

Introduction

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Poet and playwright, essayist, senator, civil servant, performer, mystic, magician, occultist, and much more: it is almost impossible to place William Butler Yeats in a single role, since all the masks he eagerly wore over the years are the result of his life experience. They were actually not masks at all, but epidermal manifestations of an interior struggle or dialogue. He was too engaged in a lifelong effort of transformation of his own self, directed towards an ultimate goal, the 'unity of being', which is why it is impossible to bottle him up in one narrow definition. *Movement* was Yeats's inner and outer life and his very vision of life; it was intrinsic to his poetics, as well as a major feature of the characters of his plays, encompassing all the symbols, images and *topoi* of his poetical and philosophical system. In his view, when that movement came to a halt, the very development of life was impossible.

From the harmonic movement of the dancer, through that undertaken by Robartes in his song, to the violent, bloody movement of the traveller and fighter Cuchulain on one hand, to that of the gyres, faculties, and principles, of mask and will, of creative mind and body of fate, as well as of celestial body, spirit, and passionate body on the other – all organized and structured in a somewhat philosophical *processus*, in Pater's words –, Yeats's poetical, symbolical and visionary world appears as a never-resting flux. In his 1930 diary, when defining his Principles through Neoplatonism, he describes ultimate reality as the realm where «all thought, all movement, all perception are extinguished»¹. However, as an antithetical man, he does not want to complete or stop this restless and self-transforming activity, for it involves «that dynamic, or essential, dialogue of the mind with itself»². In *A General Introduction for My Work* (1937) Yeats emphasizes the importance of an individual's 'selves in motion':

A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria. [...] A novelist might describe his accident, his incoherence, he must not; he is more type than man, more passion than type. He is Lear, Romeo, Oedipus, Tiresias; he has stepped out of a play, and even the woman he loves is Rosalind, Cleopatra, never The Dark Lady. He is part

of his own phantasmagoria and we adore him because nature has grown intelligible, and by so doing a part of our creative power.³

Predisposed by years of research on William Blake, Yeats soon realized he had to create his own system so as not to be bound by another; he thus shaped his own phantasmagoria, which, in turn, came from real life and became part of it, learning how to perform all the necessary roles. He moved within it, as part of the cycle. As observed by Richard Ellmann: «Sometimes he was content to think his *real* self was in his verse. “My character is so little myself,” he puts in a manuscript book, “that all my life *it* has thwarted me. *It* has affected my poems, my true self, no more than the character of a dancer affects the movements of a dance»⁴. And Yeats’s poetics follows, too, a subsequent and parallel *progressus* marked by his gradual withdrawal from a genuine folkloristic and mythological spur towards a new fascination for a much more complex symbolism. In his 1940 essay, *Yeats*, Eliot focused on the various stages of the former’s poetry, referring to a «slow and continuous development of what is always the same medium and idiom»⁵. On similar lines, in *Yeats as an Example?* (1978), Seamus Heaney maintains that «he [Yeats] reminds you that revision and slog work are what you may have to undergo if you seek the satisfaction of finish [...] if you have managed to do one kind of poem in your own way, you should cast off that way and face into another area of your experience until you have learned a new voice to fix and stay that area»⁶. Throughout his career, his works, both early and late, mirror a deep involvement in what he was doing and a continuous need for insightful revising, as the Grecian emperor’s goldsmith in *Sailing to Byzantium* (1927) learns to work his metal only through hammering away at it.

The authors of the essays collected in the current issue of «Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies» take a variety of stances with regard to how they approach Yeats’s system, shedding light on its poetical, philosophical and mythological ongoing achievements and stages. Yeats’s various forms of *migration* (literary genres, motifs, symbols and forms) emerge as a common thread from these essays, which provide a wealth of new research on aspects of his poetical and philosophical work, life and contacts, and on broader concerns of his time. They prove that there is still a great deal to be studied and possibly disclosed even about a major literary figure such as W.B. Yeats.

The essays by Giuseppe Serpillo and Dario Calimani examine two key figures in Yeats’s work. According to Serpillo, Yeats needed heroes and looked for someone who might embody his ideas and hopes for the beginning of a new era. However, his standard of perfection changed over the years: from a character in whom the best and highest qualities of an individual might come into being, to a model of the hero able to stand as a symbol and a guide for his fellow men, in particular for those people for whom Yeats felt

most responsible, the Irish. Serpillo examines Oisín and Cúchulainn, heroes who frequently recur in his work, pointing to similarities and differences in both their qualities and functions; however, above and beyond them, it is the poet himself that emerges as a hero in Yeats's poetry, as the only one who can fulfill the double task of developing his self and playing an essential social and moral role. Calimani delves into one of Yeats's beloved and most revisited myths, that of Ulster hero Cúchulainn, as it was previously embodied in *On Bailé's Strand* (1903) and completed in the *Death of Cúchulainn* (1939). In his contribution Calimani interestingly notices a trend toward demythization that Yeats seemingly follows in the two Cúchulainn plays. Cúchulainn's absolute subjectivity, deriving from his inner tragedy, stands out in neat contrast with the low mimetic style of the Blind Man and the Fool, neutralising all pathos. The father-son struggle is reiterated and displayed as an obsessive motif, reaching its ultimate accomplishment in *Purgatory* (1938). In this play, in which Cúchulainn's role and function are taken from an Old Man killing his Boy, Calimani envisages the climax of Yeats's journey of demythization. Yeats's private mythology includes, from its very beginning, the roots of self-destruction since, in Calimani's words, old Irish heroes cannot survive the impact with the present time.

