, all of them being brought together by their common quality of having been created with Thoor Ballylee as symbol in mind. The poet himself noted: “In this book and elsewhere I have used towers and one tower in particular, as symbols and have compared their winding stairs to the

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<sup>204</sup> Quoted by John Unterecker in *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.170.

philosophical gyres, but it is hardly necessary to interpret what comes from the main track of thought and expression.”<sup>205</sup>

On 26 September 1930, W. B. Yeats in talking to Sturge Moore on the design of the cover of the volume was explaining: “*The Winding Stair*, as you will see by one of the poems, is the winding stair of Ballylee enlarged in a symbol, but you may not think the stair, even when a mere symbol, pictorial. It might be a mere gyre – Blake’s design of Jacob’s ladder - with figures, little figures.”<sup>206</sup> As we may see, after studying Blake, but also after discovering that Shelley cannot be delineated from the covers of his books, Yeats took a special interest in the physical appearance of his books, as well. He knew that the cover needed to be in harmony with the content in order to convey the true message of his poems; therefore there is no surprise that the cover of *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* consists of a geometric image of a winding stair inside a tower, with a serpent sphinx laying at the bottom of it.

Without taking into consideration *Words for Music Perhaps*, the design of the volume is circular. Both personal experience and national history merge and form a unitary image. The circularity of the design lies in that it begins and ends with images of perfection unaffected by the passing of time. However, the complete collection follows a different pattern. It opens with poems dedicated to or about friends, it continues with a series of philosophical reflections, and it ends with a “sensual acceptance of life” and “a celebration of love and lust.”<sup>207</sup>

Establishing the order of the twenty-eight poems in *The Winding Stairs and Other Poems* was quite a challenge for Yeats. With every new poem he wrote, he discovered a new pattern, so he continued to revise the structure of this collection until the poems came to be thematically ordered. Given the object of our research, we shall pay more attention to those poems dealing with history. Nevertheless, we have to keep in mind that

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<sup>205</sup> Quoted by James Olney in *The Rhizome and the Flower: the Perennial Philosophy, Yeats and Jung*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1980, p.238.

<sup>206</sup> Giorgio Melchiori. *The Whole Mystery of Art: Pattern into Poetry in the Works of W.B. Yeats*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960, p.266.

<sup>207</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.203.

for Yeats history was not just an organized sequence of facts, names and dates, but rather a set of events that combine actual circumstances with myths and magic, the necessary elements to spare us from a barren existence.

The volume, dedicated by Yeats to his friend Edmond Dulac, a painter, designer and musician, opens with the poem “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz”, written in October 1927 in the memory of the two sisters that had recently died. The poem maintains some of the bitterness of Yeats’s previous volume, and yet a soft change in tone is noticeable. The poet here laments not necessarily the death of the two sisters, but rather the passing of time, which seems to have taken away both their physical and their spiritual beauty. Yeats met the two sisters in Sligo, at their family estate, and back then he discovered in them the qualities he usually associated with aristocracy. Later on, however, they both became committed political activists, and the harshness of politics took away most of their beauty and elegance. In the poem Yeats begins by remembering them as young beauties in Lissadell (“Two girls in silk kimonos, both / Beautiful, one a gazelle”), and then shifts abruptly to a darker, horrified tone that echoes the notes of revulsion/ disgust/ repugnance and disillusionment in the civil-war poems:

“The older is condemned to death,  
Pardoned, drags out lonely years  
Conspiring among the ignorant.  
I know not what the younger dreams –  
Some vague Utopia - and she seems,  
When withered old and skeleton-gaunt,  
An image of such politics.”<sup>208</sup>

The two sisters were both involved in the political events known in the Irish history as Easter Rising, but if Constance Markiewicz actively participated in the rebellion, Eva Gore-Booth focused more on her writing and on the fight for women suffrage. They were both strong supporters of Irish nationalism, but it was only Constance who became a prominent figure in the Nationalist movement, a fact that later

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<sup>208</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.263.

brought her the death sentence. However, due to her sister's campaigns, she was eventually exonerated. On a personal level, Yeats blames both of them for their decay, suggesting that by dedicating their life to politics they only became two icons of temporality, for no matter how right a fight is, the outcome is always the same. Nevertheless, on a philosophical level, time is the only one to be held responsible, for no matter what they would have done with their lives, nothing would have prevented them from becoming "withered-old with skeleton gaunt":

"Dear shadows, now you know it all,  
All the folly of a fight  
With a common wrong or right.  
The innocent and the beautiful  
Have no enemy but time;" <sup>209</sup>

More than a half century after Yeats's death, Paul Ricoeur published his work *Memory, History, Forgetting*, where he insists on his lifelong conviction that there are things purportedly remembered, for without memories there would be no history of humanity. Ricoeur distinguishes here between the individual memory, when one remembers what he or she has suffered at some point, the collective memory, which belongs to a group of people who experienced the same past events, and a mediator between the two – the memory of a group to which one belongs. History is the result of the interaction between these three, and therefore subjectivity cannot be avoided. This is precisely the quality of the poem mentioned above. Yeats is subjective in his treating of the lives of these sisters, and yet, he is quite accurate, according to other sources. But because everything is meant to be forgotten, by making them characters in his poems, he actually makes sure they will be remembered, for, as we know, his poems may often be considered chronicles or archives of those times.

The poem "Death", for instance, was inspired by the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins, Vice-President and Minister for Justice of the Irish Free State. He was murdered in the reprisal attack following the executions of the several IRA members who fought against the Irish Free State. Sean MacBride, Maud Gonne's son, who at that time

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<sup>209</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.264.

was an important IRA member, was charged with the assassination of O'Higgins, but he eventually proved his innocence. Bearing in mind that Yeats felt a strong admiration for O'Higgins, whom he saw as a "builder of a nation,"<sup>210</sup> we can safely assume that in this poem O'Higgins is the "great man in his pride / Confronting murderous men". He pictures him as a hero who fought for his convictions, although he knew his actions would rebound upon himself. He knew violence attracts more violence, therefore he expected his involvement in the execution of the IRA members to bring him a tragic end. Apparently, he even said to his wife: "Nobody can expect to live who has done what I have done"<sup>211</sup> and so the last lines of the poem praise O'Higgins' stand against his executioners:

"Confronting murderous men  
Casts derision upon  
Supersession of breath;  
He knows death to the bone –  
Man has created death."

From beginning to end, the poem deals with man's awareness of death. The contrast between the man, who knows both dread and hope, and the animal, which does not experience any of these, re-establishes man's superiority over animals, but at the same time it also underlines man's tendency to struggle over things that cannot be avoided. Nevertheless, this awareness of death, which enables man to imagine death and think beyond it, is felt to be the key to transcendence. The line "man has created death" refers here to death as the supreme instance of heroism of some archetypal great men, who died and rose again, either as resurrected hero-gods or as re-embodiments of one another's unique force and mission.

Based on a traditional theme in the English literature, "The Dialogue of Self and Soul" displays the struggle between subjectivity and objectivity, between the Self and the Soul, the first of them advocating for the poet's commitment to reality, while the second

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<sup>210</sup> David A. Ross. *A Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File Inc., 2009, p.511.

<sup>211</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares. *WB. Yeats: Man and Poet*. London: Kyle Cathie, 1996, p.225.

encourages the poet's detachment from it.<sup>212</sup> Norman Jeffares tells us that the original title of the poem was "Sword and Tower", for in a letter Yeats wrote: "I am writing a new tower poem 'Sword and Tower', which is a choice of rebirth rather than deliverance from birth. I make my Japanese sword and its silk covering my symbol of life."<sup>213</sup> The sword with its silk covering, already introduced by Yeats in *The Tower*, is here a symbol of life and of the feminine, but also of love and war, while the tower represents the masculine. Nevertheless, Yeats eventually chose to associate the soul with the winding stair, the link between the human and the divine. By urging the Self to contemplate the winding stair, the Soul proposes to Self to escape life itself. And yet, the Self chooses life and everything that comes with it. If in *The Tower*, by emphasising on the making of the soul<sup>214</sup> Yeats was trying to distract himself from the annoyances of old age, in "The Dialogue of Self and Soul", by letting the Self win the battle, he surrenders to old age and decides to make the best of it.

"A Dialogue of the Self and the Soul" occupies a distinctive position among the other poems of this volume, for it marks the shift from bitterness to renewed happiness. The poem is divided in two sections. The first one presents a debate between two personae: Soul and Self. The Soul is the first to speak with wisdom and authority. It militates for objectivity and depicts the poet's destiny as the "steep ascent" up "a winding stair", a wandering through the darkness: "Fix every wandering thought upon / That quarter where all thought is done: / Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?" The Self, in his turn, is subjective. He speaks of the sword, "still a looking glass' / unspotted by the centuries", a symbol of artistic creation. Its silken covering is 'tattered' now but it can "still protect, faded adorn." Next, the Soul asks "why should the imagination of a man / long past his prime remember things that are / Emblematical of love and war?" In reply the Self then tells the story of the guildsman who forged the sword, Montashigi,

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<sup>212</sup> Daniel Albright, ed. *W.B. Yeats: the Poems*. London: Everyman's Library Ltd., New Edition, 1992, p.696.

<sup>213</sup> Quoted by Alexander Norman Jeffares in *WB. Yeats: Man and Poet*. London: Kyle Cathie, 1996, p.228,

<sup>214</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.201.

five hundred years before. Instantly, the soul becomes insecure: “Such fullness in that quarter overflows/ And falls into the basin of the mind”.

The structure of the poem can be easily associated with a gyre. At the beginning of the poem, the Soul is at the point of maximum expansion and the Self is at its weakest point, but since this polarity is reversed at the end of the poem, a connection can be made between the gyre or the winding stair, and the theme of regeneration.<sup>215</sup> As Yeats himself confessed, the poem was written in the spring of 1928 during a long period of illness. The next day he was advised by a doctor to give up writing until his condition improves. Since he must have been very well aware of his condition long before the doctor’s visit, we may assume that this poem is a sort of declaration of Yeats’s decision to grant at least a temporary victory of life over death. The competitors in this battle are the Soul, which summons “to the winding ancient stair”, and the Self, which chooses Sato’s sword. Their collision replaces now the conflict that was once between the Self and the Mask, out of which some of Yeats’s finest poems were born. This battle too takes place within the poet’s consciousness. The Soul urges the poet to give up this life, for another beginning awaits him after death, while the Self advocates for the life he is now living because, despite the physical shortcomings of old age, he has now reached the climax in point of spiritual and intellectual development. Should he start all over again, the process that would bring him to the same state of mind would probably have the same impact on his physical condition:

“*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

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<sup>215</sup> William Pratt. *Singing the Chaos: Madness and Wisdom in Modern Poetry*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996, p.74.

Brought face to face with his own clumsiness;”<sup>216</sup>

The second part of the poem is completely dominated by the Self. The Soul has lost its confidence and its energy together with the power of speech, therefore life has triumphed. The poet decides to cling on to this life and to enjoy it as much as possible, embracing thus even the bitterness of old age and clearly rejecting the solution he had previously found in “Sailing to Byzantium.”<sup>217</sup> By accepting life, he also begins to experience its sweetness, which made him feel his destiny is blessed:

“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 blessed by everything,  
Everything we look upon is blest.”<sup>218</sup>

“The Blood and the Moon” is the next poem in the volume and it is said to be the counterpart of the poem “The Tower”. While in the latter the poet makes the tower a symbol of imagination, of civilization, of the intellect, and looks through the window at people who could incite his imagination, in the former the tower is associated with every modern nation, and since it is conveyed as “half dead at the top”, we assume that it symbolizes Yeats’s disappointment with modern imagination to which he cannot find connections anymore. From Jeffares we find out that Kevin O’Higgins’ assassination was Yeats’s incentive to write this poem too. Apparently, Yeats saw in O’Higgins a successor of the Anglo-Irish tradition, in the same way in which he saw in the tower an emblem of the same minority. Proud of his origins, Yeats thought of his race as emblem of the Irish

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<sup>216</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.266.

<sup>217</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.205.

<sup>218</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.267.



nation itself, for the Anglo-Irish were the ones who shaped Ireland's identity and "towered above [the Gaels] as the tower overshadowed the small-storm beaten cottages beneath it."<sup>219</sup> Thus, the tower is also a symbol of power, the cottages beneath it symbolize the masses that need to be ruled, and the image of the tower sheltering and dominating the entire area with its phallic appearance carries forth the idea the Anglo-Irish should play the leading roles in the Irish society: "Blessed be this place, / More blessed still this tower; / A bloody, arrogant power / Rose out of the race".

The next lines of the poem seem to contradict what Yeats wrote in the first lines: "In mockery I have set / A powerful emblem up, / And sing it rhyme upon rhyme / In mockery of a time / Half dead at the top." And yet, the message becomes quite clear in the second section of the poem. From his window, the poem no longer looks at his neighbours, but rather at monuments of eternity: the Lighthouse of Alexandria, the Tower of Babel and also Shelley's tower. He puts his tower among these monuments, but if these are symbols of the intellect, his tower combines both intellect and imagination. Of his tower, he writes:

"I declare this tower is my symbol; I declare  
This winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair is my ancestral stair;  
That Goldsmith and the Dean, Berkeley and Burke have travelled  
there."<sup>220</sup>

By mentioning the names of the four great writers that defined the shape of Irish culture, Yeats is actually contrasting the period in which they lived, the eighteenth century, with the modern times. They were the ones who managed to bring back the ancient wisdom and achieved in their work that Unity of Culture that modernity lacks. They found a connection between intellect and passion, between the state and god,<sup>221</sup> which is why Yeats says they travelled "his winding, gyring, spiring treadmill of a stair". The Ireland of their time was not "half dead at the top", but complete, and they have

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<sup>219</sup> Jeffares, Alexander Norman. *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet*. London: Kyle Cathie, 1996, p.225.

<sup>220</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.268.

<sup>221</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.206

managed to make so: Goldsmith by “deliberately sipping at the honey-pot of his mind”, Swift by “beating on his breast in sibylline frenzy blind”, Burke by boldly proving “the State a tree” and Berkeley by proving “all things a dream”.

With this poem, Yeats introduces an antithetical symbolism of the tower, for antagonism resides in human nature itself, therefore his tower could not have had a limited symbolism. In the third section of the poem Yeats creates a complex image that includes both the pure and “unclouded moon” and the floor of the tower on which “the blood of innocence has left no stain”, with the winding stair mediating between them. The moon remained impassive at the violence and bloodshed she witnessed for centuries, but Yeats’s Norman tower witnessed Ireland’s many atrocities too, and although the floor may bear no sign, the winding stair still keeps an “odour of blood”. With this image Yeats hopes to stimulate people’s awareness and restore ancient values. The target here is not just one individual, but an entire nation, Ireland itself. But because the power is “a property of the living” (those that are at the bottom of the tower), and wisdom is “the property of the dead” (those that are above it), Yeats, as inhabitant of the tower, the man standing between the two contrasting forces, hopes to gain the wisdom of Goldsmith, Burke, Berkeley and Swift and the power of the living to reinvigorate a society that seems to have completely lost its values. Just like the moon managed to erase the horrors the tower had witnessed, so Yeats hopes restore true Irish values through his poetry.

The following seven poems are designed of mere symbols, for the symbols themselves are so full of meaning that they denote a speech of their own. On the other hand they can be analyzed in terms of the history of Christian era itself, through its supreme symbol, Christ. “Oil and Blood” is said to represent an abridged version of “Blood and the Moon”. Yeats talks here about the realities of life, but instead of presenting everything through Christian images, he chooses to put in opposition “the bodies of holy men and women” that lie in “tombs of gold and lapis lazuli”, a symbol of paganism, with “bodies of vampires full of blood”, to suggest that the forces that control the present times were built on bloodshed and fictitious values. “Veronica’s Napkin” was inspired by a Christian legend that tells how St. Veronica wiped Christ’s bleeding face with a napkin that forever retained the impression of his features. “Veronica’s Napkin” is mythology created from antithetical images – God’s majesty and God’s squalor – the first

desired by the Soul, the second desired by the Self. “Symbols” is the irreducible version of “Dialogue of Soul and Self”, and “Spilt Milk”, “The Nineteen Century and After”, “Statistics” and “Three Movements” symbolize the loss of imagination in the modern era.

In “The Seven Sages” (1932), Edmund Burke, Oliver Goldsmith, Bishop Cloyne, Jonathan Swift, an old man and himself are the participants in a debate that takes place in Yeats’s mind. The poem depicts, even if at an imaginary level, a more recent history of wise people whose philosophy resembled Wiggery, and yet it was founded on principles that stand against the sort of democratic Wiggery on which modern society functions. The subject of debate is Wiggery itself, which is described as a deadening outlook, coarse and confining, without imagination: “A levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind / That never looked out of the eye of a saint / Or out of drunkard’s eye.” The poem itself is a revolt against the current political ideology of Ireland, which failed to fulfil its promise although it derives from the noble thought of these four great men who “understood that wisdom comes from beggary”. This revolt continues in “The Crazy Moon” as well, a poem in which Yeats criticised the viciousness of humanity.

“Coole Park 1929” and “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” are reminiscent of the poems of the previous volume. The first one is homage to Lady Gregory, whose house sheltered many of the men of culture of the time: “They came like swallows and like swallows went / And yet a woman’s powerful character / Could keep a swallow to its first intent”. By putting together in the last stanza characters such as Hugh Lane and Shawe-Taylor, Hyde, Synge and even himself, Yeats presents once again Coole Park as symbol of the Irish literary revival. We find evidence of this fact in the prose draft of the poem: “Describe house in the first stanza. Here Synge came, Hugh Lane, Shaw, Taylor, many names. I too in my timid youth. Coming and going like migratory birds. Then address to the swallows fluttering in their dream like circles. Speak of the rarity of the circumstances that bring together such concords of men” (Webb: 280). But since three of them were already dead, and soon every one of them will perish, the reunion that Yeats anticipates is actually a reunion of spirits, for even after death Coole Park and its landlady must be celebrated:

“Here, traveller, scholar, poet, take your stand  
When all those rooms and passages are gone,

When nettles wave upon a shapeless mound  
And saplings root among the broken stone,  
And dedicate - eyes bent upon the ground,  
Back turned upon the brightness of the sun  
And all the sensuality of the shade –  
A moment's memory to that laurelled head.”<sup>222</sup>

In “Coole and Ballylee, 1931” the poet includes Coole Park in the circuit of his county, or better yet, he creates a complex picture in which the two Irish cultural edifices are linked by the waters that race under the window of Thoor Ballylee, “sank into the earth in a round pool which the blind, or dark poet Raftery called a cellar, then rose again and fell into a lake in Lady Gregory’s park.”<sup>223</sup> The poem may be considered evidence left to posterity to attest a certain group of artists’ endeavour to revive the Celtic vein: “We were the last romantics – chose for theme/ Traditional sanctity and loveliness; / Whatever’s written in what poets name/ The books of the people; whatever most can bless/ The mind of man or elevate a rhyme”. But since the poem begins with a presentation of the two places in their glory, when they were symbols of intellect and passions, of glory and of life itself, and continues with the suggestion that soon everything may fall apart (“all that great glory spent”), then it is not wrong to assume that in this poem Yeats actually laments the loss of Romantic innocence and passion, two concepts that have nothing in common with Yeats’s idea of modern world: “But all is changed, that high horse riderless, / Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode/ Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.”

“Swift’s Epitaph” is also an homage paid to Jonathan Swift this time. The poem is in fact a poetical translation of the epitaph Swift wrote for himself in Latin. However, one cannot consider it a random translation, but rather the product of a fantastic admiration and a complete devotion to a writer whose last words – his epitaph – were “a perfect expression of the passionate integrity and stoic disdain that comprise the aristocratic

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<sup>222</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, pp.274-275.

<sup>223</sup> David A. Ross. *A Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File Inc., 2009, p.73.

temper.”<sup>224</sup> It is true that Yeats challenged Swift’s importance in Irish literature for many years, probably because Swift himself fervently criticised many aspects of the Irish society and of the Protestant minority in particular (although he was a Protestant himself). Yeats, as a proud member of the same minority must have felt offended, and yet, a careful reading of Swift’s work and biography made him understand that Swift’s criticism was born out of love for his country and his race, and was meant to determine Irishmen to embrace the real values that had existed in Irish culture since ancient times. Thus, “Swift’s Epitaph” becomes Yeats’s ultimate proof of appreciation of Swift. In the original epitaph Swift dared people to imitate him, not in point of artistic creation, but rather to embrace his belief in human freedom, and Yeats, by slightly altering Swift’s epitaph in translation, not only brings back to people’s attention Swift’s urge, but he also reassesses the importance of his beliefs and his creation:

“Swift has sailed into his rest;  
Savage indignation there  
Cannot lacerate his breast.  
Imitate him if you dare,  
World-besotted traveller; he  
Served human liberty.”<sup>225</sup>

The next three poems of this volume, “At Algeciras – A Meditation upon Death”, “The Choice” and “Mohini Chatterjee” are meditations on the value of life, death and artistic creation. They draw on personal experience, but they also reflect the doctrine thoroughly described in *A Vision*, and serve as introductions to “Byzantium”, the twin poem of “Sailing to Byzantium”. It opens with images of flesh and blood, just like its twin poem, and it continues with images of golden birds standing on golden boughs, purifying flames and souls travelling to Byzantium.<sup>226</sup> The poem itself can be viewed as

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<sup>224</sup> David A. Ross. *A Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File Inc., 2009, p.243.

<sup>225</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.277.

<sup>226</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.217.

an archive of images of personal history. It was partly inspired by Sturge Moore's letter in which he complained of the inadequacy of "Sailing to Byzantium":

"[Santayana's] arguments leave me sceptical as to whether mere liberation from existence has any value or probability as a consummation. I prefer with Wittgenstein, whom I don't understand, to think that nothing at all can be said about ultimate, or reality in ultimate sense [...] Your 'Sailing to Byzantium', magnificent as the three stanzas are, lets me down in the fourth, as such a goldsmith's bird is as much nature as a man's body, especially if it only sings like Homer or Shakespeare of what is past or passing or to come Lords and Ladies."<sup>227</sup>

Yeats answered positively to Moore's criticism. He agreed that the idea presented in "Sailing to Byzantium" needed "exposition" and made all necessary efforts in this direction. If in the first poem Yeats focused on the journey to Byzantium itself and presented the holy city through the eyes of a newcomer who has just left the material world for the spiritual one, in "Byzantium" the presentation is made from the perspective of an insider who watches the arrival of new spirits.<sup>228</sup> The images are richer, the symbolic charge is more powerful and the language is pushed "to its limit in order to point at the unspeakable."<sup>229</sup>

The poem was written in September 1930, when Yeats was seriously ill again and found in artistic creation the power to recover: "I warmed myself back into life with 'Byzantium' and 'Veronica's Napkin', looking for a theme that might befit my years. Since then I have added a few poems to 'Words for Music Perhaps,' but always keeping the mood and plan of the first poems."<sup>230</sup> At this point it is worth mentioning Brenda Webster who suggests that "Byzantium" may have served as defence mechanism against

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<sup>227</sup> Ursula Bridge, Ed. *W.B. Yeats and T. Sturge Moore. Their Correspondence. 1901-1937*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1953, p.162.

<sup>228</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.217.

<sup>229</sup> Daniel Albright. *Quantum Poetics: Yeats, Pound, Eliot, and the Science of Modernism*. Cambridge University Press, 1997, p.44.

<sup>230</sup> Richard J. Finneran. "Notes to the Poems" *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. New York: Scribner Poetry, 1996, p.462.

the approaching death, the fear of castration, the loss of integrity and the declining potency.<sup>231</sup> Because the heroic mask was no longer enough at this point, he turns to other means. He makes use of objects with talismanic qualities, as in “Sailing to Byzantium”, “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” or “Byzantium” in order to preserve his body image, “to entertain fantasies of fusion and loss of self and come to terms with concomitant feelings of anger and hostility.”<sup>232</sup> In order to be able to accept death as the normal follow-up of any existence, he deliberately regards it as an extension of artistic creation and gives to the artistic self the shape of a golden bird singing on a golden bough.

