

THEME AND FORM IN THE WORK OF

W.B.YEATS 1935-1939

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By

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PREFACE

In this thesis I have aimed to establish certain thematic and formal emphases in the work of W.B. Yeats during the last four years of his life. The variety of Yeats's interests in these years was as great as in any other period of his life; I have chosen to explore those interests which brought him into contact closely with public concerns and with other writers. Thus I deal with Yeats as a political philosopher and patriot, as a founder of the Irish Academy of Letters, as a broadcaster, as editor of an important verse anthology and as a correspondent on poetry with a fellow poet. By quoting widely from primary sources I have tried to allow Yeats to explain himself. My purpose has been historical exploration rather than literary criticism, and so my approach is geared strongly to biography and bibliography, especially in the first two chapters. The picture of Yeats to emerge will be that of a poet strongly traditional in his views of politics and aesthetics, defining his world view sharply in all his work. Although I concentrate on Yeats in all aspects as an Irish writer, for him Ireland was of course a microcosm of Europe and the modern world.

Chapter One begins from a point strictly outside the chronology of the thesis in order to present necessary introductory material; it explores the nature of Yeats's patriotism and his political views, demonstrating his intense concern for the Irish nation as it defined itself in a world troubled by crisis. Chapter Two deals with Yeats as a

discursive theorist on modern poetry and the lyric, much concerned with the problem of poetry as a public art. The following chapter turns attention to textual matters; although I have called it "The Imagery of Music" it also explores briefly aspects of Yeats's late lyrical technique including his use of the refrain in poems. Chapter Four completes the study by examining the two last plays in terms of the material of the preceding chapters. I must emphasise that my interest is not primarily critical. There are many books and articles which treat the plays in literary critical terms or as objects for dramatic criticism. My purpose is to see them as final essays in dramatic form, dealing essentially with the familiar material of Yeats's last period.

I find that the predominant theme of the late Yeats is the ideal character of Ireland, its love of individuality and heroism. The predominant formal preoccupation is with traditional poetry, the folk song and the ballad. All of Yeats's work - poetry, plays and prose works - considered together, illuminates these preoccupations.

Finally, I wish to thank Dr. Brian John, who has given advice and encouragement generously in supervising the writing of this thesis.

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I

W.B.YEATS AS PATRIOT: THE FINAL YEARS

1

1

"This country is exciting", Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespear in April 1933; in this chapter I explore the nature of that excitement for Yeats from 1932 to his death. Ireland had always been the setting of, and inspiration for, much of his work, but during the last decade of his life it became all but an obsession. From 1932 to the end of 1934 Yeats worked towards a definition of the Irish nation, becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the shape the Free State was taking; during 1936 and 1937 he wrote short poems and ballads which concentrate celebration and denunciation into simple poetic forms; his last poems and prose throw contempt on the objects of his hate in plain, often crude, words and phrases.² Yeats's patriotism must be traced through its various attitudes of pride, indignation, exasperation, devotion and exhortation.

Early in his career Yeats had firmly committed himself to Ireland:

1

Letters, p.809.

2

These three stages correspond with the following published works: (a) The King of the Great Clock Tower (1934); (b) New Poems (1938); (c) Last Poems and Two Plays (1939) and On The Boiler (1939).

4

ophy-- conservative, protestant and idealist. By all accounts Yeats was a loyal Senator, a supporter of the Cosgrave administration, though severely critical of it at times. But by the end of the decade he was no longer so hopeful that the Irish Free State would establish the kind of traditions he believed in. And so the poet confronted his country, striving to give depth and weight to his faith in the new Irish nation. He had hoped that the end of hostilities with England and the foundation of the Free State would make possible a flowering of life in Ireland, according to ideals which he recommended in speech and writing. These ideals were based on his distinctive interpretation of eighteenth-century Irish history, where he detected a vitalising tradition. In the eighteenth century, he believed, the Renaissance had at last reached Ireland, making possible a genuine culture during one century--
 5
 "the one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion." He thought that the new Ireland would do well to build its traditions on the values and thought of that century, and was dismayed when he saw his ideal being menaced by an intolerant, bigoted and ignorant Catholic populace. In the Senate and in the press he vigorously attacked the idea of censorship, foreseeing the banishment of intellectual energy:

We have created a native literature - a vigorous intellectual life in Dublin, but the blundering of a censorship may drive much Irish intellect into exile once more, and turn what remains into a bitter polemical energy.

4
 See *Torchiana, W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland*, pp.85-113, and *The Senate Speeches of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Pearce, pp.16-19.

5
Wheels and Butterflies, p.7.

We have created something at once daring and beautiful and gracious, and I may see my life's work and that of my friends, Synge, 'AE', and Lady Gregory, sinking down into a mire of clericalism and anti-clericalism.

I am glad . . . to be out of politics. I'd like to spend my old age as a bee and not as a wasp.⁶

"Clericalism and anti-clericalism": Yeats recognised that bigotry cut both ways, that hatred could spread like a cancer until it diseased the whole populace. Yet he himself, if he avoided the extremes of waspishness, hardly achieved the bee's quality of sweetness and light. He continued to identify himself with the minority whose liberty he believed to be threatened in a way that often did nothing to conciliate his opponents. Making an impassioned protest against a law prohibiting divorce, he defiantly placed himself as an heir in the Protestant Ascendancy tradition, deliberately making a virtue out of his minority position:

I am proud to consider myself a typical man of that minority. We against whom you have done this thing are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell.⁷

Yeats made his credentials and allegiances quite clear to the Senate.

ii

Yeats's work in the Senate finished at a time when all the signs pointed to a change in the political climate of the country. De Valera moved the less extreme Republican members of his party to take their

6

Quoted in Torchiana, W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland, p.143.

7

Senate Speeches, p.99.

seats in the Dail; thereafter the government became increasingly open to persuasion by Catholic feeling in the country. By 1932 Yeats was conscious of changing attitudes, and was rationalising them into a theory of Irish nationhood which accounted for the failure of Ireland's new leaders to renew that tradition of life he had located in the eighteenth century. It was in this new schema that Parnell became central. The King of the Great Clock Tower (1934), of which "A Parnellite at Parnell's Funeral" is the first poem, is the culmination of one development in Yeats's thought; more important, it marks the beginning of a new tone in his poetic treatment of Irish material.

An examination of the origins of the poem "Parnell's Funeral" reveals the progression from a period of thought based on the great eighteenth-century trinity of Swift, Burke and Berkeley to a wider interpretation of the emergence of the Irish nation, with Parnell at its centre. The early stages culminated in the composition of the play "The Words upon the Window Pane" (written during 1930), with its long and important introduction. Similar material then appeared in the introduction to "Fighting the Waves", whose introduction was written not long after that to the Swift play; this later introduction included a stanza later worked into "A Parnellite at Parnell's Funeral". From this

8

Actually, this poem is part I only of "Parnell's Funeral" as it appears in Collected Poems; part II first appeared as part of the poem in New Poems, but it had been printed as the untitled conclusion to the "Commentary on 'A Parnellite at Parnell's Funeral'" in The King of the Great Clock Tower. See the appendix for my argument that part II was written some months later than part I and for a fuller account of how the complete poem evolved.

material, Yeats worked towards a theory explaining the whole pattern of Irish history, and the nature of the Irish identity, in which Parnell occupied the central place.

The "Introduction to 'The Words upon the Window Pane' " is essentially about Swift, but the essay points forward to a succession of essays and speeches which later gather into "A Parnellite at Parnell's Funeral", as this casual remark indicates:

The fall of Parnell had freed imagination from practical politics, from agrarian grievance and political enmity, and turned it to imaginative nationalism, to Gaelic, to the ancient stories, and at last to lyrical poetry and to drama.⁹

The fragment of the poem printed as part of the "Introduction to 'Fighting the Waves' " emphasised the end of Parnell's career as marking the beginning of a phase in Irish life and literature. Yeats makes it responsible for the wave of idealistic nationalistic literature, which had included the work of "AE", Padraic Colum, Lady Gregory, Synge and Yeats himself; for,

Repelled by what had seemed the sole reality, we had turned to romantic dreaming, to the nobility of tradition.¹⁰

A more long-term result of Parnell's fall had been nothing less than a nation's revulsion from itself, so that writers,

Instead of turning their backs upon the actual Ireland of their day, . . . attacked everything that had made it possible, and in Ireland and among the Irish in England

9

Wheels and Butterflies, p.5.

10

Ibid., p.63.

11

made more friends than enemies by their attacks.

This school of Cork Realists, and the whole post-Parnell movement, is mentioned only in passing; but here are the germs of the profound analysis developed in the following two years. Already, Yeats sees Parnell's rejection by his Irish Parliamentary Party and his death in terms of a sacrifice, the hysterical mob panting for sacrificial violence, Parnell dragged down by his own people. The sacrificial note is only one part of the historical theme which forms its background. I shall examine this larger theme before looking at the final form of the poem.

Many events came together in 1932 to incite Yeats to an understanding of the events and literature of his own life as history; the re-writing of A Vision was already leading him in the same direction. When Lady Gregory died, a powerful link with the past was broken, and Yeats's frequently used phrase "Augusta Gregory, John Synge and I" took on added vibrancy, representing a call to past and passing greatness and nobility. Then De Valera took power with the Fianna Fail party, an event which dismayed Yeats. Finally, Yeats undertook the organisation of an Irish Academy of Letters and - partly with the aim of raising support and money for the Academy - set off on his last lecture tour of America. With this background in mind the shape and content of the address he used on his tour is clearly understandable. He spoke on "Modern Ireland" and again developed the theme of the Irish nation after Parnell. It is quite clear that this lecture grew out of parts of the two introductions already quoted.

Parnell is the dominating figure in this address, and his fall is the key event. The emphasis is on the twentieth century, and its importance in the finding of a national theme; consequently the eighteenth century - Swift and Berkeley - occupies only a single page. There is much more about sacrifice, which Yeats believed had been a necessary preoccupation of the Irish people since Parnell's death. In searching for the origin of what he calls "the Irish excitement" Yeats goes back to the beginning of the eighteenth century:

The modern Irish nation began when at the end of the seventeenth century the victorious Protestant governing class quarreled with England about the wool trade. In 1705 or 6 Irish intellect declared its separate identity when Berkeley defined the Whig philosophy of Locke and Newton and wrote after his definition 'We Irish do not think so.' 12

A further "formative moment" one century later allowed the peasantry "assert their will and . . . [discover] constitutional agitation and democratic Catholicism." The third moment, and now for Yeats the most important, was the moment of Parnell. It occurred not at Parnell's deposition, but at his interment in Glasnevin.

Yeats may have come to regret that when he met Maud Gonne on Kingstown Pier he did not accompany her to Glasnevin cemetery to see Parnell's body lowered into the grave, for the phenomenon that happened at that moment was now a central myth for him, and a cornerstone of his explanation of modern Ireland and its literature. He quotes Standish O'Grady's account of the event:

. . . I state a fact; it was witnessed by thousands. While

his followers were committing Charles Parnell's remains to the earth, the sky was bright with strange lights and flames. Only a coincidence, possibly; and yet persons not superstitious have maintained that there is some mysterious sympathy between the human soul and the elements, and that storms and other elemental disturbances have too often succeeded or accompanied great battles to be regarded as only fortuitous. . . . Those strange flames recall to my memory what is told of similar phenomena said to have been witnessed when tidings of the death of the great Christian Saint, Columba, overran the North-West of Europe.¹³

Standish O'Grady's account, raising the possibility of "mysterious sympathy" between the human soul and the heavens and perhaps linking Parnell with Saint Columba, was obviously suitable as an account of the central myth. Yeats goes on to expand the few hints he had already given (in the "Introduction to 'Fighting the Waves' ") and recounts how Parnell's degradation and death led first to an imaginative nationalistic literature, when young men turned "away from politics altogether, taking to Gaelic, taking to literature, or remaining in politics that they might substitute for speech more violent action." Parnell was a "sacrificial victim", and his tragedy was a "national disaster":

From that national humiliation, from the resolution to destroy all that made the humiliation possible, from that sacrificial victim I derive almost all that is living in the imagination of Ireland today.¹⁴

Yeats then recounts the famous episode in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man which comes to a climax when Charles Casey,

13

Ibid., p.14.

