

Romantic Nationalism and the Unease of History:  
The Depiction of Political Violence in Yeats's Poetry

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short title:

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### Abstract

Yeats's depiction of political violence is examined through a reading of the political poetry centred on "Easter 1916," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and "Meditations in Time of Civil War," each of these bearing a title emphasizing the poem's historicity, each representing one of the violent epochs in modern Ireland. By studying the dramatized narrative persona utilized by Yeats--a persona constituting the ideological and societal contexts of the poems, and effecting, through the choice of perspective, the selection of historical materials--the particular contents of Yeats's history-making are brought into focus. Yeats was both a romantic poet uneasy with the political component of verse, and an Irish nationalist for whom these events were essential ingredients of his life's work. In these poems we find the collision of Yeats's own conflicting ideals about poetry, politics, and history; a collision which produces a complex portrayal of Irish political violence.

La description que Yeats a faite de la violence politique est analysée dans une étude de la poésie politique, plus particulièrement dans "Easter 1916," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" et "Meditations in Time of Civil War." Chaque titre souligne son lieu historique; chaque poème représente une des trois crises violentes de l'Irlande pendant la vie de Yeats. L'étude du personnage créé par Yeats, un narrateur véhiculant le contexte idéologique et social des poèmes et faisant, par sa vision des choses, le choix des matériaux historiques, permet de cerner l'imagination historique du poète. Yeats était un poète romantique que la poésie engagée gênait. Cependant, Yeats était un Irlandais nationaliste. Les événements politiques étaient essentiels à son oeuvre. Dans ces poèmes, nous retrouvons le conflit des idées poétiques, politiques et historiques du poète et une description complexe de l'Irlande moderne.

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The writings of Terry Eagleton, Hayden White, and Elizabeth Cullingford were crucial to my thinking. Richard Ellmann's views on Yeats are part of every later writer's heritage; to someone studying the influences of social and political forces, Ellmann's voice will not allow one to forget these forces only live in human beings. Seamus Deane's work as literary critic and literary historian, as social analyst, poet, and fiction writer, was, in its pithy brilliance, invaluable to this essay. His ability to combine these roles was exemplary and reassuring in an era of hyper-specialization.

Teresa Marquis was understanding.

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"A fundamental rule seems to be that what is excluded at the overt level of identity-formation is productive of new objects of desire."

--Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, 25

". . . the romantic conception of Irish Nationality on which [we] . . . founded . . . our art."

--Yeats, Essays, 246

"Indeed, considered historically, the struggle to separate aesthetic from both moral and political considerations can be seen as constituting the inaugural, grounding act of poetics as a distinct discipline."

--Michael Bernstein, 37

"We are a dispersed people whose history is a sensation of opaque fidelity."

--Seamus Heaney, "From the Land of the Unspoken," The Haw Lantern, 18

### Abbreviations

- Essays     --Essays and Introductions, by W. B. Yeats
- L            --Selected Letters of W.B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade
- UP           --Uncollected Prose, by W. B. Yeats (2 Vol.)

Yeats's poetry is cited from The Poems: A New Edition, ed.  
Richard J. Finneran.

Yeats's plays are cited from the Collected Plays (Macmillan, 1953).

All references to Cullingford are to Elizabeth Cullingford's  
Yeats, Ireland and Fascism, except where otherwise noted.

## Chapter One

### Poetry, Politics, Violence: The Case of Yeats

Lionel Johnson was able to take up into his art one portion of this tradition that I could not, for he had a gift of speaking political thought in fine verse that I have always lacked.

--Yeats, Essays, 248

Was it needless death after all?  
For England may keep faith  
For all that is done and said.  
We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse--  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse . . .

#### I

#### The Turn of Verse

William Butler Yeats considered the art of the Irish literary renaissance to have been founded on "the romantic conception of Irish Nationality" (Essays, 246). For a romantic poet, the adoption as subject matter of political events from contemporary history constituted an uneasy abrogation of many of the poet's own warnings about separating poetry from politics, especially "popular" politics. For a nationalist, the inculcating of such events into the realm of his life's work was essential. In his series of great poems bearing as titles the dates of Ireland's violent political convulsions--"Easter 1916," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and "Meditations in Time of Civil War," the troubled interaction of competing ideals about history, politics and poetry is most intense.

In conjunction with Yeats's description, in A Vision, of the slow shiftings within the personality and in history between subjective and

objective modes, it is interesting to contemplate Hegel's dictum that "the term History unites the objective with the subjective."<sup>1</sup> "Verse," has evolved as a concept from figures of "turning," or of "being turned." It is fruitful to picture poetry as the practice of turning to face in different directions, or, within a framework of Yeats's work, to present various faces, masks, or facets, to the external world. Since--to use M. H. Abrams' still useful distinction--the poet is not merely a mirror but also a lamp, this orienting of the self involves an orienting of reality in relation to the self, an illuminating reception of some radian of the given in light of the mind's span of attention. Yeats's sense of the self in its various aspects--in which any tendency is pregnant with its Other--is sufficiently polyhedral to suggest that a poet and his or her many masks is something of a prism, analysing the light of the world variously depending upon which facet has been exposed.

When writers address themselves to specific historical and political events, particularly those so intimate with structures of power so as to result in violent action, they inevitably implicitly locate themselves (or their poetic personae) both in regard to such structures and in regard to those people who challenge them. Do they act on behalf of a group of which the poet is a voluntary member, or of which the poet is perforce initiate, or as partisans whose party the poet does not consider himself or herself a member, or as a society from which the poet considers himself or herself divorced?

Yeats was an Irishman who at times prided himself on being free from political entanglements to the point of asserting that "we artists . . . are the servants not of any cause but of mere naked life" (Essays, 260),

but as someone who also boasted of his indelible involvement in a literary movement with heavy political overtones<sup>2</sup> (insisting, in an early poem fraught with a sense of impending change, that he "accounted be / True brother of a company / That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong" ["To Ireland in the Coming Times," ll. 1-3]). He worries, with some justification, that his play Cathleen ni Houlihan had helped spur the rebels into the streets. As such a writer, that part of Yeats's poetry that is historically specific is always a locating and relocating of the poet in the political landscape, is always, fretfully and consciously, verse. To attempt to understand how and why Yeats depicts political violence and its matrices is to also ask where he sees himself in relation to this violence. Yeats's various voices and postures, the shape of his mercurial personality, can be fruitfully thrown into relief through such an inquiry, and can in turn illuminate the poetry.

A gnarled inquiry it must be, for Yeats was of many minds on such issues, as Denis Donoghue's insouciant summary of his political prescriptions suggests: "Nearly any social organization, so long as it is not democratic . . . . Beyond that, there is no knowing what Yeats wanted or how close he was willing to come to the rough stuff" (We Irish, 5).<sup>3</sup> To understand that Seamus Heaney's tortured phrasing of his own ambiguous location in Ireland's violent present, "I am neither internee nor informer" (North, 73), proposes choices Yeats would never have thought to consider, is to begin to ask a very interesting question. Yeats's famous assertion that "We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry" (Mythologies, 331) is, in regard to his political verse, not exactly false but incomplete. Yet the fact that Yeats does continue

the quarrel with himself in the midst of the quarrels of others leads him to write a unique type of political poetry the characteristics and particular effects of which are the object of this inquiry, this turning of attention.

Often considered opposing poles rather than partners, poetry and revolution have at least one thing in common: they are sustained by symbolism, by the symbolic's ability to give a sense of wider applicability and essential importance to the concrete of the empirical, to raise the ante of "meaning." In three great poems, "Easter 1916," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and "Meditations in Time of Civil War,"<sup>4</sup> (poems having in common, significantly, titles which pinpoint their chronological locations) Yeats translates the symbols fueling the three primary violent events in the Ireland of his lifetime--the Easter Rising, the Black and Tans-Republican guerilla war, and the vicious factional fighting that increasingly infected the Free State in 1921-23--into symbols suitable to his own imaginative encounter with these pivotal epochs. Symbol: Yeats was not alone in living a process which William Irwin Thompson aptly describes: "Because he lived a myth, history became the myth in which he found himself" (151). Sean O'Broin, a leader of the 1960s I.R.A. from County Kerry, where the Civil War had been most brutal, testified, for example, that,

I joined the I.R.A. at sixteen . . . My father had been killed fighting in 1922 for the ideals of Easter Week, founded on a love of Ireland and its people . . . The real struggle was for the mind and soul of a once proud nation, and now, at the end of it all, they were asked to swear allegiance to a foreign king and to acknowledge the right of the former enemy to keep troops in Ireland. These symbols of domination contrasted so violently with the

inspiring vision of a free and independent Ireland  
that they were utterly unacceptable. This, I believe,  
is why my father made his sacrifice. (Coogan, 284)

A terrible, beautiful idea that has not yet lost its power to kill and maim . . . . It is inevitable that Yeats, with his rich stock of private symbols, would find in the symbolic powderhouse of the years 1916-1923, much that "contrasted violently," and out of this argument too, construct poetry. And yet: in one of his last poems, a poem with which, perhaps, he wished to conclude his canon,<sup>5</sup> Yeats reacts vigorously against Thomas Mann's declaration that "In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms." Yeats's major political poems are in part so powerful because they are sown at the site of the poet's unease.

## II

### Romance and Politics

"There are three incompatible things which man is always seeking," Yeats wrote as a young man, "infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose" (L, 111). Yeats himself also sought two not unrelated incompatible fulfillments: to be the busy man of letters, senator, and public poet deeply involved in, and pronouncing upon, all facets of Irish literature and society; and to be the lone truth seeker free of entanglements, descendant of the Alastor poet, who would say, in the words Yeats loaned to his more-than-a-little-autobiographical version of Robert Gregory,

Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,  
Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,  
A lonely impulse of delight  
Drove to this tumult in the clouds.

("An Irish Airman foresees His Death, ll. 9-12)

There is no need for me to detail here the history of Yeats's involvement or lack of involvement in the Irish nationalist cause, of his expertise or ignorance in regard to Irish history and society, since those stories have been told in great detail by various critics, most thoroughly by Malcolm Brown in his indefatigable if (I believe) often wrong-headed book, The Politics of Irish Literature, and, more recently, by Elizabeth Cullingford in Yeats, Ireland and Fascism. The radically different portraits that Brown and Cullingford draw indicate, if nothing else, just how complex and diversified Yeats's role and pronouncements about that role were. A sample from each book will be illuminating. First, Malcolm Brown:

[To read the Parnell poems requires] not only a Yeatsian ignorance, but ignorance of the ordinary sort. Remembering that a reading of Joyce is impoverished by ignorance, not enriched by it, one would judge Yeats's contrary arrangement not the best conceivable. Possibly it is to be grieved over. From The Countess Cathleen to Purgatory one is again and again struck by the incongruous match of dazzling verbal energy to fables that miscarry . . . . .  
 . . . . .  
 His attention to Irish grievances was always slight and sustained only with difficulty . . . . .  
 . . . . .  
 His flamboyant ignorance [of Irish history]. (384, 144, 362)<sup>7</sup>

Contrast then, Cullingford's view:

Politics . . . were a constant temptation . . . Ireland was the focus of his political as of his artistic interests: he was first and foremost an Irish nationalist. One of the leading characteristics of his political verse is that he speaks not as an observer but as a deeply implicated participant. (vii)

This last sentence must be, I think, subjected to considerable qualification.

Cullingford's depiction of a Yeats continually and effectively operating

within the intricate mechanisms of Irish political culture is in large part a sustained refutation of Brown's vituperative portrait of a doddering, ignorant fascist with a vast capacity for self-mystification. Fahmy Farag's apparent middle ground, "Because his politics...were derived from his aesthetic, it is abundantly clear that recruiting Yeats for a cause was almost impossible; he would always go over to the enemy" (455) is both useful and in keeping with the way Yeats would probably have thought of the question. In Explorations he wrote, after all, that a man of genius "must brood over his work so long and so unbrokenly that he find there all his patriotism, all his passion, his religion even" (137).<sup>8</sup> Such a formulation has the weakness of assuming that Yeats's "aesthetic" was formed in a vacuum, and of ignoring such poems as "The Statues," or "Under Ben Bulbin," in which political and ideological stances certainly play a major role.

As is often the case, for a balanced view it is best to turn to Richard Ellmann:

Maud Gonne was, like Yeats, a romantic, which meant that she shared his ignorance of economics, history, sociology, and politics; but her devotion to the Irish cause was as fierce as his . . . Yeats was vaguer about the means; he was certainly less sympathetic to the idea of violence, and seems to have thought, in so far as he pondered the subject at all, that a concerted wave of opinion . . . would drive England from Ireland.

(Yeats: The Man and the Masks, 102-3)

This seems to me fair, but as sometimes is the case in Ellmann's portrayal, there is perhaps an impression created of the great divides residing within Yeats's character being continually resolved into some larger, ultimately triumphant unity. It is worth noting that there is a logical

inconsistency in stating that Yeats was "fierce for the cause" but that he rarely "pondered the subject" of means. To exist in tandem, one of the terms surely needs qualification, or, better, reformulation. It is not that Ellmann's portrayal is inaccurate in any simple sense; plenty of evidence exists to support each of his details. I wish only to stress that the two opposite tendencies in Yeats's character do not balance each other out of existence. This is why the efforts of authors as opposed as Malcolm Brown and Elizabeth Cullingford (or Donald Torchiana in W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland) to use quotations from Yeats himself to demonstrate his real political allegiances are less than satisfactory. They are like taking stands on moral issues by citing one's own choice of Biblical prescriptions. The two extremes survive, and are very real. To digress slightly, while this quotation is before us, Ellmann's mildly bemused observation that Yeats seemed to think "a concerted wave of opinion . . . would drive England from Ireland," should be taken entirely seriously. Yeats did believe this--whether he would have phrased it thus is difficult to know-- and his belief was neither abstract nor foolish, since it was in large part such a "wave" that eventually accomplished the task.

The poet's profound vacillation, his attraction and repulsion vis à vis Irish nationalist politics, as well as his, to us, important tendency to translate political events into personal narratives and vice versa (in this perhaps being merely a more articulate and honest version of the rest of us); are, perhaps, in the end, better illustrated through certain emblematic incidents than described. In the late 1890s, the Irish

Republican Brotherhood was a "secret organization of physical force."

In 1897, in classic Yeatsian equivocation, the poet was a "member" of the I.R.B. but "had never taken the oath" (Hone, 145).<sup>9</sup> Six years earlier, if we can believe Seamus Deane's belief in Yeats's own interpretation of his motivations, "When the ship carrying [Parnell's] . . . remains arrived at Kingstown, Yeats was there to meet it, not because it bore the corpse of Parnell, but because it brought back to Ireland Maud Gonne" (A Short History of Irish Literature, 141).

### III

#### Politics and the Yeatsian Poetic

I think it better that in times like these  
A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth  
We have no gift to set a statesman right;  
He has had enough of meddling who can please  
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,  
Or an old man upon a winter's night.

--"On being asked for a War Poem"

On the more general question of the role of politics in the writing of poetry, of poetry's debts and obligations toward political issues, Yeats was more consistent, although there were nevertheless subtleties in his doctrine of which it is important to take note. Like many poets Yeats often expressed the feeling, not always borne out in his practice, that "in my heart of hearts I have never been quite certain that one should be more than an artist, that even patriotism is more than an impure desire in an artist" (Essays, 4). Similarly, the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky claims that poetry has no political function, serving

solely to "elongate the perspective of human sensibility" (Less Than One, 299). This search for a pure desire, a perfect transparency of emotion, is common in the prose ruminations of poets, comparable perhaps to the "naked life" as object of poetic loyalty that we saw earlier. This yearning is akin to the poet's sensation that the greatest of poetry will be music itself, pure language unsullied by circumscribing or delimiting signification. Yet of course language freed of signification--in spite of Derridean fantasies about the free play of signifiers and in spite of the current commonplace that speaks of a given work as being primarily "about" language--would not be language at all, but "Nature," just as, perhaps, pure desire, desire with no particular object, can only exist in the subconscious, with the resulting difficulty that it cannot, by definition, be spoken of or written about.

For Yeats, the value system of the State, any state, always smacked of utilitarianism, a philosophy he consistently scorned. As he wrote in a scathing critique in 1901, nineteenth century Shakespearean critics and George Eliot "grew up in a century of utilitarianism, when nothing about a man seemed important except his utility to the State, and nothing so useful to the State as the actions whose effect can be weighed by reason" (Essays, 102). In the more extreme rhetoric of his last years, even Irish nationalism becomes a transient, superficial phenomenon. In "A General Introduction For My Work," written just two years before his death, he says:

I cannot know the nature of that [coming, violent] rule, for its opposite fills the light; all I can do to bring it nearer is to intensify my hatred. I am no Nationalist, except in Ireland for passing reasons; State and Nation

are the work of intellect, and when you consider what comes before and after them they are, as Victor Hugo said of something or other, not worth the blade of grass God gives for the nest of the linnet. (Essays, 526)

Such sentiments owe their origin in part to Yeats having been steeped in the escapist element of the Romantic tradition that is perhaps best exemplified by the innumerable bowers and copses of the early Keats, especially in Endymion, a minor epic of the psyche that consists, structurally, on the topographic level, of the periodic traversing of the troubled and troubling world in transit from one "cooling covert" or "midforest brake" to the next.<sup>10</sup> When the author of a study of Keats as a narrative poet says of Endymion, "the surplus of visions, caves, and bowers slows the movement of the poem and clogs any suspense," and adds "the structure is almost buried," (Little, 41-2), she argues against herself. The first statement is true, although the word "surplus" is inappropriate concerning a poem by and large attempting to exterminate life's narrative "suspense."

The bower theme of the earlier Romantics replicates itself in various guises in the pre-Raphaelites of the 1860s and 70s. In Yeats's case we can see many examples in the early poetry, most notably the "islands" of Oisín, each having its own "leaf-hid, hollow place" (Book 1). As Richard Ellmann says of the dreaming teenager in Sligo, "Here were formulated his first esthetic theories. Poetry was to provide<sup>a</sup> refuge from the unrest of the world of action" (Yeats: The Man and the Masks, 28). Yeats never forsakes the bower entirely. This early, and lasting, influence was gradually supplemented by--or more accurately submerged within--Yeats's developing view of history as patterned, cyclical pageant in which "real" events became, in a quasi-Platonic sense, mere examples of a vaster, profound

narrative that was most fundamentally about the human soul.

When Yeats makes his claim to patriotic virtue in the early poem (c. 1892) "To Ireland in the Coming Times," he says he should be counted with Davis, Mangan, Ferguson, "Because, to him who ponders well, / My rhymes more than their rhyming tell / Of things discovered in the deep, / Where only body's laid asleep" (ll. 19-22). His subject is both national and essentialist, spiritual, below history, the "elemental creatures" (l. 23). This attitude led Yeats, as we saw above, not exactly to disparage but to qualify or contextualize the essential values of such entities as nation states. Yeats did not always espouse so neatly Platonic a view as he did when citing Goethe: "Goethe has said 'Art is art because it is not nature. It brings us near to the archetypal ideas themselves, and away from nature, which is but their looking glass'."<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the adjective "Platonic" is not adequate in regard to A Vision. But Yeats never exactly repudiated such a philosophical perspective either. The ideal, like the aesthetic, must to some extent exist for its own sake, since any attempt at translating its provisions into the actual world will inevitably involve its pollution by imperfection. As Conrad put it in Nostromo, "there was something inherent in the necessities of successful action which carried with it the moral degradation of the idea,"<sup>12</sup> as succinct an account of the course of political revolutions, including the Irish one, as can be found. This strain of Platonism colours all of Yeats's political verse and must be kept in mind, even if, at times, the shock of such events as the Easter Rising reduce it to a muted undertone.

A third element in Yeats's habitual walling off of poetry from politics is the touchy and complex issue of his class pride; his aristocratic,

at times near-fascistic contempt for a group which included in its constellation at various times the mercantile middle class alone, democrats of all sorts, and all lower classes (usually, but not always, excluding the peasantry). As is usual with Yeats, there is plenty of evidence to support widely diverging interpretations of the extent of his insensitivity in regard to his own privileged social position. It is sufficient at this point to note that Yeats's attitude toward all modern uniformities, conformities, and democratic levellings is related to this sense of the romantic, isolated, Byronic truth-seeker as the appropriate poetic model. What at times in later life became simple hatred toward anyone less than enamored of the Eighteenth Century aristocratic land-owning model of hierarchical culture Yeats increasingly espoused, was, at the best of times, a persistent sense that to touch or to be touched by the political life of the nation left one open to an "infection" by the "mob."

Conor Cruise O'Brien's portrayal of Yeats in his well-known revisionist essay, "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats," is incomplete but not extreme. Rather, it is an accurate depiction of an extreme side of Yeats's prismatic personality:

If the snobbery endemic in his class and generation takes in his writing from now on [after 1903] an almost hysterical intensity, it is, I think, that he felt himself to have undergone, in his political years, a kind of contamination, a loss of caste, through "the contagion of the throng," and that, in the end, he had suffered a deep injury to his pride. "One must accept" --he had written to Lady Gregory--". . . the baptism of the gutter". . . . .

There were moments when he felt ashamed of this hate, but it proved enduring. (O'Brien, 225)

To be fair to Yeats, any sense of "contagion" was not always class-based snobbery; it was often artistic romanticism blended with John O'Leary-style pride and individualism. In the Autobiography Yeats writes that O'Leary warned him against intimacy with those he was trying to influence:

I should have kept myself apart and alone. It was all true; through some influence from an earlier generation, from Walt Whitman perhaps, I had sat talking in public bars, had talked late into the night at many men's houses, showing all my convictions to men . . . . I did not yet know that intellectual freedom and social equality are incompatible. (154)

I would again stress that this unattractive aspect of the poet supplements rather than contradicts or cancels out O'Brien's description. In any event, Elizabeth Cullingford's quoting of O'Leary to the effect that "The middle class, I believe, in Ireland and elsewhere, to be distinctly the lowest class morally," shows there are points of merger between the two influences (Cullingford, 5).<sup>13</sup> As Yeats's poetic depictions of Ireland's convulsive encounters with violent political struggle are read in this context, it will be useful to bear in mind the proposition of Peter Stallabrass and Allon White in The Politics and Poetics of Transgression--a proposition, derived from their readings, especially, of Freud and Foucault, that they believe applicable at both the psychological and societal levels--that, "A fundamental rule seems to be that what is excluded at the overt level of identity-formation is productive of new objects of desire" (25).

Yet "Few contemporary poets," as William Irwin Thompson has written, "have been so deeply rooted in historical

events" (151). And Yeats managed to be so, Thompson adds, without being thus taken away from his art. A part of him knew this, understood that the political was a source of nourishment; and that knowledge occasionally manifested itself in the taking of more ambiguous positions on the issue. If any statement of Yeats suggests the validity of Stallybrass and White's hypothesis, it is the following extract from the "General Introduction For My Work" (1937) that concludes his Essays and Introductions volume:

I knew . . . ~~that~~ I must turn from that modern literature Jonathan Swift compared to the web a spider draws out of its bowels; I hated and still hate . . . the literature of the point of view. I wanted . . . to get back to Homer . . . I wanted to cry as all men cried, to laugh as all men laughed, and the Young Ireland poets when not writing mere politics had the same want, but they did not know that the common and its befitting language is the research of a lifetime and when found may lack popular recognition. (510-11)

Here we encounter both Yeats's hatred of "mere politics" and his desire to speak as one with the body politic. The much scorned "common" is here an object of desire. Yeats's assertion that he "wanted to cry as all men cry" might surprise the reader of such poems as "To a Wealthy Man who promised a second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures," or Part Four of "Under Ben Bulbin." How can one want to cry as all men cried when one has repeatedly accused large sections of one's native population of being capable of little more than fumbling in greasy tills and adding pence to halfpence? Suffice it to say that Yeats's vaunted self-awareness is highly selective.

It is not, on close analysis, as contradictory to say that the "common" may not be "popular" as may first appear: most popular culture is in

fact uninterested in genuine mimesis. But the formulation does express the irresolvable tension in a man who wanted both proud, untrammelled solitude (and who once wrote that "out of the ideas and emotions of the average man you can make no better thing than good rhetoric" [UP, II, 34])<sup>14</sup> and to laugh as all men laughed. It is perhaps safe to conclude that Yeats outspokenly despised the commonplace so strongly because he also yearned to be a part of it, part of the centre, of the whole; and that this frequently suppressed desire will play a role in Yeats's sense of his own position in the great and tragic events of the Ireland of his lifetime. Yeats's habit was to swing between extremes, and when he was not cursing politics he was usually deeply involved in them.

Conor Cruise O'Brien has gone so far as to render this pattern in the terms of psychosis:

Always, in the long phases of withdrawal, he tended to write of all politics with a kind of contempt, a plague-on-both-your-houses air . . . [But his] "manic" phases of political activity were no less real or important than the "depressive" phases which followed them. (264-5)

If Yeats's actual feelings swung as violently as his pronouncements (which I tend to doubt), such an analysis is not farfetched. But in such would-be paralysing conflicts Yeats somehow sensed freedom, the freedom of imaging the other, as his great poems show over and over again:

I'll: . . . By the help of an image  
I call to my own opposite, summon all  
That I have handled least, least looked upon.  
("Ego Dominus Tuus," ll. 8-10)

Complexity does not end there, however. How does one "know" the Other? How can one assert the "opposite" to be that? How can we tell which side of our character is the shadow or "image," and just exactly what, out of the storehouse of possibilities, is it a shadow or an image of?

The positions from which Yeats writes, and perceives himself to write, in the midst, or on the periphery of Irish political struggle, are no less the product of having "taken a stand" for all of Yeats's masks and antinomies. But the nature of that stance, its values and its effects, are all conditioned by the existence both of Yeats's hatred of equivocation and his defiant embracing of his Other.

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Yet perhaps some doubts about such formulations should remain. If some "thing" is the opposite of "I," how can "I" know of it? Did W. B. Yeats reconcile his own intolerance and hatred of "mere" point-of-view with his own healthy variety of opinions through a set of half-psychological, half-mystical theories about the phases of the moon, a reconciliation involving more than a little of having one's cake and eating it too?

#### IV

##### The Irish Theme

The way in which Yeats combined an obsession with, and a revulsion from, the material and political realities of Irish history, was perhaps not an oddity but a commonplace in Ireland. How Yeats would wince. Perhaps this is one reason he fascinates and irritates the Irish to this day. A passage in Seamus Deane's recent A Short History of Irish Literature suggests such

conclusions:

The Irish experience, in all its phases, has led to an enhanced sense of the frailty of the assumptions which underlie any working system of civilization and the need to create, by a persistent effort, the enabling fictions which win for it the necessary degree of acceptance. Because of this, Irish writing has traditionally been extraordinarily interrogative. It has moved between the extremes of aestheticism--seeing literature as an end in itself--and of political commitment--seeing it as an instrument for the achievement of other purposes. Most of the great writers incorporate both attitudes within their work and they share with lesser writers the conviction that the matter of Ireland is, in parvo, the matter of civilization itself. It is only in a minority culture, acclimatized to discontinuity, that such a dream of totality can be regularly entertained. (7)

(In this respect, if in few others, Yeats seems to have something in common with Joyce.) If Yeats usually rejected writing about anything like partisan political concerns, it is also true that he felt his poetic project to be indeed an "instrument for the achievement of other purposes," that purpose being something along the lines of articulating Ireland's inarticulate soul (as Joyce's Dedalus wished to articulate its conscience after forging it in the smithy of his soul). Deane's concluding thought, that "only in a minority culture, acclimatized to discontinuity" could "such a dream of totality" be entertained (Ireland being, in Deane's terminology, a minority culture in the sense of being a colonial culture), is important to this discussion on two levels. First, because in poems such as "Meditations in Time of Civil War" Yeats's position as a member of an Anglo-Irish Protestant culture that is paradoxically both privileged and increasingly marginalized will be germane to any analysis; second, because it is suggestive of how an Irish depiction of cultural history

and political turmoil might have application beyond Irish borders, since in the disillusionment and sense of dislocation of post-World War One western civilization--made manifest in such works as The Waste Land and Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises--most or all modern "cultures" sensed themselves, I believe, to be for all practical purposes "minority" cultures, cultures distant from an always illusive centre, a centre that, in any event, was not holding.

As I've just suggested, there was at least one sense in which Yeats, and his poetry, was passionately directed toward a specifically "national" purpose virtually without caveat. This was his goal of expressing some type of essential Irishness and thereby forging a unity of culture within Ireland which could, he hoped, rival in intensity and fruitfulness that unity he tended to associate most persistently with classical Athens.

Yeats tended to insist that the state was an organic unity, and in his paeon to the Irish protestant ascendancy in part two of "Blood and the Moon," approvingly cited "haughtier-headed" Burke "that proved the State a tree." In this context Norman Jeffares notes that Yeats once wrote "Burke [proved] that the State was a tree, no mechanism to be pulled in pieces and put up again, but an oak tree that had grown through centuries" (Jeffares, 327). Insinuated within a poem that seems to praise--or at least bemoan the temporary absence of--"A bloody, arrogant power" that "Rose out of the race / Uttering, mastering it, / Rose like these walls from these / Storm-beaten cottages," the emblem may seem slightly menacing, as appeals to "natural" structures always do to our post-structuralist

minds, trained as they are to hair-trigger sensitivity to the presence of possible hierarchy-erecting tropes. A tree is not only organic and slowly developing, it is essentially seamless and indivisible, arising from a single seed, bearing the traces of one origin. And Yeats's choice of the oak is not accidental, however perverse its royal and British symbolic overtones may have seemed to those of Yeats's readers who were Irish republicans. But the image is not in itself malevolent: Fascists may all hold to organicist notions of the state, but not all organicist notions of statehood are fascistic. After all, such an image connotes also both the interdependence of parts--leaves reliant upon vasculures of the trunk and so forth--and a sense in which the Irish exist prior to and outside of the cultivation and pruning carried out by any particular political organization, or any particular treaty. And what citizen, of any nation, would deny that principle? Did "France" cease to exist when the German armies entered Paris?

Joseph Brodsky likens a nation to a forest rather than a tree, and thus gains perhaps room for flexibility and diversity within the organic metaphor, since the concept of "forest" can easily survive the implantation of a few examples of new species, for instance. For Brodsky such a metaphor also carries with it the implication that state power over the social fabric is a barbarism.<sup>16</sup> Yeats would have disagreed, but only partly: the elite should control the social fabric, but no governmental structure can touch, much less control, the essence of the people, the tribe. I digress here because I believe that in his evocation of Burke's tree we can gain an inkling of what attitude lurks behind the great political poems, and can guess why Yeats could infuriate both Tory and republican.

Home Rule was greatly to be desired: the expression of Ireland's soul would thereby be facilitated. But Home Rule, or more complete independence, could never either "create" or "save" Ireland. Whatever "Ireland" was belonged to a realm in which neither Westminster nor Dail Eireann could legislate.

A true state is alive, its branchings unpredictable. To Yeats in his last years, ideology became increasingly irrelevant, geometrical fantasies; each <sup>was</sup> a puppet of vaster, less definable forces:

Besides, why should I trouble about communism, fascism, liberalism, radicalism, when all, though some bow first and some stern first but all at the same pace, all are going down stream with the artificial unity which ends every civilization? Only dead sticks can be tied into convenient bundles . . . I remember old O'Leary saying "No gentleman can be a socialist though he might be an anarchist." (L, 869)

So was Yeats an anarchist? Yes, but only until anarchy threatened to protrude its interesting head into reality. In any event, this rejection of artificial unity, and its association with the decline of Western civilization, is only the latest proposition in a life long internal argument. Yeats is here rejecting something similar to what White and Stallybrass refer to as the "classic" or the classic body:

Taking formal values from a purified mythological canon of Ancient Greek and Roman authors . . . The classical body was far more than an aesthetic standard or model. It structured, from the inside as it were, the characteristically "high" discourses of philosophy, statecraft, theology and law, as well as literature, as they emerged from the Renaissance. In the classical discursive body were encoded those regulated systems which were closed, homogenous, monumental, centred and symmetrical. (22)

The same Yeats who rejects "artificial unity" in 1936 can rail against

the mortality inevitably associated with natural and vegetative symbol and myth and the individual self in 1927 when writing "Sailing to Byzantium," a poem that serves as an introduction and lead-in to "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" in The Tower volume. There, Ireland is perceived as unsuitable for old men conscious of their transience because it is "Caught in that sensual music" wherein "all neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect" (ll. 7-8). In Byzantium one can perhaps be gathered "Into the artifice of eternity." A few years later, in "Byzantium," the desires of the earlier poem are, if not overturned, at least interrogated. In broad terms, organic metaphors tend to be associated with a "Romantic" temperament, artifice with classical and neo-classical movements. "Sailing to Byzantium" is perhaps both epitome and culmination of Yeats's "classic" period, a period seen most distinctly in the "Renaissance" nostalgia poems of Responsibilities over a decade earlier.

When reading the political poems of The Tower it is best to keep in mind that Yeats's most "romantic" poetry tends to predominate in earlier and later volumes (which is why Harold Bloom tends to think the earlier volumes underrated and the middle volumes overrated<sup>17</sup>). "Meditations in Time of Civil War" is also a meditation in time of "Sailing to Byzantium."<sup>18</sup> Is Yeats's ideal state best described by an image of organic or of artificial unity? There is no one answer, except to stress that Yeats was early and late a romantic poet, a poet of the subjective, and that a good deal of argument with that romantic self lies in between.

But doesn't "Sailing to Byzantium" address issues of the self and the self's survival in art, not issues of political theory? Is Byzantium first and foremost a country or a state of mind? The question utilizes a false dichotomy, or at least a dichotomy false for Yeats. His mystic instincts persisted. If the Byzantium poems seem to talk about the fate of the self within societal contexts, it is because--and this is crucial to an understanding of the political poetry--Yeats believed, as deeply as he believed anything, that the self was somehow both individual and unique, yet part of a transcendental, primal Self that manifested itself as the phenomenon of human history. Yeats does not, so far as I know, refer to the image, but his not-quite-Jungian, not-quite-Platonic conception of this Self is perhaps best captured in the image of the fifth century neoplatonist Dionysius Areopagite: that of a room bathed in the light of many lamps, a seamless illumination composed of multiple parts (Pseudo-Dionysius, 121). So for Yeats, nation and state of mind are not easily separable: but in Yeats's case we must reverse the terms usually used to insist upon linkage between self and community. The individual is not an image of the state, does not body forth the national essence. Rather, for Yeats, the public is the image of the private. The self is not part of the state. The state--if we can imagine this--is part of the self, one of the manifestations of the self and Self. The self is the primary term, so that even the most "classical" verse of Yeats is somehow only the work of an austere romantic. The state stands in somewhat the same relation to the self as Dail Eireann stands to the natural tree of Irishness. If, as Terry Eagleton

puts it, history is the "concealed underside" of the "ideological forms and materials" by which we process the past (Criticism and Ideology, 74), a political crisis is the visible means of approach to the concealed underside that is true history for someone like Yeats, the history of human character, personality, spirit.

In this peculiar fashion Yeats was a nationalistic, even a racist poet. The belief that there existed some core of Irishness, an Irish "theme," some commonly held set of beliefs and characteristics in the Irish population, may seem to belie his disdain for how large parts of that population actually made themselves manifest. But this contradiction was generally resolved, in Yeats's mind at least, by holding that contemporary Ireland, particularly the mercantile middle class, was infected with the rationalistic, utilitarian disease common to modern, European, capitalist society; by holding that Ireland had, in some way, forgotten itself, lost contact with its essential being. Nowadays we find it difficult to deal with spiritual nationalism without invoking fascism, but the term is, in general, part of the wrong vocabulary when discussing Yeats.

Whether such an "essential being" existed, or had ever existed, is of course a moot point: was Yeats being--like Arnold perhaps--prescriptive rather than descriptive? There is a long and not entirely honourable tradition in Ireland of searching for a pure Irishness in the folklore and customs of the relatively "unpolluted" peasantry of the Gaelic West, that semi-mythical land of spiritualism and epic simplicity. This tradition did not end with independence. Indeed, under De Valera it picked up steam:

After the War of Independence and the Civil War, in a politically divided island . . . the image of the creative unity of the West, the vision of heroic rural life in the Gaeltacht or on a western island served as a metaphor of social cohesion . . . that transcended class and politics. (Terence Brown, 92)

Even in the Ireland of 1988, rampant cynicism has not entirely extirpated such a longing. Yeats, with his intellectual roots in Shelley and other romantic theorists as well as the occult, was certainly not immune, in spite of his attachment to the Lady Gregory model of Protestant landed aristocracy, to such temptations. As Terence Brown points out in reference to Synge's The Aran Islands, "In such treatments the structural movement of the work is a journey from the bourgeois world of self to an almost pre-lapsarian innocence and community which the writer can enter or . . . employ to highlight his own Romantic, melancholic alienation" (93). This is an often neglected factor in Yeats's recognition of Synge's genius. The playwright, and to a lesser extent Yeats, I would suggest, irritated Irish opinion not by failing to idealize the Irish peasantry but by taking that idealization all too seriously. Nothing appalls moral convention of the Jansenist sort as much as prelapsarian innocence, even when it is tinged with (rather than submerged by) both melodrama and scepticism.

When attempting to locate the perspective from which the Yeatsian poetic persona addresses the public issues of his time, we must be careful to make distinction between how Yeats saw himself in relation to the body of Irish men and women, and the actual relationship. For example, Yeats may not have always been as iconoclastic vis à vis Irish popular self-conceptions as he liked to think. When Irish cultural historians note

that public support for De Valera's nationalistic and protectionist economic policies of the 1930s can be accounted for by

the fact that there was in much of the country a deep urge toward self-sufficiency, a conviction that the life of an Irish small farm represented a purity and decency of life that could set Ireland apart from the more commercial societies that surrounded her (Terence Brown, 145),

we realize Yeats and the philistine votes he frequently professed to despise had much in common, and that it was not Yeats but a poor County Monaghan farmer named Patrick Kavanagh who would dissect such apparent verities of Irish identity.

Yeats's search for an essence of Irishness is, in the considered opinion of some recent commentators, one of his more troubling legacies. Seamus Deane, in both his Short History of Irish Literature and his Field Day pamphlet (#3) Civilians and Barbarians, has detailed the marginalization of Irish culture that has in part led the Irish to make a virtue of necessity by distinguishing themselves from their "civilized" conquerors, but of course doing this by reversing the hierarchy of values in order to assert how Ireland is in fact the genuinely moral and civilized polity. This is part of a continuing discourse with a lengthy history:

Cambrensis introduced the distinction between the barbarous Irish and their civilizing conquerors which was to form a permanent part of the ideology of conquest and domination for succeeding centuries. (Deane, A Short History, 16)

And it is a process which has included justifications for violence on both sides long before Padraic Pearse sought martyrdom to preserve the purity of the holy Gael from English depredations and corruptions. In the

seventeenth century, for example, John Davies wrote a Discovery of the Three Causes Why Ireland Was Never Entirely Subdued:

. . . the husbandman must first break the land before it can be made capable of good seed: and when it is thoroughly broken and manured, if he do not forthwith cast good seed into it, it will grow wild again . . . so a barbarous country must first be broken by war before it will be capable of good government; and when it is fully subdued and conquered, if it be not well planted and governed after the conquest, it will eftsoons return to the former barbarisms. (Deane, Civilians and Barbarians, 5)

The Irish are not even granted the status of a people combating British suzerainty. They represent merely a force of randomness, of indiscriminate pollination to be counteracted by proper crop management. Manuring the landscape is, however, as eloquent a metaphor as any for the actions in Ireland of Davies' contemporary, Oliver Cromwell.

The dream of securing a cultural, non-English essence that arose in the late nineteenth century in response to such brutal chauvinisms helped create, in Deane's mind, the sorts of intransigent quests for purity that led to the eventual fracturing of the island, and that indeed haunt it still: "we can discern," he writes, "in the figure of Cuchulain, the tragic emblem of Ireland's political strife and her dream of cultural unity. For Ireland, caught by the dream of integration, had enacted the process of disintegration. The country had found in actuality the perfect opposite to what it conceived in its imagination" (A Short History, 157). Terence Brown has suggested that while other Europeans spent the 1920s and 1930s debating the very nature of society, "Irishmen and women, writers, artists and workers, have committed themselves to a vision of national destiny which has often meant a turning away from such uncomfortable social reality to conceptions of the nation as a spiritual entity that can compensate for

a diminished experience" (105).

The debate over the nature of national identity has reared its mottled head with renewed vigour in contemporary Ireland, a debate spanning the cultural spectrum from academic journals such as the new Irish Review published from Cork to the pages of the daily press. The debate is now characterized most often by scepticism and revisionism. The second number of the Irish Review follows the first in containing articles with titles such as "Romanticism in Ruins: Developments in Recent Irish Cinema," "Between Tradition and Modernity: Cultural Values and the Problems of Irish Society," and "Atavism and Innovation: Reflections on Culture and Nationality in Ireland," in which Eamon O'Flaherty leads off the first page of the journal with the irrefutable statement that "The past twenty years have seen a proliferation of debates about Irish nationalism and cultural identity." The poet Eavan Boland has been prompted to cry out in sheer frustration, "Let us be rid at last of any longing for cultural unity, in a country whose <sup>most</sup> precious contribution may be precisely its insight into the anguish of disunity . . . For there is, and at last I recognize it, no unity whatsoever in this culture of ours" (Garratt, Modern Irish Poetry, 10). Seamus Heaney has called for the mining of an even deeper sense of history in order to "widen the terms of the answer which each side could give to the question, 'Who do you think you are?'" ("Place, Pastness, Poems: A Triptych," 37). The contemporary Irish have an obsession with "cultural identity" to rival that of Canadians, although the debate flowers from seeds of opposite popular premises: in Canada, that national identity has been heretofore under-determined and thereby threatened by dilution;

in Ireland, that it has been over-determined and thereby threatened by a deadly compaction.

But the argument over identity contains polarities difficult to mediate. For without self-consciousness of some type of "identity" such as Yeats sought for Ireland, how can a nation secure for its individuals any sense of collective endeavour, any of the security arising from a sense of belonging to a whole larger than themselves? Seamus Deane has argued that Yeats's "rhetoric of 'We Irish'," most conspicuous in such poems as "The Statues" and "Under Ben Bulbin," constitutes a lamentable heritage; that, as Denis Donaghue paraphrases,<sup>19</sup> "the wretched state of the North is at least partly due to the fact that its two communities have inherited stereotyped images of themselves which, subconsciously, they live and die to resemble . . . Yeats . . . did much to present the question of Irishness as a moral criterion" (We Irish, 8). But, Donaghue goes on to argue with characteristic precision,

even in philosophical terms, the question is not vain . . . a mind does not show itself to be dizzy merely by assuming that the meaning of a particular historical existence issues from a situation which may be beyond the reach of historical scholarship. Nothing is gained, and only the satisfaction of ridicule is acquired, by scorning "essence" as an object of interest and concern . . . . Indeed, I am not sure that Deane or anyone else could indicate the point at which an acceptable degree of self-consciousness can be distinguished from a vain "essentialism." (9)

Where does the search for a concretely articulated national identity blend into prescription and intolerance, even into fascism? At what point does the refusal to define oneself as a nation in any given terms melt

into blandness, alienation and disintegration, to all of which Yeats set himself in opposition. Clearly, as a Canadian, I find these questions to be both infuriatingly complex and undeniably germane.

# V

## "Down, down, hammer them down": Yeats and Political Violence (1)

It seems obvious that Yeats's attitude toward political violence in general will play a role in governing his response to particular events in which physical force surges to the forefront, and that the nature of this response will subsequently serve as impetus to write (or inhibition against writing), as arbiter in the selection of subject matter once writing commences, and as shaper, modifier, and even suppressor of the contents of the material chosen, of "history." Opinions on a given issue held prior to a particular encounter with an incident relevant to that issue--what we commonly refer to as "tendencies," "inclinations," or, more generally, "character"--function somewhat as molds into which exterior materials are fitted.

We might best think of the average human being as both containing an astonishing number of such molds--so that the one apparently most appropriate for containing the incoming data may be chosen--and as being forever deficient in this regard nevertheless. The world is forever a superfluity in comparison to our small vessels of intellection, rationalization, prejudice, and categorization. Because of this the molds of opinion, even given an extraordinary degree of care, inevitably shape as well as contain: that is, a particular incident is inevitably hewn by a prior tendency into which it doesn't quite fit. (Objectivity and subjectivity

are not factors here: the molds consist of elements of subjectivity in my allegory.) This operation goes on in an interweaving of conscious and subconscious modes that can never be fully unravelled. We think we know many of our tendencies, but in the shock of an unexpected and forceful event, we may well be startled by what results.

So it is clear that a knowledge of Yeats's views on the issue of politically motivated violence will be crucial in determining how and why he has shaped the materials of history as he knew them, and if an event has precipitated a confirmation or a revaluation of previously held verities about the political world and the nature of Ireland, about his place within that milieu, and about his attitude toward it. Unfortunately for the shapeliness of this argument--but no doubt fortunately in regard to the richness and variety of the poetry--on this issue as on so many others Yeats hammered his thoughts not into a unity but into an argument; or, perhaps, hammered his thoughts into a unity that his emotions took continual delight in disrupting. (To put it another way, it is extremely difficult to determine the degree of Yeats's self-awareness about the contradictory nature of his statements. It is a habit of many critics of great writers to assume self-awareness at all points, and, for others such as J. Hillis Miller, to identify evidence of their texts' self-awareness as the nexus of genius.<sup>19a</sup> But one element of the writings of Jacques Derrida that is of indubitable utility in regard to literature is his recognition that complete self-

awareness is something of a contradiction in terms. And I suspect that in reality, such a feat of consciousness would produce not superb poetry but paralysis.)

Yeats voices sufficiently numerous paeans to a violence deemed preferable to vacillation or compromise, and to a hatred preferable to weakness of spirit (thus, in part, his affinity for Nietzsche), to make it possible to paint him as a proponent, or at least an admirer, of violent upheaval. It is useful, I believe, to hold balance temporarily in abeyance and proceed with the lineaments of such a portrait.

The imagination itself is a close cousin to struggle, suggests Douglas Archibald in Yeats, particularly for the Irish writer, to whom the "idea of thralldom" is anathema: "the sense of struggle, with its accompanying wariness and ambivalence, defines one form of imaginative interaction" (xiii). After all, in any political struggle, including, for example, the brutal and brutalizing depredations of the Republican and Unionist paramilitary thugs of Northern Ireland, there is a battle for imaginative hegemony over the terms of the argument. The "exploitation of events by both sides," comments Seamus Deane, "demonstrates over and over again the endlessness of the battle for supremacy of one kind of discourse, one set of political attitudes, over another" (Civilians and Barbarians, 12). William Irwin Thompson is not alone in suggesting that the revolutionaries of 1916 "lived as if they were in a work of art." Thompson adds that perhaps a blurring of "reality" and the world of the imagination is "one very important characteristic of a revolutionary" (ix).

In achieving a hearing for his own discourse, Yeats learned early on

the value of at least speaking violently. In the Autobiography he writes that shortly after meeting John O'Leary, "I had begun, as would any other of my training, to say violent and paradoxical things to shock provincial sobriety" (63-64), and this was to become a tactic of his poetry as well, particularly in the late volumes. Provincial sobriety represented to Yeats a damming of the spirit that violence of some sort needed to dynamite. But physical violence? At times, yes, at least when considered theoretically, from a distance. And not just when considered by the irascible, elderly Yeats penning the words of Crazy Jane. Yeats found himself in 1887 between two opposing influences--each consonant with one part of himself--his father, and Maud Gonne. He came down on the side of the latter, at least for the moment: "I remember nothing of her speech that day except that she vexed my father by praise of war . . . and found those uncontrovertible Victorian reasons, that seemed to announce so prosperous a future, a little grey" (Memoirs, 40). If Hone's account can be trusted, "Willie agreed with her" (67). The lovestruck Yeats, 22 at the time, may of course have had ulterior motives. Many commentators have, indeed, tended to suggest that any advocacy of political radicalism by Yeats was due to the pursuit of the martial Maud. But whether or not such a consideration coloured his expressions of nationalist ardour, statements throughout his life repeat the spirit of the anecdote, statements coming both before and after his hopes in regard to Maud Gonne.

Cullingford adds the influence of William Morris to the pot, but indulges in a similar old Yeats/young Yeats dichotomy: "Both Morris and O'Leary insisted upon the need for revolution, and Yeats was equally ready

to envisage the destruction of society. 'Certainly I and all about me . . . were for chopping up the old king for Medea's pot' . . . His older self stigmatized as 'hysteria' his earlier romantic committment to rebellion" (17). As Malcolm Brown insists, "Yeats's overexcited state of mind might seem charmingly youthful and Shelleyan. But it needed only another crisis and comrades in Sam Brown belts to produce the unamusing adventurism of 1932" (366). (Yeats actually did less in 1932 than Brown likes to imply--and that too is revealing.)

Brown accurately ties Yeats's predilection for upheaval to an attraction toward some sort of mystical apocalypse that would reassert the primacy of the soul:

Prosperity he rejected on behalf of his countrymen [Yeats rejected materialism, not prosperity] as he spoke a very great deal about Ireland's preference for "visions of unfulfilled desire ." All this added up to an elaborate endorsement of Douglas Hyde's retreat to the proposition that Irish spirituality and Irish poverty were two sides of one priceless coin . . . There was an important difference, though, between them. The gentle Hyde, angry at no living soul, thought his object could be achieved peacefully. But Yeats anticipated a need for physical force. He could not draw his mind from [MacGregor] Mathers' bloody apocalypse, from overheated meditations on "The Valley of the Black Pig." There, as prologue to the soul's reconquest of the world, "the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries / of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears." (368)

Of course writing about violent apocalypse does not make Yeats its advocate, any more than it does Matthew Arnold (whose "Dover Beach", it has always seemed to me, may have influenced the rhythm, imagery, and topography of "The Valley of the Black Pig"), or St. John the Evangelist. But Yeats is undeniably drawn to the subject, and passionately inhabits it to the

extent that some critics, most notably Ivor Winters, Frank Kermode, and Harold Bloom, have felt--with little justification, I believe--that Yeats welcomes the "rough beast" of "The Second Coming." When Cullingford asks whether Yeats was "horrified or delighted by the advent of the roughbeast,"<sup>20</sup> the best answer seems to be horrified, but also fascinated, to the extent that part of him could delight in it: thus the vibrancy of his apocalyptic poems. Cullingford reminds us that there is nothing specifically fascist about this fascination: "Yeats is chided for looking forward to the crash, but Marxists look forward to the Revolution with equal enthusiasm" (160). She concludes, incidentally, that Yeats's "philosophy sanctioned conflict, but not murder" (124). This is perhaps accurate in a manner she does not entirely intend, as will be seen later. Peter Costello may not be far off the mark when he states in his book The Heart Grown Brutal: The Irish Revolution in Literature, that "violence disturbed him, because he wondered if it was not the only way in which to create that supremacy of feeling which he admired" (205). Another critic has emphasized Yeats's attraction to ekstasis and to a Dionysian sense of ritual sacrifice (Hassett, 60).

There are times, it must be admitted, when Yeats's ambiguity of feeling on the issue resolved itself into a more wholesale endorsement of violent conflict, into an almost bouyant anticipation of cataclysm. This seems to me to have been an outgrowth not only of Yeats's view of history's revolving cones. I believe it was also related to two other tendencies acting in combination: his sense of himself as part of an intellectual and spiritual elite and that elite's crucial role in A Vision-style history,

and his cultivation, at certain periods in his life, of hatred as the only healthy, vitalizing response to the place and time in which he found himself living. It is a combination that will bear directly upon my study of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

I have already cited the passage from "A General Introduction for My Work" in which Yeats appears to wish to cultivate the prospect of impending violence that will install in Europe "some kind of rule of kindred," a violence "issuing" from a "vague hatred": "I cannot know the nature of that rule, for its opposite fills the light; all I can do to bring it nearer is to intensify my hatred" (Essays, 526). There is something in this, to be sure, of Yeats's sense of the proud, aristocratic mode of tragic irony, an irony including a refusal, like Yeats's version of Cuchulain, to mourn inevitable death and destruction, and to choose rather to laugh high-spiritedly in its face. As early as 1901 Yeats wrote of such irony (in a less horrific context), and attributed it to Shakespeare, who, he asserted, watched the face of Henry V "cheerfully, as one watches some handsome spirited horse, and he spoke his tale, as he spoke all tales, with tragic irony" (Essays, 109). (The horse and rider was of course to become Yeats's most enduring symbol of grace and independence, of a fusion of mind and body. This will be important later. Since in the west of Ireland the poor rural classes did not generally possess riding horses, the emblem has a strong, and intentional, class connotation.) This sense of tragic irony can at times blend into a delighted acceptance of forthright action however bloody. At times, in certain forms, it appalls me in a way similar to John Updike's dictum that that which is needed, is beautiful.<sup>21</sup>

A number of letters that Yeats wrote to Ethel Mannin

in 1936 express the conviction that the emotions of the elite are a sufficient power to speed the arrival of such upheavals: why should he concern himself with communism or any other "ism"? "My rage and that of others like me seems more important--though we may but be the first of the final destroying horde " (L, 869). In Explorations Yeats writes that when he was a boy "everybody talked about progress, and rebellion against my elders took the form of aversion to that myth. I took satisfaction in certain public disasters, felt a sort of ecstasy at the contemplation of ruin" (392). Elizabeth Cullingford, in citing this passage, directs our attention toward Nietzsche: "Yeats responded more positively to Nietzsche's denial of progress, and prophecies of coming anarchy and destruction . . . This ecstasy found dramatic expression in the quasi-Nietzschean play Where There Is Nothing" (74-5). Malcolm Brown adds the description "those harsher Carlylean elements of his own thought" (135). The link to Nietzsche is relevant, but not essential: Yeats as a boy had not read Nietzsche. The fascination with the collapse of civilization is part of the Romantic ethos: perhaps it holds out the possibility of the spirit being purified, revealed in its clarity as the dross of centuries of accretion and acculturation are burnt away. Thomas McFarlane's brilliant study Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin might provide the stimulus for a study of this aspect of Yeats's personality and poetry, one to complement the detailed analyses of Yeats's affinities with Nietzsche by Cullingford and <sup>by</sup> Otto Bohlmann in his Yeats and Nietzsche. (Yeats's cultivation of hatred as both a psychological and political fertilizer is discussed in detail by Joseph Hassett in his recent book Yeats and the Politics of Hate.)

