



William Butler Yeats and Monumentalisation

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Abstract:

At the Nobel ceremony in December 1923, W.B. Yeats chose to speak about “The Irish Dramatic Movement”. In his lecture the poet paid homage to the efforts which brought about modern Ireland and focused his attention on the achievement of a group working together closing, most notably, on the contribution of close friends J.M. Synge and Lady Gregory. The Nobel Lecture represents a crucial step of the poet’s process of recognition of their and his own work, but also of his ability to mythologise and celebrate those he admired, mostly his circle of friends. The present work aims to explore the memorialising, rather, monumentalising process in W.B. Yeats, a remarkable aspect of his production, conspicuous in his late production, and to analyse the poetic and linguistic strategies adopted by him to this end. The article will conclude focussing on “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” as a monument poem.

Keywords: Friendship, Ireland, Irish Dramatic Movement, Monument, Poetry

1. The Nobel Lecture

Slightly over a hundred years ago, in December 1923, William Butler Yeats was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Lecture he delivered to the Royal Academy of Sweden was on “The Irish Dramatic Movement”¹: the poet chose to tell the Royal Academy “of the labours, triumphs and troubles of my fellow-workers” (Yeats 1999, 410) in a project that contributed

¹ The complete title is “The Irish Dramatic Movement: A Lecture delivered to the Royal Academy of Sweden”. As W.H. O’Donnell writes in the textual introduction to W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, edited by him and Douglas Archibald, “The lecture was reprinted [...] in the Cuala Press volume *The Bounty of Sweden: A Meditation, and a Lecture* [...] in July 1925. The Lecture has been included in all subsequent editions of *Autobiographies* that contain *The Bounty of Sweden*, except the Macmillan, New York, volume *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats*, published 30 August 1938 [...] and its re-issue in 1953 [...]” (1999, 22-23).

to the shaping of the “modern literature of Ireland” (*ibidem*). The lecture as well as *The Bounty of Sweden* – what Yeats calls “a meditation” (515), “a kind of diary, impressions of Stockholm” (394) – commemorates and pays tribute to the Irish Dramatic Movement and its two major exponents and his own friends, John Millington Synge and Lady Gregory. This essay will take the Nobel lecture as a starting point from which, moving backwards chronologically, to analyse Yeats’s celebratory or monumentalising manner, tracing its antecedents in time, while also outlining its development to arrive at the memorable poems of his later period. It will conclude with and focus on the analysis of “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”, that most celebratory of poems, in which the couple of friends evoked in the Nobel Lecture stand out among many other friends and connections and take centre stage, being celebrated as monuments of Irish culture.

As the poet writes in *The Bounty of Sweden*, his subject is “the work of my generation in Ireland, the creation of a literature to express national character and feeling but with no deliberate political aim” (394). He also claims that he believes that his nomination for the prize is due more to his work for the theatre – as “the representative of a public movement” (405) – than to his lyric production; “I consider that this honour has come to me less as an individual than as a representative of Irish literature, it is part of Europe’s welcome to the Free State” (Foster 2003, 245). Roy Foster emphasises Yeats’s awareness of the political implications of the award: “An Irish winner of the prize, a year after Ireland gained its independence, had a symbolic value in the world’s eyes, and he was careful to point this out” (245). This awareness was also reinforced by the fact that, by the end of the previous year, the poet had been appointed Senator of the Irish Free State, whose first meeting was held in December 1922.

Yeats concludes his Nobel lecture with these words: “when I received from the hands of your King the great honour your Academy has conferred upon me, I felt that a young man’s ghost should have stood upon one side of me and at the other a living woman sinking into the infirmity of old age” (Yeats 1999, 418). The same couple of friends will be commemorated in a masterful, late poem, “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”, which will be discussed later in this work.

The celebration of his friends is a widely recognised characteristic of Yeats’s writing. In the conclusion to his 1965 volume, Jon Stallworthy claimed that the personal emotion from which Yeats’s poems generally developed, “was commonly generated by a relationship with someone else. [...] in Yeats, more than most poets, kinship and friendship had the power to spur him into song” (2000, 97).

