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The Creator as Destroyer: Nietzschean Morality in Yeats's Where There Is Nothing

by GEORGE MILLS HARPER

It is a fundamental thesis of the Romantic artist that the creation of a new order necessarily entails the destruction of the old, that the phoenix can rise only from the ashes of the dead. The symbolic ambiguity in the necessity of hell to heaven, death to life, and even war to love (compare Blake's "wars of love") haunts the Romantic mind, which usually projects the symbolic truth in these cosmic contraries by means of apocalyptic vision. Utopian social orders are preceded by revolution, and there is a necessary corollary between the destruction-creation paradox of the social order and its projection through art. The aesthetic premises of an age are always related to its socio-political axioms, and both must be destroyed before the vision conceived by the artist can be created. In the prophetic words of William Blake,

All that can be annihilated must be annihilated
That the Children of Jerusalem may be saved from slavery."

As Blake's greatest disciple, W. B. Yeats was quite as certain that annihilation of the old structure must precede the erection of the new. Although he was certain that the end of art is peace, he insisted that its symbolic opposite ("war in our time") is necessary to "Even the wisest man . . . / Before he can accomplish fate." It is my purpose here to explore briefly one of Yeats's extended attempts to resolve this paradox in a little known play, Where There Is Nothing. Although critics generally agree that the play is an artistic failure, it is important to any study of the evolution of Yeats's hero and by extension to the study of

1. In one of Yeats's cryptic notes in the Card File in which he "codified" material from the Automatic Script, he wrote the following: "Choice of emotion of sanctity is used in 2. 3. 24. 25 [i.e., Phases of the Moon], in & through [creative] [enius], as Creator or Destroyer." Filed under "Victim, Teacher," much of the material under this heading is Nietzschean in tone: e.g., "The victim is the one who suffers that he or another may harden subjectively." The Victim is "the triumphant Soul—strong, vital, isolated, never lonely"; the "Teacher is the frail soul" characterized by "weakness, fragility, loneliness."
4. First published as a supplement to The United Irishman (1 November 1902), it subsequently appeared during 1902 and 1903 in four separate printings, all of which are quite rare. Fortunately, it is now reprinted in The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats, ed. Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 1064-1167.
his philosophy at a most crucial time in his quest for a cold hard style by which to "accomplish fate."

The conception and composition of *Where There Is Nothing* coincide with a series of literary discoveries and personal crises: it was planned apparently with the aid of George Moore, who had collaborated on *Diarmuid and Grania* (finished in December, 1900), and had outlined for Yeats "a little scenario which you may be able to develop" on 3 July 1901; in 1900 Yeats broke with MacGregor Mathers and was chiefly responsible for Mathers' expulsion from the Golden Dawn in London; in early 1901 Yeats attempted to heal a serious internal breach in the Golden Dawn and was badly defeated; in 1900 he was once again rejected by Maud Gonne, who was an ardent advocate of armed revolt against the British; finally—and most important to the play—he discovered Nietzsche, "that strong enchanter."

Although Yeats was already disenchanted with the tone, movement, and voice of his early poetry and plays, he found in Nietzsche corroboration of his misgivings. If indeed, as Yeats recalled, John Quinn was the "first to introduce me" to Nietzsche, we can date his discovery with some assurance. Quinn met Yeats in the summer of 1902 on his first trip to Ireland and apparently talked much to Yeats about Nietzsche; and he may have given Yeats the copy of Thomas Common's *Nietzsche as Critic, Philosopher, Poet and Prophet: Choice Selections from His Works* (1901), which was annotated by Yeats. In mid-September, after his return to New York, Quinn mailed his personal copy of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* to Yeats. On 15 November he sent *The Case of Wagner* and *The Genealogy of Morals* along with "several pages of suggested improvements" to *Where There Is Nothing*, which he had published for copyright in America on 24 October 1902.

