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London in *John Sherman*: Irish-English Dualism in Early Yeats

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Abstract

W. B. Yeats is mostly known as a poet and a playwright with works spanning from the 1880s to the 1930s. But little attention has been paid to his narrative writing. His only completed novel *John Sherman* (1891) offers a rather simplistic treatment of the binary between Ireland and England represented by the attitudes of its titular character towards his native Irish town Ballah and the imperial metropolis of London. Despite containing some intriguing autobiographical elements, the novel belies the complex formation of its author's identity in the late 1880s and the early 1890s, when it was composed and published. By reading the novel in the light of his letters and autobiographical reflections, this essay will highlight the similarities and dissonances between Sherman's and young Yeats's attitudes towards London and Englishness. It will demonstrate that, although Yeats chose a rather straightforward nationalist narrative for the novella, he took a more ambivalent and nuanced approach to the Irish-English dichotomy, which reveals his personal, familial, and class anxieties. This essay challenges any easy and unambiguous self-other categorization in considering Yeats's attitude towards London, which is complicated by his reservations about both nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: *John Sherman*, Yeats, Irish-English dualism, London, Sligo

Introduction

Yeats's autobiographical *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* (written in 1914) contains a protean passage in its second paragraph which sheds light on the formation of his identity and its complex relationship with London and, by extension, Englishness. There he remembers looking out of an "Irish window" in their London house on Fitzroy Road (leased 1867-73). The object of his vision was a dilapidated "wall covered with cracked and falling plaster". He was told that the wall belonged to a house which had once been inhabited by "some relation". His vision then focused on a uniformed boy playing with some other boys. Although Yeats now thinks that the boy may have been a telegraph boy, he remembers to have been scared into sleep by a servant telling him that the boy would soon "blow the town up" (Yeats, 1916, pp. 41, 419n1). We know that Yeats was prone to making and remaking his own self in his writing. Here we see him constructing his identity both in opposition to as well as in close connection with Englishness or, to be more precise, London. Whatever may have been the exact feelings of the child, when it is viewed through the Irish lens of the memoir writer, London appears to be full of cracks, anxiety, terror, and imminent danger. At the same time, it is not a completely alien place without any connection, but some relative, we are told, lives there.

Emerging from and documenting some aspects of his childhood and early youth, the period covered in the autobiographical work just discussed, his 1891 novel *John*

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Sherman captures some of Yeats's dilemmas and anxieties formed around London. To some extent, the eponymous protagonist of the novel represents the complex self-fashioning of the author, fictionally pitting his regional/local Irish identity against that of the imperial metropolis, London. True, by 1914 when the autobiographical book was written, Yeats was a much more mature writer than in 1887-1888 when he had composed *John Sherman* (Foster, 1998, p. 69). Consequently, some of the binaries that he forges there are straightforward, and the ending is rather dull. This essay reads the novel in the light of his other writings and epistolary exchanges in order to demonstrate how, despite some intriguing autobiographical overlaps, it belies Yeats's complex identification with London and Englishness. In doing so, the essay problematizes the view that his Irishness and Englishness are diametrical opposites, instead favouring a porous, nuanced form of oppositionality between them. Rather than being an easy self-other dichotomy, as manifested in John Sherman's relationship with London, the alterity for Yeats seems to be between the two versions of his own self, which foreshadows the dual-self theory that he was to develop later in his career.

