

Yeats, the man of letters

*** Raymond W. Kearney**

* Ph.D. in Literature, Pennsylvania University. United States.

– Associate Professor, English Department. King Faisal University.

Abstract

Yeats thought that the life of the poet, his philosophy, and his work should be seen as a whole. This was his approach to other poets and this was the way he wished to be seen himself. Yeats's output is very large apart from his poetry, and since he wrote in almost every genre, and since he needed ideas to write poetry, he is best seen as a man of letters in the European tradition rather than as a lyric poet only.

Yeats was concerned with nationalism and literature, the relationship of life to art, and the spirit world. He also had an overriding desire to create a unity of these elements, and to create a hierarchy of values. So, long before the system he incorporated in **A Vision** Yeats was trying to systematize his thought. He tried - to use his own phrase - to hammer his thoughts into unity. He wrote, "I had three interests: interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality. None of these seemed to have anything to do with the other Now all three are a discrete expression of a single conviction."

He wanted to achieve a unity, but not just for himself, but for Ireland also. He wanted nationalism, literature, and philosophy to make a more abundant existence possible for himself and his country. There is a persistent identification of himself with Ireland. He wanted to relate creative life to the national life. He thought, just as James Joyce did, that if he expressed himself, he would express the race too.

Throughout his long life Yeats wrote on a diversity of subjects and in almost every genre. The variety of his writing is impressive: a part from the poetry and the plays, he wrote short stories and a novel, he edited the poetry of William Blake and Edmund Spenser, as well as that of some of his contemporaries. He compiled **The Oxford Book of Modern Verse**. He collected and edited folktales and Irish stories. He wrote prefaces and introductions. He was an indefatigable essay writer and critic. The extent of his efforts as a critic and essayist is becoming increasingly evident as more of the previously unpublished material is examined and as more of his reviews and essays scattered in various journals are published. The subject matter of these essays, and the previously published ones, is diverse. They range from his polemics defending Synge and the Abbey Theatre, to Irish literary propaganda, to essays on the occult and the Orient, while his published Senate speeches deal with practical problems such as the design of the new Irish coinage and controversial ones such as the debate on divorce.

The extent of Yeats's prose writing is thus very great. It includes **Autobiographies, Explorations, Mythologies, and A Vision** together with **Essays and Introductions** (1968 edition), which collects two books previously published separately "Ideas of Good and Evil" and "The Cutting of an Agate" and a collection of essays and introductions, "Later Essays and Introductions" (Yeats, 1968). They span almost his entire writing career. The first of the essays in "Ideas of Good and Evil" is dated 1895, when Yeats was thirty years old, the last essay in "Later Essays" was published in 1937, two years before his death ⁽¹⁾ "Ideas of Good and Evil" is concerned mostly with poetry and poets. "The Cutting of an Agate" is concerned chiefly with the theatre and politics. "Later Essays" reflects Yeats's interest in the East, but also contains "A General Introduction for My Work," in which Yeats summarizes what he had tried to achieve, and which is written in prose that moves as swiftly and directly as his later poetry. This introduction has not been used, since a complete edition has never been produced. However, there are editions of **Autobiographies, Explorations, A Vision, and Mythologies**, Curtis B. Bradford in his **Yeats at Work** writes that there are unpublished journals too of great interest (Bradford, 1965:306).

So Yeats wrote an enormous volume of prose throughout his life. I think that this prose was very important to Yeats, and ought to be important to anyone who wishes to get a complete understanding of him. This prose has not received the attention it deserves. Critics dispute how necessary the "System" in **A Vision** is for an understanding of the poetry; others, quite rightly, quote extensively from his other prose works to elucidate the poetry. But of the criticism on Yeats the greatest amount has been written on the poetry, much less on the plays, and very little on the very large amount of prose. However the prose works should receive the same sort of analysis that the poetry has received, because Yeats thought that the poet's life, ideas, and poetry should be seen together. He wrote in "Gitanjali" in "Later Essays": "A few days ago I said to a distinguished Bengali doctor of medicine, 'I know no German, yet if a translation of a German poet moved me, I would go to the British Museum and find books in English that would tell me something of his life and the history of his

