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Conceptualizing Transnational Space and Identity: W.B.Yeats, Ireland and Beyond

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Abstract:

Yeats remains a productive site, a vehicle by which we can approach multiple complex issues: Irish ethnic recognition and formation during 20th century and the transnational appropriation of art and politics. Most of Yeats criticisms projects that his poetic development was prompted by Irish nationalism, but the nature and the extent of Yeats's nationalism are still frequently overlooked or misunderstood in discussions of his work. Very often in criticisms of Yeats's poetry, both England and Ireland are treated as mythological twin rather than political adversary. My paper accurately investigates Yeats's work and his contemporaries in terms of how political clash between two nations catalyzes artistic ambition at the critical turning point in modern history.

Keywords: Transnationalism, Nationalism, Mythology.

Goethe said Eckermann:

“When a poet wants to be politically effective he has to abandon himself to a party, and when he does this he is lost as a poet...as a human being and citizen, the poet will love his country, but the country of his poetic powers and poetic activity...is tied to no special province...” (Eckermann)

Yeats too believed that practical politics is not a space of the poet. An artist whose opinion is governed by a master is always insincere to his work. Thus Yeats remains a productive site, a vehicle by which we can approach multiple complex issues: Irish ethnic recognition and formation during 20th century and the transnational appropriation of art and politics. Most of Yeats criticisms projects that his poetic development was prompted by Irish nationalism, but the nature and the extent of Yeats's nationalism are still frequently overlooked or misunderstood in discussions of his work. Very often in criticisms of Yeats's poetry, both England and Ireland are treated as mythological twin rather than political adversary. What is needed is an accurate investigation of Yeats's work and his contemporaries in terms of how political clash between two nations catalyzes artistic ambition at the critical turning point in modern history. During 1980's, Yeats proclaimed that 'there is no great literature without nationality, no great nationality with literature'. There is no doubt that he saw literature as having a crucial role in revitalizing Irish national pride and creating a unified culture. Edward Said in his essay 'Yeats and Decolonization' (W.B.Yeats, Letters to the New Island) places Yeats early poetry in a phase of

anti-imperialist resistance which preceded the liberationist movements of the mid-twentieth century. In Said's idea, Yeats belongs to 'the great nationalist artists of decolonization and revolutionary nationalism, like Tagore, Senghor, Neruda, Vallejo, Cesaire, Faiz, Darwish'. (Said)

Before we proceed to any discussion of this controversial and baffling subject, however, we have to establish the fact that Yeats's specific views were never intended to be neither absolute nor his generalizations to be true out of their context. In his early youth his father taught him that:

A poet should feel quite free to say in the morning that he believes in marriage and in the evening that he now no longer believes in it; in the morning that he believes in God and in the evening that he does not believe in God, the important thing being not that he keep his mental consistency but that he preserve the integrity of his soul... (Ellmann)

The young Yeats accepted his father's advice readily, for we find him frequently stressing the dualism of his beliefs and public utterances in the nineties: "You will be angry with me for all these dreadful sentiments. I may think the other way tomorrow". (Wade) The poet was soon to be introduced with the idea of contraries in the works of William Blake and Jacob Boehme and to deal with their occurrence in his notes to the three-volume edition of Blake, which he and Edwin Ellis produced in 1893.

Yeats's antinomian philosophy has been profusely explored in relation to his poetic imagination, but little has been done to relate it seriously to his politics. His ever changing views, his paradoxical utterances, and his self-contradictions cannot be ignored in any appraisal of his social and political beliefs. To understand the contours of Yeats's politics, it is necessary to grasp the indissoluble relationship between his Golden Dawn training and what might be called the political stance. The organization as well as the occult doctrines of the order provides a structural framework for his political and social faith. His interest in twin aspects of reality and his understanding of history & politics can only be explained with reference to the idea of eternal recurrence, and an inclusive vision based on the tension between opposites:

Why must I think the victorious cause the better? Why should Mommsen think the less of Cicero because Caesar beat him? I am satisfied, the Platonic year in my head, to find but drama. I prefer that the defeated cause should be more vividly described than which the advertisement of victory has. (W.B. Yeats, *Wheels and Butterflies*)

The creatively opposing quality that is lacking in a man's or nation's personality is what he calls Anima Hominis, 'the opposing virtues'. A nation is in an incessant battle against its fate trying to regain its lost unity within its divided self- a unity which can only be attained by seeking everything that is different from what is actually is in daily life. Yeats feels that it is his unpopular duty to challenge his country to find the opposing virtues, and to sting the countrymen to complete themselves by emphasizing the antiselves. The nationalist poet, he believes should not fall a prey to the preconceived ideas. He must be someone who can be the maker of a nation

but not a product of it. True to his Cabbalist training, Yeats declares that the artist “is known from other men by all he handles like himself and yet by the unlikeness to himself, of all that comes before him in pure contemplation”. (W.B.Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*) The great artists can never accept the dominant discourse for they are opposite to their time:

Whenever young men gather together all over Ireland they are discussing such questions as the virtues of Irish people, how much they are slandered by England, and so on. Scotland in the eighteenth century go into an attitude of the same kind, which resulted in a condition of gloom. A poet came to destroy that attitude of mind. Instead of celebrating piety and like things he celebrated drink, and lust, and everything men thought wicked, and out of that celebration of iniquity he created a celebration of life itself... (Driscoll)

Each era moulds itself from its opposite, and the artist, being more receptive of the social transformations than his fellow countrymen, can recreate his own nation by helping it find its true mask:

...I have found something hard and cold, some articulation of the image, which is the opposite of all that I am in my daily life, and all that my country is; yet man or nation can no more make this Mask or Image than the seed can be made by the soil into which it is cast. (W.B.Yeats, *Autobiographies: Reveries Over Childhood and Youth and The Trembling of the Vail*)

This form of the Mask or Image comes from life and is destined, the artist, however, is concerned with the form that is chosen for it is through his art that he is to impress upon the imagination of his people a vision of the new dispensation. The Artist’s ‘business is not reformation but revelation’ and it is in this sense that Yeats sees his role as a nationalist in Ireland.

“The last sun of century set amidst the blood-red clouds of the west and the whirlwind of hatred/The naked passions of the self-love of nations, in its drunken delirium of greed...” (Tagore)

To Yeats Tagore represented the wisdom and the dignity of the East and justified the faith that he has placed in the strength and vitality of Asian Philosophy. One thing that Yeats liked about Tagore’s poetry was that it reflected an unbroken civilization where the artist is in harmony with his culture and where his work represented the true spirit of his country, a spirit that found its outlet in the voice of its poets. In other words the *Gitanjali* seemed to represent to him a civilization where folk art and poetry were one. ‘A whole people a whole civilization’, Yeats remarked, “immeasurably strange to us, seems to have been taken up into his imagination; and yet we are not moved because of its strangeness, but because we have met our image...our voice in a dream”. (Hurwitz) The idea of a unified folk culture, a unity of life had long appealed to the Irish poet. Even as a young man he has dreamed of “bringing together the two halves of Ireland so as to build a ‘unity of life’ that would produce a great literature”. (Pinto) He was particularly

sensitive to Gitanjali which seemed to possess a 'unity of life' to a very high degree. He remarked on this quality at length in his Introduction:

These lyrics...display in their thought a world of dream I have dreamed all of my life long. The work of a supreme culture, they yet appear as much the growth of the common soil as the grass and the rushes. A tradition, where poetry and religion are the same thing, has passed through the centuries, gathering from the learned and unlearned metaphor and emotion, and carried back again to the multitude the thought of the scholar and of the noble. If the civilization of Bengal remain unbroken, if the common mind which- as one divides- runs through all, is not, as with us, broken into a dozen minds that know nothing of each other, something even of what is most subtle in these verses will have come, in a few generations, to the beggar on the roads. (W.B.Yeats, Introduction)

