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**MATTHEW ARNOLD AND THE YOUNGER YEATS:
THE MANOEUVRINGS OF CULTURAL AESTHETICS**

In "A General Introduction to my Work" W. B. Yeats wrote about his feelings about English literature and the English:

Then I remind myself ... that I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris and to the English language in which I think, speak, and write, that everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate. I am like the Tibetan monk who dreams at his initiation that he is eaten by a wild beast and learns on waking that he is himself eater and eaten¹.

It is the sort of statement with which most colonial writers throughout the English-speaking world would agree. The relationship between mainstream English literature and Irish literature in English is one which Edward Said deals with in his pamphlet, *Yeats and Decolonisation*: "The [...] problem is that the cultural horizons of nationalism are fatally limited by the common history of the coloniser and colonised assumed by the nationalist movement itself. Imperialism after all is a cooperative venture. Both the master and the slave participate in it, and both grew up in it, albeit unequally"². If we want proof of imperialism's concern with the literature of other nations we hear it in Arnold's essay, "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time":

But, after all, the criticism I am really concerned with, – the criticism which alone can much help us for the future, ... – is a criticism which regards Europe as being, for intellectual and spiritual purposes, one great confederation, bound to a joint action and working to a common result; and whose members have, for their proper outfit, a knowledge of Greek, Roman, and Eastern antiquity, and of one another³.

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, London 1961, Macmillan, p. 519.

² E. W. Said, *Yeats and Decolonization*, Derry 1988, Field Day, p. 9.

³ R. H. Super (ed.), *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, 11 volumes, Ann Arbor 1960–1976, The University of Michigan Press, vol. 3, p. 284. Hereafter I will refer to these volumes as Super, followed by the number of the volume, as in Super 3.

In this paper I will be concerned with Matthew Arnold's pervasive influence on the early Yeats. I will, firstly, examine Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, a series of lectures first delivered in the year of Yeats's birth in 1865. Secondly, I will consider Yeats's reply to those lectures in his essay, "The Celtic Element in Literature" (1897). Thirdly, I will examine Arnold's influence on Celtic Twilight poetry at the end of the nineteenth century, bearing in mind that Yeats first made his name as a leading light in that movement. Lastly, I will Arnold's influence on Yeats's prose criticism, mainly on the aesthetics of poetry.

1

Matthew Arnold's lectures *On the Study of Celtic Literature* were delivered in Oxford, as part of his programme as Professor of Poetry, in 1865 and 1866. The four lectures were published serially in *The Cornhill* during 1866, and as a book in 1867. The opening of *On the Study of Celtic Literature* is notable for the way Arnold makes the landscape speak the difference between the Celt and the English. The choice of language is obviously tendentious. Liverpool is "the Saxon hive" (i.e. organised, industrious), but its people clearly need Wales for they "swarm" there "incessantly". The Liverpool "horizon wants mystery [...]" and has a too bare austerity, while that of Wales has "eternal softness". Wales is the past and the Welsh people know that past, whereas the English have forgotten theirs. Here in the first paragraph we have images of Arnold's chief preoccupations: the romance of things Celtic and England's need for that romance; the practical, male, "taking possession of the beach" English yearn for the feminine and eternal softness of the Celt. To use a word Arnold, later in his essay, employs frequently as an epithet for the Celt, this is a "sentimental" appeal to an English audience to consider the attractions of the Celtic, tempered deliberately with the picture of a Celtic land that is very much the site of decay, death and bloody defeat – Llandudno is "*the bloody city*, where every stone has its story; there, opposite its decaying rival, Conway Castle". Arnoldian balance and "disinterestedness" are on display in the opening images of this essay.

After this poetic study in contrasts we have a homely anecdote to illustrate the romance of a language, Welsh, that has been sealed off from the rest of the world, unaffected, in its pristine innocence, by any other languages. What is interesting about this story is Arnold's intention in contrasting the unsuccessful Welsh language with the successful French spoken by a French nursery-maid: namely that successful languages are carried by successful armies, that "brute despotism of fact" which Arnold will accuse the Celt of being unable to face. And success, Arnold illustrates,

is a virtuous circle, for the conquering Romans subdued the Gauls who learned their language and defeated the British Celt who adopted the conqueror's language and went on to success in their turn. The language of the strong will prevail: the language of the weak will go: "gone in Cornwall, going in Brittany and the Scotch Highlands, going, too, in Ireland; – and there, above all, the badge of the beaten race, the property of the vanquished"⁴.

In this introduction to part [1] of *On the Study of Celtic Literature* Arnold makes it quite clear that he is not associating himself with any case for the Welsh language. In the interests of unity, Arnold maintains, it is best that the weaker native tongue is abandoned. He goes on to say that in the British Isles the irresistible, inevitable and necessary course is one of homogenisation, with one, English, language. The disappearance of the Welsh language will help both England and Wales practically, politically and socially. Arnold will not have Welsh even for literature:

Nor, perhaps, can we have much sympathy with the literary cultivation of Welsh as an instrument of living literature; and in this respect Eisteddfods encourage, I think, a fantastic and mischief-working delusion... For all modern purposes, I repeat, let us all as soon as possible be one people; let the Welshman speak English, and, if he is an author, let him write English⁵.