From a prose draft of “Byzantium” we find out that the poem follows the ideas already exposed in *A Vision*:

“Subject for a poem. Death of a friend...Describe Byzantium as it is in the system towards the end of the first Christian millennium. A walking mummy. Flames at the street corner where the soul is purified, birds of hammered gold singing in golden trees, in the harbour [dolphins] offering their backs to the wailing dead that they may carry them to Paradise.”<sup>233</sup>

As we already know, these subjects had been in his head ever since he was writing *The Tower*. In *A Vision* he explains that “if [he] could be given a month of Antiquity, [he] would spend it in Byzantium, a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato.”<sup>234</sup> He believed he would find there someone to answer all his questions, and this is the image he conveys in “Sailing to Byzantium”. In “Byzantium, however, when he actually gets the chance to experience all that this holy town has to offer, his image of it is quite different. If the old man of the first poem dreamed to become a part of eternity by becoming an artifice (a golden bird singing to Lords and Ladies), the initiated man of the second poem realizes that he now lives in is an artifice of eternity in itself.

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<sup>231</sup> Brenda S. Webster. *Yeats. A Psychoanalytical Study*. Macmillan, 1973, p.16.

<sup>232</sup> Brenda S. Webster. *Yeats. A Psychoanalytical Study*. Macmillan, 1973, p.3.

<sup>233</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares. *WB. Yeats: Man and Poet*. London: Kyle Cathie, 1996, p.255.

<sup>234</sup> William Butler Yeats. *A Vision. The Original 1925 Version*. Eds. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper. *Collected Works of W. B. Yeats* 13. New York: Scribner, 2008, p. 279.

The poem opens with a presentation of Byzantium. The speaker seems more like a passive observer of the things happening there. The exploration of Byzantium seems more like a journey through a series of images quite different from the “unpurged images” of material world. Everything here seems to have no real form: the emperor is always mentioned, but never seen, his “drunken soldiers are abed”, therefore the speaker does not see them either, and the cathedral is only heard. These shapeless entities, however, are all united in their contempt for “all that is man, / All mere complexities, / The fury and mire of human veins”. Nevertheless, Byzantium is also inhabited by a different kind of entities: “an image, man or shade, / Shade more than man, more image than a shade”. These entities are the souls that have been purified in the holy flames and now wait to be reincarnated. These residents in “mummy-cloth” stand in opposition with everything else in this place, for if they want to return to their earthly shape, the others are rather contemptuous of “all complexities of mire and blood”. The golden bird itself, which in “Sailing to Byzantium” was seen as an ideal image for the poet, a symbol of perfection, but now Yeats portrays it singing the same song over and over, as if it tried to mock all that is natural. Nevertheless, new “blood-begotten spirits” keep arriving; they enter the purgatorial dance and prepare themselves for a new cycle of birth and rebirth.

#### **4.4 Love Structuring Artistic Creation – from Love to Poetry**

Yeats’s love life has always been a subject of intense discussions, mostly because of his unrequited love for Maud Gonne, but also because of his fleeting love affairs with various other women, which did not end even when he married Georgie. Brenda Maddox tells us that Yeats fell in love easily, but his feelings remained unrequited many times. Of course, he had many affairs based on sexual intimacy, but real emotions from his side were not always part of the equation.

The first woman Yeats fell in love with was Laura Armstrong, a distant cousin whom he met when he was seventeen years old and for whom he wrote some of his earliest poems and his first play. Of course, Laura did not respond to his feelings, for when he met, she was already engaged, and besides, the daughter of an army man could not have set her eyes on a young man with aspirations to become a poet. Fortunately, his



feelings for her passed quite rapidly, for when he met Maud Gonne he instantly fell in love with her.

Maud Gonne dominated Yeats's love life for almost three decades, but she never responded to his feelings. She was a passionate nationalist who dedicated her life to a cause and to Ireland, therefore there was no space for love in her life (or at least, not for Yeats). She remained his friend for a long time, but between them there was nothing more than a spiritual union and, apparently one night of passion. He followed her lead many times and he became involved in many political activities because of her, but that did not make her love him. He proposed to her many times, and he was rejected every single time, and yet, his feelings for her did not fade away. She had the ability to make him experience a storm of emotions, and because of that, some of his finest love poems were born. However, since we have already discussed many of them in a previous section of this paper, we will not insist on them here.

The next in line in Yeats's love life was Olivia Shakespear with whom he had his first love affair while she was still caught up in an unhappy marriage. After her divorce they had a one year relationship that ended because Olivia realised Yeats could not get over his feelings for Maud. This idea is sustained by a poem Yeats wrote after the two separated, "The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love", where we can see that Yeats had put all his hopes in his relationship with Olivia, and yet, his true feelings stopped him from completely dedicating himself to her:

"Pale brows, still hands and dim hair,  
I had a beautiful friend  
And dreamed that the old despair  
Would end in love in the end:  
She looked in my heart one day  
And saw your image was there;  
She has gone weeping away."<sup>235</sup>

Nevertheless, Olivia's role in Yeats's life is tremendous. She is the one "who initiates the poet into the rites of maturity and frees him from the prison of youth and

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<sup>235</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.68.

releases his creative drive.”<sup>236</sup> She was his muse, a sort of priestess of the White Goddess who holds inside her the keys of destruction and creation, who can offer him the peace he needs and restore his confidence, but who cannot erase his feelings for another woman. His early love poems have her as central figure, but most of the times they do not focus on the poet’s feelings for her, but rather on her physical features that serve as a sort of inspirational drive and as metaphors of perfection and beauty: “You need but lift a pearl – pale hand / And bind up your long hair and sigh / And all men’s hearts must burn and beat”.

Yeats saw in Olivia the embodiment of both worldliness and spirituality. The poems he wrote for her or with her in mind are vivid and complex, and the choice of words was so careful that one might get the impression that they are meant to bring back a long forgotten beauty. However, a single word from Maud was enough for him to give up his harmonious life and return to the eternal pursuit of the unattainable. She remained an important part of his life and he praised her in his poems for being such a devoted friend and bringing him so much joy:

“Now must I these three praise  
Three women that have wrought  
What joy is in my days:  
[...] one because her hand  
Had strength that could unbind  
What none can understand,  
What none can have and thrive,  
Youth's dreamy load, till she  
So changed me that I live  
Labouring in ecstasy.”<sup>237</sup>

Thirty years later Yeats reflected on his entire love life and brought back Olivia Shakespear as a central character in his love poems. This time, however, he no longer

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<sup>236</sup> Samuel Hynes. “All the Wild Witches in the Women in Yeats’s Poems” in *The Sewanee Review*, Vol.85, No.4 (Fall, 1977), p. 567.

<sup>237</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.139.

praises her beauty, nor does he use her as a symbol of beauty of perfection, but rather he expresses his regret for having surrendered himself to his obsession for Maud at the expense of his relationship with Olivia. The sequence of poems “A Man Young and Old”, in which Olivia reappears, is a sort of autobiographical report of Yeats’s love life in which he contrasts the stages of love he experienced from youth to old age.<sup>238</sup> The first four poems of this sequence have Maud Gonne as a central figure. “A Man Young and Old” opens with the poem “First Love” in which Yeats describes how his love for Maud burst out and her murderous beauty and her “heart of stone” emptied his thoughts:

“She smiled and that transfigured me  
And left me but a lout,  
Maundering here, and maundering there,  
Emptier of thought  
Than the heavenly circuit of its stars  
When the moon sails out.”<sup>239</sup>

“Human Dignity”, “The Mermaid” and “The Death of a Hare” follow the same direction as “First Love”. The poet recalls here the bitter-sweet memories of his love for Maud and tells how he returned to his love over and over again although it caused him so much pain. The fifth poem “The Empty Cup” refers to Yeats’s relationship with Olivia Shakespeare. He describes himself here as “a crazy man that found a cup”, and yet he feared to drink from it. The cup represents, of course, Olivia’s love for him, while the “moon-accursed” because of which he could not drink from the cup is Maud herself. The poem ends in a regretful tone, for the poet realized when he wrote this poem that if he had given another chance to his relationship with Olivia he might have truly fallen in love with her and he would have saved himself from the agony of an unrequited love:

“A crazy man that found a cup,  
When all but dead of thirst,  
Hardly dared to wet his mouth

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<sup>238</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.194.

<sup>239</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.249.

Imagining, moon-accursed,  
That another mouthful  
And his beating heart would burst.  
October last I found it too  
But found it dry as bone,  
And for that reason am I crazed  
And my sleep is gone.”<sup>240</sup>

“His Memories” brings back the moon goddess from the first four poems (Maud Gonne). The poet recalls here the only passionate night he spent with Maud Gonne and then, in the next poem, “The Friends of his Youth”, he takes the role of an old man and presents the encounter between barren Madge, a symbol of old age, and shrieking Peter, a remainder of Youth. Peter and Madge are in fact the central characters in all the poems in this sequence and, in the light of their interaction in the poem they can easily be identified with Yeats and Maud. The next poems are a sort of re-enactment of the love between the two, told from the perspective of an old man who decides that it is best to free himself “from the memory of the ‘delights of youth’ which can only bring pain to the old”<sup>241</sup>:

“Endure what life God gives and ask no longer span;  
Cease to remember the delights of youth, travel-wearied aged man;  
Delight becomes death-longing if all longing else be vain.”<sup>242</sup>

“A Man Young and Old”, included in *The Tower*, is paralleled by “A Woman Young and Old”, published in *The Winding Stair*. If in the first sequence the poet focuses on a man’s experience of love from youth to old age, the second is a chronological résumé of a woman’s love life from childhood to death. Since all the poems in the second section are almost like statements of a woman’s perspective on love from the moment she

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<sup>240</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.251.

<sup>241</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.196.

<sup>242</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.255.

discovers masculine beauty to the point she becomes “loveless dust”, our guess is that they are the result of many years of sexual experimentation with different women. The fact that Yeats continued to have affairs with various women even after he married is not a secret to anyone, because in his later years he thought of sex as a means of attaining the Unity of Being,<sup>243</sup> and that is exactly what “A Woman Young and Old” proves.

The relationship between love and poetry in Yeats’s writing has become quite obvious by now. However, we may divide his love poems into two categories. First, there are those in which various aspects of love are exposed. In this case, Yeats’s muses were Laura Armstrong, the first girl he fell in love with, Olivia Shakespear, the first woman in his life, Maud Gonne, the woman he loved for almost three decades, Florence Farr, the actress whose delightful voice made him write plays, and even Iseult Gonne, the symbol of youth in Yeats’s mature years, whom he wanted to marry maybe because this way he would have had at least a part of the woman he wanted his entire life. In the poems of the second category, love is replaced by lust and we may say that Yeats began writing this kind of poems after his marriage to George. Nevertheless, Yeats feared that sexual satisfaction inside a marriage might limit his inspiration, so he started enjoying sexual pleasures outside the marriage. He believed sexual potency was the tool that enabled him to write, and thus in 1934 he underwent the Steinach rejuvenation operation, a sort of vasectomy that was meant to improve his sexual capacity. After that he had sexual affairs with Margot Ruddock, an actress whom he describes as a symbol of creativity in “A Crazy Girl”, Ethel Mannin, a popular novelist, with whom he had a brief affair, and Edith Shackleton Heald, a famous journalist who was the last woman in his life. He tried his luck with Dorothy Wellesley as well, an older poet who he supposedly considered one of the best writers of the twentieth century, but because she was a lesbian their relationship was nothing more than a passionate friendship.<sup>244</sup> Yeats’s behaviour at this point may seem very strange, as well as his treatment of his wife in this equation, and yet we have to acknowledge the effects it had on his writing. They were all part of a process

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<sup>243</sup> Carole Vopat. “The Darker Vision of W.B. Yeats: ‘A Woman Young and Old’”. *Colby Quarterly*. Vol. 28, No. 1 (March, 1992) p.39.

<sup>244</sup> David Holdeman. *The Cambridge Introduction to W.B. Yeats*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.106.

of creating a sexual identity for him and they all served as muses in his latest volumes of poetry, *A Full Moon in March* and *Last Poems*.

#### **4.5 Coming Back to the Writer in Point of Local History**

Yeats has always manifested a strong interest in the history of his country and he has always been involved in one way or another in the local historical events. Since his early years as a poet he took a special interest in actual historical facts and he incorporated in his poems elements belonging to Ireland's historical past. As an admirer of Irish nationalism, he dedicated himself to writing poetry that would influence the way of thinking of his fellow Irishmen. He resorted to Irish mythology and heroic figures to make Irish people return to the true Irish values. Next, dissatisfied with the direction the Irish society was following, he tried to estrange himself from the social realities of the time, and yet he never managed to detach himself completely from the events happening around him. His entire poetical work includes poems that resonate with Irish history or with the actual social background of his country, although more than once he chose to expose his point of view under the guise of ancient myths and sometimes even magic.

There is no doubt Yeats was an important pillar of Irish society. If in his early years he was sometimes dismissed by some of the writers who had a more radical vision of the Irish values and culture, in his adulthood he was proposed to become a public figure on the Irish political stage. He enjoyed public recognition as both a senator and a poet and tried to do his best in accomplishing both of these tasks. In this section we will focus mainly on the poems written a few years before and during the period he served as senator for the Irish Free State, most of them included in *The Tower*.

Yeats's role as senator was not always satisfying and easy to accomplish. As an Anglo-Irishman he militated for the minority he represented and as a poet he showed his disillusionment with the politics of his country. *The Tower*, the volume written during the years Ireland underwent serious political transformations, reflects the "Irish bitterness" and Yeats's political pessimism. The poem "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is highly significant for our current endeavour, because it shows the poet's standpoint in the social realities of his country and is a proof of Yeats's attempts to rewrite history. "Nineteen hundred and Nineteen" can be read "through the lens of a locally engaged postcolonial

theory that attends to the specifics of the Irish situation.”<sup>245</sup> Critics often argue that Yeats, as an Anglo-Irish, may have put himself in the role of a colonizer who tried to turn his country into something it never was, but at the same time he stood against British colonialism. There were always conflicting ideas that governed his mind, just as there were always conflicting forces that tried to control Ireland, which is why both Ireland’s history and Yeats’s allegiances may seem ambiguous, and yet, in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” these conflicting forces and ideas serve as tools to create the history that Yeats wanted for his country.

“Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” stands in opposition with “Meditations in Time of Civil War” where Yeats shows a detached attitude toward the atrocities of civil war. The poem opens with an acknowledgement of destruction as part of a continuous process of transformation. In the first stanza the poet looks back at ancient history and the miracles of this ancient world and realizes everything is bound to destruction: “Many ingenious lovely things are gone / That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude, / protected from the circle of the moon / That pitches common things about.” He depicts Greek civilization and recalls the great things that were created at that time, “the ornamental bronze and stone”, the “ancient image made of olive wood”, Phidias’s “famous ivory” and “the golden grasshoppers and bees”, all wonderful creations that proved the magnificence of the era, and yet none of them survived through the centuries.

After referring to the destructive violence of the past as a part of some natural process, Yeats moves back to the present times, when everybody believed that democracy has triumphed. In the aftermath of World War I the “many pretty toys” of “law and public opinion” seemed to have completely eliminated the idea of another war<sup>246</sup> and yet Ireland was at the beginning of its war of independence. The period of peace that was meant to last forever, due to the “law indifferent to blame or praise / To bribe and threat” seems now only an illusion, for the present quickly turns into a period of war and violence because of the rogues and rascals in the world who will continue to do what they

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<sup>245</sup> Rob Dogget. “Writing Out (of) Chaos: Constructions of History in Yeats’s ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ and ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War.’” *Twentieth-Century Literature*. 47.2 (2001), p.138.

<sup>246</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.182

do best. The third stanza continues on the same note: “All teeth were drawn, all ancient tricks unlearned / And a great army but a showy thing”, and yet it then moves to the description of a nightmarish episode in which a mother is murdered at her door by drunken soldiers, to finally point out the futility of fighting:

“Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare  
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery  
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,  
The night can sweat with terror as before  
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,  
And planned to bring the world under a rule,  
Who are but weasels fighting in a whole.”<sup>247</sup>

The entire first section of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” refers to the monstrous deeds committed by the Black and Tans in order to force Ireland again into submission. And yet, the section ends with a question: “But is there any comfort to be found? / Man is in love and loves what vanishes, / What more there is to say?”, as if the poet would try to find some sort of order in the existing chaos. And he does find it in the Chinese dances – a symbol of art. However, he emphasizes upon the double nature of everything, and maybe what he is trying to express is that art may provide some sort of comfort in these tormented times, although art itself is also bound to destruction. Artists are dancers themselves, and since the evolution of a civilization is a dance as well, everybody gets caught in that chaotic dance of war or peace and everybody has to play his part: “All men are dancers and their tread / Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong”.

The third section shows a speaker half detached from reality. The solitary swan that spreads its wings to ride into the approaching night is contrasted here with the dragon-headed mob that plays its part in the light of the day in the second section. The swan is the poet who asks himself whether to involve in the action or to resume to contemplating the big picture, since the poet’s duty is to meditate and interpret, rather than act: “A man in his own secret meditation / Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made / In art or politics”. The next lines show us that the speaker chooses to remain

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<sup>247</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.233.



detached from what happens around, because neither good nor evil can be delineated in the big picture: “The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven: / That image can bring wildness, bring a rage / To end all things, to end / What my laborious life imagines.” However, solitude and detachment does not bring any satisfaction and the poet directs his anger towards his artistic creation, which in his youth was very much used to change the face of society: “O but we dreamed to mend / Whatever mischief seemed / To afflict mankind, but now / That winds of winter blow / Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed”.

In the fifth section of the poem, the speaker impels us to mock everybody: “Come let us mock at the great”, “Come let us mock at the wise”, “Come let us mock at the good” and finally, “Mock mockers after that”. This mockery is addressed to everybody involved in the conflict he describes in the first section and to the poet himself, for remaining just an observer of the horrors happening around him” “Mock mockers after that / That would not lift a hand maybe / To help good, wise or great / To bar that foul storm out, for we / Traffic in mockery”.

The last section of the poem brings us back in the middle of a chaotic world dominated by violence and anger. He depicts no heroes in this last stanza. All the participants in the conflict are equally guilty. They all contributed to the chaos that has taken over the world, and no matter who will win the fight, evil remains the only possible outcome: “All breaks and vanishes, and evil gathers head”. By summoning the names of two evil presences in Irish folklore, the daughters of Herodias who asked for the head of John the Baptist, and Robert Artisson, the evil spirit of the fourteenth century, Yeats opens the path for “The Second Coming”, the poem in which Yeats speaks about the end of the Christian civilization and the beginning of an antithetical era in which a rough beast will take control over the world. Humanity is caught in patterns of death and rebirth, and Ireland itself seems to be caught as well in patterns of unnecessary bloodshed and sacrifice for historical causes. Yeats traces no winner in this fight. Neither the nationalists that resort to murder and violence, nor the unionists that seem to come into line with their position as colonised people, are the real heroes of this fight. Neither of them shall be remembered in the end, for all that matters is that innocent people lose their

lives in an undesirable fight that seems to be a constant presence in a history that repeats itself over and over again:

“But now wind drops, dust settles; thereupon  
There lurches past, his great eyes without thought  
Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,  
That insolent fiend Robert Artisson  
To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought  
Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks.”<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.237.

## 5. Yeats's Celtic Heliolatry and/or Elitism

### 5.1 Michael North's Study Political Aesthetics of T.S. Eliot, Yeats, Pound

The political opinions and sympathies of T.S. Eliot, William Butler Yeats and Ezra Pound have always been considered delicate topics. In *The Political Aesthetics of T.S. Eliot, Yeats, and Pound*, Michael North gives a relevant and pertinent interpretation of Eliot's conservatism, Yeats's authoritarianism and elitism, and Pound's fascism and anti-Semitism. He begins his study by quoting a statement of Walter Benjamin, the German-Jewish intellectual who defined fascism as the aestheticization of politics. Starting from this statement and taking into account that aestheticism and politics are usually put together when one tries to solve through art economic or political contradiction, Michael North asserts that calling Yeats, Eliot, and Pound fascist is not completely absurd; although they were not "card-carrying members of a fascist party."<sup>249</sup> And yet, without thoroughly analyzing the actual involvement of the three poets in political activities and without analyzing their critical theories in point of politics, it would be absurd to call all of them fascist and relate them to the horrors committed by this political regime.

In order to understand these three writers' position to fascism, we must first take a look at the relationship between aesthetic modernism and modern politics. Generally speaking, modernity means material progress as the result of enlightenment, political freedom and cultural renaissance. In theory, modernity seemed perfect for the society of the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and yet, in practice, it proved to be a complete failure. Technology, cultural modernism, and liberal democracy seemed to be the factors that contributed to its downfall. In this equation, aesthetic modernism also plays an important part. On the one hand, it is part of the entire process of emancipation, and on the other, it counter-attacks the whole process. Liberalism, as the result of modernism, led to the idea of absolute freedom and individuality. And yet, absolute freedom or individuality cannot exist in a society that

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<sup>249</sup> Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.vii.

works on rules and principles. Thus, modernity becomes rather ambiguous, because it incorporates irreconcilable opposites, and judging from this point of view, it can be considered more or less a mockery, because as long as an individual belongs to a community, he cannot achieve absolute freedom.

Considering the inconsistencies that came along with liberalism, it was no surprise for Yeats, Eliot or Pound that this system would eventually fail. Even in theory liberalism was quite difficult to describe, because not even the major modernists could completely agree on every issue. Therefore it is no surprise that the three poets could not decide whether to militate in favour of the community or to support individual freedom. For the three, the idea of a community based on shared values seemed more eloquent, but by adopting this idea, they clearly manifested their anti-liberalism, and because they completely rejected liberalism, they were considered supporters of fascist modernism. However, in order to decide whether or not Yeats had anything to do with the fascism invented and installed by Mussolini in Italy, we need to take a look at Yeats's political beliefs first.

W.B. Yeats expresses his personal views on what a poet should represent in an essay on magic as early as in 1901. This essay was later published in *Essays and Introductions* in 1961 and here the poet asserts his artistic creed and his life philosophy. As the poet confesses, he believes in the practice and philosophy of what is called magic and "evocation of spirit". He asserts that he also believes in three doctrines which "had been handed down from early times" and "had been the foundations of nearly all magical practices": first "that the borders of the mind are ever shifting and that many minds can flow into one another", creating a single mind; second, that the borders of our memories are encompassed in the memory of Nature itself; and third, that the great mind and memory can be evoked by using symbols.<sup>250</sup>

Nowadays W. B. Yeats is the most appreciated modern poet of the twentieth century. And yet, not all scholars consider him 100% a real modernist since Yeats himself dismissed modernism on several occasions. As a poet whose main preoccupations were poetry or politics, in the beginning of his writing career he used the term "modern" as a severe criticism, and fifty years later he asserted that he belongs to

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<sup>250</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan, 1961, p.33.

that category of poets who “wrote as men had always written,”<sup>251</sup> thus separating himself from the writers that followed T.S. Eliot’s literary trend. Both as a young poet and then a mature one, Yeats refused to accept the modern world built by technology. He felt that with industrialization and excessive urbanization the world would lose its normality, its beauty, and even its identity. He believed that people should look back at the past to create a brighter future, and therefore he could have been neither a supporter of a world in which progress and development were more important than history, nor a poet who appreciated poetry that discussed of this world.

With his creed on one hand and with his long period of creation beginning at the end of the nineteenth century and going on in the twentieth century on the other hand, with his work ranging from the revival of old Irish legends, then on a more genuine poetical vein filled with his personal symbolic system, his existence and artistic career may be said to be both traditional and modern. W.J. McCormack, in *Ascendancy and Tradition in Anglo-Irish Literary History From 1789 to 1939*, asserts that “Yeats is more revealing of the values of Modernism than Eliot is, precisely because he is less ‘pure’ a Modernist.”<sup>252</sup> Yet Yeats’s modernism emerges from the modern quarrel between him and his Self, which ultimately transforms into a quarrel of individualism and nationalism, right and duty, freedom and history.<sup>253</sup> The battles take place between his ego and his anti-self: battle for national identity, battle for his misunderstood love, battle to reach a consensus regarding his poetical creation and even though modernity was not his target, in trying to solve the conflicts lying deep down in his soul, he became a genuine modernist.

