

CHAPTER I

Ireland as Audience: 'To write for my own race'

Yeats's presence in Irish poetry is not distinct from his presence in modern poetry. To ignore the former, which includes the sum of Irish critical responses to his work, may be to misunderstand the latter. The very failings of Irish criticism, failings bound up with its extra-literary contexts, gave it a unique influence on Yeats himself. To quote the reflexive crux of 'The Fisherman' (1914):

All day I'd looked in the face
 What I had hoped 'twould be
 To write for my own race
 And the reality ...

Maybe a twelvemonth since
 Suddenly I began,
 In scorn of this audience,
 Imagining a man ... (CW1 148–9)

'The Fisherman', which has Synge in mind, consummates its own desire to write 'one poem' for an ideal Muse-reader. Insofar as a gap between actual and ideal audiences shaped Yeats's poetry, what 'my own race' missed or misread was constitutive. But insofar as (during and after the poet's lifetime) the same forces shaped Irish criticism, they weakened its ability and inclination to mediate 'Yeats'. Some signals have been jammed. This chapter intertwines three histories: how Yeats's Irish audience entered and changed his poetic structures; his hopes for an Irish criticism; Irish academic approaches (and reproaches) to Yeats.

Mockers and Hearers

In 1890, Yeats was a poet seeking an audience. He was also the embryonic modern poet who feared that it might not exist. The Rhymers' Club, which he co-founded in London, can be seen as heralding poetry's retreat

towards a specialised readership, as fostering the fin-de-siècle solipsism satirised by W.H. Auden in ‘Letter to Lord Byron’: ‘So started what I’ll call the Poet’s Party ... // How nice at first to watch the passers-by / Out of the upper window ...’¹ For Yeats, Ireland held out the lure of advance rather than retreat: ‘To please the folk of few books is ones great aim. By being Irish I think one has a better chance of it’ (*CLI* 246). He grasped Ireland’s potential as imaginative resource, unique selling point, and mass audience. Ten strenuous years later, he wrote: ‘Nature ... wanted a few verses from me, and [so] filled my head with thoughts with making a whole literature’ (*CW4* 6). Perhaps poetry always came first, but ‘making a whole literature’, and hence a whole audience, became inseparable from Yeats’s poetic ambition and horizon: ‘Does not the greatest poetry always require a people to listen to it?’ (158). His ownership of the Irish Literary Revival may be questioned, but not his identification with it. Whether upfront or behind the scenes, his poetry monitors its own reception together with that of the Revival. This causes reception as literary criticism to merge into cultural politics, into actual politics. It also compels Yeats, if he wants to address ‘Ireland in the Coming Times’ (*CWI* 46), to find ways of evoking a physically present community. The ‘implied readers’ of reception-theory, ideal and otherwise, are embodied as dramatic personae (as in ‘The Fisherman’) or images. Similarly, Yeatsian ‘audience’ affirms literature’s oral and aural roots. His poem ‘At Galway Races’ specifies ‘*Hearers* [my italics] and hearteners of the work’ (96), and the theatre fleshed out his ideal audience: ‘A nation should be like an audience in some great theatre – “In the theatre,” said Victor Hugo, “the mob becomes a people” – watching the sacred drama of its own history; every spectator finding friend and neighbour there, as we find the sun in the bright spot under the burning glass’ (*VP* 836).

Conversely, the people might become a mob, as in ‘At the Abbey Theatre’ (*Imitated from Ronsard*) (1911):

Dear Craoibhin Aoibhin, look into our case.
 When we are high and airy hundreds say
 That if we hold that flight they’ll leave the place,
 While those same hundreds mock another day
 Because we have made our art of common things,
 So bitterly, you’d dream they longed to look
 All their lives through into some drift of wings.
 You’ve dandled them and fed them from the book
 And know them to the bone; impart to us –
 We’ll keep the secret – a new trick to please.

