

## Yeats's Marching Songs

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The immediate occasion for the present article is Richard Finneran's exclusion of "Three Songs to the Same Tune" from Yeats's 1935 collection *A Full Moon in March* in his edition of *The Poems* of W.B. Yeats (1983). Assuming that this decision was not dictated only by aesthetic considerations but by a certain political bias, the author briefly delineates Yeats's authoritarian political stance culminating in his short-lived association with the Fascist-inspired Irish Blueshirt party. His reading of the two versions of the "marching songs" purports to show that the poet's revision of the earlier song does not amount to a disclaimer of an authoritarian vision of man and society but registers the Yeats's disappointment with political activism as such. In conclusion the author voices his disagreement with Finneran's elimination of the earlier, more politically-charged text and warns that totalitarian practice may lurk in unexpected quarters.

Possibly the most unsettling issue to be dealt with when approaching the life and work of William Butler Yeats is the problem of his politics. Relying on the mind-boggling "system" he had laboriously mapped out in *A Vision*, Yeats, during the thirties, reached the conclusion that Occidental civilisation was approaching its meridian, a point of exhaustion out of which will arise the counterforce of a new order. In the final notes to *A Vision* he remarks on efforts to stave off omens of disruption and chaos: "What discords will drive Europe to that artificial unity - only dry or drying sticks can be tied into a bundle - which is the decadence of every civilisation?" However, his main preoccupation is "how work out upon the phases the gradual coming and increase of the counter movement the antithetical multiform influx".<sup>1</sup> It is within the context of Yeats's belief in the imminence of a new historical dispensation that one must situate the often troubling agenda of a segment of his politically charged work.

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<sup>1</sup> Yeats, *A Vision*, 301-2.

From notes in his 1930 diary it is not difficult to surmise the nature and form of his anticipated new order:

I can only conceive of it as a society founded upon unequal rights and unequal duties which if fully achieved would include all nations in the European stream in one harmony, where each drew its nourishment from all though each drew different nourishment.<sup>2</sup>

Yeats envisions a hierarchically structured organic society standing in starkest contrast to the destructured, decentered modern state of affairs for which he, along with Lawrence, Eliot and Pound, felt such a deep enmity. The following explicit passage bears this out:

If I till and dig my land I should have rights because of that duty done, and if I have much land, that, according to all ancient races, should bring me still more rights. But if I have much or little land and neglect it I should have few rights. This is the theory of Fascism and so far as land is concerned it has the history of the earth to guide it and that is permanent history.<sup>3</sup>

During this most volatile period of European history Yeats had no qualms of voicing his political stance. Although the qualifier in this pronouncement ("as far as land") apparently signalizes a sort of constraint on Yeats's part, what is to be said of his nostalgia for eugenic practices in *On the Boiler* (1939) where he forecasts "tomorrow's revolution":

For now by our too much facility in this kind, in giving way to all to marry that will, too much liberty and indulgence in tolerating all sorts, there is a vast confusion of hereditary diseases, no family secure, man almost free from some grievous infirmity or other.<sup>4</sup>

Yeats's vaunting his blood "that has not passed through any huckster's loin" in the opening poem of *Responsibilities* or his safeguarding those he chooses for his pantheon from "the wares peddled in he thoroughfares" ("A Prayer for my Daughter") derive from the same feeling of anxiety. However, written on the very threshold of the coming holocaust it leaves the reader with an ill-boding foretaste of things to come. One of his critics has remarked that the poet ends up "with the picture of an intellectual elite, an educated faction dominating feudally, through skill and machinery, the eugenically controlled uneducated masses" (McHugh 1962: 100). Regardless of the pattern of vacillating undecidables in Yeats's oeuvre which I have dealt with elsewhere (Grgas 1989, 1991), one would be hard put to deny a political vision of man and society in his work with which many critics feel uncomfortable.

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<sup>2</sup> *Explorations*, 311.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.

