

Yeats and Lady Gregory

Anushila Hazra Bhattacharya

Associate Professor, PG Department of English, Bethune College, Kolkata-6

Abstract: This article attempts to bring forth W.B. Yeats's association with Lady Gregory and their efforts for establishing a National Theatre, as recorded by the poet himself. Yeats had found in Lady Gregory a kindred soul who realized the need for Irish Cultural Revival. Lady Gregory's house, Coole Park, with its magnificent grounds and 'seven woods' was a source of inspiration for the poet, and he remembered with gratitude Lady Gregory's contribution when he was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Key words: Lady Gregory- Coole Park – Irish National Theatre – Nobel Prize

W.B. Yeats's long and fruitful association with Lady Gregory, the noted Irish dramatist, dates back to his early years as a struggling poet. She is present as an archetypal image in much of his poetry and prose. In the chapter, 'Dramatis Personae' of his 'Autobiographies', he begins with his recollections of her estate, Coole Park:

Coole House, though it has lost the great park full of ancient trees, is still set in the midst of a thick wood, which spreads out behind the house in two directions, in one along the edges of a lake which, as there is no escape for its water except a narrow subterranean passage, doubles and trebles its size in winter. In later years I was to know the edges of that lake better than any spot on earth, to know it all in all the changes of the seasons, to find there always some new beauty (*Autobiographies* 389).

In the different poems rooted in Coole Park, and written at different times, Yeats's keen awareness of the natural beauty he found there can be acutely felt. 'The Wild Swans at Coole', written almost ten years after his first visit bears great consistency with this prose recollection written almost twenty years later. In the first stanza of the poem, he writes –

The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones

Are nine and fifty swans. (*Collected Poems* 147).

In the first two stanzas of the poem, 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931', too, we have a vivid rendering of the beauty of Coole Park. In the second, he writes -

'Upon the border of that lake's wood
Now all dry sticks under a wintry sun,
And in a copse of beeches there I stood,
For Nature's pulled her tragic buskin on
And all the rent's a mirror of my mood;
At sudden thunder of the mounting swan
I turned and looked where branches break

The glittering reaches of the flooded lake' (*Ibid* 275).

In his recounting of Lady Gregory's girlhood days, he describes the exploits of her wild, daring brothers, whom he found to be 'figures from the eighteenth century', while their mother, an evangelical Protestant, was distinctly a woman of the nineteenth century. By dwelling on these contrasting aspects of Lady Gregory's mother and brothers,

Yeats subtly brings out her superior quality of mind, denouncing 'proselytism', which he always found typical of the 'more ignorant'

'But the born student of the great literature of the world cannot proselytize, and Augusta Persse, as Lady Gregory was then named, walked and discussed Shakespeare with a man but little steadier than her brothers, a scholar of Trinity, in later years a famous botanist, a friendship ended by her alarmed mother' (*Autobiographies* 324).

Yeats's respect for her intellect and her personality is reiterated in his prose as well as his poetry. In the poem, 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited', written in September, 1937, five years after Lady Gregory's death, Yeats pays homage to her in terms of her individual qualities as well as in terms of her position in the cultural history of Ireland.

'Mancini's portrait of Augusta Gregory
 'Greatest since Rembrandt' according to John Synge;
 A great ebullient portrait certainly;
 But where is the brush that could show anything
 Of all that pride and that humility?
 And I am in despair that time may bring
 Approved patterns of women or of men
 But not that selfsame excellence again (*Collected Poems* 369).

Lady Gregory stood for all those qualities of refinement, excellence and aristocracy which Yeats associated with Irish cultural revivalism. She was deeply concerned with the needs of her country and her vision of cultural refinement was never removed from the basic realities of everyday life. Yeats deeply appreciated her sense of responsibility towards her tenants and her closeness to peasant life, although he was intolerant of mediocrity. In the sixth section of 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited', he writes –

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
 All that we did, all that we said or sang
 Must come from contact with the soil, from that
 Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong,
 We three alone in modern times had brought
 Everything down to that sole test again,
 Dream of the noble and the beggar-man (*Ibid* 370).

