

## WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS IN THE SLOVENE CULTURAL SPACE

*Janez Gorenc*

### Abstract

William Butler Yeats, Irish poet, dramatist and essayist, winner of the Nobel prize in 1923, was also widely known for the active part he played in Irish politics. Even though he was mostly involved culturally – he wrote about Irish politics in his works, established several literary clubs, founded theatres – he also activated himself as a politician when he was a senator during the years 1923–1928. This article focuses on the mention of his political activities in different English and Slovene texts. It makes a presentation of the vast majority of the texts on Yeats that have appeared in Slovene. It also points out that while the majority of English encyclopaedias and literary histories openly write about Yeats's politics, Slovene texts about Yeats focus mostly on his literary opus and less on his involvement in politics. When they do mention it, however, they usually avoid the details. This article tries to determine some reasons for this fact.

William Butler Yeats, an Irish poet, playwright, occultist, essay writer and occasional politician, won the Nobel prize in 1923. He thus became an international poet, known in most parts of the world. His works were translated into many languages, his work was described in numerous literary studies and articles, and his name made it into all the encyclopaedias on the literatures in English. In this article I at first focus on any mention of Yeats's political views in various encyclopaedias and some literary histories, and then also on his presence in the Slovene cultural space.

Yeats was mainly preoccupied with writing and with his participation in various activities connected to literature (The Abbey Theatre, The Rhymer's Club). However, he was also involved in the political events that took place in Ireland, mostly through his writing, and he also took part in Irish politics actively, as he was Senator from 1922 to 1928. Even though politics did not substantially effect the style of his work, especially poetry and drama, and perhaps it could even be said that politics constituted only a minor portion of his life, it is still something that needs to be taken into consideration if we want to get a full picture of the poet and his work. Yeats himself always strictly held that the principle of the "unity of being" was paramount in his work and life, every smallest and insignificant phenomenon being linked to everything else. So it would be impossible, unfair even, to sever one aspect of his life from the rest, regardless of how unimportant it may seem.

Considering the fact that Yeats's political participation in Ireland was hardly ever dealt with widely in the articles on the poet published in the Slovene cultural space, it would be appropriate to determine just how important Yeats's political identity is to authors from the English-speaking cultural space and thus establish whether Slovene articles on Yeats were lacking crucial information or not. It was therefore necessary to examine what some of the English literary encyclopaedias and literary histories have to say on the matter.

*The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* is quite informative in this respect. It tries to find a strong connection between Yeats and the political events in the Ireland of his days: "at the start of the guerrilla war (the Yeats family) settled in Oxford, but in 1922 returned to live in Dublin. The bridge at Thoor Ballylee (Yeats's Norman Tower in County Mayo) was blown up and shots were fired into their Dublin home. In the same year he became a Senator, and in 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1933 (he) was briefly, but enthusiastically involved with the Fascist Blue shirts in Dublin" (*The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* 1103).

Quite extensive in describing Yeats's political views is also *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*. It points out Yeats's very emotional involvement with Maud Gonne and also her influence on him and his political views: "Yeats became a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood to please Maud Gonne, but became disillusioned with revolutionaries and nationalists, especially after the Dublin riots of 1897" (*The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* 610). The encyclopaedia also points out that Yeats was an elitist who created for the artistic "aristocracy", for the so-called elite: "His continuing interest in aristocratic art was reflected in imitations of the Japanese Noh" (610-1). As stated, he believed the Protestants to be intellectually superior to the Catholics, and this fact is also mentioned. The example of Yeats's famous Senate speech on divorce is given: "He became a senator of the Irish Free State in 1922, chairing the committee on the new Irish coinage, and later causing a controversy with his defence of the Protestant people of Ireland during the divorce debate in 1925" (611). It is interesting that Yeats's support of the Fascist Blue shirts is not mentioned in this text.

*The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English* introduces Yeats as an artist of words, but also as a politically involved intellectual. He is said to have engaged in the "Contemporary Club, a nationalist university debating club" (*The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English* 1030), where he among others, met "the old Fenian leader John O'Leary, who encouraged in him a cultural nationalism" (ibid.). It is also said that his poetry developed from "allegorical nationalist poems" (ibid.) to "a more passionate condemnation of Western civilisation" (ibid.). And most interestingly, his engagement, however brief, with the Irish Fascist movement, is also pointed out: "... in 1933 he was briefly, but enthusiastically, involved with the Fascist Blue shirts in Dublin" (ibid.).

Individual literary studies are even more informative than literary histories and encyclopaedias. Among the first texts on Yeats's politics was George Orwell's essay on Yeats in *Dickens, Dali and Others*. In it he accused Yeats of having Fascist tendencies, which were supposedly evident in the poem "The Second Coming" (Orwell 167). One of the first true literary studies of Yeats was that of Richard Ellmann, *Yeats - The*

*Man and the Masks* (Ellmann). In his book Ellmann presents Yeats's life and work in detail and also tries to pinpoint the events in Yeats's life that influenced it. He cannot by-pass the poet's involvement in politics, since he mentions Yeats's alleged Fascist tendencies already in the preface to the book. He mentions that in 1885 a vigorous nationalism was one of the directions, besides occultism, in which Yeats's energies flowed, as "it was difficult not to be affected by the patriotic fervour of the times; the dynamiters of the determined Irish Republican Brotherhood were blowing up English railway stations; Parnell had unified the Irish party in Parliament and was bringing great pressure to bear on Gladstone, who introduced a Home Rule Bill for Ireland in 1886" (Ellmann 45). Yeats was at that time under the influence of John O'Leary, an Irish nationalist, who had returned from an exile in France (46-7).

