

Two Political Poems

Marvell's 'Horatian Ode' and Yeats' 'No Second Troy'

The following is an extract from the Warton Lecture on English Poetry delivered by **Professor A.D. Nuttall FBA**, Professor of English at the University of Oxford, on 13 April 1999 at the British Academy.

Mrs Frida Mond requested that an annual lecture be given as a tribute to Thomas Warton, 'the first historian of English poetry, whose work not only led the way to the scientific study of English Literature, but also stimulated creative genius, and played no small part in the Romantic Revival'. The series was inaugurated in 1910.

In 'No Second Troy', Yeats contemplates the woman he was to love all his life, from a necessary distance. The lady is not named in the poem but everyone knew in 1910 that it was Maud Gonne, the political activist who turned down Yeats's proposal of marriage.

In the poem, the apolitical heart is transfixed when it encounters the fact that the loved woman is herself political. Thus – at least for the poet – the root of the matter may appear to be pre-political: Yeats detests violence, loves Maud Gonne; but Maud Gonne is violent.

*Why should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire?
What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern?
What, what could she have done, being what she is?
Was there another Troy for her to burn?*

The process is, I take it, as follows. First, 'Why should I blame her for filling my days with misery?' So far, indeed, we have a question that virtually invites a sceptical response. What better reason could a person have for resentment?

But the succeeding suggestion, which follows swiftly, is that self-pity is an ignoble emotion and of course we pull back at once; we do not wish to be trapped into endorsing it.

Then, as the sentence moves from the personal plane to the political, we begin to see that the poet is not, after all, playing a trivial game; the lady has made him wretched and, meanwhile, has stirred up revolutions, poor against rich.

If the personal misery seems a puny thing, the sentence implies, then let it be so; something larger is in any case afoot here. With Yeats's poem, it is of the essence of the work that it does not present a marriage of true minds. The poet must so speak to establish his own unsympathising character before he allows the lady her proper

transcendence. That is why, when the reference shifts to politics, the tone is tetchily personal, half-comprehending, indeed unsympathetic. Maud Gonne and Yeats both loved Ireland but her love was programmatic, future-orientated, while his was backward-looking, enamoured of custom and ceremony. We may add that Yeats obviously got a further kick out of the exhilarating rebarbative-ness of reactionary, hierarchical views. The poet's contempt for the ignorant poor is there on the page, with no attempt to palliate or conceal it.

The same contempt blazes in a harsh two-line poem:

*Parnell came down the road, he said to a
cheering man:
'Ireland shall get her freedom and you still
break stone.'*

The crushing effect of the measured, spondaic prophecy – coming from the great revolutionary himself! – is to turn the 'cheering man' of the preceding line into an arrested grotesque like something in Picasso's *Guernica*.

The same tic of contempt shows in the line 'Had they but courage equal to desire?' Yeats pulls off a curious technical feat here. He is simultaneously saying what he really thinks and speaking 'in character', as if to say: 'These are the things people like me will always say'.

Meanwhile, the lines are there to be at once blotted out by the lady herself and – in so far as she is the Unanswerable Positive of the poem – the conservative suggestion must be negated, which is as much as to say rendered, after all, apolitical. Hence the appropriateness of an element of primitive defamiliarisation in 'Hurled the little streets upon the great'. It is as if the sophisticated political meaning, 'caused the lower classes to rise in violent struggle with the upper classes', is engulfed by a child's surrealism, 'houses fighting houses'.

The next lines show how there is no irony in the poet's carefully public decision not to resent her treatment of him. Yeats alone of all 20th-century poets could unleash, when he chose, authentic, over-mastering high style, which carries all before it. He does so here.

*What could have made her peaceful with a mind
That nobleness made simple as a fire
With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
That is not natural in an age like this,
Being high and solitary and most stern?*

This is intended to transcend all that has gone before, and it does just that. The poet's own

thoughts are erased by an intuition of splendour that is identical with love. It is not so much that criticism dies away before the image of the lady herself; the very disclaiming of the right to criticise dies, becomes irrelevant to the contemplated wonder. The lady is not of our age, not of our kind perhaps; she is like fire from the sky, wholly non-negotiable.