In the end, hatred, and its possible accompaniment violence, were not so much positive values in themselves so much as they were examples of extravagance, of excess, and thus always preferable, in the Yeats canon, to the containment of restraint or indifference. It is not surprising that he so deeply admired Blake. They are examples of overflow, a sexually charged image Yeats used from early on for which we will be on the lookout in the great political sequences. As he wrote in 1899,

In literature, or politics, or art, or anything else, extravagance was merely the shavings from the carpenter's bench. It was an overflow of energy. It was, no doubt, regrettable; no doubt all human errors were regrettable, but extravagance was far better than that apathy or cynicism which were deep besetting sins here in Dublin.<sup>22</sup>

Geoffrey Thurley has adduced the influence of a sentence from the letters of John Keats in such a sentiment: "Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man shows a grace in his quarrel" (151). The congruence between Yeats's thought and the passage is more detailed than Thurley realizes. Keats most specifically parallels Yeats by separating the quarrel from the quarrellers, the brawl from the brawlers. Yeats was inclined to forgive a violent act--or at least qualify his disapproval--if he sensed in it a transformative effect on the character of the perpetrator or the witnesses. If Conrad felt character was fate, Yeats tended to insist that character was history. This tendency, I will argue, is a component of his complex poetic reaction to the Easter Rising.

In its most extreme form, Yeats's advocacy of conflict as essential

to the vitality of the human soul manifested itself in anecdotes as repulsive as that narrated by Joseph Hone concerning 1937. Asked by a Professor Bose for a "message for India" (then undergoing intense ethnic tensions and internecine violence), Yeats simply suggested a good healthy war:

"Let 100,000 men of one side meet the other," [Yeats answered.] "That is my message to India, insistence on the antinomy." He strode swiftly across the room, took up Sato's sword, and unsheathed it dramatically and shouted, "Conflict, more conflict!" (459)

It would be pleasant to believe that such impulses do not enter into the poetry, that the poetry represents some "better half" of Yeats hermetically sealed off from such nasty foolishness; or to think that this side of his philosophy only appears in the vague, abstract, and even not fully decipherable forms of poems such as "The Valley of the Black Pig" and "The Second Coming" as read by Winters. This is of course not possible: such advocacy of conflict is too large a component of Yeats's nature, and the poetry too persistent and honest in figuring forth that nature, for the two to avoid meeting.

If this side of Yeats does not dominate what we consider to be his finest poems it is partly because of the extent to which a poem's ideology, its moral stance, does play a role in its being read and re-read, in its being studied and loved, by large numbers of people; and partly because Yeats's best poetry was produced when conflicting elements within him were allowed to combine, not so much as a neutralized middle ground, but as a tightrope taut with the tension of passion, and rocking with the jousting being carried out upon it. The sense of extreme compression, of almost dangerous vibrancy, in poems

such as "Easter 1916," is that of the effect created by placing a large number of people in a small space. I would like to glance at a few minor poems then, poems that are governed by an attraction to conflict, not to demonstrate that the major poems are also so governed, but merely to suggest that these attitudes are part of the poetry, and therefore are an ingredient in the mixture composing the finest of Yeats's poems, an ingredient that should not be ignored.

The exhilaration that violence (or, better, the threat of violence) engendered in Yeats seemed to reach its peak in 1933 and 1934, when the Europe-wide fear of communism found its way to Ireland, somewhat ironically in light of the dismal, disorganized history of Irish socialist and labour movements. This is not the place for a history of Yeats's flirtation with the fascism of O'Duffy's Blueshirts that briefly rose in response to such fears. From the evidence of the poetry, letters, and essays, I feel that Elizabeth Cullingford's evaluation--"for less than a year Yeats gave qualified support to the Blueshirts, but abandoned them before their collapse" (144)--is as balanced as any. Yeats's meeting with O'Duffy left him less than impressed, although it didn't prevent him from completing "Three Songs to the Same Tune" and publishing them in A Full Moon in March.

The poem seems to me one of Yeats's worst, not because of its "aristocratic" sentiments (to use a kind word), but because it is fundamentally incoherent, or, at least, so vague as to be unreadable in the specific national, historical context its invocations of Ireland, Emmett, Parnell, and so forth insist on. Part two of the poem, for example, cries out the command to "Justify all those renowned generations," and is punctuated by these lines as refrain:

"Drown all the dogs," said the fierce young woman,  
 "They killed my goose and a cat.  
 Drown, drown in the water-butt,  
 Drown all the dogs," said the fierce young woman.

The poem directs us toward allegory, but who are the dogs? What do the goose and the cat symbolize?

Perhaps relying on anecdotes involving dogs and militia mined from the letters, Elizabeth Cullingford suggests, with what seems to me misplaced confidence, that the young woman represents the <sup>Blueshirts,</sup> <sub>^</sub> who "now appear, in what was once to have been their own song, as an illustration of fanaticism" (209) --though the poem is not itself made more coherent by clues accidentally surviving in letters to friends. The tone of the verse is such that it is impossible to know whether we are to assume the "fierce young woman" is someone to whom we should listen or someone we should criticize, and therefore whether the dogs might be those who are supposed to justify the renowned generations, or those who brought down the renowned generations in the first place. A glance at the preceding poem in A Full Moon in March, where the same heroes named in "Three Songs" are proud quarry dragged down like a stag brought down by dogs, might suggest the latter to be more likely.

This call to drown such dogs would then be congruent with the refrain of part three:

Those fanatics all that we do would undo;  
 Down the fanatic, down the clown;  
 Down, down, hammer them down,  
 Down to the tune of O'Donnell Abu.

It is difficult to take seriously a poem that decries fanaticism so fanatically. It is even more difficult to say with any certainty whether the poem depicts others calling for violence or calls for it itself: we can only be sure, I think, that Yeats revels in the ferocity, revels from

the detached position he felt consistent with tragic irony, a position so detached, so proud in a sense, that he strikes a tone that neither advocates nor condemns, merely marches delightedly along. But again, given the poem's situation following "Parnell's Funeral," in which Yeats's historical theory that "An age is the reversal of an age" (l. 16) is put forward, and given the insistence in "Three Songs to the Same Tune" that "The soldier takes pride in saluting his Captain" and that this pride has begun to disappear, it is not too far fetched to argue that the words of the poem, qualified only slightly by the mocking tone, call for a restoration of the élite to their proper place and a hammering down of the upstart democrats. This can be argued; it cannot be proven. What is most clear about the poem is the detachment of the narrator to the extent that, perhaps by design, his position on a particular cause cannot be determined, even in a poem locating itself at a specific historical juncture; and that this narrator delights in violence and exhorts his listeners to hammer down the fanatics with fanatic hammers. As the Grandfather says in part one, "good strong blows are delights to the mind." A similar narrative stance and attitude will reappear in more modulated versions in more important, less intellectually dishonest poems.

That Yeats tended to cheer on conflict and upheaval against the constricting dullness in the Ireland of the 1930s, and also feared such upheaval at times, realizing on occasion that his vehemence was less than tolerable to many people, is plain enough in his remarkable letter to Olivia Shakespeare in July of 1933:

Politics are growing heroic. De Valera has forced political thought to face the most fundamental issues. A Fascist opposition is forming behind the scenes to be ready should some tragic situation develop. I find myself constantly urging the despotic rule of the educated classes as the only end to our troubles. (Let all this sleep in your ear.) . . . There is so little in our stocking that we are ready at any moment to turn it inside out, and how can we not feel emulous when we see Hitler juggling with his sausage of stocking . . . The chance of being shot is raising everybody's spirits enormously . . . History is very simple--the rule of the many, then the rule of the few, day and night, night and day forever . . . (L, 811-12)

But 1933 was not the only year in which Yeats would produce poems which, on balance, admire more than censure the violent act. Because, of course, history is not simple, as Yeats discovered by examining his own emotional response to the Easter rising.

Yeats published his poem "The Rose Tree," written in 1917, in his 1921 volume Michael Robartes and the Dancer, almost thirty years after his extended meditation on that emblem in The Rose. It served as part of a suite of poems about the rising that included "Easter 1916," "Sixteen Dead Men," and "On a Political Prisoner." With an iambic pulse that is, for Yeats, unusually pronounced, its rhyme scheme, its alternating lines of four and three stresses, and its recounting of a supposed conversation between two historical figures, the poem is something of an abbreviated ballad or ballad fragment, ballad being the <sup>popular</sup> form traditionally suited to doing justice to important events--although, as in the preceding poem, "Sixteen Dead Men," Yeats has extended the stanza from quatrain to sestet.

Although the sentiments of the poem are attributed to Pearse and James Connolly, the lines show no trace of irony on the poet's part, so

that we can only assume the poem's sentiments are meant to be read in a straightforward manner: only martyrdom can save Ireland. This is made all the more apparent in that the poem continues the theme of "Sixteen Dead Men" that "talk is cheap": "O but we talked at large before / The sixteen men were shot" ("Sixteen Dead Men," ll. 1-2). With these lines Yeats transforms the lone "I" of "Easter 1916" (which precedes "Sixteen Dead Men" in Michael Robartes and the Dancer), who also "lingered awhile and said / Polite meaningless words," into a more communal "we." Yeats was not alone in ridiculing the revolutionaries before-the-act as hapless dreamers: it is the isolated remorse of that "I" in "Easter 1916" that is remarkable, not the shared guilt of "Sixteen Dead Men," a point to which I shall be returning. There is plentiful historical testimony to the attitudes of pre-Easter Dubliners; we see it entering literature in splendid and entertaining form in Denis Johnston's The Scythe and the Sunset, where in Act One Roisin reflects popular sentiment by rebutting MacGinnis's excuse that he acts on "orders from the chief a staff" with "That's what I am meself . . . The chief an' all the staff. There's no plavin' at wars for this Judy" (338). The scepticism of most bemused Dublin bystanders reaches a comic climax late in the act when MacCarthy, witnessing the takeover of the Post Office from his vantage point in the Pillar Café, comes away from the window to offer his sardonic appraisal of the situation, "Maybe they just want to buy some stamps" (344).

Cullingford properly refers to "The Rose Tree" as a "traditional celebration of blood sacrifice" (97), but it isn't quite that simple in the third

stanza. "The Rose Tree" is, in and of itself, a virtual cypher, merely repeating the doctrine of blood sacrifice to water the soul of the nation that was common in the patriotic literature not only of Pearse but of pre-War Europe as a whole.<sup>23</sup>

"But where can we draw water,"  
Said Pearse to Connolly,  
"When all the wells are parched away?  
O plain as plain can be  
There's nothing but our own red blood  
Can make a right Rose Tree."

This was a doctrine which of course formed a central part of Pearse's writings, a doctrine which Pearse, for one, could also see in Irish myth:

A love of service so excessive as to annihilate all  
thought of self, a recognition that one must give all,  
must be willing always to make the ultimate sacrifice--  
this is the inspiration alike of the story of Cuchulainn  
and of the story of Colmcille . . .<sup>24</sup>

As Seamus Deane comments in response, Pearse "was not an inspired writer; but he taught the doctrine of inspiration with extraordinary effect" (Celtic Revivals, 68). The poem, then, merely repeats a commonplace, giving no hint of authorial approval or disapproval.

Did Yeats accept, even provisionally, the doctrine of blood sacrifice? I would argue that "The Rose Tree" only speaks at all in conjunction with "Sixteen Dead Men" and "Easter 1916." In the latter, Yeats rebukes himself for "polite meaningless words" that stand in contrast to a sacrifice which has given birth to that potent oxymoron, terrible beauty. In "Sixteen Dead Men," he re-enters the community and stresses, in the first person plural, the obscenity of talking "of give and take," of "What should be and what not," "While those dead men are loitering there / To stir the boiling

pot" (st. 1). Their deaths have refuted all logic, all argument: the very structure of argumentation, the second stanza stresses, has been amputated: there is no way to offer rebuttal "Now Pearse is deaf and dumb." Language itself, here seen fundamentally as a vehicle for discussion, for the mediation of viewpoints and ideas, of "give and take," has been rendered rootless, with no soil in which to flourish.

The opening line of "The Rose Tree," then, "O words are lightly spoken," is clearly intended to follow directly upon this view of language versus action, and renders the speaker, Pearse, in accord with the narrator of "Sixteen Dead Men." The tree, perhaps, has been withered by "politic words," that is, not only prudent words, but the words of political discourse as opposed to political action. The setting is mythical. Ireland is not restored, but the Rose Tree. Yet historical figures are speaking! Here I think we see the mode of "Three Songs to the Same Tune" recurring, as if Yeats must pull back just this far--to a perspective on the blurred border of history and myth--at the moment of the affirmation of violence. With that not inconsequential caveat, it is difficult to come to any conclusion other than that in "The Rose Tree" Yeats forsakes, at this point in 1917,<sup>25</sup> the passionate equivocation of "Easter 1916" and finds the deaths, and their "lustral liquid",<sup>26</sup> worthwhile, the Rose Tree restored as "the garden's pride," pride being almost always a virtue in the Yeatsian dictionary. It is a chilling moment for a reader of Yeats's great lifelong sequence of poems. I believe Yeats intended it to be a chilling moment, written, as it seems to have been, out of an emotion as cold and passionate as the dawn.

That this poem resides in the same canon as "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," the brief lyric which follows the monumental "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" in 1919's The wild Swans at Coole, is heavily ironic--perhaps bitterly ironic from the perspective of an Irish republican--and is a testimony to Yeats's remarkable ability to write so powerfully out of each of his reverberating inclinations. For the notion of a blood sacrifice (which played some role in making the slaughter of World War One possible) entails the radical suppression of the self to the ideal of nationhood, a denial of the ego in a manner heavily influenced by the virtues, or excesses, of the Christian saints and mystics. This interpretation of the life and death of Pearse, in particular, began very early. In an essay by a Cathaoir O'Braonain, published in 1918, Pearse's Catholic faith is stressed, becomes the signifier that lends meaning to all else. Pearse, O'Braonain holds,

saw life as a poet sees it, and he would have expressed it in the songs of a poet, only that he heard a call which for him was the more insistent because it was a call from without. His was one of those finer spirits which express themselves best by sacrifice. So he stilled the voice within . . . <sup>27</sup>

(An essay on MacDonagh in the same volume emphasizes that he too died "a most devout and resigned Catholic."<sup>28</sup>) It is difficult to think of a sentiment which would have more thoroughly horrified Yeats. Pearse, the early hagiographies panegyricize, expressed his most genuine self by suppressing his inner voices, by listening to a call more insistent because it came from without; and thus by and large giving up poetry, which is portrayed here as an essentially willful activity. In "An Irish Airman ~~for~~sees his Death," the young man, implicitly a nobleman or aristocrat,

is driven to "this tumult in the clouds" not by a sense of duty but by "A lonely impulse of delight," an impulse, in the Romantic tradition, which also spurs one to poetry. (The line is reminiscent of more than one moment in Wordsworth in both rhythm and sentiment.)

The poem is written shortly after, but published before, "The Rose Tree," and one has a sense both of Yeats now regaining his equilibrium and detachment, writing of the distant, elevated airman in the first person, and therefore a sense of the sort of jolt to his "system" that the Rising must indeed have been to have produced the earlier poem. There is no possibility of blood sacrifice for the airman, for the Robert Gregory-Yeats blend who, despite his sympathy for "Kiltartan's poor," can never do anything to help them, who is, perhaps, willingly or not, irredeemably cut off, distanced from the attractive yet repulsive linkage of blood that "liberates" a Patrick Pearse into the extreme suppression of the self. It is no coincidence that "The Rose Tree" recites the words of others, while in "An Irish Airman" the character speaks in an inevitably Yeats-tinged first person singular. It is just this problem of Yeats's sense of his own location within an increasingly polarized Irish culture that I wish to examine in the major political poems.

The position of the airman is, I believe, not meant to be read as peculiar to Gregory, or to Yeats. The poem follows immediately upon "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," and there is no sense denying that Gregory serves as the poem's inspiration. But as is too often the case, critics, of whom in Yeats studies Norman Jeffares is probably the most influential

offender, carelessly slip into the habit of jumping from this fact to saying the speaker "is" Robert Gregory, or the beloved "is" Maud Gonne. This is demonstrably not the case. Yeats was not reticent about using proper names, and the fact is in this poem he chose not to do so. To equate the airman with Gregory (or with anyone else) in any simple way, gives the poem a colouration both not intended by Yeats and not supported by the text in front of us. The situation of the airman is very much that of many Irishmen and women of a certain class and heritage in this transitional decade. Placing the poem where he does, Yeats no doubt intends us to read the second poem back upon the first and conclude that indeed Robert Gregory is a prime example of such an airman. By placing these two poems side by side, the latter explicitly not a celebration of communal or political violence, I wish to pinpoint conflicting desires in Yeats: the urge to be one with Ireland and the Irish in a bond that could make violent political action genuinely meaningful and even fruitful in that elusive unification of the Irish soul, to be able to realize that mystic and romantic urge-to-the-apocalypse-of-unity in this time and this place; and the desire to be what he also feared himself to be, an Anglo-Irish, Protestant, politically moderate poet, an outsider, above and beyond the "grubbing" of Dublin shopkeepers and the sniping of Irish revolutionaries. To that end, it is important that the airman not "be" Robert Gregory so that he can also be in part William Butler Yeats.

"The Rose Tree" as emblem for Yeats's occasional and certainly under-

standable capacity for celebrating the virtues of violent upheaval, can be paired usefully with another poem, the early and quite amateurish "The Secret Rose," a poem that on the whole sounds a bit like a parody of the early Keats. The poem, alluding to both rosicrucian and other mystical meanings of the rose emblem and to specifically Irish mythology (ll. 13-15), serves as a forerunner to the odd mythological-political blend of "The Rose Tree" by folding general symbolic connotations into an Irish context. The poem also foreshadows the post-Easter verses in that it associates the rose with a force instigating some kind of apocalyptic climax that will enwrap the speaker into his "hour of hours," some greater soul, it would appear, wherein are contained seekers of truth and beauty ranging from the Magi to Cuchulain (who is not named, but pointed to in the combination of Fand and Emer). What is awaited and welcome is clearly a violent catastrophe, yet so generalized--limned with Revelations-style imagery--that it seems an exaggeration to call the poem bloodthirsty in any way:

I, too, await  
The hour of thy great wind of love and hate.  
When shall the stars be blown about the sky,  
Like the sparks blown out of a smithy, and die?  
Surely thine hour has come, thy great wind blows,  
Far off, most secret, and inviolate Rose? (ll. 27-32)

It is only the mention of love and hate that gives the finale a human tinge at all.

In this way, combined with the echo one hears in the penultimate line, "The Secret Rose" is also an ancestor of "The Second Coming." The speaker's attraction to the apocalypse does not indicate a similar feeling in the later poem, intensified as it has been in the pressures of a violent decade--quite

the opposite, in fact. Again, I am not pointing to this poem as one in which Yeats "advocates" actual violence in any specific way; but to read the poem against "The Rose Tree" is perhaps to see some of the emotional baggage, some of the hopes and fears, that Yeats brings to an atmosphere of military clashes and revolutionary fervour. It is not surprising, that is, in light of such a poem, that verses like those in "The Rose Tree" would follow in the wake of the Easter executions. Transfixed by a sense of the cycles of history and soul, Yeats would prove eager to read Ireland's tumultuous transformation into such structures, and to see Pearse's notion of blood sacrifice, at times, as a tragic and magnificent inevitability; and thus, to entertain at least the possibility of its validity. As he wrote in a powerful stanza that revisits these themes, in the last poem to refer specifically to Easter of 1916,

Some had no thought of victory  
 But had gone out to die  
 That Ireland's mind be greater,  
 Her heart mount up on high;  
 And no one knows what's yet to come.  
 For Patrick Pearse had said  
 That in every generation  
 Must Ireland's blood be shed.  
From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen.

("Three Songs to the One Burden, III, 19-27)

In concluding this survey of the side of Yeats's character that could triumphantly call for "conflict, more conflict," it seems necessary to ask in exactly what spirit we should read such poems and such pronouncements. After all, we have no evidence of Yeats actually acting violently. And are not most of the above examples typified by a certain vagueness? Yes, and no. The features of "The Rose Tree" that I have mentioned--the use of historical "characters" as speakers, the to me

questionable tactic (given the time and place of the poem's gestation) of having these historical figures discourse in a mythological vein about blood sacrifice, questionable because it makes the poem vibrate between two contexts, two fields of meaning, until it blurs toward meaninglessness--seem symbolic of a genuine dilemma in Yeats, one he perhaps really confronted only in "Easter 1916."

I wish to deal later with his short play Cathleen ní Houlihan, but it is fascinating to watch the carefully placed steps of a critic such as Richard Loftus when talking about the play, walking as if in a minefield. Loftus concludes, with Yeats's question from "The Man and the Echo" in mind, that "there is surely grounds for maintaining that it prodded Pearse, MacDonagh, Plunkett, and a few others a step closer to the blood sacrifice of 1916" (Nationalism in Modern Anglo-Irish Literature, 41), but holds as well that Yeats did not intend this:

For his notion of insurrection and upheaval bore  
little or no relation to practical realities, but in  
all likelihood evolved from his familiarity with Irish  
legend and myth [and] . . . MacGregor Mathers . . .  
[and] Blake . . . (41)

As is his custom, Malcolm Brown is dismissive of such excuses:

It was not impossible that [Yeats] . . . could find  
"God Save Ireland" to be an intolerable sentimentalism  
and yet sense something in it of surpassing attraction. To  
seize it, to formulate it in his own language, he  
would naturally remove the blatancy and jingle, but he  
would hope to preserve the nub. The result would be very much  
like Cathleen ní Houlihan: "Do not make a great keening /  
When the graves have been dug tomorrow. / Do not call  
the white-scarfed riders To the burying that shall be  
tomorrow," and so on . . . But like the Sullivans in  
duress, one would be playing with fire, and if somebody  
took him at his word and substituted actual for literary  
death he might well ask in perplexity: "Did that play  
of mine send out Certain men the English shot?" In  
what other imaginable context could those lines have

any meaning? (216)

This final question is a just one: the play, after all, blends myth and genuine historical grievance much as "The Rose Tree" blends mysticism and the proper names of revolutionaries.

We might think of Cathleen ni Houlihan as one occasion when Yeats took only the mythic or spiritual dimension seriously and was a bit surprised when everyone else read the entire play and noticed its actual setting. In representing one Yeats depiction of Irish political struggle, the play also seems emblematic of his general tendencies in its Janus-like structure of reference. Are we to label Yeats clumsy in not writing the play he had intended, or disingenuous in pretending that any revolutionary consequences were a sort of historical accident? To be fair, he often dismissed the play as an inferior effort, though it is not clear for what specific attributes he came to condemn it. Another difficult question is that of whether or not Brown is right in using the word "perplexity" to describe Yeats's later query. And if he knew the answer to his question to be affirmative, would he have regretted writing the play, or have been proud to have done so? At the moment of writing "The Man and the Echo," regret seems to predominate; after all, the next two questions are whether or not his words "put too great strain / On that woman's reeling brain" (Yeats was apparently thinking of Margot Ruddock), and "Could my spoken words have checked / That whereby a house lay wrecked?" But at the time of "Easter 1916" and "The Rose Tree"? Are, in fact, poems like "The Rose Tree" and plays like Cathleen ni Houlihan "about" Ireland primarily, or "about" the historical development of the soul?

It should be remembered that Yeats wrote many poems that do not

refer to Ireland and her history. Yeats is not a "political poet," he is a poet who wrote a handful of superb poems on political subjects. Although everyone will have a different definition and thus a different list, I would designate less than forty of the nearly 400 extant poems as "political poems." When Yeats did refer specifically to Ireland, it was because he believed that poetry, and language, could be powerful outside a literature classroom or a poetry lover's study. As Cairns Craig admonishes us,

Yeats, Eliot and Pound demanded that we take seriously the question of whether we believe in poetry as a means to certain kinds of knowledge and insight. It is a question which, by concentrating on poems as purely formal constructions, or by translating all they wrote into "gestures" about the "tragedy of culture," we evade, allowing ourselves to maintain in the realm of culture values which they or we would not choose to apply to society in general. (15)

It was impossible for Cathleen ni Houlihan to get back her four green fields without changes in political structures. Without the "meaning-space" of an oppressed Ireland, Cathleen was a symbol of nothing at all.

## VI

"That whereby a house lay wrecked": Yeats and Political Violence (2)

A little earlier I cited an article which Yeats wrote in 1899 in which he held that in politics, as in literature, extravagance "was an overflow of energy. It was, no doubt, regrettable; no doubt all his errors were regrettable, but extravagance was far better than that apathy or cynicism which were deep besetting sins in Dublin."<sup>29</sup> That such extravagance, even

an extravagance of hatred or bitterness, was preferable to Dublin apathy, was a proposition Yeats would find himself questioning--perhaps to his own surprise--in a later era, a proposition that I believe he would actually come to reject at least temporarily. In "A Prayer for My Daughter" he would declare "to be choked with hate / May well be of all evil chances chief" (ll. 52-53). That is part of another portrait of William Butler Yeats, the portrait of a man who abhorred the violence <sup>him</sup> around in the years between the Rising and the ~~truce~~ of 1923 and the shadow of the gunman, as O'Casey put it, that persisted long afterward; and a man who lamented the horrific and all too tangible human costs such violence exacted. Debating the desirability of more conflict in multiracial India was, however callous, a bit like debating Hegel. The deaths following Easter, the burnings of the Big Houses of the landed (though often absent) aristocracy, the scores of small numbing brutalities of the guerilla warfare at which the Irish were to prove themselves as adept as less "spiritual" nations--these battered through the air-castles of visions and lunar cycles to produce a bruised conscience, nausea, and profound bitter disillusionment. Such violence seemed irrefutably evil, as irrefutable as a Song of Sixpence. After suspending balance in order to delineate Yeats's persistent and complex attraction to conflict, even physically violent conflict, I would like to turn over the coin and examine its other face.

I have already alluded to Yeats's delicate balancing act of the 1890s --that of, apparently, being a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood without ever taking the oath. At the end of a particularly fierce letter late in life, the letter in which he recalls O'Leary claiming "No gentleman

can be a socialist though he might be an anarchist," and tells Ethel Mannin that "My rage and that of others like me seems more important [than ideology]--though we may but be the first of the final destroying horde," Yeats, as was his tendency, half-apologetically undercut his own ferocity:

You are right about my letters. They were unreal  
because I was afraid we might quarrel about politics.  
And my dear, though bold in public speech and public  
writing, I am a timid man. (L, 870)

Yeats, timid? Recalling the Playboy riots and the Abbey years in general one shakes one's head--but of course Yeats in the letter does confess to boldness in public speech. The context of his timidity is that of the earlier part of the missive: clearly Yeats is conscious of the gap between the somewhat grandiose musing that he may be the first of the "final destroying horde" and the reality of his actions in the life he has lived. For Yeats <sup>seems</sup> to have shied away from both hands-on violence and the ubiquitous plottings of violent insurrection endemic to the Ireland of much of his lifetime like a flighty horse.

A young man in the Dublin of the 1880s and 90s, especially one with Maud Gonne to provide introductions, did not have far to look to involve himself in innumerable schemes, blood oaths, flintlock-smuggling and so on, to involve himself in just the sort of activity most of Dublin thought was primarily hot air and exercised imagination until they woke one morning to find armed men reading proclamations to puzzled onlookers at the central Post Office in Sackville Street and a small British gunboat lobbing incendiary shells into the better shopping districts. Yeats may well have been one of the final destroying hordes, but his record of involvement with physical violence seems to begin and end with him being

struck by his father on a single occasion. He reiterated this principle to Ethel Mannin a week after the letter already quoted, in December, 1936: "I hate more than you do, for my hatred can have no expression in action" (L, 873).

In this respect, Elizabeth Cullingford argues for the decisive influence of John O'Leary:

O'Leary's conviction that the end never justifies the means is diametrically opposed to the fascist belief that the national interest overrides all questions of morality. His regard for truth and justice was even higher than his regard for Ireland, and he condemned both agrarian terrorism and dynamite campaigns as beyond the limits of "honourable warfare." Yeats adopted O'Leary's standards, not [John] Mitchel's. (12)

This is true enough, at least in practice. It is not clear if Yeats always held--in his statements--to O'Leary's principles. And of course almost no one contends, not even a Stalin or a Hitler, that the national interest overrides questions of morality. Instead "morality" is transmuted into equivalence with the national interest. The nation becomes a moral entity capable of sustaining and correcting wrong. No one supports "terrorism," though many are persuaded of the necessity of struggles for national liberation. One person's terrorist is another's Founding Father. Such cavils aside, Cullingford's point seems irrefutable as regards Yeats's actions in the physical sense of that word.

The onset of the European war in 1914 initiated an instance of mass slaughter that seems to have been "real" enough to prompt Yeats's aversion--that reality being driven home by the death in combat of Robert Gregory--but, on the whole, still too distant to preoccupy the poet to any great extent. Yeats was in fact capable at one point of writing in a note

found by Ellmann amongst manuscript for A Vision, that "We should not attribute a very high degree of reality to the Great War,"<sup>30</sup> though one should not place undue weight on marginalia that an author explicitly chose not to include in a published text. It is interesting, of course, to note that neither of the poems Yeats was spurred into writing by Gregory's death--"In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" and "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death"--poems following years of carnage on a scale humanity had never before approached, contain an inkling of pacifist sentiment, a glimmer of the horrors of twentieth century warfare. Gregory died, it would appear from reading only the poems, of natural causes, that is, in a war which was just another of life's inevitabilities. "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" is so rooted in the genteel world of commonly accepted values, rather than in the world of emerging astonishment at European culture's charnel-house climax, that "soldier" is still just another nice vocation for a well-rounded young gentleman:

What other could so well have counselled us  
 In all lovely intricacies of a house  
 As he that practised or that understood  
 All work in metal or in wood,  
 In moulded plaster or in carved stone?  
 Soldier, scholar, horseman, he,  
 And all he did done perfectly  
 As though he had but that one trade alone.

("In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," ll. 73-80)

This is in a tone relentlessly satirized in works such as Robert Musil's The Man Without Qualities, a novel dissecting the world of pre-World War Austrian and European culture. The poem is a superb elegy: but the poem is also an act of considerable imaginative self-enclosure, a poem somewhat remarkable on the heels of the Somme and Verdun, of mustard gas and

daily casualty totals larger than the population of County Sligo. It is an act of self-enclosure that reminds a reader, with a bit of a start, just to what extent Yeats was, or had turned himself into, part of the Ascendancy class of Anglo-Ireland which was in these years perforce turning in on itself to contemplate the decline of its own status and the marginalization of values it had once thought as "natural" as the landscapes of its estates.

Cullingford does however point out that "Yeats was also disgusted by the waste of life and the pointlessness of militarism," although the passage she goes on to cite from the Letters suggests "disgust" is an interpretation, not a description: "The war will end I suppose in a draw and everybody too poor to fight for another hundred years, though not too poor to spend what is left of their substance preparing for it" (L, 588). Interestingly, she then attributes to Yeats an "unwillingness to glorify bloodshed" standing in contrast to "Pearse's enthusiastic assertion: 'The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields'" (Cullingford, 87). Within a year of the letter in question Pearse was to repeat the sentiment in a poem by Yeats. Yeats did express his opinion about war's pointlessness, but I believe it significant that with the action on the European mainland and no conscription in Ireland, his letters are remarkable for rarely mentioning the war at all and for managing nothing really to warrant the epithet "disgust." We must of course remind ourselves that letters and essays are not full transcripts of anyone's mental life, and that only a fraction of Yeats's letters have after all survived, with only a small percentage of those as yet in print.

Still, Yeats was never averse to expressing outrage, and the war did continue for four years.

The Easter Rising did, in marked contrast, evoke an immediate, emotional response. In a key letter dated two weeks after that event, a letter that gives us the line "terrible beauty has been born again," Yeats tells Lady Gregory that "The Dublin tragedy has been a great sorrow and anxiety . . . I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me--and I am very despondent about the future" (L, 612-13). We see here Yeats's assumption that he lived beyond the touch of any "public event," and the ability of an immediate, close-to-home tragedy to intrude upon this self-proclaimed detachment.

The letter does take an odd turn though, a turn that is perhaps the very turn from the face of the present into the imagination's more complicated encounter with reality that is the trope of poetry: "At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish Literature . . . from politics." It is remarkable that Yeats could conceive of his own labours as involving "the bringing together of classes," but that aside, there is no aspect of the Rising as I understand it that could be seen as having anything to do one way or the other with the separation of literature from politics! Except, as is evidenced earlier in the letter, that it has had something to do with the separation of W.B. Yeats's poetry from politics. The man responding with heartfelt sorrow to the deaths of Pearse and company has quickly been transformed into the poet troubled by what this means for his aesthetic creed. There is nothing very remarkable in this: it is the fate of poets and to some extent all human beings. We cannot

will away that self-centring swerve, however much it may irritate us at times. And this movement in the mind of Yeats is not of interest merely as some sort of poetic self-indulgence. The transforming of the Easter Rising from history into myth, from an account of what happened into an account of what happens (to use Aristotle's distinction of the terms), that is, into an event generating "universal" truths, was occurring in Ireland as a whole. Such "universal" truths are, of course, what we supposedly seek within the explicitly historical works of the imagination from earlier eras. In short, the Rising was soon beginning to be put to use.

But it is nevertheless telling, I believe, just how swift and how unself-conscious the process is in Yeats. No guilt at having so rapidly turned the Rising into an issue about the separation of poetry and politics--that is, into a Yeatsian issue--is expressed; but then of course Yeats seems to have been on the whole free of that emotion. There is a sense, even in this letter, of the bemused spectator rather than the tragically, irrevocably implicated participant in the fate of a nation. One cannot help but be struck by the contrast between Yeats in such an instance and Seamus Heaney (or John Montague) fifty years later caught in the swirl of the Troubles, knowing that even a physical relocation to the Wicklow hills or a Harvard professorship cannot constitute an escape from the labyrinth of violence into whose centre he was born. Heaney's mind too, turns to poetry in the midst of funerals, but guilt stalks the turning:

"The red-hot pokers blazed a lovely red  
in Jerpoint the Sunday I was murdered,"  
he said quietly. "Now do you remember?"

You were there with poets when you got the word  
 and stayed there with them" . . .  
 And so I pleaded with my second cousin.  
 "I kept seeing a grey stretch of Lough Beg  
 and the empty strand at daybreak.  
 I felt like the bottom of a dried-up lake."  
 "You saw that, and you wrote that--not the fact."

(Station Island, pp. 82-83; "Station Island," pt. 8)

And Heaney, of course, for better or worse, could never dream of saying "I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me."

Yes, Yeats's mind in the midst of violent death turns to poetry, but the poetry turns back toward Easter. And a steady stream of letters repeat his sorrow and shock. He tells the American collector and literary patron John Quinn in late May that "This Irish business has been a great grief. We have lost the ablest and most fine-natured of our young men" (L, 614). In June he confesses to Robert Bridges that "All my habits of thought and work are upset by this tragic Irish rebellion which has swept away friends and fellow workers" (L, 614). Real men dead, their proper names as potent signifiers ringing in his head, he felt no inclination, as in 1937, to brandish Sato's sword and call for more conflict.

But also in the same period in which he made that call for conflict Yeats professed to be increasingly distressed by the violence that seemed to be welling up again in Europe. In 1936, although turning down a request to recommend Ossietzky--imprisoned by the German government of Hitler--for the Nobel Prize because "if I did what you want I would seem to hold one form of government more responsible than any other . . . all [are] responsible according to the number of their victims," the poet felt obliged to add, so as not to be misunderstood, "My horror at the cruelty of governments grows greater. I am not callous, every nerve trembles with horror at what is

happening in Europe, 'the ceremony of innocence is drowned'."<sup>31</sup> And it is only fair, in any discussion of Yeats's attitude vis à vis fascism in general and O'Duffy's Irish Blueshirts in particular, to remember that the poet spent time in the West of Ireland during the Black and Tans period and the ensuing civil war, in which the results of social chaos and lack of governmental control was all too apparent. As Donald Torchiana writes, with his habitual elevation of Yeats to near-saint status, "both Yeats and Swift thought that willful disruption of public order was indeed virtually as great a crime before God as before man . . ." (W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland, 160).

Seamus Deane aptly observes that in Yeats's poetry the sense of the meaning of events contrasts, in its perspective, <sup>that of</sup> Casey, who rejects ideology --and indeed, I would argue, the relevance of the life of the mind as a whole--so vehemently that "history . . . is, above all things, chaotic, meaningless," and can only provide "opportunities for posturing and talk" (A Short History of Irish Literature, 162). For Yeats history, including, inevitably, violent revolution, is part of "a phase in an unfolding mythic drama." History for Yeats, I would suggest, is full of meaning in the same way that ritual is: history, that is human event, is the sensual manifestation (or even confirmation) of the progress of the Soul. In Mircea Eliade's terms, for Yeats all time is sacred time; profane time does not exist:

by its very nature sacred time is reversible in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a primordial mythical time made present. . . any liturgical time represents the reactualization of a sacred event . . . Hence sacred time is indefinitely recoverable,

indefinitely repeatable. (Eliade, 68-9).

Thus Yeats would react to violence from two distinct perspectives: one "intellectual," from which conflict was the key to the historical development of both societies and personalities; the other "emotional," from which violence was futile, enervating, animalistic. I am not happy with "intellectual" and "emotional" as a dichotomy for this purpose: "spiritual" and "bodily" are perhaps as good; none of the four seem precise enough. Violence in the abstract was one thing, violence in the concrete something else entirely. But as I have implied earlier, I firmly believe that Yeats's philosophical-spiritual system of thought, as it is most thoroughly articulated in A Vision, arises in large part from Yeats's emotional life, from the tendencies of his character in forming his relationships with friends, family, and Irish society. Yeats's "subjective" and "objective" principles do not seem to serve here either. Perhaps it is better to migrate to the third set of terms I have employed here, so as to refer to them as the abstract and concrete perspectives.

In a chapter on the gunman as Irish folk hero, Peter Costello writes that "This man in a trench coat was seen either ideally [sic] as the hero of a desperate struggle . . . to wrest their country's liberty from an imperial tyrant, or as a shabby, mindless threat to order and human decency" (159-60). At different junctures ("Easter 1916" and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," for example) Yeats can incline part way to either view, but either extreme remains too simplistic for him, and for Seamus Heaney or John Montague for that matter, since his response

is tinted by his acquaintance with both perspectives, and he knows that neither is exactly false. Yeats is self-contradictory on violent political struggle as a moral issue. He could tell a New York audience in 1904 (at age 39) that "In Ireland alone among the nations . . . you will find, away on the western sea board, under broken roofs, a race of gentlemen keeping alive the ideals of a great time when they sang the heroic life with drawn swords in their hands,"<sup>32</sup> but be outraged, and speak of the bitterness that makes a stone of the heart, were someone actually to draw a sword's more potent modern equivalent.

I have no inclination here to be non-judgemental. Whatever impact Yeats's ability to treat conflict in the abstract and marchers in the street with separate parts of his mind may have had on his poetry, it is still mental carelessness and morally cavalier. There is no such thing as abstract violence except in the realm of our contemplations, which may, if they choose, abstract an event from its immediate impact on human beings. This is probably, tragically, necessary at times, because it is not always the case that short term pain also leads to long term pain even if the history of revolutionary violence suggests that this variation on the maxim is of near universal applicability; but there should be no mistake about the callous-building effect of such mental habits. The abstract chickens, as it were, will eventually come home to roost, and make a mess in doing so. The violence in India may have seemed distant and theoretical to Yeats in Dublin (though it shouldn't have), but it is appropriate for Geoffrey Thurley to remind us that while Yeats was dramatically unsheathing Sato's sword, "the Spanish Civil War was in

progress, China was being invaded by Japan, Hitler was in power in Germany . . ." (201).

Yeats himself, in a key passage of the early version of his Autobiography (published as Memoirs, edited by Denis Donoghue), points to a sense of his own nature which corresponds in structure, I believe, to this attraction to abstract, apocalyptic violence existing side by side with a disgust for local, immediate unrest. "My outer nature," he wrote, "was passive . . . but I know my spiritual nature was passionate, even violent."<sup>33</sup> We can see here a pattern, and its accompanying trope, that is, so far as I know, nameless, but which is implicit in the structure of Biblical imagery (as described, for example, in Frye's The Great Code) and in the design of the medieval theological universe as it corresponds to the Ptolemaic cosmology:<sup>34</sup> the profoundly inner mirrors the profoundly outer; the core of the individual resembles most nearly not the bodily envelope immediately surrounding it, but the circumscription of the universal. As Blake exhorted, see the world in a grain of sand. This is a structure of thought central to western concepts of reality: the universe is reversible, can be turned inside out. The essence, the "most real," is found at the core and beyond the seventh sphere, where the mind of God resides. In Christian symbol, God inhabits the periphery and the centre of the self, which is, Christ insisted, the temple of God. Each nesting sphere of medieval cosmology is closest, apparently, to the next level in either direction; the physical body, for example, contains the soul and is contained by the sphere of the earth, of physical life. But true kinship overleaps the mediating steps, the innermost touches the outermost. Yeats is "violent" in his soul, passive in his body, is

therefore almost always appalled by violence in that body's immediate vicinity (Ireland), has an increasingly ambiguous attitude toward violence at increasing distances and therefore increasing degrees of abstraction (Europe, India), and is frequently attracted to the great theatre of apocalyptic, elemental conflict that surrounds and underlies human history as he reads it, the theatre of the quasi-Jungian Anima Mundi.<sup>35</sup>

Were we to adopt the perspective of the human individual then, we could construct a diagram with the spirit or soul at the centre surrounded by concentric circles of increasing diameter, each being the realm of, in order, the physical body (passive); local or "experiential" violence (normally criticized by Yeats); distant "historical" violence such as that in India (provoking an ambiguous reaction), and the "outer" realm of abstract or apocalyptic violence where the history of the great Self is played out (violence to which Yeats was attracted). It can be seen that the term "history" will recur on various levels. The reading of Yeats's major political poems, each attached by its title to <sup>a</sup> specific historical event, will involve in part situating the poems in relation to these competing "histories."

The figure that I have been describing is perhaps a species of synecdoche, or is, more precisely, the reason that synecdoche "makes sense" to us. It might be posited from this that Yeats is, as I believe him to be, our era's most pervasively synecdochic poet in this sense of the term. This way of looking at Yeats will prove useful when studying how the poet designs poems that set out to relate Irish history to himself. The articulation of such a relationship is, I will hold, one of the primary goals of poems such as "Easter 1916" and "Meditations in Time of Civil

War." And if history is indeed the term that unites the subjective with the objective, a dictum from Hegel with which I began this chapter, for a poet as dedicated as is Yeats to nourishing both the objective and subjective modes of being, that relationship will be complex and even tortured.

I think it is clear that Yeats's theories of human personality and his mythic sense of human history see conflict and violent turmoil as both inevitable and, in the grand scheme of things, necessary and to be cultivated. When such violence actually appeared in the streets of Dublin or the ambush points and great houses of Sligo or Mayo, Yeats was, like Synge's Mayo peasants come face to face with Christy Mahon's bandaged and suddenly un-mythical father, usually resolute in his abhorrence, in his conviction that such violence was demeaning, dehumanizing, unnecessary, and counterproductive. I think it is the presence of both these attitudes that is one of the sources of the richness of that part of Yeats's verse that concerns itself with this violence in modern Ireland--richness because the poetry walks along the wire of tension between the two attitudes and the two different realms from which the attitudes spring. In poems such as "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," he seems to strike out all the more ferociously at his own abiding naivety that believed the two principles could persist side by side, uncontaminated by the other, in the same world. Richness because it leads to a historical and mystic or mythic dimension shading the contours of personal conflicts and anxieties, and to an intimate psychological detailing inhabiting--with frustrating complexity and ambiguity, not to mention periodic obscurity--the expected broader

brush strokes of historical narrative. Richness because a personal, pleading voice, and a detached, omniscient historian and mythographer, always inhabit like ghosts each other's compositions.

I will argue that the Easter Rising of 1916 in Dublin jolted Yeats into a state of mind in which all the aspects of his complex personality as I have been describing them would rush simultaneously into one great, pivotal poem, a poem without which the later major works of the War of Independence and the Civil War would not have appeared. "Easter 1916" is, from a man capable of considerable flights of insensitivity in regard to the impact on actual human beings of historical events--the actual purpose of every war is, as Elaine Scarry eloquently reminds us, "to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue"<sup>36</sup>--in regard to his century's cataclysms, nevertheless to my mind one of the central poems of our language, with a refrain which makes us shudder not because it is true, or even because we admire its sentiment, but because we recognize in it a wincing honesty, an irresolvable dilemma of a human nature that is as appalled, we are forced to admit, by perfect stability and safety as by violence and turmoil, by the levelling of all distinctions as by hierarchies and intolerance, by safe houses as by arsonists. The touchstone statement for much of what follows must be Yeats's declaration that "I admire pikes and rifles in the abstract but to use them would be sectarian."<sup>37</sup>

## Chapter Two

### The Stone at the Centre: Yeats in "Easter 1916"

"The human intellect, if it is to find expression in action, requireth images [phantasmata]."

--Nicholas of Cusa

"EMER: (passionately) I don't want him to be hanged, but I want his life to have meaning--the meaning that he puts on it himself."

--Denis Johnston,  
The Scythe and the Sunset

## I

### A Poem About Easter: Reading the Rising

"[Pound's Cantos] are not about anything."

--Allan Tate<sup>1</sup>

The wish that your life have the meaning you yourself would give to it, that, even though the material events of a lifetime succumb to fate more frequently than to will the significance allotted to those events might prove more compliant, is the root of a good deal of human contemplation. It is the spur for historical revisionism of both the personal and national varieties, and one of the chief muses for both sides of that siamese-twin polarity of fiction and history. The urge to alter the meaning of the whole of Irish history retrospectively, to redeem numerous failed rebellions from the mire of farce into the more seemly surroundings of

"initial setbacks on the road to victory," helped generate the Easter Rising of 1916 that was instrumental in producing the Irish Free State a few blood-stained years later. The "meaning" of that event was initially, again, that belonging to the genre of comic farce and slapstick. The subsequent executions of the leaders by the British government made that meaning no longer possible. The British had "read" the event in a different light, clearly (no one is shot at the end of a comedy), and the Irish, wanting an Irish event to have the meaning they themselves "put on it," selected, with stunning rapidity, the contexts of epic martyrdom as now suitable, and proceeded to seal the case for their own interpretation through the election of a virtual full slate of Sinn Fein M.P.'s in the elections of December 1918. Thus the Dail Eirinn sat at the Mansion House in Dublin the next month, thus the Black and Tans arrived in early 1920, thus the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 6, 1921 was signed, thus . . . By the 1960s Irish historians and commentators were beginning to make the historical revision of simplistic "hero" labels a part of the Irish mainstream. By the late 1980s, again unhappy with the meanings put on life in Ireland by others than themselves, Irish writers were showing signs of revising the revisionism. Writing not in the initial aftermath of the event, yet writing before the crucial 1918 elections, writing in the midst of it all but writing mainly in England, W.B. Yeats found the Rising to have been a terrible beauty.

The Rising was a shock. Yeats didn't anticipate it, and found it turning on their heads many of his relatively settled notions as to the

relevance of Irish politics to his own emotions, the relationship of politics to poetry, and the role of violence in Irish political history. Crucially, emotion had a part in Yeats's intellectual system. Instead of finding a way to restore his attitudes to their former equilibrium, Yeats would write a poem about the process of undergoing that shock, a poem about the nation undergoing that shock to its habitual definitions. For, as Joseph Ronsley emphasizes throughout his study of Yeats's Autobiography, Yeats sought to "join intellect with his experience in order to provide 'a personal quality of universal meaning': philosophy was to be generated out of the life of the individual" (Yeats's Autobiography, 10). As for the "meaning" of that jolt, Yeats, donning his occasionally-used mantle of public poet, clearly set out not so much to describe that meaning as to formulate it, bringing it into being at the very moment he, Yeats, poet, public man, and principal character in the poem, "wrote it out in a verse." As a result, whatever else it may have been or may have become, the Dublin Easter Rising has always been terrible, beautiful, and a birth.

With his title, Yeats asserts his belief in the referential function of language, and in poetry's ability to communicate with and about historical events. While this is not an appropriate place for a full scale history of the 1916 Rising, it will be useful to recount certain aspects of that narrative in so much as they bear directly upon Yeats's "Easter 1916." It seems worth emphasizing, in 1988, that it is useful because poetry is "about" something (the world) that exists independently of language, though of course language does influence the way in which

that something is intuited and mentally processed. That is, I wish to distinguish this study philosophically as much as possible from the work of a critic such as J. Hillis Miller writing in The Linguistic Moment (with a long chapter on "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"), where a poem's display of awareness of itself as language is seen as the paradigmatic moment; the moment, in fact, at which the poet proves himself or herself a major writer. The necessity of talking about the poem's actual content, the images and "references," creates in the case of Miller's essay on "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" a site for the potential appearance of an embarrassing post-structuralist heresy. This is dealt with by first insisting that the poem of course has no "centre" to ground or control the sense of its heterogeneous elements, and then modifying this statement to insist that the poem's elements are in fact "governed," but governed "not by reference to a common logos but by the fact they are all catachreses for an unknown X around which they circle" (337).

This point requires pursuit in order to render my own (implicit) method more visible. Miller's formulation both establishes a false dichotomy between a common logos and randomness, and sets up the trope of catachresis as a veiled, re-named principle of referentiality, acceptable to Miller because it is a "rhetorical" figure, and one which, as a trope of mis-naming, is sufficiently kin to Derridean différance. How one could, theoretically, know that catachresis is present if the "X" is unknown, is not explained. Soon this unknown "X" becomes "something that both makes [the poem's heterogeneous elements] . . . emblems and at the same time undermines their referential validity" (337), a remarkably precise role for something that is "absent." The poem contains an "X" that

"is at a centre that is no centre but is missing there, and at the horizon but missing there too . . . neither word, nor force, nor thing, nor subjective energy, nor spiritual energy, nor spiritual entity, but all these 'things' in a confusion that confounds" (338). But we can only identify the presence of catachresis in reference to something which we can identify and locate. Différance too is invisible without a ground.

Poetry is not "about" language by virtue of being poetry, although it has the ability to refer to language as to other phenomena. The interrogation of any phenomenon seems to suspend it from its milieu, is always a species of phenomenology, renders it seemingly self-sufficient and self-referring. Thus the conviction that text is most fundamentally about text, and poetry most fundamentally about poetry, is the attribution of the observer's phenomenological status to the object under observation. The "poetry is language" formulation is all about power. Criticism becomes the only genuine mode of apprehending reality.

But in fact language is fundamentally, irresistably referential, and "Easter 1916" is about an uprising in the Irish capital during World War One. Language does not touch reality; it is not identical to that which it refers. Language is shot through with difference, but exists because of its still unsatisfactorily explained ability to convey similarity. It is due to this principle that it is possible for me to want to examine Yeats's poems' relationship to the historical events in Dublin in 1916. I have no doubt at all that this is more useful than studying its relationship with medieval Russian tribalism or CIA operations in Indonesia in the 1960s. Clearly, when dealing with poems that explicitly direct us to specific historical events as context, this principle

becomes both crucial and the generator of formidable complexity.

The events that gave rise to Yeats's poem were given their immediate spur by the formation of the military council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood in December of 1915. The outbreak of World War I had "destroyed all hope for a peaceful solution . . . for although Home Rule reached the Statute Book in September 1914, its operation was suspended until the end of the war" (Cullingford, 86). The council, composed of Sean McDermott, T. J. Clarke, Padraic Pearse, Joseph Mary Plunkett, Eamonn Ceannt (and joined shortly afterward by Connolly and Thomas MacDonagh),<sup>2</sup> decided in January of 1916 to institute armed revolt against the British at the earliest opportunity. At a meeting in Liberty Hall on Easter Sunday three months later, an armed uprising was set for the next day, and a proclamation, The provisional government of the Irish Republic to the People of Ireland, was printed. To the surprise of virtually all citizens (the citizenry in this resembling he who, in "Easter 1916" passes "them" with "polite meaningless words"), on the following day the Irish Volunteers and Citizen Army, under the command of Pearse and Connolly, took control of several Dublin buildings, including the General Post Office on Sackville Street. By evening, the first bloodshed had begun.

To read Yeats's poems about the Rising accurately, it is necessary to have a sense of the scale of military activity in Dublin for the six day period from Easter Monday to the unconditional surrender on April 29; for if early germinations of Republican mythology tended to exaggerate the insurrection's magnitude, later commentators were inclined to err in the opposite direction, dismissing it as a minor skirmish blown all out of proportion. This latter tendency is reinforced by the Rising's historical

and geographical proximity to the slaughterhouse on the Continent: three months later the British Army alone would suffer 60,000 casualties in one day at the Somme. Yet most students of literature, steeped in the revisionist backlash, may in fact be startled to learn how bloody the Rising was.

The fighting involved approximately 1600 "soldiers" on the Republican side (fewer than half with rifles), against some 9,500 members of the Royal Irish Constabulary and 6,000 troops. Only portions of the latter groups were in Dublin (McHugh, xi). The physical destruction of the city was considerable. As the Irish Times wrote in 1916, Sackville Street was almost entirely destroyed by shelling and fire: "Only a few blackened walls remained of the whole range of business houses . . . between Nelson's Pillar and O'Connell Bridge" (McHugh, 61). One hundred and seventy-nine buildings in Central Dublin were ruined (McHugh, 259). Estimates vary, but casualties were on the order of 3,000, with a death toll of perhaps 450, perhaps 600.<sup>3</sup> Fourteen leaders were executed by firing squad over a ten day period in May, and in excess of 400 insurgents were imprisoned. The psychological impact of thousands of dead and wounded and large scale physical devastation on a small city unaccustomed to large scale political violence is difficult to overestimate.

In short, the Easter Rising was no minor skirmish: the carnage was considerable. This is something that studies which emphasize the Rising as "theatre" or Yeatsian "mask" (see, especially, that by Carmel Jordan) take too little account of. Whatever symbolic assignations may have arisen in the meaning-forge of subsequent history, it was not only a symbolic act. Or, more precisely, the purposes to which its potential for meaning and symbol could be put were in great part governed by its empirical or "witnessed" content of actual occurrence. This content was

the content of war: in Elaine Scarry's exacting phrase, the alteration of human tissue. And, as Scarry points out, unlike "symbolic" activities, the game of wounding the human body is the only game whose authority is universally accepted by human communities, that is given the power of its own enforcement (Scarry, 38).

A given historical event, a given content, can certainly produce more than one written history--or symbolic narrative--and more than a single "historical" poem. Nevertheless, that content is a foundation, is a point of origin that radically limits the nature of possible responses, and authoritatively governs their features. The historical event serves as a ground of similarity against which the spectrum of difference between representations becomes visible, if never fully reconcilable. Writings about the Rising will address subjects other than the Rising itself, will involve themselves in the representing of other phenomena, such as the response to the Rising. But the ground of the historical occurrence also renders visible this procedure, and is still this representation's necessary cause. The event produces the response; the need to make that event meaningful produces a symbolic response; the need to insert that meaning into a significant locus within the life of a particular person or nation produces a narrative response. "Easter 1916" opens with a story.