Ireland as Audience

3

Is there a bridle for this Proteus
 That turns and changes like his draughty seas?
 Or is there none, most popular of men,
 But when they mock us, that we mock again? (*CWI* 95)

This verse epistle's pedigree (Ronsard, Shakespearean sonnet form) reinforces its polemic. In 1911, the Abbey Theatre, co-founded by Yeats and Lady Gregory, faced new attacks and problems. Audiences were falling off; other theatre groups were deemed closer to the national pulse; even friendly critics spoke of 'decline'.² Yeats fights back by noting the contradiction or bad faith, which approves neither the theatre's 'high and airy' symbolic dimension nor its fidelity to 'common things'. 'Craoibhin Aoibhin' was the Gaelic pen name of Douglas Hyde: folklorist, translator and Irish-language activist, first president of the Gaelic League (founded in 1893), later president of Ireland (1938–45). The Gaelic League, although not Hyde himself, had become increasingly aligned with 'advanced nationalism'. Hyde had recently refused to back the Abbey when an American tour of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* attracted Irish-American hostility. If 'Proteus' personifies recalcitrant audience as volatile groundlings, 'Craoibhin Aoibhin' personifies it as treason of the clerks.

'At the Abbey Theatre' marks or confirms a split between the two main tendencies of Irish cultural nationalism that had emerged in the 1890s: a revival based on Irish literature in English and a revival based on the Irish language. For artistic as well as strategic reasons, Yeats always promoted cross-fertilisation between the two. He associated Hyde's work with key terms of his early aesthetic. In 1891, he wrote of Hyde's *Beside the Fire: A Collection of Irish Gaelic Folk Stories*: '[S]uch stories are not a criticism of life, but rather an extension thereby much more closely resembling Homer than ... a social drama by Henrik Ibsen'; in 1893, he praised Hyde's translations in *Love Songs of Connacht* for revealing a world where '[e]verything was so old that ... every powerful emotion found at once noble types and symbols for its expression' (*UPr* 187, 285). Yet Yeats would eventually fix Hyde as a defector from poetry to prose, from literature to rhetoric, from a style derived from 'that delicate emotional dialect of the people' to the 'coarse reasoning' required by Gaelic League propaganda (*Mem* 54). Perhaps the writing was already on the wall in 1892, when Hyde (like Yeats, an Irish Protestant) gave his influential lecture: 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland'. While praising the lecture, Yeats anxiously and publicly asked: 'Can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English

in language?’ (*CL1* 338). ‘At the Abbey Theatre’ condenses, encodes and continues a series of clashes over ‘a national literature’. The first line sets the ironic tone by juxtaposing Hyde’s fey *alter ego* (‘Pleasant Little Branch’) with forensic appeal as to a man of the world and rival cultural entrepreneur: the officialese of ‘look into our case’ implies that Hyde the artist has been corrupted into an institution. Later, ‘dandled’ and ‘fed’ hint that he has infantilised his followers with populist pap. This was a public quarrel. In a verse counter-attack Hyde accused Yeats of excessive complexity, of ‘bewildering’ Irish audiences ‘with multitudinous things’, whereas: ‘all our offerings are at one shrine. / Therefore we step together’.³

Hyde’s ‘one’ and ‘we’ seem calculated to affront Yeats’s sundered ‘we’ and ‘they’: the Abbey’s, and his own, national claims. In the dialectics of *The Green Helmet* (1912 edition), ‘At Galway Races’ (1908) counterpoints ‘At the Abbey Theatre’ (my italics) by symbolising cultural ‘oneness’ in or on Yeatsian terms. Here ‘Delight makes all of the one mind’ as skilled performance bonds with the ‘crowd that closes in behind’ (*CW1* 96). Not so in the centrifugal ‘At the Abbey Theatre’, where art and audience fail to meet. Freighted with envy as well as irony, ‘most popular of men’ echoes ‘What is Popular Poetry?’ (1901) – an essay in which Yeats recalls his youthful desire ‘to find a style and things to write about that the ballad-writers might be the better’. Put less selflessly, he had coveted the audience of the patriotic verse which, in the *Nation* newspaper, had propagated the Young Ireland movement founded by Thomas Davis in the 1840s. This bid having failed, he concluded that ‘what we call “popular” poetry never came from the people at all’ but from the latter-day historical balladry of Sir Walter Scott and Lord Macaulay, from British (Anglo-Scottish) middle-class taste. Macaulay’s ‘The Armada’ begins: ‘Attend, all ye who list to hear our noble England’s praise’. For Yeats, a poem like Davis’s ‘Nationality’ changed the country, but not the structures: ‘May Ireland’s voice be ever heard / Amid the world’s applause!’ Thus Ireland, too, has ‘people who have unlearned the unwritten tradition which binds the unlettered ... to the beginning of time and to the foundation of the world, and who have not learned the written tradition which has been established upon the unwritten’. Prefiguring the theatre’s ‘mockers’, such readers ‘mock all expression that is wholly unlike their own’ (*CW4* 6–8). ‘Fed them from the book’ implies that the Gaelic League’s mix of grammar and ideology, its neglect of literature, has replicated Young Ireland’s instrumentalism. Hyde may have taken ‘step together’ from the title of a Young Ireland ballad.

