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account for structures of dependency in 'developing' Latin American nations, see Colm Regan, 'Latin American Dependency Theory and Its Relevance to Ireland', The Crane Bag, 6.2 (1982), pp. 15–20.


THE POETICS OF POLITICS: YEATS AND THE FOUNDING OF THE STATE

But not a single form of government is legitimate for all their eternal principles. You see principle means origin, you must always go back to a revolution, an act of violence, some transient event.

Gustave Flaubert, Sentimental Education

The reading and rereading of Yeats's later poetry and prose with a view to comprehending the political implications of his post-nationalist writing might well bring to mind a remark of Bertolt Brecht's on Shakespeare's Coriolanus. When an actor was troubled by Shakespeare's representation of the plebeians, Brecht insisted on finding value in this awkwardness, 'Because it gives rise to discomfort.' Certainly Yeats continues to cause discomfort, at least to any critic unwilling to separate the aesthetic too readily from the political. The difficulty lies most evidently, of course, in the fact that we must acknowledge, when all quibble and interpretation 'is done and said', the avowed authoritarianism, if not downright fascist sympathies, of his stated politics, while at the same time acknowledging the power of his writing to return and to haunt. I do not think that these terms, borrowed from a Yeatsian lexicon, are too strong: it is as if the very obsessiveness of Yeats's own later poetry, living and reliving its relatively sparse themes and symbols, speaks to a situation, at once 'psychic' and 'political', which we have yet to work through. For when Yeats broods late in life on the probability that play of his 'sent out certain men the English shot', this is by no means an overweening assessment of the extraordinary part his writings played in the forging in Ireland of a mode of subjectivity apt to find its political and ethical realization in sacrifice to the nation yet to be. If then, as I believe to be the case, the later Yeats dwells poetically on the consequences both for the political state and for individual subjects of the triumph of a nationalism whose militant expression absorbs and displaces his own cultural nationalism, we have good
reason to attend. This is all the more so when in the lines just alluded to, as so often, the meditation on the conditions for the foundation of the state intersects with a meditation on the conditions for writing poetry — on its founding ‘themes’.

All this is to suggest neither that we abandon political judgment to aesthetic adoration nor that there is anything to be gained by simple ethical condemnation. Several critics have discussed at length the extent of Yeats’s commitment to fascism and have disagreed in their conclusions.7 There is no need to recapitulate their arguments here. For, though I hope to show that Yeats’s authoritarian political predilections are as insistent as they are consistent with his aesthetic, that argument is of little avail when it comes to the attempt to comprehend the obsessive, haunting quality of his poetry. For whether we condemn the politics and proceed to address the poetry as if it were purged of its political implications or cast out the poetry with the politics, we must assume either the separability of the poetic and the political or the secondariness of the poetic to the political, its status as a translation of political interest, so to speak. In either case the constitutive role played by the aesthetic in the political sphere, as by the political in the aesthetic, is left unaddressed. Any judgment made in the absence of such a questioning is able to assume equally that the difficulties raised by the seeming inexorability with which the logic of Western European history and culture led to fascism are peripheral to the continuing work of aesthetic culture. In the era of what the Frankfurt School termed the ‘administered society’, we might be better to ask whether fascism, in all its specificities, represents an end or a beginning.1 Insofar as the ends of any state are questioned in the questioning of its foundations, Yeats’s insistent brooding on the issue of political and poetic foundation holds these questions open in a manner which continues to arrest our thinking.

I shall argue that the political questions raised by Yeats’s later poetry are inseparable from aesthetic questions, just as, in his earlier writings, a symbolist aesthetic is inseparable from the politics of cultural nationalism. But where the earlier writings are devoted to the project of founding and forging a nation, the later writings, in the wake of the Irish Free State’s foundation, subject all acts of foundation to the most rigorous examination within a set of aesthetic terms which are profoundly antithetical to any tradition of symbolism.6

I will commence then, not with a thematic discussion of Yeats’s politics as revealed in his later poetry, for all the difficulty they may cause us, but, rather, with another kind of difficulty which the volume presents in the most intimate workings of his poetic language. Yeats is not a poet usually associated with semantic obscurity; the difficulties presented by his work are usually held to be resolvable through a proper, or fuller, understanding of his symbols or images, complex as these and their interrelationships may be. Nonetheless, a volume like The Winding Stair presents numerous instances of obscurities which are grounded in its rhetorical strategies and which preclude any attempt to interpret its structures of imagery or argument. The kind of problem I have in mind is well exemplified at certain moments in ‘Byzantium’, a poem already notoriously obscure on account of the density of its imagery. The obscurity of the poem might well cause us a little amused perplexity, since Yeats composed it in part as a gloss for Sturge Moore of the earlier ‘Sailing to Byzantium’. That the poem should have the status of a gloss is not inappropriate to its theme. As we know from A Vision, Byzantium represented for Yeats a culture which had achieved ‘Unity of Being’:

I think that in early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architects and artists – though not, it may be, poets, for language had become the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract – spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people. (pp. 279–80)

Only the poets are excluded here – ‘though not, it may be, poets’ – from what is otherwise an image of changeless unity. The unity of Byzantium, however, is similarly troubled by theological dispute: clearly there is something in the use of language and in the process of gloss and interpretation which profoundly disturbs the achievement of unity in architectural, sculptural or visual arts. In its turn, the poem ‘Byzantium’, itself an interpretation, seems haunted by the trouble of a language which insistently invokes interpretation. Take, for example, its second stanza:

Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades’ bobbin wound in mummy-cloth
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May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;

What this stanza represents is already unclear, though it certainly refers back to the last poem of The Tower, 'All Souls' Night', which is also the epilogue to A Vision, as 'Byzantium' as a whole refers to the first poem in that volume, 'Sailing to Byzantium'. The last stanza of 'All Souls' Night' might assure us that the unwinding of the winding path by 'Hades' bobbin' alludes to a purgatorial act of reliving one's life after death, a theme which runs throughout The Winding Stair. Such a reading, however, still does not resolve the meaning of the image in the larger context of the poem. I can offer no resolution to that problem and make no apology for leaving the question in suspension in order to turn to the other, rhetorical obscurities which the stanza equally exemplifies. The first is a syntactical ambiguity which would not have great significance except that the same grammatical form is found, to similar effect, in the following stanza. In the line 'Before me floats an image, man or shade,' one hesitates momentarily before deciding whether 'image, man or shade' is a list of equivalent and alternative substantives, or one substantive, 'image', qualified uncertainly by one or other of two further substantives in apposition, 'man or shade'. Certainly, this ambiguity is rapidly resolved by the following line and, a point I will return to, would cause no trouble in a performance of the poem. Nonetheless, this moment of hesitation belongs with a pattern of similar ambiguities in this and other poems that I would term 'redundant', being unable to assign any thematic function to them individually beyond the refractory resonances which, collectively, they set in motion.

Of more crucial importance to any interpretation of this stanza is the reading of the lines:

A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon.