That the nature of the Rising was that of war is then, crucial. But it was also a military engagement with many peculiar characteristics, many of which have a bearing on Yeats's response. The poet had previously confessed that his habit had been to see history as a variety of theatre, writing in 1892 that "thus, at any rate do I, with my perhaps too literary eyes, read history, and turn all into a kind of theatre where the proud

... display their passionate hearts, that the groundlings may feel their hearts wax the greater" (L, 219). The connection between history (particularly military history) and theatre was not unique to Yeats: it is one of the central tropes of Renaissance drama--most explicitly in Shakespeare's Henry V and Henry VIII--as well as in the political theory of writers from Machiavelli to the present. But in two specific respects, Yeats's comment is applicable to the themes of "Easter 1916." First, the poem is both about the process of transforming the "groundlings'" hearts and an attempt to influence that transformation. Yeats's portrayal of the Rising is summarized nicely by "the proud displaying their passionate hearts" with the result that "the groundlings feel their hearts wax the greater." Second, and related to the theme of transformation, the Rising is seen as a theatrical event whose genre--tragedy or comedy--is initially in doubt.<sup>3a</sup>

The Ireland of Yeats's lifetime, "Easter 1916" states, had seemed the land of farce and comedy, "where motley is worn" (l. 14). The executed leaders themselves had appeared to be part and parcel of their society, until the events of 1916 led them each to have "resigned his part / In the casual comedy" (ll. 36-37). The poem thus describes both national and individual history in terms approximating those used by T. S. Eliot in his description of how each new literary event subtly alters the entire historical canon: the Rising retrospectively changes the "history" of earlier events (that is, how they are "read"), in particular the narrative shape of the pre-Easter lives of the participants and of the bickering, infighting, and inglorious inefficiency of Irish nationalist politics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But it is not only pre-Easter history that was being transformed from part of one genre to

part of another, from an element of one story to another, but also the Rising itself. I believe it was the dramatic shifting of perspective on the events of those five days, the rapid change of popular opinion in the following months, that made the larger structure of comedy-turned-to-tragedy evident, and made the enacting of transformation assume a central role in the poem. Because the Rising seems to have come perilously close to being merely hilarious.

From the start, as "Easter 1916" makes clear, the Rising was something led by people whom Yeats had in general despised. As Conor Cruise O'Brien puts it, "Most of the leaders who planned the Rising . . . belonged to the general class which Yeats distrusted . . . to the clerks and shopkeepers whom he thought of as 'the base' . . . They had all been engaged for years in the kind of politics on which he had turned his back" (238-9). As will be seen, traces of Yeats thinking of them as "clerks and shopkeepers" do survive in the poem. And there can be little doubt that Yeats was far from alone in suspecting that the Irish Republican Brotherhood, with its various sects and offshoots, was much more suited to farce than epic. The military operation was extremely confused from the beginning, marred by miscalculation and bad luck. A small vessel named the Aud arrived off Tralee with arms on April 20, only to be seized by a British naval patrol vessel, and the next day Roger Casement was arrested after landing from a German submarine. Eoin MacNeill, chief of staff of the Irish Volunteers, was prompted by such ill fortune to cancel all activity planned for Easter Sunday, only to have the Military Council, led by T. J.

Clarke and dominated by Pearse, rebel and decide to strike. The Rising was inevitably weakened by the split. Monday was a day of mixed successes and failures; success, that is, from the perspective of Connolly and Pearse, whose goal was not necessarily military victory.

The General Post Office was seized with little difficulty to serve as headquarters, and was reinforced, as the Irish Times described it,<sup>4</sup> by garrisoning "all cover houses commanding the approaches" with snipers behind sand bags. The rebels cut telegraph wires, but failed to seize the Telephone Exchange, a major blunder. St. Stephen's Green was cleared of civilians and the gates closed. Again, houses commanding the principal points of access were seized and manned with snipers. The rebels failed to capture Dublin Castle, but did take City Hall, the Four Courts, Liberty Hall, and two railroad stations. They blew rail lines and bridges, shutting down train traffic for more than a week. By all accounts, the proclamation of the Republic of Ireland from the G.P.O. was historic only in retrospect, read out, as it was, to a small crowd that was largely either bemused or amused.

It seems that a vein of comedy ran, like an impurity in the heroic metal, throughout the proceedings. This vein was potentially lethal to the enterprise. Should it burst and overrun the "face" of the Rising, the "heroism" would disappear like another easily discarded cheap mask, and the historical "narrativization" would quickly adopt in the streets and pubs that mode of bitter-hilarity-as-cautionary-tale that

Ireland has perfected over the centuries and practises enthusiastically to this day. It was a near thing. This is in evidence in the appropriateness of the use of the tragi-comic genre in such plays as O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars and Denis Johnston's The Scythe and the Sunset. The recognition of the comic element is not restricted to retrospective literary treatments. The Irish Times correspondent of the day notes that there was considerable looting when the Metropolitan Dublin Police were ordered off the streets: "Boys and girls were swaggering about, dressed in the most fantastic apparel, and all had their arms full of...toys (McHugh, 56), a scene analogous, down to the comparison of looting with childishness, with that in Act Three of The Plough and the Stars. O'Casey's stage direction tells us that "Bessie and Mrs. Gogan enter, the pride of a great joy illuminating their faces. Bessie is pushing the pram, which is filled with clothes and boots; on the top of the boots and clothes is a fancy table, which Mrs. Gogan is holding with her left hand, while with her right hand she holds a chair on top of her head" (136). Bessie's next speech, in its mock-apocalyptic rhetoric ("when we've stitched a sthray bit o'silk . . . so as to shake th' shame out o' them, an' make them fit for women that hasn't lost themselves in th' nakedness o' th' times"), makes the scene something of a sarcastic reply to the "There are many things more horrible than bloodshed" speeches by the Pearse figure in Act Two.

In short, it seems there is often the danger that a rebellion--suspending as it does for a time the ligaments of governmental authority and freeing the members--will turn into its sister event, the festival

or carnival. I know no better description of the curiously fierce mirth of O'Casey's looters than Bakhtin's analysis of carnivalesque laughter in Rabelais and His World: "Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants . . . . Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding" (Stallybrass and White, 8). (This description also evokes for Yeats readers the late poems, especially the caustic delights of "Crazy Jane".) Whether the festival has, historically, supported (functioning as safety valve) or subverted the established order is, of course, controversial,<sup>5</sup> but the link between the energies of rebellion and carnival seems widely understood. Their embrace is visible, for example, in both Act Two of Macbeth, and in the ferocious comedy of King Lear.

In the autobiography of one Ernie O'Malley, who was a student in 1916, the flavour of the event is one, somehow, of heroic farce:

All through the evening rumour piled on rumour . . . . At home the seizure of the buildings was taken as some kind of mild joke. Dublin had been used to strikes. They had provided excitement but were never very serious . . . I spoke to a sentry standing in front of a pathetic-looking strand of barbed wire. He had a Lee-Enfield magazine rifle . . . . He was about sixteen, and blue-eyed; he looked at the looters as if they had staged the performance for him. He spoke eagerly . . . "The country is rising. Kerry, Cork, and Limerick and men from the North are marching. We can hold Dublin until they come," and he smiled. "Our wireless is sending out word to other countries." (McHugh, 130)

The world of this passage is remarkably similar in tone and content to that which hovers so convincingly just above the ground of "mere" comedy in Denis Johnston's The Scythe and the Sunset. As is the case with many individual speeches in that play, the words of the young Republican in front of his pathetic strand of barbed wire (as if only "playing" at war)

and spectator to the looting (as if it too were theatre) initially strike one as bathos--which they are from the perspective of military strategy--but on reflection adopt the garb of genuine pathos. What he believes is clearly false: that he does believe it is not ascertainable: that he longs to believe it is irrefutable. Since it is the third proposition that has been invested in action and has placed his life in danger, we are not too certain we should laugh after all. The Republicans made pathos possible by their belief in its possibility.

That the ultimate utility of the Rising depended on whether or not it would be "read" as pathos, and that the rebels understood this and made it part of their strategy, is the thesis of Johnston's play. Pearse's men in fact occupied Johnston's family's home for three days. His description of them in his introduction to The Scythe and the Sunset is the same mixture of respect and bemusement we see in the play. "Of the rebels, I principally remember their charm, their civility, their doubts, and their fantastic misinformation about everything that was going on" (327). Johnston cannot even bring himself to give credit to the rebels for keeping the imminent uprising secret, ascribing the feat to the fact that "the rebels had announced so publicly and so often what their belligerent intentions were, that nobody would believe a word they said" (328). The captured British soldier Palliser alone understands that the way to truly defeat the Rising--as opposed to merely quashing it militarily--is to make the rebels look silly, insisting "A lot of fireworks will only make them look important . . . I want to make them look damn silly" (Act Two, p. 368). The transformation of Roisin in Act Three is designed to drive home the validity of Palliser's conviction. Such is the dynamic of human belief in war as decisive, and in death as the definition

of war, that had the Easter rebels surrendered early-on in return for guarantees of having their lives spared, they would have remained part of the "casual comedy." Irregardless of the long-term differences engendered in Irish history, that, at least, seems certain, and lies at the root of "Easter 1916"'s insistence on itself as an act of definition, as an exterminator of bathos that has been at this moment defeated forever.

As I said earlier, Yeats was both taken unawares by the advent of the Easter Rising and startled by the effect it had on him emotionally and intellectually. "[T]he news took him with the same surprise as it took the general public"; and his friends "noticed that at last he seemed to be moved by a public event" (Hone, 299). The events swung him, at least temporarily, out of his mode of elevated aesthete disdainful of politics into his mode of public commentator. The rebellion, he had told Robert Bridges, had "upset" all his "habits of thought and work" (L, 614). He had to reassess his personal attitude toward the heretofore oxymoronic phrase "political poetry." Was it perhaps true, as Robert Pinsky has put it, that "The act of judgement prior to the vision of any poem is a social judgement . . . always embodies . . . a resistance or transformation of communal values" ("Responsibilities of the Poet," 19)?

Yeats experienced the physical destruction of Dublin only second hand, although the aftermath was still much in evidence when he visited about a month later. Having spent the early part of the pivotal year with Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear in Sussex (Hone, 295), Yeats was visiting with his friends the Rothensteins in Gloucestershire at Easter (299). The fact he was not an eyewitness influenced the type of poem Yeats wrote. Due to

the lack of an adequate biography and the incomplete publication of the surviving letters (only five from April to December 1916 are in print), it is impossible to trace Yeats's movements with any precision. But it is certain he was in Ireland at least briefly during the period of composing "Easter 1916," which he was thinking about as early as two weeks after the event (the phrase "terrible beauty has been born again" appeared in a May 11 letter to Lady Gregory), and to have completed by September, when he showed it to Maud Conne in France. (She didn't like it.) For some part of May 23 to June 13 Yeats was in Dublin (L, 614).<sup>6</sup>

From this, two points seem important. First, Yeats was in England during both the Rising and the May 3-9 week of the executions, thus being distanced from these events. Second, he visited Dublin, apparently spurred by a sense of guilt or duty ("I feel as if I shall return to Dublin to live, to begin building again"<sup>7</sup>), in the period following the work of the firing squads, when the Rising was the subject of most conversation: "I have just returned from Dublin where of course one talks of nothing else" (L, 614). This was, crucially, a time by which it had become clear the Rising had been far more than a meaningless skirmish with no lasting results, yet before it was apparent what those results might be. He had seen first hand the truth of Redmond's May warning in the House of Commons that the executions were alienating many "who have not the slightest sympathy with the insurrection" (A New History of Ireland, 7. 391), but the first clear indication of the eventual repercussions, probably the Sinn Fein by-election victory in May, 1917, was still in the future when the poem was completed. "Easter 1916" arises from a crucially mediate position in the chronology of Irish history.

As a distant observer, it might be added, Yeats's initial response seems to have been heavily influenced by Lady Gregory's opinion on the matter. Hone's narrative tells us only that to his friends he appeared "moved" and that he wrote to Lady Gregory of the "heroic, tragic lunacy of Sinn Fein" (299). A few days later he told her that the "Dublin tragedy has been a great sorrow and anxiety" (L, 614, emphasis added). His expression of grief is repeated a month later to John Quinn (L, 614). Ellmann writes that Yeats was "at first . . . indignant with the Dublin insurrectionaries for needlessly sacrificing their lives" (Yeats: The Man and the Masks, 217)--a sentiment surviving in "Was it needless death after all?" in the poem (l. 67)--but indignation seems inconsistent with the attitude found in all other available evidence, and unfortunately Ellmann gives no source. Lady Gregory's view is similar to that of the poem. Douglas Archibald notes that in her Galway journals she "refuses to blame the rebels, whom she carefully calls 'the disturbers,' though she thinks them misguided . . . Her mourning for the dead rebels she knew . . . is genuine, and without hysteria or blame" (57). Maud Gonne's response, that "tragic dignity has returned to Ireland" (L, 613), was for once not irreconcilable with that of Lady Gregory, and is certainly incorporated into the poem.

Yeats's habits of "thought and work" were, then, "upset" by the insurrection. The result, after a five month period of composition, was a poem that had, for Yeats, an unusual degree of historical and political specificity. It has been noted, for example, that "Easter 1916" contains one of only three references to "England" in the entire oeuvre, as if "in Yeats's sense of history it was at times better to be wary of matters

that might impinge upon the influence of the perfect emotions . . . that link us . . . to eternity."<sup>8</sup> There is a complete absence of poems that insist upon a specific historical matrix in the early volumes, with the partial exception of vague allegories such as "The Valley of the Black Pig" in The Wind Among the Reeds, and the insistently non-political nationalism of "To Ireland in the Coming Times" in The Rose. Perhaps emblematic of Yeats's instincts in the early volumes is a poem such as "The Lover Pleads With His Friend for Old Friends." If, as Jeffares speculates, the poem concerns Maud Gonne and her power over crowds as she and Yeats toured for the '98 Association, of which Yeats was president, all we can say is that Yeats rigorously de-politicizes the poem until it is only "about" passing fame and "old friends."<sup>9</sup>

This pattern gives way to a handful of occasional or anecdotal pieces in perhaps the weakest books, The Green Helmet and Other Poems, and Responsibilities. In these volumes Yeats tries on the mask of public poet attempting to make his poems refer to quotidian issues. One obstacle is that while a "full moon" or a "red rose" can operate on both a sensual level (due to the reader's familiarity with their signifieds in nature) and an emotional or intellectual level (due to their history in literary tradition), the phrases "Hugh Lane" or "Dublin Municipal Gallery" had for all but a fraction of Yeats's audience no sensual or emotional resonance, much less the capability to create "either because of their preordained energies or because of long association. . . . indefinable and yet precise emotions" (Essays, 156-7).

The poems in these volumes, such as "On hearing that the Students of our New University have joined the Agitation against Immoral Literature,"

or "To a Wealthy Man who promised a second subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures," or "On those that hated The Playboy of the Western World, 1907," are historically specific without being political, in the sense that they have little to do with the concerns of the populace acting in its role of body politic. On such occasions Yeats welds verbose, journalistic titles to mythic or vaguely philosophical verse, as though the pollution of the pure aesthetic were thus less egregious. The poems do not name names: they function allegorically if they function at all. Even when this device is somewhat effective, or at least elegant, as in "To a Wealthy Man," the poem conspicuously lacks emotional content, does not convince readers they need care about the issue at hand. In this sense they are notably less powerful than the similarly indirect evocation of historical contexts in Seamus Heaney's North. In its final form, "September 1913" is, despite the invoking of Fitzgerald, Emmett, Tone and O'Leary (in this an exception to the rule), and despite the date as title, a vague evocation of a temperament; unless we are to take seriously the title and former subtitle, "On reading much of the correspondence against the Art Gallery." In that case we have instead the instance of greatest rhetorical overkill in the Yeats canon. Does the "this" of "Was it for this the wild geese spread / The grey wing upon every tide" refer to the city council's narrow rejection of the plan to build a gallery over the Liffey for Lane's collection? Not to the House of Lords' rejection of the Home Rule Bill in July 1913, or the general strike and civic disturbances of August and September?

There are lesser poems in Yeats's work, but none this bad or this overrated. There is one resolutely political piece from the period, "Upon

a House shaken by the Land Agitation." This superbly crafted poem is also Exhibit "A" for anyone wishing to accuse Yeats of willful blindness on the issues of Irish political life and their consequences for the lives of the population. The speaker seems to think the poem's questions, "How should the world be luckier if this house . . . / . . . became too ruinous / To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun?" are rhetorical, though of course they are not. Land agitation threatened economic privilege; what could that have to do with loving the sun or thinking eagle-like thoughts?

Whether because Yeats sensed that these "public" poems were not entirely successful as either journalism or poetry, or for some other reason, he abandoned the mode in The Wild Swans at Coole to the extent that his only topical poem, "On being asked for a War Poem," explains why he said no. "Easter 1916" both breaks a long silence and inaugurates a new voice, one that would make political poetry of great power constitute a significant fraction of his work for the next seven years. Patrick J. Keane has written that by cancelling allusions to Ireland, Burke, Pitt, Marx, Russia and so on in "The Second Coming," Yeats "liberated his poem from those localized events destined to be assimilated . . . in the desert of time" ("Revolutions French and Russian," 51).<sup>10</sup> In light of, say, the Iliad, this statement reflects a poetics that Yeats had to reject in writing "Easter 1916," and one we must reject in reading it decades later. Art renders history "universal" not by transcending its particulars but by particularizing transcendence, by communicating particularity and thus carrying dumb facts into another place where the act of accepting them as meaningful can be repeated.

## II

## History and Poetry

It goes without saying, however, that an imaginative work's depiction of historical events is not a transparent one; it does not hand across an unprocessed, uncoloured reality to a reader. Terry Eagleton summarizes the issue:

It is characteristic of modern thinking about the past that we are conscious of such thought as a relation rather than a reflection. The past is not isolable as an object from our own concerns; and whether this truth is grasped in terms of a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer), a ceaseless re-selection of ancestors (Raymond Williams), or a constant retroactive alteration of tradition (T.S. Eliot), it is clear in any case that the object of historical knowledge is some complex conjuncture of past and present, rather than some autonomous region of antiquity quite unmodified by the contemporary gaze. ("Marxism and the Past," 271)

(Yes, so long as we remember it is the object of historical knowledge that this applies to. The past itself has a perfect autonomy [and is perfectly powerless]: we cannot disturb it.) The act of referring to historical events in poetry is fundamentally problematized in at least two ways. First, the event in question must be translated from its native materials of the body and the sensory world into the mental modes of narrative and symbol, a translation that will entail distortion, although not necessarily distortion that exceeds communication. Second, the poem itself, as writers such as Foucault and New Historicists like Stephen Greenblatt are reminding us, is a cultural artifact rooted in its own historical matrix.

The recognition of the first of these facts is a central event in modern historiography, epitomized, perhaps, in the writings of Hayden White, though with a heritage extending back to Hegel. It might be summed up as the textualization of history, and is part of a broader movement toward

occluding the influence of external factors on the shaping of the products of various intellectual "disciplines" in favour of finding sufficient cause for philosophical structures or apparent mimeses within the attributes of their media: language, rhetoric, text. Thus White will insist that "the facts do not speak for themselves, but . . . the historian speaks for them . . . fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is--in its representation--a purely discursive one" ("The Fictions of Factual Representation," 28), thereby placing the historian in the same relationship to events as Northrop Frye's version of criticism to a text that is by definition mute (Anatomy of Criticism, 5). And so, as in Frye's vision of literature, the "integrity" of historical writing will lie in its "centrifugal" relations.

As Eagleton formulates the problem, ideology is thus always present in the writing of history, not as a "false consciousness which blocks true historical perception," but as a complex formation allowing various types of access to history and carrying elements of reality within itself. Thus, a "direct, spontaneous relation between text and history, is not possible" (Criticism and Ideology, 69-70). This seems irrefutable. But its assumptions, like those of Hayden White or Paul Ricoeur, often lead to the apparent corollary that historical events are a "text" which we will read in much the same way a critic reads a literary text, with that act's attendant uncertainties, ambiguities and misreadings:

Just as texts have meanings that are not reducible to the specific words and sentences used in their composition, so too do actions. Actions produce meanings by their consequences, whether foreseen and intended or unforeseen and unintended . . . . The "reading" of an action . . . resembles the reading of a text; the same kind of hermeneutic principles are

required for the comprehension of both.

(White, "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," 26-27)<sup>11</sup>

Yet when Yeats sets out to describe the meaning of a given historical occurrence such as the Rising or the Civil War, it is clear that this very significance is the product of the apprehension and interpretation of that event by the citizenry as a whole. An historical event is not a text in any sense of that word which can be useful, because it has no signifiers. It does not acquire its signification by referring to referents "outside" of history, since history has no outside. Though Derrida speaks of there being nothing outside ("dehors") the text, all texts are it seems to me an essentially allusive or referential experience. Words are incapable of restraint: they inevitably produce the arousal of emotional and sensory life within the mind, an arousal produced by the reader's comparison of the word to previous sensory and emotional experience.

History, on the other hand, contains no pointers; in Keats's words, it has no designs upon us, no matter how many designs we may have upon it. A text is complete and static (although the experiencing of it is not), yet, because it is nothing without the world, it is radically open, a point from which one looks out. Yeats's "Easter 1916" is where he looks out at the Ireland that followed the rising from. History is always incomplete and therefore kinetic; it has no "points" in time, and thus no absolute presence. Because it is nothing but the world, it is radically closed; having no points it can point nowhere. Certainly it can be experienced, but it cannot, as itself, be reflected upon, because reflection involves a mirror, and a mirror requires a standing

point. The establishment of that standing point is the beginning of historiography, or the writing of "history." The selection of that point at which reflection begins to generate text is not, by definition, conscious, but it is radically meaningful. Some will refer to the "history-text" produced from this reflection as fiction, but a more accurate term would be "documentation": that is, it is capable of accuracy but not of completeness.

Yeats's depiction of political violence can be described, then, as the product of two basic elements: the location from which he views history, and precisely what history he chooses to recount. The composition of the second element will be dependent upon the landscape visible from the window of the first. I believe the examination of these factors to be the examination of ideology in the broadest sense. Eagleton proposes that "the literary text . . . produces ideology . . . in a way analogous to the operation of a dramatic production on a dramatic text" (Criticism and Ideology, 68-69). I understand him to mean that the literary text is a production of ideology in somewhat the way a dramatic performance is a production of a dramatic text; that is, the literary text makes manifest the ideology that serves as the mediate term between history and text. It is in this sense that I wish to pursue Yeats's standing-place, and, having rendered it visible, re-illuminate the paradoxically all-too-visible content of his vision, a particular content blurred and distorted in most readings due to its submersion in a poetics of universality.

## III

## The Locus of Verse

"Is not all life the struggle of experience naked,  
unarmed, timid but immortal against generalized  
thought, only that personal history...is the reverse  
of the world's history?"

--Yeats (1910)<sup>12</sup>

1 Finding Yeats in the Text: Ground, Viewpoint, Vision

I noted at the beginning of this essay that "verse" included in its etymology the notion of "turning" and "being turned," and suggested we think of poetry as the practice of turning to face different directions or of re-orienting the world in relation to the self. This is, I believe, particularly useful in examining a poet's depiction of historical events, events for which we have knowledge originating outside of the poem, so that the poem becomes one of many competing texts or perspectives. For in such poems a poet's practice of turning constitutes finding a standing place within the meaning-space of historical "knowledge," whereas in poetry of other types (the confessional lyric, for example, or surrealist verse) the poet's perspective is quite literally the only possible one for the world the poem inhabits, since that world's existence is causally dependent upon the adoption of that viewpoint and that viewpoint alone. In poetry that insists upon its historicity, the depiction of history, and the poet's standing place--the point from which he turns to face the world in verse--are products of each other: it is probably impossible to pinpoint one as the origin.

As a reader of Yeats's autobiographical writings, Joseph Ronsley has suggested that, by 1914, "Yeats had arrived at a willingness, even a desire . . . to display in full view the facts of his life when such a display seemed useful for his poetic purpose" ("Yeats as an Autobiographical Poet," 137). "Easter 1916" and "Meditations in Time of Civil War" are eloquent confirmations of this. Yeats reached this willingness as his musings which eventually led to A Vision began to crystallize. (They crystallized into a form that leads to an extraordinary amount of misreading of the poetry, since Yeats habitually suspended his system when his muse approached.) Yeats was increasingly interested in how historical meaning might be found, or even constituted, in the individual: thus the excerpt from a diary set at the beginning of this section, and thus his conviction that the writer must live the historically exemplary life. The history of the Anima Mundi is contained in the history of a man or a woman, and it is best to read it there. Because of this conviction, Yeats believed that the narrative that described his positioning of himself in order to write poetry was the writing of history. This narrative begins, subtly, in "Easter 1916," and gains urgency and force in later poems such as "Meditations in Time of Civil War."

Because for Yeats, the public was the image of the private. Not the mere image of the private: Yeats saw this public manifestation as a crucial test of the vitality of the inner reality--as is suggested, for example, by his conviction that Oscar Wilde's refusal to flee to the continent before his trial, to "stand it out and face the worst," constituted Wilde's finest hour.<sup>13</sup> Ellmann has commented, when writing of Yeats's poems on the 1916 revolutionaries and other historical figures, that "not only are

the symbols like men, but conversely the men are like symbols or actors . . . . A man is welded to his image, a player to his role" (Yeats: The Man and the Masks, 281). In the public as image of the private lies the possibility of meaning. When Yeats wrote that at Coole Park he had "found out at last what I had been seeking always, a life of order and labour, where all outward things were the image of an inner life,"<sup>14</sup> he is not implying that the inner is ordered, only that action is ideally a revealing image rather than a concealing one, that labour has the possibility of relevance and of self-expression. If it is true, as Peter Costello holds, that while George Moore presided over the "realistic" stream of the revival, Yeats led the "romantic" one (21), then in historically determinate poems Yeats is faced with the task of fusing the modes. All of this suggests that the inscription of the poet into the scene of his exposition is for Yeats the act of meaning production, and is so because Yeats has what we customarily call a medieval temperament, a sense that forms replicate themselves on different levels. The fact that Yeats never bought himself a manorial estate even by the time he could have afforded to do so, but purchased instead a decayed tower and cottage where he lived only sporadically, suggests that he lived most comfortably not where the outer was established as gracious image of the inner, but where one strove to make that establishment.<sup>15</sup>

In "Easter 1916" Yeats inscribes himself within the locale of his speaking-forth (renders his persona "local") in a statement of his faith that this personalizing process is linked to a parallel national process: the psyche, he insists, is political. More crucially, he makes this inscription not a priori, but as an event within the poem. This process forms the basis

of the poem's claim for significance, but it is also--given Yeats's profoundly ambiguous feelings on the matter--a process that is problematic for the poet, a process that provides the ground beneath the oxymoronic Janus of the poem's visage. After outlining the nature of this theme of authorial location (a theme we might think of as a topographical turn typical of Yeats's major historically-specific poems), I wish to examine how this theme illustrates two key aspects of the poem: the ambiguous image of the stone as site of the poem's attitude toward political fanaticism, and the attempt to find a place from which the poet can make literary and historical correspondence possible, can create a myth about history in a way that is both descriptive and prescriptive, that is something like a speech-act as J. A. Austin has used that term.

J. Hillis Miller has written that the initial questions we ask of a lyric poem are, "Who is speaking, from what place, and to whom" (319). The answer to the third question is dependent on the possibilities engendered by the answer to the second. The second stanza of "Easter 1916," which describes the thus-far anonymous leaders of the Rising as altering their "role" in their own lives' dramas by "resigning" their "parts" "In the casual comedy" and entering tragedy, when read back on the first stanza presents us with a Yeatsian persona clearly residing outside of the possibility of this tragedy. He has, if anything, contributed to the comedy through his "mocking tales" and "gibes." He has been in the wrong mode; his pronouncements produced not genuine meaning but jokes and smart remarks. He has failed to read the signs clearly.

Look at how this dramatic stanza, steeped in the muted tones of pathos and regret, in the mode of repentance, is structured:

I have met them at close of day  
 Coming with vivid faces  
 From counter or desk among grey  
 Eighteenth-century houses.  
 I have passed with a nod of the head  
 Or polite meaningless words,  
 Or have lingered awhile and said  
 Polite meaningless words,  
 And thought before I had done  
 Of a mocking tale or a gibe  
 To please a companion  
 Around the fire at the club,  
 Being certain that they and I  
 But lived where motley is worn:  
 All changed, changed utterly:  
 A terrible beauty is born.

Two long sentences of identical grammatical structure lead to the abrupt  
 transoms of repeated colons, sites of transformation, of the rupture of  
 syntactical logic. The poem commences with "I," "I" is its initial subject,  
 a subject counterpoised--grammar pointing to alienation--to "them." It  
 seems "they" do not require identification. The absence of naming is a  
 tribute that renders the eventual re-iteration of those names an act of  
 ritual rather than documentation. The "I have" formula is repeated after  
 the first quatrain is complete, but the offense described by the verb has  
 been magnified: they have not met (the opportunity of engagement) but they  
 have been bypassed. Many of Yeats's readers may have heard echoed in this  
 "I have met" and "I have passed" another common text: ". . . that I have  
 sinned through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I  
 have done, and in what I have failed to do . . ." The setting is the country  
 of the absurd, the fief of meaningless speech. A similar sentiment--from  
 the opposite perspective--can be found in a poem written by Pearse a few  
 months before the Rising: "The lawyers have sat in the council, the men with  
 the keen long faces, / And said, 'This man is a fool'. . . / And the wise  
 have pitied the fool . . ." <sup>16</sup> When the narrator has not passed by, but  
 lingered awhile (condescendingly?), the result has been discouragingly identical.

Yeats's characteristic parallel phrases are again used, as was the case with the "I have" formula, to emphasize subtle development and divergences: any effort at communication on the part of the narrator has failed. The detailing of the stanza is precise and evocative both of elements of a carefully drawn physical setting and of theme. This place is not simply a place of meaninglessness but one where the signs of meaning have been misread by the narrator. The painterly first lines make this point. The heroes, resident in the distanced third-person plural, have come in evening twilight (emblem of decaying light, of lost opportunity) from counter or desk (site of "September 1913"'s despised middle class of clerks and shopkeepers) among grey Eighteenth-century houses (apparently deteriorated remnants of the Eighteenth-century golden era Yeats frequently evoked) with vivid faces. Their faces contrasted their surroundings, light on darkness. And this vividness, surely a term of approbation in Yeats, would later prove to have reflected faithfully an inner reality.

These faces should have told the narrator something. But they produced for him only polite meaningless words and mocking tales. In the Yeats iconography implicit in my discussion in Chapter One, the leaders of the Rising emerged from the Eighteenth-century, an Eighteenth-century now reduced to greyness, and were in fact worthy successors to it, rather than the pale imitations the narrator had assumed them to be. The country of meaningless words and missed signs: it is perhaps not an accident that this stanza resembles in tone and milieu Eliot's "Prufrock":

Let us go then, you and I,  
 When the evening is spread out against the sky  
 Like a patient etherised upon a table;  
 Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,  
 The muttering retreats  
 Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels  
 And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:  
 Streets that follow like a tedious argument . . . 17

I point to the similarity only to stress how dramatically the poem goes on to depart from such a landscape: the persona admits he thought of "them" as Prufrock-like, walking through the grey evening streets of a tedious Irish argument, and then confesses his error.

Before he was "done" with them, the narrator continues, he had mocked them and joked about them "Around the fire at the club," an image suggesting comfort, ease, and a bit of smugness. (I can think of few other poems where "Yeats" is similarly hard on himself. The confessional is not a Yeatsian mode.) The club is a vessel of exclusion, keeping the vivid faces of the comic pretenders at bay, setting the narrator off from them. It is this redoubt he must abandon if he is going to transform the meaningless into poetry of historical consequence. The long second sentence, begun on line five, reaches a climax in the next lines, thirteen and fourteen. The narrator was certain that both the rebels and himself lived in the land where motley was worn, where jesters played the fool. In other words, the narrator confesses that he was indeed the author of sentiments like those of "September 1913" and some of the other poems in Responsibilities, which was Yeats's most recently published collection at the time of composing "Easter 1916." The ten-line-long clause is brought to a halt at a colon: all that went before must be retracted, all is changed utterly.

The procession of everyday occurrence must be interrupted for the crucial "digression" which is poetry.<sup>18</sup> What is changed is that the narrator will now leave his fire at the club and immerse himself in "them," naming them, explicitly, individually, in his song. He must, after all, if he expects anyone to hear him.

Paul Ricoeur has written that "Every narrative combines two dimensions in various proportions, one chronological and the other non-chronological. The first may be called the episodic dimension, which characterizes the story made out of events. The second is the configurational dimension, according to which the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered facts."<sup>19</sup> Yeats transgresses the separation of these dimensions by narrating the re-configuration of elements. The significance of a narrative's contents derives in large part from the relative position of the narrative voice, as can be seen by comparing the Iliad and Pope's Rape of the Lock. The trope of irony is brought about by positioning the material below the narrator so that his gaze turns downward and thus turns over the meanings of the words. In the terms of Frye's still immensely suggestive "Theory of Modes" in Anatomy of Criticism, stanza one of "Easter 1916" depicts the narrator's abandonment of what has been called the mode typical of this century, irony, in which the "hero" is "inferior in power or intelligence . . . so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity," and the wrenching of the leaders' biographies into the mode Frye calls "high mimetic," that of most epic and tragedy, where the hero is "superior in degree to other men but not to his natural environment . . . [with]

authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours . . . but subject to both social criticism and to the order of nature" (34). Yeats's final point will be that the tragic mode need not mean the heroes are not "one of us": the Rising lifted Ireland as a whole into a tragic consciousness. (The leaders are, it is worth noting, certainly held subject by Yeats to both social criticism and the order of nature.) Yeats's apprehension of their significance will ideally be part of his stated goal "to discover and create in myself as I grow old that thing which is to life what style is to letters, moral radiance, a personal quality of universal meaning in action and in thought."<sup>20</sup> This may strike many as simple egotism, but it is perhaps little more than taking poetry--that is, symbolic language--seriously. It is, in any event, part of the reason stanza one of "Easter 1916" was written, and why the configuration of narrator and political violence is unusually important in the poetry of Yeats:

It is not the way I go now, but one of the legitimate roads. He [Mallarmé] escapes from history; you and I are in history, the history of the mind . . . I begin to see things double--doubled in history, world history, personal history . . . (L, 887 [1937])<sup>21</sup>

2 The Poem as Oxymoron

I think it is true that for most readers, the impression from their first experience of "Easter 1916" is that of an emotional questioning of the rightness of a cause and the resort of that cause to arms, a questioning that can find "resolution" only in oxymoron. The refrain "a terrible beauty is born," now the property of headline-composing journalists and presidential speech writers, serves as a repeated synthesis--one that contains, to my ears at least, the twin emotions of defiance and resignation--a synthesis of the thesis and antithesis broached in each stanza. The "meaning space" into which the narrator escapes from the social matrix steeped in meaninglessness is one fraught with unease, interrogation, possible error, self-contradiction. ("Terrible beauty," is not a classic example of oxymoron: there is no logical reason beauty cannot be terrible [cf. "ugly beauty"]. I am using the term a bit loosely, though no more so than handbooks which adduce Shakespeare's "sweet sorrow" as illustration.) This locale has been associated with literary genius at least since Keats described Shakespeare's "negative capability," and reappears under guise of new vocabulary in the rejection of the tyranny of "univocal" meaning.

The poem's structure of paradox is related to Yeats's re-centering of the speaking self. Because, as is so often the case in Yeats's greatest poems, this act finds a macrocosmic corollary, in this case the general theme of self-definition vis à vis society. This theme in Yeats, often posed as the question of literary independence versus participation in the mob, was, as seen in Chapter One, the site of a good deal of equivocation. In the political context of the Easter Rising, one's place within society modulates into the subject of fanaticism, which occupies the central lines

of "Easter 1916." Thus, the critique of fanaticism that balances the positive portrayal of the heroes implicit in the decision to write out their names in a verse and the slight appolative lean of "terrible beauty" (where "beauty" is the substantive), is caught up in these spatial relationships, or topographies. This critique finds its ambiguous image in the stone, and it is that image I will deal with at some length.

Political "fanaticism" is of course often merely a term applied to the convictions of those with whom we disagree, but even that conceded, it seems true to say that in regard to the question of Irish nationalism, Yeats was anything but a fanatic. Geoffrey Thurley has perhaps put this best in his book on passion and politics in Yeats, stressing the poet's instincts toward qualification and hesitation:

Yeats was gradually to feel himself something of a traitor to the Irish cause. Like Joyce, he was too conscious that an orthodox commitment to the cause of independence did not call out the poet in him. To some extent, this parallels his attitude to love poetry . . . He was, in fact, from a relatively early stage . . . a poet of qualification and hesitation, a brooding wary man who was at the same time intensely alive and committed in his language. Necessarily, he failed his Republican friends from the outset (36).

Categorising Yeats as a "poet of qualification and hesitation" may seem eccentric, but I believe it is accurate in regard to most of his poetry (if not most of his writings), and particularly apt as a description of "Easter 1916."

The poem's assertions seem to spawn counterassertions; its argumentation is pendulum-like, producing the overall design of a complex oxymoron. If for Pound an image is a complex of emotions in an instant of time, "Easter 1916" consists of arguments arrayed in spatial stasis, the image of a paradox. We have already seen how one attitude toward the rebels, and its lack of meaning, is overthrown at the fulcrum of the colon (l. 15), leading to the

paean of stanza two. In Yeatsian terms (insofar as they can be understood), the poetry depicts, as it enacts, a turn from the subjective or antithetical to the objective or primary, the latter being where the relationship of self to external world is ascendant. By the time he was composing A Vision, Yeats had come to see this pattern as central to his work. As Ellmann writes,

[Yeats] concurred with Hegel that every thesis had implied in it an antithesis, and modified the notion that every movement holds the seeds of its own decay by identifying the seeds as those of a counter-movement. He was further confirmed in his symbol by the fact that it applied to his verse, which he realised with increasing clarity was guided by the principle of the containment of the utmost passion by the utmost control. (The Identity of Yeats, 153)

And indeed, "Easter 1916," arising from an event that was a considerable jolt to Yeats, is written in a difficult verse form so perfectly controlled that it is always a surprise to remember it consists of regular ABAB quatrains. Eagleton suggests that the "tension between the achieved poise of the poetic act, and the blurred, unfinished business it presents, is central to the poem's meaning" ("History and Myth in Yeats's 'Easter 1916,'" 249). Part of that "unfinished business" is Yeats's own attitude to the Rising.

Harold Bloom has written that while Yeats is usually at his best when "the visionary greatly outweighs the political . . . 'Easter 1916' is . . . an exception." There is vision in the poem, Bloom admits, but he feels this vision is not the chief strength of the poem, "which excels in a sober colouring of accurate moral description, a quality normally lacking in Yeats" (Yeats, 314). This is largely only a different terminology for the antithetical-to-primary movement, but usefully resituates it in the romantic versus Augustan, or solitary versus public poet, dichotomies I spoke of earlier. Bloom also alludes to something I wish to stress; that the romantic

or visionary poet does not disappear when the political poet surfaces. It is not as clear to me as it is to Bloom that the political facet of the poem dominates, or that "terrible beauty" belongs to one camp alone. Instead, two components seem to reverberate throughout until they meet (or collide?) in "terrible (political) beauty (visionary)." This phrase results from an irresolvable dilemma: Yeats's "visionary" transmutation of the dead revolutionaries occurs in the "political" sphere of a particular time, insisted upon by the title, and a particular place, laid out in stanza one.

The vacillation between political and visionary poles, poles which are structurally parallel to the "realistic" and "romantic" ones identified by Peter Costello,<sup>21</sup> can perhaps be most clearly seen in the poem's fourth stanza, beginning "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart," in which each visionary flight is counterweighted by moral and politically particularized reasoning. The stanza is dense with Yeats's unrelenting honesty, his insistence upon the Song of Six Pence. These were real people, people whose lives could be blighted, their hearts calcified, by too long a sacrifice. Yeats steps into the shoes of O'Casey. But, the statement is scarcely complete when it modulates into a question: "O when may it suffice?" The heart is made stone: when do the results make this considerable loss worthwhile? With an unusually conventional religious epithet, Yeats expresses the sentiment that we can't know, we can never after all judge just what has been lost in the heart, therefore cannot weigh that loss in any balance. All we can do is commemorate: "our part / To murmur name upon name." This is a strategically

disingenuous moment, since the poem in fact takes commemoration very seriously indeed, and will do far more than murmur "MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse." Yeats is here about an important business, locating the heart of the urge toward myth, the launching force of the transformation that ended British rule. It is, he insists, in lines that begin in a very human, almost anti-visionary mode, akin to the instincts of a parent. But in the sweeping, accelerating rhythms of some of Yeats's most beautiful lines, the quiet maternal murmur gradually becomes a defiant, visionary denial of mortality:

O when may it suffice?  
 That is Heaven's part, our part  
 To murmur name upon name,  
 As a mother names her child  
 When sleep at last has come  
 On limbs that had run wild.  
 What is it but nightfall? (ll. 59-65)

The metaphor, so to speak, runs away with itself, the comparison between child and martyr is entered into and the speaker must be brought back to earth, as the visionary recedes again: "No, no, not night but death." Now we are back completely in the political realm. Yeats asks the hard question: "Was it needless death after all? / For England may keep faith / For all that is done and said" (67-69). The "poetic" inversion of the conventional "said and done" seems effective here, in that it draws attention to the component parts: all that they have done, and all that we now say. The lines have an explicit historical reference. They do not simply refer to England "keeping faith" in general. The Rising occurred at a time when a Home Rule bill had finally passed both the House of Commons and the Lords, receiving Royal assent in September 1914. But the issue

is a complicated one. Yeats, no republican, would no doubt have considered the lifting of the suspension of the bill--suspended, so the excuse went, due to the outbreak of war--to constitute "keeping faith." But the bill was in fact suspended for other reasons, particularly the outbreak of the original violence of that decade in Ireland, the agitation and armed organizing of the Ulster Volunteers, who were supported all but openly by the British Conservative party. The implementation of the bill was deferred with a government pledge that it would not come into force without an amending bill temporarily excluding Ulster from its provisions.<sup>22</sup> Would Yeats have considered a Home Rule Bill enacted under such an amendment to constitute "keeping faith"? It is impossible to know, but probably he would have, especially given that no one in Ireland in 1916 (or 1921 for that matter) considered permanent partition of the island possible. This issue is an example of the poem's crucially intermediate temporal location: it was written when the "results" were unclear, when it could not be known if the deaths were indeed "needless."<sup>23</sup>

At this point the elegantly structured stanza repeats the visionary/political vacillation on a heightened level, as the poem draws to a close:

We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse . . .

The first lines here repeat a sentiment similar to that of the stanza's beginning. To me, however, the syntax, and thus Yeats's attitude toward the dream, is not completely clear. Should we read the sentence to say

"We know their dream. We know, at least, enough about it to know they dreamed and are dead, that their dream involved the possibility of martyrdom," or "We know their dream. It is sufficient to know they dreamed and are dead." (And is the following question, "And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died," rhetorical? Is Yeats saying he doesn't know, or that it doesn't matter?) But the pattern of the first part of the stanza repeats, except that the murmuring of names has become the writing of them out in verse--again, Yeats describes what he is doing--and the rising, visionary pitch culminates not in the pendulum swing back to its opposite, but in the striking oxymoron of the final phrase. Therefore, it seems to me that Douglas Archibald's attractive suggestion, "'Easter 1916' is not equivocation but ambivalence, a crucial distinction in poetic as well as political discourse" (Yeats, 108), is unsatisfactory, or at least incomplete. "Easter 1916" is the dramatization of equivocation. Whether the refrain constitutes a resolution, even a resolution in "ambivalence," is I think a question for those willing to draw finer shades of meaning from that word than I am.

The particular "ground" that underlies the non-visionary or even anti-visionary element of the stanza enables it to sustain another argument, another dichotomy closely related to that discussed above. That ground is familial--in particular maternal--love. Elizabeth Cullingford's description of Yeats's response to the events is telling: "[It] was a rebellion in which the aspect of blood sacrifice took

precedence over the hope of victory. Yeats's initial reactions . . . were complex: he was deeply moved by the resurgence of a romantic nationalism which he had considered moribund, but on the human level he mourned the waste of life" (85). Ah, levels. What of levels?

Those chosen by Cullingford are represented quite precisely in stanza four, and present in such a way as to draw attention to the pairing. An act of naming occurs at the human level, "As a mother names her child / When sleep at last has come," and at the political level of an Irish nationalism: "I write it out in a verse--/ MacDonagh and MacBride . . ." Since this poem is in so many ways a repudiation of "September 1913," the birth of a terrible beauty overturning a romantic Ireland dead and gone, this act of naming is an act of romantic Irish nationalism. The resort to human love as a contrast to military loyalties places Yeats at the centre of a literature of war dating back to Odysseus' draft resistance, and present in every Hollywood war movie. In modern fiction we see it serving as a fulcrum of Hemingway's career, as the balance between the two loyalties tilts slightly but significantly between A Farewell to Arms and For Whom the Bell Tolls. In the Irish context, the theme became the focus of dramatic tension in the plays of O'Casey. But Yeats does something different with it here, a difference in keeping with the oxymoronic nature of the poem: he establishes the two levels *only to push them* together, to create paradox through conflation. In a bold manoeuvre, he has the same activity recur on each level, and even relates them by simile: "That is Heaven's part, our part / To murmur name upon name, / As a mother names her child" (60-62). It is not precisely maternal love that we are forced to confront as analogous to the narrator's feelings toward the

martyrs, it is her instinct to murmur their names against the darkness.

It is another terrible beauty. Yeats is insisting that whatever one might think of the Rising itself, the instinct to commemoration is neither visionary nor political, it is merely the habit of mortality.

The continuous double-vision of "Easter 1916"<sup>24</sup> is the highest achievement of a theory of composition central to Yeats's thought. "'I even do my writing by self distrusting reasons,' he confessed in a private diary . . . .[A]s a result," Ellmann feels, "each poem pictures a struggle, and . . . the poet avoids as far as he can choosing between his attraction and repulsion by an idea" (Yeats: The Man and the Masks, 138). In "Easter 1916" Yeats entitles his poem with a key date from Irish history in an attempt to find a place where one can fuse the struggle and vacillation within the self with the turmoil of opposites in a nation. The poem, one might say, is replicated schematically in A Vision. Six years before the Rising, Yeats wrote in an essay that is one source of the refrain<sup>25</sup> that "All art . . . is the disengaging of a soul from place and history, its suspension in a beautiful or terrible light to await the Judgement" (Essays, 154). In a literal sense this is only true if we ascribe place and history to the body and unconscious mind alone. In his preeminent piece of art about his place in history, Yeats removed the "or."

### 3 The Danger of the Centre: "Hearts with one purpose alone"

"Easter 1916" then, can be read as a study of where Yeats considered himself to stand vis à vis political violence, a study of how the depiction of that violence is in part generated by the narrator's location. To repeat Eagleton's term, our thinking about the past is a relation rather than a reflection ("Marxism and the Past," 271). It is Eagleton's inclination to look at how Yeats saw himself in relation to the social contexts of the rising that helped distill my thinking about the poem:

One major element of that relation is guilt; yet the guilt is not simple . . . The guilt . . . springs from seeing one's own jettisoned idealism tragically revived by others; and to that extent the poet is both external to what has occurred and yet has a title to participate, recognising the relation between the rebels' motives and his own discarded hopes.

("History and Myth in Yeats's 'Easter 1916'," 258-9)

At the centre of the poem's oxymoronic ambivalence lies the stone of fanaticism. But is not the centre the place Yeats's narrator has sought for himself to gain the credibility of the participant necessary to speak out about a public event? The image of the stone captures the uneasiness Yeats felt about the very "centering" procedure he is in the process of exploiting. This unease is not, I think, consciously articulated. It is the one point at which the narrator seems unaware of the effect of his image-making. We find here a yet deeper structure of ambivalence beneath the narrative of argumentation.

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream.  
The horse that comes from the road,  
The rider, the birds that range

From cloud to tumbling cloud,  
 Minute by minute they change;  
 A shadow of cloud on the stream  
 Changes minute by minute;  
 A horse-hoof slides on the brim,  
 And a horse splashes within it;  
 The long-legged moor-hens dive,  
 And hens to moor-cocks call;  
 Minute by minute they live:  
 The stone's in the midst of all. (ll. 41-51)

This is the voice of Yeats's late poem "Politics," in which the speaker, living minute by minute, cannot fix his attention on Russian or Spanish politics (What if they are Irish politics?), and shares sentiments with the rollicking song of "Come Gather Round Me Parnellites," which cries, with Irish idiom flourished, "a proud man's a lovely man," because his heart was not to one purpose alone. His loveliness is inseparable from his failure, "So pass the bottle round."

This personality is in stark contrast to that of the martyrs. Their fanaticism--as is clear from their writings (and Yeats knew them well enough to be familiar with such details)--brook no lasses save Cathleen Ni Houlihan. As Carmel Jordan relates with relish in his recent book on Yeats and 1916 (more relish than Yeats at his most martial), mothers, children, lovers were heroically set aside:

Certainly, the human wives and sweethearts of the 1916 rebels . . . found it difficult to compete with . . . Cathleen Ni Houlihan and in the end could not save them from her fatal embrace. One can only imagine the helplessness felt by Grace Gifford when her husband of several minutes (Plunkett) was led directly from their wedding to his execution . . . . MacDonagh was happily married with two children when he was executed . . . Yet this man who had "love beyond all men" responded to the call of the Black Rose, sacrificing all that human love could offer...Although one of Pearse's sisters begged him not to go through with his plans . . . which she saw as suicidal, Pearse's determination to sacrifice himself for Ireland could not be broken...Pearse and all the other followers of the Black Rose who over the centuries have

built in the "noble house" of their thoughts an imperishable image of the Goddess Ireland that transcends all human beauty do not waver in their devotion. (107-109)

The metaphor implicit in poems such as "Politics" and "Come Gather Round Me Parnellites" is one of the "political" as a small vessel which cannot "contain" life. Literature cannot ignore the particular example that confounds a creed and remain worth reading. It remains both inexhaustible and frustrating because it has no ability to answer the desire for belief. As Hazard Adams once put it, "In literature it would seem there is always something in the particular experience of individuals or in their own uniqueness that absorbs the abstraction of theology. [Irving] Howe remarks, 'The political novel turns characteristically to an apolitical temptation'" ("Criticism, Politics and History: The Matter of Yeats," 165). The poet of "qualification and hesitation" will be wary of the vitality of an orthodoxy not of his own construction. Joseph Hone recounts one occasion in the early years of the century when, following a nasty article about the Abbey in a Dublin newspaper, "Yeats came before the curtain and appealed to the hundred people in the audience for 'life' against the desire which every political party has to substitute for life, which never does the same thing twice; a bundle of reliable principles and assertions" (194). A prominent theme of Yeats's early work in the Irish literary movement was his rejection of the poetry of the Young Irelanders movement of the 1840s--Thomas Davis and company--as he detailed in his essay "Poetry and Tradition" in 1907: "Our attacks, mine especially, on verse which owed its position to its moral or political worth, roused a resentment . . . and our verse was attacked in return . . . most of all for its . . . refusal to preach a doctrine or to consider the seeming

necessities of a cause" (Essays, 256-7). Life must be allowed, in its continual superfluity, to overflow the small vessel of intellectual commitment. It is telling that one of Yeats's most interrogative poems, "Man and the Echo," in which he asks his famous question, "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" concludes as it does:

But hush, for I have lost the theme,  
Its joy or night seem but a dream;  
Up there some hawk or owl has struck  
Dropping out of sky or rock,  
A stricken rabbit is crying out  
And its cry distracts my thought. (ll. 41-6)

Conflict between human love and "hearts with one purpose alone" when that purpose is political, is laid out most diagrammatically in Yeats's only explicit treatment of the Rising in drama, the story of a young rebel's encounter with the ghosts of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla when on the run in the harsh landscape of County Clare. The lovers have their lips "kept apart" by the memory of their crime: "for her sake and for his own, being blind / And bitter and bitterly in love, he brought / A foreign army from across the sea" (Plays, 442). The imagery of The Dreaming of the Bones, written during the ominous uncertainty of 1918, seems an elaboration of the "stone" of "Easter 1916," although here the stones and bones of Clare are more explicitly symbolic of sterility, in this case the sterility of forever-thwarted lovers, frozen in a curse and unable to kiss, like the lovers of Keats's urn. Now, "Although they have no blood, or living nerves, / Who once lay warm and live the live-long night / In one another's arms . . . / Their

manner of life were blessed could their lips / A moment meet" (441). For this to happen, they need an Irish man or woman to forgive them their deed of selling "their country into slavery": "and yet / They were not wholly miserable and accursed / If somebody of their race at last would say, / 'I have forgiven them'" (442). This is a classic Yeatsian manoeuvre: the young rebel is set face to face with all that is antithetical to his driving passion. The singlemindedness of his cause is asked to confront--as was that of Pearse and Connolly--simple human love. He defeats the temptation.

But he has failed the test. Yeats does not need to wax didactic; for despite the rigor of his stripped dramatic style, there is no doubt on which side the reader or watcher comes down. Life's more immediate potential for happiness will always attempt to thwart political commitment, will attempt to divert attention from the distant grail: "--never, never / Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven . . . / I had almost yielded and forgiven it all-- / Terrible the temptation and the place!" (444). And the chorus of musicians, while they fold and unfold the black cloth, drive the point home:

What finger first began  
Music of a lost kingdom?  
They dream that laugh in the sun.  
Dry bones that dream are bitter,  
They dream and darken the sun. (445)

There is no subtlety about the message. As Harold Bloom has commented on what he somewhat confusingly calls both "a cold

work, mere'y formulaic" and "Yeats's most imaginatively telling parable for his own nation"; "Though the young revolutionary has fought in the Post Office, it is the ghostly lovers who wear heroic masks, for the soldier has no imagination . . ." (308-9). But what if great imaginative commitment is needed also for the same Rising that supercedes the love of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla or Grace Gifford and Plunkett? And what if the Rising produces the sense of tragic dignity and independent selfhood that Yeats felt Ireland needed?

Then you have the perhaps necessary confusion that stanza three injects into "Easter 1916." In The Dreaming of the Bones there is no paradox, because the play has a much less complex role to perform. The play is, given its date of composition, a more political drama than such critics as Roger McHugh and David Clark suggest ("to consider this dreary, impressionistic, and obscure little play about the cyclic involvements of history as being politically powerful is probably quite unreal"<sup>26</sup>)--indeed it may be, in its historical context, something close to pacifist in intent. It contains no internal contradictions such as those lacing "Easter 1916" because, as Clark is correct in saying, it is not about "the lack of forgiveness, but the cost of the lack of forgiveness, however just" ("Yeats, Theatre, and Nationalism," 155).

