

Experience Day English Language and Culture

24 March 2023



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Introduction

A student of English Language and Culture will tell you about your first year at this programme.

Lecture and seminar

Title

William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) and the Creation of 'Ireland'

Short description

In the nineteenth century, Ireland was not yet an independent nation but still part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. There were many political attempts to gain independence for Ireland, but also many cultural movements to give Ireland a sense of its own, non-British, identity. One of the key figures in establishing this Irish identity in the late 19th and early 20th century was the poet and playwright William Butler Yeats, still regarded nowadays as one of the greatest writers of modern Ireland. In this lecture and seminar we will have a look at how his poetry became an important part of the struggle for independence, and why Yeats would become a national poet.

Lecturer: Prof.dr. Peter Liebrechts (p.liebrechts@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

Prof.dr. Peter Liebrechts is Hoogleraar Moderne Engelstalige Letterkunde, en geeft onderwijs in de Engelstalige literatuur vanaf ca. 1800 tot nu. In zijn onderzoek richt hij zich vooral op het voortleven van de klassieke cultuur in de moderne Engelstalige cultuur, op de periode van het Modernisme (ca. 1890-1940), en op de hedendaagse Engelstalige poëzie en roman.

Q&A

Do you have any questions regarding the programme? The student will answer them all at the Q&A.

Preparation

Read the following text.

NEW DIRECTIONS IN IRISH AND IRISH AMERICAN LITERATURE

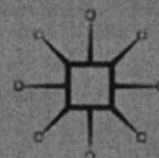


IMAGINING IRELAND IN THE POEMS AND PLAYS OF W. B. YEATS

NATION, CLASS, AND STATE

Anthony Bradley

Palgrave macmillan 2011



Introduction

William Butler Yeats enjoys the reputation of being one of the greatest English-language poets of our time. His poetry continues to speak directly, profoundly, musically, and memorably to readers in this twenty-first century. When he first read Nietzsche, Yeats described him as “that strong enchanter.”¹ The phrase might well apply to Yeats himself, in that so many of his best poems, even when we may register some ideological resistance to what they say, put us under a kind of spell in which we respond to what is beautiful and memorable and affecting in their images and music, and to their passionate utterance about the human predicament we share. Perhaps this is why Yeats is so often quoted, whether in exalting friendship over fame and ambition (“my glory was I had such friends”), in describing the dynamic of so many controversies (“The best lack all conviction/the worst are full of passionate intensity”), in providing memorable book titles (*Things Fall Apart*, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, etc.), or in formulating a despairing conclusion to Irish politics (“Out of Ireland have we come. / Great hatred, little room, / Maimed us at the start”).²

Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (in 1923), and has for long been part of the academic canon of English literature, and consequently been taught in universities in the Britain and the United States as well as Ireland; not only that, but he has global appeal, and is also a significant model for English language writers and intellectuals in postcolonial situations.³ Yeats can be read, no doubt, as a belated Romantic poet in the English tradition of Shelley and Blake, but more consistently and fully, perhaps, in the Irish context, as a poet in a society in which, historically, the poet has played—by modern standards—an unusually public role.⁴ Terry Eagleton suggests that in the sheer performativeness of Yeats’s poetry—he is always “blessing, spurning, summoning, denominating, listing, exhorting, bequeathing, and the like”—Yeats is part of “an Irish tradition of the poet as magician, social functionary and political activist.”⁵ Certainly Yeats saw himself as the heir not only to the English language poetry of his predecessors Davis, Mangan, and Ferguson in the nineteenth century, but also to the Gaelic tradition, insofar as one who did not speak the language could have access to it. It is only fitting that one of the personae of his verse is Red Hanrahan, presumably modeled on the

eighteenth-century Gaelic poet Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin (Owen Roe O'Sullivan) "whose extraordinary lyric facility gained him the reputation as the sweetest singer of all...his poems were, and still are, sung to some of the most hauntingly beautiful of Irish airs."⁶ Yeats also has something in common with the much earlier exemplars of the Gaelic tradition in the *filidh* of the period from the sixth to the twelfth centuries, whose functions were by no means restricted to the modern, private notion of poetry—they were poets, priests, prophets, eulogists, satirists, and political advisers to their kings.⁷

