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Yeats' Imagined Ireland and Postcolonial Theory

Abstract I: In the light of various authoritative definitions of the word 'culture', such as those expressed by Edward Said and Raymond Williams, the present paper investigates W. B. Yeats' idea of Irish culture and explores the poet's position regarding several crucial concepts which would eventually be taken up in ground-breaking studies of post-colonial theories, such as the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), "imaginary/invented countries" (Kiberd 1995) and the "un-homed condition of the artist" (Bhabha 1994) in a postcolonial / postmodern society. This paper intends to explore the often confusing and misleading use of fixed notions of 'culture', 'identity' and 'tradition' when employed to describe complex systems, and to show Yeats' conscious and deliberate or culture-bound use of such terms in his own definition of Irish culture.

Abstract II: Alla luce di definizioni della parola 'cultura', come quelle espresse da Edward Said e Raymond Williams, questo saggio illustra l'idea che W. B. Yeats aveva della cultura nazionale irlandese in relazione a concetti divenuti poi centrali per gli studi postcoloniali, quali quelli di 'invenzione della tradizione', di 'paesi immaginari o inventati' e della posizione 'un-homed' dell'artista. L'intento è di evidenziare i limiti di definizioni statiche di sistemi complessi e ibridi, e mostrare quanto Yeats fosse cosciente della rigidità di parole quali 'cultura', 'identità' e 'tradizione', come risulta dalle scelte che operò nella sua personale definizione della cultura irlandese.

Defining Culture

W. H. Sewell (2013) acutely pointed out that the word 'culture' has two principal meanings. On the one hand, it is a theoretical concept in opposition to other aspects of social life, such as the economy or politics; on the other, 'culture' stands for a concrete set of beliefs and practices and is generally felt to be the expression of a given society. However, this second definition implies that the term is rather ambiguous and arbitrary since a distinction of cultural identities is often the product of political decisions and power struggles rather than any neat and distinguishable factor. This contested word and its two meanings have been much discussed from the very beginning of the debate on cultural studies.

According to Edward Said "culture includes aesthetic forms, popular stock of lore and specialized knowledge" (Said 1993: xii). As for Raymond Williams, culture "i) describes a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; ii) [...] indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity in general; iii) [...] describes the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity" (Williams 1985: 90). Both Said and Williams quote from Matthew Arnold (*Culture and Anarchy*), not only criticizing him (as they often do) but also finding some positive elements in his argument. Said underlines that Arnold conceived culture as a "concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought" (Said 1993: xiii); Williams remarks that in *Culture and Anarchy* Arnold criticized "the National obsession with wealth and production" (Williams 1980: 5) and in so doing he arrived at a definition of culture which implies "the sense of more things in life than economy, the opposition to manipulation, the commitment to an extending popular education" (Williams 1980: 5).

A Class Distinction

It is difficult to say what W. B. Yeats intended by 'Irish culture', and to understand what his idea of Ireland was, as Yeats did not have a single vision of the nation. His ideas changed over the years. However, it is possible to identify points of contact with the definitions quoted above. The social classes Yeats referred to in identifying Ireland and Irish culture were those described in his poems "Under Ben Bulbin" (Yeats 1989: 333) and "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" (Yeats 1989: 328). He wrote: "Irish poets learn your trade,/ Sing whatever is well made [...]".

These first two lines can be read in relation to the definitions of culture given by Said and Williams. By comparing them with the quotations above, it can be said that for Yeats the 'aesthetic forms' and 'artistic activity' (the trade of the Irish poet), which are highly relevant to the concept of culture, have to reproduce 'the best that has been known and thought' ("whatever is well made"); they represent an 'elevating element' of society. Yeats continues:

Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard-riding country gentlemen,
The holiness of monks, and after
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;
Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay
Through seven heroic centuries.

Before commenting on these lines, it is useful to add a further quotation, this time from the second of the aforementioned poems:

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
All that we did, all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil

[...]

We three alone in modern times had brought
Everything down to that sole test again,
Dream of the noble and the beggar-man.

Two main points are made here, the first of which deals with class distinctions. From the lines above, it is evident that for Yeats the social classes representing Ireland were the peasants ("the peasantry") or the poor people ("the beggar-man"), and a supposed aristocracy ("country gentlemen"; "the lords and ladies gay"; "the noble [...] -man"). In fact Yeats was convinced that an important contribution to popular poetry derived from the two social classes called here into question "Aristocracies have made beautiful manners [...] and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs [...] and the artists have made all the rest [...]" (Yeats 2007: 183) as he wrote in the essay "Poetry and Tradition" included in the collection *The Cutting of an Agate*.

