



CASTING AN EYE ON THE HISTORY OF A NATION: FROM ARMED TO LITERARY REVOLUTION

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims at contextualizing the political and historical situation of Ireland from the Protestant Ascendancy that began in 1690; presenting the main changes in Irish society during the process of colonization and commenting on the struggles for independence. The second part of this paper aims at discussing about the literary production while the country was still under British rules, focusing specifically on the work of the Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats. Throughout the discussion in this regard, critics and academics of literature provide insights on the role of literature in the colonial context and its importance in the process of decolonization.

KEYWORDS: Literature; History; Literary criticism; Ireland; W.B. Yeats.

RESUMO: Esse artigo tem o objetivo de contextualizar a situação política e histórica da Irlanda a partir da Ascensão Protestante que teve início a partir de 1690, apresentando as principais mudanças na sociedade irlandesa durante o processo de colonização e comentando a respeito das lutas por independência. A segunda parte desse artigo tem o objetivo de discutir a respeito da produção literária no contexto de luta por independência, focando especificamente na obra do poeta e dramaturgo Irlandês William Butler Yeats. Ao longo da discussão a esse respeito, críticos e teóricos da literatura trazem reflexões sobre o papel da literatura no contexto colonial e sua importância no processo de descolonização.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura; História; Crítica Literária; Irlanda; W.B. Yeats.

PREAMBLE

This paper is divided into two sections. The first one is about history and politics in Ireland. Thus, important historical events will be discussed in light of some views of historians and critics. The accounts on such subject will be related to the first influences of the Protestant Ascendancy on the dynamics of the Irish people's lives. Protestant Ascendancy, according to W. J. McCormack (1989, p. 161), "refers to the social élite predominant in Ireland after the battle of the Boyne (1690)". R. F.

Foster goes to the core of the matter in *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* and discusses it in more details. He says that “the foundation of Ascendancy rested on the penalization of Catholics; but to understand this operation it is necessary to note the position of Irish Catholics before the Protestant victory” (FOSTER, 1988, p. 153). Some definition of the term seemed necessary although the Ascendancy serves more as a starting point to the historical accounts on the first part of this discussion. The second section focuses on what was discussed by critics in relation to what the work and engagement of the Irish Poet and playwright William Butler Yeats meant to the political and cultural scenario of Ireland.

HISTORY AND POLITICS IN IRELAND

The history of Ireland is pervaded by a succession of conflicts. In ancient times, most of the conflicts were the result of invasions as the ones by the Vikings and the Normans. In the seventeenth century, a new invasion took place in Ireland, this time by British people, who aimed to colonize and exploit the country. Thus, the historical frame of this paper starts from the arrival of the Protestant settlers from Great Britain in Ireland.

The severe problems faced by the Irish people, which started in the seventeenth century, were a result of English imperialism. The installation of the system of Plantation in the north of Ireland was the starting point of many social problems. As part of the praxis of colonization, many natives had their lands confiscated and had to go to other areas of the country. The Plantation system that was established shortly after the arrival of the newcomers was supposed to be experimental and only in a few regions of Ireland, yet, it became gradually more aggressive, and huge areas of land were taken from the Irish and given to the British people. Thus, it was from this moment in the history of Ireland that a ruthless oppression began and, as a response, the struggle of Irish people to get rid of the subjugation they were under. During this period the “Penal Laws” were created, and there were a watershed in the history of conflicts and politics in Ireland. After the implantation of Penal Laws, Catholics had their civil rights drastically restricted. The restrictions included a ban on buying land and having access to education. Apparently, the main intention behind such laws was to force the Irish Catholics to become Protestants, but in reality, it was even more damaging than it may seem, the nature of such laws led to terrible consequences. In *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd says that “under Penal Laws in Ireland a son, simply by converting to Protestantism, could usurp his father’s prerogatives, or a wife her husband’s, and this Burke saw as a blueprint for revolution”

(KIBERD, 1996, p. 17). Many restrictions concerning land acquisition or permission, such as those mentioned by Kiberd, were removed in 1778, as Foster reminds us. Nevertheless, Foster adds that “by then the Penal laws had done all they could. Catholics were 75 per cent of the total population, and over 90 per cent in certain ecclesiastical provinces; yet, Arthur Young calculated in 1776, they held only 5 per cent of the land” (FOSTER, 1988, p. 211). That disproportional division of land, along with some other aggravating circumstances, led to many conflicts.

