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Erica Maggioni

"This inexplicable war". William Butler Yeats and his 'Silence' on the Great War

Abstract I: In occasione del 150° anniversario della nascita di W. B. Yeats e del centenario della Prima Guerra Mondiale, l'articolo si propone di studiare la risposta del poeta alla tragedia degli anni 1914-1918 analizzando la sua limitata produzione letteraria sull'evento. Mentre "On Being Asked for a War Poem" è un breve manifesto del suo distacco, poesie successive dedicate all'amico Robert Gregory, caduto in battaglia, documentano un coinvolgimento maggiore, ma un atteggiamento mutevole nei confronti di una guerra implicata nella complessa questione Anglo-Irlandese. La reticenza di Yeats può anche essere letta come una reazione alla crescente violenza della politica, da cui egli, quale personaggio pubblico con un'inclinazione per la pace, voleva distanziarsi.

Abstract II: On the occasion of W. B. Yeats's 150th birth anniversary and the First World War centenary, this paper aims at investigating the poet's response to the tragedy of 1914-1918 by analysing his limited literary output related to the event. While "On Being Asked for a War Poem" is a short manifesto of his detachment, later poems dedicated to his friend Robert Gregory, killed in action, document a closer involvement, but a shifting attitude towards a war entangled with the complex Anglo-Irish question. Yeats's reticence might also be read as a reaction to the increasing violence of politics, from which, as a public figure with an inclination for peace, he wanted to distance himself.

The year 2015 marks the 150th anniversary of W. B. Yeats's birth, an occasion which is being celebrated with publications, conferences and even a special edition euro coin that confirm the cultural relevance of the Irish poet in our time. 2015 is also the occasion to pay tribute to another important event: the centenary of the First World War, a four-year commemoration that started in 2014 and is particularly felt in the UK. It seems fitting, therefore, to pose the question of how the two anniversaries are related, and how an author like Yeats, often active in the public life of his time, has commented on and elaborated this defining event of the history of the period.

Yeats's personal and political involvement with the series of dramatic events that his native Ireland went through at the beginning of the twentieth century has long been underlined. A remarkable part of his production was inspired by his interest for current national affairs, especially after the Rising; "Easter 1916", "The Rose Tree", "Sixteen Dead Men", "Meditations in Time of Civil War" just to mention some among his most renowned poems. His first-hand experience of politics – Yeats was elected a Senator of the Free Irish State in 1922 – has also been a topic for academic discussion and many scholars have addressed the issue of the poet's changing political sympathies and how these permeate the poems[1]. Less attention has however been paid to the poet's engagement with the Great War, which somehow appears to be marginal in his interests and writings. In the context of the 2015 anniversaries, the purpose of this paper is to explore how the poet reacted to the tumultuous years 1914-1918 by looking at the poetry he produced on the topic.

The first response comes in a text of just six verses and is unmistakably entitled "On Being Asked For a War Poem". The lyric is a short but powerful manifesto of his "studied indifference" (Perloff 2007: 227) and his decision to remain silent on the war. Significantly, it was not written out of his personal willingness to comment on the topic, but it is, as the title explains, a response to a direct request from someone else. It was his friend Henry James, the novelist, who had approached Yeats in 1915 asking him to participate in a new anthology, *The Book of the Homeless*, edited by Edith Wharton. The volume, which contained poems, music, art-works by some of the greatest artists of the time, from Thomas Hardy to Jean Cocteau, Igor Stravinsky and Leon Bakst, was one of the many fundraising activities for war refugees[2]. For the occasion, Yeats wrote a poem "A Reason for Keeping Silent", whose title he changed later into "On Being Asked for a War Poem" for his 1917 collection *The Wild Swans At Coole:*

> I think it better that in times like these
> A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
> We have no gift to set a statesman right;
> He has had enough of meddling who can please
> A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
> Or an old man upon a winter's night (Yeats 1997: 156).

Yeats's contribution to Edith Wharton's book presents a clear declaration of his stance and is formulated in a speech-like style as if the poet were actually answering to a friend who had asked for his view on the war; the "I think" which opens the poem is a

[1] For an overview of the literature on the topic, see Allison 2006b.

