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W. B. Yeats: Wordsmith and Political Actor

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Abstract

Yeats wrote powerful poetry and was renowned for his skills as a writer. This paper looks at his writing through the lens of political culture and how it influenced and shaped his writing. A variety of sources are examined in the composition of this text which aims to inform interested readers on Yeats' motivations, influences and concern for the cultural and political development of the Irish nation until his retirement from public life and into his retirement. This text is particularly concerned with Yeats' belief in the power of the political system to bring about real change but he retained his faith in the power of literature to inspire these developments. In this, however, he was realistic and recognised how poorly key figures like Parnell and leaders of the 1916 Rising were treated and how these events reverberated within public life in Ireland in the decades that followed.

Keywords: W. B. Yeats, Irish Writing, Cultural Nationalism, Political Culture, Philosophy of Writing

Introduction

Much has been written on the work of W. B. Yeats. This text is concerned with looking at the political character of his work. Words on a page have had a powerful effect on the lives of people and this was a central concern of Yeats. The nature of a writer's motivation was examined by another Irish writer many years after Yeats' passing. In a short text called 'The Image' by John McGahern published in the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 1991, McGahern traces out the intricate nature and ultimate purpose of those who wield the writer's pen:

> When I reflect on the image two things from which it cannot be separated come: the rhythm and the vision. The vision, that still and private world which each of us possesses and which others cannot see, is brought to life in rhythm – rhythm being little more than the instinctive movements of the vision as it comes to life and begins its search for the image in a kind of grave, grave of the images of dead passions and their days.

> Art is an attempt to create a world in which we can live: if not for long or forever, still a world of the imagination over which we can reign, and by reign I mean to reflect purely on our situation through this created world of ours, this Medusa's mirror, allowing us to see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable.
> [...] Image after image flows involuntary now, yet we are not at peace – rejecting, altering, shaping, straining towards the one image that will never come, the image on which our whole life took its most complete expression once (McGahern 1991, p. 12).

In asserting his favour for this kind of artistic formation, I believe that McGahern recognised the power of the written word. He refers to the near-eternal search for the ideal form through which the world can be rendered into a condition which could perhaps at some moment in time, from some particular perspective, be brought under a fleeting control, as he put it 'an attempt to create a world…of the imagination over which we can reign'. For those of us who subscribe to the veracity of the assertion that writing is a process that adduces the opportunity to "see and to celebrate even the totally intolerable" (McGahern 1991, p. 12) when, however briefly, it becomes possible to produce "an image on which our whole life took its most complete expression once" (*Apud*), there is little to doubt about the potency of the role of the writer.

John McGahern was an acknowledged admirer of W. B. Yeats and both share the distinction of having affected cultural – and ultimately – political influence through their writing. This paper is concerned with examining notable aspects of Yeats' political activities.

As Michael North has noted:

Yeats railed against England, against its politics, its economic system, its lack of historical values, and the cultural nationalism for which he was such a strong spokesman was supposed to counteract English influence by holding the Irish together without sacrificing their individuality (North 1992, p. 14).

Yeats was an early advocate for the liberalisation of divorce laws and the defence of personal freedom in addition to the promotion of the family as the redoubt of social organisation. In these goals, he wished to achieve a balance between diverse realities and a pluralist stance toward them as a means to bring about a state of unity in Irish culture (North 1992, p. 14). The tension present in the Irish nationalism of Yeats's day is an integral part of Yeats's own politics.

Rendering a portrait of Yeats's political parameters is a complex task, and it is as fraught with contradictions as is the development of the Irish state and the sophisticated identities of those who people it. The heart of the political tension within Ireland and between it and Britain mirrored the tensions between the Protestants and Catholics that

populated it in Yeats's time. Unjust assertions of the apparently devalued nature of Irish Protestants also caused ripples to roll across society. This was eventually to subside but not before Yeats felt compelled to engage with his own background as a member of what Roy Foster described as the:

> […] declining Protestant bourgeoisie, civil servants and clerics rather than landowners, with roots stretching back to the centuries of dispossession and ascendancy. This was not only an inheritance he rediscovered in middle age; it conferred a burden which he carried from his youth, and in Ireland it would have been self-evident to anyone he met as soon as he opened his mouth. Much of his early life was spent trying to demonstrate to people that 'marginalised Protestants' could be as Irish as anyone else […] (Foster 1997, p. 93).

