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LOUIS MACNEICE

THE POETRY OF W. B. YEATS

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THE POETRY OF

W. B. YEATS

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TO E. R. DODDS
AN IRISHMAN, A POET, AND A SCHOLAR,
WHO KNOWS MORE ABOUT IT ALL
THAN I DO

And Pan did after Syrinx speed
Not as a nymph, but for a reed.

MARVELL

PREFACE

THERE is not, to my knowledge—nor do I think there can be—any satisfactory definition of the relationship of poetry to life. I am convinced however, that there is such a relationship and that it is of primary importance; I am also convinced that a poem is a thing in itself, a self-contained organism, a ‘creation’—I might almost say, saving the presence of philosophers, an absolute. When Dr Johnson demanded that the products of ‘Wit’ should be *both natural and new*, he was recognizing these two characteristics of a poem, that it corresponds in some indefinable way to life and that it is at the same time an individual, a brand-new *thing*. The literary critic, being unable to assess thinghood, inevitably concerns himself with poetry as correspondence. Such criticism can be valuable but it never rises above what Aristotle called “bastard reasoning.”

When we talk about the value of anything, we tend to suppose a gulf between this abstracted value and the thing which is valuable. This seems to me wrong. When a rose hits me in the senses, it is the rose that hits me and not some value separable from the rose. Idealist philosophers in talking about their Absolutes and Universals have made them vulnerable by hypostatizing them, whereas the only invulnerable Universal is one that is incarnate. We still tend to think that, because a thing is in time, its value can only be explained by an abstraction from the thing of some supposedly timeless qualities; this is to explain the thing away. That a rose withers is no disproof of the rose, which remains an absolute, its value inseparable from its existence (for existence is still existence, whether the tense is past or future).

A poem (which, we must never forget, is a physical organism) is in the same category. For this reason all literary critics

are falsifiers in that they try to disintricate the value or essence of a poem from the poem itself; they peel away the onion. Thus in my book, *Modern Poetry*, I over-stressed the half-truth that poetry is *about* something, is communication. So it is, but it is also a separate self; in the same way a living animal is an individual although it is on the one hand conditioned by heredity and environment and the laws of nature in general and on the other hand has a function outside itself, is a link in a chain. In *Modern Poetry* I also denied that the poet is properly a mystic and argued that the poetic is a *normal* human activity. I still hold that the poet is a distinct species from the mystic, but I should like to correct the emphasis here, although I shall have occasion to repeat these points later. Mysticism, in the narrow sense, implies a specific experience which is foreign to most poets and most men, but on the other hand it represents an instinct which is a human *sine qua non*. Both the poet and the 'ordinary man' are mystics incidentally and there is a mystical sanction or motivation for all their activities which are not purely utilitarian (possibly, therefore, for *all* their activities, as it is doubtful whether any one does anything purely for utility).

Life—let alone art—cannot be assessed purely in terms of utility. Food, for example, is useful for life but what is life useful for? To both the question of pleasure and the question of value the utilitarian has no answer. The faith in the *value* of living is a mystical faith. The pleasure in bathing or dancing, in colour or shape, is a mystical experience. If non-utilitarian activity is abnormal, then all men are abnormal. It was because I did not think of men as essentially utilitarian that I maintained that poetry is a normal activity, that 'the poet is a specialist in something which every one practises.'

In writing about Yeats and his poetry I have inevitably concerned myself with 'facts'—with what Yeats was writing *about*, with the life and ideas from which his poetry came. These facts provide certain clues to his poetry but the poetry

cannot be summed up in them. I would repeat that a poem is about something but that a poem also *is*. The critic being impotent to convey this thinghood of a poem, no one need expect that critical discussion of poetic values can ever convey *the* value of a poem itself, for every poem is unique and its value inseparable from its existence. The background of a poem, its origin, its purpose, its ingredients, can be analysed and formulated, but the poem itself can only be experienced. All that the critic can do is lay stepping stones over the river—stones which are better forgotten once the reader has reached a position where he is in touch with the subject of criticism.

L.M.

September, 1940.

NOTE

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTORY

We impose on one another, and it is but lost
time to converse with you whose works are
only Analyticks.—BLAKE

I

IF I were making a general anthology of shorter English poems, I should want to include some sixty by W. B. Yeats. There is no other poet in the language from whom I should choose so many. This being so, I feel it would be merely academic for me to discuss at length whether Yeats was or was not a great poet or to spend much time trying to rank him. I am not interested in ranking poets and I am not even very much interested in greatness *per se*. The poets who interest me are the poets whom I like re-reading. I like re-reading Yeats more than I like re-reading most English poets. This is why I undertook to write a book about his poetry; I wished to find out why Yeats appealed to me so much and I hoped also to present Yeats sympathetically to others. Poetry nowadays appears to need defending. I would not attempt however to defend poetry itself; that poetry is good seems to me axiomatic; if you do not accept this axiom, we have no common ground for argument. In a world, however, where the vast bulk of criticism is destructive, I feel that to express and, if possible, to explain one's admiration for a particular poet is something worth doing.