These produce a syntactical ambiguity which is resolutely irreducible, since it is impossible to decide whether the subject of this sentence is 'A mouth' which may summon 'Breathless mouths' or 'Breathless mouths' which may summon 'A mouth'. To decide one way or another would make considerable difference to one's understanding of the cultic – or political – direction of the image: is it, for example,
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This crux is, of course, entirely apposite to a poem which is apparently concerned with, among other things, the generation and mastery of images and which is tormented by the question of control. Are the ‘smithies’ who ‘break the flood’ aloof masters taming its fury from above or, like breakwaters, immersed in and potentially eroded by what breaks over them? As I have suggested, the impossibility of resolving the syntactic crossroads of the poem satisfactorily is met by an equally inescapable impossibility of not resolving them in any and every reading, and especially in a reading which performs the poem aloud. Yeats, a poet for whom performance was always a crucial preoccupation of poetic creation, was doubtless highly aware of this, and it is scarcely incidental if what are from every perspective the obscuris lines of the poem seem to evoke, as if in response to their very obscurity, a set of performative speech acts which are exceptionally common in the later Yeats.9

I hail the superhuman; I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.

Not that this invocation and this naming resolves anything for us: the very reversibility of identification that was our syntactical problem persists, as does the problem of defining its cultic or political valency. But, in the face of the irreducible refractoriness of language, the purely formal intervention of a performative speech act may appear to reaffirm the authority of the poet, who might otherwise seem swamped by the energies of his own material. Such emphasis on acts of voicing tends to assert vigorously the continuing (self-) presence of the poet precisely where one might have most cause to question the unity of his intentions.

Indeed, the recourse to performatives at this juncture only compounds our problems of understanding, since it is by individual authorial fiat that allegorical significance is assigned to the image of the mouth here. Personal arrogation of the power of naming – ‘I hail’, ‘I call it ... ’ – prevents any easy assumption that the allegory is rooted in a generally recognizable body of traditional correspondences. The allegorical image, or, in other, more Yeatsian terms, the ‘emblem’, equally intervenes to prevent a reading of the poem in relation to that tradition of symbolism wherein an organic continuity inheres between the particular symbol and the universal totality which it represents, difficult as it may be at times to recompose the universal from the particulars.10 Thus, while it may be reassuring to be referred to the mosaic pavement of the Byzantine forum for the origins of ‘the Emperor’s pavement’, or to mystical traditions for the dolphins and the ‘flames begotten of flame’, this knowledge helps us little in understanding the poem. The meaning of the image emerges, rather, in a quite radical, even arrogant, detachment of the sign from any referent in the real, its significance being looked for rather in the overall syntax of its possibly shifting and certainly cumulative relationship to other, similarly dislocated signs.11

What is asserted of the quasi-mythical Byzantium is perhaps even more true of the apparently more naturalistic poems in The Winding Stair. ‘To take one instance, the opening stanza of ‘Coole and Ballylee, 1931’ appears on first reading to be a quite referential description of the path of the river between two locations, and it is only the stanza’s final line which disturbs that assumption:

Under my window-lodge the waters race,
Oysters below and moon-hens on the top,
Run for a mile undimmed in Heaven’s face
Then darkening through ‘dark’ Rafferty’s cellar’ drop,
Run underground, rise in a rocky place
In Coole demesne, there to finish up
Spread to a lake and drop into a hole.
What’s water but the generated soul?

That final interpretation of the whole scenario forces one to a re-reading, noting the careful distribution of elements above and below, the allegorical significance of the descent of the waters, the cryptic network of significance invoked by the allusion to the blind Gaelic poet Rafferty, and, if one attend either to the Ordnance Survey or to the editor’s notes, the quite arrogant indifference to the actual landscape: Ballylee’s river does not emerge as a lake in Coole Park.12 It is a mark of the success of Yeats’s arrogation of landscape to allegory that it takes us so long to recognize, if we do at all, that the proper response to the question ‘What’s water but the generated soul?’ might simply be ‘Many things.’ The triumph of rhetoric is for a rhetorical question to become an unquestioned fiat, coercing landscape and reader alike into complicity with allegory. Yeats’s writing here is far from the consolatory tradition in recent Irish poetry which seeks to maintain symbolic continuity between place and poetic intention, however much that tradition may seem to take its permission from his will.13

Yeats is rather more our contemporary here, recognizing before its
time that principle of contemporary advertising which knows that for a reader to be confronted openly with hype is not for that reader to be any less sold on the product. ‘Coole and Ballylee, 1931’ is a truly hyperbolic performance, the line of its argument casting far beyond any apparently natural setting. The arrogance of the performance is such that it virtually blinds the recipient to the visualization which its rhetorical flourish dates:

And in a copse of beeches there I stood,
For Nature’s pulled her tragic baskin on
And all the rant’s a mirror to my mood.

If the naturalistic description up to the first line here cited provokes visualization and the attempt to compose a naturally symbolic landscape, the improbable image of Nature in huskins in conjunction with a ranting assertion of correspondence between that hyperbolic landscape and the subjective mood seem virulently to parody that attempt. The pathetic fallacy here so knowingly asserted is underwritten by an unapologetically flaunted tense shift which accentuates the performative power of an imagination deliberately eschewing organic correspondence in favour of the setting of ‘another emblem there’.

For the sudden appearance of the swan here in the moment of its vanishing mimes the process by which a minimal reference to a real representation (‘actual shells of Rosses’ level shore’) subtends the curve of allegorical hyperbole. The assuredness of the rhetoric permits what is in fact metaphoric drift to appear as merely an extension of natural correspondence, whereas, in the following lines, ‘morning’ is dragged in purely in service of the extended allegory to which alone it can be referred:

And, like the soul, it sails into the sight
And in the morning’s gone, no man knows why.

In the very arrogance which constitutes their grace, such gratuitous acts of the allegorical imagination are precisely what the swan itself allegorizes — the wilful if beautiful appropriation of theological acts of grace in order to redeem simultaneously knowledge and ignorance:

And is so lovely that it sets to right
What knowledge or its lack had set away.
So arrogantly pure, a child might think
It can be murdered with a spot of ink.

66

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Only the mind in which ignorance is still the condition of innocence would think to appeal now to organic purity against the artifice of written allegory. The purity of the image is rather the reappraisal of grace by arrogation, is realized in, not sullied by, artificiality.

It is thus, of course, that this apparently robust process of allegoration rejoins with the melancholy traditionally associated with allegory. For precisely as the emblem arises in the vanishing of its real referent, so the aristocratic house of Coole Park, with its redeemingly artificial ‘ceremonies of innocence’, is to be celebrated only in the moment of its demise. This is neither accurate prophecy nor uncanny insight on Yeats’s part, but at most a transformation of what both he and Lady Gregory knew to be imminent, the destruction of Coole Park, into the basis of a poetics. As in ‘Coole Park, 1929’, it is on the exposed ‘foundations of a house’ that the poet ‘takes his stand’, the poetic act being the foundation of a tradition in its demise. One is reminded of Yeats’s remark that Burns represents the end, not the beginning, of a tradition, a remark which is reflected in his own position in the ‘We were the last romantics’ of the final stanza.