14

Ibid., p.15.

his head buried in his hands, sobs "Poor Parnell. My dead King."¹⁵

The Parnell history, and its focus in the story of the Glasnevin interment, constituted a powerful myth for Yeats and was the cornerstone of his explanation of the emergence of modern Ireland. It had made a literary revival possible because it led writers away from the futility of politics to express the life of the people in a literature which was heroic, imaginative and based on the peasantry. Lady Gregory, when she said "we do our work to restore dignity to Ireland", summed up the unconscious aspirations of the post-Parnell literature. This literature was a reaction against the national debasement, a glorification of Ireland's past (and thus her soul, and perhaps her destiny) in literature. Lady Gregory, Synge, Yeats and James Stephens are named as the "typical figures of the first movement of thought after the death of Parnell."¹⁶

Yeats's fascination with the theme of sacrifice can be traced in the American address and in "A Parnellite at Parnell's Funeral" and its "Commentary . . .". Sacrifice was of many kinds, however, and Yeats is not altogether consistent in his use of it as theme and symbol. One traditional use of the sacrifice theme found ultimate expression in Pearse's famous poem, translated by Lady Gregory, which he quotes:

15

These quotations from three contemporaries, O'Grady, Joyce and Yeats, suggest the centrality of Parnell as a figure of myth in modern Ireland. Yeats was neither original nor unusual in singling out Parnell as the Saint of modern Ireland.

16

Irish Renaissance, p.16.

I am Ireland,
Older than the Hag of Beara.
Great my pride,
I gave birth to brave Cuchulain.

Great my shame,
My own children killed their mother.

I am Ireland,
Lonelier than the Hag of Beara.¹⁷

This is the classic theme of Irish treachery and duplicity where Ireland appeals for help in the guise of an old woman (as in Yeats's own "Kathleen ni Houlihan") and is often betrayed. In "A Parnellite . . ." a central point is that Parnell was betrayed by his own people:

None shared our guilt; nor did we play a part
Upon a painted stage when we devoured his heart.

This particular aspect of sacrifice was embodied in the figure and fate of Parnell. The first part of the poem combines many details of
18
sacrificial symbolism all of which interweave to assert the efficacy of the sacrifice; as Yeats remarks in the "Commentary . . .",

I think of the symbolism of the star shot with an arrow,
described in the appendix to my book Autobiographies. I
ask if the fall of a star may not upon occasion, symbolise
an accepted sacrifice.¹⁹

The thought of part I is clear, and in keeping with the foregoing

17

Ibid., pp.21-22; Yeats later included this in his Oxford Book of Modern Verse.

18

The details of this symbolism can be traced back to 1896. See Letters, p.266; Mythologies, p.340; Autobiographies, pp.372-375.

19

Variorum, p.834.

analysis of the modern Irish nation. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the deaths of their heroes affected the people only superficially whereas Parnell's betrayal was an Irish blasphemy, an event which gave the lie to the romantic patriotism of the past. Because it was an accepted sacrifice it could give new life to the "bare soul" of Ireland. But, as Yeats points out, the new life could come only if the people would consume Parnell's heart. Indeed, at first the most salutary effect of the degradation was a mood of "national self-contempt":

Joyce was to be the most famous of a movement of imagination that was, I am convinced, a direct expression of the national self-contempt that followed the death of Parnell.²⁰

Joyce, he claims, was an insignificant influence on Irish writers, but he was the most brilliant of a group that included Frank O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, Liam O'Flaherty, Sean O'Casey and Francis Stuart. All these writers were realists and satirists turning to rend Ireland rather than England, not fully aware that their nation's hurt was self-imposed.

A further aspect of the sacrificial theme had already been suggested by Yeats in the poems "Easter 1916" and "The Rose Tree", which emphasised the voluntary self-sacrifice of some of Ireland's heroes, sacrifices made consciously for the sake of Ireland. This theme would have been familiar to members of the American audiences who had read these poems about the Easter Rising. Between the death of Parnell in 1891 and the execution of the leaders of the Rising in 1916, Yeats told the audience, "the mood of the mystic victim" entered the life of Ireland. Pearse, an intensely nationalistic schoolmaster, spread an atmos-

phere of impending disaster, a hope for ultimate salvation for Ireland which would be brought about only by voluntary bloodshed. This doctrine which impelled the leaders of the 1916 Rising was more terrible than anything which had preceded it. Parnell as victim had been sacrificed by the nation; the 1916 heroes acted the double role of priest and victim.

The "Commentary . . ." sets the poem in the same context as that provided by the lecture "Modern Ireland", and thus makes it quite clear that the poem is not exclusively about Parnell but also about the Irish nation and the moment that brought modern Ireland into being. Yet the poem, in a sense, reads better as it stands on its own feet in the Collected Poems. Yeats was trying to synthesise events and literary movements into a coherent, unified, symbolic interpretation of his country's history. Part I of the poem was finished after his return from America and ended the poetic silence he had endured since Lady Gregory's death. Clearly, it draws on the thoughts of the lecture and translates them into a complex poem, integrating a number of previously-used symbolic details. The five stanzas catch the funeral scene in a moment of mythic illumination, forcefully emphasising the significance of the moment as an "accepted sacrifice". The other emphases are on the real nature of the event as opposed to ritualism; the guilt of Parnell's own people; the suggestion that the sacrifice was completed by the eating of the slain King's heart; and the willed desolation of an onlooker like Yeats, thirsting for accusation to be turned on himself and his "bare soul".

21

Letters, p.808. In April 1933 Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespeare: "I have been in a dream finishing a poem, the first I have done since Lady Gregory's death. American lectures and so on filled up my time."

But in all this there is nothing of the theme of the self-imposed "mystic sacrifice" of Pearse nor of the theme as it was found by Irish writers:

When I would represent the finding of the theme, I think of a strange Eastern tale, of the Japanese boy who ran screaming from an abbot who had cut off his fingers, then, standing and looking back, suddenly attained Nirvana. The poetic theme is found, like sanctity, through desire and humiliation.²²

Or, as he put it in the "Commentary . . .":

We had passed through an initiation like that of the Tibetan ascetic, who staggers half dead from a trance, where he has seen himself eaten alive and has not yet learned that the eater was himself.²³

The very different second part, appended to the commentary before its printing and later worked in as a balance to the first part of "Parnell's Funeral", is in fact a better gloss on the meaning of the poem. As a whole, it does not fit into the discussion of the literary theme or its Eastern illustrations but is essentially a comment on Irish nationalism and politics, especially since the creation of the Free State. The unsaid sentence, the suggestion that the Irish people devoured Parnell's heart, showed that Yeats had changed his mind, so that the sacrificial symbolism is set up only to be destroyed. In Yeats's terms the sacrifice depended for its completion on the mob devouring the slain victim. The poem as a whole of two parts makes a point that has nothing to do with the poetic theme enunciated in the speech and commentary. It reflects Yeats's disappointment with Ireland's leaders who had not learned from Parnell.

22

Irish Renaissance, p.25.

23

Variorum, p.835.

The wheel had come full circle, and the eighteenth-century theme again prevailed: the antithesis between Swift of the dark grove of solitude and bitter wisdom on the one hand, and De Valera the demagogue on the other. The "second thoughts" of the appended quatrains directed the meaning of the whole away from its first design so that the dead King Parnell stands in judgement on his countrymen. By condemning mob mediocrity, demagoguery and civil rancour Yeats contributed to the school of realism in Irish literature. If he was at one with James Joyce and the other writers he classified in this school, in turning his attack upon his own people, the poems do not suggest that through this painful recognition of national culpability he found either sanctity or Nirvana.

I have shown that Yeats returned from his American tour with a store of matured thought and emotion which achieved poetic form in "Parnell's Funeral", I. On his return he was engaged in "endless occupation", the public aspects of which gave material for other poetry. From the letters, the bibliographical lists of Yeats's productions during the last five years of his life, and the biographies, it is possible to fill in the relation between this "endless occupation", his thought and the poems of the last years. The following account should show how "Parnell's Funeral" reached its final bi-partite form when Yeats's observation of the political life of the Irish Free State produced the judgement we see in part II of that poem. The same reflections led him into what some readers have thought of as his Fascist engagement and the writing of the "Three Songs to the Same Tune".

Yeats did not ease himself into the rhythm of composition again until late in 1933. The Academy, the Abbey Theatre (undergoing major

changes in policy and administration) and the thoughts of his American address kept him occupied. A more significant reason for the 1933 silence is provided in a letter:

At the moment I am trying in association with [an] ex-cabinet minister, an eminent lawyer, and a philosopher, to work out a social theory which can be used against Communism in Ireland-- what looks like emerging is Fascism modified by religion. This country is exciting. I am told that De Valera has said in private that within three years he will be torn in pieces. It reminds me of a saying by O'Higgins to his wife 'Nobody can expect to live who has done what I have.' No sooner does a politician get into power than he begins to seek unpopularity. It is the cult of sacrifice planted in the nation by the executions of 1916. Read O'Flaherty's novel The Martyr, a book forbidden by our censor, and very mad in the end, but powerful and curious as an attack upon the cult. I asked a high government officer once if he could describe the head of the I.R.A. He began 'That is so and so who has [the cult] of suffering and is always putting himself in positions where he will be persecuted.' ²⁴

Literature and life were strongly interacting. The "cult of sacrifice" that Yeats had spoken of in "Modern Ireland" conditioned his thinking on the political events which were occurring during 1933.

I have already mentioned Yeats's dislike of De Valera and his party, which had come to power in 1932. Yeats was an anxious observer of political events from the time of his return to Ireland in 1933. He saw the Church (especially Jesuits) and the De Valera ministry as agents of ignorance, opposed to the new Academy which was preparing to fight censorship; he anticipated a period of conflict before De Valera would be prepared to repudiate the mob which supported him. ²⁵ In a later letter he

²⁴
Letters, pp.808-809 (April, 1933).

²⁵
Ibid., p.805 (21 February 1933).

compared De Valera to Mussolini and Hitler-- "All three have exactly the
²⁶
 same aim so far as I can judge." When Olivia Shakespear asked him why
 he could not get over to London, he wrote and told her that he had to
 stay in Dublin because of the Irish Academy and the Abbey Theatre-- to
 prevent the first from flying apart, and the second from "complete cler-
²⁷
 ical domination." In the same letter he mentions beginning "a longish
 poem", presumably "A Parnellite at Parnell's Funeral". The April letter,
 already quoted above, shows all these strands coming together and Yeats
 participating in designing a social theory to combat the democratic
 masses, for the first time mentioning Fascism as a possible bulwark
 against chaos. Again, the fanaticism of Ireland appears in the form of a
 mania for sacrifice and martyrdom-- De Valera, O'Higgins and O'Flaherty's
The Martyr.

