

**W.B. Yeats: A Poet of Irish Reality**

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**Abstract**

As an Irish poet and as a man of genuine nationalist feelings Yeats was obliged to write on Irish themes. He chose to go back to the rich store house of Irish myths and legends. That was the political position for the Irish poet to adopt. But the point is that the aesthetics he chose for himself considerably qualified his politics.

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As an Irish poet and as a man of genuine nationalist feelings Yeats was obliged to write on Irish themes. He chose to go back to the rich store house of Irish myths and legends. That was the political position for the Irish poet to adopt. But the point is that the aesthetics he chose for himself considerably qualified his politics. One has to refer to the following lines to know how his politics was qualified by his romantic affiliations:

I have noticed some things about my  
poetry I did  
Not know before, in his process of  
correction: for  
Instance, that it is almost all a flight  
into fairyland  
From the real world and a summons to  
that flight.  
The charus to the 'stolen child' sums it  
up- that it  
Is not the poetry of insight and  
knowledge, but of  
Longing and complaint the cry of the  
heart

Against necessity. I hope some day to  
alter that

And write poetry of insight and  
knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

The Irish myths had taken a strong hold on the Irish mind. It generally happens like that when a nation is held in subjugation, and the freedom of registering protest is curbed.

The Wandering of Oisín is a fairly long poem in the narrative mode. The staple of the poem is the myth of Oisín who moves from one exhausive Island to another in pursuit of a kingdom proper to his stature. His wanderings are prompted by Niamh, a woman of enchanting loveliness; she is the daughter of Aengus and Edian, she feels a violent passion for Oisín. The point is that it is not any real kingdom that the wanderings of Oisín take him. Once again it is a fairyland kingdom that Yeats creates for his hero:

Caoilte, and Conan, and Finn were  
there

When we followed a deer with our  
baying hounds,  
With Bran.Sceolan, and Lunair,  
And passing the Firbolg's burial  
mounds  
Came to the cairn heaped grassy hill  
When passionate Maeve is stony- still;  
And found on the dove – born lady,  
who rode  
On a horse with bridle of fundrinny;  
And like a sunset were has lips,  
A stormy sunset on doomed ships;  
A citron colour gloomed in her hair.<sup>2</sup>

Niamh is no ordinary woman seeking her fulfillment in love. She is a symbolic figure, much like the enchanting female figures created by Spenser. When asked what brought Niamh to the land of Oisín from across the seas, she says:

I loved no man, though Kings  
besought.  
Until the Danaam poets brought  
Rhyme that rhymed upon Oisín's  
name.  
And now I am dizzy with the thought  
Of all that wisdom and the fame  
Of battles broken by his hands.  
Of stories huled by his words  
That are like coloured Asian birds  
At evening in their rainless lands.<sup>3</sup>

It is in a dream like situation that the love of enchanted Oisín and enchanting Niamh is acted out. The myth says that they visit three Islands in their quest for love. These are (a) the Island of Living, (b) the Island of victories, and (c) the Island of forgetfulness. We are left in no doubt that these are all symbols structures set up to show the different facets of Oisín. What is significant and we have noted it earlier is that the three

islands, in each of which Oisín spends one hundred years are designed as distractions. Oisín, ancient Ireland's ideal ruler, stands lost in a world of dreams. He forgets the mission and the purpose for which the gods have chosen him. However, the time comes when the magic breaks. The details of his forever life break in upon his memory. Oisín is brought back to the land of reality.

“Ode to a Nightingale”, or for that matter “Endymions” are not poems of escape or forgetfulness. The poems eventually find their protagonists return life at a higher point. The same thing happens in the wanderings of Oisín. Niamh takes the protagonist to the magical lands of living, Victories and Forgetfulness, Hone Remarks:

The poem was vastly improved in later revision to which many of greatest delights are due. Even Then some felt that their pleasure in the colour And imaginative energy of the narrative was interrupted by the theosophical hints and suggestions, and asked whether it was in this manner that Irish saga, Objective as the Greek, endowed things with dream shape and magical significance. One critic saw in the poem the English romantic movement in process of Decomposition.<sup>4</sup>

Let us consider these lines from the “Wandering of Oisín”.