As an Irish poet writing in English in the cultural and political ferment of Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Yeats's Irishness is interestingly complex, rather than simple. He is heir to a number of cultural traditions in Ireland, none of which is itself unitary: this mingling of Anglo-Irish, Gaelic, and English makes for a particularly rich kind of cultural hybridity. Yeats is not constrained by any kind of parochialism, then; his Irishness is not a limiting factor, and in its postcolonial attributes finds parallels in the newly emerging literatures in English of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Yeats probably has as much in common with poets and dramatists writing in English in former colonies as he does with English writers of his time. Yet encountering Yeats in an anthology or even the *Collected Poems* tends to separate the poems from their historical, political, and cultural contexts, and some restoration of these contexts is surely necessary for a fuller appreciation of the whole of Yeats's work. Certainly Yeats intended his poems and plays to be part of the public life of Ireland. If what we first value in a poem is its sensuous immediacy (and Yeats poems offer that in full measure), what we understand of the poem's contexts can enhance its aesthetic function, or change it in some significant way.

Yeats is not just an Irish poet with nationalist opinions, but one who has the best claim to being Ireland's national poet: he is a founder of Ireland's national theater, and his poetry and plays have been instrumental in imagining the nation that emerged from a guerrilla war with England, civil war, and partition of the island of Ireland into two political entities. Yeats's status as a national poet is not so much a matter of nationalist opinions he held, as it is his literary style; that style imagines the community of the modern nation of Ireland. To some extent, Yeats can be seen as a Romantic poet, to some extent as a Modernist like his younger contemporaries T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and D. H. Lawrence. But these distinctions are somewhat misleading, for Yeats has been well described as "a poet who, by blurring the boundary between late romanticism and high modernism, challenges

the effort to periodize modernism.”⁸ And precisely because he is Irish and not English, both his romanticism and his modernism also take different forms than they do in the English poets. One might argue that Yeats’s (and James Joyce’s) modernism comes as much from the Irish colonial experience of fragmentation and discontinuity as it does from a sense of the twentieth-century crisis of European culture. Throughout his career, it is, in the main, the dialectical relation between the Ireland of Yeats’s mind, and the actual Ireland he inhabited, between nation and state, as well as other forms of the ideal and real, which drives Yeats’s poetry and plays.

Chapter One

“Romantic Ireland”: The Early Poems and Plays (1885–1910)

They [the great writers] were national first...and it was the intensity of their own nationalism which made them international.

—James Joyce, in conversation with Arthur Power

Without Yeats there would have been no Literary Revival in Ireland. Without the inspiration of that Revival and the glorification of beauty and heroic virtue I doubt there would have been an Easter Week.

—Maud Gonne, “Yeats and Ireland”

William Butler Yeats was not just Irish by virtue of his birth and upbringing—he helped define and imagine a particular kind of Irishness that shaped the modern nation of Ireland. Yeats not only imagined Ireland in his poems and plays, but anticipated modern theories of nationalism, often using similar language to describe the creative power of the aesthetic image in imagining the community of the nation, emphasizing the ways Irish nationalism could be a substitute religious belief that might unify divisive sectarian and class loyalties, and pointing up the importance of the psychology of love and death in nationalism. Yeats’s creative powers and the Irish nation were symbiotically linked in the minds of many, and certainly in his own mind. Yeats was a public figure in Ireland long before he was appointed senator in the first Irish government (1922), and when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature the following year, it seemed to many (even, with due allowance made for modesty, to Yeats) that the prize was to some extent a recognition of the new Irish Free State: “Of course I know quite well that this honour is not given to me as an individual but as a representative of a literary movement and a nation and I am glad to have it so.”¹

Like James Joyce, Yeats wrote in English, not Irish (neither knew much Gaelic), but unlike Joyce and the large majority of the Irish

people, Yeats was, by birth at least, Anglo-Irish and Protestant, and inevitably existed in a different relation to Ireland and England than Irish Catholics. Yeats belonged to the artistic and intellectual segment of the Anglo-Irish who attempted to separate themselves from their own class interests, took a passionate interest in the native culture, including the Gaelic language, and were nationalist in political opinion. The vast majority of the Anglo-Irish supported landlordism (the economic system) and Unionism (the political conviction that Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom). Late in his life, after his marriage to a young Englishwoman, Yeats registered impatience with the recurrent question (usually from non-Irish or British people, in this particular case apparently from an Indian student) of why he did not write in Gaelic, and described how he felt himself torn between two cultural traditions, the English and the Irish, and how his feelings of hatred for England because of its historical oppression of Ireland were offset by respect for his own lineage, and love for English literature and language:

no people, Lecky said at the opening of his *Ireland in the Eighteenth Century*, have undergone greater persecution, nor did that persecution altogether cease up to our own day. No people hate as we do in whom that past is always alive.... I remind myself that, though mine is the first English marriage I know of in the direct line, all my family names are English and that I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser, and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris, and to the English language in which I think, speak, and write, that everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate.... Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue.²