Ellman also concentrates on the role of Maud Gonne, the fervent Irish nationalist, in Yeats's life. Since the moment they met in 1889 he was deeply in love with her. So, to please her, he even became a political activist. At first he established several literary societies, namely the Irish Literary Society in 1891 and the National Literary Society in 1892 (107), but in 1896 he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood, a rather violent organisation, in order to push his love problems aside (111).

Later, when Yeats became Senator, he became very conservative and supported Mussolini's regime and celebrated it as the new type of authoritative government the new Europe, according to his predictions in his essay *A Vision*, called for. But as Ellmann constitutes, he "did not go so far as to accept Fascism explicitly, but he came dangerously close" (247-8). However, he did support general Eoin O'Duffy, the leader of the Irish Fascist National Guard, also known as the 'Blue Shirts', for a brief four months in 1933, but averted from him when he saw his error. Even Yeats's wife denied his sympathies with O'Duffy and said that Yeats on one occasion called O'Duffy a 'Swashbuckler'" (xix).

If Ellmann does not make Yeats's politics the focal point of his debate and is rather forgiving when it comes to Yeats's 'Fascism', Connor Cruise O'Brien is not. His essay »Passion and Cunning« proclaims Yeats to be a Fascist, authoritarian and elitist. O'Connor founds his conclusions mostly on letters and essays, not so much on Yeats's poetry. But it is with the help of the former that he then interprets some of Yeats's poems and presents them as texts containing very reactionary ideas. The time when Yeats was Senator was particularly expounded, as O'Brien claims that his ideas were "extremely reactionary" at that time (O'Brien 29). He admired Kevin O'Higgins, the Minister of Justice in the Free State government, who had seventy-seven political opponents shot (31) and praised him in the poem "The Municipal Gallery Revisited". He considered himself an aristocrat and turned sharply against the Catholics when they passed a bill against divorce and contraceptives. This was to Yeats a bad insult, as he believed that the aristocracy "was now taking orders from a bunch of peasants in mitres. The 'base' were dictating to the betters" (33).

In 1932 Irish politics saw a turn in power. Namely, Eamon de Valera, who had lost the Civil War, was elected president. Yeats disliked him very much, so he started supporting anyone who could endanger de Valera's government. And he found this someone in general Eoin O'Duffy. Through a series of letters to Olivia Shakespeare, which O'Brien cites in his essay, Yeats exalts O'Duffy and says he is the right man to

lead the opposition, which will eventually take over from de Valera (34-38). But O'Duffy turned out to be soft in his core and backed down when de Valera sent armoured cars on the streets. The opposition's entire plans of a *coup d'état* fell through and Yeats was utterly disappointed. O'Brien here claims that it was O'Duffy who Yeats became disillusioned with, not Fascism. Yeats was still the old Yeats, "strongly drawn to Fascism" (38), and he remained such till his death (38-51).

From this brief comparison of critical texts on Yeats in English we can see that the poet's political views and involvement are expressed to different extent and that they also stress different qualities of Yeats's political identities which have been written on by several other authors besides the ones looked into above. Whereas O'Brien claims that Yeats was authoritarian, Elizabeth Cullingford in her essay "From Democracy to Authority" refutes O'Brien and even suggests that Yeats might have been a Marxist (Cullingford 61-79). Both Marjorie Howes, author of the essay "Family Values: Gender, Sexuality and Crisis in Yeats's Anglo-Irish Aristocracy", and Roy F. Foster, author of "Protestant Magic: Yeats and the Spell of Irish History", expound Yeats's strong inclinations for a Protestant ascendancy in Ireland and his fear of its decline (Howes 107-29; Foster 83-105). There are also studies that revert to Yeats's politics only briefly, when they mention what some other author said about a poem of Yeats's (Bloom 463), but are otherwise completely dedicated to Yeats's work and not his life. But it is almost impossible to find a literary history or encyclopaedia in English with a text on Yeats without any mention of his political involvement.

I shall now examine the presence of W.B. Yeats and his verse in Slovene. Even though the first translations appeared in our press as early as 1929, it should be mentioned that Yeats is very poorly represented in Slovene literary history and criticism. We would search in vain, if we wanted to find his name mentioned in *Pregled svetovne književnosti* (A Survey of World Literature - Kos 1991). Yeats does not appear in *Ivan Cankar in evropska literatura* either (Ivan Cankar and European Literature - Pirjevec 1964), where we can otherwise find the most renowned European names connected with symbolism and different literary trends. Yeats does appear in *Primerjalna zgodovina slovenske literature* (A Comparative History of the Slovene Literature - Kos 1987), but only to be presented as "a representative of symbolism, alongside Rilke, Maeterlinck, and Andrejev, /who/ did not use the concept of symbolism in the way Cankar did" (Kos, 1987: 117). Nevertheless, there are several (though not numerous) articles about Yeats in Slovene that shall be discussed here.

The first translations of Yeats's poetry were published in 1929 in *Listič iz angleške lirike* (A Leaf of English Verse). The editor and translator was Griša Koritnik and besides Yeats he also included poets such as P. B. Shelley, Lord Byron, John Keats and William Blake into the booklet. There are four translations of Yeats's poems in the publication ("Down by the Salley Gardens", "When You Are Old", "The Lake Isle of Innisfree", "He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven"), but there was no foreword or commentary on the poets (Koritnik 51-4).