This contrasts oddly with what Arnold has to say later: "By the forms of its language a nation expresses its very self"⁶. He is prepared, apparently, to deny identity to individual Celtic peoples in the interests, presumably, of affinity and unity with more powerful peoples.

In this introduction Arnold lays down the grounds of his argument for the study of Celtic literature. Language is the bearer of the dominant culture, which is English. Science demands that we study origins of peoples, which means their literatures, specifically Celtic literature. The understanding this gives will facilitate an ever greater unity of peoples. Common sense tells us that the language of conquered peoples withers and dies and ought not to be preserved. So, recover the literature of subject peoples for the sake of science; but abandon their language as of no practical use. What we have already heard prepares us for what is to come: a series of lectures which are going to be social and political as much as literary.

In the second section of his essay Arnold examines the work done by Celtic scholars such as Mr Nash and Mr Jones in Wales and Eugene O'Curry in Ireland. He hopes that the study of Celtic literature will yield the unity that he craves. In section [3] Arnold warms to his task of

⁴ Super 3, p. 293.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 297.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 334.

theorising about affinities between races, particularly Saxon and Celt. His argument runs thus: since the Saxons invaded the Britons and assimilated them as a people, "made our country by England and us be English"⁷, therefore there must be a Celtic strain from the conquered Britons in the English people. Arnold maintains that what research there is in physiology and language would seem to indicate that there is a strain of the Celtic in the English. He even suggests that literary criticism may find a Celtic element in English literature; and he refers to Mr Morley's thesis which states that poetry before Chaucer was Celtic, and suggests a poetic lineal descent from Oisín's dialogues with Patrick through Chaucer to Shakespeare. Arnold feels that he would like to explore further the "literary, spiritual" aspect of the affinity between the English and the Celtic. In fact his exploration leads him, in the end, to the finest part of his study in section [6].

Arnold begins his approach to the essence of Celtic literature in sections [4] and [5] where he considers, firstly, the genius of the German, the Norman and the Celtic; and, secondly, examines how these contribute to the English genius. He characterises the English genius as "energy with honesty" and the Germanic as "steadiness with honesty". These qualities are seen to be virtuous; even when the Germanic "steadiness" deteriorates into dullness it is, according to Arnold, compensated by a scientific, result-achieving approach to life. When Arnold comes to the Celt, he begins by referring to Renan's description of the Celtic people and how he was "struck with the timidity, the shyness, the delicacy of the Celtic nature, its preference for a retired life, its embarrassment at having to deal with the great world"⁸. Since Arnold does not elaborate on what he sees as the typical Irishman, we are left with Renan's somewhat "feminine" epithets for the Celt in general. Arnold then settles for the word "sentiment" as the key to the Celtic nature: "*Sentiment* is, however, the word which marks where the Celtic races really touch and are one; sentimental, if the Celtic nature is to be characterised by a single term, is the best term to take"⁹.

The single epithet, "sentimental", does not contrast favourably with the dual characteristics for the English, "energy with honesty", and the Germanic, "steadiness with honesty". When the more Philistine readers of *The Cornhill* find, further, that this Celt "loves bright colours, ... easily becomes audacious, overcrowding, full of fanfaronade", he is apt to visualise some Rousseauesque natural monster – an unlikely candidate for joining with Teuton and Saxon in harmonious unity. Arnold goes on to quote with approval Henri Martin's description of the Celt as "Sentimental, – always

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 336.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 342/3.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 343.

ready to react against the despotism of fact; that is the description a great friend of the Celt gives of him; and it is not a bad description of the sentimental temperament; it lets us into the secret of its dangers and of its habitual want of success"¹⁰. Emotionalism and failure to face up to facts have meant, according to Arnold, that the Celt failed in the spiritual arts of music and poetry because of his lack of "measure": "The Celt has not produced great poetical works, he has only produced poetry with an air of greatness investing it all..."¹¹.

Celtic poetry, Arnold maintains, can be singularly beautiful in short passages, but it lacks "the *architectonicé* which shapes great works, such as the *Agamemnon* or the *Divine Comedy*"¹². Celtic poetry is strong on style but weak in content: "but in the contents of his poetry you have only so much interpretation of the world as the first dash of a quick, strong perception, and the sentiment, infinite sentiment can bring you"¹³. Thus the Celt fails the test for poetry which Arnold set out in his essay on Wordsworth: "It is important... to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life..."¹⁴. Therefore, Arnold concludes, the Celt's unwillingness to face facts has "lamed" him both in poetry and politics.

In Section [5] Arnold traces the Celtic strain in English cultural practices and this leads him conveniently to Section [6] where he explores the Celtic element in English poetry: "It is in our poetry that the Celtic part in us has left its trace clearest, and in our poetry I must follow it before I have done"¹⁵. It is not surprising that Arnold, who, when talking of the character of the Celt, singled out "*Sentimental*, always ready to react against the despotism of fact" as an essential and operative description, should find that "natural magic" is the hallmark of Celtic poetry, magic being a kind of reaction against fact. Arnold also lists "melancholy" and "style" as other characteristics of Celtic literature. We recognise that style, or technic, was, according to Arnold, the Celt's compensation for his lack of *architectonicé*; and that melancholy was the obverse side of the Celt's passionate love of "life, light and emotion"¹⁶. Arnold maintains that, in contrast, Germanic literature lacks style, while the English, with some lapses into Germanic insensitivity, have it to a degree; but none can compare to the Celts who possess style in abundance. Nevertheless, this Celtic gift is again declared to be compensatory; it balances a lack of something else:

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 344.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 345.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 345.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 345.

