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Philip Edwards

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION:
THE KING'S THRESHOLD

In 1888, when Yeats was twenty-three, he wrote: 'To the greater poets everything they see has its relation to the national life, and through that to the universal and divine life . . . You can no more have the greater poetry without a nation than religion without symbols. One can only reach out to the universe with a gloved hand – that glove is one's nation, the only thing one knows even a little of.'¹ Yeats at this time owed much of his thinking about the relation of literature and nation to John O'Leary, the old Fenian, and he acknowledged his debt to O'Leary in a famous remark of 1889: 'He, more clearly than any one, has seen that there is no fine nationality without literature, and seen the converse also, that there is no fine literature without nationality.'²

We no longer use the word 'nationality' in the sense in which Yeats is using it. We should probably say 'nationalism', but 'nationality' was a wider and more useful word including both an individual's devotion and commitment to his nation, and a spirit of national aspiration. I am not concerned with the general truth of Yeats's propositions, but they form the text for this book because the interactions between drama and 'nationality' in Shakespeare's England and Yeats's Ireland are so vital and intense. It is impossible to think of Shakespeare's work without its preoccupation with nation – England or Britain. It is not only in the 'Histories' proper, nearly a third of his entire life-work taken up with dramatising English history, but also in plays like *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Cymbeline* that the idea of the English or British nation is of fundamental importance. Jonson's work, too, is meaningless except when seen as a relationship with nation. His plays became more and more rehearsals of a connection between himself and national authority which he then attempted to enact as masque-writer-in-chief at James's court. Of Yeats, Lady Gregory,

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and Synge, it is unnecessary to make the point; their art was of Ireland, deliberately and inalienably. As for the converse view, that there is no fine nationality without literature, the shape of English nationhood at the turn of the sixteenth century and Irish at the turn of the nineteenth, as it is received in our minds, is literary as well as political. 'England' means Spenser and Shakespeare as well as the Armada and Jamestown, as 'Ireland' means Yeats, Moore, and Synge as well as Parnell and Easter 1916.

Shakespeare's England and Yeats's Ireland have not been chosen for study just because the interaction between theatre and nation are there particularly strong and fruitful. It is a single subject that I propose, the beginning and the end of a single historical cycle. We have to look at the association of the theatre first with the beginnings of a nation and an empire, and then with the most important moment of its decline and disintegration. If there had been no inauguration of Great Britain, no conquest of Ireland, no institution of an overseas empire, all of which were seen in Shakespeare's lifetime, there would have been no separatist and nationalist movement needing its spiritual voice in Yeats's lifetime. With a strong cyclical view of history, Yeats saw the vigour of a renovated Irish culture, drawing strength from deep uncontaminated roots, superseding an effete, cosmopolitan, commercialised English culture, and creating a new beginning like the English Renaissance. It doesn't look like that now. The Irish literary renaissance was a golden sunset, not a golden dawn. Its originating cause was the policy of the late Tudors and early Stuarts in Ireland, and it provided the conclusion of that policy. Yeats, seeing himself as a new beginning more than an ending, paid the closest attention to the work of the writers of the English Renaissance as a model for the Irish renaissance, as we shall see in both this and a later chapter. This attention increases the unity of my subject: Shakespeare's plays are as alive and seminal in the later stages of the story as in the earlier. We shall see how Yeats built up Shakespeare in a Celtic image to authorise his own work, and then found this image directing him into radically new paths. Yeats and Shakespeare dominate this book. Shakespeare's influence on Yeats is clear enough and is written about often enough, but we also have to think in a way of Yeats's influence on Shakespeare. Yeats's perceptiveness about his Elizabethan cultural forbears is partly due to his so often seeing himself in their place, facing their very problems with relation to their society three hundred years after their time. Very often, therefore, I

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find myself looking at the Elizabethans with Yeats's eyes, and interpreting their work by the light of his perceptions. I think this is probably most clearly seen in the acceptance of the Yeatsian *schema* of a tension between the values of an older way of life and of a new one that is superseding it as a primary issue in Renaissance literature. The Shakespeare in this book is heavily influenced by Yeats.