According to Elena Cotta Ramusino, the texts included in *Autobiographies* (1955) – a collection of texts written at different times, intentionally arranged not according to the order of composition but to the chronological growth of the subject, from early childhood to the Nobel prize award – are the narrative of how Yeats struggled to shape his own personal identity as well as that of the nation: in fact, life stories flourished in the Revival and post-Revival periods in Ireland, thus testifying to a widely shared belief in the correspondence of individual and national destiny. Yeats showed a life-long interest in the shaping of the self, achieved through a careful rearrangement of experience, and in *Autobiographies* he managed to provide a text in which everything, from syntactic to lexical choices, from his treatment of time and place to his presentation of friends and rivals, combines to give a composite portrait of himself from early expectations to final achievement.

The essays by Ann Saddlemyer and Enrico Reggiani deal with music from different perspectives. Saddlemyer's *William Butler Yeats, George Antheil, Ezra Pound, Friends and Music* inquires into Yeats's constant determination to relate his words to music and the involvement of many writers and musicians «in his search for the key». While in Rapallo staying near Ezra Pound, he met the young American composer and music theorist George Antheil, who became one of his converts. Yeats asked Antheil to provide incidental music for his allegorical chamber play *Fighting the Waves* (1934), and was probably influenced by Antheil's music in the composition of the seven Crazy Jane poems. Others followed, with Yeats continuing to expound and clarify his ambition. Reggiani's essay «*Rewording in melodious guise*»: *W.B.*

Yeats's *The Song of the Happy Shepherd and its Evolution Towards a Musico-Literary Manifesto* explores how *The Song of the Happy Shepherd* (1885, 1889, 1895) elaborates on the notion of poetry as song, contextualizing it against the background of its (para)textual history and evolution, and emphasizing its role as a music-literary manifesto. Yeats's *Song* can perform its variations on «the supreme theme of Art and Song» because its atavistically unifying 'sooth' is inborn to the very substance and features of its tropical mediation between poetry and song, thus making it neither classically «cracked» – i.e. burst asunder, fractured – like the merely «musical tune that Chronos sings», nor romantically 'primeval and wild' like *The Song of the Shepherd* in Thomas Moore's *To Joseph Atkinson, Esq. From Bermuda* (1780).

The next essays focus more sharply on theatrical themes, whether of influence, reform or collaboration. As is widely known, Yeats was deeply engaged in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction of Irish culture, even trying to import the Nō form of theatre from Japan. Having been introduced to the dialectical movement between life and death, reality and illusion, truth and deception featured in the Japanese Nō by his friend Ezra Pound, Yeats was enabled, as suggested by Klaus Peter Jochum, if not to elaborate a new genre, to foreground his poetic ideals and find «what he had always been looking for, an elitist form of drama». In *Music of a Lost Kingdom: W.B. Yeats and the Japanese Nō Drama*, Jochum draws attention to Yeats's habit of transferring other foreign sources to his own mental reality and, in particular, of shifting and adapting the Japanese Nō theatre to his poetical and symbolic system. By examining some of Yeats's later dance plays, written under the influence of Nō drama, Jochum remarks how Yeats, in his later plays, distances himself from the strict conventions previously borrowed from this dramatic form, as, for instance, in *At the Hawk's Well* (1916). This is why, in Jochum's view, it is possible to assume that Yeats's plays for dancers are in no way barren reproductions of the Nō aesthetic, but rather original Yeatsian attempts at revisiting and reinterpreting Japanese drama, as well as being interesting examples of contamination and hybridization of forms.

Along similar lines, an attempt to re-stage the first performance of Yeats's *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (Abbey Theatre, 1934), one of the four works in which he collaborated with the dancer-choreographer Ninette de Valois, has given Richard Allen Cave the opportunity to examine, from a new perspective, one of Yeats's endeavors to combine different arts. Starting from the assumption that no re-staging can be totally authentic, his analysis dwells on the innovative, performative devices and strategies adopted. Cave emphasizes the innovative way in which a drama mostly based on ballet may be able to narrate a complex narrative on its own, from which the performance text can be inferred, and discusses the limitations to be found in various kinds of extant data concerning performance. The essay also explores the many, diverse levels of collaboration on which a successful staging of one of Yeats's

dance-dramas depends, and interrogates, and to some degree re-defines, the meaning of the word collaboration.

