

## Popular Audiences and Poetical Culture

W. B. Yeats's first published article, 'The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson', originally carried a more inclusive title, 'Irish Poets and Irish Poetry', and appeared in *The Irish Fireside* of October 9, 1886. In it Yeats made a point that would lie at the core of his critical and theoretical endeavours to come:

Great poetry does not teach us anything – it changes us. Man is like a musical instrument of many strings, of which only a few are sounded by the narrow interests of his daily life; and the others, for want of use, are continually becoming tuneless and forgotten. (*UPI* 84)

Yeats boldly invests poetry with a capacity to shape people by stirring their whole nature. This is a foreshadowing of what he would later evoke in many a poem as, for example, in the third stanza of 'Demon and Beast' where 'an absurd/Portly green-pated bird/[...]/Being no more demoniac/A stupid happy creature/Could rouse my whole nature' (*CWI* 188). In itself, the bird is just 'A stupid happy creature' but when it has been incorporated into the poetic vision, it stirs in the poet a sudden joy in which his 'whole nature' is for an instant submerged. However, the passage on Ferguson is remarkable not only for the insight into the power of verse to fuse the poet's self into a fleeting unity but also for establishing a link between the poet and his audience who at this point is implied to be the whole of Irish society. What the poet offers is an extension of people's consciousness of themselves and their world, a state of greater compass of the self that is otherwise blunted by involvement in daily pursuits.

Moreover, it is only heroic poetry, that ‘phantom finger swept over all the strings’, that can arouse ‘from man’s whole nature a song of answering harmony’. Therefore heroic poetry is ‘the poetry of action, for such alone can arouse the whole nature of man. It touches all the strings—those of wonder and pity, of fear and joy’ (*UPI* 84). The image of the stringed instrument implies that through verse all emotions are orchestrated so that a single tune flows from man’s innermost core; years later Yeats would call such an orchestration of the self Unity of Being.<sup>1</sup> No wonder that ‘it ignores all morals, for its business is not in any way to make us roles for life, but to make character’ (*UPI* 84). The idea of character would eventually be superseded by personality, a term suggestive of malleability and better suited to Yeats’s notion of the mask; in mid-1886, ‘making character’ was synonymous with ‘burning away what is mean and deepening what is shallow’ (*UPI* 84).

Even though the article on Ferguson is in many respects guilty of faulty logic, which cannot surprise in so young a writer, it comes to identify the importance that ‘making [the] character’ of the people held for Yeats. From the outset, he emphasises the view that poetry is an art form that alone can transform a people from uncouth simpletons into a society of rich nature and sensibility. From his point of view, Ireland in the mid-1880s and in the years following was blindly following the modes imported from England. Additionally, what he perceived as literature of the highest order was often attacked in the press, such as his 1899 selections from William Carleton whose stories an anonymous critic denounced as being irreligious ‘envenomed caricature’.<sup>2</sup> Yeats responded by emphasizing that for almost

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<sup>1</sup>In *Four Years*, Yeats defines Unity of Being after Dante but recalls that his father, ‘from whom I had learned the term, preferred a comparison to a musical instrument so strung that if we touch a string all the strings murmur faintly’ (*CW*3 164). The association of Unity of Being with music is also used in the *Sleep and Dream Notebooks*: ‘[Unity of Being] is a harmony. All the being vibrates to the note, it is like striking a chord. It is like sounding on the piano certain harmonic notes which are responded to by others in their sequence’ (*YVP*3 27). In an article in praise of Maud Gonne, ‘The New Speranza’, he used the reference to ‘Aeolian Harp’ to emphasise Gonne’s completeness as a speaker (*UPI* 214), thereby adapting the Romantic and Victorian trope to his own, in this case, nationalist ends. See Matthew Gibson, *Yeats, Coleridge and the Romantic Sage* (London: Macmillan, 2000), 152–153.

<sup>2</sup>Anonymous review of *Stories from Carleton*, *Nation* 28 (December 1899), 4.

thirty years 'book after book came from [Carleton] in only too great profusion, and almost all contains some eulogy, defence, or tender description of the Faith of his childhood' (*CLI* 206, *UPI* 168). In a letter to Katharine Tynan, he reported a priest's note sent to him, lamenting that he 'would edit such a book'. 'O these bigots', was Yeats's slightly weary comment, 'fortunately their zeal is not equalled by their knowledge' (*CLI* 208). This was just a foretaste of the wrath his ideals would incur in later years, but it was enough for him to decide that the Irish needed to be taught to appreciate literature for its quality and not for the political sentiments it expressed. His early fascination with the work of Irish poets to which he was introduced by John O'Leary: Ferguson, Thomas Davis, William Allingham and James Clarence Mangan, waxed and waned for the next fifteen years or so.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, he firmly believed that unless people could also understand what great literature is and does, Ireland would never progress beyond religious dogma and intellectual stupor as epitomized by the 'tittering, jeering emptiness' of newspapers (*L* 83) and popular theatre.

### THE NATIVE STRAIN

Interventional as it is, Yeats's critical prose of the decade from 1885 to 1895 aims to battle the ossification of Ireland's aesthetic mindset. And since greater attunement to literature opens the way to the transformation of people's ideas and ideals, aesthetic education is also the key to the general edification of the nation. Yeats stresses this social function of literature in his second article on Ferguson, published in the *Dublin University Review*: 'Of all the many things the past bequeaths to the future, the greatest are the legends; they are the mothers of nations' (*UPI* 104). Through the influence of O'Leary, from whose 'fine collection of Irish books' came 'the material for many a song and ballad' (*LNI* 75) and Standish O'Grady, whose *History of Ireland: The Heroic Period* Yeats deemed one of the books that lay at the foundation of the Celtic Revival, the young poet reposes his trust for the edification of Ireland in the native legendary tradition. Phillip L. Marcus pithily summarized Yeats's agenda

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<sup>3</sup>The varying degrees of influence on Yeats of these Irish poets, particularly, Ferguson, is traced by Peter Denman, 'Ferguson and Yeats', *Yeats: An Annual of Critical and Textual Studies* XII (1994), 78–94.

by noting that for Yeats, ‘any Irish writer who brought his or her Irish readers into vital contact with their indigenous culture would surely lead them towards involvement with it and away from any superficial attraction to the (ultimately) alien English tradition; and that out of national pride would come political patriotism’.<sup>4</sup> Heroic poetry and prose like that of O’Grady would thus provide the Irish with an ideal that they would embody in their lives. The patriotic note on which Yeats ends his article emphasises the division between on the one hand the ‘professorial classes’, only fearing ‘for their emoluments’ as well as ‘the shoddy society of “West Britonism”’ and, on the other, ‘those young men clustered here and there throughout our land, whom the emotion of Patriotism has lifted into that world of selfless passion in which heroic deeds are possible and heroic poetry credible’ (*UPI* 104). As a result, Yeats observed in a review of Todhunter’s *The Banshee and Other Poems* published in the *United Ireland*: ‘it should be incumbent on all good Irishmen to know something of their old legends’ (*UPI* 216) because, as Yeats learnt from O’Leary, ‘there is no fine nationality without literature, and seen the converse way also, [...] there is no fine literature without nationality’ (*LNI* 76).<sup>5</sup> Yug Mohit Chaudhry argues that O’Leary’s claim was for Yeats ‘a demand that literature be politically serviceable. The dictum may be O’Leary’s but its application is the *United Ireland*’s’.<sup>6</sup> The *United Ireland* at the time saw literature as an aid to ‘the national cause’<sup>7</sup> and Yeats must have chosen to speak of ‘good Irishmen’ being aware of the political slant of the periodical. At the same time, the fact that in the review of Todhunter, Yeats corroborated the idea put forth in the article on Ferguson that appeared in the

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<sup>4</sup>Phillip L. Marcus, *Yeats and Artistic Power* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 38.