This act of settlement is nonetheless poised carefully and shrewdly against the image of the nomad:

Where fashion or mere fantasy decrees
Man shifts about — all that great glory spent —
Like some poor Arab tribe man and his tent.

What looks here like mere depreciation by contrast is more complex: nomadism, normally taken to precede the foundation of settled civilizations, is here taken to come in their wake — ‘all that great glory spent’ — and one might reflect that the very emblems through which the foundations of the house are celebrated are fashioned deliberately by the arbitrary decree of Yeats’s mere fantasy. Decree is the very process by which foundation is established poetically in the moment of its actual demise. The poem’s achieved design is to forge a moment of foundation out of the explicit failure to produce the epic which would ensure the foundation or renewal of a tradition:

But all is changed, that high horse riderless,
Though mounted in that saddle Homer rode
Where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood.

The conjunction of an appeal to the Homeric epic tradition (clearly assimilated here to ‘what poets name/The book of the people’) with
the assertion of the faltering or aborting of that tradition induces another of those moments of syntactic instability which we have seen to produce redundant ambiguities. The inversion which defers Homer to the end of the line makes the past participle 'mounted' refer logically to the 'high horse riderless'. In this case, we need to read the lines to mean that even though this horse, the Pegasus of heroic legend, is still mounted in the same saddle as that in which Homer rode, it is riderless here at Coole Park 'where the swan drifts upon a darkening flood'. Alternatively, we read the lines to mean that the high horse is now riderless despite the fact that Homer once rode it here where the swan now drifts. It would be easy to contend that the first of these readings strains against the natural grain of the lines, were it not for the paradox that the more natural reading, the second, places a much greater strain on the imagination, forcing the entirely hyperbolic claim that Homer actually rode at Coole Park. The most conventional reading of the syntax produces the highest degree of poetic arrogation while the equally logical, though less conventional, reading produces a more unexceptionable assertion. As Yeats reminds us, he is here on his 'high horse' rhetorically, performing a linguistic tour de force whose instability plays paradoxically for a reinforcement of his control.

To try to summarize and clarify what is occurring here demands holding both sides of a paradox simultaneously in mind. The poem is about a founding, but about one which is poetically brought into being only in the moment of its demise. It asserts the value of settlement and tradition, but in a language and imagery which are deliberately and even hyperbolically detached from any organically mimetic relationship to their supposed setting. It asserts correspondence between the mind and its natural 'mirror' (already a strong inversion of the more conventional reflection of nature in the mind) while at the same time radically denaturalizing its natural imagery. It is as though it is precisely in his radical dislocation that the poet, unlike his 'poor Arab tribesman' perhaps, finds the sources of his power, with the result that even, if not most intensely, the very destabilization of his language becomes the index of his strength.

Deft allusion to a poem other than Homer's in these last lines indicates both the reasons for that dislocation and the necessity for the process of recuperation in which Yeats is engaged. That the poem is his own coheres with the act of self-begetting which he is here setting in motion, becoming his own tradition. I refer to the allusion to 'Easter 1916' in 'But all is changed', which takes up the earlier poem's celebrated refrain: 'All changed, changed utterly'. At the very moment where Yeats in 'Coole and Ballylee, 1931' seeks to retrieve a poetic tradition from its demise, he dares reference to the poem in his canon which most thoroughly explores the poet's marginalization or redundancy. For where 'Coole and Ballylee' writes out the failure to maintain epic continuity between the tradition of one family and that of the people, 'Easter 1916' concerns the foundation of a nation by the transformation of individuals into symbols. What disturbs Yeats here, though, is that this transformation takes place not through the intermediary of poetry but in consequence of violence itself. The passive voice of 'All changed, changed utterly' betrays the secondariness of poetic reflection to a process of transformation which has already completed itself, impersonally, as it were.

Simultaneously, change appears in two other domains, that of the poet's function vis-à-vis the national struggle and that of reflection upon the symbol. Yeats, as is well known, devoted three decades of his life to a cultural nationalism whose object was to forge a sense of national identity in Irish subjects such that their own personal identity would be fulfilled only in the creation of the nation. For the Irish tradition of cultural nationalism, literature has always had a primary productive role, both in providing the national institutions that stood in for the political institutions yet to be, and in forming citizens in anticipation of the founding of the state of which they were to be the citizens. Within this tradition, the literary artist represents the nation in the fullest possible sense, not only depicting its life-forms, but simultaneously speaking in its name and being its exemplary prefiguration. This tradition clearly demands of the artist a total ethical and cultural identification with the nation. The national artist not only deploys symbols, but is a symbol, participating organically in what he represents, that is, the spiritual identity of the nation-yet-to-be. It is this function which seems to be erased by the Easter Rising of 1916, the poet losing his projective or prefigurative
role to one which is merely commemorative:

To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.

Not only is it surprising to find Yeats adopting a collective pronoun and figuring it in a maternal image, but the act itself is clearly a redundant one: the obsessive repetition of the child’s name after it is asleep no longer serves as a lullaby, but only asserts one’s own anxious continuity with it in its virtual absence. It is one of Yeats’s earliest reflections upon the obsessive rituals of repetition by which nation states assure the legitimacy of their foundations and maintain their equilibrium.

I shall return to this point, as also to the question of gender which this image raises. I want first, however, to examine further the function of the symbol for nationalism and Yeats’s implicit reflection upon that here, since, though in different terms, I would concur with Samuel Hynes in finding ‘Easter 1916’ to mark a certain rupture in Yeats’s poetics. Where Hynes traces a greater awareness of evil, I would concentrate rather on Yeats’s intense questioning of the status of the symbol and on the legitimacy of the artistic act. These two are not entirely separable. In a famous letter to Lady Gregory, written shortly after the Easter Rising, Yeats mentions how a couple of years earlier Maud Gonne had told him of her dream in which she saw Dublin in flames and in the grip of armed struggle. Yeats remarked to her then that if this dream were prophetic, it was so in a purely symbolic sense. We can read here Yeats’s own anxiety as to the appropriation of symbols by militant nationalism, an anxiety which concerns his own possible displacement. That displacement would, of course, be perfectly logical. When Patrick Pearse refers to the national martyrs as ‘burning symbols’, his terms are as much aesthetic as religious. Just as the poet represents the nation he prefigures, so the martyr in his death identifies utterly with the nation to which he appeals. The acts of militant nationalism are always more significant as symbols than as pragmatic deeds. Both nationalist poetry and nationalist violence have the same end: to organize the incoherent desires of the population towards the goal of popular unity, which is the essential prerequisite of an effective political struggle for national liberation. The narrative of symbolism is one which progressively leads its subjects on by way of symbols which are consubstantial with the nation which they represent. There is thus a very real sense in which those martyrs, whose self-sacrifice in the name of Ireland asserts their utter identity with the nation, displace or substitute for the poet’s symbolic deployment of the lore and landscape of the country. Both intend, as Yeats put it in speaking of his early decision to turn to Gaelic matter, to ‘deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer would accept a common design’.

