



Source: W.B. Yeats, *Uncollected Prose* (ed. J. Frayne, 2 vols., Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1970), 1: 266-275



Nationality and literature

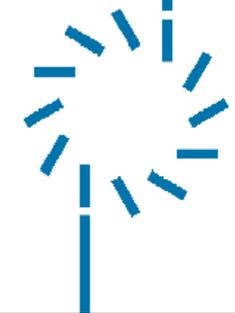
William Butler Yeats¹

Mr. Yeats having in his opening remarks compared mere oratory to the fiery and fleeting patterns which children make upon the night air with a burning stick, and having said that even if he could achieve this kind of speech-making, exciting though it was, he would prefer careful criticism, proceeded as follows –

I am going to talk a little philosophy. If I were addressing an English audience I would not venture to even use the word philosophy, for it is only the Celt who cares much for ideas which have no immediate practical bearing. At least Matthew Arnold has said so, and I think he is right, for the flood-gates of materialism are only half-open among us as yet here in Ireland; perhaps the new age may close them before the tide is quite upon us. Remembering those but half-open gates, I venture into criticism of the fundamentals of literature, and into the discussion of things which, I am proud to say, have never made two blades of grass grow where one did before, or in any other fashion served the material needs of the race. Criticism has been defined as the separation and isolation of some literary tendency, mood, or

impression, until we can look at it separated from all other tendencies, moods, or impressions. I wish to separate the general course of literary development and set it apart from mere historical accident and circumstance, and having so done, to examine the stages it passes through, and then to try and point out in what stage the literature of England is, and in what stage the literature of Ireland is. I will have to go far a-field before I come to the case of Ireland, for it is necessary, in the first instance, to find this general law of development. But first let us see if there is an analogy in external nature for this development. Is there any object which we can isolate and watch going through its growth and decay, and thereby perhaps discover a law of development which is common alike to it and to literature. Any tree or plant is just such an object. It grows from a simple seed, and having sent up a little green sprout of no great complexity, though much more complex than its seed, it develops a complex trunk at last and all innumerable and intricate leaves, and flowers, and fruits. Its growth is from unity to multiplicity, from simplicity to complexity, and if we examine the method of this growth, we find that it takes place through a constant sub-division of the constituent cells. I hope to show you that a literature develops in an analogous way, and that this development takes place by a constant sub-division of moods and emotions, corresponding to the sub-division of the cells in the tree. In its youth it is simple, and in its mid-period it grows in complexity, as does the tree when it puts forth many branches, and in its mature age it is covered by an innumerable variety of fruits and flowers and leaves of thought and experience. I will show you, too, that it must go through these periods no matter how greatly we long for finality, no matter how much we desire to make this or that stage permanent. I wish to show you, too, that all these stages are beautiful in their various fashions, and that our desire should be to make each perfect after its kind, and not to try and make one imitate

¹. A lecture given on May 19, 1893 before the National Literary Society, reprinted in *United Ireland*, May 27, 1893. The wayward spelling of names and titles is the original's.



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another quite different one, or even a corresponding one to itself in some quite different literature. For all such endeavours will fail, and, perhaps, stunt the tree. If I succeed I will show that not only is this literature of England different in character from the literature of Ireland, as different as the beach tree from the oak, but that the two literatures are in quite different stages of their development. I wish to show you also what it is that we can learn from English and other literatures without loss of national individuality; how, we can learn from their complex and mature literature to carry to perfection our own simple and immature one. We are gardeners, trying to grow various kinds of trees and flowers that are peculiar to our soil and climate; but we have to go for the art of gardening to men who grow very different flowers and trees in very different soils and climates. But now to apply in detail the analogy of the tree or plant and of its growth by subdivision from simplicity to complexity.

Let us take for our examples the literatures we all know something of, the literatures of Greece and England, though the literature of any other country would, I believe, serve as well. In both you find three clearly-marked periods:-First, the period of narrative poetry, the epic or ballad period; next the dramatic period; and after that the period of lyric poetry. In Greece the first period is represented by Homer, who describes great racial or national movements and events, and sings of the Greek race rather than of any particular member of it. After him come Aeschulus and Sophocles, who subdivide these great movements and events into the characters who lived and wrought in them. The Siege of Troy is now no longer the theme, for Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and Oedipus dominate the stage. After the dramatists come the lyric poets, who are known to us through the Greek anthology. And now not only have the racial events disappeared but the great personages themselves, for literature has begun to centre itself about this or that emotion or mood, about the Love or Hatred, the Hope or Fear which were to Aeschulus and Sophocles merely parts of