<sup>5</sup>In his essay on ‘Heroic Styles’, Seamus Deane observes that the narratives spun by Yeats, Joyce and Padraig Pearse ‘are all based on the ideological conviction that a community exists which must be recovered and restored’. This restoration, according to Deane, took place in literature that ‘is self-consciously adversarial’ in that what it did in its time and does now is oppose clichéd notions of Irishness, proffering antithetical ways of conceiving of the nation. ‘Heroic Styles: The Tradition of an Idea’ in *Theorizing Ireland*, ed. Claire Connolly (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003), 21.

<sup>6</sup>Yug Mohit Chaudhry, *Yeats: The Irish Literary Revival and the Politics of Print* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2001), 126.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 112.

*Dublin University Review*, a periodical whose agenda was close to the Protestant, Trinity College Dublin line, shows that the variable political element did not inflect the firm aesthetic position.

The crucial point for Yeats was that the cultivation of the native literary tradition was instrumental in combating the deleterious impact not only of press and politics, but also of cosmopolitanism, which was the final stage of an ailing culture. While Yeats's perception of cosmopolitanism is fraught with internal tensions,<sup>8</sup> between 1889 and 1893 he is committed to castigating it, even though his attacks are launched not in the Irish but in the American papers. In the *Providence Sunday Journal* for 10 February 1899, he connects cosmopolitanism with the decay of literature:

As a literature ages it divides nature from man and sings each for itself. Then each passion is taken from its fellows and sung alone, and cosmopolitanism begins, for a passion has no nation. But in [John Todhunter's poems] man and nature are one, and everywhere is a wild and pungent Celtic flavor. When a literature is old it grows so indirect and complex that it is only a possession for the few: to read it well is a difficult pursuit, like playing on the fiddle; for it one needs especial training. But these poems should rouse each one so far as he is human and imaginative. (*LNI* 191–92)

Musical metaphors return to stress that only by following a distinctly Celtic note will poets, as Todhunter has, create images of passions shared by all mankind. Literatures that are divided from nature, like for example English, are confronted with a 'coming decline' (*UPI* 273), for 'England is old and her poets must scrape up the crumbs of an almost finished banquet, but Ireland has still full tables' (*LNI* 148). Such a sharp distinction between a flourishing Ireland and an ailing England is partly motivated by Yeats's desire, manifest in the period between 1885 and 1893, to 'ingratiate himself' with the nationalist circles, the obvious target readership of the *United Ireland* and, in the USA, of the *Providence Sunday Journal*.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, stressing the potency of the literature of young countries would have held an obvious appeal to the American press, at the time an important source of income for the impecunious and relatively unknown Yeats. Still, his aversion to division and to cultural fragmentation, which is

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<sup>8</sup>See Barry Sheils, *W. B. Yeats and World Literature: The Subject of Poetry* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 88–100.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 129.

evident but marginal in the article on Todhunter's volume of poems, grows in strength. In May 1890, referring to an article by Justin McCarthy, a writer and future nationalist MP, Yeats addresses cosmopolitanism together with politics and journalism in an article in the *Boston Pilot*, stating that 'Irishmen leave little impression on contemporary literature—they are absorbed into journalism and politics'. Detrimental though they are, however, 'cosmopolitanism is one of the worst [things]'. Yeats continues, 'We are not content to dig our own potato patch in peace. We peer over the wall at our neighbor's instead of making our own garden green and beautiful. And yet it is a good garden and there have been great transactions within it, from the death of Cuchulain down to the flight of Michael Dwyer from the burning cabin' (LNI 106). This may sound a little provincial but seen in the context of his earlier remark on the disadvantages of division and fragmentation, the passage implies that researching Irish literary and mythological traditions can refresh the aching body of contemporary literature. Furthermore, since literature shapes the nation, giving writers and poets a new lease on imaginative life is to result in enlivening society. This idea anticipates the later perception of culture as a source of Irish distinction from England that would be proposed by Douglas Hyde and Horace Plunkett as well as nationalists like D. P. Moran and Arthur Griffith, though in the case of the latter two, aesthetic excellence would be deemed inferior to more immediate political goals.

Yeats considered at length the problem of cosmopolitanism and discussed it in a more thorough fashion in his 1893 lecture, reported in the *United Ireland* for 27 May 1893. There, he noted that what he called 'the lyric age [...] becomes as it advances towards an ever complete lyricism, more and more cosmopolitan; for the great passions know nothing of boundaries' (UPI 272). After four years Yeats remembers his statements from the *Providence Sunday Journal*: passions have no boundaries and no nations. But this time he does not shun a more precise description of how literature, particularly poetry, can counteract the progressing fragmentation of society and man himself, cosmopolitanism no longer being so obviously a pernicious state:

In the age of lyric poetry every kind of subtlety, obscurity, and intricate utterance prevails, for the human spirit has begun to look in upon itself with microscopic eyes and to judge of ideas and feelings apart from their effects upon action. The vast bulk of our moods and feelings are too fine, too subjective, too impalpable to find any clear expression in action or in speech

tending towards action, and epic and dramatic poetry must deal with one or other of these. (*UPI* 271)

A cosmopolitan society, due to its ‘endless sub-division [...] to trades and professions, and of human life to habits and rules, is making men every day more subtle and complex, less forcible and adaptable’ (*UPI* 272). Thus the poet’s task is to create a language capable of embracing all these subtleties and fusing them into one melody no longer emphatic of divisions but of ‘the flaming heart of man’ (*UPI* 273). As a result, Yeats realized that what Ireland needed in order to cast off the bonds of dogmatism was language both simple and evocative, which only literature, particularly, as it turns out, old ballad poetry, could offer. As P. J. Mathews observes, the idea that the past literary modes and cultural phenomena were to help reinvent the contemporary national literature and culture would remain a paradoxical hallmark of the work of Yeats as well as that of the Gaelic League.<sup>10</sup> Already in a long letter to Katharine Tynan of December 1888, Yeats observed that ‘I do not mean that we should not go to old ballads and poems for inspiration but we should search them for new methods of expressing our selves’ (*CLI* 119). If all society tends towards subdivision, then a subtler language is needed to apprehend the passions, moods and thoughts of the people; that language can be derived from Irish literary tradition and consequently can provide the nation with a description of itself which both ensures continuity with its indigenous culture and helps it embrace the future.

With this end in view, around 1890 Yeats ‘began to plot and scheme how one might seal with the right image the soft wax before it began to harden’ (*CW3* 104). Publishing in various periodicals, from the *United Ireland* to the *Scots Observer*, Yeats seems not only to have skillfully ‘[toed] the editorial line’ by ‘modulating his politics to suit those of his readers’,<sup>11</sup> as Chaudhry would have it, but also to have appealed to various quarters of the Irish and indeed British society with the more or less directly stated message that literature was the key to national rebirth. As the Irish

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<sup>10</sup>P. J. Mathews, *Revival: The Abbey Theatre, Sinn Féin, The Gaelic League and the Co-operative Movement* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 25–6. See Michael McAteer, *Yeats and European Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2–3.