thought." (Yeats, 1968:387). It is note worthy that he would not look for books on the poetry, but on the life and the history of the thought. Similarly, Yeats very seldom discusses his own poetry in his essays. But, he does discuss his poetic principles and his ideas, and in the same fashion it is usually the philosophy and ideas of a poet that he discusses and wishes to evaluate when considering a poet's work. Yeats frequently quotes Goethe as saying, "A poet needs all philosophy, but he must keep it out of his work". But Yeats adds though "that is not always necessary."² In the same way Yeats did not always keep philosophy out of his poetry, and he shared Goethe's belief in the necessity of philosophy for the poet. So, when he writes on Shelley, the poet he said influenced him the most, in "The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry" in "Ideas of Good and Evil", it is Shelley's ideas and philosophy that Yeats is most interested in (Yeats, 1968:154). Quite obviously he believed that an understanding of the history of a poet's thought was crucial for an appreciation of the poetry.

The principal concerns of Yeats in his prose are nationalism and literature, the relationship of life to art, and the spirit world. He was concerned too with the relative importance of these concerns, and he also had an overriding desire to create a unity from them. He wanted to create a hierarchy of values but he also wanted to unify his ideas.

Yeats did most of his systematization and elaboration of his ideas in his prose, before they appeared in his poetry, so it is necessary to understand his prose to appreciate his work as a whole. And his work needs to be seen as a whole because he was constantly trying to unify it. Because of this, Yeats is best seen as a man of letters rather than just a lyric poet. This is evident from the comprehensiveness of his interest and the diverse sources he went to for knowledge.

Yeats's prose, written over a long period of years, varies considerably in style, depending on the period in which it was written, the purpose for which it was written, and on its subject matter. "The Celtic Twilight" which contains the early dreamy short stories, with their mixture of Pre-Raphaelitism and Irish folklore, is very different in style from the conversational **Letters to the New Island**, and both are unlike the mixture of fact and memory of **Autobiographies**, which in turn is very different from the philosophical theorizing of **A Vision**. They are different facets of a complex and growing mind.

It is this diversity of styles and range of interests and their development throughout his long career that is one of the most remarkable aspects of Yeats's work. Wordsworth, with whom Yeats has many similarities, had a long career too, but his poetry dwindled and became more conservative, while Yeats became more intense and outspoken in both poetry and prose. Arnold, to whom Yeats owes a good number of his early critical views, and who was also a school inspector, had a moderately long career, but he became a social critic and abandoned poetry. Yeats, on the other hand, was able both to continue writing his poetry out of the "foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart," and become a public figure. (Yeats, 1968:65-95) I think the prose may even have made possible the long poetic development by clarifying

his ideas and theories. Bradford writing of the unpublished journals, states that "in it are to be found the seeds of much of the work that Yeats was to be doing during the next decade" (Yeats, 1956:336). It is probably not without significance either that in the actual writing of a poem that Yeats usually wrote the first draft in prose, writing out the ideas to be embodied in the poem.

However the development of Yeats's thought does not appear to have been easy. Probably not till the writing of **A Vision** did he arrive at a scheme that satisfied him. Nor does he seem to have done much to make it easier for himself. He approached the great works of literature as if he were the first to read them (Bradford, 1965:41) This would not make things easier, but it would make them more interesting. I believe that Yeats did so because it increased his sense of wonder and discovery. This view was the correct one for him, because in every stage of his life he showed growth because of his restless search. His attitude is the same as that recommended by Carl Gustav Jung in **The Integration of the Personality**: "We are in reality unable to borrow anything from outside, from the world, or from history. What is essential to us can only grow out of ourselves" (Hough, 1949:217). The comprehensiveness of his search and hence perhaps his enduring growth can be seen in a passage that is crucial for an understanding of Yeats.