¹⁴ *Super* 9, p. 46.

¹⁵ *Super* 3, p. 361.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 343.

Celtic poetry seems to make up to itself for being unable to master the world and give an adequate interpretation of it, by throwing all its force into style, by bending language at any rate to its will, and expressing the ideas it has with unsurpassable intensity, elevation, and effect¹⁷.

It is, one notes, "a sort of intoxication of style"¹⁸, with its overtones of something that, although stimulating, is not in control of itself. In giving examples of Celtic style it is to gravestones that Arnold turns – Welsh, Irish and English – and finds that the Celts excel in "felicity of style"; it is, perhaps in this instance, an unintentional irony that Arnold finds the Celtic style happiest in verse celebrating that ultimate defeat, death.

The essence of style, according to Arnold, is a "peculiar kneading, heightening and recasting"¹⁹ of thought; and it is this aspect of style which "is perceptible all through English poetry"²⁰. Arnold wonders where the English derive their sense of style; and he considers a Norman provenance only to conclude that the Normans were too positive and too little given to the poetic to have style to bequeath to the English. He suggests that English style comes from the Celts. He hears the essential tone of the "penetrating passion and melancholy" of the Celt in Macpherson's *Ossian*:

All Europe felt the power of that melancholy; but what I wish to point out is, that no nation of Europe so caught in its poetry the passionate penetrating accent of the Celtic genius, its strain of Titanism, as the English²¹.

Arnold is aware of Macpherson's plagiarism of the Irish text, but he insists that the melancholy, which is the essence of the Celt, is in his poetry. He finds the passionate melancholy and Titanism of the Celt not only in Macpherson's *Ossian* but in Byron's poetry and in Milton's Satan.

For Arnold the Celt's supreme gift was his ability to interpret nature in a way that could only be called magical:

Magic is just the word for it, – the magic of nature; not merely the beauty of nature, – that the Greeks and Latins had; not merely an honest smack of the soil, a faithful realism, – that the Germans had; but the intimate life of nature, her weird power and her fairy charm²².

He goes on to say that the Celt will influence all European literatures, but, Arnold says that "there will be a stamp of perfectness and inimitableness about it in the literatures where it is native"²³. He cites the Celtic influence

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 366.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 366.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 362.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 363.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 371.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 374.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 376.

in its magical way with nature in Shakespeare's daffodil, Wordsworth's cuckoo, and Keats's Autumn. Arnold, not surprisingly, has difficulty in describing what these magical effects of Celtic poetry are. He gives examples from Keats and Shakespeare such as Keats's: "magic casements, opening on the foam/ Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn". Or Shakespeare's:

On such a night
Stood Dido, with a willow in her hand
Upon the wild sea-banks, and waved her love
To come again to Carthage.

However, Arnold fails to define the Celtic magic except as a something extra, something transcending the natural description of nature²⁴. When Arnold describes poetry which is lacking in magic he is a little clearer; at least now we can put the matter in the context of Arnold's other writings on poetry, notably his view of the best poetry as being an interpretation of life. German poetry, in particular Goethe's, can accomplish much more than the natural magic of Keatsian or Byronic poetry because it is concerned with "the grand business of modern poetry, – a moral interpretation, from an independent point of view, of man and the world..."²⁵. Arnold seems to imply that the Celtic spirit would be a hindrance to such an undertaking: "This is not only a work for style, eloquence, charm, poetry; it is a work for science; and the scientific, serious, German spirit, not carried away by this and that intoxication of ear, and eye, and self-will, has peculiar aptitudes for it"²⁶. "Intoxication" and "self-will", already established by Arnold as peculiarly Celtic, are counter-productive in the serious, scientific business of interpreting life. This is consistent with Arnold's overall purpose which is to demonstrate that we need a variety, a blend of gifts: "We are what we are, the hero and the great nation are what they are, by our limitations as well as by our powers, by lacking

²⁴ See R. Bromwich, *Matthew Arnold and Celtic Literature: A Retrospect, 1865–1965*, Oxford 1965, Clarendon Press, where she notes that the characteristics of the Welsh tales from which Arnold quotes is "an intimacy, awareness, and imaginative sympathy with the separate life of nature... the easy interchange between the marvellous and down-to-earth realism of daily life", p. 16.

²⁵ Super 3, p. 380. L. Gottfried, in *Matthew Arnold and the Romantics*, London 1963, Routledge and Kegan Paul, believes that Arnold's praise of German poetry is an example of this depreciation of the role of the imagination in poetry; that it is a belated "turn at the end of *Celtic Literature*, amounting almost to a sleight of hand, by which he decisively elevates German intellectualism in poetry over the Celtic imagination of the great English geniuses". (208). I would rather take the view that this is typical of Arnoldian balance: after rhapsodising about Celtic magic, which seems to be imbued with the spirit of Romanticism, Arnold comes down firmly in favour of what would appear to be the more Classical German virtues of restraint and attention to form.