By 1911, Yeats had long made a virtue of unpopularity. But he inwardly reclaimed a national audience by locating the true ‘people’ in a poetic

Ireland as Audience

5

bonding of written and unwritten, the Rhymers' Club and the folk: '[The] old Irish peasant love-songs [Hyde's versions] foreshadow a poetry whose intensity of emotion, or strangeness of language, has made it the poetry of little coteries' (*UP2*, 188). The contexts of 'At the Abbey Theatre' place Young Ireland verse, the Gaelic League and Victorian literary values in a sin-bin outside this creative orbit. From the 1890s to the 1910s, Yeats's difficulties with Irish audiences reinforced his sense of sharing in the Symbolist 'revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric' (see Chapter 3): 'The poetry that comes out of the old wisdom must turn always to religion and to the law of the hidden world, while the poetry of the new wisdom must not forget politics and the law of the visible world; and between these poetries there cannot be any peace' (*UP2* 193). This was, in part, a war about modern poetry, or for modern poetry, fought on Irish soil. Yeats's hostility to the (Irish and British) middle class was aesthetic before it was aristocratic, and it hinged on poetry's loss of audience to verse and worse. 'At Galway Races' yearns for the 'good attendance' supposedly available 'Before the merchant and the clerk / Breathed on the world with timid breath' (*CWI* 96).

With *The Green Helmet* (1910, 1912) and *Responsibilities* (1914), an overtly 'critical' voice enters Yeats's lyric, its tones deployed to defend the aesthetic principles at the core. Hitherto such a voice, the medium of epistle and epigram from Horace to Pope, had been alien to his poetry if not his prose. Titles like 'On hearing that the Students of our New University have joined the Agitation against Immoral Literature' or 'To a Poet, who would have me Praise certain Bad Poets, Imitators of His and Mine' (this poem ends 'was there ever dog that praised his fleas?') are critical essays in themselves (*CWI* 93). Pent-up anger spills over from Yeats's prose criticism. As his poems take on other critics who 'mock', 'agitate' or 'praise', they necessarily have dealings with 'the law of the visible world', with rhetoric and exteriority. But Yeatsian rhetoric remains at odds with Victorian versifying because it protects interiority and functions in a classical sense. His poem 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation' defines achieved style as uniting 'passion and precision' (94). Yeats's oratorical strategies, the emergent 'powerful and passionate syntax' that fractures the incantatory cadences of his early poetry, parallel his rebukes from the Abbey stage (*CW5* 212). Conversational shorthand ('they'll', 'You've') adds a 'common' touch. By engaging so directly with audience, he tests poetry in the world of action, the modern world, not just an Irish world. The polemical syntax of 'At the Abbey Theatre' breaks with strict sonnet structure. Line 8 both pre-empts the 'turn' and overrides the quatrain with a new sentence.

