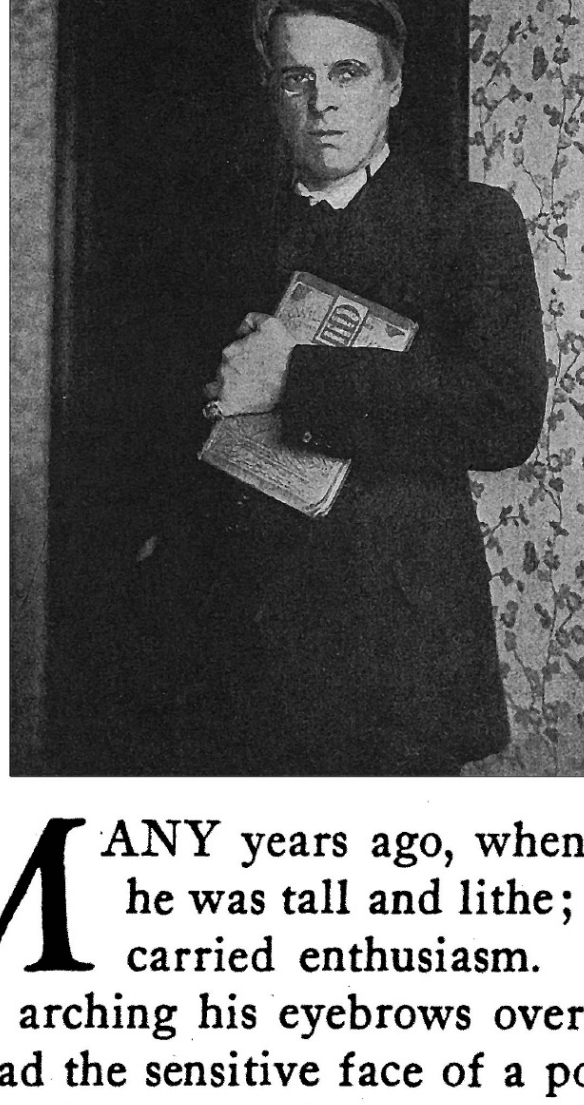


THEATRE ARTS MONTHLY

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WITH
WILLIAM
BUTLER
YEATS*

By MONTROSE J. MOSES

MANY years ago, when I first met William Butler Yeats, he was tall and lithe; with a boyish quality to him which carried enthusiasm. There was a look of constant inquiry arching his eyebrows over the straight bar of his eyeglasses. He had the sensitive face of a poet alive, not to the moment, but to the mystic stretch of the moments in the past. Yet, at that time, he was intent on establishing a theatre—which carried with it a multitude of worldly arrangements. He came to America to talk of the Irish Revival—and he did talk, glowingly, confidently. He was the flaming flower of that rebirth: to him we owe the stirring of the rich soil of Irish folk tradition; it was he who went to Paris and uprooted Synge, and transplanted him in the Aran Islands; through his encouragement it was that Lady Gregory turned playwright, and became mother of the movement which he had fathered in his mind so many years.

I saw Yeats the second time when the Irish Players came to America, after they had won their spurs at home and abroad—meaning London—and there was the same resilience, the same rush of energy,—not the energy of action so much as a spiritual energy directed toward an ever-present ideal. I had never seen a visitor to America more oblivious to the country he was visiting. A child chasing butterflies could not have been as completely impervious to surrounding condition. It was during this time that I had a taste of the golden tongue of Yeats—which, in the early days of the Celtic Revival, was the cause of so many friends losing their sleep, for he insisted on talking to them far into the morning on the principles of poetry and on theosophy, which has interested him from

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his earliest days. His *Cathleen ni Houlihan* had been given an excellent performance in Boston, and three or four of us met afterward in the lobby of the hotel. Yeats began talking of the Irish peasantry, what their adoption of the Gaelic tongue had done for them in decreasing drunkenness; he passed to memories of Synge and their meeting in the Paris days; he touched on the richness of legendary Ireland and what he owed to it. Such talk was an overflow of thanksgiving for a successful evening. Yeats was in his element. The Irish Theatre was flourishing in his mind and his heart was full.