In 1798 a rebellion took place. It was one of the bloodiest uprisings in the history of Ireland. The rebels were fighting against all the abuses brought with the installation of the Penal Laws back in 1691. The rebellion lasted three months and it was violently suppressed. Many rebels were caught and executed under British orders. This rebellion had its final aftermath in the Act of Union in 1800. The Union took place but the Penal Laws continued to be applied. The situation of the Irish people only started to change with the struggle of an active politician named Daniel O’Connell. As observed by Kiberd, “this proudly Catholic leader had secured emancipation for his co-religionists: the penal laws against them were finally broken” (KIBERD, 1996, p. 20). It was a considerable accomplishment to the Irish people on one hand, but on the other, things would remain the same, since Ireland had a small number of representatives in the parliament. The Act of Union was approved but little change operated for the Irish. It became a guarantee of protection to the Protestant Ascendancy and besides that, as Foster remarks: “It formed the rhetorical issue of Irish Politics: the thing to be for or against, the simple reason for everything. It also came to symbolize the confessional divide that remained the structural reality of Irish Politics” (FOSTER, 1988, p. 290).

In this unfavorable context, Daniel O’Connell (1775-1984) starts a new struggle against the Act of Union and towards the emancipation of Ireland. His dismay at the aftermath of the Act of Union was perceived soon after it. Edward Alfred D’Alton in his book about the history of Ireland brings an excerpt of Daniel O’Connell’s first public speech at a meeting after the Act of Union in which O’Connell declares: “we would rather trust to the Protestant fellow-countryman than lay our country at the feet of foreigners, and that if a Union was to be the alternative of the re-enactment of the penal laws, we would prefer the re-enactment of the penal laws” (D’ALTON, 1910, p.96). At first, it might seem a radical positioning, but, after the Act of Union, what the Irish people had was the same bad situation as before but with the illusion that something had changed for better. Thomas O’Connor, professor of the National University of Ireland, comments in the BBC documentary *The Story of Ireland* that if the emancipation had been granted as planned, as part of the Act of Union deal,

Catholicism in Ireland would not have taken the direction it did. He also says that it would not have become so associated with politics and later on with nationalism.

The situation of Catholics after the Act of Union continued to be unfavorable. The amount of land Catholics could possess kept diminishing. In 1823, O'Connell brought the Catholic Church directly into Irish politics. By doing so, he started the campaign for emancipation which united thousands of Catholics to the cause. In 1828, he was elected to be a representative in the parliament. It was an important moment for Catholics because for more than a hundred years they had not had any representative in the parliament. As stated by Foster, also in the BBC documentary *The Story of Ireland*: "Catholic emancipation enables and empowers a whole world of Irish Catholics, who previously, over the traumatic first twenty years of the Union, have not seen any element of power open to them". Nonetheless, with the strength of O'Connell and the hope of Irish Catholics, came also the Protestants' fear of losing their stability and their privileged position in society. For the Protestants, the connection with Great Britain guaranteed the advantages they had over Catholics, and it was exactly this connection that O'Connell wanted to break. Consequently, he started a campaign to repeal the Act of Union and towards an independent Kingdom of Ireland. Great Britain and most of the Protestants in Ireland were not pleased with such possible change. Three months after the beginning of the campaign, Daniel O'Connell was caught and imprisoned, and thus, the Catholics' dream for emancipation had to be postponed.

In 1845 a terrible happening changes dramatically the history of Ireland. Because of the complications imposed by the process of colonization, which led to extreme poverty, impediment of land acquisition and access to education, Irish Catholics had to rely heavily on one mean of subsistence: the cultivation of potatoes. In 1845, though, the plague of potatoes known as blight, which had already caused damages to other European countries, comes to Ireland. It provoked five years of starvation, and it is estimated that over a million people died due to inanition and other diseases related to it. More than another million migrated, mainly to the United States. In Christine Kinealy's book about the Irish famine, she states that "there is a willingness to engage with issues such as excess mortality, all too often deaths are reduced to a statistic (usually a million dead and two million emigrated), thus giving no sense of personal bereavement, especially for the survivors who had seen loved ones die" (KINEALY, 1994, p. 14). So, the number of deaths, as well as the way such happening is narrated, might change according to different ideological inclinations.