In the letter accompanying the copy of *Zarathustra* Quinn observed

5. Ibid., pp. 1168-1222.
7. For details of the quarrel see my article "'Meditations upon Unknown Thought': Yeats's Break with MacGregor Mathers," *Yeats Studies*, Number 1 (1971), 175–202.
11. Now in the library of Northwestern University. All but one of the annotations are on the section headed "Ethics" (pp. 89–138). The single exception is on a passage from *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (p. 193). Cited hereafter in the text as N. For a careful examination of these annotations see David S. Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England 1890-1914* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 143–52. According to Thatcher, "Quinn lent Yeats Common's anthology of Nietzsche" when he "visited the USA on his first lecture tour (November 1903 to March 1904)" (p. 139).
12. I cite these details from a personal letter from Professor B. L. Reid dated 22 April 1970.
perceptively that "in recalling some of the dialogue of your play I was reminded of certain passages in 'Zarathustra.'" Since the play was already finished, any indebtedness of the first version to Nietzsche obviously pre-dates Quinn's gift of the three volumes. One paragraph in Quinn's letter strongly suggests a debt Yeats would have been unwilling to admit at this or any subsequent time:

Another reason for my sending it [Zarathustra] was that I saw a copy of it on Moore's library table when I called at his house in company with your father the Saturday night before I went down to Galway. If he is writing a novel on the subject, he may be reading "Zarathustra" with the plan of the novel in his mind. This is only a supposition on my part. The two things may have no connection. Now that your play is finished you will not of course care to waste time on Nietzsche's rhetoric.14

Quinn was, I suspect, merely being circumspect. Yeats and Moore probably planned the play around a Nietzschean hero from the beginning. If Moore had "written a novel on that scenario we composed together,"15 as he telegraphed Yeats, we might have the corroboration we need. In fact, he probably did not write a single line.

Fortunately, we have evidence that he had been reading Nietzsche intensely and extensively before receiving Quinn's gifts. On 26 September, the day before Quinn wrote to say that he had mailed Zarathustra a week earlier, Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory: "I have written to you little and badly of late I am afraid, for the truth is you have a rival in Nietzsche, that strong enchanter. I have read him so much that I have made my eyes bad again. They were getting well it had seemed. Nietzsche completes Blake and has the same roots—I have not read anything with so much excitement since I got to love Morris's stories which have the same curious astringent joy."16

The letter continues with a reference to Where There Is Nothing which suggests that Yeats had been revising it while reading Nietzsche: "Paul is at last finished, sermon and all, and is going to press. I have written in a good deal here and there—sermon gave me most trouble but it is right now. It is as simple as it was and no longer impersonal but altogether a personal dream and it has a Latin text."17 This sermon, which may have been imposed on the play after it was conceived, contains its doctrinal heart. Both idea and subject matter of the sermon are directly indebted to a sermon in Thus Spake Zarathustra included in the collection edited by Thomas Common which Yeats annotated; and Paul

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13. This letter, dated 27 September 1902, is in the John Quinn Memorial Collection, Manuscript Division, New York Public Library, which has kindly approved its quotation here. I am also indebted to Dr. Thomas F. Conroy, Quinn's executor, for permission to quote from unpublished letters.
14. Ibid.
16. Letters, p. 379. According to Thatcher, "there is evidence to show" that this letter "belongs to a period three months later" (p. 139n). But he may be wrong. When Yeats wrote the letter, his play "is going to press." Since Where There Is Nothing was first published on 1 November 1902, the letter to Lady Gregory may have been written before that date. John Kelly, who dates the letter 26 December, imagines "that Yeats started reading Nietzsche in the summer" (personal letter dated 15 January 1979).
17. Ibid. My italics.
Ruttledge is modeled upon Nietzsche's character sketches of Christ and Saint Paul in the same collection. Paul's characterization also reflects Nietzsche's conception of two movements of the soul as Dionysian and Apollonian in *The Birth of Tragedy*.  

In a section which Common entitled "The Old and New Tables," Zarathustra's sermon is Nietzsche's ironic commentary on Christ's Sermon on the Mount as well as Moses' descent from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the Ten Commandments. As the passage begins, Zarathustra is alone on the mountain seated among "old broken tables" of the law, preparing to go once more to man and awaiting the sign that "my hour" has come (N 234). Delivered as a dramatic soliloquy to "my brethren," his sermon is concerned with both the old tables of law and order to be destroyed and the new to be delivered. This passage may have been chiefly responsible for Yeats's conviction that "Nietzsche completes Blake," to whom the Decalogue was anathema.