<sup>11</sup>Chaudhry, *Yeats*, 92.

nationalists' views on the future of the country, from Maud Gonne through Douglas Hyde to D. P. Moran, agreed that battling the hegemony of English cultural imports was crucial, 'there [was] a lack of specificity as to what actually constitutes the native culture'.<sup>12</sup> For Yeats, the 'soft wax' of opinion was ripe to be shaped by the 'right image', which was to be the effect of both creative and critical writing; as he put it in *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*, 'a national literature that made Ireland beautiful in memory, and yet had been freed from provincialism by an exacting criticism, a European pose' (CW3 104). Whereas the goal of literature, especially poetry, is to compose the unifying image that would involve all the strings of the flaming heart of man, criticism takes it upon itself to create the standards that the national writing would have to meet. In a letter to *United Ireland* of November 1894, he insisted that "The true ambition is to make criticism as international, and literature as National, as possible" (CLI 409). Therefore his discussion of cosmopolitanism became the backbone of his artistic credo in that it reflected a point of maximum fragmentation and subtlety within a society or an individual and it offered a common standard of appreciation of literature. If national writing, poetry of passions and heroic legends, redeemed itself against criticism of the highest rank, and if it could capture the fleeting, albeit powerful, emotions and moods, then its purpose would be validated. However, so that poetry could work its magic, people would have to embrace it, allowing it to replace their rather down-to-earth readerly interests catered for by newspapers and popular novels. 'We must learn [...] from the old nations to make literature almost the most serious thing in our lives if we would understand it properly, and quite the most serious thing if we could write it well' (UPI 274). Even though the lecture ends by stressing the importance of literature for reviving the nation's heart, Yeats at this point is no longer in full sympathy with the people, claiming that 'with [...] advancing subtlety poetry steps out of the market-place, out of the general tide of life and becomes a mysterious cult, as it were, an almost secret religion made by the few for the few' (UPI 271). For Yeats, poetry has always been a serious matter, requiring professionalism of approach and complete devotion, since he comes to regard it as 'a new religion' that has replaced 'the simple-minded religion of [his] childhood' (CW3 115). The few writing for the few will of course dominate his thinking in the twentieth century

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<sup>12</sup>Mathews, *Revival*, 21.



but already in 1891, Yeats feels an implicit desire to appeal to the minority, while being embraced by the many. In a letter to Tynan of 5 March 1891, he expressed hopes of winning some popularity with the general public, finally being ‘well in evidence’ (*CLI* 245), thanks to the publication of *John Sherman*, which he published under a nom de plume ‘Ganconagh’ but subsequently revealed as his own,<sup>13</sup> and *The Countess Cathleen* together with the Blake book that he co-authored with his father’s friend Edwin Ellis. But he quickly confesses, ‘I dont imagine it will please many people but some few it may please with some kind of permiment pleasure’, adding with some cynicism, ‘except for the wish to make a little money I have no desire to get that kind of passing regard a book wins from the many. To please the folk of few books is ones great aim’ (*CLI* 246). The note of artistic superiority over the common people, which was partly what led him to the acrimonious critic of Irish nationalism W. E. Henley and into the pages of his *Scots Observer*,<sup>14</sup> would have been damning in the eyes of nationalists from the *United Ireland* camp, little wonder then that at the time he would reserve them for private correspondence.

In late 1886, however, in an attempt to make poetry an address to all people, Yeats came to distinguish between two classes of poets:

First, those who – like Coleridge, Shelley, and Wordsworth – investigate what is obscure in emotion, and appeal to what is abnormal in man, or become the healers of some particular disease of the spirit. During their lifetime they write for a clique, and leave after them a school. And second, the bardic class – the Homers and Hugos, the Burns and Scotts – who sing of the universal emotions, our loves and angers, our delights in stories and heroes, our delights in things beautiful and gallant. They do not write for a clique, or leave after them a school, for they sing for all men. (*UPI* 105)

While for the time being he would count himself ‘one with Davies, Mangan, Ferguson’ (*CWI* 50), he would eventually forge a more lasting

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<sup>13</sup>Yeats hinted at the actual authorship by including ‘Girl’s Song’, already published in *The Wanderings of Oisín*. He told Father Russell, ‘I want it to be known as mine—the poem at page 187 is in my book of poems so the disguise is not very deep’ (*CLI* 268). See also Richard J. Finneran, Editor’s Introduction to W. B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats, Volume XII: John Sherman and Dhoya*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1993), xiii–xvii.

<sup>14</sup>See Chaudhry, *Yeats*, 136–7.

alliance with the English Romantic poets, especially Blake (who he went to some lengths to turn Irish) and Shelley. Although in the article he says that ‘both classes are necessary’, he adds that the poets of the bardic class ‘are perhaps more valuable to mankind, for they speak to the manhood in us, not the scholar or the philosopher’ (*UPI* 105). Between 1886 and 1892, Yeats wanted to show himself as a poet not only using folklore but also writing for the folk. Partly, this agenda reflected his conscious attempt to win recognition from both Nationalists and Unionists as a leading poet of Ireland, but also it was his desire to shape the nation by exposing it to the right images: ‘only the poets can make us love what they please—and that which makes men differ is not what they know, but what they love’ (*UPI* 105).

The topic of bards being the ‘legislators of the world’ is on Yeats’s mind all through 1887. In *The Leisure Hour* of 14 March 1888, after some nine months’ delay, Yeats published his survey article of ballad poetry of Ireland, where he discussed, among many other lesser-known poets, Davis, Mangan and Ferguson. In the opening paragraphs he sketches the division between ‘Ireland fierce and militant’ and ‘Ireland poetic, passionate, remembering, idyllic, fanciful, and always patriotic’ (*UPI* 147). The article shows Yeats at his propagandist height, claiming that English ballad poetry, written for ‘the populace’, has been driven away by ‘commercialism and other matters’. In contrast to the deadened England, Ireland is still alive with ‘national traditions not hidden in libraries, but living in the minds of the populace’ (*UPI* 147). Trumpeting his enthusiasm, he maintains that ‘it is needful that the people and poets shall have one heart—that there shall be no literary class with its own way of seeing things and its own conventions’ (*UPI* 147). Despite the rather heavy-handed laudation of Irish literary tradition, Yeats emphasises here the point that he has mused over at least since 1885: poets establish the way society functions, they set up what is loved as well as what is hated, but it is by reading their poems that the people develop intellectually and emotionally. This position of poets resembles the eighteenth century Gaelic *Cúirteanna*, or ‘schools’ of ballad poetry, whose members had the authority to ‘[assert] their position as the independent voice of the Gaelic nation’.<sup>15</sup> For Yeats, the poet in

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<sup>15</sup>Katherine O’Donnell, ‘Edmund Burke’s Political Poetics’ in *Anáil an Bhéil Bheo: Orality and Modern Irish Culture*, ed. Nessa Cronin, Seán Crosson and John Eastlake (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 181.

contemporary Ireland must be granted even more power, no longer only being audible as a mouthpiece of a political dogma, like nationalists of the *United Ireland* camp wanted, but exercising his mastery to shape the intellect of the entire nation.

Thus Yeats begins to see patriotism as a reason to study national literature, which, in turn, enables one to develop the patriotic feeling beyond the dichotomy of Unionist–Nationalist, which he felt acutely when writing for periodicals as adversarial as the *United Ireland* and the *Dublin University Review* or the *Scots Observer*. Marjorie Howes has noted that reciprocal relation between literature and politics: ‘for Yeats, Irish nationality was both a fixed origin and an elusive Utopian end; it was a way of seeing or knowing, a mode of feeling, a set of institutions, and a mass of images—a national symbolic’.<sup>16</sup> The nation is where literature takes its strength and literature is what strengthens the nation. Consequently, the future of Ireland lay in extending the compass and depth of its symbolic representations, for only in an appropriate language, forged in the smithy of national poetry, could the people evade the dogmatic and cliché-ridden self-descriptions. The past is thus the key to the future as long as the people realise they need to adopt their ideas from poetry.

