W. B. YEATS AND EDWARD SAID: NATIONAL TRANSNATIONALISM: CONCEPTS OF IRISHNESS–FROM WITHIN AND FROM WITHOUT

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Резюме

Съвременната литературно-критическа мисъл често насочва вниманието си към геополитическата, историческата и културна значимост на така наречените „периферни" земи/провинции, определяни като „нисшестоящи" в имперските дискурси на колониалния хегемон. В същото време, нееднократно е подчертавано, *че в случая на англоезичния модернизъм бившите колонии са онези,* които наследяват литературното пространство. Настоящата статия изследва специфичните отношения на власт и подчинение чрез художествени практики и стратегии на представянето им в английския и ирландския контексти, *като основният акцент е върху естетизацията на Ирландия.* Пред*ставени са* две съществено различни гледни точки – тази на ирландския емблематичен национален поет У. Б. Йейтс, която условно ще нарека „вътрешнонационална", и на американо-палестинския литературен критик Едуард Саид, която ще дефинирам като „транснационална."

Literary critics have recently drawn much attention to the cultural, political and historical significance of the so-called "peripheral" lands/provinces, defined as "infe-

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rior" by the hegemonic discourses of imperialist dominion. At the same time, it has been repeatedly pointed out that in the case of Anglophone modernism, paradoxically, it is the colonised that shall inherit the literary domain.[1] The present text focuses on and aims to reveal a number of specific power relations and multiple aesthetic practices and strategies of representation concerning the English and the Irish contexts. However, it specifically discusses the aestheticization of the latter, whose importance is still to be evaluated by current critical researches. For the purposes of the study two essential angles will be explored. The first, which I will conditionally call an "intra-national" one, is offered by the Irish poet William Butler Yeats and is revealed in his conception of "Irishness." The second, which I will define as "transnational," is the point of view of the American-Palestinian critic Edward Said. By juxtaposing the two perspectives, I will attempt to reach substantive insights into the issue and draw relevant conclusions about Ireland's specific status in two essentially different literary-cultural spheres.

Irrespective of whether literary scholars accept or reject Ireland's postcolonial status,[2] it is impossible to deny that Irish culture still has strong ties with that part of the English-language tradition which centred in London in the past. The interaction, then, between what the Empire perceived as a metropolitan "centre" and the Irish "periphery" became inevitable. "It seems undeniable," writes Robert Crawford, "that it was the un-English provinces and their traditions which contributed most to the crucially provincial phenomenon which we now know as Modernism" (Crawford, 1992: 217-219). On the other hand, the imperial city *par excellence*, the "heart of the world," as G. H. Wells called London,[3] could appear as a fruitful ground for accommodation and domestication of antithetical conceptions such as "national" and "transnational," "primeval" and "innovative," "archaic" and "contemporary," "linear" and "cyclic," "unitary" and "fragmented."

It cannot be denied that, in the Irish case, there was cultural accumulation of experience and mutually constructive interaction between colonised and coloniser. At

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[1] See, for instance, Terry Eagleton, 1987, p. 1.

[2] Ibid

[3] Qtd. in Malcolm Bradbury, 1991: 172.

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the same time, however, there was also a mounting dissent between the two parties. In the case of Ireland, the resistance of the subordinated was countered by a specific myth of the so-called "primary other,"(Valente, 1994: 193) constructed by the British Empire about Ireland. Respectively, the process of establishing a national/cultural identity by Irish intellectuals, pioneering a cultural renaissance, was most violent. The forging of a cultural self-image was very closely linked to the political and national conflicts in the early twentieth century and thus it bore the traits of the Irish nationalist struggle against British colonial, imperialist claims.

