

Introduction

Where All the Ladders Start is written for the general reader but I hope it will also be useful to A level and International Baccalaureate students, and to first-year undergraduates. It is an exploration of some of the finest poems in the English language, the poets who wrote them and the particular people who inspired them. Some but not all of the poems are love poems, where the love may be romantic or platonic; in others the people are used as objects of satire, or vehicles of protest, or simply convenient starting points. Moreover, because until the last century poetry was mainly a patriarchal business, many of the muses are supportive, long-suffering and sometimes powerful women who have been relegated to an obscurity they do not deserve. The poems are arranged in chronological order and along the way I include a brief outline of the way poetry has developed over the past four hundred years. I have tried to avoid too many references and footnotes, but for those who wish to explore more deeply each chapter ends with suggestions for further reading and places to visit. The Glossary at the end of the book offers an aide-memoire to critical terms used in the text.

Critical Background

As an undergraduate very many years ago, I studied English Literature when Practical Criticism and New Criticism were in the ascendant – with such notable exponents as I.A. Richards (who started it all off with his *Principles of Literary Criticism*, 1924, and *Practical Criticism*, 1929), William Empson, Yvor Winters, Cleanth Brooks and W.K. Wimsatt. Practical Criticism and New Criticism were a reaction against both the relaxed and impressionistic approach which hung over from Victorian times and (later) the strident moralistic approach of critics such as F.R.

Leavis and his *Scrutiny* disciples.¹ It was no longer writers and their supposed intentions that were important – after all, who can say with any degree of certainty what a writer’s intentions are in any particular work or how far he or she has been influenced by background and circumstance: C.S. Lewis warned rightly that ‘you must not believe all that authors tell you’.² Nor was it readers who mattered, with their penchant for bringing a plethora of their own emotions, prejudices, and political and cultural beliefs to the party (Oscar Wilde suggested dangerously that ‘the critic’s sole aim is to chronicle his own impressions’).³ Rather, Practical Criticism and New Criticism argued that literary criticism should start by concentrating on the text itself as a self-contained work of art – a unique fusion of content and structure, standing apart from and independent of both writer, reader and history. It is the critic’s duty (says Cleanth Brooks) to wrest a poem from its context and make it for all time.⁴

However, it was not long before critical fashion became more prescriptive and Practical Criticism and New Criticism gave way to Structuralism – an approach developed in Europe by such writers as Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, which concentrates more on a scientific analysis of the text as a linguistic structure. Then Structuralism found its ultimate expression in Post-Structuralism (or Deconstruction), where analysis exposes the contradictory and irreconcilable elements of the text, and decidable meaning is never actually reached. Although I have some sympathy with Post-Structuralism’s proposition that a poem exists only when it is read, just as a play exists only in performance, it seems to me it is largely a critical dead-end of interest only to academics. Other ‘isms’ and theories come and go – Marxist Criticism, Feminist Criticism, Cultural Materialism, Queer Theory, Race Theory, Ecocriticism and New Aestheticism, to name just a few. All have their place in helping us towards a greater understanding of literature, but they become

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1. *Scrutiny* was a quarterly literature journal founded in 1932 by L.C. Knights and F.R. Leavis, its principal editor. Leavis believed that literature should be judged mainly on the basis of its author’s moral position.
 2. C.S. Lewis, ‘It All Began with a Picture’, in *On Stories, and Other Essays on Literature*, ed. Walter Hooper (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), ch. 7.
 3. Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic as Artist: With Some Remarks upon the Importance of Doing Nothing’, in *Intentions* (1891).
 4. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (1949) (London: Methuen University Paperback, 1968), p. 175.

self-defeating if not handled with care and if their limitations are not accepted. On the one hand, there is the danger they can make readers and their prejudices more important than the text;⁵ on the other, they can deny the text its essential humanity.