The first articles about Yeats, or at least about his work, appeared in 1933, when his play *Countess Cathleen* was staged in the Slovene National Theatre in Ljubljana, together with Maeterlinck's *Justification*. Three articles appeared in the daily press about the performance and one was published later in the annual publication of the

theatre, the *Gledališki list Narodnega gledališča v Ljubljani*. In this article the play is just summarised and four excerpts are added (*Gledališki list Narodnega gledališča v Ljubljani* 2-4). In *Jutro* an article called "Dve premieri v drami" (Two First Nights in The Drama) was written by Juš Kozak, *Slovenec* published "Ljubljansko gledališče: Zadoščenje - Gospa Cathleena" ("The Ljubljana Theatre: *Justification - Countess Cathleen*") by France Koblar, and Fran Govekar wrote "Zopet novitete naše drame" (New Plays in Our Drama) for *Slovenski narod*. Koblar's article was re-printed in the publication *Dvajset let slovenske drame*, which he wrote and edited himself thirty-two years after Yeats's play had been staged (Koblar 1965: 119-21).

Each paper belonged to a different political party (*Slovenec* - Catholic; *Slovenski narod* - Liberal; *Jutro* - Socialist), so comparing them is interesting from the point of view of this article - namely, how Slovene writers of different political views comprehended the play politically. The drama itself could be seen as a mixture of poetic, nationalistic and even some revolutionary elements. Cathleen, being a Protestant landowner, is the only person in the valley of darkness who maintains her spirit pure and does not go running right off to the devils to sell her soul for material goods, as the other people, obviously her own, Catholic tenants, do. When she finally does so, she sells her soul not because there is something in it for her, but because she wants to save her "children" and their souls. As I have already mentioned, the poetic element is very strong and it somehow conceals the narrative part of the story, but nevertheless, it is there. Were the writers of the three articles able to judge the play each from their own (political) standpoint? The comparison of the three articles shows that all three journalists were impartially trying to simply assess the staging, acting and directing of the performance. The presentation of the plot itself does differ a bit according to the political line each paper adhered to, but the differences are visible only to a trained and alert eye, to an average reader, however, there appears to be no obvious difference between the articles.

All the three articles present the staging of the play and its effectiveness, the text itself, and also the cast. They all commend the powerful impact the first part made. It is said to be "dramatically powerful" (Govekar 3), "dramatically stronger" (Koblar, 1933: 4) and it proves "the great might of Yeats's pen" (Kozak 4). The three critics, however, subtly criticise the second part of the play, which "loses (...) its initial energy and takes on a pathetic lyricism" (*ibid.*), "is more lyrical and pious (...) and becomes rather pathetic" (Koblar, 1933: 4), and the play is "pathetically lyrical and pleasant to watch, but less comprehensible and powerful" (Govekar 3). Govekar even writes that there is "intimate lyrical beauty in the play", but it is "inaccessible to the audience in this pre-Carnival season" (*ibid.*). The other two articles say nothing about the responses of the theatre-goers.

The articles also describe the plot of *Countess Cathleen*. Govekar is rather sparing of his words. He mentions, however, that the plot in *Countess Cathleen* resembles *Faustus*, who, just like the Countess, sells his soul to the Devil. However, she is redeemed and the doctor is not (*ibid.*). Koblar in *Slovenec* focuses on the Christian aspect of the play. He says that we see "the idea of doom and redemption", that in this land of famine "God (...) has hidden his face and the people are averting from him", but Cathleen decides to deliver her subjects back to God (Koblar 1933: 4). Koblar also

says that "it is difficult to turn the emphasized religious elements" of the second part of the play "into a sincere and straightforward performance" (ibid.).

Kozak, who wrote for the more left-wing *Jutro*, depicts the suffering crowd from a more 'revolutionary' aspect. In this great poverty and deprivation, where "only some corn-salad" grows in the "parched soil", in the hen-house "the last hen awaits the hatchet", the people are beginning to feel desperate (Kozak 3). So they turn their backs on God and trade their worthless souls to two devils for a piece of bread. Shemus Rea, one of the main characters in the play, defies "god and his mother, who do nothing" (ibid.) to help the people. It is interesting to observe that Koblar writes "God" with a capital letter, whereas Kozak does not. Govekar never mentions God. Both Govekar and Koblar write about the director of the play as "Mr Debevc" (Koblar) or "Mr C(iril) Debevc" (Govekar), but Kozak puts the director's name down simply as "Debevc". It can be concluded, then, that even though the three newspapers mentioned belonged to different political options, they did not differ much in the way they described the premiere of *Countess Cathleen*. The articles are impartial and they convey the same message - the drama was a success.

The second article about W.B. Yeats that appeared in the newspaper *Jutro* in 1939, when the poet died, was actually an obituary. It is unsigned, but its title is "Smrt dveh pesnikov" (The Death of Two Poets) and it mentions the deaths of W.B. Yeats and F.S. Prochazka. The text mentions how old Yeats was, when he died and that he got the Nobel Prize in 1923. He is said "to have drunk out of the rich fountain of Irish folklore and more than any poet expressed the spirit of the Irish yearning for liberty and independence in his poetry" (*Jutro*, 2 February 1939). The article also says that Yeats wrote many dramas, essays, and philosophical texts. "The Irish revolutionary spirit is omnipresent in his work, always embroiled with mysticism and a hymnal fervour" (ibid.), the obituary ends. It does not mention Yeats's political involvement, let alone what his political orientation might have been. But of course, an obituary is hardly the place where such character traits of a person should be discussed.

The following article, one that was published in the newspaper *Naši razgledi* in 1962, did mention Yeats's political work; it was about the publication of *The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats*. It was titled "Govori W.B. Yeatsa v senatu" (The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats) and the author was Olga Grahor. She mentions that Yeats, known in Slovenia "as one of the greatest English poets of the twentieth century" (Grahor 79), born in Ireland, was one of the "leaders of the Irish national movement" (ibid.). "He helped organise the Irish National Literary Society in London and in Dublin and then, together with George Moore, founded the Irish Literary Theatre, which was later renamed into The Abbey Theatre" (ibid.).