Much earlier than the Nobel lecture, on 4 February 1909, confounded on hearing of Lady Gregory’s serious illness, the poet had written in his *Journal*: “All day the thought of losing her is like a conflagration in the rafters. Friendship is all the house I have” (Yeats 1972, 161). If friendship is remarkably so important for him, the commendation of his friends or, more inclusively, of a community in which he recognises himself, is also a way in which the poet indirectly celebrates himself.

2. Antecedents

Before focussing on the relationship between friendship and Yeats’s celebratory manner, it is necessary to explore what can be considered antecedents or precursors of this mode, which develops as a process in which the poet gradually masters a growing assertiveness. In an early poem, “To Ireland in the Coming Times” (1892), the poetic subject establishes himself as “True brother of a company” (l. 2), a company “That sang, to sweeten Ireland’s wrong, / Ballad and story, ran and song.” (ll. 3-4). The lyric “I” re-states the concept giving the names of some members of this company at the beginning of the second stanza: “Nor may I less be counted

one / with Davis, Mangan, Ferguson,” (ll. 17-18). Therefore, with uncharacteristic confidence, he claims his position among major personalities in the then deeply uncertain contest for what, in the Nobel lecture, he would define as the “modern literature of Ireland” (Yeats 1999, 410). This is probably the only poem showing such a forceful public attitude² in Yeats’s early period, when the dominant mode is one of uncertainty, liminality, of not fully belonging in the here-and-now of the utterance³. In this poem Yeats claims that his interests in symbolic art, literature and politics are not mutually exclusive. This is a subject he would openly go back to years later, in 1919, in “If I were four-and-twenty” remembering his youth:

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 [...] Now all three are [...] a discrete expression of a single conviction.⁴

Hints of the process of developing and gradually mastering an assertive tone can be gathered in Yeats’s different collections. This process was also characterised by the abandonment of the decadent style that characterised his early poetry with its archaisms and evocative adjectives, in favour of ordinary speech. *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910) collects poems written in the first decade of the new century which bear traces of the struggle of those years that hardened the poet and “dried the sap out of my veins, and rent / Spontaneous joy and natural content / Out of my heart.” (ll. 2-4): that is, mainly, “Theatre business, management of men” (l. 11)⁵. After cursing some of the difficulties he has had to face, the concluding couplet opens with a performative speech act, “I swear”, which enacts the resolution of the poet’s statement. A similar awareness of the strength of his utterance returns in “Words”, the third poem of the collection, in which the poet acknowledges that “I have come into my strength, / And words obey my call” (ll. 11-12), a statement that testifies to a further step in this process. In “All Things can Tempt Me” published in the same volume, the poet somehow mockingly reflects on his earlier style and proclaims a change of attitude:

When I was young,
I had not given a penny for a song
Did not the poet sing it with such airs
that one believed he had a sword upstairs;
Yet would be now [...]
Colder and dumber and deafer than a fish. (ll. 5-10)

Coldness is a quality he envisages as necessary for his aesthetics, an equivalent of the “traditional metres” (Yeats 1989, 522) he needs to adopt in order to master passions, not to lose himself, as “all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt” (522), as he wrote in 1937. The poet authoritatively returns to this idea in “The Fisherman”, written in

² “The Lake Isle of Innisfree”, finished in 1890, and defined by the poet as “my first lyric with anything in its rhythm of my own music” (Yeats 1999, 139) shows, also through the skilful use of future auxiliaries, an uncharacteristic decisiveness. This is, however, a private poem, in which the lyric subject speaks to himself.

³ For an analysis of Yeats’s early poetic production see Cotta Ramusino 1997.

⁴ “If I were four-and-twenty”, in Yeats 1962, 263. Anthony Johnson has pointed this out in his accurate notes to the poems in Yeats (2005, 1014).

⁵ These quotations are from “The Fascination of What’s Difficult” (Allt, Alspach 1968 [1957], 260).

