

No Country for Young Men : the Lesson of W.B.Yeats *Sensei* (Among University Students)

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Sensei literally means “one who was born before” and in the cultures of the Far East influenced by Confucian values it is an appellation of respect for those of an older generation who have achieved a certain position in society. Thus the word has become synonymous for “teacher”. W.B. Yeats, a pre-eminent poet of the twentieth century, may be addressed accordingly since much may be learned by young Japanese students from the life and work of a poet of his stature.

Although his life was not of especial longevity (1865-1939), the fact that it spanned both the 19th and 20th century means that W.B. Yeats (WBY) experienced enormous changes in society that were a source of great stimulation for his thinking as well as a cause of considerable stress for his spirit. Apart from the times in which he lived, the places where he spent his life, mainly Ireland and England, also complicated and enriched a life wedded to the fateful destinies of these two contentious polities.

Thus anyone who wishes to make a study of the man and his work must be prepared to ascend the twin peaks of culture and history that stand between the student and the master. The journey entails finding one's way through the labyrinthine thickets of Ireland's modern history (Brown, 1981) and negotiating the treacherous rapids of Anglo-Irish relations. The mists of Ireland's mythological past, the enchanted forests of Celtic folklore, the fairy world of blandishments and blarney, not to

mention the fog and miasmic fumes of the occult, are all obstacles to be passed as well as at times tempting places to linger when ascending to the summit of his creation - the poetry.

WBY can be a difficult and daunting poet and many will lack the patience and stamina to make the journey along the winding road of his biography or not possess the courage and skills to scale the heights of his verse to find a meaningful experience.

We live today in a world vastly different from the one WBY knew and while it may be true that more people read poetry today, those who do so are still a distinct minority. For young people especially, reading poetry is unfashionable yet while deploring their lack of enthusiasm for verse it is salutary to be reminded that even such a fine, discriminating mind as possessed by Virginia Woolf once balked at the prospect of reading poetry, as she noted in her diary on August 15th 1924:

By the way, why is poetry wholly an elderly taste? When I was twenty [...] I could not for the life of me read Shakespeare for pleasure....It is poetry that I want now - long poems....I want the concentration and the romance, & the words all glued together, fused, glowing; have no time to waste any more on prose....Now it's poetry I want, so I repeat like a tipsy sailor in front of a public house.

Reluctantly one is forced to concur that poetry is "no country for young men (or women) " ; yet it behooves every teacher of literature to make the effort of planting seeds in the hope of a future crop, to at least risk boring the majority for the sake of the lucky few who will one day look back with gratitude to their sensei as they remember the first faltering steps of their intellectual odyssey, the excitement of their adventures with language on their voyage of discovery leading them

toward " the concentration and the romance " that thrilled the heart and mind of Virginia Woolf.

Anyone wishing to explore modern English verse cannot avoid the towering corpus of WBW's poetry built on the shoulders of great predecessors such as Blake, Shelley, Keats (Bloom, Young) yet apart from the obvious difficulties of deciphering the intricacies of his poetic language or making sense of the complexities of his life and times, much may be gained by even a casual acquaintance with his life and work.

The young WBW wrote romantic, ethereal verse clotted with mystifying symbolism or depicted scenes redolent of Pre-Raphaelitism, made sombre vatic pronouncements, sometimes bordering on the histrionic or confected uninspiring, artificial images because his timidity and tenuous connection to the real world forced him to write from a position of wavering introspection tormented and vitiated by feelings of inferiority and self-loathing. Much of this early verse could hardly inspire contemporary youth indifferent to lost Celtic lore or romantic heroes and symbols born of sexual frustration. The famous opening line of "Sailing to Byzantium" "That is no country for old men" expresses the poet's desire to put behind him the idylls of youth, a world foreign to the emotions and experience of a man awakening to the "terrible beauty" of reality which infuse some of the best of his verse. Ironically, the later poems which may be considered "no country for young men" are precisely the ones from which the young heart and mind can learn most, not only obviously from the wisdom of a sensei, one born before them, but also from listening to the magic sounds of the poetry.

Although WBW's public persona developed quickly as he learned to hide his insecurities by striking a number of poses, espousing Irish nationalism and Celtic revivalism and masking his uncertain identities (famously explicated by Richard Ellmann), battling his personal dae-

mons, he struggled desperately for mastery over himself; his unceasing search for certainty, his gradual accommodation with reality and the process of self-acceptance proceeded at a different, slower pace in the face of several setbacks in his private life; especially the long agony of his sexual self-flagellation for his belle dame sans merci, Maud Gonne, his embroilment in the cauldron of Irish politics, and not least his constant anxieties about the future menaced as he saw it by the "revolt of the masses" and the ever growing tide of materialism and mass popular culture riding on the rapid advances in science and technology, inimical in his view to the human spirit and the life of the imagination. Such drastic changes in modern life following in the wake of the spreading chaos of revolution and war posed a real threat to his mandarin world of bourgeois culture; his fears were quite natural for a man of the nineteenth century and of his class having to confront the furious pace of change and the frightening events of the new, the most destructive century in history.