The Irish poet W. B. Yeats was both free from and held by his belonging to Anglo-Ireland, and this made his stance one of a writer at the crossroads. His formation and development as a poet of a specific historical, cultural and literary climate made it possible for him to become an emblematic figure of a double balance: on the one hand, he had to bear the metropolitan influence of the English cultural "centre," while, on the other, he had to preserve his Irish identity, which decentered him as an outsider. What Joseph Conrad termed "homo duplex" (Conrad, 1988: xiii) seems to be the most appropriate descriptor for the eclectic anthropological aspect of Yeats's character. His status–"at once an insider and an outsider, a resident alien" (Crawford, 1992: 223) – can be regarded as both incorporation into and an escape from the metropolitan centre.

Logically, what the American-Palestinian critic Edward Said sees in the figure of Yeats in his essay "Yeats and Decolonization" is his stature as "a *national* (my emphasis) poet who articulated the experiences, aspirations, and the vision of a people suffering under the dominion of an offshore power."(Said, 1990: 69)[4] The critic's angle, pertaining to the politicized literary discourse of postcolonial studies, accentuates the impact which Ireland's anti-imperialist resistance and national Renaissance exerted on the works of the Irish poet. In fact, these processes gave Said a powerful license to define Yeats's work as basically ideological. Indeed, the strategy of using images, myths and archetypes (as Yeats did) proceeding from

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[4] Hereafter cited by page number

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unconscious sources may acquire an ideological perspective rather than an artistic one, but the ideological suppression which imperial Britain exercised on its colonized peoples required an ideological counter-strike on the part of the subordinated, equal in power and intensity to the hegemonic one. To do justice to Edward Said, we should point out that he astutely grasped the meaning of "national resistance" and its mounting scale in different colonial states:

> A great deal, but by no means all, of the resistance to imperialism was conducted in the name of nationalism. Nationalism is a word that has been used in all sorts of sloppy and undifferentiated ways, but it still serves quite adequately to identify the mobilizing force that coalesced into resistance against an alien and occupying empire on the part of the peoples possessing a common history, religion and landscape. (74)

Further on in his essay, when Said talks about the "civilization of imperialism" on the one hand, and its "dominant culture," (72) on the other, he in fact establishes equality in their otherwise different statuses. Said's conception of civilization comes fairly close to the ideas of some historical philosophers, such as Oswald Spengler or Arnold Toynbee who tend to regard "civilization" as a unified *cultural* (emphasis added) entity above all, a large cultural sphere whose coherence is based around a single primary cultural symbol. Though to a great extent "culture" and "civilization" emerged as complementary notions, they should, in my view, never be considered identical.

Whatever encyclopedic (whether philosophical, sociological or psychological) interpretations of "civilization" we take, we cannot help but discern a manifold diversity in the definition of its meaning. Qualifications of the word may include various factors such as life in the cities, advanced agriculture, stable state government, social hierarchy and institutions, extensive economic exchange, organized religion and education, technological development or advanced development of the arts and writing. However, it has often been pointed out of late that "civilization" has come to be regarded as a value-charged word

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signifying superiority over other "uncivilized" or "barbarian" societies. Eric Dunning elaborates the point by referring to Norbert Elias's conception of the issue:

> What Elias initially attempted to do…was to trace the sociogenesis of the word "civilization," how it came to express the self-image of the most advanced Western nations, and how it came in that connection to acquire derogatory and racist connotations, not only in relation to non-Western societies, but in relation to less advanced societies in the West itself as well. (Dunning, 1992: 2)

"Culture," on the other hand is a less "racist," more particularistic term, predominantly conceived as part of "civilization" with its more comprehensive system of economic, socio-political as well as cultural interrelations. Thus my argument is that what the Anglocentric empire initially did to the colonial lands was to impose on them its advanced, "superior," "economic and political machinery," to use Said's own terms, (72) which subsequently came to work as a powerful weapon to further enforce on the subordinated the dominant imperial culture and its civilized manner of living. This, in turn, heavily challenged the authenticity of the diverse native cultures, sometimes literally assimilating them into the hegemonic one. In the long run, "culture" came to be included in the more comprehensive term "civilization."

It may not be easy to differentiate between concepts such as "culture" and "civilization," but it is essential to do it in order to establish one further link: that between "culture" and "civilization," on the one hand, and the problematic concept of "ideology," on the other.