June 1914 and collected in *The Wild Swans at Coole*, where he imagines the fisherman, “A man who does not exist, / A man who is but a dream;” (ll. 35-36), as the ideal dedicatee of a “Poem maybe as cold / And passionate as the dawn” (ll. 39-40).

The path to assertiveness becomes clearer in *Responsibilities*, which collects forceful poems in which the poet strongly opposes the philistines of contemporary Ireland. The introductory and the closing lines, both untitled and both in italics to set off their interconnectedness, are instances of a changed attitude. In the “Introductory Rhymes – *Pardon old Fathers*” the poet apologises with his ancestors⁶ – whom he decidedly praises – for presumably interrupting the family line “*Although I have come close on forty-nine, / I have no child*” (ll. 20-21) he states, thus showing an assumption of responsibility – the central issue of the collection – towards his family. He also claims his role as a poet: “*I have nothing but a book, / Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine*” (ll. 21-22, italics in original). In 1940, inaugurating the first annual Yeats Lecture in Dublin, T.S. Eliot defined these lines “great”, seeing in them the strength of the poetic voice: “More than half a lifetime to arrive at this freedom of speech. It is a triumph” (1975, 252). The “book”, as David Holdeman aptly reminds us, the “1916 Macmillan edition of *Responsibilities* [...] is the first of Yeats’s poetic volumes to be distributed by a major global publisher” (2023, 50), a considerable improvement for “one that ruffled in a manly pose / For all his timid heart” as the poet retrospectively saw himself in “Coole Park, 1929”, (ll. 11-12), and a recognition. The lines closing the collection show *sprezzatura* or disdain towards his detractors, again introduced by a performative verb: “*I can forgive even that wrong of wrongs, / [...] / till all my priceless things / Are but a post the passing dogs defile*” (ll. 9 and 13-14, italics in original).

What is undeniable is that *Responsibilities* marks a change in W.B. Yeats’s production: after this collection his poetry increasingly offers major examples of an assertive tone. As Stephen M. Parrish claims, the two collections of *The Wild Swans at Coole*, 1917 and 1919, “arch over the decisive events in Yeats’s life and mark the opening of the poetic voice in which his late work was cast” (1994, xxxiv). *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) is a composite collection, in which the poet skilfully merged the poems published in *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1917) – the poems written out of despair for unrequited love and fear of imaginative sterility – and the poems written after his marriage in October 1917. The new poems the poet added to the 1919 edition show a new and assertive voice which would become the distinctive mark of Yeats’s mature poetry.

Marjorie Perloff has argued that “the two great poems that Yeats wrote during the autumn of 1916 – ‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ and ‘Easter 1916’ – stand out as extraordinary achievements. Followed in 1918 by ‘In Memory of Major Robert Gregory’ and in 1919 by ‘A Prayer for My Daughter,’ they herald a new mode in Yeats’s poetry” (1975, 530)⁷. Thoor Ballylee, the first house the poet acquired, on 30 June 1917, a medieval tower not far from Coole, on former Gregory property, makes its first appearance in “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” in *The Wild Swans at Coole*. If this acquisition was exciting for the poet, it made him all the more aware of his personal solitude as expressed at the end of the “Introductory Rhymes” in *Responsibilities* and in the poems of the 1917 edition of *The Wild Swans at Coole*. Several elements contribute to strengthen its importance: ever since his first journey to Italy in 1907 W.B. Yeats had considered the tower as a suitable dwelling for a poet. In addition to its poetic appropriateness and the poetic suggestions it evoked, Thoor Ballylee attested his rootedness,

⁶ This dialogue would be reprised and continued in “Are You Content”, in *New Poems* (1938), in which he addresses his ancestors “To judge what I have done”, l. 4.

⁷ The first poem opens the eponymous collection, and the third one is collected in the same volume, while the second and the fourth ones are collected in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921).

a condition Yeats had tended to since his youth and especially over the previous, personally stormy, years: he needed to settle and root himself, and the Tower would give him this opportunity. As a matter of fact, as Nicholas Grene has remarked, “[i]t is particularly in the Coole Park and Tower poems that the poetic voice is most fully embedded [...]. It is only in Thoor Ballylee that Yeats is to be found fully at home in his poems” (2008, 46)⁸, that the poetic “I” is no longer dislocated. What has here been defined as the path to assertiveness is another aspect of what Roy Foster and Nicholas Grene have termed the poet’s drive to rootedness and runs parallel to what David R. Clark has defined the poet’s ability, in his later poetry, to “mak[e] the abstract concrete” (1995, 28).