Referring again to the quotations by Williams and Said, it can be surmised that the Irish literature Yeats refers to derives its themes from the "popular stock of lore" and "indicates a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group or humanity in general". However, it is not, perhaps, *that* 'general', as it refers just to the rural folk and to the gentry represented by the Ascendancy ("dream of the noble and the beggar-man"), while one social class, the bourgeoisie, is left out. Yeats proposed two different models for Irish identity; the first saw peasants and poor people as the social class embodying and continuing the oldest and most traditional habits of the authentic "national race". The second was the ruling class to which he belonged, the Protestant Ascendancy. He thought this social class could usher forth a new era in Irish history, paradoxically leading to a de-Anglicization of the Island and a new start for an independent country. The paradox here consists of the fact that the Ascendancy derived from those rich families of English origin who had settled in Ireland from the Elizabethan Age on, and become great landowners thanks to

the dispossession of large holdings previously belonging to Roman Catholic (Irish) people.

In indicating these two different social classes as the only ones which could rebuilt Irish identity, Yeats, to a certain extent, was not very far from what Williams saw as the positive point in Arnold's definition of culture. The "obsession with wealth and production" is a value expressed by the middle-class and upper middle-class. Culture has nothing to do with the pursuit of economic goals because it represents a "sense of more things in life than economy, [...] and a commitment to an extending popular education" (Williams 1980: 5). This refusal to consider the middle class as a distinctive element of Irish culture is expressed by Yeats in the manifestoes of the Irish National Theatre, published in the periodicals *Samhain* and *Beltaine* (1). Here Yeats declared that in order to represent Irish culture, Irish theatre should reject the so-called 'theatre of the drawing-room' because "the life of the drawing-room, the life represented in most plays of the ordinary theatre of today, [...] differs very little all over the world, and has [...] little to do with the national spirit" (Yeats 2003: 10) (2). This means that Yeats refused to write, and, as one of the managers of the Abbey Theatre, even to stage, what could be defined as bourgeois drama (3).

Several authors and politicians of the time shared this view and referred to this social class distinction in order to identify the authentic characteristics of the Irish people. President Eamon De Valera's speech of 1943, about four years after Yeats' death, is highly significant:

The *ideal* Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we *dreamed of*, would be the home of a people who *valued material wealth only as a basis for right living*, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit – a land whose *countryside* would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose *fields and villages* would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children,

the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age (4).

De Valera is apparently concerned here with the same values Yeats refers to in the poems quoted above. In this speech he focuses his attention on the countryside and on the villages, declaring that Irish culture represents “something more than economy”. This view is certainly informed by an opposition to English mercantilism and an English focus on economic power, and by the traditional image of Ireland as a country whose economy is based on agriculture and sheep farming. What emerges from these quotations is a common idea of the characteristics that make Ireland. In the view of this political or artistic élite, Irish culture is described in similar terms; its identity is a fixity, based on a pure tradition.

Tradition: an Invented Definition

This leads us to question another keyword used and discussed by Said (1993) in relation to ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’. Indeed, the debate regarding ‘identity’, together with another related term such as authenticity, informs a certain number of well-known critical works: *Inventing Ireland* (Kiberd 1995), *Modernism and the Celtic Revival* (Castle 2001) and *Inauthentic* (Cheng 2004). It must be noted that this debate was not introduced by Said for the first time, but had already been exhaustively discussed by at least three other authors in texts which Said describes as groundbreaking, namely *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983), *Imagining India* (Nilekani 1988) and *The Invention of Africa* (Mudimbe 1988). In *Culture and Imperialism* Said reoriented this debate along the lines laid out by cultural studies, shifting the focus from political and economic matters to more philosophical, cultural and literary issues. This long cultural debate helps us to explore Yeats’ ideas and his specific use of keywords such as “culture”, “tradition” and “identity”.

Raymond Williams had early on illustrated the dangers involved in the misleading association of the word "tradition" with the adjective "national", as well as considering the concept of 'culture' as synonymous with 'nation' and 'tradition'. This association leads to a misinterpretation of the words in question and to false, and potentially conflictual, attitudes implicit in the concept of 'national identity'. The word 'identity' conveys the idea of something static or monolithic, a sense of fixity. This false and distorted concept of a tradition strictly linked to national identity is exposed by Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and by Martin Bernal (1987) (5). Their studies "have accentuated the extraordinary influence of today's anxieties and agendas on the pure (even purged) images we construct of a privileged, genealogically useful past in which we exclude unwanted elements, vestiges, narratives" (Said 1993: 16).