Yeats and Ireland have always been on the same route, and because Ireland was heading towards modernity with its Anglo-Irish Literary Revival, Yeats, as one of the heads of this movement, was following the same path. The Revival pushed forward the

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<sup>251</sup> Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.21.

<sup>252</sup> W.J. McCormack, *From Burke to Beckett. Ascendancy, Tradition and Betrayal in Literary History*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1994, pp.296-297.

<sup>253</sup> Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.21.

modern state, but at the same it brought Ireland closer to its historical and cultural identity. Ireland was in the position to ask from England complete independence. Irishmen wanted to be politically and economically equal with the Empire, which meant they had to organize the state on modern principles, but they also wanted their historical and cultural identity to be recognized, accepted and used as a background to create a true Irish identity. These two ideals were quite difficult to combine, and consequently, political turbulences occurred inside the state. Now Ireland had to deal not only with British rule, but also with the disparities within the society.

Within this context, Yeats's politics could not be different from the politics of his natural country, given his permanent presence in the middle of events. The conflicts within the Irish society seemed endless, and in an attempt to understand his own place in that society "Yeats was to trace both fascism and communism, back to Hegel's attempts to resolve the liberal contradiction between right and duty, individual and community."<sup>254</sup> The poet's position was uncertain. As an Anglo-Irish in an Irish community, he wanted to understand his own place, the position of the entire Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, as well as the connection between poetry and politics, and because society could not offer him a suitable answer, he tried to discover by himself the answer to the questions that tormented him. And because fascism and communism were the doctrines that also tried to solve this puzzle, it is only natural that Yeats resorted to them in order to find and answer. And yet, he is not to be condemned for this, because at their origin, these doctrines only tried to reconcile the conflict between difference and unity, between individual right and public duty, a conflict which unfortunately can be solved only in theory, since the applicability of these regimes turned out to be a complete failure. Elizabeth Cullingford, quoted by Michael North, claims that Yeats aimed to achieve his "much-desired unity" not "by a narrowing of vision but through acceptance of diversity."<sup>255</sup> The question that emerges naturally is how Yeats was supposed to achieve that, even at the poetical level, if his own country was not able to find a way out of this

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<sup>254</sup> Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.22.

<sup>255</sup> Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.22.

puzzle. Even if at a hypothetical level, Yeats tried to achieve this goal in his poetical work. "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", named a "utopia" by Michael North, attempts at restoring the connection between right and duty. It is the first example where Yeats tries to obtain reconciliation between these conflicting ideals, though maybe incidentally. In *Autobiographies*, the reader finds out the way the poem emerged from a book. After his father had read to the poet passages from *Walden*, he planned to live some day in a cottage on a little island called Innisfree. At first, the poem arose from a youthful impetus, from a hidden desire, as a consequence of his adolescent troubles, as the poet himself explains: "I thought that having conquered bodily desire and the inclination of my mind towards women and love, I should live, as Thoreau lived seeking wisdom." The idea of the poem came to him while walking through Fleet Street in London "very homesick I heard a little twinkle of water and saw a fountain in a shop-window which balanced a little ball upon its jet, and began to remember lake water. From the sudden remembrance came my poem..." W.B. Yeats wrote in *Four Years*. In a letter to Katharine Tynan the poet gives another explanation saying that the feelings expressed belonged to a persona, though in reality they were the poet's own feelings. Innisfree is in fact, Sligo, the place where the poet wanted to return whenever he was overwhelmed by the uncanny atmosphere in London.

In his study, Michael North finds it however that "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is no longer the result of an adolescent daydreaming of passions and love and women, but a clear statement for right and duty. The critic suggests that the poem represents the climax of the story of the Prodigal Son. In quoting Jeffares, they both imply the idea that "I will arise and go now to my father" borrows more from the biblical parable than the verbal formula in the sense that the idea from the poem coming to him while walking in London, feeling homesick and longing for Sligo, where everybody knows everybody, instead of London, where nobody knows him, was rather a patriotic call. Though a less documented reader does not know for sure whether Innisfree is England or Ireland, for a reader familiar with the history and mythology of Ireland the name Innisfree may remind of Innisfail, island of the stone, one of the poetic names for Ireland. Thus, Innisfree obviously represents Sligo and implicitly Ireland in a stark contradiction with London and implicitly England. The political implication is discreet however. The word "cabin"

from “And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made” becomes the symbol of a past life that still exists in the mind of any true Irishman. In the second stanza the message becomes pretty clear: “And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow”. This line alludes to the moments when, from one reason or another, there were street clashes between the republicans and the English, and because the poet seeks peace “there”, in Innisfree, we are entitled to say that Innisfree is indeed Sligo, the place where the poet went to escape the urban bustle.

“And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,  
And evening full of the linnet's wings.”<sup>256</sup>

The period when the poem was written refers precisely to the moments after Charles Stewart Parnell’s death. Parnell was a Protestant landlord, the parliamentary champion of land reform and then leader of the land reform, who became the most beloved of men in Ireland. The Land Act in 1881 for which he fought paved the way for additional reform and it was the first victory after 270 years of unsuccessful agitation for land reform. Then the period comprised between 1890 and 1910 was a period of tranquillity and even registered modest progress for Ireland. The following period distinguished itself through a nostalgic turn of the Irish population to an exploration of their ethnic and national identity. In 1893, the Gaelic League was founded by Douglas Hyde, the president of the future Irish Free State, marking a revival of the Irish language and culture. Though there were differences of opinion between Hyde and Yeats, since Hyde initially believed that Gaelic language should be restored in Irish institutions and Yeats considered Ireland could create its own culture and national identity even without restoring Gaelic language, it was unanimously acknowledged that William Butler Yeats was the greatest English language poet of his era, because through his poetry he advocated for his country’s Irish roots and a national identity built on true Irish values.

The last stanza presents various references that move the poem in two directions, toward two different ideals, as if the poet tried to solve the conflict between the

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<sup>256</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.44.



individual and the community. As Michael North says, Yeats was never a sophisticated political thinker, yet he is aware that these do not need to be in opposition, because some sort of compromise can be made in order to reconcile the two. *Innisfree*, seen as Ireland, is the place where individuals are allowed to be different within their community, creating thus a stark opposition with England, where there is an attempt to impose some sort of cultural homogeneity on everybody. The verisimilitude of this idea is reinforced by a passage of *John Sherman*, Yeats's only novel, where the author writes: "In your big towns a man...knows only the people like himself. But here one chats with the whole world in a day's walk, for every man one meets is a class."<sup>257</sup> The same idea is presented in a letter to Katharine Tynan: "Down at Sligo one sees the whole world in a day walk, every man is a class. It is too small there for minorities"<sup>258</sup>, therefore the poet believes that London is a large town where the existence of classes is possible, but each individual is isolated from the others, while Sligo is too small for classes, but each man has the liberty to be unique in his own way. The dichotomy here is between small settlements, seen by the author as more unified, and large urban area, where people tend to live in isolation, while at the same time they are forced to live together. Under these circumstances, England is seen by Yeats as a place of isolation and loneliness, while Ireland is seen as a paradise where personal uniqueness and social harmony are at home.

As Michael North puts it, *Innisfree* represents Yeats's attempt to define his freedom. Nevertheless, Yeats's concept of freedom is a controversial one because it cannot be related to the ease of movement. *Innis* is the Irish for island, therefore it is a place surrounded by a lake, but because this lake is also on an island surrounded by a sea, *Innis* becomes a place of complete isolation, and freedom is understood as preventing the interference of others. At this point, because of the association between freedom and isolation, the former gets negative connotations. And because individual freedom as it is presented by Yeats cannot be defined unless it is opposed with external freedom, we can also discuss about an antithetical structure of the poem. *Innisfree* is the place where the poet can be free from London, therefore the patriotic character of the poem is obvious.

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<sup>257</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats. Vol. XII. John Sherman and Dhoya*. Eds.

Richard J. Finneran and George Mills Harper. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991, p.9.

<sup>258</sup> W.B. Yeats, *Letters to Katharine Tynan*. Ed. Roger McHugh. New York: McMullen Books, 1953, p.153.

And yet, the poem does not present any direct political reference, therefore it would be unjust to accuse Yeats of having a hidden agenda.

In the poem, M. North also discovers a linguistic conflict. Quoting Norman Jeffares, North relates that Innisfree means *Heather Island* and, in Irish, it should be spelled Innis Fraoigh. But because Yeats chose to use an Anglicised version of an Irish word, North suggests that in Yeats's case, we can talk about a divided allegiance that is characteristic to all Anglo-Irish. Furthermore, bringing an Irish name in his English verse could also be translated as an expression of the poet's individual isolation in England.<sup>259</sup>

Next, Michael North suggests that Yeats is imprisoned by an idea of freedom through the fact that he places himself on an island with the aim of being free. And yet, it is obvious that the poem relies on antithetical concepts. It encompasses both the idea of freedom and that of a communal past. The author rejects modernity, but at the same time he proclaims the concept of freedom on which modern politics and modern industry depend. And because "one can hardly return to Innisfree without having left it, just as one cannot regret the past without having lost it,"<sup>260</sup> the poem is in fact about loss and longing, two important themes that establish the nostalgic tone of the poem and confirm that "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" is indeed a modern poem, not only because of the sense of nostalgia that pervades each line of this poem, but also because of the author's attempt to reconcile in this poem the antithetical concepts that usually define modernity and modernism.

As a writer that came to be recognized as modern precisely because of his overt opposition to modernity and modernism, Yeats could not have set the political climate of his country apart from his poetry. In his writing he often sought to harmonize the opposing ideals that governed the Irish society, but because the means he used were not enough in a country dominated by a general turmoil that had shattered people's confidence in politics, he sometimes only managed to extend the gap between those ideals. The Irish Revival seemed at first the appropriate solution to the Irish situation, and

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<sup>259</sup> Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.25.

<sup>260</sup> Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.26.

through it Yeats hoped to provide a new resonance to Ireland's national identity. But how could he have managed to solve this conflict since not even the most prominent political figures of the day managed to solve the differences between cultural nationalism and the liberal state? Evidently, the task he had taken was not one to be easily accomplished by only one man, and we will continue this paper with a brief presentation of the issues that led to the failure of the Irish Revival.

At the beginning of his literary career, Yeats was under the influence of John O'Leary, and because O'Leary was a strong supporter of Thomas Davis, Yeats's trust in Davis's cultural nationalism came naturally. After many years of disillusionment, O'Leary began to understand that Irish independence could only be gained by means of force. Consequently, he came to believe in a sort of nationalism that excluded any kind of liberal element, sharing thus the ideas of the members of the Young Ireland, who wanted Ireland to be unified by political doctrine. Yeats, on the other hand, was more inclined towards an intellectual and historical nationalism that would restore Irishmen's trust in the true Irish values and decided to begin what he would later call "the revolt of the soul against the intellect."<sup>261</sup>

As Michael North asserts, Yeats rejected the liberalist ideal not only because he did not want Ireland to follow the path imposed by the British Empire, but also because the bases on which this system was built seemed weak enough to be able to provide the equality that everyone seemed to want. For Yeats, however, equality was not an attainable option. He wanted a country in which both unity and diversity would coexist; for the idealised image of Ireland that he had portrayed for himself could have only been created by joining two seemingly contradictory elements that would define not only Ireland's cultural background but it would also speak of the conflict within the author's mind. In Yeats's case, we can discuss about a fragmented identity, for he was always caught between his Irish-ness and his Englishness, a double-edged problem that would reflect itself throughout his writing, which more than once seemed to play the role of a reconciliatory element between his Ego and his Self.

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<sup>261</sup> Quoted by Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.28.

The theme of the double was very fashionable among modern writers and although Yeats might not have deliberately incorporated it in his work, his poetry reveals the double perspective of his aestheticism and political ideals. But before we can discuss further on this matter, we should take a look at the theme of the double as well as on various concepts such as identity, subjectivity and otherness, which are essential for our endeavour. As explained by modern philosophers of the twentieth century, there are several stages in the development of the concept of identity and subjectivity. The first stage is identified in Alphonso Lingis and Paul Ricoeur's theories. According to them, subjectivity can only be attained in direct relationship with otherness, for the individual cannot be defined or analyzed unless by contrast with others.

Noteworthy philosophers suggested that western civilisation is in continuous progress, thus lacking the sense of finality. Because of that, it can often be described as harboured by frustration and nihilism, the individual himself becoming the victim of these two. Through the image that sciences provide, the individual becomes aware of his limits, and yet, it is precisely the individual's contribution that keeps civilisation and history as well in continuous evolution. Thus, the individual becomes the absolute power, capable of creating everlasting history.

The self, as part of subjectivity, is defined only in contrast to the other, and the two can only exist within temporal coordinates. Time, as Husserl, Heidegger and Levinas agree,<sup>262</sup> is not an ideal category existing a priori, but rather a spontaneous element within one's consciousness, a perpetual re-enacting of the present. Life itself is a summation of events happening "now", over and over again, and as soon as one moment is over, the present becomes past. And yet, the past cannot be seen as a force that leads to the loss of the present, but rather as a drive that allows the present to exist, a process that gains meaning within consciousness. Time is generally understood as a sequence of moments, but because the moment has no past and no future, Levinas sees time as a self-contained entity, with no connection to the self or the consciousness. And yet, the Self perceives time and occupies temporal coordinates.

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<sup>262</sup> Felicia Burdescu Focșeneanu, *Sinele și Celălalt. Probleme ale Dedublării în Poezia lui Lucian Blaga și William Butler Yeats*. Editura Universal Dalsi, 1999, p.34.

The twentieth century psychoanalysis reveals the most dramatic aspects of the double. Carl Gustave Jung and Sigmund Freud were the psychoanalysts who defined the concepts derived from the analysis of the human conscious and unconscious mind: the Ego, the Self and the Shadow (or the Shadow-aspect). According to them, the Ego consists of two parts, a psychic and a somatic one, it works on the reality principle and it mediates between satisfying the individual's natural urges and being socially responsible and acting according to moral or social standards, operating thus in both the conscious and the unconscious mind. In other words, it is the result of the confrontation between the somatic elements and the external reality.

The Self encloses both the unconsciousness and the consciousness. Jung suggested that the Self plays the major role in the development of the individual personality, whereas the Ego represents only a small part of one's identity. But the real important element for our demonstration is the Shadow, an obsessing element closely related to the concept of "double". Jung defines the shadow as the dark side of human personality. It has been known since ancient times that human personality comprises both good and evil, and apparently the Shadow is responsible for the evil part that generates the darker and obsessive aspects of human personality. These aspects are the result of a confrontation between consciousness and the Shadow, the latter determining the manner in which moral judgement is applied to actions undertaken by the Ego.

Freud takes the task of defining the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious by using the concepts of Ego, Self and Super-Ego. According to him, there are three layers of the psyche: the conscious, the unconscious and the preconscious. These three layers form a coherent structure of an individual, called Ego, respond to external stimuli and are responsible for any perception and reaction of the individual. The Ego is the active, conscious counterpart that chooses what to repress. It is also the part of the Self that deals with perceptions and it becomes aware of the repressed material through the intervention of the Self. The Ego is responsible for wisdom and reason, while the Self is dominated by passions. The double appears thus as another representation of the Ego, the part that fights against the destruction of Ego, "a replica of one's unknown face."<sup>263</sup> With artists, the double finds its origins in the biographic component itself and

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<sup>263</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Selected Writings*. Introd. Anthony Storr. London, 1983, p.92.

extends to the work and language. Yeats makes no exception. His entire existence is marked by the double. While living in London, he was dreaming of Sligo, the place that offered him peace and stability, despite the internal struggle that Ireland had to face under British domination. The Irish people's character itself is double-faced: formal, yet nationalist, emotional, and yet restrained. Moreover, the young poet had to deal with the issue regarding his identity. As a descendant of Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy, he could not find his place either in the British or in the Irish society, and at home, he would feel somehow suppressed by an over-dominating and sceptical father who would seek to implant his own ideas into his son's mind. Because of that, the young boy whose taste for poetry had been developed by the reading of famous English writers would seek refuge in Celtic mythology, occultism and the Irish landscapes that allowed him to dream as a child.

Yeats's biographers claim that Anglo-Irish Ascendancy found in W.B. Yeats the proper environment to represent both the oppressed and the oppressor.<sup>264</sup> While claiming that the Anglo-Irish have brought an immense contribution to Gaelic culture, he also suggests that Anglo-Irish culture has been assimilated by the local one. At the same time, while advocating for a national Irish literature, he denied the importance of writing in Gaelic and considered that the true Irish spirit can be expressed in English just as well. The antithetical elements that governed his childhood, and implicitly his personality, extend themselves not only in his work, but also in his political creed. In point of race, he defended his Gaelic roots, but he was also the supporter of the idea of an English Ireland, one that would continue to speak and write in English, and yet it would manage to keep its spirituality intact. Through the Irish Revival he tried to accomplish all that, and yet, the more he tried to explain what the Irish culture was about, the more he made everything more ambiguous and even more antithetical.

According to Michael North, Yeats's attempt to create a unified culture for Ireland was not successful because the idea itself of unity achieved through acceptance of diversity is foolish. Therefore, it is no surprise that the weapons he had used to train his Irish audiences and to somehow impose through art a sort of cultural nationalism would

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<sup>264</sup> Felicia Burdescu Focșeneanu, *Sinele și Celălalt. Probleme ale Dedublării în Poezia lui Lucian Blaga și William Butler Yeats*. Editura Universal Dalsi, 1999, p.185.

turn against him. When the audiences objected to the exact elements that Yeats identified with Irish-ness, he considered that they have been touched by the English spirit, failing to notice that the elements he chose to celebrate were the one the English attributed to the Irish for centuries: wilderness, violence and savagery.<sup>265</sup>

The failure to create the cultural nationalism that the artist had pictured for his country, as well as the negative criticism of his play, determined Yeats to discover its weakness, and implicitly go for a more liberal approach. In defending Synge, whose play *Playboy* stirred up riots among the audiences, Yeats resorted to the doctrine of individual rights, the element that defines democracy itself. At the same time, he rejected democracy, for it was the principle that had led to the failure of the English society. The attack on his plays made Yeats believe that his idea of educating the masses was ineffective and decided thus to educate the elites. At this point, he was still convinced that Ireland should be represented by unity, and yet, when referring to true Irish people he was actually talking about the aristocracy, for he had come to realize that only the elites were capable to dedicate their lives to Ireland, while the masses with which he had sympathized in his youth did not follow the same path. His position at this point is rather controversial, because his idea of unity now means imposing a certain ideal of life on the masses.

As a senator, Yeats favoured some liberal ideals, but at the same time he continued to distrust democracy. He was against censorship based on moral grounds, he supported religious freedom and individual rights, but he still favoured elitism. These contradictions in point of political beliefs are in fact the result of the author's Anglo-Irish background. In his political career he advocated more for the rights of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, as North suggests, and he did it even if that meant embracing and resting his arguments on an ideology he did not really believe in. Some critics suggest that Yeats even went as far as to identify his own class with the Irish nation; however one can argue that such an idea is exaggerated, since Yeats never clearly stated such a thing.

Later in life, after he had abandoned the political career, Yeats's image of the State was that of a family. The controversy now arises from his idea that the family must

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<sup>265</sup> Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.33.

be kept strong through selective breeding, an idea not so different from Nazi's belief in the supremacy of the Aryan race. As North puts it, at this point it is almost impossible to believe that the man who now supports the idea of controlling the biological form of a nation had sometimes militated for the divorce law.

Yeats's entire political creed can be defined as an attempt to reconcile a part and the whole. The part can be identified either with the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy or with the elites, while the whole is represented by the masses. He believed that the part that distinguishes itself from the whole should become the representative part, even if violence is required to do so. His model was now Mussolini's fascist doctrine that promised to stand "against the masses, against human standardization."<sup>266</sup> Eventually, Yeats came to realize the fascism was nothing more than just another mass movement not so different from communism and even democracy and he ultimately reaches the conclusion that the antinomies between individual and community, duty and right, freedom and community, part and the whole cannot be reconciled. After all, his embracing of various doctrines is nothing more than an attempt to overcome the weaknesses of liberalism. He admits that his attempt to harmonize these opposites had failed, but he claims that it is the beauty of human nature to deal with issues that resist solution.

## 5.2 "The Second Coming" – a Poem on Gloomy Premonitions

"The Second Coming" was written during the Black and Tan Troubles in Ireland<sup>267</sup> in 1919, and it first appeared in *The Dial* in November, 1920. Later republished in the collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, the poem explores "the theory of cycles which governs the sequence of events."<sup>268</sup> *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* is a carefully structured collection that contains poems inspired by the Easter Rising, as well as others for which the main source of inspiration was *A Vision*. The collection contrasts

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<sup>266</sup> Michael North. *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot and Pound*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1991, p.71.

<sup>267</sup> Morton Irving Seiden, *William Butler Yeats, The Poet as a Mythmaker, 1865-1939*, Michigan State University Press, 1962, p.234.

<sup>268</sup> Cecil Maurice Bowra. *In General and Particular*. London: The World Publishing Co. 1964, p.233.



personal happiness and social turmoil. As a newlywed, Yeats had recently entered a period of marital happiness that allowed him to analyze clearly the external chaos. As usual, the biographical note is obvious in these poems too. The collection starts with a poem that shows that the artist's obsession for Iseult Gonne is finally over, continues with several poems whose purpose is to show how wonderful his young bride is, and ends with a poem dedicated to his new-born daughter. However, the collection also includes a series of poems that remind of the turbulence in Ireland and all over Europe at that time, poems that display the collision between supernatural forces, as well as poems that describe the dark and gloomy atmosphere that seems to have captured the whole world.

“The Second Coming” belongs to the second category. It is quite interesting to see how Yeats chose to combine poems that praise marital life and those that point out the imminent danger that threatens human existence itself. Perhaps this combination was not quite unintentional, or meaningless, and perhaps the idea it tries to deliver is that the author had finally managed to reach a state of tranquillity that allows him to enjoy personal happiness despite the external disorder. “The Second Coming” presents an image of disaster and it is usually interpreted as a prophetic manifesto for the arrival of a new god or for the end of world itself. The poem opens with an apocalyptic tableau:

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Thing fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world;  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of the innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all convictions, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.”<sup>269</sup>

“The Second Coming” is perhaps one of the finest poems in which Yeats made use of his own visionary system outlined in *A Vision*. In his occult mythography he talks about cyclical patterns and he states that every 2000 years a new spiritual leader is born and a new era begins. According to his theory, we are now in an objective era, and most

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<sup>269</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.210.

likely this will be followed by a subjective one, in which all the values and principles that rule our world will have no meaning. He predicted that this era will reach its end when a “rough beast will slouch towards Bethlehem to be born”, the exact episode that he incorporates in this poem. Yeats gives an interpretation to this scene from the point of view of a poet and a priest, using a modern myth. The poem is set in modern Ireland, which becomes a microcosmic symbol that the poet uses to project the present moment in history into a vision of the past and future. As we can notice, the speaker describes the array of signs that indicate that the present must collapse (everything falling apart, anarchy, the loss of innocence, etc.) and that soon a supernatural creature will be born to end everything.