Then Grahor mentions that it is less widely known that Yeats was also politically involved, for he "was elected senator in 1922, into the first assembly of the Free State Senate, and in 1928 resigned from the job" (ibid.). The book is said to feature "all of Yeats's senate speeches on a wide array of topics (education, divorce, copyright, etc.), and also abstracts of parliament debates he took part in, thus the atmosphere in the parliament and also the personalities of some of his colleagues are depicted" (ibid.). The book is also said to contain some of Yeats's essays and public speeches on his Senate activity. Grahor is surprised that the poet, "who was a disciple

of the French symbolists, who admired and also published the poems of William Blake and was in his youth fully immersed into ancient Irish folklore, proved to be very practical and far-sighted" (ibid.). According to Grahor, Yeats tried to show what a certain law would look like in real life, not just on paper. Grahor also mentions that the book *Senate Speeches* was published by R. Pearce, Faber Publishers, that it costs 21 shillings, and also that it has a hundred and eighty-three pages.

By the time this article was published, we had had six Yeats's poems translated into Slovene and one play staged. There were four articles written about *Countess Cathleen* first-night performance and one obituary a few days after Yeats had died. How can it be, then, that there is a whole article, however short it may be, published on Yeats and on his political activities, just because his senate speeches have been printed and published? It would be understandable, if Yeats were a very influential poet in Slovenia, but he was not, at least not until 1983, when the first book of Yeats's verse, dramas, and essays was published. I am not trying to say that it was a nonsensical thing to do. Grahor wrote, after all, the first article on Yeats and his political activities, on Yeats as the public figure, and it would have been the first article on Yeats in our language, had it not been preceded by the obituary. It is just the occasion for which it was written and published that draws one's attention. However, it is, despite a few inaccuracies, an important text, one that shows that Yeats was always lurking somewhere in the Slovene artistic and cultural space, even though he did not make his presence fully evident until 1983.

In 1965, the first foreword in Slovene to the works of W.B. Yeats's appeared in the newspaper *Most*, published in Trieste. The translator A. Rečan translated four different poems and wrote an accompanying introduction, titled "W.B. Yeats: pesmi" (W.B. Yeats: Poems) about the author. He says that Yeats is Irish by birth "just like the other three representatives of the new English literature (Joyce, Wilde, Shaw), who have gained world fame" (Rečan 10). Rečan, just like Grahor, mentions, that Yeats socialised with the symbolists in Paris and London in the nineties and that he was especially influenced by Mallarmé. Since I am especially interested in what different authors writing about W.B. Yeats have to say about his political activities, I cannot bypass Rečan's statement, that Yeats was "politically and socially completely uncommitted" (ibid.) and that he tried, in his works, in poetry, drama, essays, myths, or legends, "only to search for his own essence" (ibid.), that is why he "discloses himself to other nations very slowly" (ibid.). The only social function that Rečan admits to Yeats is "being one of the leaders of an important theatre in Dublin" (ibid.) and that he is one of the "re-builders of Irish culture" (ibid.). Taking into consideration that this foreword was written in 1965, when not only were there many books and views on Yeats and his political involvement published, but there was also the article by Olga Grahor, which, if nothing else, should tell the potential reader by just looking at its title, that Yeats was a senator for a while, which is far from being "politically uncommitted", such a statement is slightly deficient and far-fetched. Even though Rečan is to be commended for writing the first ever foreword in Slovene on W.B. Yeats, it should be said that the translator should have done his work more thoroughly. Otherwise, perhaps, he would not have placed a poem named "Miš" (Mouse) alongside three of Yeats's poems, claiming that "Mouse" too, was signed by Yeats. With all the best

intentions, I could not, however hard I tried, trace any poem among Yeats's lyrics with such a title.

A new leaf in the Slovene reception of Yeats was turned, however, when the first translations of Yeats's poetry were made by the most important Slovene Yeatsian yet, Veno Taufer. The first pieces appeared in 1974. They were published in the fortnightly magazine for intellectuals *Razgledi* and there was also a short, but descriptive foreword about Yeats. It says that Yeats, who called himself "the last romantic" (Taufer 1974: 186) is "a senior contemporary to T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound" (ibid.). The whole article focuses on Yeats's artistic development and work, on the sources of his poetic inspiration and also discusses some of his philosophy - the ever-turning gyres, the unity of being, and the duality of his poetry, this being its strongest characteristic. Taufer looks through the development of Yeats's style and states that he is at first a child of "romanticism, Irish folklore and the pre-Raphaelite school" (ibid.), only to later turn to French symbolism. Taufer mentions that Yeats was, in the course of his life, influenced by many aesthetic schools and philosophies, the most omnipresent being occultism. And yet he was able to "absorb them with his personal beliefs and create his own, very elaborate poetic world of symbols" (ibid.). All of his poetry thus revolved, according to Taufer, around his (almost) obsessions: "...his dedication to Ireland and his unconsummated love with Maud Gonne (whether it was consummated or not remains a subject of debate), and his mystical perception of the destiny of our world and civilisation" (ibid.). There is hardly any mention of Yeats's political activities, apart from the remark that he "actively influenced the Renaissance of the Irish theatre" (ibid.). The content of this introduction to Yeats's work does reveal the most essential traits of the poet's life, work and philosophy to inform the more attentive readers about what they are to expect from the poetry that follows in translation.