One of the most contentious events regarding Yeatsian politics is his short-lived affiliation with the Fascist-inspired Blueshirts and their leader Eoin O'Duffy. Although the actual association lasted no longer than the summer of 1933, according to R.F. Foster, "the Blueshirt flirtation remained an embarrassing episode in the pedigree" not only of Yeats but of a number of other sympathetic intellectuals.<sup>5</sup> However, if we only look back at the citation from the 1939 text of *On the Boiler* it would be unfounded to conclude that Yeats had experienced a mellowing of his positions. Readers familiar with his late poetry will easily recognize the untenability of this assumption. His radical aristocratism had come through intact but faith in political action as the arena where its values could be implemented had simply vanished or, perhaps one could say, been put on hold. A comparative reading of two poems, "Three Songs to the Same Tune" and its later modified version, "Three Marching Songs" will not only illustrate this development but attend to certain problems in the case of revisionary Yeatsian editorship.

In the definitive edition of the *Collected Poems* published by Macmillan in 1956 and containing the poet's final revisions, "Three Songs to the Same Tune" (henceforth version A) appears as the second poem in the collection *A Full Moon in March* (1935) while "Three Marching Songs" (henceforth version B) is numbered among Last Poems (1936-1939). In a newer edition of *The Poems* of W.B. Yeats (1983) Richard J. Finneran simply leaves out the A version from the 1935 collection with the moot comment that earlier editions had "improperly" retained it. Excepting this summary judgement the editor fails to provide convincing reasons for the omission but the excerpts Finneran quotes from the commentaries Yeats himself made on the two versions reveal his original intentions and the reasons for the subsequent changes.

Writing in February 1934 in *The Spectator* Yeats identifies his ruling political passion as "rancour against all... who disturb public order (which) cannot long persist without the rule of educated and able men". Referring directly to the first version of the poem he ascribes its origin to a mood during which it appeared that the growing sense of disorder "was about to turn our noble history into an ignoble farce". The apparent reason for writing a new version was his sense of its "rhetorical vehemence" which he simplified retaining "a commendation of the rule of the able and educated, man's old delight in submission".<sup>6</sup> In "Commentary on The Three Songs" published in *Poetry* in December of that same year Yeats is more forthright: he had written the original pieces believing that a political party (obviously the Blueshirts) had "some such aim as mine... Finding that it neither would nor could, I increased their fantasy, their extravagance, their obscurity, that no party might sing them".<sup>7</sup>

An analysis of the revisions Yeats made in his songs will show the compositional strategy the poet used to achieve this aim. When Finneran moves the earlier version to

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<sup>5</sup> R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, Allen Lane, London, 1988, p. 549.

<sup>6</sup> Richard J. Finneran, *The Poems of William Butler Yeats*, Macmillan, New York, 1983, pp. 701-2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 704.

what he labels as "additional poems" he is relegating it to the order of a first draft. Comparing the two texts I am unable to discover aesthetic considerations for such a valorization and suspect that this decision is primarily dictated by his political bias. Namely, since the political charge of the later version is more covert it is more pliable and poses less of a challenge than the raucous tonality of the original song.

The outer structure of the three parts making up the two texts, arranged into three sestets followed by a refrain (quatrain), is identical for both versions. Both text A and B count 90 lines equally divided into three units. What were the changes Yeats made when revising the earlier version?

On the level of the macro-organization of the texts a change took place within the sequence of the units. The opening song of version A appears as the concluding segment in the revised version (so that: A: 1-2-3, while B: 2-3-1). Excepting its refrain and, of course, its position in the sequence, Yeats left the opening song of A intact in the later version. Comparing the second unit of A which in the later version now functions as the opening song the reader notices certain modifications. I will later note the semantic import of replacing the imperative anaphora of activism implied in the term "justify" (A) by the langourous repetition of "remember" (B). In addition, my feeling is that lines 15-16 in A - "Stood or have marched the night long / Singing singing a song" - have more militant spunk than the implied passivity of the parallel verses in B - "Stood, took death like a tune / On an old tambourine". The second stanza of the third song in the A version is simply deleted. Since this erasure has particular bearing on my argument I quote it in full:

When nations are empty up there at the top,  
When order has weakened or faction is strong,  
Time for us all to pick out a good tune,  
Take to the roads and go marching along.  
March, march - how does it run? -  
O any old words to a tune. (A, 71-76)

The corresponding lines in B have a different ring to them:

We know what rascal might has defiled  
The lofty innocence that it has slain,  
We were not born in the peasant's cot  
Where man forgives if the belly gain.  
More dread the life that we live,  
How can the mind forgive? (B, 41-46)

Changes also occur in the third stanza: in A line 21 repeats the opening verse of the unit ("Soldiers take pride in saluting their captain") whereas in the same position of B the poet reverts to a question: "What if there's nothing up there at the top?". What do these modifications and interventions in the earlier text amount to?

