

# ***UCDscholarcast***

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**The Art of Popular Culture: From ‘The Meeting of the Waters’ to *Riverdance***

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### Yeats, Journalism and the Revival

I suspect most people find it hard to think of WB Yeats as a journalist. The designation doesn't seem to fit. His image is, after all, that of the ultimate literary man because for him literature was a form of religion. He said as much in his *Autobiographies*. Even his appearance – that cape and *pince nez* image, although sometimes the augmentation was a huge fur coat, which Seamus Heaney in *Finders Keepers* has called 'the great fur coat of attitude' – seems at odds with the popular image of journalists. I think Yeats himself and literary critics, prizing poetry above all else, are largely responsible for our reluctance or inability to think of him as a journalist at all.

But Yeats wrote a lot of journalism – more than 400,000 words of it (about five average-sized literary novels, such as you might see judged during the Booker Prize or indeed, five PhD theses). Journalism therefore accounts for about 50% of his total published output (omitting his *Letters* which were only published because he became so famous). He wrote in all for about 70 publications (I've counted 71 and he's known to have written for two others –[the *Gael*, the first magazine of the GAA and the *Manchester Courier*, for whom he wrote literary gossip – although no copies have since been found.) Anyway, those 70-plus publications included newspapers, magazines and journals. He wrote journalism between 1886 (when he was 21) and 1938 (when he was 73, a few months before he died in January, 1939).

Now that figure of 70-plus publications can be misleading. It's not as though Yeats wrote an average of 5,000 or 6,000 words for each publication. Many of them were ones-off or, more likely, 2 or 3 pieces. In fact, more than 40% of his journalism was written for just five publications. In all, he wrote about 250 contributions although a few – and they are few – have never been recovered. For instance, Oscar Wilde told him that writing literary gossip was no job for a gentleman so he quit being the literary Keane Edge of the 1880s).

His most frequent outlet was *The Bookman*, which as the name implies, was a literary magazine – a British one. His other most regular outlets in order were *United Ireland*, the feisty, nationalist Parnell paper; the (Dublin) *Daily Express*, the most unionist of Dublin's dailies; the (Boston) *Pilot*, staunchly Catholic and edited by the Fenian, John Boyle O'Reilly. It's now the paper of Boston's Catholic Archdiocese; and the *United Irishman*, Arthur Griffith's Sinn Fein paper founded in 1899. Yeats wrote journalism for Irish, British, American and French publications. His Irish and British contributions are quite even – more than 100 pieces for each; his American articles number about 40; he didn't speak French but Maud Gonne translated two of his contributions for inclusion in *L'Irland Libre*.

He was much more political in Irish publications whereas in British outlets he mostly confined himself to literary matters. In America, he regularly lambasted London – the centre of critical orthodoxy – trying to persuade American readers (and presumably Irish ones too) not to tug the forelock to British tastes. Over the years, he wrote for papers and magazines which are still with us: the *Observer*, the *Times*,

the *Irish Times*, the *Spectator* and the *Evening Herald*. He wrote too for publications which have gone: the *Dublin Evening Mail*, the *Listener*, the *Irish Statesman* and others. He also, of course, wrote for and edited the Irish theatre journals, *Beltaine* and *Samhain*.

Yeats began writing journalism for the *Irish Fireside* – four of his first five pieces were for it. The *Fireside* appeared first in 1883 and was a supplement of the *Weekly Freeman*. Jesuit, Stephen Brown's 1937 book, *The Press in Ireland* describes the *Irish Fireside* as consisting 'largely of snippets about everything under the sun ... and a few good articles about serious subjects'. Yeats then, like Joyce (who was first published in the *Irish Homestead*, George Russell's journal for Horace Plunkett's Irish Agriculture Organisation Society) began his writing career in a modest publication. Joyce, seeing his immortal prose appearing beside the week's manure prices, promptly called the *Homestead*, the 'pig's paper'. Hilarious ... to a certain mentality, no doubt. It appears as if Joyce inherited the snobbery of his foolish father ... 'Mickey Muck' and 'Paddy Stink' or whatever it was to describe Christian Brothers' boys.