Yet this retrospective analysis did not quite describe what he had felt as a young man. Thirty-six years earlier he had written of the overtly political poets of Young Ireland—the most memorable of whom are Thomas Davis (“A Nation Once Again”), and James Clarence Mangan (“Dark Rosaleen”): “I do not think Shelley or Spenser ever moved me as did these poets.”³ What continued to appeal to Yeats about the Young Irelanders is precisely what is so appealing about Yeats, for some of his readers, at least. Young Ireland’s idea of poetry was not merely private or individualist: “They had the quality I admired and admire: they were not separated individual men; they spoke or tried to speak out of a people to a people; behind them stretched the generations.”⁴ The idea of a single, united “people” of Ireland is problematic, but at least it makes clear Yeats’s desire to speak for

more than the individual lyric "I." At the same time as he identified politically with Young Ireland, Yeats longed for a style that would be more compelling than its political rhetoric and yet would not be merely English, a way of writing "which would not be an English style and yet would be musical and full of colour."⁵ In terms of subject matter, too, he differed from Young Ireland in choosing not the direct and inevitably rhetorical expression of political opinion, but rather the lore and legends of the people. These aspirations, largely realized in the intervening years, did not prevent Yeats from appropriating and rewriting Thomas Davis's "The Green Above the Red" in his "September, 1913" (*Responsibilities*).

Yeats's early verse and plays involved, then, a deliberate choice of Irish subject matter and style. His interest in India, evident in such poems as "Anashuya and Vijaya," "The Indian upon God," and "The Indian to His Love" (*Crossways*), remains into Yeats's old age, and is hardly incompatible with Yeats's Irishness, which involved global affiliations and was not simply the contrary of Englishness. It was Yeats's interest in world religions that led him to link India with ancient Ireland: "I associated early Christian Ireland with India."⁶ It is not only in poems set in India, but in poems like "The Secret Rose" (and perhaps the whole collection in which this poem appears) that, as Lyn Innes points out, "the Celtic and Oriental traditions become merged."⁷

The Celticism of the Irish cultural revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to which Yeats contributed was a movement in the main of Anglo-Irish artists, intellectuals, and antiquarians (as earlier such revivals had been) who translated the Gaelic texts anew, or wrote new works based on those texts, or studied the life of the people living in the Irish countryside. Ironically, the people themselves, often Irish-speaking, and their political leaders, notably Daniel O'Connell, were less enamored with the language, and even before the Great Famine at mid-nineteenth century, frequently disparaged Gaelic as a handicap to their getting on in the world, as though the language itself were somehow responsible for their degradation and poverty. (O'Connell advocated learning English to Gaelic-speaking crowds to whom he spoke only rarely in Gaelic, and frankly acknowledged "I can witness without a sigh the demise of Irish.")⁸ For many Irish people in the nineteenth and even the twentieth centuries, indeed, it was their Catholicism and not the Gaelic language and culture that constituted their strongest sense of who they were. It was in O'Connell's time that the "identification of the Irish nation with the Catholic nation" was first accomplished.⁹ Anglo-Irish

intellectuals and writers like Douglas Hyde, however, were convinced of the essential importance of the Gaelic language in remaking modern Irish identity. Quite what the political significance of that cultural identity implied was different to different people, and certainly Hyde was soon uneasy with what he saw as the growing politicization of his Gaelic League. For the Revival, the rediscovery of Ireland's ancient culture meant primarily that the modern Irish people could redefine themselves as noble and cultured and imaginative, as other than the objects of scorn and ridicule they so often had been in English culture. In some ways that rediscovery of Gaelic culture in Ireland was quite in keeping with the Celticism of English critics like Matthew Arnold in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), in which the Celtic/Irish temperament is described as spiritually and imaginatively superior to the Anglo-Saxon/English. Despite his Celticism, however, Arnold was antinationalist even when it came to the soft option of Home Rule for Ireland, since he also thought that the Celts were by nature hostile or indifferent to fact, and therefore not fit even for a mild degree of autonomy in the form of devolved government.¹⁰

