AUTOBIOGRAPHY

But looking back now after many years, and knowing how hard it [is] to keep men in their graves,¹ I will put an inscribed stone over their heads that they may not plague another generation. Their patriotism was exceedingly great, and they were by that undone, driven to form opinions on matters beyond their experience. One is not always at one's best when one says, 'I must consider the reputation of my country.' To me they were mainly hostile men, though allies for momentary reasons, and formidable because they could outface my truths by irresistible deductions from some premise everybody there but myself seemed to accept. For how could I prove by argument that certain wavering rhythms, for instance, are nearer to the soul than the resolute rhythm of political oratory, or even that such a question had any importance? I had by taking to propaganda estranged the artist's only friend, Time, who brings to his side the purified senses of men.

XV

The Parnellite newspaper [was] United Ireland—there I could always write, and find the discussion around any important lecture. The editor,² a pleasant, indolent man who had written a book of fairy stories, left the main control to John McGrath, a man of twenty-five or so, known to have written the famous article³ that accused the anti-Parnellites of the murder of Parnell. To help me he started a controversy under the heading, 'Is Dublin the intellectual capital of the Irish race?'⁴ and decided the matter not by an inquiry as to whether there the ablest Irishmen lived, but as a matter of morals. 'Was not

¹ 'Though grave-diggers' toil is long,
     Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,
     They but thrust their buried men
     Back in the human mind again.'

² Edmund Leamy (1848–1904).
³ Unsigned article, 'Done to Death', United Ireland, 10 October 1891: the accusation was directed against T. M. Healy, John Dillon, and William O'Brien. 'They have killed him. Under God today, we solemnly believe that they have killed him.' The charge was repeated in another unsigned article, 'The Dead Chief', in the same issue.
⁴ McGrath's article appeared in United Ireland, 2 April 1892. A letter from Yeats on the subject was published in United Ireland, 14 May 1892. Uncollected Prose, vol. 1, pp. 222–5.
it the duty of Irishmen to consider Dublin their intellectual capital, and then always to accept its leadership? We had the support of all the Nationalist press. A new Ireland, they told their readers, had been born; the Ireland of Mitchel and Davis had returned.

One lecture, Dr Hyde's 'Necessity of de-Anglicizing Ireland,' led to the formation of [a] sub-committee of the National Literary Society, and presently that sub-committee, neglected as I thought by the council, resigned and became the Gaelic League. We had dropped into the chemical solution the crystal that caused the whole mass to drop its crystals. The London society had no man of the importance of Dr Douglas Hyde, but many young journalists who were able to celebrate our work in the English and American press. There was no limit to our confidence; a few months after our first meeting a history of our movement was published in volume form, and on one of my visits to London I had some difficulty in preventing our council there accepting a circular that began with these words: 'Ireland, despite the dramatic genius of our people, has had no dramatist like Shakespeare, but a sub-committee of the Irish Literary Society has decided that the time has come.'

Maud Gonne's share had been clear to me from the first. She was to found branches throughout Ireland. She had her beauty and her eloquence and enough money to travel, and who could place a limit upon her influence in those little country towns where life is so dull? 'Become the fiery hand of the intellectual movement,' I had said to her. A young man in a solicitor's office, Henry Dixon - perhaps a grandchild of his may be among my readers - had invented an excellent plan and had allowed me to take it for my own. We were to send to any group of men and women who would form a branch a collection of books of Irish literature. In return for the library, which we decided should contain besides books given by friends a couple of pounds' worth of new books, they were to arrange a public lecture and give half the gate money to the central society. In this way the scheme would be partly self-supporting, and the societies were to be centres for the sale of publications and

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"Later on they might be visited by a travelling theatre I was planning out. I had intended to begin with a play upon the life and death of Robert Emmet.

For the only time in my life I was a popular personage, my name known to the crowd and remembered in the affections of the wise. Standish O'Grady, whose History of Ireland: Heroic Period had been the start of us all, showed me a passage in the new book he was writing - a meditation before the mountain of Slieve Gullion. The young man it spoke of - who once seeming of so little account had now become strong to uphold or to strike down - was meant, he said, for a description of myself. On an expedition into Ulster to find some branch there I was asked to call upon a certain workman's wife, an author of patriotic stories in a children's paper. I found her and her four children all in their Sunday best and she made me a little speech and, turning to her children, said, 'When you are grown up and have children of your own you will tell them that you once saw this man.'"

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"While I was working out these plans, in which there was much patriotism and more desire for a fair woman, and watching them prosper beyond my hopes, Maud Gonne had found more exciting work. After the fall of Parnell, tenants evicted during the Land War were abandoned, or so it seemed, by their leaders. There was no longer any money from America and the energies of political Ireland were absorbed in the dispute between Parnellite and anti-Parnellite. She felt responsible for certain of these tenants as she had been among those who advised them to join the Plan of Campaign."
and she began lecturing in France for their benefit. She spoke of the wrongs of Ireland and much of certain Irishmen who were in jail for attempting to blow up public buildings. Some of these men, who had already served many years, were in bad health, and seven or seventeen had, it was said, lost their reason. Neither of the Irish parties would take up their cause for fear of compromising the Home Rule movement with the English electorate. Perhaps her lectures, besides bringing a little money for the evicted tenants, might make England anxious enough for her good name in France to release some of these men.