Paul Ruttledge is likewise concerned with the destruction of "law and number." In the very beginning of the play he insists that he is "talking in parables." At the end of Act III he speaks of the "dreadful fermentation in the Sermon on the Mount" which Christ had promulgated "in the irresponsibility of His omnipotence" (Y 1119). And the parallel to Christ is carried one step further when Father Jerome reminds Paul of a sermon he had preached while in a state of ecstasy "about getting out of the body while still alive, about getting away from law and number" (Y 1131). The visionary trance is, of course, reminiscent of Saint Paul rather than Christ, and the suggestion is extended in Paul's own account of a vision in which he is surrounded by laughing angels on white unicorns that "trampled the ground as though the world were already falling in pieces." "They stood all round me, and they cried out, 'Brother Paul, go and preach; get up and preach, Brother Paul'" (Y 1132). Like Zarathustra, Paul believes that "my hour" has come. As his disciples are being driven from the monastery, he informs them prophetically, "You are ready now to hear the truth. Now I can give you the message that has come to me." Paul's apocalyptic sermon warning that "the walls are beginning to be broken up, that we are going back to the joy of the green earth" (Y 1135), is Nietzsche dramatized and Christianized, a part of Yeats's continued attempt at "the reconciliation of Paganism and Christianity."  

Zarathustra also exhorts his followers to laugh "at whatever had sat admonishing, as a black scarecrow, on the tree of life" and to "fly,

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18. Some of Yeats's knowledge of Nietzsche may have come from the numerous articles about him in London periodicals. See Herbert W. Reichert and Karl Schlechta, eds., *International Nietzsche Bibliography* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of N. C. Press, 1968), pp. 5 ff. See also Thatcher, Chapter II ("The English Translations of Nietzsche"). Among Yeats's friends who were interested in Nietzsche by the turn of the century were John Davidson, Edmund Gosse, Edward Garnett, and Arthur Symons, who read the French translation of *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1902 (Thatcher, p. 39).


quivering like an arrow, with sun-intoxicated rapture, out into distant futures which no dream has yet seen, into warmer souths than ever sculptor has conceived, where Gods in their dancing are ashamed of all clothes” (N 235-36). The laughter, the dancing, and the shedding of clothes are all part of Paul’s characterization. He insisted that only a “terrible joy” can “overturn governments, and all settled order” (Y 1140). He told his disciples that dancing “was a kind of prayer and would bring joy down out of heaven, and make it easier for him to preach” (Y 1126). Both laughter and dancing are, of course, ritualistic projections of return to “joy of the green earth,” an ecstasy suggested in Yeats’s striking phrase “astringent joy” to describe, in Nietzsche’s words, the state of “those suffering from the superabundance of life, who want a Dionysian art” (N 3). Before joy can be attained, however, the old must be cast aside. To signify that “the world of rigid custom and law is broken up,” Yeats resorts to the time-tested device of changing clothing: twice in the play—when he joins a band of tinkers and when he leaves the monastery—Paul divests himself symbolically in his quest for “the joy of the green earth.” It is clear, I think, that Yeats sought to project Paul’s quest in his version of Nietzsche’s Dionysian Art, and that Paul is his Dionysian reveler. But Yeats also learned from The Birth of Tragedy that “the Dionysiac enthusiasm preceded the Apollonic,” as it does in Paul’s quest.

But the emphasis in Where There Is Nothing is on the wild joy of destruction rather than the calm joy of creation, and Nietzsche is the model: Paul insists that “we must put out the Laws” (Y 1137), Zarathustra that we must “break up the old tables” (N 237). Since Zarathustra was surrounded by “new, half-written tables” as well as “old broken tables,” we might assume, I suppose, that Nietzsche was more confident than Yeats at this stage that the new order could be established once the old is destroyed. Paul is certainly not very hopeful at the end. Of course, Nietzsche’s optimism rested—in part at least—on the theory of the superman, a sociological and political nostrum concerning which Yeats had serious reservations.