Structurally, the poem's third stanza constitutes an aside, an interruption in a narrative that seems to this point that of the transformation of the still anonymous "them." The second stanza continues and develops one of the poem's ostensible *raison d'être* with something of an epic listing

that expands upon, and begins to particularize, the unidentified citizens of stanza one; although Yeats does not yet name them, creating a progression from anonymity to the ritualistic invoking of names, a progression lost if we insert their "identities" in our margins as gleaned from the standard reference works. As part of a building mood of ceremony, Yeats points at each in turn, writing not "her days were spent" but "That woman's days were spent." The stanza performs two somewhat contradictory acts, acts betraying Yeats's discomfort with his enterprise. In addition to their surface function of paying homage (which I do not downplay), these lines are involved both with further inscribing Yeats's narrator in the company of the revolutionaries, putting him, as we might phrase it, "in the midst of all," and in preparing for a critique that will explicitly distance him from them. It accomplishes the first of these functions through wilfully distorting the historical importance of some of those he names, and the second by introducing the theme of fanaticism that will be the subject of stanza three.

The identities would probably not all have been clear to Yeats's readers, and that is no doubt as he intended it. In his Commentary on the Collected Poems, Jeffares identifies "that woman" of the first six lines as Constance Gore-Booth Markievicz, whose sentence was commuted, an identification made almost certain by the more particular location ("under Ben Bulbin") given about a similar figure in the poem "On a Political Prisoner." Constance Markievicz's role as the highest profile woman involved in the Rising means readers might well have made the connection. The evocation of Pearse, "This man had kept a school / And rode our wingèd horse" (ll. 24-25), although brief, would have been

clear to most Irish readers by the time of the poem's composition, but "This other his helper and friend" would probably have been too vague, as it is too vague to justify Jeffares's unqualified identification of the figure as Thomas MacDonagh. No one but Yeats's friends would have thought of John MacBride when they read "This other man I had dreamed / A drunken, vainglorious lout." What would have been apparent to Yeats's readers was that this list was peculiar in three ways. First, it does not match the names Yeats gives in the poem's dramatic final lines--MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly and Pearse. Second, it is not the list a disinterested observer would be expected to draw up. Without denigrating her role, Markievicz was not a figure of major political importance in 1916. But the most conspicuously Yeatsian tinge to the poem's history is the case of MacBride. His part in the Rising was extremely minor. A volume edited by F. X. Martin, Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising, has essays which deal at length with twenty-six prominent figures, and MacBride is not among them. He is mentioned exactly once:

After the surrender of the G.P.O., Brigadier-General Lowe placed his car at the disposal of the Capuchins . . . to bring copies of the order to leaders, and on Sunday morning, 30 April, they arrived at Jacob's [Biscuit Factory]. There they saw MacDonagh, who was with Major MacBride, and who refused to negotiate with anyone except the general officer commanding the military. (175)

What of Sean MacDermott, "the mainspring of the rising,"<sup>27</sup> or Thomas Clarke, presiding head of the I.R.B. military council and signatory of the proclamation of independence, or Plunkett--all also executed?

Third, the list stresses the personal relationship of the speaker with two of the four (the description of "that woman" is clearly by someone who knew her), and those two happen to get most of the space.

The president of the provisional government is given a non-committal couplet. The cynical reader (Terry Eagleton, Conor Cruise O'Brien et. al.) might add that Yeats has introduced extra members of his own social class.<sup>28</sup> The effect is to put the narrator closer to the nexus of the Rising by arranging its leaders in a circle about himself. Whether this is part of a conscious design is not clear; I am inclined to think it is not. I am not in any event critical of the manoeuvre; it is part of the poem's power over us, part of its sincerity. But the poet has adapted the raw material of the historical event in this particular way. In stanza two, the ideology of the poem (using that word in its broadest sense) begins to become more visible.

Simultaneously, the stanza introduces us to the idea of extreme political commitment as something sterile, even ugly, a theme which is the poem's principal counterbalance to its eulogizing function (and, no doubt, the principal reason Maud Gonne found the poem so disappointing). Yeats does this to distance his narrator's beliefs from those infected by such a fanaticism. He does this in two ways. First, he prepares for the image of the stone not by reference to the chilling blood-sacrifice rhetoric of Pearse, as might have been expected, but by discussing the effect of political argument on the sweet voice of his friend, "that woman." His description of her voice in his memoirs, "in later years . . . shrill and high, but at the time I wrote of it . . . low and soft," does not mention the effect of political debate (Memoirs, 78). Yeats even hints, with the lines "What voice more sweet than hers / When, young and beautiful, / She rode to harriers?" that her politics cost her her beauty, a resonant word given the famous refrain to come. It is worth

wondering why, beyond conventional attitudes toward the role of women, the effect of the rhetoric that made Pearse the acknowledged leader of the Rising is displaced onto "that woman." This seems to have gone unremarked by the poem's many commentators.

Sinn Fein was in 1916 an organization radical by the standards of the body politic, and Padraic Pearse was radical by the standards of Sinn Fein. His secret organization, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, was in fact rebelling against the Sinn Fein mainstream headed by Eoin MacNeill in mounting the Easter operation.<sup>29</sup> There is no doubt, despite the peculiar pleading by Jordan that he was an essentially peaceful man<sup>30</sup> (peculiar in that Jordan is simultaneously applauding Pearse's calls to arms), that Pearse's ideology held violent insurrection to be necessary, and held the violence in and of itself to be fruitful (i.e., violent revolution was preferable to other means even if they achieved the goal of independence), that his speeches and writings were designed to bring about violence, and that his actions proved the sincerity of his professions. It is senseless to "apologize" for Pearse, pretending we can only praise him by downplaying his most basic convictions. It is more Pearse's utter lack of hypocrisy that unnerves us than what he says, since, after all, most praise Yeats in not being at all sure Pearse wasn't right. But he is the very definition of fanaticism; fanaticism being something Yeats and most of Yeats's readers both fear and envy, both criticize and wonder if they would be capable of it were a genuine cause to come along . . . . The Irish Republican Brotherhood was convinced that John Redmond's constitutional nationalists were wrong by in effect answering "yes" to Yeats's "England may keep faith," and felt certain "the granting and

immediate suspension of Home Rule [was] merely a ploy to secure peace on the English flank" (Cullingford, 86). That belief was fuelled by their assumption of the purifying force of bloodshed, an assumption in the ascendent around the turn of the century:

In literature after literature we find a preoccupation with the themes of carnage and bloodshed, of conspiracy and subterranean explosion . . . [giving] substance to George Steiner's comment that by about 1900 "there was a terrible readiness, indeed a thirst, for what Yeats was to call 'the blood-dimmed tide'."

(Lyons, Culture and Anarchy in Ireland, 1890-1939, 91)

The transferral of Pearse's doctrines onto a discussion of the effect of political fervour on a woman designed to evoke Constance Markievicz stands in conspicuous contrast to O'Casey's pointed juxtaposition of extracts from Pearse's orations and the goings-on in 'Tom the Barman's pub in The Plough and the Stars:

It is a glorious thing to see arms in the hands of Irishmen. We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, we must accustom ourselves to the use of arms . . . . Bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing, and the nation that regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood . . . [W]e rejoice in this terrible war [WWI]. The old red heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefield . . . . Such august homage was never offered to God as this: the homage of millions of lives given gladly for love of country. (104, 106)

Given the prevalence of such sentiments in 1988 it is perhaps impossible to know whether they were really more common in the 1900-14 era.

The effect of discussing the impact of such beliefs on those who hold them with regard to Markievicz rather than Pearse or MacDonagh or Connolly is significant, because these lines early in stanza two are the particular application of the theme of fanaticism that is the sole subject of stanza three and one of the central thrusts of the entire poem. That the theme is broached, then abandoned for many lines before being picked up again,

serves to obscure this relationship. One consequence is the reinforcement of a feature I dealt with earlier, the personalizing of the poem in terms of the narrator's circle of acquaintance. Second, it means we must read stanza three differently.

The effect of "one purpose alone" is not to be considered only in regard to the named martyrs who "dreamed and are dead," but also in regard to the living, such as Gore-Booth Markievicz. The effect on the living is, of course, the subject of The Dreaming of the Bones, and, in a more complicated fashion, of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." When we muse on this we may wonder if Thurley's identification of "that woman" as Maud Gonne isn't so much wrong as too literal, especially since Maud does enter the stanza obliquely through Yeats's digression about MacBride's real or imagined sins. The issue of Pearsean fanaticism is displaced onto "Markievicz" and perhaps, faintly, onto Maud Gonne. The Rising's psychological effect on the living is an element of the poem that has been insufficiently emphasized.

I said earlier that there were two ways in which this stanza serves to distance the narrator's beliefs from those "with one purpose alone." The first involved the use, during his description of "that woman," of "beautiful" at line 22. The second pivots on another cunning repetition of a key word: "This other man . . . had done most bitter wrong / To some who are near my heart" (31, 33-34). His heart is not charmed to one purpose, but is instead still a place loved ones approach. Personal malice--and loyalty to Maud Gonne--triumph over the political exigencies of eulogizing Easter; and in the very act of pronouncing MacBride transformed, Yeats gets in what has proven an immortal swipe at his character: now and in time to be

a drunken, vainglorious lout. As Terry Eagleton acutely comments, "The previous judgement on John McBride is both formally retracted . . . and restated [and] . . . the fact of the 'most bitter wrong' still stands" ("History and Myth in Yeats's 'Easter 1916'," 253). Yeats's rhyming ear cannot have failed to hear the word "heart" recurring to such pointed effect.

The six lines on "That woman [whose] . . . voice grew shrill" in political "argument" participate in two other motifs that should be recalled if the portrait is to be read accurately. Countess Markievicz, née Constance Gore-Booth, was a thoroughly political woman. She had left her family's estate at Lisadell near Sligo to become an art student and actress. She led the group that held St. Stephen's Green, barely escaped death, agitated for Jim Larkin, served time in prison, and later served as a minister in the Dail after supporting De Valera during the Civil War. She believed, with good reason, that "all the reforms at the beginning of the nineteenth century have their roots in the Terror [of the French Revolution]" (Torchiana, 184, 189). We should first of all note that when her voice was sweetest she "rode to harriers." Yeats described her in the draft version of his Autobiography as often passing him "on horseback, going or coming from some hunt . . . acknowledged beauty of the county" (Memoirs, 78). The image of the horse, almost always an emblem of the aristocracy in Yeats, reappears in the next stanza, where a horse and rider come from the road and the horse's hoof "slides on the brim" of the stream, and then "plashes within it." This is sound imagistic logic, since now that her voice is "shrill," "that woman" belongs with

those whose hearts have one purpose alone, hearts changeless within the stream and no longer riding on the horse of elegant, changeable pleasures.

Second, "that woman" is conspicuously a woman but conspicuously not the mother who names her child as the poet names the rebels. The implicit ideology of the text at this point is, I believe, that her voice grows shrill as she abandons her proper roles: her womanly role of mother, and the role of her social class, "beautiful" as they ride to harriers, to become involved in political argument. Terry Eagleton emphasizes a tension in the poem arising from Yeats's despising of the "ideology and social class of its leaders" (Criticism and Ideology, 152). There is no doubt, as I've made clear, that Yeats frequently expressed such contempt, although I do think Eagleton exaggerates its presence in "Easter 1916." But Yeats's depiction of political violence does include his conviction that something beautiful and gracious, something like Coole Park or Lissadell, is lost in the fanaticism required to engender it, and his suppressed regret appears in the content of his description of the "Markievicz" figure. A reader's sense of this is perhaps even stronger if reading through the Collected Poems, where "Easter 1916," coming early in Michael Robartes and the Dancer, follows on the heels of Responsibilities and The Wild Swans at Coole.

If "that woman" betrays her social class, she also clearly engages in behaviour that is, in Yeats's view, tragic in a woman. His roots in aestheticism are most visible in his conviction that women should never, at

any cost, impair their beauty. And politics--as he felt Maud  
Gonne's example taught him--were disastrous. Again the poem that echoes  
most clearly in this regard is "A Prayer for My Daughter," situated by  
Yeats near the end of Michael Robartes and the Dancer, between the dark  
musings of "The Second Coming" and "Meditations in Time of War."

Written during a rising tide of violence,  
its understandable and beautifully evoked concern for the child's  
safety evolves into his admonition that

An intellectual hatred is the worst,  
So let her think opinions are accursed.  
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? (ll. 57-64)

Yeats had linked "opinion" to the stone imagery that dominates stanza  
three in a diary entry years earlier: "Women because the main event of  
their lives has been a giving of themselves give themselves to an opinion  
as if it were a stone doll . . . women should have their play with dolls  
finished in childhood for, if they play with ideas again it is amid hatred  
and malice." <sup>31</sup> It is a statement, I suppose, that proves even Yeats, close  
acquaintance of many remarkable women (Lady Gregory, Maud Gonne, Marie Perle,  
Katherine Tynan) at times allowed conventional wisdom to blind him to facts  
staring him in the face. The link between "Easter 1916" and "A Prayer  
for My Daughter" is also drawn by Joyce Carol Oates, who comments that  
the daughter's brain activity should be "analogous to the linnet's song  
--no distracting evidence of mental powers, only a 'magnanimity' of sound,  
a kind of background music" (17). A focus upon voice is present in both

cases.

In Cathleen ni Houlihan, the theme of family love versus nationalism is explored from a point of view opposite to that in O'Casey's The Plough and the Stars. But in spite of the totemic Cathleen, the plays' gender structures--women giving priority to family life, men susceptible to the siren song of revolution--are identical. Yeats's instinct to designate politics a male folly too harsh for the female constitution was of course common to his society and era, however much the documents repeat tales of the particular resolve of women's organizations during the War of Independence, for example. These are stories familiar to any who have read of the female dominated skirmishes against the landlords during the depopulation of the Scottish highlands. As Denis Johnston puts it in his introduction to The Scythe and the Sunset, "in actual fact the women of Ireland, ever since the Maud Gonne era, have been the most vocal part of its militancy. If I can claim nothing else, I can at least point with some complacency to the fact that . . . both my women are killers" (326).

Part of the reason for Yeats's integration of "that woman" into the poem set in contrast with "the mother" is that one of the principal images of political violence for the poet is sterility. William Irwin Thompson notes Yeats's association, in his autobiographical writings, of violence with sexual abstinence. Violence results from abstinence reacting with the imagination to produce "the strange eunuch-like tone and temper. For the last ten or twenty years there has been a perpetual drying of the Irish mind" (Thompson, 149). In his bitter description of the late years of Constance Markiewicz in "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and

Con Markiewicz," Yeats writes that "The older is condemned to death, / Pardoned, drags out lonely years / Conspiring among the ignorant." He adds that Eva, when "withered old" seems "An image of such politics," "withered" bearing association with corrupted sterility since at least Spenser, and Coleridge's "Christabel." Yeats's concern for the loss of "aristocratic" values certainly also contributes to these portraits.

To digress for a moment, it is interesting that however patronizing Yeats's view of the role of women might be, he also equates that role with both the poetic enterprise of "Easter 1916" and, by implication, the response towards the martyrs that he wishes it to encourage. If "that woman" of stanza two has coarsened her beauty and voice through argument, the conventionally suitable role of mother she has abandoned in favour of the stone dolls of fanaticism involves the naming of the child at nightfall when "the limbs that had run wild" lie still, as lie the limbs of the martyrs' exuberance; a naming that is compared to the commemoration that is "our part," and thus to the action of the poet. Yeats's metaphor, make of it what we will, is clear enough: Dubliners will, or at least should, respond to the martyrs with the feelings of a mother with her sleeping child. The memorialization is an act of love born out of a sensation of mortality (is that not the source of the melancholy joy of the parent watching a sleeping child?) akin to maternal love. The figure is not farfetched. It may, in fact, pin down the nature of the sentimental yet authentic emotion that issues from such events. We can also see, by contemplating this possibility, the nature of one resolution of the poem's ambiguity of response, a response involving no oxymoron. That Yeats

questions the martyrs' fanaticism, and wonders if their deaths were needless, while still murmuring their names, is no contradiction: the figure of the mother and her child makes clear a distinction between how we judge actions, and how we feel about their consequences.

The Yeats who, to his chagrin, had been absent from Ireland at the climactic moment, who mumbled unconvincingly about why he hadn't been notified in advance, interrupts his narrative of commemoration and self-reintegration--being now encircled by the martyrs he admits having incorrectly despised--with an outburst of reservations that picks up on the theme proffered, then dropped, at the start of stanza two. Having situated himself at the centre, he finds there "hearts with one purpose alone," and begins to undermine, to powerful poetic effect, the surefootedness of his own advance.

In general, that is to say in the abstract, the Yeatsian hero was "a daring, foot-loose outcast, a fool in the eyes of the world because he had relinquished the indolent pleasures of love and home, but a tragic figure to poets, because he was always destroyed by the weak and cowardly. Cuchulain . . . was the archetype." It was a delineation of heroism in many respects similar to the ideals of Pearse (Mitchell, "Yeats, Pearse, and Cuchulain," 52, 54), and sharing the situation of the members of Sinn Féin, they being, as eyewitness Desmond Ryan wrote, in a situation where all the influential elements of Irish life--"the wealthy classes, the large farmers, the Church, the Press," were "contemptuous and hostile." They thus possessed a necessary "fanatical conviction of [their]. . . inevitable triumph" (Desmond Williams, 39). But the Rising, with its

immediacy, with its victims who were far from faceless, made Yeats question simply opposing heroism to the "indolent pleasures of love and home." He may have arrived at a heightened awareness of the cost to real lives of patriotic sacrifice through contemplating Constance Gore-Booth Markievicz and women like her, but stanza three of "Easter 1916" bears no trace of being specific to one gender. In 1907 Yeats wrote that three groups of men had made "all beautiful things, Aristocrats have made beautiful manners, because their place . . . puts them above the fear of life, and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose and so do not fear, and the artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness" (*Essays*, 251). The Rising, and perhaps marriage, had made Yeats realize that all "men" have something to lose, and to wonder whether the "beauty" they created by suppressing their love of those things was not perhaps a terrible one.

Intertextual readings within the Yeats canon have suggested a variety of contexts for the image of the stone in "Easter 1916." The word itself appears over a hundred times in his work. It is a key image for this study, as it is Yeats's central figure for the cause and the effect of violent political struggle. Jordan has perhaps gone furthest afield, exploring the image as a leitmotif in what he calls the "great tapestry" of Irish cultural expression:

The stone which is the central metaphor of the poem is one of Yeats's "masterful images" and has mythological and nationalistic associations that can be traced back to the dawn of Irish history . . . Yeats scholars see the stone as a symbol of rigidity and death--a reflection of the fanatic dedication of the rebels to their political ideals. And though the stone symbol does, indeed, effectively suggest the hypnotic devotion of the rebels to the Irish Cause . . . it also suggests much more. The stone appears to represent

Ireland herself, for one of the well known names of Ireland, Inisfail ("Island of the Stone of Destiny"), was derived from the name Lia Fail ("Stone of Destiny") . . . one of the four sacred talismans of the Tuatha De Danaan . . . Keating notes that, besides being "enchanted," the stone also had "fatal" qualities . . . . In other words, the stone possessed the "terrible beauty" of Ireland herself. (76)

Yeats was undeniably aware of these ancient names for Ireland (77), and Jordan's comments seem worth having in the back of one's mind as a reader of the poem. I feel, however, that "the stone appears to represent Ireland" misstates the poem's text, which says that those with one purpose alone are enchanted to a stone, not by one. Also, the hearts, not the stone, are enchanted.

As Jordan notes, to most readers the stone suggests rigidity and death, and we must be careful not to undervalue the obvious. The common phrase has it that one is 'stone dead.' It is a phrase repeated by the Ulster poet Michael Longley, for example, in a recent interview in which he speaks of his fine poem "Wounds." He accompanies its use by the provocative idea --one that would have intrigued Yeats--that violent political action may require something very much like innocence: "It seems important to me . . . to image how one can be so brainwashed or so angry or in a sense perhaps so innocent that one can . . . shoot another person stone dead. It seems important to imagine that."<sup>32</sup> There is nothing beautiful or mythic about the relentless, disfiguring grief of Ulster violence in Longley's work. It surrounds; it knocks on the door of the diurnal.

Here are two pictures from my father's head--  
 I have kept them like secrets until now:  
 First, the Ulster Division at the Somme  
 Going over the top with "Fuck the Pope!"  
 "No surrender!": a boy about to die,  
 Screaming "Give 'em one for the Shankill!"  
 . . . . .  
 Now, with military honours of a kind,

With his badges, his medals like rainbows,  
 His spinning compass, I bury beside him  
 Three teenage soldiers, bellies full of  
 Bullets and Irish beer, their *lies* undone.  
 A packet of Woodbines I throw in,  
 A lucifer, the Sacred Heart of Jesus  
 Paralysed as heavy guns put out  
 The night-light in the nursery for ever;  
 Also a bus-conductor's uniform--  
 He collapsed beside his carpet-slippers  
 Without a murmur, shot through the head  
 By a shivering boy who wandered in  
 Before they could turn the television down  
 Or tidy away the supper dishes.  
 To the children, to a bewildered wife,  
 I think "Sorry Missus" was what he said. (Longley, 86)

This is how one dies: with the dishes undone, beside your slippers. Yeats in "Easter 1916" is still under the trance of a startlingly new and concrete reality, but he does not yet have, and perhaps never really possesses, Longley's sense of being encircled and penetrated (his father, with Great War shrapnel inside him, is "dying for King and Country, slowly"), or Longley's desperate last line, "Looking for some glimpse of humanity amid the brutality of that particular violence."<sup>33</sup> Yeats comes closest to such a claustrophobia of violence in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," during the Anglo-Irish, not the Civil War. But by moving himself imaginatively into the company of the martyrs he has begun to sense the price of being "Cuchulain." Yeats himself insists--in contrast to the rest of the poem--on the universal application of this stanza. Grammatically it makes no reference to the martyrs. "That woman" and "this man" have been subsumed in "hearts." It has only implicit links with the rest of the poem.

Other critics have raised a variety of implications of the image. Cairns Craig reminds us that the sacrifice of those killed resurrected "the tragic nobility which Yeats . . . had sung so often and so often bemoaned the loss of . . . . If the rebels are wrong in their sacrifice

then there is something wrong too in the values of Yeats's poetry" (176), thereby locating, certainly, one of the poem's tensions. For me Craig goes awry by then suggesting "the stone in the midst of all is not only the fixities of the nationalist ideology, it is the poem which, in spite of its fixed structure, continues to trouble the living stream." The poem does not play on this identification, and the critic credits Yeats with a self-awareness he did not put into these verses. We should turn to self-reference as a last resort; it is too easy a game to play. To Terry Eagleton, the stone is a hard objectivity that stands in contrast to "the subjective illusion of 'enchanted,'" the "strange, stone-like inscrutability" of myth amidst the "living process of the event" ("History and Myth in Yeats's 'Easter 1916'," 255). This model will prove useful.

I wish to discuss the metaphor in two ways which will prove to be in intimate relation with each other, and, by being so, to constitute a central self-contradiction of the poem: the stone as fanaticism or "ideology" (a smallness or paucity within the stream of abundance); and the stone in the stream as an image of belonging (being in the centre, in the midst of things).

In Chapter One I illustrated at some length Yeats's resistance of the links between himself and the body politic, and between politics and poetry. He attacked "verse which owed its position to its political worth," and wrote verse notable for "its lack of rhetoric, its refusal to preach a doctrine or to consider the seeming necessities of a cause" (Essays, 256-57). This attitude, about which Yeats was particularly insistent, was, I suggested, but one side of a divided personality; for Yeats was heavily involved in Irish political life in both intellectual and practical capacities, and in fact ended up writing three of the major

works of historically specific, politically engaged poetry in his century. It did not seem far fetched to wonder if Yeats emphasized political detachment with all the more vehemence in order to counter an awareness that his own involvement was unusually extensive, an involvement inimical to the aesthetic values taken as givens in his youth. Earlier in this chapter I proposed that Yeats tended to visualize the political as a small vessel that falsified reality because it was unable to "contain" the abundance and variety of life.

In the third stanza his subject is the intensity of political commitment needed to sacrifice one's life--one's own abundance--for a political goal. Its context renders the image emblematic of the political single-mindedness of the Easter rebels. (Jeffares feels "making a stone of the heart" refers to, "in particular, Maud Gonne's long service given to revolutionary ideals" [228], an odd understanding of the words "refer" and "particular.") But this particularizing vector is countered on the level of syntax--grammatically the stanza does not refer to the rebels or even to politics. For Douglas Archibald, to give an example of the latitude this engenders, the stone becomes a "vivid, poignant and bitter emblem of Maud Gonne"--whom Yeats compared to a stone statue and a stone doll in his memoirs--"of their relationship, and of what Yeats believes can happen to romantic love, sexual pairing, human affection, and the myriad abundance of life under the pressure of revolutionary politics" (49).<sup>34</sup>

Stone being inanimate, the image both suggests "the stilled hearts of the executed leaders" (Eagleton, "History and Myth," 257), and hearts figuratively dead, dead to the world of the other elements--water, horses, birds, air, cloud. His disquisition on the effects of intellect and hatred

on women in "The Death of Synge" settles on the image: "to women opinions become as their children or their sweethearts, and the greater their emotional capacity the more do they forget all other things . . . . At last the opinion is so much identified with their nature that it seems a part of their flesh becomes stone" (Autobiography, 341). But does the stanza's digression about fanaticism simply represent the "terrible" side of the poem's oxymoronic structure, the price paid for political action, or is Yeats's depiction of fanaticism itself of two minds?

#### 4 Longing for the Centre

"The past is an alien country which stimulates  
us into imperializing it."

--Milan Kundera<sup>35</sup>

"Easter 1916" validates Richard Ellmann distinguishing Yeats from his father in that he was "fascinated by belief, or rather, by the believer's stance, as fascinated as Shelley was by atheism. He had a great interest in any thought which had aroused the passions of masses of men or of some small group . . . . Yet he was unable to hold it with the same enduring fervour" (The Identity of Yeats, 40). The poem, with its making of amends for the narrator's apostasy in stanza one, and its tilting of the historical narrative to place himself in the company of "them" and its description of political argument as destructive of "beauty" in stanza two, exhibits an ambiguous attitude toward the "believer's stance." It is almost as if, in order to illustrate Ellmann's insight, "Yeats" is, during the progress of the poem, "fascinated by . . . the believer's stance" but "unable to

hold it." Geoffrey Thurley discusses the image of the stone in connection with Yeats's "The Magi," written three years earlier. Here, in the crusading context of "September 1913," the fixity of the philosopher's quest, stressed by anaphora, is seen as heroic:

Now as at all times I can see in the mind's eye,  
In their stiff, painted clothes, the pale unsatisfied ones  
Appear and disappear in the blue depth of the sky  
With all their ancient faces like rain-beaten stones,  
And all their helms of silver hovering side by side,  
And all their eyes still fixed, hoping to find once more,  
Being by Calvary's turbulence unsatisfied,  
The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor.

Thurley notes that with his use of the word "enchanted" in "Easter 1916," Yeats has related his faeryland poetry to his political poetry (94). In the later poem then, "the paradox of enchantment reveals its true identity: on the one hand there is the fixity of the stone-mind, of trance, on the other the possession of violence, of abandonment" (96).

Richard Loftus insists that the stone "encompasses allusions both to the magical stone that the Tuatha De Danaan of Irish mythology carried into battle and to the philosopher's stone" (78). "Allusion" seems too strong, but in a poem that announces the transformation of the martyrs from dross to gold after carrying their stone hearts into battle, this is an evocative suggestion. But I would take Loftus one step further: the poem is in part an ironic re-reading of the image, one that embodies Yeats's own unease with political passion as transformative. Has dross changed to gold in the poem, or flesh to stone? Both.

In a letter to the Irish Worker during the rioting surrounding the great lock-out in 1913, when "the principal employers and the Church united in embittered opposition to the development of trade unionism"

(Freyer, W. B. Yeats and the Anti-Democratic Tradition, 31), Yeats refuses to criticize fanaticism: "I do not complain of Dublin's capacity for fanaticism whether in priest or layman, for you cannot have strong feelings without that capacity" (Freyer, 31). Or should one cultivate the "capacity" for fanaticism while avoiding the thing itself? In On Baile's Strand (1904), a central theme is "whether men should be ruled by rational law or by their own natural passions," and Yeats "drives home his moral--that passion is Nature's law and rational logic mankind's blunder" (Loftus, 64); that, as Cuchulain phrases it, you "cannot follow one / That lives like a bird's flight" (Plays, 261). But will Yeats allow all people their passion, even if it be a passion that burns down the Big Houses? Is the man who wrote On Baile's Strand the one who also wrote "In politics I have but one passion and one thought, rancour against all who, except under the most dire necessity, disturb public order" (Jeffares, 414)?

Has dross changed to gold in the poem, or has flesh changed to stone? Yeats never hammered his thoughts into a unity on the question of hatred and passion. Over and over Yeats extolls "natural passion," and seems to see the aristocracy, for example, as embodying this. He implicitly praises the overman type who does not deign to submit to petty human law. Yet how is such a natural passion to be distinguished from the hatred and violence--obviously also "natural" to mankind--which he deplors in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"? Yeats praises and attacks hatred. Like most of us he <sup>usually</sup> sees his own hatred as a sort of virtue, a virility, and that of those with whom he disagrees as a vice, a sterility.<sup>36</sup>

Is the stanza as negative a critique of the "hearts with one purpose" as is usually supposed? Though not a clear-cut nationalist in the political sense, Yeats thought of the self, of the personality, as something created in conjunction with a nation, a people. He did so to an extent which seems to me unusual. In our own time, such a consciousness seems the preserve of very few writers, usually those possessed of both an immense talent and a traumatic political heritage on the margins of the empires: Solzhenitsyn, Seamus Heaney, Adrienne Rich, Derek Walcott come to mind. Yeats seemed to find unremarkable the notion that his personality was part of "Ireland." In 1910, for instance, he wrote in his journal,

To oppose the new ill-breeding of Ireland, which may in a few years destroy all that has given Ireland a distinguished name in the world . . . I can only set up a secondary or interior personality created by me out of the tradition of myself, and this personality . . . must be always gracious and simple. It must have that slight separation from immediate interests which makes charm possible, while remaining near enough for fire. (Memoirs, 142)

Yet, as Ellmann notes, "His method of treating his Irish background and subject-matter is . . . exceedingly complex. Ireland is his symbol for the world, and he is caught between estrangement and love for both" (The Identity of Yeats, 4-5).

The first part of "Easter 1916" describes Yeats's persona re-inscribing himself in an element of Irish political life which, he was coming to see, would be central to Ireland from that point on, and with whose "terrible beauty" he clearly wished to align himself. When, in stanza three, he addresses single-minded politics, he seems at first to be recalling all of his reservations about the activities of Markievicz and those of Maud Gonne: "I came to hate her politics, my one visible rival" (Memoirs, 63). But the

image of the heart of stone undergoes a synecdochic transformation and becomes a stone in the midst of all, changeless, ever-present. Its stoniness is also its permanence, its fervour has become its centrality.

We can see O'Leary's presence in the rhetoric of the poem. "O'Leary himself insisted," writes Cullingford, "that the dignity and freedom of the individual ought not to be sacrificed, even for the most worthy cause. Yeats continually quoted his aphorism, 'there are things a man must not do even to save a nation'" (13). But O'Leary's voice is compounded with competing tongues. The martyrs are in the midst of being dignified by this very poem, and, as to freedom, they have apparently exercised it, or willingly offered it up, much the same thing. Simply put, does the stanza describe isolation or involvement? Is the narrator's stance one of condemnation or desire?

The lines' apparent design, especially if we take into account the earlier lines "Her nights in argument / Until her voice grew shrill" and the first sentences of stanza four, is that of describing isolation. The preponderance of meaning, and the poet's explicit intent, is critical: a description of the emotional price of political violence.

(Though Ireland's subjection to England had a human, emotional price too, especially in economic deprivation and the rending of families through emigration--we need only re-read "A Modest Proposal.") But there is what a deconstructionist might call a fissure in the logic of the symbolism, a submerged commentary on fanaticism playing itself out as a subterranean echo, although, oddly enough, it becomes visible by reading the stanza more literally and seeing if the conclusion is consonant

with the introduction. Whether or not this is part of Yeats's conscious design, it is consistent with the earlier movement toward re-instituting the narrator in the body politic; even if that consistency, as it plays out, violates our sense of metaphoric logic in stanza three. Good poetry often works in this way: in the intensity of composition, what we traditionally call "inspiration," the writer's mind seems capable of keeping track of its own "subconscious" (for lack of a better term) and letting it appear, in some fashion, in the text. I am not as ready as Derrideans to locate, in this fissure of logic, a revelation that somehow overthrows the more explicit meaning. Poetry is a means of attempted communication: to devalue its "surface" message is a triumph of methodology over something very like passion. But the other voice should be heard. Not in order to produce an "open" discourse or a "plurality of intention," but to produce a more accurate, because more complete, singularity.

Does the stanza describe isolation or involvement? An answer involves identifying what the stanza's two principal images--the stone, the stream--represent, not at all a simple matter. The identity of the stone is at first clear enough: "Hearts with one purpose alone / Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone." The hearts of the still unnamed figures with the single purpose of an independent Ireland resist changing with the season (are therefore not "natural"), and in their fixity are stone-like. So the stone represents the hearts of the martyrs. In the logic of the metaphor, the "living stream" that the stone "troubles" (a prophetic word, given the later Irish euphemism for guerilla warfare) is the body, the

flesh subject to the ravages of winter and summer. The "purpose" of the revolutionaries does indeed trouble their bodies, leading to their death: war, the alteration of human tissue. But by the end of the stanza no reader is still thinking of the stone as representing the hearts of the Easter martyrs, but, rather, the martyrs themselves.

This occurs, almost invisibly, as the narrator takes the metaphor metaphorically, so to speak. The heart, as the vital pump, is a vivid synecdoche. The stone never loses its earlier representative function as the "fanatic heart": the stanza's <sup>final lines</sup> still make sense of it, and it is reiterated at the start of stanza four. But this becomes, in the middle of the stanza, distinctly a secondary meaning. The stone is, technically, a mixed metaphor, but I find the term inappropriate: it is not just a synecdoche but a synecdochic way of looking at the world by a poet who thought of personality as something possessed by both individuals and nations. The image slips back and forth between two levels. It is the human slipping into history. It is, in fact, a type of image used frequently in the Bible, where, as Frye points out, Leviathan is both within the chaos of the ocean and synecdochic emblem of it: "Metaphorically, a monster in the sea is the sea" (The Great Code, 190). The heart of stone in a man or woman is a man or woman.

The shunting between metaphorical levels is clarified by considering the shifting in meaning of "the stream." As I said, the stone's explicit identification with the heart (l. 43) makes the stream within which it lies symbolic of the body (although the veins may also be implicit). With its one purpose the heart is a stasis within the temporal decay of flesh, within the stream of time. Yeats's "To trouble the living stream," though,

begins immediately to enlarge the scope of reference for the image. The "living stream," a quasi-Biblical phrase (see, for example, Revelations 22.1), is hardly distinguishable <sup>from</sup> the "stream of life," and this is probably the principal thrust of the metaphor at this point, as the first quatrain concludes.

In the second quatrain, the theme of change versus stasis introduced with "Through winter and summer seem" is reinforced:

The horse that comes from the road,  
The rider, the birds that range  
From cloud to tumbling cloud,  
Minute by minute they change. (ll. 45-48)

This is the beginning of an elegant, periodic sentence that will wend for a dozen lines, with four evenly spaced semi-colons, to the end of the stanza. It is in this stanza that the poem's rhythms are most insistent; which is, in reading Yeats, a signal to pay particular attention: here, intertwined, lie the poem's greatest rhetorical insistence (its dramatic peak) and its most profound emotional and intellectual uncertainty. The stream has of course served as an emblem both of the life force and of transience since at least the pre-Socratics. It is found amongst the fragments of Heraclitus, "You cannot step twice into the same river,"<sup>37</sup> and mused upon more than once by Stephen Dedalus, serving eventually as one of the metaphors for Bloom's "sea-voyage" through uncertainty, mutability of self, and the perilous text of Ulysses.<sup>38</sup> Just as the stone heart comes to represent the martyrs, the living stream of the body and its veins synecdochically becomes the stream of life: the stone heart in the body becomes the martyr within "life."

But the stanza's content soon thwarts this reading as well. In the

lines quoted above, other elements are introduced which contrast the intransigence of the stone: "The horse that comes from the road, / The rider, the birds that range / From cloud to tumbling cloud." This last image, especially, creates a sense of turbulent vivacity. Thus far, these elements are not set in relation to the stream, but in the next lines the topography becomes clearer:

Minute by minute they change;  
A shadow of cloud on the stream  
Changes minute by minute;  
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,  
And a horse splashes within it;  
The long-legged moor-hens dive,  
And hens to moor-cocks call. (ll. 48-54)

Suddenly the clouds, birds, horse and rider are in a relationship of edge, margin. They approach the stream. The shadow of cloud is on its surface, mutating constantly. The horse slides on the brim and then splashes--has it stepped in only by accident? If the stream is "life," how is it that we are not all--including horse and rider--always within it? How can we approach it, slide on its edge, get our feet wet? This may seem to be pushing the images too hard, but it is necessary to see that the images of the stream, and of the stone in the stream, are awkward unless we propose that given their setting in a poem with a date as title, they have slid once more onto another level. When Douglas Archibald writes of the stanza that Yeats "admires and authenticates the heroism, but longs for the brimming stream of life" (51), one is struck by how weakly the stone in the stream serves as an image for sterility of human relationship, for isolation. In relation especially to the image of horse and rider, before it again serves to represent "life" and sexuality as the hens and cocks dive within it, the stream seems to stand more for history, and history in the sense of tumultuous, public events that the rider lives on the

edge of, may choose--as "that woman" who once "rode to harriers" did not--to avoid. His horse (his passion?) may, however, slip in against his will; he may be caught up in his "times": "Easter 1916."

To the extent that the stream takes on the guise of history, the stone becomes not just the heart or even the martyr but the event his purpose has brought forth, the "terrible beauty" that will from now on "trouble the living stream." The martyrs have resolved the vexing question of personal identity. No longer part of the stream, and therefore not, as Hume would have it, merely a bundle of contradictions, they have become identical with the event they enacted. Stone is image for heart, heart becomes synecdoche for martyr, martyr synecdoche for the Rising.

I do not insist on this reading. To me its claim is based on what seems an otherwise excessive concentration on the horse's hoof. I do insist that the timbre of the final lines creates a thoroughly ambiguous response: "Minute by minute they live: / The stone's in the midst of all." The narrator's attitude has subtly shifted. The temporality of "they"--horse, rider, bird, hens, cocks--is "natural": but all this shall pass away. The stone is, in midst of all, a kind of essence, an irreducible quantity. The power of images of centrality and immersion is considerable in our culture. Given the shock that the Rising gave to a Yeats who had since at least 1913 felt himself disenchanted with and ostracized from Nationalist politics, given how that story is told in stanza one with a "happy ending" of reintegration, given how the poet goes on to declaim in the fashion of culture-prophet the sanctity of the martyrs' names--given all this, it is difficult to see how the image of the stone in the midst cannot be both the object of the stanza's critique and an object of desire. Yeats

cannot entirely make peace with the dead because he wants to be like them. He is a rider come in from the road to the edge of the stream of public life, the poet come back via Holyhead weeks after the battles are over and the leaders shot, a rider at harriers on the elegant estates of Coole: haughty romantic who wants to cry as all men cry, cool debater of national questions who defines his isolation from the paudeen of the greasy till yet succumbs to Stallybrass and White's fundamental rule: "what is excluded at the overt level of identity-formation is productive of new objects of desire" (25). The stone of the martyr's heart, hard in the body, is also the man or woman in the midst of all, is also--if the stream is history--the inalterable event that now and in time to be will trouble Irish life. The stone is an emblem of Yeats's ideal hero: too firm to be eroded by the winds of chance and style, too hard to be affected by events and instead effecting history, an unmoved mover.

This then, constitutes another element of "Easter 1916"'s oxymoronic structure, one I am not certain Yeats saw the changeless heart enchanted to a stone has through its actions created an Ireland utterly changed, has served as a philosopher's stone (Loftus, 78), a catalyst itself unchanged but transforming dross to gold. William Barnwell's account of the post-Easter era is incomplete:

the actual events of the contemporary scene in Ireland (the Parnell split, 1916, the Troubles, Civil War, and the censorious democratic rule of the Free State) seemed to have posed a constant threat to this concept of public nobility, and he endured a constant struggle to maintain himself, his artistic "interior personality" and his craft against it. (56)

The critique of hearts with one fanatical purpose is subverted by its own image of immersion and centrality, an image growing out of the narrator's

desire to be as central, as politically and mythologically potent, as MacDonagh or Pearse, as "that woman" or "this man." This ambiguity of feeling is inevitable given the internal contradiction in the nature of fanaticism, itself reflected in Yeats's own conflicting feelings about himself as part of the Irish political body, and about aestheticism or the visionary versus historicism in poetry. Fanaticism's mind is divided. Is it an isolationist or communal response? Two themes, for example, run through the memoirs of Francis Simard, a member of a terrorist cell convicted of the murder of Québec cabinet minister Pierre Laporte in Montréal in 1970: that he is an outsider in a corrupt society, and that he has a sense of responsibility so strong it becomes the basis of all morality: "If you don't feel a constant sense of responsibility, not only for your own life, but for the lives of others, then you'll never find the answers" (62).

As we've seen in the oft-reiterated dichotomy of family love versus political belief both in "Easter 1916" and the writings of Pearse and MacDonagh, conventional wisdom tends to read their fanaticism as isolationist. But of course the politically committed suppress their roles vis à vis family, lover, friend, in order to give obeisance to the very community they constitute. Listen, for example, to the divided longings of the poem "Heaven in Hell," by Plunkett:

I chose, and joined the band  
 of Heaven's adventurers that seek  
 To climb the never-conquered peak  
 In solitude by their sole might.<sup>39</sup>

The revolutionary joins the band that climbs in solitude.

Harold Bloom is correct to say that "Yeats, despite himself, remained

always a poet of autobiographical self-recognition, in the solitary tradition that Shelley had founded upon Wordsworth. Yeats's subject . . . tended to be his relation as poet to his own vision" (63), although Yeats's will is too complex an entity to be confident of that "despite himself." It is just in this way that "Easter 1916" is clearly an exception to Yeats's habitual practice. "I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me" (L, 613). The poem does glance at elements in Yeatsian "visionary" history, but it is nevertheless clear that the principal autobiographical relationships are those between Yeats and his nation, Yeats and revolutionary nationalism, Yeats and a particular date in history. And in addressing these he ran headlong into the oxymoron figured forth by his own life: the necessity of "the lonely ecstasy of the artist" (Bloom, 224), and the search for an essential Irishness, a unified spirit for a nation, the "communal wisdom of society." These poles correspond roughly to the subjective or lunar movement versus the objective or solar movement in A Vision, where, however, the respective forces wax and ease in alteration. Those poles also correspond roughly to the conflicting vectors of nationalistic fanaticism, a conflict made manifest in one historical moment (thus confounding apparent one-ness), and made manifest in the completed personal narratives of the people named in the oxymoronic poem dated by that moment. The elegant synchronicity of Yeatsian personality theory encounters the difficulty of approaching a "moment" in time. There is no logical escape. The decade-long project of the Prague School's "historical structuralism," is evidence of the intrinsic difficulties involved.<sup>40</sup>

The paradox of the revolutionary who leaves the arms of those he loves to enter into the essence of his community is expressed by the poem's

counterpointing of maternal love and "that woman"'s sweet voice and beauty to the heart made stone by too long a sacrifice. The critique of fanaticism and the imagery of the family join in a word which Yeats holds in abeyance and then, finally, chances: "And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?" (72-3).<sup>40a</sup> Love? Love of Ireland? Of a child? Sexual love? The poem establishes love of country and love of family as competing forces, yet asks us to commemorate political martyrs in the spirit of naming a sleeping child, as if the conflict were thus overcome. Clearly, as applied to the leaders, it is love of Ireland that is implied, but in the poem's larger contexts, the word is rendered problematical. Our very inability to discriminate between our various loves is the schism at the heart of our term "fanaticism." Here Yeats encounters his particular schizophrenia, his lauding of passion, his condemnation of bitterness, his invoking of hatred as a life force, his revulsion at both fanaticism and the day-to-day compromises of "politics." How can we discriminate between our passions when passion is the antithesis of hair-splitting logic?

In this tension, part of all political struggle, we see the clearest instance of the persona writing himself into the centre of this once despised group with their vivid faces:

That is Heaven's part, our part  
To murmur name upon name,  
As a mother names her child  
When sleep at last has come . . .

As Elizabeth Cullingford puts it, "The poet's role is not to glorify bloodshed, but to raise the keen" (96). The poet's part--become our part--is to name them in the way a mother names her child. The narrator, no longer thinking of mocking tales or gibes, has insisted that he is part of the family.

## IV

## From the Platform of Prophecy: A Poem to Make Something Happen

"You were silly like us; your gift survived it all;  
 The parish of rich women, physical decay,  
 Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.  
 Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,  
 For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
 In the valley of its making where executives  
 Would never want to tamper . . ."

--Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats"

1 The Timing of "Easter 1916"

If Yeats had wished to refute Auden's sentiment and make something happen, one is inclined to say he would have published "Easter 1916" in a newspaper with wide circulation as soon as it was finished, or print penny pamphlets in vast numbers as Thomas Kinsella would do half a century later with his "Butcher's Dozen" in the wake of the Widgery Tribunal's whitewash<sup>41</sup> of the Bloody Sunday shootings in Derry:

. . . . . A phantom said:  
 "Here lies one who breathed his last  
 Firmly reminded of the past.  
 A trooper did it, on one knee,  
 In times of brute authority." (Fifteen Dead, 16)

Instead Yeats printed twenty-five copies for close friends. He finally published it in the New Statesman in October of 1920, at the height of the Black and Tans terror (with 1920's own "Bloody Sunday" less than a month away), and in book form the following year.

But it depends on just what Yeats wanted to make happen. Michael Robartes and the Dancer appeared when a newly independent nation, now more experienced in the terrible, was being "born," and he may have felt

this to be the most effective time to make his point. Given the volatile situation in 1920-21, it is nonsense to suggest he withheld it in 1916, or from The Wild Swans at Coole (1919) out of cowardice.<sup>42</sup> My object of study here however, is the poem's text, and it was completed in September, five months after the Rising. At this point the rebellion had been quashed, but the long term fallout of the endeavour was unclear.

As mentioned, the events were not experienced first hand by Yeats, who was staying in Gloucestershire at Easter. To live in England was to be neither at the centre of Irish political life nor outside it (as was the case for Joyce in Trieste or Paris), but to be on its periphery. We know that Yeats visited Dublin during the period between the appearance of the phrase "terrible beauty has been born again" (in a May 11 letter) and the completion of the poem in September, when he was with Maud Gonne in France. (Jeffares' confidence in stating "Yeats wrote it when he was staying with Maud Gonne MacBride" [224] seems misplaced.) He seems to have spent late May and early June in Ireland, a visit in large part the result of a renewed sense of obligation to his country: "I feel as if I shall return to Dublin to live, to begin building again" (L, 614). Needless to say, during his time there people spoke "of nothing else."

Since Redmond had declared in Westminster as early as May 8 that the executions were swaying sympathies even of those who "have not the slightest sympathy with the insurrection" (A New History of Ireland, 7. 391), Yeats would have learned that Pearse and the other leaders had begun to lose the role of fools and take on that of martyrs. But as the lines "England may keep faith / For all that is done and said" (68-9) make obvious, he still thought of Irish independence as something to be granted by England: the first Sinn Fein electoral victory, in the South Longford by-election, was

still eight months off. The outcome of the Rising, both in practical political terms and in terms of public perception of its importance, was still unclear. "Easter 1916" was written at a time of unusual historical flux. The event was over, a stone in the stream, but the transformation into "history"--with all that process's power to fuel future political developments--was barely beginning. The poem occupies a time of ambiguity within Yeats about concrete, real-life violence, an ambiguity that was much diminished before and after. As Eagleton points out, this timing, long enough after the fact for the "implications to be deeply pondered," but too soon "for any hard historical conclusions to be drawn," is "crucial for the poem's emotional structure" ("History and Myth in Yeats's 'Easter 1916'," 248). But it also has an effect on the poem's content. "That woman" appears not as a martyr but as an emblem--unfairly--of a blighted life. These lines would have differed before the commuting of Markievicz's death sentence (to penal servitude for life) on May 5, at which point she is reported to have said, knowing her gender alone had saved her, "I wish you had the decency to shoot me" (Norman, 156); and may well not have appeared at all after she was released, along with De Valera and others, in July 1917, returning to cheering crowds" (Freyer, 67).

The summer months of 1916, during which the poem, so far as we know, had its refrain but not its verses, were full of contradictory signals in Irish politics. One event of the period, the Somme offensive involving the 36th Division from Ulster and resulting in 60,000 "British" casualties on July 1 alone, has produced a major work of Irish literature, Frank McGuinness' 1985 play Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme.<sup>43</sup> Through May and June Lloyd George negotiated the implementation of Home Rule

excluding the Ulster counties--which led to the formation of the Anti-Partition League in Derry in late July--a proposal Yeats would probably not have found offensive, although no words of his on the subject seem to have survived. But even this concession proved unacceptable to the Prime Minister, Asquith, and the failure of negotiations with Redmond, apparent by the end of July, made the inclusion of "may" in "England may keep faith" necessary. More importantly, the Irish Trade Union Congress in August showed a decidedly "neutral attitude" toward the Rising in its resolutions (A New History, 7. 392) in spite of Connolly's death. In August the last judicial execution, that of Roger Casement, reminded everyone of the emotions of April and May. The time was indeed ripe for a poet whom Denis Donoghue says "was never willing to allow history to press upon him as a dead weight: his mind would wrestle with fact . . . but only with live fact, still open to change and greater life. I quote again . . . the Diary of 1930: 'History is necessity until it takes fire in someone's head and becomes freedom or virtue'" (We Irish, 51). If the revolutionaries are imprisoned by their hatred and single purpose and thus have become something less than human, Yeats will free them by both granting them the "necessity" of their tragic role and returning to them their humanity as Ireland's children, asleep after their limbs have "run wild." And in doing so he could transform the necessity of their history into the freedom of his complex commemoration, and, he hoped, the complex commemoration by an Ireland similarly free. It may be facile to suggest that art makes freedom from history merely by addressing itself to its exigencies, but I do not believe it is facile to suggest that Yeats believed it was possible could he achieve a potent and public voice.

It is interesting that decades later, the violence in the North and the accompanying economic stagnation has produced an era of similar fluidity of interpretation:

It is increasingly common to say that this [revolutionary] wind brought good to nobody. Or at least it is common among the bourgeoisie and the intellectuals, who now regard the men of Easter Week <sup>1916</sup> as self-deluded fanatics, driven by lust of sacrifice and blood . . . . What the plain people of Ireland think, feel, and believe is harder to discover.  
(Donoghue, We Irish, 154)

Donoghue is here, in 1976, a forerunner in the current debate about Irish "essentialism"--seen as a tragic Yeatsian legacy by Seamus Deane, Richard Kearney, Conor Cruise O'Brien and others.<sup>44</sup>

A historically literate reader will then find in "Easter 1916," suggests Terry Eagleton, an additional poignancy in "its bold decision to mythologize the dead before the objective validity of that action . . . can be historically confirmed" (History and Myth in Yeats's 'Easter 1916' " 250-51). The way Yeats "reads" this "intermediate" historical epoch, and the way he will depict subsequent eras--the subject of the following chapters--seems to me to have little to do with Richard Loftus' formulation:

The difference between the heroic episode of the Easter insurrection and the irrational violence that followed in its wake is the difference between Yeats's subjective and objective visions, between an ideal existence and the repulsive reality of the modern world. ("Yeats and the Easter Rising," 170)

As I hope I have made clear, Yeats's "subjective" and "objective" visions do not surface to the exclusion of each other, and there is neither a picture of "ideal existence" in "Easter 1916" nor one of the "repulsive reality" in, say, "Meditations in Time of Civil War."

I want to stress, however, that Yeats was not in "Easter 1916" initiating the event's ritualistic commemoration of the leaders as martyrs.

This process of reversing the early, widespread contempt, began in the popular imagination very early, in the "commemorative masses . . . marked by the gathering of large and sullen crowds . . . . [P]rayers were already being addressed to [Pearse]" within "a few weeks of the executions" (Lyons, 160), that is, about the time Yeats was in Dublin. The process of idealization was hastened when "Plunkett was married to his sweetheart . . . on the night before his execution, and the wounded Connolly . . . was executed strapped to a chair" (Thompson, 104). Yeats's poem conspicuously expresses solidarity with this process, while striving to modify it from within by recognizing the schism in political fanaticism, within himself, and, by Yeatsian implication, within the body politic of Ireland. Again, this aspect of the poem would have varied quite significantly had the poem been written either a few days after the Post Office was seized (during the first executions), or not until a few years later. Yeats's historical mind bears a good deal of resemblance, in its stress on the "spirit" and/or "mind" of historical movements and nations, with that of Hegel, for whom, as Hayden White has put it, the content or referent of historical discourse was not the story of what happened but the "peculiar relation between a public present and a past" ("The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," 4). Part of the content of "Easter 1916" is the relation of the summer months of 1916 to the events of April.

There can be little doubt that a poetic treatment of the Rising written even a few years later would have painted a less heroic portrait of its leaders and a vision of a less salutary spiritual impact. Although I recognize the danger of attempting to describe Yeats's *opinions* in any formulaic manner, it is true that, broadly speaking, his assessment of

the personalities, methods, and outcome of the Rising grew more and more negative as the years passed--although not monolithically so. I have already alluded to his play The Dreaming of the Bones, which, even though written only the next summer,<sup>45</sup> during the growing, internecine bitterness of the partition debate and the political uncertainty engendered as Sinn Fein began to pile up by-election wins (in February, May, and July's win by De Valera in Clare), moves the sterility of perpetuating political hatred to centre stage, and apparently advocates the fruits of forgiveness.

From 1918 to 1922 and beyond, living in Ireland on a more continuous basis, Yeats came into closer contact with the ugliness and waste of the violence during the Irish struggle toward nationhood. Yeats's attraction to elemental conflict and apocalyptic violence seemed to dissipate rapidly in the face of real wounds and real destruction. William Barnwell, in his essay on Yeatsian utopia, points as another source of disillusionment to the greyer practicalities of administering a poor country deprived of its manufacturing base in Belfast and dominated by Jansenist Catholicism: "As it happened, democratic rule eventually overrode the highly structured perfect state Yeats had desired. Therefore, in retrospect, and given his particular point of view, the 'terrible beauty' is a bitter beauty" (63).