By July Yeats was already vaguely associated with the Blueshirts,
 supporting a "Fascist opposition . . . forming behind the scenes" in
²⁸
 readiness to act when challenge or chance gave the cue. Politics had
 again become a matter of heroism, only now the valour was not found with-
 in the government (as it had been when Yeats's friend Kevin O'Higgins, as
 Minister of Justice, faced continual danger) but was forming, according
 to Yeats, among the educated who were being forced by De Valera to define
 the "most fundamental issues".

26

Ibid., p.806.

27

Ibid., p.808 (14 March 1933).

28

Ibid., pp.811-812 (13 July 1933).

The spirit of these letters is excited, even optimistic, but Yeats soon developed misgivings. An old friend, Captain Dermot MacManus, brought the chosen leader of the Blueshirts to see Yeats and discuss with him an
 29
 "anti-democratic philosophy". Yeats was sceptical of MacManus's assertion that the leaders of the new Blueshirts would be assassinated; he dismissed it as a dream. Here, as in the "Commentary on the 'Three Songs' ", he is leavening heroics with irony. He did not think O'Duffy a great man and confessed that he would doubtless hate the new regime when and if it took power. But he reserved his most caustic statement, which suddenly reduced the struggle to the level of the undifferentiating logic of history, to the end of the letter:

We are about to exhaust our last Utopia, the State. An Irish leader once said 'The future of mankind will be much like its past, pretty mean.'

In a later group of poems, Yeats strengthens this epigrammatic terseness, as in "Parnell":

Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man:
 'Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone.' 30

Excitement and scepticism continually balance each other. Yeats was less interested in or hopeful about the success of the movement than he was glad that "it will certainly bring into discussion all the things I care
 31
 for." By November even Yeats was talking about "our political comedy." 32

29

Ibid., pp.812-813 (23 July 1933).

30

The words of the second line are direct quotation of Parnell.

31

Ibid., p.814 (17 August 1933).

32

Ibid., p.815 (20 September 1933).

This comedy ended very anti-climactically; De Valera's party remained in power, while O'Duffy took temporary leadership of Cosgrave's Dail opposition. It is difficult to see Yeats as a doctrinaire Fascist in the light of these letters; his "flirtation" with O'Duffy's Blueshirts had lasted no longer than some seven months.

It was during O'Duffy's visit to Yeats in July 1933 that the latter promised to write a song for the Blueshirts. The proposed "national song" became the "Three Songs to the Same Tune"; they show Yeats turning from the hope that his ideals of government, derived from his eighteenth-century ideals, might coincide with the aims of the new movement, to a recognition that no change was foreseeable. The three songs went through several revisions; Yeats claimed that he increased their obscurity but essentially he merely made two of the choruses indirect and fanciful. Several details of the composition record, and the remarks Yeats appended to them in the Spectator and The King of the Great Clock Tower, cast doubt on the standard interpretation that they were originally intended for the use of marching Blueshirts,³³ despite Yeats's own hints. Richard Ellmann gives the dates of composition as Nov.30, 1933-Feb.27, 1934.³⁴ The first date is suggested by Yeats's remark in a letter to Olivia Shakespear,³⁵ but even there he was talking about possible performance at the Abbey Theatre, rather than about

33

See, for example, Unterecker, Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats, pp.244-245, and Ellmann, Yeats. The Man and the Masks, p.277.

34

The Identity of Yeats, p.293.

35

Letters, p.818 (30 November 1933).

their use as popular marching songs. And weeks previously, as I have shown, Yeats had begun to see the Blueshirt excitement as a comedy-fiasco. It is not likely then that he was ever very confident that they would become a rallying cry for O'Duffy's supporters.

The long note which Yeats had printed after the title when the songs appeared in the Spectator suggests the nature of his difficulties. A reminder of the eighteenth-century ideal, and the presence of Burke, are evident in the first sentence:

In politics I have but one passion and one thought, rancour against all who, except under the most dire necessity, disturb public order, a conviction that public order cannot long persist without the rule of educated and able men.³⁶

These fixed ideals for the state and Yeats's growing penchant for simple lyrics set to music and sung by the people came together in the songs. One sentence from the Spectator note provides an extraordinarily perceptive comment of self-analysis which should have been taken into account by readers who have seen in these songs signs of a politically committed Fascist poet:

Some months ago that passion [i.e., rancour] laid hold upon me with the violence which unfits the poet for all politics but his own.³⁷

Yeats would have been delighted if songs of his could have been used in the service of a state that shared and expressed his ideals. But the songs, he admits, were the work of a poet passing through a phase of passion and indignation; and so they emerged as simple emotional attitudes, "rhetoric-

36

Variorum, p.543.

37

Ibid.

al", "exaggerated" and "rancorous", the type of propaganda in poetry Yeats often deprecated. But the propaganda was all on the poet's own behalf, a heightened presentation of his own emotional attitudes. While the Fascist aims of Dermot MacManus and O'Duffy may have been the nearest equivalent possible to Yeats's passion for discipline and order in the service of educated rulers, they were not very nearly equivalent; so the songs were offered to anybody who found them "singable . . . and worth singing".

The picture of companies of young Dubliners and others, clad in blue shirts, marching the streets singing verses from any of the three songs is ludicrous. For example, the second verse of the third song (in its original version) is the poet's attempt to create a feeling of simple, patriotic fervour:

When Nations are empty up there at the top,
When order has weakened or faction is strong,
Time for us all boys, to hit on a tune boys,
Take to the roads and go marching along;
Lift, every mother's son,
Lift, lift, lift up the tune.

Kipling's marching songs are equally banal, but they appealed to a wider range of soldiers' emotional attitudes; Yeats achieves only a single banal sentiment, the forced camaraderie of "boys together" and "true sons". As patriotic songs they were misconceived for if Yeats had known anything of the songs used by youth and para-military organisations in Germany and Italy he would have realised that they were promoted by monolithic governments adept at propaganda. In Ireland there may not have been more than twenty people who understood, let alone supported, Yeats's philosophy of the state (and O'Duffy was certainly not one of them), who believed that

the Nation was "empty . . . at the top"; and, of course, in literal terms it would have been this group that composed a faction. Swift would surely have recognised this irony. Dreaming apart, even Yeats did not really think that the answer to Ireland's problems was to send all enthusiasts on to the roads to march and sing.

Yeats may have liked the idea of the songs because they do put his political philosophy into simple, vigorous language, and give them an emotional content; but both words and emotions become so exaggerated and crude in parts as to vitiate the artistic purpose-- as when he writes "What's equality? - Muck in the yard." All the same, it is a distinctive sort of talent that can fit words and phrases like "justify" and "renowned generations" into the strict metre of a song, then match them with colloquialisms like "a trouble of fools".

When he wrote the "Commentary . . ." early in 1934, Yeats³⁸ offered "these trivial songs and what remains to me of life" to a government or party which would follow his own aims for the state, by seeking to give the nation a "Unity of Culture"³⁹ on which to found its life; such a government or party would, he admitted, "need force, marching men . . ." and it would promise "a discipline, a way of life". It is clear from this major section of the commentary that Yeats was

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Variorum, p.835.

39

Unity of Culture meant, for Yeats, the wider quality in the state analogous to Unity of Being in the individual. In terms of A Vision it is Full Moon or phase 15. It was attained in Byzantium, where all workers were "absorbed in their subject matter and that the vision of the whole people" (A Vision, pp.279-280). Yeats's admiration for modern Sweden, expressed in the section of Autobiographies called "The Bounty of Sweden", suggests that he thought modern Sweden came close to achieving such a unity.

not prepared to endorse General O'Duffy and his Blueshirts in 1934. The postscript appended to the preceding commentary and dated August 1934 was in fact superfluous except that it made explicit what was already implied: that no party "had, or was about to have, or might be persuaded to have, some such aim as mine".

The postscript, like the main body of the commentary, is rather gnomic. Yeats was capable of writing letters and prose commentaries with tongue firmly in cheek; the reader must often read between the lines to catch at the intended meaning. For instance, although Yeats claimed to have rendered the songs unsingable by any party, there is no reason to suppose that if O'Duffy's party could sing the versions printed in the Spectator they could not sing those which appeared some months later in The King of the Great Clock Tower. Technically, except for two of the choruses, there is little difference in the suitability for singing between the two sets. The two choruses which replaced the single quatrain of the earlier versions bear so little relation to the songs that the original quatrain could easily have been substituted for them in performance. Little was altered in the revisions. The second song of the original set became the first of the revised set; new lines were substituted for the fifth and sixth lines of each stanza in this song, which thus lost a repeated refrain appended to each stanza; the chorus to the first song of the original set, which had served for all three songs, was replaced in the new songs I and II by new quatrains, indirect and unrelated to the songs, rhythmically too irregular for the metre of the tune. Of the more extensive revisions to Song III (the same number in each printing), not all wrenched the simpler rhythms to

make singing impossible. In fact, it was the revised third song which was published as a Broadside in December 1935. Yeats was still attracted to the idea of having his ballads sung.

The prose commentary to these three songs in The King of the Great Clock Tower indicates only that Yeats was experimenting with the form of the popular ballad with political material; that he found some suitable incentive to write such ballads; and that, when he thought there was a danger of being taken seriously politically, he went some way towards dissociating himself from any connection with the Blueshirt movement.

During 1933 and 1934, then, Yeats engaged in a running criticism of Ireland. The government and the church aroused his hostility because of illiberal attitudes towards censorship, the new Irish Academy of Letters, and the Abbey Theatre. The "mob", that undefined mass always a target for Yeats's barbs, could not draw him away from his conservative, authoritarian philosophy. The final word to emerge as a summation of his growing scepticism at this time was the untitled two stanzas appended to the postscript of the commentary discussed above. Surprisingly and dramatically, and very explicitly, it posed a question which could leave the reader in no doubt that Yeats was calling a plague on all houses, and thoroughly disengaging himself:

Here is fresh matter, poet,
Matter for old age meet;
Might of the Church and the State,
Their mobs put under their feet.
O but heart's wine shall run pure
Mind's bread grow sweet.

That were a cowardly song.
 Wander in dreams no more;
 What if the Church and the State
 Are the mob that howls at the door?
 Wine shall run thick to the end,
 Bread taste sour.

No wonder that Yeats's authority was a lonely authority. His thinking during the twenties had imaged forth a State that was a country's pride, a Utopia; now the Utopia was exhausting itself. The rule of the mob, the bigotry of the Church, the stupidity of parading "Fascists", the weak demagoguery of the government-- there was, after all, no viable choice here for the idealist, conservative poet. Was there, after all, any distinction between the mob and the institutions? Yeats feared there was not, and his voice became scornful.

iii

Such was Yeats's development as patriot and political thinker up to the publication of the volume The King of the Great Clock Tower in 1934. Examination of his work in the years preceding the publication of his New Poems (1938) shows Yeats cultivating the extreme rage of an old man, a mask he adopted consciously and was capable of donning with irony. But during 1934 Yeats turned abruptly away from thinking and writing about his country and its political life. "Political" interests gave way to the composition of the play "The King of the Great Clock Tower", and later some of the "Supernatural Songs"; the latter were written rapidly while the Quala volume bearing the name of the play as title was with the printers. To Olivia Shakespear Yeats wrote:

I think I have finished with self-expression and if I write more verse it will be impersonal, perhaps even

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going back to my early self.