Daniel Albright in *Notes to the Poems* gives a plausible explanation of how the poem was born (Albright: 619). He argues that according to Orthodox Christianity, the ones who have faith are prepared and are gladly expecting Christ to come down to Earth once again. Apparently, after a Second Coming, Christ will establish a kingdom of peace and joy on earth. Yet the purpose of the poem is to predict something else. At the end of the millennium, it will not be Christ who arises, but his opposite, a savage and merciless God – a rough beast – who will establish a different system of values that will stand against everything presented by Christ. Albright’s *Notes to The Poems* present Yeats’s own references to the poem, in which Yeats described the system of gyres. Thus, Yeats argues that:

“All the progress of the human soul and the progress of history can be analysed mathematically as the movement of two interlocking spinning cones, the apex of one screwing into the centre of the base of the other. As the reader finds out from *A Vision*, the movement consists of a simultaneous diminishing of the cone and an expanding of the other. In our age the primary cone, the cone of the Christian era, objective and self-effacing, has expanded almost to its maximum extent. But as it has enlarged, it has weakened, lost its fervour and the turning point of the gyres, a new god, the Antichrist, will be born, at the narrow point of the antithetical cone

and will inaugurate a subjective age, violent, arrogant, hierarchical, polytheistic, aesthetic and immoral.”<sup>270</sup>

Norman Jeffares, in *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, specifies that Yeats had in mind the story of the mythical Judwalis and Robartes (Jeffares: 241) when he wrote this poem, a fact that proves that Yeats was a minute observer of the human soul and the events influencing both his personal life and his career. He considered Yeats’s explanations on the poem quite complex, a strong evidence of Yeats’s being a man of great thinking, who analyzed and designed the human thought, as he himself felt.

As if in response, Daniel Albright contends that historical patterns may provide a proper interpretation for the poem, and yet “The Second Coming” can be read as a direct response to the Great War of 1914-1918, on the one hand, and on the other it is a transcription of a vision he had during a process of image-making he got acquainted with while he was attending an occult experiment led by one of the founding members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Yeats talks about this experiment in *Autobiographies*:

“He gave me a cardboard symbol and I closed my eyes. Sight came slowly...there rose before me mental that I could not control: a desert and black Titan raising himself up by his two hands from the middle of a heap of ancient ruins. Mathers explained that I had seen a being of the order of Salamanders because he had shown me that symbol, but it was not necessary even to show the symbol, it would have been sufficient that he imagined it... [I discovered] that for a considerable minority...the visible world would completely vanish, and that world, summoned by the symbol, take its place.”<sup>271</sup>

The vision he had made him more aware about the end of the millennium, and, as the legend goes, every 2000 years a spiritual war of imagination will lead to the birth of a

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<sup>270</sup> Daniel Albright, ed. *W.B. Yeats: the Poems*. London: Everyman’s Library Ltd., New Edition, 1992, p.619.

<sup>271</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Autobiographies*: “Reveries over Childhood and Youth”. William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, pp. 162-163.

new world. The use of blank verse instead of the rhymed one so often favoured by Yeats and so representative for English lyric poetry shows Yeats's intention to give a better image of the disintegration of civilisation. The initial intention of the author might have been to create rhymed lines, since there are also rhymed lines in the poem ("Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world"), but he obviously abandoned the idea in order to create an image as close as possible to the one he had seen during the occult experiment.

The poem opens with a vivid picture of a falcon in flight "turning and turning in the widening gyre". By using the image of the falcon, Yeats, the master of visual symbol, provides the possibility to interpret this symbol in different ways. If we interpret the poem according to its biblical connotations, the falcon flying away from the falconer is the man who has deserted Christ. From *A Vision* we find out that the gyres the author talks about are cone-shaped, and since the falcon turns in gyres starting from the narrowest point, which represents Christ's birth, to its widest one, which represents the end of an era, the evolution of mankind is only natural. In the beginning, every new leader gains popularity quickly, but as time goes by, its popularity decreases continuously, and when mankind finally forsakes its leader, a new one has to be born, and with him a new era begins. The following images succeed like in a film. The falconer vainly calls out the indifferent falcon, in other words, mankind is so immersed in sin and immorality that it cannot even remember Christ's teaching: "The falcon cannot hear the falconer", and as a consequence, "the blood-dimmed tide" floods the world. The image of the falcon and falconer received different interpretations. For instance Seiden perceives them as the medieval knight's sport of hawking. Daniel Albright quotes Yeats asking Thomas in the automatic script for 17 1918: "Is not world as spiral ascends getting farther from reality" and gives then a passage from 1910 draft of the *Player Queen* anticipating the image of ruin.<sup>272</sup> Jeffares simply implies that the lines may derive from Dante's inscription of how he and Virgil reach the eight circle of Hell seated on Geryon's back, who in Cary's translation moves in wheeling gyres:

"Of ample circuit, easy they descent..."

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<sup>272</sup> Daniel Albright, ed. *W.B. Yeats: the Poems*. London: Everyman's Library Ltd., New Edition, 1992, p.620.

As falcon that hath long been on the wing  
But lure nor bird hath seen, while in despair  
The falconer cries 'Ah me! Thou stoop'st to earth'!  
Wearied descends whence nimbly he arose  
In many an airy wheel and lighting sits  
At distance from his lord in angry mood...<sup>273</sup>

A more troubling interpretation determined by Yeats's openly-stated trust in aristocracy to control the course of humanity puts the falcon and the falconer in the position of servant and master. In this case, the aimless flight of the falcon might suggest that without the falconer's guidance, the results would be disastrous: "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world". In the light of this theory, Yeats might suggest that the destructive forces that have taken over the world might be the consequence of a dysfunctional relationship between aristocracy and the masses. Yet again, this is just another interpretation, but the author must be given credit for creating a poem that seems so related to occult studies and at the same time so rooted in reality. Whatever interpretation we consider more appropriate, one thing remains the same: the widening gyre and the flood are the dark side of an imaginary moon and the cone of our primary civilization.

The next line "Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world" suggests similar points of view in the opinion of the three critics. For Seiden, for instance, it represents the moment when Yeats, after having named his symbols, goes on describing the social, religious and political conditions. Daniel Albright analyses the verses according to *A Vision* where anarchy and the adoration of violence are presented as the characteristics of the end of a historical era. Jeffares' analysis situates itself in the light of *The Trembling of the Veil* where Yeats wrote that he had not foreseen "the growing murderousness of the world" and that when writing *The Second Coming* he had the troubles of Ireland in mind, as well as the Russian Revolution:

"What I want is that Ireland be kept from giving itself (under the influence of its lunatic faculty of going against everything which it believes England to affirm) to Marxian revolution or Marxian definition of value in any

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<sup>273</sup> Alexander Norman Jeffares. *WB. Yeats: Man and Poet*. London: Kyle Cathie, 1996, pp.109-110.

form. I consider the Marxian criterion of values as in this age the spearhead of materialism and leading to inevitable murder. From that criterion follows the well-known phrase ‘Can the bourgeois be innocent?’<sup>274</sup>

Yeats continues his poem with the line “The ceremony of innocence is drowned”, suggesting that social manners and religious faith are being neglected or destroyed, in Seiden’s opinion. Everything is turned upside down: the rulers of mankind – the “best” or the falcons – have lost their conviction whereas those designed to be ruled – the “worst” or the “falcons” – feel their confidence is full of intensity. The same line in Jeffares’ commentary bears similarities with Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*: “The good want power, but to weep barren tears / The powerful goodness want...”<sup>275</sup> For his interpretation of the poem, Daniel Albright quotes Yeats telling to Ethel Mannin in 1936 to “look up a poem called *The Second Coming*. It... foretold what is happening... every nerve trembles with horror of what is happening in Europe”. In this case, the poem receives political connotations. The author seems to condemn the atrocities committed by the political regimes of the beginning of the twentieth century: communist, fascist, nationalist, etc., with no exception. He believed that the irrational violence of World War I and the Russian Revolution, as well as the random atrocities that Black and Tans committed in Ireland, were signs of an approaching apocalypse in point of social stability and political dominance.

In the political disquietude of Ireland, an image full of love is revealed before the eyes of the poet: “Surely some revelation is at hand; / Surely the Second Coming is at hand.” A new age, classical and aristocratic will be born. Nevertheless the image full of hope is dimmed by another image: “A vast image out of Spiritus Mundi/ Troubles my sight”. The frightful image of the troubled world makes him look into the supernatural and there he finds the image of creature with lion body and the head of a man, which can be identified as the symbolic Sphinx of antiquity, finally overcome and put to sleep by

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<sup>274</sup> A. Norman Jeffares. *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of WB. Yeats*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968, p.242.

<sup>275</sup> A. Norman Jeffares. *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of WB. Yeats*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1968, p.242.

Christ's conception and birth.<sup>276</sup> The image of the "reel shadows of the indignant desert birds" analyzed together with the first two lines of the poem suggests that the falcon has been "reborn as its anti-self."<sup>277</sup> Once again the dominant theme is that of historical cycles, thoroughly discussed by Yeats in *A Vision*:

"Each age unwinds the threads another age had wound, and it amuses me to remember that before Phidias, and his westward moving art, Persia fell, and that when full moon came round again, amid eastward moving thought, and brought Byzantine glory, Rome fell; and at that at the outset of our westward moving Renaissance Byzantium fell; all things dying each other's life, living each other's death."<sup>278</sup>

The Spiritus Mundi/ Anima Mundi/ Soul of the World is defined by Yeats himself as "a general storehouse of images which have ceased to be a property of any personality or spirit", while Daniel Albright, defines it as the treasure house of images not invented by man but given to him from beyond. In western tradition, the vast image received from Spiritus Mundi, the lion with the human head, moving sensuously on the sands of the desert, with "a blank gaze and pitiless as the sun", slouching towards Bethlehem to be born is obviously a sort of warning regarding the birth of the Antichrist:

"That twenty centuries of stony sleep  
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle  
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?"<sup>279</sup>

Both Jeffares and Albright mention that Yeats considered the Christian era as being two thousand years long. As for the "rough beast", Albright associates it with

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<sup>276</sup> Morton Irving Seiden, *William Butler Yeats, The Poet as a Mythmaker, 1865-1939*, Michigan State University Press, 1962, p.235.

<sup>277</sup> David A. Ross *A Critical Companion to William Butler Yeats. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File Inc., 2009, p.221.

<sup>278</sup> Yeats, William Butler. *A Vision. The Original 1925 Version*. Eds. Catherine E. Paul and Margaret Mills Harper. *Collected Works of W. B. Yeats 13*. New York: Scribner, 2008, p.183.

<sup>279</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.210.

unicorns, Yeats's symbol for decadence, which "prances, inspire, trample grapes, copulate with queens and prostitutes, causing general havoc" and states that around 1904 Yeats wrote:

"I began to imagine, as always at my left side just out of the range of the sight, a brazen winged beast that I associated with laughing, ecstatic destruction. And then the poet predicts the end of the fin-de-siècle art that he loved: After Stephane Mallarme, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau...after our own verse...what more is possible? After us the Savage God."<sup>280</sup> (Albright: 621).

For the last line of the poem "Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born" - Albright discovers the interpretation in *Exploration*, assembled by Yeats's widow in 1962 and containing some book prefaces: "the next civilisation may be born, not from a virgin's womb, nor a tomb without body, not from a void, but of our own rich experience." He also asserts that Yeats liked to describe the origin of the antithetical civilisation as sensual thrashing, a spasm of horror. Unterecker suggests that Yeats might have created his poem relying on what Jung called archetypal patterns. He claims that Yeats, who was already in his mature years, might have felt what any other man feels when he realizes his end is close – that everything will completely change after him. The thought might result from some sort of jealousy generated by the idea that everything around will continue to exist and somehow tempered by the consolation that everything is going to end anyway. Yeats, however, does not talk about a physical destruction of the world, but rather about a reversal of the world as we know it.

Seiden finds a paradox in the poem. He says that in *A Vision*, Yeats writes about the supernatural influx with which a civilisation begins, which is both antithetical and primary, both lunar and solar. Therefore, despite the fact that Christ stands in opposition with the classical antiquity, he was also a primary God for the two thousand years following his birth. The falcon, the primary god for this era, was thus antithetical and ruthless for the previous era, and the Sphinx, the antithetical god for this era but the primary god for the next one is a symbol of both sorrow and joy. The falcon paved the

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<sup>280</sup> Daniel Albright, ed. *W.B. Yeats: the Poems*. London: Everyman's Library Ltd., New Edition, 1992, p.621.



way to cultural rebirth on the one hand, but on the other it extinguished the past. The Sphinx (the rough beast) will bring better times perhaps, but it will also destroy whatever precedes its reign.

## 6. The Artefact and Artist in Yeats's Poetry

### 6.1 The Young Artist in Search of the Perfect Poetic Expression

The Oxford Dictionary defines the artefact as “an object made by human, being typically one of cultural or historical interest.” For Yeats, as for many other writers, poetry was the supreme artefact. His main purpose was not to create an art that would easily become popular, and yet it would be at risk of easily falling into oblivion, but rather an enduring work of art that would withstand the test of time. Of course, he could have been able to create an artefact only after discovering a perfect poetic expression, and in order to do that he relied on the aspects presented by Pater in his “Essay on Style”. First of all, the emphasis is laid on the artist's individuality: “The style is the man, complex or simple, in his individuality, his plenary sense of what he really has to say, his sense of the world.”<sup>281</sup> In his opinion, poetry is an expression of its creator's view of the world, and this is precisely what Yeats's poetry does, no matter whether his world was represented by the past, the present or the future.

At the beginning of his artistic creation, for Yeats, as for Pater himself, poetry was subjective. It was an utterance of its creator's personality and temperament. The poetic self identifies itself with the voice of the poet, a quality that can also be traced at Romantic and pre-Raphaelite poets. Nevertheless, Yeats realized that such poetry, despite being a reflection of his genius, could have failed to achieve the qualities of an artefact, for little stress on the poetic technique and much subjectivity could have only put him at risk to become too sentimental, and thus express in poetry an altered version of reality.<sup>282</sup> And yet, he still could not embrace the theories subsequently laid down by Eliot in his essay “Tradition and Individual Talent”, in which he argues that “the more perfect artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which

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<sup>281</sup> Pater, Horatio Walter. *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style*. Rockville, Maryland: Arc Manor, 2008, p.23.

<sup>282</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959p.16

creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material”<sup>283</sup> (Eliot, 1932: 18).

As a young poet, Yeats stood against modernity and Modernism. He rejected the changes brought by modernity in people’s lives and he discredited the qualities of Modernism in poetic creation. His stubbornness to write as men have always written, referring here to Romantic poets, produced however some of his best poetry. A perfect example might be “The Sorrow of Love”, a poem written with Maud Gonne in mind, in which the author tells the simple story of a girl who manages to stir up a storm of feelings into the mind of the young poet, all presented in picturesque landscape with a “full round moon”, “star-laden sky” and “ever-singing leaves”:

“And then you came with those red mournful lips,  
And with you came the whole of the world’s tears’  
And all the sorrows of her labouring ships,  
And all the burden of her myriad years.”<sup>284</sup>

As we can see, the poem objectifies a complex set of emotions, and yet it keeps the author’s personal touch. It is highly personal and sensual, and follows the pattern of Romantic poetry with its perfect rhyme and rhythm, and the placement of emotions above anything else. And yet, despite the musicality of such verse, for a poet that always needed to reinvent himself, this technique gradually became unsatisfactory. He needed now to discover a technique that would allow him to objectify personal utterance; he needed to make the personal impersonal, a sort of absolute truth that would still reflect his own personality. Thus, he created the Mask, a sort of alter-ego, an antithetical self that produces poetry when it collides with the poetic self.

The Mask, in Yeats’s words, is a sort of device that allows man to become what he is not or he could never be. And because of his fascination with Ireland’s history, the Mask he chose for himself finds its origins in the mythological past of his country. The Mask allows him to become a man of action, instead of a man of thought, and it is the

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<sup>283</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot. *Selected Essays 1888-1965*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company Inc. 1932, p.18.

<sup>284</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.45.

result of an entire psychological process generated by an internal struggle. Now, bearing in mind that Yeats sometimes used his poetry as a sort of educational tool for an entire people, we can safely assume that he wanted to apply the Mask he chose for himself to Ireland as well. He had always identified himself with Ireland, and he dreamed that through the Mask, Ireland would identify with himself, or at least with that image of himself created through the doctrine of the Mask. In such a frightening, unsafe and shallow reality the Mask would provide the means to overcome any difficulty, for he believed a reminder of his country's mythical past would suffice to bring back the unity that Ireland lacked. Of course, such ideas did not result only from the interpretation of his poetry, but also from his essays and autobiographies where Yeats clearly tells us his opinion on the theory of the Mask and its applicability to the real world:

“I was compelled to live out of Ireland the greater part of every year and was but keeping my mind upon what I knew must be the subject matter of my poetry. [...] My mind began drifting vaguely towards that doctrine of ‘the mask’ which has convinced me that every passionate man [...] is, as it were, linked with another age, historical or imaginary, where alone he finds images that rouse his energy. Napoleon was never of his own time, as the naturalistic writers and painters bid all men be, but had some Roman Emperor's image in his head and some condottiere's blood in his heart.”<sup>285</sup>

The Mask is not, however, Yeats's only personal stamp in poetry. His entire poetic work is a carefully constructed whole, and each poem included in it is the result of a laborious process of creation that begins with a prose draft of a poem, continues with elaborate efforts to put it in rhyme, and then passes to multiple revisions before being delivered to the reader. Yeats himself declared in his *Autobiography*: “Metrical composition is always very difficult to me, nothing is done upon the first day, not one rhyme is in its place; and when at last the rhymes begin to come, the first rough draft of a

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<sup>285</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Autobiographies*. “Four Years”. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, pp. 137-139.

William Butler Yeats. *Autobiographies*: “Reveries over Childhood and Youth”. William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999

six-line stanza takes the whole day.”<sup>286</sup> This statement refers to his early years when he was trying to make a name for himself in the literary circles of Dublin and London. Nevertheless, the process of creation did not get any easier as time went by. Of course, after developing his own style, another difficult process that ran its course after many years of experimenting, he managed to put out a first draft of a poem quite easily, and yet it still needed extensive revision before achieving a shape that would satisfy its creator.

This intense process of writing has become more than once an important theme in his poetry. In *The Wind among the Reeds*, the collection in which Yeats proves his craftsmanship in lyrical and symbolist poetry, Yeats included the poem “He gives his beloved certain rhymes”. It is known that “the beloved” in this poem was Olivia Shakespear, the woman with whom Yeats had a short, but passionate love affair, and the one he saw as a symbol of perfection and beauty, so in order to express the hardship of creating verse he contrasts the image of his beloved, whose sensuousness seems so natural, with the creative process, described more like burden:

“Fasten your hair with a golden pin,  
And bind up every wandering tress;  
I bade my heart build these poor rhymes:  
It worked at them, day out, day in,  
Building a sorrowful loveliness  
Out of the battles of old times.  
You need but lift a pearl-pale hand,  
And bind up your long hair and sigh;  
And all men’s hearts must burn and beat;  
And candle-like foam on the dim sand,  
And stars climbing the dew-dropping sky,  
Live but to light your passing feet.”<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Autobiographies*. “Ireland after Parnell”. William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald Eds. New York: Scribner, 1999, p.171.

<sup>287</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.71.

Another interesting aspect about Yeats is his need for unity, which he tried to achieve in poetry. Throughout his life, there were three main domains that haunted his thoughts: literature, philosophy and nationalism. However, the three of them seemed incompatible, and although there had always been a voice in his head telling him “Hammer your thoughts into unity”, this was not an easy task for the young poet. His first collections were often seen as a chaotic assembly of poems reflecting Yeats’s interests in various domains.<sup>288</sup> Nevertheless, they all had in common a sense of intimacy, the vivid imagery in all of them reminds us of the Romantic tradition, and their musicality is constructed through a careful choice of words and versification. Meanwhile, Yeats was very preoccupied with discovering a new style that would manage to bring together his three main interests and would not be similar with that of the Modernists that were becoming more and more popular in England:

“I thought one day... ‘If somebody could make a style which would not be an English style and yet would be musical and full of colour, many others would catch fire from him, and we would have a really great school of ballad poetry in Ireland...’ Then, a little later on I thought, ‘ If they had something else to write about besides political opinions, if more of them would write about the beliefs of the people like Allingham, or about old legends like Ferguson, they would find it easier to get a style.’”<sup>289</sup>

Obviously, Yeats militates here in favour of his own style and argues against poetry written for political purposes, and yet, he would soon find himself captive in the nationalist whirls for which he would eventually find aesthetic purposes. However, Yeats’s style must not be confounded with that of Thomas Davis or James Mangan who wrote poetry for Nationalistic purposes only. He did not write poetry for a cause, he wrote for Ireland. He wanted to create an Irish tradition in literature, and for that he needed to leave behind any tradition available to him at that time and immerse in Ireland’s mythical past for subject matter:

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<sup>288</sup> Thomas Francis Parkinson. *W. B. Yeats, Self-Critic: a Study of his Early Verse, and the Later Poetry*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971, p.1.

<sup>289</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan, 1961, pp.3-4.

“I could not write for any other country but Ireland, for my style has been shaped by the subjects I have worked on, but there was a time when my imagination seemed unwilling, when I found myself writing of some Irish event in words that would have better fitted some Italian or Eastern event, for my style had been shaped in that general stream of European literature which has come from so many watersheds, and it was slowly, very slowly, that I made a new style. It was years before I could rid myself of Shelley's Italian light, but now I think my style is myself. I might have found more of Ireland if I had written in Irish, but I have found a little, and I have found all myself.”<sup>290</sup>

Again, the emphasis is laid here on the national and the personal as two complementary, if not identical fundamentals that in Yeats's poetry could not exist one without the other. In the first stage of his poetic career he drew his subject matter mainly from Irish folklore and heroic myths, remaining thus faithful to national experience, and yet again, he passed all that through the filter of personal experience, trying to transform his poetry into a coherent entity that would embody individual understanding and at the same time establish general truths. He tried to educate his people through his poetry, and yet he cannot be accused of trying to impose a personal view on an entire nation, because his poems do not express a singular view on a subject matter, but rather a wide range of interpretations, allowing the reader to form his own opinion.

## **6. 2 The Artist – a Passionate Man Writing for Men and Praising Feeling**

As an artist, Yeats dedicated his life to art and to his country. However, his country has not always been as dedicated to him as it is nowadays. In his youth, Yeats was a supporter of the Nationalist movement and tried to bring his contribution to this cause through his writing, and yet, as we have said before, he did not create poetry to be used as political tool. Nevertheless, he wrote a few poems that could have been used for political purposes too, some of them being included in *From 'A Full Moon in March'*, a collection that seems to have never satisfied Yeats's artistic demands, which is what

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<sup>290</sup> William Butler Yeats. *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan, 1961, p.82.

explains the fact that it includes poems inspired by events that happened many decades before.

The collection itself seems to be a disordered ensemble in which Yeats seems to have forced the material he had in order to start working on his final collection of poetry. Because of his poor health he must have been quite aware that his end is near, therefore time was now a luxury he could not afford to lose if he wanted to “create the great design” of his poetry.<sup>291</sup> The collection opens with “Parnell’s Funeral”, one of the poems that recall past events and also the one that lays down the disorder that characterizes the entire volume. Evidently, the poem is based on an event that happened in 1891 – the funeral of the nationalist political leader Charles Stewart Parnell and it seems to have been written as a response to the tragedies happening in his life and in Ireland as well. The death of O’Higgins had left him with a bitter taste regarding Ireland’s social environment, while the death of Lady Gregory and the dismemberment of Coole Park made him feel barren, as he wrote in the “Preface” to *The King of the Great Clock Tower*:

“A year ago I found that I had written no verse for two years; I had never been so long barren; I had nothing in my head and there used to be more than I could write. Perhaps Coole Park where I escaped from politics, from all that Dublin talked of, when it was shut, shut me out from my theme; or did the subconscious drama that was my imaginative life end with its owner” but it was more likely that I had grown too old for poetry. I decided to force myself to write, then take advice.”<sup>292</sup>

“Parnell’s Funeral” opens with a recollection of the moment when Parnell was buried in Glasnevin Cemetery. According to some of the two hundred thousand participants at the event, a star fell from the sky the moment Parnell was buried, and this cosmic event was interpreted by Yeats as “an accepted sacrifice.”<sup>293</sup> The moment is

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<sup>291</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959p.242.

<sup>292</sup> Quoted in Brewster Ghiselin’s *The Creative Process: A Symposium*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press Ltd. 1952, p.107.