Some years later, in 1927, Yeats wrote to Thomas Sturge Moore, when discussing the book cover for *The Tower*, that “I like to think of that building as a permanent symbol of my work plainly visible to the passer by. As you know all my art theories depend upon just this – rooting of mythology in the earth” (Yeats 2022). Thoor Ballylee would indeed come to embody a complex knot of intertwining ideas and symbols⁹, but what is relevant here is its concrete, material presence, standing out in the landscape, that contributes to give strength to the poet’s words, a sort of correlative of the poet’s voice.

In “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” the setting is established in the first stanza “[...] we’re almost settled in our house / [...] / Beside a fire of turf in th’ ancient tower,” (I, ll. 1 and 3). There with his wife, he cannot entertain friends, because “All, all are in my thoughts to-night being dead” (I, l. 8). Notably, among these dead friends “that come into my mind” (II, l. 8) is also “that enquiring man, John Synge” (IV, l. 1), who would be conjured up again in the Nobel lecture and in “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”. The elegy for Robert Gregory is interesting from several points of view: it is a due tribute to Lady Gregory’s son, shot down in Italy the previous January; it is also written in octave-stanzas, adopted, as Helen Vendler points out, from Abraham Cowley’s “On the Death of Mr. William Hervey” (2007, 291). This form represents a sort of forerunner of the ottava rima the poet would inaugurate with “Sailing to Byzantium”, “one of Yeats’s favorite stanza forms” (Perloff 1970, 22)¹⁰. Vendler claims that “Yeats [...] established *ottava rima* as a viable modern form, fit for everything serious – valediction, ode, historical meditation, fantasy” (2007, 263), but she concludes her analysis of the form asserting that “he made it sympathetic to intellectual and emotional autobiography” (289). He attributed to this form, “first brought into English by Edward Fairfax’s translation of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1600)” (262), a “Renaissance Aura”, as Vendler titles her chapter on it, with its attendant “‘courtliness’, ‘stateliness’, ‘aristocratic personhood’, ‘a patronage culture’ ” (263). The poet used it from the mid-twenties as a form suitable for solemn autobiographical

⁸ Holdeman rejects Grene’s statement, writing that “Contra Grene, [Yeats] is never ‘fully at home’ at Thoor Ballylee”, (2023, 65). Actually, it rather seems that the two scholars refer to different things: Grene focusses on the poetic subject that at last no longer feels liminal, or unfocused, and has found what Grene defines roots, a sort of anchoring, while Holdeman seems to interpret ‘fully at home’ in the proper or more usual sense of a home with its attendant objects and furniture, which are the focus of his article on material culture.

⁹ As the lyric subject would proclaim in “Blood and the Moon”, in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, “I declare this tower is my symbol”, II, l. 4.

¹⁰ The poems in ottava rima are: “Sailing to Byzantium”, “Among School Children”, “I. Ancestral Houses” and “IV My Descendants” in “Meditations in Time of Civil War” and Section “I” in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”, all included in *The Tower*. “The Choice”, “Coole Park, 1929”, “Coole and Ballylee, 1931”, Sections “II” and “III” of “Vacillation”, Section “VIII” of “A Woman Young and Old”, all included in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*; Section “I” of “Parnell’s Funeral”, included *A Full Moon in March*; “The Gyres”, “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”, “The Statues” and “The Circus Animals’ Desertion”, all included in *Last Poems*. See Helen Vendler “The Renaissance Aura: Ottava Rima Poems” (2007, 262-289).

reflections, as it enabled him to emphasise his meditative mood, contributing to his monument making: of his friends and himself, of the country they moulded, as well as of his own work.

