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.

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-oriented, while his was backward-looking, enamoured of custom and ceremony. We may add that Yeats obviously got a further kick out of the exhilarating barbarianism 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 negatived, 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.

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.
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. She is not of our age, not of our kind perhaps, she is like fire from the sky, wholly non-negotiable.

In 1910, Mrs Frida Mond provided for the foundation of the Shakespeare Lecture. In a letter to the Secretary, Sir Israel Gollancz, Mrs Mond asked for an annual lecture to be delivered 'on or about 23 April on some Shakespearean subject, or some problem in English dramatic literature and histrionic art, or some study in literature of the age of Shakespeare in order to emphasize the world-wide devotion to Shakespeare, any person, of any nationality shall be eligible to deliver the Shakespeare oration or lecture'.

Macbeth and the Third Person

The following is an extract from the Shakespeare Lecture, delivered by Dr Adrian Poole of Trinity College, Cambridge, on 21 April 1999 at the British Academy.

There are some terrible moments in Macbeth, but none more terrible than this, when one man has to break the news to another that his dear ones have all been murdered:

Your castle is surprised; your wife and babes
Savagely slaughtered. To relate the manner
Were on the quarry of these murdered deer
To add the death of you.

The two men are not alone; a third is present and listening, and it is he who completes the line left suspended by the messenger's words 'To add the death of you.' 'Merciful heaven!' this third person cries. He urges the bereaved man to give sorrow words, to be comforted and to dispute it like a man – with 'us'.

Let's make us medi'cines of our great revenge
To cure this deadly grief.

To which the man whose life of incurable grief is just beginning famously responds:

He has no children.

We cannot tell for certain whom he means by 'he' - whether the man who is trying to comfort him too promptly, or the man who has killed his children. He might have said 'Thou hast no children', or 'You have no children'. It is not the only occasion in Macbeth where it is not clear whom 'he' is.

 Pronouns help us work out who we are, you are, they are, and their singular equivalents. In the theatre, pronouns acquire a radical urgency because they are wrought into the conditions of performance. They remind us at less than fully conscious level that we are all performing these pronouns all the time, whether we like it or not. The three men in this scene do have names of their own: Ross, who brings the news; Macduff, who receives it; and Malcolm, who listens and intervenes. But in the theatre we do not hear these proper names as we hear the pronouns that enact the relations between them: I, you, thou, he. WE hear the name of Macbeth many times in the scene, but the names Ross and Malcolm are never uttered nor heard here because the speakers and addressers identify themselves simply and I, Thou or You, and We.

I want now to set up some thoughts about 'the third person'. Let me swiftly sketch a spectrum of beliefs and practices. At a mundane level there is the legal position of the 'third party', that is to say, 'a party or persons besides the two primarily concerned', as in the third-party insurance familiar to car-drivers.

At a more fabulous level, we may think of the tripled daughters and sisters of myth and folk-tale, of whom the third represents 'that which shall be', or in Freud's tragic scenario, the Goddess of Death in masquerade as Cordelia, Aphrodite, Cinderella and Psyche. Less paganly, we may think of the Holy Ghost as the Third Person of the Trinity, or of Christ on the road to Emmaus, or of the figure in T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land: 'Who is the third who walks always beside you?' The figure of the third is always ominous, whether of good or of ill, of black magic or white. 'When shall we three meet again?' Such a sociable question to open a play with, far from the uncouth spirit in which a couple of humdrum murderers will later greet a third accomplice: 'But who did bid thee join us?' It none the less always portentous and pregnant, this