The political activities in Ireland, his involvement in the literary and cultural revival, and his consequent bitterness with the projection of mediocrity in the name of nationalism made Yeats rather alienated from the masses. At the same time, the association with Coole offered him a glimpse of genuine quality and aristocracy. Although his patriotism never diminished, his disenchantment with the crowds grew. Yeats's admiration for aristocratic ways of thought, with emphasis on refinement and culture, stemmed from his conception of the artist as embodying the finer qualities of life. He felt the artist was threatened by the coarseness of the mob. He conceived of a safe little haven in some Duke's court from where he could watch the world. Lady Gregory's house at Coole offered that safe vantage position where he could with ease make distinctions between dignified thought and mob frenzy. It was a world which was conducive towards imagining a place like Byzantium, where one could transcend the material and the physical and move to a world of perfection wrought through art. Yeats believed that artists and aristocrats have 'old emotions' and bear in their heads 'that form' of society occasionally found for brief periods as in Castiglioni's Urbino. The world of aristocracy which represented the world of refinement that artists imagined found concrete shape in Lady Gregory's house. In the poems 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', 'Coole Park, 1929', 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931' and 'The Municipal Gallery Re-visited', Lady Gregory's house is representative of 'traditional sanctity and loveliness', which is the palpable expression of 'that form' of society, where perfection is sought and created through tradition and art. Lady Gregory's son, who died a hero's death while conducting an air-raid, represented the man of action Yeats celebrated in the poem, 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory', dated 1918. He is the completed 'arc' and, therefore, subject for celebration in literature-

Heart-smitten with emotion I sink down,
 My heart recovering with covered eyes;
 Wherever I had looked I had looked upon
 My permanent or impermanent images:
 Augusta Gregory's son; her sister's son,
 Hugh Lane, 'onlie begetter' of all these;
 Hazel Lavery living and dying, the tale
 As though some ballad-singer had sung it all (Ibid368).

It is interesting to note that thoughts about the artist's quest for permanent images somehow centre round subjects related to Coole and Lady Gregory. Coole was his symbol of aristocratic excellence and Robert Gregory was 'Our Sidney and our perfect man'.

In *Autobiographies*, he writes: "'She has been', said an old man to me, 'like a serving-maid among us. She is plain and simple, like the Mother of God, and that was the greatest lady that ever lived'" (395).

In fact, when Yeats had been passing through a difficult phase in his personal life, he found succour and hope in Lady Gregory, who was almost a mother-figure to him. She took him from cottage to cottage, collecting folk-lore, which helped him evolve an identity where body and spirit work together, as he found the supernatural to be part of the everyday life of peasants. Brenda S. Webster has noted the functional role of Lady Gregory as a mother-figure in contrast to his real mother. There was an almost unconscious linking of Lady Gregory with his mother and his ideal of a perfect friend in his mind. He reminisces that once, when he had received news of her illness, he confused her with his own mother who had died a year ago.

I thought my mother was ill and that my sister was asking me to come at once: then I remembered that my mother died a year ago and that more than kin was at stake. She has been to me mother, friend, sister and brother. I cannot realise the world without her – she brought to my wavering thoughts steadfast nobility. All day the thought of losing her is like a conflagration in the rafters. Friendship is all the house I have (Ibid477-478).

In the poem, 'A Friend's Illness', he characteristically mentions Castiglioni's phrase, "Never be it spoken without tears, the Duchess, too, is dead". For Yeats, Coole and Lady Gregory embodied the world of 'The Courtier', the world of aristocratic charm and excellence.

Later, when Yeats went to Coole, after 'the curtain had fallen upon the first act' of his cultural and literary activities, the time was ripe for his next enterprise, that is, to bring into fruition his dream of a national theatre. In a characteristic Romantic setting in the grounds of Lady Gregory's friend, Count Florimond de Basterot's garden, the Irish theatre was born. When George Moore, a contemporary Irish writer criticised Lady Gregory's and Yeats's efforts in building the Irish Theatre, Yeats answered with a sharp rebuff in the 'Closing Rhymes' of his volume of poems, 'Responsibilities' –

I can forgive even that wrong of wrongs,
 Those undreamt accidents that have made me
 Seeing that Fame has perished long awhile
 Being but a part of ancient ceremony –
 Notorious, till all my priceless things
 Are but a post the passing dogs defile (*Collected Poems*143).

