



June 1979

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### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, Volume 15, no.2, June 1979, p.71-92

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Standish O'Grady

# *Artificers of the Great Moment: An Essay on Yeats and National Literature*

by PHILLIP L. MARCUS

THE YOUNG W. B. Yeats was a nationalist in politics, but virtually none of his early writing had any obvious and direct political import. During the 1890's he became the target of attacks by his fellow nationalists for failing to create and support propagandistic literature in the manner of Young Ireland, the patriotic political and literary movement of the 1840's; and despite vigorous resistance he was defeated by Sir Charles Gavan Duffy, one of the original Young Irelanders, in a struggle for control of a scheme to publish a series of cheap, "popular" editions of Irish books. Yeats had sought to include in the series only work of the highest literary quality available, but Duffy had his way and the series soon ebbed out, as Yeats put it, "in a tide of irrelevant dullness." This defeat did not check Yeats for long, but it did affect his thinking about "national" literature and its relation to his audience and, ultimately, to his country.<sup>1</sup>

YEATS WAS reacting against Duffy and the Young Ireland tradition when he called his own collection of stories *The Secret Rose* (1897) "an honest attempt towards that aristocratic esoteric Irish literature, which has been my chief ambition. We have a literature for the people but nothing yet for the few."<sup>2</sup> However, he knew that that "literature for the people" was generally not very good, and thus at this same time he was initiating another project designed to win the ear of the popular audience: the Irish theater movement. The preliminary manifesto he and Lady Gregory issued expressed confidence that they would have "the support of all Irish people . . . in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us."<sup>3</sup> But this confidence, though almost certainly genuine, was to prove quite unjustified. Yeats's own play *The Countess Cathleen*, part of the opening program in 1899, was

1. Yeats's early attitudes towards national literature, and his controversy with Gavan Duffy, are discussed in detail in my *Yeats and the Beginning of the Irish Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970), especially pp. 1-34, 79-103.

2. *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allan Wade (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 286; hereafter cited as *Letters*.

3. Quoted by Lady Augusta Gregory, *Our Irish Theatre* (1914; rpt. New York: Capricorn Books, 1965), p. 9.

attacked for allegedly being unpatriotic as well as irreligious. (No *Irish* men and women would sell their souls.) In a contemporary letter, Lady Gregory called on him to finish the work begun by *The Secret Rose*: "And if your writings are a danger, why are you so abused for writing in a way hard to understand? Clearly just now your work is not directly with the masses, which would be the most directly interesting work, but that matters less as the Gaelic movement has taken up their education, and any of the fine work you do, besides having an influence on the best minds, is there ready for the time when your countrymen will dare to praise it."<sup>4</sup> Her shrewd observations pointed up the conflicting desires Yeats felt. He wanted a literature that would be national but high in literary quality, not mere propaganda but nevertheless a force in shaping the lives of the many as well as the few.

During the next few years he drew together from a variety of sources an aesthetic that put his various desiderata into a harmonious relationship. Chief among those sources were two works with which he had already been familiar for years but which must now have appealed to him with a new force, Shelley's *A Defense of Poetry* and Wilde's *The Decay of Lying*. Both essays offered him, first of all, support for his belief in the *importance* of art. The Shelleyan poet is in touch with ultimate reality and creates actions "according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator. . . ."<sup>5</sup> Although Wilde's world-view certainly differed from Shelley's, Yeats found similarly "Platonic" passages in *The Decay of Lying*: "Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror. . . . She makes and unmakes many worlds. . . . Hers are the 'forms more real than living man,' and hers the great archetypes of which things that have existence are but unfinished copies."<sup>6</sup> Consequently the artist's primary responsibility is to make his works correspondingly perfect in quality, to let nothing interfere with the demands of his craft.

A second point follows from the first. Works of art transcend the age in which they are created, transcend immediate moral, social, and political concerns, and thus are not to be judged by canons of usefulness; however, they can exert an influence far more powerful than any tract or homily. Shelley's last sentence, "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," epitomized this view. Earlier in the essay he had expressed it more fully, asserting that the poet is legislator and prophet,

4. Quoted by Colin Meir, *The Ballads and Songs of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974), p. 29.

5. Percy B. Shelley, "A Defense of Poetry," in *Shelley's Critical Prose*, ed. Bruce R. McElderry, Jr. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967), p. 10.

6. *The Critic as Artist: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Vintage, 1970), p. 306. See W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 135; and Richard Ellmann, *Eminent Domain* (New York: Oxford, 1967), pp. 9-27.

“for he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of the latest time.” Wilde was equally memorable, paradoxically inverting a commonplace into the formula that “Life imitates Art” and using to describe the mechanism of transmission an image that stayed in Yeats’s mind for decades: “The Greeks . . . set in the bride’s chamber the statue of Hermes or Apollo, that she might bear children as lovely as the works of art that she looked at in her rapture or her pain. They knew that Life gains from Art not merely spirituality, depth of thought and feeling, soul-turmoil or soul-peace, but that she can form herself on the very lines and colours of art, and can reproduce the dignity of Pheidias as well as the grace of Praxiteles.” The artist affecting the child through the mother imaged the slower, *indirect* form of influence on which Yeats would have to base much of his own hope to shape Irish life, and imaged also a mode of influence that went deeper, was more basic, more organic than oratory, journalism, propaganda.

Shelley’s essay had been triggered by Peacock and the claims of modern science, and Wilde was reacting against realism and naturalism on one hand and Victorian morality on the other; but Yeats had no difficulty adapting their views to a distinctly Irish context, and they soon began to appear in his polemic writings, in his poetry, and in his plays.

The emergent aesthetic can be discovered in two prose pieces of 1900, “The Symbolism of Poetry” and “Irish Language and Literature.” In the former his primary concerns were international: a “spiritual” reality and the literary techniques by which the artist can put his audience in touch with that reality. Sounds, colors, and forms “call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions.” The process may seem rarified and insignificant, but

It is indeed only those things which seem useless or very feeble that have any power, and all those things that seem useful or strong, armies, moving wheels, modes of architecture, modes of government, speculations of the reason, would have been a little different if some mind long ago had not given itself to some emotion, as a woman gives herself to her lover, and shaped sounds or colours or forms or all of these, into a musical relation, that their emotion might live in other minds. A little lyric evokes an emotion, and this emotion gathers others about it and melts into their being in the making of some great epic; and at last, needing an always less delicate body, or symbol, as it grows more powerful, it flows out, with all it has gathered, among the blind instincts of daily life, where it moves a power within powers, as one sees ring within ring in the stem of an old oak tree.