Then, in 1935, he was commissioned to compile the Oxford Book of Modern Verse and his friendship with the poet Dorothy Wellesley began. During this period his profound interest in the possibilities of lyric poetry developed as he defined his kind of poetry as against that of other moderns. In 1936, with the Oxford anthology work completed, two dominating interests came together-- the interest in lyric poetry, ballads and folk songs for music, and the excitement of political attitudes which had seemed to diminish during 1934. Yeats had not lost interest in his own political views, however; they were merely in abeyance until some incident should spur him into strong expression again.

Letters to Ethel Mannin written during the period 1935-7 show Yeats picking up the debate about the relationship between the poet and politics. It seems that Ethel Mannin felt strongly that a writer should commit his political views to paper. Yeats had in fact done this directly and indirectly over many years, but he was now ready to deprecate such activity, distinguishing sharply between poetry on the one hand and politics, propaganda and journalism on the other. For instance, he wrote:

Our traditions only permit us to bless, for the arts are an extension of the beatitudes. Blessed be heroic death (Shakespeare's tragedies), blessed be heroic life (Cervantes), blessed be the wise (Balzac). . . . There are three very important persons (1) a man playing the flute (2) a man carving a statue (3) a man in a woman's arms. Goethe said we must renounce, and I think propaganda - I wish I had thought of this when I was young - is among the things they thus renounce.⁴¹

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Letters, p.816.

41

Ibid., pp.831-832.

Thus, when it came to the point, Yeats defended the impersonal detachment of the artist, who was essentially a celebrator of beauty and love. The same thought provides the idea of the poem "Politics", written in 1938:

And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms!

The poet must renounce propaganda because it brings bitterness into art whose business it is to bless. By "propaganda" Yeats means the cultivation of intense, personal emotion in a cause outside the poet's sphere of beatitude. Like rhetoric, propaganda establishes a dangerous link between the poet and his audience, breaking down the vital distinctions between poet and public, leader and mob. It is the antithesis of that "sense of something steel-like and cold within the will"⁴² which he recommended to Dorothy Wellesley. The debate with Ethel Mannin was a debate within the poet's self, the resolution of which was to hang in the balance till the end of Yeats's life. For much of his poetry was indeed personal in the sense that it conveyed unmistakably strong, sometimes wilfully exaggerated, polemical emotion. There was throughout these years a see-sawing between the cultivation of impersonal apolitical song and the cultivation of "lust and rage".

His return to this public poetry came about when the ageing author of a book on Parnell⁴³ asked Yeats for support in vindicating

⁴²
Letters on Poetry, p.7.

⁴³
Henry Harrison, the author of Parnell Vindicated (1931).

Parnell's reputation. This Irish hero was already, for Yeats, the symbol of the ideal leader, the proud, lonely and aloof man who worked for his country's well-being while refusing to become a mere instrument of the people-- a man of the same stamp as John O'Leary and Kevin O'Higgins. The resulting ballad, "Come Gather Round Me, Parnellites", combines some of the generic features of Yeats's Irish ballads. His central figure is a wronged man who has claims to admiration-- he was a "hunted man", "he fought the might of England/And saved the Irish poor", he "loved a lass", and above all he was the true subject for such a song, a proud, lovely man. The ballad form was a natural instrument for vindication in Yeats's hands, ideal for the business of celebration. It joined hero and followers in a ritual praise of those ideal qualities which are not far removed from the three figures mentioned in the letter quoted above: "a man playing the flute, a man carving a statue, and a man in a woman's arms." The Parnellites of the ballad are identified with their leader in their manliness, their love of heroism, a filled glass and a pretty girl.

It was no accident that this Parnell ballad was the first of a series celebrating, vindicating and defiling. Yeats was finding the ballad form congenial and exulting in the verbal and rhythmical qualities which made music a natural accompaniment. There was a subtle process of association of ideas at work here. The poet's business was to "sing": song, for Yeats, had connotations linking form and content, since the form had to be kept simple and singable and the content was celebration of some kind, as in the traditional usage of the classical epic poets;

44

song, because it united poet to people, was impersonal. Here is one of the basic reasons for the apparent inconsistencies of Yeats's position. By attempting to escape from personal, propagandist emotion through ballad writing, he was bringing himself closer than ever to it in poetry. The ballad form, because it destroyed the separate identity of poet and audience, impelled the poet to project his own "lust and rage" into its most simple and potent form.

"Come Gather Round Me, Parnellites" was properly grouped, in New Poems (1938), with a number of other ballads concerned with praising and defiling, written in late 1936 and early 1937. There was a ballad on Cromwell, two on Roger Casement, one on the O'Rahilly, a further epigram about Parnell and a brief praise of revolution. The Letters on Poetry serve as a linking commentary on these poems, and one letter in particular is revealing:

I write poem after poem, all intended for music, all very simple--- as a modern Indian poet has said 'no longer the singer but the song'. I will send you that Cromwell when I can get it typed. It is very poignant because it was my own state watching romance & nobility disappear. I have recovered a power of moving the common man I had in my youth. The poems I can write now will go into the general memory.⁴⁵

To this letter he appended three brief epigrammatic poems - "The Great Day", "Parnell" and "What was Lost" - and said that they "give the essence of my politics". The message of each of the three is similar:

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Cf., from "Under Ben Bulbin",
Irish poets, learn your trade,
Sing whatever is well made,

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Letters on Poetry, p.123.

Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!
 A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot.
 Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again!
 The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.
 ("The Great Day")

Thus there are two kinds of poem referred to in this letter, the ballads such as "The Curse of Cromwell" and the epigrams called "Fragments" when they were first printed. The ballads are exulting and extravagant, a praise of the proud and a reviling of the mean. The specific subjects, Parnell, Casement and the O'Rahilly, embody Yeats's values so that his role is that of celebrant. The simplicity of these ballads is bardic; Yeats is essentially laudator temporis acti, "watching romance and nobility disappear". In passing from figures like Swift, Burke, Berkeley to Parnell, Casement and the O'Rahilly he was accentuating even more personal qualities, clear and unequivocal emotions which glorified a human being. The epigrams, though they may represent "the essence of my politics", are in fact far removed from external politics and owe nothing to any possible admiration for Fascism Yeats may or may not have entertained. The "essence" was determined by the two firm aspects underlying his philosophy, one the certainty of a perpetual cyclic pattern in history which precluded ideas like "progress", the other an instinctive and conservative scepticism about mankind's ability to develop or perfect man as individual or society. Violence, revolution, battles: all were part and parcel of human energy consuming itself, without in any way affecting the nature of the world.

Yeats's poetic inspiration was working in two directions during this time:

You think it horrible that lust and rage
 Should dance attention upon my old age;
 They were not such a plague when I was young;
 What else have I to spur me into song?
 ("The Spur")

Lust and rage are appropriately linked, because a ferment of excitement was forcing itself into poems which explored the sexual in frank terms and poems which explored and exploited simple emotional states. The forms of the ballad and terse lyric avoided subtle irony, and conflicting states and claims; they exploited the frustration and passion of old age. Yeats's rage increased as incitements were offered which led to poems increasingly harsh, bitter and intense. The Parnell ballad was written at the instigation of an old Parnellite with whom Yeats identified himself and the readers by calling on the old, faithful followers to "stand upright while you can"-- the last members of a dying clan. The tone is boisterous, bawdy and defiant. But, as with all these poems of celebration there is a balance of praise and blame. Parnell was hero, and his stature is increased by drawing attention to his victimisation by the Church and the Party (appropriately capitalised-- "the mob at the door"), the villains who spread false stories.

"The Curse of Cromwell" owed less to a particular incitement than to a generalised historical view of Ireland that Yeats had developed during the early thirties. Cromwell is the symbol of a puritan oppression that caused the split in Ireland between the life of gay, imaginative revelry common to the lords and ladies and the beggar-singer and the climbing, materialist ambition of the upstart "whiggish" Irish. The beggary of this poem could be lauded with the aristocrats because "His

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fathers served their fathers before Christ was crucified".

Of these poems of rage, "The Curse of Cromwell" stands out as a poem of suggestive resonance, transcending vilification. It first appeared as a Broadside, eminently suited to a traditional folk tune, as the words themselves owe much to phrases and attitudes and traditions of the Irish peasantry; the tone of the singer, again "watching romance and nobility disappear", produces a genuine feeling of bitterness which is larger than Yeats's simple rage against the modern civilisation which scorns the poet and the world he stands for as things of no account.

On one side, then, Yeats exalts the man who stands alone, self-justified and resolute. These men - Casement, the O'Rahilly, Parnell - were the anchors of humanity for Yeats in that they stood firm against danger and death coming in their most petty forms. On the other hand was the mob, represented by the middle classes and their institutions--the State and the Church. England itself could serve as a symbol for this post-Industrial Revolution world of the masses. Despite his protests to

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Ethel Mannin and Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats displayed particular animus

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The phrase is picked up from the "Commentary on 'A Parnellite at Parnell's Funeral'", where it reads: "My fathers served their fathers before Christ was crucified"; this was all but a direct borrowing from a Gaelic poet, Egan O'Rahilly (quoted in Frank O'Connor, The Backward Look, pp.113-114). Yeats also borrowed from O'Connor's translation of "Kilcass" for the lines

. . . the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay

Cf. section V of "Under Ben Bulbin". (See Jeffares, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats, p.464).

47

Letters, p.872; Letters on Poetry, p.111.

towards English institutions, including that of the Poet Laureate.

The ballad form, Yeats had discovered, fitted his material and his attitudes closely; he believed that his book New Poems was a better collection than his previous volume:

I have corrected the proofs of New Poems, my poems of the last few years, that for the moment please me better than anything I have done. I have got the town out of my verse. It is all nonchalant verse - or so it seems to me - like the opening of your 'Horses'. 48

New Poems are now printed misleadingly as the first section, thirty-five poems, of "Last Poems" in the collected editions; there is a case to be made for their standing as a separate volume. The book was remarkably homogeneous because - contrary to Yeats's statement that they were "of the last few years" - the poems were all written within the space of little more than a year. Yeats did not compose quickly. He was excited by this volume partly because the poems had come rapidly and easily as a result of new energy, a stimulating friendship and an aesthetic preoccupation with the ballad form.

Whether or not one agrees that New Poems deserves a high estimate, there are points of strength in the volume. "The Gyres" and "Lapis Lazuli" are fine poems in Yeats's more traditional manner, and "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" should convince readers sceptical about the sincerity of his backward-looking, vindicating manner. But by a stroke of genius, the last two poems together sum up the theme of the volume. The greatest temptation was to sink, surfeited with emotion; the challenge was to confront life as it offered up its models of excellence to oblivion. Yeats

accepted the challenge, prayed for "an old man's frenzy", sang of heroism, gaiety and wildness and rejected the temptation of mere "good company". The title of the last poem, "Are you Content?", echoes other questions of the volume-- "'What then?' sang Plato's ghost. 'What then?'" and the refrain to "The O'Rahilly", "How goes the weather?" Such questions are unanswerable but - one year before his death - Yeats would not agree to becoming "an old hunter talking with Gods":

Infirm and aged I might stay
In some good company,
I who have always hated work,
Smiling at the sea,
Or demonstrate in my own life
What Robert Browning meant
By an old hunter talking with Gods;
But I am not content.