Oedipus or Agamemnon or Clytemnestra, or of some other great tragic man or woman. The poets had at the beginning for their material the national character, and the national history, and the national circumstances, and having found an expression of the first in the second, they divided and subdivided the national imagination, for there was nought else for them to do. They could not suddenly become Turks, or Englishmen, or Frenchmen, and so start with a new character and a new history. They could but investigate and express ever more minutely and subtly the character, and history, and circumstance of climate and scenery, that they had got. When they could subdivide no more, or when the barbarian had defeated them into silence there came a long blank until the next great creative period, when the literature of England arose and went through the same stages, and set to music its very different national character, national history, and national circumstance of climate and of scenery.

In England the first period was represented by the poems of Chaucer, by Mallory's 'King Arthur,' and by the ballad writers. England was not to carry this period to the same perfection as did Greece, for her genius inclined her rather to dramatic and lyric expression. In the writings I have named there is no lack of characterization, but every character exists rather as a part of some story, or for the sake of some action, than for its own sake. England had no great epic tales, and so we find this early literature dealing, not with some tale of Troy, or the like, but with innumerable stories and incidents, expressing the general bustle of the national life. As time passed on, men became more and more interested in character for its own sake, until at last they were ripe for the great dramatic movement of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Poetry now no longer reflected the general life, but gave us Lear, Hamlet, and Macbeth, isolated colossal characters, dominating the whole life about them, and deafening into silence the general bustle of the world. But this



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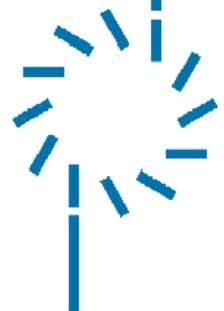
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dramatic period could not last, for literature can never repeat itself and the human spirit must ever go on analyzing itself further and further, and expressing more and more minutely and subtly its own profound activity. The dramatic gave way to the lyrical, and the poets took for their themes the passions and moods that were once but parts of those great characters, and again the part drove out the whole. The great personages fell like immense globes of glass, and scattered into a thousand iridescent fragments, flashing and flickering in the sun. Men ceased to write of Romeo and sang of Love. They thought no more of Iago but sang of Hatred. When the time was ripe the English spirit cast up that lyrical outburst of which Byron, Shelley, and Keats were the most characteristic writers. Character, no longer loved for its own sake, or as an expression of the general bustle of life, became merely the mask for some mood or passion, as in Byron's 'Manfred' and in his 'Don Juan.' In other words, the poets began to write but little of individual men and women, but rather of great types, great symbols of passion and of mood, like Alastor, Don Juan, Manfred, Ahasuerus, Prometheus, and Isabella of the Basil Pot. When they tried, as in Byron's plays, to display character for its own sake they failed.

In the age of lyric poetry every kind of subtlety, obscurity, and intricate utterance prevails, for the human spirit has begun to look in upon itself with microscopic eyes and to judge of ideas and feelings apart from their effects upon action. The vast bulk of our moods and feelings are too fine, too subjective, too impalpable to find any clear expression in action or in speech tending towards action, and epic and dramatic poetry must deal with one or other of these. In a lyric age the poets no longer can take their inspiration mainly from external activities and from what are called matters of fact, for they must express every phase of human consciousness no matter how subtle, how vague, how impalpable. With this advancing subtlety poetry steps out of the market-place, out of the general tide of life and becomes a mysterious cult, as it

were, an almost secret religion made by the few for the few. To express its fine shades of meaning, an ever more elaborate language, an ever more subtle rhythm has to be invented. The dramatic form, and the ballad and epic forms exist still, of course, but they do so, as the lyric form existed in the age of drama and of epic, and their whole burden is lyrical. The old simplicity has gone out of them, and an often great obscurity has come in its stead. The form of Browning is more commonly than not dramatic or epic, but the substance is lyrical. Another reason why the poetry of the lyric period steps aside further and further from the general life is, that in order to express the intricate meaning and subtle changes of mood, it is compelled to combine external objects in ways never or seldom seen in nature. In other words, it is compelled more and more to idealize nature. But the most obvious distinction between the old and the new is the growing complexity of language and thought. Compare, for instance, the description of nature in almost any old ballad, description in which the sea is simply blue and the grass simply green and the flowers simply sweet-smelling, with such a description as that contained in Tennyson's famous line, 'A roaring moon of daffodils,' or compare the simple thought of Chaucer or of the ballad writers, or the writers of the miracle plays with the elaborate thought of modern poems like 'In Memoriam,' the 'Paracelsus' and 'Sordello' of Browning; the sonnets of Rossetti, 'The Atalanta in Caledon,' or the 'Tristan and Iseult' of Swinburne, or with any of the poetry of George Meredith. The very names of these writers and of these poems are enough to prove my case. The tree has come to its greatest complexity of leaf and fruit and flower. And what is true of England is true also of all the older literatures of Europe. I need but mention to you the name of Goethe, having in my mind more particularly his 'Faust,' and of Hugo, having in my mind more