This revival of ballad poetry and mythological tradition, Yeats admits in ‘Popular Ballad Poetry of Ireland’, is not his idea but ‘began with the founding in 1842 of the “Nation,” a powerful and seditious sheet in those days. Everything was considered Irish that embodied Irish passion and thought’ (*UPI* 152). It was Charles Gavan Duffy, the legend of the Young Ireland movement of the 1830s and 1840s, who collected the poetry that sang Irish uniqueness and put it in one anthology, *The Ballad Poetry of Ireland*, which was released in 1845 to great popular success. Having emigrated to Australia in 1855, following a failed Fenian rebellion, Duffy returned to Ireland in the summer of 1892. As his past was marked with nationalist exploits and considerable success as Governor of Victoria, Duffy seemed to Yeats a perfect symbol of the nationalist cause that regarded literary culture as an important factor in shaping a patriotic stance which was not constrained by simple binaries. Now that he was back, a union between the old in the person of Duffy and the new embodied by Yeats

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<sup>16</sup>Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Nation, Gender, Class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 2.

would have cemented the budding aesthetic nationalism promoted by Yeats. This, however, was not going to be the case.

Since literature was to be the key to moulding the nation, it seemed requisite that the people have access to the best of it, especially given that, according to Yeats, Irishmen were less than avid readers of *belle lettres*, opting for 'the text-book for some examination' (*UPI* 232). So in late 1891, he set about organizing 'a London branch of The Young Ireland League' (*CLI* 277) that resulted in the establishment on 28 December of the Irish Literary Society with Duffy as president, Stopford Brook as vice-president and T. W. Rolleston as secretary (*CLI* 278). However, the problem was that the establishment of the Irish Literary Society in London implied that it was the capital of England that represented the heart of the Irish revival, which was obviously at odds with Yeats's agenda. Foster gives a summary of the problem: '*United Ireland* noted sharply that [Yeats] was "irrepressible, but all at sea in matters of detail." Its editor, Edmund Leamy, raised a contentious issue by declaring that the intellectual capital of Ireland must be in Dublin, given the dawning Home Rule future. This harked back to a controversy which had been rumbling since March: where should an Irish cultural initiative be located?' (*Life* 119). In June 1892, after much hassle, the National Literary Society was set up in Dublin, although its plans were far from what Yeats would have expected. Recalling his involvement in the literary societies, Yeats claims he 'had definite plans':

I wanted to create an Irish Theatre; I was finishing my Countess Cathleen in its first meagre version, and thought of a travelling company to visit our country branches; but before that there must be a popular imaginative literature. I arranged with Mr. Fisher Unwin and his reader, Mr. Edward Garnett – a personal friend of mine – that when our organization was complete Mr. Fisher Unwin was to publish for it a series of books at a shilling each. I told one man of this arrangement, for after I had made my plans I heard an alarming rumour. Old Sir Charles Gavan Duffy was coming from Australia to start an Irish publishing-house, and publish a series of books, and I did not expect to agree with him, but knew that I must not seek a quarrel. (*CW* 3 169–70)

This account is only partly true. It was what he would later call a 'library for the people, rather than a theatre', that Yeats was 'chiefly anxious about' early in 1892 (*CLI* 280). Also, for the time being Duffy's return caused little reason to worry, as Yeats had been on good terms with him for some

three years<sup>17</sup> and considered his *Spirit of the Nation* an important milestone in the process of creating a literary culture in Ireland. After all, as Foster points out, ‘the Young Irelanders wanted to write fiction and poetry which would forge a national consciousness’<sup>18</sup> and Yeats subscribed to the idea, if not to the style in which it was carried out. Therefore, in 1892, what mattered to him was the publication of the books that would not only retell the history of Ireland but would do so in passionate terms.

Between January and August 1892 the NLS was ‘growing under our hands into what promises to be a work of very great importance’ (*CLI* 308), although Foster has shown that no moment of this growth went on without some bickering between Yeats and Duffy and his supporters (*Life* 121–22). In the above-quoted review of Todhunter’s poems, Yeats expressed some hope for what was officially to be Duffy’s series of books but kept to himself reservations that were to prove true: ‘Gavan Duffy’s projected “Library of Ireland” also, if it be not too exclusively a basket to gather up fragments that remained after the feast of the old “Library,” may do much to foster a reading public in Ireland’ (*UPI* 218). By September 1892 Yeats had become aware that the titles he had wanted to release would receive no support from Duffy and the National Publishing Company, which was set up at Duffy’s instigation. He expressed his doubts in a letter to the *Freeman’s Journal* and *National Press*, ‘will [“The National Publishing Company”] publish the right books on the right subjects, and if it does so, will it be able to put them into the hands of a sufficient number of Irish readers?’ and added that ‘whether it does or does not succeed in doing these things must largely depend on whether or not it keeps itself in touch with the young men of Ireland whom it wishes to influence’ (*CLI* 310). As it transpired, Duffy ‘wanted “to complete the

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<sup>17</sup>In late August 1889, Yeats told Ernest Rhys that Duffy ‘promises me unpublished letters of Clarence Mangans’ (*CLI* 184), a topic to which he returned every now and then. In March 1890, Yeats wrote to Duffy concerning Mangan’s letters and ‘a lecture on Mangan as a preliminary to writing a study of him for a projected little book on Irish literature that has been long in my mind’ (*CLI* 214–15). In *Autobiographies*, Yeats recalls that when he arrived, Duffy ‘brought with him much manuscript, the private letters of a Young Ireland poetess, a dry but informing unpublished historical essay by Davis, and an unpublished novel by William Carleton [...]’ (*CW* 3 186).

<sup>18</sup>Roy F. Foster, *Words Alone: Yeats and his Inheritances* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 88.

Young Ireland movement”—to do all that had been left undone because of the Famine, or the death of Davis, or his own emigration’ (CW3 187). Although Yeats says that ‘all the younger men were upon my side in resisting’ Duffy’s neo-Young Ireland plans, he was alone in his endeavours.

In his address to the Irish Literary Society in June 1892, Duffy stated his position, which in most respects stood in stark contrast to Yeats’s hopes and plans. Although both would have agreed with Duffy’s criticism that ‘the books chiefly read by the young in Ireland are detective or rather sensational stories from England and America’, Yeats must have resented the implication that French literature, probably meaning his favourites Baudelaire and de L’Isle Adam, was ‘vile’.<sup>19</sup> More importantly, besides Davis and Mangan, Duffy listed names like John Blake Dillon, John O’Hagan, Thomas Meagher and Charles Kickham for inclusion in the ‘Library of Ireland’ series. All the writers were distinguished by their Irish Republican Brotherhood and Young Ireland past but lacked the literary merits that were vital for Yeats: intensity of passion, originality of diction and imagery. Even if the writers and poets Duffy proposed for inclusion may not have appealed to Yeats, it was the former’s general goal for propagating literature that was the crucial bone of contention: ‘From the highest class in the nation to the humblest, good books are the salt of life. They make us wiser, manlier, more honest, and what is less than any of these, more prosperous. It is not the least of their merits that good books make manly men and patriotic citizens’.<sup>20</sup> He went on to advise reverence for ancestors and for people to ‘submit cheerfully to lawful authority’ and to this end, literature would prove most useful. Though he inveighed against cheap thrill popular stories, he pointed out that people ‘will read picturesque biographies, which are history individualised, or vivid sketches of memorable eras, which are history vitalised’. Those would be undemanding but would ‘teach us our faults and how to amend them’.<sup>21</sup> For Yeats, Duffy considered literature to be a means to achieving a political end of reviving the Young Ireland ideals, which would have helped to prepare

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<sup>19</sup>Charles Gavan Duffy, ‘What Irishmen May Do for Irish Literature’ in *The Revival of Irish Literature. Addresses by Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, K. C. M. G., Dr. George Sigerson, and Dr. Douglas Hyde* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1894), 12.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 24, 30.

the people patriotically for the eventuality of Home Rule being actually granted. Thus the Irish predicament endured, as the critic Stephen Gwynn observed: 'Literature in Ireland [...] is almost inextricably connected with considerations foreign to art: it is regarded as a means to an end'.<sup>22</sup> For Yeats, if literature mattered, it was to serve a higher purpose.