The essentialism of such views, benign or otherwise, and their ahistorical nature permeated Celticism: the idea that, as Hyde wrote, the Irish at the turn of the twentieth century were essentially unchanged from the ancient Irish, that there was a national character, that his contemporaries could simply relearn how to be genuinely Irish, and expunge the effects of centuries of colonization in order to assert their authentic identity, is reductive and antihistorical at the least.¹¹ So is Yeats's identification of himself as a Celt; there is something almost comically incongruous about his writing for American newspapers and identifying himself as "Your Celt in London."¹² Not that anyone in Ireland could with any certainty identify himself as Celtic, but least of all Yeats, whose Anglo-Irish genealogy was well established, whose origins in the Protestant landowning and business classes were also well established, and who was, as often as not, writing not from the fastnesses of Connacht or some other Gaelic-speaking redoubt in Ireland, but from London, the cosmopolitan center of empire.¹³ And yet, if romantic nationalism was historically ill-founded in Celticism, it was a fact that Ireland was possessed of an ancient residual culture, whose history, language, literature, and artifacts were accessible in writing and translation in the National Library and what became the National Museum in Yeats's day. Contemporary nationalism drew, perhaps rather fancifully at times, on that past in attempting to give the Irish a more positive sense of themselves than the English had often represented them—as barbarous and violent people, as figures

of fun, as the simian missing link in the chain of evolution, as violent, bomb-throwing terrorists, as lazy and dirty. And if his essentialism led him to assert the sameness of the Irish character for hundreds of years, Hyde was a keen Gaelic scholar, and was, according to Jeffares, Yeats's "first source of informed information about Irish oral tradition and texts of Irish poetry and legend." Yeats also marveled at Hyde's ability to write in a distinctive English style that he described as "Gaelic in idiom and Tudor in vocabulary."¹⁴

So while Yeats did not write in Gaelic, he based many of his poems on translated Gaelic texts: his first volume featured the long narrative poem "The Wanderings of Oisín" (1889), and borrowed "extensively" from the translations of three Irish Gaelic poems about Oisín's exploits, and especially Michael Comyn's "Oisín's Lay" (1760).¹⁵ (There were, of course, ancient manuscript sources in the Finn cycle for Oisín's story, dating at least from the twelfth century.) The commentary of Nicolas O'Cearnaigh on the texts, which Yeats consulted, "draws wide-ranging spiritualist parallels for what seem to be the exotic aspects of Irish Gaelic literature" in non-European cultures, especially India's.¹⁶

Other early poems and plays by Yeats with Gaelic antecedents include *The Countess Cathleen*, based on a story in Irish folklore; "The Madness of King Goll" (*Crossways*), based on O'Curry's version of a tale in the Fenian cycle; *On Baile's Strand*, one of his finest plays, based on the Ulster Cycle tale, "The Death of Aoife's Only Son"; "A Faery Song" (*The Rose*), which employs the Diarmuid and Grainne story from the Fenian cycle; the lullaby "A Cradle Song" (*The Rose*), in which, Yeats wrote, "the last two lines are suggested by a Gaelic song"; and "The Host Of the Air" (*The Wind Among the Reeds*), which Yeats said was based on "an old Gaelic ballad that was sung and translated for me by a woman at Ballisodare in County Sligo." There are many more such discernable borrowings and influences in the early poetry, as well as dominant tropes, like metamorphosis, that Yeats may have taken from poetry in Gaelic.¹⁷

Even if not cast conclusively in the Gaelic mold, the forms of Yeats's verse and plays bore the impress, at least, of Gaelic forms like the *aisling* in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, the *immram* in "The Wanderings of Oisín," and *dinnsenchas* in the keen sense of place in such poems as "The Lake Isle of Innisfree," where the island's Gaelic name, literally, "heather island," explains the poem's otherwise surreal image of noon being "a purple glow."¹⁸ As with the Gaelic poets, Yeats's love of place comes out in his relish and delight in the (phonetically Anglicized) place-names of the west of Ireland, as in the first line of