23. Well-informed critics continue to disagree over the strength of Yeats’s commitment to Nietzsche’s theory of the Übermensch. The interested reader should consult Thatcher, pp. 152-61. After quoting Zwerdling, Ellmann, F. A. C. Wilson, and John Butler Yeats (who warned his son against “the ferocious absurdity of the Overman”), Thatcher concludes that Yeats accepted the theory “as he accepted many other theories he adhered to, that is, mythically, as a symbol of value. . . . Yet it is the implications of the superman theory, rather than the theory itself, which pervade Yeats’s work . . . .” (p. 161).
As the archetypal and only Example of Phase 12, the Phase of the Hero (A Vision, p. 126), Nietzsche remained “the extreme sensitive of all the phases” to Yeats. This is not to say, however, that Nietzsche was an ideal in the sense that Blake, Dante, and Shelley were. Although the verbal portrait of the man of Phase 12 contains more praise than derogation, an unpublished sketch (probably written in 1918) in an early version of A Vision may be a more valid evaluation of Nietzsche’s character. After considering
The first of "the old tables" which Zarathustra calls upon his "brethren" to "break up" is the false conception of holiness in such negations of life as "Thou shalt not rob" and "Thou shalt not slay" (N 237), for Nietzsche is convinced that it is "the preaching of death to call holy that which contradicts and dissuades from life" (N 238). Paul extends this idea in an echo from Blake: "God put holiness into everything that lives, for everything that desires is full of His Will, and everything that is beautiful is full of His Love." Paul therefore insists that "we must destroy the Church" (Y 1138), since it has fostered the negative conception that only one building and one time are holy. Like Nietzsche, Yeats was convinced that not Palestine but every man's homeland was the holy land (N 239).

Even hope itself must be destroyed if the ideal of the creator is to prevail, for hope becomes a part of the stock-in-trade of the middle-class reformer who is concerned with shoring up the old order rather than creating a new. "Go your own ways," Zarathustra instructs his disciples, "and let the people . . . go theirs!" (N 240). Paul preaches that "The Christian's business is not reformation but revelation. . . . We must get rid of everything that is not measureless eternal life. We must put out hope" (Y 1139). The pursuit of wealth and comfort has spawned the mercantile middle class, who have established as truth a spurious code of ethics. Designed for the defense of property rather than the enjoyment of life, this code has led to an aesthetic of reason and a leveling of all classes of society: "It is the era of kings no longer," Zarathustra cries, "See how the people themselves now do just as the traders; they pick up the smallest advantage, even out of the rubbish" (N 240-41). For this reason precisely Paul renounces family and society as he takes to the roads with the tinkers in his search for truth. When people desecrated the "green Earth" and "began to build big houses and big towns," they did so because "they thought it would be better to be comfortable than to be blessed. . . . They grew wealthy and they sat chattering at their doors" (Y 1137). These, according to Zarathustra, are "the calumniators of the world" whose maxims we must "disparage altogether" (N 240). The revolutionary Paul insists that "we must put out the towns" (Y 1138). That is, to use Blake's apocalyptic
phraseology, we must drive the "Plow of ages over Cities / And all their Villages" if we are to dispel the "dismal darkness" of an uncreative civilization.

Both Nietzsche and Yeats were convinced that no new order could be established as long as society was ruled by the grasping middle class, the so-called "good and just." They were self-deluding, hypocritical, and stupidly pious. Before "new peoples arise," Zarathustra insists, we must "destroy, I pray you, destroy such slang of the soft-hearted and the half-and-half!" (N 242) and he dramatizes the destruction with the image of an earthquake. Paul’s vision of the future is likewise projected by apocalyptic symbols: "we must put out the light of the Sun and of the Moon, and all the light of the World and the World itself. We must destroy the World; we must destroy everything that has Law and Number, for where there is nothing, there is God." With that, "He now puts out the last candle" (Y 1139-40). At the end of the play he exhorts his disciples to "keep a pick going at the foundations of the world" (Y 1161).