By early 1919 this vehemence against Irish political life seems to have reverted to the caustic tones of "September 1913." In the early weeks of that year, with Sinn Fein's general election sweep of December recent history, Yeats wrote "On a Political Prisoner," the poem he would place immediately after the 1916 triptych of "Easter 1916," "Sixteen Dead Men," and "The Rose Tree." It is an odd codicil that threatens to topple altogether the sentiments of the preceding poems, especially "The Rose Tree":

Did she in touching that lone wing  
 Recall the years before her mind  
 Became a bitter, an abstract thing,  
 Her thought some popular enmity:  
 Blind and leader of the blind  
 Drinking the foul ditch where they lie? (ll. 7-12)

Given the scarcity of Irish female political prisoners, the reference to riding under Ben Bulbin, and Gore-Booth Markiewicz's recent election as the first woman M.P., it is clear to whom Yeats alludes. Given her heavy involvement in the day-to-day struggles of the nascent Dail, Yeats's characterization of her mind as "abstract" seems wrong-headed; clearly he has retreated to his facile and offensive characterization of the Irish voter and of "popular" matters in general. The title is double-edged. No longer a political prisoner, Constance Markiewicz is still a prisoner of politics, with her cleanliness and sweetness and beauty thereby polluted. The rhetoric of the poem is so extreme that this is again perhaps evidence of Yeats's own inner turmoil in regard to his former intricate involvements in public life and his present lack of them.

The nastiness of political life is always most emphasized in Yeats when women are involved. His image of its fetidness has solidified by October 1927, near the end of his own stint in the Irish Senate and after the Divorce Bill defeat of 1925 and, most immediately, after the assassination of Minister of Justice Kevin O'Higgins in July and the martial law of August's Public Safety Bill. The occasion was again the Gore-Booths: "The older is condemned to death, / Pardoned, drags out lonely years / Conspiring among the ignorant" ("In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz," (ll. 7-9). The lines are somewhat hypocritical (though Constance probably lost his remaining sympathy as a supporter of De Valera and the anti-Treatyites), and bear little relation to the action-packed,

fulfilling life of the Minister of Labour and twice-elected M.P. She was still attending Fianna Fail executive meetings two weeks before her death (Norman, 276), and is quoted on her deathbed as saying "it is so beautiful to have all this love and kindness before I go." She lay in the Rotunda while 100,000 people viewed the body prior to one of the largest funerals in Dublin history (277). She deserved better treatment from a supposed friend than lines such as "now you know it all, / All the folly of a fight / With a common wrong or right" (ll. 21-23); Yeats thinking perhaps that "innocence" and "beauty" (ll. 24-25) were her sole responsibility in life. When we read the admittedly superb lines that open and close the poem, we should keep in mind that the poem insults everything that mattered to a friend who had just died, and that the representation of political struggle in Yeats consists, in part, of a complete failure to represent many crucial issues that shaped the Ireland of his time and preoccupied Constance Gore-Booth Markievicz.

But it is also clear that the possibility of politics as transformative, even as spiritual, to which Yeats is open immediately after Easter 1916, has, to his mind, long since evaporated. Politics was again simple contamination, no fit place for a woman, and no fit place for the better classes or the higher sensibilities and passions of a poet. In

his clearest renunciation of the Rising, written while he was composing "Meditations in Time of Civil War" at Ballylee, Yeats writes "there is nothing so dangerous to a modern state, where politics take the place of theology, as a bunch of martyrs. A bunch of martyrs (1916) were the bomb, and we are living in the explosion" (L, 690). As Peter Costello remarks, "a bunch of martyrs" is "an odd phrase to describe the men he had hailed in the poems written after the event" (201), though "hailed" is too strong.

While I believe a disillusionment with the outcome of violence was the dominant trend in Yeats's thought in his late years, when caught up in his musings on impending, apocalyptic chaos, he could still praise Pearse and Casement. "Three Songs to the One Burden" (1936?) includes the lines, "Some had no thought of victory / But had gone out to die / That Ireland's mind be greater / Her heart mount up on high" (ll. 73-76), and "Roger Casement" speaks of "this most gallant gentleman / That is in quicklime laid" (ll. 23-24). Would he have written such lines had Pearse and Casement survived to serve in the Dail? Is it hatred and political intransigence Yeats cannot abide, or political practicality and actual successful revolution?<sup>47</sup>

But who can talk of give and take,  
What should be and what not  
While those dead men are loitering there  
To stir the boiling pot? ("Sixteen Dead Men," ll. 3-6)

Easter 1916" is a document, then, from a precise moment in Irish history, the summer of 1916, and a precise moment in Yeats's evolutionary thought on politics and political violence. His attraction to the decisiveness of apocalyptic violence, and his revulsion against "politics" and violence of a more immediate nature, were simultaneously thrown into question by

the events in Dublin. The poem details in its stirring refrain the allure of crossing, at whatever cost, one's patriotic Rubicon, but recognizes--perhaps not consciously on the author's part--that the passionate decisiveness Yeats so admired is a principal characteristic of the sterile political "fanaticism" or "bitterness" he so distrusted. Conversely the death, destruction and acrimony incipient in the Rising, the real-life violence Yeats found so appalling, had arisen from the matrix of a passionate drama where characters threw off their comic masks and revealed their tragic lineaments. This sequence of emotional events within Yeats was time-bound: these forces could co-exist only for a moment. Later, the violence of the Rising could become the abstraction of myth, and Yeats could begin to speak of Cuchulain in the Post Office, using what Richard Loftus aptly calls the "histrionic technique" with which he stylized the event<sup>48</sup> ("Yeats and the Easter Rising," 177); and the principles of the revolutionaries could be mingled with the political infighting of the Free State while Yeats wrote of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla lost and unredeemed. Later on, Yeats would again allow himself to have it both ways.

## 2 Creating History or Creating Myth?

The narrator of "Easter 1916" re-situates himself in the political landscape forsworn in Yeats's date-entitled poem of three years earlier and adopts, by poem's end, the first person plural of community. The pronouncements of outsiders on Irish politics are notoriously unwelcome--with good reason--and the poem demonstrates Yeats's anxiety that he had become such an outsider, and seeks to remedy the situation in order to speak with authority on the issue at hand. The centering of the speaking voice in the body

politic it wishes to address is an act of self-authorization, the construction of a platform. He goes so far as to distort the historical importance of such figures as MacBride in order to set himself in a relationship with the martyrs that will be implicitly compared to a familial one. This is a troubled relationship, but the fact it exists has been given insufficient attention. This rhetorical manoeuvre is one of the clearest signs that Yeats was going to unaccustomed lengths to create an historical and political document, that he wished both to describe and to influence the path of Irish history. His depiction of political violence is strategic.

I have previously alluded to the well known instance where Yeats most explicitly addresses the question of poetry creating history, his lines in "The Man and the Echo" in 1938 in reference to Cathleen ni Houlihan. The issue had come to his attention as early as 1909, when one young nationalist had insisted to Yeats's sister that the play had "changed his politics." "I should share the enthusiasm, but I don't," the poet declared (L, 527). Cathleen ni Houlihan is in fact an early example of Yeats's artistic equivocation in the face of concrete political issues, as Malcolm Brown points out:

[Yeats] occasionally argued that even Cathleen ni Houlihan was . . . really nonpolitical, a startling contention at variance with his original dedication (quickly dropped) "To the Memory of William Rooney," a proto-Sinn Féiner . . . Still, it is true that the word "England" is missing from the play, too, its place is filled by "strangers" who had got possession of the Old Woman's "four beautiful green fields," it does not say how . . . Yeats reported that the Swedes' alterations [at the Nobel Prize performance] were most agreeable to him, since the play was really "symbolic" . . . and as relevant to any random time and place as to Mayo-Sligo in 1798. (323)

Yet, writes Peter Costello, "though immediate violence was not part of

Yeats's intention in writing the play, the appeal to force of arms was latent in every line . . . . No matter what he did later, these particular words of his would indeed be strangely modified in the guts of the living" (3). There is no trace of worry in "Easter 1916" that "that play of mine," scheduled on the Abbey program for Easter Monday 1916 (Cullingford, 53) sent the martyrs to their deaths; rather, Yeats is worried that he had nothing at all to do with the event. But it is important to remember that Yeats quite rightly saw himself as writing in a social matrix in which the impact of poetry on history, or at least on historical consciousness, was a possibility; that, as he has the O'Rahilly say in another late poem, "Because I helped to wind the clock / I came to hear it strike" ("The O'Rahilly," ll. 25-26). This is a poem which echoes "Easter 1916" with its "He wrote out that word himself, / He christened himself with blood" (ll. 6-7). After all, Maud Gonne would later write that "Without Yeats there would have been no Literary Revival . . . [and] without the inspiration of that Revival, the glorification of beauty and heroic virtue, I doubt if there would have been an Easter Week" (Cullingford, 88). Whether or not that is true, many people believed it to be true.<sup>49</sup>

If Cathleen ni Houlihan is a mythologized history in that by removing references to the particular historical situation it asks to be read as a work about "what happens" rather than "what happened," and thereby becomes a radically different play in Stockholm than at the Abbey, it is an example, like "The Rose Tree," of Yeats blending the particular and the general in a way that produces a blurred vision, blunted as either myth or political poetry. It is thus a more malleable text, more "open" to its viewers' imported predilections; they thereby leave the text intact but unenriched.

This, at least, is my experience with this element of the Yeats canon. But in "Easter 1916," history and myth--never a readily separable pair, since all written history is designed to be didactic, and symbolic of repeatable patterns--are in a very different relationship. If Yeats does attempt here to create something like myth, he does so by recounting a very particular history, by naming names. The recourse to mythic parallels--such as grows more common in late poems like "The Statues"--is scrupulously repressed.

Yeats's movement of his narrator toward the centre of the Irish people responding to the Rising is the principal "narrative of narration," to use an awkward term, within the poem. I have discussed how that movement is one fraught with unease for Yeats, as shown by the fact that the stone heart of fanaticism is also "in the midst"; but I have done so in order to attempt to demonstrate that the Yeats who fears immersion in the commonplace does not disappear when the Yeats who wishes to belong there comes to the fore, not in order to deny that the centering gesture is the primary one, and indeed a principal part of the poem's ability to generate meaning. And it is this gesture that is most important in asking what type of history Yeats was attempting to describe and/or create.

His movement from singular to plural first person, and his comparison of his poetic act of naming the martyrs with both the Irish people's commemoration and with a mother's naming of her child, are designed to figure forth a common political space of which the narrator is a part and for which he can therefore speak. The narrator and the public are two aspects of one identity. Yeats's sense of the Irish as an organic unit is thus a crucial part of the poem's intellectual framework. The story

of the narrator's changing relationship with the Easter martyrs is posited as exemplary text: individual history and national history converge in a persona who will Homerically "cry as all men cry" (Essays, 511). Writing of symbolism in 1901, Yeats comments that symbols are "the greatest of all powers," and that "Whether their power has arisen out of themselves, or whether it has an arbitrary origin, matters little, for they act . . . because the Great Memory associates them with certain events and moods and persons. Whatever the passions of man have gathered about, becomes a symbol in the Great Memory, and in the hands of him who has the secret it is a worker of wonders" (Essays, 49-50). Yeats is here speaking of magic and cabbala, but the appeals to common symbols such as stone and stream--replete with significance in Irish lore<sup>50</sup>--and the linking of narrator and mother, suggest a relevance to "Easter 1916." He is attempting to appeal to something like the Irish Great Memory and to gather the Irish around potent symbols of his creation.

If a critic asks whether, in "Easter 1916," Yeats is about the business of writing history or creating myth, he or she soon comes to realize that the terms propose categories ineffective in discussing Yeats. The short answer is that he is writing a historical poem, just as, say, Robert Musil's A Man Without Qualities or Toni Morrison's Beloved are historical novels, and that its historical content is by implication exemplary history, as is the history in those novels or in the Shakespeare play cycles--history designed to be read as myths of a particular culture. "Easter 1916" differs from these examples in that it is about contemporary history, and also about, quite literally, its own present tense: dated in the recent past, it describes that past's fallout, the present's evolving relationship to

it, and then propels that past through this present into the future of "now and in time to be." Its narrative "catches up" to itself. Among historical novels, perhaps only Doctor Faustus both functions in this way and has similarly proven a central document of our century. The story of Zeitblom's narration of Leverkühn's biography, the story of the present's relation to the past, occupies a paradigmatic historical axis: the writing of the biography has duration, during which the military collapse of Germany, itself a repetition of the national trauma twenty-five years earlier, proceeds apace to a final conflagration of historiography catching up with history reminiscent of the finale of Garcia Marquez's One Hundred Years of Solitude. In both Musil and Mann we see an almost obsessive particularization, a focus on biography and daily minutia as a route to historiography. And in both these cases, it is either a narrator-character (Zeitblom) or a hero of outlandish passivity (Ulrich), which provides the central historical consciousness. The content of history, as in "Easter 1916," is primarily the story of an individual's apprehension of his relationship to particular events. This is how history "means."

Neither "history" nor "myth" seems suitable. When Harold Toliver, in The Past that Poets Make, writes that "even though he promises to 'restore to the philosopher his mythology,'" Yeats is an extremely "historical poet who not only cites a good many actual events but constructs a systematic reading of history" (56), we can agree only with the proviso that Yeats's reading of history is a melding of Platonic, Jungian, and Hegelian, that historical events are turned into public emblems of private history, the history of the soul, of the evolution of consciousness. This is the sort of history he is writing in "Easter 1916." It is his conviction

that the source of a new aspect of human or at least Irish "soul" can be identified, named, debated; his ability to make us share that conviction is remarkable. Conversely, Eagleton's assertion that "Easter 1916" is "evidently enough, the creation of a myth," in that its goal is not analysis of the dead rebels but the writing of them "in a verse," so that "what matters is the ritualising act,"<sup>(249)</sup> both underestimates the complexity of the portrayal of the rebels and of fanaticism, and, more importantly, confuses ritual with myth. Ritual is not part of myth, but of religion. Religion utilizes myth only in Frye's very large sense of that word (mythoi), or utilizes myth in the narrower sense only from the perspective of the non-believer. Equally, when he writes that "there is a quality of essential detachment inherent in the mythical treatment itself . . . and in this way a glorification of the dead can be achieved without an unreserved commitment to their historical importance" (252), he fails to recognize that Yeats is ascribing paramount historical importance to the event, but that his sense of what "history" is differs radically from that of a materialist philosophy.

Seamus Deane has said that "at all times, Yeats was entranced by the possibility of history becoming legend before his eyes. The particularities of Irish history, intensely apprehended, could become the symbols of world history as they passed through the medium of art" (A Short History of Irish Literature, 143). The first sentence applies to "Easter 1916," but as we analyse the nature of the "history-of-character" being depicted and created we begin to see that in this key exception, the second does not. The Yeatsian persona inscribes himself in the Irish body politic to find his platform for historical speech. Can the Anima Mundi have national subsets? It seems

philosophically indefensible to say so, but this is perhaps a bias of the North American cosmopolite post-fascism intellectual. It is not altogether clear that in our passion to exterminate the idea of national characteristics and all of its racist baggage in this century, we are not ignoring the evidence of our sense and impoverishing our conception of life's possibilities in the meantime. But in any event, to ignore that Yeats believed simultaneously in the unique character of the individual consciousness, the existence of some sort of ur-personality or world spirit ("the borders of our mind are ever shifting . . . many minds can flow into one another . . . and create or reveal a single mind" [Essays, 28]), and a spiritual national essence, will only distort a reading of the poetry. The political implications of this addressing an Irish non-materialist history must be confronted.

### 3 The Mental Revolution

"Here's to you Pearse, your dream, not mine.  
But yet the thought, for this you died,  
Has turned life's water into wine."

--AE

The history Yeats is describing is a shift in consciousness, in this case a shift in Irish consciousness. Does this mean he is repressing the impact of real history, of physical events, in favour of something we may wish to call myth? That in attempting to spur the creation of national myth he is revealing his proto-fascist tendencies after all? Yeats's aristocratic impulse, his sense that a political, cultural, even spiritual elite set the tone for a nation, does have something to do with how he interpreted

the Rising, but that point granted, I would suggest that Yeats saw history not so much as myth but in a fashion similar to our contemporary conception of that problematic term "history." Denis Donoghue, writing of the current Irish view of Yeats (one he resists), says that Yeats is seen as understanding history "as myth, a timeless structure of meaning and value" (66). I don't entirely disagree, but I do tend to doubt that Yeats's view of history is reducible to a pithy formula. Yes, Yeats in A Vision lays out "timeless" repeating patterns. But he tended to see particular events, whether in the past or present, inside Ireland or outside, as neither timeless nor repeating, but as unique and innovatory. For Yeats things happened, the world was in a flux we could only partially divine: events changed minds. As a thinker he was in vigorous reaction against prevailing nineteenth-century modes of thought (while of course never quite escaping their presuppositions). Hayden White has written that "Prior to the French Revolution, historiography was conventionally regarded as a literary art. More specifically, it was regarded as a branch of rhetoric, and its 'fictive' nature generally recognized," while "Typically, the nineteenth-century historian's aim was to expunge every hint of the fictive, or merely imaginable, from his discourse . . ." ("The Fictions of Factual Representation," 23-25). Yeats does not rebel against this by introducing the fictive into history but by insisting on the primacy of the "merely imaginable," of all that is invisible to scientific measurement or archival documentation. Ernst Cassirer once wrote that "In the relation between myth and history myth proves to be the primary, history the secondary and derived factor. It is not by history that the mythology of a nation is determined, but conversely, its history is determined by its mythology."<sup>51</sup> This is

attractive, but our contemporary view of "history" as a mode of knowledge makes history and myth more difficult to distinguish. Does Cassirer mean by myth "popular" (mistaken) history? Historians like White would argue that all history is, if not fictive, at least permeated with fictional structures and techniques used toward ends very similar to those of myth.

It is perhaps simplest to say that a country's history is shaped by its interpretation of its previous history. What stands in light is what we think of darkness. Although the projects of historical archaeology undertaken by, say, Foucault, are more documentary in nature than the thought of Yeats, they are--in their attempts to track what Foucault calls the "preterminal regularities," the rules that allow the objects of a discourse to form, the premises beneath institutions and the idea of the institutional (The Archaeology of Knowledge, 76, 48), and to track how these change--always involved in reciting what already exists anterior to the first evidence of their subject's appearance. In or about 1910, Virginia Woolf wrote many years later, human nature changed.<sup>52</sup> Yeats would say the change was caused by a shift in the Anima Mundi, and would dare, at times, to suggest what caused that, usually the actions of a few splendid individuals who thus become the primum mobile. We wouldn't be happy with the term, but have in its place only Derrida's infinite deferral and "always already." Even the powers of modern media and advertising seem capable only of capitalizing on shifts in public temperament, not instigating them. No, "myth" will not do. Hayden White says that story-telling becomes problematic only when two "orders of events," real and imaginary, "dispose themselves . . . as possible components . . . . What we call 'mythic' narrative is under no obligation to keep the two orders

of events distinct . . . . Narrative becomes a problem only when we wish to give real events the form of story" ("The Value of Narrativity . . ." 8). This latter is Yeats's enterprise.

In his classic study The Imagination of an Insurrection: Dublin, Easter 1916, William Irwin Thompson stresses that every political revolution requires a mental revolution: "The consequence of an event takes place in the mind, and the mind holds on best to images" (x). There is something of the artist in the revolution<sup>ary</sup>, as F.X. Martin was one of the first to stress in regard to Easter. "The Irish revolutionaries," writes Thompson, "lived as if they were in a work of art, and this inability to tell the difference between sober reality, and the realm of the imagination is perhaps one . . . characteristic of a revolutionary" (ix). Hence, in part, Yeats's attraction to them. Yeats invokes a grammar of self-inclusion, then writes a narrative of his own mental revolution, a narrative which gathers up time into a meaningful present, that is, the historicized present of the final lines. As Paul Ricoeur puts it, narrative is in itself a type of symbol, and narrative of history is "understandable insofar as it can be 'grasped' by symbolization, that is, shown to have the kind of meaning with which plots endow stories." The content of narrative is not history but historicality.<sup>53</sup> In "Easter 1916" Yeats is insisting on the historicality of the narrative containing the context and symbols of his particular mental revolution in regard to the Easter rebels: that is, he is insisting that it is this narrative that constitutes history itself.

Events in our own decade seem to confirm Thompson's maxim. The sudden transformation of the people's attitude after decades of relative stability

in say, the West Bank or the Soviet Union, are difficult to explain inductively. It is not clear whether political revolutions will follow: all revolutions require a mental metamorphosis, but not all mental metamorphoses produce a political revolution. Yeats's tendency to think of character as history (or, "all knowledge is biography"<sup>54</sup>), makes it unsurprising that he would consider any worthwhile Irish revolution as first and foremost a mental one. But one qualification must be made. The recent spate of books and articles on Yeats and Nietzsche (e.g. Oppel's Mask and Tragedy and Bohlmann's Yeats and Nietzsche) seem to exaggerate the similarities, but it is certainly true that Yeats would think of a mental revolution as occurring in the minds of a few members of his vague spiritual and aristocratic elite. When Grattan Freyer speaks of the "Nietzschean element in his thought, the rating of personality and energy over logic and humanitarianism" (23), we must admit that Yeats would not think of most of the Irish as having personality. The revolution must occur in the minds of those of sufficient sensitivity, training, and leisure (on leisure see Memoirs, 169, 178 etc.); the people will follow. His Anima Mundi may have been in theory a "corporate imagination which includes all individual imaginations" (Ronsley, Yeats's Autobiography, 76), but Yeats in general thought of "individual" in a way similar to the German philosopher. "[W]hy should I trouble about communism, fascism, liberalism, radicalism . . . ? My rage and that of others like me seems more important" (L, 869).

#### 4 An Act of Speech

So if the history of revolution is the history of revolutions in thought, by centering himself in the family of the Irish and depicting his own mental sea-change, Yeats is creating history as he describes it: the dreams are conjoined. As he wrote in Explorations,

up to that moment literature had tried to express everybody's thought, history being considered merely a chronicle of facts, but now, at the instant of revelation, writers think the world but their palette and if history amuses them, it is but, as Goethe says, because they would do its personages the honour of naming after them their own thoughts.<sup>55</sup>

Commenting on this passage, Cairns Craig writes, "The poet plays with the 'history' of the past, but in doing so he truly makes the history to come" (153). Well, does he? Shelley's Defence of Poetry notwithstanding, not usually. Is Yeats--a poet with an unusually high profile in his society both during his lifetime and posthumously--an exception? That the answer is at least potentially "yes" is demonstrated by the intense debates about images of Irish culture and identity which still swirl about his name. Denis Donoghue's afterword to the recent collection of Field Day pamphlets (Ireland's Field Day) is but one example. How does Yeats, rhetorically, assert such a claim within the lines of "Easter 1916"?

I commented earlier that Eagleton was right to use "ritual" in regard to the poem, but probably wrong to associate ritual with myth. As public speech, the poem's ritual is a secular one, its words are meant to make something happen. The poem moves from its descriptive and narrative modes to prescription and a sense of public enactment as it comes to its close:

We know their dream; enough  
To know they dreamed and are dead;  
And what if excess of love  
Bewildered them till they died?  
I write it out in a verse--

MacDonagh and MacBride  
 And Connolly and Pearse  
 Now and in time to be,  
 Wherever green is worn,  
 Are changed, changed utterly:  
 A terrible beauty is born.

Then, snug under the last line, another date, September 25, 1916, to compare with that heading the poem. (In the Cuala Press edition of Michael Robartes and the Dancer in 1920, the date follows the last line without even a stanza break, in the same typeface--not italicized--as the poem proper.)

The poem identifies itself as what John Austin labelled a performative utterance, or speech act, in "Performative Utterances" (see Philosophical Papers, 220-39), and John Searle elaborated upon at arcane length in his book Speech Acts. Many uses of language, Austin pointed out, don't "really set out to be statements at all" or to "report facts," but instead "to influence people in this way or that, or to let off steam in this way or that" (221). "If a person makes an utterance of this sort," we should say she or he "is doing something rather than merely saying something" (222). His examples range from a priest's "I now pronounce you husband and wife" to the couple's "I do," to an "I apologize" or "I name this ship the Queen Elizabeth." Or, perhaps, "I write it out in a verse."

The rarity of such self-reflexiveness in Yeats's poetry suggests that this is a crucial locution. Early in his career, Yeats wrote that he had turned away from the conviction that art was "tribeless, nationless," and conceived the ambition to write poetry that would move "a whole people." He had forcefully rid himself "of Shelley's Italian light" (Essays, 208). The part of public poet speaking on current issues is most frequently adopted in his middle period, in poems that Donald Torchiana describes as "Augustan in style and intent" (279); but is adopted most passionately, and most

convincingly, in "Easter 1916." "The poet must always prefer the community where the perfected minds express the people" (Essays, 214). "Easter 1916" shows specific parallels with the conditions Austin outlines for a successful performative utterance, and one of these is the poet's establishing of a relationship with the martyrs, and kinship with the community in order that the perfected mind might express the people. For, as Austin points out, it does no good for someone from the crowd to lob champagne at the QE II's hull and designate it "The Rose of Tralee," or for a plumber to designate two people husband and wife. "The circumstances in which we purport to invoke this procedure must be appropriate for its invocation" (Philosophical Papers, 224), and the actor must have the necessary authority, otherwise the utterance remains constative. A prophet is normally in some sense an outsider who enters into society, proclaims his or her identity with it, then announces the birth of a new era.

As mentioned, the poem is written at a particular time, when the public attitude toward armed rebellion was in a state of turmoil and the political consequences of the Rising were still in the future. This timing is central to the efficacy of a speech act. He might have described Pearse and Connolly as "changed, changed utterly" to a "terrible beauty" in 1932, but could not have proclaimed them thus. The poem's prescriptive power is, ironically, caught up in its descriptive powers: it must take "something" already existing in some as yet incompletely articulated fashion, and carry it forward into permanence. The transformation of the event had already begun when Yeats was writing. After all, the proclamation of the Republic from the Post Office was welcomed by "a few perfunctory cheers. The crowd thought the Volunteers were either mad or playacting," and after the

surrender the "wretched rebels were marched off to prison to the jeers and catcalls of angry Dubliners" (Costello, 87,88). Yet clearly the poem's role is not the passive one construed by Craig when he writes that it is "driven to an unwilling acceptance of those [associations] that history has created" (174).

In most of Yeats's "public" poems, such as "Mourn--And then Onward," Yeats's "tone of public oratory--confident, insistent, loud--does not permit . . . that 'quarrel with oneself' out of which, according to Yeats himself, one makes poetry" (Kazmi, 201). But in "Easter 1916," Yeats pronounces only the results of an unresolved quarrel with the self: an oxymoron tinged with melancholy. That is what he pronounces as now existing. Donoghue distinguishes myth from fiction thus: "we have not invented it; we have received it from its use by other people; in many cases it may already be a force in the world at large" ("Romantic Ireland," 18). These are also attributes of history, or at least of the history of personality. A Yeatsian speech act blurs the myth-fiction boundary Donoghue establishes as Yeats articulates on his own authority what "may already be a force in the world at large."<sup>56</sup>

Austin notes that as far as form is concerned, all performative utterances "begin with the verb in the first person singular present indicative," the form of "I write it out in a verse." Given the poem's period of composition, months after the Rising, the present tense is otherwise an unusual choice. The Rising poems which follow all utilize the expected past tense. The present tense of the second stanza, and the subsequent return to "presence," makes the final date, in light of the line "a terrible beauty is born," contradict the title. The poem's

grammar, the assertion of present indicative active, declares that the terrible beauty was not born at Easter, but is born now, September 25, 1916.

The twofold subject of "Easter 1916" is not the revolution itself but the relationship between the Yeats narrator and the revolution, and between the revolution and the future. The subject is not so much event as it is history-writing, what is now to be made of the event. The subject is, specifically, what Yeats will make of the event, but this is taken as talismatic. As a speech act the poem is performative rather than descriptive; it accomplishes itself in the mouth of its speaking, in the manner of all authoritative public speech. Seamus Deane perceives in the work of poet John Montague a tendency to keep history "at arm's length," his fear of "aphasia" or being pulled by the gravity of his love "into the arms of history . . . mired in an unprocessed experience" (Celtic Revivals, 149). The poem seems to wrap history in its own moment of making.<sup>57</sup> Yeats is outside history since he is the namer of it--he hopes. He watches history, and it watches him. To be within history, trapped, is the fate of the politician and perhaps of the fanatic, the stone in the midst of the stream. But to name the history of political violence? Does the horse's hoof slide on the brim?

##### 5 History, Genre, and the Unease of Politics

Yeats's articulation of history must inevitably turn in on itself, since all of our systems of thought are by definition self-contained--although I would stress that such an inward turn is not the essence or totality of the portrait's meaning, just as the line of the horizon is not the deepest

reality of a landscape. The revolution that is most important to Yeats is a revolution in spirit or mind. And what is transformed by the mental revolution that the speech act of the poem announces as accomplished?

Character, in both senses of the word:

I write it out in a verse--  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly. (74-79)

The ritualistic listing of names, "a variation on the heroic catalogue of the epic poet" (Friedman, 41), has been delayed for dramatic effect. Anonymity has been insisted on until this point to drive home the present tense, that claim to be hereby enacting the utter change. Perhaps by coincidence, a ballad printed by 1918 offers a parallel rhyme: "Plunkett, MacDonagh and Pearse, / Sweet was the sound of their verse" (O'Braonain, 50). What is transformed by an event in a Yeatsian history is character. This is not, however, to eliminate the significance of the empirical event--that damaged human tissue--cited in the poem's title. I think we misread Yeats to do so: he would not wish to separate thought from action (seeking "to discover and create in myself . . . a personal quality of universal meaning in action and in thoughts" [Ronsley, Yeats's Autobiography, 10]) in such a way as to suggest that the lives of the revolutionaries could equally have been transformed by heroic thoughts of martyrdom. The events of the Rising translated these thoughts, were the vehicle of transformation, in a process the poem wishes to confirm in its particular formulation. The events translated their transformation: carrying it from the personal to the public sphere in exactly the same way Yeats insisted a country's intellectual or artistic elite were uniquely equipped to render their

personality of service to a nation. He is here inscribing Pearse and the others into that pantheon, one based less consistently on social class than Conor Cruise O'Brien would admit.

It is as yet unclear, at the juncture of the poem's composition, whether history in the sense of political reform has been effected. What is clear is that the political images of the four have been transformed, but not, we must remember, transformed only into "martyrs." They have been transformed into an oxymoron, with the devastatingly ambiguous image of the stone in the midst providing texture to the adjective in "terrible beauty."

Through carrying out their convictions regardless of probable failure and possible death, the leaders of the Rising become, from the "audience"'s perspective, not their own, tragedians rather than comedians or clowns,<sup>58</sup> and therefore make of the drama of Ireland tragedy not comedy. It is of course often said that the leaders of the Rising did not expect military success. Roger Casement wrote in his diary of "a foregone assurance of failure," but added, "I must lend it my countenance (Yeats would have savoured the word) and accompany the forlorn hope" (McHugh, 4). Many have emphasized the "messianic ideal" in the writings of the Rising poets (see Loftus, 123-64), and Yeats expresses a similar view in "Three Songs to One Burden." (There is a danger of overstating the case, though. Denis Johnston is at some pains to stress that many of the rank and file believed [or had been convinced by their leaders?] that the country would rise, the Germans would come to their aid, and the revolution could thus succeed.) A colleague of Connolly and Pearse, Sean MacDiarmada, told a friend, "If we hold Dublin for a week, we'll save Ireland's soul" (McHugh, xvii).

The rebels' plans, then, were not all that different from those of Yeats. It is a cliché to note that Yeats presents the Rising as a drama. But it is precisely in this way that he saw history as being re-shaped by events, a potential he wants his poem to exploit. For history as drama is history dominated by character and a history given shape by the observing mind. The raw data of physical occurrence, asserts Hayden White, present no shape. The narrative impulse of historical writing "figures the body of events that serve as its primary referent." There is in fact "no way in which one could conclude on logical grounds that any set of 'real' events is a farce" ("The Question of Narrativity," 22, 24). This does not mean the "facts" are thus distorted. Adolph Hitler and Elie Weisel could display the same documentation in writing histories of the Jewish Holocaust belonging to opposite genres. "Easter 1916" flaunts its own role in enacting a transformation, and in foregrounding this is partly about the troping of history.

In writing of the poem "Lapis Lazuli," Ellmann says that Yeats's tragic heroes "play the tragic parts they have decided upon, and the moment of their actual death is the moment of their stage triumph, for death fuses them to their chosen image of themselves" (The Identity of Yeats, 186). Yet the troping in "Easter 1916" is not a naive one. It shows signs that its author had also written a play like The Green Helmet, a heroic farce which with its petty infighting over "honours" and "fame" seems to sum up Yeats's pre-Easter cynicism with Irish politics. The poem shows an awareness of the terrible irony at the heart of tragedy and the human search for catharsis; that tragedy, a rough beast, can by definition only be born out of death, and that a death of the heart--

the sterility of stone--may precede the death of the body. Anyone writing on Yeats and violence must eventually ask whether Yeats aestheticizes violent struggle. He certainly does, sometimes with extraordinary vulgarity, in his letters and journals, though to accuse someone of "aestheticizing" in their informal writings is probably a bit contradictory. In the poetry, with a few exceptions, Yeats aestheticizes not violence but history. Or, perhaps, he is in fact the rare writer who will percolate down the centuries because he successfully historicizes aesthetics.

Yeats's depiction of political violence is foreshadowed by the painterly scene-setting of the poem's opening lines, that of contrast and highlight, the highlighting of vivid faces against the grey background, of the passion of highly visible individuals against the darkness of all that is invisible to "history." In the Biblical intonations of the ending, an annunciation: into Ireland is born this day a terrible beauty, a terrible beauty with four names, four vivid faces. Yeats had long flirted with the idea, notes Cullingford, that mystical and political liberation were linked (45). Even Maud Gonne was "occupied with occult studies and the power they might release." In "The Valley of the Black Pig," we see a similar colour contrast, as "We who<sup>still</sup> labour by the cromlech on the shore, / The grey cairn on the hill, when day sinks drowned in dew," bow down to the "Master . . . of the flaming door." In "Easter 1916," Yeatsian eschatology admits the historical. The immaterial abstraction has been incarnated--"now."

If "Easter 1916" is intended as a performative utterance, an intention that caused Yeats, who died long before Austin's essay appeared, to slip into the first person present indicative active proper to such acts; if

it is a poem designed to be prescriptive in such a way that the narrator's apprehension of events--a narrator who casts off old sins and estrangement and enters the family of witnesses to speak with authority--becomes emblematic; if all this is true, what, precisely, is the act the poem is performing? "Annunciation" is too general a term, and its religious overtones obscure the historical particularity upon which the poem insists.

The poem asserts the creation of this history: that the leaders of the Rising subsequently executed by the English have been, as of this moment--a moment compounded of the historical fulcrum of summer, 1916, and that of the poem's narrative of revised opinion and communal reintegration--changed. As actors in a history that is like drama, they are changed in the minds of those who have watched them. The sea change in the characters of the leaders does not exactly lead to, but is, in I think a mystical way, continuous with a sea change in the personality of a nation. The two transformations are not separable: syntax being unable to mediate, they are set next to each other on either side of a colon, the poem's signature of punctuation. This transformation is the result of their actions on Easter, 1916, and the transformation they are and bring about is of a particular race that exists wherever green is worn--an emblem for romantic Ireland. This change, inextricable from death and the stone in the chest, but also inextricable from an affection for the dead heroes that resembles a mother's love for her child, is terrible and beautiful. Their gift to the nation is not simply martyrdom, it is also fanaticism. That is, Ireland inherits both terms of the oxymoron. By making his change in attitude also that of the Irish people by proclaiming his unity of familial commemoration with all who wear green, and by proclaiming his correspondence of function--bringing terrible beauty into the world--with

the martyrs, the Yeatsian narrator wishes to make event, poetry, and history-of-the-mind-and-nation a seamless garment. Or so it would appear. The poem has the rhetorical form of a speech act. It is a speech act because, on the whole, Yeats was in this instance of like mind with most of the Irish public, and because his emotional nuance, described by "terrible beauty," became part of the emotional nuance of modern Ireland.

Or so it would appear. It is a curious fact of historical narrative --and perhaps of all language--that its very power to articulate truthfully one aspect of reality renders it impotent to express something else. All that we say betrays an ancillary silence. "Every narrative," says White, "however seemingly 'full,' is constructed on the basis of a set of events which might have been included but were left out" ("The Value of Narrativity," 14). This does not make what is expressed false: the chasms of a text, its "subconscious," are certainly worth remarking: it is careless to assume they annihilate or even undermine the text's meaning. It is deconstruction's tendency to do so that makes it better at explaining what texts cannot possibly say than explaining why language--unable to "refer"--ever evolved in the first place.

A mental revolution may be a necessary, but not sufficient, cause of political revolution, yet history refuses to stay in the mind. The difficulty this entails for Yeats is similar in derivation to his unease in regard to politics in general. Yeats in "Easter 1916" allies himself with the Irish, all who wear green, in order to lend authority to his words. But this very model of the formation of history is predicated on an "aristocratic" (in a broad sense) or "antithetical" driving force at variance with this sort of communalism. To be immersed, drowned in the

"mob," is to be trapped in a vulgar history of Paudeen and his greasy till of 1913--the fate of "that woman." The vehemence of Yeats's small-minded lecturing of Markievicz here and in other poems is partly caused by his own fears and regrets. Markievicz betrayed her sex, it is true, but she also betrayed her gracious, beautiful class, and Yeats's ideal of that class, by getting caught up in violent and eventually democratic politics. This too is part of Yeats's depiction of political violence.

"Nations, races, and individual men," Richard Loftus quotes Yeats saying, "are unified by an image, or bundle of related images," clearly a unity he is trying to bring about with this poem. But, continues Loftus, somewhat smugly defending Yeats, "During the first two decades of the twentieth century . . . the people of Ireland were . . . joined [by] . . . images drawn . . . from the body of sterile moral and political abstractions by which the Irish middle class justified its own existence" (Nationalism in Anglo-Irish Literature, 11). There is no evidence that the middle class "justifies its existence" with images more or less sterile or abstract than those of the aristocrat or the labourer; but that aside, clearly in Yeats's view the body politic as a whole must be given its images by those capable of higher vision. The antithetical vision is equated by Yeats in A Vision with aristocracy, as opposed to democracy (104), and the antithetical artist, who "finds inspiration in the relationship of his primary to his antithetical self is more likely to achieve unity than the objective, or primary artist who finds it in the relationship of his primary self to the external . . ." (Ronsley, Yeats's Autobiography, 80). The writing of "Easter 1916" is then, the path of disunity. Here we again encounter the ambiguous image of the stone in the stream. Is the poet

who involves himself with history, and the political fanatic who has one purpose alone, an antithetical aristocrat of the spirit, separate and alone, or immersed in the stream of life, part of his or her community and able to speak for and influence it, to give it images? Does the horse's hoof slide on the brim? How can the poet enter the community yet remain the antithetical spirit the community needs? Can the aristocrat both be sufficiently a part of the people to know what they need and separate enough from their "vulgarity" to be able to give it to them? Are the stage and the pit part of one realm?

These questions are not resolvable. They go to the heart of Yeats's ideas of political structure and of history, and, I suspect, to the heart of all attempts to find ideological purity by demonizing the bourgeoisie. Yeats's verse-making faces the question in "Easter 1916" as honestly as anyone can expect. His antithetical view of history, history as the transformations of the soul or the character of the individuals in a nation brought about in some mysterious manner (synecdoche?) by the transformations of its leaders, allows him to depict the Easter Rising in a way which is resonant to this day, and which had a long term, tangible impact on Irish thinking. It also, as I suggested earlier, makes it impossible to address certain other political issues without erasing his own thesis.

## V

## Invisible History

"'Real' history is cancelled by the text, but in the precise mode of that cancellation lies the text's most significant relation to history."

Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology, 177

In an historical poem, what is omitted in the depiction of events constitutes an "unconscious" of the poem. This omitted material is, in its absence, nevertheless significant, because it is through this "oversight" that the content of the poem finds its delineation and thus its visibility. Yeats's idea of how history operated led to an exclusive focus not on the violence of the Rising itself, but on the martyrdom of the leaders and the political entanglements of "that woman." The poem does not allude in any way to the violence in Dublin. "Thus . . . do I . . . read history, and turn all into a kind of theatre where the proud walk clad in cloth of gold, and display their passionate hearts, that the groundlings may feel their souls wax the greater" (L, 219). The metaphor of tragic theatre focuses history on the lead players. We need not be a Tolstoyan to find Yeats's depiction of the Rising redolent of Carlyle. What of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What of those whose names we do not know? The deaths of hundreds of Dubliners are never mentioned by Yeats even in his letters. His concept of history renders them invisible in a poem to make something happen. A reader of "Easter 1916" and the other poems on the Rising in Michael Roberts and the Dancer and later volumes who was ignorant of Irish history might easily assume sixteen men had been executed for a bungled assassination attempt or a bomb plot in which no one was hurt.

Not dying public deaths those privates mowed down on either side, or civilians caught by a stray bullet, are not part of Yeatsian history because they are neither part of a sensitive elite who "dreamed," nor have they caused by their particular death a revolution in the mind. In this respect, Yeats has much in common with public sentiment, though little in common with O'Casey or Johnston--a bitter irony. Yeats, after all, told O'Casey that The Silver Tassie would not do for the Abbey because "the mere greatness of the world war has thwarted you; it has refused to become mere background and obtrudes itself upon the stage" (L, 741).

According to Hayden White, the impulse to create narrative from historical data--and "Easter 1916" is certainly narrative--is generated from a desire to rank events, "establish a hierarchy of documentation" ("The Value of Narrativity . . ." 15). This ranking process occurs in part well before historians begin their work, since the reality of "the kind of events that are offered as the proper content of historical discourse" consists not simply in their occurrence but in that they are remembered (23). Yeats senses again the possibility of a social centre (which, according to White, the early "non-narrativizing" medieval annalists lacked), and wishes to re-inhabit it, something he also does, for different ends, in "Among School Children." Since the "spirit" which underlies genuine society is for him generated in the consciousness of the few (a designation influenced, but not exclusively determined by, social class), he will focus on the transformation of the leaders and on how that transformation has in turn affected his own exemplary character. (This strategy is not at all exclusive to Yeats. Probably the use of persona as exemplary character is fundamental to most historically specific poetry.) It is in this way that, as Terry Eagleton so elegantly

puts it, history enters the text as ideology, "as a presence determined and distorted by its measurable absences" (Criticism and Ideology, 72). This need not imply that Yeats's history is "incorrect," or that we can therefore "know" nothing of the past.<sup>59</sup> Neither does it make Yeatsian history, as Brown holds, mere solipsism.<sup>60</sup> I hope I have shown that indeed his analysis of the Rising's impact is so influential because of its confluence with Irish opinion and with the way most of us will probably always enact our own "history." I have also shown that in the context of Yeats's career, that very confluence is something he both resists and desires, and that "Easter 1916" displays that unease.

I commented earlier that the poem's first stanza employs a painterly sense of contrast, setting the vivid faces against grey, eighteenth-century houses. Yeats's historical technique is part and parcel of his sense, as outlined in A Vision and elsewhere, that opposites such as subjectivity and objectivity, sun and moon, operate in continual play, each fueled by the decline of the other, sapped by the rise of the opposite, a process applicable to both the individual and to national and historical epochs. It is therefore not surprising that his depiction of history also uses the technique of contrast and highlight, the pitting of oxymorons (opposites contained in one "individual") against themselves, vivid face against dull desk, motley against martyrdom, terror against beauty. How then, can such a method treat of politics, by definition the instrument of mediation between opposing demands? How, in the midst of violent upheaval, can it deal with treaties, with organization building, with debating and brokering? It is a method that makes plausible the placing, without elaboration, of Pearse and Connolly--who had little in common ideologically--in the same line

of verse in not one but two poems, as if they constituted a single voice. Although I think the use of "myth" problematical, Eagleton is right to suggest that "a refusal to pursue critical analysis which might undermine the myth can emerge as decorous--proper to the genre--rather than as cautiously evasive; Yeats can turn his own political reservations to poetic use, inserting qualifications which make their point but leave the elegaic balance undisturbed" ("History and Myth in Yeats's 'Easter 1916'," 249).

"Bewilder": "To lose in pathless places. To perplex, confound; to cause mental aberration" (OED). History refuses to remain in the mind. What of the hard historical questions which, indeed, the poem itself raises? "Was it needless death after all?" (How would the political outcome <sup>have</sup> differed had they lived?) "And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?" What if the Rising was created not by will but by bewilderment? By motley after all? Or: What if their hearts weren't stony but full of love? And what if they still died for no reason? What are Yeats's answers to these very real questions? When Eagleton speaks of Yeats's two-fold tendency towards "the mystical affirmation and the counterpointing historical uneasiness," I find myself in disagreement with his terminology but not entirely with his point. What is Yeats's answer?

Literally, his answer to the questions is "I write it out in a verse--" and so on to "Wherever green is worn" and the final lines. But in all the words written on "Easter 1916," the implications of Yeats raising these questions, and then answering them with this line and the view of history it implies, have never really been confronted. Yeats's poem contains, implicitly, a specific political proposal: a plea to

separate Irishness from the concern with political independence.

Question: Was it needless death after all? Answer: "I write it out in a verse." Will England ever pass the Home Rule Bill? It doesn't really matter. Now and in time to be, not only in Ireland but wherever green is worn, a terrible beauty has been born. Ireland has achieved yet another revelation, another dramatic climax to place at the end of a sequence extending back to Cuchulain's tilt with the sea. Home Rule? Partition? These are not mere niceties, but they cannot effect, now or ever, the birth of that particular type of beauty.<sup>61</sup> Yeats was sufficiently entranced by the spectre of his antithetical view of history apparently being confirmed, that he shrugged off the crucial fact that history refuses to remain in the mind. Whether or not he was a fool or a visionary to express this tenet of Romantic nationalism--most explicit in the line "wherever green is worn," is not for me to say, but I don't think we should blink from acknowledging that he says it. The irony of this sentiment in a poem naming Pearse and Connolly is considerable. Perhaps Maud Gonne sensed this irony when she demeaned the poem more than one might otherwise have expected.

But that irony is double-edged because it is an irony seeded in the project of Pearse and the other rebels. If Irishness is a spiritual or religious quality, if their deaths can water the rose tree, was electoral victory in 1918 necessary or ever useful? When we ask ourselves why "Easter 1916" seems such an accurate rendition of our own hopes and fears about community and social identity, reform and political cynicism, when we ask ourselves why Yeats is a very great poet indeed yet one who does not elicit fondness from us, we may be beginning to

render conscious our own problematic attachments, in 1980s North America, to both community and detachment, to both nationalism and romanticism. And thus is Yeats a badger at our beliefs, and a political poet we can't be rid of.

Malcolm Brown narrates the alienation of Yeats from fenianism: "For while they had distinctly heard the old man say, 'Go home and make ready,' Yeats had only heard him say 'There are things no man should do, even to save a nation'"(10). Both sides heard O'Leary correctly, and it is in that paradox, as well as in Yeats's idealization of O'Leary as an "Irish Gentleman," that the oxymorons of "Easter 1916" are born. As Cullingford puts it, Yeats's "limit" (an intriguing choice of words) "was John O'Leary's 'honourable warfare'"(31). The logical contradictions the poem wishes to enclose are numerous, as the preceding pages have shown. Some have been mentioned by numerous commentators (e.g. that violence is both terrible and beautiful, that the martyrs give birth through death, that they are "changed" into both heroes and corpses,<sup>62</sup> and so on), others are I believe articulated here for the first time. The latter have in common the fundamental question for a man both a poet and a citizen and wishing to depict political violence: is the causing of death for a national cause an act of transcendental spirit (Romance) or mere communion with the mob (Politics)?

What is the aesthetic status of Easter? How is the term "Romantic Nationalism" to be reconciled to its component parts? Allon White and Peter Stallybrass, in writing of the Enlightenment, stress that the clearest "crimes" are those of mediation: "they occupy a taboo-laden space between the topographical boundaries which mark off the discrete

site of high and low culture. They transgress domains" (113-14). Yeats's vehement denunciation of the political activity of Constance Gore-Booth Markievicz is due in part to the fact that she did what Yeats worried he had also done, mediated between the high and low cultures of art and the landed gentry on one hand, and politics (and Abbey politics) on the other. Even more fundamental a problem than "that woman," however, was the question of martyrdom itself. Here is the oxymoron that the poem is, I feel, unable to articulate clearly because it is too fundamental to the poem's existence, is part of the meaning-space it occupies: that martyrdom is, in the value system of Yeats, both high and low culture, both romance and politics.

This appears to be the place for criticism of the poem to cease. It is where our era, our way of seeing literature, is most comfortable. But I wish to listen to Yeats once more, and to Richard Ellmann's meditation on what Yeats has to say about desire and belief:

There are three incompatible things which man is always seeking--infinite feeling, infinite battle, infinite repose. (L, 111)

Less fleeting than a mere wish, and less crystallized than a belief, a mood is suspended between fluidity and solidity. It can be tested only by the likelihood of its being experienced at all, and being so, by many people.<sup>63</sup>

I believe that for the poem to be portrayed as accurately as possible, this "conclusion" must first be presented so that its components are in the mind, then its limitations recognized. We are adept, in the post-structuralist era, at perceiving a work of art's subconscious, that is, the flaws in its logical superstructure, the seams in its harmony and

balance. In fact, our ability to experience harmony and balance is severely circumscribed, for better and for worse. Our particular skill should tell us as much about ourselves as about what we are reading. It is an admirable talent that has immeasurably enhanced our awareness of doubletalk and propaganda, of claims to impartiality and "natural" virtues, although we systematically underestimate the abilities in those regards of earlier eras (and that underestimation is also telling). But it is a method that is applied clumsily to literature, on the whole. In spite of the deconstruction of logic and metaphysics of presence, deconstruction is paradoxically obsessed with logic, an obsession that manifests itself in the gleeful unveiling of faults in logic, in disrobing apparent "reason." Applied more appropriately, it would recognize that literature is an intellectual and emotional complex, and that when the work of analysing intellectual content and "truth claims" is finished, the work of art is hardly exhausted. I believe it is perfectly possible for "Easter 1916" to have, on close inspection, contradictions to which the author seems to have been blind, to have a buried ideology, to be, even, intellectually dishonest at certain points (as are we all), without this in any way undermining or erasing the poem's emotional consistency and truth. As the Yeatsian persona tries first this idea, then that, then this again, the result is a compressed narrative of argument contained within one emotion or mood, a compressed narrative that constitutes a precise historical document.

This is the site of contemporary criticism's unease. "Easter 1916" is in part a great poem because it powerfully articulates a single emotion that is honest, piercing, and shared by many people who read it. It is a

complex emotion. It can only be created, indeed, by rhetoric and images that partake of logical contradiction--but the emotion is not therefore in any way self-contradictory, dishonest, "ideological" or merely a trick of the text that "writes" the author. Criticism's unease is that it has no way to talk about emotion, no system to capture it, no categories to define it. It can be talked about, or at, but it cannot be named. For the modern critic the appeal to emotion is considered recidivist (Leavis-ism perhaps), as unverifiable, a bit sentimental, humanist, and more than a little unprofessional. And it is. Criticism's vehemence in rejecting mood as an indice of coherence betrays the necessity of eliminating that about which criticism cannot speak as a profession. I believe that the emotional experience of modern political violence expressed in "Easter 1916," is, in its particular subtlety, central to the disturbing inner life of our time, compounded of a longing for change and a longing for safety, a longing for detachment and for community--and is yet seamless. But I cannot prove it: I can only attest to it. This type of seamlessness is only part of literature, but it is a part. In its presence my professional qualifications as a "critic" or "professor" are most utterly redundant.

### Chapter Three

#### "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen": Violence and the Degradation of Culture

##### I

##### Entanglement: Versions of "We"

Presently they began breaking windows where there were [Jubilee] decorations. Maud Gonne was walking with a joyous face; she had taken all these people into her heart. I knew she would not interfere. I knew her principle. If a crowd does anything illegal and you try to stop it, you may succeed, but you are certain to seem to have done it to keep from danger yourself. I tried to speak and could only whisper. I had spoken too much through a disorderly debate at the council, and my voice had gone. Then I too resigned myself and felt the excitement of the moment, that joyous irresponsibility and sense of power.

--Yeats, Memoirs, 112-13

"I too resigned myself": this phrase could serve as a refrain for the suite of six poems which Yeats wrote during the height of the Republican-Black and Tans War of Independence and entitled, again, with a date. It could serve, given the proviso that the tone in the poem is that of the bitterest possible resignation, and given that what is conceded is not "the joyous irresponsibility and sense of power," but an entanglement indistinguishable from complicity in brutal rounds of violence and terror. What is felt is not the "excitement of the moment," but an entrapment in the moment, a helpless submersion in history as if the horse's hoof has indeed slipped into a widening torrent.

"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" was supposedly written in 1919 and first published in 1921. Its second publication, in the London Mercury in November of that year, was under the title, "Thoughts upon the Present State of the World," but Yeats made the decision to revert to the original designation when he published it in what is surely his finest single volume, The Tower, in 1928. There, in the superb company of "Sailing to Byzantium," "Among School Children," "The Tower," and others, the poem conspicuously follows "Meditations in Time of Civil War," thereby reversing the chronology of both composition and the historical events referred to. The revision process for the poem is thereby somewhat the reverse of "The Second Coming," from which Yeats excised particular political references so that, in spite of the misguided efforts of manuscript excavators such as Patrick Keane in "Revolutions French and Russian: Burke, Wordsworth, and the Genesis of Yeats's 'The Second Coming'," the poem remains scrupulously non-political and virtually non-historical. In the case of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," the alternate title would have created a poem almost equally reticent, because the text's references to the violence in Ireland following the establishment of the Dail Eireann in 1918 are relatively vague.

The date as title makes a great deal of difference in this case, especially since it is a date laden with significance in Irish history, marking the beginning of the "Troubles" --the subject of an almost entirely mythological or, better, eschatological text, becomes a particular time and a particular place (since the date is only reasonably emblematic of violence and chaos in Ireland). Yeats has something to say about the War of Independence, but it is the yoking of the particularizing title to teleological text that enables him to

enunciate the particular message he has to offer.

Labelling all poems as "political," as, for example, Robert Pinsky does ("A corollary realization is that 'all poetry is political': what is politically acceptable to some particular observer may seem 'unpolitical' to that observer" ["Responsibilities of the Poet," 10]), is perhaps the best evidence we have that the Romantic era in literature is finally receding. With the rise of sociological and materialist analysis in history, philosophy, and criticism, many commentators have come instinctively to feel they are empowering a discourse by declaring it "political," attributing to it greater value than it would otherwise be deemed to possess. We are further from Fichte--having read Freud, Foucault, Marx, Bakhtin and others--than some are willing to concede. In Fichte we find the "pure" romantic, what Yeats would call, perhaps, the completely antithetical or lunar spirit:

Merke auf dich selbst: kehre deinen Blick von allem, was dich umgiebt, ab, und in dein Inneres--ist die erste Forderung, welche die Philosophie an ihren Lehrling thut. Es ist von nichts, was ausser dir ist, die Rede, sondern lediglich von dir selbst. (Samtliche Werke, I, 422)<sup>1</sup>

[Heed only yourself: turn your gaze from all around you, and in toward your self--this is the first requirement that Philosophy makes of her apprentice. Nothing outside of you matters, solely your self.]

