

INTERRELATIONS BETWEEN HISTORY AND POLITICS IN “SEPTEMBER 1913” BY W.B. YEATS

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present a discussion about the interrelations between history and politics in the context of Ireland, specifically in relation to the poetry of William Butler Yeats. The first part of this paper is dedicated to define and discuss some concepts that are relevant to understand some issues in Ireland and the second part is dedicated to the analysis of the poem “September 1913” by W.B. Yeats.

KEYWORDS Poetry; History; W.B. Yeats.

Recebido em: 24 mar. 2017

Aprovado em: 15 set. 2017

Irish literary production and criticism are generally interwoven with the history and politics of Ireland, especially concerning the conflicts that started in the seventeenth century and went on until recent years. Irish Studies, as remarked by Edna Longley in her book *The Living Stream: Literature & Revisionism in Ireland*, have inherited two broad modes of enquiry: “One, derived from the Enlightenment. ... But this approach can never be wholly

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detached from another tradition: the discursive tradition of 'talking about Ireland' which grew up with nineteenth-century Nationalism and is, indeed, politics by other means" (LONGLEY, 1994, p. 68). The history of Ireland, especially after the establishment of the Protestant Ascendancy in the seventeenth century, was marked by political, economic and social domination, since power was restricted to English, Irish and Scottish Protestants. England had started its march toward imperialism. With the presence of the imperial force in Ireland, Catholic Irish people had most of their rights suppressed. The new settlers, Protestant English and Scottish people, took possession of the land and started interfering in the lives of the Catholic Irish. Soon after the arrival of the British in Ireland in the seventeenth century a new code of laws was created. It was known as the Penal Laws, heavily based on sectarian principles. It was with the establishment of those laws, with which Protestants had their social rights guaranteed and Catholics had theirs suppressed, that the political issue of Ireland becomes more explicitly interwoven with religion.

Politics in Ireland presents some peculiarities, especially in relation to Irish politics after the establishment of British rule. The oppression operated by it provoked many violent reactions of Irish people. All the attempts to resist dominance were suppressed. Irish nationalism was the fuel to make the hope and struggle for independence a constant presence. Due to the central role of nationalism in Ireland, it seems necessary to scrutinize such a term; however, to isolate and define it has been a difficult task. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy indicates that the term "nationalism" is generally used to describe two phenomena: "(1) the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity, and (2) the actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve (or sustain) self-determination." (n. pag.). Patrizia Albanese makes a list of the main definitions of nationalism in her book *Mothers of the Nation*, in which she states that part of the difficulty with the term is because it is defined as "an ideology (Anderson, 1991), a theory of political legitimacy (Gellner, 1983), a mass-sentiment (Kohn, 1962), faith (Hayes, 1960), and a political principle (Gellner, 1983) among other things" (ALBANESE, 2006, p. 9). These broad definitions are relevant to understand the concept as a whole but it still lacks some specificity when narrowing down to the case of Ireland.

John Coakley and Michael Gallagher discuss politics in Ireland in *Politics in the Republic of Ireland*. For them, “a powerful nationalist interpretation of Irish history was able to make full use of these events in constructing an image of unrelenting resistance to English rule” (COAKLEY & GALLAGHER, 2009, p. 4). It seems necessary to establish some differences in relation to nationalism applied to a moment in history, that is, nationalism as a number of actions directed to conquer independence; and nationalism as a positioning in relation to the way one retells history and analyzes literary production. The latter is considered to be opposed to revisionism. The presence of these two methods to interpret and write about history is probably due to the considerable intricacy of Irish historiography.

Steven G. Ellis writes about the complexity of this matter in his article, “Historiographical debate: Representations of the past in Ireland: whose past and whose present?”. He introduces the issue showing the complication that involves the history of Ireland. In his perception there are few countries in modern history that present the historian with the sort of interpretative challenge offered by Ireland. He argues that “The general outlines of the problem are well known: the impact on the island of successive waves of colonization; the endemic unrest, religious strife, and political instability” (ELLIS, 1991, p. 289). Ellis also problematizes the particularities of Ireland’s experience that should be taken into consideration if it is assumed that Ireland’s historical experience cannot be understood in isolation.