Yeats was incandescent when his project of a 'Library for the People' was slowly but inevitably turning into a rehash of the 1840s propagandist writing. By 1892 he had come to dismiss the Young Irelanders. Immediately before the official establishment of the NLS and Duffy's address, he wrote letters to the *United Ireland* and later to the conservative *Daily Express* (Dublin), stating his own plan for a library of the people. On 14 May, he expressed a hope that he would be able 'to circulate through Ireland a series of books which will be no mere echo of the literature of '48, but radiant from the living heart of the day' (*CLI* 298). And on 2 June, also in the *Daily Express*, he gave the clearest exposition of his ideas: 'These books and lectures will be national but not political in any narrow sense of the word. They will endeavour to make the patriotism of the people who read them both deeper and more enlightened, and will set before them the national and legendary heroes as they present themselves to the minds of scholars and thinkers' (*CLI* 299–300). Hardly attuning his opinions to the editors' whims, Yeats seeks to further his aesthetic approach to patriotism. Literature is not meant to help expedite the political cause by blatantly supporting dogmatism in religion, nationalism and morality. Challenging Duffy and those who considered his involvement in the Rhymers' Club to disqualify him as a representative of the Irish cause, Yeats wrote in the *United Ireland*:

We have behind us in the past the most moving legends and a history full of lofty passions. If we can but take that history and those legends and turn them into dramas, poems, and stories full of the living soul of the present, and make them massive with conviction and profound reveries, we may deliver that new great utterance for which the world is waiting. (*UPI* 250)

It is the utterance, the image phrased in a passionate language, that can break the manacles of dogma and partisanship that constrain Irish thinking.

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<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Foster, *Words Alone*, 1.

If political ends mattered to Yeats, they did so because literature could bring about a change in the way politics was organized.

The high ideals that Yeats tried to promote met with less and less understanding from the members of the NLS. Eventually, his many attempts to regain control over the Society and the titles to be included in the library for the people backfired, when John F. Taylor, one of Duffy's staunchest supporters and an old enemy of Yeats, accused Yeats of 'sectional ideas' and 'log-rolling'.<sup>23</sup> Yeats's response to Taylor's charges sounded tepid and indicated that he was on the defensive.<sup>24</sup> Years later Yeats admitted that he 'was not Taylor's match with the spoken word, and barely matched him with the written word' (*CW3* 187). Indeed, by late 1893 Yeats's cause, which he tried to promote 'by good writing' so he would 'convince as a sleeping child convinces' (*Mem* 64), had been defeated by Duffy's high stature and Taylor's skill.<sup>25</sup> Yeats's loss of control over the library was compounded by the fact that Maud Gonne sided with Duffy and Taylor (*CLI* 322). Given her 'one-idea'd'<sup>26</sup> attitude to politics, this could have been expected. However, the fact that Yeats would not abandon his highbrow programme for the revival of letters in Ireland, even when he realized that his agenda proved displeasing to Gonne, indicates that perhaps his early involvement in politics, of which the establishment of the NLS and the plan for the 'Library for the People' were parts, was more than just an attempt to impress his beloved by 'bar[ing] sharp political

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<sup>23</sup>John F. Taylor, Letter to the *Freeman's Journal*, 7 (September 1892), 5.

<sup>24</sup>See *CLI* 312–14.

<sup>25</sup>Yeats's estimation of Taylor is interesting for its ambiguity. Even though there was no mistaking his dislike for Taylor, he admired his gifts: 'When Taylor spoke, it was a great event, and his delivery in the course of a speech or lecture of some political verse by Thomas Davis gave me a conviction of how great might be the effect of verse, spoken by a man almost rhythm-drunk, at some moment of intensity, the apex of long-mounting thought' (*CW3* 103). In 1908, he put O'Leary and Taylor on a similar footing, calling both men of genius and admitting that 'it is easier for me to understand his anger in this year than thirteen years ago when the lofty thought of men like Taylor and O'Leary was the strength of Irish nationality' (*CW6* 110). Elsewhere, Yeats attributed their dislike for each other to his jealousy of Maud Gonne (*Mem* 65), a view corroborated by Foster (*Life* 1 44).

<sup>26</sup>Gonne repeatedly uses this term to refer to her political views in her autobiography *The Servant of the Queen*.



teeth'.<sup>27</sup> His ideas seemed to be of greater importance even than pandering to Gonne's radical nationalism.

The dispute with Duffy and the Young Ireland ideal, although it lasted for a limited period of time in the 1890s, is 'central to his process of self-fashioning in his early twenties'<sup>28</sup> and to the emergence of his theory of art as social action. It was the first open battle that Yeats engaged in between dogmatism and his own aesthetic progressivism. What he clashed with was an embodiment of what Nietzsche, whom in 1892 Yeats had yet to read, called 'monumental history' whereby 'that which in the past was able to expand the concept "man" and make it more beautiful must exist everlastingly, so as to be able to accomplish this everlastingly'.<sup>29</sup> For Duffy, it was the Young Ireland ideal that managed to expand the Irish spirit and self, but Yeats perceived it, in line with the Nietzschean critique, as being in 'danger of becoming somewhat distorted, beautified and coming close to free poetic invention'.<sup>30</sup> The notion of 'poetic invention' is here understood as an inartistic celebration of a dead ideal quite similar to Yeats's view of the majority of poems included in *The Spirit of the Nation*. On the other hand, his own agenda could be compared to Nietzsche's idea of culture defined as 'unity of artistic style in all the expressions of the life of a people' so that 'a culture has to be in all reality a single living unity and not fall wretchedly apart into inner and outer, content and form'.<sup>31</sup> Years later this 'unity of artistic style' would find its expression in the idea of Unity of Being, but already in 1892, Yeats realises that if history and historiography matter, they do so because their 'value will be seen to consist in its taking a familiar, perhaps commonplace theme, an everyday melody, and composing inspired variations on it, enhancing it, elevating it to a comprehensive symbol; and thus disclosing in the original theme a whole world of

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<sup>27</sup>Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats* (Malden: Blackwell, 2001), 86.

<sup>28</sup>Foster, *Words Alone*, 140.

<sup>29</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 71. At the same time it must be noted that Yeats also falls into the trap of monumentalism when he comes to believe that 'Irish national identity can unify around a heroic figure as we see in his involvement with the 1898 Commemoration Committee'. G. Higgins, *Heroic Revivals from Carlyle to Yeats* (London: Palgrave, 2012), 108.