It is in “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory”, as Vendler maintains, that “Yeats first successfully undertakes the sort of sweeping and [...] random reminiscence that will pervade ‘The Tower’ (II), ‘All Soul’s Night,’ and ‘The Municipal Gallery Revisited’”. In these poems he establishes a powerful new genre of Yeatsian lyric: a ‘realistic’ autobiographical meditation that expresses both ordinariness and dignity” (295). Reflecting on Yeats’s autobiographical writing, on which the poet was at work in 1914 – *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* was finished on Christmas Day 1914 – but in which he was immersed at least until August 1916, Marjorie Perloff ponders on the poem “The Wild Swans at Coole”, written in 1916, the poem which opens both the 1917 and the 1919 collections. She underlines that

‘The Wild Swans at Coole’ is the first of the great autobiographical poems in which Yeats’s protagonist – a projection of the poet himself – recalls and implicitly judges those experiences in his past which reveal something essential about his personality as it responds to the outside world. Although the structure of ‘Wild Swans’ is not the only one that Yeats devised for his longer lyrics (the *débat* structure, for example, is used in many poems from ‘Ego Dominus Tuus’ to ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’ and ‘Vacillation’), it is the prototype of such famous poems as ‘The Tower’, ‘Among School Children’, ‘Coole Park, 1929’, and ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’. (1975, 531-532)

Michael Robartes and the Dancer, the collection that follows *The Wild Swans at Coole*, closes with “To Be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee”. In a letter to John Quinn dated 23 July 1918, Yeats informs him that “I am making a setting for my old age, a place to influence lawless youth with its severity & antiquity” (Yeats 2002). He sends him an earlier draft of this poem writing that it “will be inscribed” “On a great stone beside the front door” (*ibidem*), as is indicated by the poem’s title. In this poem the poet first proclaims his name – “I, the poet William Yeats” (l.1) – then recalls his restoration of the tower, and the person for whom this was done “Restored this tower for my wife George” (l. 4), and concludes expressing that most daring wish, that his words may resist time: “And may these characters remain / When all is ruin once again” (ll. 5-6). As David Albright observes in the Notes to this poem, “The poem’s text is a theme of the poem itself: its inscribing on the rock is an act of physical construction comparable to (and competing with) the rebuilding of the tower itself” (1992, 628). The act of having his words – “these characters” – carved on stone is a most assertive one for a poet, as it marks his words’ transition from text to the real world; it is a challenge to time to gain timelessness, and thus a decisive step in his process of monumentalisation, echoing the effort of the poetic voice’s struggle with time in Shakespeare’s sonnets. Four years later, at the end of the fourth section of “Meditations in Time of Civil War” in *The Tower*, the poet would reprise again this idea of the tower representing a monument that triumphs over time even if in ruin. “My Descendants” represents a sort of sequel to the “Introductory Rhymes” opening *Responsibilities*: there the poet talks to his ancestors, who came before him in his family, here he thinks of his children in the future and concludes that “And know whatever flourish and decline / These stones remain their monument and mine” (ll. 23-24). By then, although deeply immersed in “my philosophy”, as Yeats used to refer to the work that resulted in *A Vision*, the poet’s grip on reality is unwavering.

The poet’s “inscribing” attitude, as if writing on monuments, or using writing as a monument, would climax in “Under Ben Bulbin”, 1938, where the lyric subject ends the poem giving dispositions for his burial: “Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by!” The words to be cut – “By his command” (l. 8), thus emphasising the speaker’s strength, with verbs in the imperative mode – go back to a quality already foregrounded in this work, a quality

long valued by the poet, coldness. Assertiveness and monumentalisation, which had appeared sporadically and increasingly more frequently with time, become the dominant mode for the poet by the time of the publication of *The Tower* in 1928, where the poetic I, though raging against old age, is master of himself and of the discursive process, celebrates his imaginative power, declares his pride and his relationship to the noble forefathers of the best Anglo-Irish tradition, celebrates the tower's nature of permanent monument to his children and to himself.