But this is just the first of the four forewords that Taufer has written about W.B. Yeats. The next one, published in the 1982/83 edition of *Nova Revija* was both longer and also more explicit. It contains all the information from Taufer's first foreword in 1974, and extends it in many different ways. The article, simply titled "W.B. Yeats", begins with the statement that "Yeats is one of the most renowned poetical names of the 20th century, although quite unknown with us (the staging of *Countess Cathleen* did not make a major impact)" (Taufer 1982/83: 535). Again it is mentioned that Yeats called himself "the last romantic", however, it is added that "despite this his poetry counts as one of the milestones of modern Anglo-Saxon verse," (ibid.). This is followed by the description of the schools and philosophies that he was influenced by, but again it is extended by the note that Yeats was a re-builder of English and Irish verse, "which was at the turn of the century suckled by a liverish, aestheticised muse, grazing on pastoral fields" (ibid.).

Taufer continues his presentation by describing the development of Yeats's poetry and his symbolic cosmology, his dedication to Ireland, but for the first time also mentions that this did not "exclude the most profound contempt for Irish 'affairs'" (536). The language of the poet and his poetic and symbolic cosmology are also described. For this Taufer states that "it strove towards ultimate simplicity and verblativity, but at the same time towards crystal musicality" (ibid.). His entire system of symbols, that he himself developed and elaborated, was interwoven with an invisible presence



of Yeats's "personal experience" (ibid.) of pain, scepticism, rejection, but also of faith, acceptance and elevation. So his labour to achieve the 'unity of being', his ultimate goal, as Taufer further states, was a very difficult thing to do. And precisely this was, according to Taufer, the strongest trait of Yeats's poetry - to embrace all the seeming contradictions and blend them into an all-prevailing unity, which Yeats believed in until he died. Taufer ends the preface with the logical conclusion, that to Yeats, "writing poetry was like a magical ritual, which in itself fused scepticism, premonitions, relativism" and that he was pushed forward by the "awareness of the reality of the poetical, perhaps even more: faith in it" (ibid.).

The most comprehensive volume of Yeats's work in Slovene has so far been published in 1983 in the series *Nobelovci* (the Nobel Prize awarded writers). There are seventy-eight poems, and alongside that three translated dramas and just as many essays. All of these works were translated by Venko Taufer, except for the poem "Down by the Salley Gardens" ("Pod vrbo tam na loki" - trans. Janez Menart). There is an extensive foreword on the poet in the volume, written by Taufer, and also a translation of the poet's speech, which he gave in Stockholm when he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923. What is of most interest for this article is the introduction, more precisely the description of Yeats's political involvement.

The introduction puts most stress on Yeats's aesthetics, also on the philosophy of his work. The meaning of his "unity of being" is expounded by saying that Yeats "had forged and polished his poems, from his first to the very last ones, into one big poem, an organic unity, until he died" (Taufer 1983: 201). Yeats tried very hard to fuse his "work and his life into a unity" (ibid.), which, of course, means that his thoughts, views and also his political involvement simply cannot be severed from his art. The text says that "it might be claimed" Yeats "was a determinist" (202), yet he also continuously "exalted and even cherished individualism" (ibid.), which the reader can feel in most of his poetry. However, Taufer goes on to say, "Yeats was no revolutionary," except in the sense which the word 'revolutionary' carried in the pre-Free State Ireland, "to be a nationalist, to hate the English and to oppose them in any way possible" (ibid.). This is the first time in Slovene 'Yeatsology' that the word "hate" is introduced, and perhaps even more unprecedented, it is expounded at whom his hatred was directed. Up until this point Yeats's role in Ireland's becoming independent was only vaguely mentioned, never making clear what his objectives in this respect were or even why any Irish political involvement was necessary in the first place. Other introductions and articles on Yeats simply brought it to the reader's attention that Yeats was involved in some political activity, but never exactly how. Certainly it could be expected from an average reader to have some knowledge about what went on in Ireland before it became the Emerald Island of folk music and Guinness, as it is known among tourists today. But by skipping such information we may just as well skip mentioning Yeats's political commitment in the first place, without much damaging the text we create. So Taufer broke the ice in this field and made things clear(er).

Taufer also writes that Yeats was "not a modernist, and even less so an experimenter, just as he was politically a traditionalist" (ibid.). This statement refers to his poetry, which, as Taufer puts it, was never severed from Irish myths, "and myths are always rooted in the soil" (210), the soil in this case being Irish. Yeats wanted to be

understood by the reader, so he used the language of the people - paradoxically, it was this very simple language that he used for his own symbolic system, which made his poetry completely incomprehensible for an average reader. Taufer made that clear in the foreword. He did not clarify in detail, however, what he meant by Yeats's "political traditionalism".

Taufer is also the first to mention perhaps the most influential character in Yeats's life and work, Maud Gonne. She was, as it is well known, a zealous Irish nationalist, rallier of great masses of people who were ready to follow her, also an occasional, yet very successful, actress in the Abbey Theatre and of course Yeats's unfulfilled and unconsummated love. It can rightly be said that he did many things in order to impress her, or even to impress himself in order to be later able to impress her with his newly acquired self-confidence. Maud Gonne was a regular character in Yeats's verse, "not as a symbolic 'lady', but as the most beautiful woman of flesh and blood, with passion worthy and unworthy of the archetypal Helen, worthy and unworthy of passionate love" (215).

Taufer makes it clear to what length Yeats was prepared to go to win her love, as he may be seen "with the mask of a hero of the Irish mythology, the statesman, Senator, a passionate old man, Pan or a satyr" (ibid.). Yeats, because of her influence, diverts himself from the focal interest of his being, poetry, and becomes "a public figure", who not only became the renovator of Irish culture, "but also a self-confident political agitator, took on the role of the leader of big anti-English nationalistic demonstrations and also performed as the tamer of the audience during riots of artistically blind, ideology-ridden Irish nationalists in the Irish National Theatre" (ibid.).