There is another way of seeing the study of the theatre of Shakespeare's England and Yeats's Ireland as a single study. The daimon of this book is the Reformation. In the second chapter I deal with the strange paradox of a proud, self-sufficient, national Protestantism inspiring, nourishing, bullying, and in the end extinguishing the great professional drama of the Elizabethans and early Stuarts. Without the Reformation there is no new nation with a deified monarch at the centre for the new drama to cluster around. Without the Reformation there is no mercantile Protestantism to protest against the theatre as an offence against God and hard work. Without the Reformation there are no sovereign monarchs of the English kind to provide drama with its chief themes and images. Without the Reformation there is no growth of an anti-monarchical Puritanism which eventually destroys both crown and stage. Without the Reformation there is no need to secure new frontiers against Spain, no sense of Protestant destiny to expand first to Ireland and then to Virginia. The Elizabethan conquest of Ireland and the Jacobean pacification bore a markedly religious colour at the receiving end. Had the Irish been somehow induced to accept the new religion as the bewildered Welsh did, Irish intransigence would have eased and finally disappeared, for over the centuries the great subliminal strength of Irish intractability was the stubbornness of an outlawed religion which refused to be quenched and which took on more and more the features not of belief but of tribalism. The leaders of the new-fangled nationalist movements in Ireland which came in with the American and French Revolutions were high-minded Protestants – Grattan, Tone, Emmett, Davis, Parnell – but in the end the Protestant leadership was dispensable. George Moore and John Eglinton were early to warn the Anglo-Irish enthusiasts of their insecurity. On the great rock of Irish Catholic xenophobia, sometimes submerged but never much below the surface, the Irish national drama, created by the Protestants Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Synge, foundered, changed shape, and disappeared. Thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges. Extreme Puritanism snuffed out the great 'Elizabethan' drama in 1642; extreme Catholicism

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constantly opposed Yeats's theatre until finally it rendered the Abbey harmless by taking it over.

Anything approaching a thorough history of the relations between theatre and nation in Elizabethan England and post-Parnellite Ireland would be a monumental work of many volumes. In any case, the Irish side of it (in its obvious features) has been done nearly to death. The present study is a series of essays, a few shafts dug in different parts of the ground to try to show the range and complexity of a rich and absorbing subject. The lack of all pretension to comprehensiveness might be seen in the English section in the silence about Middleton's *A Game at Chess* and in the Irish section in the absence of any formal discussion of Lady Gregory's work in historical drama. Two projected chapters in the Irish section never got written. The first was to be on Irish national and historical drama before the Literary Revival, but the subject was jejune. The second was to be the relation between Pearse the playwright of *The Singer* and Pearse the actor in the Post Office; that was before I had read W. I. Thompson's outstanding book, *The Imagination of an Insurrection* (1967), which made a further examination an impertinence.

This book is not a history of its subject and all I can hope is that the methods I have adopted for treating my selected authors and topics may make students wish to apply them to the many authors and topics not noticed. Chapter 2 examines the rise of the professional drama in Elizabethan times, and its decline in the next century, in the context of the growth of the English nation and the cross-currents in the spirit of that nation; I begin with a look at a play in which Marston had a hand, *Histriomastix*, which is a remarkable attack on professional drama as a corrupting element in national life. My third chapter deals with the monarch in sixteenth-century drama: why the monarch is the principal image in that drama, how the queen herself is the focus of drama and of the lives of the dramatists (this I illustrate chiefly from Lyly), and how Marlowe treats kingship in his plays. In the fourth chapter I am concerned with England's imperial expansion, chiefly in Ireland and America, as it is reflected in historical plays and others. My chief texts are *Henry V*, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*, and *Eastward Ho!* Chapter 5 is a study of Shakespeare's English histories, and Chapter 6 a study of Ben Jonson in which I have more to say about his earlier comical satires and his masques than about his best-known comedies. Shakespeare and Jonson are inevitably studied as contrasts in the way in which a dramatist engages with his nation in

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his life and in his art. Chapter 7 attempts to show, in a study of Ford's *Perkin Warbeck* and Massinger's *Believe As You List*, how in Charles I's reign the age-old myth of the national leader who did not die and will one day return came to have new dramatic power as fears about Charles's leadership increased. Part Two, on Ireland, has three essays. The first examines Yeats's attempts to create a national drama and his preoccupation with Shakespeare's histories in the context of European cultural nationalism, and suggests an identification which is the main justification for writing this book. The second essay examines George Moore's failure to integrate himself with the national and literary movement. The final essay looks at some well-known Irish plays from O'Casey to Behan, and tries to characterise their despair.