John Sherman's London

Coming from a provincial Irish town called Ballah, a shadow of Sligo, Sherman, approaching thirty, goes to London having been offered a job in his uncle's firm (Yeats, 1891/1991, pp. 5, 11, 14, 23). He leaves behind his best friend and adviser Mary Carton who inspired him to pursue his ambition away from the small town of Ballah— "this little backward place"—despite herself feeling at home there, content with the role of teaching at a school (Yeats, pp. 17–20). Sherman has always wanted to "marry money" and been "tempted" by wealth and aristocracy, defined for him by having "a house in the country", "a garden and three gardeners", hunting and shooting. In London Sherman falls in love with Margaret Leland, a rich girl with "curious and vagrant taste". He feels that he has found a "love" which is "more of the imagination than of either the senses or affections" (Yeats, pp. 24–25, 30–31). The distinction made between the imaginative and the sensuous or affective is crucial and extended into his response to London as well. Walking along the "deserted" Thames in a misty evening, he feels that "everything in London was owned by too many to be owned by anyone" and thinks of the river in Ballah to which he seems to be personally attached (Yeats, pp. 31–32). The contrast here is also between the personal and the impersonal, the local and the metropolitan, and the sense of belonging and the sense of alienation. Marrying Margaret, he then thinks, will mean the severance of his link with "the old life he loved so well" (Yeats, p. 32).

Contrasts like this become more pronounced when Margaret starts her project to improve Sherman, whom she considers "a dreadful barbarian", by cultivating his taste for artificial mannerisms and contemporary fashion in vogue in London, determining which necktie to wear, which popular books to read in order to participate in "small talk", and so on (Yeats, 1891/1991, pp. 38, 61). Hard pressed by all this, Sherman soon finds London to be "like a reef whereon he was cast away" (Yeats, p. 41). On his return trip to London after revisiting Ballah, he considers himself going "among aliens", and reads the "smooth faces" of his female "fellow-travellers" as some hateful "ominous symbols", standing for "the indifferent world about to absorb him" (Yeats, p. 47). He finally makes up his mind

to move back to Ballah and marry Mary, inspired by his discovery that he has always loved her without his realizing and that she has been "the root of my life" (Yeats, p. 75). After he returns and expresses his feelings to her, he is greeted by her indifferent silence. Plagued by a sense of loss and hopelessness, he almost involuntarily takes the road leading to the sacred mountain (Knocknorea) with its cairned top, which is believed variously to be "the grave of Maeve, Mab of the fairies, and … the place where certain prisoners were … sacrifice[d] to the moon". Overwhelmed with emotion, he climbed the mountain and collapsed on the cairn, staying there from sunset to midnight when he returned to the town a little before dawn and found Mary waiting for him. Overcoming her frustration at his failure to be successful in the wider world of London, a wish which was as much hers as his own, she finally accepts him. Her love for him, we are told, has some elements of maternal affection and protectiveness, "a reverberation of the feeling of the mother for the child at the breast" (Yeats, pp. 75–78). This reconciliatory description suggests that Sherman's return to Ballah and Mary is in a sense a return to his past or childhood.

Autobiographical Resonances

There is a great deal in the novel that is taken out of the life of its author. Yeats himself opines in a 5 March 1891 letter to his friend and fellow writer Katharine Tynan that the novel contains "more of myself in it than in anything" he has written so far (Yeats, 1986, pp. 245–246; Foster, 1998, p.110). Yet, unlike John Sherman, Yeats did not migrate to London in his early thirties, but moved back and forth between London, Sligo, and Dublin from a very early age. Shifting to London with his family at the age of two in 1867, Yeats moved back to Sligo with his mother and other siblings in 1872. Staying there for two years, they returned to London in 1874, when Yeats was nine years of age, to settle there for some seven years until the family's 1881 return to Ireland, where they moved lodgings between Dublin and a seaside village near Dublin called Howth. Then when the poet was a young man of twenty-two, he returned, once again, to London with his family in April 1887 (Brown, 1999, pp. 11–12; Howes & Kelly, 2006, p. x; Foster, p. 12). It is this return which might somewhat parallel Sherman's first travel to England. Yet, far from being his first journey away from his Irish roots, this was just one of Yeats's few arrivals in the English metropolis up to that point. As we have seen above, of the 22 years of his life up to 1887, some twelve years were spent in London and some ten in Ireland (two in Sligo, along with some additional summer visits; two in Dublin; and six in Howth). So, he had in no definitive sense been rooted in Ireland, but had spent a peripatetic childhood, boyhood, and young adulthood. Quinn (2008) carefully distinguishes him from such "rootless cosmopolitan" writers as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (p. 45). He could rather be called, using Appiah's (1997) concept, a "rooted cosmopolitan", who engages happily with other cultural spaces for all his/her patriotic attachment to his/her native land and culture (p. 618).