<sup>293</sup> Brian Arkins. *Builders of my Soul: Greek and Roman Themes in Yeats*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1990, p.108.



presented by Yeats as a sort of final effort of Parnell who manages to bring people together one more time before his body is put in the ground where he would rest in peace for eternity. The soul however, does not find its peace yet, for Ireland is still governed by the same forces Parnell fought against his entire life, and with its final powers it generates a cosmic phenomenon that is meant to remind Irish people what they must fight for:

“Under the Great Comedian’s tomb the crowd.  
A bundle of tempestuous cloud is blown  
About the sky; where that is clear of cloud  
Brightness remains; a brighter star shoots down;  
What shudders run through all that animal blood?  
What is this sacrifice? Can someone there  
Recall the Cretan barb that pierced a star?”<sup>294</sup>

The second stanza continues on the same note. Yeats describes the “frenzied crowd”, the people that attended the funeral, as being sheltered by the “rich foliage” of trees through which the light of the stars glitters. By resorting to Greek myth – “the Cretan barb that pierced a star”, “the Great Mother” that killed the boy and “cut out his heart” – Yeats tries to underscore Parnell’s god-like nature. Parnell is the boy who gets killed, and as the legend tells us, he will rise again through those who will eat his heart.

In the next stanza, Yeats describes an Ireland that seems to have accelerated its entry into the “final phases on his visionary wheel.”<sup>295</sup> Modernity seems to take its toil on everybody and anarchy is loosed upon the world. He mentions Emmet, Fitzgerald and Tone were murdered by strangers, while for Parnell’s death the raging mob is to be held responsible:

“An age is the reversal of an age:  
When strangers murdered Emmet, Fitzgerald, Tone,  
We lived like men that watch a painted stage.  
What matter for the scene, the scene once gone:

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<sup>294</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.319.

<sup>295</sup> John Unterecker. *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1959, p.243.

It had not touched our lives. But popular rage,  
Hysterica passio dragged this quarry down.  
None shared our guilt; nor did we play a part  
Upon a painted stage when we devoured his heart.”<sup>296</sup>

The poem was written when Yeats’s trust in Nationalism was almost non-existent, and his belief in the ability of aristocracy to rule the country was more and more powerful. In the last stanza of this section he writes: “Come, fix upon me that accusing eye”, as if he would try to remember his readers about that moment in 1890 when Parnell was put under public scrutiny and condemnation because of his love affair with a married woman. He therefore blames public opinion for the death of a much beloved leader. The line “I thirst for accusation” suggests that Yeats himself feels responsible for the death of Parnell, because he, like many others, remained a simple spectator and turned his back on him together with the raging crowd. The section ends with a final warning addressed to those that can make a change in Ireland:

“[...] All that was sung.  
All that was said in Ireland is a lie  
Bred out of the contagion of the throng,  
Saving the rhyme rats hear before they die.  
Leave nothing but the nothings that belong  
To this bare soul, let all men judge that can  
Whether it be an animal or a man.”<sup>297</sup>

The entire poem is a sort of protest against the mob that seems to be no longer under control. The second section of the poem opens with the line “The rest I pass, one sentence I unsay”. From Phillip Marcus we find out that the sentence is “None shared our guilt; nor did we play a part / Upon a painted stage when we devoured his heart”. He further explains that “[what] the poet has had to take back is not the blame and the self-condemnation but the suggestion that anyone of the Free State era had been Parnell’s

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<sup>296</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.319.

<sup>297</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p.320.

legitimate successor, had assimilated his vital essence and assumed his role as priest-king.”<sup>298</sup> Next, Yeats suggests a few possible people that would have done a far better job in controlling the mob if they had “eaten Parnell’s heart”. The first in line is de Valera, the Head of Government of the Irish Free State, who would not have turned into a “loose-lipped demagogue” and would have managed to prevent the civil war as the head of the state. The next one is Cosgrave who would have satisfied “the land’s imagination” and would have prevented the assassination of O’Higgins. Finally, even O’Duffy would have made a good job if he would have eaten Parnell’s heart. However, in O’Duffy’s case, Yeats makes no further comments, maybe because of O’Duffy’s allegiance to fascism, or maybe because he was the head of the Blueshirts, a right-wing political organization that Yeats himself supported for a short time. The poem ends with the lines: “Their school a crowd, his master solitude; / Through Jonathan Swift’s dark grove he passed, and there / Plucked bitter wisdom that enriched his blood”, suggesting maybe that Parnell shared the same fate with Swift, for a hero in the modern times must be without a doubt annihilated.

### 6. 3 “The Dolls”

The volume *Responsibilities* is the first collection of poetry in which Yeats includes modernist poems. “The Dolls”, the twenty-line poem that is delivered right after “The Magi” and right before “A Coat”, serves for the writer’s aesthetic responsibilities, just like its predecessor and its successor. In this poem, more than in any other poem written before, the reader notices Ezra Pound’s influence upon Yeats’s style. The focus here is on an image, an artificial product that becomes the embodiment of perfection, a work of art, an artefact that can survive the passing of time, just like the golden bird from “Sailing to Byzantium”.

The idea of artifice as opposed to the natural world has always been a great source of fascination for Yeats, mainly because of the ageless quality of artifice. Nevertheless, in his poetry artifice does not replace nature, or the other way around. Instead, they seek each other, they interact, and in special cases like “The Dolls”, their roles are reversed. In

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<sup>298</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.160.

other cases, like “Sailing to Byzantium”, the reader is carried toward the artificial, while in its opposing twin, “Byzantium”, in which the reader finds himself surrounded by artificiality, his attention is directed towards the natural. However, for a better understanding of this poem in which the artificial seems to have more value than the natural, we must take into consideration Yeats’s own commentaries regarding the origins of “The Dolls”:

“The fable for this poem came into my head while I was giving some lectures in Dublin. I had noticed once again how all thought among us is frozen into ‘something other than human life.’ After I had made the poem, I looked up one day into the blue of the sky, and suddenly imagined, as if lost in the blue of the sky, stiff figures in procession. I remembered that they were the habitual image suggested by blue sky, and looking for a second fable called them “The Magi”[...], complementary forms of those enraged dolls.”<sup>299</sup>

Analyzed together, “The Magi” and “The Dolls” seem to counterbalance each other. In “The Magi”, for example, the artificial represented by the “pale, unsatisfied ones”, look towards the natural, “the uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor”, while in “The Dolls”, the artificial, symbolized by the dolls standing on a shelf, rejects in repulsion the natural, the “noisy and filthy” baby. Yeats’s choice to place “The Dolls” after “The Magi”, even if the former was written first is very interesting, and our guess is that perhaps that happened because they were written in a period when the author himself was disappointed with the natural, imperfect world around and was searching for some sort of artifice that would make the real world more tolerable. However, this situation reverses in *The Tower* and *The Winding Stair*, for if in the first volume the poet travels towards an artificial world, in the second he comes back to the natural and embraces life with all its imperfections.

In “The Dolls” the reader is carried into an artificial setting right from the opening lines. The attributes of the artificial and the natural are, however, reversed up to a point. The dolls are given a voice, and thus they are personified, while the baby, the natural

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<sup>299</sup> W.B. Yeats’s “Notes” to *Responsibilities and other Poems*. New York: The Macmillan Company: 1916, p. 187.

version of the dolls makes nothing but noise. By attributing such qualities to both parties, Yeats actually underlines the superiority of the artificial:

“A doll in the doll-maker’s house  
Looks at the cradle and bawls:  
‘That is an insult to us.’  
But the oldest of all the dolls,  
Who had seen, being kept for show,  
Generations of his sort,  
Out-screams the whole shelf: ‘Although  
There’s not a man can report  
Evil of this place,  
The man and the woman bring  
Hither, to our disgrace,  
A noisy and filthy thing.’”<sup>300</sup>

Considering Yeats’s determination to discover a perfect poetic expression that would turn his writing into an enduring work of art, and aligning it with the superiority of the artificial over the natural that is bound to destruction, we may see in the dolls a symbol of poetry itself. As we can notice, there is a hierarchy of the dolls, the oldest one being the most important, just like there is a hierarchy in art, the oldest work of arts being the most valuable, while the newly born strive to achieve the standards imposed by their predecessors.

The world of the dolls is an artificial version of the natural world. The dolls are self-sufficient entities that cannot accept any natural, decaying “things” among themselves. The lines “There’s not a man can report / Evil of this place” make us think of some sort of utopia, a perfect world in which evil cannot exist. However, the peaceful atmosphere of this artificial world is destroyed when, “to [the doll’s] disgrace, a baby is brought into their world. Strangely, the dolls act as if their existence was threatened by the interference of the animated ‘doll’ brought among them, and even more curiously,

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<sup>300</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, pp. 141-142.

the doll-maker and his wife feel responsible and remorseful for having disrupted the doll's harmony:

“Hearing him groan and stretch  
The doll-maker's wife is aware  
Her husband has heard the wretch,  
And crouched by the arm of his chair,  
She murmurs into his ear,  
Head upon shoulder leant:  
'My dear, my dear, O dear.  
It was an accident.’”<sup>301</sup>

An interesting interpretation of “The Dolls” is offered to us by Kitti Carriker who relies on Freud's “The Uncanny” for the poem's analysis. She begins her analysis by establishing the uncanny character of the dolls as miniature idealized replicas of human bodies.<sup>302</sup> She points out the iconic quality of the doll, which in order to be considered an object needs to possess the optic, the ontological and the conventional properties of an object. In Yeats's poem, however, the dolls become the subject, while their creator is reduced to an object. They are given the ability to speak, to cry, and thus they become human and inhuman at the same time. They share some of the features of the living, and yet they interpret the living as negative, for sexuality is the main feature that differentiates the artificial from the natural. While they are “mere sexless re-creations that the doll-maker has built in his own image,”<sup>303</sup> their creator, his wife and their newborn babies are sexual beings, and this is the main factor that generates their repulsion.

The dolls seem to play however a double role: that of icons and that of doubles. The baby is doubled, and at the same time portrayed by the doll that feels offended when he is brought in their environment, while the oldest doll that “has seen generations of his

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<sup>301</sup> William Butler Yeats. *The Collected Poems of William Butler Yeats*. London: Macmillan Publishing Limited, 1985, p. 141.

<sup>302</sup> Kitti Carriker. *Created in Our Image: the Miniature Body of the Doll as Subject and Object*. London: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1998, p.65.

<sup>303</sup> Kitti Carriker. *Created in Our Image: the Miniature Body of the Doll as Subject and Object*. London: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1998, p.68.

sort”, doubles the doll-maker, and it is also an icon of the one who created generations and generations of dolls. The doll-maker, however, created all of them, but the doll is the idealized version of the baby, and not the other way around. The doll keeps its body intact with the passing of time, while the baby grows up, becomes old and then dies and falls into oblivion.

The poem ends with two important lines that suggest the main difference between the dolls and the baby: “My dear, my dear, O dear / It was an accident.” The “accident” is of course the baby, for the dolls can only be deliberately created. Marcus proposes yet another interpretation of the poem. He suggests that the poem can be analyzed through the perspective of the contradictions over national art. He explains that the baby corresponds to the art that bears the touch of personal utterance, while the dolls correspond to the Nationalist poets who use verse for political purposes.<sup>304</sup> Whether this is the case or not, the dolls still remain symbols of eternal beauty, while their maker’s body gradually deteriorates. And yet, the maker would exist even without his dolls, while the dolls’ existence depends exclusively on the maker.

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<sup>304</sup> Phillip L. Marcus. *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Literary Revival*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987, p.117

## CONCLUSIONS

Had not Yeats made all the changes in style, method and personality, his prestige would not have been of a writer of remarkable consistency and power. The boy who dreamed to conquer “the world with a magician’s wand” (Richard Ellmann, *W.B. Yeats: The Man and the Mask*: 287), the man who during a lifetime did everything in his power to revive the old Irish culture, the author who reinvented the Irish literature and contributed to shaping Ireland’s national identity, did succeed in having his name inscribed among the most valuable world-class writers. The most beloved among the Irish writers, the old man who expressed his desire not to be buried in a place where nobody knew him and the artist who wanted to take the shape of a golden bird to sing to lords and ladies of Byzantium of what is past and present or to come, Yeats and some of the finest writers that Ireland produced managed to put their homeland on the literary map.

The aim of our thesis has been to explore Yeats’s oeuvre in the context of national and international history and above all in the context of his personal life in order to highlight what the reasons were for the Irish writer to write the way he did and to endow such a priceless literary estate to humankind of all times and of places. Moreover, as the title of our thesis asserts, the way in which the concept of history intertwined with family bonds, education and studies and all these came as whirls in his poetic creation. Yeats materialized the concept of history on the grounds of legends and Irish folklore while the sources blended with his cultural studies, his friendship with great English poets and his desire which ultimately became a duty to change the poetic expression of the time into modern poetry and at the same time deep rooted in Ireland’s mythological past. Thus, the writer’s poetical creation is characterized by three great passions: for literature, for history and philosophy, on the one hand and on the other his interest in occultism, hermetic studies, theosophy, cabalistic teachings, Rosicrucian philosophy, alchemy, astrology, magic, spirituality, all these while healing for his unreciprocated love for Maud Gonne. Undoubtedly, these are topics forever open to interpretations and over-interpretations. Nonetheless, the present endeavour does not claim to exhaust the research on William Butler Yeats. Yet, through our interdisciplinary undertaking, we attempted to



enlighten some aspects of the writer's life and work. Thus the present thesis is based on literary, historical and philosophical theories making use of descriptive method in the theoretical part while the practical part makes use of comparative, hermeneutic and critical approaches.

M.M. Bakhtin's study, "Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences", represents a useful connection advocating for the intercession of our thesis. Thus, Bakhtin (Bakhtin: 159) ascertains that understanding may be "dismembered into individual acts" which then merge into a "unified process" and that each individual has an "ideal semantic independence". Further on, he asserts that "a work's author is present only in the whole of the work, not in one separate aspect of this whole [...]. This makes it easy to identify him with that author who is a person of a particular time, with a particular biography and a particular world view" (Bakhtin: 160). Moreover, the last three words of the quotation, "particular world view" harmonizes with the title of our thesis "The World in its Times. A Study of Yeats's Poetic Discourse vs. the Concept of History".

In the light of Bakhtin's assertions and as W.B. Yeats himself stated in the draft of his lecture *Friends of My Youth*, (Foster: copyright page), it is necessary to know a poet's life in order to understand his poetry, because art and the artist's personal life cannot exist separately. Consequently, in order to have a proper grasp of Yeats's entire work we did research on his biography and, above all, his *Autobiographies*, all of these interpreted in the context of a nightmarish history, as well as in the whirl of time passing, both of them represented in Yeats's oeuvre.

After doing research on the Irish writer's biographies written by noteworthy biographers such as Richard Ellmann, Terence Brown and Roy Foster, the first chapter entitled *Yeats's Biography as an Anglo-Irish Artist* has revealed in its five subchapters a detailed biography of the artist by emphasising the steps he had to undergo in his development as a poet and man. *The Artist Grows of Historical Extremes*, the first subchapter has dealt with the formation of the author torn between two worlds, two countries and two identities that he continuously tried to combine in order to achieve the much desired unity of being. We have found proofs about this uncertainty in *Autobiographies*, namely "Reveries of Childhood and Youth" where the poet himself informed the reader he was not sure whether he was Irish or English, since his family and

he often commuted between Sligo and London. The two urban locations themselves presented differences in that the writer felt closer to Sligo, a little town in Western Ireland with its familiar places and people, while London revealed itself as an uncanny capital city, too large and too dirty for the little boy. As a matter of fact, a relative took the liberty to tell the nine-year old boy that in Sligo he was somebody, while in London he would be nobody at all. Yeats was the product of the union of two clans that embodied the essence of the Irish Protestant middle class: the Yeatses and the Pollexfens. Both of these families were affiliated to the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, and yet, after taking a closer look at them separately, we could notice antagonistic traits in their cultural background, mentality and even origin and wealth, as R.F. Foster claims in *W.B. Yeats, A Life. I. The Apprentice Mage*. The Yeatses had “money, social influence and a history in Ireland,” yet by the later 19<sup>th</sup> century “all they were left with was the history”; while the Pollexfens were country businessmen, but much recently arrived. As Lily Yeats, quoted by Foster (Foster: 5), says, they were much Irish than many of the saints and martyrs. Yeats-Pollexfen marriage represented a “cornerstone” for the family background. Nevertheless, it is precisely this combination that should be considered responsible for making artists of them all, as John Butler Yeats put it (Foster: 5).

The second subchapter, *The Sign of a Father – an English Artist*, has dealt with Yeats’s relationship with his father, John Butler Yeats, whom he deeply appreciated, and to whom he owed much of his development as an artist, but who overwhelmed him with his desire to move back and forth between England and Ireland, and with his tendency to have a strong point of view on every matter and to impose it on everybody around him. Paradoxically, even if young Willie preferred Sligo to London, in point of his grandparents he preferred the talkative, funny and sociable Yeatses to serious, gloomy and proud Pollexfens, as the latter family put pressure on the poet. Later on, the poet became aware of Sligo providing peace for writing poetry while London contacts “were necessary for bread and butter” (Foster: 91). Nevertheless, it was John Butler’s lack of belief in something higher than science that pushed Yeats towards exotic religions, occultism and esoteric practices – fascinating domains that helped Yeats create his own vision of world and history, thoroughly described in *A Vision*, a study extended to philosophical, historical, astrological, and poetic topics, that Yeats assembled due to his

wife's automatic writing. The Irish writer's interest in literature was also developed by his father, as he mentions his father's readings in *Autobiographies*. Despite the discontent with his son's progress as a young boy, W.B. Yeats awakened in John Butler Yeats a sort of possessiveness and pride which he let his son know fifty-four years later: "I think your birth was the first great event in my life. [...] I never felt like that afterwards at the birth of the others" (Foster: *W.B. Yeats. A Life*: 15).

*Imaginary Background in his Mother's Irish Family*, the following subchapter has presented the spiritual bond that the poet had with his mother, whose songs and stories with fishermen, and whose profound love for Ireland, and especially for Sligo, her birthplace, where he and his brothers spent time as children, awakened the young child's interest in the local geography and folk tales, two central inspirational elements in the poet's subsequent creation. Terence Brown quoted Deidre Toomey in saying that Susan Pollexfen "gave value to folklore, legend, country wisdom, the irrational, traditional, 'unthinking', 'lunar' side of life' representing all that J.B. Yeats rejected" (Brown: *The Life of W.B. Yeats*: 16). Sligo, "county and town – the classic Irish soil" (Brown: *The Life of W.B. Yeats*: 1) represents the most celebrated place in Yeats's work, the place that mostly influenced his thinking and creation. Despite the beneficial influence exercised by his mother indirectly in point of creation and sense of belonging to Sligo, his relationship with women was the result of his mother's absence in the poet's life. Consequently, his entire life he tended to look for women that embodied motherly qualities, as it is the case of Lady Augusta Gregory on the one hand and on the other, Katharine Tynan who was his pen friend and who was the model for the protagonist's sweetheart in Yeats's only novel, *John Sherman*.

Lady Augusta Gregory, whose friendship with Yeats has been dealt with in the subchapter *Lady Augusta's Estate*, represented an overwhelming element in the poet's artistic development. Nevertheless, Lady Augusta was more than a business associate for him. She was the one who took care of him when he was in poor health, the one who brought him on the right path whenever his experiences with Maud left him completely disoriented and also the one who encouraged him to draw his subject matter from Irish folklore. Under her guidance, he began writing plays and he included folk-tales and folk-legends in his shaping of the unique cultural identity that Ireland needed. Proofs of their

friendship, as well as the fact that Lady Augusta acted as a Maecenas for Yeats himself and for many other writers we find in Foster, Brown or Jeffares' biographies. In Coole Park, Lady Augusta's property in County Galway, there is an old tree, Autograph Tree, with a copper beech on it bearing the signatures of all famous visitors among which George Bernard Shaw, Sean O'Casey, Douglas Hyde, John Millington Synge or Jack B. Yeats to name just a few of those who were Gregory's guests (I visited Coole Park myself in 2008 during Yeats International Summer School, in Sligo).

Maud Gonne "the trouble in his life" (Yeats, *Memoirs* quoted by Brown: 48), the woman Yeats was in love with for almost three decades, the most haunting experience of his life, has been the topic of the fifth subchapter, *Maud Gonne*. His constant obsession with her personality, and his admiration of her beauty and courage drove him to propose to her time and again, as if he could never get tired of her refusals. The more she drove him away, the more he kept coming back for more, as if every rejection only managed to reinforce his feeling for her. His unrequited love for her was the subject of many of his poems, in each and every one of them stating his devotion and admiration for her character and beauty. Even though time came when he felt frustrated by her actions, the charm he felt for her never faded away. Her refusal to marry him became a cyclic event in his existence, but he kept on "feeding" himself from frustration and grief to give birth to an incredible poetic imagery. Actually, Margery Brady in *The Love Story of W.B. Yeats and Maud Gonne*, sets some questions in *Introduction* (p.6) like for instance "was Maud worthy of such beautiful poems? Would Yeats have written so well if she had married him or even returned his love? Was it only in the agony of unrequited pursuit that he could write and would the ecstasy of fulfilment have been short-lived and uninspiring?" Yet, along the 127 pages the author does not draw any plain conclusion. On the contrary she leaves this task to the reader. Nevertheless, in the last pages, Brady (p. 125) retells a talk the two lovers had when they last met. Yeats said to Gonne "that they should have continued with their Castle of Heroes" to which Maud could not find any words to reply. From this we imply that Yeats's love for Maud Gonne was meant to happen and the scholars somehow consider this unhappy and unanswered love responsible for Yeats's prodigious artistic career: "Maud Gonne's influence, fully recognized in *Memoirs*"

(Foster, *II. The Arch-poet*: 201); “From the very beginning [...] Yeats saw Gonne through the veils of literature and art” (Brown, *The life of W.B. Yeats*: 48).

The second chapter, *Yeats within the Irish Revival*, has focused on the impressive Irish movement, whose purpose was to create a national art. The first subchapter, *Yeats’s Return to Tradition*, exemplified the ways in which the young poet was guided and influenced by Lady Gregory, who urged him to write about folklore and national myths and thus under the influence of O’Leary he reshaped the national literature by writing on Irish topics for Irish people and in turn he urged young writers to ponder upon Ireland in their endeavour to become writers. Indeed, his first literary attempts dealt with Irish subject matters: *The Wonderings of Oisín* being the result of his readings on Celtic mythology and other translated works he could lay hands on (Brown, *The Life of W.B. Yeats*: 67). Things changed with the second volume, *The Countess Cathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics*, published in 1892. The poems begin to express Yeats’s Irishness, and the author was convinced that patriotic poetry was no less valuable. The next subchapter, *The Irish Literary Theatre*, presented Yeats in the position of a dramatist, focusing mainly on his years when he realized the importance of formulating an Irish dramatic tradition. As a matter of fact, Richard Allen Cave emphasizes (Cave: xi) that Yeats’s whole career in the theatre “was quite a remarkable process of making and remaking the self”. Thus we may speak of innovation in form and essence: Yeats struggled to promote true Irish culture by bringing forward Irish heroic subject matters on the one hand and on the other by making use of devices not really known in the English theatre. So he was preoccupied in finding new ways “of controlling the sound and look of a production”; he revolutionized the Irish theatre by making use of the mask, a device used in Japanese Noh theatre; as a director he set emphasis on voice while the movement itself was to be sparing and simple. To cut it short, he brought novelty to Irish theatre by mixing Celtic elements (for instance the focus on the threshold, expressing states of in-between-ness) and elements of Noh theatre in plays designed for Irish audience performed by Irish actors and through all these he contributed to Irish Revival.

The third subchapter, *In the Whirl of Local History Events*, has underlined the fact that Yeats, even though young when the Irish struggle was at its highest points, felt the need to integrate himself in the fight in a more active manner, joined several literary

organizations that supported the cause and befriended Fenian members. Yeats began to be a famous poet when Ireland's voice began to be heard. He met John O'Leary who influenced him in his desire to become a writer. "There is no great literature without nationality and no great nationality without literature", O'Leary's words became also his motto in life and work. Even if he was not an overt fighter, his poems were at a given moment manifests, as it happened with *Easter 1916*. Yeats's poems may be used to re-write Ireland's history, as they comprise pages from Celtic twilight till contemporary events, namely World Wars I and II.