What Said terms "the economic and political machinery" of imperialism is an ideologically charged descriptor which designates a hierarchy in power relations, whose repressive apparatus was meant to hold in subordination "inferior" nations or states by the colonizer. In my opinion, the American-Palestinian critic seems to confuse the concept of ideology with "culture," seen as an integral part of each civilization.

The effect of this unjustified identification of civilization with ideology is that the significance of the indi-

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vidual can be "comfortably" downgraded and his/her status reduced to a mere marginal presence. The ideological apparatus can be used to repress individuality (as history has proved) in order to facilitate the fulfillment of its own ideological ends. Ideology can serve as a means of disguising truth, of concealing what is really happening behind drawn curtains. A truly creative personality cannot be formed exclusively by what a Freudian revisionist school might have termed "an interpersonal process of experience and behavior"[5] which is predominantly ideologically conditioned. The formation of identity can be effectively autonomous, quite often diverging from the prevalent norms of the *ideologically* (emphasis added) established societal relations. Herbert Marcuse astutely remarks that very often

> The obvious, ("diversity of personalities;" analysis as an "interpersonal process"), because it is not comprehended but merely stated and used, becomes a half-truth which is false since the missing half changes the content of the obvious fact. (Marcuse, 1955: 9)

It is not my primary concern to prove here that Yeats's "flirtations" with ideology were intended as a critique of the new rising middle class in Ireland, which, as Said rightly observed "led the nationalist struggles" but "in effect ha[d] often replaced the colonial force with a new class-based and ultimately exploitative force." (74) It should, however, be pointed out that Yeats was led to an ultimate disruption with these "nationalist" forces because of their reaction to cultural legacy. If in the context of Ireland politics often subordinated art to its sometimes pathologically extreme chauvinist aims, then the poet's social as well as personal stance must be evaluated in a complex and circumspect way. Yeats's distinction between what he himself perceived as a "world of dreams" and the "world of action" demonstrates his complex attitude to the issue: while art may demand oppositions and complexities predominantly within the realm of art,

> in the world *of action* (my emphasis) absurdity may become terrible, for men will die and murder for an abstract synthesis, and the more abstract it is the farther it carries them from compunction

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[5] Qtd. in Herbert Marcuse, 1955: 7.

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and compromise; and as obstacles to that synthesis increase, the violence of their will increases. It is a phase as tragic as its opposite, and more terrible, for the man of this phase may, before the point of balance has been reached, become a destroyer and persecutor, a figure of tumult and of violence; or as is more probable... his system will become an instrument of destruction and of persecution in the hands of others. (Yeats, 1962: 161)

It can be deduced, I believe, that Yeats was not striving simply to discuss the "real" outcome of "abstract synthesis," but rather to posit, though implicitly, a pressing dilemma: how could art function, in a discourse defined by violent suppression and justified resistance, in the best possible way so as to restore the severed link between life and itself, and to ensure their reasonable and constructive interaction. And if we juxtapose Yeats's statement and one by Said in which he accuses the Irishman of "outright fascism" and of "unacceptable and indigestible reactionary politics," the latter seems to be unjustified. Furthermore, Said's claim appears to be all the less accurate if another most important factor is also taken into account: the gendering of Ireland as "feminine" and the tendency to assign it an inferior role in a relationship of familial subordination with Britain. The following commentary by Joseph Valente sheds light on some of the key aspects of that relationship:

The sexual inflection of socio-economic dominance was usually explicit in the case of Ireland. First of all, its hybrid status as a metropolitan colony left Ireland especially susceptible of familial metaphors. Long nicknamed the Sister Isle, Ireland was increasingly imaged in wifely terms as the century wore on, the implied connubial connection with England serving to naturalize that longstanding bone of contention, the Union. (Valente, 1994: 190)

It may be assumed that such feminized symbolic representation aimed at preventing the emergence of an Irish cultural identity. Furthermore, it shifted the focus from the Irish *nation* to the Irish *race* (emphasis added). The masculine power of the Teutonic "races" had to be set against, in Mathew Arnolds's words, "the nervous exalta-

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tion" and "feminine idiosyncrasy" of the Celts.[6] This carried a strong connotation of racism and supremacism and the assumption of Irish inferiority might be linked with a certain type of "avant-la-lettre" fascism, which would appear closer to "the real thing" than the fascism of which the Irish poet William Butler Yeats was subsequently accused.