[2] The book was sold for the benefit of the American Hostels for Refugees and of The Children of Flanders Rescue Committee. Theodore Roosevelt provided an introduction.

straightforward indication of the personal nature of the opinion. The expression "in times like these", with its melancholic and reticent intensity, places the reflection both in Yeats's days and in an atemporal, universal moment. It speaks of the unprecedented and extraordinary quality of the Great War, while at the same time, it suggests that this war is similar to any other dark period of history. In situations such as this, Yeats believes that poets should not comment, and uses the metonymy "a poet's mouth be silent" to confer concreteness and irony to his thoughts. Interestingly, the first version of the poem had an even stronger tone as it read "I think it better that at times like these / We poets keep our mouths shut" (Wharton 1916: 45). The reason for this silence – "We have no gift to set a statesman right" – hints at the issue of the role of the poets in public life. Ever since Plato, the question of whether it is appropriate or not for poets to intervene and try to influence the masses and their leaders has been debated. Yeats seems to imply that, in this case, it is not a matter of right or duty, but of ability; as a spokesperson for poets, he admits their impotence and incompetence on the matter. Self-irony shows through the lines in the informal language of "has had enough of meddling" – an expression which reveals Yeats's discredit of the political engagement of literary intellectuals of the time, himself included. Poets are better suited for the more modest task of "pleasing" and Yeats humbly chooses two examples from his public, a young girl and an old man, who traditionally symbolize a sentimental, even superficial readership.

In writing that poem, in 1915, Yeats certainly had in mind a literary phenomenon of that period known as 'war poetry'. More than two thousand British citizens wrote poems on the Great War; newspapers were flooded with verses and several best-selling anthologies were published. What is remembered and read today is the work of a limited group of writers, usually soldiers or officers, who put into verse their experience on the Western Front portraying and denouncing the appalling reality of their condition. What was popular at the time, however, were the patriotic, jingoistic verses of many civilians, and very few soldiers, who embodied the mood of enthusiasm and optimism at the outbreak of the war. Yeats did not want to have anything in common with that wave of poetry, and "On Being Asked For a War Poem" confirms his rejection. Not that the second phase of war poetry, the pity of Owen and the satire of Sassoon, interested him either. His decision to exclude most war poets from the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* he edited in 1936, on the basis that "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry" (Yeats 1936: xxxiv), is notorious as it caused unanimous perplexity.

Even considering his personal distaste for war poetry, Yeats's silence on the Great War might sound hypocritical on the part of a public figure who often participated, in life and in writing, in the political life of his time and did not abstain from setting statesmen right on multiple occasions (Allison 2006a: 217). Yet, one should remember that Yeats was Irish, and that the First World War occupies a peculiar and ambiguous place in Irish history. Scholars have identified in the poet's Irishness the main reason for his

disengagement, with Giorgio Melchiori claiming that the war "was not the concern of an Irish nationalist" (Melchiori 1979: 63), Tim Kendall that it "was neither his own nor his country's quarrel" (Kendall 2013: 22), and Samuel Hynes stating that "an English war fought in France was too remote to engage an Irish imagination" (Hynes 1989: 47). Fran Brearton, while defending Yeats's attitude, finds that he "places the Great War on the English side of an English-Irish opposition" (Brearton 2000: 45).

Undoubtedly, the Great War broke out at a time when the Irish question was a flammable issue in British politics; rumours of Home Rule and independence had become more and more insistent since the 1870s and domestic rivalries between the Unionists and the Nationalists exacerbated the situation. The Liberal Prime Minister Herbert Henry Asquith was still looking for a compromise that would satisfy both parties, when war was declared against Germany on 4 August 1914. Priorities changed, Home Rule was postponed to quieter times and Irishmen were invited to join the army alongside their English comrades as if they were a truly united country. As was to be expected, the response in Ireland was divided and problematic, but did not stop around 200,000 Irish volunteers from serving in the military, with almost a quarter dead by 1918 (Grayson 2014). While troops were fighting abroad, in Dublin on Easter Monday 1916 a group of Irish nationalists staged a rebellion against the British government, which ended in a violent suppression[3]; after that, "All changed, changed utterly"[4], as Yeats wrote in a famous poem commemorating the event. An anti-war, anti-British sentiment grew among part of the population that now looked with hostility at the Irish participation in the Great War. Entangled in the bloody and complex War of Independence that followed, Ireland tried to forget the war that had happened overseas. Yeats's silence therefore fits into the silence of a country which still continues today to show uneasiness towards the memory of the First World War. Roy Foster has used the expression "therapeutic voluntary amnesia" (Foster 2001: 125) to refer to the way Ireland has treated the Great War; for years, the topic has been carefully avoided, even by historians, as it was a cause of ambiguity and embarrassment. The last two decades have seen a gradual reversal of the situation with more attention both in academia and among the public; volumes on the Irish engagement with the War have been published[5] and national commemorations of the casualties have been held[6].

[3] For an account of this episode of Irish history see, for example, Chapter 19 of Foster 1988.
[4] "Easter, 1916" (Yeats 1997: 182).
[5] Among them, Horne 2008; Jeffery 2000; Johnson 2003.
[6] An official commemoration of the Irish dead in the First World War was held on 1 July 2006 at the Irish National War Memorial Gardens in Islandbridge to mark the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Somme. This was followed by a historic visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 2011. In 2014, President Michael D. Higgins and the Duke of Kent unveiled a Commonwealth Cross of Sacrifice to honour Ireland's war dead at Glasnevin Cemetery in Dublin.