Now, the most intense period of Yeats's journalism career was in the nineteenth century. In his fourteen years writing up until 1900, he produced more than he did during his 38 years in the twentieth. His first ten years – his twenties – were the busiest of all, although there was little let-up throughout his thirties. After that, he was better established as a poet and had since age 32, Augusta Gregory as a patron, and though he continued to write occasional journalism, about 80% of it was done by the time he reached forty.

That's just the background to fill people in on the extent of Yeats's journalism. However, even though it may seem surprising – it certainly did to me – that this archetypal literary figure should have written so much for newspapers and the periodical press, it's not when you examine it. If you look first at his milieu – the people he mixed with – even leaving aside, for the moment, the time in which he lived, Yeats's involvement with journalism is not all that surprising. Really, his involvement came at a time when print journalism *was* the media. The golden era of print journalism – before radio, later television, later still the internet – is generally estimated to have occurred between the 1880s and the 1930s, the precise half century he did it. Yeats understood its power. Remember too that Yeats's early mentor was the ex-Fenian John O'Leary (commemorated in 'September 1913' by the couplet):

Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,  
It's with O'Leary in the grave.

O'Leary had been jailed and exiled chiefly for his writings in the Fenian newspaper, the *Irish People*.

In both London and Dublin, Yeats knew many journalists. In London, for instance, William Henley, Elkin Matthews, William Morris, Thomas Rolleston and Henry Sparling were among people who called to the Yeats's home in Bedford Park, Chiswick. In the Rhymers Club too, many of Yeats's London friends – Arthur Symonds, Ernest Radford, John Davidson, Edward Garnett, Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson, among others – acted as a kind of reviewing cartel and exerted decisive influences in a number of publications. Yeats did so with the *Bookman* and

in his letters, occasionally offers to review books for his friends. In Dublin, he was friendly with Douglas Hyde, George Russell, Frank Fay and others. He also had print spats with journalists such as D.P. Moran, Arthur Griffith, Charles Gavan Duffy, and even Patrick Pearse.

Even Yeats's journalism-loathing father, John, who railed against his son's reviewing, and his painter brother Jack, supplemented their incomes by painting illustrations for magazines. John Yeats was a barrister, who felt that the law was no way for a gentleman to make a living. He believed that law, like journalism, was merely the work of the intellect and therefore injurious to fuller creation using the imagination. He was afraid journalism would stunt William's growth as a poet.

Nonetheless, Yeats followed the advice of his mentor, John O'Leary. He understood that the hot metal typefaces of the press were the best way to forge an impression on what he called the 'soft wax', which was his image of Revival Ireland. His specific aims are reasonably well understood too: he wanted to make himself and his work known; he wanted to create a public receptive to the high-class literature he wished to write and, of course, he wanted to found a literary movement. In a letter to the editor of *United Ireland* in December, 1894 he wrote:

... if we are ever to have an Irish reading public we must have an Irish criticism to tell it what to read and what to avoid ... . [This] is not a matter in any sense for the authors but for the journalists, editors and newspaper owners of Ireland. If good criticism is written in Irish newspapers it will carry its due weight with authors and public alike ...

It is, I believe, pretty clear what he's using journalism to achieve.

He also, because he was poor, with a notoriously feckless father, made a little money from journalism. It was very little really. His letters show him waiting to get paid and looking for a rise. It's the typical life of a young freelancer. Until he became an established poet, he couldn't command the highest fees. This is a fact of literary journalism that remains with us today, I suppose. But in writing for Irish, British and American publications – continually stressing the need for Irish literature and Irish criticism to unhook itself from London-centred prejudice, he was pleading at the Bar of international opinion for a separate Irishness. It was cultural decolonisation and that, of course, was central to the Revival.

Journalism also made Yeats familiar with wordcraft and rhythm. It was prose, not poetry but it is crucial to remember that, as today, far more people read – if they were reading at all – journalism than read poetry. It was perhaps one of the reasons why he famously said late in life: 'When I was young, my muse was old / Now, I'm old my muse is young'. Alternately, of course, that last statement may be a self-justification for his trysts with younger women when he was over 65 years old.