That WBY heroically mustered his mind and spirit to meet the challenge of the changing times is a measure of his greatness even if he stumbled over fascist pabulum and never completely succeeded in his transformation. Nonetheless this struggle resulted in a remarkable flow of creative energy and produced a poetical oeuvre which closely reflects the trajectory of his life and the growth of his personality. The poet and the man were becoming one and without sacrificing any power of imagination they penetrated ever deeper into the phenomena of human reality; the poetry became a genuine organic expression of the man-poet maturing like a good wine and producing deeper and more moving lyrics as he aged and "sailed to his Byzantium". In the end to paraphrase WBY and in tribute to his immortal line which is one of many "How can we tell the singer from the song" Thus even a cursory study of his life gleaned from authoritative biographies by Ellmann, Jeffares, Brown and Foster provides an

instructive lesson for the young; it shows a man born on the margin of the British Empire in a pre-modern era; despite his probable dyslexia, poor eyesight and stumbling first steps in life which cost him a good education, and his slow awakening to psycho-sexual maturity WB Yeats finally succeeded in forging a powerful identity and making an indelible mark on the world with a life characterized by a heroism of the spirit and with a poetical legacy which has enriched the English language and spread his spirit of humanity around the world.

Finally there is the lesson imparted by the poetry, for above the life stands the crowning glory of the verse which has given us so many memorable lines that have found a permanent place in the language and culture of English-speaking peoples, lines ubiquitous wherever English is spoken, quoted for all kinds of situations and to serve a variety of purposes: Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;...The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity....And what rough beast, its hour come round at last/Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (The Second Coming, 1926); A terrible beauty is born. (Easter, 1916, 1917) To illustrate the sacrifice of an Irish life for his English oppressors or the absurdity of war: I know that I shall meet my fate / Somewhere among the clouds above; / Those that I fight I do not hate / Those that I guard I do not love. (An Irish Airman Foresees his Death, 1919)

Young men can readily identify with the romantic mood of yearning to escape from the stress of living among the crowd, to exchange the ugliness of modern society for the simple life in the country, sentiments expressed with the solemn decisiveness peculiar to the younger generation: I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree, / And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made: (The Lake Isle of Innisfree, 1890)

But the later poems will have a strong appeal for those braver

young souls curious about what a man may expect in the future: Why should not old men be mad? / ...Young men know nothing of this sort, / Observant old men know it well; / And when they know what old books tell / And that no better can be had, / Know why an old man should be mad. (Why should not Old Men be Mad, 1939) To learn that the old can still burn, libido the last “organ “ to fail may be a cause for either encouragement or dismay: I have what no young man can have / Because he loves too much. / Words I have that can pierce the heart, / But what can he do but touch? ' ...But a coarse old man am I / I choose the second best, / I forget it all awhile / Upon a woman's breast' (The Wild Old Wicked Man, 1938) Contradicting Thomas Mann's claim that “ In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms“, a quotation that heads one of his last poems, the former politician confessed his inability to live without his passion for Woman, a sentiment contemporary youth disaffected from politics would surely endorse : But O that I were young again / And held her in my arms. (Politics, 1939)

Finally, words encouraging us to live with hope in our hearts, without fear:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top

While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,

That I was blessed and could bless.

(Vacillation, IV, 1932)

John Butler Yeats, the father, against whose rational skepticism and valorization of intellect the young WBY revolted “into style“ and from whom he fled into the world of imagination and anti-rationalism, writing to his friend Edward Dowden in a letter in December 1869 (quoted in Ellmann, 15) bluntly set out his views on education : priority should be given to emotional development as the alpha and the omega of the right education which instructs by arousing to the full the whole gamut of human emotions: shame, anger, love, pity, contempt, admiration, hatred by means of Art and with the aim of “ invigorating“ the “Personality“ and establishing an internal harmony between the emotions, the sine qua non of a person’s strength and happiness.

Ironically, for all the differences between father and son it would appear that one the achievements of WBY was to make possible the kind of education envisaged by his father: listening to his poetic language teaches us to appreciate the harmony of intellect and emotion by making us aware of the beauty and power of words.

University students at an age when the loss of a grandparent is not uncommon, keenly regret the severed link to the older generation and thus might be receptive to and find solace in the wisdom of the older WBY, for as the old Jewish proverb goes, the death of a person is like the burning down of a library : a lifetime’s knowledge is lost forever. Fortunately, literature as a perennial source of human knowledge and inspiration can be an instrument of change in the hands of the teacher who can communicate the excitement of language and ideas to young people receptive to self-transformation and seeking passion and values to live by.

The voice of WBY speaks the more powerfully as he matures, becomes more self-aware and conscious of the transience of life, the

poignancy of life's journey which begins with sound and fury and ends with submission to the reality of oblivion. If young people can step into this "country for old men" to heed the wisdom of "one born before", to listen in on the thoughts of a personality weathered by experience expressed in unique and inimitable language and to feel the emotions undergirding his arguments and encompassing the warp and weft of his words, they will see beyond the beauty of the language how a man lived struggling to establish an identity congenial to his spirit, how he wrestled with the anxieties of human existence, how he searched for love and found in creation some consolation and respite from the pain of living and loving.

Young people willing to listen to the words of a man who was born, lived and died before them will surely find encouragement in their own personal struggle to establish their own identity in a hostile world ever ready to impose its own oppressive stamp on their personality and drag them down paths they are loath to go; they will also discover the magic of the imaginative world WBW created with inspired language replete with innumerable felicities of image and expression. They will recognize a kindred soul if they possess the patience and sensitivity to enter his persona and imagine the reality this great creative spirit bequeathed to us. We show our sincerity by listening with our hearts to his words, for all art is but a mirror into which we may gaze, and no matter what is reflected back to us, if we have the humility and the courage to look with open eyes, we will see our own likeness: *Ecce Homo!*

And in the end we may come to understand the stoic wisdom written on the poet's gravestone in sight of the mighty limestone outcrop of Benbulbin as an epitaph not only to the life of WBW but to the common destiny that unites us all:

Cast a cold eye

On life, on death.

Horseman, pass by!

(Under Ben Bulben, 1939)

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