When sending his "epigrammatic refusal" (Chapman 2006: 145) "A Reason For Keeping Silent" to Henry James, W. B. Yeats declared: "It is the only thing I have written of the war or will write" (Wade 1954: 600). However, in February 1918 he learned of the death of Major Robert Gregory[7], the son of Lady Augusta Gregory, his long-time friend and patron. On the occasion, Yeats could not 'keep silent': current events were now involving his personal acquaintances and he felt he had a reason 'to meddle'. Moreover, Lady Gregory herself asked him to commemorate Robert in poetry with the result of the almost immediate composition of three poems, all published later in a new edition of *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919). The first, "Shepherd and Goatherd", is a long pastoral elegy which grieves the untimely death of Gregory on the model of what "Spenser wrote for Sir Philip Sidney" (Wade 1954: 646). The virtues of the young man are enumerated, with reference to his artistic and athletic skills, but the war remains an indefinite entity, "a great war beyond the sea" (Yeats 1997: 144). Also the second poem, "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory", which the mother of the deceased found beautiful (Kohfeldt 1985: 255) and which commemorates the airman in an elegant and poised style, avoids direct reference to the actual circumstances of Gregory's death. The third, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death", is the one which more openly addresses the topic of war also revealing Yeats's attitude towards it.

> 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;
> My country is Kiltartan Cross,
> My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
> No likely end could bring them loss
> Or leave them happier than before.
> Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
> Nor public man, nor cheering crowds,
> A lonely impulse of delight
> Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
> I balanced all, brought all to mind,
> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind
> In balance with this life, this death (Yeats 1997: 135-136).

The poem is an atypical elegy, similar to a dramatic monologue, written in the first person as if Gregory himself were pondering on his situation just before the end of his life. The

[7] Known as a painter, scholar and horseman, Gregory had enlisted in the army in 1915, was transferred to the Royal Flying Corps the following year and died while flying a plane on the Italian front, near Padua.

title, with its sad prediction of death, endows the poem with an initial tragic tone confirmed by the resignation inherent in the first verse, "I know that I shall meet my fate". However, as the poem continues, the tone grows more vivid, energetic, almost exultant. Flying above the clouds puts Gregory in a higher, extra-human position, which singles him out as no ordinary man. His reasons for enrolling in the Flying Corps seem different from all that is expected. His neutrality towards the opponents in the war – "Those that I fight I do not hate / Those that I guard I do not love" – mirror Yeats's[8] and echoes Edward Thomas's "This is no case of petty right or wrong" that read "I hate not Germans nor grow hot, with love of Englishmen" (Thomas 2008: 104). Gregory's identification with a specific community, the little family village of Kiltartan Cross, is a further indication of his limited engagement with the cause of war and of his profound attachment to Ireland.

No patriotism and no dreams of glory lie behind his enlistment which is born out of "a lonely impulse of delight", a personal pleasure in flying, in the freedom and independence of a life of adventure. Yeats is depicting Gregory not as a victim of the war, but as a hero in full control of his situation despite the danger and precariousness of life as a pilot. This confidence and poise are overtly expressed in the last verses, not only in the choice of the verb "balance", but also in the image of the plane in equilibrium above the clouds, and in the careful construction of the sentence with its parallelisms. Yeats's recurrent theme of escapism finds here an appropriate application as a "recrudescent Romantic impulse" (Norris 2000: 41) seems to pervade the lyric. The airman is tranquil as he resigns himself to death, which finally seems almost welcomed, an alternative to "this life", to both the emptiness of the past, and the uncertainty of the future.

David Goldie considers the poem "deeply ambiguous" and states that it "can say nothing meaningful about the war or the Irish experience of it" (Goldie 2013: 168). In fact, the lyric reveals a powerful message, which resonates with a tragic joy of Nietszchean nature, as Roy Foster has noted (Foster 2001: 135). Yeats is attempting to give sense to the war, even to death, by transforming the experience of war into an aesthetic one. He is trying to explain the "inexplicable war", and what is interesting is that he does so, not through his own voice, the voice of a civilian and a public figure with no right to 'meddle', but rather that of a man who had actively participated in the conflict. In this way, Yeats somehow keeps faith to the vow of silence he had taken in "A Reason for Keeping Silent".