The third chapter, of our thesis, *Yeats's History as a Concept*, has examined the relation between the concepts we find in Ricoeur's *History, Memory, Forgetting* and Yeats's own concepts. In studying the phenomenology of memory, we came to the conclusion that between Paul Ricoeur's treatise and W. B. Yeats's *Autobiographies* connections can be found. The theoretician laid the foundation for his theories on Socrates' philosophy, which in turn influenced both Plato and Aristotle.

The first subchapter, *Yeats's History as a Concept*, has been based mainly on Ricoeur's treatise *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Thus, examining other philosophers' opinions (Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Husserl, Halbwachs etc, in the first part of his endeavour, Ricoeur expanded on the idea that remembering something meant remembering the self, mentioning the importance of individual and collective memory. Based on their opinion, the author himself draws the conclusion that the field of history is characterized through the polarity between the individual and collective memory, but also through a treble attribution of history: that of the self, of close people and the others. The second part of his study dealt with history as the limit between lived past and present and highlights the opposition between the memory of the group and collective memory, suggesting that history belongs to everyone and at the same time to nobody, which makes it universal. The third part dealt with forgetting and the author conveys the idea that it is necessary to forget in order to continue; it is necessary to leave behind the wrong that has been done to you in order to live the present and anticipate the future.

The second subchapter, *The Poet's Involvement in the Local and European History*, has established a connection between the poet and the national events which inspired his work. At the same time, we have pointed out that Yeats's poems were a type

of propaganda for the Irish literature, not for the Irish politics. We also have showed his rise as a politician and his becoming a senator, when he militated for the minority he represented. His utmost desire was to understand the place of the Anglo-Irish in a community torn apart by the lack of unity and most of all, his place, his identity in the context of his Anglo-Irish origins. Continuing our endeavour, we tried to find a proper explanation for Yeats's toil to write Irish poetry in English. He believed that a poem's Irish-ness does not lie in the language it was written in, but in the feelings it conveys which are able to trespass any barrier imposed by language. The fourth subchapter, *Yeats and Doctrinaire Point, Reinventing the Modern English Verse* has also examined Yeats's three stages of creation with an emphasis on the characteristics of his poetry in each of these stages: the romantic qualities of his first poems, the mixture of love, nationalism and symbolism in his subsequent poems, and the symbolism and modernity of his final poems. What we have tried to emphasize here is that Yeats's poems bear the imprint of his personal life, as Margaret Fogarty in her study "It is myself that I remake': The Shaping Self of W.B. Yeats's Autobiographies" ascertains. On the other hand he himself wrote to his friend Katharine Tynan and told her "my life has been in my poems" (*Letters to Katharine Tynan*: 64). Consequently, in the light of Fogarty's study, the subchapter presented Yeats's volumes of poetry as main stages in the poet's life.

The final subchapter, *Yeats vs. Imagism and the Haiku; Yeats and T.S. Eliot*, has exemplified the complexity of the author's poetry by contrasting its vivid language, elaborate structure and its musicality with haiku and its characteristics, showed the relationship between haiku and Imagism and highlighted Ezra Pound's influence on Yeats's style. Thus under Pound's guidance, Yeats wrote the poems included in the volumes *The Wild Swans at Cool* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, where a change in style can be noticed. The poems in these volumes, though keep the symbols used previously emphasize "the thing", representing Pound's word for the focal point of imagist poetry. The second part of the subchapter presented a parallel between the modern visions of Yeats and Eliot analysing the common, but mostly the antithetical elements of their literary legacy: the former wanted to write as men have always written, while the latter attempted at revolutionizing poetic expression. Nonetheless, despite the literary discrepancies between the two, Eliot ultimately recognized that Yeats played a

major part in the history and the consciousness of his time (Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats*: 231-232). Even more important is that the two writer's works are situated among the masterpieces of the twentieth century.

The fourth chapter, *Yeats's Historical Cycles in Poetic Representation*, has been structured in five subchapters, each covering various poems regarded as pinpointing elements that help sustain our research. *The Way to "The Tower" or Art is higher than life* has exposed the poet's inspirational drive, together with society's decline, has examined the steps he took in his development as a poet, and has present some sort of return to the Irish mythological past bearing in mind that art is higher than life. This subchapter has represented also a survey of the poet's main stages of creation. In the next subchapter, *The Tower – A Spiritual Travel into the European Past; Present Artistic Values and Higher Poetic Creation*, we have analyzed some of the most important poems included in the collection that marks Yeats's involuntary embracing of modernism. A special focus has been laid on "Sailing to Byzantium" representing a poem in which Yeats created an allegory for Ireland, with its present artistic values, and also on his movement towards a higher artistic creation, disregarding the literary trends. In this volume Yeats is a master of the technique of introducing a subject, a symbol, a theme in one collection and elaborating upon it in the following. This is what happened with the next volume of poems examined in the nest subchapter. The following subchapter bears the title *The Winding Stairs or Coming Back to the Human and Local History* has presented references to the Thoor Ballylee, the castle that Yeats turned into his personal symbol, the bond between the human and divinity, immanent and transcendent. The two volumes *The Tower* and *The Winding Stairs* accompany each other, in that they contain twin poems, as Daniel Albright asserts (Albright, *W.B. Yeats, The Poems*: 962). In the next subchapter, *Love Structuring Artistic Creation – from Love to Poetry*, Yeats's relationship have been analysed, relationships with the other women he was in love with (Laura Armstrong, Olivia Shakespear, Margot Ruddock, Ethel Manin, etc.) and the impact these love affairs or, at least, feelings for these women had on his poetry. To end our chapter we have come back to the poet's works created between 1916 and 1923. The subchapter *Coming Back to the Writer in Point of Local History* has aimed at spotlighting the concept of history which constituted the poet's leitmotif whichever his personal



experiences were. Among these poems, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” gains an important role, as it represents a page of history, an artistic document that confirms the horrors of the civil war.

The fifth chapter, *Yeats's Celtic Heliolatry and/or Elitism*, has brought forward the political preferences that the author shared with Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot for Fascism and Communism. These doctrines were embraced by the author not for the concepts they promoted in reality but for their idealised image, which he preferred. As an elitist, disappointed by the failure of his attempts to educate the Irish society starting from its basis, he reaches the conclusion that in order to create a unified Irish culture it was first necessary to educate the upper classes and then the masses. This is the point in common with the Fascism, as Hitler himself believed in the superiority of white race. Fortunately, Yeats's sympathy for Fascism stopped when he saw what the real intentions were. Michael North's study examines the reasons why the three poets: Yeats, Pound and Eliot were considered at a certain moment of their existence of fascist orientation. Nevertheless, the origin of all evils, so to say lies in Walter Benjamin's definition of fascism, quoted by North: “anesthetization of politics”. Under these circumstances, North's explanation comes to make Yeats's political orientation clearer: “Yeats was to trace both fascism and communism, back to Hegel's attempts to resolve the liberal contradiction between right and duty, individual and community” (North: 22). In the context of Yeats's ideals toward his country and people, this appears to be a pertinent explanation. Whether Yeats has always been involved in his country's politics, how could he separate his ideals from those of contemporary history? Yet a poem enabled the poet's contemporaries believe him of fascist orientation.

*The Second Coming – a Poem on Gloomy Premonitions not only* has explored Yeats's opinions related to historical cycles and the beginning of a new era, as he considered that each era lasts 2000 years, and then an antithetical era begins; but also emphasizes what Yeats felt since another century began. The last stanza of the poem makes reference to something that is about to happen to humankind, as a new era is announced. In fact the sensitive poet felt it compulsory to re-examine the old traditions and pay specific attention to the newly brought changes into the more contemporary society, which seemed to have lost most of the values on which it was founded.

The final chapter, *The Artefact and Artist in Yeats's Poetry*, has explored in the first subchapter the poet's drive to find the ideal poetic form that haunted his imagination during his youth and which seems to have come into shape in the later years of his career; in consequence we showed how Yeats strove to find the perfect poetic formula and at the same time he defied modernity and modernism, as well as the changes they brought into the people's lives. We emphasize the poet's stubbornness to write as men have always written and exemplify with some of his best poems. Then we have taken a closer look at the doctrine of the Mask, an antithetical self that produces poetry when collides with the poetic self, considered by Yeats a sort of device that allows the man to become what he is not or he could never be.

Next we have examined the relationship between artefact and artist, which Yeats saw more like a burden, since he worked hard until declared satisfied with the final form of the poem. The next subchapter, *The Artist – a Passionate Man Writing for Men and Praising Feeling*, has reiterated Yeats's ideas that can also be related to Eliot. According to Eliot it was utterly important to write for the intellectuals and the upper classes, since they were able to grasp the meaning of symbols, tradition and individual talent. In this context, "Parnell's Funeral" is given special attention; the poem was written three decades after the death of the nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell and it represented a protest against the Irish society that seemed to be no longer under control.

The final subchapter, whose title is simply *The Dolls*, has conveyed the idea of superiority of art and artefact above daily routine and reality. This display of an artificial arrangement where everything is meant to be perfect and in equilibrium versus the flawed real life of human beings emphasises the creation of both a doll, but at a deeper level that of a child. The textual personification of the doll is secondary to the idea of a superior forged artificiality, important for the creation of poetry. Taking into account Yeats's determinism to find the perfect poetic expression on the one hand and the eternity of art on the other, as they are rendered in the poem "Sailing to Byzantium", then there is no wonder that the poet advocates the superiority of art versus "what is passing", namely the child. We did some research on Kitti Carriker's study, *Created in our Image: Miniature Body of the Doll as Subject and Object* who points out the iconic character of the doll with their human and inhuman character. The doll-maker is the creator of both, baby and

doll; nonetheless the doll is the idealized version of the baby, which can cross boundaries of time while the baby cannot.

Hence we can conclude that Yeats developed his style throughout his long poetic activity from a romantic sentimentalism to a highly concentrated modernism of essentialised expressions. The poet considered the work of art as superior ideal of creative life above the earthly human existence, so his interest was represented by the artefact. He discussed about the faculties and human powers acquired in the phenomenological existence, which were apparent and spring into consciousness, but the principles were acquired through birth and they remained immutable even in the afterlife. So Yeats believed that we knew history because we created it, just in the same way that God knows nature. We cannot know for sure, however, if W. B. Yeats was seeking a poetic formula or a philosophical truth. In his subjective reason the self begins a journey of knowledge and creation, looking for its antithetic, named by the poet as phantasmagoria. His development from the dreaming idealist to the sceptic and finally conserver makes him a blend of contradictions and antinomies of love and hate, hope and despair, joy and bitterness. The originality of his search for human love and spiritual connection provides uniqueness to his work, love and passion for people and respect for traditions.

History, nowadays, as theme and concept used by artists, writers, and creators is connected to the self-reassuring concepts of world and art. The post-modern reception of Yeats's work finds a correlation between his heliocentric views and his multicoloured perceptions, referring to multiple identifications of impersonality. And yet, one can state that W. B. Yeats saw history in a personal manner, exploring rather its subjective quality throughout his literary career. He was not admired, however, only for such views, but also for connecting and re-connecting with the establishing of a national literature, which in time could become entirely Irish.

As a former student of Yeats International Summer School, I may state that despite contradictory opinions related to his work and life, contemporary or after his death, William Butler Yeats remains a world-class writer who strove his entire life to find the perfect poetic expression and above all unity of being in his attempts at concluding a truce with himself and most important of all attempted and succeeded in reviving his

country's national literature. Consequently, the memory of the boy who wanted to conquer "the world with a magician's wand" then the master of poetry and Nobel recipient will always live as long as worldwide scholars find topics for passionate debates as the poet himself urges in *Under Ben Bulben* and epitaph on his tombstone:

“Cast a cold eye  
On life, on death.  
Horseman, pass by!”

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## Rezumat

Cuvinte cheie: istorie, discurs poetic, estetică, politică, filozofie, sinele

William Butler Yeats a fost, fără îndoială, unul dintre cei mai antologizați scriitori ai secolului al douăzecilea. De-a lungul ultimului secol, creația sa a fost subiectul a numeroase interpretări, și totuși, cu fiecare nouă lectură a poeziei sale, cititorul poate descoperi noi semnificații și îi poate da o nouă interpretare. Scopul acestei teze, **Lumea în timpul ei - Studiu asupra discursului poetic al lui Yeats versus conceptul de istorie**, este tocmai acela de a reinterpretă discursul poetic al lui Yeats pe baza a câtorva concepte-cheie cum ar fi istoria, atât cea personală cât și cea națională, estetica, creația artistică și ideile politice, deoarece toate aceste elemente îmbinate creează ceea ce numim capodopera unuia dintre cei mai prolifici scriitori Anglo-Irlandezi.

Întrucât scopul acestei disertații este acela de a analiza ideea de istorie în viziunea lui Yeats și ramificațiile rezultate din aceasta, am selectat studiul lui Paul Ricoeur – *Istoria, memoria, uitarea* – ca punct de plecare în încercarea noastră de a oferi o interpretare critico-filosofică a conceptului de istorie. Tratatul lui Paul Ricoeur ne oferă cadrul adecvat pentru a analiza modul în care evenimente istorice majore din istoria Irlandei au influențat percepția de sine a individului și a unei națiuni întregi și au conturat identitatea unei culturi irlandeze în plin curs de dezvoltare.

De-a lungul celor șase capitole ale acestei disertații, am pornit de la contextul autobiografic, în care urmărim devenirea/dezvoltarea poetului de la copilărie la maturitate, și am continuat cu activitățile culturale și literare ale lui Yeats, discutând rolul sau în înființarea Teatrului Literar Irlandez, ambiția sa de a crea o dramaturgie pur-irlandeză, complet diferită de cea a altor state europene, implicarea sa în evenimentele istorice locale, suportul entuziast oferit mișcării naționaliste irlandeze și decepția suferită ulterior din cauza ideilor politice, dorința sa de reformula poezia modernă scrisă în limba engleză, și căutarea continuă a unei expresii poetice perfecte.

Primul capitol, *Biografia lui Yeats – un artist anglo-irlandez*, scoate la iveală aspecte relevante din biografia autorului, scopul nostru în acest capitol fiind acela de a evidenția pașii pe care Yeats i-a urmat în dezvoltarea sa ca artist. Primul subcapitol – *Artistul se formează din extreme istorice* – îl descrie pe poet ca fiind rezultatul a două

culturi diferite, cea irlandeză și cea engleză, și totuși aparținând și rămânând devotat numai uneia – cea irlandeză. Totuși, în acest proces Yeats s-a simțit captiv undeva între două lumi, două țări, dezvoltând astfel două identități pe care încearcă să le îmbine în permanență pentru a obține o mult dorită unitate spirituală.

Următorul subcapitol, *Sub semnul tatălui – un artist englez*, dezbate relația lui Yeats cu tatăl său, John Butler Yeats, un om cult și foarte inteligent, și, de asemenea, un pictor nu foarte celebru care și-a dedicat întreaga existență pasiunii pentru artă și nu datoriei de a-și întreține familia. Cu toate acestea, a fost un tată iubitor, interesat de educația fiului său și rolul lui în transformarea fiului său în artist a fost crucial. El a fost cel care i-a trezit interesul pentru literatură și i-a cultivat talentul de a scrie poezie în ciuda tendinței sale de a-și impune punctul de vedere asupra celor din jurul său. De asemenea, din cauza lipsei de credință religioasă a lui John Butler Yeats, nevoia fiului sau de a crede în ceva care se afla mai presus decât știința, l-a condus pe tânărul poet spre religii exotice, ocultism și practici esoterice, domenii fascinante care l-au ajutat pe Yeats să-și dezvolte propria viziune asupra lumii și asupra istoriei, descrisă în detaliu în *O viziune*, o „mitografie ocultă” ce cuprinde subiecte filosofice, istorice, astrologice și poetice, puse laolaltă de către Yeats cu ajutorul scrisului automatic al soției sale.

Al treilea subcapitol, *Contextul imaginar în familia irlandeză a mamei sale*, explorează relația poetului cu mama sa, o adevărată femeie irlandeză fascinată de trecutul mitic al Irlandei. Datorită ei, poetul descoperă o realitate diferită de cea a tatălui său, în care raționalismul și pozitivismul primează. Realitatea pe care Yeats o descoperă prin intermediul mamei sale este plină de mituri, basme, obiceiuri și credințe, și tot datorită ei poetul se familiarizează cu poveștile și cântecele pescarilor, se îndrăgostește de Sligo, locul natal al mamei sale, și devine interesat de geografia locală și poveștile populare care vor deveni ulterior surse valoroase de inspirație pentru creația sa poetică.

Subcapitolul următor – *La moșia Augustei Gregory* – discută despre un capitol de o însemnătate covârșitoare în dezvoltarea artistică a poetului – Renașterea Irlandeză și legătura dintre Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory și Edward Martyn, alături de care poetul a fondat Teatrul Literar Englez și Teatrul Abbey. Și totuși, Lady Augusta Gregory a fost mai mult decât o parteneră de afaceri pentru Yeats. La moșia ei, poetul a găsit în sfârșit un cămin. Ea avea planuri literare pentru el și treptat cei doi au dezvoltat o relație care

avea să fie avantajoasă pentru amândoi. Lady Gregory a găsit în Yeats un poet cu ajutorul căruia putea promova folclorul irlandez, în timp ce Yeats a găsit în ea un fel de mamă surogat, o femeie căreia putea să-i povestească toate necazurile și în fața căreia putea da frâu liber emoțiilor. Lady Gregory, l-a rândul ei, îi dădea sfaturi literare ori de câte ori Yeats era în impas și i-a oferit acces la materialele adunate de ea – o sursă directă de inspirație pentru Yeats, care ulterior s-a dovedit a fi extrem de valoroasă. Lady Gregory nu a vrut doar să-l protejeze pe Yeats de-a lungul carierei sale, ci și-a dorit să-l aducă pe calea cea dreaptă de fiecare dată când Yeats părea pierdut în gândurile proprii. Ea s-a asigurat că Yeats nu-și va irosi talentul, va reuși să-și împlinească destinul și va deveni un scriitor de succes care va glorifica folclorul irlandez în opera sa.

Ultimul subcapitol aduce în prim plan o experiență care îl va obseda pe poet întreaga viață – prima sa întâlnire cu Maud Gonne, femeia pe care a iubit-o timp de trei decenii. Când cei doi s-au cunoscut, tânărul poet deja publicase *Rătăcirile lui Oisín și alte poeme*, așadar Maud era deja familiarizată cu poemele sale. Colecția fiind o expresie a culturii irlandeze, Maud i-a mărturisit poetului de la bun început că a fost profund impresionată de poemele sale. Cuvintele ei și, de asemenea, frumusețea ei, trebuie să fi produs o adevărată furtună în mintea tânărului poet, acesta realizând încă de la prima întâlnire că Maud este dragostea vieții lui și, deși ea niciodată nu i-a împărtășit sentimentele, Yeats și-a amintit mereu prima lor întâlnire ca fiind un eveniment mitologic.

Obsesia permanentă a artistului pentru ea, admirația pentru curajul și frumusețea sa l-au determinat pe Yeats să o ceară în căsătorie de nenumărate ori, deși ea l-a respins de fiecare dată. Cu cât ea încerca să-l îndepărteze, cu atât își dorea mai mult să fie alături de ea, fiecare respingere reușind numai să întărească sentimentele lui Yeats pentru ea. Dragostea lui neîmpărtășită a devenit subiectul mai multor poeme de-ale lui Yeats, și tocmai în această dragoste Yeats pare să fi găsit resursele pentru a supraviețui și pentru a deveni un om și un poet matur. Nefericirea și durerea lui și-a transformat-o apoi în poezii frumoase care vor servi uneori ca sursă de confort spiritual pentru generațiile viitoare. Deși au existat momente când artistul s-a simțit frustrat din cauza acțiunilor femeii iubite, sentimentele acestuia nu au dispărut. Refuzul ei de a se căsători cu Yeats devine un

eveniment ciclic în existența poetului, el continuând să se hrănească cu frustrarea și durerea cauzată de refuzul ei pentru a crea versuri memorabile.

În următorul capitol – *Yeats în cadrul Renașterii Irlandeze* – atenția noastră se concentrează asupra impresionantei mișcări irlandeze care avea ca scop crearea unei arte naționale. Primul subcapitol, *Reîntoarcerea lui Yeats la tradiție*, exemplifică modurile în care poetul a fost ghidat și influențat de Lady Gregory, care l-a îndemnat să scrie despre folclor și mituri naționale. Totuși, pentru Yeats, să lucreze cu material folcloric a însemnat mai mult decât schimbarea formei sau includerea unui mesaj moral în poezie; Yeats nu doar a prelucrat materialele folclorice ci le-a interpretat și le-a trecut prin filtrul propriei imaginații, reușind astfel să propage spiritul celtic. Ambiția sa a fost să reconecteze poporul irlandez cu moștenirea străveche și prin poezia și dramaturgia sa nu numai că a contribuit la crearea unei literaturi care descrie spiritul unui întreg popor, dar a și insuflat compatrioților săi propriile idei naționaliste.

Subcapitolul următor se concentrează pe anii petrecuți de Yeats la Teatrul Literar Irlandez, când și-a dat seama cât de important era pentru Irlanda să-și formuleze propria tradiție dramaturgică. Rolul poetului în Renașterea Literară Irlandeză a fost deosebit de important. Prin poezia și dramaturgia sa, Yeats a reușit să inițieze o mișcare ce avea să revoluționeze scena literară a Irlandei. Prin stabilirea propriilor idealuri literare, prin promovarea acestora prin intermediul poeziei, dramaturgiei, prelegerilor și activităților sale jurnalistice, prin implicarea activă în propagandarea acestor idealuri, Yeats nu numai că a reușit să descopere o formulă irlandeză perfectă pentru creația sa, dar i-a și influențat pe contemporanii săi să se întoarcă la valorile tradiționale irlandeze. Astfel vor fi create numeroase opere inspirate din viața țăranilor, obiceiurile și tradițiile irlandeze, mituri și legende, deoarece mulți artiști irlandezi își vor alege temele pentru operele lor din trecutul glorios al Irlandei de acum încolo.

Subcapitolul final, în *Vâltoarea evenimentelor istorice locale*, evidențiază faptul că Yeats, deși era destul de tânăr când zbuciumul irlandez atinsese apogeul, a simțit nevoia să se implice în lupta pentru independență într-o manieră mai activă, alăturându-se, așadar, mai multor organizații literare care sprijineau mișcarea naționalistă și împrietenindu-se cu mai mulți membri fenieni. Aceasta experiență l-a ajutat pe poet să-si

desăvârșească concepția asupra istoriei mondiale și i-a stârnit aprecierea pentru naționalismul irlandez.

Următorul capitol – *Istoria ca și concept în viziunea lui Yeats* – exprimă relația dintre conceptele lui Ricoeur și Yeats. În timp ce studiem fenomenologia memoriei, ne dăm seama că tratatul lui Paul Ricoeur, *Istoria, memoria, uitarea*, seamănă și poate fi relaționat cu *Autobiografiile* lui Yeats. Teoreticianul își fundamentează propria teorie bazându-se pe filosofia lui Socrate, care, la rândul său, i-a influențat pe Platon și Aristotel.

Ricoeur elaborează asupra ideii conform căreia a-ți aminti ceva este un act subiectiv, menționând totodată importanța individului în memoria colectivă. Autorul trage concluzia că domeniul istoriei este caracterizat de o polaritate între memoria individuală și colectivă și realizat prin contribuția a trei participanți: individul, cei apropiați individului (un grup) și comunitatea. Cea de-a doua parte a studiului lui analizează istoria ca limită între trecutul trăit și prezent și evidențiază opoziția dintre memoria unui grup și memoria colectivă, sugerând că istoria aparține tuturor și în același timp nimănui, ceea ce o face universală.