“The Man Who Dreamed of Faeryland”—to give just one example—“He stood among a crowd at Dromahair,” where the line ends with a lingering, affectionate caress of the double-stressed place-name that is both intimate and emphatic. These early poems and plays brought into poetry in English the exoticism of Ireland, the precolonial Irish landscape evoked by its Gaelic place-names, haunted by the myths and legends that were attached to the landscape by those names, as well as the folklore of the peasantry, their songs and ballads, their supernatural beliefs. Yeats understood that he was not simply writing in a tradition of protest against England and empire, or of naive political propaganda, but that his work was actually helping to imagine and nourish the community that would achieve (at least) an autonomous cultural existence. “Nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind which is, of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult to that man, race, or nation.”¹⁹

“Nationalism” in Yeats’s Ireland was a large ideological umbrella for different sets of political beliefs that sometimes overlapped: it included the Marxist orientation of James Connolly, who believed that the cause of labor was the cause of Ireland, that the Brehon laws operative in Irish Gaelic society from earliest times to the seventeenth century were more progressive than English law, and that the political endgame of his brand of nationalism was a workers’ republic. It also included feminists and suffragists like Maud Gonne, whose women’s group was called *Inghinidhe na hEireann* (“Daughters of Ireland”), Constance Markiewicz, and others, including university-educated Catholic women, some of whom at least saw no contradiction between feminism and nationalism; it could include also the prepolitical cultural nationalism of Douglas Hyde, who stressed the need to de-Anglicize Ireland by learning and speaking Gaelic, playing Gaelic sports, favoring Irish music and dancing, wearing Irish clothes, and so on. It included the revolutionary, self-sacrificial Catholic mysticism of Pearse and other schoolteachers, poets, and intellectuals who saw Irish history as leading ineluctably to the teleological end of separation from England. It also included the journalist Arthur Griffith, editor of the *United Irishman* and founder of Sinn Fein, who sought a nonsectarian Ireland that was prosperous and industrialized, with opportunities for the new, educated urban middle class; D. P. Moran, also a journalist, and the Irish-Irelanders, whose exclusivist sense of Irishness, defined not only as anti-imperialist but also as anti-Ascendancy and pro-Catholic, led them often to attack Yeats and other Anglo-Irish writers in *The Leader*; it included those supporters

of empire and capital like Plunkett, owner of the pro-British *Daily Express*, which promulgated their views that a culturally distinctive Ireland should take its place within the existing political framework of empire; it included the supporters of the cooperative movement, democratic nationalists like George Russell and friends; it included parliamentary nationalists like Redmond, who encouraged Irishmen to fight on Britain's side in the First World War, as a way of finally securing Home Rule for Ireland; and included, finally, many members of the newly educated Catholic middle classes who saw a greater possibility for preferment in an independent Irish state than in an Ireland whose social and economic order was dominated by England. Yeats and company had much in common with Hyde, but thought that a modern Irish literature could be written in English, and were more politically inclined than Hyde. Considered as a set of political opinions and beliefs, Yeats's nationalism was fluid and moved between the revolutionary and the moderate. But in his plays and poems, his view of the nation is always radical and visionary. Yeats described himself (late in life) as "a nationalist of the school of John O'Leary," the old Fenian he credited with making him a nationalist, and under whose tutelage he probably took the Fenian oath and joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood "in the late 1880s."²⁰ But if O'Leary can hardly be credited with leading a school of nationalism, the actual political beliefs Yeats may have held at different points in his life are, anyway, less important than the ways in which he imagined Ireland in his poems and plays; nationalism for Yeats is virtually a literary style—it is his writing that contributes so profoundly to the creation of Ireland.²¹ David Lloyd gives a generous but just estimate of Yeats's contribution: "When Yeats broods late in life on the probability that that play of his [*Cathleen Ni Houlihan*] 'sent out certain men the English shot,' this is by no means an overweening assessment of the extraordinary part his writings played in the forging in Ireland of a mode of subjectivity apt to find its political and ethical realization in sacrifice to the nation yet to be."²² Yeats and others of his mind summoned up a heroic past in Ireland that was precolonial and self-ruling, a time "When her own people ruled this tragic Eire" ("The Dedication to a Book of Stories selected from the Irish Novelists" is the unwieldy title of this poem in *The Rose*). If this was inadequate history, from an academic perspective, people like Yeats successfully deployed that image of the past to change the course of Irish history in their time. Yeats's views were made known in other ways than through the poems (indeed Yeats's early poems did not sell very well) since he made himself known in public appearances, readings, lectures, membership of