During the years of the famine, Daniel O'Connell, who had already left prison, engaged in the struggle to get help from England to his fellow countrymen.

Unfortunately, he got sick and died in 1847. About his death Edward D'Alton lists a series of reasons that might have aggravated his disease: the failure of the repeal movement, his imprisonment, disagreement with fellows, among others. D'Alton, however, remarks one event as crucial: "It was the famine above all which struck him the most crushing blow. To see those whom he loved so well and for whom he had laboured so long perishing by thousands, and to feel unable to save them was more than he could bear" (D'ALTON, 1910, p. 204). The help from England came only at the beginning of the famine, later, it was decided by the prime minister of England that the Irish people had to manage the situation by themselves. This decision of England was faced by some Irish people almost as genocide. It served as fuel to the future actions towards independence.

By 1850, when the famine was officially over, some regions of Ireland were emptied. Historians often say that there were more Irish people living in New York than in Dublin. The immigrants that arrived in the United States were extremely poor, but they had a great sense of organization. Joe Lee, professor of New York University, comments on the BBC documentary about Ireland that the Irish people brought with them something intangible, and that is a capacity for political organization, which they have acquired under the tutorship of Daniel O'Connell over the previous thirty years. And he adds that no other people were able to organize themselves at so lower social level and within a decade of arriving, they have become the driving force of New York Politics. Thus, it is from this context that a new strength to fight for the Irish cause is reborn. The Fenian Brotherhood, founded in 1858, which had been defeated in a previous revolution for independence, was inclined to fight again. They were able to mobilize thousands of people in the United States to help with donations that were sent to the poor Irish Catholics that remained in Ireland. But they wanted more than money; they were eager for a revolution that could grant independence to Ireland. When questioned about the Fenian Brotherhood, in the BBC documentary *The Story of Ireland*, Joe Lee replies that the organization was essentially a cry for revenge for the famine.

In order to be part of the Fenian Brotherhood, it was necessary to make an oath in which, among other things, the member repudiated England, and everything that was related to it. D'Alton comments that it was not difficult to find thousands of people that were willing to do the oath. He exposes some of them in a passage that is worth citing here because, besides informing, it brings some account of the emotional atmosphere that surrounded the organization of the Fenian Brotherhood:

Amid the rush and bustle of American cities, on American farms and railroads, in the

lonely log-cabin in American woods, down in the depths of American mines were Irish exiles who thought of England only with a curse. Their fathers had told them of the horror of the famine days, and they themselves had seen the crowbar brigade at work, the house levelled in which they were born, the fired quenched round which they have gathered to pray at their mother's knee. They had known England law only by its oppressions, and Government only as an instrument of terror (DALTON, 1910, p. 246).

This passage demonstrates what has made the adhesion of so many people to the Fenian Brotherhood something easy to be achieved. It was the pain they shared and the wish for revenge that moved the Irish people in America towards a new struggle that could accomplish something more effective; at least the method would be different from the pacific politics of Daniel O'Connell. Destruction of buildings and bloodshed would be included in their actions. The brotherhood had great care with its organization and it worked in a way that prevented treachery. So, as explained by D'Alton (1910), the society was organized into circles, each under a center. He comments that "all authorities converged through higher centres commending many circles, towards the head centre, Stephens, who was in supreme commend.[...] John O'Mahony was supreme in America; John O'Leary, Tomas Clarke Luby, Charles Kickhen in Ireland" (D'ALTON, 1910, p.245). The Irish poet W.B. Yeats had a great admiration for John O'Leary. Yeats was very young when he met him and attributes to him the inspiration for his writings. In "A General Introduction for my Work", from 1937, Yeats makes it explicit when he says:

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).

Yeats comments in his essay that O'Leary collaborated to the improvement of his writing. Other great collaboration of O'Leary was in the Fenian Brotherhood. Besides the separatist attempts, they also created the *Irish people*, a newspaper that aimed to discuss issues related to the cause of Ireland. In 1865, however, the organization was found out by the government and its members arrested. O'Leary

was sentenced to twenty years in prison. In 1867, the first acts of terrorism took place in England, the participants were caught and killed, but they became martyrs to subsequent actions. The Fenian rebellion in Ireland did not succeed, but the organization provoked a great social awakening.