3. "The Municipal Gallery Revisited"

Wayne Chapman has observed that a feature of Yeats's later career is his "intention to memorialise his friends, and himself by association" (2010, 210), in response to an "impulse to make monuments or to erect tombs" (*ibidem*). A very interesting case in point is "The Municipal Gallery Revisited", started in August and finished by 5 September 1937.

"The Municipal Gallery Revisited" was written in response to a donation given to the poet by a group of Irish-American nationalists – "A poem about the Ireland that we have all served, and the movement of which I have been a part" (Allt, Alspach 1968 [1957], 839) – celebrated by a Banquet in Dublin on 17 August 1937 where the poet gave a speech and introduced the poem he had in mind to write¹¹. It is a public poem, prompted by a visit Yeats paid to the Dublin Municipal Gallery, for which he had struggled forcefully¹² several years before, and for whose missing paintings he had canvassed for years with Lady Gregory. The visit was therefore a reason of strong personal emotion which called forth past friends: some whose portraits were displayed in the Gallery, others who were the painters of some of the paintings exhibited there; there were also portraits made by Yeats's father. Images of protagonists of the Irish Revival, as well as moments of Irish history and Irish life hung on its walls. This mix of emotions transformed what might have been a private moment of "contemplation [into] an occasion for a very public address" (Gardiner 1995, 69). Deirdre Toomey claims that "Wherever he looked, he saw the dead" (2005, 132), many of whom had been close to him. These paintings recalled the recent Irish past – "the images of thirty years" (l. 1) – in which the poet and his friends had had a prominent role, and many of the subjects depicted were people who also appeared in his poems.

In the first two stanzas, the events or people portrayed are either unnamed or unspecified¹³ or they are politicians, people belonging to the public world. They recall the "glory" of Ireland's "passions", as the poet said in his speech, – soldiers, Casement, Griffith, O'Higgins – while at the same time also recalling his own role in that past as well as the role of his works. Looking at the

¹¹ Yeats's speech continues: "For a long time I had not visited the Municipal Gallery. I went there a week ago and was restored to many friends. I sat down, after a few minutes, overwhelmed with emotion. There were pictures painted by men, now dead, who were once my intimate friends. There were the portraits of my fellow-workers; there was that portrait of Lady Gregory by Mancini, which John Synge thought the greatest portrait since Rembrandt; there was John Synge himself; there, too, were portraits of our Statesmen; the events of the last thirty years in fine pictures: a peasant ambush, the trial of Roger Casement, a pilgrimage to Lough Derg, event after event: Ireland not as she is displayed in guide book or history, but, Ireland seen because of the magnificent vitality of her painters, in the glory of her passions. For the moment I could think of nothing but that Ireland: that great pictured song" (*A Speech and Two Poems*, Dublin, The Three Candles Press, 1937, pp.4-5 quoted in Allt, Alspach (1968 [1957] 839-840).

¹² The controversy over the construction of a gallery of modern art in Dublin is the subject of five poems in *Responsibilities*: "To a Wealthy Man...", "September 1913", "To a Friend whose Work has come to Nothing", "Paudeen", "To a Shade".

¹³ "An ambush, pilgrims at the water-side", l. 2; "An Abbot or Archbishop", II, l. 1. They are unnamed or unspecified in the poem, but the portraits have been identified by critics.

paintings displayed on the walls around him, the poet claims: “‘This is not,’ I say, / the dead Ireland of my youth, but an Ireland the poets have *imagined*, terrible and gay.” (II, ll. 2-4, emphasis added) thus assessing the primacy of poetic imagination: the reality portrayed in the paintings is the fruit of the poets’ imagination. Then, he shifts from the outer to the interior world, evoking his own past: “not simply the people of his past, but the creations of his past” (Bergmann Loizeaux 1979, 135).