It is not difficult to recognize here an implicit commentary upon Yeats’s own current situation in Ireland. His artistic endeavors might seem to be having little positive effect on his country, but the process of influence was at work nevertheless. In the sentence immediately following these claims he identified another text in which he found support for them, speculating that “this is maybe what Arthur O’Shaughnessy

meant when he made his poets say they had built Nineveh with their sighing; and I am certainly never sure, when I hear of some war, or of some religious excitement, or of some new manufacture, or of anything else that fills the ear of the world, that it has not all happened because of something that a boy piped in Thessaly.”<sup>7</sup>

O'Shaughnessy (1844–1881), a minor Pre-Raphaelite poet, had published “Ode,” the poem to which Yeats referred, in 1874. It is concerned entirely with the great powers of artists, of “the music-makers”; the most pertinent lines are

With wonderful deathless ditties  
We build up the world's great cities,  
And out of a fabulous story  
We fashion an Empire's glory:  
One man with a dream at pleasure,  
Shall go forth and conquer a crown;  
And three with a new song's measure  
Can trample a kingdom down.

We, in the ages lying  
In the buried past of the earth  
Built Nineveh with our sighing,  
And Babel itself in our mirth;  
And o'erthrew them with prophesying  
To the old of the new world's worth;  
For each age is a dream that is dying,  
Or one that is coming to birth.

A breath of our inspiration  
Is the life of each generation. . . .

Yeats indirectly glossed the last two lines later in his essay, and blended them with an echo of Wilde, in saying that “solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as I think, the creative impulse from the lowest of the Nine Hierarchies, and so make and unmake mankind.” And O'Shaughnessy's suggestion of a relationship between the artist and a pattern of historical epochs was a subject to which Yeats would return frequently in the coming years.

In “Irish Language and Literature” Yeats confronted head-on the matter of national art. His piece was addressed to D. P. Moran, editor of *The Leader*, whose support of the language movement and of Irish cultural and economic self-reliance was so passionate that he had virtually no use for the idea of an Irish literature in English. The position adopted by Yeats reflected his meditations upon the advice in Lady Gregory's letter:

Side by side with the spread of the Irish language, and with much writing in the Irish language, must go on much expression of Irish emotion and Irish thought, much writing about Irish things and people, in the English language . . . and this writing must for a

7. The quotations from “The Symbolism of Poetry” are all from *Essays and Introductions* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 157–158.

long time to come be the chief influence in shaping the opinions and the emotions of the leisured classes in Ireland in so far as they are concerned with Irish things, and the more sincere it is, the more lofty it is, the more beautiful it is, the more will the general life of Ireland be sweetened by its influence, through its influence over a few governing minds. It will always be too separate from the general life of Ireland to influence it directly, and it was chiefly because I believed this that I differed so strongly in 1892 and 1893 from Sir Charles Gavan Duffy and his supporters, who wished to give such writing an accidental and fleeting popularity by uniting it with politics and economics.<sup>8</sup>

Yeats could not feel totally enthusiastic about Gaelic League influence, and wanted it offset by more desirable forces. In his view, the writers of the Irish Renaissance should continue writing in English, and by devoting their art to the sincere pursuit of elevated beauty rather than to political propaganda they still could make a genuine contribution to the development of the national life. Clearly the Duffy controversy still rankled. But by now the idea that Irish art would work indirectly, through the leisured classes, had so taken hold in Yeats's mind that it caused him seriously to distort his account of that controversy: all contemporary evidence shows that Yeats and Duffy alike had hoped to reach a large audience directly, and that it was Yeats who had fought for the inclusion of the good literary work. Soon, however, he was to have many opportunities to invoke his aesthetic not in fruitlessly rewriting history but rather in defending his work and that of his literary allies against new attacks and providing a more positive perspective from which to view what frequently seemed the failure of his entire movement.

In 1902 Yeats's unimpeachably patriotic *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, with Maud Gonne in the title role, was a great success.<sup>9</sup> The following year, however, there was an increase in political tension (in part the result of George VII's visit to Ireland), and the theater movement was subjected to new pressures; Maud herself—now Mrs. John MacBride—was a leader of the forces opposing Yeats. Early in the year, she accused W. G. Fay of having altered Padraic Colum's *The Saxon Shillin'* in order to weaken its political message. She withdrew from the Irish National Theatre Society and supported rival performances by the Cumann na nGaedheal Irish Theatre Company.<sup>10</sup> A further cause of dissention was John Synge's *The Shadow of the Glen*, first read to the Society in June.<sup>11</sup> Its vision of Irish life proved offensive to some of the players, including Dudley Digges and Maire T. Quinn, who resigned from the group and took part in the Cumann na nGaedheal performances; they,

8. *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats*, ed. John P. Freyne and Colton Johnson (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1976), II, 238.

9. Whatever the extent of Lady Gregory's contribution to the writing of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, in Yeats's controversies about national literature he treated the play as his own.

10. Robert Hogan and James Kilroy, *The Modern Irish Drama II: Laying the Foundations: 1902-1904* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1976), pp. 48-51, 70.

11. David H. Greene and Edward M. Stephens, *J. M. Synge: 1871-1909* (New York: Collier, 1961), p. 141; Gerard Fay, *The Abbey Theatre: Cradle of Genius* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), pp. 59-60; see also Máire Nic Shiubhlaigh, *The Splendid Years* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1955), p. 42.

along with Maud Gonne, walked out of the theater when Synge's play was put on.<sup>12</sup> And then William Martin Murphy's *Irish Independent* and Arthur Griffith's *United Irishman*, both nationalist papers, waged a vigorous attack on it as damaging to Irish national aspirations.

In September Yeats wrote rather optimistically to Frank Fay, "I think that a political theatre would help us greatly in the end . . . by making it easier for us to keep a pure artistic ideal. It will satisfy the propagandist feeling and at the same time make plain the great effectiveness of our work."<sup>13</sup> In the *Samhain* of the same month he made several indirect references to the developing situation. In one he mentioned Colum's play and said he had no doubt that there would be a good many more such plays in the next few years and perhaps even a permanent company of political players; in contrast, he went on, his own group "has no propaganda but that of good art." Potential audiences were warned, in what seems a clear anticipation of Synge, that "we must encourage every writer to see life afresh, even though he sees it with strange eyes. . . ." Another paragraph asserted that "beauty and truth are always justified of themselves, and that their creation is a greater service to our country than writing that compromises either in the seeming service of a cause."<sup>14</sup>

The *Independent's* first attack appeared on October 8, the day Synge's play was to have its first performance; Yeats published a defense in which he once more returned to the newly developed aesthetic.<sup>15</sup> "An Irish National Theater" (published in Griffith's paper) began by recalling the Duffy affair again, this time more accurately. Yeats and his supporters had denied that *The Spirit of the Nation* contained greater lyric poetry than that of Shelley and Keats, and as a result Irish literature had prospered in the ensuing decade. The question of political literature, he went on, had been raised anew by the theater movement; and Irish writers must be given the freedom to express their own vision of experience, no matter how popular or unpopular that vision might be. Again Synge's play was in his mind, but to give his point more force he made it in relation to *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, which no nationalist had attacked: "If creative minds preoccupy themselves with incidents from the political history of Ireland, so much the better, but we must not force that moral upon them." Such freedom was necessary precisely because literature *does* make things happen—is "the great teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of all values."<sup>16</sup>

12. Samuel Levenson, *Maud Gonne* (New York: Reader's Digest Press, 1976), p. 202.

13. G. Fay, *The Abbey Theatre*, pp. 62-63.

14. *Samhain*, September, 1903, pp. 4, 7, 9.