A prescient observance on Foster's part also noted the challenging task of any biographer interested in examining Yeats's life since: 'To write his life is to venture into land-mined territory, in terms of social history; and it is booby-trapped else-where too' (Foster 1997, p. 93). Given the fractious state of cultural dynamics and the political theatre of his day, this is indicative of the underlying factors that encouraged Yeats to eventually involve himself in cultural politics and political life in Ireland.

There was for a time a widely-held assumption – curiously erroneous as it happens – that it was Maud Gonne who was responsible for Yeats's entry in the political world. Yeats had taken interest in political affairs long before he had ever made Gonne's acquaintance and this turn in his life is, in fact, attributable to the Fenian John O' Leary who had returned to Ireland in 1884. In fact, Maud Gonne found this decision on his part quite disappointing and she outlined her opinion to him in a letter in which she remarks:

> "For a long time, I had a feeling that I should not encourage you to mix yourself up in the outer side of politics & you know I have never asked you to do so" and also gave her preference in respect of what she thought would be better for him: "You remember how for the sake of Ireland, I hated you in politics, even in the politics I believed in, because I always felt it took you from your writing & cheated Ireland of a greater gift than we could give her" (Arkins 2010, p. 67).

Yeats had also demonstrated his apparent disdain for political matters in asserting:

"I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons; State and Nation are the work of intellect, and when you consider what comes before and after them they are, as Victor Hugo said of something or other, not worth the blade of grass God gives for the nest of the linnet" (Arkins 2010, p. 65).

It would seem clear from these exchanges that Yeats could never see a day in which

politics would be part of his life, this, however, was to change. He was, as Conor Cruise-O'Brien has defended, disquieted by the inequalities between the Irish and the English and this was quite clear when he said: "I, am Irishman, am a good as any Englishman. Ireland is therefore as good as England. Yet England governs herself, Ireland is governed by England. Can this be right?" (Cruise-O'Brien 1965, p. 212).

Nationalist Echoes

It was through the ideals of what was termed 'the Nationalist school of John O' Leary' that Yeats found his political standpoint. This has been described as a movement that was driven by 'classical uncompromising republicanism.' The Dublin branch of the Fenians led by O' Leary was more concerned with preventing acts of terrorism than in perpetrating them as it had a strong preference for parliamentary activities over agrarian agitation as well as possessing a strong aversion to acts of terrorism which they did not hesitate to condemn when they occurred. Charles Stewart Parnell, an Irish-Protestant like Yeats, died in 1891 and this proved a pivotal moment in the writer's involvement in political affairs. United Ireland was Parnell's last mouthpiece in the print media and the much sought-after copies of 10 October 1891 sought to cater to the tastes of a mourning public and it was here that W. B. Yeats – then relatively obscure in the eyes of the wider public – took a giant leap toward greater notoriety with the publication of his poem 'Mourn - And then Onward!' which goes as follows:

Ye on the broad high mountains of old Eri,
Mourn all night and day,
The man is gone who guided ye, unweary,
Through the long bitter way.

Ye by the waves that close in our sad nation,
Be full of sudden fears,
The man is gone who from his lonely station,
Be full of sudden fears,
The man is gone who from his lonely station
Has moulded the hard years.

Mourn ye on grass-green plains of Eri fated,
For closed in darkness now
Is he who laboured on, derided, hated,
And made the tyrant bow.

Mourn – and then onward, there is no returning
He guides ye from the tomb;
His memory now is a tall pillar, burning

Before us in the gloom![1]

A closer reading of this poem reveals deliberate political intentions on Yeats's part and this spirit of interventionism was to remain a strong feature of his public life to a greater or lesser degree until his retirement. Taken with his other writings, it is possible to justifiably claim that as Connor Cruise-O' Brien reflected on the totality of Yeats's political participation:

> I no longer believe Yeats' political activities to have been foolish or fundamentally inconsistent or his political attitudes to be detachable from the rest of his personality, disconnected from action, or irrelevant to his poetry. His politics were, it now seems to be, marked by a considerable degree of inner consistency between thought and action, by a powerful emotional drive, cautious experimentalism in action, and, in expression, extravagances and disengagements which succeeded one another not without calculation and not without reference to the given political juncture of the moment (Cruise-O' Brien 1965, p. 208).

