

Early Twentieth Century Poetry: William Butler Yeats

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Please Silence Cell Phones

W.B. Yeats, 1865-1939

- ▶ Anglo-Irish; Lived in London before going back to Ireland
- ▶ Maud Gonne
- ▶ Sought to develop a uniquely Irish Mythology in his poetry: Celtic Revival
- ▶ Founded the Abbey Theatre
- ▶ Won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923



Yeats's Poetic Aesthetic

- ▶ Early poetry: Irish peasantry and country—
Nationalistic
- ▶ Integrates the Classical heritage of Western literature with Irish heritage
- ▶ Hegelian Dialectic: The individual as a Symbol for the National; The Present as embodying the Past and Future
- ▶ Influence of Japanese poetry on he and Ezra Pound—desire for a poetry “closer to the bone”—
Imagism and Minimalism

Seeking Dialectical Transcendence

- ▶ Reconciling Opposites: Irish Catholicism and Anglo-Irish Protestantism
- ▶ “I had noticed that Irish Catholics among whom had been born so many political martyrs had not the good taste, the household courtesy and decency of the Protestant Ireland I had known, yet Protestant Ireland seemed to think of nothing but getting on in the world. I thought we might bring the halves together if we had a national literature that made Ireland beautiful in the memory, and yet had been freed from provincialism by an exacting criticism, a European pose.”

“When You Are Old” 1893

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

“Easter 1916”

- ▶ <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/easter-1916>
- ▶ Irish Nationalist Uprising
- ▶ Take over of Post Office
- ▶ English kill leaders and imprison thousands

An Irish Airman Foresees His Death

► 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 no 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 men, 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.

- ▶ Ambivalence toward War; Localism
- ▶ Yet the impulse of mystical rapture
- ▶ Fatalistic

Mysticism

- ▶ Grand Theory of the Universe
- ▶ Each cycle lasts 2000 years; Christ's birth to 1919 was one era
- ▶ As an age nears its end it slows down and begins to experience troubles; WW I
- ▶ “The Second Coming”
- ▶ The rape of Leda and the birth of Helen was the beginning of an earlier cycle that inaugurated the Greek era and ended with the birth of Christ

“The Second Coming” 1919

▶ “Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

► Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Leda and the Swan, 1923

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

“Sailing to Byzantium” 1926 <http://www.online-literature.com/yeats/781/>

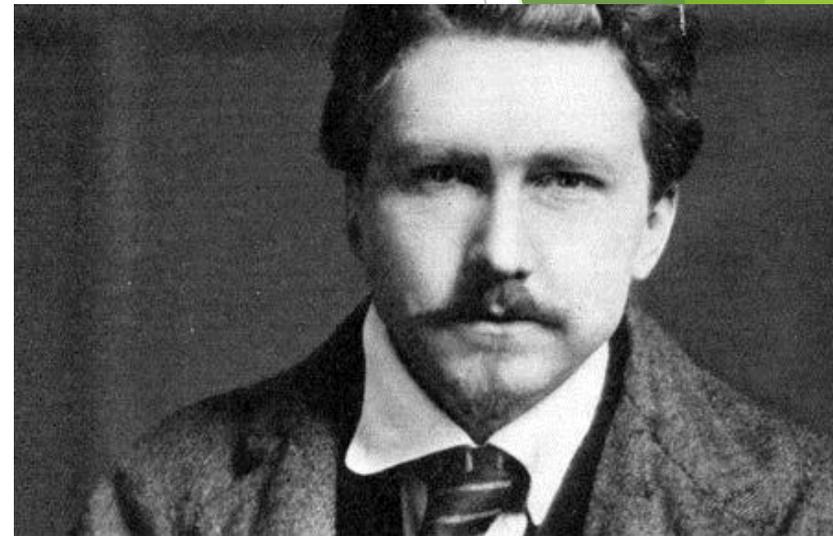
- ▶ Byzantine a metaphor for artistic creativity and vitality
- ▶ Response to Old Age; leave the country of the Young and go to a place of Permanence
- ▶ Art is the only eternal thing
- ▶ Virgil’s “Golden Bough”

“Byzantium”, 1930

- ▶ <http://poetry.poetryx.com/poems/1455/>
- ▶ Can be taken as a metaphor for the afterlife
- ▶ Or, a metaphor for poetic creation
- ▶ The ‘golden bird’ as a poem
- ▶ Response to Keat’s “Ode to a Nightingale”—Birds (poets) do die; Artificial bird is better than natural bird
- ▶ Dolphins as bearers of the dead to afterlife
- ▶ Art as the Eternal Transcendent

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

- ▶ Born in Idaho! Left USA in 1908 for Italy and settled in London
- ▶ Friendship with Yeats
- ▶ 1912, created Imagism:
- ▶ T. S. Eliot declared that Pound "is more responsible for the twentieth-century revolution in poetry than is any other individual."
- ▶ Edited Eliot's "The Waste Land"
- ▶ In his *Cantos*, Pound connects poetry of ancient China and Greece to modern England and America.
- ▶ Proto-Fascist statements led to his arrest during WW II.



Imagism

- ▶ Pound explained his new literary direction. Imagism combined the creation of an "image"—what he defined as "an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" or an "interpretative metaphor"—with rigorous requirements for writing. About these requirements, Pound was concise but insistent: "1) Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective 2) To use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation 3) As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome."
- ▶ <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/ezra-pound>

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (1920)

- ▶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mZ3uBTCsG_4
- ▶ Irregular rhythm in quatrains
- ▶ America as a provincial
- ▶ England is too commercial to appreciate art
- ▶ Longing for Classical, ideal beauty, which is lost to us moderns
- ▶ Commerce has corrupted art

Summary

- ▶ Yeats is great poet of Irish Nationalism
- ▶ Early Romantic style
- ▶ Later, Modernist—Symbolism
- ▶ Mystical and Hegelian Dialectic
- ▶ Shows how people reacted to WW I as an apocalyptic, era ending event
- ▶ Pound moves poetry into Modernist style; metaphors more concise to create images; emphasis on connotation rather than explicit meaning
- ▶ Highly allusive with references to world literature and history deeply embedded