One major theme in this book I wish to introduce here. That is the effort of the dramatist to occupy a central position in the political community, believing that without art a nation is sterile or deformed. This effort to move to the centre of political life invites the most serious challenge to the integrity of the artist and the independence of his art. The artist risks being seduced into flattering the leaders, conniving at dishonesty, and writing propaganda instead of poetry. Yeats's concern to be a voice for Ireland without compromising his art with the stridency of propaganda or the corrosions of political strife is of course a main topic of his verse and his prose writings. As usual, he transferred his own concerns to the Renaissance when he wrote his essay on Spenser in 1902.³ He saw the English dramatists as men who followed their imagination wherever it led them; Shakespeare was indifferent to the state. But Spenser, Yeats thought, allowed his instinctive leanings to be perverted towards state morality, a system of life which he felt it was his duty to support. This 'poet who gave his heart to the State' 'loved his Queen a little because she was the protectress of poets . . . but a great deal because she was the image of the State which had taken possession of his conscience'. Though Yeats is unfair to Spenser, and far too complacent about the dramatists, with his usual acumen he has located exactly the anguish of the Elizabethan writer at large, as we shall see it in Lyly and Jonson, with Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* as the index of Shakespeare's own awareness of the ease with which a poet becomes an establishment hypocrite (see pp. 153–4).

Yeats's dramatic image of the relation between the poet and the political authority was *The King's Threshold*, which he wrote in 1903

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with the collaboration of Lady Gregory. The action takes place on the steps before the palace of King Guaire at Gort. Seanchan the poet (pronounced Shanahan, Yeats tells us) is on a long-drawn-out hunger strike because the king has taken away the ancient right of the poets to sit by the king at his council table. That right was 'established at the establishment of the world', but this king claims that *he* is the source of all laws,

And that it was the men who ruled the world,
And not the men who sang to it, who should sit
Where there was the most honour. (ll. 48–50)

The dying poet gets his oldest pupil to repeat the lesson he has taught him, 'why poetry is honoured':

The poets hung
Images of the life that was in Eden
About the child-bed of the world, that it,
Looking upon those images, might bear
Triumphant children . . .
If the Arts should perish,
The world that lacked them would be like a woman
That, looking on the cloven lips of a hare,
Brings forth a hare-lipped child. (ll. 128–32; 136–9)

The action of the play is very much like that of *Samson Agonistes*: person after person enters to appeal to Seanchan to capitulate and eat, but he rejects them all, including the king. Finally it is the king who capitulates. 'He has the greater power.' He surrenders his crown to Seanchan.

It is but right if hands that made the crown
In the old time should give it when they will. (ll. 841 k–1)

This is the ending of the original version. But in 1922 Yeats changed it all: Seanchan died, with the ancient right of the poets still abrogated by an unmoved king. Yeats said, 'I had originally intended to end the play tragically.'⁴ Whether or not this is true, it is certain (as Peter Ure has argued)⁵ that there is greater artistic integrity in the revised version than in the original with the sudden reversal in the king's collapse. The reception of the poet back into the centre of power is strained and facile, and its false tone is to be explained not by an artistic misjudgement of Yeats (his own excuse) but by the sheer human improbability of the solution. All endeavours by poets to make their uncompromised art the moral force at the centre of an active

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political movement end in disillusion or self-deception, and Yeats knew this in his bones as early as 1903. In the revised ending, the oldest pupil directs them to bury Seanchan's body on the mountain-side:

And there he can sleep on, not noticing,
Although the world be changed from worse to worse,
Amid the changeless clamour of the curlew.

... ..
Not what it leaves behind it in the light
But what it carries with it to the dark
Exalts the soul: nor song nor trumpet-blast
Can call up races from the worsening world
To mend the wrong and mar the solitude
Of the great shade we follow to the tomb.