²⁶ Super 3, p. 381.

something as well as possessing something"²⁷. What is important is to mix the various elements in us to our advantage: "So long as this mixed constitution of our nature possesses us, we pay it tribute and serve it; so soon as we possess it, it pays us tribute and serves us"²⁸. The imperial "tribute" and "serves" and "possess" would not be missed by a mid-nineteenth century English audience. Throughout these lectures Arnold is aware of the "fact" that the modern Celt has to be governed; his plea is that he could be governed more intelligently: "if we had been all Celtic, we might have been popular and agreeable; if we had all been Latinised, we might have governed Ireland as the French govern Alsace, without getting ourselves detested"²⁹.

Arnold prefaces his plea for a chair of Celtic Studies at Oxford by a humorous, bantering tactic. He refers to the concern of the economist and statesman, Mr Cobden, that university students should know more about America than ancient history and literature thus, according to Arnold, encouraging a crass, Anglo-Saxon materialism in the English. Far better, says Arnold, that the English students learn about the ancient Celt; he has the advantage over the ancient Greek as an object of study, for he is less remote, being already part of the English nature. However, typically, Arnold manages to placate "the Murdstones" in his audience by reminding them that the English "own" the Celt:

But, at any rate, let us consider that of the shrunken and diminished remains of this great primitive race, all, with one insignificant exception, belongs to the English empire; only Brittany is not ours; we have Ireland, the Scotch Highlands, Wales, the Isle of Man, Cornwall. They are a part of ourselves, we are deeply interested in knowing them, they are deeply interested in being known by us...³⁰

These are comforting words those in his audience who would distrust the "alien" Celt; after all the Celtic race is "shrunken and diminished" and it "belongs to the English empire"; the disabling of the one gives the power of enabling to the other. In his peroration we see Arnold already looking forward to his essay, *Culture and Anarchy*, in his attack on Philistinism. However, here the attack is not frontal but a suggestion of a method of undermining Philistinism "through the slow approaches of culture, and the introduction of chairs of Celtic"³¹. The literary, the scientific and the political are brought together in Arnold's last sentence which demonstrates a concern for peace in Ireland that is a feature of so many of his essays:

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 380.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 383.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 382.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 384.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 386.

Let us reunite ourselves with our better mind and with the world through science; and let it be one of our angelic revenges on the Philistines, who among their other sins are the guilty authors of Fenianism, to found at Oxford a chair of Celtic, and to send, through the gentle ministration of science, a message of peace to Ireland³².

2

In the literary history of the effects of Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* the most interesting primary evidence is offered by Yeats's *The Celtic Element in Literature*, written in 1897, nine years after Yeats's first substantial venture into the poetry of the Celt in *The Wanderings of Oisín*, and thirty years after the publication of Arnold's essay. Yeats's reply to Arnold is both an acknowledgment of the latter's influence in the continuing debate on Celticism and an assertion of dialectical difference, and of the need to go off at a tangent from Arnold's ideas, to universalise them and to appropriate them for *all* poetic and imaginative effort. As Robert Welch expresses it, "Yeats's method is not so much to contradict Arnold as to write against him, to formulate a language different from the stereotyped categories Arnold has stated, whilst also giving him his due... The method is not argument; it is an open acknowledgment of difference, which is then said to be deeply integrative, profoundly unifying, because it leads into the 'main river' of European tradition"³³. Yeats claims that it is his intention to "re-state a little Renan's and Arnold's argument"³⁴. This, in effect, means a re-fashioning of Arnold's arguments to save the spirituality of the Celt for the poetic imagination and, in doing so, to change what Arnold said went along with the Celt's spirituality, namely a refusal to face the "despotism of fact", into an anti-materialistic virtue. Yeats appears to be flattered that Arnold should consider that English poetry has been profoundly influenced by Celtic sources. He argues that closeness to nature is not the sole preserve of the Celt; but that all primitive peoples have felt close to nature, sensed an intimacy with her, an affinity amounting to identification. It is simply that the Irish and Welsh have retained some of this ancient feeling for nature more than other peoples: "our 'natural magic' is but the ancient religion of the world, the ancient worship of Nature and that troubled ecstasy before her..."³⁵. Yeats writes that Arnold's examples from English poetry attempting to prove a Celtic strain in English poetry "have the delight and wonder of devout worshippers among the haunts of their divinities"³⁶. He interprets Arnold's "faithful way" and "Greek way" of

³² *Ibidem*, p. 386.

³³ R. Welch (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: Writings on Irish Folklore, Legend and Myth*, London 1993, Penguin Books, pp. XXIII-XXIV.