But now the moon like a white rose  
shove  
In the pale west, and the sun's rim  
sank,  
And clouds arrayed their rank on rank  
About his fading crimson ball:  
The floor of Almuin's hasting hall

Was not more level than the sea,  
As, full of loving fantasy,  
An with low murmurs, we rode on.  
Where many a trumpet twisted shell  
That in immoral silence sleeps  
Dreaming of her own melting hues,  
Her golds, her ambers, and her blues,  
Pierced with soft light the shallowing  
deeps.  
But now a wondering land breeze  
came  
And a far sound of feathery quires:  
It seemed to blow from the dying  
flame,  
They seemed to sing in the smoldering  
fires.<sup>5</sup>

The lines, as Hone suggests, are  
“reminiscent of the verse of  
Coleridge”.<sup>6</sup> There is a soft touch about  
Coleridge which is not conducive for the  
writing of Saga.

“Forlorn” is one the key words in Keats’s  
Poetry.

Think of these lines from “Ode to a  
Nightingale”.

Forlorn !the very word is like a bell  
To tall the back from three to my sole  
self !Adieu !  
The fancy cannot – cheat so well  
As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.

Yeats found the story of Oisín in translations  
of the old Gaelic legends. He seems to have  
been immensely interested in the subject. He  
wrote to Katherine Tynan:

I was then living a quite harmonious  
poetic life.  
Never thinking out of my depth  
always

Harmonious, narrow, claim. Taking  
small  
Interests in people but most ardently  
moved by the more minute kinds of  
natural beauty.....

In the poem entitled “Adam’s Curse” Yeats  
spells out his aesthetics in emphatic terms:-

I said, A line will take us hours  
maybe;  
Yet if it does not seem a moments  
thoughts,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been  
naught.  
Better go down upon your marrow –  
bones.

The lines from “The Wanderings of Oisín”  
make evident the meticulous care Yeats took  
to choose his words and place them in their  
right order. “The Gray-Rock” also, the  
experience of love plays an important part.  
The poem’s protagonist is Cúchulain, one of  
the most heroic figures of ancient Irish  
legends. For this heroic mortal death in  
battle is far more welcome than a life of ease  
and love. Thus it is that Aoife “the rock born  
daughter of the gods” fails in her passion for  
Cúchulain:

Thereon a young man met his eye.  
Who said, “Because she held me in  
Her love, and would not have me die,  
Rock-nurtured Aoife took a pin,  
And pushing it into my shirt,  
Promised that for a pin’s sake.

Whitaker notes that Cúchulain, as Yeats  
designed him, is “Solar hero, persona of the  
poet, fighter of the sea, and lover of lunar  
beauties”, all rolled into one.<sup>7</sup> Cúchulain is a  
towering figure in all respect. He could  
function as an archetype to represent the  
revival of Ireland, and its rise to glory. It

might be useful to refer here to the poem dealing with the brave heart and sad fortune of King Gall. "The Madness of King Gall" is based on the interesting tale of Gall's madness following a battle he undertook to put to the maranders from the neighboring land to sword.

It sat and mused and drank sweet wine;  
A heroman came from inland valleys,  
Crying, the purates drove his swine.  
To fill then dark breaked hollow galleys  
I called my battle-breaking men

And my loud brazen battle-cars  
From rolling vale and rivery glen;  
And under the blinking of the stars  
Fell on the purates by the deep,  
And hurled them in the gulph of sleep:  
These hands won many a torque of gold.<sup>8</sup>

Jeffares, A. Norman on the poem makes clear what it is all about; "this poem was frequently rewritten; it is about a third century Irish king whom Yeats described in a note as hiding himself in a valley near Cork where it is said all the madmen in Ireland would gather were the free".<sup>9</sup>

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