(ll. 886–8; 889–904)

Yeats derived the concept of the rightful position of the poet by the side of the king at council from two main sources: the traditional status of the Irish poet, and the theorising of Renaissance humanist-poets. To take the latter first, a notable article published by Thomas McAlindon in 1967, 'Yeats and the English Renaissance',⁶ showed how deeply Yeats was affected by the ideas of Spenser and Jonson about the ancient dignity of the poet's office and the proper rôle of poetry as the moral core of political power. (I analyse aspects of these ideas in Chapter 6). Yeats transferred the great humanist ideal of poetry as the civilising force in society to early twentieth-century Ireland to help him define his own situation as the leading artist in that troubled community. *The King's Threshold* becomes a companion play to those plays of Jonson which McAlindon points out were of special interest to Yeats, and which I pay particular attention to in the chapter on Jonson – those plays in which Jonson makes a dramatic projection of the intellectual's relation with the ruling power in the state, *Every Man Out of his Humour*, *Cynthia's Revels*, and *Poetaster*. McAlindon also quotes from an important letter of 1906 in which Yeats says, 'I am thinking of writing something on Ben Jonson, or more likely perhaps upon the ideal of life that flitted before the imagination of Jonson and the others when they thought of the Court.'⁷ Yeats's phrasing is extremely interesting, and one would give much to hear more. For Seanchan and for Jonson and for Yeats an ideal of a court which acknowledges the poet and radiates its standards of thought and conduct to the populace 'flitted before the imagination'.⁸ The real thing, as Yeats implies, is another matter.

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What I have to say of Jonson later is largely a matter of the vexatious gap between what Jonson's mind suggested the court ought to have been and what in fact James's court was.

Knowledge about the status and traditions of the ancient Irish poets was available to Yeats from all sorts of sources, chiefly perhaps from P. W. Joyce, to whom Yeats often turned in his youth for information on Gaelic literature and whose two-volume *Social History of Ancient Ireland* was published in 1903 and was known to Yeats at the time of writing *The King's Threshold*.⁹ Joyce's work shows the Gaelic *filidh* or poets in precisely that kinship with men of learning which Renaissance-humanist theory postulated, and strongly emphasises the respect in which they were held.

In Ireland the position of the poets constituted perhaps the most singular feature of society. It had its origin in the intense and universal veneration for learning . . . (1, p. 449)

The 'ollave' (the highest ranking in the learned professions) 'spent many years of preparation: and once admitted to the coveted rank, the guerdon was splendid; for he was highly honoured, had many privileges, and received princely rewards and presents' (1, p. 444). 'On state occasions the chief poet of all Ireland wore a precious mantle elaborately ornamented' (p. 447). 'An ollave sat next the king at table . . . and they had the same joint at dinner' (p. 459).

The best account of the Irish *filidh* is in Osborn Bergin's famous lecture of 1912, 'Bardic Poetry'.¹⁰ We must remember, he says, that the Irish *file* – or bard if we must so call him – 'was not necessarily an inspired poet'.

He was, in fact, a professor of literature and a man of letters, highly trained in the use of a polished literary medium, belonging to a hereditary caste in an aristocratic society, holding an official position therein by virtue of his training, his learning, his knowledge of the history and traditions of his country and his clan. He discharged . . . the functions of the modern journalist. He was not a song writer. He was often a public official, chronicler, a political essayist, a keen and satirical observer of his fellow-countrymen. At an earlier period he had been regarded as a dealer in magic, a weaver of spells and incantations, who could blast his enemies by the venom of his verse, and there are traces down to the most recent times of a lingering belief, which was not, of course, confined to Ireland, in the efficacy of a well-turned malediction.

In a more recent account, David Greene has noted that the lay order of poets, still a great force in Ireland in Elizabethan times, continued in association with the Church to exercise the ancient powers of the

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druids.¹¹ 'A poet's satire was as terrible a weapon as the Church's excommunication, as we can see from a treaty between Manus O'Donnell and O'Connor Sligo, in which both sanctions are treated as of equal weight.'