This accentuates the strong rhyme 'look' / 'book', which prepares for the repeated 'mock'. Similarly, the syntactical cohesion of lines 11–14 adds impetus and bite to the movement from the third quatrain to the final couplet (more Pope than Shakespeare). By internalising the auditoria of their performance, Yeats's poems sharpen their sensitivity to the 'real' world, to 'the bright spot under the burning glass'. 'At the Abbey Theatre' is a title that specifies the poem's own theatricality, its sense of itself on a stage or platform – for Yeats, the Abbey was both – its status as 'syillogistic public argument' (to quote Jahan Ramazani).⁴ The syllogism of lines 2–7 exposes the illogic that the poem targets. This speaker-as-advocate closes with rhetorical questions – a construction that would prove versatile for Yeats. But a reflexive subtext leaves further questions hanging, as the final couplet glances back over the poem's genre, its critical voice, its 'mockery'. To return mock for mock may be to admit defeat.

Yeats's much-quoted aphorism in 'Anima Hominis' (1917), 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry' (*CW* 5 8), should be taken neither as a watertight distinction nor as evidence that the quarrel between these quarrels – as poetic modalities – was over. In his 1890s battles with the Irish political mind (see below), battles complicated by his envy of its power, Yeats's generic antagonist had been the 'orator', for whom 'there are none but certainties' (*CLI* 372). He particularly feared the lawyer J.F. Taylor who trampled on 'convictions ... founded not upon any logical argument but upon a series of delicate perceptions' (*Mem* 66). In 1893, defending the view that 'partisan politics' had damaged the Irish intellect, Yeats said that a writer should 'endeavour to become a master of his craft, and be ever careful to keep rhetoric, or the tendency to think of his audience, rather than of the Perfect and the True, out of his writing' (*CLI* 371). Yet, by 1906 he was proposing that 'oratory' (now distinguished from 'rhetoric'), rather than Walter Pater's 'music', was 'the type of all the Arts': 'I in my present mood am all for the man who, with an average audience before him, uses all means of persuasion – stories, laughter, tears, and but so much music as he can discover on the wings of words' (*CW* 4 196). *The Green Helmet* marks the release of Yeats's repressed orator: his acquisition of verbal armour to protect 'delicate perceptions' – if at possible cost to their delicacy.

In *Responsibilities*, audience moves centre stage. The vocative case is prominent as poems invoke or provoke, assign praise or blame. This poet-orator finds himself in an agora where art and politics interpenetrate; where audience-defined poetics have been given a further twist by Dublin's reluctance to fund a gallery for Sir Hugh Lane's gift of French

Ireland as Audience

7

Impressionist paintings. At one pole ‘audience’ is the caricature ‘Paudeen’; at the other, it is Renaissance Urbino and Ferrara, merged with Coole Park where Yeats’s patron Lady Augusta Gregory (Lane’s aunt) lived. As interventions in a row about ‘reception’, Yeats’s Lane poems have themselves been received as sectarian or colonialist rather than simply elitist. But when ‘September 1913’ contrasts the gallery’s opponents with ‘Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone’, the Protestant as well as Catholic bourgeoisie are charged with betraying such (Protestant) patriots (*CWI* 107). Yeats counted the ‘pious Protestants of my childhood’ among Irish philistines, and knew that the ‘few educated men’ were by no means all Protestant (*VP* 819). But weight of numbers and the capacity to mobilise them ensured that the terms of opposition to Lane, as to the Revival, were largely Catholic. The *Irish Catholic* led the campaign against the gallery. As mass culture became linked with the rising Catholic middle class, ‘educated’ Irish Protestants began to assume the mystique of minority, tempting Yeats to connect two kinds of tradition: ‘Every day I notice some new analogy between [the] long-established life of the well-born and the artist’s life. We come from the permanent things and create them’ (*Mem* 156). ‘Analogy’ is always risky, and this one would get riskier.