³⁴ W. B. Yeats, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 176.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 177.

treating nature poetically as the poet looking at nature affectionately rather than in ecstasy, as in the manner one enjoys a garden. Primitive man felt the overwhelming power of nature and consequently felt closer to the immortal. Writing of the passion of folk literature Yeats comments: "Such love and hatred seek no mortal thing but their own infinity, and such love and hatred soon become love and hatred of the idea"³⁷. This is very similar to what Arnold said about poetry – "Poetry attaches itself to the idea: the idea *is* the fact" –; and is very apt for the primitive age that Yeats envisaged when poetry and religion were one.

It is interesting to note the shift in causality resulting from the Celt's reaction against the despotism of fact: Arnold suggests that the result is a lack of material success: Yeats believes that the outcome is a lyrical and beautiful melancholy. Arnold, with his love of polar opposites, maintains that the Celt's melancholy was the counterpart to his passionate love of life. Douglas Hyde would appear to agree with Arnold, for Yeats quotes the former as saying: "The same man who to-day will be dancing, sporting, drinking and shouting, will be soliloquising by himself tomorrow, heavy and sick and sad in his own little hut, making a croon over departed hopes, lost life, the vanity of this world, and the coming of death"³⁸. It is noteworthy that in an article on Shakespeare in 1901³⁹ Yeats tries another tack in his wary dialectic with Arnold's Celtic essay. In his review Yeats appears to accept Arnold's notion of a Celtic failure to face facts. As Philip Edwards points out in his paper, "Shakespeare and the Politics of the Irish Revival", "The whole of his brilliant essay of 1901 on Shakespeare's history plays", 'At Stratford-upon-Avon', is founded on the Arnoldian binary opposition of the spiritual and sensitive failure, the Celt, to the pragmatic, materialistic, successful Anglo-Saxon"⁴⁰. In his essay Yeats claims that Shakespeare sympathised with the failure of Richard II, living in an age when the "courtly and saintly ideals of the Middle ages were fading, and the practical ideals of the modern age had begun to threaten the useless dome of the sky", because he embodied "the defeat that awaits all, whether they be artist or saint, who find themselves where men ask of them a rough energy and have nothing to give but some contemplative virtue, whether lyrical fantasy, or sweetness of temper, or dreamy dignity, or love of God, or love of His creatures"⁴¹. So, once again, we have that Yeatsian vacillation

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 181.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 184.

³⁹ W. B. Yeats, *op. cit.*, pp. 96–110.

⁴⁰ P. Edwards, "Shakespeare and the Politics of the Irish Revival", [in:] J. McMin (ed.), *The Internationalism of Irish Literature and Drama*, Gerrards Cross 1992, Colin Smythe, p. 51.

⁴¹ W. B. Yeats, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

in his relationship to Arnold's criticism which points, I believe, to the abiding influence of the English critic.

Yeats suggests that dreams are "perhaps essences", that is, pertaining to things; and reality itself "perhaps accidents", that is, non-essential and non-substantial. Yeats is putting forward the theory of Platonic essences where the real *is* the idea, and the experience of the physical world is transitory and illusory. It is this disjunction between essence and reality that, according to Yeats, explains the eternal melancholy of the Celt. He goes on to assert that the arts, anyway, are essentially spiritual, "are founded on life beyond the world". Where Arnold considers that the Celts suffer a serious lack of "balance and measure", Yeats defiantly replies that "excess is the vivifying spirit of the finest art, and we must always seek to make excess more abundantly excessive"⁴². However, Yeats would seem to agree with Arnold on the Celtic failure to produce great, epic poetry. He writes that the "old Irish had a nature more lyrical than dramatic". However, Yeats is unwilling to consign Celtic literature, as Arnold seemed to do, to marginal and minor status. Instead he sees Celtic literature as central to European culture, quoting Renan who believed that St. Patrick's Pilgrimage in Lough Derg inspired Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He even locates the provenance of the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend, and, by association, the spirit of Romance in European literature, in the "cauldron of an Irish god".

Yeats appears to agree with Arnold that art will replace religion. Indeed he put it more strongly than Arnold; for him it is a matter of work in progress: "The arts by brooding upon their own intensity have become religious, and are seeking... to create a sacred book"⁴³. Yeats feels that the moment in history has come when Celtic poetry will have its recognition; and that it will be part of the already stirring movements in the arts in Europe: "The reaction against the rationalism of the eighteenth century has mingled with the reaction against the materialism of the nineteenth century, and the symbolical movement, which has come to perfection in Germany in Wagner, in England in the Pre-Raphaelites, in France in Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, and Mallarmé, and in Belgium in Maeterlinck, and has stirred the imagination of Ibsen and D'Annunzio, is certainly the only movement that is saying new things"⁴⁴. These words seem to be a call to a new Romanticism, for the reaction to eighteenth-century rationalism was the Romanticism of Keats and Shelley; while it was Arnold who led the reaction to nineteenth-century materialism and espoused the romance of Celtic legends. It is one of the Arnoldian anomalies that the man who

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 184.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

reacted against the Romanticism of the poets of the early nineteenth century was himself the sponsor of the new Romanticism of the late nineteenth century. One feels that Yeats saw himself as the emerging poet of the new movement. Since he recalled so much of what Arnold wrote in *On the Study of Celtic Literature* Yeats might also have noted what Arnold wrote in *On the Function of Criticism*: "For the creation of a master work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment; the creative power has, for its happy exercise, appointed elements, and those elements are not in its control"⁴⁵. My contention is that Arnold provided Yeats and other writers of the Celtic Revival with the ideas, and created the intellectual atmosphere within which, in Yeats's case at least, great works could be written. Indeed, Arnold saw the critic in such a role in *The Function of Criticism* when he wrote: "The grand work of literary genius is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery; its gift lies in the faculty of being happily inspired by a certain intellectual and spiritual atmosphere, by a certain order of ideas, presenting them in the most effective and attractive combinations, — making beautiful works with them, in short"⁴⁶.