15. The issue was dated October 10, but was on the streets on the 8th; see William M. Murphy, *Prodigal Father* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), p. 595. According to Holloway, Yeats attacked the *Independent's* piece in his speech at the end of the first night's program; see *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre*, ed. Robert Hogan and Michael J. O'Neill (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1967), p. 27.

16. *Explorations* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 114-118.



In "The Theatre, the Pulpit, and the Newspapers," which appeared in the *United Irishman* the following week, he reiterated these points; in doing so he alluded to his fullest and most eloquent contemporary defense of art and its power, his play *The King's Threshold*: "and if the priest or the politician should say to the man of letters, 'Into how dangerous a state of mind are you not bringing us?' the man of letters can but answer, 'It is dangerous, indeed,' and say, like my Seanchan, 'when did we promise safety?' "<sup>17</sup> There was a symbolic appropriateness in the fact that this play was first performed on the same bill with *The Shadow of the Glen* and a revival of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, for its own vision offered a justification of the Synge play, which seemed the polar opposite of Yeats's own nationalist crowd-pleaser.

Shelley's influence on *The King's Threshold* has been established by Barton R. Friedman and by Harold Bloom, who goes so far as to claim that "Shelley is the ultimate model for Seanchan, and *A Defense of Poetry* the deepest quarry for Sanchan's [sic] convictions."<sup>18</sup> George Bornstein has noted the echoes of *The Decay of Lying*, including "I said the poets hung / Images of the life that was in Eden / About the child-bed of the world, that it, / Looking upon those images, might bear / Triumphant children . . ."—which derives from Wilde's description of the statues in Grecian bridal-chambers.<sup>19</sup> Wilde also lies behind such lines as

For there are men that shall be born at last  
And find sweet nurture that they may have voices  
Even in anger like the strings of harps.  
Yet how could they be born to majesty  
If I had never made the golden cradle?<sup>20</sup>

And when Seanchan tells the Chamberlain,

. . . shake your coat  
Where the little jewels gleam on it, and say  
A herdsman sitting where the pigs had trampled  
Made up a song about enchanted kings,  
Who were so finely dressed one fancied them  
All fiery, and women by the churn  
And children by the hearth caught up the song  
And murmured it until the tailors heard it.<sup>21</sup>

we can hear an echo of the passage in "The Symbolism of Poetry" in which Yeats had alluded to O'Shaughnessy and the world-shaping power of "something that a boy piped in Thessaly."

17. *Explorations*, p. 121.

18. Barton R. Friedman, "Under a Leprous Moon: Action and Image in *The King's Threshold*," *Arizona Quarterly*, XXVI (1970), 39-53; Bloom, *Yeats* (New York: Oxford, 1970), p. 149.

19. "A Borrowing from Wilde in Yeats's 'The King's Threshold,'" *NQ*, November, 1971, pp. 421-422.

20. *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach, asst. by Catharine C. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 276.

21. *Variorum Plays*, p. 290.

Yeats combined these sources with a medieval Irish story to create a fable that, in addition to its universal implications, had a quite specific applicability to the Irish scene in 1903. He had been at work on the scenario for the play by Easter of that year;<sup>22</sup> he had heard *The Shadow of the Glen* by February 2.<sup>23</sup> Thus *The King's Threshold* can be read as a response to the dispute over *The Saxon Shillin'* and a defense of Synge's play. In a 1906 note Yeats said he had written *The King's Threshold* "when our Society was having a hard fight for the recognition of pure art in a community of which one half was buried in the practical affairs of life, and the other half in politics and a propagandist patriotism," and had "revised its moral that the poet might have the best of it."<sup>24</sup> (The original Irish tale was a merciless satire of the pride and excessive demands of the bards.) The action of the play takes place at an era before there even was an English presence in Ireland, but through the concept that life imitates art it suggests that Synge's work would ultimately contribute as much to the national cause as the dream-inspired *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and far more than conscious propaganda of the sort represented by Colum's play.<sup>25</sup>

In the next two years, Yeats took the offensive and worked at strengthening his practical position. Early in 1904 he informed Lady Gregory of a plan for "challenging Griffith to debate with me in public our two policies—his that literature should be subordinate to nationalism, and mine that it must have its own ideal. . . . He will refuse, of course, but the tactical advantage will be mine."<sup>26</sup> Yeats's unwillingness to sacrifice art to propaganda was a crucial factor in winning the support of Miss Horniman and thus in obtaining the Abbey Theatre and the annual subsidy. In his own eyes he was "just as strenuous a Nationalist as ever,"<sup>27</sup> and he had the support of the Fenians,<sup>28</sup> but Maud Gonne and the patriotic clubs considered him lost to the movement.<sup>29</sup> He devoted much of *Samhain* for 1904 to answering their criticisms and confidently reasserting his own principles concerning national literature—based upon faith in the soul and a "spiritual" reality,<sup>30</sup> absorbing the lessons to be learned from foreign masters without fear of "decadent" influences,<sup>31</sup> and free of political and religious pressures. He repeated, in prose now, part of the "message" of *The King's Threshold*: "If liter-

22. Lady Augusta Gregory, *Seventy Years*, ed. Colin Smythe (New York: Macmillan, 1974), p. 427; Lady Gregory was assisting him with the scenario. See also *Our Irish Theatre*, p. 83.

23. J. M. Synge, *Plays*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), I, xvii.

24. *Variorum Plays*, p. 315.

25. S. B. Bushrui, *Yeats's Verse Plays: The Revisions 1900-1910* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965), p. 71 sees in the play "a hidden message to Maud Gonne: the poet's treatment of Fidelm shows the resistance she would meet if she were to continue her efforts to involve Yeats in politics at the expense of his art."

26. *Letters*, pp. 421-422 (January 2, 1904).

27. *Letters*, p. 432 (February 26, 1904). See also *Uncollected Prose*, II, 257 (1905).

28. *Yeats and Patrick McCartan: A Fenian Friendship*, ed. John Unterecker (Dublin: Dolmen, 1965), pp. 427-428.

29. *Letters*, pp. 427, 445.

30. *Samhain*, December, 1904, p. 27.