Yeats, of course, had reservations about cosmopolitanism which he identified with Englishness. Persuading Tynan to review his novel as typically Irish, he writes in a 2 December 1891 letter that in doing so, he would want her to stress that "Sherman is an Irish type. I have an ambition to be taken as an Irish novelist not as an English or

cosmopolitan [*sic*.] one" (Yeats, 1986, pp. 274–75). Tynan obeyed him by emphasizing "the author's rootedness in Sligo" in her review (Foster, 1998, p. 111). It is intriguing to note that the maternal character of the schoolteacher Mary in *John Sherman* (1891) may have been modelled on "the motherly Tynan" who was older than Yeats by seven years and acted as a "confidante" for the insecure and anxious younger poet. He met this daughter of a well-to-do Catholic farmer and businessman in her village near Dublin in 1885, and they became friends and corresponded frequently over the years that followed (Brown, 1999, pp. 30–31). More importantly, Tynan was not only a writer but also a Parnellite nationalist with whom Yeats wanted to form "a school of Irish poetry—founded on Irish myth and History—a neo-romantic [*sic*.] movement", as he wrote in a letter of 27 April 1887 (Yeats, pp. 10–11; Foster, pp. 55, 70). Such chemistry in their relationship, coupled with the fact of her being a Catholic as well as the aisling[2] tradition of identifying Ireland as a woman, may also have contributed to the Madonna and the Child image echoed at the end of the novel in association with Sherman's reclaiming of his Irish root.[3] So, it is Yeats's self-conscious ambition to be taken as an Irish writer that accounts for much of the unequivocal Irish-English dualism as well as much of the anti-English polemics of the novel.

Yeats's Revivalist Nationalism and *John Sherman*

The drafting and publication of *John Sherman* in 1891 overlapped with the nationalist or Revivalist[4] phase of Yeats's career when he was exploring Irish themes and myths for his poetry and other prose works, editing and publishing such books as *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* and *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, both published in 1888 (Foster, 1998, pp. 75–77). In 1892, a year after the publication of the novel, he would wonder: "Can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be nonetheless Irish in spirit from being English in language?" (Yeats, 1970, p. 255). This was an immediate response to Douglas Hyde's staunch de-Anglicizing speech delivered at the National Literary Society entitled "The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland" (Foster, pp. 125–126). Yeats's more moderate position in this regard betrays his cultural-political ambivalence. With regards to Yeats's early poetry of the 1890s, Regan (2006) has perceptively observed that Yeats's position in the Irish-English question (both geographically and linguistically) is "more complex and ambiguous than" the "decolonization and revolutionary nationalism" (Said's phrase, cited by Regan) model suggested by Said (1993) in his "Yeats and Decolonization".[5] His nationalism in the 1890s maintains Regan, was "the product of a complex set of allegiances and identities"

[2] A dream-poetic tradition in which Ireland is personified as a woman (Regan, 2010, p. 33).
[3] As Brown (1999) has observed with regards to Christian "liturgy and symbology" finding their place in Yeats's poetry, they are more Catholic than the Church of Ireland Protestant: "the true cross, the Madonna with Child, the image of the Holy Family" (p. 32).
[4] The Irish Literary Revival, taking place in the period between 1890 and 1910, is characterized by an "increased interest in the Irish language, Irish dance, Irish stories, songs and poems" (Quinn, 2008, pp. 44–45).
[5] This essay, originally written in 1988, has been reprinted in Said's 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism*.

born of a combination of "colonial insecurity" and "anxiety about his own embattled social class", i.e., the Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy class (Regan, 2006, p. 96; Said, pp. 89–92).[6] Evaluating Yeats as a "postcolonial poet", Ramazani (2001) proposes that we should consider him as "a man of [many] masks" if we want to grasp his "multifaceted postcoloniality". Yeats is an "assimilationist", a "nativist", a "liberationist", and an "ironist" often at the same time and "in a single period, career, or even work" (p. 33). Such a hybrid critical model proves helpful for our purposes as well.