Yeats' ideas of how tradition and identity relate to culture are controversial. However, the poet's project for a new Irish National Theatre and his dream of an Irish State are based upon a solid awareness of the cultural and historical implications of his work. Yeats knew that "romantic Ireland's dead and gone" (6), and was aware of the fact that the imagined world he referred to did not exist and had never existed, at least in the terms he portrayed it. In an interview he was provoked by a journalist who intentionally defined him as Anglo-Irish rather than Irish. Yeats' answer shows that he was aware of the hybridity of Irish culture, and of the artificiality of the attempt to recreate the "Irish race". He replied that "Anglo-Ireland is already Ireland. You may revive the Gaelic language but you cannot revive Gaelic civilization. We have not only English but European thoughts and customs in our heads and in our habits. We could not, if we would, give them up. You may revive the Gaelic language, you cannot revive the Gaelic race" (Yeats 2000: 257).

In the conclusion to the same interview, Yeats explained what he meant by his earlier statements. The "Irish race" is made up of different influences; its roots, like any other nation's roots, result from the combination or the interaction

of different peoples. Identities are hybrid: "The pure Englishman came to Ireland under Cromwell and married into the mixed Irish race. The pure Gael from the Blasket Islands comes to Dublin and goes into the civil service; he will marry into the race in his turn. The Irish people are as much a unity as the German, French, or English people, though many strands have gone to the making of it" (Yeats 2000: 257-258). Irish tradition is thus a hybrid tradition. However, it should be called Irish and not Anglo Irish, because this is what Ireland had become after centuries of imperial subjugation. To some extent, Yeats had already acquired that which Bhabha would later describe as a "sense of the hybridity of imagined countries" (Bhabha 1994: 7); indeed, he had embraced "a plural philosophy [...], celebrated the hybridity of the national experience" (Kiberd 1995: 7).

This awareness was not something that the Irish poet achieved only late in life. In this respect, what Yeats wrote in 1908 is significant: "We sought to make a more subtle rhythm, a more organic form, than that of the older Irish poets who wrote in English, but always to remember certain ardent ideas and high attitudes of mind which were the nation itself, to our belief, so far as a nation can be summarized in the intellect" (Yeats 2007: 181). He clearly knew how difficult, if not impossible, it is to define a nation, a culture or a tradition.

It is indeed impossible to define a nation that has been dominated by empires, as "because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through the imagination" (Said, 1993: 271). Moreover, two opposing forces are at work in this context: "At the level of practical politics, the 'green' and 'orange' essentialists seized control, and protected their singular versions of identity on either side of a patrolled border" (Kiberd 1995: 7). Yeats, referring to the Fenian leader John O'Leary and to the image of Irish art and life given by Irish artists in the past, observed that "ideal Ireland, perhaps from this out an imaginary Ireland, in whose service I labour, will always be in many essentials their Ireland" (Yeats 2007: 180). This sentence is highly significant for at least two reasons: firstly, the adjectives 'ideal' and 'imaginary' are

attributed to Ireland, and secondly, the author attributes a possessive adjective ("their") to his country, allowing for the possibility of declining Ireland in different ways. There is Yeats' Ireland and also O'Leary's Ireland. Yeats was aware that Ireland, as the Gaelic League or the Irish National Theatre intended it, was something that did not exist: "We three [Lady Gregory, Synge and Yeats] have conceived an Ireland which will remain imaginary" (7). It must be noted that also De Valera, in the speech quoted above, referred to an "ideal Ireland" and to an "Ireland we dreamt of".

Although Yeats was conscious that his idea of Ireland would be partial and artificial, he worked and fought for the construction of a new national identity based on supposedly traditional values. This process is evident and stated explicitly in his *Autobiographies*, where the poet remembers Sligo and relates how in his childhood and youth he had begun to compare a sweet familiar Ireland to a cold impersonal London, accepting the binary oppositions created by the empire, but at the same time feeling that the situation was much more complex than a simple dichotomy.

What Yeats did not do – intentionally and purposefully – was to "provoke and challenge the fundamentally static notion of identity" (Said 1993: xxviii). While he avoided this, he was aware that the words 'identity' and 'nation' are approximations and merely represent a static view of a complex whole. Nevertheless, he questioned the production and the creation of a national identity, following "the very concepts of homogeneous national cultures" which are nowadays "in a profound process of redefinition" (Bhabha 1994: 7). Indeed, Yeats' position is not as static and traditional as one may think at first; although at the beginning of his career his "ethnographic imagination combines the desire for an accurate cultural description with a reluctance to achieve the kind of distance that would allow for the separation of observer and observed" (Castle 2001: 63). With the loss of hope in his initial project, he eventually acquired a deep sense of understanding of the implications deriving from his

own point of view. We could say that his privileged position as an artist allowed him to see things from a distance, with a detached attitude.