31. *Samhain*, December, 1904, pp. 21-23.

ature is but praise of life, if our writers are not to plead the National cause, nor insist upon the Ten Commandments, nor upon the glory of their country, what part remains for it, in the common life of the country? It will influence the life of the country immeasurably more, though seemingly less, than have our propagandist poems and stories."<sup>32</sup> And, defiantly, he asserted that "Mr. Synge . . . is truly a National writer."<sup>33</sup>

1905 had begun with renewed attacks on *The Shadow of the Glen*, which had been revived as part of the Abbey's inaugural program.<sup>34</sup> In the fall of that year the theater company was reorganized so that Yeats, Synge, and Lady Gregory had essential control.<sup>35</sup> Yeats's fellow directors by no means shared all his ideals, but they were in total agreement with him on the question of political/religious pressure.<sup>36</sup> Unpublished correspondence concerning the reorganization shows Yeats unwilling to add anyone to the group "unless we were quite sure they would leave us independent as to politics and religion."<sup>37</sup> His public version of this position was published in *Samhain* in November:

All fine literature is the disinterested contemplation or expression of life, but hardly any Irish writer can liberate his mind sufficiently from questions of practical reform for this contemplation. Art for art's sake, as he understands it, . . . seems to him a neglect of public duty. It is as though the telegraph boys botanized among the hedges, with the undelivered envelopes in their pockets. . . . Till [these principles] are accepted by writers and readers in this country it will never have a literature, it will never escape from the election rhyme and the pamphlet. So long as I have any control over the National Theatre Society it will be carried on in this spirit, call it art for art's sake if you will; and no plays will be produced at it which were written, not for the sake of a good story or fine verses or some revelation of character, but to please those friends of ours who are ever urging us to attack the priests or the English, or wanting us to put our imagination into handcuffs that we may be sure of never seeming to do one or the other.<sup>38</sup>

The change caused another secession, involving Padraic Colum and several of the players, who formed a rival group called the Theatre of Ireland which was dominated by figures who put nationalism before all else;<sup>39</sup> but Yeats believed the gain in freedom and power more than outweighed the loss of talent. By the end of the year he could legitimately feel that the Abbey had institutionalized his principles on national literature, and his letters express a cautious optimism.<sup>40</sup> Before long, however, his mood was to grow considerably darker.

32. *Samhain*, December, 1904, p. 23. Bushrui, pp. 103-108, shows that Yeats's revisions of *The King's Threshold* between 1903 and 1905 were partly for the purpose of giving greater emphasis to the sacredness of poetry and of the poet's position in society.

33. *Samhain*, December, 1904, p. 21.

34. See Greene and Stephens, *Synge*, pp. 181-184.

35. See *Joseph Holloway's Abbey Theatre*, p. 62; *Letters*, pp. 461-463; Greene and Stephens, *Synge*, pp. 196-202; and *The World of W. B. Yeats*, revised edition, ed. Robin Skelton and Ann Saddlemyer (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1967), p. 86.

36. Greene and Stephens, *Synge*, p. 202.

37. Letter to AE, August 7 [1905], National Library of Ireland.

38. *Samhain*, November, 1905, pp. 12-13.

39. On the Theatre of Ireland, see Nic Shiubhlaigh, pp. 75-107.

40. Greene and Stephens, *Synge*, pp. 201-202; *Letters*, p. 463.

F. S. L. Lyons has noted that from 1900 on, with the end of the nine-year split in the Parliamentary party, conservative, middle-class nationalism was in the ascendant in Ireland and "romantic nationalism was at a discount. . . ."<sup>41</sup> In 1907 Yeats had commented upon this development: "When I was a lad, Irishmen obeyed a few leaders; but during the last ten years a change has taken place. For leaders we have now societies, clubs, and leagues. Organized opinion of sections and coteries has been put in place of these leaders, one or two of whom were men of genius. Instead of a Parnell, a Stephens, or a Butt, we must obey the demands of commonplace and ignorant people, who try to take on an appearance of strength by imposing some crude shibboleth on their own and others' necks."<sup>42</sup> He recognized that these forces constituted much of the opposition to Synge's plays, the newest of which, *The Playboy of the Western World*, had given rise to a violent controversy at the end of January. During this new controversy he asserted that an even younger generation was already wearying of the tyranny of the clubs and leagues, and Synge himself supported this view in a contemporary letter; but that generation failed to become a significant counter-force and so the problem remained.<sup>43</sup>

On March 16, 1907, Yeats's old Fenian mentor John O'Leary died, and in "Poetry and Tradition," finished in August of the same year, Yeats treated his death as the watershed between the era of the leaders and the era of the clubs. In this crucial essay, which is really a prose scenario for "September 1913," O'Leary served as epitome of the old "romantic conception of Irish nationality."<sup>44</sup> Yeats, as his disciple, had not foreseen that "a new class, which had begun to rise into power under the shadow of Parnell, would change the nature of the Irish movement, which, needing no longer great sacrifices, nor bringing any great risk to individuals, could do without exceptional men, and those activities of the mind that are founded on the exceptional moment. . . . Power passed to small shopkeepers, to clerks . . ." to the "Paudeens."<sup>45</sup> The essay contained the seeds of much of Yeats's later socio-political thought. Against the middle classes and their values he counterpointed not only the peasantry, whom he had been praising for years, but also the aristocracy. He made several positive references to the age of Grattan (which was to become for Yeats "that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion")<sup>46</sup> and an important allusion to Castiglione, reflecting his recent reading of *The Courtier* and

41. F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine*, revised ed. (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 243.

42. James Kilroy, *The 'Playboy' Riots* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1971), p. 32.

43. See *Explorations*, p. 228, and *Uncollected Prose*, II, 351; also *Letters*, p. 466 (January 8, 1906); and J. M. Synge, *Letters to Molly*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971), p. 226.

44. *Essays and Introductions*, p. 246.

45. *Essays and Introductions*, pp. 259-260.

46. *Variorum Plays*, p. 958.

his visit to Italy in the spring of 1907.<sup>47</sup> Both the Irish eighteenth century and the Italian Renaissance would serve him in future years as rich quarries of positive social and artistic values, but in 1907 they could not offset his discouragement. It was becoming increasingly clear to him that in the short run, at least, his own art was not going to exert much positive influence upon the shape of Irish life; "Ireland's great moment had passed," and its artists, "who are the servants not of any cause but mere naked life, and above all of that life in its nobler forms, . . . Artificers of the Great Moment, became . . . protesting individual voices."<sup>48</sup>

Behind these paragraphs can be discerned the lineaments of the theory of history which Yeats would later give its most complete expression in *A Vision*. Although artists had the power to affect the characteristics of historical cycles, there was within the historical process itself an unchanging pattern involving alternation of contrasting eras and burgeoning and decline within eras. Some entire eras, and portions of every era, would by their nature be less receptive than others; consequently the strength of the artists' influence and the time required before it would be felt must of necessity vary with the whirlings of the gyres. Yeats would continue to labor in the service of the ideal Ireland he associated with O'Leary, and would continue to know moods of optimism, but he would have also a growing if reluctant awareness that it was "perhaps from this out an imaginary Ireland,"<sup>49</sup> destined to be realized only in a future too distant for him ever to see.

In the present, he continued to be subjected to conflicting pressures, fellow nationalists wanting him to be more political, and Unionist supporters of his artistic projects questioning his national activities. His difficult position led him during 1909 and 1910 to fill his journal with repeated explorations of the entire problem of national literature. A series of entries for March 12 and 14 began with the premise that "there is a sinking away of national feeling . . ." because Ireland lacked models for the development of its identity. The Young Ireland movement had provided some simple images, and Yeats's own movement "began by trying to do the same thing in a more profound and enduring way." With the advent of Synge, this hope vanished; Yeats then realized that the Irish people were too ill-educated to accept models more profound than the "schoolboy thought" of '45, and that the new writers "would have to give up the deliberate creation of a kind of Holy City in the imagination, a Holy Sepulchre, as it were, or Holy Grail for the Irish mind, and be content to express the individual." (The religious terms here recall Seanchán's "images of the life that was in Eden. . . .")