Reading the great poet's writings on nationalist matters in an earlier text written in 1886 in the form of his 'The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson', Yeats sets out his hopes for the coming generation and who may also become part of his audience: "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." (Stanfield 1988, p. 6). The discerning reader of such an affirmation will recognise the intertwined nature of the aesthetic and political qualities of this thought.

Given the complex and tense nature of cultural and political affairs of Ireland on the cusp of achieving ever greater autonomy and eventual independence from British rule, it is hardly surprising that such an environment provided a rich source of material on which to reflect and write. Much conflict remained largely unavoidable but this was something that Yeats believed could ameliorate in that Ireland possessed enormous potential to inspire great art due to the enduring nature of its literary tradition and what was seen as 'the unchanging core of their national identity, art ensures that the daily affairs of the nation are always informed by a sense of unity that transcends the immediate situation' (Cusack 2009, p. 44). From this perspective, it is unsurprising to learn that Yeats believed in concrete action and that poetry and wider literature had a significant role to play in generating conditions and motivation to bring about the desired outcome. This belief was evinced in his remarks that the imagination should be treated as something that possessed image-

[1]W.B. Yeats cited in W. B. (1997). W. B. Yeats: The Poems, Second Edition, edited by R. J. Finneran. New York: Scriber, pp. 587-88

making power where concrete realities are posited rather than abstractions postulated. In "The Tower" he notes that his imagination seeks more than to 'deal/In abstract things'; and he "send(s) imagination forth' to summon 'Images and memories/From ruin or from ancient trees." In this poem, Yeats' imagination is concerned precisely with scouring the world outside the self for what Stan Smith refers to as 'emblems of its spiritual state and preoccupations' (Smith, 1990, pp. 63-64).

As circumstances evolved after Parnell's passing, Yeats recognised his opportunity to intervene through his work and fortunately his sense of timing was sufficiently well-attuned to ensure he succeeded in making a meaningful contribution to the public discourse of the time. The situation the country was in at the time led him to state that he felt it resembled 'wax' and he set to work to give a shape to his own vision through the literary side of a broader nationalist movement. As part of these efforts, he was instrumental in founding the Irish Literary Society in London and the National Literary Society in Dublin and the theatre that later evolved into what became known as the Abbey Theatre (Cruise-O' Brien 1965, p. 220). His faith in the power of writing and its role in inspiring actual change beyond the page is clearly evinced in a diary entry from 1909 which also alludes to broader contours of Yeats's political consciousness. He acknowledges that:

> By implication the philosophy of Irish faery lore declares that all power is from the body, all intelligence from the spirit. Western civilisation, religion, and magic alike insist on power and therefore body and these three doctrines – efficient rule, the Incarnation, and thaumaturgy…The Incarnation involved modern science and modern efficiency and also modern lyric feeling which gives body to the most spiritual emotions. It produced a solidification of all things that grew from the individual will (cited in Stanfield 1988, p. 5).

Quite evidently then, the individual will in an already agitated public psyche could only benefit from encouragement and articulation from the artists rendering of thought into possible forms of action. Some of the motivating factors for these forms of action were of course still quite personal for Yeats as circumstances and outcomes sometimes had a tendency to conspire against his preferred vision of art as a unifying force. A major example of this was how the Irish cultural revival had proved practically the opposite of what Yeats had set out to achieve as it generated more division than unity. He counteracted Douglas Hyde's notable remarks in his "The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland" by suggesting:

> Can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language? Can we not keep the continuity of the nation's life, not by trying to do what Dr. Hyde has practically pronounced impossible, but by translating or retelling in English, what shall an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm (sic) and style, all that is best of the ancient literature? (cited in North 1991, p. 30).