That same evening, at the Boston Playhouse, I had seen Lady Gregory in black lace, with a royal assemblage of red roses in her arms, standing in the lobby of the theatre, watching her audience coming in, smiling graciously whenever someone paused at the book-stall by the door to buy a volume of Irish plays—it made no difference whether hers, or Yeats', or Synge's, or Lennox Robinson's. She was the hostess, and every one was a friend. There was an onslaught of a tall figure with somewhat stooped shoulders, a flowing tie, a thick black ribbon to the eyeglasses, a nervous greeting, and Yeats himself sped down the aisle to his seat. I could see then that the best way of announcing the presence of these literary folk would have been as follows: "Lady Gregory and William Butler Yeats with their child—The Irish Literary Revival—are staying for a few days at the Plymouth Theatre in Boston. They welcome their friends and challenge their enemies."

The next time Mr. Yeats came to America, the theatre of his enthusiasm had grown to be over twenty years old and was left at home, to cope with the spirit of modernism which was creeping into Ireland. The shock of black hair had turned gray; the lithe figure had become heavy; the enthusiasm of youth had settled into a glow of wisdom. William Butler Yeats was fifty-four.

I have just come across the notes of our conversation at that time. They are interesting in view of what has recently happened to Yeats. He is now a senator attending to the ordering of the Irish Republic. He is now a recipient of the Nobel Prize, the award

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having been made in recognition of his devotion to Art. We do not hear as much of the Irish Theatre as we used to. Is it that Mr. Yeats is being caught at last in the maelstrom of world affairs? If so, what he said to me will be enlightening.

An interesting contrast—the three stages in which I have seen him in the past. I am now able to read his delightfully refreshing *Reveries of Childhood and Youth* and the letters written in his early poetic years to Katherine Tynan, the poet, and see what there is of the boy which has persisted; what there is of his ambition that has ripened into accomplishment. I found him on this last trip to America still the absent-minded fellow who, in younger days, would forget to eat, would go walking when it rained and forget to open the umbrella he carried in his hand. Years had not quenched his dreams; I found him living in a past which was strictly his own. It was strange to hear him speak of The Art and Poetry of *his* generation. Yeats was viewing himself and his contemporaries in perspective—he and Lionel Johnson and George Moore, and "Æ"; Shaw; Arthur Symonds; Maeterlinck—to mention names which once represented the youth of literary theories now either established or rejected. We faced Yeats now with his gray hair; Maeterlinck with his youthful countenance grown wise; Shaw with his fiery beard grown gray, the figure of a satyr domesticated. And we realize that literary movements, as well as literary people, have a habit of growing old. The Irish Revival is no longer a child.

It struck me in my talk with Yeats that he still held to his love of fantasy; his nationalism was bound up in tradition, not in political programs. "What's the matter with the world," he said to me, "is that intellect has destroyed dignity, nobility. People become restless and emphatic when they are in conscious pursuit of things." And he still longed,—as he did when he first welcomed Tagore, in an introduction written to *Gitanjali*,—for the age of innocence, the age of saints. I heard him declare that what differentiated the present time from *his* age was that poets today are objective, while he and his contemporaries were subjective. In that sense—not in

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the philosophic—there is a personal note to Yeats' poetry and prose which recalls Wordsworth; he treasures in memory the small manifold details of the spirit; he describes places through feeling rather than through his eyes. He is ever the mystic.

"Thank God!" he exclaimed, "we have passed the age of photographic realism. There was a period at the Abbey Theatre, when we ran peasant life plays into the ground, making a formula of them. But there is now a new rush of life in the world; audiences are more imaginative than ever; they are demanding fantasy. I may safely say that during the war the Dublin Abbey Theatre was the only place in all Ireland where free speech actually reigned. But now that the war is over, a great deal of valuable energy is unfortunately being directed into political channels. When the Irish Republic comes, I suppose the modern mind will be all over the place! I wish that it would come that we might attend to more vital things!" Strange words from a future senator of the Irish Republic.