Plato's ghost might sing "what then?" but Yeats was not ready to talk with Gods; he had more poems, plays and essays to write.

iv

The work of Yeats's last year or so of life was vigorous and diverse-- poems, two plays, essays and introductions designed for the definitive collected edition and a polemical occasional publication. Two books, both posthumously published, included the work of a part of 1937, 1938 and January 1939. These were Last Poems and Two Plays and On the Boiler. Contrary to widespread belief Yeats had not given finality to his work when he died. "Under Ben Bulbin", the poem now placed at the end of Collected Poems, can give the impression that Yeats planned and wrote last words; actually, as Curtis Bradford points out, ⁴⁹ the final work that Yeats acc-

⁴⁹
"On Yeats's Last Poems" in Yeats: "Last Poems", ed. Stallworthy, pp. 75-77.

omplished was to write out in numbered order the contents for his next projected volume of poems and plays, of which "Under Ben Bulbin" was to be the first poem.

If New Poems and Last Poems were to appear as distinct sections of the Collected Poems, as they logically should, the reader would readily sense differences between the two. He would notice that Yeats finally moved away from the ballad form to write poems more formal and complete (with a few exceptions); he would notice a wider variety of themes in the later volume, and a different treatment of the Irish theme. It is this last treatment of the poet's national theme I wish to discuss briefly in the final section of this chapter, as it appears in On the Boiler and Last Poems.

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There are poems which look back in time, recalling past experience to question it, as in "The Man and the Echo":

All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.

The same poem voices an equally important concern, a questioning of the future:

O Rocky Voice
Shall we in that great night rejoice?

This kind of questioning about the nature of experience after death runs through the last volume, but an equally significant aspect is the prophetic gaze directed towards the future experience of Ireland and of the

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The plays "Purgatory" and "The Death of Cuchulain" were printed in Last Poems and Two Plays, the former also in On the Boiler; I reserve discussion of these to the final chapter.

world, which makes the term "apocalyptic" appropriate to On the Boiler and Last Poems. Despite Curtis Bradford, the positioning of "Under Ben Bulbin" in the latter volume - either at the beginning or the end - does not really matter; in either place it underscores the themes of the last body of work.

In all this last work, Yeats's reactions to the world outside him are important, indeed create a framework which is important precisely because we see how the poet, the writer who had sometimes suggested that the poet's world was self-contained and autonomous, persistently related his own poetic world to Ireland and Europe. In doing this, there were problems for the poet who had already designed his own systematic interpretation of history and was tempted to interpret contemporary events by its light. However, one can establish at least three ways in which Yeats adjusted his poetic vision to the world outside himself. First, he shared a sense of the state of crisis in Europe with others of his time, writers and intelligent laymen; simply expressed in prose and verse this sense of crisis appears to be no different than that expressed in the work of other contemporary poets like T.S.Eliot. Second, since A Vision specifically interpreted world history in terms of oppositions, contrary movements and moments of crisis, Yeats often contained his own sense of world crisis within the framework of his system. This accommodation of contemporary events to system and prophecy disturbs the reader who rejects the theory. Third, there is the Yeats who deliberately cultivated and exaggerated his own natural biases, who prophesied, then willed what he had prophesied because he saw the coming violence as inevitable, if not desirable.

This is the poet of the apocalyptic vision who has been accused of political irresponsibility, extremism and Fascist tendencies.

In a letter to Ethel Mannin in 1936 Yeats revealed his horror at what was happening in Europe while carefully disclaiming allegiance to any political system:

Do not try to make a politician of me, even in Ireland I shall never I think be that again-- as my sense of reality deepens, and I think it does with age, my horror at the cruelty of governments grows greater, and if I did what you want, I would seem to hold one form of government more responsible than any other, and that would betray my convictions. Communist, Fascist, nationalist, clerical, anti-clerical, are all responsible according to the number of their victims. I have not been silent; I have used the only vehicle I possess-- verse. If you have my poems by you, look up a poem called The Second Coming. It was written some sixteen or seventeen years ago and foretold what is happening. I have written of the same thing again and again since. This will seem little to you with your strong practical sense, for it takes fifty years for a poet's weapons to influence the issue

Forgive me my dear and do not cast me out of your affection. I am not callous, every nerve trembles with horror at what is happening in Europe, 'the ceremony of innocence is drowned.' 51

However, real as his sense of this state of crisis undoubtedly was, he saw no point in writing of it for its own sake. Violent upheaval, revolution and war were not only inevitable, they were also a generative power in world history, the means by which an antithetical civilisation would be ushered in. There is consequent detachment in Yeats's expressed opinions, a certain lack of surprised horror:

. . . why should I trouble about communism, fascism, liberalism, radicalism, when all, though some bow first and some stern first but all at the same pace, all are going down stream with the artificial unity which ends every civilisation? 52

51

Letters, pp.850-851.

52

Ibid., p.869.

By seeing history, in A Vision, as a series of opposing historical eras, Yeats was able to channel his own sense of discomfort with the twentieth century into a system, a unifying framework. He could intensify his own speech and the framework of deterministic myth in the background might avert the charge of prejudiced political writing. Thus, in the poem "The Statues", the Irish

born into that ancient sect
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
And by its formless spawning fury wrecked

are not altogether to be blamed for this degeneracy; the movement of the tides is influenced by the moon. However, even Yeats felt the tug-of-war between predestination and free will, and could be carefully ambiguous:

. . . civilisation rose to its high tide mark in Greece, fell,
rose again in the Renaissance but not to the same level. But
we may, if we choose, not now or soon but at the next turn of
the wheel, push ourselves up, being ourselves the tide, beyond
that first mark. But no, these things are fated; we may be
pushed up.⁵³

The Irish could not push themselves up, but could help themselves to be pushed.

Ultimately, every critic must put aside Yeats's systematic framework and explore his ideas as his own attitudes, interpreting them in the light of his character, temperament, environment and published works. Yeats himself threw off the mythical structure often, to speak in his own person and in language other people could understand. Planning On the Boiler, he wrote:

I must lay aside the pleasant paths I have built up for years and
seek the brutality, the ill breeding, the barbarism of truth.⁵⁴

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On the Boiler, p.29.

54

Letters, p.903.

"The reader can make allowance for my bias, and certainly I am a biassed man", he admitted in the pamphlet itself. The bias, brutality, ill breeding and barbarism were all signs of the prophetic, apocalyptic approach to contemporary events. Extreme statements are set down with stark clarity and simplicity so that they seem to project beyond the confines of A Vision to a final unity. In the emphasis on violence and warfare there is an extremism which is not discontinuous with Yeats's expressed everyday views; it develops them to a final point, to a projection of a post-crisis Utopia based on traditional, landed conservatism, intellectual authoritarianism and philosophical idealism.

Both Dorothy Wellesley and Ethel Mannin accused Yeats of strong anti-English feelings, and indeed differences between the two nations emerge insistently from On the Boiler. Yet, as Yeats replied, England was the country of Shakespeare, Morris and others--- how could he hate England? The argument against England was actually a locus for sets of opposites, one side of which Yeats wanted to identify with Ireland. Thus there was rationalism set against spiritualism, materialism against Berkeley's idealism, democracy as against aristocracy, the masses against the individual, the town against the country, the "newspaper" mind against the Irish mind. Yeats believed vehemently in something he called "the Irish intellect" which stood against everything he hated:

. . . I beg our governments to exclude all alien appeal to mass instinct. The Irish mind has still in country rapsallion or in Bernard Shaw an ancient, cold, explosive, detonating impartiality. The English mind, excited by its newspaper proprietors and its schoolmasters, has turned into a bed-hot harlot.⁵⁵

The exhortatory nature of On the Boiler and "Under Ben Bulben" impelled Ireland forward to a future which would recognise and build its life on these differences.

The attack on the masses, deviously given a pseudo-scientific basis in the passage on eugenics, gave rise to the most unpalatable portion of "Under Ben Bulben":

Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds.

No political group in either Ireland or England recognised his own philosophy. He saw a deep cleavage between the aristocracy (which he tended to equate with ability and "intellect") and the half-educated mass of the people; hence this directive:

I say to those that shall rule here: If ever Ireland again seems molten wax, reverse the process of revolution. Do not try to pour Ireland into any political system. Think first how many able men with public minds the country has, how many it can hope to have in the near future, and mould your system upon those men.⁵⁶

This kind of anti-democratic idealism certainly seemed strangely out of place in the twentieth century.

Education also comes under attack, because it had come to stand for mediocrity and uniformity of opinion, to produce bigotry (censorship) and the reign of middle-class opinion. Yet fundamentally the Irish capacity for individual identity, whether in "country rapsallion or in Bernard Shaw", remained. The Irish had also retained a freedom from the pressures of the popular press or universal school system, a freedom of

spirit perhaps derived ultimately from the heroic tradition. Something of this spirit had been witnessed in 1916:

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,
What stalked through the Post Office?

What else but some spirit still capable of infusing the life of Ireland?

The most extreme insistence in On the Boiler is on the necessity of a war to unite the best minds in the country:

You that Mitchel's prayer have heard,
'Send war in our time, O Lord!'

-- the inversion of a Christian litany was Yeats's way of indexing in the strongest terms the decay of European civilisation, "the triumph of . . . gangrel stocks". The masses were multiplying rapidly, and this multiplication could be halted only by a conflict in which the "educated classes" would seize and control one or more of the necessities of life. "Human violence . . . embodied in our institutions" would draw out the loyalty of young and old, and promote the identity of the nation, for:

A government is legitimate because some instinct has compelled us to give it the right to take life in defence of its laws and shores. . . .

I write with two certainties in mind: first that a hundred men, their creative power wrought to its highest pitch, their will trained but not broken, can do more for the welfare of a people, whether in war or peace, than a million of any lesser sort no matter how expensive their education, and that although the Irish masses are vague and excitable because they have not yet been moulded and cast, we have as good blood as there is in Europe. Berkeley, Swift, Burke, Grattan, Parnell, Augusta Gregory, Synge, Kevin O'Higgins, are the true Irish people, and there is nothing too hard for such as these.⁵⁷

The characteristic roll-call concluding the above passage is an indication

that the thought, though extreme, is not altogether unfamiliar; among other thoughts, this is the call to the nation to heed eighteenth-century ideals and models.

The Yeats who produced On the Boiler was very much in the tradition of the irascible patriot Swift of A Modest Proposal, as Torchiana has

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pointed out. It is in the name of Swift, and in that of Berkeley, that Yeats offers his challenge to rationalism and "whiggish" science, affirming the wisdom of ancient Ireland as he acknowledged its presence in the poems-- "From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen."

Yeats is very careful that his insistence on immortality is not taken as the mere superstitious, pagan quirk suitable to an Irish poet, for as we know from the whole body of his work, this is the aspect of the "Irish intellect" most fundamental to his thought, as it is in the first declamatory section of "Under Ben Bulbin":

Many times man lives and dies
Between his two extremities,
That of race and that of soul,
And ancient Ireland knew it all.
Whether man dies in his bed
Or the rifle knocks him dead,
A brief parting from those dear
Is the worst man has to fear.
Though grave-diggers toil is long,
Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,
They but thrust their buried men
Back in the human mind again.

The relevant gloss in On the Boiler sets the same affirmation in the context of Swift, Berkeley and the attack on mathematics, democracy and materialism:

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Yeats and Georgian Ireland, p.340.