It is important to remember that, as George Boyce observed: 'the Literary Revival was not one that embraced, or even interested, the mass of Irish people, Catholic or Protestant'. Yeats was using the technology of the time – print journalism – to persuade people. It's rather like 'televangelists' using TV in the 1980s to persuade people to follow them. Print journalism is, in fairness, generally less propagandistic but then again poetry too carries its weight of propaganda in terms of subject, treatment and mood. Interpretation is invariably an act of propaganda. The most important point to remember is that far more people, then as now, read newspapers

and magazines than read imaginative literature. Yeats knew how important it was to keep in touch with an audience. This makes him different from contemporary Continental modernist artists who railed against journalism and made their art deliberately more complex to keep it secure from the democratising masses. 'The rabble spit forth their bile and call the results a newspaper,' said Friedrich Nietzsche. The Continentals mostly agreed but the Irish Revivalists, realising the power of post-Famine journalism, did not.

Indeed there's an argument that post-Famine journalism, because of technological developments in printing, because of the completion of the railways linking most Irish towns and this in turn, united the country like never before, played a frequently underestimated part on the road to 1916. There is a larger context to Continental intellectuals engaging with the press anyway, but modernists simply didn't.

Before I move on to suggest what the effects of all this journalism had on Yeats, as well as on the Revival, I should point out that Yeats complained regularly and bitterly about journalism and journalists. For instance, in letters to Katherine Tynan between 1888 (the year of Jack the Ripper in London which changed journalism forever: crime; crime; crime) and 1891, he writes on one occasion: 'I hate journalists. There is nothing in them but jeering, tittering emptiness . . . especially the successful ones'. On another he confided that, 'journalism interests me more dimly than poetry'. He also made reference to 'mere ephemeral journalism'. And by the mid-1890s he was talking about his 'attempts to escape from journalism'. This was a small book deal which represented about six months work.

Journalism wasn't ever an end for Yeats. I would not suggest that. It did have a propaganda function (so too, of course, did much of his poetry). Certainly, it wasn't intended to be the liturgy of his new sacred literature but it was there to support that and make it possible.

One aspect of Yeats's journalism that fascinates me is this: in his *Autobiographies* he barely makes mention of it. It's as if he were trying to write journalism out of his life. This is especially strange seeing as he dedicates his *Autobiographies* to: 'Those few people, mainly personal friends, who have read all that I have written'. Yet, his *Collected Letters* are full of references to journalism. In the first, and busiest, ten years he refers to journalism more than a hundred times – often multiple mentions within single letters. You can see that he's excited, anxious, scheming, praising, condemning – all these emotions. So it's obvious, he held charged views on the subject.

This ignoring or repression of journalism in his memoirs and practical obsession with it in private correspondence is telling, I believe. It's possible to suggest a number of reasons for this glaring disparity between the public and the private. My own sense of it is that insecurity and snobbishness persuaded him to ignore his own journalism. He was established as an artist by 1914 (when he began *Autobiographies*) and dreaded the risk, I suspect, of being regarded as a mere 'man of letters'. In that sense, although he was different from Continental modernists, it was only a matter of degree. Journalism was useful to his project.

Let me remind you how Yeats's father railed against his son for doing it. But Yeats still did it. In that sense, it marks a revolt against his feckless father, who was a defining influence on him. He follows John O'Leary and not his father. Richard Ellmann suggests that the Yeats family shows a dialectical progression: the orthodox

Protestant minister grandfather begets his antithesis – the utterly sceptical father who, in turn, begets WB, the poet. The poet synthesises some of his father's ideas – principally, and this is crucial, that the only criterion in art as in life is the fullness or totality of one's personality – with those of his grandfather (substituting, in line with the intellectual morality of the time, literature for religion). My own additional sense of what journalism did for Yeats (as did forcing himself into public speaking and the 'management of men' in the theatre) is this: They provided a means, not for him to become quite a 'man of action' as he sometimes dreamt about, but to become a man – a person differentiated from his father.

His father could never finish a painting, was ineffectual in the pragmatic world and was indeed, feckless. Journalism however, made his son (despite hating the modern world and fearing the onset of the 'filthy modern tide') engage with the technology of his time; it taught him to hit deadlines and furthered the dialectical progression identified by Ellmann. The clarion irony is that it helped Yeats to realise his father's dictum about the primary importance of the total personality. In other words, journalism's effects on Yeats were probably more dramatic than its effects on the world. (It's an occupational hazard for most journalists, indeed for most careers.) Michel Foucault has remarked: 'People know what they do. They frequently know why they do what they do. But what they don't know is what they do does'. This applies to themselves as well as others.