In the midst of such complexity, two attempts to obtain accuracy in the process of retelling Irish History can be found: Revisionism and Nationalism. Concerning Revisionism, Roy F. Foster, in his essay “We Are All Revisionists Now”, declares that “to the scholars, it is quite simply a desire to eliminate as much as possible of the retrospectively ‘Whig’ view of history which sees every event and process in the light of what followed it rather than what went before: the effort to get behind hindsight” (FOSTER, 1986, p. 2). Edna Longley defines it as a “shorthand and quasi-abusive term for historical studies held to be at odds with the founding ideology of the Irish Free State (Republic of Ireland since 1948)” (LONGLEY, 1994, p. 10). The criticism in relation to revisionism is associated to the claim that revisionists undermine the significance of the facts that are being retold. In Irish literary criticism, revisionism

might be placed in opposition to nationalism. As Longley defines her approach to history and literature as being revisionist, she also criticizes the modus operandi of the nationalists. She points to the constant criticism performed by the nationalists towards revisionists. Longley states that "Nationalist history, resistant to the democracy of 'intertextual antagonism', desires to cast 'revisionism' in its own monolithic mould" (LONGLEY, 1994, p. 37).

The nationalist approach to history and literature, however, seems to be, to a certain extent, more taken for granted by some critics. Foster, who at a certain point was "accused" of revisionism, is quoted in an article by Andrew Brown in *The Guardian*. Foster declares that "the Irish nationalist myth was energizing and in many ways necessary for a couple of generations after independence and the necessary reappraisals in the last generations have not taken away from that". (BROWN, 2003, n.pag.). If on the one hand revisionism is criticized for minimizing the damage caused by the process of colonization in Ireland, on the other hand, nationalism is criticized for increasing such damage.

In relation to the nationalism that took place during the process of colonization, as it is mentioned by Foster, (1986, p.2) to be a nationalist was an attempt to obtain some changes in the already established colony. Edward Said sees nationalism as a powerful defense against colonial force wherever it took place. He writes:

A great deal, but by no means all, of the resistance to imperialism was conducted in the name of nationalism. Nationalism is a word that has been used in all sorts of sloppy and undifferentiated ways, but it still serves quite adequately to identify the mobilizing force that coalesced into resistance against an alien and occupying empire on the part of people possessing a common history, religion, and language. (SAID, 1990, p. 74)

On account of the necessity of resistance, nationalism was used by Irish people to fight against the imposing presence of the colonizer in Ireland. Thus, many writers, including Yeats, saw in a nationalist positioning the possibility to rescue some traits of the Irish identity using literature. Other writers and

poets, besides writing, picked up weapons in the name of a nationalist ideology, as was the case of most participants of the Easter Rising in 1916.

Seamus Deane in the introduction to *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* argues that:

All nationalisms have a metaphysical dimension, for they are all driven by an ambition to realize their intrinsic essence in some specific and tangible form. The form may be a political structure or a literary tradition. Although the problems created by such an ambition are sufficiently intractable in themselves, they are intensified to the point of absurdity when a nationalist self-conception imagines itself to be the ideal model to which all others should conform. (DEANE, 1990, p. 8)

Deane's argument points to the danger of transforming nationalism into an absolute set of practices because such a thing disregards diversity. That is true particularly in the case of Ireland, in which at some point was important to consider the question of diversity of political positioning. Eric Hobsbawm, in *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, also talks about the case of nationalism in Ireland. After defining and discussing the concepts of nation and nationalism in many countries, he directs his attention to Ireland and states that a more serious divergence between definition and reality developed in Ireland. "In spite of Emmet and Wolfe Tone, the majority communities in the six counties of Ulster refused to see themselves as 'Irish' in the manner of the bulk of the inhabitants of the twenty-six counties" (HOBBSAWM, 1992, p. 135). So, the idea of the unity of nation and nationalism in Ireland, although important in many ways, as was seen in the revolutions and in literary movements, was also a sort of myth, as argued by Foster (1986) and Hobsbawm (1992). On the process of mythologizing such concepts, Hobsbawm (1992) complements:

The assumption that a single Irish nation existed within a single Ireland or rather that all inhabitants of the island shared the aspiration of a single, united and independent Fenian

Ireland proved mistaken, and while, for fifty years after the establishment of the Irish Free State (and later Republic), Fenians and their sympathizers could dismiss the division of the country as a British imperial plot and the Ulster Unionists as misguided dupes led by British agents, the past twenty years have made it clear that the roots of a divided Ireland are not to be found in London. (HOBSBAWN, 1992, p. 135)

This discussion is relevant because it demonstrates the level of complexity that permeates history and politics in Ireland. It also demonstrates the risk of taking ideological sides. For this reason, in this paper, revisionist and nationalist historians as well as literary critics are brought to present their points of view on the subject. In the particular context of Ireland, Hobsbawm (1992) suggests that it is possible to investigate Irish history avoiding closed ideologies. He says: "Historians are potentially obliged not to get it wrong, or at least to make an effort not to. To be Irish and proudly attached to Ireland – even to be proudly Catholic-Irish or Ulster-Protestant Irish – is not in itself incompatible with the serious study of Irish history" (HOBSBAWN, 1992, p.13). It is relying on such impartiality that this paper intends to bring different critical views.