What is crucial to the design in both cases is the organic continuity between the symbol and what it represents. The national martyr is a member of the inchoate people of which he seeks to make a unified nation; Kathleen Ni Houlihan or Knocknarea are elements of the tradition which has yet to be fulfilled as a poetic unity. Similarly the narrative of desire invoked here is always implicitly one of return, the ultimate return of the desiring subject to identity with itself, a desire therefore which is perpetually deferred and in turn perpetually invoked until symbol, subject and nation come to form a single totality. It is the narrative of that desire which Yeats figures in relation to The Wanderings of Oisin as the ceaseless pursuit of the hornless deer by a hound with one red ear: ‘the desire of the man, which is for the woman, and the desire of the woman which is for the desire of the man’, as Yeats elsewhere glosses it. The dissymmetry keeps open the pursuit in a perpetual deferral which could find closure only in death, but it is the promise of ultimate reconciliation that provides the motive force for a desire that in its process is as politically formative as it is erotically compulsive.

The paradox of ‘Easter 1916’ is that the achievement of such politically symbolic status, the transformation of loyal or clown into martyr that brings about the foundation of the nation, is seen to produce not reconciliation but a troubled tension. The tension subsists metaphorically between the symbolic ‘stone’ and the continuing ‘living stream’ that it troubles; the question posed is the relation between the singular moment in which a nation is founded or constituted and the future history of the citizens it brings into being. Yeats represents that relationship as simultaneously one of trouble and of anxious, obsessive remembrance. For though the stone, like any symbol, continues to reside ‘in the midst of all’, its finality as gravestone on which the names of the national martyrs are inscribed would appear to be at odds with the opening of a future history.
which its function as foundation-stone implies. Its double status obliges a continual recurrence to and questioning of the moment of foundation it represents, with the result that the formerly unificatory function of the symbol is irrevocably ruptured.

Yeats's questions are therefore not so rhetorically disabling to the claims of the men of 1916 as they first appear, being tonally genuinely ambivalent: ‘Was it needless death after all?’ or ‘Was it needless death after all?’ and ‘What if excess of love/Bewildered them till they died?’ or ‘What if excess of love/Bewildered them till they died?’ That second question as I have last stressed it, one whose form is notoriety exploited in ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ as the index of transhuman indifference, here also implies an answer which tends violently to annul all questioning: the historical fate of the founding of a nation is finally indifferent either to the motives or to the legitimacy or necessity of the act performed. The founding of any nation state is necessarily an act of violence irrupting as an absolute discontinuity in the course of history, an utter transformation by way of a singularly transformative utterance, and its legitimacy is established not in itself but in the subsequent remembrance it invokes.

The logic of this acknowledgment is deeply antagonistic to the symbolist tradition that informed cultural nationalism and gave, however disingenuously, an ethical structure to militant nationalism. This is not, of course, to express a preference, ethical or otherwise, for one version of nationalism over another. Cultural nationalism, in Ireland as elsewhere, continues to legitimate a state ultimately founded and maintained by a violence whose explicitness alone varies, while militant nationalism continues to appeal to an organic model of representation to justify its symbolic acts of violence. An appeal to ethics is beside the point where it is precisely this organic model of representation which is to be questioned, common as it is to both versions of nationalism, and fundamental to any ethical judgment of a political act or system. For when Pease, in the name of the people of Ireland, declares Ireland’s independence, he does so in a purely performative act that simultaneously constitutes that people and his own status as its representative. This act spells the passage from a symbolic nationalism that seeks to develop the nation in continuity with what it conceives as its original, self-identical essence, to an allegorical state’ whose relationship to that which it represents is always by appeal to an arbitrary act of constitution.

In the repeated acts of commemoration required by the allegorical state to revalidate the legitimacy of its representative function, we may find equally the rationale for that most striking but little-interrogated phrase, ‘A terrible beauty is born’. It is a phrase which imperiously collapses two fundamental and distinct aesthetic categories, the sublime and the beautiful. Commemoration ensures the reproduction of a social form by way of the reinvocation of the moment of terror that founded it. In traditional aesthetics, those two categories are systematically distinguished in all their elements: the sublime is referred to the masculine domain of production and transcendence evoked in response to the terror of death and the potential dissolution of the self; the beautiful, on the other hand, is relegated to the feminine sphere of reproduction, both literally and in the sense of the harmonious reproduction of social forms. Both cultural and militant nationalism appeal to a version of the sublime, seeking to transcend death even in death by identifying with the greater life of the nation they are producing. The actual foundation of the nation spells the end of this horizon of transcendence, as it spells an end to the developmental desire of cultural nationalism, absorbing terror into the heretofore feminine sphere of remembrative reproduction. Hence the necessary slippage in ‘Easter 1916’ from the militant (and therefore tasteless) Countess Markievicz to the mother ‘murmuring name upon name’, terror of dissolution being relegated to a sphere in which, in a certain sense, it in any case originated, that of reproduction.

A sacrifice that thus leads to no further transcendence is one that seeks to establish itself outside historical time, to lodge in the unchanging space of a rupture in history. The foundation of the nation puts an end to the epic of its historical destiny in a performative act that abolishes history at the same time as it allows the epic to be fulfilled. The abolition of history, however, abolishes equally any principle by which the antinomies that organize the categories of nationalist thought – as indeed of all forms of bourgeois thought – can be synthesized, if only proleptically, by development towards reconciliation. The temporal space that opens in place of abolished historical time threatens to be filled by the merely formal antagonism between antinominal categories: the private interest and the public will, the human and the natural, the individual and the state, and so forth. What actually intervenes to contain this threat is the displacement of history into cultural education: culture becomes a sphere of reproduction – or recreation – rather than production, repetitively medi-
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ating the interpellation of individual subjects into citizens by way of a canon of works formally identical in their 'designs'.

Yet the undeniable fact that, perhaps more than any other modern poet, with the possible exception of T.S. Eliot, Yeats's work has been absorbed into the institutions of cultural education can be explained only in terms of the enormous interpretative effort of humanization and naturalization brought to bear on it, particularly the later work. Against this recuperative tradition, I would argue that Yeats's reaction to the rupture that 'Easter 1916' represents, within his own œuvre as in history itself, is at once relentlessly extreme and profoundly unsettling in political terms. For, far from seeking to offer aesthetic reconciliation, he writes out to its logical extremes the lesson of an act that threatened to displace him both as a poet whose cultural work becomes redundant and as one of the 'colonizers who refuse'.