For me, in reading, studying and teaching literature, two things are paramount and they are at the centre of *Where All the Ladders Start*. First, I believe in the primacy of the text and what it says to us (and how it says it). We must always avoid the danger of what we would like it to say. Secondly, and what makes this book a little different from others, I believe our understanding and enjoyment of the text can be enhanced by a knowledge of the inevitable real-world influences and inspirations, and in particular the people, that affect a writer – although here we have to be acutely aware of the dangers of historical, biographical and any other form of reduction. Whatever the original links between them, reality and art, fact and fiction, are very different places. Thus, while *Where All the Ladders Start* sets out to identify and flesh out the muse (where it is possible) behind each of the poems considered, there is always an important caveat. The real people it foregrounds as an inspiration are important because of the role they play in the creative process, but they may be altered entirely when they appear in the fiction of the poem. The poet, who is a person and not a machine, and also deserves consideration, may have turned magician to transform them into characters quite different from their actual selves, flattering some and no doubt enraging others, and sometimes giving them a permanence they never sought or deserved. Moreover, the narrative voice in each poem may, intentionally or otherwise, be another transformation and not the poet at all. So, except where life and art become inextricably mixed, the following chapters use the term ‘speaker’ to put a possible distance between them. Autobiography, in verse as well as in prose, can never be wholly trusted.

From Heart to Art: W.B. Yeats, ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’

I have taken my title from ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’ by W.B. Yeats, one of three of his later poems concerned with the creative process and the nature of art (the others are ‘Long-Legged Fly’ and ‘Lapis Lazuli’).

5. See W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, ‘The Affective Fallacy’, in W.K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

By way of introduction, and to highlight how a poet creates an artefact out of the actual, and how both are important, I want to consider its first and last stanzas. Yeats's poems – more of which are discussed in chapter 9 – are full of people and places: heroes of the Irish struggle for independence, 'changed utterly' from their mundane existence;⁶ the women in his life, like Maud and Iseult Gonne, Lady Gregory, Eva and Constance Markiewicz, and Georgie Hyde-Lees; and the Irish countryside, like the Lake Isle of Innisfree, Coole Park and Thoor Ballylee. In 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', written as the speaker's creative life seemingly draws to a close, he reflects on how he has conjured these people and places from everyday life into the spectacular.

The opening stanza introduces the image of 'circus animals' which is central to the poem:

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
 I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
 Maybe at last being but a broken man
 I must be satisfied with my heart, although
 Winter and summer till old age began
 My circus animals were all on show,
 Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
 Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

There is no doubt that the speaker is Yeats, or a version of him, but still, as readers, we have to be on our guard. Although this is Yeats's own account of his waning powers, he may be hiding behind a persona different from his real self. The speaker, as poet, is imagined as a circus ringmaster who was once able to marshal the stuff of everyday life into a sparkling performance. 'Those stilted boys' – are these the heroes of the Irish revolution celebrated in some of Yeats's poems? – swagger into the ring on stilts; behind them is 'the burnished chariot', the ordinary made into something eye-catching and extraordinary, and yet in 'stilted' and 'burnished' there is also a sense of artifice. Are they more or less important than real life? Then come the lion and the lion-tamer, bringing to mind Yeats under the spell of Maud Gonne, the woman with whom he was infatuated. As the procession continues, the tripping rhythm of the final line adds to the sense of excitement. But now the speaker is old. The 'circus animals', the words that once leapt at his command, dazzling the reader, are no longer in thrall to him and there

6. See W.B. Yeats, 'Easter 1916'.

is a reluctant acceptance of the performance ending, the last sweeping bow, the sense of mortality. He is ‘a broken man’ and must be satisfied with his ‘heart’ – but ‘heart’, we know, can have an extraordinary power of its own.

The three stanzas of the poem’s central section rely on a knowledge of Yeats’s earlier writing and a knowledge of Irish folklore. For the moment they need not concern us, but the final section, a single stanza, crystallises the theme of life recreated as art:

Those masterful images because complete
 Grew in pure mind but out of what began?
 A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
 Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
 Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
 Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder’s gone
 I must lie down where all the ladders start
 In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