The turning point in the shift from the exterior to the interior world is represented by the latter half of the second stanza: “Before a woman’s portrait suddenly I stand” (II, l. 5), where the time adverb “suddenly” signals the poet’s having been caught off guard. Deirdre Toomey convincingly argues that this woman is not, as accepted by most critics, either Lady Beresford as portrayed by Sargent, which would hardly move the poet so much, or a portrait by Lavery of an Austrian Baroness (Toomey 2005, 134-5), but rather, of Muriel Broadbent, ‘Mu’, or ‘Ryllis’, a young woman who, in the early 1890s had had a “close relationship with Symons” (142)¹⁴. Helen Vendler also agrees that this woman is “the fulcrum on which the poem turns” (quoted in Toomey 2005, 134, n. 4). This portrait plunges the poet back into his youth and at the beginning of the following stanza he acknowledges the strength of this emotion¹⁵, after which the poet reprises the focus on the intensity of poetic imagination, asserting: “Wherever I had looked I had looked upon / My permanent or impermanent images” (III, ll. 3-4): the use of the possessive, as suggested by Jahan Ramazani (see Ramazani 1990, 49), conveys the primacy of his mind’s work over the paintings around him.

Bergmann Loizeaux emphasises in “The Municipal Gallery Revisited” the echoes, from a prosodic and from a verbal point of view, of other Yeatsian poems: the ottava rima recalls some of his great poems, like “Sailing to Byzantium”, and some of the vocabulary¹⁶ echo previous poems by Yeats. Thomas Parkinson has criticised the presence of these echoes defining them as the poem’s “sense of quotation” (quoted in Bergmann Loizeaux 1979, 1345). Actually, it is not only or not just “a sense of quotation” which is at stake here, rather, this is a strategy which the poet uses to mirror and amplify his own work through hints or references to several others of his poems: “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”, started as a celebration of the portraits and of the history and the people they portray, moves on to a reflection on the poet’s own works, on his personal history and on himself. Moreover, the placing of this poem, an ever significant element in Yeats’s collections, also reinforces this reading. Set between “Those Images” and “Are You Content?”, both, according to Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, “about the imagination’s conjuring of images, it forms part of a meditation on the poet’s craft and creations” (135) which is also a questioning of their value and therefore of their possible permanence. The poetic voice asserts that the poet and the poetic imagination are at the origin of “the Ireland the poets have imagined” while resisting, in Ramazani’s words, “the eye’s dominion over the imagination” (1990, 50).

While facing the portraits of the dead, the poet inevitably faces his own death, a recurrent motif in the poet’s mature production. According to Ramazani, in this poem Yeats “recasts his usual contest with the dead as a contest with the visual images of the dead” (49), as in “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory” or “All Souls’ Night” in *The Tower*.

¹⁴ In her article Toomey motivates this statement explaining that she also “became a favourite model of Shannon’s” (145) who repeatedly painted her as Delia “from elegy VI of Tibullus’s first book of poems” (150-151), a subject previously painted by Rossetti, Rickett and Shannon’s “idol” (151), and in which the painter portrays himself as the lover: “The considerable artistic investment in this subject [...] suggests a parallel “emotional investment” (*ibidem*) on the part of the painter.

¹⁵ “Heart smitten with emotion I sink down, / My heart recovering with covered eyes” (III, ll. 1-2).

¹⁶ “‘The dead Ireland of my youth’, ‘terrible’, ‘gay’ recall ‘September 1913’ and ‘Easter 1916’ among others” Bergmann Loizeaux (1979, 135).

His reflection on the past and “the images of thirty years” (I, l. 1), as well as his assertion of the role of the poet, make this poem a literary celebration of the poet’s place in a society increasingly shaped by De Valera’s new Constitution, approved in July 1937. The nation devised by the new charter is very different from Yeats’s ideals and from the country he and his friends had laboured to shape, something the poet is strongly aware of.

The focus zooms in from unspecified people or events and politicians at the beginning, to friends who crowd around him – Robert Gregory, John Shawe-Taylor (Lady Gregory’s other nephew), Hugh Lane, Hazel Lavery, George Russell, not mentioned in the poem, but whose portrait was there – to the IV stanza, in which the crowd disappears as Mancini’s portrait ushers in Lady Gregory, which is the focus of stanza IV and V. She, John Synge and the poet dominate the last four stanzas of the poem.