Fabio Luppi devotes his paper, *The Smart Wizard: Literature as a Lie, Theatre as a Rite (Giorgio Manganelli reads W.B. Yeats)*, to an examination of the relationship between the literary critic and writer Giorgio Manganelli and Yeats. In *La letteratura come menzogna* (1985), Manganelli highlights his concept and vision of literature as a lie, conveying a key role and function to the «smart wizard» Yeats, in Manganelli's words (1965). Yeats's capability to deceive and challenge his readers is evident in his discerning use of rhetoric, in which the poetic word acquires a new autonomy. Luppi also emphasizes the connections between Yeats's and Manganelli's idea of theatre and their common attempt to reform it. «The hour of convention and decoration and ceremony is coming again», writes Yeats in *The Irish Dramatic Movement* (1923)⁷, finding an echo in Manganelli's *Cerimonia e artificio* (2000). By contrasting realism and neorealism, their experimental plays – Yeats's plays being a fundamental model for Manganelli's – give words a physical, concrete dimension and present dance as a heritage of primitive rituals and rites.

Viola Papetti's essay *All'ombra del mago astuto W.B. Yeats* deals with Yeats and Manganelli too, investigating Manganelli's deep interest in and appreciation of the Irish poet. She explores the upsetting vicissitudes the young Italian poet, translator and scholar faced in the late 1940s in having his translations of about eighty poems by Yeats printed. Offering three unpublished typewritten letters to Oreste Macrì, and some interesting holographic pages from his cahier «9 aprile 1954-19 gennaio 1956/Roma», and drawing on Manganelli's subtle examination of and comments on Yeats's works, Papetti also retraces Manganelli's attempts to come to terms with his enduring and conflictual feeling of affinity with the Irish poet, finally recognizing with Yeats, the «actor and wizard», a real kinship.

The two essays by Arianna Antonielli aim to approach Yeats's *A Vision* from two different perspectives. The aim of Antonielli is to explore Yeats's variously conceived and discussed philosophical work respectively from a traditional and digitally-oriented standpoint. In *The Theosophical Symbolism in Yeats's Vision*, Antonielli examines the influence of theosophy on Yeats's *A Vision*, investigating how theosophical methodologies helped him to discover and adopt a metaphysical approach in his own internalisation and representation of material and spiritual realities. In *Yeats's Digital Identity: Q&A with Web Editor Neil Mann*, Antonielli sets out to show the current form of migration that Yeats's poetics and symbolism is experiencing from paper to the digital environment. Antonielli's contribution draws attention to Neil Mann's attempt to analyse the complex system of *A Vision* on and through the web, by exploiting its hypertextual context, based on a linking strategy that enables any reader to go more deeply into its very structure. Like journeying in Dante's infernal circles, Mann's website is aimed at analysing each image and symbol in Yeats's esoteric system, which he created together with his wife, George, and developed in the

1925 and 1937 editions of *A Vision*. The interview also focuses on several issues concerning Yeats's contemporary digital identity, by providing insight into Mann's involvement with digital humanities and his interest in using an experimental hypertext-like format to leverage its communicative possibilities.

By trying to examine Yeats's talent, one would inevitably be introduced to more than one name, role, voice and even poetic vision, and focus instead on various symbols, images, concepts and traditions. The essays included in this miscellany are not intended to hammer Yeats's thoughts into a unity but, on the contrary, to give evidence of their perennial dialectic movements and they possibly offer new readings – visions, revisions and new visions – of a complex multifaceted literary system as that of Yeats is.

Our path through Yeats's world concludes with the reprint of nineteen forgotten translations from Yeats by Carlo Linati and Gabriele Baldini, where his rhythms and peculiar use of a vocabulary tending toward the visionary and dream are preserved, emphasised, and given a new life. After all, what is more suitable than translation, which is movement in itself and an «artifice of eternity»⁸, to show Yeats's everlasting breath?

Notes

¹W.B. Yeats, *A General Introduction for My Work* (1937), in Id., *Essays and Introductions*, Macmillan, London 1961, p. 307.

²W. Pater, *Plato and Platonism*, Macmillan, London 1893, pp. 166-167.

³W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, Macmillan, London 1961, p. 509.

⁴Quoted in J. Flannery, *W.B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theater*, Yale UP, New Haven 1976, p. 245.

⁵T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets*, Faber, London 1957, p. 254.

⁶S. Heaney, *Yeats as an Example?*, in Id., *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, Faber, London 1980, p. 110.

⁷W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats, Volume VIII: The Irish Dramatic Movement*, ed. by M. FitzGerald, R.J. Finneran, Scribner, New York 2003, p. 79.

⁸W.B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium* (1927), in Id., *Collected Poems*, Macmillan, London 1950, p. 40.