Since the three refrains of both versions were wholly rewritten obviously this is where Yeats made the most significant changes. To put it roughly, while the militant rhetoric of the refrains in A contributes to the bellicose atmosphere of a marching song,

the refrains in version B retract from this belligerency. The lines of the later version are permeated by sceptic misgivings and scruples.

The refrain of the first song (A) reverberates like a war-cry:

Those fanatics all that we do would undo;  
Down the fanatic, down the clown;  
Down, down, hammer them down,  
Down to the tune of O'Donnel Abu!

The anaphora signalizes Yeats's hatred of and ire against those whose work is to undermine order and rank. The repetitive cadence amounts to a summons to extermination and intimidates with its goosestepping menace. Yeats uses the same anaphoric structure in the second refrain (A):

Drown all the dogs,' said the fierce young woman,  
'They killed my goose and a cat.  
Drown, drown in the water-butt,  
Drown all the dogs,' said the fierce young woman.

In relation to the earlier refrain, the blustering vituperative tone has here reached new heights. The personification degrades the enemy to the animal level while the choice of lexis imbues the lines with a threatening immediacy. Seemingly, the tone of the third refrain mellows the stridor:

'Who'd care to dig 'em,' said the old, old man,  
'Those six feet marked in chalk?  
Much I talk, more I walk;  
Time I were buried,' said the old, old man.

However, if we note the change of speaker and the lack of any hesitancy in the fourth line the verses can be shown to be in tune with those preceding them. If the "old man" is interpreted as a synecdoche of degenerate, bankrupt society, of a civilization spent and waiting its collapse, then the phrase "Time I were buried" anticipates its destruction in the imminent upheaval. Considering the historical context of these poems, one cannot help but hear their ominous connotations, a celebration of ecstatic violence which will shortly tear Europe apart. Yeats eventually revised the original text or, I would rather think, gave us a variant, where he apparently recants his political miscalculation but not, I maintain, his hubristic aristocratism.

Having read version A in the earlier collection the reader will inevitably stage a kind of dialogical rapport with it when he encounters the later variant in *Last Poems*. Needless to say, Finneran's leaving out version A undoes the singular diachronic relation between the two texts and overrides certain interesting poetic considerations. Placing the two texts next to each other accentuates the dialogical resonances. To return to the refrains, instead of the acrimonious call for extermination in A, the corresponding lines in B are more dispassioned, forbearing and resigned to fate:

Be still, be still, what can be said?  
My father sang that song,  
But time amends old wrong,  
All that is finished, let it fade.

The exalted intrepidity seems to have faded yielding to a kind of passivity before the vicissitudes of time. Drawing back from the urgent activism of the A version, in the second refrain (B) the poet appears to be at a loss before future development: "no man knows what treads the grass". Then there is the obscurity - intended if we recall Yeats's remarks in *Poetry* - of the third refrain:

Robbers had taken his old tambourine,  
But he took down the moon  
And rattled out a tune:  
Robbers had taken his old tambourine.

One way of making sense out of these lines is to read "old tambourine" as an allusion to the A version. Yeats is not recanting his former beliefs but voicing his disapproval of the misappropriation of his poem by an unsatisfactory political option.

If we briefly glance at the alterations I drew attention to earlier their overall effect is on a par with the semantic significance of the rewritten refrains. Since Yeats's excursion into the political theatre had come to nought he withdrew into a haughty sense of resigned superiority. This accounts for the transformation of lines evoking troops marching through the night (A, 15-6) into a recollection of renowned generations who faced death without flinching. Of particular relevance for understanding the bent of Yeats's revisions are the lines (A, 71-6) he excluded from the later version and the replacement he found for them. The deletion can primarily be accounted for by the political explicitness of the sestet. In it the poet diagnosticates the modern malady as a time lacking plausible leadership, a spectacle of the disintegration of order and a site of rampant factionalism. The corresponding fragment in B (41-46) substitutes two interrogative sentences for its commandeering tone and in place of political jargon (nations/order/faction) introduces more metaphoric language (lofty innocence/rascal might). This change blunts the thrust and immediate relevance of the earlier version. However, not to mistake the modification for a change of heart, the reader ought to recognize the separatedness the poetic voice feels towards the common lot (We were not born) and the derogatory way Yeats describes it (peasant's cot / Where man forgives if the belly gain). Instead of the resounding repetition found in A (61, 81) with its insistence on the need of submission - "The soldier takes pride in saluting his Captain" -, in the parallelism of the B version the first line (31) is coupled with a disturbing scepticism: "What if there's nothing up there at the top?" (21).