This writing in extremis proceeds on four levels, distinct but interrelated: a refusal of a symbolism founded in an organic model of natural representation in favour of an allegorical mode; a wresting from the very condition of dislocation of a language use which depends for its authority on authorial fiat alone, being anti-mimetic and performative; the radical deployment of antinomies which, if posited in pure formality, often gain an extraordinary degree of semantic instability by the inorganic arrangements through which their elements produce meaning; a sustained reflection on the political significance of violence and death as the condition of any act of foundation.

III

Antinomy provides the structural principle of The Winding Stair at every level, though this involves neither bald opposition nor developmental synthesis, however much the title of the volume might seem to imply this latter. Certainly antinomy involves the principle that by 1933 is fundamental to Yeats's thought, namely, self-realization through opposition, and entails a transformation of his earlier, developmental notion of symbolism. The two principles are identical both for self-development and for the formation of national identity. The passage quoted above from The Autobiography on the need to 'deepen the political passion of the nation' is followed by this account of a later conviction:

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Nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images, symbolic or evocative of a state of mind, which is of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult to that man, race, or nation; because only the greatest obstacle that can be contemplated without despair robs the will to fall intensity. (The Autobiography, pp. 119-20)

The self-realization through opposition that Yeats here envisages is radically counter to the developmental organization of desire through organic symbols. It is also radically anti-historical, the time required being the purely formal and reversible, giring time of transformation rather than the irreversible temporality of history.

These principles inform 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul', which furnishes the volume The Winding Stair with its title, determining the antithetical images through which each seeks its realization. On the one hand, the Soul, seeking fixity beyond thought and process, must establish as its emblem the winding stair, an image of process and movement, within the tower, which, though from one perspective an image of stability, is depicted as broken and crumbling. The instability of the image's valence is compacted if we recall that in the Tarot the tower is the card not of permanence but of imminent change. Rhetorically, the images are 'set' not mimetically but performatively:

I summon to the winding ancient stair;  
Set all your mind upon the steep ascent;  
Upon the broken, crumbling battlement;  
Upon the breathless starlit air;  
Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;  
Fit every wandering thought upon  
That quarter where all thought is done (my italics)

Performative presentation reduces what could be taken as purely mimetically represented – the stair, the battlement, the starlit air – to equivalence with the purely emblematical – wandering thought, the hidden pole – both being subordinated to a rhetorical question that, as in the first stanza of 'Coole and Ballylee', is really an assertion of identity: 'Who can distinguish darkness from the soul?'

This assertion on the soul's part is met by the Self's retort, a descriptive image of the sword, which, as a counter-image, is fittingly 'still'. This word, repeated four times in a single stanza, accentuates the unchanging nature of the blade, whose curve, like the moon with which it is associated in 'The Tower', gives form to the emblems of change which entwine it:
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The consecrated blade upon my knees
Is Sao’s ancient blade, still as it was,
Still razor-keen, still like a looking-glass
Unspotted by the centuries;
That flowering, silk-en, old embroidery, torn
From some court-lady’s dress and round
The wooden scabbard bound and wound,
Can, tattered, still protect, faded adam.

I accentuate the formative rather than the potentially destructive nature of the sword in order to point up the formality of the representation of change in this poem as, indeed, throughout The Winding Stair. For Yeats is not so much interested here in historical time as in a pre-established form of transformation, imaged in the moon of ‘Blood and the Moon’, through which all things return into their opposites without ever overcoming the antinomies that determine their cycles — or gyres — of change. Or rather, if an end is postulated, it is the same end for both Self and Soul, the end of all dialogue in death. As Yeats put it in ‘Pages from a Diary in 1930’:

I am always, in all I do, driven to a moment which is the realisation of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is the surrender to God of all that I am … Could those two impulses, one as much a part of the truth as the other, be reconciled, or if one or the other could prevail, all life would cease. (Explorations, p. 305)

Evidently the condition of self-realisation for the Soul entails the end of antinomy at the cost of thought itself:

- Such fullness in that quarter overflows
  And falls into the basin of the mind
  That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,
  For intellect no longer knows
  Is from the Other, or Knows from the Known —
  That is to say, ascends to Heaven;
  Only the dead can be forgiven;
  But when I think of that my tongue’s a stone.

It is perhaps less evident, but for all that no less true, that the end of the Self is identical with that of the Soul. Where the Soul ascends the winding stair towards ‘ancestral night’, Self in the second section descends that stair which is the ascent, or evolution, of the ‘finished’ man, repeating it ‘again/And yet again’ until the bitterness of life’s ditches is purged and perfected:

- I am content to follow to its source
  Every event in action or in thought
  Measure the lot, forgive myself the lot!
  When such as I cast out remorse

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So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by everything,
Everything we look upon is blest.

This concluding stanza is not only a celebration of perfectly achieved repetition, but itself repeats the Soul’s final stanza with its imagery of overflowing. And if, according to the Soul, the condition of forgiveness is death — ‘Only the dead can be forgiven’ — so too the destiny of the Self that forgives itself is a state of reciprocal blessedness achieved by laying itself to rest.

This is one reading of the act of ‘casting out remorse’ and, by way of conclusion, I shall consider further this complex term of Yeats’s lexicon. Before doing so, however, I want to indicate how the complex structuring of the whole volume The Winding Stair time and again militates against closure, not in any organic mode of openness but through vigorous, at times even deliberately parodic counter-utterance. The two poems which bracket ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’, ‘Death’ and ‘Blood and the Moon’, may seem to suggest that such masterful utterance as ‘A Dialogue’ deploys is at once the condition of transforming the state of death into a moment of founding, and what troubles all foundation. For if, as ‘Death’ has it, ‘Man has created death’, it is no less true that death has created man, recurrent anticipation of death, or ‘dread’, being what defines man in opposition to the animal. Reading in the light of this poem, we are forcibly reminded that the entry of both Soul and Self into the reconciliation of death is in neither case achieved by any organic process, but precisely by acts of willed self-assertion that achieve only a momentary and tenebrous equilibrium.

