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Following Mr. Hall, Mr. Clubbe introduced the incoming president, Joseph Bryant, who brought the evening to a close by thanking the members for the honor of his election and predicting another successful year.

The following is an excerpt from Mr. Hall's remarks at the Annual Meeting.

To Imitate Yeats

by Donald Hall

I wrote my senior thesis at college on William Butler Yeats's revisions of early poems. Because the *Variorum* had not yet made these revisions public, I worked in a rare book room, comparing texts to find evidence of Yeats's indefatigable struggle to improve his work. Although I had loved his poems for years, and had chosen him for subject because of this love, it was this study which turned him into a model for me. I don't mean a stylistic model, for I never wanted to imitate him—I hope that the early traces of brogue have departed my poems—nor do I mean a model in his private life; no thorough biography exists, but I am confident that he was an imperfect model of the private life—combining affectation and honesty by turns, loyalty and disloyalty. I take him as a model for artistic morality.

When he was young he was literary-political, entrepreneurial, flattering important elders. Reading his letters to Katherine Tynan, or to Oscar Wilde, we find him a trimmer. But as we continue to read the letters—and heaven knows the poems—we watch his character alter profoundly. Gradually, slowly, decade by decade, he becomes more and more serious. Remember that Yeats turned fifty in 1915, and that if he had died at fifty we would not know him for "Sailing to Byzantium," "Leda and the Swan," "Byzantium," "Among School Children," neither the great work of *The Tower*, nor the amazing *Last Poems* written when he was dying. He was already middle-aged when he announced that "I seek an image not a book." The younger man had sought a book indeed; now until the end of his life he sought an image or emblem or symbol which would tell or even discover *the truth*. No longer was he a poem-seeker, but a truth-seeker; however, it was by the poetic image that he sought it. In his pursuit he felt discouraged again and again. One can follow in the *Collected Poems*, and in the

Letters the restless seeking, the sense that the image is there to be found, the triumphant energy of pursuit and apparent discovery—and then, every time, the disillusion and the sense of failure, the renunciation of past work done.

But when Yeats was discouraged about what he had accomplished, when Yeats renounced his old poetry as an embroidered coat or as mere circus animals, he renounced the old in order to try to make the new. He began the struggle all over again. It is this twin ability—first to see the failure of his work, then to use that failure as a starting point for new work—which makes Yeats the greatest model for another poet. Discouragement with old work drives some artists to despair and silence; complacency over former accomplishment is more pernicious still: we have the self-imitators. Yeats never suffered from complacency; and he was indomitable in surmounting his own discouragement.

When he was old and dying he wrote great poems. Early in January of 1939 he wrote his last poem. He did not know that he had written his last poem, and on 4 January he began a letter:

. . . I know for certain that my time will not be long. I have put away everything that can be put away that I may speak what I have to speak . . . In two or three weeks—I am now idle that I may rest after writing much verse—I will begin to write my most fundamental thoughts . . . It seems to me that I have found what I wanted. When I try to put it all into a phrase I say, 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.' . . . The abstract is not life and everywhere draws out its contradictions. You can refute Hegel but not the Saint or the Song of Sixpence

Three weeks later Yeats died—instead of writing his "most fundamental thoughts." But he had done it all along, and he had done it because he never thought he had done it. It is the best possible death, still to pursue the desire of a life, into the grave.