3

If one wanted to refute Yeats's contention, in *The Celtic Element in Literature*, that Irish writers did not build any arguments for Celtic literature on the basis of Arnold's essay, Fiona Macleod (alias William Sharp) has provided ample evidence in an article that she wrote for the *Fortnightly Review*⁴⁷ in 1889, eight years before Yeats's essay. It is clear from Macleod's article that Celticism in literature is flourishing; the influence of Arnold's philosophy of the Celt is obvious throughout; and Yeats is held up as the finest modern example of the kind of Celtic literature that Arnold recommended to his audience in 1865/6⁴⁸. In her

⁴⁵ Super 3, p. 261.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 261.

⁴⁷ F. Macleod, "A Group of Celtic Writers", *Fortnightly Review* 1889, January, N. S. 65, pp. 34–53.

⁴⁸ Ann Saddlemyer reminds us that Yeats was so heavily implicated in Celticism that its influence is felt in the manifesto of the Irish Literary Theatre in 1897 in which the stated aim is to perform "certain Celtic and Irish plays" in order "to build up a Celtic and Irish school of dramatic literature". Saddlemyer goes on to say that Lady Gregory observed in her memoirs that "the 'Celtic' was thrown in for Fiona Macleod". Saddlemyer remarks that "It is significant, however, that these Irish nationalists should have been compelled to flourish their prospectus under an allegiance broader than their own island, and indicates to what extent the mystical spell of Pan-Celticism had cast its own twilight". R. Skelton, A. Saddlemyer, *The World of W. B. Yeats*, Dublin 1965, The Dolmen Press, p. 19.

opening paragraph she brackets together Celticism and Romanticism. She refers to "the most distinctive work of the more recent Anglo-Celtic poets and romanticists"⁴⁹. She distinguishes "imagination" as the hallmark of the truly Celtic writer: "I purpose to speak only of those younger men and women in whose writings, beside the faculty of verbal art, obtains that subtle but convincing quality of atmosphere which differentiates imaginative creation from literary manufacture. There are a hundred others who by virtue of racial accident may be Anglo-Celtic writers: but what I have in mind is the sole distinction of any value, the distinction of the imagination"⁵⁰. We note that "imagination" is opposed to "manufacture", an important tenet in the Romantic manifesto; the Celt must be anti-materialist. She goes on to "aver that there is more of Gaelic Ireland in a few pages, say, of Mr Yeats or Miss Nora Hopper, than in a score of books by writers Irish by accident but trained in the London literary tradition"⁵¹. Macleod then defines the Celtic:

What is called "the Celtic Renaissance" is simply a fresh development of creative energy coloured by nationality and moulded by inherited forces, a development diverted from the common way by accident of race and temperament. The Celtic writer is the writer the temper of whose mind is more ancient, more primitive, and in a sense more natural than that of his compatriot in whom the Teutonic strain prevails⁵².

We note Arnold's distinction between Celt and Teuton, together with the philosophy which is Arnold overlaid with Yeats. Spirituality and defeat are stressed: "And as the Celt comes of a people who grew in spiritual outlook as they began what has been revealed to us by history as a ceaseless losing battle, so the Teuton comes from a people who have lost in the spiritual life what they have gained in the moral and practical..."⁵³. The distinctive note of Celtic writing, Macleod says, is "of exquisite sadness, of troubled longing, of spiritual exaltation, of emotional intensity". Those are the positive qualities of the Celtic writer; the negative side is "the tendency of the primitive emotions to degenerate into sentiment, of the intensity to lapse to the hysterical"⁵⁴. She goes on to declare the aims of the new generation of Celtic writers: "to interpret anew 'the beauty at the heart of things', not along the conventional lines of English literary tradition, but along that of the racial instinct, coloured and informed by individual temperament"⁵⁵. Here again we have echoes of

⁴⁹ F. Macleod, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 36.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 36/7.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

Arnold and natural magic, combined with the vagueness of "racial instinct".

It is not surprising that Fiona Macleod's description of what she considers Celtic in poetry is very much the same that Yeats was promoting from the 1880s. She was, after all, one of his most fervent disciples; and for a time Yeats admired her poetry. In Macleod's view, and Yeats's, the ground of Celtic poetry is the ancient, primal world of unspoiled nature. Its heroes are larger-than-life, glamorous men and women of action who are more than willing to embrace glorious defeat. It is a poetry which is energetic, spiritual and tragic, which faces with single-minded, passionate imagination the very concept of dissolution and death. This duel with the idea of death was to remain a driving force and organising principle in Yeats's poetry to his *Last Poems*. It was a literature which had to be distinctly Irish, racially opposed to Anglo-Saxon English. For Yeats this posed considerable problems, for while he was aware that paying attention to English writing could adversely influence the Irishness of his poetry, nevertheless, he recognised that Irish writers needed to learn from the great writing of Europe, and that included England. This led, at times, to an ambivalence in his attitude to Tennyson, and a sort of crankiness in his criticism of Arnold⁵⁶, as if he recognised their authority but feared their influence.