One day when I was twenty-three or twenty-four this sentence seemed to form in my head, without my willing it, much as sentences form when we are half-asleep: "Hammer your thoughts into unity". For days I could think of nothing else, and for years I tested all I did by that sentence. I had three interests: interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality. None of these seemed to have anything to do with the other, but gradually my love of literature and my belief in nationality came together. Then for years I said to myself that these two had nothing to do with my form of philosophy, but that I had only to be sincere and to keep from constraining one by the other and they would become one interest. Now all three are, I think, one, or rather all three are a discrete expression of a single conviction. I think that each has behind it my whole character...(Jung, 1956:336).

Yeats's work achieves a unity, but it is only apparent if we read the prose works where he made his ideas explicit. He thought that the life of the poet, his philosophy, and his work should be seen as a whole. This was his approach to other poets and this was the way he wished to be seen himself. Since Yeats's total output is very large apart from his poetry, and since he wrote in every genre, and since he needed ideas to write poetry, he is best seen as a man of letters in the European tradition rather than as a lyric poet only.

Yeats wanted to achieve a unity, but not just for himself, but for Ireland also. He wanted nationalism, literature, and philosophy to make a more abundant life possible for himself and for his country, and increasingly his experience of life led him to the tragic wisdom that this meant accepting life with all its hardness and cruelty.

There is too a persistent identification of himself with Ireland. He thought that, if he expressed himself, he would express the race also. He wanted also to create the new Irish values and to form a new imaginative nationalism with the help of literature. It was fortunate for Yeats that he lived in a time of intense Irish nationalism. He did not put the writer above his time. He thought that for the poet to create two things were necessary: the man and the moment. In his own case he realized that he was more fortunate than his English fellow poets in the Rhymers' club.

Long before he wrote **A Vision**, in which he arrived at an organized system, Yeats was trying to work out a coherent system of values. He tried to use his own phrase to hammer his thoughts into unity. The harmony between the various parts of Yeats's work is more impressive than the contradictions which obscure that unity. In fact, the contradictions and equivocations exist because of the poet's attempt to arrive at a satisfactory ideal of a unified culture. Thus, he often described literature in terms more appropriate to religion or philosophy, and often put religion in literary terms. He equivocated in his use of such a word as "life", using it in conflicting senses. However, within such conflicts there is a persistent dedication. Yeats did not change much in his deepest thought, but he experienced growth throughout his life in his attempts to create an organic unity: to integrate literature, nationalism, and philosophy in a harmonious view of life. **A Vision** is his last effort to create that harmony. It is a system to include all time all countries and all individuals. In its attempt to unify it is ultimately mystical, since the mystical vision is a vision unity.

It was an almost impossible intellectual endeavour and there is in **A Vision** a certain ruthlessness and mechanicalness associated with the wheels and gyres and their inexorable movement, but by then Yeats had accepted the Dionysiac view of existence and was able to contemplate his system with tranquility. Nevertheless, he never forgot that it was an individual being on that wheel and some of his descriptive human portraits used as examples of the individual life as it enters and reenters the wheel of existence are presented with all the complexity of their individual psychology and heroism.

Yeats was mystic philosopher. He believed in the spirit world, in magic, in archetypal ideas, in the supernatural elements of Celtic folklore and mythology; all things which cannot be rationally proven. But he thought that the supernatural argument was the only argument which would never be decided, but which even so was the only argument worth taking sides in. He rejected the rationalism of the Victorians for the intuition of Blake and Shelley. His interest in the occult and the spirit world was a search for wholeness: without the supernatural he did not think that a man could be complete.