La Yeats, conceptul de istorie articulat în discursul poetic dobândește o calitate distinctă bazată pe o subiectivitate în care putem depista elementele care definesc personalitatea autorului: originile anglo-irlandeze, contextul familial, educația, principiile politice, aspirațiile literare și spiritualitatea sa. În opera lui, el oferă o interpretare proprie, personală a istoriei, prezentând mai degrabă originile sale transcendente, și nu realitățile istorice, creând astfel o perspectivă originală asupra istoriei.

Al doilea subcapitol urmărește conexiunea dintre poet și evenimentele naționale care l-au inspirat și expune o analiză a contextului în care Wiliam Butler Yeats a trăit și a creat – un context care pare să-i fi stârnit imaginația și să-l fi îndemnat să creeze o operă unică, bogată în simboluri celtice și semnificații irlandeze. În același timp, acest subcapitol demonstrează că versurile lui Yeats au reprezentat o propagandă pentru literatura irlandeză, nu pentru politică, și ia în considerare și ascensiunea politică a lui Yeats, discutând despre perioada când acesta a devenit senator și a militat pentru minoritatea din care el însuși făcea parte, cea mai mare dorință a sa ca poet anglo-irlandez fiind aceea de a înțelege care e locul său într-o comunitate sfâșiată de lipsa de unitate.

Trecând la următorul capitol, *Yeats și punctul doctrinar – Reformularea versului modern scris în limba engleză*, explorăm dorința lui Yeats de a i se permite să continue să scrie în limba engleză versuri irlandeze și de a simți acea libertate pe care oricine ar trebui să o simtă când încearcă să se definească pe sine însuși ca aparținând unei comunități cu origini multiple. El era convins de faptul că acel caracter irlandez al unui vers nu își are originile în limba în care a fost scris, ci în sentimentele pe care le transmite, acestea fiind capabile să depășească orice limite impuse de limbaj. Subcapitolul curent examinează, de asemenea, și cele trei stadii ale creației yeatsiene: calitățile romantice ale primelor poeme, amestecul de iubire, naționalism și simbolism din poemele scrise ulterior și simbolismul și modernitatea ultimelor sale poeme.

Ultimul subcapitol, *Yeats versus Imagism și haiku; Yeats și T.S. Eliot*, exemplifică complexitatea poeziei autorului prin contrastarea limbajului viu, a structurii elaborate și a muzicalității versului yeatsian cu haiku și caracteristicile sale, arată relația dintre imagism și haiku și evidențiază influența lui Ezra Pound asupra stilului yeatsian. A doua parte a acestui subcapitol prezintă o paralelă între modernitatea lui Yeats și modernismul lui Eliot, analizând elementele comune, dar mai ales pe cele antitetice, unul dintre ei rămânând fidel ideii că trebuie să scrie așa cum oamenii au scris dintotdeauna, pe când celalalt își propunea să revoluționeze expresia poetică.

Capitolul al patrulea, *Ciclurile istorice în reprezentarea poetică*, este format din cinci subcapitole, fiecare dezbătând diverse poeme care reprezintă elementele cheie ale acestei lucrări. *Calea spre turn sau „arta e mai presus decât viața”* expune energia creatoare a poetului, împreună cu declinul societății, examinează pașii pe care poetul i-a urmat în dezvoltarea sa artistică și prezintă un fel de reîntoarcere a poetului la trecutul mitologic irlandez, ghidat fiind de ideea că „arta e mai presus decât viața.” În subcapitolul următor, *Turnul – O călătorie spirituală în trecutul european; Valori artistice curente și creație poetică superioară*, analizăm unele dintre cele mai importante poezii incluse în colecția care marchează trecerea involuntară a lui Yeats la modernism. O atenție specială i se acordă poeziei „Navigând spre Bizanț”, o poezie în care Yeats creează o alegorie pentru Irlanda, cu valorile sale artistice curente, dar se urmărește și mișcarea lui Yeats către o creație artistică superioară, indiferent de tendințele literare.



Următorul subcapitol intitulat *Scara în spirală sau revenind la om și la istoria locală* prezintă referințe la Thoor Ballylee, castelul pe care Yeats l-a transformat într-un simbol personal, acesta reprezentând legătura dintre om și divinitate, dintre imanent și transcendent. Trecând la capitolul *Iubirea structurând creația artistică – de la iubire la poeziei*, analizăm, de data aceasta, relațiile lui Yeats cu alte femei de care a fost îndrăgostit (Laura Armstrong, Olivia Shakespear, Margot Ruddock, Ethel Manin, etc.) și impactul pe care relațiile cu aceste femei sau sentimentele poetului pentru acestea l-au avut asupra poeziei sale. Pentru a încheia capitolul, ne întoarcem la poeziile scrise între 1916 și 1923. Printre acestea „O mie nouă sute nouăsprezece” are un rol deosebit, deoarece reprezintă o pagină de istorie, un document artistic care atestă ororile războiului civil.

Al cincilea capitol – *Heliolatria celtică și/sau elitismul lui Yeats* – se concentrează pe preferințele politice pe care autorul le-a avut în comun cu Ezra Pound și T.S. Eliot. Printre acestea se numără o imagine idealizată a fascismul și comunismul, doua forme de guvernământ care nu au fost apreciate de autor datorită manierei în care au fost puse în practică, ci datorită conceptelor pe care le propuneau în teorie. Ca elitist, Yeats a fost dezamăgit de faptul că încercările sale de a educa societatea irlandeză de la bază au eșuat, așadar a ajuns la concluzia că unificarea culturii irlandeze poate fi înfăptuită numai prin educarea elitelor, mai întâi, și apoi a maselor.

*A doua venire – un poem cu premoniții sumbre*, explorează opiniile lui Yeats referitoare la ciclurile istorice și începuturile unei noi ere, el considerând că fiecare eră durează 2000 de ani, la sfârșitul acestei perioade urmând o era antitetica. Cum sfârșitul de mileniu se apropia, Yeats s-a simțit obligat să reexamineze vechile tradiții și să acorde o atenție deosebită schimbărilor survenite recent în societatea contemporană care părea să-și fi pierdut cea mai mare parte din valorile care au stat la baza construcției ei.

Capitolul final, *Artefactul și artistul în poezia lui Yeats*, aduce în prim plan, în primul subcapitol, puterea poetului de a transpune forma poetică ideală care pare să-i fi pus stăpânire pe imaginație încă din tinerețe și care pare să se fi concretizat la maturitate, acordă o atenție deosebită Doctrinei Măștii și examinează în același timp relația dintre artist și artefact. Următorul subcapitol, *Artistul – un om pasionat scriind pentru oameni și lăudând sentimentul* – revine la ideea lui Yeats și T.S. Eliot conform căreia un scriitor

trebuie să scrie pentru intelectuali și pentru elite, aceștia fiind capabili să priceapă înțelesurile simbolurilor, tradiția și talentul individual. O atenție specială i se acordă poemului „Funeraliile lui Parnell”, un poem care a fost scris la treizeci de ani după moartea liderului naționalist Charles Stewart Parnell și în care poetul se plânge de indiferența și superficialitatea societății în care trăiește.

Ultimul subcapitol al cărui titlu este *Păpușile* aduce la lumină ideea de artă și artefact superioare rutinei zilnice și realității. În acest poem, aranjamentul artificial unde totul este menit să fie perfect și echilibrat, în contrast cu defectele vieții reale evidențiază atât crearea unei păpuși, cât și a unui copil. Personificarea textuală a păpușii este secundară ideii de artificialitate superioară, importantă pentru crearea poeziei.

Yeats și-a dezvoltat stilul în lunga sa activitate poetică pornind de la sentimentalismul romantic către un modernism concentrat de expresii esențializate. Poetul plasează opera de artă ca ideal superior al vieții artistice deasupra existenței umane pământești, așadar atenția lui este îndreptată asupra artefactului. El discută despre facultățile și puterile umane dobândite în existența fenomenologică, care sunt aparente și conștiințioase, dar principiile sunt dobândite prin naștere și rămân inflexibile chiar și în viața de apoi. Așadar, Yeats consideră că noi cunoaștem istoria pentru că noi am creat-o, la fel cum Dumnezeu cunoaște natura. Nu putem ști sigur dacă William Butler Yeats a căutat de-a lungul vieții sale o formulă poetică sau un adevăr filosofic. În raționalizarea sa subiectivă, sinele începe o călătorie de cunoaștere și creație, căutând antiteticul, numit de poet fantasmagorie. Transformarea sa dintr-un idealist visător, într-un sceptic și în final într-un conservator, ne îndreptățește să-l considerăm un amestec de contradicții și antinomii ca iubire și ură, speranță și deznădejde, bucurie și amărăciune. Unicitatea operei sale, iubirea și pasiunea pentru oameni și respectul pentru tradiții vin din continua sa căutare de iubire umană și conexiune spirituală.

## Summary

Key words: history, poetic discourse, aesthetics, politics, philosophy, the self.

William Butler Yeats was by far one of the most anthologized writers of the twentieth century. Over the last century his work has been the subject of various interpretations, and yet, with every reading of his poetry the reader might discover different meanings in it and might give it new and fresh interpretations. The purpose of this thesis, **The World in its Times – A Study of Yeats’s Poetic Discourse versus the Concept of History**, is precisely that of re-interpreting Yeats’s poetic discourse following several key concepts such as history, both national and personal, aesthetics, artistic creation and politics; for with Yeats, all these come together and form what we call the masterpiece of one of the most prolific Anglo-Irish writer.

Since the aim of this dissertation was that of analyzing Yeats’s idea on history and the ramifications that come along with it, we have selected Paul Ricoeur’s study *History, Memory, Forgetting* as critical and philosophical starting point for our endeavour, for it provides the appropriate framework for interpreting the way major historical events in Irish history influenced the individual’s and the nation’s self-perception and shaped the identity of an emerging Irish culture. In the light of Ricoeur’s study, the idea of history in Yeats’s poetic discourse becomes easier to embark upon.

Along the six chapters of this dissertation, we have moved from Yeats’s biographical background, in which we follow the development of the artist from childhood to maturity, to Yeats’s literary and cultural activities, discussing his role in the foundation of the Irish Literary Theatre, his ambitions to create a pure Irish drama, entirely distinctive from that of other European countries, his involvement in local historical events, his enthusiastic support of Irish nationalism and his subsequent disillusionment with politics, his desire to reformulate the Modern English verse and his continuous search for a perfect poetic expression.

The first chapter – *Yeats’s Biography as an Anglo-Irish Artist* – discloses relevant aspects of William Butler Yeats’ biography, our purpose in this chapter being that of emphasising all the steps he had to undergo in his development as a poet. The first subchapter – *The Artist Grows of Historical Extremes* – depicts the artist as emerging

from two different cultures, the Irish and the English one, and yet belonging and remaining faithful to only one of them – the Irish one. Nevertheless, in this process he found himself torn between two worlds, two countries, developing thus two identities that he continuously tries to combine in order to achieve the much desired spiritual unity.

The next subchapter, *The Sign of a Father – an English Artist*, discusses Yeats's relationship with his father, John Butler Yeats, an educated and very intelligent man, and also a not so famous painter, who dedicated his life to his passion for art rather than to providing for his family. Nevertheless, he was a loving father, interested in his son's education and his role in Yeats's development as an artist was crucial. He awakened Yeats's interest in literature and he nurtured his talent to write poetry, despite his tendency to simply impose his point of view on everybody around him. Also, because of his father's lack of belief in something higher than science, Yeats, who needed to believe in something, was driven towards exotic religions, occultism and esoteric practices, fascinating domains that helped Yeats create his own vision of world and history, thoroughly described in *A Vision*, an "occult mythography" extended to philosophical, historical, astrological, and poetic topics, that Yeats assembled due to his wife's automatic writing.

The third subchapter – *Imaginary Background in his Mother's Irish Family* – explores the poet's relationship with his mother, a true Irish woman fascinated by Ireland's mythical past. Because of her, the poet discovers a reality different from his father's rationalism and positivism, one full of tradition, myths, tales, customs and beliefs, becomes familiar with songs and stories with fishermen, falls in love with Sligo, his mother's birthplace, and becomes interested in the local geography and folk tales, which would later become valuable inspirational sources for his creation.

The next subchapter, *At Lady Augusta Gregory's Estate*, discusses an overwhelming element in the poet's artistic development – the Irish Revival and his connection to Lady Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn, with whom he founded the Irish Literary Theatre and the Abbey Theatre. Nevertheless, Lady Augusta Gregory was more than a business associate for him. At Lady Gregory's estate Yeats finally found a home. She had literary plans for him and they gradually developed a relationship which was mutually advantageous for each of them. Lady Augusta Gregory had found an Irish

poet she could use to promote Irish folklore, whereas Yeats had found some sort of surrogate mother, a woman to whom he could recount all his sorrows and disclose every emotion. Lady Gregory, in her turn, offered him literary advice whenever he had reached an impasse and granted him access to the materials gathered by her – a direct source of inspiration that proved to be very valuable. She did not just want to protect him, but also to bring him on the right path whenever he was too lost in his own thoughts. She made sure he would not waste his talent, he would manage to fulfil the great destiny he was born to and he would become a successful writer that would praise Irish folklore in his work.

The last subchapter deals with the most haunting experience of Yeats's life – his first meeting with Maud Gonne, the woman he was in love with for almost three decades. By the time the two met, the young poet had already published *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems*, so Maud was already familiar with his work. Yeats's collection of poetry was an expression of Ireland's culture and Maud confessed to him from the beginning that she was deeply touched by his work. Her words and also her beauty must have caused a storm into the young poet's mind because their first encounter made him realise that she was the love of his life, and although she would never share his feelings, Yeats would always remember their first meeting as an event of mythological import.

His constant obsession with her, and his admiration of her beauty and courage drove him to propose to her over and over again, despite her repeated rejections. The more she drove him away, the more he kept coming back for more, as if every rejection only managed to reinforce his feeling for her. His unrequited love for her was the subject of many of his poems, and in it Yeats found the resources to survive and become a mature man and artist. He took his sorrows and pains and transformed them into beautiful poems that would sometime serve as a source of spiritual comfort for the generations yet to come. Even though time came when he felt frustrated by her actions, the attraction he felt for her never faded away. Her refusal to marry him became a cyclic event in his existence, but he kept on *feeding* himself from frustration and grief to give birth to incredible poetry.

In our next chapter – *Yeats within the Irish Revival* – the focus is on the impressive Irish movement whose purpose was to create a national art. The first

subchapter, *Yeats's Return to Tradition* exemplifies the ways in which the young poet was guided and influenced by Lady Gregory, who urged him to write about folklore and national myths. For Yeats, however, working with folklore material was far more than changing the form of a poem or including a moral message in it; it was an act of personal interpretation combined with the fire of imagination, a mixture that ultimately led to the creation of a work that really managed to convey the true Celtic spirit. His ambition was to reconnect Irish people with their heritage, and through his poetry and drama not only did he contribute to the creation of a literature that outlines the spirit of an entire nation, but he also preached his own sense of nationalism.

The next subchapter focuses on the years Yeats spent at the Irish Literary Theatre, when he realized the importance of formulating an Irish dramatic tradition. Yeats's role in the Irish Literary Revival was crucial. Through his poetry and drama he managed to initiate the movement that would revolutionize the literary scene of Ireland. By establishing his own literary ideals, by promoting them through his poems and plays, his lectures and journalistic activities, and by actively propagandizing for them, Yeats not only succeeded in discovering a perfect Irish formula for artistic creation, but he also influenced his contemporaries to return to the traditional values of their native Ireland, and soon enough a series of works inspired by peasants' life, Irish customs and traditions, myths and legends would be born, for many Irish artists would seek the subject matter for their works in the glorious, ancient past of a Gaelic Ireland from now on.

The final subchapter, *In the Whirl of Local History Events*, underlines the fact that Yeats, even though young when the Irish struggle for independence was at its highest points, felt the need to integrate himself in the fight in a more active manner, joined several literary organizations that supported the cause and befriended Fenian members. This experience made the poet wrought a larger concept of world history in its important moments and stirred up his appreciation for Irish nationalism.

The following chapter, *Yeats's History as a Concept*, extends to the relation between Ricoeur's concepts and Yeats. While studying the phenomenology of memory, we realize that Paul Ricoeur's research *History, Memory, Forgetting* resembles and can also be connected to W. B. Yeats's *Autobiographies*. The theoretician sets ground of his

theory basing it on Socrates' philosophy, which in its turn influenced both Plato and Aristotle.

Ricoeur expands on the idea that remembering something means remembering the self, mentioning the importance of individual and collective memory. The author draws the conclusion that the field of history is characterized through the polarity between the individual and collective memory but also through a treble/triple attribution of history: that of the self, of close people and the others. The second part of his study deals with history as the limit between lived past and present and highlights the opposition between the memory of the group and collective memory, suggesting that history belongs to everyone and at the same time to nobody, which makes it universal.

With Yeats the concept of history articulated in the poetic discourse achieves a distinctive quality based on a certain subjectivity in which we can trace the elements that define the author's own personality: his Anglo-Irish origins, his family background, his education, his political creed, his literary aspirations and his spirituality. In his work he gives a personal interpretation of history, displaying its transcendental origins rather than the historical realities, creating thus an original perspective on history.

The second subchapter links the poet to the national events which inspired his work and analyzes the context in which W.B. Yeats lived and created – a context in which he found the flight of imagination that made him write a unique oeuvre, rich in Celtic symbols and Irish meaning. At the same time it points out that his poems were a type of propaganda for the Irish literature, not for the Irish politics. We also take into account his rise as a politician and his becoming a senator, when he militated for the minority he represented, for his utmost desire as an Anglo-Irish poet was to understand the place of the Anglo-Irish in a community torn apart by the lack of unity.

Moving forward to the next chapter –*Yeats and the Doctrinaire Point to Reformulate a Modern English Verse* – we explore Yeats's desire for the liberty to write Irish poetry in English and for the freedom one should feel in trying to define himself/herself as belonging to a community of multiple origins. He believed that a poem's Irish-ness does not lie in the language it was written in, but in the feelings it sends forth, which are able to trespass any barrier imposed by language. The present subchapter also examines Yeats's three stages of creation with an emphasis on the characteristics of

his poetry in each of these stages: the romantic qualities of his first poems, the mixture of love, nationalism and symbolism in his subsequent poems, and the symbolism and modernity of his final poems.

The final subchapter, *Yeats vs. Imagism and the Haiku; Yeats and T.S. Eliot*, exemplifies the complexity of the author's poetry by contrasting its vivid language, elaborate structure and its musicality with haiku and its characteristics, shows the relationship between haiku and Imagism and highlights Ezra Pound's influence on Yeats's style. The second part of the subchapter presents a parallel between the modern visions of Yeats and Eliot analysing the common, but mostly the antithetical elements of their literary legacy, one of them keeping in mind the idea that he wants to write as men have always written, while the other was trying to revolutionize poetic expression.

The fourth chapter, *Yeats's Historical Cycles in Poetic Representation*, consists of five subchapters, each covering various poems regarded as pinpointing elements that help sustain our research. *The Way to "The Tower" or Art is higher than life* exposes the poet's inspirational drive, together with society's decline, examines the steps he took in his development as a poet, and presents some sort of return to the Irish mythological past bearing in mind that art is higher than life. In the next subchapter, *The Tower – A Spiritual Travel into the European Past; Present Artistic Values and Higher Poetic Creation*, we analyze some of the most important poems included in the collection that marks Yeats's involuntary embracing of modernism. A special focus is laid on "Sailing to Byzantium", a poem in which Yeats creates an allegory for Ireland, with its present artistic values, and also on Yeats's movement towards a higher artistic creation, disregarding the literary trends.

The following subchapter entitled *The Winding Stairs or Coming Back to the Human and Local History* presents references to the Thoor Ballylee, the castle that Yeats turned into his personal symbol, the bond between the human and divinity, immanent and transcendent. Moving forward to the subchapter *Love Structuring Artistic Creation – from Love to Poetry* we analyze this time Yeats's relationship with the other women he was in love with (Laura Armstrong, Olivia Shakespear, Margot Ruddock, Ethel Manin, etc.) and the impact these love affairs or, at least, feelings for these women had on his poetry. To round off our chapter we come back to the poet's works created between 1916



and 1923. Among these, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” gains an important role, as it represents a page of history, an artistic document that confirms the horrors of the civil war.

The fifth chapter, *Yeats’s Celtic Heliolatry and/or Elitism*, moves towards the political preferences that the author shared with Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot for Fascism and Communism, forms of government that were not appreciated by the author for the concepts they promoted in reality but for their idealised image, which he preferred. As an elitist, disappointed by the failure of his attempts to educate the Irish society starting from its basis, he reaches the conclusion that in order to create a unified Irish culture it was first necessary to educate the upper classes and then the masses.

*The Second Coming – a Poem on Gloomy Premonitions* explores Yeats’s opinions related to historical cycles and the beginning of a new era, as he considered that each era lasts 2000 years, and then an antithetical era begins. As the end of the millennium was approaching, Yeats felt that it was compulsory to re-examine the old traditions and pay specific attention to the newly brought changes into the more contemporary society, which seemed to have lost most of the values on which it was founded.

The final chapter, *The Artefact and Artist in Yeats’s Poetry*, brings forward in the first subchapter the poet’s drive to find the ideal poetic form that haunted his imagination during his youth and which seems to have come into shape in the later years of his career, takes a closer look on the doctrine of the Mask, and examines at the same time the relationship between artefact and artist. The next subchapter, *The Artist – a Passionate Man Writing for Men and Praising Feeling*, comes back to Yeats’s ideas that can also be related to Eliot, who believes that first and foremost it is utterly important to write for the intellectuals and the upper classes, which can grasp the meaning of symbols, tradition and individual talent. A special attention is given to “Parnell’s Funeral”, a poem which Yeats wrote three decades after the death of the nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell and in which the poet complains about the indifference and the superficiality of the Irish society.

The final subchapter, whose title is simply *The Dolls*, brings to light the idea of art and artefact above daily routine and reality. In this poem, the display of an artificial arrangement where everything is meant to be perfect and in equilibrium versus the flawed real life of human beings emphasises the creation of both a doll, but a deeper level that of

a child. The textual personification of the doll is secondary to the idea of a superior forged artificiality, important for the creation of poetry.

Yeats developed his style in his long poetic activity from a romantic sentimentalism to a highly concentrated modernism of essential expressions. The poet places the work of art as superior ideal of creative life above the earthly human existence so his interest is represented by the artefact. He discusses about the faculties and human powers acquired in the phenomenological existence, which are apparent and conscientious, but the principles are acquired through birth and they remain immutable even in the afterlife. So Yeats believes that we know history because we have created it, just in the same way that God knows nature. We cannot know for sure however if W. B. Yeats was seeking a poetic formula or a philosophical truth. In his subjective reason the self begins a journey of knowledge and creation, looking for its antithetic, named by the poet as phantasmagoria. His development from the dreaming idealist, to the sceptic and finally conserver makes him a blend of contradictions and antinomies of love and hate, hope and despair, joy and bitterness. The originality of his search for human love and spiritual connection provides uniqueness to his work, love and passion for people and respect for traditions.

## Résumé

Mots-clés: histoire, discours poétique, esthétique, politique, philosophie, le sien

William Butler Yeats a été, sans aucun doute, l'un des écrivains les plus éloges du XX<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Au cours du dernier siècle, son travail a fait l'objet de nombreuses interprétations, et pourtant à chaque nouvelle lecture de sa poésie, le lecteur peut découvrir de nouvelles significations et peut donner une nouvelle interprétation. Le but de cette thèse, **Le monde dans son temps - Étude sur le discours poétique de Yeats versus le concept d'histoire**, est précisément de réinterpréter le discours poétique de Yeats s'appuyant sur plusieurs concepts clés tels que l'histoire, à la fois personnelle et nationale, l'esthétique, la création artistiques et les idées politiques, parce que tous ces éléments combinés contribuent à la création de ce qu'on appelle le chef-d'œuvre d'un des plus prolifiques écrivains anglo-irlandais.