In attempting to maintain the 'continuity of the nation's life' Yeats recognised that it would be logical to attempt to appeal to reinforce the strength of the cultural institutions a strong source of identity and influence in Irish life. However, the public was not always a reliable ally in furthering these interests. These sentiments are evident in his December 1912 poem "To a Wealthy Man who promised a second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures" which reads as follows:

You gave, but will not give again
Until enough of Paudeen's pence
By Biddy's halfpennies have lain
To be 'some sort of evidence,'
Before you'll put your guineas down,
That things it were a pride to give
Are what the blind and ignorant town
Imagines best to make it thrive.
What cared Duke Ercole, that bid
His mummers to the market-place,
What th' onion-sellers thought or did
So that his Plautus set the pace
For the Italian comedies?
And Guidobaldo, when he made
That grammar school of courtesies
Where wit and beauty learned their trade
Upon Urbino's windy hill,
Had sent no runners to and fro
That he might learn the shepherds' will.
And when they drove out Cosimo,
Indifferent how the rancour ran,
He gave the hours they had set free
To Michelozzo's latest plan
For the San Marco Library,
Whence turbulent Italy should draw
Delight in Art whose end is peace,
In logic and in natural law
By sucking at the dugs of Greece.
Your open hand but shows our loss,
For he knew better how to live.

Let Paudeens play at pitch and toss,
Look up in the sun's eye and give
What the exultant heart calls good
That some new day may breed the best
Because you gave, not what they would,

But the right twigs for an eagle's nest![2]

Yeats' sentiments here seek a greater deployment of energy from reader and reactionary alike. He strives to awaken the sleeping masses into waking from their slumber and applying their faculties for the betterment of society. The action he seeks is peaceful as it evidenced in his call toward 'Whence turbulent Italy should draw Delight in Art whose end is peace' and in this reference he recalls the powerful and lasting affect of the Renaissance on the literary and architectural culture from the standpoint of 'Urbino's windy hill' a renowned centre of civilization amidst warring states in a fractured and fraught state of affairs in early modern Italy.

Entering the Political Fray

It may be pertinent to examine an interview Yeats gave to Marguerite Wilkinson, which was published in 1920 in New York, in this he affirms that one can ascribe a very potent role and purpose to a book and this he believes giving 'expression to a self that is the antithesis of his every-day self.' (Mikhail 1977, p. 120). Yeats links this directly to poetical writers of the past who he says are engaged in an activity that "the lineaments of his life, that the work is the man's flight from his entire horoscope, his blind struggle in the network of the stars." (*Apud*). The artist, particularly the writer, is charged with having the responsibility to point out that, as Landor did, 'topped us all in calm nobility when the pen was in his hand, as in the daily violence of his passion when he had laid it down' (Mikhail 1977, pp. 120-21). Much political and actual violence was to take place in the decade prior to Irish independence and this arena engaged Yeats' interest to the extent that he sought to influence the political system from within. Roy Foster has noted how Yeats 'grew up against the background of Home Rule and of the dizzying ascent and fall of Parnell, a figure who would preoccupy Yeats all his life' and how his 'own politics had moved through stages of violent engagement, intense disillusionment and another change with the seismic impact of 1916'.[3]

Despite his participation in political activities, Yeats's interest in public affairs should not be interpreted as a profession of faith in the system of democracy. He remained suspicious and deeply distrustful of it even after having served in the Senate of the Irish Free State. He did, however, use his privileged position as a member of parliament to highlight and oppose certain ideas and measure that he found disagreeable. He took a strong

[2] W.B. Yeats cited in W. B. (1997). W. B. Yeats: The Poems, Second Edition, edited by R. J. Finneran. New York: Scriber, pp. 106-7

[3] Roy Foster, 'Philosophy and a little passion: Roy Foster on WB Yeats and politics', article in *The Irish Times*, 10th June 2015

stand against censorship and against the policy on the part of the new Irish State to censor books and newspapers on moral grounds and also defended the independent inspection of prisons, religious freedom and the right to a private conscience. In the case of the latter, he grounded his stance on the position that "The living, changing advancing human mind, sooner or later refuses to accept this legislation from men who base their ideas on the interpretation of doubtful texts in the Gospels" (North 1991, p. 62). These views were consistent with his earlier defence of the workers' welfare in the Dublin lockout in 1913. His criticisms were laid out in a letter to Big Jim Larkin's paper, *Irish Worker*, in which his text titled 'Dublin Fanaticism' was published on 1st November 1913 where he charged that:

> I do not complain of Dublin's capacity for fanaticism where in priest or layman, for you cannot have strong feeling without that capacity, but neither those who directed the police nor the editors of our newspapers can plead fanaticism. They are supposed to watch over our civil liberties, and I charge the Dublin Nationalist newspapers with deliberately arousing religious passion to break up the organisation of the workingman, with appealing to mob law day after day, with publishing the names of workingmen and their wives for purposes of intimidation.
>
> And I charge the Unionist Press of Dublin and those who directed the police with conniving at this conspiracy. I want to know why the Daily Express, which is directly and indirectly inciting Ulster to rebellion in defence of what it calls 'the liberty of the subject' is so indifferent to that liberty here in Dublin that it has not made one editorial comment, and I ask the Irish Times why a few sentences at the end of an article, to late in the week to be of any service, has been the measure of its love for civil liberty?
>
> I want to know why there were only (according to the press reports) two policemen at Kingsbridge on Saturday when Mr. Sheehy Skeffington was assaulted and a man prevented from buying a ticket for his own child? There had been tumults every night at every Dublin railway station, and I can only assume that the police authorities wished those tumults to continue. […][4]

Even while serving as a Senator, in his last speech before retiring as a member he cautioned fellow members on the dangers of having too many democratic tendencies in composing their membership when he defended the idea that: "I think we should not lose sight of the simple fact that it is more desirable and more important to have able men in this House than to get representative men into this House." He buttressed this principle in

[4] Cited in A Norman Jeffares, K. G. W. Cross (Eds.) (1965) *In Excited Reverie: A Centenary Tribute – W. B. Yeats 1865-1939*. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, p. 230

later remarks when he expressed his strong preference for leadership of an elite over the people, rather than the people's own elected representatives. In "On the Boiler", these ideas are undoubtedly authoritarian in nature, even fascist in the view of some critics since he espouses that: "The whole state should be so constructed that the people should think it their duty to grow popular with King and Lord Mayor instead of King and Lord Mayor growing popular with them" (North 1991, p. 63).

Agitated Aristocracy

Yeats's sense of loyalty toward the aristocratic elements of Irish society and authoritarian political leadership was not entirely without doubt on his own part. He was pleased to accept appointment to the Senate in the first instance at the hand of the William T. Cosgrave's Free State government and expressed his admiration for Cosgrave's Minister for Home Affairs, Kevin O' Higgins who was sometimes and erroneously referred to as the 'Irish Mussolini' since he was responsible for formulating and enforcing the governments oppressive policies against the virulent Republican movement. His views were subject to challenge given the undeniable effects of changing circumstances such as O' Higgins assignation in 1927 and the introduction of a stricter censorship regime from 1928. De Valera's later ascension to power also provided further grounds for his distaste for the political direction the country was taking (Stanfield 1988, p. 14).

This professed distaste was a long-standing element of Yeat's opinion and had its origins in his lack of faith in contemporary Western society. One critic notes how "his respect for ordinary people as constituting a particular society and living a certain life at a certain time was, extremely weak. Consistent with his Tory sympathies he adhered to Burke's concept of the State as being 'an oak tree that had grown through centuries". Such were his views that he looked to an idealised past over his unsatisfactory contemporary political environment. Indeed, Yeats political persuasions echo throughout his *Words upon the Window-pane* (1930) which indicate his admiration for the Roman oligarchy. A major shortcoming of democracy for him was that it did not maintain the balance the One (i.e. the government), the Few (the landed-gentry and intellectual elite) and the Many (i.e. the wider populace) since his contention holds that people are too easily manipulated into following a particular direction of opinion. He laments how this can happen when people know so little about the character of those political leaders they profess to faithfully trust wherever from that moment forward "puts nothing into his mouth that some other man has not already chewed and digested" (Airkins 2010, p. 68).

Civil Misgivings

Yeats awareness of the vagaries of public opinion did not, however, aid his security in the midst of a tense political environment. The relatively privileged position he gained

with his six-year appointment to the Senate from December 1922, also came with considerable risk to his personal security due to the effects of the Civil War which saw thirty-seven of his fellow Senators having their homes destroyed by arson attacks. All members of parliament were also potential assignation targets and Yeats experience having shots fired into his Dublin home in which the shots fired lodged in the wall next to his wife's head as she cradled their daughter (Holderman 2010, pp. 79-80).