The typical Irishness that Yeats claims for his novel does not necessarily have a nationalist inflection. Sherman typifies the West of Ireland's "small gentry" with a sentiment that is, as Yeats puts it in the aforementioned December 1891 letter to Tynan, "local rather than national"; Sherman's "love" and "devotion" are not for Ireland as such, but rather for his "native town" which is his "world" (Yeats, 1986, p. 275).[7] In the novel we find Sherman saying to Howard about Ballah that, unlike in "big towns", "here one chats with the whole world in a day's walk" (Yeats, 1891/1991, p. 9). Of course, in the letter, Yeats relegates such sentiments to his past by suggesting that in his childhood he used to possess similar feelings for Sligo though his mother still does so (Yeats, 1986, p. 275). The poet's mother Susan Yeats hated London and, while living there against her will, inhabited Sligo in spirit, reminiscing about her adolescence there. Brown (1999) suggests that, through Sherman's nostalgia for Ballah (Sligo), Yeats is not merely representing his personal feelings but trying to "give his mother's repressed and inarticulate sensibility a voice it would not otherwise have had", because in 1887 (the year in which he began composing the novel) she had a stroke which would eventually lead to her "[sinking] into silence" (pp. 16–18). One remembers that Sherman's mother, too, "was solitary because silent" (Yeats, 1891/1991, p. 11). Therefore, Sherman's eventual return to the place of his childhood affection, symbolized by the motherly protection of Mary, might be a subconscious tribute to Yeats's mother's deep emotional attachment to Sligo.

However, such a return to childhood was not possible for Yeats partly for the fact that he did not have a specific place and house to return to, unlike Sherman who "had lived" in their "No. 15, Stephens' Row" address "all his life" with only his mother and an "old servant [who] hardly remembered having lived anywhere else" (Yeats, 1891/1991, p. 11). As we have already seen, this was not the case with Yeats who had had to move amongst a plethora of temporary lodgings, resulting in an anxiety that may have been reflected in Sherman's fantasy about a country house with a garden. Foster (1996) has carefully studied Yeats's preoccupation with "[h]ouses, and an insecurity about whether they will last", highlighting its connection with the decaying power and authority of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy class in Ireland, further exacerbated by the 1880s Land Wars (pp. 86–87, 95). Indeed, whatever security was provided to Yeats and his family by the Pollexfen houses of his maternal side in Sligo was marred by the fact that the Pollexfen

[6] Although he belonged to the middle class, Yeats identified himself with the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy (Nolan, 2005, p. 160).

[7] Howes (2006) has similarly observed about his early poems that they capture "a geographical imagination that is profoundly local, rather than national, but that is harnessed in the service of a nationalist re-possession of territory" (p. 4).

were subjected to "social marginalization" due to their "business background", keeping them apart from "the great houses of the neighbourhood like Hazelwood, Markree and Lissadell" which appear as glimpses in Yeats's autobiographical works (Foster, 1996 p. 93; Foster, 1998, pp. 19–20). Given this complex socio-cultural background, it is not surprising that by relegating any sentimental response to Sligo to the past, Yeats in the aforementioned letter carefully distances himself from Sherman's wholesome devotion to Ballah (Sligo) built on a rather straightforward dichotomization of Ireland and England.

