

JOSEPH CRABTREE AND THE KELTIC TWILIGHT

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My Oration is entitled 'Joseph Crabtree and the Keltic Imperative'. In translation, the title becomes 'Seosamh Mac an Crann Ull Beag agus Pog Mo Hone'. As Wittgenstein put it in Section 1 of his *Philosophical Investigations*, 'Words are Deeds' — therefore I had intended, Mr. President, with your permission, to deliver the entire Oration in Gaelic. However I have, in the event of the kind of protestation I feel you are about to make, included a translation. And therefore I will deliver it instead.

By the Keltic Imperative, I mean the energising which Yeats and to a lesser extent, James Joyce, derived from the presence of Joseph Crabtree. You will notice that the order paper this evening spells Keltic with a 'C', thereby inviting some of you to pronounce it Seltic. This is wrong, let me explain.

I went out to the hazel wood
Because a fire was in my head
And cut and peeled a hazel wand
And hooked a berry to a thread.

You see, already it begins to appear, hazel wand, meaning 'cudgel'. The poem then describes how the poet caught a trout which changed into a glimmering girl, 'with apple blossom in her hair/Who called me by my name and ran/And faded through the brightening air.' Are you not reminded immediately of the Wordsworthian lines, which we have so often had the wisdom to question, 'Dim sadness — and blind thoughts, I knew not nor could name,' — because our Keltic bard ends with the lines:

I will find out where she has gone,
And kiss her lips and take her hands;
And walk among long dappled grass,
And pluck till time and times are done,
The silver apples of the moon,
The golden apples of the sun.

There, gentlemen, you have it. Pollexfen, Crabtree, the Munster poets and their influence on Yeats, remember the euphemistic use of Crabtrees. Now we have Pollexfen, silver pubic hair, the silver apples of the moon. And here above all is the point. Yeats's great uncle on the Pollexfen side was a close friend of John Murray, and he also had a great interest — he was an amateur veterinarian — in male sterility. In 1811, Crabtree met John Murray; the painting hanging in Albemarle Street shows a variety of young and middle-aged men in various positions, and in 1816, in that extraordinary operation in Guy's Hospital at the hands of Sir Lancelot Pratt, Yeats's great uncle Pollexfen was present. The Yeatses and the Pratts were closely connected. And the Pollexfen uncle brought home to Sligo a selection of Crabtree's poems which the young Yeats later discovered and plagiarised as shamefully as he plagiarised the French writers from whose work he translated the famous poem, which begins 'When you are old and gray and full of sleep'.

Would that Yeats had only followed my good friend Wittgenstein when he says, 'No one can think a thought for me in the way no one can don my hat for me'. It gets worse: remember James Lackington's course of reading for Crabtree, in our august commemorand's own description, 'Plato and Seneca and Plutarch and Epicurus, and other of the pagan philosophers, etc.' Well, I ask you, listen to this, from Yeats's last poems:

His chosen comrades thought at school
He must grow a famous man.
He thought the same and lived by rule,
All his twenties crammed with toil;
'What then?', sang Plato's ghost, 'What then?'

And, indeed, what are we to make of the similarities between Crabtree and Mlle. Vallon and Yeats and Maude Gonne? I take the view that Yeats's relationship with Madam MacBride had a lot that was fraudulent in it. But listen to this, the much-disputed lines of Wordsworth, 'wanting yet the name of wife, carried about her for a secret grief the promise of a mother'. When Yeats wrote *Prayer for My Daughter*, how much did he plagiarise? Some random lines:

'I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour'

and:

'It is certain that fine women eat
A crazy salad with their meat'

and:

'Whereby the Horn of Plenty is undone'
(clearly a reference inspired by Crabtree's operation)

and:

'May she become a nourishing hidden tree'

I carved for myself an epitaph
Which would immortalise my descendants.
Cast a cold eye,
On life, on death,
May you live as long as you want to,
May you want to as long as you live;