Taufer thus hints at the possibility that most of Yeats's political commitment can be attributed to the influence of Maud Gonne. Since she was politically very active and also very radical, it was necessary for any man who was to win her heart to get involved in nationalist politics. Yeats was not a very brave man, especially when it came to public appearances, and Taufer makes this clear (ibid.). Maud Gonne's figure thus influenced Yeats so strongly that he probably undertook many political enterprises he would not have otherwise, if it had not been for her. To his great disappointment, however, she did not choose to marry him as he had wished, but gave herself away to major John MacBride, who later turned out to be a "drunken, vainglorious lout" (*Collected Poems* 203), as Yeats described him in "Easter 1916". Mentioning Maud Gonne is therefore of vital importance to an extensive foreword such as Taufer's, if the reader is to understand Yeats's poetry. Taufer made a minor error, though. He stated that Yeats was 37 years old when the two of them met (Taufer 1983: 215). The truth is, however, that he was 24 years old when John O'Leary introduced them to one another. This happened in 1889.

The next book of Yeats's work had to wait a whole decade to be published. It was a book of Yeats's verse which appeared in the book series of poetry of different authors translated into Slovene, *Lirika* (Lyrical Poetry). All the translations of Yeats's poems in it are Taufer's, and there are 79 of them. All of Taufer's poems from 1983 can be found in the *Lirika* volume plus two more. There are no translated dramas or essays in this book, but the introduction, titled "W.B. Yeats, mag poetičnega" (W.B.

Yeats, Magician of the Poetical) is somewhat longer and also there is a chronology of Yeats's life added as well as a short interpretation of the featured poems.

The introduction to this volume is somewhat longer than the one in *Nobelovci*, one might say, an extended version of the latter. There are some new parts in the text that did not appear in the first introduction. Taufer states that Yeats has been "attributed many things, many of which were actually very true: Irish nationalist, (...), the founder of the 'Irish literary and theatre Renaissance', politician, Senator, and for a short while even a subversive revolutionary, so to speak" (Taufer 1993: 148). Where Yeats's revolutionary subversion can be traced, however, remains to be seen.

Taufer also extended the part of his introduction with illustrations of Yeats's use of symbols in his poetry. Thus we can read a very thorough interpretation of the poems "Leda and the Swan" (153) and also "Byzantium" (156-8). These two interpretations are placed alongside the explanation of "The Second Coming" (166), which had already been published in the first introduction in 1983.

Besides these details the 1993 foreword to Yeats's poetry conveys more or less the same information as the one from 1983 and it is, as a matter of fact, only slightly modified. When "The Second Coming" is explained, there is a slight correction of the 1983 version: the sphinx gets "a man's head" instead of simply a "man's (human) head" as was interpreted in the first version of the translation. This is due to the fact that Taufer recognised the sphinx in question was an Egyptian one. However, the error concerning Yeats's age when he and Maud Gonne met remains unaltered. This is interesting as the chronology of Yeats's life gives the correct information about their first meeting - 1889 (184).

The most recent Slovene preface to Yeats's poetry was published in an anthology of modern verse, *Slovenski Orfej* (Ihan 1998). The preface, written by Uroš Zupan, is titled simply "William Butler Yeats". The text is strictly biographical and gives us the essential information about Yeats's life and work. Thus we are given the exact places of birth (Sandymount near Dublin) and death (Roqueburn, France). The activities in his youth are mentioned, as well as the fact that "he joined the 'Dublin Hermeticists' near the end of the century, later got connected to the revolutionary movement and helped found the Irish national theatre, the Abbey Theatre, where he became director" (Zupan 734). Zupan is very thorough in revealing the role that Yeats played in Irish social life. He continues: "He was one of the first members of the Irish Senate and the central figure of the cultural revival or the 'Celtic Renaissance'; he renewed Irish poetry and theatre" (ibid.). The rest of the preface contains the description of Yeats's language, the schools that influenced his writing and also how his poetry developed. There is a list of his better known poems and poetry collections and it is mentioned that he also wrote "fantasy plays on the Irish past, mythology and contemporary rustic life. Besides that he also wrote essays" (ibid.). This short biography accompanies four translated (trans. Veno Taufer) poems by W.B. Yeats that were published in the previously mentioned anthology.

A new introduction to Yeats's poetry was written by Marjan Strojjan and published in the anthology of English verse *Antologija angleške poezije*. The text does not mention anything concerning the poet's political or social involvement. There are, however, interpretations of some of the translated poems - all translations are Taufer's

- one of which is "Easter 1916". There it is mentioned that the husband of "Yeats's great love, the revolutionary Maud Gonne" (Strojan 716), namely John MacBride, was executed along with the other leaders of the Easter uprising.

Another part of this anthology, written by Mirko Jurak, namely *Pogledi na razvoj angleške poezije*, which is a survey of poetry in English from 1066 till the beginning of the 20th century, does speak of Yeats's political commitment. It begins by mentioning that Yeats, together with T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, was the most important British poet of the 20th century (Jurak 769). It continues, however, that "Yeats was a great supporter of the Irish nationalist movement and, together with Lady Gregory, founded the Irish National Theatre in Dublin" (ibid.) and that he regretted that "Ireland could not gain its independence peacefully, since the Easter rising in 1916 was violently suppressed" (770). The text goes on to explain that Yeats was against the crude materialism that he witnessed in his days, and that life also had its mystical side which was just as important (ibid.). Even though this latter part of the text about Yeats apparently has nothing to do with Yeats's politics, it very much stresses the fact that Yeats firmly believed in the notion of the "unity of being", which incorporated all aspects of life and interwove them all into one impenetrable organism.