Yeats tells us in *The Words Upon the Window Pane*, to free the Irish imagination from practical politics, from political enmity and so to turn it into imaginative nationalism, to Gaelic, to the ancient stories and to lyrical poetry and drama. He thinks the artist makes love for his country more fruitful in his mind making it a part of his daily life. He tries to lay down an intimate connection between his personal experience, the experience of country and the larger pattern of history:

To the greater poets everything they see has its relation to the national life, and through that to the national life, and through that to the universal and the divine life: nothing is ...isolated ...there is unity everywhere; everything fulfills a purpose that is not its own ...But this universalism, this seeing of unity everywhere, you can only attain through what is near you, your nation, or, if you be no traveler, your village and the cobwebs on your wall. You can no more have the greatest poetry without a nation than religion without symbols. One can only reach out to the universe with a gloved hand—that glove is one's nation, the only thing one knows even a little of. (Yeats)

Orthodox nationalism, for him, is not a spontaneous self-expression of man as social being, but rather a political and commercial union of a group of people formed to encourage their substantial benefits. It is framed on the coordinated self-interest and not on selflessness being detached from humanity and the spiritual nature of man. When the personal avocation becomes all in all of political and economic organization, the moral is sacrificed, the surviving alliance of society disintegrates and the relationships become utilitarian.

The fabricated aspect of nationalism is also seen as a weakness in its ideology, which makes it vulnerable to compensating into more natural social aspects of clan, tribe and race, or language and religious groups. In conceiving its overarching ideologies often places the dominant group at the Centre, pushing the minority population to the periphery. Thus, instead of a fraternity, it creates a hierarchy and hegemony within its structure, and exposed the fracture between its rhetoric and reality.

Yeats's relationship with the land is more complex and equivocal than labeled by Edward Said. Some critics say that his yearning for landscape of his youth and his preoccupation with childhood in such poems as 'The Stolen Child' are instance of infantile regression than progressive nationalism.' (Kiberd)

The similar disagreements are with the way Yeats treat his own people. There are many early poems, such as 'The Meditation of the Old Fisherman', in which Yeats asserts the vigor of the Irish peasantry. The English stereotype of the Irish peasant as ignorant and savage is replaced with a more dignified and appalling image. Yeats endeavor to restore the Irish peasantry as a source of wisdom and value is so exclusive and idealistic that it cannot promote the cause of national unity.

In the early writings prior to the publication of *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* in 1910, Yeats succeeds in creating a version of Irish life untouched by contemporary political realities. The more prosaic features of modern Irish democracy are singularly lacking in the nation that Yeats conceives in 1890's. That adaptation of Irish life is also one that effectively precedes sectarian conflicts. What the peasant appears to practice is not Catholicism but a form of occult spirituality close to Yeats's own. The reply that Yeats makes to the land and its people cannot be considered as a revolutionary act of decolonization, since the amount of Anglo-Irish relations on which it is based is both uncertain and ambiguous. Such a response issues from the insecurity and marginalization of the Protestant ascendancy class in the face of growing Catholic nationalist aspiration, and not simply from some shared or unified resistance to English colonial power.

'To Ireland in the Coming Times' (1892) is perhaps the most revealing statement of Yeats's uncertain nationalist sentiments. Throughout the poem Yeats attempts to reconcile his aims as a poet writing within specifically Irish literary tradition with his late romantic commitment to the ideal of eternal beauty. Yeats balancing act is enabled with the help of symbolism of the rose, which possess both Irish political and universal association of love and beauty. Accordingly the flower suggests both the personification of Ireland as dark, suffering rose, especially as it appears in James Clarence Mangan's poem 'Dark Rosaleen', and the ideal of beauty as depicted from the time of Dante and Spenser to that of Blake and Shelley. Yeats conveniently bypasses the sectarian conflicts of his own time by imagining the worship of the rose of beauty as Druidic and pagan, preceding Christianity, and he further attempts to reconcile the nationalist and Universalist ideals by intimating that the pursuit of eternal beauty was what prompted Irish art in the first place. The problematic nature of totalizing political applicability is particularly apparent in the postcolonial approach to Ireland's history, where art becomes a means of resistance only because of narrow interpretation. Ireland is a country whose literary representations of history have had an indelible if troubled influence on its developing cultural consciousness.