In 1878, the potato blight strikes again and a movement to protect the people against a new episode of famine was organized. This movement had two leaders: Michael Davitt (1846-1906), of peasant origin, who was born in County Mayo and emigrated to Lancashire with his family due to the problems of eviction in Ireland, joined the Fenian Brotherhood in 1865, and returned to Ireland after seven years of imprisonment in England for his participation in such organization; and Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891), an aristocrat and Protestant man whose family had lost almost everything in the first strike of the famine back in 1845. They differ from each other in many ways, from background to political outlook, but they join for the cause of Ireland, which in that period was mainly concerning land. Irish people were not allowed to buy land since the implantation of Penal Laws, and there was also the danger of eviction that many people were going through. Yeats mentions both politicians in his poetry, in fact, there are a couple of poems in which Parnell is a central figure. Poems like: "Three Songs to the Same Tune," "Parnell," "Three Marching Songs," "Parnell's Funeral," "Come Gather Round me, Parnellites," among others.

Parnell was one of the major names of the nationalist movement. He was deeply involved in the struggle for the implantation of Home Rule in Ireland. By means of negotiation, Parnell gets the support of William Gladstone, a conservative British politician who also engaged in the project of Home Rule. However, a scandal involving Parnell and a married woman, Catherine O'Shea, was able to destabilize the struggle for independence. Many people delegitimized the leadership of Parnell due to the particularities of his personal life. Gladstone was one of those that declared that he could not continue to support Ireland's struggle for Home Rule if Parnell continued to be the leader of the movement. The whole situation was devastating for such a passionate politician as Parnell. A year after the scandal he passed away and a huge crowd was gathered in his funeral. The unexpected fall of a powerful politician and the subsequent death of Parnell generated a variety of feelings. Many literary writers included this episode of the Irish history in their work. James Joyce brings the discussion about Parnell to almost all his novels. Yeats also writes about Parnell, although he started including him in his poetry a little late. In the fourth stanza of the first part of Yeats's poem, "Parnell's Funeral", Yeats writes:

Come, ûx upon me that accusing eye.
I thirst for accusation. All that was sung,
All that was said in Ireland is a lie
Bred out of the contagion of the throng,
Saving the rhyme rats hear before they die.
Leave nothing but the nothings that belong
To this bare soul, let all men judge that can
Whether it be an animal or a man (YEATS, 1987, p. 159).

In this stanza, Yeats brings the voice of Parnell to show the atmosphere that remained after his death. Many of the people who supported and admired him were the same who, after the scandal concerning his personal life, judged him. A fraction of the crowd that attended his funeral was also part of those that did not accept him to continue as a leader of the Home Rule movement. After the downfall of Parnell, no other political leader ascended to fight for Home Rule. Foster states that "there is a tendency to see the twenty-five years between Parnell's death in 1891 and the Easter Rising of 1916 as a vacuum in politics: political 'energy' being diverted mystically (and mechanically) into the channels of 'culture'" (FOSTER, 1988, p. 431). According to Foster, it was a theory put forward by Yeats in a passage that became widely known:

The modern literature of Ireland, and indeed all that stir of thought which prepared for the Anglo-Irish war, began when Parnell fell down from power in 1891. A disillusioned and embittered Ireland turned from parliamentary politics; an event was conceived; and the race began, as I think, to be troubled by that event's long gestation (FOSTER, 1988, p. 431).

To some degree, Foster tends to see it as a sort of fiction. He argues that "the radical avant-garde of cultural nationalism was a small minority round the turn of the century" (FOSTER, 1988, p. 432). Be that as it may, the small minority managed to accomplish some changes in the literary and cultural scenarios of Ireland.

Due to the many years of English presence in Ireland and consequently all the changes such presence promoted, a sense of inferiority started to be associated with everything that was Irish, including the Irish language that, at a certain point, was heavily associated to poverty and lack of instruction. Before this reality, a movement to rescue the pride for Irish identity gains strength in Ireland. Founded in 1893, by Eoin MacNeill and with Douglas Hyde as president, the Gaelic League, an organization without political interest, at least not in its outset, had as main objective to revitalize Irish identity. As described on the online page of the National Library of Ireland, the

organization was non-political and nonsectarian and aimed at involving people of different religious and political loyalties in a common cultural effort. Its objective was the revival of the Irish language and the preservation of Irish literature, traditional culture and music. Later, the cultural revival became what set the tone for new struggles for independence in the beginning of the twentieth century.