Yet tradition in *Responsibilities* can work against the binary ‘quarrel with others’ that threatens to simplify Yeats’s poetry. The opening poems address different auditors. A genealogical prologue, which calls assorted ‘old fathers’ into ‘ear-shot’, is followed by ‘The Grey Rock’, which seeks to please the ‘ears’ of the Rhymers’ Club poets ‘with whom I learned my trade’: poets committed to the principles of Aestheticism (see Chapter 3). These dead poets, especially Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson, are told: ‘*You kept the Muses’ sterner laws, / And unrepenting faced your ends*’ (*CWI* 101–2). In poems haunted by Synge’s death (in 1909), the ideal audience often seems to be dead. But, as ghostly auditors rededicate Yeats’s poetry to life and art, they raise its sights above more immediate contexts. They turn the past into posterity. The ever-receptive Rhymers are ahead of the poetic and critical audiences indicted in the closing poems of *Responsibilities*. In ‘A Coat’ (see p. 81), Yeats marks how his poetry has moved on, by again scorning his imitators, by depicting them as ‘fools’ stuck in his own past. This powerful literary-critical squib is followed by an involuted epilogue, which internalises ‘Coole’ as tradition (‘ancient’), literary solidarity, intelligent reception, therapeutic asylum, artistic survival:

While I, from that reed-throated whisperer
 Who comes at need, although not now as once

A clear articulation in the air,
 But inwardly, surmise companions
 Beyond the fling of the dull ass's hoof,
 – Ben Jonson's phrase – and find when June is come
 At Kyle-na-no under that ancient roof
 A sterner conscience and a friendlier home,
 I can forgive even that wrong of wrongs,
 Those undreamt accidents that have made me
 – Seeing that Fame has perished this long while,
 Being but a part of ancient ceremony –
 Notorious, till all my priceless things
 Are but a post the passing dogs defile. (127)

That one-sentence sonnet-soliloquy, with its syntactic inversions, loops and parentheses, contrasts with the syllogistic thrust of 'At the Abbey Theatre'. Witness the puzzling distance between 'I' and 'surmise', 'me' and 'Notorious'. Taken together, the sonnets suggest that Yeats's interpenetrating 'quarrels' have made his lyric stereophonic. This sonnet's own difficulty is bound up with hearing difficulties. Hostile audiences have reciprocally inhibited 'articulation', driven inwards the 'whisper' of inspiration: a wistful recall of *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). Yeats holds in uneasy tension the Muse's comings and goings, the ideal 'companions' that poetry seems to promise, artistic and critical rigour ('A sterner conscience'), the rebuffs that have reduced 'all my priceless things' to 'but a post the passing dogs defile' ('dull ass's hoof' alludes to George Moore). Despite 'forgive', the syntax highlights 'Notorious' and gives 'defilement' the last word, thus leaving open the psychic wounds, the 'wrongs', inflicted by audience. The poem was originally called 'Notoriety'. In *Yeats and the Masks of Syntax*, Joseph Adams notes how its 'sharply interrupted' sentence 'seems to undergo disarticulation'.⁵ Yeats may have come close to this too.

Responsibilities neither resolves, nor resolves into, antithetical versions of audience. The structures generated by the kind of reception that seemed to require 'a thermometer of abuse' (*CL3* 659) paved the way for what Yeats would later call 'antinomies'. The ideal audience is itself deconstructed in 'The People' (1915), where he questions his need to be thanked 'for all that work', semi-parodies utopian Urbino ('unperturbed and courtly images'), and digests Maud Gonne's rebuke: 'never have I ... / Complained of the people' (*CWI* 151). As Yeats internalises audiences, and thereby oratory, his poetry becomes dialectical at the level of syntax – with consequences for the angle of poem to poem and book to book. (My Postscript discusses some implications of his statement 'As I altered my syntax I altered my intellect' [*CW2* 24].) This fuels his special power to remake his lyric.

Ireland as Audience

9

With irony, 'Words' attributes Yeats's mobile artistic horizon to Gonne's (Ireland's) misreadings: 'every year I have cried, "At length / My darling understands it all, / Because I have come into my strength, / And words obey my call"' (*CWI* 89). More obliquely, 'Paudeen' suggests how a struggle with audience has affected Yeats's structures. The audience's 'fumble' causes the poet's 'stumble':

Indignant at the fumbling wits, the obscure spite
 Of our old Paudeen in his shop, I stumbled blind
 Among the stones and thorn-trees, under morning light;
 Until a curlew cried and in the luminous wind
 A curlew answered; and suddenly thereupon I thought
 That on the lonely height where all are in God's eye,
 There cannot be, confusion of our sound forgot,
 A single soul that lacks a sweet crystalline cry. (108–9)