<sup>30</sup>Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 70.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 79–80.

profundity, power and beauty'.<sup>32</sup> This insight of Nietzsche's will underlie one of the foundational claims of Yeats's theory of poetry in the last five years of the nineteenth century—that art can shape society by singing ideals into ever subtler language.

In 1893, however, all that was left for Yeats to do was avenge his failures on the few books that after much perturbation Duffy and his supporters did manage to get published. His criticism was carried out under the banner of intellectualism that he had been promoting throughout the battle for the NLS. In August 1894, in a review of three books released within the framework of the New Irish Library series that eventually arose from the initial project of the 'Library for the people', Yeats deemed Davis's *The Patriot Parliament* unfit for anyone but historians, for 'it bored beyond measure the unfortunate persons who bought some thousands of copies in a few days' (*UPI* 334). He also availed himself of the chance to make some acrid remarks *ad personam*:

The truth of the matter is that Sir Charles Gavan Duffy has let that old delusion, didacticism, get the better of his judgement [...] and has given us a library which, however pleasing it be to 'the daughter of science, the gift of god', is, if we except Mr. O'Grady's stories, little but a cause of blaspheming to mere mortals, who would gladly see the Irish reading classes discovering the legends and stories and poems of their own country, instead of following at a laborious distance the fashion of London. (*UPI* 334)

Didacticism, tantamount to moralizing, was, according to Yeats, not only unreadable for the people, who would expect to find beauty of phrase and depth of image, but also essentially unpatriotic. Yeats makes a clever accusation against Duffy, suggesting that his selection of books tries to emulate the likes of Wordsworth's 'Ecclesiastical Sonnets' (*UPI* 334) and the Arnoldian idea of poetry as 'criticism of life' that four years later he would proclaim to be characteristic of most English literature (*CW* 4 140). Instead of this cheap emulation of English standards, which made Duffy seem a traitor to the nationalist cause, the books should have reflected the Celtic passion and old Irish melody.

The turn that events took in 1892 and 1893 led to Yeats slowly losing the battle for Irish hearts and minds. Despite the unfavourable circumstances, Yeats pointed out, in a slightly homiletic manner, that the least one

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 93.

could do to rectify a situation so hopeless due to the ill-advised decisions of the NLS was to critically evaluate the books that were published:

Believing, as I do, that literature is almost the most profound influence that ever comes into a nation, I recognize with deep regret, and not a little anger, that the 'New Irish Library' is so far the most serious difficulty in the way of our movement, and that it drives from us those very educated classes we desire to enlist, and supplies our opponents with what looks like evidence of our lack of any fine education, of any admirable precision and balance of mind, of the very qualities which make literature possible. Perhaps honest criticism, with as little of the 'great day for Ireland' ritual as may be can yet save the series from ebbing out in a tide of irrelevant dulness, and keep the best opportunity there has been these many decades from being squandered by pamphleteer and amateur. (*CLI* 397–8)

In this response to John McGrath's remarks on the 'New Irish Library' in the *United Ireland*, Yeats again underlines the importance of developing Irish literature beyond the now clichéd patriotism of the Young Irelanders and adds another silent challenge to Duffy; he commended education in his second lecture to the NLS in June 1893, but his project has now proven all but educative. Although Duffy spoke primarily of the importance of the study of history that 'makes better citizens' and 'better men', stressing that all learning must be made more practical,<sup>33</sup> points that Yeats would have opposed vociferously, Yeats's criticism hits home by attacking the books on general grounds. Now that the choice of books is beyond his authority, he will do his best to pinpoint in practical criticism the faults he warned against in mid-1892.

Reviewing P. J. MacCall's *Irish Nóníns* in the *United Ireland* of 10 November 1894, McGrath advised 'adamantine indifference to the judgement' of Irish books by foreign critics.<sup>34</sup> This started an exchange with Yeats, signing himself as 'A Student of Irish Literature', who claimed that paying heed to foreign critics would help ameliorate the standards by which works of literature are evaluated, 'If good criticism be written in Irish newspapers it will carry its due weight with authors and public alike; but so long as Irish critics are forced to criticise Irish books in English

<sup>33</sup>Charles Gavan Duffy, 'Books for the Irish People' in *The Revival of Irish Literature*, 42–3.

<sup>34</sup>John McGrath, 'Review of P. J. MacCall's *Irish Nóníns*' (10 November 1894), 1.

papers you will have no criticism in Ireland that any man will listen to' (*CLI* 417). No longer so adroit in his desire to edify the Irish mind and sing its heart as he was two years before, Yeats still wishes to elevate the general public so that notions like patriotism, morality and religion could be rethought outside the simple binary of good and bad. This is the task for criticism, which is to alert people to the finer points of literature, for Irish opinion, as he came to know in his struggles with Gavan Duffy and more importantly the vehement Taylor, is more susceptible to being influenced by grandiose speech than by subtle lyricism.

Yeats's crucial declaration of the period, stressing the difference between the oratorical argument and the high literary image, came in his December 1893 response in the *United Ireland* to Iris Olkryn's (Alice Milligan) criticism of Richard Ashe King's lecture. Following Yeats's line in a lecture delivered to the NLS on 8 December 1893, Ashe King condemned partisan politics and political rhetoric as having 'overwhelmed the finer literary arts in Ireland' (*UPI* 305–6).<sup>35</sup> When Milligan criticized his position, Yeats decided to enter the fray and on 30 December 1893, as the last voice in the discussion that continued for nearly a month in the pages of the *United Ireland*, he stated his views on oratory, rhetoric and the simplicity of thinking:

It is of the very nature of oratory that the orator should make his hearers feel he is convinced of what he is saying, and, therefore, he is for ever tempted to assume, for the sake of effect, a show of sincerity and vehement conviction, or, what is worse, to become really sincere and vehemently convinced about things of which he has no adequate knowledge. In the world God made are none but probabilities, and, as the Persian poet sings, a hair divides the false and true; but too often there are none but certainties in the world of the orator. If once a nation is thoroughly stupefied by oratory of this kind, she loses all sense of proportion, all sense of reality, for has she not discovered that her orators can convince themselves and her of anything at a few minutes' notice, and bring both, by the pleasant pathways of a few similes, a few vehement gestures, to that certainty which the scholar attains after years of research, and the philosopher after a lifetime of thought? (*CLI* 372)

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<sup>35</sup> Later, in a dedication to *Early Poems and Stories* (1925), Yeats remembered Ashe King's lecture as 'a denunciation of rhetoric, and of Irish rhetoric most of all'. *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Alt and Russel K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), 854.