In 1912, the Liberal Government of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland was in negotiation to approve the Home Rule bill. That was the beginning of the most severe conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland. With the eminence of the change, the Unionists feared to lose their stability and to be governed by Dublin. Thus, a militia, the Ulster Volunteers, was created to fight against that decision. In the following year, the nationalists also create their militia, the Irish Volunteers, to protect Home Rule. In 1914, a great number of guns and ammunition arrived in Ulster, but when the Irish Volunteers attempted to do the same in the following years, they were prohibited. These two different ways in which the government dealt with these two groups led to a more radical posture of the nationalists. The hope for the Home Rule bill was strong in 1914, however, due to the beginning of the World War I, Home Rule became a secondary matter.

In 1916 an uprising, known as the Easter Rising, took place in Ireland. It was planned by the Irish Volunteers and also members of Sinn Féin, a political party founded in 1905. The main goal of the rising was to declare Ireland's independence. The participants seized strategic buildings and started the rising on Easter Monday. In *The Insurrection in Dublin*, a book by James Stephens, it is possible to get closer to the atmosphere of the happenings at that time. Stephens published the book one month after the Rising and narrated the event from the perspective of a citizen who woke up in the morning, went to work and suddenly found out that the insurrection was occurring. Stephens states in the foreword of his book that: "If freedom is to come to Ireland—as I believe it is—then the Easter Insurrection was the only thing that could have happened" (STEPHENS, 1916, p.8). After detailed description of each day of the Rising and its aftermath, Stephens comes to the core of the question of Ireland and argues that there are two of them: "The first is international, and can be stated shortly. It is the desire of Ireland to assume control of her national life; [...] the second question might plausibly be called a religious one" (STEPHENS, 1916, p. 112). Stephens disagrees about the second question he mentions by arguing that the religious question is absolutely political however constructed in a way that made the population believe that it was linked to religion.

The Easter Rising was indubitably connected to the first question of Ireland stated by Stephens. It was a new attempt to fight for independence. During the

insurrection, the proclamation of the independence of Ireland was written and signed by the seven leaders. John F. Boyle (1916), in *The Irish Rebellion of 1916*, discusses the implication of the insurrection and also brings the document of the Proclamation of the Republic of Ireland. In the third paragraph of the proclamation the insurgents wrote: "We hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a sovereign independent state, and we pledge our lives, and the lives of comrades in arms, to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation amongst the nations" (BOYLE, 1916, p. 53). The rising lasted a few days before the leaders were forced to surrender. They were judged and most of them executed. Yeats felt the impact of the executions, and in his poem about the Rising he wrote: "MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse / Now and in time to be, / Wherever green is worn, / Are changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born" (YEATS, 1987, p. 83). The deaths were able to provoke a great commotion, and many people joined the cause. The Easter Rising is considered to be one of the events that led to the Irish War of Independence.

A series of events are considered relevant to build the motivation to the Irish War of Independence. They include events such as the aftermath of the Easter Rising in 1916, the victory of the Sinn Féin party in the elections of 1918, which culminated in the declaration of independence of Ireland, provoking a reaction of England against it. The war had its official outset in 1919, when members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA), a paramilitary army which had Michael Collins as a leader, killed two members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), the armed police force of the United Kingdom in Ireland. Some other acts of violence followed the first year of war, but it was in 1920 that the violence became more intense and there was a succession of attacks by the IRA to barracks of the RIC. That situation alarmed the United Kingdom, which sent a group of World War I veterans called Black and Tans to Ireland. They were supposed to stop the IRA attacks, but they also inflicted violence against civilians. In response to an attack of the IRA to members of the British intelligence, the Black and Tans and the RIC opened fire at a football match in Croke Park, Dublin, killing fourteen people. That episode known as the first Bloody Sunday shocked the population and the IRA gained more support from the citizens. After that, violence was intensified and for each attack from one side, there was retaliation from the other side.