The Irish Theatre did not seem to be as much on the mind of Yeats during his last visit as it was in years passed. I recall directing our talk to the Abbey Theatre and the importance it had in quickening belief in a folk theatre.

"I think the Abbey is a folk theatre, a playhouse of the people, in a way not understood by America. The American and European stages have been occupied too constantly with the well-to-do and educated classes. But Ireland has pulled away from the drawing-room. When I come to think of it, possibly a theatre of the people is dependent for its richness on whether a country has a peasantry or not. Is it not true that every country must aim for a drama that deals with a life appealing to the greatest number of its people?"

"Has that been the chief aim of the Irish Literary Revival?" I asked.

"Ireland has an imaginative peasantry," he rejoined, "and there is a predominant tendency on our part to lay stress on association. Poetry comes, I believe, from associative values. Among a peasantry, life changes so little from generation to generation that every article

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one possesses takes on a heavy charge of personal meaning. Note, for instance, what a host of human experiences is called forth by the mere mention of a wooden spade. The very word 'spade' has a value strictly spiritual which the word 'sewing-machine' has not. To your own self repeat the words 'spinning-wheel' and 'thread factory.' Which one has its associative value? The one is saturated with poetic meaning; the other conjures up industrial slavery."

"You have a charge to make against Industrialism?" I asked.

"Yes," Mr. Yeats replied, "a charge outside the channels of economics and social history. I believe that an industrial population uses a form of machinery which does not profoundly affect the subconscious. This machinery creates restlessness. It is continually changing; what is used in one decade is out of date in another. The modern world is prosaic merely because it is continually changing. That is why we are so objective. All modern life tends to make us so. But agriculture depends on growing things; sentiment can grow in the soil but never in machinery."

"Then you deplore this objective phase through which we are passing?"

"I don't say that, quite," Mr. Yeats replied, "But I do say that I am content with the style of my generation—with the subjective mood of Lionel Johnson and the rest. One must not deny merely because one is not of the thing which is new. For instance, my habit of ear, as a poet, makes *vers libre* unsatisfactory. But I do not see why *vers libre* should not do better what beautiful prose has already done. There are some who practice this *vers libre* delightfully, but there are others who use it merely in a bizarre fashion,—aiming only at originality and cleverness. I hate the search for originality; it is always journalistic and a form of advertisement. After all, what counts is quality; it is the only thing that interests me."

I have never met a man whose life was more completely bound up in spiritual reactions, at the moment transcending political and social problems. When Yeats was here on his last visit, Sir Horace Plunkett, St. John Ervine, and the "President of the Irish Republic" were in this country and all of them were talking on nationalism

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yet never once did their subject draw from Mr. Yeats any pronounced enthusiastic retort. He said to me:

"I know we are approaching some kind of philosophy which will deal with the social state. But I avoid politics merely because I feel that our opinions will not long hold. To my way of thinking, speculative interests are our true interests for the time being. The more I ponder it, the more I am confident that the only salvation for the world is to regain its feeling for revelation. That is the criterion to live by. But it is not the criterion of a thinking age. What a democracy needs is a great system of education, not great school-masters; a system of Art, not great artists alone. We must bring ourselves to distrust general principles, and strive to get some sort of spiritual basis. Until we do there is no hope."

We do not know what he may be, now that he is a senator. But assuredly before these public honors were thrust upon him, Yeats had dreamed himself into Life. To him speech was music and music was poetry. Read his essay *On Speaking to the Psaltery*, and you say, "Yeats should have lived in the age of minstrelsy." Read certain purple passages on his favorite poet, Blake, and there is, as one of Yeats' critics has asserted, a mediaeval touch to his prose. He is as far removed from the present as these.

I recall a passage from a prose piece written by Yeats and culled from a story entitled *John Sherman*. It reads as follows:

"If my voice at whiles grows distant and dreamy when I talk of the world's affairs, remember that I have seen all from my hole in the hedge. I hear continually the songs of my own people who dance upon the hillside, and am content."

I left Mr. Yeats when I saw him on that last visit of his to America thoroughly confident that he would never remember that I had called upon him. His eloquence was the eloquence of beautiful talk; there was no trace of social intercourse about it.

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