Here, the 'priceless things' are the plays written for the Irish Theatre. It is the idea of a nation held together by 'an emotion held in common' that Yeats strove to seek. In the poem, 'Coole Park, 1929', he says he had found himself drawn to a shared emotion in Lady Gregory's house, where –

Great works constructed there in nature's spite
 For scholars and poets after us,
 Thoughts long knitted into a single thought,
 A dance-like glory that those walls begot (Ibid274).

But, Ireland lacked institutions, which could draw all men culturally through education and training. Yeats strove, along with Lady Gregory and Synge, to create such an institution through the Irish National Theatre, which would promote the best native talents and help in educating the public in matters of aesthetic appreciation. He acknowledged that his name figured in the list for the Nobel Prize largely for his work in the Theatre. In his famous speech on 'The Irish Theatre' at the Swedish Royal Academy, he mentioned with deep humility his debt to Lady Gregory and Synge: 'I think when Lady Gregory's name and John Synge's names are spoken by future generations, my name, if remembered, will come up in the talk, and that if my name is spoken first their names will come in turn because of the years we worked together (*Autobiographies*553-554).

And in the sixth stanza of 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited', he writes-

We three alone in modern times had brought
Everything down to that sole test again,
Dream of the noble and the beggar-man (*Collected Poems*369-370).

An important part of their theatre activities was the discovery of Lady Gregory's talent as a writer. She not only contributed generously with money, but, unforeseen by all, with her own plays. Yeats traces the exfoliation of her style as a writer in her 'semi-feudal' background and her knowledge of courtly living coupled with the folk-idiom of Kilkartan. In himself, in Synge and in Lady Gregory, Yeats finds the 'contraries' of their selves, seeking expression and fulfillment in art, the opposite of what each termed 'self'.

'..... Lady Gregory, in her life much artifice, in her nature much pride, was born to see the glory of the world in a peasant mirror' (*Autobiographies*457).

In a farewell tribute to Lady Gregory, after her death, Yeats quoted the song of Grania for Diarmuid from his play-

'The parting of us two will be the parting of two children of the one house; it will be the parting of life from the body' (*Autobiographies*458).

Reference :

1. *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Peter Alt and Russell k. Alspach, Macmillan, New York, 1966
2. W.B.Yeats, *Collected Poems*, Rupa &Co., Calcutta, 1993
3. W.B.Yeats, *Autobiographies*, Bracken Books, London, 1995
4. *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*, edited by Allan Wade, Rupert Hart-Davis, London, 1954
5. W.B.Yeats, *Memoirs*, Autobiography -First Draft Journal, Transcribed and edited by Denis Donoghue, Macmillan, London, 1972
6. W.B.Yeats, *Mythologies*, Macmillan & Co.Ltd., London, 1959
7. W.B.Yeats, *Explorations*, Selected by Mrs.W.B.Yeats, Macmillan &Co.Ltd., London,1962
8. W.B.Yeats, *Uncollected Prose*, Vol.I. First Reviews and Articles (1886-1896), Collected and edited by John p. Frayne, Macmillan, London,1970
9. Alldritt, Keith, *W.B. Yeats- The Man and the Milieu*, John Murray Publishers Ltd., London, 1977
10. Ellmann, Richard, *The Man and the Masks*, Faber and Faber, London,1983
11. Ellmann, Richard, *The Identity of Yeats*, Faber and Faber, London, 1983
12. Gregory, Lady, *Interviews and Recollections*, edited by E.H.Mikhail, Mcmillan, London, 1977
13. Webster, Brenda S., *Yeats: A Psychoanalytic Study*, Macmillan, London, 1974
14. Wilson,F.A.C, *Yeats's Iconography*, Methuen & Co.Ltd., London, 1960