clubs and societies, engaged in ceaseless self-promotion in Ireland, England, and the United States, and was instrumental in founding, administering, and writing plays for what became the Irish national theatre, the often controversial Abbey Theatre.²³ Moreover, he anticipated modern thinking about the nature of nationalism in that he realized the importance of creating a “model of the nation” to give the Irish people “sensible images,” rather than giving them Gaelic grammars or nationalist rhetoric, and realized too that such images needed the mass circulation of newspapers if they were to be disseminated widely: “In the work of Lady Gregory, of Synge, of O’Grady... in my own work, a school of journalists... could find right building material to create a historical and literary nationalism as powerful as the old [Young Ireland] and nobler.”²⁴ Late in his life, looking at the paintings depicting revolutionary Ireland in Dublin’s municipal gallery, in an anticipation of the idea of the nation as “imagined community,” Yeats exclaimed “This is not, I say, / The dead Ireland of my youth, but an Ireland / The poets have imagined, terrible and gay” (“The Municipal Gallery Re-Visited”). Yeats was foremost of those poets to imagine Ireland.

Even allowing for an element of uncertainty about what constitutes the text of an early Yeats poem, one might reasonably generalize that his early poems are full of the landscape of the west of Ireland (Yeats wrote: “Ireland is always Connacht to my imagination”), resound with its Gaelic place-names, and invoke the names and deeds of Celtic heroes like Oisín, Cúchulainn, Maeve, and Fergus.²⁵ What could be political about such celebrations of place? As Homi Bhabha argues, landscape is virtually “the inscape of national identity.”²⁶ In Yeats, the atavistic love for place, the understanding of its identity as pre-colonial, as linked to an authentic and noble identity, as the source of energy, and of a spirituality uncontaminated by the materialism associated with England and urban life, clearly have political implications that underwrite the separatist idea of the nation. The early poetry reflects, too, the folklore of the peasantry, including the faeries, and ballads and songs based on local lore, all of which are understood to be distinctive and authentic expressions of national identity. It includes some love poems (like “Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland”) in which, as in older Gaelic poems, Ireland is a loved woman, and the beloved is both an object of erotic desire and the allegorized figure of the nation. Yeats’s early play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, which he co-authored with Lady Gregory, more fully embodies this *aisling* structure of feeling—it might be called a national allegory.²⁷ The irony that these poems and plays that aroused Irish nationalist feeling

and pride (but also sometimes anger and resentment) were written by authors such as Yeats, Gregory, Synge and others whose origins were in the Protestant Anglo-Irish landowning or business classes, and the fact that they were written in English, as opposed to Gaelic, even if they are also marked by the Gaelic tradition, is symptomatic of their being, quintessentially, works of postcolonial hybridity. A nationalist hard line might characterize such poems and plays as an appropriation of the native culture, just as colonizing in their intent as the historical conquest and appropriation of the land of Ireland. The opposite, softer view might see this literature and drama as a translation of sorts without which the rapidly disappearing native culture would remain completely inaccessible to the modern world. Why would Yeats (and other Anglo-Irish artists, antiquarians, intellectuals, and political activists) seek to recuperate ancient Gaelic myth and Irish folklore, anyway? The short answer is, to provide the exemplars and images of selfless pride, dignity, spirituality, and heroism that Irish people in the present might live up to, to stamp the malleable and receptive condition of contemporary Ireland with this ancient impress. Yeats remembered it this way: “I began to plot and scheme how one might seal with the right image the soft wax before it began to harden.”²⁸