The contradiction involved here is taken up in the opening section of ‘Blood and the Moon’, which almost paradoxically takes up the conclusion of ‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’: ‘Blessed be this place,/More blessed still this tower’. The passive, reciprocal blessing that concludes ‘A Dialogue’ returns here as wilful utterance, destroying that delicately poised equilibrium in the very act of enunciation. In the return to ‘source’ which follows, utterance conjoins with power and mastery as the condition of all foundations, ‘A bloody, arrogant power’ establishing itself in the image of the tower or establishing the tower in its image:

- A bloody, arrogant power
  Rose out of the race

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Uttering, mastering it,
Rose like these walls from these
Storm-beaten cottages

But what the tower now signifies is radically unstable, as is the subject of any performative enunciation, always excluded from what its enunciation constitutes. On the one hand, the tower represents mastery itself, dominating the landscape and the cottages with which it is consubstantial. On the other hand, like the tower struck by lightning in the Tarot pack, it is 'half-dead at the top', caught in a moment of transition between life and death, though which will govern the direction of its transformation is uncertain. For this emblem is established 'in mockery', is antiethical, and one is reminded that the origin of the Fool card in the Tarot is the Egyptian god of writing, who was harried initially, not by a dog but by an ape that reversed and troubled all that the god wrote. 57 Like the 'stone' of 'Easter 1916', the tower becomes a duplicitous emblem, it being unclear whether it is set up here in mockery of the arrogant power that, as 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' relates, dwindled, 'Forgetting and forgot', or in mockery of contemporary Ireland. The repetition of the phrase 'in mockery' allows the emblem to point in both directions at once, as well as back to the previous poem, such that the very power of the emblem becomes simultaneously an allegory for the instability of all foundation. By the final stanza, all that subsists is the eternal oscillation between wisdom and power, imaged in the relentless gyration of the lunar cycles, which make a mockery even of mockery itself:

Is every modern nation like the tower,
Half-dead at the top? No matter what I said,
For wisdom is the property of the dead,
A something incompatible with life; and power,
Like everything that has the stain of blood,
A property of the living; but no stain
Can come upon the visage of the moon
When it has looked in glory from a cloud.

Something desolate and empty stirs in the faintly Wordsworthian cadences of those concluding lines. These poems offer no hope of retrieving the reciprocal dance of man and nature that survives now only as the 'malicious dream' tormenting the speakers of the later poem 'The Crazed Moon'. The emblematical power of Yeats's rhetoric is wrested throughout from the ruin of that Romantic tradition in arbitrary declarations of self-creation. We may trace the reasons for this despairing exultation in the poet's own loss of any sense of organic connection with the nation that was founded by Easter 1916, or with his marginalization as a poet of cultural nationalism. If both dislocations find a kind of triumphant expression in the poetical declarations of an alternative Anglo-Irish tradition, the knowingly fictive, performative nature of that act is finally a mockery of any act of foundation claiming representative status. A tradition that finds expression only in its demise is the antithetical image of a state founded in the demise of its founders. Both are perpetuated only in the recurrent act of self-creation, which must constantly locate the foundations of social forms in violence and death rather than continuing organic life.

The terror of these poems lies in the relentlessness with which they discover death at the heart of culture and at the base of the state. Though their exultation in violent acts of the will points the way towards a fascist politics, it draws that political solution from a desperation by no means capable of offering the consolatory myths of belonging on which fascism relies for its legitimation. If, as Walter Benjamin put it, fascism is the 'aestheticization of politics', Yeats's writings are profoundly antagonistic to the representational aesthetics in which fascism finds its legitimation, deriving, for example, the power of the leader from his organic symbolic relation to the race. 58 But to recognize this is equally to realize the futility of any condemnation of Yeats's politics in the name of representative democracy, for it is to the same symbolic aesthetic that democratic states appeal for their own legitimation. And, on the contrary, the very stridency of both Yeats's poetry and his politics stems from the clarity of his recognition of the bankruptcy of the aesthetic or poetic foundations of the state.

No more than the faintest gleam of an alternative can be traced, and then, not unpredictably, in precisely what Yeats's aesthetics can only with difficulty accommodate and are always, obsessively, tempted to expunge: remorse and the erotic pleasure of women. The latter is celebrated triumphantly in the Crazy Jane poems of 'Words for Music, Perhaps' and in 'A Woman Young and Old', but it is as if that theme is incompatible with the mortal theme of The Winding Stair and must be relegated to a separate sequence. Remorse, a term with peculiarly complex resonances in Yeats's idiosyncratic usage, is in 'A Dialogue' that must be cast out for the Self to be reconciled to itself. In 'Vacillation' it is the name given by the heart to that
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‘brand, or flaming breath’ which ‘Comes to destroy/All those antinomies/Of day and night’ and which, in turn, the body calls death. What seems from one perspective to prevent reconciliation in another destroys antinomy. We need, I believe, to understand remorse as that emotion which, beyond the predetermined gyres of Yeatsian time, chooses to assert that things might have been otherwise. It is an appeal to the history of the possible, of what might have been. In the end, it is only such history that opens the possibility of change, brushing the retrospectively inevitable history of what is against its tidy grain.” The loose ends produced by such a history are incompatible with the formal drive of Yeats’s poetic, as indeed they are equally with any representative aesthetic, asserting the irruption of a content that is in excess of any form and inassimilable to narrative time.

It is in this respect that we can begin to understand how remorse associates with the erotic pleasure of women, surprising as the conjunction may seem. For if the tradition of aesthetics has always located the effect of verisimilitude in the domain of the probable, to the explicit rejection of the possible, we can trace the relationship of that aesthetic not only to the ideological verisimilitude of dominant social forces, i.e. to those narratives which alone can ‘seem true’ for any historical moment, but equally to the verisimilar structure of patriarchy. For, famously, patriarchy never seeks to derive the truth claims of its lines of descent (or ascent) from any final biological certainty as to the identity of the male child, but rather from the legal fiction established by the performative ceremonies of marriage. Thus an appeal to a probability supported by legislative performance excludes the subversive possibilities of another performance, that of women’s possibly unbounded pursuit of pleasure.39

Yeats’s own sense of remorse is constantly associated with the erotic, with

that most fecund ditch of all,
The folly that man does
Or must suffer, if he woot
A proud woman not kinded of his soul.
(‘A Dialogue of Self and Soul’)

At one point, late in his career, erotic pleasure and remorse conjoin in an unexpected constellation that, even then, can be represented only through a negative judgment. I refer to that extraordinary speech in Purgatory where the old man, contemplating the repetition by his parent’s ghosts of the moment of his conception, is suddenly

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struck by the thought that the remorse for the destruction of a genealogical line that motivates this living back is indissociable from the reliving of the pleasure of the act:

But there’s a problem: she must live
Through everything in exact detail,
Driven to it by remorse, and yet
Can she renew the sexual act
And find no pleasure in it, and if not,
If pleasure and remorse must both be there,
Which is the greater?

The mother’s pleasure represents a complete excess here: an excess beyond her identity as mother, beyond the end of conception and beyond that chain of determinate consequences that motivates both her remorse and her son’s desire to put an end to history by murdering his own son. It is an irreducible remainder that cannot be subordinated to form or identity and therefore eludes the process of reproduction. As a play with one’s supplementarity to the racial exigencies of reproduction, with what Freud terms ‘the victory of the race over the individual’,32 erotic pleasure is the exact inverse of the ‘terrible beauty’ by which the foundation of the state ensures its commemorative celebration as the means to its continuation. Bizarre conjunction as it may seem, remorse, taken as the negative affect of the history of the possible, and feminine pleasure pose together the question as to what our aesthetic states cannot contain. Like Antigone, whose song closes The Winding Stair and Other Poems, they keep open the question as to the legitimacy of the state that is founded in the four determinations of death.