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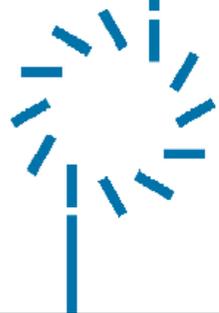
particularly his later and more oracular song. Everywhere the elaborate luxuriance of leaf and bud and flower.

Now, I want to notice especially one peculiarity of all these poets. They more often than not go to foreign countries for their subjects; they are, in fact, citizens of the world, cosmopolitans. It is obvious that a story like that of the Siege of Troy or stories like those in Chaucer cannot be separated from the countries they happened in, and that characters like Macbeth and Lear, like Oedipus and Agamemnon, cannot be separated either from the world about them. But tell me to what nations do Hatred, Fear, Hope, and Love belong? The epic and the dramatic periods tend to be national because people understand character and incident best when embodied in life they understand and set amid the scenery they know of, and every man knows and understands his own country the best. They may now and then permit their poets to fare far afield even unto the seacoast of Bohemia, but they soon call them home again. But the lyric age, upon the other hand, becomes as it advances towards an ever complete lyricism, more and more cosmopolitan; for the great passions know nothing of boundaries. As do the great beasts in the forest, they wander without let or-hindrance through the universe of God.

Granted fit time and fit occasion, I could apply the same law of division and sub-division and of ever increasing complexity to human society itself -to human life itself- and show you how in the old civilizations an endless sub-division of society to trades and professions, and of human life to habits and rules, is making men every day more subtle and complex, less forcible and adaptable. The old nations are like old men and women sitting over the fire gossiping of stars and planets, talking of all things in heaven and earth and in the waters under the earth, and forgetting in a trance of subtlety the flaming heart of man.

If time and fit occasion offered, I could take you upon that path, beaten by the feet of the seers, and show you behind human

society and human life the causal universe itself, 'falling,' in the words of my master, William Blake, 'into division,' and foretell with him 'its resurrection into unity.' But this is not fit time or fit occasion. And already the fascination of that beaten path has taken me further than I would. I wished merely to show you that the older literatures of Europe are in their golden sunset, their wise old age, that I might the better prove to you, in the closing parts of my lecture, that we here in Ireland who, like the Scandinavian people, are at the outset [of] a literary epoch, must learn from them but not imitate them, and by so doing we will bring new life and fresh impulse not only to ourselves but to those old literatures themselves. But are we really at the outset of a literary epoch? or are we not, perhaps, merely a little eddy cast up by the advancing tide of English literature and are we not doomed, perhaps, to its old age and coming decline? On the contrary, I affirm that we are a young nation with unexhausted material lying within us in our still unexpressed national character, about us in our scenery, and in the clearly marked outlines of our life, and behind us in our multitude of legends. Look at our literature and you will see that we are still in our epic or ballad period. All that is greatest in that literature is based upon legend-upon those tales which are made by no one man, but by the nation itself through a slow process of modification and adaption, to express its loves and its hates, its likes and its dislikes. Our best writers, De Vere, Ferguson, Allingham, Mangan, Davis, O'Grady, are all either ballad or epic writers, and all base their greatest work, if I except a song or two of Mangan's and Allingham's, upon legends and upon the fortunes of the nation. Alone, perhaps, among the nations of Europe we are in our ballad or epic age. The future will put some of our ballads with 'Percy's Reliques' and with the 'border' ballads, and at least one of our epic songs, the 'Conary' of Ferguson, among the simple, primitive poems of the world. Even the 'Spirit of the Nation' belongs to the