Man has made mathematics, but God reality. Instead of hierarchical society, where all men are different, came democracy; instead of a science which had re-discovered Anima Mundi, its experiments and observations confirming the speculations of Henry More, came materialism: all that whiggish world Swift stared on till he became a raging man. The ancient foundations had scarcely dispersed when Swift's young acquaintance Berkeley destroyed the new, for all that would listen created modern philosophy and established for ever the subjectivity of space. No educated man today accepts the objective matter and space of popular science, and yet deductions made by those who believed in both dominate the world, make possible the stimulation and condonation of revolutionary massacre and the multiplication of murderous weapons by substituting for the old humanity with its unique irreplaceable individuals something that can be chopped and measured like a piece of cheese; compel denial of the immortality of the soul by hiding from the mass of the people that the grave diggers have no place to bury us but in the human mind.⁵⁹

This belief, for Yeats, was a part of the Irish heritage that created a link between the ancient heroic sagas, Catholic Ireland, the Protestant Ireland of the eighteenth century and his own work up to his death.

There have been serious attacks on the Yeats discussed in this chapter, as he emerges from the last volumes of poetry, the letters and

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On the Boiler; one modern critic places him in a modern group of

"reactionaries" who were all hostile to democracy and characteristic

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twentieth-century political thought. The identification of Yeats with thinkers of Fascist tendency will never be altogether affirmed or rejected because there is not sufficient evidence of the extent and real

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On the Boiler, p.26.

60

See, for example, Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Passion and Cunning: An Essay on the Politics of W.B. Yeats", in In Excited Reverie, eds. Jeffares and Cross, pp.207-278.

61

John R. Harrison, The Reactionaries.

nature of his commitment to Fascist ideals, nor is there a fully developed understanding of what it meant, in the nineteen-thirties, to be a "Fascist sympathiser" or a "Communist sympathiser". These terms remain vague in import and therefore meaningless to a point, especially when applied to writers and artists. To embark on a discussion of this subject would raise a whole field of difficult questions about the relationship between politics and art. Yet the difficulty of Yeats's views will remain and may increase for future readers further removed from knowledge of pre-World War II Europe.

Yeats was certainly out of sympathy with the twentieth century, a point he made no effort to conceal; he even worked it into his systematic classifications of types and phases. I have stressed his conservatism, his identification with a particular group in Irish history and his own awareness of the ambiguities of his relationship with politics. Yet if Yeats was indeed a "reactionary" (a term which seems calculated to confuse rather than clarify the issue) the nature of his reaction should be explored in its complexity, if only to reveal how many-sided it was. It certainly went much further than "Fascist tendency" would account for, and it was based on many positive beliefs which influenced both life and art. The most useful direction to move in, if one wishes to vindicate Yeats, is to stress these positives--- imagination, a tragic sense of life which nevertheless produced ecstasy and joy, a love of heroism and traditional virtues (beneficence, honesty, pride); and, as I have shown, a patriotism which was critical yet thorough-going, and which saw the nation and the national ideal as a reality. One would stress, too, the

inter-relationships between aspects of his thought, and the violent suggestive manner in which he voiced his thought.

Yeats actually anticipated many of the critiques of modern life since written by liberal thinkers (for example, F.R. Leavis, Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams⁶²) who have deplored aspects of democracy and technology which have weakened communal life and instinctive values while making possible the tremendous powers of persuasion used by newspapers and other mass media to impose uniformity on people. Yeats's last-written poem, "The Black Tower", shows him aware of the temptations to be faced by those who defend old values:

Those banners come to bribe or threaten,
Or whisper that a man's a fool
Who, when his own right king's forgotten,
Cares what king sets up his rule.

Yeats never did forget his right king or the right rule, and until his death "sang" of the themes he set against the "filthy tide" of modern life: beauty and love, heroic Ireland, tragic defeat and the consciousness of age. If Yeats's list of contents for his projected volume of poems were followed today, his answer to those who accused him of political bigotry would be his last word:

And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms!
(*"Politics"*)

As lyric, this poem rejects in its very form the large claims of politics. It leads us to the subject of the next chapter, where I turn from the public theme of patriotism and politics to examine Yeats's passion for the lyric.

See, for example, most of Leavis's books, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society 1780-1950*.

II

THE LYRIC INTEREST

Lady Gregory's death, the lecture tour of America and the publication of The King of the Great Clock Tower were the key points of a transitional phase in Yeats's career as a poet. The temporary break in poetic activity impelled Yeats to think through his beliefs about poetry so that he could resume his work. Yeats was not a theorist. Aesthetics and poetic theory had always interested him at the point where they touched his own needs and instincts about the nature of poetry. Generally he had little cause to be deeply interested in the theories and innovations of "modern poetry" because he found traditional forms well suited to his own subject matter. He achieved the necessary marriage between content and form instinctively, employing formal patterns with a natural ease. His modernity was largely a matter of catching the rhythm of the spoken language; through syntax and rhythm he bridged the gulf between everyday speech and poetic speech. When he turned to theory and principle, then, it was neither because he was dissatisfied with his own poetry nor because he thought he had discovered a new and vital principle. In choosing to emphasise that aspect of poetry which he called "song" and "lyric" he was returning to a life-long preoccupation and manner. Some of his best early poems had been ballads. His most recent collection of poems was titled Words for Music Perhaps. There was no radical departure in turning his interest towards

the collection and writing of lyrics, to his interest in the association of poetry with music, or to a concern about the public performance of poetry, whether spoken or sung. Only the degree to which this aspect of poetics engaged his attention was unusual.

C. Day Lewis defines the lyric as:

. . . a poem written for music-- for an existing tune, or in collaboration with a composer, or in an idiom demanded by contemporary song-writers, or simply with music at the back of the poet's mind.¹

Yeats used the term lyric in some of these senses, as a synonym for "song" or for a poem written "with music at the back of the poet's mind." Many of Yeats's poems from 1934 on were intended for music, though not always for existing music. New Poems (1938) contained five pages of tunes, and in the two series of Broadsides (1935 and 1937) poems, illustrations and tunes were all brought together by design.

Whatever the reasons for the lapse in Yeats's poetry writing between May 1932 and July 1933 (that period covering Lady Gregory's death and the American lecture tour), the return to poetry lay through the writing of the dance play "The King of the Great Clock Tower":

I made up the play that I might write lyrics out of dramatic experience, all my personal experience having in some strange way come to an end. They are good lyrics a little in my early manner.²

As a method of finding poetic inspiration this may appear strange, but it was natural for Yeats in terms of past experience and his passion

1

The Lyric Impulse, p.3. This definition relates the lyric to music more closely than does current usage of the term in literary criticism.

2

Letters, p.819.

for "impersonal" poetry. Many of his plays included songs. The Noh form of the drama and its adaptations were a natural setting for songs because this drama was based on ritual and aesthetic elements far removed from dramatic "realism". "The King of the Great Clock Tower" is a very tight modification of Noh principles. In its first performance and in the form of its first printing, as part of the volume bearing its name, the lyric nature and purpose are very clear. The dialogue is in prose, cut to the essential minimum, while the lyrics and dances are emphasised. The play is held together by aesthetic "moments"³ and these rather than the prose dialogue concentrate the communicated meaning. Thus the lyrics are impersonal and dramatic. Of the four lyrics in this prose version, one appeared later in Collected Poems as "The Alternative Song for the Severed Head" and the final song (which was sung as the curtains were closed) appeared as the February Broadside of the 1935 series, titled "The Wicked Hawthorn Tree".

Yeats used the term "song" in two distinct senses, one literal and one figurative. In the literal sense song described poems set to or intended for music. Such songs could be lyrics, folk songs, ballads or marching songs. Yeats may have possessed little formal knowledge or appreciation of music, but he certainly studied aspects of the relationship between words and music sufficiently thoroughly to be able to

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For an exposition of Yeats's concept of the "moment", see Melchiori's The Whole Mystery of Art, pp.283-286. I use the term only as an analogy, suggesting that the dances and songs in the play capture and hold still in an aesthetic context that moment in life when a person achieves Unity of Being (as does the dancer in "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes").

understand some of the aesthetic problems involved. As early as the first decade of the century he was experimenting with simple string music as a possible aid to the musical rendition of speech. Out of these experiments he wrote the essay "Speaking to the Psalter"⁴. Most of his ideas on music as an aid to poetry reading derived from this early essay; he was able to put them to use again in his broadcasts of 1936 and 1937. The Broadsides were an opportunity to carry his ideas about music and poetry a stage further. Yeats's sisters at the Guala Press had produced occasional sheets of poems linked with music and pictures. Yeats himself had written poems based on folk song and ballad models. Now, with the help of F.R.Higgins, a poet whose best work was in the folk song - ballad form, he decided to launch a series of such Broadsides to appear monthly bringing together poems, tunes and illustrations. The poems were all to be the work of Irish writers, a traditional poem and a modern one paired in each issue.

The appearance of a traditional poem each month emphasised one of Yeats's purposes which was to revive a traditional art. By publishing the Broadsides as a bound set at the end of the year with a foreword he underlined this purpose, despite the fact that few of the modern poems could be classified strictly as folk song, ballad, political ballad or lyric. However, Yeats and his fellow-writers fulfilled an aesthetic aspiration in a way authentic and novel-- the printed form of the broadsides themselves. They showed that even if such poetry

⁴ Essays and Introductions, pp.13-27. A useful treatment of Yeats's association with Florence Farr is to be found in Edward Malins, Yeats and Music (The Dolmen Press Yeats Centenary Papers), pp. 487-493.

could not be truly "popular", poets and musicians could still produce satisfying work within an earlier tradition.

The foreword to the collected volume of 1935 was signed by W.B. Yeats and F.R. Higgins but both Yeats's references to it in letters and its style indicate that, however much technical information Higgins provided, Yeats was mainly responsible for it. It is headed "Anglo-Irish Ballads"; the first section very briefly outlines the history of the ballad in Ireland from the Battle of the Boyne, but the second section is clearly a justification by Yeats of his own theories about the qualities of Irish music which made it suitable for poetry:

Both town and country ballads get their characteristics from the music. Because that music permits, like much Asiatic music, quarter-tones, the stress will sometimes lack sharpness, certainty.⁶

Yeats identified the main problem of the composer who writes a tune for words: that of fitting the metre of the tune to the metrical pattern of words. For Yeats, music's function was to aid the words, not in the sense of interpreting them but in permitting "speech to rise imperceptibly into song" while serving the words, letting them retain their own rhythm and sound qualities. It was this crucial difficulty that he gave most thought to. In good poetry, there is almost invariably a certain degree of "counterpointing" of rhythm against metre. Yeats himself never rejected formal metrical patterns, yet the rhythms of his poems create a tension with the underlying metre. To surmount the difficulty as far as

⁵
See Letters on Poetry, pp. 33-34.

⁶
"Anglo-Irish Ballads" in Broadsides (1935), n.p.

song was concerned, where a regular tune will not allow this counter-point, he claimed that music freed from the modern diatonic scale would in turn free the metrical pattern of the song, allowing the rhythm of the words to create their proper stress system:

In "The Groves of Blarney" the third line
 "Being banks of posies that spontaneous grow there"
 halts because the stress falling upon "spontaneous" carries too many syllables. Sung to Irish music all runs smoothly; the stress, though falling mainly upon the second syllable, enriches the whole word. A singer cannot indeed sing it adequately if he does not like words for their own sake however little he understands them. If he sang to a musician trained in modern music he would be condemned for the imperfection of his ear, yet no rich-sounding two or three syllabled word can be spoken or sung without quarter-tones.⁷

Musically this makes little sense. In fact, the strictly tuned diatonic scale of modern music (i.e., post-sixteenth century) has made it impossible for all but the most highly-trained singer to distinguish and reproduce any sound smaller in interval than a semitone. If quarter-tones could be fixed and reproduced, they would have no liberalising effect on metre and rhythm. Yeats's argument really derives from his conviction that music must be freed from the rigidity of fixed musical notation, which is why he disliked instruments like the piano where the arrangement of the keys limits the possible sounds to those of the diatonic scale. His argument also explains his favoured instruments, the drum, flute and violin, which can produce tones other than those fixed by the scale.