By the end of 1921, both sides decided to negotiate a treaty. Thus, Michael Collins traveled to England and after the negotiation he accepted a treaty in which Ireland was divided. In the partition, twenty-six counties of southern Ireland became the Irish Free State, which was still attached to England in many ways; and the other six, mostly Protestant states of the north, became a new state within the United

Kingdom. The Treaty did not please Éamon de Valera, who argued that Collins accepted the treaty without his consent and abandoned the main objective of previous struggle that was to make Ireland a republic. It is worth mentioning that de Valera was one of the leaders of the Easter Rising and the one in charge to proclaim the Irish republic in the outset of the Rising. As the other leaders of the Rising, after the surrender he was court-martialed and sentenced to death, nevertheless, probably due to the fact that he was born in the United States, of an Irish immigrant mother and a Spanish father, de Valera was just jailed. As soon as he was released from Prison in 1917 he became a candidate for the Sinn Féin party, and subsequently the president of the Irish Parliament (Dail Eireann). When the treaty was accepted by Michael Collins, de Valera resigned as president and started to resist violently against it. Kiberd brings some details about the aftermath of such disagreement: "A bitter election was fought on the issue in June 1922... A civil war of unparalleled bitterness then ensued, in which brother fought brother and men who had recently been comrades against a foreign enemy now killed and executed former friends" (KIBERD, 1996, p. 194). Both sides, those supporting the treaty and those against it, committed atrocities. By the end of 1922, Michael Collins was killed by members of the IRA, of which he had been a leader in the past. After the end of the Irish Civil War problems still remained in Ireland. Many political reforms were established. In 1949, Ireland finally became a Republic. Nonetheless, the sectarianism continued both in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland.

From the perspective that the cultural identity of the Irish people had been damaged by the process of colonization, changes seemed necessary to the cultural scenario of Ireland. Kiberd states that "it would be left to Yeats, Hyde and a later generation to restore culture to its central importance in the liberation of a people" (KIBERD, 1996, p. 22). Based on these considerations, it is worth investigating what was the role of Yeats's literary production, especially his poetry, in the attempt to revitalize the cultural identity of Ireland.

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS: FROM THE IRISH REVIVAL TO POST WAR PESSIMISM

Considered one of the most prominent writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, William Butler Yeats (1865—1939) was born in Sandymount, County Dublin, Ireland. However, as he spent great part of his childhood in county Sligo, much of what he wrote about his childhood has Sligo as the main scenario. Yeats wrote about a variety of themes during his literary career, but there are some particular aspects in his writings that stand out. Regarding his involvement with Irish

politics, Yeats's interest in nationalism seems to have part of its root in his relation with the old Fenian leader John O'Leary. In "A General Introduction for my Work", Yeats mentions that it was through the old Fenian leader John O'Leary that he found the theme for his writings. Yeats also mentions O'Leary by name in at least three of his poems.

Yeats, as many other writers and citizens, embraced the cause of Ireland. Besides the attempt to obtain liberation from British rule, it was also necessary to rescue Irish identity. Ireland went through a process of colonization in which many features of its culture were left behind due to the imposition of elements of the culture of the colonizer. It was in this context that the Irish Revival was constructed. The Irish Revival is a broad term that must be defined so that it may be possible to analyze some particularities of this movement. According to Anne Fogarty, "the Irish literary revival was a protean phenomenon. It united numerous different cultural, political and economic initiatives, all of which shared the aim of reawakening national self-interest and spearheading the quest for independence from British rule" (FOGARTY, 2007, p. 129). A similar definition is given by Gregory Castle:

The terms Revivalism and Revival (when capitalized) refer to a critical disposition or attitude toward culture and history expressed in multiple movements and a broad spectrum of modes (popular, academic, literary, journalistic, political) and ideologies (advanced nationalism, cultural nationalism, Home Rule, Fenian Unionism) (CASTLE, 2011, p. 292).

It is also worth verifying Seamus Deane's discussion on this regard:

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 (DEANE, 1990, p. 13).

Yeats was one of the leading figures involved in the Literary Revival. He himself admitted to be doing something for the nationalist endeavor. About this literary movement, Horatio Krans says that it was after the awareness of the state of things that took place in Ireland that "a company of young man sprung up, resolved to hold fast to the noblest traits of Irish life and character, and to present them to Ireland and to the world in a worthy literary form" (KRANS, 1904, p. 10). Among those young

man, Yeats was a remarkable presence. Krans brings an excerpt of Yeats's writing about the Irish Revival in which Yeats said that:

A true literary consciousness – national to the centre – seems gradually to be forming out of all this disguising and prettifying, this penumbra of half culture. We are preparing likely enough for a new Irish literary movement – like that of '48 – that will show itself in the first lull in this storm of politics (KRANS, 1904, p. 10).