Finally, both sermons end by citing Christ, the ideal man, as doctrinal authority. Zarathustra uses the crucifixion as a symbolic action of what the piously good always do to the creative man: "Oh, my brethren, once on a time there was one who saw into the hearts of the good and just, and said, ‘They are Pharisees.’ But people did not understand him" (N 242). The good "have no choice" but to be Pharisees, and they "must crucify him who devises his own virtue! That is the truth!" (N 243). Since they are the comfortable, the timid, the seekers after status quo, the stupidly good "hate the creating one most, him who breaks the tables and old standard values, the breaker—they call him the law-breaker":

The good, as one knows, they cannot create; they are always the beginning of the end; They crucify him who inscribes new standard values on new tables, they sacrifice the future to themselves, they crucify the whole future of man!

The good—they have always been the beginning of the end. Oh, my brethren, when I enjoined on you to destroy the good, and the tables of the good, then only did I embark man on his high seas. (N 243)

Paul also finds ideological justification in the paradox of the creator as destroyer. As his sermon ends, he is driven from the monastery by his Father Superior, who calls him a "blasphemous rebel!" Paul’s reply is significant: "Do as you like to me, but you cannot silence my thoughts. I learned them from Jesus Christ, who made a terrible joy and set it to overturn governments, and all settled order" (Y 1140). Here in brief is the theory which led Yeats to deny the dogma of conventional Christianity while he exalted Christ. The image of Christ as the man of imagination, freedom, and joyousness whose first concern was the destruction

24. Blake, p. 365. These lines come, appropriately, from "Night the Ninth" of The Four Zoas.
of law and number is greatly significant in the development of the new Yeatsian hero, and his conception and philosophic outlook are surely indebted to Nietzsche, though as usual Yeats put his peculiar stamp on what he borrowed. Like Blake, he was a slave to no man’s system, and both men cast Christ in their own image of the poet-prophet.

My consideration of the doctrinal heart of Where There Is Nothing may therefore be directed at a section of Common’s book containing sketches of Saint Paul and Christ to which Yeats was indebted for the character of Paul Ruttledge. According to Nietzsche, “longing for death” overtook Christ because “he had known only tears and the melancholy of the Hebrews, and the hatred of the good and just.” But if he had “remained in the wilderness, and far away from the good and just! Perhaps he would then have learned to live and love the earth—and laughter likewise!” “Believe it, my brethren! He died too early; he himself would have disavowed his doctrine if he had attained my age; he was noble enough to disavow!” (N 13).25 Such themes as the “longing for death,” the renunciation of “the good and just,” and the search for life’s secret in love of the earth and laughter are basic in Paul Ruttledge’s characterization. But more important is a much longer passage about Saint Paul. Although Nietzsche denigrates him as “ambitious and obtrusive,” “superstitious and crafty,” he is fascinated by Paul’s “remarkable history,” and declares that “without the bewilderments and tempests of such a mind and soul, Christianity would not have existed, and we should hardly have known of a small Jewish sect, whose Master died on the Cross.” Nietzsche’s admiration was chiefly inspired by what he described as Paul’s “fixed idea”: “What is the state of the case as regards the Jewish law?” (N 13-14). Being a man of sensuous delight in worldly pleasure, he came to hate the law and indeed found it “unfulfillable”: “The law was the cross on which he felt himself nailed” (N 16), and it must be destroyed.

At this point in the development of his character sketch, Nietzsche draws a significant analogy between Paul’s hatred of the law and Martin Luther’s: “Luther may have felt in a similar manner, when in the monastery he sought to become the perfect man of the spiritual ideal; and similarly as with Luther, who one day began to hate the spiritual ideal, the Pope, the saints, and the whole priesthood with a hatred which was the more the less he was able to avow it—so it happened with Paul” (N 15-16). This analogy may not have been lost on Yeats. When he revised Where There Is Nothing in The Unicorn from the Stars, he changed the name of the protagonist from Paul Ruttledge to Martin Hearne, and made him a kind of carpenter-assistant to his uncle, who was a coachmaker. Since the herne was a symbolic fisher bird to Yeats, he may have

25. It is perhaps significant that George Moore employed the fictional device of having Christ return to disavow the misconceptions of “the good and just” in The Apostle (revised as The Essene). Compare also D. H. Lawrence’s The Man Who Died.
conceived Martin Hearne as a kind of ideological amalgam of Luther, Saint Paul, and Christ.