Puisque le but de cette thèse est d'examiner l'idée d'histoire dans la vision de Yeats et les ramifications qui en découlent, nous avons choisi l'étude de Paul Ricoeur *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli* - comme point de départ dans notre tentative de donner une interprétation critique-philosophique du concept d'histoire. Le traité de Paul Ricoeur offre le cadre approprié pour analyser la manière dont des événements historiques majeurs de l'histoire irlandaise ont influencé la perception de soi de l'individu et d'une nation entière et ont façonné l'identité d'une culture irlandaise en plein développement.

Tout au long des six chapitres de cette thèse, on a commencé par le contexte autobiographique, où on suit le développement du poète de l'enfance à l'âge adulte, et on a continué avec les activités culturelles et littéraires de Yeats, mettant en discussion son rôle dans la création du Théâtre Littéraire Irlandais, son ambition pour créer un drame pur-irlandais, complètement différente de celle des autres pays européens, la participation à des événements historiques locaux, le soutien enthousiaste offert au mouvement nationaliste irlandais et la déception subie plus tard à cause des idées politiques, le désir de reformuler la poésie moderne écrite en anglais, et une recherche continue d'une expression poétique parfaite.

Le premier sous-chapitre, *La biographie de Yeats - un artiste anglo-irlandais*, révèle les aspects pertinents de la biographie de l'auteur, notre but dans ce chapitre étant

celui de mettre en évidence les étapes suivies par Yeats dans son développement en tant qu'artiste. Le premier sous-chapitre - *L'artiste formé par les extrêmes historiques* - décrit le poète comme le résultat de deux cultures différentes, la culture irlandaise et la culture anglaise, et pourtant appartenant et restant consacré à une seule - celle irlandaise. Toutefois, dans ce processus Yeats se sentait piégé quelque part entre deux mondes, deux pays, développant ainsi deux identités qu'il cherche constamment à combiner pour obtenir une unité spirituelle tant désirée.

Le chapitre suivant, *Sous le signe du père - un artiste anglais*, porte sur la relation de Yeats avec son père, John Butler Yeats, un cultivé et très intelligent, et, aussi, un peintre pas très célèbre qui a consacré son existence entière à sa passion pour l'art et pas à son devoir de soutenir sa famille. Cependant, il était un père aimant, qui s'intéressait à l'éducation de son fils et son rôle dans la transformation de son fils dans un artiste exceptionnel a été crucial. Il a été celui qui a éveillé son intérêt pour la littérature et a cultivé son talent pour écrire de la poésie en dépit de sa tendance d'imposer son point de vue à ceux qui l'entourent. Aussi, à cause de l'absence de foi religieuse de John Butler Yeats, le besoin de son fils de croire en quelque chose qui était plus important que la science, a conduit le jeune poète aux religions exotiques et aux pratiques occultes et ésotériques, des zones fascinantes que l'ont aidé à développer son propre vision du monde et de l'histoire, décrite en détail dans *Une vision*, une "mythographie occulte" qui aborde des sujets philosophiques, historiques, astrologique et poétiques, mis en place par Yeats à l'aide de l'écriture automatique de sa femme.

Le troisième sous-chapitre, *Le contexte imaginaire dans la famille irlandaise de sa mère*, explore la relation du poète avec sa mère, une vraie femme irlandaise fascinée par le passé mythique de l'Irlande. Grâce à elle, le poète découvre une réalité différente de celle de son père, dominée par le rationalisme et le positivisme. La réalité que Yeats découvre à travers sa mère est pleine de mythes, des contes, des coutumes et des croyances, et aussi grâce à elle le poète devient familier avec les histoires et les chansons de pêcheurs, il tombe amoureux de Sligo, la ville natale de sa mère, et s'intéresse à la géographie locale et aux contes populaires qui deviendront plus tard des sources précieuses d'inspiration pour sa création poétique.

La section suivante – *Sur le domaine d'Augusta Gregory* - traite d'un chapitre d'une importance écrasante dans l'évolution artistique du poète - la Renaissance irlandaise et la relation entre Yeats, Lady Augusta Gregory et Edward Martyn, avec lesquels le poète a fondé le Théâtre Littéraire Anglais et le *Théâtre Abbey*. Et pourtant, Lady Augusta Gregory a été plus qu'un partenaire d'affaires pour Yeats. Sur son domaine, le poète a finalement trouvé un foyer. Elle avait des plans pour son œuvre littéraire et peu à peu les deux ont développé une relation qui serait bénéfique pour les deux. Lady Gregory a trouvé en Yeats le poète qui pouvait promouvoir le folklore irlandais, tandis que Yeats a trouvé en elle une sorte de mère substitut, une femme à laquelle il pouvait lui raconter tous ses malheurs et devant laquelle il pouvait donner libre cours aux émotions. Lady Gregory, à son tour, lui donnait des conseils littéraires chaque fois que Yeats était en difficulté et lui a offert l'accès aux matériaux recueillies par elle - une source directe d'inspiration pour Yeats, qui plus tard s'est avéré extrêmement précieuse. Lady Gregory n'a pas voulu seulement protéger Yeats tout au long de sa carrière, mais elle a voulu l'apporter sur le bon chemin chaque fois que Yeats semblait perdu dans ses pensées. Elle s'est assurée que Yeats ne gaspillerait jamais son talent, qu'il serait capable d'accomplir son destin et qu'il deviendrait un écrivain de succès qui va glorifier le folklore irlandais dans son œuvre.

Le dernier sous-chapitre met en évidence une expérience qui va hanter le poète pour le reste de sa vie - sa première rencontre avec Maud Gonne, la femme qu'il a aimée pendant trois décennies. Lors de leur rencontre, le jeune poète avait déjà publié les *Errances d'Oisín et autres poèmes* ; c'est pourquoi Maud était déjà si familière avec ses poèmes. Car la collection est une expression de la culture irlandaise, Maud lui a avoué dès le départ qu'elle a été profondément impressionnée par ses poèmes. Ses paroles de même que sa beauté, ont provoqué une tempête dans l'esprit du jeune poète, semble-t-il, car il s'est rendu compte dès leur première réunion que Maud est l'amour de sa vie et, même si elle n'a jamais partagé ses sentiments, Yeats s'est toujours rappelé de leur première réunion comme d'un événement mythologique.

L'obsession permanente de l'artiste pour elle, l'admiration pour son courage et sa beauté ont amené Yeats à la demander en mariage plusieurs fois, bien qu'elle l'ait rejeté chaque fois. Plus elle essayait de l'enlever, plus il voulait être avec elle, chaque rejet ne

faisant autre chose que renforcer ses sentiments pour elle. Son amour non partagé est devenu l'objet de plusieurs poèmes de Yeats et il semble que justement dans cet amour-ci il a trouvé les ressources nécessaires pour survivre et devenir un homme et un poète mûr. Il a tourné sa douleur et sa misère dans de beaux poèmes, qui serviront parfois comme une source de réconfort spirituel pour les générations suivantes. Bien qu'il y ait eu des moments où l'artiste se sentait frustré à cause des actions de la femme bien-aimée, ses sentiments n'ont pas disparu. Son refus de marier Yeats devient un événement cyclique dans l'existence du poète. Il a continué à se nourrir de la frustration et la douleur causée par son refus pour créer des paroles mémorables.

Dans le chapitre suivant - *Yeats au sein de la renaissance irlandaise* - notre attention est concentrée sur le mouvement impressionnant irlandais qui vise à créer un art national. Le premier sous-chapitre, *Le retour de Yeats à la tradition*, illustre la façon dont le poète a été guidé et influencé par Lady Gregory, qui l'a poussé à écrire sur le folklore et les mythes nationaux. Toutefois, pour Yeats, travailler avec du matériel folklorique signifiait plus que le changement de la forme ou l'inclusion d'un message moral dans le poème ; Yeats n'a pas seulement transformé les matériaux folkloriques, mais il les a interprétés à travers son propre imagination, aboutissant à diffuser l'esprit celtique. Son ambition était celle de reconnecter le peuple irlandais et l'héritage ancien et, à travers sa poésie et son théâtre, il n'a pas seulement contribué à la création d'une littérature qui décrit l'esprit d'un peuple entier, mais il a aussi inspiré des idées nationalistes à ses compatriotes.

La section suivante se concentre sur les années que Yeats a vécu au Théâtre Littéraire Irlandais, quand il a réalisé l'importance de forger sa propre tradition dramaturgique pour l'Irlande. Le rôle du poète dans la Renaissance Littéraire Irlandaise a été particulièrement important. Grâce à sa poésie et ses drames, Yeats a pu initier un mouvement qui allait révolutionner la scène littéraire en Irlande. En établissant ses propres idéaux littéraires et en les faisant connus par le biais de la poésie, du théâtre, des conférences et de ses activités journalistiques, à travers sa participation active dans la diffusion de ces idéaux, Yeats a non seulement réussi à trouver une formule irlandaise parfaite pour sa création, mais il a également influencé ses contemporains à revenir aux valeurs traditionnelles irlandaises. Ainsi seront créées de nombreuses œuvres inspirées de

la vie des paysans, des coutumes et des traditions irlandaises, des mythes et des légendes, car de nombreux artistes irlandais choisiront dorénavant les thèmes de leurs œuvres du passé glorieux de l'Irlande.

Le dernier sous-chapitre, *Dans le tourbillon des événements historiques locaux*, souligne l'idée que, en dépit de son jeune âge, lorsque la lutte irlandaise a atteint son apogée, Yeats a senti la nécessité de s'engager dans la lutte pour l'indépendance d'une manière plus active, en se joignant, donc, à plusieurs organisations littéraires qui soutenaient le mouvement nationaliste et en liant d'amitié avec plusieurs membres fenians. Cette expérience a aidé le poète à perfectionner sa conception sur l'histoire mondiale et a suscité son appréciation pour le nationalisme irlandais.

Le chapitre suivant - *L'histoire en tant que concept dans la vision de Yeats* - concerne les concepts de Ricoeur et Yeats. Pendant qu'on étudie la phénoménologie de la mémoire, on se rend compte que le traité de Paul Ricoeur, *La Mémoire, l'Histoire, l'Oubli*, ressemble et peut être relié aux *Autobiographies* de Yeats. Le théoricien base son propre théorie sur la philosophie de Socrate, qui, à son tour, a influencé Platon et Aristote.

Ricoeur développe l'idée suivante : se rappeler quelque chose est un acte subjectif ; en même temps il mentionne l'importance de l'individu dans la mémoire collective. L'auteur conclut que le domaine de l'histoire est caractérisé par une polarité entre la mémoire individuelle et celle collective et il est réalisé par la contribution apportée par les trois parties: l'individu, les proches de l'individu (un groupe) et la communauté. La deuxième partie de son étude examine l'histoire en tant que limite entre l'expérience du passé et le présent et souligne l'opposition entre la mémoire d'un groupe et la mémoire collective, ce qui suggère que l'histoire appartient à tout le monde et en même temps à personne, chose qui la rend universelle.

Pour Yeats, le concept d'histoire articulé dans le discours poétique acquière une qualité distincte, fondée sur une partie subjective où on peut détecter les éléments qui définissent la personnalité de l'auteur: les racines anglo-irlandaises, le contexte familial l'éducation, les principes politiques, les aspirations littéraires et sa spiritualité. Dans son œuvre, il propose une interprétation personnelle de l'histoire, présentant plutôt ses racines transcendantes, que les réalités historiques, et créant ainsi une perspective originale sur l'histoire.

Le deuxième sous-chapitre suit la connexion entre le poète et les événements nationaux qui l'ont inspirés et présente une analyse du contexte dans lequel William Butler Yeats a vécu et créé - un contexte qui semble avoir frappé son imagination et l'avoir poussé à créer une œuvre unique, riche en symboles celtiques et significations irlandais. En même temps, ce sous-chapitre démontre que les paroles de Yeats ont constitué une propagande pour la littérature irlandaise, pas pour la politique, et prend aussi en compte l'ascension politique de Yeats, portant sur la période où il est devenu sénateur et a fait campagne pour la minorité dont lui-même faisait partie. Son plus grand désir en tant que poète anglo-irlandais a été celle de comprendre sa place dans une communauté déchirée par la désunion.

Dans le chapitre suivant, *Yeats et le point de la doctrine – la Reformulation du vers moderne écrit en anglais*, on explore le désir de Yeats de recevoir la permission de continuer à écrire en anglais ses vers irlandais et de sentir la liberté que chacun doit sentir lorsqu'on essaye de se définir comme appartenant à une communauté avec d'origines multiples. Il était convaincu que le caractère irlandais d'un vers n'a pas des racines dans la langue dont il a été écrit, mais dans les sentiments qu'il transmet, ceux-ci étant en mesure de dépasser les limites imposées par la langue. La section courante examine également les trois étapes de la création yeatsienne<sup>305</sup>: les qualités romantiques des premiers poèmes, le mélange de l'amour, du nationalisme et du symbolisme dans les poèmes écrits plus tard, et le symbolisme et la modernité de ses derniers poèmes.

Le dernier sous-chapitre, *Yeats contre l'imagisme et le haïku, Yeats et TS Eliot*, illustre la complexité de la poésie de l'auteur, en comparant la langue vivante, la structure élaborée et la musicalité du vers Yeatsian avec le haïku et ses caractéristiques ; aussi ce sous-chapitre montre la relation entre l'imagisme et le haïku et met en évidence l'influence d'Ezra Pound sur le style Yeatsian. La deuxième partie de ce sous-chapitre présente une comparaison entre la modernité de Yeats et le modernisme d'Eliot, analysant les éléments communs, mais surtout ceux antithétiques, l'un d'entre eux restant fidèle à l'idée qu'il doit écrire comme les gens ont toujours écrit, tandis que l'autre visait à révolutionner l'expression poétique.

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<sup>305</sup> yeatsien/yeatsienne – spécifique à William Butler Yeats



Le quatrième chapitre, *Les cycles historiques dans la représentation poétique*, est composé de cinq sous-chapitres, chacun mettant en discussion des poèmes différents qui constituent des éléments clés de ce travail. *La voie vers la tour ou «l'art est plus importante que la vie»* expose l'énergie créatrice du poète, avec le déclin de la société, se penche sur les étapes que le poète a suivi dans son développement artistique et illustre un retour du poète au passé mythologique irlandais, étant guidé par l'idée que «l'art est plus important que la vie.» Dans la section suivante, *La tour - Un voyage spirituel dans le passé européen ; Valeurs artistiques actuelles et création poétique supérieure*, on analyse quelques-uns des poèmes les plus importants inclus dans la collection qui marque la transition involontaire de Yeats au modernisme. Une attention particulière est donnée au poème «Naviguant à Byzantium», un poème dans lequel Yeats crée une allégorie pour l'Irlande, avec ses valeurs artistiques actuelles, mais on suit aussi l'évolution de Yeats vers une création artistique plus élevée, indépendamment des tendances littéraires.

Le sous-chapitre suivant, intitulé *L'escalier en colimaçon ou revenant à l'homme et à l'histoire locale*, comporte des références au château Thoor Ballylee que Yeats a transformé dans un symbole personnel. Celui-ci représente le lien entre l'homme et la divinité, entre l'immanent et le transcendant. En ce qui concerne le chapitre *L'amour structure la création artistique - de l'amour à la poésie*, notre analyse se concentre, cette fois-ci, sur les relations de Yeats avec d'autres femmes qu'il a aimées (Laura Armstrong, Olivia Shakespeare, Margot Ruddock, Ethel Manin, etc.) et l'impact que ces relations et les sentiments du poète pour ces femmes ont eu sur sa poésie. Pour mettre fin à ce chapitre, on se tourne vers les poésies écrites entre 1916 et 1923. Parmi ces-ci on mentionne «Mille neuf cent dix-neuf» qui a un rôle particulier, parce que c'est une page d'histoire, un document attestant les horreurs de la guerre civile.

Le cinquième chapitre – *L'adulation celtique du soleil et / ou l'élitisme de Yeats* - met l'accent sur les préférences politiques que l'auteur avait en commun avec Ezra Pound et TS Eliot. Il s'agit notamment d'une image idéalisée du fascisme et du communisme, deux formes de gouvernement qui n'ont pas été appréciées par l'auteur non seulement à cause de la manière dont ils ont été mis en œuvre, mais aussi à cause des concepts que les théoriciens ont proposés. En tant qu'élitiste, Yeats a été déçu de constater que ses tentatives pour éduquer la société irlandaise commençant avec la base ont échoué et il a

donc conclu que l'unification de la culture irlandaise peut être atteinte, d'abord, à travers l'éducation des élites et seulement ensuite on pouvait passer à l'éducation des masses.

*La seconde venue - un poème des prémonitions sombres*, explore les points de vue de Yeats sur les cycles historiques et le début d'une nouvelle ère. Il pense que chaque époque dure 2000 ans, cette période finissant par le début d'une époque antithétique. Comme la fin du millénaire s'approchait, Yeats s'est senti obligé de revoir les vieilles traditions et d'accorder une attention particulière aux changements récemment survenus dans la société contemporaine qui semblait avoir perdu la plupart des valeurs qui étaient à la base de sa construction.

Le dernier chapitre, *L'artefact et l'artiste dans la poésie de Yeats*, met en évidence, dans le premier sous-chapitre, le pouvoir du poète de mettre en œuvre la forme poétique idéale qui semble avoir saisi l'imagination dès sa jeunesse et qui s'est matérialisé à l'âge adulte. Il paie une attention spéciale à la Doctrine de la Masque et examine en même temps la relation entre l'artiste et les artefacts. Le sous-chapitre suivant, *L'artiste - un homme passionné qui écrit pour les hommes et loue le sentiment*  $\neg$ , revient à l'idée de Yeats et de T. S. Eliot conformément à laquelle un écrivain doit écrire pour les intellectuels et les élites, ceux qui sont en mesure de comprendre les significations des symboles, de la tradition et du talent individuel. On paie une attention particulière au poème *Les funérailles de Parnell*, un poème qui a été écrit trente ans après la mort du leader nationaliste, Charles Stewart Parnell, où le poète se lamente de l'indifférence et la superficialité de la société dans laquelle il vivait.

Le dernier sous-chapitre intitulé *Les poupées* souligne l'idée d'art et d'artefact, idées supérieures à la routine quotidienne et à la réalité. Dans ce poème, l'arrangement artificiel où tout est conçu pour être parfaitement équilibré qui est en contraste avec les défauts de la vie réelle met en évidence non seulement la création d'une poupée mais aussi celle d'un enfant. La personnification textuelle de la poupée est subordonnée à l'idée d'artificialité supérieure, qui est importante pour la création de la poésie.

Yeats a développé son style dans sa longue activité poétique à partir du sentimentalisme romantique vers un modernisme centré sur des expressions élémentaires. Le poète considère l'œuvre d'art comme un idéal de la vie artistique plus élevé que l'existence humaine terrestre, donc son attention est focalisé sur l'artefact. Il discute des

facultés et des pouvoirs humains acquis dans l'existence phénoménologique, facultés et pouvoirs qui sont apparents et consciencieux, mais les principes sont acquis par naissance et restent inflexibles, même dans l'au-delà. Donc, Yeats estime qu'on connaît l'histoire parce qu'on l'a créé, de même que Dieu connaît la nature. On ne peut pas savoir avec certitude si William Butler Yeats a cherché toute sa vie une formule poétique ou une vérité philosophique. En rationalisant son soi subjectif il commence un voyage, de la connaissance et de la créativité, cherchant l'antithèse, appelé par le poète fantasmagorie. Sa transformation d'un rêveur idéaliste dans un sceptique et finalement dans un conservateur, nous permet de l'envisager comme un mélange de contradictions et d'antinomies telles que l'amour et la haine, l'espoir et le désespoir, la joie et la tristesse. La singularité de son œuvre, l'amour et la passion pour les gens et le respect des traditions ressortent de sa recherche interminable de l'amour humain et de la connexion spirituelle.

# APPENDIX

## 50<sup>th</sup> EDITION OF YEATS INTERNATIONAL SUMMER SCHOOL

Champion

CLASSIFIEDS & LETTINGS

PUBLIC NOTICES and APPOINTMENTS

plus...  
Property

ENTERTAINMENT

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### Packed programme celebrates special Yeats' School anniversary

The Yeats International Summer School, which this year marks its 50th anniversary, was officially opened on Sunday afternoon in the Hawk's Nest Theatre, Sligo.

The world-renowned school will run from 2 August 7th and there will be a full academic programme of lectures and seminars by many eminent scholars of modern literature, with readings by some of the most exciting names in modern poetry, including Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, Eavan

Poland, Dennis O'Driscoll, Sinéad Morrison, Gerald Dawes, Julie O'Callaghan, Bernard O'Donoghue, Lavinia Flynn, Alan Gillis, Shona Casson, Peter Fallon, Justin Quinn, Peter McDonald and others.

The Drama Workshop, run by Sam and Joan McCrindle, will run throughout the two weeks and continues in the production of a Yeats play. Award-winning poet Sinéad Morrison will conduct the Poetry Workshop which takes place over the central weekend.

There will be an unusually exciting round of music sessions, concerts and afternoon excursions in the surrounding Yeats country.

The first school, fifty years ago, was directed by Denis Donoghue, now the Henry James Professor in English and American Letters at New York University; he will return to Sligo for the anniversary year, to deliver a lecture entitled "Three Presences: Yeats, Eliot and Pound".

Helen Vendler of Harvard University officially opened the school on Sunday and she will remain to give seminars on Yeats's middle and late poems and to present a lecture, "Naciflaim: De Vortidan Coustruies." John Holly, editor of the Collected Letters of W.B. Yeats and a former director of the school, will lecture on "the relationship between the poet and his father, John Butler Yeats."

David Fitzgerald (Trinity College, Dublin) will discuss the complicated relationship between the Yeats and Dickinson families and Sign. Other guest speakers will include the poet's official biographer, Roy Foster

(Carroll Professor of Irish History, University of Oxford), Warwick Gould and (Institute Treasury) of Yeats Annual, Ronald Strachan (honorary) a former director of the school, and other eminent critics, including Edna Longley (QUB), Elizabeth Butler Collingford (Texas, Tennessee), Margaret Mills Harper (Georgia - State), George Burdick (Michigan) and Declan Kundy (Michigan Library New York).



(L-R): Floria Dico, Camelia Dico, Margaret Balfour and Georgina Wynne pictured at the opening of the 50th Yeats Summer School in the Hawk's Nest Theatre on Sunday afternoon last. Photos Carl Brennan



Joe Cox, President, Yeats Summer School and Nobel Prize winning poet Seamus Heaney



(L-R): Joe Cox, President, Yeats Summer School, Una Logan, Seamus Heaney, Jim Laughlin, Sebastião Spasos, Charles Gemmy and Tony Jay



(L-R): Frank O'Donoghue, Mary Waters and John Flynn

**49<sup>TH</sup> EDITION ON YEATS INTERNATIONAL SUMMER SCHOOL,  
SLIGO, 2008**



**BEN BULBIN SEEN FROM CARROWMORE**





ENTRANCE IN COOLE PARK





YEATS'S TOMB





W.B. YEATS, CONTEMPORARY OF SLIGO CITIZENS





THE TOWER



STELLA MEW (MIDDLE), CEO OF YEATS SOCIETY, MY DEAR FRIEND  
FATHIEH (LEFT) AND ME IN THE BUILDING OF YEATS SOCIETY IN SLIGO





ORGANIZERS OF YEATS INTERNATIONAL SUMMER SCHOOL





THE RAFTERIES: NOEL AND MARGARET





SEAMUS HEANEY



ORGANIZERS: THE ENRIGHTS, MARTIN AND JOYCE



PROFESSOR TERENCE BROWN





ANNE ENRIGHT, WRITER, WINNER OF THE MAN BOOKER PRIZE 2007



PROFESSOR MASSIMO BACIGALUPO





LECTURERS OF YEATS INTERNATIONAL SUMMER SCHOOL



FATHIEH SAUDI, ME, IMSOO AHN, MARTIN ENRIGHT



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