Oratory as Yeats is trying to define it here suggests his contemporary low opinion of Taylor's skill. In 1894, he was still livid about being bested by Taylor. Nonetheless, the passage returns to the idea that Yeats had been promoting for almost a decade now: art teaches depth that later translates into greater insight from the readers, while oratory seeks to quickly convince the listeners that the orator's opinion is in every respect true. Moreover, by making reference to the Persian poet from *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, stanza L: 'The Ball no Question makes of Ayes and Noes, / But Right and Left as strikes the Player goes', Yeats makes a crucial point, suggesting that in a world where there are only probabilities it is poets who can distinguish between the subtleties in order to at least hint at the truth, though never fully apprehend it, for 'He that toss'd Thee down into the Field, / He knows about it all—He knows—He knows!'<sup>36</sup>

From this premise Yeats derives an implication that oratorical thinking like Taylor's promotion of Duffy's monumentalizing approach to Irish history leads to intolerance:

Is not our social life ruined by the oratorical person? Whether his subject be the sins of the Parnellites or the anti-Parnellites, protection, the liquor laws, literature, or philosophy, all worthy and kindly converse dies when he enters a room. We all know his vehement intolerance – for how can he be tolerant whose world contains none but certainties? – his exaggerated opinions – for how can he be moderate who must always have a profound conviction? – his scorn of delicate half lights and quiet beauty – for how can he who is ever affirming and declaring understand that the gentle shall inherit the earth? (*CL1* 373)

Yeats tries to demonstrate his openness to 'probabilities' by maintaining an impartial attitude to Parnell, whose reasoning he considered correct in every respect. Such willingness to accept difference, which with time will be superseded by a more assertive position but will never entirely disappear from Yeats's thinking, is opposed to the presumption of the 'oratorical person' who only deals in 'certainties', 'exaggerated opinions' and 'profound convictions'. By contrast, the poet wishes to 'convince as a sleeping child convinces'. This, however, requires much educative effort, for the Irish 'are a nation of orators, and must suffer the defects of our quality with

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<sup>36</sup>Edward FitzGerald, *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*, trans. T. N. Foulis (Edinburgh and London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1905), stanza L.

good grace; but we would soon go headlong into unreality were there not men like Mr. (Richard Ashe) King and Mr. O'Grady ever ready to raise the red flag before us' (*CLI* 372). It is thanks to them and their passionate heroic stance, which is transferred into their prose, that some remain critical of the 'oratorical persons' and are able cry out at the 'daily tie of written oratory' in newspapers: 'O God, if this be sincerity, give us a little insincerity, a little of the self-possession, of the self-mastery that go to a conscious lie' (*CLI* 373). If truth must be so heavy-handed as to bar subtle 'half lights', Yeats decides to choose art with its falsehoods because, for him, falsehood—implicit in all poetic inventions—is where truth can be unveiled, for 'to him who ponders well, /My rhymes more than their rhyming tell/Of things discovered in the deep, /Where only body's laid asleep' (*CWI* 50).

### THE LIE, THE TEXT AND SOCIETY

By gleefully admitting that lies may carry more truth than the orator's sincerity, Yeats adverts to Oscar Wilde's 'Decay of Lying', which Wilde read out to him on Christmas Day, 1888. In it, Vivian, the blasé member of The Tired Hedonists club, puts forward four doctrines of his new aesthetics, of which the third—'Life imitates Art'—has appealed to Yeats most. The doctrine is amplified further: 'Life holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed in fiction. Scientifically speaking, the basis of life [...] is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained'.<sup>37</sup> This idea, although it is by no means a new hypothesis, showed to Yeats what he had already intimated and would push forward in his essays of the turn of the century: art in general and literature in particular 'takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *Intentions* (London: The Unicorn Press, 1948), 46, 35.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 23. Wilde provides the example of fog that is seen 'because poets and painters have taught [people] the mysterious loveliness of such effects' (37). Less willing to shock, Yeats gives an anthropological example of how poetry influenced the way people lived, reaching an equal status with the strength of arms, in his review of Sophie Bryant's *Celtic Ireland*, 'when St. Patrick had Christianised the country another kind of conquest began, and England, Scotland, Iceland,

Wilde speaks of assuming a pose but his high aesthetic idea, expressed with a hint of an ironic smile, is taken up and developed a hundred years later into a textualist conception of reality by Richard Rorty.

Rorty refers to Wilde only once, in a late essay, 'The Decline of Redemptive Truth and the Rise of a Literary Culture',<sup>39</sup> where he is taken as an aesthete in support of liberal individualism. For him, Wilde is an aesthete insofar as his goal is to 'explore the present limits of the human imagination' and so Wilde becomes an antecedent of the ironic textualist for whom the language we use defines the world we live in. Elsewhere, Rorty argues that 'the textualists start off from the claim that all problems, topics, and distinctions are language-relative—the results of our having chosen to use a certain vocabulary, to play a certain language-game'.<sup>40</sup> Therefore 'whereas nineteenth-century idealism wanted to substitute one sort of science (philosophy) for another (natural science) as the centre of culture, twentieth-century textualism wants to place literature in the center, and to treat both science and philosophy as, at best, literary genres'.<sup>41</sup> Instead of seeking the final theory that would explain away all doubts, literature provides various vocabularies that offer different ways of speaking of the world and one's own place in it. In this sense, for Rorty, writers like Galileo, Hegel, Freud or Yeats (all of them 'poets' in Rorty's sense) came up with new ways of describing their own milieu and their place therein. He argues that, '[the poet's] new vocabulary makes possible, for the first time, a formulation of its own purpose. It is a tool for doing something

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(Footnote 38 continued)

Germany, and France, owed their Christianity mainly to the Irish missions. [...] The bards [...] rode hither and thither gathering up the dim feelings of the time, and making them conscious' (*UPI* 163). Therefore Christianity, according to Yeats, is in fact the product of the skillful Celtic bards, who first turned the stories of the Bible into powerful and passionate tales that were duly adapted by the people.

<sup>39</sup>The full version of the essay, containing a pertinent reference to Wilde, is available online (<http://olincenter.uchicago.edu/pdf/rorty.pdf>—accessed 12.15.2015) but an abridged version is included in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007), 89–104.

<sup>40</sup>Richard Rorty, 'Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism', in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 140.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 141.

which could not have been envisaged prior to the development of a particular set of descriptions, those which it itself helps to provide'.<sup>42</sup> Thus

[A]n ideally liberal polity would be one whose culture hero is [Harold] Bloom's 'strong poet' rather than the warrior, the priest, the sage, or the truth-seeking, 'logical', objective scientist. Such a culture would slough off the Enlightenment vocabulary [...]. It would no longer be haunted by specters called 'relativism' and 'irrationalism'.<sup>43</sup>

Yeats would neither have accepted such a liberal stance, which allows only for language games and dismisses all ideas of depth, nor would he have disqualified warriors, priests and sages (whose importance depends, however, on the poet's ability to cast their 'heroic ideal' in appropriate verse). He would, however, have endorsed the privileged position that Rorty grants to the strong poets. Since only poets can express 'delicate half lights', 'subtleties of emotions' and the elusive beauty of passions, their role in society must be dominant, for without their works, people get mired in convictions of partisan politics or narrowly-defined patriotic morality. Therefore Yeats's liberal approach to aesthetics<sup>44</sup> stands in stark contrast to his growing fondness for elites and authoritarian forms of government.

The closest point of contact between Rorty and Yeats is Shelley. Rorty argues that in *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley 'deliberately and explicitly enlarged the meaning of the term "Poetry." That word, he said, "may be defined as the expression of the Imagination." [...] Just as the Enlightenment had capitalized and deified Reason, so Shelley and other Romantics capitalized and deified Imagination'.<sup>45</sup> Thus both Rorty and Yeats regard Shelley as a successful opponent of the Enlightenment, for whom imagination is the source of all novelty in the world. As a result, it is thanks to poets, the priests of imagination (Yeats's and Shelley's word, but

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<sup>42</sup>Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 12.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>44</sup>Yeats's occasionally bizarre literary preferences resulted from attempts to be consistent with some of his beliefs, although when he occasionally lets his instinct speak, his perceptions prove insightful (his championing of complete unknowns like Lady Gregory, Synge and Joyce, and in *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* of Hugh MacDiarmid).