Once the crisis of the Civil War subsided, he become more suspicious of the new States strong preference for strict Catholic moral doctrines being transposed into legislation. He also frowned upon the policy of "Compulsory Gaelic" which he felt was appropriate to a point out, but he opposed its imposition on those who could not speak the language. This led him to remark that this policy of forcing a Protestant to learn Irish was like "compelling a Jew to eat bacon" (Holderman 2010, p. 80). Throughout his involvement in political life and matters there arising, he retained his loyalty to his art which he felt should stand as a kind of bulwark against what he termed 'the desire which every political part has, to substitute for life in a bunch of reliable principles and assertions' (Jeffares 1965, p. 210).

In 1935, some four years before his death, Yeats penned *Parnell's Funeral* in which his pent-up frustrations were laid bare:

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?
Rich foliage that the starlight glittered through,
A frenzied crowd, and where the branches sprang
A beautiful seated boy; a sacred bow;
A woman, and an arrow on a string;
A pierced boy, image of a star laid low.
That woman, the Great Mother imaging,
Cut out his heart. Some master of design
Stamped boy and tree upon Sicilian coin.
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:
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.

Come, fix upon me that accusing eye.
I thirst for accusation. 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.
II
The rest I pass, one sentence I unsay.
Had de Valera eaten Parnell's heart
No loose-lipped demagogue had won the day,
No civil rancour torn the land apart.
Had Cosgrave eaten Parnell's heart, the land's
Imagination had been satisfied,
Or lacking that, government in such hands,
O'Higgins its sole statesman had not died.
Had even O'Duffy-but I name no more-
Their school a crowd, his master solitude;
Through Jonathan Swift's dark grove he passed, and there
Plucked bitter wisdom that enriched his blood.[5]

These verses effectively provide a tour de force of key moments in Irish history interspersed with enlivening language that couch the rough events with refined poetic imagery. He is unafraid to criticise and praise important figures of their day, as and where necessary.

Ultimately, Yeats made sincere efforts to seek genuine liberation for Ireland and its people through the political system. Arguably, his most powerful contribution was his brand of cultural nationalism which he hoped could deliver the Irish people from what one critic has called 'the political bondage but also from conflict and infighting'. Yeats believed that an aesthetic cultural renewal could liberate the world from a deep chasm of generation so as to, as he wrote in the journal *To-Morrow*, "call back the soul to its ancient sovereignty" (McKenna 2012, p. 86). Exercising this form of sovereignty accords closely with the principle I quoted at the beginning in how John McGahern affirmed that art 'an attempt to create a world…of the imagination over which we can reign'. Yeats's large body of writing made an indelible mark on the formation of the ballast of Irish cultural nationalism. An important part of this was where expectation and experience were treated through the imagination which could wield sovereign power over a complex arena of competing demands of cultural and political forces that would ultimately shape a

[5] W.B. Yeats cited in W. B. (1997). W. B. Yeats: The Poems, Second Edition, edited by R. J. Finneran. New York: Scriber, pp. 285-86

significant part of Irish culture.

Conclusion

Overall, an examination of Yeats's work would confirm the positive pursuance of an enterprise well-defined by Oscar Wilde being concerned with the observation that: "Life holds a mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type of imagined by painter or sculptor, or realizes in fact what has been dreamed in fiction. (…) the basis of life…is simply the desire for expression, and Art is always presenting various forms through which this expression can be attained" (Wilde 1948, pp. 35, 46). Yeats emulated much of the human experience in the world in his literature and could indeed be said to have achieve what Wilde believed art in general and literature in particular seeks to take "…life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms" (Wilde 1948, p. 23). This echoes the sentiments that Yeats himself had expressed back in 1886 in his article 'The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson' in which he said: '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 become tuneless and forgotten.[6]

For Yeats, art (*i.e.* literature) retained a necessary and influential role in guiding and driving the direction of society. Indeed, as Smith has remarked, Yeats believed that 'democracy is the politics of plaster saints'. But his strongly held conviction was that true art had a hospital home only in a society which bore witness to an environment in which exceptional individuals both in public and artistic life would be cherished for its genuine value in how it dignifies its 'beautiful lofty things' (Smith, 1990: 73).

There can be little doubt that Yeats's contribution to the literary world, taken together with his political activity succeeded in refining the expression of ideals and desires in Irish life and gave it fresh form so that its fortunes could be sought anew.

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