The Artist and his Liminal Position

According to Raymond Williams, the main mistake made by Arnold consisted in identifying and confusing culture with familiarity. Such a practice reduces the chance to implement culture, making culture a static element incapable of improvement. Accordingly, cultural practices unfamiliar to a society are also seen as dangerous. Williams argues that 'culture' does not necessarily represent familiar habits, but should represent "the best that has been known and thought". This fundamental distinction between 'culture' and 'familiarity' can be seen as the first step in deconstructing the idea of cultures including the concepts of country, state, nationalism and national tradition. The word 'familiarity' has strong affinities with the word 'home', and what can be more familiar than 'home'? Bhabha (1994) describes the privileged position of the artist as "un-homed", estranged in every context. In order to describe something and avoid influencing the experiment, an artist should become "un-homed". Through this condition the artist goes beyond the "binary logic through which identities of difference are often constructed" (Bhabha 1994: 5), beyond what Vincent Cheng (1995) defines the artificial logic of the "binary trap". If the artist wants to be objective and to describe the condition of a post-colonial country adequately, all familiarity with the subject must be positioned at a considerable distance.

Being "un-homed" is the condition of the postmodern/postcolonial author. Feeling un-homed in one's own country is a "privileged condition" because it enables the author to project him/herself as 'other'. This status is not constructed or artificial; it is a product of the colonial experience and it is produced by the logic imposed by the dominant powers which tend to see everything in binary terms. Following the perverse and simplified logic of such a

distinction, which ignores all possible alternatives, the subject inevitably ends up conceiving, erroneously, the world in terms of oppositions. Once these oppositions have been imposed by the empire and accepted by the colonies, the colonised are trapped in static definitions. Even for the colonised, it becomes difficult not to play "by the same terms as the binary system" (Cheng 1995: 47), albeit with reversed values. Moreover, all binary oppositions inevitably lead to oversimplification.

Yet, after decades and centuries of imperialism something has drastically changed. Bhabha states that new generations of artists, who have grown up in once dominated nations and been educated in complex subjugated societies, have naturally achieved an 'un-homed' condition, which can be considered as a natural reaction to the complex hybrid situation of colonised nations. Being at close, forced contact with native, colonised and colonizing cultures, many artists have acquired a much deeper understanding of their position which goes well beyond conceiving the world in binary terms. As Said puts it, "gone are the binary oppositions dear to the nationalist and imperialistic enterprise" (Said 1993: xxviii).

From this perspective, Yeats, at the end of his career as a senator of the Irish Free State, was un-homed in his own country, and estranged both from the colonizer's idea of Ireland and from the colony's self-image as an outraged state. He was in favour of Irish independence, but he was also a Protestant and part of the so-called Ascendancy. He dreamt of an Ireland that had never really existed and that, by the end of his life, it was clearly impossible to (re)create. His position had changed over the years: he moved from the invention of an Ireland based upon the idealization and transfiguration of the peasantry and of the people of the West, to the idea of an Ireland led by the Ascendancy. The latter was represented by the Irish Big House, the political symbol of its own status, a centre of culture in a newly-invented tradition where the landlord class provided the idealized image of a gentry ruling the land from its country

mansion. Yeats saw the Big Mansion House in Coole, run by Lady Gregory's family, as the icon of this ideal conservative country whose social order was guaranteed by the great landowners (8). The Big House, indeed, was a recognized symbol of a pre-existing order and it is no coincidence that several mansions were destroyed or burnt and severely damaged during the civil war between 1919 and 1923 (Dooley 2001: 174-196) (9).

It must be added that, as with the Irish political situation of the beginning of the twentieth century, any diametric opposition between two different ideals is an oversimplification of a complicated matter. The history of Irish independence is much more complex than an empire-vs-colony opposition. The Irish Civil War saw the fratricidal struggle between the forces of the Free State and those of the Irish Republic; the Unionists were, in turn, different from those who, though being Protestant, like Yeats, longed for an independent country (10). This means that there were at least four different views of a possible future for the country.

Yeats was aware of his problematic position and of the fact that 'his' Ireland, if it had ever existed (11), was lost. At the end of his career, he represented this bitter conclusion in his last play, *Purgatory*, where the Big House of the Protestant Ascendancy is destroyed. Gregory Castle refers to it at the end of a chapter dedicated to Yeats in *Modernism and the Celtic Revival*: "The play is an eloquent memorial to the Anglo-Irish Big House culture whose passing Yeats had been mourning for over twenty years" (Castle 2001: 95).