4

Although Arnold's main task in the second half of his career was literary criticism, his concern was not just with reviews of books and analyses of texts. He was intent on making criticism itself as creative as possible in fashioning it as an aid and inspiration to the artist. Arnold believed that the critic does not merely judge; he interprets current thought which is then at the disposal of the writer. He thus puts himself at the service of literature, not only for the sake of the writer but, as William E. Buckler⁵⁷ pointed out, for the reader also:

His [Arnold's] effort, therefore, to make English criticism move outward was his way of making literature itself move outward. Wordsworth had redeemed poetry for the few, so Arnold was redeeming literature for the many. It was the central "social idea" of his life's work, and in it there is silent correction to Newman's characterization of the university as the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end. The study of letters is, to Arnold, the

⁵⁶ Wilde, also, displays in his critical writings a pointed awareness of the English "models", but he prefers to adopt a youthful, arrogant stance towards Arnold whom he had obviously seriously studied.

⁵⁷ W. E. Buckler, *The Victorian Imagination: Essays in Aesthetic Exploration*, London 1980, Harvester Press.

great extraordinary means to a great and extraordinary end, namely the redemption of life in this world. Without some sense of creativity, life is hardly worth living; and for the present and the indefinite future, poetry is man's new and only testament⁵⁸.

Arnold's influence as the "apostle" of literature, as Buckler's last phrase would suggest, was to be felt well into the twentieth century. Francis Mulhern⁵⁹ traces the philosophy behind the *Calendar of Modern Letters*, the precursor of Leavis's *Scrutiny*, back to Arnold in the nineteenth century. Mulhern writes of the motives behind *The Calendar* as, "... establishing literature as the new repository of moral values and, therewith, literary criticism as the privileged arbiter of social thought. The ambition was not new. It had taken mature and programmatic shape fully half a century earlier, in the writings of Matthew Arnold"⁶⁰. Mulhern quotes one of the twentieth century's most rigorous literary critics, I. A. Richards, who thought that "ordinary people would be thrown back, as Matthew Arnold foresaw, upon poetry. It is capable of saving us; it is a perfectly possible means of overcoming chaos"⁶¹.

Finally, if Arnold could have an influence on the literary aesthetics of Richards and Leavis in the 1930s and 1940s, it is very likely that he had a considerable influence on Irish writers in Ireland and England in the 1880s and 1890s. We have already seen how Arnold's Celtic lectures praised the spirituality of Celtic poetry, its Romantic feeling for the infinite. Such praise must, in some measure, be seen as sponsoring the "neo-Romantic" movement of which Yeats saw himself a part in the 1880s. Yeats's first long poem, "The Wanderings of Oisín", is in the Romantic tradition; and his lyrics, up to 1900, have a definite Romantic colouring. His poetry, in these early years of the Revival, is uniquely spiritual; it rejects the materialism of the world and opts for the infinite. Oisín is always yearning for the ideal – "And which of these is the Island of Content?" – and he finally reacts against the despotism of the fact of Patrick's presence in Ireland. *The Wind Among the Reeds* is, in its very structure and textuality, a spiritual volume. Being a poet of considerable talent, even before 1900, Yeats did not exploit Arnold's Celtic agenda in the programmatic manner of such as Fiona Macleod. Nevertheless, I believe that Arnold's presence is felt in an oppositional sense in the number of poems in *Crossways* (1889) which are set in India or the Orient. Yeats was determined, even before he wrote his reply to Arnold's lectures in *The Celtic Element in Literature* (1897), to illustrate his point that a feeling for the infinite was not an exclusive preserve of the Celt.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 9/10.

⁵⁹ F. Mulhern, *The Moment of Scrutiny*, London 1979, NLB.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 26/7, quoted from I. A. Richards, *Science and Poetry* (1926).

