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JOSEPH CRABTREE AND THE KELTIC TWILIGHT
Frank Delaney
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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.

The original Mediterranean word for these European migratory tribal peoples, first found in Herodotus, was attached to a single tribe or perhaps a group of tribes in Iberia. They were called 'Keltioi' — a name which may be taken to mean 'outsiders', or 'strangers', that is to say non-Mediterraneans. On the other hand, one particular etymological reference suggests that they took their name from a small metalworker's chisel, in use at the very end of the Bronze Age, and developed by the ironworking Europeans whose imperative we are here to have illuminated, and that chisel was known as a 'selt', with an 'S'.

The great poet William Butler Yeats, whose work illuminates my Oration this evening, understood this problem and explained it by reversing it. He was, he claimed, greeted by an American who embraced him, much to the great man's distaste, and who said, 'Gee, Mr. Yeats, I am so pleased to meet you. I am such an admirer of your poetry. And I am of Scottish descent, with a little Welsh blood, so I am so delighted to be related to you, we are both Selts, Mr. Yeats.' The great poet looked carefully at him and said, 'No — I am a Selt, you, Sir, are a Sunt.'

Crabtree had the most profound impression and influence upon Yeats and he is, I believe, directly responsible for the Keltic Imperative, that is to say, the legendary and mythological connotations deployed to such great effect in Yeats's work. Crabtree may have directly inspired Yeats's last great poem, *Under Ben Bulbin*, a reference which might be taken to mean Pitt. No, Mr. President, no gentlemen: *Under Ben Bulbin* did not connect in any euphemistic way with the Crabtree/Pitt relationship, neither did Yeats have a relationship with a gnarled man from Sligo called Ben Bulbin. I will come to the poem later.

And how, you must ask yourselves, how did Yeats, in his occult period, put his hand enquiringly into Madam Blavatsky's box, and what did he find in there? In Yeats's play *The Player Queen* (not a reference to Pitt) Septimus says to the First Countryman, the Second Countryman and the Big Countryman:

Did I hear somebody say the Unicorn is not chaste? It is a most noble beast, a most religious beast. It has a milk-white skin and a milk-white horn and milk-white hooves, but a mild blue eye and it dances in the sun. I will have no one speak against it, not while I am still upon the earth. It is written in the Great Beastery of Paris that it is chaste, that it is the most chaste of all the beasts in the world.

That he was mythically moved in the same way as Crabtree is undoubted. In 1967 Bennett reported that Crabtree:

was trying an interesting experiment in that he was anticipating by some 140 years the activities of the present-day Barrow Poets. To encourage young poets, Crabtree became a publisher and he with one or two young fellows would sell their broadsheet poems and ballads from street stalls.

This shrewd scholarship opens the Yeats file. Yeats's mother was a Pollexfen from County Sligo. Now regard the word. (Sligo has a penchant for odd nomination. The Yeats family solicitors, still there at Teeling Street Sligo, called Argue & Phibbs.) Dwell on the word 'Pollexfen'. 'Pollex', though a little changed etymologically, seems clear enough. 'Fen', in this context, is a corruption of the Gaelic word 'Fionn', meaning white or silver in colour, usually of hair. Pollexfen, therefore, means in its most traditional form, silvery pubic hair.

You can, gentlemen, anticipate me. One of Yeats's most famous poems is *The Song of Wandering Aengus*. It begins, as you know:

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'

and one more (a reference to Mlle. Vallon and Wordsworth):

Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty's Horn,
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good
By quiet natures understood
For an old bellows full of angry wind.

Wordsworth was intensely disliked by Annette Vallon. Crabtree was in his thirty-seventh year when he met Paul Vallon's sister in Paris, the very same year of his, aged 37, and place, Paris, in which Yeats was later to have claimed that Maud Gonne refused to consummate their relationship. 'My Willie', she cried, she was the first of the feminists, 'Oh my Willie. Do not marry me and out of my Willie will pour great poetry.'

We come now to the business of the monkey gland. By which means we finally arrive under Ben Bulbin. The operation had, as we know, a profound effect upon Crabtree. Tattersall puts it very poignantly. How Crabtree reflected upon Teiresias, the seer of Thebes, who when asked which of the two sexes derived the greater pleasure from sexual intercourse — Yeats called it 'Carnival Knowledge' — had said after brief reflection, 'the woman'. I quote Tattersall. 'Crabtree pondered this long, and saw a way of turning the misfortune that had struck him, into gain — of having it both ways. He got Keats to arrange a consultation with Sir Lancelot and asked the surgeon whether he could complete for him a sex change operation' and Tattersall concludes, 'A few deft slashes, a couple of neat folds, some stitches and dressings; and Josephine Crabtree was born.'

In his plays, in his great seminal spiritual work, *A Vision*, where he ventures ever deeper into Madam Blavatsky's box, and above all in his poems, Yeats asks that he find the strength to 're-make himself again and again'. The greatest of Yeats's Celtic poems, *The Wanderings of Oisín*, summarises the Crabtree Celtic Imperative and Inheritance. Oisín or Ossian, as you may prefer, meets Patrick on the shore, in a most moving scene. Ossian descends and in a flash all the three hundred years he has lived in the Land of Eternal Youth are upon his shoulders. But Yeats, in a reference to Crabtree — as he later acknowledged to Lady Gregory, who had a pathological interest in Crabtree's operation — wrote these lines:

'Why do you wind no horn?', she said,
'And every hero droop his head?
The hornless deer is not more sad
That many a peaceful moment had.

Here in the very fountain of Celtic mythology, the legends of Finn MacCool and the Fianna, we find Crabtree's influence on Yeats. And furthermore, in his 'Helen walked' poem, even the Homeric reference is not free from allusions to topless towers. I am overcome.

I will conclude. There are two families of Crabtree in the west of Ireland, one in Newmarket-on-Fergus, one in Limerick. Both families have blood relatives in Orléans, one is in fact a wine importer, the other worked for a time with Gerry Cottle's Circus. The Limerick branch has in its possession a strange letter — or it may be a copy — dated to the Spring of 1837, and written by a woman called Marichen Ibsen. I refer you to *Joseph Crabtree and the North* by Peter Foote. The letter clearly asks for an address for this man of the same name, and reference is made to his 'versatility', his 'capacity to be all round pleasing' — I am translating — 'to a woman'.

The other family, in Newmarket-on-Fergus, was visited by Yeats in 1935, just before he contemplated leaving Ireland forever; he died, as you will remember, in Antibes. He asked very carefully whether they had any literary ancestors and they produced for him some papers they had, entitled Broadsheets and Parodies, on which he found this ballad:

Under bare Ben Bulbin's prick
Of discomfort, in the graveyard
Called Drumcliff, I laid a local girl
To rest while the great balls
Of fire which burnt my mind ran
To thoughts of Pollux
And Castor, and Pollexfen.
I came and came upon my own mortality,
And looked up its uncertainties.

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;
Bees do it and die,
Kings do it and sigh:
I can't do it and I'll tell you why;
I have a love and I promised to be true,
But I'll tell you what I'll do,
I'll lie still and let you.

This was later plagiarised and translated into Gaelic by the playwright Brendan Behan, who tried to pass it off as one of the verses written by the poets of the Maigue who invented the limerick.