That was said in the outset of the movement and what was reached later is worth investigating. Declan Kiberd also talks about the Irish revival and Yeats's role in the literary movement. Differently from Krans, he highlights what was accomplished when looking back to that cultural movement. Kiberd states that:

That enterprise achieved nothing less than a renovation of Irish consciousness and a new understanding of politics, economics, philosophy, sport, language and culture in its widest sense. It was the grand destiny of Yeats's generation to make Ireland once again interesting to the Irish, after centuries of enforced provincialism following the collapse of the Gaelic order in 1601 (KIBERD, 1996, p. 3).

Although it may be argued that the Irish Revival had positive impact on the cultural scenario of Ireland, it also had some aspects to be criticized. Some of the criticism towards it has to do with the fact that much of its members came from a Protestant background, which placed them in a more privileged social class. Besides that, as the Irish Revival proposed a rescue of some traits of the past; either by means of engaged translations of ancient tales, such as the case of those performed by Lady Gregory, which omitted passages of the text considered not fit to the propaganda of nationalism, or even the attempt to reestablish the Irish language to some social domains, made the movement seem backward. About this situation Kiberd declares that:

In theory, two kinds of freedom were available to the Irish: the return to a past, pre-colonial Gaelic identity, still yearning for expression if long-denied, or the reconstruction of a national identity, beginning from first principals all over again. The first discounted much that had happen, for good as well as ill, during the centuries of occupation; the second was even more exacting, since it urged people to ignore other aspects of their past too. The first eventually took the form of nationalism; as sponsored by Michael Collins, Éamon de Valera and the political élites; the second offered liberation, and was largely the invention of writers and artists (KIBERD, 1996, p. 286).

The reconstruction of such Gaelic identity and other aspects that were part of the Irish nationalism were supported by Yeats, at least in great part of his writing. It can be seen in the Irish mythical background that was retaken in Yeats's poems. As regards the second kind of freedom mentioned by Kiberd, i.e., how "liberation" could have been opposed to the literary path traveled by Yeats, Eamon Grennan observes that it seems a denial of the historical present. Grennan adds that "Yeats seems to want to dominate the Irish literary future as he had dominated that much of its past for which he himself had been virtually responsible" (GRENNAN, 1999, p. 134). In the sequence of his writing, Grennan talks about the nature of the kind of poetry Yeats claims, and he argues that "in its willful collapsing of temporality, its elimination of the fluent vulgarities of the present, the passage attempts to ground an aesthetic in a personally fruitful cultural myth" (GRENNAN, 1999, p. 134). Yeats tried that formula of returning to the mythical past in many of his poems, such as in "Fergus and the Druid", "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea", "To Ireland in the Coming Times", among others. Nevertheless, in the course of his literary career, he not only tried to return to the past, but he also raised the issue of politics critically and engaging himself with the present.

The Irish Literary Theater and other societies were planned as early as 1887 and in 1903, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Sean O'Casey and John Synge found the Abbey Theatre. It was part of the project for the Irish Revival. Many plays were written involving the goals preconized by the Revival. In *The Irish Literary Revival*, Cornelius Weygandt remarks on some important aspects in relation to the endeavor of the Revival. He comments that Yeats has said that "it was the fall of Parnell, in 1890, that turned the attention of intellectual Ireland from politics to letters and made possible the Revival that was witnessed". (WEYGANDT, 1904, p. 425) He also mentions that:

The plays of Mr. Yeats alone make a list whose naming brings a realization of the possibilities for drama in the changing moods of Irish life: "The Countess Kathleen," "The Land of Heart Desire," "The Shadow Waters," "On Baile's Strand," "The Hourglass," "A pot of Broth," "The King of Threshold", and "Where There is Nothing" (WEYGANDT, 1904, p. 430).

Yeats's plays, along with other playwrights' plays such as Synge's, Lady Gregory's, George Moore's and a long list of others, were an important brick in the construction of the Revival, however, it is important to remember that poetry also had a fundamental role on it. Weygandt is emphatic in relation to it when he says that the greatest work of the Revival has been done in Poetry.