Concerning history, it is important to analyze its relation to poetry, since it is by means of poetry, more specifically a poem that this paper intends to establish a discussion with history. Octavio Paz (1956) manages to present a view of the high degree of interdependence between poetry and history. He says that "without history—without men, who are the origin, the substance and the end of history—the poem could not be born, or incarnated, and without the poem there could not be history either, because there would be no origin or beginning" (PAZ, 1956, p.170). In another excerpt of *The Bow and the Lyre* in which Paz traces the relation between poetry and history, he elaborates on a broader sense of this relation. He argues that:

Like all human creations, the poem is a historical product, fruit of a time and a place; but it is also something that transcends the historical and is situated in a time prior to

all history, at the beginning of the beginning. Before history, but not outside it. Before, because it is an archetypal reality, impossible to date, absolute beginning, total and self-sufficient time (PAZ, 1956, p. 170).

Paz's considerations on the relation between poetry and history are applied to poetry in a general sense; this study, however, intends to use them as a support but also to go a little further due to the specificities of Yeats's work, that is, besides being inserted in history as argued by Paz, Yeats uses history, more specifically Irish historical events in his poems. In this sense, the relation of Yeats's poetry to history is twofold. One more aspect of Paz's discussion on this subject is worth mentioning:

Seen from the outside, the relation between a poem and history do not present any fissure: the poem is a social product. Even when discord reigns between society and poetry – as happens in our times – and the former condemns the latter to exile, the poem does not escape from history: in its very solitude, it continues to be a historical testimony. (PAZ, 1956, p. 170)

It is precisely the historical testimony produced by Yeats's poetry that requires an attentive analysis. In this sense, to understand the role of the poet and the importance of casting an eye on history through poetry is paramount. George Santayana (2009) indicates part of such incumbency. He writes that the poet, by means of the study of the world, will construct it for us, out of the material of his observations: "He will involve us in a scene which lies beyond the narrow lane of our daily plodding; he will place us in the presence of important events, that we may feel our spirit rise momentarily to the height of his great argument" (SANTAYANA, 2009, p. 280). Santayana talks about the potential of poetry to "place us in the presence" of history, and touch our sensibility. Other elements are put together to make the experience with a poem of a different nature. Paz highlights the importance of the relation between the poet and the reader: "the poet's language is that of his community, whatever the latter may be. Between the two is established a reciprocal play

of influences, a system of communicating vessels" (PAZ, 1956, p. 29). Paz manages to highlight the importance of the reader in another passage when he argues that the poem is an original and unique creation, but that it is connected to the participation of the reader: "The poet creates it; the people, by recitation, re-create it. Poet and reader are two moments of a single reality. Alternating in a manner that may aptly be called cyclical, their rotation engenders the spark: poetry" (PAZ, 1956, p. 28). In poetry, elements such as irony, ambiguity, choice of words, conciseness, among others, are put together in a way that creates a whole different experience in relation to the way one gets in touch with the subject that is being presented in the poem. In the case of Yeats's poetry, it offers a new way to understand Irish politics and history.

Yeats and the political engagement in his poetry

The poet and playwright William Butler Yeats was born in 1865 in county Dublin, Ireland, and died in 1939 in France. During his life, he not only witnessed political effervescence in Ireland but also had an active role in some of the political activities that were developed, mainly in relation to the Irish Revival, a movement that helped to foster a political awakening in Ireland.