Irish-English Dualism and Yeats's Ambivalence

Yeats had a more ambivalent attitude towards both Ireland and England than the eponymous hero of his novel. "The place that has really influenced my life most is Sligo", claims Yeats in a 6 November 1889 letter written to Tynan from London (Yeats, 1986, p. 195). Yet, when he visited Sligo in August 1887, on which trip he worked on the novel's "first outline", he found it to be "the loneliest [*sic*.] place in the world. Going for a walk is a continual meeting with ghosts for Sligo for me has no flesh and blood attractions— only memories and sentimentalities [*sic*.] accumulated here as a child making it more dear than any other place". He wrote this to Tynan on 18 November 1887 from Sligo (Yeats, 1986, p. 41; Foster, 1998, p. 71). Another letter to her, written on 6 October 1890, more clearly captures his dilemma regarding Sligo and London:

> London is always horrible to me. The fact that I can study some things I like here better than elsewhere is the only redeaming [*sic*.] fact. The mere presence of more cultivated people too is a gain of course but nothing in the world can make amends for the loss of green field & mountain slope. & for the tranquil hours of ones [*sic*.] own countryside. (Yeats, 1986, pp. 230–231; Foster, p. 91)

His views on Sligo remain mostly unaltered in the three years that pass between these two letters to Tynan. Sligo's value is mostly sentimental, as he rightly realizes in the earlier letter, residing in childhood memories and associations, as well as in its "green field & mountain slope", the "loss" of which is lamented for, though, in the 1890 letter. In the novel, Sherman's mother, we are told, considers Ballah to be "a kind of lost Eden" (Yeats, 1891/1991, p. 65)—echoing Yeats's father's observation regarding his daughters' feeling for Dublin in an 1888 letter to John O'Leary (Foster, pp. 59, 554n2).

Such description of Ireland is symptomatic of what Leerssen (1996) terms "auto-exoticism"—"a mode of seeing, presenting and representing oneself in one's otherness" or "non-Englishness". He contends that after the 1800 Acts of Union (forming the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland), Anglo-Irish fiction writers started to appeal to the interests of the target English audience by depicting Ireland as an "exotic", "foreign place" (pp. 35–38). However, despite sharing some of their tropes, Yeats's novel also stands apart from Leerssen's model texts in some ways. Whereas, typically, such fictional works have as their "hero, narrator or focalizer, a cosmopolitan, non-Irish (usually English) character" who moves "towards Ireland" (Leerssen, pp. 36–37), Yeats's protagonist Sherman is a realistic Irish character who moves towards London if only to discover his true priorities and return to his native Irish town with redoubled love. Rather than being merely a passive Irish character subjected to the English gaze of Margaret and others, Sherman has some strong (mostly negative) opinions on England or London. nor

does his author adopt an English point of view, but a self-consciously Irish one. As we have seen above, Yeats's 1890 letter reveals his mixed feelings about London. It is both a "horrible" place—as Sherman would also corroborate thoroughly—and one whose value lies in its "cultivated people" and cultured atmosphere.

The metropolis was important for the freedom and opportunities it provided Yeats to explore his literary talents. True, the prospect of making money in London was also a motivating factor for Yeats (Brown, 1999, p. 30), as it is for Sherman. However, unlike Sherman, money for Yeats was not the only thing that drew him to London. While his hero does badly with his ambition to secure a place for himself in the big city, between 1887 and 1891—the period spanning the novel's composition and publication—Yeats in London found himself amidst some influential like-minded people in the literary industry. Dublin was also important in this regard, but, as Foster (1998) has observed, it "was a smaller pond to swim in than London" (pp. 73–74). Much of what mattered to him ideologically also found its nourishment in London in that period. His reservations about a bourgeois metropolitan modernity found its kindred spirit in William Morris's anti-Victorianism, while he shared with Ernest Rhys, a Welshman, something of what he ascribes to Sherman– a "Celtic devotion, that devotion carried to the ends of the world by the Celtic exiles" (Foster, pp. 63–64; Yeats, 1891/1991, p. 42). He came under the decadent-aestheticist influence of another member of the Irish Protestant bourgeoisie like him, Oscar Wilde, who was also an occasional visitor at the Rhymers Club. Wilde's aphoristic statement, "a man should invent his own myth" deeply resonated with Yeats (Foster, pp. 80–81, 108–09). Moreover, the Francophile Arthur Symons—met through the Rhymers Club—would expose him to what for both was a quasi-mystical French symbolist tradition (Foster, pp. 107, 138). Concerning his mystical and magical predilections, the Theosophical Society and Golden Dawn ensured proper schooling under the tutelage of such gurus as Madam Blavatsky and MacGregor Mathers, the latter of whom he may have met in the British Museum's Reading Room (Foster, pp. 102–105).