However, it is in the critical prose of the Revival's foremost writer that we can most clearly discern the influence of Matthew Arnold. A few Arnoldian "touchstones" will serve to illustrate the consonance of ideas between Yeats and Arnold. Both stressed the importance of culture in national life. Arnold wrote extensively on the matter in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) in which he thought of culture as the movement towards perfection: "Culture is then properly described not as having its origin in the love of perfection; it is a *study of perfection*"⁶². Later in the same essay Arnold writes: "Culture looks beyond machinery, culture hates hatred, culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light"⁶³. Yeats, writing in 1909 in his diary, expresses a similar idea: "For without culture or holiness, which are always the gift of a very few, a man may renounce wealth or any other external thing, but he cannot renounce hatred, jealousy, revenge. Culture is the sanctity of the intellect"⁶⁴. Arnold was very concerned throughout his life with stressing the need for English critics to be aware of what was being achieved in literature in other countries. He writes in 1864: "The English critic of literature, therefore, must dwell much on foreign thought, and with particular heed on any part of it, which, while significant and fruitful in itself, is for any reason specially likely to escape him"⁶⁵. Yeats, writing in 1893, exhorts Irish writers: "we must not imitate the writers of any other country, we must study them constantly and learn from them the secret of their greatness. Only by the study of great models can we acquire style, and this, St. Beuf (sic) says, is the only thing in literature which is immortal"⁶⁶. Note that Sainte-Beuve was one of Arnold's most admired European critics. We even have an echo of Arnold in Yeats's poem, "September 1913", recalling his mentor's prose thought in 1869: "But how generally with how many of us, are the concerns of life limited to these two: the concern for making money and the concern for saving our souls!"⁶⁷. Yeats found, in the clear day after the Celtic twilight, that Ireland, too, had her Murdstones! Finally, both Arnold and Yeats believed in the saving power of poetry; and both wrote of their critical mission in the arts as if it was a priestly vocation. In 1879 Arnold tells us how religion has failed the people and must be replaced by poetry: "for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion... The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry"⁶⁸. In 1900

⁶² Super 5, p. 91.

⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

⁶⁴ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies*, London 1955, Macmillan, p. 489.

⁶⁵ Super 3, pp. 282/3.

⁶⁶ J. P. Frayne, *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, 2 vols., London 1970, Macmillan, vol. 1, p. 274.

⁶⁷ Super 5, p. 186.

Yeats asks "How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hands upon men's heart-strings again, without becoming the garment of religion as in old times"⁶⁹.

Since Arnold was delivering his Oxford lectures as Professor of Poetry at Oxford in the year when Yeats was born, and died before the younger poet published his *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* in 1889, it is reasonable to conclude, from the evident accord in their thinking, that Arnold had a considerable influence on the Irish Literary Revival's principal poet. Why Yeats never acknowledged his debt to Arnold remains a matter of conjecture⁷⁰. The agreement in thought across the Irish Sea between Arnold and the Ulster poet, Samuel Ferguson, can be explained by the fact that Ferguson was a cultural and political Tory and Arnold, although a Liberal, was an unreconstructed Tory as regards his implacable opposition to the official Liberal policy on Home Rule for Ireland. The remarkable similarity in poetical and critical outlook between Arnold and Yeats can only be explained in terms of influence. The younger Yeats, I believe, paid even more attention to Arnold than he did to Ferguson. And, since Yeats was the prime mover in the Irish Literary Revival, it could be argued that the Revival received its impetus from Arnold and was, in a sense, "invented" by him. Oscar Wilde, who saw himself as the natural successor to Arnold⁷¹, and who was fond of turning on their head some of Arnold's critical pronouncements, may well have had him in mind when he wrote:

The longer one studies life and literature, the more strongly one feels that behind everything that is wonderful stands the individual, and that it is not the moment that makes the man, but the man who creates the age. Indeed, I am inclined to think that each myth and legend that seems to us to spring out of the wonder, or terror, or fancy of tribe and nation, was in its origin the invention of one single mind⁷².

⁶⁸ Super 9, p. 161.

⁶⁹ W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, London 1961, Macmillan, pp. 162/3.

⁷⁰ See V. Sena, *W. B. Yeats: The Poet as Critic*, London 1981, Macmillan. Sena suggests that Yeats had studied Arnold closely and hero-worshipped him in his youth; but that Arnold's "simplifications about the Celtic temper" and his denigration of Shelley estranged him from the younger poet. It may also have been that Arnold's influence was so deep and pervasive that, like the similar influence of Carlyle on Arnold, Yeats was afraid to admit it. Note how Wilde combats this "anxiety of influence" by poking fun at Arnold's sayings, turning his critical nostrums on their head, as in *The Critic as Artist*.

⁷¹ See Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, London 1987, Hamish Hamilton and R. Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, p. 172.

⁷² "The Critic as Artist". From O. Wilde, *Intentions and the Soul of Man*, London 1969, Methuen, pp. 127/8.

*Christopher Corr***MATTHEW ARNOLD I MŁODY YEATS: POWIKŁANE LOSY TEORII KULTURY**

Artykuł poświęcony jest omówieniu wpływu, jaki wywarły pisma krytyczne Matthew Arnolda na wczesną poezję i prozę W. B. Yeatsa. Wpływ angielskiego krytyka na młodego irlandzkiego poetę został przedstawiony na tle całokształtu związków między literaturą angielską a anglojęzyczną literaturą irlandzką, a także w szerszym kontekście kultury kolonialnej, niesuwerennej i lokalnej. Autor koncentruje się na wykładach Arnolda z lat 1865/66, "On the Study of Celtic Literature" oraz na polemicznym w stosunku do nich tekście Yeatsa "The Celtic Element in Literature" z 1897. Analizuje również wpływ Arnolda na pisarzy związanych z Celtyckim Odrodzeniem, w którym to ruchu Yeats był jedną z czołowych postaci. Artykuł kończy się omówieniem zbieżności między niektórymi koncepcjami Arnolda a założeniami estetyki Yeatsa.