It is perhaps especially worth doing at this moment when external circumstances are making such a strong assault on our sense of values. I had only written a little of this book when Germany invaded Poland. On that day I was in Gal-

way. As soon as I heard on the wireless of the outbreak of war, Galway became unreal. And Yeats and his poetry became unreal also.

This was not merely because Galway and Yeats belong in a sense to a past order of things. The unreality which now overtook them was also overtaking, in my mind modern London, modernist art, and Left Wing politics. If the war made nonsense of Yeats's poetry and of all works that are called 'escapist', it also made nonsense of the poetry that professes to be 'realist'. My friends had been writing for years about guns and frontiers and factories, about the 'facts' of psychology, politics, science, economics, but the fact of war made their writing seem as remote as the pleasure dome in Xanadu. For war spares neither the poetry of Xanadu nor the poetry of pylons. I gradually inferred, as I recovered from the shock of war, that both these kinds of poetry stand or fall together. War does not prove that one is better or worse than the other; it attempts to disprove both. But poetry must not be disproved. If war is the test of reality, then all poetry is unreal; but in that case unreality is a virtue. If, on the other hand, war is a great enemy of reality, although an incontestable fact, then reality is something which is not exactly commensurable with facts.

Yeats all his life was a professed enemy of facts, and that made my generation suspicious of him. It was a generation that had rediscovered the importance of subject matter: a poem must be *about* something. Further, a poem must be about something *real*, and 'real' was often taken to mean contemporary. By these standards much of Yeats's poetry was vicious. In his later books, however, there was enough contemporary subject matter to permit of the discovery that Yeats had become a 'realist'.

Most arguments nowadays about realism rest upon unwarranted over-simplification. The champions of realism are suffering from a reaction against Pure Form, against Art

for Art's Sake. It was quite right that a poet like W. H. Auden should reassert that a poem must be about something. It was right to go further and maintain that great poetry cannot be made out of subject matter which is essentially trivial. But it was a mistake to take subject matter, as some of the 'realists' seemed to, as the sole, or even the chief, criterion of poetry. It was a mistake to fancy that criticism could ever devise a sliding scale which would assess the value of a poem by simple reference to the objective importance of its subject matter. The believers in Art for Art's Sake had gone too far in asserting that poetry can be judged without any reference to life. But the realists went too far in the other direction. A poem does not exist in a vacuum, but a poem at the same time is a unity, a creation. Criticism based on the assumption that a poem is a mere *translation* of facts outside itself is vicious criticism. The facts outside a poem, the facts which occasion a poem, are no longer the same facts when they have been fused into a poem. Or, looking at it in another way, one can say that the facts which occasion a poem are far too complex to be fully ascertainable by the critic. No poet writes a poem merely about a house; any poem he writes about a house is also a poem about himself, and so about humanity and life in general. The realist critic tends to diagnose subject matter crudely and naïvely. Was Pindar really only writing about foot-races and boxing matches? Was Rilke really only writing about a panther in the Jardin des Plantes? Was Wordsworth really only writing about villagers or celandines?

This book will be largely taken up with a discussion of Yeats's subject matter during various periods of his life. I shall try to show what were Yeats's dominating ideas, his prevalent likes and dislikes, at different periods. Unlike the believers in Art for Art's Sake, I consider that such a study will make his poetry more intelligible and more sympathetic. I do not, however, think for a moment that knowledge of the subject matter will provide a key to any one poem *qua* poem,

and, while I admit that in Yeats's case, as in the case of many other poets, an improvement in his poetry seems related to an extension of his subject matter, I would make the proviso that this relationship cannot be rigidly formulated; and, further, that there are few poems in the world which can be taken exactly at their face value. Few poems are exactly what they appear to be; you cannot say "This is a love poem" or "This is a nature poem" or "This is a piece of satire" and leave it at that. Again, if the critic, as critics must, should abstract various aspects of poetry and discuss it say under the headings of matter and form, or again should subdivide form into such categories as rhythm, diction, imagery, it must always be remembered that these are only convenient abstractions from an indissolubly blended whole. It is an outrage to a poem to think of it as such-and-such matter *plus* such-and-such form, or even as matter *put into* form. Form must not be thought of as a series of rigid moulds. All matter is to some extent *informed* to start with; and the very selection of matter is a formalistic activity. On the other hand artistic form is more than a mere method or convenience or discipline or, of course, *décor*. Just as one cannot, by the furthest analysis, completely deformalize matter, so one cannot completely desubstantialize form. Musical form, for example, is in a sense a *thing*. Artists use form not merely to express some alien matter but because form itself is a spiritual principle which calls for expression in matter. The relationship between form and matter is like a marriage; matter must find itself in form and form must find itself in matter.

