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Conversation with Coleridge

Micheal O'Siadhail

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In 1931, musing on his life in his last decade, Yeats made a claim in "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931," reminding readers, present and future, that "We were the last Romantics." In the final stanza, he traces a lineage back to Homer with a Romantic slant. Yeats had claimed that as a young man, the son of a painter fascinated by Romantic poetry, Shelley had made him a poet. Even in his occasional efforts to reject his Romantic forbears, Yeats retained a connection to both the natural world and otherworldly figures that shows he never lost that link. The 1931 poem is all about fashioning an identity, in Yeats' case, towards the end of his life, a Romantic one. Here, Micheal O'Siadhail's "Conversation with Coleridge" also dwells on "fathers," and the "ancestral trees" of Yeats' final poems of place. Like Yeats, O'Siadhail is concerned with an Irish continuation of the Romantic tradition, one that turns to the land and the "old fathers" of earlier centuries even as it looks forward.

Micheal O'Siadhail has published sixteen collections of poetry. He was awarded an Irish American Cultural Institute prize for poetry in 1982 and in 1998 the Marten Toonder prize for Literature. His poem suites, The Naked Flame, Summerfest and Earlsfort Suite were commissioned and set to music for performance and broadcasting. He has given poetry readings and broadcasts in Ireland, Britain, Europe and North America.

Conversation with Coleridge

Micheal O'Siadhail

Dear prince of preparation's castled air
And master of great schemes drugs undermined,
Sad Coleridge so acutely self-aware,
Imprisoned in your lime-tree-bowered mind.
A mother's stern upbringing stunted praise
And you play Hamlet numbed by reverie;
Youth's promise lived in opium's malaise,
A baffling preface to what once you'd be.
A wholeness sought, you risk a prophet's role;
Then, turning second-sighted Highgate sage,
A tortured mind that swings from pole to pole
Can still reveal the story of our age.
You coaxed that sunny dome, those caves of ice;
Now drink the mother's milk of paradise.

You only ghost-write shame, my wedding guest,
That guilty trail of friends and loves betrayed;
Though I'm to blame, can self-despair be blest
As when I praised the water-snakes and prayed?
As serpent roots keep raging under earth,
Dreams ramify and spread soft lime-tree leaves;
I give my word for what my word is worth,
Yet every breaking promise self-deceives.
Out of my need to start and start again

I face the healing failure of Christ's cross;
Dare I believe such pardonings uplift
A heart to hope for love beyond all ken,
Whose amnesty unnecks the albatross?
My craving for forgiveness turns to gift.

How blandly any age assumes *carte blanche*
To tear up deeper roots it needs to tap;
But you embrace the whole tree, root and branch,
In wonder at the oneness of its sap.
Then, though you lust for Edens lost, you find
The dazed sublime Romantics rhapsodise
Rings hollow when there's nothing more behind.
Are Wordsworth's shepherds Wordsworth in disguise?
In chemistry you're keeping up to date,
Improving still your stock of metaphor,
And racked imaginings still recreate
The secrets in your veins that juiced can soar.
Your range of thought a sap-divining rod
To dowse the lavish mind of dazzling God.

My father showed me fathomless night skies,
A world where large and little all cohere,
Where stars are dewdrops of a different size.
And am I still my father's faithful seer?
We ride a universe inscribed in rings
Of love that yearly bind both branch and bole;
In all this thick community of things,
How gropingly I integrate the whole.
But yes, he prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small, for saps of grace
That soar within can summon up grand schemes;
But this I tell thee, thou my wedding guest!
Although so much eluded my embrace,
I drank dew buckets full of God's own dreams.