The most recent text in Slovene on W.B. Yeats is the M.A. thesis *William Butler Yeats pri Slovencih* (Gorenc 2001b), where Yeats's political involvement and convictions are discussed. The text raises the question, whether Yeats really was in fact rather right-wing in his political beliefs, as many authors have claimed (Orwell, Howes), perhaps even a fervent Fascist supporter (O'Brien), or as a contemporary saw him: "... he was a fascist and authoritarian, seeing in world crisis only the break-up of the 'damned liberalism' .... hater of reason, popular education and 'mechanical logic'" (O'Connor 12), or if he was none of the mentioned (Cullingford). The second part of the work analyses the presence and reception of Yeats's work in the Slovene cultural and literary space.

As stated at the beginning of the article, I intended to find out not only what the articles, forewords and texts on Yeats said about him in general, but more specifically, what they had to say about his political views. Since Yeats was a poet and since he got his Nobel Prize not for peace, economy, or science, but for literature, it is right and even normal for every writer of a preface to focus on Yeats's poetry, his aesthetics, his unique symbolic system and whatever in his life might be closely related to his work. But since the notion of the "unity of being" was the very helix round which everything in his life was supposed to revolve, his politics simply cannot be quite so simply extricated from different texts about him. Yeats was very much involved in the forming of a new Ireland, even before home rule was introduced. If he was to "suck at the dugs of" (*Collected Poems* 120) Ireland for his work, then he had to know what the milk he was drinking was made of.

The article has shown that Yeats's allegedly right-wing political convictions were widely discussed in literary histories and that in various English literary encyclopaedias the writers were very reluctant to write about the "murkier" side of Yeats's life. Statements that Yeats had a relationship with the Blue shirts can only be found in the most up-to-date encyclopaedias. I tried to clarify the reasons for such deficiencies when it comes to Yeats's politics in an interview with Venó Taufer, at present the most

acclaimed and distinguished expert on Yeats in Slovenia. To the question why nobody mentioned Yeats's antidemocratic attitude Taufer answers that "he would not be so quick to claim Yeats was an anti-democrat 'in those times and circumstances'" (Gorenc 2001a: 1). According to Taufer Yeats was not antidemocratic, what is more, he tried to solve some of the problems the Ireland of his time was faced with in very democratic ways. As far as Yeats's elitism is concerned, Taufer concurs with this statement. However, he sees it as the only solution for Yeats, who tried to live and create in a world of conservatism, nationalism, provincialism, "which were all extremely annoying to Yeats" (ibid.). Thus, concludes Taufer, being an elitist - "elitist of the mind, of the spirit, of idealism" (ibid.) - was the only solution for Yeats if he was to be able to survive and create in his immediate environment.

About Yeats's alleged 'Fascism' Taufer says that "what we may see as Fascism today was not necessarily Fascism under certain circumstances" (ibid.), so we cannot say that Yeats would qualify as a Fascist. Taufer even says that Yeats spoke against it in an interview some time before his death. However, Yeats knew that, according to his cyclical theory, a new era was to arise and a 'rough beast' was to emerge. Taufer is sure that Yeats would have exclaimed, had he been alive today, when he saw and heard of Osama Bin Laden: "What did I tell you!?" (ibid.).

So how important is it really for a potential reader of Yeats's work, and specifically his poetry, to know certain things about his political life and political views? Taufer believes that not much. "Yeats's poems do speak of very personal experiences of the poet, but they are so convincingly elevated to a level of symbols and human archetypes, that it is possible for us to perceive them in a totally personal way" (ibid.). He claims that if a poem is good, then such perception is possible at every time and in every place. "Sometimes the poem defies even the poet's political intentions" (ibid.), concludes Taufer.

I personally concur with Taufer's opinion to a large extent. Yeats most certainly was an elitist of the mind and spirit and he also defied and rejected Fascism before he died. I also agree that knowing the political views of an author is not essential for understanding his poetry, especially if the experience of the reading is to become personal and timeless. However, there are points where Mr Taufer and I have different views. Yeats was a champion of elitism of the mind, no question about that. But it cannot be overlooked that he preferred the Protestant mind over the Catholic one, to mention solely that (Gorenc 2001b: 31-3). He ceased to promote Fascism in 1933, because he became disillusioned with it (O'Brien 38). It did not fulfil his expectations, as it turned to exaggerated populism, which ruined its initial 'promises'. At the end of his life he even opposed any regime and held them responsible for any life they caused to end. By and by, he was quite ambivalent about his support to one political option or another (*On the Boiler* 13) and even wrote satirical poems about it ("Church and State", "The Great Day", "Parnell", "Politics", etc).

I would also say that being familiar with a poet's political life is not (absolutely) necessary to comprehend a poem as a fully personal experience. In such a case it is unnecessary even to know anything about the poet's life and still understand the verse we are reading. But for a full understanding of what the poet might have had in mind, when he/she was writing the text (as long as we believe that this is at all possible),

being acquainted with the poet's political views does help, if these ideas are evident in the poet's work. And if this were not so, then why is it important to expound Ezra Pound's political commitment during the Second World War in Italy? And why write extensively about G.B. Shaw's love for socialism?