Much of the poetry of the *filidh* was in honour of their kingly patrons. Here are some extracts from a poem to Cathal Redhand, King of Connaught, by the thirteenth-century poet, Giolla Bride Mac Con Midhe. This rhapsody of the fertility of the land under her true king reminds us how deep and ancient was the tradition which consciously or unconsciously Shakespeare dipped into in writing the hymn of peace at the end of *Richard III* (see pp. 110–11).

Croghan's Redhand has rendered fruitful the green woods of the warm land . . .

His rule has put grain into the ground, it has made blossoms to sprout through the tips of the branches . . .

Ireland has recognised her ruler; she has brought forth the increase of a quarter in one month, so that the forest which trembled with age has put forth fruit again under his rule.

When comes the autumn, the fruit will reach Galway's prince of the swift steeds; ear upon ear, cluster upon cluster will there be from Kesh Corrin to Croagh.

The arms of each apple-tree are weighed to the ground in the land of Cathal of Cruachan-Aoi.¹²

Irish scholars seem agreed that the duty of praising those who so lavishly rewarded them led the poets into a good deal of routine adulation. Bergin said that 'all court poetry is more or less tainted by the vice of insincerity and formalism'. David Greene, speaking in 1958, said, 'Their weakness was that they were, by the very nature of their calling, as much the paid propagandists of the existing order of things as any writer east of the Iron Curtain.'¹³ Bergin quotes a wonderful poem in which a poet warns his fellows that hell lies ahead for both the flatterer and his patron:

O ye who fashion lies in verse, when the judgement day comes ye shall repent it; if His anger arise, the Creator of the elements will take vengeance for the false witness that ye bear against Him.

... ..

From every man from whom you win a reward, you have deserved hatred and anger; because of your praise, alas! his last end will be hell.¹⁴

Such awareness of the pitfalls dug for the poet on the steps of the palace is as redeeming for the Irish as Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* is for the Elizabethans. When the bards were in the sixteenth century

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facing what they knew was the possibility of their extinction in the challenge of the English invader, one can't help respecting the fervour with which they urged on the Gaelic chiefs to defend their lands and their ancient way of life. Here are some lines praising a man who stood firm as against one who defected:

A man who never loved English ways is Eóghan Bán, beloved of noble women. To English ways he never gave his heart: a harsh life he chose.

... ..

He has no longing for a soft bed, he had rather lie upon rushes. Pleasanter to Donnchadh's good son is a hut of rough poles than the battlements of a tower.

A troop of horse at the brink of a gap, a fierce fight, a struggle with footsoldiers, these are some of the desires of Donnchadh's son – and seeking battle against the foreigners!

How unlike are you to Eóghan Bán – they laugh at your foot on the stepping-stone. Pity that you have not seen your fault, O man who follow English ways.¹⁵

Here in Ireland in Elizabethan times was a breed of poets occupying precisely that position of respect and honour as counsellor and friend at a king's court so eagerly sought by the Elizabethans Lyly, Spenser, Jonson. What did they have to say about their fellows across the water? The Elizabethans had plenty of information about the Irish bards. Indeed there is no Irish source for our knowledge of the practices of the later poets so full and detailed as that provided by Thomas Smyth early in Elizabeth's reign,¹⁶ backed up by the fascinating woodcut of a poet reciting before his patron in John Derricke's *Image of Irelande*, 1581 (see Plate 1 and jacket). But the universal attitude of the Elizabethans – poets, dramatists, and all – to the Irish poets was one of contempt and hatred. The English view of those who were attempting to preserve their lands and way of life being that they were rebels (as I describe more fully in Chapter 4), those who by their verses stirred them to fight, encouraged them in battle, and celebrated their successes came in for peculiar execration. There is no greater nor more saddening testimony of the inability of the Elizabethans to put themselves even for a moment in the place of those who opposed their ambitions on the other side of the Irish Sea than the refusal of the poets to recognise their fellows, and to see that the rich and over-rich vein in which their own loyalty to the Queen flowed explained and justified (if their own was justified) the plangent heroics which they so scorned in the Irish. (On these matters, see further in Chapters 3 (pp. 39–40) and 4 (pp. 78–80).) The