Anyway, I would argue that the effect of Yeats's journalism contributed greatly to his dramatic effect on the world of literature. John Frayne, who collected and edited most of Yeats's journalism in the 1970s maintains that journalism was 'one of Yeats's earliest masks'. I believe that's fair to say although it's not the entire story. Shy and introverted, Yeats sometimes thundered in print and could be quite belligerent. Attacks on Edward Dowden (Trinity College's first professor of English); on Gavan Duffy; on Professor Mahaffy; on Trinity in general) make the point. Perhaps he wasn't Eamon Dunphy but he could be Fintan O'Toole. In that sense, journalism was a mask for him. But critical stress on his searching for secret knowledge – the Hermetic society, the Golden Dawn, the Theosophical Society, cabbalistic lore, séances, occult magic – itself masks, I believe, the profound effects of adjusting himself, through journalism, to engage and cope with banal, quotidian reality.

Yeats was conscious of his unconscious (generally a Jungian term) or his sub-conscious (which at the time was largely Freudian) though he seems to use these interchangeably. His *Autobiographies* has many references to both. If the production of art depends on bringing to consciousness, unconscious aspects of the personality – like the mythology of a country – then the secret knowledge he sought was an attempt to access his unconscious, like myth could reveal the unconscious of a nation or race. That's quite Jungian. In Freudian terms, culture is largely the product of sublimating sexual energy. Yeats remained a virgin until he was almost 30 year old so he qualifies there too. Anyway, his sheer will in making himself write journalism or forcing himself, despite his shyness into public-speaking and managing a theatre company has arguably more effect on him than all this 'secret knowledge' stuff. In that sense, the Theosophy, Golden Dawn, spiritualism *etc*, amount to an elaborate enclosing mask.

Yeats's interest in the occult is often seen as a symptom of his desire to create a mythology within which his poetry could operate in defiance of the modern world. But he also embraced the modern world and journalism was one of his main ways throughout his twenties and thirties. Put it this way: writing journalism contributed

to – not as his father feared, detracted from – his internal psychological processes for producing art. It was, in ways, the writing of his anti-self that he developed and integrated to make him what he became. It's not simply the denial of modern realities, which the occult helped promote, that allows him to succeed. It's the blend of denial plus or minus his accommodation with these realities. Maybe that's why he doesn't mention journalism in his memoirs. He was creating his own myth and his own image too. I believe these have been too readily accepted by literary scholars.

Journalism also provided Yeats, of course, with the other external aspects normally attributed to it: creating an audience; keeping him in touch (remember that journalism did not require a university degree) and pleading Ireland's case. I believe it was at least as (and probably more) psychologically influential as the magic stuff that has gained so much attention. But whether such things are measurable is another matter. That old line about the graceful swan threshing away furiously under the water applies, I believe to the nine and fifty wild swans too. Journalism was crucial in making the threshing possible and the threshing underlies the grace.

I don't want to suggest that the Revival and the 1916 Rising which followed it came about purely because of journalism. It didn't but journalism mattered hugely. The more romantic origin-myth for the Irish state is that it came about through a Rising of poets, not journalists. Actually, there were only three poets involved and five journalists. Still, I think it's fair enough to stress poets. As Yeats excavated (perhaps exploited) Irish mythology, the state venerates (and exploits) the myth of its founding. All states do likewise. It all raises questions about masks enclosing other masks, of course, and also the separation of literature and journalism (mostly bundled-in with social sciences) in colleges.

Yeats showed the relationship between literature and journalism. He backed off it, of course. But, unlike Seamus Heaney, for instance, our living Nobel Prize winning poet, who has used academia to further his career, Yeats was left with journalism. It may be a blessing in disguise that he did not have the entry requirements for Trinity College. In a general sense, Yeats's use of journalism reflects the self-help aspects of the Revival, identified by P.J. Mathews – the GAA, the Gaelic League, the Irish Agriculture Organisation society. It certainly helped him to become known but more importantly, in helping his Self, it clearly contributed to Yeats's becoming arguably the greatest poet of the twentieth century.

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