

Lecture 4 W.B. Yeats

I believe in the practice and philosophy of what we have agreed to call magic, in what I must call the evocation of spirits, though I do not know what they are, in the power of creating magical illusions, in the visions of truth in the depths of the mind when the eyes are closed; and I believe in three doctrines, which have, as I think, been handed down from early times, and been the foundations of nearly all magical practices. These doctrines are:---

(1) That the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create or reveal a single mind, a single energy.

(2) That the borders of our memories are as shifting, and that our memories are part of one great memory, the memory of Nature herself.

(3) That this great mind and great memory can be evoked by symbols.

---Yeats, "Magic" (1901)

When I try to put all into a phrase I say, 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.' I must embody it in the completion of my life. The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the song of experience.

---Yeats, letter to Elizabeth Pelham, January 4, 1939

. . . I think that the true poetic movement of our time is towards some heroic discipline. People much occupied with morality always lose heroic ecstasy. Those who have it most often are those [Ernest] Dowson has described (I cannot find the poem ["Villanelle of the Poet's Road"]) but the lines run like this or something like this

Wine and women and song
To us they belong
To us the bitter and gay.

'Bitter & gay' is the heroic mood. When there is despair, public or private, when settled order seems lost, people look for strengths within or without. Auden, Spender, all that seem the new movement *look* for strength in Marxian socialism, or in Major Souglas, they want marching feet. The lasting expression of our time is not this obvious choice but in a sense of something steel-like & cold within the will, something passionate and cold.

. . . I notice that you have much lapis lazuli; someone has sent me a present of a great piece carved by some Chinese sculptor into the semblance of a mountain with temple, trees, paths and an ascetic and pupil about to climb the mountain. Ascetic, pupil, hard stone, eternal theme of the sensual east. The heroic cry in the midst of despair. But

no, I am wrong, the east has its solutions always and therefore knows nothing of tragedy.
It is we, not the east, that must raise the heroic cry.
---Yeats, letter to Dorothy Wellesley, July 6, 1936

To review the images discussed in lecture today, go to English 310a, Modern Poetry, on the classes server, and look under “materials” for a Power Point file named “YeatsImages.” The list that follows describes the images and their sources in the sequence presented in lecture.

---Painting of Yeats as Mad King Goll by his father, J. B. Yeats, reproduced in the *Leisure Hour*, September 1887

---Maud Gonne, aged 23 in 1889, when Yeats met her [Foster, *Yeats*]

---W. B. Yeats, *The Wind Among the Reeds* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1899); cover, title page, and table of contents [Beinecke]

---W. B. Yeats in his study in *The Tatler*, 29 June 1904 [R. F. Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life; Volume I: The Apprentice Mage*, Oxford UP, 1997)

---Letter from W. B. Yeats to Ezra Pound, June 14, 1913 [Beinecke]

---W. B. Yeats, *Responsibilities* (London: Macmillan, 1916) cover and table of contents [Beinecke]

---Photo of the Lake Isle of Innisfree [Beinecke]

And now I wander in the woods
When summer gluts the golden bees,
Or in autumnal solitudes
Arise the leopard-coloured trees;
Or when along the wintry strands
The cormorants shiver on their rocks;
I wander on, and wave my hands,
And sing, and shake my heavy locks.
The grey wolf knows me; by one ear
I lead along the woodland deer;
The hares run by me growing bold.
They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter round, the beech leaves old.

* * *

I sang how, when day's toil is done,
Orchil shakes out her long dark hair
That hides away the dying sun

And sheds faint odours through the air:
When my hand passed from wire to wire
It quenched, with sound like falling dew,
The whirling and the wandering fire;
But lift a mournful ulalu,
For the kind wires are torn and still,
And I must wander wood and hill
Through summer's heat and winter's cold.
They will not hush, the leaves a-flutter round, the beech leaves old.

From W. B. Yeats, "The Madness of King Goll" (1889)