So he tried to create a new religion to replace his lost Christianity, in much the same way as William Blake had done. Obviously this was not a simple task but he found a unifying principle in the occult idea that Nature had a memory. He wrote in his essay "Magic" that "our memories are a part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself". Later in the same essay he writes (Yeats, 1962:263)

I cannot now think symbols less than the greatest of all powers whether they are used consciously by the masters of magic, or half unconsciously by their successors, the poet, the musician and the artist.. Whether their power has arisen out of themselves, or whether it has an arbitrary origin, matters little, for they act, as I believe, because the Great Memory associates them with certain events and moods and persons.(Yeats, 1968:28)

This is another of Yeats's major unifying principles. But this search for unity was not easy because Yeats did not accept a world view that excluded the unseen world of spirit and memory. This explains his joining Theosophical groups, his research into magic, and his rejection of a rational or mechanical interpretation of existence. But it is important to remember that he pursued these subjects throughout his life since later when he was a practical politician and man of affairs these mystical subjects informed all his thinking. In **Autobiographies** speaking of Shelley's poem about Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew, who seems to symbolize for Yeats the solitary man of wisdom seeking knowledge in occult sciences, Yeats writes:

Already in Dublin, I had been attracted to the Theosophists because they had affirmed the real existence of the Jew, or of his like, and, apart from whatever might have been imagined by Huxley, Tyndall, Carolus Duran and Bastien-Lepage, I saw nothing against his reality. Presently having heard that Madame Blavatsky had arrived from France, or from India, I thought it time to look the matter up. Certainly if wisdom existed anywhere in the world it must be in some lonely mind admitting no duty to us, communing with God only, conceding nothing from fear or favour. Have not all peoples, while bound together in a single mind and taste, believed that such men existed and paid them that honour, or paid it to their mere shadow, which they have refused to philanthropists and to men of learning?³

This passage establishes too one aspect of Yeats's attitude towards knowledge, he prefers wisdom to learning. He does not define these very well, but wisdom includes being versed in mystical sciences.

The names Huxley, Tyndall, Carolus Duran, and Bastien-Lepage stand for the opposite of this wisdom. Their names are a refrain in **Autobiographies** for everything that spells utility, science, and lack of imagination. They stand for the things in his age that Yeats hated. Huxley and Tyndall had deprived him of his religion as he wrote in an oft-quoted passage in **Autobiographies**:

I was unlike others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first ex-

pression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. I wished for a world where I could discover this tradition perpetually. (Autobiographies, 1966:173)

This was not to be Yeats's last attempt to create a religion or philosophical system to try to order the disorder of existence and his own experience. There is a concomitant desire too - the desire to withdraw from the confident and self-satisfied bourgeois world. In Yeats's early life it was a desire to withdraw to Inisfree. Finally, he went to his tower at Ballylee, though then it was only partial seclusion.

However, he vacillated in his rejection of the bourgeois world, and at other times tried to come to grips with it. "I knew myself to be vague and incoherent" Yeats wrote at the end of his life about himself as a youth (Autobiographies, 1966:115-116). But he always tried to find a way out in literature. Yeats once wrote: "why should I write what I knew? I wrote always that when I laid down my pen I might be less ignorant than when I took it up." (Yeats, 1968:510) In this he is reminiscent of D.H. Lawrence. However, Lawrence wrote essays after writing a novel to make its theme explicit to himself. Yeats, on the other hand, seems to have reversed this process. Criticizing one journalist he writes, "He is certain that no one who had a philosophy of his art, or a theory of how he should write, has ever made a work of art." And he comments "that journalists and their readers have forgotten, among many like events, that Wagner spent seven years arranging and explaining his ideas before he began his most characteristic music." (Black, 1958:24) Yeats thus argues for a writer who has clarified and organized his philosophy of art. Inevitably such thoughts and their expression in essays involve making generalizations. He wrote in **Autobiographies** about himself as a young man in the years 1887-1891: "I generalised a great deal and was ashamed of it. I thought it was my business in life to be an artist and a poet, and that there could be no business comparable to that. I refused to read books and even to meet people who excited me to generalisation, all to no purpose". (Yeats, 1968:153-154)