Yeats, then, disliked the two regulated aspects of written music which set it apart from poetry-- fixed metrical system and regulated

pitch. On the other hand, music could, if understood in his way, complete the written poem by lifting it from the page, making it possible to be sung by simple people, thereby guaranteeing its impersonality, dramatic quality and "popularity". The closest musical approximation to what Yeats wanted of his music is found in the recitative sections of opera, passages of dialogue sung in a manner that follows as closely as possible the natural rhythm of the intonations of the speaking voice. Berg and Schönberg among modern composers pioneered this recitative technique in opera.⁸ Because the scoring of such passages has to be extremely unspecific and because subtleties of speech intonation are possible to the singer but impossible to score by conventional methods, gifted and sensitive performers can, indeed, produce the quarter-tones so favoured by Yeats.

The theory that Yeats had propounded in his essay "Speaking to the Psalter" and in the forewords to the two sets of Broadsides was far removed from the practice followed in the poem settings themselves, and has more relevance to his experiments in broadcasting. The few minor composers who undertook the musical side of the work followed Yeats's wishes in writing only tunes, thus freeing the settings from fixed harmonies which would have limited the scope available to his singers for improvisation. Several of the tunes also avoided allegiance to a strict harmonic framework (for example, "The Wicked Hawthorn Tree"), perhaps an attempt by the composer to retain a suggestion of traditional Gaelic music. Otherwise the settings remain conventional, written in orthodox

notation and all with strict metre.

Yeats's songs in the 1935 series are the least derivative from traditional literary models of those by modern poets and the three songs have little in common with each other. "The Rose Tree", which had been written some two decades earlier as one of the post-Easter Rising poems, comes closest to being a political ballad, but it is too thoroughly literary to deserve the name. The subject matter is that suitable to the political ballad but the style is closer to that of the literary ballad with its resonant symbolism and perfectly balanced dialogue form. "The Rose Tree" is hardly characteristic of Yeats's later ballad style in any case, and of course it was not intended for singing when it was written. When he selected it for publication as a Broadside, all but one line were sufficiently regular in rhythm for the tune; but the line "Maybe a breath of politic words" was revised into the less awkward "Some politician's idle words". Yeats commented on this change in his foreword, by way of exemplifying his theory of quarter-tones:

One of the present writers had to change the word "politic" in a song because it was "unsingable", but a country singer would not have found it "unsingable", might indeed have taken a particular pleasure in it. No word effective in speech should perhaps be unsingable.⁹

He was partly right. Very few of the traditional ballads and carols are sufficiently regular in metre to match, verse by verse, the metre of their music; often notation must be varied to accomodate varying numbers of syllables and often, too, the rhythm and stress of the words must govern the musical setting. But the issue here was rather different, for

all but that line of the poem are so regular that one line containing too many syllables and an awkward stress would have ruined the song in performance.

"The Wicked Hawthorn Tree", from the play "The King of the Great Clock Tower", is closer to Yeats's own conception of the lyric in that it is completely dramatised as a conversation between the "rambling, shambling travelling-man" and the "wicked, crooked hawthorn tree", the one a simple, instinctive peasant who is granted his moment of insight into the world beyond mortal life (Castle Dargan come to life again with its gay and gallant occupants), the other devious and worldly wise. This lyric is neither restricted by its literary qualities nor derivative from traditional models. It adheres to the ballad conventions of the four-beat line and the dialogue form, yet it retains the natural rhythm of speech. Arthur Duff must have had to employ some ingenuity to allow for all the variations in the number of syllables to one line of music, and the different stress patterns throughout, yet he did do this so that a singer would have help in knowing precisely which syllable to sing to which note and when to give one syllable to two notes of music.

Yeats's last contribution to the 1935 Broadsides - "The Soldier takes Pride" - was a different matter; even Arthur Duff merely reprinted as it stood the traditional tune he had chosen, because the variations demanded for each of the three verses were so many and complex. This song was one of the "Three Songs to the Same Tune" prompted by O'Duffy for his Blueshirts; Yeats himself explained that the refrain was replaced by one more fanciful, in order to deflect undesirable movements from using the song. The old man's refrain is typical of those Yeats wrote

for his late ballads:

'Who'd care to dig 'em,' said the old, old man,
'Those six feet marked in chalk?
Much I talk, more I walk;
Time I were buried', said the old, old man.

It works as a comment on the verses, shifting and expanding its meaning with each verse. By its last appearance it comments ironically on both the hollow nature of the "tree that has nothing within it" and the hollow aspirations of the marching soldiers. The particular twist lies in the insult of the chorus which would have been sung by the marching men themselves; while they marched with stirring idealism they were to sing of an old man who also talked and walked, but with the cynicism of a man who has seen through life and the pretensions of the young. Ironically, too, the four lines of the refrain are the only successive lines which match their part of the tune syllable for syllable. Some of the verse lines are virtually impossible to sing against the notes given unless the tune is tampered with considerably.

In these 1935 Broadsides the emphasis was fairly narrow. The contents were entirely Irish and were slanted towards traditional styles and forms even in the work of modern Irish poets; F.R.Higgins, for instance, contributed four poems, all in the folk style. But already that year Yeats planned a rather different series for 1937, and the Broadside activity became one of a number centering around Yeats's theories about modern poetry, lyrics and the public presentation of poetry. In 1935 Yeats was commissioned to prepare an anthology of modern verse for the Oxford University Press. This was to be no routine task, but a challenge for him to define his own views on poetry:

. . . I can never do any kind of work (apart from verse) unless I have a clear problem to solve. My problem this time will be: 'How far do I like the Ezra; Eliot, Auden school and if I do not, why not?' 10

In preparing the anthology Yeats made contact with other poets who shared his views and tastes in poetry, and found in Dorothy Wellesley and W.J. Turner especially two poets who shared his enthusiasm for the lyric; Dorothy Wellesley became co-editor with him of the 1937 Broadsides, while W.J. Turner as music critic of the New Statesman enthusiastically reviewed them and wrote articles on the subject of poetry and music. A group of poets, musicians and readers centred around Yeats and Dorothy Wellesley, involved first in the work for the Broadsides and later in Yeats's broadcasts for the B.B.C.

There were, then, two aspects of poetry interesting Yeats at this time, which touched each other at several points. There was the formulation of Yeats's values in modern poetry, as they emerged in the long introduction and contents of the Oxford Book of Modern Verse, values of lyricism, rhythmic strength, intensity and personality; all these values were sought in the poems selected for publishing with music as Broadsides. The second aspect arose from the first, from Yeats's constant wish to hear poems sung and recited well. This aspect of public performance resulted in the series of B.B.C. broadcasts. Yet it is clear that these two aspects were part of a whole; they were related strands of the Yeatsian dogma that poetry is a popular art, binding intense thought and common speech together into single, intense lyric utterance.

The Oxford anthology may not be the safest means by which to approach English poetry in the first third of this century, but as an illustrated exposition of what Yeats himself considered significant in poetry it cannot be bettered. Throughout the introduction and the selections we find the strongest emphasis given to the nature of the lyric and the lyric poet; the centrality of rhythm; the exaltation of personality, heroic song, the folk tradition; and the growing love of what Yeats called "strange philosophy". These were not the values acclaimed by "modernist" poets and critics, and Yeats was always aware of the Faber publishing house and the Faber anthology standing in the background, as the orthodox
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opposition to his own point of view.

The opening selection of the Oxford Book indicates the nature of Yeats's interests; he took the famous description of Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" from Pater's Renaissance and printed it as free verse, in order to show Pater's consciousness of rhythm and verbal music:

Pater was accustomed to give each sentence a separate page of manuscript, isolating and analysing its rhythm; Henley wrote certain 'hospital poems,' . . . in vers libre, . . . but did not permit a poem to arise out of its own rhythm as do Turner and Pound at their best and as, I contend, Pater did.¹²

Yeats admired Edith Sitwell because she expressed the disillusionment of the modern world by her artificial strangeness, distorting metre and language in her poetry, while still remaining "traditional";

Her language is the traditional language of literature, but twisted, torn, complicated, jerked here and there by strained

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See Letters on Poetry, pp.36, 58.

12

Oxford Book of Modern Verse, p.viii.

resemblances, unnatural contacts, forced upon it by terror
or by some violence beating in her blood,¹³

Yeats did not believe he was throwing the anthology into a historical vacuum, but while he recognised that the modern world was undergoing a crisis in values and beliefs, he did not admire poets who turned to satiric method and formlessness, or those who became passive in the face of the undefined horror, cruelty and meaninglessness of life. His comments on T.S.Eliot show that Yeats recognised his stature while remaining fundamentally unsympathetic to his poetry:

. . . in describing this life that has lost heart his own art seems grey, cold, dry. He is an Alexander Pope, working without apparent imagination, producing his effects by a rejection of all rhythms and metaphors used by the more popular romantics rather than by the discovery of his own, this rejection giving his work an unexaggerated plainness that has the effect of novelty. . . . Nor can I put the Eliot of these poems [i.e., up to "The Waste Land"] among those that descend from Shakespeare and the translators of the Bible. I think of him as satirist rather than poet.¹⁴

Yeats was more generous in his estimate of the later poetry, but clearly did not consider Eliot a "traditional" poet, in the sense that he regarded Edith Sitwell, W.J.Turner and Dorothy Wellesley as traditional; their poetry seemed to him closer to the criterion of a good poem: "an elaboration of the rhythms of common speech and their association with profound feeling."¹⁵ Rhythm gave life to poems. Yeats disliked the avoidance of strong rhythmic quality he detected in T.S.Eliot, and looked for a rhythm

13

"Modern Poetry" in Essays and Introductions, pp.500-501.

14

Oxford Book of Modern Verse, pp.xxi-xxii.

15

Essays and Introductions, p.508.

close to speech, but artificial in its elaboration by the artist, its dependence on a sense of word quality and thought. He had written to Dorothy Wellesley, telling her that she had

. . . the best language among us because you most completely follow Aristotle's advice and write 'like the common people'. You have the animation of spoken words and spoken syntax. The worst language is Elliot's [Yeats's mis-spelling] in all his early poems--- a level flatness of rhythm.¹⁶

Again, the two aspects are linked: the values of poetry are inseparable from those of articulated language.

Rhythm, then, was linked with other Yeatsian values, such as the ideal of folk poetry with its exaltation of popular themes, oral tradition and heroic personality. These qualities Yeats found in the Irish verse tradition, and it is for this reason that Irish poets were so generously represented in the Oxford anthology:

In Ireland, where still lives almost undisturbed the last folk tradition of western Europe, the songs of Campbell and Colum draw from that tradition their themes, return to it, and are sung to Irish airs by boys and girls who have never heard the names of the authors.¹⁷

English poetry, even that of Sitwell, Wellesley and Turner, was preoccupied with philosophy, Irish poetry with personality:

The English movement, checked by the realism of Eliot, the social passion of the War poets, gave way to an impersonal philosophical poetry. Because Ireland has a still living folk tradition, her poets cannot get it out of their heads that they themselves, good-tempered or bad-tempered, tall or short, will be remembered by the common people. Instead of turning to

16

Letters on Poetry, p.44.