A full consideration of the antagonism between certain feminisms and the nationalism of the state would require at least another essay, and once again the aporia of a male writer’s texts lead us to the threshold of other questions than can be posed within their terms. In the essays that follow, I explore further the question of the history of the possible in terms of two cultural formations, popular song and agrarian movements, that are occluded by the dominant narratives of statist nationalism. Though space does not allow it here, one could show that the strands of radical feminism which intersected in the early twentieth century with militant socialist nationalism and with which, to different degrees, Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz were identified, drew on subordinate popular traditions in a way that was deeply antithetical to the logic of the state formation. Indeed, to
the state, in act as in principle, both women came to be strongly opposed. Behind Yeats's figure of the shrill and tasteless woman politician, condensed out of these two actual women, lies a significantly different material politics that brings out the aesthetic and theoretical unease that has been so much in evidence here.

NOTES

References to Yeats's works in the following editions are given in the text:
The Autobiography (New York: Macmillan 1953)
Essays and Introductions (London: Macmillan 1960)
Explorations (New York: Collier 1973)
A Vision (New York: Collier 1966)

4. It is again Conor Cruise O'Brien's 'Passion and Cunning' which provides the strongest argument for the fascist implications of Yeats's poetry, especially pp. 244-79. Deane, on the contrary, in 'Yeats and the Idea of Revolution', p. 49, argues that 'this so-called fascism is, in fact, an almost pure specimen of the colonialist mentality'. The indispensable account of Yeats's politics, which is especially judicious in its evaluation, is Elizabeth Cullingford's Yeats, Ireland and Fascism (Dublin 1981). For Yeats's sources in philosophy and political philosophy, see Gratian Freyer, Yeats and the Anti-Democratic Tradition (Dublin 1981).
5. On administered society, see especially Max Horkheimer's Preface to Critical Theory, Selected Essays, M.J. O'Connell et al. (trans.) (New York 1982), pp. vii-viii. The concept governs such essays as Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno's 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception' in The Dialectic of

6. As will be immediately evident, my arguments have been greatly informed by Paul de Man's extraordinary essay 'Image and Emblem in Yeats' in The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York 1984), pp. 145-238. I have critiqued de Man's argument concerning the temporality of symbolism, which structures some of his assumptions about Yeats, in 'Kant's Examples', Representations, 28 (Autumn 1989), pp. 34-54.
8. Paul de Man, in his essay 'The Resistance to Theory', makes a not dissimilar point concerning the title of Yeats's poem, The Fall of Hyperion. As he puts it here, 'Faced with the ineluctable necessity to come to a decision, no grammatical or logical analysis can help us out.' See 'The Resistance to Theory', Theory and History of Literature, vol. 33 (Minneapolis 1987), p. 16.
9. I have been unable to ascertain whether Eric Griffith's paper, 'Yeats's Performance', delivered at the University of Cambridge in 1979, has been published. It contained a very late reading of Yeats's poetry in terms of performative and performance, but, in its criticism of Yeats's lack of ironic sensibility, fell short of realizing its own implications for an understanding of Yeats's politics.
10. I am indebted for these distinctions to Paul de Man's 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' in Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism (London 1983), pp. 187-228, especially p. 207. The provision on the temporality of symbolism that I make above (n. 6) applies equally to this essay.
11. For these referents, see Jeffares, Commentary, pp. 358-9. One hitherto overlooked referent for Yeats's dolphin in fact be those which decorate one of the poems of A. Gia Sophia. The ecclesiastical significance of these dolphins, which I noted in June 1989, is still obscure to me, but they may have suggested Yeats's emblem. I have found no mention of this motif in W.R. Holmes's The Age of Justinian and Theodosius, 2 vols (London 1905-7), which Jeffares cites as Yeats's principal source of information on Santa Sophia and Byzantium. In 'Image and Emblem', p. 193, de Man remarks on the 'intricate network of emblems' through which an understanding of Yeats's poetry must be assembled.
13. On some aspects of the consolatory 'poetics of identity' involved in much of the landscape poetry of contemporary Irish poets see "Pap for the dispossessed" above.
14. For my understanding of hyperbole here, I am greatly indebted to Lee Monk's
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15. Parkinson in W.B. Yeats, *The Later Poems*, p. 145, notes this instability of tone but attributes it merely to Yeats's great difficulty with this particular poem.

16. The oxymoronic concept of 'the ceremony of innocence', which Yeats deploys as early as the 1921 volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, in 'The Second Coming', is glossed in 'A Prayer for my Daughter', in the same volume: 'How bat in custom and in ceremony/Are innocence and beauty born?' It is intrinsically related to the idea of an aristocratic appropriation of the theological concept of grace to social usages such that ceremonial grace becomes indices of theological innocence. This usage Yeats may well have derived from Bakhtin's *Castrigation's Book of the Courtier*, which Joseph Hone records him as having read in Italy in 1907. See W.B. Yeats, 1865-1939 (New York 1943), p. 233. Castigliano discusses the acquisition of grace in the First Book, *The Book of the Courtier*, George Bull (trans.) (Harmondsworth 1976), pp. 65-7. The possible etymological connection of 'ceremony' to 'cerement' compounds the close relation in all of Yeats's writing between foundation and mortality. It is perhaps worth noting, as an instance of the precession which Yeats constantly affects here, that his rhyme scheme enforces a momentary half-verse which is itself oxymoronic between 'sets to right' and 'set away' in this stanza.

17. Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* is the clearest exposition of the relation of allegory and melancholy: 'the only pleasure the melancholic permits himself, and it is a powerful one, is allegory', John Osborne (trans.) (London 1977), p. 185. Benjamin's discussion of the intimate linking of nature (as site of mortality) with history in the composition of allegory, as well as the intimate connection he discerns between allegory and mourning, are extraordinarily pertinent to Yeats's similar usages of an allegorical poetic, especially where Benjamin discusses the relation between ruin and allegory. Ruin in Yeats becomes, unlike poets in the Romantic tradition, the index of a work of foundation, as we have been seeing, through allegorization rather than a celebration of or lament for the organic processes of history. If de Man cites early work of Yeats as privileging the symbolic over the allegorical, it is sure that the later Yeats is much closer to Benjamin's thinking. See Benjamin, pp. 167, 232-5, 177-82 and 162. In 'The Rhetoric of Temporalities', p. 207, de Man insists also on the connection between allegory and the painful recognition of the non-self as non-self.