This is a rather rhetorical half-confession. Yeats often confesses to things that he later became proud of. Here he appears to be condemning himself from the standpoint of the pure artist of the type of Flaubert or Joyce. It is doubtful if Yeats was every really of this type, even in the Nineties when he was closest to it at the time of writing the stories in "The Secret Rose". These are the stories that Joyce praised. Joyce criticized Yeats's other tendency, and charged him with permitting himself to make generalizations. The charge is, of course, quite true. Yeats did generalize, he was involved in the world of affairs in a public way-even in a propagandistic way. His range of interest and public involvement was always much wider than Joyce's, and Joyce's accusation that Yeats was a man of letters, instead of an uninvolved artist, is justified but irrelevant. This is a distinction that Thomas Mann, one of the outstanding modern men of letters, rejected impatiently. In his essay on "Goethe's Career as a Man of Letters" in **Essays of Three Decads**, he writes:

It is a fruitless and futile mania of the critic to insist on the distinction between the poet and the man of letters -- an impossible distinction for the boundary between the two does not lie in the product of either, but rather in the personality of the artist himself; and even here is so fluid as to be indistinguishable. Poetical invasions into the field of pure letters, "literary" invasions into the field of poetry, are so frequent that to affirm a distinction between them is mere wilfulness, born of the wish to disparage the fruits of reason in favour of the unconscious. _ _ _ _ _

 ----- When I speak of Goethe the man of letters, I use the term simply as the common designation for the life on earth of the poet: preferring the everyday, moderate and objective phrase to the more high-flown one with all its implications. Goethe lived in the flesh, he was a human being, a citizen-and he was a man of letters. (Autobiographies, 1966:127)

I think that Yeats too should be seen in this way, as a writer in the European tradition of men of letters, of writers of many interests, rather than as a poet only. He insisted on "the life on earth of the poet" when he said that in writing so much about himself in prose he wanted to give this information, because it was important for readers to know about the poet's life. This was his approach to other poets, as can be seen from his remarks to the Bengali doctor already quoted. Also he disliked a rootless art. He wrote in **Explorations**, "I disliked the isolation of the work of art. I wished... to plunge it back into social life" (Mann, 1948:44-45). so he insisted on making generalizations, in spite of his stated early misgivings. His attitude, and the very different attitude of the poets of the Rhymers' Club towards ideas not purely poetic, are shown in this passage in **Autobiographies**:

We read our poems to one another and talked criticism and drank a little wine. I sometimes say when I speak of the club, "We had such and such ideas, such and such a quarrel with the great Victorians, we set before us such and such aims", as though we had many philosophical ideas. I say this because I am ashamed to admit that I had those ideas and that whenever I began to talk of them a gloomy silence fell upon the room. A young Irish poet, who wrote excellently but had the worst manners, was to say a few years later, "You do not talk like a poet, you talk like a man of letters," and if all the Rhymers had not been polite, if most of them had not been to Oxford or Cambridge, the greater number would have said the same thing. I was full of thought, often very abstract thought, longing all the while to be full of images, because I had gone to the art school instead of a university. Yet even if I had gone to a university, and learned all the classical foundations of English literature and English culture, all that great erudition which once accepted frees the mind from

restlessness, I should have had to give up my Irish subject-matter, or attempt to found a new tradition. Lacking sufficient recognised precedent I must needs find out some reason for all I did. I knew almost from the start that to overflow with reasons was to be not quite wellborn; and when I could I hide them, as men hide a disagreeable ancestry; and that there was no help for it seeing that my country was not born at all. I was of those doomed to imperfect achievement, and under a curse, as it were, like some race of birds compelled to spend the time, needed for the making of the nest, in argument as to the convenience of moss and twig and lichen. Le Gallienne and Davidson, and even Symonds, were provincial at their setting out, but their provincialism was curable, mine incurable; while the one conviction shared by all the younger men, but principally by Johnson and Horne, who imposed their personalities upon us, was an opposition to all ideas, all generalisations that can be explained and debated. (Yeats, 1962:300)