47. See "Discoveries: Second Series," in *Irish Renaissance*, ed. Robin Skelton and David R. Clark (Dublin: Dolmen, 1965), p. 88; and Daniel A. Harris, *Yeats: Coole Park and Ballylee* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1974), p. 5n.

48. *Essays and Introductions*, p. 260.

49. *Essays and Introductions*, p. 246.

At the end of this entry, however, the tone became somewhat less negative, as Yeats considered the possibility that from his own work and that of such writers as Synge, Lady Gregory, Katharine Tynan, Lionel Johnson, and Standish O'Grady a school of journalists could cull national models as simple as the old but nobler and more powerful.<sup>50</sup> He returned to the subject two entries later, restating the problem but not the solution.<sup>51</sup> But on March 14 he speculated once more about the founding of a new *Nation*, free from the weaknesses that had marred the national movement, which "could change the future of Ireland."<sup>52</sup> Such solutions, while they promised a more immediate impact than Yeats could hope for otherwise, were bound to be less satisfying because they necessarily involved simplification and could only be short-term expedients—the Irish people would have to "dream impermanent dreams."

A short time later, Synge was dead. This event seemed to Yeats even more symbolic than O'Leary's death; it provoked him to great personal bitterness towards Synge's enemies,<sup>53</sup> but also to renewed efforts to define the larger issues raised by the work of his friend. In May of 1910, Yeats and Maud Gonne revived their old argument about the attacks on Synge, and there was still passion on both sides. Realizing that this dispute was fundamental, that his own integrity and that of his movement were involved, he determined to include in his essay "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time" (dated September 14, 1910) a statement about national literature. Entries in the journal offer a glimpse of that statement in the process of formulation.

He began with the observation that work such as Synge's (or his own), "created for its own sake or for some eternal spiritual need can be used by politicians . . . but it can seldom be used at once." At the period he and Maud disputed about, he "did not know this"—in fact, the controversies about Synge had played a key role in revealing it to him. He then went on to define quite explicitly the nature of the art-life process as he now saw it: "A nation can only be created in the deepest thought of its deepest minds . . . who have first made themselves fundamental and profound and then realized themselves in art. In this way they rouse into national action the governing minds of their [time]—few at any one time—by awakening of their desire towards a certain mood and thought which is unconscious to these governing minds themselves," and connected it with the "golden cradle" Sean-ghan "would prepare for his future children."<sup>54</sup>

During this same period, a visit to Mont-Saint-Michel stimulated further thoughts about the relationship between history and the power of art. The unity of culture suggested by the abbey was not possible in the

50. *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 183–185.

51. *Memoirs*, p. 185.

52. *Memoirs*, pp. 186–187.

53. *Memoirs*, pp. 200–204.

54. *Memoirs*, pp. 247–249.

modern world; Yeats's ambition was out of phase and hence doomed to failure for the time being. Yet this realization would not put a stop to his efforts. Echoing the O'Leary essay of 1907, he went on bravely to affirm the value of the enterprise:

When I try to create a national literature, for all that, do I not really mean an attempt to create this impossible thing after all, for the very reason that I always rouse myself to work by imagining an Ireland as much a unity in thought and feeling as ancient Greece and Rome and Egypt . . . ? Am I not therefore un-national in any sense the common man can understand? . . . I must . . . be content to be but artist, one [of] a group, Synge, Lady Gregory—no, there is no other than these—who express something which has no direct relation to action. We three have conceived an Ireland that will remain imaginary more powerfully than we have conceived ourselves. The individual victory was but a separation from casual men as a necessary thing before we could become naturalized in that imaginary land which is, as it were, the tradition-bound people of the West made independent from America or from London, and living under its own princes.

This passage was to be developed not only in the essay but also, years later, in "The Municipal Gallery Revisited."<sup>55</sup>

The comparable paragraphs in the essay itself served as the conclusion of the entire piece. In them Yeats ranked Synge with Shakespeare, Homer, Dante, and Goethe as artists in whose work, "although it does not command—indeed because it does not—may lie the roots of far-branching events." Such writers, however, need surroundings conducive to their work. In referring to "the nobleness of emotion associated with the scenery and events of their country by those great poets who dreamed it in solitude, and who to this day in Europe are creating indestructible spiritual races . . ." Yeats was once again glancing back at *The King's Threshold*, which had ended with Seanchán's

O silver trumpets be you lifted up  
And cry to the great race that is to come.  
Long-throated swans among the waves of time  
Sing loudly, for beyond the wall of the world  
It waits and it may hear and come to us.<sup>56</sup>

But Synge had not found such surroundings in Ireland, and the conclusion of the essay lacks the optimism of the play.<sup>57</sup> The collocation of Synge and Yeats's play supports S. B. Bushrui's contention that Synge's death was one of the events that led Yeats to change the ending of the play to a tragic one in which the poet dies.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, his belief was soon to be further tested by a controversy which seemed, like the *Playboy* affair, to reveal just how far off the "Great Moment" really was.

55. *Memoirs*, pp. 250–251. Professor Donoghue has noted the anticipation of "The Municipal Gallery Revisited."

56. *Variorum Plays*, pp. 311–312 (1904 version, stage directions omitted).

57. *Essays and Introductions*, pp. 340–342. See also Joseph Hone, *W. B. Yeats/1865–1939*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 237.

58. Bushrui, p. 119. In a 1922 note (*Variorum Plays*, p. 316), Yeats claimed he had intended the tragic end from "the first."

The controversy over Hugh Lane's plan to give Dublin a valuable collection of modern art was so crucial from Yeats's point-of-view because it represented a dramatic test-case for the theory that art could change the character of life. This was particularly true of Sir Edward Lutyens' spectacular design for a bridge-gallery, which would bring ordinary Dubliners into daily contact with Edenic images—a modern equivalent of Wilde's Greek statues.

The project fell through, largely, in Yeats's eyes, as the result of opposition from the same new class that had opposed *The Playboy*.<sup>59</sup> (Maud Gonne also disliked Lane, for reasons that had nothing to do with art, and in one hate-filled letter revealed a passionate desire to "show him up" in *Sinn Féin*.)<sup>60</sup> Yeats defended the scheme in verse and prose. "To a Wealthy Man . . .," written while there was still hope, urged Lord Ardilaun to

Look up in the sun's eye and give  
What the exultant heart calls good  
That some new day may breed the best  
Because you gave, not what they would,  
But the right twigs for an eagle's nest.<sup>61</sup>

The poem offered as models courtiers from Castiglione, counterpointed against the Paudeens; it produced no result.