The 'realists', to excuse their acceptance of Yeats, pointed to a poem like *Easter 1916*, and argued that this is a good poem because it is about an important event in contemporary history. Such events, we can agree, made a welcome entrance into Yeats's later poetry. Such subject matter confers an advantage both on the poet and the reader; on the poet because a contemporary event such as the Easter Rising in

Dublin is likely to produce in him that emotional tension which can do half the poet's work for him; on the reader because, being himself acquainted with and probably moved by that event, he is already halfway to an understanding of the poet's reactions to it. We cannot, however, infer from this that a poem about such an event is necessarily a better poem or a more important or even a more realistic poem than a poem about something far less contemporary or far more obscure or private. We can say at the most that many poets—including, I think, Yeats—are more likely to write well, that is with clarity, strength, and emotional honesty, when they are writing about something which has moved them *and others* in their own time than when they are writing about something which belongs more exclusively to their own private mythology. We can say also that most readers are more likely to react poetically to material which they know themselves than to material which they have to take on trust from the poet. And the poet in turn, who tends to adjust his sights by the presumed knowledge of an imaginary reader, is more likely to shoot truly when he knows that there are many real readers who have knowledge of the matter which he is treating.

Realists of a narrower school sometimes take realism to imply photographic verisimilitude or scientific objectivity. On their criterion *Easter 1916* is not a realistic work, or at any rate it is much less realistic than say *The Plough and the Stars* by Sean O'Casey. And on the average it will be found, on their criterion, that poetry is less realistic than drama and drama less realistic than the novel. Does this mean that poetry is less successful than these other forms in attaining its object? Or does it mean that it has a different object?

I would say that poetry *has* a different object and that it is certainly further from realism than the prose drama or the novel, if realism is used in the constricted sense mentioned above. I would suggest however that the poet's business is

realism, if it is admitted that the reality which he is trying to represent is further removed than the novelist's is from the reality of the scientist or of the photographer or of any one who is engaged in recording facts which do not include himself and are not modified by his own emotional reaction to them. I do not think we can say that the poet's reality is therefore less real than the scientist's—unless we are prepared to say that hunger is less real than bread. The poet's reality is not less real; it is merely different. Can we see if we can define it a little further?

Poetry, I think, cannot be assessed solely in terms of itself; it must be referred back to life. But to what life? The great difference, I would say, between the scientist and the artist is that life for the scientist means something outside himself, neither affecting him nor affected by him, whereas life for the poet is essentially *his* life. However objective a poet's method may appear to be (for it is in no way unpoetic to be scientifically knowledgeable or to be an exact recorder), the poet, even in selecting the material, which he may afterwards record with a superficially 'scientific frugidity', is governed by personal motives. Mr T. S. Eliot in our own day has repeatedly preached 'impersonality' as a virtue of poets. But by impersonality he means something different from the impersonality of the scientist. Mr Eliot in his own poetry avoids saying 'I' but he would admit that the poet's world is a world coloured by himself, complicated by his own emotions and re-arranged on a principle which is anathema to the scientist. When Mr Eliot attacks 'personality' in poetry, he is really attacking the kind of anarchist individualism which characterized the Romantic Revival. Sophocles for example was not impersonal in the sense that he wrote without emotion or presented a world uncoloured by emotion; he was impersonal in that he wrote within the conventions of a tradition and an outlook shared by most of his public. In this narrowed sense of the word, the personal poet is a law to

himself, judging the world entirely by reference to his own emotions. Whereas the impersonal poet, in the narrow sense, though he need not be unemotional or inhuman, does not impose his emotions upon the world but rather (though this is a clumsy and loose distinction) accepts them *from* it.

I prefer to use the word 'personal' in the wider sense and to call any writing personal which is conditioned by the writer's own emotions—whether these emotions are peculiar to himself or sanctioned by a community or a tradition and whether the writer himself is conscious or unconscious of the effect that his emotions have upon his presentation of facts. In case it should be thought that I am subscribing to a Wordsworthian doctrine of poetry, I must explain that when I say that poetry is a personal activity because it is conditioned by the emotions of the poet, I am not using emotion in the narrow Romantic sense of intense emotion, nor do I wish to abstract emotion from the poet's self in opposition to intellect. The poetic self—like any human self—is ipso facto emotional and intellectual at the same time. Emotion can be subordinated to intellect, or vice versa, but the two elements are always present. Every poet does two things, though he may be more conscious of one than of the other and though his success may be due more to one than to the other. He reacts emotionally (though such emotion may be strong or weak, conscious or unconscious) to his subject matter and he selects and arranges that subject matter—consciously or unconsciously—in order to square it with some intellectual system of his own. But even this distinction is too crude, for these two moments of the poetic activity are inseparable like the positive and negative elements in electricity. Even before the artist has started his art-work proper he is not only reacting emotionally to his subject but he is also automatically systematizing it. I agree with Croce that the artist is functioning artistically from the very first moment he thinks or perceives his subject; I do not however agree that his sub-