This is very persuasive, the more so since Yeats appears to be rebuking himself. But neither his own rebukes nor Joyce's make him desist from generalizing. What Yeats is saying is that he was right in the first place. He was not interested in inherited generalizations however; he wished to formulate them for himself. I do not think he would have given up his restlessness for university erudition. Several generations of Yeats's family had been to the university. It seems as if he were not overly impressed by it, or rather that he was more impressed by the type of wisdom that he hoped to find in Theosophy. Furthermore the assumptions of his father and the pre-Raphaelite group comprehended this sort of knowledge either by training or awareness. More importantly this sort of knowledge suggested reason which suggested Huxley and Tyndall whom Yeats despised. It is also likely that he thought that this type of knowledge would be destructive to his poetry. This is not to say that Yeats disliked all learning, but I consider his image of himself was sufficiently aggressive that he wished to form his system of thought independently. He needed generalizations, but he wanted them to be his own not someone else's. So, when he shifts in midsentence saying that "I should have had to give up my Irish subject-matter" (which he did not want to do-but that is another matter) he means "I should lose that restlessness by which I create my poetry, by accepting formulated modes of thought." It would have been giving up life for reason. Reason to Yeats was a straight line, and life a crooked one, and he always chose life.

When we compare the poetry Yeats did write with that of the other Rhymers, we may conclude that their views were wrong, and that at the time Yeats was writing **Autobiographies** he knew it. He must have felt that his approach had been vindicated. He needed to formulate his generalizations - very often in essays as a man of letters. The use of the less artistic medium of prose essay, as well as the more imaginative genres is a long tradition. Joyce's attack was really just a statement of what Joyce hoped to do, and how he hoped to do it-to dramatize and embody in character his generalizations.

Joyce and Yeats were responding to the same situation in different ways and the situation they were confronted with was Irish nationalism, and it is noteworthy too, in the passage quoted, that the reason Yeats gives for making generalizations is "that there was no help for it seeing that my country was not born at all". In this sense it is interesting to compare their attitudes to the writer as an individual who through artistic self-expression expressed a much larger group too. Here, Joyce and Yeats were closer in their attitudes. As we have seen already, Yeats's generalizations were rather individualized utterances to begin with. With regard to self-expression, or personal utterance, he wrote in **Autobiographies**:

Personal utterance, which had almost ceased in English literature, could be as fine an escape from rhetoric and abstraction as drama itself. But my father would hear of nothing but drama; personal utterance was only egotism. I knew it was not, but as yet did not know how to explain the difference. I tried from that on to write out my emotions exactly as they came to me in life, not changing them to make them more beautiful. "If I can be sincere and make my language natural, and without becoming discursive, like a novelist, and so indiscreet and prosaic" I said to myself "I shall, if good luck or bad luck make my life interesting, be a great poet; for it will be no longer a matter of literature at all." Yet when I re-read those early poems which gave me so much trouble, I find little but romantic convention, unconscious drama. It is so many years before one can believe in what one feels even to know what the feeling is (Autobiographies, 1966:111-112).

This passage shows that much of Yeats's theorizing was done against a background of family discussion. But, it also shows that sincerity and personal utterance were the requisites for writing good poetry in his view at that early stage of his career. Sincerity and an interesting life were sufficient. This is really a belief in self-expression. He wrote in 1937 in the introduction to **Essays**, "I thought when I was young-walt Whitman had something to do with it-that the poet, painter, and musician should do nothing but express themselves". (Autobiographies, 1966:68-69) The poem "Three Movements" written in 1932 describes this too:

Shakespearean fish swam the sea, far away from land;
Romantic fish swam in nets coming to the hand;
What are all those fish that lie gasping on the strand? (Yeats, 1968:x)