She lectured first in Paris and then in the French provinces, and her success was exceedingly great. Michael Davitt had come to her help with certain letters; M. Magnard had placed the Figaro at her disposal. Everywhere old journalists and young students spoke of the cruelty of England, and the English Embassy had begun to show signs of uneasiness. I was touched at her success and read with pleasure of her ‘mysterious eye’ that drew some journalist to say it contained the shadow of battles yet to come. I also knew that vague look in the eyes and had often wondered at its meaning – the wisdom that must surely accompany its symbol, her beauty, or lack of any thought? Looking backward now I see that a mastery over popular feeling, abandoned by the members of Parliament through a quarrel that was to last for nine years, was about to pass into her hands. At the moment I was jealous of all those unknown helpers who arranged her lectures – had she not told me too a French friend, seeing her unhappy, had suggested her first lecture? And then too I saw no sufficient gain for so much toil – a few more tenants restored, perhaps a few dynamite prisoners released – and I had begun to dream of a co-ordination of intellectual and political forces. Her oratory, by its emotional temper, was an appeal to herself and also to something uncontrolled, something that could never be co-ordinated. I also, as Hyde later on with more success, had begun to bid for that forsaken leadership.

My Dublin world was even blinder. O'Leary saw but a beautiful

1 Davitt (1846–1926), founder of the Land League.
2 Francis Magnard (1837–94), editor of the Figaro after Villeneuve's death.
3 'dream' deleted.

woman seeking excitement, and Miss Sarah Purser said, continuing her pictorial interpretation, ‘Maud Gonne talks politics in Paris, and literature to you, and at the Horse Show she would talk of a clinking brood mare.’ I always defended her, though I was full of disquiet, and said often, ‘None of you understands her force of character.’ She came to Ireland again and again and often to the West where, through her efforts, all the tenants who had joined some combination through her influence were restored to their houses and farms. When in Dublin, we were always together and she collected books for our country branches and founded, I think, three of the seven branches, which were all we ever attained to. But it was no longer possible for her to become that ‘fiery hand’. Till some political project came into her head she was the woman I had come to love. She lived as ever, surrounded by dogs and birds, and I became gradually aware of many charities – old women or old men past work were always seeking her out; and I began to notice a patience beyond my reach in handling birds or beasts. I could play with bird or beast half the day, but I was not patient with its obstinacy.

XVII

She seemed to understand every subtlety of my own art and especially all my spiritual philosophy, and I was still full of William Blake, and sometimes she would say I had saved her from despair. We worked much with symbols, and she would pass at once into semi-trance and see all very distinctly. I was always seeking to bring her mind by their means into closer union with the soul, and above all with the peace of the soul. Two visions startled me and were a prophecy of moods that had not yet shown themselves in her life. I told her that during life we were able to enter at certain moments the heavenly circles we would inhabit in eternity. I called up the appropriate angelic form and asked how many were her

1 'I will walk no more of books or the long war
But walk by the dry thorn until I have found
Some beggar sheltering from the wind, and there
Manage the talk until her name come round.
If there be rags enough he will know her name
And be well pleased remembering it...'
From 'Her Praise', Collected Poems, p. 169.
circles. She said, ‘He is telling me that I am in Hell, but that some day I will be able to enter three circles, though I cannot now.’ He then showed her three circles: a garden, ‘the circle of almost fulfilled desire’; a place in a wood with a fallen tree, ‘the place of peace eternal, which is very brief for every human soul’; a mountain with a winding road and a cross, ‘the circle of labour from divine love’.

Months later, on another visit to Dublin, and after she had forgotten, as I found, even the number of these circles, he showed her the hells she had fallen in: a great sea with hands as of drowning men rising out of it – a memory of a drawing by Blake perhaps – the circle of unfulfilled desire; a great precipice with dragons trying in vain to climb it – a continual climbing and falling, the circle of unfulfilled aspirations; and then a vast emptiness and the falling petals of a torn rose, the circle of revenge. I read out my notes of the original vision and pointed out the correspondences. ‘Peace eternal’ was the opposite of unfulfilled aspiration, and revenge of ‘labour from the divine love’.

Now too the grey woman showed herself as very evil; hither[to] Maud Gonne had thought her only sorrowful. Speaking suddenly to Madame —,—, a friend who was present while Maud Gonne was in semi-trance, she had described herself as a murderess of children. Upon another occasion this friend, a pious woman, suddenly screamed in the middle of some vision [of] Maud Gonne’s. She had found herself amid the fires of Hell and for days afterwards found all about the smell of sulphur – she said that her towels smelled of it in the morning. She had a great affection for Maud Gonne, and certainly suspected neither of us of diabolical practices. She thought it a warning to herself because she had not joined the Catholic Church. She died a Catholic a few years later. I believe now that Maud Gonne had a strong subconscious conviction that her soul was lost, and that though her conscious mind repelled all its accompanying symbols, these symbols could become visible in minds in close accord with her mind. Perhaps there was also an actual contest between two

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1 ‘Rowley’ deleted. ‘... a certain Mrs Rowley, who is a friend of Miss Gonne’s,...' She is kindly and well-meaning, and ardently Irish,...' Yeats to John O’Leary, February 1892, Letters (Wade), pp. 222–3.