Consequently, the forces of cultural Renaissance in Ireland had to translate this gender hierarchy into the urgency of forging an ethno-colonial counter-offensive. The terms of the "metropolitan marriage" had to be rejected by the postulation of a specific kind of Irish masculinity dissociated from the myth of "womanishness" imposed by the British Empire on Ireland and the Celtic "races." The engineers of Irish "cultural nationalism" thus faced a dilemma: on the one hand, they had to reject the imperial influence through their own myth, while, on the other, it appeared essential to sustain, as Valente rightly remarked, the "feminized idea of the Celt as the "differentiae" of their ethnic and cultural self-definition." (Valente, 1994: 193)

Edward Said's entirely political reading of Yeats leads him so far as to disregard, in an intra-national context, the impassable gulf which divided Yeats the "national" poet from the sustained political and chauvinist extremes, brutal behaviour and arrogant attitude toward culture on the part of the "national bourgeoisies" (74) as Said himself called them. Therefore Yeats's "fantasies," in Said's words, "of old homes and families" (81) appeared to be nothing more than a mere striving for a specific kind of organicism in a society torn apart by savage dissents and violent controversies. It was the commercial mentality against which Yeats reacted and his alleged "fascism" was "purgatorial" in this sense: it was directed against "a mob" (which he aptly opposed to "a people") that was obsessed with profit and assaulted cultural values.

In an international context, the resistance of Ireland to Britain was carried out in a different direction. In this respect Said's astuteness in identifying a process of re-

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[6] Matthew Arnold qtd. in Cullingford, 1990: 6.

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trieving the "homeland" by the anti-imperialist minded colony as sacred topography, is remarkable:

> There is a pressing need for the recovery of the land that, because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, is recoverable at first only through the imagination. Now if there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism it is the primacy of the geographical in it. Imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control. For the native, the history of his or her colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss to an outsider of the local place, whose concrete geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored...This impulse then is what we might call *cartographic.* (77-79)

Yeats's earlier verse and prose aptly proves this impulse. The "sacred character" initially assigned to rivers and mountains in his beloved land of Sligo, becomes an indispensable characteristic for identifying "home," or as Allison points out, "in coming home, as it were, to his own national inheritance, and home to himself. (Allison, 2001: 4)." Yeats's own tribute to "sacred places" which offered him both literal and allegorical tranquility is also demonstrated in numerous later poems such as "Coole Park, 1929," "Coole Park and Ballylee," dedicated to an estate belonging to his patroness Lady Gregory. The poet's concern with sacred topography, however, finds its culmination in the collections "The Tower" and "The Winding Stair," generally believed to be his most significant literary production. The space of the emblematic poem "The Tower" is rendered sacred because, for the first time in his life, Yeats was master of his own estate, in whose house and tower he intended to settle down and found a family. Logically, in the subsequent poem "Meditations in Time of Civil War" the poet investigates the "ancestral houses" of the estate's previous owners, while in the following section, "My House," sacredness is projected into the stony permanence of his own home. The images in this section impress most conspicuously the idea of his personal sense of belonging to a particular place. The meaning of "sense of place" is elaborated by Allison:

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As a phrase, "sense of place" implies the acts of feeling and intuiting but also the processes of inventing, construing, and shaping place. The word "place" itself, as opposed to "space," implies a protected environment distinct from other spaces, a region of uniqueness where cultural processes differ from those elsewhere. (Allison, 2001:1)