In March, 1913, Yeats wrote to *The Irish Times* urging Dubliners to support the gallery so that "our children's children will love their town the better, and have a better chance of that intellectual happiness which sets the soul free from the vicissitudes of fortune."<sup>62</sup> "To a Shade," written after the plan had clearly failed, put the same thought into poetry, referring to Lane as a man "who had brought / In his full hands what, had they only known, / Had given their children's children loftier thought, / Sweeter emotion, working in their veins / Like gentle blood. . . ."<sup>63</sup> Further echoes of the passage would appear in "A Prayer for My Daughter" (1919) and—in relation to Lady Gregory—in "Coole Park, 1929."

Yeats's discouragement about the Lane Gallery affected also "September 1913": although that poem is a more general indictment of the new nationalists, its original subtitle, "On reading much of the correspondence against the Art Gallery," shows Yeats making the link between the current controversy and the matter of "Poetry and Tradition." The effect of the Lane affair can even be seen in the poem "Peace," written in May, 1910, apparently just before the argument

59. See Hone, *Yeats*, pp. 265–267.

60. Levenson, *Maud Gonne*, pp. 280–281 (September 4, 1914).

61. *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (1957; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 287–288.

62. *Letters*, pp. 579–580.

63. *Variorum Poems*, pp. 292–293. The poem also uses some of the same language as the comparable passage in "Irish Language and Literature," Yeats's essay of 1900; see above.



with Maud about Synge. The drafts had referred to artists painting Maud's noble form "Till they had roused us to that strength."<sup>64</sup> The line did not appear in the first two published appearances of the poem; but in a slightly altered version it was restored in a 1912 printing, then deleted some time between 1913 and 1917. The change may reflect the collapse of the scheme and possibly even a recognition that Maud's opposition to so many examples of Yeats's ideal made her a rather inappropriate embodiment of it.

Still later, when the pictures seemed lost to Ireland entirely, Yeats waged an energetic campaign for their return. Part of his argument was that Ireland *needed* the pictures more. He said he had based his "whole life" on the conviction "that it is more important to give fine examples of high art to a country that is still plastic, still growing, than to an old country where national character has been formed for centuries."<sup>65</sup> He did not live to see the realization of this hope, but much of his own creative work was intended to provide "examples of high art" for Ireland that would be available long after he himself was gone. During the period of his growing alienation from the nationalist movement he had produced many poems and plays incarnating what he would call "the heroic ideal," a vision of a spiritual reality, and images of romantic love, often using as vehicles traditional Irish myths and legends.

Inevitably some works, beginning with *The King's Threshold*, were in one way or another "about" the aesthetic we have been tracing. In a journal entry of 1909, meditating upon "that coterie of patriots who have never been bought because no one has ever thought them worth the price,"<sup>66</sup> he wondered whether he had erred in shaping his style "to sweetness and serenity."<sup>67</sup> The poems concerning Lane showed that he could introduce the aesthetic into powerful satiric verse. Bushrui has suggested plausibly that the dissensions dramatized in *The Green Helmet* (1908/1910) image those over Synge's plays.<sup>68</sup> And at least two other poems from *Responsibilities*, "The Grey Rock" and "The Dolls," deal with Yeats's thoughts on the relationship of art and nationalism.

That "The Grey Rock" is a parable about national literature is obvious; Yeats addressed it to his fellow Rhymers because, having shared his own devotion to the demands of art, they could appreciate its moral. There was even more than a little defiance in the boldness with which he identified himself with "decadents" in preference to the Paudseens. As the vehicle for his parable he adapted fabled incidents associated with the Battle of Clontarf (1014). In them the goddess Aoibheall appeared to Brian Boru and warned him in vain that he would be killed in the battle; she also gave to her favorite, Dunlaing O'Hartigan, the gift of

64. *Memoirs*, pp. 245-246.

65. "Sir Hugh Lane's Pictures" (December 17, 1916), *Uncollected Prose*, II, 418.

66. *Memoirs*, p. 161.

67. *Memoirs*, pp. 178-179.

68. Bushrui, pp. 178-180.

invisibility, but he cast it off to be equal with his friend Murchadh and they too were killed. In other circumstances Yeats might have treated such a refusal as a positive act, an example of heroic recklessness, but here he made it a betrayal of principle: Aoibheall is a sort of Irish muse, the Grey Rock her Parnassus, and Dunlaing, claiming "his country's need was most," was untrue to her. Yeats, by contrast, had kept *his* faith, "*though faith was tried, / To that rock-born, rock-wandering foot.*"<sup>69</sup>

In his excellent study of the poem, Russell K. Alspach has shown Yeats's identification of the goddess with Shelley's Witch of Atlas, which reinforces the connection between the poem and the aesthetic to which Shelley had likewise contributed; he also provided a survey of possible sources for the Irish legend.<sup>70</sup> He failed to note, however, the latest and one of the most significant sources, Lady Gregory's play *Kincora*. The first version of this play was finished by August of 1904 and almost at once put into rehearsal for the Abbey. In a contemporary letter Synge revealed that several of the players preferred it to works by Yeats and himself, and speculated that this sentiment might be a manifestation of a "Neo-patriotic-Catholic clique" in the Theatre.<sup>71</sup> His speculation proved to be correct, and the source of the play's appeal to that group is easy to see. It opened with a scene in which Aoibheall appeared to Brian and sought to tempt him: "I am come to bid you give up the sweetheart you have chosen, that hard sweetheart, Ireland. Come to me in place of her and I will bring you into the hidden houses of the hills. . . ." Brian's refusal was couched in explicitly patriotic terms: "I will not go with you; I will not give up Ireland. For it is a habit of my race to fight and to die, but it never was their habit to see shame or oppression put on their country by any man on earth. . . . *I will never break my faith with the sweetheart I have chosen* nor turn from her service till she can lift up her head in the sight of the whole world!"<sup>72</sup> Later in the play she appeared to Murchadh in a virtually identical scene. He, too, rejected her, condemning her as a "demon."<sup>73</sup>

Yeats had praised the play prior to its first performance, which took place March 25, 1905, but before long he had developed reservations.<sup>74</sup> On April 26, Joseph Holloway recorded in his diary the opinion that "the 'Murrough' and 'Aoibheall' incident, though full of noble patriotic sentiment, ought to go." He "had a chat with W. B. Yeats and Lady Gregory after the play on this matter, and they agreed that some-

69. *Variorum Poems*, pp. 270-276.

70. "Yeats's 'The Grey Rock,'" *Journal of American Folklore*, LXIII (1950), 57-71.

71. *Some Letters of John M. Synge to Lady Gregory and W. B. Yeats*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Dublin: Cuala, 1971), pp. 8-10.

72. *The Tragedies and Tragic-Comedies of Lady Gregory*, ed. Ann Saddlemyer (Gerards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1970), p. 316; emphasis added.

73. *Tragedies and Tragic-Comedies*, pp. 350-351.

74. *Letters*, p. 448 (15 February 1905). In *Our Irish Theatre*, p. 92, Lady Gregory indicates that at an early stage in the composition of the play, Yeats had advised her to give it up.

thing was required to be done with those scenes, but what it was they had not as yet settled upon. . . ."<sup>75</sup> Lady Gregory eventually rewrote the entire play; in the new version both the "Aoibheall" scenes were deleted and she was only referred to in passing.