18. Following de Man's distinction between symbol and allegory, in *The Rhetoric of Temporalities*, one could argue that, whatever symbolic status they claim, the nationalist representatives of a nation yet to be only ever produce allegories of the nation since the allegorical mode will always imply a concept prior to what it represents. Hence perhaps Fredric Jameson's concept of 'national allegories' as the typical form of third-world writing has some pertinence as an engagement with one particular instance of third-world literary traditions where they are concerned with the failure of the symbolic claims made generally for the representative status of new national cultural and political institutions. See Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-National Capitalism', Social Text, 15 (Autumn 1986), p. 69. The problematics of founding a people-nation produces, as Jacques Derrida has shown in the case of the American Declaration of Independence, intractable theoretical problems for representation itself, where representation is said to take place in the sense of a representation which participates in that which it represents, as should the foundling in the people in whose name he speaks. In the absence of an external point of origin, can that which originates also represent that which it brings into being? See Derrida, 'Déclarations d'Indépendance', in *Oséographies* (Paris 1984), pp. 13-32. This aporia of foundation induces a situation akin to that described by Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* as fundamental to allegorical representation until limited by the transcendental intervention of redemption: 'so would the allegorical intention fall from emblem to emblem down into the darkness of its bottomless depths...' (p. 232).

19. I refer to Samuel Hynes's lecture, 'Yeats's Wars', delivered at the Yeats International Summer School, 1988. In 'Image and Emblem', W.B. Yeats, images in Yeats's poetry. University of California Press, 1983, in which the Irish poet is an unwilling participant, the earlier dating of this shift from symbol to emblem at around 1900 (pp. 162-5), but I wish to argue that insofar as the symbol functions as a means to a narrative organization of desire rather than a mode of mimetic representation, the later shift is both fuller and more significant.

20. For this account, see Edward Greenway Mullins, W.B. Yeats and the Easter Rising (Dublin 1965), who quotes Yeats's letter (infra).

Maud Gonne reminds me that she saw the ruined houses about O'Connell Street and the mending and the dying lying around the streets, in the first days of the war. I perfectly remember the vision, and my making light of it by saying that if it was a vision at all it could only have a symbolized meaning.

21. The *Autobiography* (New York 1953), p. 119. It should be remembered that the section 'Four Years: 1887-1891' was published in 1922, making its reflection upon Yeats's early cultural nationalism all the more apposite to his revisionary reflections after 1916.

22. Yeats's gloss is in his notes to the volume *Crossways, The Rose, Collected Poems*, p. 591. According to Richard Finneran, Yeats is recalling a remark of Coleridge's from *Table Talk* (cf. *Collected Poems*, p. 602), De Man in 'Image and Emblem', pp. 176-7, remarks on the place of death as the fulfillment of Yeats's poetic and on his nihilism as the product of 'the unresolved conflict between image and emblem'.


24. Benedict Anderson, in *Imagined Communities* (London 1983), pp. 17-18, remarks on the constant concern of nationalism in general with death. His observation needs to be extended, however, through the consideration not so much of nationalism's affinities with religion per se as of the ethical structure of subjectivity which its invocation of the willingness to die for the people or nation supposes.

25. The division of spheres in Irish nationalism between the masculine sphere not only of action and of production but also of martyrdom, and the feminine sphere,
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in which the national ethos as well as the sons of the nation are literally and figuratively reproduced, is especially marked from Young Ireland on. Though this tradition draws on figures derived from the Celtic tradition of the queen-goddess Ireland perpetuated in the form of Mother Ireland or Kathleen Ni Houlihan, its specific form is both modern and democratic, directed not towards a concept of sacred kingship but towards a concept of ethical citizenship. I have argued this more extensively in Nationalism and Minor Literature (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1987), chapter 6. Such a gendered division of spheres may in fact be characteristic of all forms of nationalism. Partha Chatterjee, in The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman Question' in Kum Kum Ganguli and Sudesh Vaid (eds), Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History (New Brunswick, New Jersey 1990), traces very similar formations in nineteenth-century Indian nationalism. With regard to the sexual division of the sublime and the beautiful, the earliest and perhaps clearest source is Edmund Burke’s Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (1757). It should be noted, however, that though the sublime and the beautiful are both experiences which the male subject has, the beautiful is subordinated only by the female, woman’s body providing, so to speak, the contours of the beautiful. Interestingly, in Burke as in ‘Lasser 1916’, a certain collapse of the beautiful is cast as precisely that which threatens, in the experience of desire, to dissolve and melt the resolution of male subjectivity. In a certain sense, the feminine threat to male subjectivity is the source of both the sublime and the beautiful, subduing both, as indeed the feminisation of both nature and culture might suggest. See especially Burke, The Sublime and the Beautiful, Section 19, ‘The Physical Cause of Love’.


Sometimes I am told in commendation, if the newspaper is Irish, in condemnation if English, that my movement perished under the firing squads of 1916; sometimes that those firing squads made our realistic movement possible. If that statement is true, and it is only so in part, for romance was everywhere receding, it is because in the imagination of Pears and his fellow soldiers the Sacrifice of the Mass had found the Red Branch in the tapestry, they went out to die calling upon Cuchulain. (Essays and Introductions, p. 515)

27. I derive this and other information from Aleister Crowley’s versions of the Tarot. The relation of this representation of Thoth and the Afro-American tradition of the signifying monkey is a matter for interesting historical and transcultural speculation. On the latter, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr, The Signifying Monkey (Oxford 1988).


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materialist ‘regards it as his task to brush history against the grain’ (Illuminations, p. 259).

30. The distinction between the probable and the possible is derived from Aristotle’s Poetics, chapter 9, where what the poet tells is ‘what is possible according to probability or necessity’. See Aristotle, On the Art of Fiction, An English Translation of the Poetics, 2nd impression (Cambridge 1959), p. 29. This distinction of ‘un ordre nécessaire, par opposition à la diversité aléatoire des événements réels’, cf. Aristotle, La Poétique, Roselyne Dupont-Roc and Jean Lallot (ed. and trans.) (Paris 1988), p. 221, is equally what founds the universal and ‘philosophical’ claims of poetry. The distinction recurs, mutatis mutandis, in the founding text of modern aesthetics, Immanuel Kant’s The Critique of Judgement, where the universal validity of the aesthetic judgment is predicated on its abstraction from the contingent or actual judgments of individuals and its consequent elevation to the status of a judgment made ‘as if’ in the name of all mankind. The necessity or universality of the accord that it claims is founded accordingly on a probability rather than on the range of actual possible judgments. Equally demanded here is the subordination of individual pleasure (das Angenehme) in all its contingent variability to a pleasure which is always identical, being that of the identical subject of aesthetic judgment. See especially § 40 of The Critique of Judgement, James Creed Meredith (trans.) (Oxford 1952), pp. 150-4. On the patriarchal law that derives the identity of the child from the nuptial ceremonies, see Frederick Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, Eleanor Burke Leacock (ed.) (New York 1972), p. 131, where he cites the Code Napoléon, Article 312: ‘L’enfant conçu pendant le mariage a pour père le mari’. These conjunctions raise the purely speculative query as to the possible historical relation between the emergence of Western aesthetics and the suppression of a prior matriarchal culture, evidence for which has often been sought in the very tragedies on which Aristotle bases his poetics, and the related query as to whether, on either historical or ideological grounds, a ‘verisimilar’ aesthetic could ever serve insurgent cultural practices, whether feminist, minority or class based. These speculations are material for a whole other essay and project.