Yeats's role in the Irish Revival in the field of poetry was also prolific. He was involved with nationalism and his work reflects his political positioning. A remarkable feature of his political poems is the presence of real characters, such as politicians, poets and writers. Yeats uses their real names; some of these people are present in a great number of different poems, as it is the case of O'Leary and Parnell. Besides talking about these important people to the history of Ireland, Yeats also gives them voice in his poems. An example can be seen in his poem entitled "Parnell" in which Yeats writes: "Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man: / 'Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone'" (YEATS, 1987, p. 177).

Justin Quinn, in his book entitled *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern Irish Poetry, 1800-2000*, dedicates a great deal of attention to the Irish Literary Revival and to the contribution of Yeats's literary production to the Irish literary scenario as a whole. Quinn points out the implications of politics in the work of Yeats arguing that:

The profound political changes that Ireland underwent from the turn of the century to the establishment of the Free State are linked in complex ways to Yeats's development; his work engaged with these and to an extent created them. During the last decade of the nineteenth century, he was ever careful to avoid militant issues, but this changed in the twentieth century, as his poems intervened directly in political matters (Quinn, 2008, p. 60).

Yeats's work which is considered the watershed in relation to his stronger relations with current political matters is *The Tower* (1928). This collection of poems is marked by his impressions on the atrocities of the Irish wars. Edward Said, one of the main researchers in the field of postcolonial studies, considers *The Tower* a pillar in the process of decolonization of Ireland. He states that:

The Tower is, as far as decolonization is concerned, how to reconcile the inevitable violence of the colonial conflict with the everyday politics of an ongoing national struggle, and also with the power of each of the various parties in the colonial conflict, with the discourse of reason, of persuasion, of organization, with the requirements of poetry. Yeats's prophetic perception that at some point violence cannot be enough and that the strategies of politics and reason must come into play is, to my knowledge, the first important announcement in the context of decolonization of the need to balance violent force with an exigent political and organized process (SAID, 1990, p. 91).

Said is one of the critics who consider that Ireland was a victim of English imperialism as a colony and acknowledges Yeats's work as an agent in the process of decolonization in Ireland. Said says that: "It is not wrong to interpret Yeats as in his poetry setting a trajectory in common with other poets of decolonization, like Neruda and Darwish" (SAID, 1990, p. 89). Besides Yeats's poetry, an example of action that would promote the decolonization of Ireland was the Irish Literary Revival. Yeats had a foundational role in it. Anne Fogarty writes about the participation of Yeats in the Irish Revival:

Yeats's involvement in revivalism was as variegated, far-reaching and vexed as his contribution to modernism. But, crucially, his engagement with Irish cultural and political disputes shaped his evolving sense of his role as a poet and fuelled his ruminations and pronouncements about the requisite aesthetic for a burgeoning nation (FOGARTY, 2007, p. 129).

The Irish Revival was an important movement to promote a cultural awakening in Ireland, however, severe criticism was directed to its core. One of the reasons was the use of the word Irish to refer to a literary production written primarily in English. To the critics of that literary movement, it seemed contradictory to resist the colonizer using their own language. Moreover, as Gregory Castle points out in his essay entitled *Irish Revivalism: Critical Trends and New Directions*, "too often, however, we find advanced-nationalist critics, like Arthur Grifúth and Maud Gonne, attacking Anglo-Irish intellectuals for cultural elitism and, in the case of Synge, for maliciously misrecognizing the character of Ireland and its people" (CASTLE, 2011, p. 293). Much criticism was often directed to literary revivalists who happened to be the founders of the Abbey Theatre. Castle also adds that:

To be sure, the Literary Revivalists did constitute (and extravagantly so at times) a cultural elite and they did use themes, genres and techniques of work similar to what was emerging in folklore studies, anthropology and ethnography; to this limited extent, they were influenced by colonial discourse. But that influence was, by and large, dialectically transformed in the aesthetic project of building a national literature and a national theater, the oft-stated goals of the Literary Revivalists. Synge's plays, together with the dramatic productions of Yeats and Gregory, got Irish audiences involved in the process and made possible the creation of a major literature, even a foundational one. (CASTLE, 2011, p. 293)

Even though the Irish Literary Revival was criticized for some of its flaws, its relevance to some important changes in the Irish literary scenario is undeniable.

After the long process of colonization, it was a wise decision of those writers to start thinking about a movement to revitalize the cultural and political Ireland.

NOTES

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