The key to Nietzsche’s Saint Paul, as to Yeats’s Paul Ruttledge, is his intense desire—almost mania—to destroy the law, and the means of destruction came to both Pauls as visionary revelation. According to Nietzsche, as Paul was searching “to find some means to destroy” the law, “the saving thought flashed upon him, together with a vision as it was bound to do in the case of an epileptic”: he saw “the way of escape” in Christ’s words “Why persecutest thou me” “because morality has been swept away, destroyed—that is, fulfilled, on the Cross!” Paul now conceived Christ’s “ignominious death” not as “the main argument against the Messiahship” but as “Necessary in order to do away with the law!” The “consequences of this insight” are astounding:

He becomes all at once the happiest of men; the fate of the Jews, nay, of the whole human race, seems to him involved in this insight, in this instant of sudden illumination; he possesses the thought of thoughts, the key of keys, the light of lights: it is around him henceforth that history will revolve! for he is now the teacher of the destruction of the law! To have become one with Christ—that is to have become also the destroyer of the law with him; to be dead with Christ—that is, also to be dead to the law! Even if it be still possible to sin, it can no longer be against the law: “I am beyond the law.” (N 17)

With the removal of guilt in the death of the law, “the carnal-mindedness in which it resided is now dead,” and man “becomes a ‘Son of God,’ like Christ. The ecstasy of Paul is thereby at its height, and likewise the obtrusiveness of his soul. With the thought of becoming one with Christ, all shame, all subordination, all constraint is removed from his soul, and his ungovernable ambition reveals itself as an anticipatory revelling in divine glories” (N 17–18).

In this striking character sketch are all the primary doctrinal strains of Paul Ruttledge’s character: the sensuous delight in the joy of the green earth, the conviction that freedom can be realized only through the destruction of the law, and an ethical code based upon the assumption that the creative spirit is beyond good and evil.

But Yeats and Nietzsche disagreed on a fundamental issue: whereas Nietzsche was bitterly scornful of Christian doctrine, Yeats merely insisted that its basic truths had been distorted. Like Blake, he believed that “All religions are one.” Moreover, Nietzsche’s hostility to Christianity makes inevitable an ironic clash in the projection of religious convictions which the two Pauls shared: to Nietzsche, Saint Paul’s motives are purely selfish; to Yeats, Paul Ruttledge’s motives are heroic. His attempt to destroy the law represents a positive ethic and aesthetic: “. . . the subject of art is not law, which is a kind of death, but the
praise of life, and it has no commandments that are not positive.’”

Out of this passionate conviction sprang the Latin text of Paul’s sermon, “Et calix meus inebrians quam praeclarus est” (Y 1128), which Yeats translates conveniently as “How splendid is the cup of my drunkenness.” It is, of course, more familiar to us as “My cup runneth over.” A blend of aesthetics and religion, this idea that the worlds of dreamland and drunkenness are contiguous originated in Nietzsche’s thesis, developed in The Birth of Tragedy, that Greek tragedy is the ideal fusion of Apollonian dreams and Dionysian ecstasy. Paul represents Yeats’s dramatic fusion of the two states.

Paul’s conclusion that heaven itself is “a sort of drunkenness, a sort of ecstasy” (Y 1106), leads to the final irony of the creation-destruction paradox: the most creative of all impulses is the yearning for death. In the moment of vision Paul tells his followers, “Death is the last adventure, the first perfect joy, for at death the soul comes into possession of itself, and returns to the joy that made it” (Y 1160). The world of law and number is finally destroyed in the annihilation of the individual: when man is “beyond terror and pity, to realize in fact the eternal delight of becoming, that delight which even involves in itself the joy of annihilating.” In this state of Dionysian ecstasy man “feels himself a god, he himself now walks about enchanted and elated even as the gods whom he saw walking about in his dreams.” He is, at last, truly beyond law and number. In Nietzsche’s words, “Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art”; in self-destruction he has achieved the eternal stasis of the “still unravished bride.”