There are some speculations regarding the deep involvement of Yeats in Irish Nationalism. Some critics argue that it was after he met Maud Gonne, a revolutionary deeply engaged to Irish nationalism, women's right and Home Rule to Ireland, for whom he nourished feelings and the desire to get married. Maud Gonne refused Yeats's proposal but, continued to be his muse and inspiration to his poetry and, to a certain extent, to his political activism. Nevertheless, Yeats argues that his engagement to politics in his writing was inspired by the Irish revolutionary John O'Leary. In "A General Introduction for my Work" Yeats writes that:

It was through the old Fenian leader John O'Leary I found my theme. His long imprisonment, his banishment, his magnificent head, his scholarship, pride, his integrity, all that aristocratic dream nourished amid little shops and little farms, had drawn around him a group of young men; I was but eighteen or

nineteen and had already, under the influence of *The Faerie Queene* and *The Sad Shepherd*, written a pastoral play, and under that of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, two plays, one staged somewhere in the Caucasus, the other in a crater of the moon; and I knew myself to be vague and incoherent. (YEATS, 1937 p. 5)

As Yeats argues that it was thought O'Leary that he found his theme, his writing could not be, at least a great part of it, something other than political.

Yeats's involvement in Irish nationalism can be perceived in some of his writings and in his participation in the Irish Literary Revival, a movement that was created as an attempt to affirm the national identity that was being destroyed by the process of colonization undertaken by the British Empire since the Protestant Ascendancy that started back in the seventeenth century. The Irish Revival was the base for the subsequent struggles for independence that followed. Seamus Deane argues that:

The revival, like the rebellion and the war of independence, the treaty of 1922 (which partitioned Ireland into its present form), and the subsequent civil war, were simultaneously causes and consequences of the concerted effort to renovate the idea of national character and the national destiny. It was only when the Celt was seen by the English as a necessary supplement to the national character that the Irish were able to extend the idea of supplementarity to that of radical difference. (1990, p. 13)

By means of the Irish Revival, Yeats and some other writers tried to revive the people's interest in Gaelic heritage and nationalism. This period is usually referred to as the early phase of Yeats's poetry in which he dove into the world of Celtic legends. The middle phase of his poetry, however, Yeats continues to talk about Ireland but he shifts the subject to the present. The poem to be analyzed in the next section of this paper is a good example of his change and his engagement to his contemporary reality.

“SEPTEMBER 1913” BY W.B. YEATS

The poem selected for the analytical section of this paper was “September 1913”. It is part of *Responsibilities* (1914), a book of poems that is considered to be a turning point in Yeats’s literary career. In “The Later Yeats”, written by Mary M. Colum, there is an accurate description of the changes that took place in Yeats’s work. Colum points out that *Responsibilities* differs from Yeats’s early works in “vocabulary, and in any impassioned directness of expression acquired through years of working for the theater. It is an attempt to get nearer to ordinary things of life, an attempt to grapple with common and topical interest, city councils, political intrigues, music hall dancers, etc.” (COLUM, 1916, p. 258). Yeats’s approach on the subjects that are present in *Responsibilities*, on the one hand, were able to engage him in the present, but on the other hand, the detachment from mythical Ireland also provoked dissatisfaction in him. Colum adds that “the nearer he gets to these things the more tragic and personal does he become, so that the joyousness, as of a man out on a great adventure, which characterized the work of his youth, is all gone, but in its stead there is the virility of one who has come onto his strength” (COLUM, 1916, p. 258). The strength that Colum mentions is filled with criticism towards the middle-class society of his time. This can be perceived in the long question in the opening lines of “September 1913”. Yeats writes:

What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone?
For men were born to pray and save:
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,
It’s with O’Leary in the grave. (1-8)

He is addressing the changes that occurred in Irish society, that is, the changes of behavior of the citizens before the slight improvement in relation to the rights, gradually and painfully, granted to them. For Yeats, middle-class

Irish people had become too attached to money acquisition. Yeats's disapproval in relation to this new reality can be perceived when he writes: "But fumble in a greasy till / And add the halfpence to the pence". The use of the word "greasy" to talk about the till produces a sense of unpleasantness in relation to the Irish modern middle-class society. Besides that, there is a strong sense of hopelessness when he mentions that "romantic Ireland is dead and gone / It's with O'Leary in the grave." These sad lines are used as the refrain at the end of the four stanzas of the poem, emphasizing the tone of lamentation and hopelessness.

After a long time of dedication to the past, in the sense of writing about ancient myths and folklore, Yeats turns his attention to the reality of his time. That reality, however, was a source of disillusionment. In "September 1913", the title is a reference to the Labour Lock-Out of 1913, a general strike that took place in Ireland from August 1913 to January 1914, Yeats uses a great deal of sarcasm to approach the subject. Thus, in the first stanza, he presents the theme of the poem by means of an ironic tone, talking about the people whose behavior he wants to criticize.