--the "bourgeois concept of the individual," in full flower. I wish to use the word "political" in regard to literature that treats of the consequences of a particular society's actions; but it must, I think, be admitted that "The Second Coming" and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" are marginal examples on a border that cannot, after all, ever be hermetically sealed.

Unlike Keane or Malcolm Brown,<sup>2</sup> I do not consider, as I've mentioned, "The Second Coming" to be a political poem. If it is useful to mention at all the political events named in Yeats's cotypes for the poem, it is best to do so with the subtlety of Seamus Deane: "The First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the Irish 'Troubles,' all contribute to this charged vision, but the myth of the critical historical moment at which the bestial and divine intersect is capacious enough to receive these without being filled by them" (A Short History of Irish Literature, 159).

It is an historical poem in only one respect. I believe Bloom is right to suggest that nothing in the poem justifies the "surely" of the evocation of apocalypse: "mere anarchy does not always bring on revelation" (322). The power of the poem, I suggested earlier, lies in its cultural context: it does not contain all of the power which has made it so famous, but evokes power from our culture's reservoir of fear fed by World War, genocides, and nuclear weapons. "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is virtually indistinguishable from "The Second Coming" in the degree to which it evokes a particular historical and geographical setting for its eschatology. But Yeats dates the apocalypse, and dates it with a year resonant in the Irish mind (especially for those with the Yeats sequence of dated poems also in mind), creating a Janus-like work whose every general statement and "universal" symbol must also face toward Ireland and 1919, and whose particularizing title and brief reference to the "troubles" must in turn gaze toward the universal apocalypse of human histories. In the chancy game of categories, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is a political poem--barely. And that marginal status is part of the poem's point, and

a source of its power.

Like "Easter 1916" (no date--entitled poems lie between them, and the later poem is designed, I believe, to form the second half of a provocative pair), "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," with its conspicuous reference to the "multitude," has as a central component of its narrative structure the problematical nature of the narrative pronoun.

Many ingenious lovely things are gone  
That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,  
Protected from the circle of the moon  
That pitches common things about. There stood  
Amid the ornamental bronze and stone  
An ancient image made of olive wood--  
And gone are Phidias' famous ivories  
And all the golden grasshoppers and bees.

We too had many pretty toys when young:  
A law indifferent to blame or praise,  
To bribe or threat; habits that made old wrong  
Melt down . . . (ll. 1-12)

Yeats launches the poem in lines as stately and intricately wrought as the culture whose passing he laments (the triplets of long "e's" clustered at the front of each line, the knitting "m's" and "t's" of the second line), as if covertly allying himself with those fabriers against the indecorous multitude. But the second stanza brings us up short: "We too." This ravaging wind that seems to subdue, in the manner of that in Shelley's "Ozymandias," a "colossal Wreck": is it the product of a multitude the poet eschews or of which he admits he is a part? ("Ozymandias," King Lear, and Yeats's own "The Song of the Happy Shepherd," "The Wild Swans at Coole," and "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" are five works that serve as fruitful subtexts.)

If "Easter 1916" involves its narrator in a hesitant but voluntary embrace of involvement in the community defined by the title, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" has as a central part of its drama the alternate acceptance and denial of a complicity not of the narrator's choosing, of entanglement in the increasingly horrific march of his country's history. The poem's mediating position between a specifically dated history and generalized eschatology parallels this vacillation, a vacillation that involves the interpreting of the word "we." Does "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" discuss the fate of culture or a particular culture? Again, an examination of the co-ordinates of the narrator can clarify the direction(s) of the poem's "gaze," and thus the content of its vision.

What can we say of culture, Yeats seems to ask in his final "Supernatural Song," "Meru" (c. 1934), if its very essence--the life of the mind--is what ravages each civilization to the ground?

Civilisation is hooped together, brought  
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace  
By manifold illusion; but man's life is thought,  
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease  
Ravaging through century after century,  
Ravaging, raging, and uprooting that he may come  
Into the desolation of reality. (ll. 1-7)

What can we say, indeed, of the poet? Does she or he defend civilization (the illusion) or smash it in favour of reality (desolation)? Civilization is a bundle of sticks gathered into one place. It is an image Yeats uses more than once. Here, the sticks are "hooped" as if to form a vessel, a barrel, image of safety and sustenance. But if this gathering is an illusion of "pretty toys," if reality is "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone" in a Shelleyan desert, and the poet's responsibility is to "come into" that

reality, how may the poet be disentangled from the "sudden blast of dusty wind," the "weasels fighting in a hole," or the "nightmare" riding upon sleep of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"? The vision of "Meru" is not so much the basis of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" as the direction in which its narrator's thought is evolving. "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is, like most of Yeats's major poems, a narrative, the evocation not of a state of mind but of a train of thought. It details the growing awareness of the poet's entanglement in Ireland's violence, in the history of his time.

William Irwin Thompson writes that "the pull between creation in time and escape out of time is the great tension and excitement in Yeats's poetry" (153). There is no better illustration than this suite of poems. The poem contains within its intricate alleyways of thought evidence of the conflict within Yeats in regard to politics which I discussed in detail in Chapter One and examined in relation <sup>to</sup> "Easter 1916." When discussing this question, as I've noted, Elizabeth Cullingford insists that "one of the leading characteristics of his political verse is that he speaks not as an observer but as a deeply implicated participant" (vii). Yet earlier on the same page she talks of the "myth" that Yeats constructed in his Autobiography, where "he was inclined to disparage his political enthusiasms as peripheral to his creative achievement." It is senseless to use the word "myth" here and leave it at that. I hold it axiomatic that both those political enthusiasms, and the attitude that leads to the disparaging of them, are real, and that they must both manifest themselves in poetry cast in the crucible of a pivotal historical moment for the Irish body politic.

'I used not to believe the stories of English savagery  
whether written or told. I thought they were made  
up by factions but now I see that they are true.

(Foley, the doctor, to Lady Gregory;  
from her Journals [ed. Murphy], Vol. 1,  
p. 192, 9 October, 1920)

1919-20 was an inordinately eventful period for both Yeats and Ireland. Yeats wrote a large amount of outstanding verse, including "The Second Coming," "A Prayer for My Daughter," "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," and of course "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." The recently married poet's first child, Anne Butler Yeats, was born in February 1919, and that spring he wrote the poem in her honour. It is a poem that both in its imagery and in its depiction of an increasing anxiety about social instability that the birth of a child often provokes ("Will it be right . . . to bring Anne to Ballylee? Has there been much cattle-driving . . . enough to endanger the supply of milk?" [Hone, 323]), betrays, especially in its second stanza, its proximity in time to the composition of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen":

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour  
And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,  
And under the arches of the bridge, and scream  
In the elms above the flooded stream;  
Imagining in excited reverie  
That the future years had come,  
Dancing to a frenzied drum,  
Out of the murderous innocence of the sea. (ll. 9-16)

The Yeatses spent the summer in the cottage of Ballylee, and the autumn in Oxford, before, late in the year, they left for an American tour designed in part to "earn a roof for Thoor Ballylee" (Hone, 320). For the duration of the War of Independence Yeats spent little time in Ireland, living mainly in Oxford (Costello, 153). Hone and Jeffares tell us that sometime during 1919 Lady Gregory's account of atrocities committed at Gort reached

Yeats and spurred the writing of the poem. Jeffares (265-66) attributes these actions to the Black and Tans. But as they did not arrive in Ireland until 1920, this is either untrue, or the poem is incorrectly dated by both Yeats and subsequent editors and commentators. I strongly suspect that the poem was not written until late 1920, after a year of Black and Tan brutality.\* The sheer inconvenience and continual anxiety of life

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\* Current information concerning the dates and sources of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" seems a muddle of inconsistency. Jeffares in his Commentary, including his revised edition (1983), says that the poem was written in 1919, inspired in part by Lady Gregory's account of Black and Tan atrocities at Gort. The poem is dated 1919 by Yeats, following the last line, in both The Tower and Collected Poems.

But the anecdotes concerning atrocities at Gort referred to by Jeffares, i.e. the murder of a Mrs. Eileen Quinn (not, as Jeffares has it, "Ellen"; see Gregory, I, 201--my references are to the two volume edition of the journals edited by Murphy) refer to events that did not occur until 4 Nov., 1920, as is clear in the very source Jeffares cites. (Also, they occur at Kiltartan, not "Gort"--one begins to worry, at this rate, about the accuracy of the rest of Jeffares's work in what has become the standard reference book on Yeats's poetry.) There are no allusions to any atrocities in the Gort area at any time in 1919 in Lady Gregory's journals, and since reprisals had not yet begun and the Black and Tan units had not yet been formed, it is highly unlikely there were any. The author of a recent study of The Tower, David Young, repeats this incorrect information (48). Given the correspondence between Yeats's poem at ll. 26-28 and the event Lady Gregory describes (she writes that Mrs. Quinn was killed with a child in her arms [I, 197] and Yeats calls her "the mother"; Yeats speaks of "a drunken soldiery," Lady Gregory repeatedly stresses Black and Tan drunkenness [eg. I, 190]), is there not reason to suspect that the poem was written in late 1920 or even early 1921 about 1919? It seems very unlikely that a poem written before the advent of the notoriously undisciplined auxiliary

units would refer to a "drunken soldiery." There was certainly, by that later date, much more reason for Yeats's apocalyptic pessimism, and this would also explain why the poem was not published anywhere until late 1921, and why Yeats's note accompanying the poem is dated May 1921 (Variorum Poems, 433). It should also be noted that the poem's first publication in book form, in the Cuala Press Seven Poems and a Fragment, has no date, and used as title "Thoughts upon the Present State of the World." The version of Lady Gregory's journals edited by Lennox Robinson to which Jeffares refers, also makes it clear the anecdote in question happens in Nov. 1920 to a Mrs. Quinn ("Ellen", who tells the story to Lady Gregory, is not the victim) in Kiltartan. I find it odd, given that the date of the Black and Tans arrival is fairly common knowledge, that critics after critics accept both the 1919 dating and insist "it was written in response to the Black and Tans violence in Ireland" (J. Hillis Miller, 318).

Why would Yeats have dated and titled his poem 1919 if it was not written until 1920? First, it is possible the poem had a lengthy gestation, and that a poem begun in 1919 had details added to it more than a year later. This would make the poem extremely unusual for Yeats, and one would still have to explain the logic of such bitter pessimism at this early date, but this is certainly possible, if unlikely. Primarily, I suspect, Yeats wished to preserve the symmetry of dates in his three poems up until that time that bore dates as titles and dealt with the state of affairs in Ireland: "September 1913," "Easter 1916," "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"--three year intervals. As the year in which the War of Independence began, the date 1919 also has a talismanic significance in Ireland.

I do not have access to manuscripts--if they survive--or the complete letters, so must leave the resolution of the question to others. Curtis Bradford's transcriptions show that the references to "drunken soldiery" and the Kiltartan incident appear in the earliest drafts he consulted, as well as an additional line about a "swaggering soldier on the public ways" (Yeats at Work, 78). Oddly, Bradford does not raise the question of dating whatsoever. I have found only one other reference to the problem. While revising this chapter I came across W.J. McCormack's statement

in a land undergoing violent convulsions was brought home to him due to the circumstances of his life: he had an infant daughter to be concerned about, a British wife who, to be fair, shouldn't perhaps have to become entangled in Irish revolution, and he now owned property for the first time. "Every day he expected to hear that Ballylee had been raided and sacked" (Hone, 330).

For the intermittent and unpredictable horrors of the War of Independence had, by early 1920, begun in earnest. In the aftermath of the Sinn Fein sweep in the December 1918 general elections, and the simultaneous meeting of the Dail Eirean in Dublin and the ambushing by the Irish Volunteers of a gelignite cart (killing two policemen) on January 21, 1919, the breakdown of order accelerated. Tensions rose as the British attempted to stem the tide of Republican sentiment. Richard Bennett, in his book on the Black and Tans, estimates that between January 1919 and March 1920 (i.e., before the worst months) "there were twenty thousand raids on houses by the Crown Forces in Ireland, nearly 400 political arrests and deportations, 429 proclamations to suppress meetings and newspapers" (32). 1920, the year which probably culminated in the writing of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," saw much more violence, and on a larger scale. The Lord Mayor of Cork was assassinated in March, riots rocked Derry and Belfast through the spring and summer (Catholic

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that "the signatory date is false for the poem was not finished until 1921" (Ascendancy and Tradition [1985], 311). Unfortunately, he does not elaborate. I suspect the poem was written in November-December 1920. One thing is then, clear: the poem cannot both have been written in 1919 and have been inspired by the atrocities at Kiltartan. Hone gives no source for his information.

employees were expelled from the shipyards in July). Thirty people died in clashes there in August. The notorious "Auxiliaries" of the Royal Irish Constabulary was instituted in July. Bloody Sunday provided a climax in July with I.R.A. assassins striking across Dublin in the morning, and the Black and Tans firing randomly into a football crowd in the evening. Martial law was declared for the western counties in December. On November 28 an entire patrol of eighteen Auxiliaries and Black and Tans was killed in an I.R.A. ambush in County Cork.

Yeats, in a July 1919 letter to John Quinn, the American patron and collector, strikes a bemused note, yet also gives hints of the attitudes seen in the poem:

I did not send [the manuscripts] . . . The \_\_\_\_\_ post-office is a happy, inattentive place . . . Besides, the mail was robbed a month ago and the parcel office robbed... a little later. We are reeling back into the middle ages, without growing more picturesque.

George has gone to Ballylee where she is, I hope, catching trout, and I follow in a few days . . . It would be pleasant to go away until the tumult of war had died down, and perhaps Home Rule established, and even the price of coal settled . . . . And would I mind if Sinn Fein took possession of my old tower here to store arms in . . . ? I think my chief difficulty in accepting [the post in Japan] will be my tower, which needs another year's work under our own eyes before it is a fitting monument and symbol. (L, 658-9)

Skirmishes between Sinn Fein and the Irish Volunteers, and the Royal Irish Constabulary began in the summer and autumn, although by May Lady Gregory was already deeply worried by murders and intimidation in Galway (Journals, ed. Murphy, I, 68ff.). The Dail was declared illegal by Britain in September. In January 1920 the first of the Black and Tans arrived. Their advent was a disaster for the country, particularly the western counties where the efforts of both the R.I.C. and the Dail-Sinn Fein to maintain

a semblance of control over units nominally under their command proved fruitless, although it is of course debatable whether the British had any desire to restrain the depredations of their irregulars.

"The rule of law," that is British law, became a very ambiguous term. Westminster passed the Restoration of Order in Ireland Bill in August 1920, which "virtually abolished the principle of trial by jury and established military law. In practice trial by jury had already fallen into disuse in most areas as neither witnesses nor jury dared attend the courts." Most crimes were tried by courtmartial (Bennett, 82). The presence of the Black and Tans brought violence to the immediate level of the altered body for Yeats, and epic parallels seemed to leap forward: "All we can see from our windows is beautiful and quiet and has been so; yet two miles off near Coole . . . the Black and Tans flogged young men and <sup>then</sup> tied them to their lorries by the hands and dragged them along the road till their bodies were torn in pieces" (L, 680)--like latter-day Hectors, one might add. Even so even-handed an observer as Lady Gregory, mistress of a great Ascendency estate and usually inclined to give England the benefit of the doubt, grew continually more appalled through 1920 at their drunken burning, looting, and random reprisals (the raping of pubescent girls was not unheard of [Journals, ed. Murphy, I, 202]), until, in late November, she exclaims, "Belgium, where are you? This is worse than Belgium ever was" (I, 205), clearly a reference to British propaganda about the "rights of small nations" and concerning German actions in Belgium during World War One (detailed, for example, in Peter J. Buitenhuis, The Great War of Words).

The loss of life in the "war" as a whole was considerable in a small country, but less than in virtually all other violent revolutions (somewhat

putting the lie, as Declan Kiberd insists, to the British and even Irish stereotype of the Irish as inherently violent): about 1250 in all, slightly more than half of them either Republicans or Irish civilians, the others from the British forces (Bennett, 221). But the nature of the violence made the impact of these deaths more acute, especially to a Yeats who admired pikes in the abstract but found the actual use of them distressingly sectarian. As Richard Bennett puts it, "acts of aggression were numerous enough to disturb, but never to entirely disrupt the ordinary, everyday life . . . . Imaginations which had been stunned by the fearful slaughter of the Great War could more easily recognize the ugly face of violence when it was brought down to this small scale" (33). The imagination, that is, of someone like Yeats, drawn to the apocalypse on the distant horizon, but shocked by the ability of human beings to knock on the door of a Galway cottage and gun down a mother holding her child. The killing of civilians in the conflict was in fact quite frequent, but the deaths were "accidental," or so the discourse insisted. It was an odd sort of war. The tension for everyone was like a continual hum, but order never quite broke down entirely for any length of time. The Black and Tans were scattered "in small detachments over the countryside . . . . They were under greater stress and less control than the military, and they broke out more often" (Bennett,        Few on either side had "proper" uniforms. It was a situation in which the possible

disintegration of civilization seemed all the more clearly defined because of the scandalous presence of near anarchy and routine administration side by side. "Neither Dail Eireann nor Volunteer Headquarters" had officially instituted guerilla warfare. "In fact, these bodies still shared the public dislike of activities which caused casualties . . . . Nobody laid down the form which hostilities were to take."<sup>3</sup> Full scale war, with uniformed armies, visible chains of command, and conventions of conduct, has been so fully integrated into the structure of social expectations that, at least to the non-combatants, it allows the face of the brute violence of which it consists to be ignored: Robert Gregory's death in the War did not seem an emblem of evil to Yeats. A slaughter was one thing; the slow piling up of corpses in 1919-20 was a disorganized run of murders. No one knew what the rules were. The soldiery, dedicated after all to eradicating human life whenever on the battlefield, was "drunken," and couldn't tell just where the edge of the battlefield was, or when active duty shades into furlough. That a drunken soldier seems more horrifying than a sober one says a great deal about civilization's ability to integrate murder into its norms.

Lady Gregory is an instinctively non-political chronicler, and in fact prefers to quote the opinions of others rather than give her own. Nevertheless, it becomes patently clear that the civilian population of Galway had much more to fear from the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries than from the Irish Volunteers-cum-I.R.A. Revulsion was general. The O'Connor, a Unionist landowner, proclaimed at the Dublin Peace Conference in August

1920, "if the government doesn't turn these damned Black and Tans out of the country, we'll soon all be damned republicans" (Bennett, 85). Yeats gave perhaps the bitterest speech of his life in condemnation of the Black and Tans at Oxford in early 1921 (Hone, 330). I give such details in order to cast the scrupulously non-partisan "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" in the proper light: this was clearly a conscious artistic decision on the poet's part. The poem is less partisan on the situation than most of Yeats's friends including many Unionists, and perhaps less so than Yeats himself.

"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is the fourth poem in The Tower, placed by Yeats after three other major works. David Young notes that "Sailing to Byzantium" (1927), "The Tower" (1924), and "Meditations in Time of Civil War" (1923) are, along with "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," all given dates in the volume, and thus form a reverse chronology: "The comparative triumphs of the first two poems, personal and self-contained, must now give way to the forces of historical and political circumstances. and the question will be how the poet's imagination can fare" (31). The context of this reverse chronology, which whispers in advance that there can be an escape from the hellish pit of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," is perhaps the only trace of light one can find in that poem's landscape. The sequence is, quite explicitly, a descent, a progressive removal of the poet from the artifices of Byzantium that provided an escape from a country unsuitable "for old men," and from the battlements of his tower, to the threatened Ballylee in "Meditations," where an "affable irregular" cracks jokes at the door but a dead soldier is also "trundled down the road," and then out into the King Lear-like unhoused-philosophy-on-the-heath of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

The effect of reading the poems in order is of the tower being broken open and cast down, the narrator exiled into the midst of the violence upon roads and the labyrinths of wind. The progression is outward from the ancestral houses of culture and tradition into the entanglements of a history pictured as synonymous with mortality itself, with destruction. "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is, despite the efforts of critics to find various solaces (in, for example, the mere fact of the poem's existence: imagination working upon chaos), the dark night of Yeats's canon. There is no hint of any redemption in its lines. As a depiction of political violence, it insists repeatedly on one point: such violence has no moral shadings, no varieties, no factions. It is evil.

But Swift was, in many respects, a man and mind subverted rather than subversive. Ireland enriched his rhetoric and undermined his beliefs. In the end, he appeared to himself to have become one of his own foolish projections, a man preaching improvement to a doomed people. "Satire," he once said, "is a sort of glass, where beholders do generally discover everybody's face but their own."

(Deane, A Short History, 48-9, *italics added*)

In this poem, if perhaps in no other, Yeats has much in common with Swift. At the beginning of this study I suggested that when examining a writer's depiction of political struggle one is also of necessity asking where the author sees himself or herself in relation to those perpetuating that struggle. Is the poet, for example, part of that group or distinct from it? If distinct, are the rebels morally superior or inferior? If a part, by choice or through fate? In "Easter 1916" we saw the Yeats persona stating his separation from a group perceived as morally (or at least aesthetically) inferior, then witnessed that persona's voluntary declaration first of a revaluation of the rebels, then of their relationships to him,

and lastly an insistence upon his own voice as central and empowered. The poem presented a complex figuration of the attractiveness and the dangers--the romantic dedication and the sterile vulgarity--of such an immersion in the people and in history. The situation in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is a far different one, although I believe that the speaker's narrative of self-location is similarly instructive.

Yeats's choice of title forces us to read what is otherwise a conspicuously non-particularized poem both in relation to Irish history and to Yeats's similarly date-entitled evaluations of the state of Ireland in "September 1913" and "Easter 1916." (No other poems have titles consisting only of a date.) If the poem was actually written in 1920, as I have speculated, Yeats's insistence on this sequence is all the more pointed, but the insistence is there in any event. The three poems can serve as a short-form narrative of Yeatsian vacillation on the true nature of the Irish character as displayed by Irish behaviour on questions of 1) the pursuit of true Romanticism, the spirit, the imagination, and 2) the pursuit of Nationalism; and, whether these pursuits are complementary or conflicting. In short, was Romantic Nationalism still possible? The short answer, reading the three poems in order, is 1) Romantic Ireland is dead and gone; no, 2) I was wrong, wherever green is worn there is again a terrible beauty; 3) no, I was right after all, Easter was a mirage, I was crazy to think the rogues and rascals had died out.

In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," then, the poetic persona is orienting himself in relation to a violence-inducing entity that is also a moral nightmare. Not only is one cast into history, one is cast into

historical futility, the impossibility of action. As Harold Bloom writes, here Yeats has a sense "that the context renders all action mere murder" (356). Whatever the dangers of the artist splashing into the stream in "Easter 1916," and whatever the effect of fanaticism on the heart, Pearse and Connolly do not stand in a morally inferior position. Robert Garratt shrewdly notes that,

while both Joyce and Yeats looked upon Catholic lower- and middle-class Ireland with a critical eye, Joyce looked from within, making his separation the rebellion of one who knew firsthand the conditions that had proved unacceptable . . . . Yeats, on the other hand, remained apart from that which he criticized. (101)

This is broadly speaking true, and true also of Yeats's relationship to the armed rebellion those classes effected from 1916 until the Treaty and beyond. The ideology of class and religion, and even the ideology of the romantic artiste, plays a far greater role in Yeats's writings than in those of Joyce, who, after all, centred his masterpiece on Leopold Bloom rather than Stephen Dedalus. Yeats is only fitfully conscious of this (though he is, superbly so, in "The Fisherman"), and he at times, as we've seen, evidences a desire to seal this separation to preserve his artistic integrity, and at other times desires a Homeric union with "the people." In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," Garratt's rule is proven by the ferocity with which Yeats, in an exception, acknowledges that he is not separate from 1919 in Ireland: "O what fine thought we had because we thought . . ." (l. 15). So in this poem the object of desire is separation, but this manifests itself in the bitterness with which the narrator admits the impossibility of any such distinction. Violence is a perfect virus: none can claim immunity or deny complicity. In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" the persona seems not to have the choice of whether or not

he is part of this nightmare. Much as in the writing from the North in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, the Yeats of this poem is caught in the midst of all, unable to choose between involvement and detachment.<sup>4</sup> The poem's narrative of self-placing, its narrative of narration, does not however simply present this situation as a given. As in "Easter 1916," the poem foregrounds, to some extent, the persona's own struggle with the question.

Here, the artist is facing history, a history he fluctuates between admitting is all around him, and stepping back to observe and accuse. The movement in this downward spiral (the poem must also be read against "The Tower") is actually that of two steps forward, one step back. The balance is clear: the poet has been dragged outward into the nightmare of his time. In the end the backward steps symbolize not rays of hope, of escape, but figure forth the desire to escape. This is what Bloom refers to as Yeats's "moving doubt" in the poem, doubt about his own "subjective solitude" (362). In this lies a great deal of the poem's psychological acuity.<sup>5</sup>

"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is the inverse of 1916 in more than just the overturning of one digit. A reader coming to the poem fresh from "Easter 1916" is struck by the difference in the grammar of narration. "Easter 1916" is launched by "I," its first word, and "I" appears four times in the first stanza, before it is eventually given up in favour of a merging of poetic and public forms of remembrance in the figure of the mother's part, which is "our part." When a pronoun first appears in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," likewise as first word in a stanza, it will be "we," and its context accusatory, even sarcastic: "We too had many pretty toys when young" (l. 9). This<sup>is</sup> noted by David Young, "Yeats can not, or will not, separate himself from the credulous multitude who have had their

pretty toys turned into nightmares" (49)--although the poem is not attributing pretty toys merely to the credulous multitude. The pronoun is held in abeyance through the classically-toned lament of the first stanza. The sculpted opening is a sort of aristocratic last stand:

Many ingenious lovely things are gone  
That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude,  
Protected from the circle of the moon  
That pitches common things about. There stood  
Amid the ornamental bronze and stone  
An ancient image . . .

The title itself, spelled out and including "hundred," is conspicuously formal.

In speaking of the "multitude" and "common things" in such tones, the speaker implicitly, but only implicitly, holds himself apart from the mob. If we've been reading of the "Big House" burnings, or reading in Yeats's own middle volumes, we may conclude that Yeats's dirge is in part in reference to the loss of aristocratic culture in Ireland, a culture compared to that of classical Athens both in its loveliness and in its transience, and a culture of which he considers himself at least an honorary member. A case can be made for this reading: the poem's first line, "Many ingenious lovely things are gone," to me echoes the world of "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory" (which also uses the eight line stanza), recalling such phrases as "all lovely intricacies of a house" (st. 10). Yeats encourages this linkage by placing these lines immediately after the conclusion of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and "The Tower." Encourages, but does not give full sanction to: the stanza has scruples, is shy about revealing the precise nature of the "we" it will utilize. The stanza establishes the beauties of a culture now past and gives no hint (except in the cunning "seemed" of line two) of the mockery to follow. It is, so to speak, a

complete thought: the later fate of these lovely things and those who loved them gains power through Yeats's unequivocal expression of one phase of thought and emotion. The mortality of these lovely things is admitted--they only seemed to be protected from the circle of the moon (here representing, I think, merely the phases of transience, not the "antithetical" moon of A Vision) that destroys common things. Yeats then suddenly presents images of the classical world, apparently alluding, very obliquely, to the sack of Athens (Jeffares). The concluding couplet evokes the lost sculptures of Phidias and "all the grasshoppers and bees," a line which recalls the reader to the poet's declaration a few pages earlier that he will take his "bodily form" not from natural things but "such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make" ("Sailing to Byzantium," l. 27). Like classical Athens, the speaker's culture is ruined.

The slight illusion of disassociation from the be-miracled "multitude" begins to dissipate with the "we" of line nine, and it is a "we" that takes us back to stanza one to ask just what culture is being compared to the ruined Athens. We who?

We too had many pretty toys when young;  
A law indifferent to blame or praise,  
To bribe or threat; habits that made old wrong  
Melt down, as it were wax in the the sun's rays;  
Public opinion ripening for so long  
We thought it would outlive all future days.  
O what fine thought we had because we thought  
That the worst rogues and rascals had died out. (ll. 9-16)

We? Aristocratic Ireland? Artistic Ireland? Protestant Ireland? Ireland as a whole? Great Britain? Yeats? (a royal "we"?) Western Civilization? Humanity? Thomas R. Whitaker assumes "Britain" at various points: "Something like Thucydides' critique is being sharply directed at modern British culture" (224), which is, oddly enough, true--at certain moments. J. Hillis

Miller states sweepingly that Yeats "speaks as no one, from nowhere, at no time" (321), (which, given that "presence" is by definition illusory in Miller's deconstructive orthodoxy, isn't surprising), although this rather contradicts his assertion that the poem was written in response to the Black and Tan violence and the disillusionment following the war (318), which reads "we" as literally Irish and figuratively European. (The latter is difficult to reconcile with the poem's title and "drunken soldiery" reference, which would seem odd in a post-armistice Europe.) Miller's idea that the "we" is a sort of empty cave ("the cavern from which the wind blows," [340]) is the result of a certain critical presupposition finding apparent fertile ground. The Yeatsian "we" is complex here, and self-contradictory. Its "identity" is a question I want to deal with in a moment, but it is important to note that its complexity does not make it a cypher or a location-less no-one, or make it a poem founded on the "linguistic moment." Miller's theory has the effect of annihilating the poem's historical moment,<sup>6</sup> with the happy effect of making the critic's prophecy self-fulfilling. Indeed, Yeats almost annihilates the historical moment entirely. But there is that troublesome title . . .

The second stanza is implicatory, part of a process of erasing all possible or hoped-for distinctions from the multitude or the body politic that continues until the end of the third stanza, where the narrator seems irrevocably trapped within the nightmare for the remainder of Part One. This sense of the narrator as an inextricable part of the "we" is strengthened by a hitherto unnoticed subtext for the stanza. "We too had many pretty toys when young" refers the reader not only to the "laws"

of the following lines, but to Yeats's youthful poetry. The earliest poem he preserved, "Song of the Happy Shepherd," is a remarkable work for a twenty-year-old, if derivative of Keats, Spenser, and Shelley:

The woods of Arcady are dead,  
And over is their antique joy;  
Of old the world on dreaming fed;  
Grey Truth is now her painted toy. (ll. 1-4)

The parallels with "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" are extensive, either intentional or a remarkable example of poetic self-communing: when Yeats wishes to mock the "dream" of culture he perhaps intuitively wrote a poem redolent with the imagery of his own romantic insistence that the dream of poetry could be a "certain good" ("Song of the Happy Shepherd," st. 2). In these first lines he moves from lamenting the passing of Greece's "antique joy" to a reference to "painted toy," just as the later poem's first stanza leads to "pretty toy." The number of echoes is startling. "[O]f all the many changing things / In dreary dancing past us whirled" (l. 7-8) becomes "So the Platonic Year / Whirls . . . Whirls in the old instead; / All men are dancers" (ll. 54-57). The earlier poem's "whirled, / To the cracked tune that Chronussings" (ll. 8-9) is echoed by "but now / That winds of winter blow / Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed" (ll. 86-88). "Dream" repeats the central theme of "Song of the Happy Shepherd." "Truth" at line four compares with "We, who . . . Talked of honour and of truth" (ll. 89-90) in the later poem. "Where are now the warring kings, / Word be-mockers?" (ll. 11-12) is paralleled by "Come let us mock at the great" (l. 93) and much of Part Five. "In clanging space a moment heard" (l. 20) is echoed by "their tread / Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong" (ll. 57-58). After the first stanza of "The Song" the echoes cease, as if it were the very first page of his canon that Yeats wished to mock. The two poems both lament the loss of the "woods of Arcady," but the early piece,

conventionally, proclaims the preservation of the earth's great dream through its internalization in poetry: "My songs of old earth's dreamy youth: / But ah! she dreams not now; dream thou!" (ll. 54-55). "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," in the midst of social chaos, treats of culture more in collective, monumental terms than in romantic reverie. But there, all consolations of culture are mocked as delusion, including the poetry that, "Rewarding in melodious guile / Thy fretful words" (ll. 39-40), seemed a compensation in the early poem.

For the remainder of the stanza the "we" seems to suggest a blurry consortium of artists, Ascendancy, and, possibly, British or European culture. The poem's title tends to ask us to read the generalities in terms of Ireland; the poem's generalities ask us to read the title in terms of repeating historical patterns. Some phrases are intriguingly resonant. Their laws' "indifference" to blame or praise invokes numerous Yeatsian paens to the proud, self-sufficient loneliness of his culture heroes O'Leary, Emmett, Parnell and others--the people who, in the terms of Catherine McGill, were to Yeats "statesmen" instead of "politicians" (in her unpublished M.A. thesis, pp. 1 ff.). "Public opinion ripening for so long / We thought it would outlive all future days" (ll. 13-14) likewise suggests Yeats's hope for a spiritual-intellectual uplifting of the Irish, though the lines are more optimistic about the "public" than any sentiment Yeats mustered. Such passages hint at being specific to Ireland, especially to readers of Yeats and particularly to readers of The Tower. They hint that the "Irish" culture Yeats felt himself heir to is the object of the poem's requiem. But they only hint.

Stanza three continues to report the sort of "fine thought" "we" had, thus continuing to portray the narrator as irredeemably deluded:

All teeth were drawn, all ancient tricks unlearned,  
 And a great army but a showy thing;  
 What matter that no cannon had been turned  
 Into a ploughshare? Parliament and king  
 Thought that unless a little powder burned  
 The trumpeters might burst with trumpeting  
 And yet it lack all glory; and perchance  
 The guardsmen's drowsy chargers would not prance. (11. 17-24)

The cornucopia of classical references continues; the first of many references to the dragon of the Argonautica, and an updated version of the Biblical prophecy of universal peace, currently being exposed as a fraud. Here the meaning of "we" solidifies, momentarily; a reference to the culture of Britain. This culture has accepted violence as the only thing that can be sure to produce glory: we "thought" that without actual gunpowder, all the trumpeting in the world might seem empty; we instinctively, still, accept war as the guarantee of authenticity. As Elaine Scarry puts it, war is virtually the only institution in whose power of self-enforcement we misguidedly believe.<sup>7</sup> The stanza mocks the "great Victorian peace," and suggests that the forms and ritual of war, adhered to throughout that "peace," turned out to be accurate reflections of deeper reality rather than "mere" symbols. Where once a "drowsy" Emperor was kept awake by his craftsmen's hammering in idealized Byzantium, now "drowsy" horses prance at the sound of cannon. The lines are acute. Our affection for militaristic symbols of authority somewhat belies our claim of no longer believing in war. We still find cannon the only proper, authoritative method of greeting visiting heads of state. Cannon, in our diplomatic discourse, prove "we really mean it."

By the fourth stanza the authorial "we" is trapped in history. The days are dragon-ridden, and sleep is a beast ridden not by the dreams of "The Song of a Happy Shepherd" but by nightmare. In a more explicit

description of violence than any appearing in "Easter 1916," where the non-"heroic" victims are invisible, Yeats tells of a "drunken soldiery"--soldiers freed of the pretence of "military discipline,"<sup>who</sup> can "leave the mother, murdered at her door, / To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free" (ll. 27-28). The mother who at Easter recited the name of her child against the darkness is now gunned down at her door. The "we" now seems clearly Irish--all accounts stress the Black and Tans' drinking habits. The phrase is meant to establish another momentarily specific cultural context. The depiction of political violence centres (as it often does in the events and in the poetry of violence in the North today) on the doorstep. It is a powerful emblem, especially following on the meditations of the poems preceding "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" concerning public violence invading the private, of the erasure of boundaries by which an artist or other individual may choose to be apolitical. Now,

The night can sweat with terror as before  
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,  
And planned to bring the world under a rule,  
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole. (ll. 29-32)

We who? The entire human enterprise, trying to piece together coherence. The British empire, bringing enlightened values to savages. We Irish, prospective New Athens gone bust. We who are weasels fighting in a hole. The elliptical grammar admits of no distinctions. The narrator is a member of all these groups, including the last. Violence is endemic on each level.

The following stanza briefly establishes the narrator in this new wisdom of wisdom's transience, trying out, one last time, the romantic consolation of possible detachment from history, even from civilization: triumph of any sort will only allow one's lovely things to be defiled by

time and its lackeys. Each triumph "would / But break upon his ghostly solitude" (ll. 39-40) in the tower. But this brief stepping back, accompanied by a shift away from the first person plural, is more like a last gasp. The poem's relentless logic ploughs forward in the final lines of the opening section:

But is there any comfort to be found?  
 Man is in love and loves what vanishes,  
 What more is there to say? That country round  
 None dared admit, if such a thought were his,  
 Incendiary or bigot could be found  
 To burn that stump on the Acropolis,  
 Or break in bits the famous ivories  
 Or traffic in the grasshoppers or bees. (ll. 41-48)

The second line answers with a clear no the question of the first, and insists upon the impossibility of ghostly solitude, impossible because man is in love. Then we are thrown back into another flurry of heterogeneous cultural references. That much of the poem seems to be written in what is tantamount to secret code is not coyness but strategy. The poem offers itself as a continuous test case of symbolic versus historical reference as Yeats carefully manipulates our expectations. "That country round," followed by references to the Acropolis, seems an allusion to Greece. But the phrase "that country" is also used to refer--relatively clearly--to Ireland in "Sailing to Byzantium," a later poem which, however, precedes "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" in The Tower. This oblique clue--or perhaps only coincidence of rhetoric--along with, again, the title, seems to invite comparison of the burning of the Acropolis with the torching of the Big Houses in 1919-20, thus again hinting at a link between Athens and Ascendancy culture. This also has the effect of balancing lines possibly "about" Black and Tans atrocities with lines possibly "about" the depredations of

Republicans. Using the phrase "that country" represents another ever-so-delicate proffering of topical allusion.

In the last lines of Part One, and in Part Two's description of Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers, "we" disappears, and a more detached, less self-implicatory perspective briefly emerges in these references to various cultural contexts--the American Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers in Paris in the 1890s, and a supra-historical "Platonic Year." "It seemed that a dragon of air / Had fallen among dancers" (in fact a "floating ribbon of cloth"), reinforcing the sense of evil's intrusion, but also making this intrusion applicable to this Asian-American-French-Greek cultural yoking in addition to the Classical-Irish-British series evoked earlier. The poem might be thought of, using a phrase from the work of Osip Mandelstam, as nostalgia for world culture. The image created by the dancers is revealed to be, like the king's cannon, an all-too-faithful rendering of reality, of what Richard Peterson calls "the violent and terrifying dance of history" (138). It is a testament to art's power, perhaps, but it is also telling that this art has the same relationship to reality--as a figuring forth of inherent violence--as military show. I think Unterecker's claim that the section depicts art as redemptive because it can depict even the dragon (183) ignores the tone of the last bitter lines: "All men are dancers and their tread / Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong" (ll. 57-58).<sup>8</sup> The poem is about the failure of poetry, among other things.

The narrator, thoroughly disillusioned, draws a series of circles around himself and applies to each of them his unrelenting message: the dragon has whirled them off "on its own furious path" (l. 53). All men are dancers, but they dance to the barbarous clangour of a gong. The allusion to

the Platonic Year looks to the title, also the name of a year. 1919 is a point of transition in the grand cycle. Yeats's apocalyptic sensibility is in evidence.

By line 57 ("All men"), the impulse to particularize the urge-to-violence and to hive off certain rogues, an impulse evidenced in the epithets "incendiary or bigot," has once again collapsed, the narrator again determined to make no distinctions. The increasingly inclusive set of cultural references strengthens this impression, while the word "so" linking Loie Fuller's dancers to the furious Platonic Year seems to imply that art is fueled by--even composed of--any evil it can mimic. He begins to sweep poets--and W.B. Yeats--into his ring of the damnable. Section Three, written in the undulating line lengths of Part Two, as if the earlier classical stanzas are now caught in the whirling, abandons even the consolations of "some moralist or mythological poet," who "compares the solitary soul (cf. "ghostly solitude" at line 40) to a swan" (l. 60). This continues the motif of solitude opposed by community horror, the antithetical versus the increasing dominance of the primary. Given that Yeats's previous volume was entitled The Wild Swans at Coole, there can be no doubt that his later poetry is being judged, just as his earliest work had been. To this end, Yeats links the first stanza of this section with the diction of "The Wild Swans at Coole":

Some moralist or mythological poet  
Compares the solitary soul to a swan;  
I am satisfied with that,  
Satisfied if a troubled mirror show it,  
Before that brief gleam of its life be gone,  
An image of its state;  
The wings half spread for flight,  
The breast thrust out in pride  
Whether to play, or to ride  
Those winds that clamour of approaching night. (ll. 59-68)

The gentle October twilight and the delicate melancholy of lost youth in

"The Wild Swans at Coole" find here harsher counterparts: "the water /Mirrors a still sky" (ll. 3-4) in the earlier poem; here the mirror is troubled by stronger winds "that clamour of approaching night." Before, the clamour was that of the "clamorous wing" of the wheeling swans (l. 12); here the wings can only hope, Cuchulain-like, to persist with pride in the face of irrevocable darkness. But, for the moment, the narrator is "satisfied with that" (l. 61).

The next startling stanza, however, destroys all satisfaction of even the solitary soul. Indeed, in what can only be called a remarkable, atrocity-induced reversal of one of the poet's abiding beliefs, the narrator insists that the very existence of the solitary intellect posited in the title of "Meditations in Time of Civil War," is a mirage:

A man in his own secret meditation  
Is lost amid the labyrinth that he has made  
In art or politics;  
Some Platonist affirms that in the station  
Where we should cast off body and trade  
The ancient habit sticks,  
And that if our works could  
But vanish with our breath  
That were a lucky death,  
For triumph can but mar our solitude. (ll. 69-78)

I think it should be clear at this point that "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is far more profound a critique of the romantic sensibility than is often recognized, and that there lies within it a remarkable insight into the internal contradictions of his own Romantic Nationalism. That is not to say he subsequently abandoned those values (although they become less prominent). Perhaps the fact that he <sup>saw</sup> their flawed "logic" is no real reason he should have, since values have little to do with logic.

who is

The man in his most secret meditation <sup>is</sup> a major figure in Yeats's mature

work--"Ego Dominus Tuus," "The Phases of the Moon," "The Tower," "Meditations in Time of Civil War"--is here, now, "lost amid the labyrinth that he has made / In art or politics." It is a remarkable moment for a reader of Yeats to see such a pairing, to see the labyrinths of art and politics equated. Meditation cannot be extricated from the maze-like nature of aesthetics or politics, and these natures have much in common. Both the king's guns and the ribbons of Loie Fuller are permeated by what they seem merely to symbolize. The tower has been invaded, the old, crack-pated king or poet (l. 88) has been turned out into the storm and taught Lear's hard lessons about the thing itself and the helplessness of culture in the face of that "ancient habit" (l. 74). Some Platonist suggests that this habit survives even the stations between lives, and that all works--body, trade, art, politics--mar a solitude that must, by the section's logic, lie below meditation. Meditation, and poetry, must be about something, so that the aesthetic purity of the Alastor poet or the hard discipline of the philosopher-hermit are doomed to failure. They even, perhaps, contribute to a drunken soldiery through their ambition.

The third stanza eschews rhetorical brilliance for a wonderfully effective harshness of statement: "The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven" (79). The bleak image can bring "a rage / To end all things," thus concluding the poet's half-completed labours, a poet who has learned "now / That winds of winter blow / . . . that we were crack-pated when we dreamed" (ll. 86-88). And once again the "my" and "I" of individual contemplation (ll. 61, 88) are gathered into a "we" of communal lunacy.

The blunt quatrain of Part Four makes explicit the complicity of the narrator as part of the "we," the weasels first mentioned in Part One. It describes a decline from the idealism of the pre-war, pre-Rising years.

By this point the grouping implied by the pronoun has again waxed nebulous. The narrator is included, but only, it seems, in humankind in general, as the more metaphysical context of Part Three suggests. This leads into the most caustic stanzas of the poem in Part Five, lines of cynical mockery reminiscent of "Three Songs to the Same Tune" save for the self-consciousness evidenced by "Mock mockers after that" in the final stanza. The narrator accepts his involvement in this era's destructiveness and gives in to destruction, mocking the great who forgot the lessons of "Ozymandias"; the wise who missed the passing of real history through staring at calendars and gaping at the sun; those who, like Yeats himself, "fancied goodness might be gay." Bloom is correct to ascribe the poem's power to its role as an "antidote to . . . poems [like "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan"] in which Yeats is a little too much at ease in his own system, a touch too secure in a superhuman posture as he contemplates the terrible annunciations" (362-3). Now the poem reaches the endgame of its implosion:

Mock mockers after that  
That would not lift a hand maybe  
To help good, wise or great  
To bar that foul storm out, for we  
Traffic in mockery. (ll. 108-12)

Is it reasonable to be disillusioned even by disillusionment, to mock "we" for trafficking in mockery, to mock both idealism and cynicism?

The extremely awkward versification here betrays the collapse of a discourse that is trapped in a house of mirrors: the storm that has invaded the tower, has knocked on the door and murdered the innocent, comes from both within and without. The narrator is trapped in a history composed by the violence of his own soul, so that there exists no ground of virtue

from which criticism can be launched. The response to violence Yeats maintained--deploring physical, local violence, but attracted to a violence of the soul and on the apocalyptic horizon--is recognized, and those distinctions shown to collapse. Yeats's habits of thought are here the subject of his vitriol, which he again quite accurately identifies with those of his generation. Even mockery must be mocked. An impotent "we-ness" is triumphant. Destructiveness invades the poem itself. But this is important only in regard to the question of just what such an invasion symbolizes. It is not a "linguistic moment" that proves a poet's mastery, as Hillis Miller would have it. Destructiveness invades the imagination and the pursuit of wisdom, invades the means of envisioning culture that will not bear within it a peculiarly self-directed ruthlessness, a suicidal genocide. Without the possibility of such vision, the human imagination, mocking even mockery, attains the worst of all possible worlds, a flailing, self-mutilating paralysis.

The narrator's fleeting attempts to separate himself, the Yeatsian poet, from the damned and damnable "we" of the poem's violent historical moment, lie abandoned. If there is any triumph at all, it lies in this wincing honesty. What James Wilson in The Romantic Heroic Ideal calls "the vital romantic dialectic between self-consciousness and communal responsibility" (20), surfaces long enough only to be hamstrung by the poet's bitter awareness of the contingent nature of that very self-consciousness. Part Six is largely a recapitulation of the disaster. The storm-in-the-voice of Part Five calms, but only into continued disillusionment; the verse form settles to the crafted, rhymed pentameter of the opening. The cultural references are apt in that they both evoke an

historical middle ground between the contemporary-classical poles of much preceding allusion (Herodias' daughter and Robert Artisson are both redolent of Medieval demonology); in that they are both historically rooted yet supernatural, history shading into myth; and in that they are drawn from first European then specifically Irish culture.

The section opens with a crucial image:

Violence upon the roads: violence of horses;  
Some few have handsome riders, are garlanded  
On delicate sensitive ear or tossing mane,  
But wearied running round and round in their courses  
All break and vanish, and evil gathers head. (ll. 113-117)

A reader of Yeats, sensitive to the poet's use of the well-ridden horse as an emblem of both the best of Ascendancy culture (in poems such as "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory"), and as a more universal symbol of the yoking of passion and control, will be inclined to exclaim, "Even the horses!" "Violence of horses" is surely one of Yeats's most despairing lines. A few still have handsome riders, and are "garlanded on delicate sensitive ear" (sensitivity) or "tossing mane" (passion). Yet they too, symbols of the great and wise, the dreamers, are broken by the relentless round of unprogressing history, and, finding themselves to have been in fact tethered all along, "break and vanish," to be replaced by evil. If the oblique reference to the burning of the Big Houses in Part One was a glimpse through the meshwork of heterogenous allusion so as to highlight a particular culture to be lamented in this great swansong, the lines at the beginning of Part Six, as is the poem's repeated impulse, hint at implicating Ascendancy culture in the violent cataclysm. Not only violence to horses, but violence of horses, the violence of a dying culture trapped in its courses.

In the middle lines of this finale, Yeats presents his vision of this gathering evil. It is like a demonic version of "Prayer for My Daughter," with the same violence in nature functioning as pathetic fallacy--"A sudden blast of wind and after / Thunder of feet, tumult of images"--and with the manmade labyrinths of Part Three now cast as nature's "labyrinth of wind." Here, the daughters are those of Herodias, whom Yeats linked both to the Sidhe and the Middle Ages (Jeffares). The poem concludes with the somewhat obscure lines on the 14th century incubus of an Irish "witch":

. . . thereupon  
 There lurches past, his great eyes without thought  
 Under the shadow of stupid, straw-pale locks,  
 That insolent fiend Robert Artisson  
 To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought  
 Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks. (ll. 125-30)

It is a final example of the complete degradation of culture, of energy sacrificed to the stupid vacancy of thought. Alice Kyteler is referred to as "Lady Kyteler," as if to emphasize her membership in "a good Anglo-Norman family" (Jeffares, citing St. John D. Seymour's Irish Witchcraft and Demonology). "Man is in love," Yeats wrote earlier in the poem, and now the products of love are thoroughly debased. What does Lady Kyteler give to the demon? Images of culture and of sexuality: "Bronzed peacock feathers"--recalling the ornaments of bronze, stone and gold in the poem's opening lines--and the red combs of her cocks. All distinctions are levelled. The lovely things of a culture, in this case Anglo-Norman culture, are, along with the cock's comb, given to the insolent fiend.

## II

Historical Generality and Poetic Particularity:  
Generic Violence in a Sectarian War

"In the shadows in Ireland, north and south . . . lurks reptilian human life, bigots who in the name of Christ spit on his precepts and who have put on the whole armoury of hate, men, and women too, who have known the dark intoxication of blood, and who seek half unconsciously for the renewal of that sinister ecstasy."

--AE (cited by Lyons, 108)

"They [the instructors] encouraged me, however, to read history in relation to their historical logic, and biography in relation to their twenty-eight typical incarnations, that I might give concrete expression to their abstract thought."

--Yeats, A Vision, p. 12

The narrative structure of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," clarified by examining the narrator's location, is one of a descent into entanglement in chaotic, violent history, a descent rendered emotionally compelling by sporadic movements toward setting the narrator apart. The central image of the poem for this reading is that of a (paradoxically) centreless labyrinth in which the narrator--and his culture--wanders without hope. The labyrinth of entanglement is given a precise temporal location by the poem's title. If the theme of the poem is entanglement, it is still necessary to elaborate, beyond the previous, sequential reading, on the nature of what the poet is entangled in, the nature of Yeats's depiction of political violence in 1919-20.

The long volley of tit-for-tat atrocities between Michael Collins's Republican forces and the British auxiliaries and Royal Irish Constabulary --volleys also directed at civilians in the form of Black and Tans intimidations and a series of more-or-less "unauthorized" burnings of "Big Houses"

by Republicans--is represented by Yeats as constituting the degradation of culture. Just which culture is a complex question. Finding its answer is a process that begins with the observation that the violence involved is depicted as being non-political. In this Yeats's response resembles the even more disgusted voice of AE quoted above: the "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" violence is portrayed as generic human evil; and this evil is seen to constitute fundamental truth about humankind and human culture's "desolate dream." It is at this point that difficult questions of universal versus specific meaning must be addressed. I would hold that it is Yeats's manipulation of the expectations engendered by his mythic, melange-of-history content that constitutes the political message.

The poem's stately, tragic opening sets whatever hints of historical particularity the poem may include (hints sufficiently slight to render them open to wildly varying interpretations) in a broad historical context whose underlying premise is the cyclical nature of history. "1919" is compared to the fall of Athens, the violence of Parliament and King, and, still more generically, to "the Platonic Year," "all ancient tricks," "old wrong," the final two phrases euphemisms for original sin. The swirl of Irish violence is set against a number of cultures and cultural artifacts: Athenian, British, Irish, Oriental (l. 49), Medieval Irish (Pt. 6), the Acropolis, the Bible (ll. 19-20), King Lear (ll. 87-88), Western Culture as a whole, Yeats's own early and more recent poems. The richness of the allusion brings still more <sup>cultures</sup> proximate to the poem to varying degrees: French (Fuller performed in Paris), American (her nationality), witchcraft, Irish Ascendancy culture (ll. 113-15), "Ozymandias." Readers will have slightly different lists, depending on their levels of tolerance for allusion

hunting. (In this regard, the poem somewhat anticipates The Waste Land.) One critic, for example, sees a reference to World War I in "Now days are dragon-ridden" (Young, 49). The effect of all this is not in itself violent in the way Hillis Miller feels it to be:

[The elements of the poem are] an amazingly heterogeneous lot. They represent by synecdoche the material that enters into Yeats's work generally. In fact, each detail of the poem . . . tends to stand for an entire context . . . . The concentration and explosive intensity of the poem is achieved by this bringing together in abrupt juxtaposition detached parts . . . . The parts have been cut by violence from these wholes and mutilated . . . . Each image of Yeats's poem in complex ways records an act of violence and is put into the text by another act of sundering . . . yoked together by violence. (320-21)

Beyond the fact of heterogeneity and the extensive use of synecdoche, this seems to me overstated. In the first section of almost fifty lines, for example, Yeats develops an explicit parallel between Athens and Ireland, alludes<sup>to</sup> Great Britain with a reference to parliament and king (a cultural context mediate between the local and the general classical heritage), then returns to both Athens--explicitly--and Ireland--implicitly--in the final stanza. In fact, Hillis Miller himself will go on to explain the logical interrelationships between many of the images (see pp. 344-45). If the variety of cultural references is an act of violence, if all allusion and symbolism constitutes "mutilation," then the same statements need be made of all densely and variously allusive works, ranging from Joyce's Ulysses to Paradise Lost to "Fern Hill." It seems more likely that while the number of cultural references and symbols here (only mildly unusual in Yeats) does convey urgency and wide-ranging disillusionment, their

principal effect is to cast the particular year and place implied by the title into a rapidly sketched catalogue representing human civilization as continually subverted by violence and history. Some particular culture is being destroyed in this particular era, but this is the fate of all cultures. Also, the culture being destroyed is composed of these many others, and bears within the same seeds of destruction they contained.

In writing on the poem, Geoffrey Thurley sees a contrast between Yeats's vehement denunciation of the Black and Tans in Oxford, and his statements here: "In the poem, the bestiality of the Irregulars is treated as an illustration of a general fault in man: the political incidents are subsumed in a tragic context that transcends them in giving them their most powerful expression" (123). But I don't think "transcendence" is the business Yeats is about here. He does not depict the Rising as generic or non-sectarian in "Easter 1916," nor does he sink to this poem's depths of furious disillusionment even in "Mediations in Time of Civil War."

"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" explicitly rejects the possibility of detached meditation. The poem, ironically, moves toward a perception of the particular that confounds the possibility of the true individual. The violence in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is not only non-sectarian, it is depicted as evil itself, as demonic, as part of the force destroying civilization from within.