James Joyce, among others, did not share what he saw as Yeats and company’s willful romanticism, or their cultivation of the images of Irish myth—what Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, much preferring to see contemporary Ireland through the lenses of realism and irony, calls “the broken lights of Irish myth... upon which no individual mind had ever drawn out a line of beauty.”²⁹ Yet Joyce “often recited Yeats’s poems from memory” and for all of his parodying Yeats and disparaging the literary revival (in “The Holy Office” and then later in *Ulysses* and elsewhere) and his occasional attacks on Yeats, he was compelled to admire *The Wind Among the Reeds* as “poetry of the highest order.”³⁰ One can see a warmer compliment in the traces of early Yeats in the style of Joyce’s own poems, and a more heartfelt one in that Joyce sang Yeats’s “Down by the Salley Gardens” at his first public performance; the song is a touching melancholy ballad about love and life gone tragically awry, a ballad that actually originated in the folk culture, as Yeats himself noted. Joyce also copied out the text of this poem, “which he had evidently sung for her,” to send on a postcard to the young woman he had just met, Nora Barnacle, who was to be his life-long partner.³¹ And in the first chapter of *Ulysses*, Joyce’s autobiographical character Stephen Dedalus recalls singing another early Yeats poem, “Who Goes With

Poems by W. B. Yeats

The Stolen Child¹

Where dips the rocky highland
Of Sleuth Wood² in the lake,
There lies a leafy island
Where flapping herons wake
5 The drowsy water-rats;
There we've hid our faery vats,
Full of berries
And of reddest stolen cherries.
Come away, O human child!
10 *To the waters and the wild*
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Where the wave of moonlight glosses
The dim grey sands with light,
15 Far off by furthest Rosses
We foot it all the night,
Weaving olden dances,
Mingling hands and mingling glances
Till the moon has taken flight;
20 To and fro we leap
And chase the frothy bubbles,
While the world is full of troubles
And is anxious in its sleep.
Come away, O human child!
25 *To the waters and the wild*
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Where the wandering water gushes
From the hills above Glen-Car,
30 In pools among the rushes
That scarce could bathe a star,
We seek for slumbering trout
And whispering in their ears
Give them unquiet dreams;
35 Leaning softly out
From ferns that drop their tears
Over the young streams.
Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
40 *With a faery, hand in hand,*
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.

Away with us he's going,
The solemn-eyed:
He'll hear no more the lowing
45 Of the calves on the warm hillside
Or the kettle on the hob
Sing peace into his breast,
Or see the brown mice bob
Round and round the oatmeal-chest.
50 *For he comes, the human child,*
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
From a world more full of weeping than he can understand.

1886, 1889

1. I.e., a child stolen by fairies to be their companion, as in Irish folklore.
2. This and other places mentioned in the poem

are in County Sligo, in the west of Ireland, where Yeats spent much of his childhood.

The Rose of the World¹

Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?
For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,
Mournful that no new wonder may betide,
Troy² passed away in one high funeral gleam,
5 And Usna's children died.³

We and the labouring world are passing by:
Amid men's souls, that waver and give place
Like the pale waters in their wintry race,
Under the passing stars, foam of the sky,
10 Lives on this lonely face.

Bow down, archangels, in your dim abode:
Before you were, or any hearts to beat,
Weary and kind one lingered by His seat;
He made the world to be a grassy road
15 Before her wandering feet.

1892, 1895

1. Originally titled "An Old Song Resung," with Yeats's footnote: "This is an attempt to reconstruct an old song from three lines imperfectly remembered by an old peasant woman in the village of Ballysodare, Sligo, who often sings them to herself." "Salley": a variant of *sallow*, a species of willow tree.

1. The Platonic idea of eternal beauty. "I notice upon reading these poems for the first time for several years that the quality symbolized as The Rose differs from the Intellectual Beauty of Shelley and of Spenser in that I have imagined it as suffering with man and not as something pursued and seen

from afar" [Yeats, in 1925]. Yeats wrote this poem to Maud Gonne.

2. Ancient city destroyed by the Greeks, according to legend, after the abduction of the beautiful Helen.

3. In Old Irish legend the Ulster warrior Naoise, son of Usna or Usnach (pronounced *Úskna*) carried off the beautiful Deirdre, whom King Conchubar of Ulster had intended to marry, and with his two brothers took her to Scotland. Eventually Conchubar lured the four of them back to Ireland and killed the three brothers.

No Second Troy

Why should I blame her¹ that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
5 Had they but courage equal to desire?
What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire,
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
10 Being high and solitary and most stern?
Why, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?²

Dec. 1908

1910

1. Maud Gonne, whose revolutionary activities are at issue in the poem.

2. Helen of Troy was the legendary cause of the Trojan War and thus of Troy's destruction.