'Paudeen' is less 'the people' than the bourgeoisie ('shop') that French poets could scorn or shock without running into ethno-sectarian sands. 'Fumbling wits' and 'obscure spite' sum up the history of obstructive reactions to the Revival (see below). The clashing sounds of the initial hexameters mimic a 'stumbling' block to art's pulse and vision that has again passed from audience to creator. Then a synaesthetic 'luminous wind' reinstates full sensory and cognitive life (inspiration) – the ideal conditions for transmission and reception. This image, which invites the poem's readers to become ideal readers, is set between the crying curlews at the poetic epicentre, at the point of reciprocity, at the point where chiasmatic syntax opens out across the line: 'a curlew cried and in the luminous wind / A curlew answered'. This, in turn, enables the reflexively 'thoughtful' structure of the last three lines: a poem within a poem that culminates in harmonious rather than clashing sound effects.

Yeatsian ascents to a 'lonely height' figure sublimation more than denial. The trope implies that, by engaging with inflective audience, poetry acquires antibodies or rhythmic muscles that strengthen its 'cry'. Perhaps exposure to 'the law of the visible world' has underlined the necessary 'sternness' of the Muses' laws, of critical conscience and lyric form. The auditorium of *Responsibilities* musters differently pitched voices: 'loud service to a cause', 'reed-throated whisperer', 'brazen throat', 'lover's music', 'an old foul mouth', a beggar's 'humorous happy speech'. In 'Paudeen', which condenses the dynamics of other poems, 'confusion of our sound' includes the poet's own 'indignant' or critical voice. But this very confusion intensifies the 'pure crystalline cry' that ideally connects poetry and audience.

Making an Irish Criticism

Yeats's critical prose, first of his media to be shaped by the quest for audience, has always competed with other approaches to Irish literature. That includes the contemporary academy with its drive, even where no special axes are being ground, to historicise, contextualise, correct and deconstruct his versions of the Literary Revival. Yet a poet announcing a new movement, inventing traditions for it or sculpting its (his) legacy, deserves some latitude. Yeats's 'neglected early critical writings', to quote Roy Foster,⁶ are foundational to the writing of Irish literary history; and 1890s Ireland involved him in a conflict between aesthetic and historical-political priorities, which still occupies Irish literary studies. The arguments into which Yeats was drawn also test the wider remit of literature and criticism. Half-innocently, he cast poetry into a political bear pit. He hit a nerve, and goes on hitting it.

Throughout his career, Yeats shuttled between poet-critic and critic-poet. But during the 1890s he was also the critic in a more everyday sense: reviewer, journalist, editor, lecturer, evangelist. He constantly pressed the need for the Revival to be backed by indigenous criticism. Without it, English critics would still determine views of Irish literature; Irish critics would be 'forced to criticise Irish books in English papers' (*CLI* 417). In 'Poetry and Tradition' (1907), Yeats even puts criticism first. He describes his 'school of writers' as having sought 'to begin a more imaginative tradition in Irish literature, by a criticism at once remorseless and enthusiastic' (*CW4* 187). Given the patriotic immunity of Young Ireland verse, remorselessness was the harder to instil. In November 1894, Yeats took a public stand, which was more than self-serving: 'The true ambition is to make criticism as international, and literature as National, as possible.' Rejecting the view that Irish writers should ignore 'the judgment of every public but the public of Ireland', and citing American snubs to Whitman, he insisted: '[I]t is often necessary for an original Irish writer, to appeal, first not to his countrymen, but to that small group of men of imagination and scholarship which is scattered through many lands and many cities' (*CLI* 409). Here Yeats again opts for purism after finding populism unviable. From the outset, he had to argue on behalf of literature itself, 'almost the most profound influence that ever comes into a nation', and of Irish literature in English, let alone advocate or advance indigenous literary criticism (398). Ireland circa 1890 was not quite the literary or critical vacuum that Yeats makes out. But he was radically reconceiving – or conceiving – 'Irish literature', and his differences with other cultural