Yeats makes this statement about a guerilla war that was clearly fought for an articulated cause, and in doing so is explicitly rejecting the portrait of the war commonplace in both England and Ireland. The poem inverts the scandalous mixture of historical figure and mythical backdrop which I discuss in regard to the 1916 poem "The Rose Tree." There, the

actual words of actual men, Pearse and Connolly, are inserted into a mythological context, into what Eliade would call sacred time. Here, the grand sweep of human civilization, of history, myth, demonology and philosophy, are subsumed under a very Irish date. For the Republican forces, a culture was not being destroyed in 1919-21, one was being born, and the deepest disillusionment was to be encountered in the Civil War a few years later. For the British, their war effort was an attempt to preserve what they saw as civilization against the barbarism of the mad, violent Irish. For Yeats, the very conflict between these two cultures, forces that in his mind should have nurtured each other, constituted the apocalypse of his hopes. "In place of aspirations to universality," writes Robert von Hallberg, "political poets often aim at forceful particularity" (Politics and Poetic Value. 3). Certainly for Yeats, sometime political poet and author of A Vision, upholder of a Song of Sixpence against Hegel, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is situated on the borderline of the conflict between his theory of history and individual experience, and the problem of free will. In contrast to his final version of "The Second Coming," by entitling his poem that depicts violence's degradation of culture and depicts that violence as evil itself "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," and not 1916, or 1923, Yeats is making a political statement.<sup>9</sup>

### III

#### The Violence of Horses

Hugh Kenner, in A Colder Eye (an entertaining but snide book inaccurate on an epic scale), percipiently locates a poet's genius in his ability to appropriate commonplace words to his own ends, with his own meanings. A

convincing example is Yeats's superbly eccentric use of "cold" (59-60). A similarly Yeatsian valence invades a word found in the opening line of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen": "lovely." I have glanced earlier at how, in Yeats's poem installing Robert Gregory as culture hero, the word occurs in telling lines: "What other could so well have counselled us / In all lovely intricacies of a house / As he that practised or that understood / All work in metal or in wood" (stanza 10). This stanza seems to be either consciously or instinctively invoked in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"'s "many ingenious lovely things are gone," and its "ornamental bronze and stone." its "image made of olive wood." The swans are wild in the volume containing Gregory's elegy, but the sadness of their passing is visible at Coole. Similarly, "loveliness" is a word that for Yeats comes to designate not natural beauty but the accomplishments of this culture. The word is explicitly related on more than one occasion to the graces of the Ascendancy at Coole and elsewhere. "In Memory of Major Robert Gregory," is one instance, a poem from the first "aristocratic" volume, The Green Helmet, is another:

Although  
Mean roof-trees were the sturdier for its fall,  
How should their luck run high enough to reach  
The gifts that govern men, and after these  
To gradual Time's last gift, a written speech  
Wrought of high laughter, loveliness, and ease.

("Upon a House shaken by the Land Agitation," 11. 7-12)

In each of the three poems, "loveliness" is associated not with nature but with craft: "ingenious lovely things," "wrought . . . of loveliness," "lovely intricacies. In "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931," Yeats talks of "traditional sanctity and loveliness" (l. 42), and also uses "lovely" to describe Coole's grounds.

In "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," war is not presented as an aber-

ration but as revelation. It is violence and chaos that is the reality underlying culture's raising up of ingenious loveliness. In his poetry as a whole, "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" notwithstanding, Yeats is not at all a "nature poet" in the Romantic sense. For Yeats, beauty tended to be something that was created by culture, loveliness in particular something created at, for example, Coole. Even the beauties of nature, like the wild swans, only become meaningful in the context of human social continuity. The "ancient habit" of violence "sticks" through all transformations. It is now time to "mock at the great" for believing their monumental labours could establish foundations on such a sea of wind and slaughter. As Yeats put it in "Meru," one can only in the end come to "the desolation of reality" (l. 7). One of the most striking ideas in "A Prayer for My Daughter" is the question, "How but in custom and in ceremony / Are innocence and beauty born?" (ll. 77-78). Innocence is not found beneath the accretions of culture, beneath the civilization and its discontents. Yeats was ahead of his time in this, when most were in the grip of Rousseau. Innocence is the conquering of the transitoriness of brutish desire. The poem inverts the values in Thomas Davis's popular patriotic hymn "The West's Asleep" (a poem Yeats loved in spite of himself--see Deane, A Short History, 78), where the poet calls on man to "learn liberty / From crashing wind and lashing sea." Innocence must be established in an attempt to refute history.<sup>10</sup> There is, in fact, an ongoing debate about the culture/nature dichotomy in The Tower, culminating in "Among School Children."

It isn't necessary to detail Yeats's increasing emphasis, as he reached middle age, on his cultural heritage in Anglo-Ireland, a story told with

sympathy by Donald Torchiana and others; and told more caustically by George Moore:

We were surprised . . . when, instead of talking to us as he used to about the old stories . . . he began to thunder like Ben Tillett against the middle classes, stamping his feet, working himself into a great temper . . . . [O]ne would have thought that he was speaking against a personal foe, and we looked around asking each other with our eyes where on earth our Willie Yeats had picked up the strange belief that none but titled and carriage-folk could appreciate pictures. (Hail and Farewell, 540)

Moore goes on to mock Yeats's search for family crests and distinguished lineage. Yeats's background was an admixture of middle class and haute bourgeoisie, and though he often felt himself impecunious, it was--given his flittings between Sligo, Dublin and London, his clothes and his books--an impecuniosity beyond the wildest dreams of either Sligo peasant or despised Dublin clerk. Yeats's developing love for the graces and intellectual vitality at Coole, and what he considered their forebears in Georgian Ireland, was a passion adopted with the usual fervour of the convert. It was the obvious onset of the death of this culture that by-and-large prompted Yeats's interest in fascist techniques,<sup>11</sup> and that spurred his famous "We are no petty people" speech in the Senate during the divorce debate (Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats, 99). As Malcolm Brown perhaps exorbitantly puts it, "Whatever the source, W.B. Yeats's infatuation was total. It obscured not only the vices of his model but the virtues no less. Outside the literary orbit, the Irish Protestant gentry will never be wildly acclaimed for its 'generosity though free to refuse'; nor for its . . . Italianate patronage of the arts . . . nor for its tragic gaiety . . . The Irish gentry will be remembered instead for its cheerful . . . good sense . . . a social class that took solid money in exchange for its

privileges and went away quietly" (300). What one considers culture is invariably one's own cultural makeup, and in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" Yeats draws in a wide range of components. But most fundamentally, Yeats, a man who lived almost equal parts of his life in England and Ireland, who considered himself both irrefutably Irish and irrefutably one with the people of Burke, and Grattan, and Swift, had a cultural heritage compounded of both islands.

It is then perhaps no coincidence that the principal modern cultural references in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" are (in successive stanzas) to "Parliament and King" and the "drunken soldiery" and, to conclude Part One, the implicitly Republican "bigots" who would burn in "that country" that "stump on the acropolis."

This is the ultimate entanglement in history. The nightmare hinted at in the reference to "that woman" in "Easter 1916" and the other Gore-Booth Markievicz poems has come to pass: the autocratic and/or artistic individual has failed to escape. The culture that is being destroyed, that is destroying itself, is that of which Yeats is composed. What destroys one's "culture" is not sectarian violence but primal nature, which, in this poem's cosmology, is evil. The Civil War may have been disillusioning, but it is in the ferocious weasel fight between all that is Irish and all that is English that apocalypse lurks. The self cannot mediate in the midst of that. "A man in his own secret meditation / Is lost amid the labyrinth he has made / In art or politics." The Anglo-Irish war pits Anglo-Ireland against itself, devours the hyphen. The depiction of political struggle in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is a picture of cannibalism and schizophrenia, the self's constituent parts

at war, the dream of cultural synthesis rendered, forever, impossible.

Yeats is Irish. His loyalty to Ireland goes without saying. But his definition of Irishness, his ideal Irishness, is that (Seamus Deane would say) of the colonial, whether he will or no. Yeats's is an Irishness compounded, superbly, with Britain. That is his nexus of mysticism and the Romantic poetic heritage (or so he would see it), that is the combination that made Ascendancy culture seem to him so promising, its golden age of Burke and Swift so golden, that is what the absolute non-sectarian nature of this violence destroys. It is for this reason that Yeats's only abiding political position was that of dignity without revolution, independence without sundering. As the Treaty neared ratification in 1921, he wondered if it would be possible to continue living in either country. "I feel now that all may be blood and misery. If that comes we may abandon Ballylee to the owls and the rats . . . to live in some far land. Should England and Ireland be divided beyond all hope of remedy, what else could one do for the children's sake?" (L, 675, [22 Dec. 1921]). As late as July 1919 his best hope remained that Home Rule--for Yeats the best of both worlds--could somehow be established (L, 659).

Yeats insists on the non-political nature of the violence. "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is not only a political poem. It has much to say about other issues. But there are elements of particularity Yeats wishes to exploit. By placing "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" after "Meditations in Time of Civil War," inverting the order of both history and the chronological poetic canon, Yeats is bitterly concluding his great sequence

of dated poems--1913, 1916, Civil War, 1919--with the narrative of the victory of history over his conception of a nationalism free from parties and factions. In 1919-20, "culture" was destroyed. The cock at the poem's end is a shard of degraded culture instead of an annunciation.<sup>12</sup> Easter is silenced, the martyrs betrayed, the wind drops, the violence of horses sweeps "high" culture into the whirlwind of fanaticism, a scandal of mingled domains. One might say that Yeats's aristocratic condescension in poems like "No Second Troy," "that she would of late / Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways, / Or hurled the little streets upon the great, / Had they but courage equal to desire" (ll. 2-5), has come back to haunt him. Violence, having come too close to his selfhood, becomes a pure evil, and is no longer the object of half-hatred, half-desire. For Yeats it would be the Civil War between Treaty-ites and anti-Treatyites, a war after the important issue had already been lost, that would be sectarian.

## Chapter Four

### The Muse in the Tower:

#### Figures of Enclosure in "Meditations in Time of Civil War"

"Or let my lamp at midnight hour  
Be seen in some high lonely tower,  
Where I may oft outwatch the Bear  
. . . . .  
Till old experience do attain  
To something like prophetic strain.  
These pleasures, Melancholy, give,  
And I with thee will choose to live."

--Milton, "Il Penseroso," ll. 85-7, 173-6<sup>1</sup>

The title of Yeats's suite of short lyrics set and composed during the fighting between the Free State and the anti-Treaty forces under De Valera asserts the possibility of a certain detachment--if not escape--from the forces of time and violence; asserts the possibility of a meditative self-containment, symbolized by the tower. To a reader of Yeats's eloquent encounters with political violence--and his own attitudes toward nationalism, history and poetry--in "Easter 1916" and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," "Meditations in Time of Civil War" offers the sensation of being washed onto a strand after hours at sea: the division between solid land and chaotic water has been re-established, and the tone is one of sadness and (relatively) quiet longing, even if one of the desires that persists is for the sea. The poem has a sense of belatedness as the "Platonist" withdraws, a self-described "aging man," into the contemplation of images that had enchanted him as a "growing boy." As the closing allusion to Wordsworth makes clear, this is Yeats's "Intimations Ode." Space has been reclaimed--after the penetrations and implosions of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"--for meditations on mortality.

As for the war outside, it comes only so far as the door.

In "Easter 1916" we saw Yeats reacting against "September 1913" in order to re-establish a place for himself within Irish political society, a place from which to speak the "performative utterance": "Now and in time to be." He comes to that poem <sup>as</sup> someone who has repudiated the role he now chooses to adopt. Political history is not something in which he is immersed, but something he approaches in the conscious rejecting of his own repeated assertion that politics is not a vital subject for his poetry. We saw that what is, for the moment, repudiated, still possesses the ability to generate tensions forming that poem's incomparable set of oxymoronic figurations. An image from the poem which might be thought of as representing the narrative presence is that of the horse approaching the stream from the road, its hoof splashing on the brim and then entering it. Similarly, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is a re-writing of "Easter 1916," a profoundly disillusioned strangling of the annunciation that rings out in the last lines of the earlier poem. The violence it describes is as degrading and corrosive as the actions of the martyrs were enriching and creative of identity. The "location" of the narrating persona could hardly be more different. The violence of 1919 occurs all around the narrator's refuge and, ultimately, also arises from within it: all walls are breached. The narrator cannot choose between solidarity with or separation from those who act out the era's frenzy. Despite faint-hearted attempts to imagine himself as distinct, the narrator is irretrievably implicated, part of the landscape of violence, entangled in the stream of history. The abilities of various cultural entities to remain detached from politics have proven ephemeral, and Irish nationalism, composed for Yeats of the great traditions

he saw in both Gaelic culture (the touchstone of the early Yeats which he here explicitly mocks) and the Ascendancy heritage epitomized at Coole (increasingly a preoccupation of the mature Yeats, also mocked in the poem), had resulted in not a fruitful confluence but a profound psychosis: Anglo-Irish war. The poem's mode is ridicule; its trope irony in the form of sarcasm. The figure for the narrative posture is entanglement; or, in the poem's own words, "the labyrinth." "Meditations in Time of Civil War" is, I would argue, a mediating of the images and narrative perspectives of the great date-titled poems which precede it. The violence is inescapable: Ballylee is rebuilt, Ireland is chosen as home, and its history must be taken with it. But even in its midst there is a space for thought, a tower, a figure of the vertical to partially confound the horizon-crossing roads of violence at its door. The image I would choose to describe the locus of narration is neither hoof on the brim nor entanglement, but enclosure: "we are closed in."

# I

## Figures of Violence

There is in fact more description of political violence in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" than in either of the other poems with which I have dealt. The breakdown of authority (or, the rise of competing authorities), and the level of violence during the Civil War surpassed that of all but the worst months of the 1920 terrors, particularly in the Republican strongholds in the west. Yeats's situation at Ballylee was not so much precarious as entirely unpredictable: the exhausting, low-level anxiety seems to be captured in the first stanza of "My House," where the war is not even

mentioned. History was repeating itself to some extent: centuries earlier, another great English-language poet cum landowner had sat in his castle in the west of Ireland watching two competing authorities--the British administration centred in the Pale, and the Irish lords based in the west headed by the O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone--vie for supremacy. The difference was that Spenser's Kilcolman was, of course, burned, while Ballylee was not, and that Spenser was perfectly certain who represented civilisation and who barbarism: "that the English nation so mightie and puisant so far a broade in a Countrie of your owne dominion lying hard vnder the lapp of England should by so base and Barbarous a people as the Irish so vntrained in warrs so inexperte of all goverment and good pollicies be so suddenlie troden downe . . ." (10. 239). Or, as Yeats gently put it, he "never understood the people he lived among."<sup>2</sup> Genocide, followed by large scale plantation, was probably the policy Spenser advocated.<sup>3</sup> The other difference was that Spenser in this situation expounded at length on "the present state of Ireland," whereas Yeats, despite giving over lines to descriptions of the war, does not have the state of the nation as his primary concern any longer. The pressing questions of a romantic nationalist's hopes for his country are conspicuous by their absence.

With the exception of "Ancestral Houses," written in England a year earlier (Jeffares, 266), the seven poems of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" seem to have been written at Thoor Ballylee during the worst periods of fighting in 1922. Voluntarily living in County Galway through this time was an act of some courage, and with the frequent ambushes on the roads, living in a region over which the Free State's forces had very shaky control, feelings of claustrophobia were common. The bridge of Ballylee was blown up by

Republicans--quite politely, reports Yeats. He tended to recount events from the war-zone in the good natured air of "The Road at My Door," but did comment to Olivia Shakespeare, "I am not alarmed at anything but the murders of Protestants in Cork" (Hone, 345). Whether the suite was finished by the time Yeats was appointed senator at the end of 1922--thus setting himself more firmly against the Republicans--is not certain. Probably it was.

The war was vicious, and represented for most a profound disillusionment all the deeper in that it ended with Ulster under British rule and the Dail pledging allegiance to the King of England. Desmond Williams is blunt: "The civil war has often been held the mainspring of bitterness and cynicism in Irish life" (117), although Sean O Faolain, who fought with the I.R.A., called them "both wonderful times and nightmare times" (Freyer, 78). 1922 began with Dail Eireann's narrow approval of the treaty, a treaty which "bore an incongruity between effort and achievement" (Malcolm Brown, 290). Its most repugnant feature, partition, was assumed by virtually everyone to be a temporary phenomenon. War broke out six months later, shortly after June's general election gave a slender edge in the Dail to pro-Treaty candidates. "The conventional [starting] date" was June 28, when anti-Treatyite headquarters in the Four Courts were bombarded by the forces under Michael Collins (William, 18). The result was "mass confusion" (128) and a year of warfare. And while it is worthwhile to be reminded by Declan Kibard that, by the standards of most civil wars (American, British, Russian . . .) Ireland demonstrated restraint, and that the stereotype of a genetically violent race is British propaganda, propaganda from a participant in the greatest slaughterhouses of human history and a long string of dirty colonial skirmishes (see "Anglo Irish Attitudes," in Ireland's Field

Day, 83-105), the impact on Irish life should not be minimized. "It was a dirty war," writes Graham Walker. "It claimed some 4,000 lives . . . and it provoked acts of inhumanity on a greater scale than the Anglo-Irish war of 1919-21" (93).

A newspaper billboard from Cork captures the extent to which violence had become part of the fabric of the quotidian:<sup>4</sup>

THE WEEK'S WARFARE  
MURDER BY INSANE PROFESSOR  
CAUGHT AT DRILL  
FIVE CIVILIANS KILLED  
GARDENING AND POULTRY NOTES  
TALKS ON HEALTH  
ALL THE USUAL FEATURES

Was the composer of this possessed of the same Irish black humour that today speaks of the "troubles" or refers to accidental self-immolation by an I.R.A. or U.D.A. bomb planter as an "own goal," or merely adopting the bemused taking-it-all-in-stride tone of "The Road at My Door," a tone that must be taken into account when delineating Yeats's depiction of political violence: "A brown Lieutenant and his men,/ Half dressed in national uniform,/ Stand at my door, and I complain / Of the foul weather . . ."? The title of this lyric points to another historical factor relevant to the poem. The civil war lasted as a war in the conventional sense--with massed military forces squared off against each other--only until August 1922, when the Free State captured the I.R.A. stronghold of Cork (Walker, 93ff.). Thereafter it was very much a "road" war, with the Republicans utilizing ambushes of military patrols as their primary tactic. It was a war in which civilians were usually (though not always) safe, so long as they stayed off the roads.

The narrative structure of the poem is simple. It governs the relationship of the Yeats persona to two poles: meditation and civil war. In outline,

the philosopher-poet begins in meditation with the war a distant shadow only present at all in the ominous title, comes downstairs to meet that war at his doorway, then returns inside to mount the staircase to the tower top, from which he has the visions which conclude the poem. This narrative repeats on a structural level the "argument" that forms the content of the suite. "Meditations in Time of Civil War" occupies the border between the long poem and the suite of related but discrete poems (such as Words for Music Perhaps, or Derek Walcott's Midsummer). Its parts are detachable, and can be read intelligibly on their own, but refer extensively to each other and give only a slight sense of narrative disjunction or "collage" when read in sequence. They are individual meditations about and within the same historical moment.

The poem begins by practising its own assertion: that, somewhat in contradiction to "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," meditation in the abstract and philosophical mode is possible in the midst of civil war. A first person singular narration predominates, again in contrast with the earlier poem. We start at as distant a remove from road ambushes and knee-capping as can be imagined, on the lawns of "Ancestral Houses":

Surely among a rich man's flowering lawns,  
Amid the rustle of his planted hills,  
Life overflows without ambitious pains;  
And rains down life until the basin spills,  
And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains  
As though to choose whatever shape it wills  
And never stoop to a mechanical  
Or servile shape, at others' beck and call. (st. 1)

The civil war is present only in the pressure it has exerted in the selection of subject matter (which, in turn, occludes the war). The poem meditates upon ancestral houses not arbitrarily because the great estates were

being burned under the generally correct assumption that their occupants were pro-Treaty and out of general resentment against British links no matter how attenuated. They had also been under economic pressure due to land reforms and rent strikes.

We begin, with "surely," as if in the midst of an argument, as if the speaker knows his assertions are susceptible to challenge. He both defends the estates on grounds similar to those in earlier poems such as "Upon a House shaken by the Land Agitation," and sets up the forces of war as being implicitly contrary to these values. This latter assertion will soon be qualified. Throughout "Ancestral Houses" the war has only this sort of oblique role, in spite of the increasingly suggestive lines of stanza three: "Some violent bitter men, some powerful man . . ." The second poem, "My House," also looks back to earlier, violent foundings ("A man-at-arms / Gathered a score of horse"), and also contains an example of how Yeats skillfully recreates the sensation of continual anxiety. In doing so, he re-introduces the hens and stream of "Easter 1916":

The sound of the rain or sound  
Of every wind that blows;  
The stilted water-hen  
Crossing stream again  
Scared by the splashing of a dozen cows. (st. 1)

Here the cows are as half-comic and half-menacing as the half-uniformed soldiers who will come to the door. Likewise, in "My Table," the third poem, the felt but unspoken background of war leads to musing upon Sato's sword and its position on the writing trestle:

Two heavy trestles, and a board  
Where Sato's gift, a changeless sword,  
By pen and paper lies,  
That it may moralise  
My days out of their aimlessness.  
A bit of an embroidered dress

Covers its wooden sheath.  
 Chaucer had not drawn breath  
 When it was forged.

But the relationship remains implicit: the martial aspect of the sword is never mentioned. "My Descendants" has nothing to say of the war except in the manner of "Ancestral Houses": when the state is in flux, questions of destruction and decline seem natural enough. Then, with the title and opening lines of "The Road at My Door," the war brings the philosopher down from his study.

# 1 War as Slavery: Flowering Lawns and Mechanical Birds

Once out of nature I shall never take  
 My bodily form from any natural thing,  
 But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
 Of hammered gold and gold enamelling . . .

("Sailing to Byzantium")

Is the sage of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" yet "out of nature"? No, but not quite in it, either; an aging man making do with "abstract joy." The encircled tower is half of this world, half of another, contemplation within war, thought within society. "Sailing to Byzantium" is written four years later, but precedes the poem in The Tower. That a few years later still, in the brilliant "Byzantium," Yeats will rage on the intolerable gap between "A starlit or a moonlit dome" (l. 5) and the "fury and the mire of human veins" (l. 8), suggests the uneasy place that rage and violence, bitterness and hatred, occupy in his system of thought. From his tower, a putative ancestral foundation, Yeats is caught between passion and passion: between the passion he has always considered natural, proper and necessary to the aristocracy of the spirit ("the aristocrat" is for Yeats "the embodiment of human passion" [Loftus, Nationalism in Anglo-Irish Literature, 57]),

and the destructive passion of the civil war embittering the country he loves and destroying thousands of lives. His attempt--his desire--to be able to discriminate between these all-too-familiar poles is in part what gives the sequence its interrogative attitude. If one reads the poem after an immersion in Yeats's non-poetic writings, its sections seem a debate between system and circumstance, intellect and wistfulness, the abstract and the inviolable particular. It is not so much that Yeats's theories and prejudices spoil the poem, as Bloom suggests (356), but that, immersed in the automatic-writing by his wife that was producing A Vision, Yeats is trying on the role of the sage of "Sailing to Byzantium," casting the meditative system into the flux to see what can be salvaged. A Vision is one of the poem's voices, and contributes many images: it doesn't "possess" the poem, but rather acts as one of its objects of desire.

As Yeats chose images both for war and to set against it, this choosing becomes visible along an axis of natural-mechanical poles. I have generally in this study resisted a recourse either to Yeats's A Vision terminology or Ellmann's theory of the mask. Rich as these both are, they can easily become a crutch, apparently explaining away tensions in Yeats's work by translating them into a different vocabulary. The poetry is in such cases made into a network of reference conversant only with what is, after all, an only sporadically enlightening work of historical philosophy. This philosophy then serves to justify and explain some of our language's most complex, emotionally intricate poetry. Readers thus impoverish the poetry, their emotional radar blunted rather than sensitized. At this point, however, I feel I must break my own rule.

I suggested earlier that On Baile's Strand is a useful foil when reading

Yeats's political poetry. In that play, written before the great Victorian peace (peaceful for Europe at least) had disintegrated, passion is the playwright's priority. The play's moral is that "passion is Nature's law and rational logic mankind's blunder" (Loftus, Nationalism in Anglo-Irish Literature, 64). This is very well in the abstract, but grows more troublesome in the face of the price paid by everyone in a constitutional crisis, with competing authorities in military garb. Will Yeats allow all people their passion, even if that passion threatens his family? In a "time of civil war" the question is not so neatly one of passion versus logic. The civil war is the result of the passion for the Republican cause and the desire for peace (i.e., in 1922, the authority of the Dail) in conflict.

As is appropriate in a geography of encirclement, "Meditations in Time of Civil War" sets up a schema by which the poem's world is divided into two realms: inner and outer. On the "inside" we have ancestral houses and their lawns, culture and "self-delight," meditation and poetry, "My Table" and so on; on the "outside" that which threatens ancestral houses (decline of the family line, civil disorder), barbarism, "servile shapes, at others' beck and call" [opposite "self delight"], civil war, the road at my door. The "inner" is represented most clearly by the meditation of the title, but also becomes associated with self-integrity and the pursuit of wisdom, whereas the "outer" is not just the war but all that threatens the "inner" by either fire or corruption, by luring the "Platonist" out. Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, the inner is "natural," the outer mechanical:

Surely among a rich man's flowering lawns,  
Amid the rustle of his planted hills,  
Life overflows without ambitious pains . . .  
As though to choose whatever shape it wills  
And never stoop to a mechanical

Or servile shape, at others' beck and call. (ll. 1-3, 6-8)

Opposed to self delight is servility, opposed to flowering lawns a mechanical shape. We might infer from this that the poem associates the civil war with the second term of each pair, and the later sections seem to bear this out.

Yeats's "door" is the division line between contemplation and war. Not once, but twice, he turns away from what he sees outside the tower and closes the door behind him, at the ends of "The Road at My Door" and "I See Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness" (These two poems in fact recount a narrative of the "Platonist"'s encounter with the "outer," a narrative interrupted by the lyric about the war, "The Stare's Nest by My Window.") On the first of these occasions, he turns away from the soldiers themselves, having just listened to the jokes of "affable" Irregulars and complained about the bad weather to the "brown Lieutenant" from the National Army:

I count those feathered balls of soot  
The moor-hen guides upon the stream,  
To silence the envy in my thought;  
And turn towards my chamber, caught  
In the cold snows of a dream. ("The Road at My Door," st. 3)

The "envy" he experiences is explained more fully in "I see Phantoms of Hatred," where he wonders "how many times I could have proved my worth / In something that all others understand or share" (st. 5). The soldiers "momentarily tempt him to prove himself in 'affairs'" (Unterecker, 180). The outer--the war--is the world of others' beck and call: to silence this call he turns to nature, the moor-hens on the stream, who serve, as they did in "Easter 1916," as a contrast to those engaged in political violence. The soldiers are opposed by nature, the war being both unnatural and a

field for potential servility. He is propelled into the "cold snows of a dream," as if pulled from the "hot" world of rifles and affairs, through the warmth of nature. The horseman casts his cold eye. The route to the transcendental passes through nature, not through the mechanical servility of society's compromised loyalties. The narrator turns toward what Seamus Heaney has called Yeats's "high-stepping tread" (Preoccupations, 160).<sup>5</sup>

Ascending to the tower top, the poet has his nightmarish vision, through a "mist that is like blown snow," of the rage-driven, rage-hungry troop. The dream culminates in "the innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon" ("I See Phantoms" st. 4). Immediately thereafter the narrator turns again and shuts the door, wondering, on the stair, about whether he might have chosen a more public life. Mechanical imagery is again followed by reference to the "outside" world of affairs. These mechanical birds seem to represent the end of the process the civil war represents--"coming emptiness." They symbolize the non-human, and derive from A Vision and its lunar phases. The birds are mechanical and have "put out the moon." They thus represent the dark moon, the final phase. The poem "Phases of the Moon," printed in A Vision (pp. 59-64) as a preface to the prose sections on the same subject (and written in 1918, shortly after George Yeats's automatic writing began), serves as a gloss for the final section of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" and for the inner/outer, natural/mechanical structure in the poem as a whole. "The Phases of the Moon" (also in The Wild Swans at Coole) opens with the same scene implicit in "Meditations," with Aherne and Robartes crossing a stream and seeing a tower where "the light proves he is reading still" like "Milton's Platonist" or "Shelley's visionary prince" (A Vision, 59). The

links between the poems are obvious and extensive. For my purposes the relevant passages are Robartes' third speech, in which he comments that of the twenty-eight phases "there's no light at the full or the dark," the full being where "The soul begins to tremble into stillness, / To die into the labyrinth of itself" (60), and his later explication of the progression toward the new moon:

And after that the crumbling of the moon:  
 The soul remembering its loneliness  
 Shudders in many cradles; all is changed.  
 It would be the world's servant, and as it serves,  
 Choosing whatever task's most difficult  
 Among tasks not impossible, it takes  
 Upon the body and upon the soul  
 The coarseness of the drudge.

. . . . .

AHERNE:

And what of those  
 That the last servile crescent has set free?

ROBARTES:

Because all dark, like those that are all light,  
 They are cast beyond the verge, and in a cloud,  
 Crying to one another like the bats;  
 But having no desire they cannot tell  
 What's good or bad . . . (pp. 62-63)

The<sup>final</sup> vision of "I See Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness" is clearly that of "the last servile crescent" as the phases pass into the dark where nothing human lives, where the mechanical birds put out the moon. The inner/outer structure that the title's poles of "Meditation" and "Civil War" engender is taken from this schema, where "Before the full / It [the soul] sought itself and afterwards the world" (62). With "The Phases of the Moon" already in print, it is quite possible Yeats intended "Meditations" to be read against it. But we must do so warily. As I've suggested, "Meditations in Time of Civil War" is not a poem in which Yeats gives us another "example" to fit his schema any more

than the poem unreservedly embraces the role of Platonist-in-the-tower; but rather exposes the system to history (to the road at the door).

Given the poem is something between a single poem and a group of unrelated poems, extra care is required. It seems that the inner/outer, natural/mechanical poles are allowed to stand, and demonstrate their emotional power, in a poem such as "The Road at My Door" if considered as a separate unit. But in the longer, more complex sections that open and close the suite, the polarities are first established and then subjected to interrogation. In the first stanza of "Ancestral Houses," the speaker proposes the overflowing basin (usually an image of fertility with hints of sexual fulfillment in Yeats) and the fountain as symbols for the life of the "rich man." The fountain isn't precisely an organic metaphor, but it does "mount more dizzy high the more it rains," rises in direct relation to nature's fruitfulness. The ancestral house is a natural bounty, and, like the fountain's fluid forms, sustains a way of living which can "choose whatever shape it wills." The ancestral home, then, is posited as a space of radical freedom (the reader is intended to ask whether the tower will serve as such a home) standing in opposition to "a mechanical / Or servile shape, at others' beck and call," an abstraction thus far linked to no historical or social particularity except, again, insofar as the suite's title implies the milieu of civil war.

The poem's second stanza, however, casts this all into doubt with its exasperated initial words:

Mere dreams, mere dreams! Yet Homer had not sung  
 Had he not found it certain beyond dreams  
 That out of life's own self-delight had sprung  
 The abounding glittering jet; though now it seems

As if some marvellous empty sea-shell flung  
 Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams,  
 And not a fountain, were the symbol which  
 Shadows the inherited glory of the rich.

The word "rich" to end the stanza chimes with the poem's first line. It is a term tinged--but only tinged--with deprecation. The opening lines here turn the tables. The idea that this purely willed existence is possible is derided as "Mere dream," but then "Yet" suggests doubt about that proposition, since Homer, Yeats's emblem of the purest voice of a unified era, would not have sung were he not certain that the "abounding glittering jet" (the fountain and his song) rose out of self-delight. Here the inner/outer dichotomy reappears. Not a servile shape, Homer's song, and the lives of ancestral houses, are--it is hoped--the product of "self-delight," the purely inner with no need of external reference. But this proposition too is qualified: that may have been true for Homer, but now it seems that the symbol that "shadows" the "inherited glory of the rich" is not a fountain but a "marvellous empty sea-shell." The implications of this image are not clear, but I would venture that Yeats is to a large extent questioning his belief in the possibility of inheriting wealth that is meaningful, of inheriting the freedom of the self-delighting will. What the rich inherit is the beautiful but empty shell that was created by the creature that willed it into existence. In other words, as the third stanza suggests, "maybe the great-grandson of that house, / For all its bronze and marble's but a mouse."

Daniel Harris's suggestion that "Ancestral Houses" is Yeats's "thorough, and agonized, rejection of the contemporary Anglo-Irish aristocracy" (see Cullingford, "How Jacques Molay Got Up the Tower," 772), is not far-fetched, although it seems more a saddened questioning of aristocracy's limitations.

(For Torchiana, the image implies only that the great houses have been rejected by others [313]). The fourth poem, "My Descendents," seems to confirm this. There Yeats wonders if Ballylee can become an ancestral home. He concludes that it depends on whether or not he can leave behind children "As vigorous of mind" (l. 4); otherwise he prefers that "this laborious stair and this stark tower / Become a roofless ruin" (l. 13-14). This is a distinct possibility given that petals soon give way to leaves' "common greenness," and that there is a "natural declension of the soul." The latter is again a reference to the phases of the moon in A Vision, and reveals Yeats's conviction that his was an era of decline in greatness and rampant democracy, a conviction that made him susceptible to the bogus science he swallows in his conversion to eugenics late in life. He accepted figures "proving" humanity was growing shorter and lighter because "Since about 1900 the better stocks have not been replacing their numbers, while the stupider and less healthy have been more than replacing theirs" (On the Boiler, 18). The new parliament in India doomed a nation that had managed to save its intellect via the caste system (19). Such lunatic flowers were a decade in the future, but their seeds are evident enough in "Meditations in Time of Civil War." Needless to say, the poem, although capable of linking the violence of the founders with the civil war violence, is blind to the former's role in producing the latter.<sup>6</sup> Yeats's love for Coole Park (whose wealth arose from the mercantile profits of the East India Company [McCormack, 394-5]), plays a part in all this, as does the causal link between the decline of the estates and the rise of the Catholic middle class he so frequently castigates.<sup>7</sup>

But "Ancestral Houses," in conjunction with "I See Phantoms of Hatred,"

questions the inner/outer dichotomy in two ways, and in doing so conducts a more thorough critique of Irish society during the period than Yeats is given credit for. First of all, he of course suggests that the ancestral houses were founded by violent, bitter men (a principle he will also apply to his tower), men who constructed the beauty of the estates out of their desire for the antinomy, creating the opposite of their own violence, a "gentleness none there had ever known" (st. 3). In other words the estates have their roots, on a psychological level, in civil war, war between two aspects of their selves. This idea leads to the famous questions in the last stanzas of this opening poem:

O what if gardens where the peacock strays  
 With delicate feet upon old terraces,  
 Or else all Juno from an urn displays  
 Before the indifferent garden deities;  
 O what if levelled lawns and gravelled ways  
 Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease  
 And Childhood a delight for every sense,  
 But take our greatness with our violence? (st. 4)

The accomplishments of the founders are not deprecated entirely, but they are infected with lassitude, with indifferent deities and slippered Contemplation. It is no accident that Yeats robes his lines in Augustan manners. The splendid "Where slippered Contemplation finds his ease" is positively Pope-ish. The ancestral houses were built upon the antinomy, but the antinomy does not survive in their later inhabitants. They put on an empty shell of inherited glory. "The eighteenth-century elegance," as one reader puts it, "renders ambitious plans unnecessary and dries up the fountain" (Whitaker, 172). In the terms of A Vision, they are in the early phases of the moon, turned inward, listing dangerously toward the equally inhuman realm of the full moon, of pure self-delight. It is this that the speaker glimpses in the final poem: the phantoms are not only of

war and the coming emptiness of mechanical birds (the era of pure outwardness, pure servility), but also of the "Heart's Fullness," the purely self-contained, self-delighted, slippered contemplation. This appears in the final poem's third stanza, in the form of the magical unicorns bearing the ladies, figures redolent of the medieval tapestries:

Their legs long, delicate and slender, aquamarine their eyes,  
Magical unicorns bear ladies on their backs.  
The ladies close their musing eyes. No prophecies,  
Remembered out of Babylonian almanacs,  
Have closed the ladies' eyes, their minds are but a pool  
Where even longing drowns under its own excess;  
Nothing but stillness can remain when hearts are full  
Of their own sweetness, bodies of their loveliness.

This is a pure narcissism, the nightmare of infinite self-reference, the dream without "befitting emblems of adversity" "to exalt a lonely mind" that the speaker requires in "My House." The eyes are closed. The "I" is closed.

Ancestral houses are built on bitterness but attain to sweetness. But now they have kept a pure sweetness that becomes cloying, an inwardness where even longing drowns. This is what has happened, it is implied, to the once great Anglo-Irish aristocracy (great in Yeats's eyes). It has locked itself inside its estates, busied itself only with lawns and hedges, with slippered ease. It is threatened by the annihilation of the full moon:

The thirteenth moon but sets the soul at war  
In its own being, and when that war's begun  
There is no muscle in the arm; and after,  
Under the frenzy of the fourteenth moon,  
The soul begins to tremble into stillness,  
To die into the labyrinth of itself! (A Vision, 60)

The country outside, riddled with war, is plunging toward the dark moon. The two elements of Irish culture are "out of phase." The war's values are the values of the

pure outer, the poem suggests, the beck and call of others, a servility. The vision of Ireland in the poem is that of a nation that might have been saved by a confluence of an Ascendency beauty, passion channelled into elegance and sensitivity, and a vital, youthful nation united in its aims. But both sides of the equation are spinning out of control in opposite directions, the middle ground gone. Narcissism and servility reign. The schism that degraded culture in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" cannot be repaired. It is perhaps hinted that this is another meaning of the term "civil war"; not just the battle between pro- and anti-Treatyites, but the battle between the great forces of the objective and the subjective in the psyche, culture, and history.

But despite its interrogation of its own dichotomy, and the speaker's conviction that he has found a place to bypass the deadly alternatives of the fourteenth and twenty-eighth phases, the poem does not abandon its conviction that the life outside, whose representatives in 1922 are soldiers in motley uniforms, is <sup>becoming</sup> a servile one. The war is pure outwardness, the opposite of contemplation and self-delight. The poem not only chooses not to engage in the debate lying behind the war, but refuses to acknowledge that these ideas have anything to do with the war: it is purely sectarian, pure hatred fueled not by the mind but by the absence of any inwardness. However brutal the Irish civil war became, it was not without causes. Yeats's image of servility serves to obliterate any distinction between the Dail and the Republicans, Cosgrave and De Valera. It is not an image that does justice to Ireland's most troubled year. It betrays Yeats's sense that it was the Troubles of 1919-20 that split Ireland into two parts, the parts that still form the structure of "Meditations in Time of Civil War." The virtual irrelevance of the Anglo-Irish Ascendency as a unit in the politics

of the new state or the civil war, was not something Yeats yet understood. That irrelevance is the principal "invisible history" of the poem.

2 Empty Houses: "The Stare's Nest By My Window"

Hide me from day's garish eye,  
While the bee with honed thigh  
That at her flowering work doth sing,  
And the waters murmuring  
With such consort as they keep  
. . . . .  
And as I wake, sweet music breathe . . .

(Milton, "Il Penseroso," ll. 141-45, 151)

Shut in by civil war, seeking a place of quiet and contemplation, the speaker's thoughts throughout turn to images of home. In the lyric "The Stare's Nest By My Window," the war is present in its brutal immediacy and banality, and Yeats's poetry descends from its "high-stepping tread" to find a quiet warmth. In this poem the image for war is clear: the houses are empty and must be repaired and refounded. The last line of "The Road at My Door" and the first line of the final poem are continuous, inhabiting the cold dream. "The Stare's Nest By My Window" is an irruption of sentiment into the system of debate (as were the tender lines on the mother and child in "Easter 1916"). But as in the earlier poem there is a sense of a new facet of a given "moment" emerging. The poet captures the emotion lying in the pause during the strenuous intellectual debates on the decay of ancestral houses, the nightmarish antinomies, and the violence at the heart of aristocratic elegance.

The bees build in the crevices  
Of loosening masonry, and there  
The mother birds bring grubs and flies.  
My wall is loosening; honey-bees,  
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

We are closed in, and the key is turned  
 On our uncertainty; somewhere  
 A man is killed, or a house burned,  
 Yet no clear fact to be discerned:  
 Come build in the empty house of the stare. (st. 1-2)

One notices the continuation of the apparent non-partisanship of the previous poem, "The Road at My Door." The details of the violence are not attributed to either side. In the third stanza, "A man is killed, or a house burned," "That <sup>dead</sup> young soldier [lies] in his blood." The image of enclosure becomes explicit. "We" are closed in, locked inside with our uncertainty. The violence produces no clear fact, only an internal emptiness, a residence in vacancy. The Irish civil war is stripped of its issues and debates. Was it a sort of "betrayal" of republicans already dead to take an oath of allegiance to the British king in the Dail? What of the question of the ports and Royal Navy prerogatives? What of the status of Ulster? The war becomes fundamentally mindless (and as a result is sometimes seen thus by literary critics). There may of course have actually been a stare's nest at the tower, but as Frye says of the Bible, elements which are historically accurate are nevertheless present for other reasons (Great Code, 40). The violence is mindless, purely interior, outside the community, the "we." The shift in pronouns, the brief move into the self-implicatory mode of "Nineteer Hundred and Nineteen," is another way in which the lyric interrupts the prevailing pattern.

The poem utilizes, as many have noticed, an allusion to the riddle of Samson: "Out of the eater came what is eaten, / and out of the strong came what is sweet," to which the answer was, "What is sweeter than honey,

/ and what stronger than a lion?" (Jerusalem Bible, Judges 14).<sup>8</sup> This is both in keeping with Yeats's basic theory of history and of artistic creation--that each era, each attribute, gives rise to its opposite--and looks back to "Ancestral Houses," where bitter and violent men create the opposite of themselves, "the sweetness that all longed for." We should also have in mind the fourth poem, "My Descendants":

And what if my descendants lose the flower  
Through natural declension of the soul,  
Through too much business with the passing hour,  
Through too much play, or marriage with a fool?  
May this laborious stair and this stark tower  
Become a roofless ruin that the owl  
May build in the cracked masonry and cry  
Her desolation to the desolate sky. (st. 2)

In "The Stare's Nest by My Window," the speaker, in a fit of pessimism, feels his wall is already "loosening." In an apostrophe to the honey bees that is almost a prayer, he begs them instead of the owl to build in the cracked masonry that sweetness might come of despair. The plea, erupting out of the detachment of the "cold snows of a dream," is for sweetness, for another re-founding of a house out of bitterness and violence. I wish to stress this interruption of a system of thought, the overwhelming of A Vision, which Yeats was concurrently composing. "The Stare's Nest" utilizes the system of antinomies, the gyre of the subjective spinning toward the antithetical, but the poem, so to speak, does not believe in the system, otherwise the plea were unnecessary and a confident prophecy would take its place. The harsh insistence on driving change forward that fills many late poems with images of the apocalyptic "fierce horsemen" of "Three Songs to the One Burden," an image that blends ominously into images of aristocracy--the "Hard-riding

country gentlemen" and passing rider of "Under Ben Bulbin," the "Horseman erect upon horseback" in "The Wild Old Wicked Man"--and the leitmotif of "the lash" ("Supernatural Songs VIII," "The Great Day," etc.), is here only a gentle yearning for the sweetness and peace brought to Milton's Platonist in Il Penseroso.

In the final stanza of "The Stare's Nest By My Window," I believe we see an early sign of a trend that gathered momentum in Yeats's late poetry: not exactly a demythologizing and rejection of the spiritual and the nationalistic ideal, but a setting of his mythologies in relation to his personal history, as masks for his own lives, relativising them, altering the arena of their truth-claims, tending to cast them into the past tense, to replace them with the sensual claims of "Politics" or "A Drunken Man's Praise of Sobriety" or the Crazy Jane poems. This process is most explicit in poems such as "Beautiful Lofty Things," "The Circus Animal's Desertion," "The Man and the Echo."

We had fed the heart on fantasies,  
The heart's grown brutal from the fan;  
More substance in our enmities  
Than in our love; O honey-bees,  
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

The heart of the Irish has been fed on what turned out to be fantasy, producing more enmity than love, and a heart "grown brutal," lines which look forward to 1931's "Remorse for Intemperate Speech": "Out of Ireland have we come. / Great hatred, little room, / Maimed us at the start. / I carry from my mother's womb / A fanatic heart."

It is unclear to which "fantasies" the speaker is referring, but the communal "we" would suggest they include Yeats's own ambitions for the country. It is hard to avoid the sensation that this represents a final

farewell to his dream of combining romantic and spiritual ideals with nationalism in Ireland, and the beginning of the increasing cynicism and sporadic nastiness on the subject in the late volumes. In October of 1922 he hoped Ireland might learn "charity after mutual contempt. There is no longer a virtuous nation and the best of us live by candle light" (L, 691). On this stanza Thurley comments that it is "something of a shock to be told now that not only had Ireland nourished a tendency to substitute fantasy for reality . . . but that this long history of illusion-making . . . should have brutalized the Irish" (139). It has been ten manic years since "September 1913." The death of "Romantic Ireland," and the advent of those willing to die for "Romantic Ireland" has made the yoking of romance with the national proper name a problematic husbandry. The advents of martyrdom and fanaticism have proven inextricable. Perhaps the mean spirited narrator of many late poems is more comprehensible if we reflect that even more unnerving than the thwarting of one's ideals is the beholding of a nightmarish landscape that bears too many resemblances to one's own utopia.

### 3 Who is Jacques Molay? Referentiality, History, Dream

"O honey-bees," we read, "Come build in the empty house of the stare": and then read "i see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness." The warming lyric plea vanishes. We are cast back into cold dream and the enervating inevitability of the gyres, accompanied by those signatures of the magus-Yeats: "unchangeable," "glittering," "frenzies," "reveries," "monstrous," "images," "vengeance." The shift between sections is so abrupt it is like being reminded, suddenly, that Samson's

riddle was also self-reflexive, that the "sweetness out of strength" query had, from the prototype of strength, a trick ending:

She was so persistent that on the seventh day he told her the answer . . . . So on the seventh day, before Samson entered the bridal room, the men of the town said to him: "What is sweeter than honey, and what is stronger than a lion?" . . . Then the spirit of Yahweh seized on him. He went down to Ashkelan, killed thirty men there, took what they wore and gave the festal robes to those who had answered the riddle. (Jerusalem Bible, Judges 14)

Yeats's plea that sweetness come out of bitterness is followed by a vision of madness and rage, and by a third central image for civil war, the avenging of the murder of Jacques Molay:

Frenzies bewilder, reveries perturb the mind;  
Monstrous familiar images swim to the mind's eye.

"Vengeance upon the murderers," the cry goes up,  
"Vengeance for Jacques Molay." In cloud-pale rags, or in lace,  
The rage-driven, rage-tormented, and rage-hungry troop,  
Trooper belabouring trooper, biting at arm or at face,  
Plunges toward nothing, . . and I, my wits astray  
Because of all that senseless tumult, all but cried  
For vengeance on the murderers of Jacques Molay." (ll. 7-16)

The vision contains no hope. The moon is a thin crescent, "That seems unlike itself, that seems unchangeable" (l. 4), about to be blotted out by the mechanical birds of the final, inhuman phase. As is suggested by "unchangeable," A Vision's implicit promise that this too shall give way to a new era, the birth of the opposite, does not apply here. Again, Yeats utilizes the schema as much to confound expectation as confirm it: even something like belief in the grand cycles of time does not eliminate the darkness of one's own, murderous era, the circumstances of a life, of a mind.

But why Jacques Molay? Answering the question is the same process as determining to what extent the vision of this seventh poem can be said to constitute a commentary on

Ireland's civil war. The reader can ignore neither the apocalyptic nature of the visions, nor that they are seen "in time of civil war," and follow two poems which refer explicitly to that conflict. There is, I believe, no satisfactory way of resolving how we should read the proper name Jacques Molay.

The conflict is first referred to directly in "The Road at My Door," the narrator's closest approach to the "outside," as he meets the soldiers at his door. The brief lyric conveys two principal impressions: an initial lightheartedness, reflecting both the attitudes of the soldiers and some of Yeats's letters from the period, that turns somber in the last stanza; and an apparent neutrality. The war, he implies, is not his battle, and he hopes the combatants will respect his desire to stand apart.

An affable Irregular,  
A heavily-built Falstaffian man,  
Comes cracking jokes of civil war  
As though to die by gunshot were  
The finest play under the sun.

A brown Lieutenant and his men,  
Half dressed in national uniform,  
Stand at my door . . .

Yeats cannot be unaware of his own frequent references to public events as a great drama: these lines foreshadow the self-indictment implicit in "we had fed the heart on fantasies" in "The Stare's Nest by My Window." Here the glory of such drama is double-edged. Is the narrator indeed neutral? The answer is never as clear in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" as it would be a decade later in "Parnell's Funeral": "Had de Valéra eaten Parnell's heart / No loose-lipped demagogue had won the day, / No civil rancour torn the land apart " (ll. 33-35). That is, the Republicans are primarily to blame. In 1922, in an unpublished letter to Lady

Gregory, Yeats declared "both sides are responsible for this whirlpool of hatred."<sup>9</sup> "The Road at My Door" probably shows in fact a slight lean in favour of the National Army. "Falstaffian" skewers the Republican on the theatrical metaphor. As Harold Bloom puts it, these are "laughing men of action who relieve their bitterness in the joy of violence" (354), and Falstaff was a notably unsavory warrior, most willing to provide others as cannon fodder. "Irregular" itself was the label of choice for pro-Government newspapers in preference to "Republican." These elements are perhaps partly balanced by the vaguely uncomplimentary "A brown Lieutenant" and a possible gentle mocking of the Free State in "half dressed in <sup>national</sup> uniform."

It is difficult to judge how Jacques Molay, and his followers dressed in both rags and lace, fit into this equation. The most thorough study of the question is by Elizabeth Cullingford. As Yeats informs us in his note to the poem, Molay was Grand Master of the Knights Templar. He was in fact the last Grand Master, burned at the stake in 1314:

The Templars had been accused of heresy, blasphemy, and sodomy; but legend relates that even amid the flames Molay proclaimed their innocence . . . . The guilt of the Templars has never been clearly established, and they can easily be regarded as the victims of an avaricious monarch, who coveted their enormous wealth, and a weak pope, who feared the threat they posed to orthodox authority.

("How Jacques Molay Got Up the Tower," 763)

Cullingford goes on to note that Templar rites, perhaps Gnostic in origin, probably influenced those of the Masons, and considers it relevant that the word "masonry" appears in "The Stare's Nest by My Window." Perhaps, Yeats's uncle, George Pollexfen, was a Freemason, and mystic societies to which Yeats belonged, such as The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, used quasi-Masonic rituals (766).

In his note, Yeats writes that "A cry for vengeance because of the murder . . . seems to me fit symbol for those who labour from hatred, and so for sterility of various kinds . . . [It] fed class hatred." This strengthens one's sense that Yeats is hereby commenting on the Irish situation. Cullingford observes that the crowd of avengers contains "both paupers and aristocrats": "Traditional class enemies, therefore, are united in the negative emotion of hatred . . . [W]e see that their fury is actually directed, not against the murderers of Jacques de Molay, but against each other: 'Trooper belabouring trooper, biting at arm or at face'" (765). Certainly it is here that the poem is most Dantesque, reminding one particularly of Inferno XXXII, where two traitors, frozen in the ninth circle, gnaw at each others' heads.<sup>10</sup> Cullingford then makes her central point; Molay serves as a substitute for "Pearse":

The story of Jacques de Molay . . . provided Yeats with an exact parallel. In it he found the same explosive confusion of religion with politics, the same heroic martyrdom, and the same horrific quest for revenge, in which the suffering of the original victim becomes irrelevant and the present reality of self-generating violence is all-consuming. (775)

This is in many ways an attractive reading, which does enrich the stanza.

But I believe that the identification of Jacques Molay with Pearse, or with anyone else, presents a conundrum for criticism. If we refuse to read Molay allegorically, refuse to consider the referentiality flagged in the suite's title, we are in danger of rendering the poem generic, of ignoring the implications of a proper name, and of de-historicizing a document which is, I believe, a complex debate about the history of a nation, the history of the mind, and one's access to and/or loyalty toward those poles. Yet if we do render Molay a symbol or euphemism for

Pearse, so that we mentally substitute one for the other, we literally mis-read the poem, since clearly Yeats has his reasons for not using "Pearse" or "Parnell" (another plausible choice), just as he had reasons for using them in other poems. One thing is clear: Yeats attributes the violence in the scene to revenge, and depicts that violence as cannibalistic.

However, Cullingford's suggestion that Molay is a substitute for Pearse does lead us, I believe, in the right direction. We should though, make clear that it is a reading whose logic directs more of Yeats's venom toward the Republicans. If a cry for vengeance against the murder of Molay constitutes a "fit symbol for those who labour from hatred," and Molay is, in the Irish context, Pearse, then the murderers of Jacques Molay are clearly the British. Those who continue to struggle for vengeance against the British are not the Dail under Cosgrave. They have made their peace, however bitter tasting it was. The rage-hungry troop, in this reading, can only represent the anti-Treatyites. This all makes a sort of sense. If Jacques Molay was a Templar, and Yeats had sympathy for Masonic ritual, Molay's murder, like the execution of Pearse and the other leaders of the Rising, would both be events Yeats would be tempted to avenge, as is the narrator: "Because of all that tumult, [I] all but cried / For vengeance on the murderers of Jacques Molay" (ll. 15-16). Thus Yeats resists the urge to succumb to bitterness and take up the Republican cause.

Although I feel this reading is in this sense in keeping with other (slight) hints in the poem that the narrator lays the preponderance of the blame for continuing hatred and violence at the feet of the anti-

Treatyites, and I have little doubt that in a plebiscite Yeats, soon to be a senator, would have voted for partition and the treaty (assuming, like most others, that partition would be temporary), I find that the statements of the preceding paragraphs have a certain precision of political commentary, a baldness, that seems for particular reasons out of keeping with the dialogue in which the suite is engaged. The narrator resists being swept into the sort of exultant mob violence he felt attracted to while accompanying Maud Gonne in the anecdote I cite at the beginning of Chapter Three. Cullingford's reading, if it leads us to take seriously the proper name of Molay, and to speculate that Yeats means these lines to evoke as an image of the civil war a nation drowning in fratricidal bitterness after the death of a mystical or spiritual soul-transforming heroic figure in which it had found its identity, has performed a valuable service. We must try, as best we can, to perform the delicate mental balancing act of allowing Molay to remain Jacques Molay yet simultaneously resonate with similarities to the Irish contexts: Parnell, Pearse, Connolly, the Easter Martyrs as a group, a personified revolution, a personified Ireland.