Even his "Irish novel" *John Sherman* (1891) owes its existence to London in many ways. A great deal of the attraction for Sligo or Ireland that gives the novel its beauty and authenticity resulted, one might say, from looking from the outside. The novel indeed contains an earlier prose version of the nostalgia and daydream that would be distilled into his famous poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree":

> Delayed by a crush in the Strand, [Sherman] heard a faint trickling of water nearby; it came from a shop window where a little water-jet balanced a wooden ball upon its point. The sound suggested a cataract with a long Gaelic name, that leaped crying into the Gate of the Winds at Ballah. (Yeats, 1891/1991, pp. 56–57)

It also reminds Sherman of an old "day-dream of his" to go to the "little islet called Innisfree" situated by the lake that is "[t]he source of the river that passed his garden at home" and build a "wooden hut there and [burn] a few years out". What is more, these reveries were pulsated by the "footstep" of Mary Carton who "moved among them like a phantom" (Yeats, p. 57). For all the similarity between their sentiments, unlike Sherman's, Yeats's "wish to leave the city" in the corresponding poem, in the repeated statement "I will arise and go now", as Howes (2006) has rightly pointed out, "will remain perpetually deferred" (p. 3).

So far as the overplayed Irishness in the novel is concerned, it may have resulted partly from Yeats's consideration of the demand created by his Irishness in the competitive literary market of London. In the previously quoted 5 March 1891 letter to Tynan, in which he wrote about the novel containing more of himself than in any other work of his so far, he is acutely conscious that if his book finds its place among "a half dozen of others" in a London drawing room "for a week", that would be due to a large extent to his "being Irish" (Yeats, 1986, p. 246; Foster, 1998, pp. 110–111). This again emphasizes that rather than serving a nationalist purpose, Yeats's writings about Ireland were received in England as what Seamus Deane calls "essentially picturesque manifestations of the Irish sensibility" (cited in Regan, 2006, p. 96). So, his Irishness in this novel was to some extent geared to the taste of his English or London readers.

Conclusion

Although not among his finest works, the novella *John Sherman* (1891) deserves attention for its autobiographical significance. It masks the anxiety and ambivalence of Yeats's formative years regarding nationalism and cosmopolitanism, Irishness and Englishness, and Sligo and London. We have seen how Yeats took a more nuanced approach to each of these binaries than his hero Sherman. With his primary self being embedded in Ballah, London for Sherman acts like an anti-self. The tension between these two selves of Sherman is symbolized by the two loves of his life—Mary and Margaret—who act like each other's opposite. Talking about "Anashuya and Vijaya", a poem which was also written in 1887, Yeats later writes that his plan was to fit this poem into "a play about a man loved by two women, who had the one soul between them" (cited in Albright, 1992, p. 417). This reveals that the idea of two selves tied to one stem, like two branches of a tree, was indeed at the back of his mind around that time though it would not be developed until much later in his career.[8] At the novel's end, Sherman finds his peace at the breast of Mary or Ireland, that is by coming to his primary self, and gives the novel an un-Yeatsian ending by resolving the tensions. For Yeats, on the contrary, London or Englishness would continue to be an antithesis to his Irish selfhood, generating a tension that energizes his thoughts and works.

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[8] Such ideas of an "anti-self or "antithetical self" would find more sophisticated exposition in such works as "Ego Dominus Tuus" (a poem composed in 1915) and *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1917-1918), which was the first exposition of Yeats's visionary system (Albright, 1992, pp. 210–212; Yeats, 1994, pp. 4, 8).

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