To sum up, William Butler Yeats is a very important poet in English, perhaps the most important one of the 20th century. However, he is not known well enough in Slovenia, nor is he translated extensively into Slovene, except for his major poems. Despite the two books of his poetry that have been published, the general reader still does not know much about him. He is not even included into the most important books about world literature in Slovene, let alone into the school curriculum of our secondary schools (an exception here is the old curriculum for English, which incorporated one of Yeats's poems into the literature book - but this book is no longer in the curriculum for the English language). Yeats is a Nobel Prize winner, the quantity and quality of his entire work is great. Maybe it is because his symbolic language is so complicated that no one prior to Taufer dared take on the task of translating a larger number of his poems. Or perhaps it is simply so because he is just one of the many renowned poets and authors who simply failed to find their way onto the desks of our translators (except, of course, Taufer's) and literary historians. Introducing Yeats's work, other than his poetry, into our language should by all means become one of the priorities of our translators and literary historians. And when this happens, the poet's political views should not be shunned. They are important for a full understanding of some (if only the great minority) of his poems ("The Second Coming", "Under Ben Bulbin", "At the Galway Races", "The Man and the Echo", "Meditations in Time of Civil War", etc.), plays ("Cathleen Ni Houlihan", "The King's Threshold", "The Words Upon the Window-Pane" etc.), and essays (*On the Boiler*, "A General Introduction to My Work", "If I Were Four-and-Twenty" etc.). And Yeats would probably have wanted his political views, which were very closely related to his perception of life and society, to be made explicit anyhow.

## WORKS CITED

- Bloom, Harold. *Yeats*. New York: Oxford UP, 1972.
- Cullingford, Elizabeth. "From Democracy to Authority." *Yeats's Political Identities*. Ed. Jonathan Allison. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996. 61-80.
- Drabble, Margaret, ed. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 1932. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Ellmann, Richard. *Yeats, the Man and the Masks*. London: Faber & Faber, 1949.
- Foster, Roy. "Protestant Magic: W.B. Yeats and the Spell of Irish History." *Yeats's Political Identities*. Ed. Jonathan Allison. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996. 83-103.
- Gillie, Christopher, ed. *The Longman Companion to English Literature*. London: Longman, 1972.
- Gorenc, Janez. *Intrevju z Venom Tauferjem, pisateljem in prevajalcem*. A personal interview. Novo mesto: kept by the author. 2001a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *William Butler Yeats pri Slovencih*. M. A. thesis. Ljubljana: Filozofska Fakulteta Ljubljana, 2001b.
- G(ovekar), F(ran). "Zopet novitete naše drame." *Slovenski narod* 11 February 1933: 3.
- G(rahor), O(lga). "Govori W.B. Yeatsa v senatu." *Naši razgledi*. (1962): 79.

- Howes, Marjorie. "Family Values: Gender, Sexuality and Crisis in Yeats's Anglo-Irish Aristocracy." *Yeats's Political Identities*. Ed. Jonathan Allison. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996. 107-29.
- Ihan, Alojz, ed. *Orfejev spev*. Ljubljana: Nova revija, 1998.
- Jurak, Mirko. "Pogledi na razvoj angleške poezije". *Antologija angleške poezije*. Ed. Marjan Strojjan. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1997.
- Koritnik, Griša. *Listič iz angleške lirike*. Ljubljana: privately published, 1929.
- K(ozak), J(uš). "Dve premieri v drami." *Jutro* 8 February 1933: 3-4.
- Koblar, France. "M. Maeterlinck: Zadoščenje, W.B. Yeats: Gospa Cathleena." *Dvajset let slovenske drame II - 1930 - 1939*. Ljubljana: Slovenska matica v Ljubljani, 1965. 119-121.
- Kos, Janko. *Pregled svetovne književnosti*. Ljubljana: DZS, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Primerjalna zgodovina slovenske literature*. Ljubljana: Znanstveni inštitut Filozofske fakultete, 1987.
- O'Brien, Connor Cruse. "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics on W.B. Yeats." *Yeats's Political Identities*. Ed. Jonathan Allison. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1996. 29-56.
- O, Connor, Frank. "The Old Age of a Poet". *The Bell* Feb. 1941. 7-18.
- Orwell, George. *Dickens, Dali and Others*. New York: Hardcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1946.
- Ousby, Ian, ed. *The Cambridge Guide to Literature in English*. 1988. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.
- Ousby, Ian, ed. *The Wordsworth Companion to Literature in English*. 1988. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Pirjevec, Dušan. *Ivan Cankar in evropska literatura*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1964.
- Strojjan, Marjan, ed. *Antologija angleške poezije*. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1997.
- Taufe, Ven. "Spremna beseda o avtorju." *Yeats: Nobelovci*. W.B. Yeats. Trans. V. Taufe. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1983. 201-18.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "W.B. Yeats." *Nova revija* 5-6 (1982/83): 535-6.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "W.B. Yeats." *Naši razgledi* (1979): 186.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "W.B. YEATS poet magičnega." *William Butler Yeats*. Lirika. Trans. V. Taufe. Ljubljana: Založba Mladinska knjiga, 1993. 147-74.
- Welch, Robert, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Yeats, William Butler. *Autobiographies*. 1955. London: Bracken Books, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Collected Poems*. London: Macmillan, 1995.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Izbrano delo*. Nobelovci. Trans. Ven. Taufe. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1983
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Leda in labod", "Nikoli ne daj vsega srca", "Po dolgem molku", "Vse me lahko zvabi", "Novice za delfijsko preročišče", "Drugi prihod", "Kaj potem", "Noro kot megla in sneg". Z uvodom o avtorju. *Pesmi*. Trans. Ven. Taufe. *Naši razgledi*. (1979): 186.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Miš", "Želi si oblačila neba", "Potovanje v Bizanc". "Z uvodom o avtorju". *Pesmi*. Prev. A. Rečan. *Most* 5 (1965): 10-11.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Memoirs*. London: Macmillan, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *On the Boiler*. 1938. Dublin: Cuala Press, 1971.
- Zupan, Uroš. "William Butler Yeats." Alojz Ihan, ed. *Orfejev spev*. Ljubljana: Nova revija, 1998.