Yeats's opinion of the change is suggested by another journal entry of 1909. W. A. Henderson had expressed a preference for the earlier version, to which Yeats had replied "The old version pleased the half-educated because it was rhetoric; the new displeases because of its literature."<sup>76</sup> "Rhetoric" was a word repeatedly used by Yeats for low-quality, propagandistic art, and here must mean the "noble patriotic sentiment" Holloway had praised. The germ from which "The Grey Rock" grew appeared in the same journal a year later, at a period between the death of Synge and the thoughts about national literature that were carried over into "J. M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time": "I would write a poem I had long thought of about the man who left Aoibhinn of Craiglea to die at Clontarf and put in it all the bitter feeling one sometimes has about Ireland. The life of faery would be my lyric life."<sup>77</sup> From these facts we can reasonably conclude that at one level "The Grey Rock" was Yeats's own re-writing of *Kincora*, a re-writing in which the offending portions were not omitted but rather preserved and given a totally opposite significance—signalled in the inverted echo of Brian's "I will never break my faith. . . ." By this time Yeats was truly "*in no good repute | With the loud host before the sea, | That think sword strokes were better meant than lover's music . . .*" and by inverting the *Kincora* they had applauded he was signalling once more his disdain for them.

"The Grey Rock" has another, more abstract level of meaning concerning the ontological relationship between the condition of supernatural reality and the imperfect (but more vital and in some ways more attractive) world of human experience—a level epitomized in Aoife's plaintive cry, "Why must the lasting love what passes, / Why are the gods by men betrayed?" "The Dolls" is a poem that in its final form at least, seems to operate almost entirely at that level. "Cradle" is a common Yeatsian metaphor for "incarnation," and "Generations of his sort" puns upon the neo-platonic term for the "fallen" condition and anticipates the "dying generations" of "Sailing to Byzantium" and the soul betrayed into life by the "honey of generation" in "Among School Children." But the poem originated in a more parochial, Irish matrix and its connection with early twentieth-century tension between art and patriotism can still be discerned.

Yeats said in a note that "the fable for this poem came into my head while I was giving some lectures in Dublin. I had noticed once again

75. Joseph Holloway's *Abbey Theatre*, p. 58.

76. *Memoirs*, p. 167. (The words "of its" should perhaps be "it is.")

77. *Memoirs*, p. 241.

how all thought among us is frozen into 'something other than human life.' ”<sup>78</sup> He wrote the poem in September, 1913, the time of the collapse of the Lane gallery project and of the famous poetic lament for O’Leary and romantic Ireland. In a 1903 essay concerning the controversy over *The Shadow of the Glen*, he had characterized the opposition to Synge as an opposition to “life” by the “enemies of life.” For life these enemies substituted generalizations, “partisan fictions.” The task of the artists was to shatter these “wooden images”: “The man of letters looks at those kneeling worshippers who have given up life for a posture, whose nerves have dried up in the contemplation of lifeless wood. He swings his silver hammer and the keepers of the temple cry out, prophesying evil, but he must not mind their cries and their prophesies, but break the wooden necks in two and throw down the wooden bodies. Life will put living bodies in their place till new image-brokers have set up their benches.”<sup>79</sup> A decade later, the opposition of life and the artists, especially Synge, on the one hand, and repressive patriotic and religious forces and wooden images on the other, reappeared in Yeats’s poem.

In his journal for March 6, 1909, Yeats recorded a meeting with the nationalist poet Thomas MacDonagh in which he was discouraged to discover that MacDonagh’s patriotic activities were affecting him adversely: “He is being crushed by the mechanical logic and commonplace eloquence which gives the most power to the most empty mind because, being ‘something other than human life’ it has no use for distinguished feeling or individual thought.”<sup>80</sup> The use of Blake’s phrase here to describe the current politico-intellectual atmosphere is another anticipation of “The Dolls.” Shortly after this Yeats wrote “On those that hated ‘The Playboy of the Western World,’ 1907” (April 5, 1909) in which the nationalist groups are depicted as eunuchs staring upon the virile power of the artist.<sup>81</sup>

With this background, certain elements in “The Dolls” can be seen to reflect the dispute over national literature. The “baby” corresponds to the vital depiction of experience in the work of Synge, Yeats, and the other true artists. The “dolls” represent their nationalist opponents, trumpeting Irish virtues (“ . . . there’s not a man can report / Evil of this place”)<sup>82</sup> and asserting that the offensive art they are being offered is not genuinely Irish at all, but imported “hither” from France, decadent Greece, or England. It is tempting to go a step further and read the entire poem allegorically, but this forces us dangerously close to

78. *Variorum Poems*, p. 820.

79. *Explorations*, pp. 119–121.

80. *Memoirs*, pp. 177–178; see also pp. 191–192, where Yeats quotes the phrase again in relation to Maud Gonne’s political activities. The phrase comes from Blake’s then unpublished “Public Address,” *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman, commentary by Harold Bloom (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. 569.

81. See also *Memoirs*, pp. 175–176 and *Letters*, p. 525.

82. *Variorum Poems*, p. 319.

the ludicrous. Are the doll-maker and his wife to be read as Yeats and Lady Gregory? In fact, it is hard to tell even whether the poem treats the doll-maker and the wife positively or negatively: the last few lines are lyrical, but also susceptible to an almost comic interpretation. But if the doll-makers are the artists rather than the leaders of nationalist opinion, the implication would be that those artists had created not only the images of life but also the sterile audiences who opposed those images. Would this be a recognition of a potential drawback to the power of art to mould life,<sup>83</sup> or are we to make a distinction between the effects produced by the artist when he devotes himself exclusively to his art and when he immerses himself in partisan controversy? Yeats did suggest such a distinction in a journal entry, contrasting his own response to Synge's enemies with his father's: "I fought them, he was nobler—he forgot them";<sup>84</sup> and in his famous maxim that out of the quarrels with others we make rhetoric, of the quarrels with ourselves, poetry. Surely, however, this takes us too far from the poem as we now have it; as a treatment of such problems as we have been considering in this essay it would be too abstract to be effective. We may read the political concerns as a sort of palimpsest, but also we must acknowledge that here Yeats seems to have dealt with them by moving out from them to a subject more universal.

The period at which Yeats wrote these poems was a transitional one for him. He had captured administrative control of the Theatre, and used this power to free the Abbey from programmatic nationalism; however, he had not been able to prevent a grimly realistic type of drama with which he had little sympathy from coming to dominate the Abbey stage. The dream of affecting Irish life through the popular theater was fading, while the idea that such influence as there could be would pass to the many through the enthusiasm of a few was growing.