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epic age, for it deals with great National events. Our poetry is still a poetry of the people in the main, for it still deals with the tales and thoughts of the people. The little foreign criticism of Irish literature which I have seen speaks of it as simple and primitive. They are right. There is a distinct school of Irish literature, which we must foster and protect, and its foundation is sunk in the legend lore of the people and in the National history. The literature of Greece and India had just such a foundation, and as we, like the Greeks and the Indians, are an idealistic people, this foundation is fixed in legend rather than in history. But, we must not imitate the writers of any other country, we must study them constantly and learn from them the secret of their greatness. Only by study of the great models can we acquire style, and this, St. Beuf says, is the only thing in literature which is immortal. We must learn, too, from the old nations to make literature almost the most serious thing in our lives if we would understand it properly, and quite the most serious thing if we could write it well. How often do I hear it said that such and such a poet is obscure and therefore bad, as if obscurity had anything to do with greatness, as if obscurity was not inevitable unless much that is most profound in thought and feeling is to be left out of poetry. All poetries in their lyrical age get into obscurity. We in this country go to literature to be rested after our day's work, we must go to it on the other hand that we may be made the stronger for that work. How often do I not hear in this country that literature is to be achieved by some kind of mysterious visitation of God, which makes it needless for us to labor at the literary art, and hearing this long for one hour among my books with the great Flaubert, who talked of art, art and again art, or with Blake, who held that life itself became an art when wisely lived. When I hear this kind of talk I am inclined to say that being inspired by God is a profession that is full, so many men have I met who have held themselves to be thus visited. Alas, the inspiration of God, which is, indeed, the source of all which is greatest in the world, comes only to him

who labours at rhythm and cadence, at form and style, until they have no secret hidden from him. This art we must learn from the old literatures of the world. We have hitherto been slovens, and even our best writers, if I except Allingham, have put their best thoughts side by side with the most contemptible commonplaces, and their most musical lines into the midst of the tritest rhythms, and our best prose writers have mingled their own gold dust with every kind of ignoble clay. We have shrunk from the labour that art demands and have made thereby our best moments of no account. We must learn from the literatures of France and England to be supreme artists and then God will send to us supreme inspiration. There is still much to say, but I have already passed the time I allotted to myself, and in conclusion I must apologise to you for not having spoken from a more familiar and therefore more generally interesting point of view, by repeating the words of the crow who was asked why he went to a wedding in a black suit, 'I had no other.'²

² The minutes of the meeting add:

Mr. George Casey occupied the chair. Amongst those present were the following: Dr. Ffrench-Mullen, Dr. G. Sigerson, F.R.U.I.; Rev. J. F. Hogan, Mr. J. Larminie, Mrs. Pierce Mahony, Miss Dora Sigerson, Miss Mary Fitzpatrick, Miss Esther Sigerson, Miss Mary Furlong, Miss Alice Furlong, Mr. J. P. Quinn, Mr. Dunlop, Mr. O'Leary Curtis, Mr. George Russell, Mr. M'Call, Mr. T. P. O'Carroll, Mr. John M'Grath, Miss Murray, Miss Dickenson, Mr. J. O'Mahony, etc.

The Chairman briefly opened the proceedings, and introduced the lecturer.

Rev. J. F. Hogan, in proposing a vote of thanks to the lecturer, said that Mr. Yeats had made his mark in Irish literature, and he was likely to make his mark much deeper in the future (applause). The energies of a people might be applied to painting, architecture, industry, or commerce, but the most perfect expression of life and thought and intellectual power



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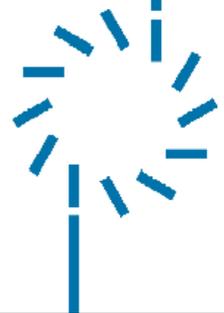
of a people was to be found in its literature, and they should pay all possible honour to those who were distinguished in literature in Ireland in the past, especially to those who were faithful to the country (applause). Speaking of the important part which literature had played in other countries, he said that, when Hungary was making a struggle for National independence, similar to that which they were making in Ireland, they had three literary men who did more, perhaps, for their country than any three generals who led the army to battle (applause).

Mr. J. Larminie seconded the vote of thanks, and said that if some primitiveness was observable in a good deal of their poetry produced in the present century, it might be explained by the fact that there was a good deal of isolation especially in certain of their poets.

The Chairman, in putting the resolution, said that art and literature seemed to run through several phases-first, simplicity and directness, then expression, and afterwards a return to the older simplicity, produced by an over decorative period. If they produced anything really great in art or literature, no matter to what period it belonged, it would command the attention of the world. He had great pleasure in putting the vote of thanks.

The resolution having been adopted, Mr. Yeats, in replying, said the work they hoped to do in Ireland was part of the new impulse; of the new literary enthusiasm of the new kind of racial character. They had exceptional opportunity in the great mass of legendary lore by which they were surrounded. They could add a new beauty to their legends by bringing to bear upon them their experience of the literature of other countries (applause).

The proceedings then terminated.



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