Here the poem has turned the detritus of existence into ‘masterful images’, a testimony to the power of art; and because the images are ‘complete’, they have grown ‘in pure mind’, in the artist’s purifying imagination which divorces them from all taint of reality.⁷ But the images have started life in ‘a mound of refuse’. Notice the repetition of ‘old’, hammered out five times, and the way the poem plays with sound: the alliterations of ‘sweepings of the street’ and ‘bottles’/‘broken’/‘bones’; the half rhymes of ‘kettle’/‘bottle’, ‘can’/‘gone’, ‘street’/‘slut’; and the way ‘broken can’ picks up on ‘broken man’ in the opening stanza. So ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’ ends almost where it began, but it does not quite come full circle. Throughout the poem there has been an underlying interplay between ‘heart’ (which appears four times) and art: although the speaker lies down in ‘the foul rag and bone shop of the heart’, unable to climb the creative ladder any more, there is a sense that the ‘heart’ is somehow just as real and alive as the images and dreams it has inspired – as real as the ‘circus animals’ who have been an escape from heartbreak, however much they have delighted. Nevertheless, although the ‘heart’ remains, even if broken, when the ‘circus animals’ have gone, it is a paradox of the poem that in the end it

7. G.S. Fraser usefully contrasts the ‘masterful images’, grown in the poet’s mind, with the ‘unpurged images of day’ which open Yeats’s ‘Byzantium’ – in G.S. Fraser, ‘Yeats’s Byzantium’, *Critical Quarterly*, 2:3 (1960), pp. 253-61.

is the animals which survive long after the people and things of which they are emblems have disappeared – just as in the following chapters it is the people in the poems who survive and not the real people out of whom they were created. It is the poem's second paradox that, at the same time as it mourns the drying up of the poet's abilities, it is itself a virtuoso performance that affirms the opposite.

For all its 'masterful images', 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' relies too much on a knowledge of Yeats's earlier work and Irish mythology to be easily accessible, but it repays careful reading and is a complex and haunting illustration of how a poem can elevate everyday life into something more permanent and universal. It is not art imitating life, but transforming it into something different and capturing it for all time. In a lecture on Yeats to the Friends of the Irish Academy, T.S. Eliot described him as a poet 'who, out of intense and personal experience, is able to express a general truth; retaining all the particularity of his experience, to make of it a general symbol', and this, I think, is true in varying degrees of all the poets represented here.⁸

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Where All the Ladders Start is about nine major poems or collections of poems in the English language from the sixteenth century until the twentieth. As well as introducing each poet, it explores the texts in some detail and aims to shine a light on the people who may have inspired them. Who, it asks, were the subjects of Shakespeare's sonnets? How far were at least some of Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* prompted by his ill-advised marriage to seventeen-year-old Anne? Who was the family that lay behind Milton's *Comus*? And how did Pope manage to use the misfortune of a girl he had never met as the starting point for one of the greatest comic satires of all time? In the nineteenth century, was Wordsworth as much in love with his sister as his wife? Who, exactly, was Keats's muse, Fanny Brawne, and how did Elizabeth Barrett Barrett come to record her wooing of Robert Browning in secret sonnets (while her letters were far less romantic)? Finally, attention turns to two tragic love stories which fuelled some of the twentieth century's most memorable poems – the stories of Thomas Hardy and Emma Gifford, and W.B. Yeats and Maud Gonne. How, in both stories, did things go so disastrously wrong? I would have liked to include *Birthday Letters* (1998),

8. Lecture to the Friends of the Irish Academy, 1940, reproduced in T.S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), pp. 253-62.

Ted Hughes's searing love-epic which remembers Sylvia Plath, but felt the emotions which swirl around the couple are still too raw.

Over a lifetime spent in education I have enjoyed discussing all these poems with students and colleagues – too numerous to mention but not to remember. However, my particular thanks are owed to Professor Stefan Hawlin and Dr Sarah Waters, both of the University of Buckingham, who have taken time and care in their busy lives to read a draft of *Where All the Ladders Start*. Their advice has been invaluable: they have pointed out errors, disagreed constructively and suggested new avenues to explore, and the book would have been very much poorer without them. Thanks also to Samuel Fitzgerald at the Lutterworth Press for his continued support and encouragement.

So roll up, roll up, and take your seats. You can hear the circus animals waiting and smell the greasepaint. The band is striking up and there's an expectant hush in the tent – and here, to unsettle us, comes the sad clown, or is it the poet? The performance is about to begin.

Exploring Further

For an introduction to critical theory, see Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 4th edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017) and Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, 6th edn (London: Routledge, 2023).

Suggestions of books and places relating to W.B. Yeats are given in the 'Exploring Further' section of chapter 9.