We should also remember that even the clear assertion that war is a product of revenge does not imply that the avengers are the Republicans: the entire civil war was, structurally, a long string of reprisals on both sides. And of course one need not have been totally neutral to have been appalled by the actions of both parties to the conflict, and to have been distressed by the state of the nation and its prospects for the future.

It must also be recognized that the vision of Part Seven is not in fact a single apparition, but three: one of "Hatred" (stanza two), one of "the Heart's Fullness" (stanza three) and one of "the Coming Emptiness" (stanza four). The effect of these taken together casts a somewhat different light back on Jacques Molay.

The nightmare of the revengers of Jacques Molay represents the translation of the civil war's hatred--pictured in "The Road at My Door" and "The Stare's Nest by My Window"--into the visionary realm, a realm which is not, as A Vision demonstrates, non-historical, but instead pan-historical. The next stanza seems, similarly, a translation of the decayed Ancestral houses of indifferent garden deities and slippered ease onto that plane, but at the opposite end of the plane's lunar cycle: not exteriority or "primary"-ness (to use Yeats's term) that the war signifies, but the nightmare of the full heart, of ease and perfect self-sufficiency. In this vision the "ladies close their musing eyes . . . their minds are but a pool / Where even longing drowns under its own excess" (ll. 19, 21-22). This stanza is further linked to that fourth stanza of "Ancestral Houses" in that Yeats repeats, with variations, the image of the peacock that "strays / With delicate feet upon old terraces" ("Ancestral Houses," ll. 25-26). The magical unicorns bear the ladies on "legs long, delicate and slender," the adjective the stanzas have in common highlighting the comparison. The precise significance intended by Yeats for these delicate, slender legs--certainly a striking image--is obscure to me.

Certainly it occurs elsewhere, in the "long-legged moor-hens" of "Easter 1916," and, most conspicuously, in that mysterious, chilling work, "Long-legged Fly":

Our master Caesar is in the tent  
Where the maps are spread,  
His eyes fixed upon nothing,  
A hand under his head.  
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream  
His mind moves upon silence. (ll. 5-10)

The image may not be unrelated to the slender ankles of fine horses. It seems to suggest the discombobulating fragility of the mind's relationship with the world, or the mind's ability to move over the stream of history, delicately touching, without immersion, the surface of "reality." This remains unclear, but Yeats's desire to link these two stanzas does not.

The women, eyes closed, represent a pure narcissism; the approach to the fourteenth phase, where "The soul begins to tremble into stillness, / To die into the labyrinth of itself!" (A Vision, 60), the phase in which, according to A Vision, all responsibility is lost. It is important to notice that just as the horrors of hatred (the approach to the 28th phase) were cannibalistic, the minds that are but a pool, dreams without emblems of adversity, are also self-consuming, but on an individual level: "even longing drowns."

The final stanza of the vision, which describes neither present war nor narcissism, but "the Coming Emptiness," suggests more clearly than anything in A Vision that the pure antithetical and the pure primary, pure interiority and pure exteriority, pure war and pure contemplation, approach being a single state:

The cloud-pale unicorns, the eyes of aquamarine,  
The quivering half-closed eyelids, the rags of cloud or of lace,  
Or eyes that rage has brightened, arms it has made lean,  
Give place to an indifferent multitude, give place

To brazen hawks. Nor self-delighting reverie,  
 Nor hate of what's to come, nor pity for what's gone,  
 Nothing but grip of claw, and the eye's complacency,  
 The innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon. (ll. 25-32)

Yeats is appalled by violence in "Meditations in Time of Civil War," not by conflict. His nightmare is not, as it may first appear, that the ancestral houses were founded by the same forces that now rage in war, but that the civil war may in fact be different, the presage of an era where sweetness will not make its home in the empty nest of bitterness, an era devoid of conflict's tumultuous but fructifying power: the eye's complacency of mechanical drowse and mechanical slaughter.

The visions of the avengers of Jacques Molay and the dreaming ladies are not prophecy but a Yeatsian kind of history, an analysis of the history-of-personality or anima mundi principles underlying current trends manifesting themselves in Irish culture in the forms of civil war and the decline of an aristocracy now lacking the conflicts of its founding. The fury of the avengers is, however, directed increasingly not at their enemies, the murderers of "Jacques Molay," but at themselves, becoming a horrific parody of the self-sufficiency of pure Contemplation and fulfilled desire. Yeats's depiction of the political struggle of 1922-23 involves the suggestion that it is losing its humanizing conflict. Yeats's civil war is not portrayed as a site of vital conflict in part, it must be admitted, because he doesn't take the issues of the war seriously, or at least he does not do so in his poetry. His version of Ireland's historical moment in the final section necessitates the suppression of that aspect of history, much as

Jane Austen, for example, renders visible "ethical discourse, rhetoric of character, ritual of friendship," by excluding Eagleton-ian historical materialism" (Criticism and Ideology, 71).

Denis Donoghue has written that Yeats "feared peace because he feared inertia." He does not "mean that he was a propagandist for murder or that he condoned the Civil War; but he was afraid his poetry would stop if conflict stopped within himself" (We Irish, 188). And, I must add, afraid the poetry of Irishness would stop if Ireland's conflict ceased. So it is that in "Meditations in Time of Civil War" Yeats can deplore murder, the physical soldier slain in his blood, but deplore it as part of the loss of genuine "spiritual" conflict. The poem encapsulates the artistic unease in the fact of an actual war in a poet who increasingly viewed any threat to civil order as the ultimate treason,<sup>12</sup> and who was equally horrified by the eye's complacency; who could write in 1933 that "the chance of being shot is raising everybody's spirits enormously" (l. 812). The sectarian use of pikes and swords is actually, for Yeats, symptomatic of a lack of essential conflict. The issues of the civil war--partition, the oath, Irish ports, and so on--are the invisible history of "Meditations in Time of Civil War," just as the deaths of those other than the executed leaders was the invisible history of "Easter 1916."

## II

## Conclusions: The Narrative Locus; Yeats in the Tower

"To be preoccupied with public conduct is to be pre-occupied with the ideas and emotions which the average man understands . . . and out of the ideas and emotions of the average man you can make no better thing than . . . rhetoric."

--Yeats, UP, II: 34

"The land sustaining us seemed to hold firm only when we embraced in in extremis. All I can believe that happened there was vision."

--Seamus Heaney, "The Disappearing Island"  
(from The Haw Lantern)

The vision fled, the narrator turns away as he has earlier, shuts the door, and returns to the staircase, wondering

. . . how many times I could have proved my worth  
In something that all others understand or share;  
But O! ambitious heart, had such a proof drawn forth  
A company of friends, a conscience set at ease,  
It had but made us pine the more. The abstract joy.  
The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,  
Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy. (II. 34-40)

Given that Yeats was working on A Vision with great excitement during this period, we should be careful not to read the retreat into those "half-read images" as necessarily defeatist in tone. "Suffice" is, like so much else in the poem, tantalizingly poised on the border between fullness and poverty. The poem's ending tilts from mildly positive to mildly negative, from meaning "satisfying" to meaning "circumscribed," from one reading to the next. In this tentative manner, the poem is an assertion of freedom as set against the entanglement of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen": there is space for individual contemplation. But the narrator is free within limits; he is enclosed. Enclosure is, I would argue, one of the common "topographies" of poems written in a context of

violence and social disintegration.

This is not the place for a full scale foray into the astoundingly rich body of poetry produced in the past twenty years in Northern Ireland --a community with about half the population of greater Montreal--by Seamus Heaney, John Montague, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley, Medbh McGuckian, Paul Muldoon, Tom Paulin . . . But an example or two might be illuminating. Seamus Heaney is, as I have suggested earlier, similar to Yeats in that he derives a good deal of the tension in his poetry from the way in which he both insists that poetry not become "a diagram of political attitudes" (Preoccupations, 219) and also deals frequently and brilliantly with the impact and roots of violence in Ulster. The archetypal Heaney poem, vis à vis political issues, is perhaps the Glanmore sonnet sequence in Field Work: the poet moves away to escape the violence and bitterness, feels a sense of having betrayed his roots and his muse, but also realizes that he cannot, after all, escape Ulster no matter where he goes. His dominant political/poetic topography is entanglement. Because Heaney is also unlike Yeats in that, normally, he feels no sense of being able to choose his poetic locus, his position in society, community, violence, the Yeats of "Easter 1916" is most foreign to him. The mode of something like what I have called enclosure is becoming, I suspect, more a part of Heaney's work. The allegories of his 1987 volume The Haw Lantern, so unlike his previous poetry, work constantly with the figure of the island, a small space with the virtues of density and boundedness, the failing of suffocation, imprisonment. On the other hand, in an awkward but telling poem, James Simmons, a member of the "Protestant," i.e., non-Republican community (when it is possible to write of the North without using sure-to-offend-

someone categorizations, the Trables will be over), writing in the late 1960s, describes meeting a crazed, incomprehensible fellow in the lavatory. Closed in with him, claustrophobic, the narrator's attempt to be understanding sounds, now, intolerably condescending: "'Fighting solves nothing. Tell me how I've annoyed you,' / I said . . . I backed over cold stone in / a room that contained and joined us" ("Experience," Poems 1956-1986, 43). The narrator is clearly in a position to redress grievances, is of the empowered class. But what can one do trapped in a small room with someone who won't tell you what he wants? Stormont, of course, wasn't terribly good at listening.

In "Meditations in Time of Civil War," the poet lives in a landscape populated by soldiers symbolizing a social chaos that had elements of both the comic and the grotesque, a chaos representing a mechanical slavery to the opinions of others. For Yeats, revolution becomes a form of servitude rather than of liberation (a position simplistic but hardly absurd). But within this landscape the tower is a refuge. It is a space of freedom, a depoliticized realm which, however limited, harbours meditation. Part of the problem is not how to avoid getting blown up, but how to avoid the threat of war's opposite, the lethargic complacency of inwardness, the self-reflecting pool of closed eyes. The nature of the refuge is a product of this need.

I believe that a major role of the second poem, "My House," is to distinguish the tower from the subject of "Ancestral Houses," i.e., my house, the house of this meditation, is not an ancestral house. This is not a poem apt to arise even from Coole, much less from the decayed, complacent estate of "levelled lawns and gravelled ways." The tower has only a

discontinuous heritage: "Two men have founded here" (l. 21). Yeats has re-founded a home here, feeling kinship with the violent man who felt cast away "through long wars and sudden night alarms," so that after him his heirs might find "To exalt a lonely mind, / Befitting emblems of adversity." The implication is that the narrator has likewise a lonely mind, has likewise found in the tower such "befitting emblems." As in "Ancestral Houses," the founding has been fruitful. It has produced the "sweetness that all longed for" out of violence and bitterness. The narrator is in part the honey bee at the stare's blank nest, in the nation's warring cipher of a homeland. Passion's decay into "slippered Contemplation" and toward the nightmare of lassitude may be inevitable, but it lies in the tower's future, not in the present of its founding. The pure antithetical is not extant at the foundation, where opposites mingle.

The tower is the Platonist's tower. Yeats installs himself, via allusion, in the line of Milton and Wordsworth. This might suggest the world contemplated from within the tower is reality, and the outer but a poor copy of the eternal forms. The poem's intimacy with A Vision strengthens that impression, until we remember what an unclassifiable treatise on both personality and history it is, and that its agents continually warned Yeats against abstraction. The "dream" of the final vision in the poem, after all, contains the historical proper name of Molav! In A Vision the historical categorizing, with dates and names, is not a filling of ghostly paradigms: the examples have equal ontological status with the phases. The phases are not real without them. Similarly, "Meditations in Time of Civil War" contains the world outside the door, referring to uniforms and dead soldiers and bad weather, and confounds

A Vision by giving voice to the hope of "A Stare's Nest by My Window" that the empty, mechanical phase not come, and to the despair that immediately follows it, a conjunction incongruous in a cyclical historiography.

The road comes to his door, the soldiers knock, "reminding Yeats of the active man he might have been," as one critic writes (Unterecker, 180). Yes, but that particular mask reminds us of what an active man he in fact was, making the poem a debate between Yeats's warring halves as well as Ireland's. In "My House," we also see Yeats's sense of being a castaway in a world where poetry is growing more and more peripheral. This too is the unease of all poetic Romanticisms.<sup>13</sup> The narrative digression of "The Stare's Nest," the lyric product of having gone to the door, temporarily removes the tower's wall, readmitting the narrator into the first person plural. "We are closed in" is initially principally in reference to Yeats's family, but in the following stanzas this "we" expands to imply the Irish people, all trapped in their uncertainty. The narrator seems to admit his own role in the "feeding upon fantasies" that he feels to have caused the turmoil. This is an implicit admission of Romantic nationalism's failure, the failure to fuse the spiritual (or aesthetic) and political realms. But unlike "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," this admission does not seem to be the poem's conclusion in regard to this issue, but only one of its stopping places.

The poet has chosen his location, and this involves staking his loyalty within enclosure, within his tower but also in the diminished realm of actual Free State rather than ideal Ireland. The tower (and, I think, the nation) is fit home for the imagination because it contains within it the necessary, Yeatsian, emblems of adversity. It is not the realm of

Ancestral Houses: that dream, "a world (writes Archibald on stanza one) of privileged enclosure, spatial and auditory . . . self-defining and sustaining fountain" (128), eventually turns into slippered contemplation. Yeats's view of that space is here--and only here!--remarkably like that of novelist Elizabeth Bowen in the 1940s: "Each of these family houses, with its stable . . . and gardens . . . at the end of long avenues, is an island--and, like an island, a womb . . . . Each of these houses, within its intense, centripetal life, is isolated by something . . . more lasting than the physical fact of space: the isolation is innate; it is an affair of origin."<sup>14</sup>

My outer nature was passive . . . but I knew my  
spiritual nature was passionate, even violent. (Memoirs, 124)

The tower, an exposed battlement with cottages, is neither landed estate nor "road," neither interiority nor exteriority. As "My House" implies, a richness of thought seems possible there, where no long avenue of trees keeps soldiers from the door, that a greater degree of separation could not achieve. I believe Seamus Heaney exaggerates the extent to which Yeats "emphasized and realized the otherness of art from life . . . and moved within his mode of vision as within some . . . bullet-proof glass of the spirit" (*Preoccupations*, 99), although Yeats would, in certain moods, applaud. But that is not the poet of "The Stare's Nest by My Window." Rather, as Whitaker has phrased it, "The breaking of protective walls . . . had long been known to Yeats as a prerequisite of poetic vision" (179). I believe this included the wall between poetry and that which threatened poetry. The topography of "Meditations in Time of Civil War" involves a movement from meditation, out to the war at the downstairs door, then to meditation about the war on the upper battlements. The inner meditation is given its

subject matter at the door, and thus avoids the pool of closed eyes. Or, the poem moves from meditation, to the context of meditation, to meditation upon context, a meditation from the privileged upper position. The tower is enclosed, but has a vertical dimension, the location of Yeatsian visionary history. The text, unlike history, is radically open, because a text is nothing without the world as a ground of reference. The text is the point from which one looks outward. The tower is not isolated from the civil war, but party to it: the locus of the narrator is at the door, on the battlement, and yes, sometimes in the chamber, moving to and from the border between meditation and the public sphere, between what this poem calls freedom and servitude:

Many times man lives and dies  
Between his two eternities,  
That of race and that of soul  
.....  
Though grave-diggers' toil is long,  
Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,  
They but thrust their buried men  
Back in the human mind again. ("Under Ben Bulben," part 2)

"Meditations" does of course conclude with another "retreat" to the laborious stair of thought. At this point, at least, the persona feels his place is with the "abstract joy" that sufficed in his youth--weariness is the mood of the conclusion. By coincidence or not, it is Yeats's last historically specific political poem of any stature. The late works he does attempt in the mode, "A Full Moon in March," "Parnell's Funeral," "Three Songs to the One Burden," "The Statues," the Roger Casement poems, the squibs on the futility of revolution such as "The Great Day," the wildly uneven "Under Ben Bulben" (influenced by the eugenics of "On the Boiler"), are, with the partial exceptions of "The Statues" and the occasional line or phrase elsewhere, curios, which, for the first time in his career, tell

us about Yeats without telling us anything about the intellectual or emotional history of Ireland.<sup>15</sup> Do such weak poems diminish the achievement of a great poet who was, occasionally, a great political poet? Yes, a little. Their weakness illustrates, I think, that the fertile and troublesome combination of Romanticism and Nationalism within the crucible of history was no longer a central component of his imagination. His internal debate on the relationship between poetry and the political, his desire both to speak as all men speak and yet be above the crass multitudes, and his never resolved desires both for the conflict of the antinomies and for social peace, provided him during the decade of Ireland's founding as a political entity a mode through which to write about political turmoil and the struggle for national identity, and the struggle between Romantic essentialism and the practical politics of the time. In the stultifying atmosphere of the economically depressed and cleric dominated post-colonial Free State, the Ireland of Yeats's mind was too distant to operate as part of a creative tension. Writes Seamus Deane, after 1922 "the society itself made the discrepancy between mythological grandeurs and quotidian pettiness so severe it became impossible to incorporate them . . . in fiction" (A Short History, 202).

This study's view of Yeats might be described as Deane and Ellmann combining with Bloom. Ellmann's insight that Yeats, as "a revolutionary who puts spiritual ennoblement above political or economic gains," finds himself, "in later life, on the side of the Tories" (Yeats: The Man and the Masks, 179), and Deane's that to Yeats Ireland should retain its culture by keeping awake its consciousness of metaphysical qualities, that "to be traditionalist in the modern world was to be revolutionary" (Celtic

(Revivals, 49), that he was, in short, a conservative revolutionary, are acute, but do not explain why for Yeats the Rising, and Pearse and Connolly's martyrdom, was profoundly troublesome as well as uplifting. As a Romantic poet in origin, a youth in the aesthetic 90s, a lover of Spenser and Shelley, he never discarded the idea that artistic isolation was essential to his work, and that the public (i.e, especially the demonized middle class) was a source of pollution for the overman. Thus the martyrs, stones in the midst of all and ritual sacrifices for the people, yet elevators of the Irish soul, scandalously combine high and low culture. It is not surprising that Yeats had a very ambiguous attitude toward Jesus Christ.

Yeats ends "Meditations in Time of Civil War" with his retreat from the prophecy of coming emptiness, a sense of his mortality, and an insistence that abstract joys and half-read demonic images will suffice. After looking outward twice he will, in the presence of emblems of adversity, return to meditation. But while giving voice to these feelings, Yeats then goes on to place the poem before "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" in The Tower. He is an unorthodox Platonist indeed. The poem enacts a different sort of poetic than it professes in those final lines, a poetic not of escape from the outer through a vertical dimension which must "suffice," but of the process (down and outward, up and outward again to vision) through which that "escape" might be achieved. As George Steiner contends, "the political message or critique . . . can be abstracted [from] . . . the formal aspects, metrical, documentary, dramatic, of the given text. It is just such instances which, however, fail to enact the compelling and enduring poetic of the political" (547). The poem depicts not contemplation of the abstract joy, but the difficult, encircled struggle toward it. The poem displays a motley of modes--an autobiographical encounter

with historically particular soldiers, an expression of the desire for public life, apocalyptic vision, the nature-rooted lyric--which together show the narrator on the border, facing Janus-like in two directions. He may profess the sufficiency of dream vision, but the poem nevertheless describes soldiers and uniforms and atrocities, and it lightly mocks the specific political groups involved, utilizes allegory to hint at blaming Republicans for the bitterness, pleads with the honey bee, observes the natural world beyond his doorway. The poem's narrative structure sums up a conflict at the core of Yeats's political verse: the profession of the necessity of Romantic contemplation, sensitivity, and the separateness of art; continually undermined by both his own actions outside poetry and by his poetry's historicizing and nationalizing of aesthetics and philosophy. Not only does the poet go to the door to greet the soldiers, he writes a poem about it. The hardly abstract images of the quotidian, of fourteen days of civil war, of the cracked masonry and the honey-bee, are not erased but included in his canon of "meditations." At the end of the poem he tells us that abstract joy will suffice the aging man, that he turns inward, like a Wordsworth disillusioned by the French Revolution turning to The Prelude. But the next words, in the Collected Poems, are "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," a date . . .

Abstraction does not suffice. History refuses to remain in the mind, and the mind refuses to stay out of history. The horse comes from the road, and the hoof splashes. The poet, like the ancestral house, must be re-founded time and again, in adversity, in those powers greater than the will or the craft. The poetic of Yeats finds its genius in that it can never believe

poetry to be self-contained and self-fulfilling. In Yeats's poetic, poetry is not the greatest good.

## Notes to Chapter One

<sup>1</sup> I was alerted to this dictum from Hegel's The Philosophy of History by Hayden White's essay "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> As Seamus Deane delineates this relationship, "After O'Grady, there was the revival. Or, more accurately, there were two revivals, one literary and one political. They managed to stay distinct, without ever ceasing to be intimate. One kept appearing in the guise of the other" (A Short History of Irish Literature, p. 86). I do not believe they could be said to be "distinct" at all points, as such institutions as the Gaelic League, founded in 1893, made evident.

<sup>3</sup> Or, in the words of Richard Ellmann, "Throughout his life he read personal problems into national ones, and national ones into personal" (Yeats: The Man and the Mask, p. 288).

<sup>4</sup> Of the latter two poems, Geoffrey Thurley asserts, "The two great poem-sequences of the early twenties . . . attain a sustained intensity which Yeats was never again to equal" (p. 145).

<sup>5</sup> That is, in the controversial opinion of Richard Finneran. I have not the expertise to mediate such a dispute, though Finneran's decision to use this ordering in his text of Yeats's poems seems to me regrettable. All that may be safely said is that Yeats never stopped revising his poems or their ordering. Thus, since death catches us all improperly prepared, no definitive intention of "Yeats" can be said to exist. No doubt at certain times, in moods typical of his later life, "Politics" is the

sort of poem Yeats would have defiantly placed to serve as his final full stop. See Finneran, Editing Yeats's Poems, pp. 64-66. Ronsley disagrees, and notes that Senator Michael Yeats, the poet's son, "has assured me . . . that the alteration, placing 'Under Ben Bulbin' at the end, was already set out by the poet himself before his death." See "Yeats as an Autobiographical Poet," p. 147 n. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Yeats, aged 24, was writing in reference to 'Cúisín,' in a letter to Katherine Tynan, 6 Feb. 1889 (Letters, 111).

<sup>7</sup> When reading Brown's The Politics of Irish Literature, one must remember that he believes Yeats to have been "really" a fascist, who, when he was not expressing fascist views, was conspiring to deceive. Like all conspiracy theories, this leads to a good deal of dubious presumptions of guilt, and is impossible to disprove since any evidence against it is merely another sign of the conspiracy's clever machinations.

<sup>8</sup> Cited by Clark, p. 134, from Explorations.

<sup>9</sup> Hone adds, Yeats "had long dreaded a revival of revolutionary action in Ireland, in which Maud Gonne might risk her life" (146). It is possible to interpret Yeats's actions as an attempt to please Maud without completely sacrificing his own integrity.

<sup>10</sup> This citation from Endymion is taken from the text given in Jack Stillinger's edition of the complete poems.

<sup>11</sup> Cited by Hass, p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Cited by William Barnwell. p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> Cullingford goes on to say, in her fair minded if at times apologetic manner, "Here is the germ of Yeats's poetic denigration of the merchant and the clerk, who 'breathed on the world with timid breath.' His dislike of the middle class has been stigmatized as snobbery, but it began as a revolutionary condemnation of cowardice and materialism, and it stemmed from the doctrines of Tone and O'Leary" (p. 5).

<sup>14</sup> The date of this statement (1897) should make us wary of ascribing increasing aristocratic tendencies to Yeats's old age.

<sup>16</sup> In Less Than One, Brodsky writes, "An organic entity, society generates the forms of its organization the way trees generate their distance from one another, and a passerby calls that a 'forest.' The concept of power, alias state control over the social fabric, is a contradiction in terms and reveals a wood cutter" (p. 86).

<sup>17</sup> For Bloom's appraisal, see his Yeats. For example, he writes that "so much of Responsibilities is abortive work that the events of 1916-17 seem more and more fortunate, whenever the interrelation between Yeats's life and poetry is considered" (p. 172).

<sup>18</sup> "Meditations" was written in 1923, "Sailing to Byzantium" in 1927, but I mean the statement thematically rather than chronologically; i.e., "Meditations in Time of Civil War" is set by Yeats within the thematic context of the later poem.

<sup>19</sup> I cannot testify to the accuracy of the paraphrase, being ignorant of Donoghue's source.

<sup>19a</sup> See, especially, Miller's The Linguistic Moment: From Wordsworth to Stevens. I will have occasion later to argue with the assumptions of this volume, which I consider (given Miller's reputation) perhaps the most unfortunate travesty of a massive body of superb poetry I have ever encountered. Suffice to say at this point that despite Miller's rather clichéd theoretical gestures toward deconstruction ("Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"'s "structure incorporates also a non-place . . . a place that is both there and not there . . . a certain crossroads to which all roads lead and yet can be reached by no road," p. 316), I consider the readings to be profoundly reductive and normative. (Miller will, of course, after assorted repetitions concerning language's and poetry's indeterminacy, precisely define this crossroad for us, citing text as support.) The book might serve as a case study in how the clumsy application of the tools and terminology of Derrida's invaluable deconstruction of phenomenology and Foucault's radical questioning of social structures can be not so much disastrous as sterile.

<sup>20</sup> See Cullingford's discussion: "At the centre of discussion about Yeats's attitude to apocalypse, to bloodshed, and indeed to fascism, stands the poem 'The Second Coming.' Was Yeats horrified or delighted by the advent of the rough beast? The notes on the poem and the poem's place within the structure of A Vision suggest that he ought to have been delighted, since the beast is herald of the new, antithetical dispensation. Indeed, Yeats quotes the poem in A Vision as an illustration of his theories . . . Yeats's prose gloss may appear to bear out a critic like Ivor Winters, who observes that 'we may find the beast terrifying, but

Yeats finds him satisfying . . . Yeats approves of this kind of brutality.' Yet the poem itself conveys not satisfaction but horror . . . In the poem's ambiguous balance of terror and fascination, terror seems uppermost" (161-62). Cullingford also notes the condemnation by Frank Kermode (160). Hassett also cites Winters and disagrees with his assessment (142). Harold Bloom writes of the poem, "The greatest terror to come . . . may frighten the poet as it does us, but what I hear in the poem is exultation on the speaker's part as he beholds his vision, and this exultation is not only an intellectual one" (Yeats, 321).

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Harper's, January 1988 (Vol. 271, No. 1652), p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Cited by Cullingford from an 1899 article, "Trinity College and the Literary Theatre" (41).

<sup>22a</sup> This poem, astonishingly, does not appear in Finneran's edition.

<sup>23</sup> Seamus Deane notes in Celtic Revivals that the cult of violence and war as ritual, cleansing things was widespread before World War One, and that this cult was largely destroyed, in England, at the Somme in 1916 (63).

<sup>24</sup> Quoted by Deane, Celtic Revivals, 68.

<sup>25</sup> Cullingford suggests that the poem may bear the imprint of Maud Gonne's dissatisfaction with "Easter 1916"'s ambiguities, and her "fierce rejoicing," as well as the mark of the conscription crisis and of the execution of Roger Casement (probably the sixteenth dead man in "Sixteen Dead Men"). These events may have "helped to harden Yeats's antagonism toward England, and perhaps to evoke that traditional celebration of blood sacrifice, 'The Rose Tree'" (97). These seem to be possible influences

though I would again stress that there was sufficient attraction to blood sacrifice within Yeats to render them less than essential causes.

<sup>26</sup> So called by Richard Loftus in his Nationalism in Modern Anglo-Irish Literature: "The stylized figures of Pearse and Connolly are certainly meant to represent acolytes. They are no longer political leaders but consecrated priests performing a mystical ritual, that of exorcizing the Sacred Rose Tree of the Irish race and nation with a lustral liquid--in this instance their own blood" (82-83). Yeats's use of the rose tree as emblem does inevitably call up such or similar figures, although I distrust the specific details in Loftus's analysis--not as incorrect, but as unverifiable.

<sup>27</sup> From Cathaoir O'Braonain, et. al., Poets of the Insurrection, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> O'Braonain, p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Cullingford, p. 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, pp. 278, 317. Ellmann refers to the phrase as "a remark [Yeats] . . . made somewhat at random" in an "unpublished note among mss. of first edition of A Vision."

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Ellmann in Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 278, from an unpublished letter to Ethel Mannin in April, 1936.

<sup>32</sup> Cited by Costello, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Otto Bohlmann's Yeats and Nietzsche, p. 26

<sup>34</sup> I have speculated in an unpublished paper on Elizabethan meta-drama, that a similar structure informs plays such as The Malcontent by John Marston, and Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy, with their nesting spheres of plays-within-plays; "reality" is found at the extreme margin and at the core, usually in a tableau at the centre of the innermost play. The connection between such a trope and the thought of Derrida might prove an interesting subject for inquiry.

<sup>35</sup> Quasi-Jungian, although Yeats seems to have inherited the term from elsewhere: "He knew this universal, or mythic memory most specifically as the Anima Mundi, described by the seventeenth-century neoplatonic philosopher Henry More . . . . Yeats conceives of the Anima Mundi as the corporate imagination which includes all individual imaginations and hence all things and ideas" (Ronsley, Yeats's Autobiography, 76).

<sup>36</sup> Elaine Scarry, "Injury and the Structure of War," Representations, No. 10 (1985), p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Cullingford, p. 31.

Notes to Chapter Two

<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Gerald Graffe, Professing Literature, 229.

<sup>2</sup> As listed in A New History of Ireland, Vol. 8, p. 390.

<sup>3</sup> A New History lists 450 dead (8. 390), Costello 600 (87).

<sup>3a</sup> I am partially anticipated in this by C. K. Stead (35-36), although Stead focuses only on the genre of the poem itself.

<sup>4</sup> Reprinted in McHugh, Dublin 1916, 51ff.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the discussion in Stallybrass and White, pp. 27-43. It seems, from my non-expert perspective, that the festivals were not constituted by the authorities, but that the authorities of course tried to control them, and when they could not, banned them.

<sup>6</sup> On May 23, 1916, he wrote to John Quinn from London; on June 13 he wrote to Robert Bridges that he had "just returned from Dublin" (L, 614).

<sup>7</sup> Letters, 614. This mood is also no doubt behind the purchase of Thoor Ballylee, which he finalized that autumn.

<sup>8</sup> See William Barnwell, "Utopias and the New Ill-Breeding," pp. 55-56.

<sup>9</sup> This is one of many instances in which Jeffares in his Commentary gives autobiographical data as if he were thereby glossing the text of the poem.

<sup>10</sup> Keane, "Revolutions French and Russian: Burke, Wordsworth, and the Genesis of Yeats's 'The Second Coming'." Generality, I will argue (with many others), does not "liberate" a poem. Like similar articles on

"The Second Coming," Keane's piece is of two minds. As master of the manuscript-plundering school which says an item is significant because it is included unless on the other hand it is telling because it was left out, Keane wishes to deepen our reading of the poem by revealing specific historical referents "behind" it, while simultaneously insisting Yeats strove for "a deliberate indefiniteness and vagueness" (51). Keane argues that the absent details somehow strengthen the poem: "But while the limiting, localized details may, quite properly, have dropped away, the characteristic Yeatsian rooting of mythology in the specific contributed substantially to the extraordinary power of the poem . . . one feels that, however transformed in the alembic of Yeats's own imagination, the spirit, and the politics, of Burke have survived virtually intact" (27). To say that Burke's politics have survived intact in the poem seems absurd. This is scholarship of a peculiarly self-indulgent sort, for if we accept Keane's argument, we must also conclude that Yeats's intentions have simultaneously been thwarted. Keane refuses to read the poem Yeats wrote.

But we might well ask why "The Second Coming" does affect us so strongly, more strongly, I believe, than many better poems. I would suggest that this is because of the history that follows the poem, the apocalypses of WW II, the Holocaust, Stalin's purged millions, Mao's Cultural Revolutionary slaughters, the murderous Khmer Rouge cadets, and especially the hovering possibility of nuclear annihilation. The poem's lack of historical referents might someday--with more luck than I'm able to believe in--make it seem a somewhat melodramatic artifact, dated and vague. It fits the consciousness of its century, as it would not that of Victorian England. It is, unfortunately, prophetic, not historical.

11

White here is summarizing as well the views of Paul Ricoeur.

12

Cited from Yeats's Diary in Ronsley, Yeats's Autobiography, p. 10.

13

See Richard Ellmann's Oscar Wilde: "As for Yeats himself, he wrote later, 'I have never doubted, even for an instant, that he made the right decision, and that he owes to that decision half his renown'" (442-3). Ellmann certainly admires Yeats (and his father) for supporting Wilde when most were busily abandoning him, but he does insert a modulating note: "Others were keener than Yeats and Willie to save him from prison, however it might spoil the drama" (442). One must remember though, that Yeats did not merely spout rhetoric; he went to see Wilde, bringing letters of support he had gathered, at a time when this was an act of considerable courage. It was not only one of Wilde's finest hours.

14

Cited in Douglas Archibald, Yeats, p. 54.

15

Geoffrey Thurley writes of Yeats's political poetry in a way that perhaps hints at the direction I pursue here: "Thus, the 'political' poetry he wrote takes the theme of Irish emancipation, but subjects it to a process of mediation from which it emerges transformed into something else--that congress of themes associated with dream and obsession" (The Turbulent Dream: Passion and Politics in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats, p. 37).

16

See Carmel Jordan, A Terrible Beauty, p. 108. The poem suggests that the sentiment of the narrator in stanza one may have been a common one.

17

From The Collected Poems, 1909-62, 11. 1-10.

18

Cf. Harold Toliver's book, The Past that Poets Make, where he comments that from a sociological perspective, literature is a digression from the flow of affairs. Writers must clear a space, put other duties aside: "literature is to other social messages as a digression or paren-

thetical statement is to a given line of statements" (19). In "Easter 1916," which is integrated with unusual efficiency into history, we nevertheless have this integration depicted in the poem, in the colons near the end of stanza one as a lead-in to stanza two.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Hayden White in "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> My attention was drawn to this quotation by Ronsley in Yeats's Autobiography, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> See also Yeats's Autobiography: "Elaborate modern psychology sounds egotistical, I thought, when it speaks in the first person, but not those simple emotions which resemble the more, the more powerful they are, everybody's emotion, and I was soon to write many poems where an always personal emotion was woven into a general pattern of myth and symbol" (101-2).

<sup>22</sup> There is a fine summary of these events by F.X. Martin, O.S.A., in his essay "The Origins of the Irish Rising of 1916," in Desmond Williams, ed., The Irish Struggle: 1916-1926, pp. 2-17.

<sup>23</sup> Of course we can still not be certain, even to the extent that it is impossible to be sure if the Rising alone led to the Sinn Fein electoral landslide of 1918: "It was obvious from the general election of 1918 that it was the execution of the 1916 leaders, and more particularly the threat of national conscription in 1918, which had caused a revulsion of popular feeling." F.X. Martin, in Williams, The Irish Struggle, p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> The term is Terry Eagleton's, although he uses it to refer to a different aspect of the poem's oxymoronic nature, an aspect I feel he overstates: "The oxymoronic double-vision of 'Easter 1916' reveals well enough

Yeats's difficulties in trying to reconcile the Romantic heroism of the uprising with the despised ideology and social class of its leaders" (Criticism and Ideology, 152).

<sup>25</sup> Carmel Jordan and Raymond Porter suggest Pearse's play An Ri, produced with Yeats's encouragement at the Abbey in 1913, as another likely source. The hero, Ciolla na Naomh, goes to die for Ireland in answer to the "terrible, beautiful voice that comes out of the heart of battle," a phrase repeated throughout the play. See Jordan, A Terrible Beauty, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> Cited by Clark in "Yeats, Theatre, and Nationalism," p. 155.

<sup>27</sup> See Desmond Wilson, The Irish Struggle, 1916-1926, pp. 11-12.

<sup>28</sup> Eagleton comments in Criticism and Ideology, "The oxymoronic double-vision of 'Easter 1916' reveals well enough Yeats's difficulties in trying to reconcile . . . the despised ideology and social class of its leaders" (p. 152).

<sup>29</sup> See McHugh's Dublin 1916, pp. xi-xiii.

<sup>30</sup> " . . . by nature he was anything but violent. He abhorred violence and turned to armed rebellion only as a last resort" (Jordan, 63).

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Jeffares in his Commentary on "A Prayer for My Daughter."

<sup>32</sup> Longley is interviewed by Dillon Johnson in the Irish Literary Supplement, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1986), p. 20.

<sup>33</sup> Dillon Johnson, p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> Peter Costello implies that Yeats's line have as partial source Pearse's poem running "I kissed thy lips / O sweetness of sweetness /

And I hardened my heart / For fear of my ruin" (104). There are more immediate parallels in Yeats's own work, but the conjunction of hardened heart and the repudiation of sweetness ("What voice more sweet than hers") makes this at least a remarkable coincidence. This link is also relevant in reading "The Stare's Nest By My Window" in "Meditations in Time of Civil War."

<sup>35</sup> As paraphrased by Terry Eagleton in "Marxism and the Past," p. 277.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Harold Bloom on Michael Robartes and the Dancer: "The volume's unifying theme is hatred, political and sexual, hatred being a passion that Yeats, like his persona Ribh . . . studied with a great diligence, but also with a certain saving wariness" (Yeats, 313).

<sup>37</sup> Heraclitus, Fragments 41, 42, trans. John Burnet, in The Greek Portable Reader, ed. W. H. Auden (New York: Viking, 1948).

<sup>38</sup> See my McGill University M.A. Thesis (1985), "Humean Scepticism and the Stability of Identity in Joyce's Ulysses."

<sup>39</sup> Cited by Jordan (96-97) from The 1916 Poets, ed. Desmond Ryan.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Galan, Historical Structures, introduction.

<sup>40a</sup> Cullingford suggests that Yeats is remembering Shelley's Poet, whose heart "was sickened with excess of love" ("Yeats and Women," 38).

<sup>41</sup> Anyone who does not find this term appropriate might turn to the report by Samuel Dash, an American lawyer, Justice Denied: A Challenge to Lord Widgery's Report on "Bloody Sunday", New York: Defence and Education Fund of the International League for the Rights of Man, 1973.

<sup>42</sup> As Conor Cruise O'Brien writes, "To publish these poems in this context was a political act, and a bold one: probably the boldest of

Yeats's career" ("Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W. B. Yeats," p. 239).

<sup>43</sup> Written in 1984, the play was produced at the Peacock in Dublin in Feb. 1985 and published by Faber and Faber in 1986.

<sup>44</sup> Donoghue goes on to say that, "disgusted by the consequences of a myth [O'Brien, Minister in the government of the time] . . . admonishes us to live in a clear air, humanist and secular, without complaint or nostalgia. His rhetoric offers us a life without passion, unless we are ready to develop a passion for mundane experience" (154-55). A similar sentiment is beginning to be expressed by a younger generation in Ireland. An editorial in a new Dublin journal, Graph, probably more in response to Richard Kearney's advocacy of a "post-modern" Irish cosmopolitanism than to O'Brien (who is tricky to pin down in any event), muses that, "On an island where conflict has had such terrible consequences, pluralism would appear to be a truth whose virtue is self-evident. But is it? May it not simply turn out to be an articulate form of indifference, a well-meaning liberal hegemony where everyone agrees to differ because nobody cares . . . ? It is particularly important that culturally we do not end up trading in the tolerance of open and trenchant disagreement for the potential intolerance of a pan-European pluralism watched over by a National intelligentsia . . . . A culture needs the energy of antagonism if it is to escape the banalities of a secular ecumenism or the gentle stranglehold of consensus."

<sup>45</sup> The play is considered to have been finished in August 1917. See Peter Ure's Yeats the Playwright, p. 84.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted from Estrangements by Richard Loftus, Nationalism in Modern

Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 42.

<sup>47</sup> Ellmann comments, acutely, that "in Yeats's verse man is never a political animal, and almost never under economic pressure" (Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p. 292).

<sup>48</sup> Loftus writes at length of this side of Yeats's treatment of Easter in his "Yeats and the Easter Rising: A Study in Ritual": "In his verse, Yeats incorporated the Easter rebellion and the poet-warriors who brought it into being into his national myth . . . . The rebel leaders . . . reject by the nobility of their death the meanness of modern life . . . . Yeats elevates the insurrectionaries to a mythological world where the battle is identical with the dance, where swords flash but never strike home, where every movement has symbolic meaning. Within this framework the Rising becomes a kind of national ritual" (171).

<sup>49</sup> Grattan Freyer, in W. B. Yeats and the Anti-Democratic Tradition, feels that Yeats's question in reference to Cathleen ni Houlihan is a reasonable one, noting that Stephen Gwynn recorded that after seeing the play he asked himself "if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared to go and and to shoot and be shot," and that Constance Markiewicz once said, "It was a sort of gospel to us" (66). William Irwin Thompson agrees, although he adds, "many things had placed them in a frame of mind to be sent out" (The Imagination of an Insurrection: Dublin Easter 1916, viii, 233). F.X. Martin concurs, describing Yeats's influence on the events of 1916 as "indirect but real" (in Desmond Williams, ed. The Irish Struggle: 1916-1926, p. 5). Loftus maintains both that "there is surely ground for maintaining that it prodded the martyrs," and that Yeats did not intend this (Nationalism in Modern Anglo-Irish Literature, p. 41).

<sup>50</sup> See especially Jordan's discussion in A Terrible Beauty, chapter 2.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted by Toliver, p. 49.

<sup>52</sup> Quentin Bell, Virginia Woolf: A Biography, Vol. 1, p. 170.

<sup>53</sup> As summarized by Hayden White in "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory," pp. 28-29.

<sup>54</sup> Yeats, notes to The Resurrection, Variorum Plays, 935.

<sup>55</sup> Cited by Cairns Craig, Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry, p. 153.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. William Barnwell in reference to "That is heaven's part" and following: "dictating the limits of public 'sacrifice' is no longer the poet's province; the stability of perfect public order now seems out of his hands . . . . Celebration of the public sacrificial deed in poetic 'public speech' alone remains to the poet: 'I write it out in a verse' "(62).

<sup>57</sup> Eagleton has beautifully expressed his to me slightly exaggerated sense of Yeats's aestheticization of his heroes: "for Yeats the present is already a kind of myth in itself, and so potentially . . . terms with a heroised past: his own task as poet--'Easter 1916' is a signal example--is to gather the present into the artifice of eternity, 'write it out in a verse,' so that his contemporary heroes (Robert Gregory for instance) seem to have attained the aesthetic purity of death even when they were alive" (Marxism and the Past," p. 239).

<sup>58</sup> Yeats in the poem seems to simplify his actual pre-Easter opinion of those he commemorates. Yeats referred to MacBride as a clown in an earlier, unpublished poem (Memoirs, 145). On the other hand, he describes two meetings with MacDonagh and has mostly good things to say about him (177-8, 198).

59 Eagleton powerfully refutes wholesale historical relativism in "Marxism and the Past": "If by denying that we can ever know the past as it was we mean that no kind of reasonably certain truth claims can ever be advanced about an historical event, then it is difficult to see why anybody should want to hold such a self-evidently absurd position. If what I had for breakfast yesterday morning counts as an 'historical event,' then I can certainly be said to know it. If, on the other hand, what is meant by rejecting the notion of 'the past as it was' is a rejection of the assumption that we can ever know some historical events other than in some sort of context . . . and that there is no 'past as it was' in the sense of some context of contexts which would secure a single total meaning of the past for all time, then it is difficult to see why anybody should not want to hold this eminently reasonable position. The past, in a literary text, is unknowable 'in itself' not because it secretes a noumenal core of truth forever foreclosed to our inevitably partial courses, but because there is no 'in itself' to be known. We cannot know the past 'in itself' as we cannot know 'what is going to happen' because there are no such objects of knowledge. To say that we can never know a literary text 'in itself' is to say that we can never draw a boundary around it which would contain everything there was about it to be known. The same, surely, is true of our knowledge of the past" (281).

I would only add that some elements of history are more determined by context than others. Events of the purely physical (the number of people killed in a bomb explosion, say), in a specific time and place, are not altered by the context, though their "significance" is.

60 "It is a simple solipsism, the view that the world is generated in

the angry vision of W. B. Yeats. Solipsism is the content, too, of his oracle that 'man can embody truth but he cannot know it,' which interpreted means . . . that history is not records but revelations" (362).

<sup>61</sup> As Donoghue aptly phrases it, "many current Irish readers of Yeats resent his appeal to Irishness and his assertion that he knows the quality when he meets it" (66). Or, as Ellmann puts it, "With all the vagueness of his intentions, he was sure of one thing, that Irish literature must not fall prey to mere shibboleths, to what he later used to call the Shamrock and the Pepperpot. He was tormented by the fear that 'delicate qualities of mind' might be destroyed in a mob movement . . . . If any generalized statement of his intentions during the early stages of the movement may be made, it is that he wanted art to be dedicated to the service of heroic dreams, and that in Ireland the dreams must be Irish ones" (Yeats: The Man and the Masks, pp. 104-5).

<sup>62</sup> "Changed into both heroes and corpses." Cf. Eagleton, "History and Myth in Yeats's 'Easter 1916'," p. 258.

<sup>63</sup> Ellmann, The Identity of Yeats, p. 57.

Notes to Chapter Three

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in James D. Wilson, The Romantic Heroic Ideal, p. 4. The translation I give is that of Wilson, slightly modified.

<sup>2</sup> See Brown's discussion of Yeats's "scheme" to obscure the "natural referents" of the poem, pp. 170 ff. Brown's interpretation belongs to the "conspiracy theory" of literary creation: since Yeats crossed out lines in his manuscript, he must have had something to hide.

<sup>3</sup> C. A. Hayers-McCoy, "The Conduct of the Anglo-Irish War," in Desmond Williams, p. 59. See also, for example, the account by Henn in The Lonely Tower. Henn is both a Yeats scholar and an eyewitness to the events in question: "But the fight dragged on into the aimless brutal warfare of the Black and Tans, and that in turn into the fight between the Free-Staters and the Republicans; at the end, political ideologies seemed to count for very little. In 1919 . . . in my own county, three known murderers lived within a short distance . . . atrocities were frequent, and on both sides. The night raids, the digging of a grave on the lawn, whether for use or as a warning . . . were normal preludes to the burning of the 'big houses.' When the Auxiliaries and the Black and Tans appeared, they were ill-disciplined, badly officered, and without clear orders (17).

<sup>4</sup> Not everyone thinks so. John Unterecker, in a text which my library's copy indicates is very widely used, writes these astonishing words about the poem: "'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' is an effort to justify the isolation he has accepted at the end of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War.' Having assumed the 'ghostly solitude' of his prophetic role [Unterecker has neglected to read the next line, l. 41], he is able to face with a kind of equanimity [!:] the destruction both of familiar

social institutions and the great art products of the past" (A Reader's Guide to W. B. Yeats, 181).

<sup>5</sup> Bloom writes, "he retreats into self-mockery, which in him is always a sure gate to poetic splendor. There are many poets who go wrong when they turn upon themselves, but Yeats always prospers by it" (356).

<sup>6</sup> "As the poem progresses the now of the poem reveals itself to be not the historical now of 1919 but a perpetual now in which the dance of history has always already occurred . . ." (Hillis Miller, 325). This is surely a blinding glimpse of the obvious. Of course history has already occurred.

<sup>7</sup> In asking why other more benign contests cannot be substituted for war, Scary points out that the answer is not that the injuring function carries with it the power of its own enforcement, since in fact the "losing" side is rarely physically incapable of continuing. War "works" because the power of enforcement "is believed to be at work" (38). The next question is, of course, why do populations believe in the power-of-enforcement principle? Perhaps because, having injured the bodies of other humans, they have demonstrated their belief in it, and thus are bound to the principle to avoid the scandal of "crime"?

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Whitaker: "When historical flux is seen as artistic form, then . . . change may be accepted and fate may be creatively danced. But though this speaker entertains such a possibility, for him the sense of coercion by the whirling dragon is still dominant" (226).

<sup>9</sup> I am here disagreeing with Harold Bloom. "Where Yeats's personal prejudices, and his theories of history obscure his vision

four years later in "Meditations ..." Yeats is remarkably free here. The cause may lie in the very different disturbances from which the poems rise. The Civil War necessarily embittered Yeats and his contemporaries, no matter which side they took, in a way that went beyond the cleaner bitterness of . . . 1919" (356). However, if Bloom means by his odd phrase "cleaner bitterness" a more profound bitterness, we are not completely at odds. "Clean bitterness" is, in fact, a very Yeatsian concept, or desire.

The poem is what Hayden White calls an applied syllogism, which "contains an enthymemic element . . . consisting of nothing but the decision to move from the plane of universal propositions (themselves extended synecdoches) to that of singular existential statements (these being extended metonymies)." Adding the date as title cemented that decision. (Tropics of Discourse, 3)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Archibald: "Innocence must be learned, a strenuous discipline that helps to redeem . . . the burden" (Yeats, p. 8).

<sup>11</sup> Seamus Deane describes the context of this process with his usual concision: "the confrontation between mythological energy and contemporary penury of spirit . . . was rewritten many times but it could not endure the disappearance of heroic ideals, which the new Catholic-bourgeois state so quickly and efficiently dispelled . . . . Nationalism had certainly helped to create a new idea of Ireland, which had great and liberating consequences. But it also created a version of Irishness--compounded of whimsy, romantic populism, Celtic nativity heroism, and a belief in the salience of the artist in political as well as cultural affairs--which was as restricting and as subject to caricature as the old colonialism had been. This was not surprising since the nationalism was ..

response to the colonialism and since it had been led by the Anglo-Irish section of the people, the colonials themselves. The long and lingering death of this nationalism became the aggrieved theme of much Irish writing" (A Short History of Irish Literature, 202-03).

My personal short answer to the intractable and already somewhat infamous question of "Was Yeats a fascist?" is that we should in general reserve the use of the copula--in either a positive or negative designation--to those cases where an individual's own declaration of allegiance to a certain political philosophy is on record. The copula's pretense of summing up the essence of a personality, its all-or-nothing air, makes it too blunt a tool in many cases, of which the case of Yeats is a singular example.

<sup>12</sup> As Toliver puts it, the last lines represent "perhaps Yeats's gloomiest descent into the senselessness of cyclical change and the spinning of history out of inhuman powers" (91).

Notes to Chapter Four

<sup>1</sup> The Poems of John Milton, ed. John Carey and Alastair Fowler.

<sup>2</sup> In his introduction to his selection of Spenser's poetry, Yeats goes on to add, with considerable insight, "Like an hysterical patient he drew a complicated web of inhuman logic out of the bowels of an insufficient premise--there was no right, no law, but that of Elizabeth, and all that opposed her opposed themselves to God, to civilisation" (xix-xx).

<sup>3</sup> The word "genocide" is Ian Sowton's. See his introduction to Edmund Spenser: A Selection of His Works: "The threat of systematic genocide is not far beneath the surface of his prose" (xi). Anyone who has waded the caustic waters of View of the Present State of Ireland will be apt to agree. Ian Paisley is a moderate in comparison with Spenser.

<sup>4</sup> Cited by Bennett in The Black and Tans, 178.

<sup>5</sup> From Heaney's fine essay, "Yeats As an Example?", in which he sees the "high-stepping tread" as one aspect of Yeats's work, an aspect opposite to that he sees in "The Stare's Nest By My Window," where "the maternal is apprehended, intimated, and warmly cherished" (Preoccupations, 112).

<sup>6</sup> Yeats's insensitivity to the social structures upon which Ascendancy privilege was founded was thorough. As Seamus Deane points out, he had nothing of Edmund Burke's recognition, a century earlier, that the history of the ascendancy had nothing to do with "an influence obtained by virtue, by love, or even by artifice and seduction," but was devoted simply "to keeping a dominion over the rest by reducing them to absolute slavery under a military power . . . to divide the publick estate . . . soley amongst themselves," even though he claimed Burke as a predecessor (Celtic Revivals, 23).

A 1910 poem, "These are the Clouds," illustrates Yeats's attitude:

The weak lay hand on what the strong has done,  
Till that be tumbled that was lifted high  
And discord follow upon unison,  
And all things at one common level lie. (ll. 3-6)

If the weak are weak, how can they pull down strength? If there was "unison," where did the weak come from, and why are they discordant? Only a decade before Yeats's birth, Engels wrote of Ireland that "The land is an utter desert . . . English liberty based on colonial oppression, the country seat of the landowners 'surrounded by enormous, wonderfully beautiful parks, but all around is waste land'" (Deane, A Short History, 79). Yeats demonstrates no inkling of the connection between these estates, the land question, and the revolutionary process of which the civil war was the final phase.

<sup>7</sup> Bottigheimer notes that the famine led to a larger (if still small) land holding, the "family farmer, [who] even if he was a tenant rather than a freeholder, posed a slightly different problem for the Protestant ascendancy . . . He was a man with a stake in the land, rather than a cowed dependent, and multiplied thousands of times over, he provided the beginning of a Catholic rural middle class which aspired to ownership" (181).

<sup>8</sup> Donald Torchiana suggests another antecedent for the bee: "The call is for clarity, the sweetness and light Yeats always associated with Swift's The Battle of the Books (315).

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Cullingford, "How Jacques Molay Got Up the Tower," 775.

<sup>10</sup> A scene, coincidentally, translated by Seamus Heaney in Field Work, his collection most preoccupied with the Troubles:

We had already left him. I walked the ice  
And saw two soldered in a frozen hole

On top of other, one's skull capping the other's,  
 Gnawing at him where the neck and head  
 Are grafted to the sweet fruit of the brain,  
 Like a famine victim at a loaf of bread. ("Ugolino")

The translated lines are Inferno XXXII, 124ff. "Famine victim" is a politically pungent, Irish version of "e come 'l pan fame si manduca."

<sup>11</sup> Readers might be interested in another poem charged with the terrible loveliness of the unicorn, "The Days of the Unicorn," by the superb, and underrated Canadian poet, Phyllis Webb, in her volume Wilson's Bowl (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> So much so in some letters that Geoffrey Thurley could write that "Eliot is the poet of anomie, ennui, pointlessness. These things do not appear to have worried Yeats much at any time. For him, the enemy to civilization was violence" (127). This seems to me the precise opposite of the truth.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Eagleton: ". . . a crucial contradiction in early Romanticism--the poet's need to claim centrally 'representative' status as precisely the point where he is being relegated to an historically peripheral role" (Criticism and Ideology, 53).

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by Terence Brown in Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922-1985, 112.

<sup>15</sup> T.S. Eliot once said of Yeats that he was one of the few poets "whose history is the history of their own time; who are part of the consciousness of an age" (Whitaker, 3). I don't feel this to be true, very often, after 1926 or so.

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