Art breaks open a dimension inaccessible to other experience, a dimension in which human beings, nature, and things no longer stand under the law of the established reality principle. Subjects and objects encounter the appearance of that autonomy which is denied them

in their society. The encounter with the truth of art happens in the estranging language and images which make perceptible, visible, and audible that which is no longer, or not yet, perceived, said, and heard in everyday life. (Marcuse)

—Herbert Marcuse

[...] I too have tried to be modem.

—W. B. Yeats (W.B.Yeats, The Collected Works in Verse and Prose)

Theosophy provided Yeats with a foundation for influence: the inner circle. Through theosophy's example, Yeats created his own inner circle of literary influence, resulting in a unique theatrical style authorized by global traditions. Rather than create a national literature based exclusively upon rebellion against British rule and contemporary politics, Yeats discovers a distinct Celtic essence which cannot be discredited by Ireland's critics. In creating Ireland as a distinct and authentic culture in its own right, Yeats connects the country and people with a global tradition; however, this tradition and population go mostly unnamed and unidentified since it is discovered through the comparative study of vastly different traditions. The underlying assumption that all experience and beliefs are essentially the same is the unchallenged assumption through which Yeats bases his claims to authority.

Yeats incessant struggle to question and negate the confined structure of nation and finding a way to visualize the macrocosm within the microcosm and vice versa, projects him as a proto-transnationalist. For him the history of nationalism is a political movement in the outer material domain and it is now established that different societies with diverse histories can have different nationalisms. It is one that rightly rebuffs the imagery of England as a kind of benefactor who has always been more than helping in letting Ireland have an imagination, a faculty they suppose they lack. So Yeats reclaimed his freedom to imagine that has been mortgaged to England. He imagined beyond borders and boundaries drawing his resource from Indian mythology, believing in the idea of *vasudhaivakutumbakam* and living magnanimously considering the entire world as a single family. This worldview is not just about peace & harmony among the nations but about the truth that somehow the whole world has to live together like a family.

Yeats pioneers as a transnational thinker as for him the nation is nothing but a vast space of enclosure, reminding of Jeremy Bentham's dream prison 'panopticon'. Without doubt he wanted to get rid of this auto regulating normalizing society where schools, colleges, universities resemble the prison and the prison resembles them all. It places the hidebound, culturalist model demand for a model, a tradition into question. The world is a theatre where everyone is oscillating between the finitude of being in specific times and places, and the infinitude of being's becoming. So the world being the zone of occult instability, the theatre of metamorphoses, beyond the occlusion of identity is the domain of transnation. Bill Aschroft defines transnation as not simply universal, not simply between or across nations, but as something which has its own historical and cultural currents, its range of orientations. For Yeats

transnation is the embodiment of transformation: the insertion of the state as the focus of power, the erasure of simple binaries of power and the circulation of the struggle between the global and the local. Most importantly migration outside the state begins within the nation. It is about the dynamic patterns of interaction accounting for the nature of global flows, the transformation of the global by the local and the circulation of the local in the global. The transnation is the in-between space, which has no definitive citizen, state or community, but is everywhere. (Ashcroft)

What might be said about Yeats with more confidence is that he endeavored to create a number of powerful and enduring myths of Irishness that might shape a new transnational consciousness. His early cultural nationalism may work to romanticize Irish identity though his late verses engages in a regressive nationalist project experiencing an increasing sense of disconnection from bourgeois Ireland . His sense of desire for transcendence in terms of an imagined place , compelled with an awareness of political realities of notions of place as divisive and potentially violent, presented a model for new Ireland.

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