Castle's words should be considered alongside what Bhabha writes in *The Location of Culture*. A remarkable aspect of *Purgatory* is the fact that the only two characters in the play see the scene of the abandoned and destroyed house from a distance. They are estranged, beyond the time and the action of the play; they are in a marginal, or liminal, position (12). In Bhabha's terms, it can be said that the two characters of Yeats' play are "un-homed". This is not only true in a literal sense, since their house has been destroyed, but also in the

metaphorical sense. They have the chance to contemplate the situation in which they were once involved. From this point of view, their role is similar to that of the postcolonial writer whose liminal condition, according to Bhabha, allows him/her to relocate 'home' and 'the world'. The setting of *Purgatory* represents the moment of "aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge" (Bhabha 1994: 19). The two protagonists of the play clearly see the representation of Yeats' ideal Ireland, of their own world, but at the same time they are spectators of its final ruin.

Conclusion

Bhabha sheds light on the fact that all cultural and postcolonial discourse from Williams, Said, Hobsbawm and Ranger to minor or more recent scholars, inevitably tends to question fixed and static definitions of cultures and identities. At the beginning of this paper, an attempt was made to bring together these definitions of culture with reference to the eminent scholars quoted. At the same time, they have been matched with Yeats' plans for a new theatre in Ireland. Other key-terms such as 'nation' and 'tradition' have, of necessity, been brought into discussion. Though Yeats was conscious of the fact that language and mental habits naturally tend to create artificial concepts, he also felt the need to name things and define controversial realities with labels, an operation that inevitably lead to oversimplification. In fact Yeats resorted to simplistic terms such as "Irish race" and proposed a project that could neither reconcile opposing views, nor be seen as a solution to the binary oppositions created by colonialism. He was aware of the artificiality of his own personal construction, of his invented Ireland, yet he needed something that could help him shape his vision. Being able to see things from a distance and to discern between imaginary over-simplified ideas of a country or of a culture did not prevent him from taking sides in the dispute and from proposing his own artificial dream.

NOTES

1. Now collected in Yeats 2003.
2. Yeats admitted the possibility of accepting Irish plays dealing with the same bourgeois issues tackled by great modern European playwrights like Ibsen and Hauptmann, but his scepticism is evident: "We can, if but the dramatists arrive, take up the life of our drawing-rooms, and see if there is something characteristic there, something which our nationality may enable us to express better than others, and so create plays of that life and means to play them as truthful as a play of Hauptmann's or of Ibsen's upon the German or Scandinavian stage" (Yeats 2003: 108-109).
3. A perfect example of this change can be seen in his shift in perspective towards the audience of his own theatre. At the beginning of his career Yeats proposed what he called "a People's theatre" (see Yeats 2003). This project was not to be understood as popular theatre, but as a theatre representing Irish people, an image of Irishness. His plays were not popular at all; indeed, they became more and more difficult with the passing of time. In an essay entitled "What is popular poetry?" Yeats underlined the confusion created by the term. He wrote: "what we call popular poetry never came from the people at all" (Yeats 2007: 7).
4. This speech was given on March 17, 1943. Emphasis added.
5. Actually Said rephrases Martin Bernal's words saying that "since Greek writers themselves openly acknowledged their culture hybrid's past, European philologists acquired the ideological habit of passing over these embarrassing passages without comment, in the interest of Attic purity" (Said 1993: 15).
6. This is a line from the famous poem, "September 1913" (Yeats 1989: 107).
7. Yeats, quoted by Castle (Castle 2001: 137). Castle adds that "Yeats epitomizes the dilemma of the Irish writer faced with the necessity of

- constructing an imaginary nation from within a colonial context" (Castle 2001: 175).
8. See also the poem "Coole Park, 1929" (Yeats 1989: 246).
 9. This is what Yeats described in his last play, *Purgatory* (Yeats 2001).
 10. From his childhood and youth, Yeats felt the inevitable presence of these contrasts that were much more complex than a binary opposition. Here is one of the many examples of what he perceived as a young boy: "Everyone I knew well in Sligo despised Nationalists and Catholics, but all disliked England with a prejudice that had come down perhaps from the days of the Irish Parliament" (Yeats 1999: 60).
 11. I am not quite sure Yeats really believed that Ireland as he conceived it had really existed. He thought that a different Ireland had existed, but that it had been destroyed and replaced by a corrupt country when the English colonized it. However, what he wanted to re/create was a new order by recovering parts of an imagined lost Ireland, together with the spirit of leadership represented by the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. He was aware of the oversimplification inherent in his occasionally neat references to a glorious, pure past.
 12. A term which, rather significantly, implies ambiguity and disorientation.

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