Yeats's withdrawal, both literal and symbolical, into the tower, demonstrates his desire to find a protected space, sufficiently familiar and enclosed to ensure his static resistance to the all-inclusive processes of internationalization under way in the public space of modernity. Rapidity of change as exemplified by the quickened hectic compression of the "time-space" dimensions deprived the poet of the private space necessary for his creative imaginings. While the intra-national context forced him into solitary, dreamlike isolation from the real world, the age of modernity set up new standards which challenged the poet's ideas of "nation." Yet, we cannot regard Yeats's feeling for a sanctified space/place as a reactionary attitude, but, rather, as an attempt to enter, through a culturally formed "national" identity, into a context of post-colonial strivings for openness, tolerance and communication between different nations. Consequently, Yeats's sense of identity appears to be a complex one, emerging not from the idea about ethnic purity but evolved out of a conflicting attitude, accommodating both cosmopolitan "active" openness and the "passive" reflex of intra-national inevitabilities. In this sense, contemporary underestimations of the totality of meanings regarding the Irish context seem to be unjust, for pluralistic thinking and democratic ideas were not denounced but rather *included* (emphasis added) in Yeats's works. Though relying on Gaelic origins for mythologizing "Irish" identity, the poet steered clear of concepts of racial intolerance and affirmed cultural openness, rather than the kind of popular nationalism which eventually engendered the unfortunate aftermath (the Irish Civil war), bitterly contemplated by the poet from his lonely tower. The exclusivist connection between politics and imagination in the case of Ireland should be seen as historical inevitability demanding the active participation of creativity in the processes of history. A defensive

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attempt on the part of the poet to define a homeland results in his walling in "the tower," described as a sacred spot, free from both intra-national violence and from international rapidity of experience. Anthony Smith elaborates the point:

> Homelands are important as bases for ethnic survival, not only because they delimit communal boundaries, but also because of the "poetic landscapes" they offer to members of even exiled ethnie. Here again, memories and images of sacred places–rivers, mountains, tombs, sites, monuments–help to keep alive the common sense of ethnicity and provide shared "maps" for collective regeneration.[7]

Though the idea of a homeland as exemplified by the tower may appear nothing more than a desired imaginative construct, it is equally true that an act of depriving people from the imaginings about their communal ethnic self-belonging is, in the long run, an act of, to put it mildly, injustice. Violation of sacred topography often appears to engender a counter-reaction of violent behaviour, as the case with Ireland aptly demonstrated. Consequently, the violence in "Meditations in Time of Civil War," suggested by the verbal force of a tough syntax as well as by the bold assertion of personal pronouns in the section titles "My House," "My Table," "My Descendants," may be interpreted as a logical effect in the long process of forging an identity out of national myths, founded on historical realities as well as on mythological spaces from Greek, Gaelic or Celtic worlds.[8] The explicit link to an ancestral past in "Ancestral Houses" and to an inevitable future in "I See Phantoms of Hatred" is yet another means of emphasizing the character of a process which eventually led to a desire for cooperative exchange of experience and mutually interactive communication between different cultural discourses, unconditionally affirming the absolute value of the other.

In conclusion, I would like to add that new mappings of identities rightly renounce the "national myth" not only as a mere utopia, but also as a dangerous source of fascist agency. The ultimate "liberation" from the colonial past indisputably involves "a transformation of so-

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[7] Smith quoted in Allison, 2001: 3.

[8] Yeats employs motifs and characters from Greek, Gaelic and Celtic mythologies to build up his own mythopoeia.

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cial consciousness beyond national consciousness," (83) as Said rightly observed. But at the beginning of the twentieth century Ireland was a country torn up by savage political conflicts and dissents. The process of forging of an independent and prosperous country had a very complex character and figures like Yeats had a tremendous importance for that context. His own appeal to us as readers in his beautiful poem "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" is for a fair last judgment of his life and work:

> You that would judge me do not judge alone
> This book or that, come to this hallowed place
> Where my friends' portraits hang and look thereon;
> Ireland's history in their lineaments trace;
> Think where man's glory most begins and ends
> And say my glory was I had such friends. (Yeats, 1997: 164)

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