2 Sephiroth: ‘In the philosophy of the Cabala, the ten hypostatized attributes or emanations by means of which the Infinite enters into relation with the Finite.’ O.E.D.
in him an assistant upon equal terms as I expected, I found a domi-
neering obstinacy and an entire lack of any culture that I could
recognize. The books he wished to publish were all books that by
some chance had failed to find publication in his youth, the works of
political associates or of friends long dead. After a long quarrel I
got Dr Hyde and T. W. Rolleston appointed editors1 under Gavan
Duffy to represent the two societies, and began sending up many
suggestions through these editors or through an advisory committee
I had persuaded the London society to elect, and by chance I was
myself a member. In this way Dr Hyde's History of Gaelic Literature2
and Standish O'Grady's Bog and Stars3 and certain lives of Swift
and Goldsmith were added to a series that, had it not been killed
after a couple of years by the books chosen by its editor-in-chief,
would have done much for popular education. Sir Charles Gavan
Duffy insisted on an excellent unpublished historical work—ex-
cellent, that is, for the proceedings of a learned society—by Thomas
Davis,4 and so successful had our plans been that we sold ten thousand
copies before anybody had found time to read it. Unhappily, when
they did read it, they made up their minds to have nothing more to
do with us or our books.

Besides making suggestions I had an ungracious task: to stop the
publication of books Gavan Duffy had set his heart on. Dr Sigerson
and J. F. Taylor sided with Gavan Duffy against me and the move-
ment was soon divided, the young men on the whole taking my side.5
To Sigerson and to Taylor as to Duffy, Ireland was perhaps but one
side in an argument. I wished to make it, by good writing, an ex-
perience, and to be able to say with Walt Whitman, 'I convince as
a sleeping child convinces,' and that was so little formidable and is
it not necessary for Ireland to be formidable? Besides, Taylor's

1 In an article in the Freeman's Journal, 6 September 1893, Yeats protested against
the arrangement by which Gavan Duffy would be appointed sole editor of the New
Irish Publishing Company. Yeats proposed a committee of five members; his protest
was supported by United Ireland, 10 September 1892.
2 The Story of Early Gaelic Literature (London, Unwin; Dublin, Sealy, 1895).
3 The Boy of Stars, and Other Stories and Sketches of Elizabethan Ireland (London,
Unwin; Dublin, Sealy, 1893).
4 The Patriot Parliament of 1689 (1892).
5 Specimens of the controversy appeared in the Freeman's Journal, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10
September 1892, and United Ireland, 10 and 24 September 1892. Uncollected Prose,
vol. 1, pp. 239-45.

imagination, in which there was much chivalry, was touched by the
spectacle of an old man coming back at the end of his life to take up
again the patriotic work of his youth. I was too full of the impatience
of youth to be touched, and began an attack on the literature, above
all on the poetry, of Young Ireland. At some of our committee
meetings questions perhaps of [the] merits of The Spirit of the
Nation,6 a volume of political verse then in its fiftieth edition, would
often put our proper business aside, and passion ran so high at times
between Taylor and myself—O'Leary taking my side— that I have
known strangers drawn by sport or sympathy to step into the room
and nobody have a mind disengaged enough to turn them out.

The cleverer and better educated of those opposed to me did not
think the literature of Young Ireland very satisfactory, but it was
all Ireland had, they said, and if we were to admit its defects England
would take advantage of the admission. The argument would rouse
me to fury; England had only bound the hands of Ireland, they would
silence her intelligence. Others who believed perhaps, as indeed
thousands did, that The Spirit of the Nation was as great lyric poetry
as any in the world would then say that I disliked it because I was
under English influence—the influence of English decadent poets
perhaps—and I would reply that it was they, whose lives were an
argument over wrongs and rights, who could not escape from Eng-
land even in their dreams. I took it all with a seriousness that amuses
my more tolerant years, believing, as I had done years before at
some school debating society, that I stood with Plato and with
Socrates. To Taylor, to Sigerson perhaps, I was but an over-
confident young man who had interrupted a charming compliment
to an old statesman at the end of his career. Upon my side, my
emotions were exasperated by jealousy, for everyone that came near
Maud Gonne made me jealous, and by the strain upon my nerves of
that perplexed wooing. The discussion soon reflected itself in
the subcommittee that chose the books for the country libraries,
and meetings that sometimes took place in her sitting-room became
interminable.

1 The Spirit of the Nation, ed. Thomas Davis (Dublin, 1845).