As the years passed, the positive, however unconventional portrait of Gregory in the poem became subject to revision. In 1920, with the ongoing Irish War of Independence, Yeats wrote "Reprisals", a fourth poem on Robert Gregory, which remained unpublished

[8] Yeats expressed his concern for all the participants in the war. In a letter to Lady Gregory on 18 February 1915, he wrote: "I feel strangely enough most for the young Germans that are now being killed. These spectacled, dreamy faces, or so I picture them, remind me more of men that I have known than the strong-bodied young English football players who pass my door at Woburn Buildings daily, marching in their khaki, or the positive-minded young Frenchmen" (Gregory 1974: 521).

until 1948 because the mother and wife of the deceased did not appreciate it. The airman is indeed presented under a strikingly different light. Yeats imagines Gregory's ghost revisiting Kiltartan and beholding the atrocities that, in their attempt to repress the IRA[9], the British paramilitary force Black and Tans were perpetrating against the nationalists. The airman is no longer a hero; he is not there to help his people as he has lost his life for a cause that is now being questioned. In the bitter, final line, Yeats invites him to "lie among the other cheated dead", the victims of a meaningless war. The verb "lie" might even be read as a pun on the deceitful service of Irishmen in the British army or a hint, along with "cheated", at the "old Lie" of the glorious death in battle[10].

> Some nineteen German planes, they say,
> You had brought down before you died.
> We called it a good death. Today
> Can ghost or man be satisfied?
> Although your last exciting year
> Outweighed all other years, you said,
> Though battle joy may be so dear
> A memory, even to the dead,
> It chases other thought away,
> Yet rise from your Italian tomb,
> Flit to Kiltartan cross and stay
> Till certain second thoughts have come
> Upon the cause you served, that we
> Imagined such a fine affair: [...] (Yeats 1997: 568-569).

The poet's change of attitude is discernible in his calculated use of the past tense to recall what had been a different consideration of the war and its casualties – "We called it a good death", "We imagined such a fine affair" – opposed to the use of the present when asking the alarming rhetorical question "Today can ghost or man be satisfied?". The pointlessness and inexplicability of the Great War is all those lines.

It is exactly by reflecting on the inexplicability of war that Yeats's silence appears to be more justified. In one of his frequent letters to Lady Gregory, in February 1915, he writes "I wonder if history will ever know at what man's door to lay the crime of this inexplicable war (Gregory 1974: 521)". The incommunicability of the tragedy and the difficulty to come to terms with the reasons that had sparked the First World War, and more specifically Britain's decision to intervene, are recurrent preoccupations of authors writing in the period. Moreover, Yeats found himself in a delicate position, as a

[9] For extensive information on the Black and Tans, see Leeson 2011.

[10] In 1917, the poet Wilfred Owen denounced the "old Lie" of war propaganda in his famous "Dulce et Decorum Est" (Owen 1994: 29).

distinguished public and literary figure, a Dubliner who had strong connections in London, an Irishman who had had nationalist sympathies in his youth but had later turned almost apolitical. He believed in the Home Rule, but refused to align himself either with John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party and supporter of the Irish participation in the war, or with Patrick Pearse, the advanced nationalist who dissuaded Irishmen from enlisting and was later to organize the Easter Rising. Taking sides was not what Yeats intended to do; he always revealed a tendency towards peaceful resolutions, judging with uncertainty even the Rising, admiration mixed with doubt.

Throughout the years, the poet showed an increasing dislike and mistrust towards politics, which he found too violent and partisan. If in 1918 he wrote that "I have no part in politics and no liking for politics, but there are moments when one cannot keep out of them"[11], in the 1930s he declared "I have a horror of modern politics…I'm finished with that for ever [*sic*]"[12]. Some scholars have accused Yeats of deliberately ignoring the Great War; John Stallworthy has written that Yeats was unmoved by the war (Stallworthy 1969: 214), Declan Kiberd that he denied the reality (Kiberd 1995: 246), and even another great Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, in his Nobel lecture hinted at the older poet's disengagement with political realities (Ryan 2014). However, Yeats's indifference is only apparent and reveals a conscious reaction. His decision to dissociate from the Great War comes from the awareness of its futility, from the shock of its inhumanity, from the protest against its incomprehensible schemes. In the light of such a poor consideration of the war, it is now easier to understand why he found it "inexplicable". If something defies explanation, we lack the appropriate words to speak of it and therefore may choose, as Yeats did, to remain silent, at least partially. In private, the poet defined the Great War as "the most expensive outbreak of insolence and stupidity the world has ever seen[13]" and "a bloody frivolity" [14]; therefore his reticence on the topic in public is to be read as a form of quiet and strategic disapproval.

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[11] W. B. Yeats to Lord Haldane, October 1918, quoted in Foster 2003: 131.

[12] W. B. Yeats to Ethel Mannin, 11 February 1937 (Wade 1954: 881).

[13] W. B. Yeats to John Quinn, 24 June 1915, quoted in Foster 2003: 5.

[14] W. B. Yeats to Henry James, 20 August 1915 (Wade 1954: 599).

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Erica Maggioni is a PhD candidate in Linguistic and Literary Sciences at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan. Her research interests include: English poetry of the Romantic period and the early 20th century. She has worked on John Keats, W. B. Yeats and the British poets of the First World War.
Erica.Maggioni@unicatt.it