The indirect approach had been behind the founding in 1903 of the Dun Emer (later Cuala) Press, whose slender, limited editions were too dear to be bought by the masses. These books were the antitypes of the cheap volumes of the "Libraries" of the 'forties and the 'nineties, and in the selection of their contents Yeats wielded the power he had lost in the controversy with Gavan Duffy. His introduction to *Selections from the Writings of Lord Dunsany* (1912) praised the work of a committed Unionist and exulted in the *unpopularity* of the entire series. It has a further significance in relation to the realignment of Yeats's own national sympathies. Donald Torchiana, in his survey of Yeats's growingly positive response to the Irish eighteenth century, treats the introduction as a watershed: "from this time forth Yeats looked at another century [than the nineteenth] when he had hopes for the future of modern Ire-

83. A similar drawback is suggested in "The Tower," in which a man drowns in pursuit of the image of Mary Hynes evoked by Raftery's poetry.

84. *Memoirs*, p. 161 (February 6, 1909).

land. He saw in the eighteenth century and in his own work and that of his Anglo-Irish compatriots materials for a new Irish image."<sup>85</sup>

Also, in the winter of 1913–14 Ezra Pound introduced Yeats to the Japanese Noh theatre, which confirmed him in the direction his own dramatic theories had been moving and provided him with a model for the development of a coterie drama that could be played in the very drawing rooms of the aristocrats. He by no means abandoned his concern for the public theater, but henceforth he would never be at its mercy.<sup>86</sup>

YEATS, like most others, was surprised by the Easter Rising of 1916; but it was a memorable instance of the impact art could have on life. The leaders had immersed themselves not only in the Young Ireland tradition but also in the work of O'Grady (who, ironically, had created his idealized portrait of Cuchulain—a profound influence upon Patrick Pearse—at a period when he had been an active propagandist for the Union) and of the writers of the Irish Renaissance.<sup>87</sup> Many years later in "The Man and the Echo" Yeats would ask, of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" At the time of the Rising itself he was greatly discouraged about the future; but within two weeks he was planning to "return to Dublin to live, to begin building again."<sup>88</sup> The Rising soon became the subject of two of his most overtly "patriotic" later works, "Easter 1916" (with its astonishing concession to the "other" national tradition at its most vulgar, "Wherever green is worn") and *The Dreaming of the Bones*.

He was to feel such hopes periodically throughout the rest of his life. In early 1921 he encouraged AE to write an essay on Unity of Culture with the thought that "if we can present this one idea from many sides we might affect the future of Ireland!"<sup>89</sup> The Free State proved to be disillusioningly unlike the independent nation imagined in literature and political rhetoric, and Yeats's Senate experiences and the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins in 1927 produced another period of discouragement, brilliantly dramatized in "Blood and the Moon." Yet in 1930 Yeats was planning *Wheels and Butterflies*, a volume of plays the intro-

85. Donald T. Torchiana, *W. B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland* (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 33–34.

86. See "A People's Theatre" in *Explorations*, pp. 244–259.

87. See Lady Gregory, *Seventy Years*, p. 548; Peter Kavanagh, *The Story of the Abbey Theatre* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1950), pp. 104–105; Raymond Porter, "Language and Literature in Revival Ireland: The Views of P. H. Pearse," in *Modern Irish Literature*, ed. Raymond J. Porter and James D. Brophy (New York: Iona College Press, 1972), pp. 195–214. On O'Grady, see my *Standish O'Grady* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1970).

88. *Letters*, p. 614 (May 23, 1916).

89. *Letters*, p. 665 (March 14, 1921). Wade has "Unity and Culture," and this may be what Yeats wrote (though in his hand "and" and "of" are occasionally difficult to distinguish); but he presumably meant "Unity of Culture." In the journal entry of 1909 quoted above, Yeats had speculated that a new *Nation* "could change the future of Ireland."

ductions to which would be “addressed to Ireland mainly—a scheme of intellectual nationalisms”;<sup>90</sup> and seven years later he conceived the work which became *On the Boiler* as a “policy for young Ireland.”<sup>91</sup> To all of these plans his own creative work, from “popular” ballads to esoteric dance plays, could contribute. And sometimes that work again took the shaping power of art as its subject, particularly in the last years of his life.

“The Statues” (written in 1938) traces that power through several revolutions of the gyres. Besides alluding to Wilde—

Europe put off that foam when Phidias  
Gave women dreams and dreams their looking glass

—the poem ends as *The King’s Threshold* had with a vision of a “great race” to come; in doing so it brings into a delicate equilibrium the ancient Irish heroic tradition represented by Cuchulain, the modern patriotic movement of which the Rising represented the culmination, and the eighteenth-century Ireland (implicit in the allusion to Berkeley) which Yeats had come to prefer to Pearse’s tradition.<sup>92</sup>

The power of art plays a central role also in “Under Ben Bullen” (1938), in Part IV and especially Part V, which can be read as another poetic rehearsal of the 1907 essay “Poetry and Tradition.” The “base-born products of base beds” are the Paudeens and their literary spokesmen. Against them Yeats sets up, as in the essay, three groups—the peasants, the aristocrats, and the true artists. The last, taking as their subject-matter the two other groups, will find in their past glory ideals which, embodied in vital new works of art, will at some unspecified future time make Ireland great once more.<sup>93</sup>

*The Death of Cuchulain* (written 1938–39) is darker in mood than either of these poems, and its final lyric echoes the concluding stanza of “The Statues” but without that work’s confident assertiveness. Yeats thought Oliver Sheppard’s Cuchulain, placed in the Post Office to commemorate 1916, a “bad statue,”<sup>94</sup> and the lines

No body like his body  
Has modern woman borne

(a last glance at Wilde’s striking image) stress failure. On the other hand,

But an old man looking back on life  
Imagines it in scorn<sup>95</sup>

90. *Letters*, p. 779.

91. *Letters*, p. 901 (28 November 1937).

92. *Variorum Poems*, pp. 610–611.

93. *Variorum Poems*, pp. 636–640.

94. *Scattering Branches*, ed. Stephen Gwynn (New York: Macmillan, 1940), p. 52 (letter of December 29, 1938). The erection of *any* statue *after* the event would be a reversal of what Yeats considered the proper relationship between art and life.

95. *Variorum Plays*, p. 1063; “back” was erroneously omitted from later printings of the play.

can be taken as suggesting that in the play Yeats himself has “imagined” Cuchulain more powerfully and thus has provided a new embodiment of the heroic ideal that offers at least some hope for the future.

A similarly hard-won hope emerges from “The Black Tower” (written 1939). This poem is all the more moving for having its deeply personal vision expressed allegorically, and like all allegories it can be read on various levels. At one of these it is a new version of “The Grey Rock.” The men of the old black tower correspond to Yeats, the Rhymers, and other “pure” artists; their “king,” like Aoife, represents their artistic ideal. Besieging them are the new nationalists, who reject all their values and threaten to destroy them—the “*loud host before the sea*” of “The Grey Rock.” Optimistic predictions that a better time is near at hand are not to be listened to, but the men have their oath, their allegiance to art, and will keep the faith as long as it takes.<sup>96</sup> Yeats had made such a claim for himself in 1912–13, after two decades of fighting for his ideals, and over twenty-five years later he made it again as he faced the darkness of the tomb.

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96. *Variorum Plays*, pp. 635–636.