

ENGL 310 Modern Poetry

February 9, 2007

Discussion Section: W.B. Yeats

A Little More on W.B. Yeats

Edward Said on Yeats as a poet of decolonization:

[Yeats'] greatest decolonizing works quite literally conceive of the birth of violence, or the violent birth of change, as in "Leda and the Swan," instants at which there is a blinding flash of *simultaneity* presented to his colonial eyes—the girl's rape, and alongside that, the question "Did she put on his knowledge with his power / Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?"...Yeats' greatest theme in the poetry that culminates in *The Tower* is, so far as decolonization is concerned, how to reconcile the inevitable violence of the colonial conflict with the everyday politics of an ongoing national struggle, and also with the power of each of the various parties in the colonial conflict, with the discourse of reason, of persuasion, of organization, with *the requirements of poetry*.¹

Heaney in his Nobel Lecture, which concludes with a discussion of Yeats:

Yeats' work does what the necessary poetry always does, which is to touch the base of our sympathetic nature while taking in at the same time the unsympathetic reality of the world to which that nature is constantly exposed. The form of the poem, in other words, is crucial to poetry's power to do the thing which always is and always will be to poetry's credit: the power to persuade that vulnerable part of our consciousness of its rightness in spite of the evidence of wrongness all around it, the power to remind us that we are hunters and gatherers of values, that our very solitudes and distresses are creditable, in so far as they, too, are an earnest of our veritable human being.²

¹ Edward Said, "Yeats and Decolonization," in *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), by Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, and Edward Said, 90–91 (emphasis mine).

² Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996* (New York: FSG, 1998), 346. Heaney alludes in particular to Yeats' sequence *Meditations in Time of Civil War*, "Crediting Poetry," 430.