<sup>45</sup>Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 109.



not Rorty's), that novelty enters this world. Reason and realism allow one to recognise the new rules whereby the world functions but never open new paths for conceptualizing this world. This closely corresponds with Yeats's emphasis on the poet as the leader of Irish social revolution and it is in this sense that he seems to argue for an ironic perception of reality: living in the world means nothing in itself until the poet comes to frame the experience in a beautiful image, which is then adopted by the people (necessarily aware of its contingent nature). As Stan Smith observes, for Yeats, 'Nationhood is not an act of natural construction. It is essentially a work of artifice, for the nation has to be ideologically "uttered" to be validated'.<sup>46</sup> Being 'ideologically uttered' admits of complex strategies of setting up a nation's auto-description that both create and deconstruct its self-portrayal.

Yeats derived that ironic attitude to poetry as a form of expression as much from Wilde and Shelley as from his father. In a letter to his son, J. B. Yeats made a distinction between two kinds of belief that Rorty would gladly have endorsed:

There are two kinds of belief, the poetical and the religious. That of the poet comes when the man within has found some method or manner of thinking or arrangement of fact (such as is only possible in dreams) by which to express and embody an absolute freedom, such that his whole inner and outer self can expand in full satisfaction. In religious belief there is absent the consciousness of liberty. Religion is the denial of liberty. An enforced peace is set up among the warring feelings. By the help of something quite external, as for instance the fear of hell, some feelings are chained up and thrust into dungeons that some other feelings may hold sway and all the ethical systems yet invented are a similar denial of liberty, that is why the true poet is neither moral nor religious.<sup>47</sup>

The argument runs very closely to Rorty's distinction between the age of literature and the age of religion, where the former offers complete freedom of expression whereas the latter mainly introduces constraints that gain their mandate from some alleged transcendental authority. In another letter, Yeats *père* asserted that 'a poet should feel quite free to say in the

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<sup>46</sup>Smith, *Irish Poetry and the Construction of Modern Identity*, 34.

<sup>47</sup>Quoted in Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 19.

morning that he believes in marriage and in the evening that he now no longer believes in it'.<sup>48</sup> Rorty finds a similar vein in Yeats's 'Two Songs from a Play': 'Whatever flames upon the night/Man's own resinous heart has fed' (*CWI* 213).<sup>49</sup> Therefore the lies literature tells us are Wildean lies insofar as they can never reveal the truth, which for Rorty is always Nietzsche's 'army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms',<sup>50</sup> but offer subtler ways of speaking about our world that are more adequate for solving current problems.

Despite this affinity between Wilde and Yeats on the one hand and Rorty's later revision of their work on the other, there is a fundamental disparity between Yeats and Rorty, of which the latter takes no heed. 'Two Songs from a Play' opens by calling attention to the visionary aspect of his verse: 'I saw a staring virgin stand/Where holy Dionysus died' (*CWI* 213). Rorty silences this visionary side to Yeats; as much as he was an ironist, ready to abandon any description of reality and his own self provided he found a more appealing one, throughout his life Yeats also felt the presence of supernatural truth that manifested itself in his communications with spirits like 'Leo Africanus' and the Instructors in his wife's Automatic Script. Interestingly, both Yeats's and Rorty's ideas are extensions of the romantic aesthetics. For Rorty, romanticism was the beginning of the

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<sup>48</sup>Quoted in Ellmann, *The Man and the Masks*, 18. In a letter to Oliver Eton, J. B. Yeats expressed his partiality to 'incomplete men': 'all qualities [...] in excess'. John Butler Yeats, *Letters to His Son W. B. Yeats and Others*, ed. Joseph Hone (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 61. By the early 1890s, Yeats *filis* had already shaken off some of his father's influences like his interest in J. S. Mill; also, the idea of incompleteness, though it would become one of the hallmarks of Yeats's theory of the self, seems to have been discarded in favour of its opposite, especially when the figure of completion was represented by Maud Gonne (see *Mem* 63). See Alexander N. Jeffares, *The Circus Animals: Essays on W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 117–46 and Douglas Archibald, 'John Butler Yeats', in *W. B. Yeats in Context*, 109–118.

<sup>49</sup>The quotation from Yeats closes Rorty's essay 'Pragmatism and Romanticism', 119.

<sup>50</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense', in: *Friedrich Nietzsche on Rhetoric and Language*, trans. Sander L. Gilman, et al. (London: Oxford University Press, 1989), 250. See Ronad Schleiffer, 'Yeats's Postmodern Rhetoric', in: *Yeats and Postmodernism*, ed. Leonard Orr (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 21–4.

search for a literary culture of ironists and strong poets. He concludes his 'Pragmatism and Romanticism' by claiming that 'the romantic movement marked the beginning of the attempt to replace the tale told by the Greek philosophers with a better tale'; by 'better' Rorty means a tale that would prove more apt to solve people's current problems than elaborate metaphysical theories. He goes on to explain that

The old story was about how human beings might manage to get back in touch with something from which they had somehow been estranged – something that is not itself a human creation, but stands over and against all such creations. The new story is about how human beings continually strive to overcome the human past in order to create a better human future.<sup>51</sup>

After romanticism there have only been new metaphors that have replaced the old ones because they have proven better suited to the new conditions of people's lives in this world.

On the other hand, for Yeats, this claim is only partly true. While the romantics did show that it was poets who supplied people with a subtler imagery to speak of the most elusive of emotions and thoughts, they also clung to a belief in the supernatural for which man sets out on a futile quest. This is the case with Wordsworth who declares his love for 'all the mighty world/Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create, /And what perceive'<sup>52</sup>; or Shelley who concludes that 'The secret Strength of things/Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome/Of Heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!'<sup>53</sup> This duality of the romantic thought returns to visions of the truth beyond as it continually asserts that never will the poet's song match the vision. The duality underpins Yeats's theory of poetry as well and is encapsulated in his appraisal of George Russell's (AE) *Homeward Songs by the Way*: 'all ideas fade or change in passing from one mind to another, and that what we call "truth" is but one of our illusions, a perishing embodiment of a bodiless essence' (*UPI* 338). No final truth is to be caught in verse, as AE put it in an appropriately entitled poem

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<sup>51</sup>Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 118.

<sup>52</sup>William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour' in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Mary Jo Salter (New York: Norton, 2005), 767, ll. 105–7.

<sup>53</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Mont Blanc' in *Shelley: Selected Poetry, Prose and Letters*, ed. A.S.B. Glover (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1951), 139, ll. 139–41.

‘Truth’: ‘And time has no story/That’s true twice in telling’.<sup>54</sup> Still, the incapacity of our language does not disqualify the belief that there exists ‘a bodiless essence’, precisely that which is not a ‘human creation’. Yeats’s involvement in the occult, which his father resented, reflected the poet’s desire to get in touch with the other world and to oppose his father’s skepticism: ‘It was only when I began to study psychical research and mystical philosophy that I broke away from my father’s influence [...] through this new research, this reaction from popular science, I had begun to feel that I had allies for my secret thought’ (CW3 96). Ever since the establishment of the Hermetic Society on 16 June 1885, Yeats sought to confirm his central thesis of the period, that ‘whatever the great poets had affirmed in their finest moments was the nearest we could come to an authoritative religion, and that their mythology, their spirits of water and wind, were but literal truth’ (CW3 97). Ellmann aptly characterized Yeats of the 1885–1895 period as ‘a zealot in search of a creed’<sup>55</sup> even though the zealot could never wholly give up his ‘father’s scepticism’ (CW3 97).

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<sup>54</sup>AE (George Russell), *Homeward: Songs by the Way* (London and New York: John Lane, 1894), 57.

<sup>55</sup>Ellmann, *The Man and the Masks*, 42.

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