In fact, in the following stanza, Yeats evokes Coole Park, a pre-eminent symbol of Renaissance values for him – patronage, culture, courtesy –, values which again recall the poems on the municipal gallery of modern art controversy in *Responsibilities* where the poet juxtaposed the Dublin middle class to the Italian Renaissance patrons. The link with the Renaissance is reinforced by the reference, respectively, to Shakespeare, in connection with Hugh Lane, defined as “the only begetter”, from Thomas Thorpe’s dedicatory words in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, and to Edmund Spenser. The latter is quoted in the last line of the V stanza – the only stanza with 7 lines instead of 8, but also alluded to in the reference in the following stanza, stanza VI, to the figure of Antaeus who appears in *The Faerie Queene* (II., ix, 45-6).

The contents of Coole were sold a few months after Lady Gregory’s death in May 1932. Although Yeats would not live to see its destruction in 1941, he knew by the time he wrote this poem that it was doomed: “but never foresaw its end, /and now that end has come, I have not wept” (ll. 6-7). Spenser’s misquotation – “No fox can foul the lair the badger swept” – is in keeping with the Renaissance status of Coole, and, as Chapman claims, “Implicit, then is Yeats’s intention to memorialise his friends, and himself by association, so they may be spared the fate of Leicester – of being merely replaced and forgotten in the scheme of things” (2010, 210). As Roy Foster acutely observes, although the gift was welcomed by the poet, the two references to Spenser in front of the Irish-American benefactors, is somehow a challenge to them, as Spenser is “seen by Irish nationalists not as the master of Elizabethan allegorical poetry but as the advocate of genocidal colonial policies” (2003, 596).

With the VI stanza the imaginary trio Yeats evoked in his speech in Stockholm is reassembled: John Synge, the poet, and Augusta Gregory. It is on this group, of which he writes in Summer 1910 in his *Journal*, “We three have conceived an Ireland that will remain *imaginary* more powerfully than we have conceived ourselves” (Yeats 1972, 251, emphasis added) that the poem closes. The first two lines of stanza VII are dedicated to “John Synge himself, that rooted man” (VII, l. 1), where the status Yeats had so valued and needed for himself in the middle years of the second decade of the century, rootedness, is used to qualify the friend and monument of the Irish Dramatic Movement.

The invitation, in the last stanza, to “come to this hallowed place” (VII, l. 4) before judging him indicates both the Gallery and the poem: the Gallery displays the portraits of people consecrated by history, which gives them a holy status. Their presence makes this a holy place, but also, as by now “the Yeatsian Gallery has gradually superseded the Municipal Gallery” (Ramazani 1990, 51), Ramazani points out that “the deictic phrase ‘this hallowed place’ must signify at least in part the poem itself. Although Yeats acknowledges that the Gallery is an extra-poetic place, he does so only after he has proven the primacy of his immaterial cenotaph” (51). In an anticipation of his death, in the last stanza the poet suggests the words with which to judge him:

“Think where man’s glory most begins and ends / And say my glory was I had such friends” (VII, ll. 7-8). A monument to his friends, but at the same time a monument to himself, “an implicit epitaph for himself” (Foster 2003, 598). As Seamus Deane has perceptively noted, “the last six lines are an address to the audience, containing six imperatives” (1989, 40)¹⁷, a verbal mode which marks the poetic subject’s voice as definitively asserting and commanding.

This work has examined the emergence of an assertive tone in Yeats’s poetry and its strengthening over time, which enabled the poetic subject to memorialise and celebrate his friends, himself and his works. The acquisition of this ability took him a long time, and the poet’s full mastering of this mode pervades *The Tower*. After having traced the development of this manner, the present article has finally provided a close reading of “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”, a poem which well represents the embodiment of such a celebratory mode. Attention has been cast on examining the strategies Yeats uses in this poem to make a monument of his friends, of his work and through it of himself and of the country they worked to shape, the Ireland they “imagined”, although the poet is aware that his country is different at the time of writing and has not lived up to that ideal.

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¹⁷ The six imperatives are: “Do not judge” l. 50, “come” l. 51, “look” l. 52, “trace” l. 53, “Think” l. 54, “say”, l. 55.

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