One by one Paul has been symbolically “plucking off the rags and tatters of the world.” “I pulled down my own house,” he tells an apostle; “now I go out to pull down the world” (Y 1142-43). Having embraced a religion so supernatural that it denies the very meaning of the world, Paul realizes that in fact it does not exist. He imagines being plunged “into the wine barrel of God,” and proclaims apocalyptically, “where there is nothing there is God” (Y 1164). As Nietzsche said, in a passage from which Yeats most likely took his title, “Where there is nothing more to see or to grasp, there is also nothing more for men to do.”

Tragedy, he said, is able “in the person of the tragic hero, to deliver us from the intense longing for this existence, and reminds us with a warning hand of another existence and a higher joy, for which

27. Explorations (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 155. Yeats is speaking of Coriolanus in this passage: “Had Coriolanus not been a law-breaker, neither he nor we had ever discovered, it may be, that noble pride of his. . . .” In affirming his belief that ethics and politics are inseparable from though subordinate to aesthetics, Yeats is, of course, rewriting Shakespeare. In this conviction he is nearer to Blake than to Nietzsche.

28. See also pp. 1106, 1135, and 1161. Paul’s Latin text actually includes the whole of verses 4 and 5 of the twenty-third Psalm, mistakenly cited by Yeats as the twenty-second.


30. Ibid., I, 27.

31. Ibid., XII, 22. The sentence comes from Beyond Good and Evil.
the struggling hero prepares himself presentiently by his destruction, not by his victories.”  

The high keen joy of tragic victory comes only in destruction: Martin Hearne, the remodeled version of Paul Ruttledge, found lasting satisfaction only in the apocalyptic vision of the unicorns of the soul “breaking the world to pieces,” which is surely Yeats’s symbolic device for projecting concretely the revolutionary urge of all great Romantic art in Martin’s compulsion to “Destroy, destroy, destruction is the life-giver! destroy!” (Y 669).

Nietzsche was the impetus and Where There Is Nothing the most significant vehicle for conveying the Romantic paradox that the highest and keenest creative joy can be realized only in destruction: first, of the sullied self which society has made of man, next of the society which has distorted the potential artists we all are, and finally of the world itself. Since this world is really a “Delusion of Ulro” existing only in the mind, it cannot be destroyed by killing British soldiers and burning the big houses but only in the mythopoeic vision of the artist, and Yeats therefore sees himself not only as Paul Ruttledge but also as the fabulous unicorn which was to draw his cart and his plow over the bones of his own dead self.

To be sure, a Romantic artist like Yeats might have reached these aesthetic conclusions unaided or unconsciously from a variety of sources. And he did in fact insist, in a letter to John Quinn, that he had “always felt that the soul has two movements primarily: one to transcend forms, and the other to create forms.” Although he might have found that idea in Blake, he tacitly admits in the following sentence that Nietzsche was mythopoeic support for, if not indeed the source of, his intuition: “Nietzsche, to whom you have been the first to introduce me, calls these [movements] the Dionysiac and the Apollonic, respectively.” Although Yeats probably knew Nietzsche before he met Quinn, it is clear that Quinn urged upon him, by overt suggestion and gifts of books, the virtue of Nietzsche’s “wonderful epigrammatic style.” Whatever the immediate inspiration, Nietzsche is the philosophical base upon which Where There Is Nothing rests. Paul Ruttledge fails as a dramatic character primarily because he is an abstraction to project Yeats’s Romantic conviction that destruction must precede creation. For a brief period of time, perhaps for a variety of reasons but certainly coinciding with the discovery of Nietzsche, Yeats emphasized the necessity to destroy. But he knew also that the Apollonic phase must succeed the Dionysiac, in politics as well as art, if Unity of Culture was to be achieved in Ireland. Six months after the completion of Where There Is Nothing he wrote: “. . . I have to some extent got weary of that wild God Dionysus, and I am hoping that the Far-Darter will come

32. Ibid., I, 159-60.
33. Letters, p. 403.
in his place.’’

In Yeats’s mind perhaps the struggle was never resolved: first the wild one then the Far-Darter gained the ascendancy. They are, after all, mutually dependent in Romantic art.

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Tallahassee