In the second stanza of "September 1913", though, Yeats directs his attention to other people, those who, in many ways, were responsible for keeping the dream of a free Ireland alive through their writing and also by means of their political positioning, which, in many cases, led them to face severe punishment. Yeats suggests that these people no longer exist:

Yet they were of a different kind,
The names that stilled your childish play,
They have gone about the world like wind,
But little time had they to pray
For whom the hangman's rope was spun,
And what, God help us, could they save?
Romantic Ireland's dead and gone
It's with O'Leary in the grave. (9-16)

Yeats expresses his lament towards the fact that romantic Ireland, at least his version of it, is gone; his contemporaries were too worried adding "the

halfpence to the pence", yet, most of those who had fought for Ireland had died. In the third stanza, Yeats keeps questioning and lamenting the deaths that, put in retrospective, seemed to be useless before the reality he was witnessing: "Was it for this the wild geese spread / The grey wing upon every tide; For this that all that blood was shed, For this Edward Fitzgerald died, And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone, All that delirium of the brave?"(17-24). Yeats mentions the names of important politicians who fought for Ireland. The first he mentions is Edward Fitzgerald, an important figure in the Irish Rebellion of 1798. According to Thomas Moore: "When Ireland, after a long sleep of exhaustion and degradation to which a code of tyranny unexampled in history had doomed her, was again beginning to exhibit some stirrings of national spirit, again was the noble name of Fitzgerald found foremost among her defenders" (MOORE, 1832, p. 8). At the age of thirty-four, Fitzgerald, who was taking part in the Rebellion of 1798, was found in his hiding place. He was wounded and taken to prison and, as no treatment was granted him, he passed away.

The second man mentioned by Yeats in the poem is Robert Emmet, an Irish nationalist who also fought in the Irish Rebellion of 1798 and who was the leader of the rebellion against British rule in 1803. The rebellion failed and Emmet was captured and condemned for high treason. He died even younger than Fitzgerald, being executed at the age of twenty-five. Before his execution he gave a speech, which is in full in Ruán O'Donnell's book, *Emmet and the Rising of 1803*. In his speech he announces: "I have but one request to ask at my departure from this world: it is the charity of its silence. Let no man write my epitaph. . . . When my country takes her place among the nations of the earth, then, and not till then, let my epitaph be written" (O' DONNELL, 2003, p.159). This passage exemplifies the strength of Emmet's nationalism, which in some degree is similar to the thought of many other nationalists including Yeats.

The last nationalist who Yeats pays homage to is Wolfe Tone. He is considered to be the founder of Irish Republicanism. Tone also took part in the revolution of 1798 and was captured and executed by the British. Yeats evokes Tone and Fitzgerald again in "Sixteen Dead Men", from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), also published as a volume in *The Collected Po-*

ems in 1933. It is a poem about the Easter Rising which also makes reference to Fitzgerald and Tone. In the last stanza of "Sixteen Dead Men", Yeats writes: "How could you dream they'd listen / That have an ear alone / For those new comrades they have found, / Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone, / Or meddle with our give and take / That converse bone to bone?" (13-18). Once more he reminds the reader about the deaths of those men in the past and those other sixteen in connection with the Easter Rising. The tone of the stanza is skeptical in relation to the effectiveness of a dialogue with the British. As it is implied, they would not listen to the demands of the Irish people. Maybe it is the skepticism in the method used by those men Yeats mentions in his poem that motivated him and some other writers to "fight for Ireland" with the help of literature.

By means of this brief analysis of the poem "September 1913", one among many political poems written by Yeats, the reader is able to notice how much of history and politics are interweaved in Yeats' lines. In "September 1913" and in the other poems in the same collection, Yeats is more connected to the present, as argued by some critics; nevertheless, the past is always present as he evokes the names of some heroes of Ireland. The poetry of Yeats not only contained much discussion on politics and history but it also helped his contemporaries and the researchers of his work to understand part of the complexity of the history and politics of Ireland.

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AS INTER-RELAÇÕES ENTRE HISTÓRIA E POLÍTICA EM "SEPTEMBER 1913" DE W.B. YEATS

RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar uma discussão sobre as inter-relações entre história e política no contexto da Irlanda, especificamente em relação à poesia de William Butler Yeats. A primeira parte deste artigo é dedicada a definir e discutir alguns conceitos que são relevantes para entender algumas questões na Irlanda e a segunda parte é dedicada à análise do poema "September 1913" de W.B. Yeats

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Poesia; História; W.B. Yeats.