But it also shows that Yeats became discontented with romantic self-expression, as does a passage in **Essays**:

I read nothing but romantic literature; hated that dry eighteenth-century rhetoric; but they had one 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. I knew, though but now and then as young men know things, that I must turn from that modern literature Jonathan Swift compared to the web a spider draws out of its bowels; I hated and still hate with an ever growing hatred the literature of the point of view. (Yeats, 1956:236)

The movement is really the same as that stated in Goethe's famous saying, "Romanticism is sickness, Classicism is health." But this was a gradual movement in Yeats. He came gradually to dislike his earlier romanticism; even though the subjective element is still present in his later poetry. The statement, "Personal utterance... could be as fine an escape from rhetoric and abstraction as drama itself," evokes this whole personal-public contradiction in Yeats. His statement, "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry," just describes the conflict; it does not describe what he did (Yeats, 1968:510-511). Yeats wrote great poems about his quarrels with his times. Many of the poems in "The Tower" are of this kind. This conflict of public and private Yeats-the necessity to generalize and the impulse towards self-expression-made him express Ireland too. In this he has much in common with Joyce. W.Y. Tindall commented that Joyce made a philosophy out of self-expression (Yeats, 1969:331). Joyce wrote, "This race and this country and this life produced me, he said, I shall express myself as I am (Tindall, 1947:14). And in the conclusion of **A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man** Dedalus says, "I go ... to forge ... the uncreated conscience of my race" (Joyce, 1956:203). Joyce's view is that if he can express himself, he can express the race. Yeats defined a national literature as "the work of writers who are moulded by influences that are moulding their country, and who write out of so deep a life that they are accepted there in the end (Joyce, 1956:253). so the view of both of these writers is that if they can express themselves they can express the race. Much depends upon the self that is being expressed. When one recalls Goethe's statements "One must **be** something in order to **do** anything," and "A man can have no effect on mankind save through his actual personality alone," it is clear that everything depends upon the self being expressed: with Joyce and Yeats self-expression could be more than egotism (Yeats, 1962:156). Yeats wrote in **Autobiographies** defending his choice of personal material on the grounds of tradition and on the grounds that personal emotion expressed everybody's emotion:

Elaborate modern psychology sounds egotistical I thought, when it speaks in the first person, but not those simple emotions which resemble the more, the more powerful they are, everybody's emotion, and I was soon to write many poems where an always personal emotion was woven into a general pattern of myth and symbol. When the Fenian poet says that his heart has grown cold and callous- "For thy hopeless fate, dear Ireland, and sorrows of my own" - he but follows tradition. (Mann, 1948:45-46).

In this way Yeats sought to reconcile the individual and general elements in his writing, in what is really an impersonal stance. Both Joyce and Yeats achieved a

compromise in impersonality. Joyce wrote, "The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (Autobiographies, 1966:101-102). Yeats expresses the same view, "I wanted to create once more an art where the artist's handiwork would hide as under those half-anonymous chisels" (of Scopos and Praxiteles) (Joyce, 1956:215) In this way Yeats was able to impersonalize the subjective element and to achieve a more objective public stance.

Naturally in his role as a public figure trying to create a national literature, Yeats had many quarrels with his contemporaries. But to create a national conscience this was inevitable, because it involved arguing and trying to define what were Irish ideals and aims. To argue the national issues of the day, it was necessary to define oneself racially. Many of the other figures in the Irish literary movement shared this predicament. To make the distinctions necessary to differentiate specifically Irish interests from English ones was difficult, so mingled were the two races and cultures in Ireland. For instance, writing about the Irish novelists in **Explorations** Yeats said,

Of course, too, the tradition itself was not all English, but it is impossible to divide what is new, and therefore Irish, what is very old, and therefore Irish, from all that is foreign, from all that is an accident of imperfect culture, before we have had some revelation of Irish character, pure enough and varied enough to create a standard of comparison" (Autobiographies, 1966:101).