Finally, the change Yeats made in the sequence of units in the B version carries semantic implications. In A the opening unit presents the hanging of a heroic character. The second unit calls for a justification of his martyrdom while the concluding segment commands the listener to subordinate himself to the historical process. Due to the altered sequence of the units, I see in version B a contrary movement: the stress is no

longer on the imperative to action but on a kind of commemorative rumination on the past, while the futility to take up arms against history leads to a tragic acceptance of destiny. While the individual in A evaporates within history (the imperative of subordination), in B the historical process is bracketed off and the ultimate insight is heroic man transcending, even if in histrionic fashion, the unappeasable gyres of historical time.

My argument has been against the expurgation of version A from *A Full Moon in March*. On the level of aesthetic experience, such an elision impoverishes the reader's reception of the version which, Finneran for example, privileges as the one definitive text. If, on the other hand, the reader is permitted to juxtapose the two texts what he hears is a rich interplay of voices, cross references, citations, a conspicuous display of intertextual production featuring its transfers, displacements, incorporations and repressions. In addition to the resultant complexity, the copresence of the texts incapsulates the diachronic modifications of attitude that Yeats underwent between the publishing dates of the two versions. Without the interplay of the earlier version, text B appropriates to itself a mendacious self-contained homogeneity which belies the dialogical nature of Yeatsian texts and deletes a pole of the poet's many vacillations.

Richard Finneran's editorship of Yeats's poetry and the case of his ostracism we have been dealing with imply that he presupposed a stylistic homogeneity in Yeats and that the heterogeneity of the earlier version of the Marching songs had to be made over into a settled unity. In this particular instance the editor could be said to have acted as an expurgator, excluding what he deemed distasteful or troublesome to the image of the poet he set out to present. But does the leaving out of one poem, and a poem of dubious political import at that, warrant the accusation of limited censorship? As far as I can see the problem with Finneran's editorial policy is that his choice of inclusion had little to do with aesthetic criteria but was very likely dictated by political considerations. The fact that the censorial intervention was prompted by a seemingly benign, anti-Fascist agenda should not diminish his culpability. We know too well the dire consequences of imposing political criteria on works of art. This paper has made an attempt to indicate that danger sometimes lurks in unlikely quarters.

Yeats should be allowed to speak for himself even when the text voices the most vituperative harangues, when it expresses ideas which are, if Harold Bloom is called to witness, "pernicious from a humanistic (or even merely humane) point of view".<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, the reader is deaf to an entire dimension and to an idiosyncratic frequency of his poetry and skates over the tension-filled complexity that signals Yeats as a great, albeit at times dangerous, writer. Humanizing Yeats, we emasculate him, blunt the sharp edge of his verse and do him an objectionable disservice.

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<sup>8</sup> Harold Bloom, *Yeats*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1971. p. 6.

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## YEATSOVE KORAČNICE

Neposredan povod priloga jest ispuštanje pjesme "Three Songs to the Same Tune" iz izdanja Yeatsovih *Pjesama* koje je Richard Finneran pripremio 1983. godine. Pretpostavljajući da tu odluku nisu diktirali čisto estetski obziri nego da se temeljila na određenim političkim pristranostima, autor u kratkim crtama ocrta Yeatsove autoritarne sklonosti koje su kulminirale njegovom kratkotrajnom suradnjom s irskom partijom plavokošuljaša. Čitanje dviju verzija "koračnica" koje autor nudi nastoji pokazati da promjene koje je Yeats izvršio na ranijoj pjesmi ne označuju poricanje autoritarne vizije čovjeka i društva nego pjesnikovo razočaranje političkim djelovanjem kao takvim. U zaključku autor izražava svoje neslaganje s Finneranovim izostavljanjem ranijeg, politički izričitijeg, teksta i upozorava da se totalitarni postupci mogu naći na neočekivanim mjestima.