Similarly, Yeats himself felt very much as an Irish nationalist, but when he thought about his family he found all English names. Furthermore, he was forced to recall that he owed his soul to the English poets (Yeats, 1962:235). This was another source of conflict in a very divided man, but from these divisions in Yeats and others emerged a literature that was not English but distinctively Irish, in the opinions of Wellek and Warren in their **Theory of Literature** (1956 :52).

Joyce did not face the problems of national definition in as public or political a manner as Yeats did. But Joyce never escaped from nationalism, anymore than he escaped Dublin by self-exile. Dublin was always his subject and nationalism his nightmare. On the purely political level he affected disinterestedness. His anti-political attitude probably stemmed from his disgust at the Irish over the fall of Parnell, which is described so intensely in the Christmas scene in **A Portrait**. On the other hand, Yeats was involved in partisan politics, due largely to the influence of Maud Gonne MacBride. Without his national and political involvement Yeats would have been like his friends in the Rhymers' Club. Nationalism gave him a public cause, and focussed his poetic energies. But, unlike Maud Gonne, he was not actively revolutionary in outlook since he always argued in his essays for an Arnoldian disinterestedness, for a more enlightened outlook than that which he found in the politics of the day. It is difficult to distinguish politics from nationalism in the early twentieth century, but Yeats always argued for a national spirit higher than the hatreds that informed Irish politics of that time.

Thus, in both Joyce and Yeats there is the common concern with nationalism. Their responses have similarities: Joyce, aloof, uninvolved directly in politics or polemics after Parnell, but always involved with Irish subject matter: Yeats, always involved, but arguing for detachment. Both sought detachment, but both were involved. In either case there seems to have been no way to avoid concern—whether in a call for an informed national spirit, or in detached artistic sublimation.

From this comparison with Joyce it is obvious that Yeats was never the detached artist consciously excluding any public commitment from his work. In fact, it appears that Joyce was more of an aesthete than Yeats ever was. Yeats's search for a philosophy, his efforts to create a literary movement, and his efforts to define and raise the national conscience show that he was far more than a lyric poet. It is necessary to see him in a more general way, as a person deeply involved in national and literary affairs. Thus, seeing the breadth of his interests and involvement, and the range of his writings, we must reappraise the image of Yeats as a lyric poet and see him, as I think he wished to be seen, in the more comprehensive role of a man of letters in the European tradition.

NOTES:

1. The titles of Books that were later brought together in larger works have been put in quotation marks.
2. There are several references to Goethe in the **Essays** but little extended discussion. The relationship has been studied fully however by Marjorie Perloff in "Yeats and Goethe" in **Comparative Literature**, 23 (Spring, 1971), No. 2 pp. 125-140.
3. W.B. Yeats, **Essays and Introductions**. New York: Collier Books, 1968, Yeats usually capitalizes Great Memory but he is not consistent, pp. 49-50.

Bibliography

- Black, Hester M. "William Butler Yeats," **Kansas University Library Bulletin**, Lawrence: The University of Kansas Library, 1958.
- Bradford, Curtis B. **Yeats at Work**. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965.
- Hough, Graham. **The Last Romantics**. London: Duckworth, 1949.
- Joyce, James. **A Portrait the Artist as a Young Man**. New York: The Viking Press, 1956.
- Jung, Carl G. **The Integration of the Personality**. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1956.
- Mann, Thomas. **Essays of three Decades**. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "Yeats and Goethe," **Comparative Literature** (1971:23), 125-140.
- Tindall, William York. **Forces in Modern British Literature**. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947.
- Wellek, Rene and Austin Warren. **Theory of Literature**. New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc., 1956.
- Yeats, W.B. **Autobiographies**. London: Macmillan, 1966.
- **The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats**. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1956.
- **Essays and Introductions**. New York: Collier Books, 1968.
- **Explorations**. London: Macmillan, 1962.
- **Mythologies**. New York: Collier Books, 1969.