17

Oxford Book of Modern Verse, p.xiii.

impersonal philosophy, they have hardened and deepened their personalities.¹⁸

It is not hard to see why Yeats excluded Wilfred Owen from the anthology, yet represented the minor Irish poet Gogarty by no less than seventeen poems, giving him as many pages as T.S.Eliot. The contrast Yeats drew between English and Irish poetry of the period could be summed up in the comment of a fellow Irish poet (probably F.R.Higgins) who reacted to a poem of Turner's with the comment, " 'We cannot become philosophic like the English, our lives are too exciting.' "¹⁹ It was characteristic of Yeats to make much of these national differences; one of his favourite sayings was the philosopher Berkeley's refutation of the dogmas of Locke with the succinct phrase, "We Irish do not think so."

Yet for Yeats the philosophy he discovered in English poets like Sitwell, Herbert Read and his two friends Dorothy Wellesley and W.J.Turner was strangely attractive. Much of the introduction to the anthology is occupied with an analysis of the way in which the poet's sense of crisis in the modern world is transmuted into philosophy. It seems mystifying that Yeats could write almost reverentially of the "exciting thought" and "strange philosophy" of Turner's poems, until one sees that by "philosophy" Yeats means something quite different from "abstraction", and that he usually uses the words to describe that reliance on man's sense of the mystery at the heart of life we find in his own poems. Unfortunately

18

Essays and Introductions, p.500.

19

Oxford Book of Modern Verse, p.xiv.

Yeats was not very clear in defining this philosophy, but in Turner and Wellesley he admired the sense of the mind's power to penetrate beyond the material world to one where the distinction between born and unborn is indeterminate. In other words, Yeats followed Berkeley as always, and admired modern poets like Turner, who saw the world in terms of a divine, mysterious landscape, and Dorothy Wellesley, who emphasised the individual and indestructible soul as it passed from conception to life. This kind of metaphysical, speculative poetry was the "philosophy" admired by Yeats, and to him it was a part of the Irish identity too, as I have shown in the previous chapter. Profound feeling, strange thought and powerful rhythm-- all these things Yeats found in this poetry.

In the work of the final school of poets considered in the introduction - that of C.Day Lewis, MacNeice, Spender, Auden and Madge - Yeats found a poetry foreign to his own tastes and yet admirable in its strong intellectual character. To Yeats these poets seemed to have transcended the passivity of the War poets, without cutting themselves off from the sense of suffering induced by the war and the sense of meaninglessness recorded by Eliot in "The Waste Land". Comparing them with the Sitwell, Turner, Wellesley group, he found them "modern through the character of their intellectual passion":

Although I have preferred, and shall again, constrained by a different nationality, a man so many years old, fixed to some one place, known to friends and enemies, full of mortal frailty, expressing all things not made mysterious by nature with impatient clarity, I have read with some excitement poets I had approached with distaste, delighted in their pure spiritual objectivity as in something long foretold.²⁰

Yeats was, in fact, fairer to a school of poets basically incompatible with him than he has generally been given credit for. But his preferences were clear: for "lyric" poets as against "intellectual" poets, whether the former were in the Irish tradition of personality, heroism and folk poetry or in an English tradition of romantic, lyric "philosophy".

By preparing the Oxford Book and engaging in a frequent exchange of letters with Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats had done much of the groundwork for the later set of Broadsides. "I want to make another attempt to unite
21 literature and music", Yeats wrote to Dorothy Wellesley; this time all the poems chosen were to be contemporary, and in each issue an English poem and an Irish were to be paired. Most of the names of contributors are familiar from the Oxford book. Of the fourteen Irish poems selected, Yeats wrote five, Higgins three, O'Connor and James Stephens two each, Gogarty and Colum one each; four had appeared in the anthology. Dorothy Wellesley and W.J. Turner wrote three poems each for the series and the four remaining were contributed by Edith Sitwell, de la Mare, Hilaire Belloc and Gordon Bottomley; two of the English poems were from the anthology. The music was the work of a number of musicians including Turner and Edmund Dulac. The main significance of the 1937 Broadsides compared with the earlier set lay in the nature of the songs. There were some folk songs and ballads in the traditional manner, including some of Yeats's series to appear later in New Poems ("Come Gather Round me Parnellites" and "The Curse of Cromwell", for instance), but a larger core

of the series were some of the strange philosophical lyrics which Yeats had written about in the introduction to the Oxford anthology. The difference in style can be illustrated clearly by examples from these two distinct classes:

What shall we do for timber?
The last of the woods is down,
Kilcash and the house of its glory
And the bell of the house are gone;
The spot where her lady waited
That shamed all women for grace
When earls came waiting to greet her
And Mass was said in that place.

In "Kilcash" by Frank O'Connor the simplicity is that of the traditional Irish folk song, formally regular and direct, its subject matter traditional in its lament for past days. This ballad influenced Yeats in his "The Curse of Cromwell" but in any case it is typical of the type of ballad being written by Irish poets, Higgins in particular. More typical of the English poems was Turner's "Men fade like Rocks", with its suggestive rhythm and language, tending towards what Yeats called his "strange philosophical poems":

Rock-like the souls of men
Fade, fade in time.
Falls on worn surfaces,
Slow chime on chime,

Sense, like a murmuring dew,
Soft sculpturing rain,
Or the wind that blows hollowing
In every lane.

This kind of slight poem has been typified as "pure lyric" with its tentativeness and simplicity and its emphasis on carefully produced verbal music. Yeats's predilection for lyric poetry included both kinds of lyric, the folk lyric and its modern approximations and the lyric

which comes closer to "art song" form.

An important part of the new series was to be the introduction signed jointly by Yeats and Dorothy Wellesley, but actually the work of Yeats and W.J. Turner. When broaching the subject of the introduction with Dorothy Wellesley Yeats wrote that they could "get hold of Turner and incorporate his musical learning and pretend it is our own".²² Turner was regarded as something of an expert on English music, opera and song, and echoes of his rather specialised knowledge are readily detectable in the introduction, called "Music and Poetry". Turner had reviewed the 1935 Broadsides in the New Statesman and besides writing two articles on music and words for the same journal in July 1937, he met Yeats and discussed the subject with him at Dorothy Wellesley's home. Among the musical names Yeats cited in the introduction were those of Gluck, Pyrcell, Mozart and Wagner; the same names figured as part of Turner's argument in his New Statesman column of 10 July 1937, when he was writing on "Music, Words and Action". Turner's article suggested strongly that music and poetry were separate arts and concluded that "the poet must eschew rigidly the slightest attempt to write poetry" when writing a text for a musician. Yeats, deviously concealing his reliance on Turner's musical knowledge, wrote in the introduction that

Somebody has said that the poet who writes for a composer should "eschew all attempts to write poetry"; yet did not Sappho and Pindar attempt it and even a folk song begins somewhere?

Whether or not Turner had read Yeats's rejoinder, he modified his opinion

in his New Statesman article of 24 July, in words that in turn echoed

Yeats's views:

Mr Yeats has written many lyrics which are really songs and should be sung, but who is to compose the music for them? Certainly not the expert modern musician using the diatonic scale, a scale devised for purely musical purposes, for keyboard instruments and to enable musicians to have at their service the whole wealth of harmony and easy modulation from key to key! The old ballad-singers and folk-song singers did not use keyboard instruments and depended entirely on their melodic line which fitted their words like a glove, both being generated together. In Ireland the tradition of folk-song being not yet quite extinct, Mr. Yeats is haunted by the possibility of his lyrical songs being sung. He himself sings them in a sort of chant which is not unmusical, though it is not music as professional musicians understand it. But the old folk-singers, even if they were using a recognisable mode, used to go flat or sharp as they wished for the sake of expression. When modern musicians have recorded these songs they have generally falsified them by fitting them to the procrustean bed of the diatonic scale and given them a keyboard accompaniment. They claim this is done in the interests of music, but it is a false claim. It is conceivable that music, like poetry, needs regenerating by a return to a more natural expression.²³

These views are very similar to those expressed in the introduction written for the Broad-sides. Dorothy Wellesley has provided the key to understanding why the views of Yeats and Turner revealed a mutual, see-sawing influence:

W.B.Y. stayed at Penns in the Rocks in June and again in July, and we 'blocked in' . . . the 'manifesto' which was printed as the Preface to the bound volume of 1937 Broad-sides.

W.J. Turner, Hilda Matheson and others gathered here during these visits, arguing, discussing, listening to Yeats's talk, making tunes for poems, trying to find the elusive truth about words for music. In the following year Clinton Baddeley carried these discussions further in three broadcast talks, illustrated with songs, which greatly pleased Yeats. He (Clinton Baddeley) is carrying them still further in a forthcoming book.²⁴

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The New Statesman, 24 July 1937, p.147.

²⁴

Letters on Poetry, p.140.

While Turner was able to provide Yeats with the musicological background for his argument (in the examples of Gluck, Purcell, Mozart and Wagner), Yeats did much more for Turner in converting him to the view that music and poetry were arts that should be united. Turner's remarks about the shortcomings of the diatonic scale reflect Yeats's attitudes as far back as his essay "Speaking to the Psaltery". These attitudes had, of course, been strengthened in the interim, especially by Higgins's knowledge of traditional Gaelic music. "Natural expression" was the key to Yeats's theories about the recitation and singing of poems.

When Dorothy Wellesley remarked, in a letter to Yeats, that all
 25 poetry was born of a tune, Yeats took up the phrase enthusiastically and in characteristic manner developed the thought:

It is a queer thing that the folk lilt lost since the time of Burns has been discovered in our time. The essay I told you I was writing on tune and poetry is for the bound volume of the present Guala Broad-sides and done in collaboration with F.R. Higgins who is a fine folk musician. We show that even the poet who thinks himself ignorant of music will sometime write unconsciously to tunes.²⁶

Yet, having granted the dependence of lyric poetry on tune, or at any rate on a concept of tune, Yeats nevertheless insisted strongly on the primacy of words and the absolute necessity for stark simplicity in music written or used as settings:

We can do little, but we can sing, or persuade our friends to sing, traditional songs, or songs by new poets set in the trad-

25

Ibid., pp.32,33.

26

Ibid., p.34.

itional way. There should be no accompaniment because where words are the object an accompaniment can but distract attention, and because the musician who claims to translate the emotion of the poet into another vehicle is a liar. Sustaining notes there have been and may be again; a pause, dramatic or between verses, may admit flute or string, clapping hands, cracking fingers or whistling mouth. We reject all professional singers because no mouth trained to the modern scale can articulate poetry. We must be content with butchers and bakers and those few persons who sing from delight in words.²⁷

What Yeats called his "manifesto" represented his last word on the relationship between words and music. Now that his ideas had clarified and material was ready to hand, he became anxious to arrange performances of his songs and those of his friends. This insistence on the necessity of performance drove thoughts of earlier issues out of his mind:

. . . I am much too happy writing ballads & getting them set to music & arranging to get them sung.²⁸

During late 1936 and 1937 there were performances of poetry and music at the Abbey Theatre and the Irish Academy and Yeats undertook several broadcasts for the B.B.C. which were an opportunity for him to carry experimentation further.

The first few broadcasts indeed proved to be experimental; one of them, confined to Radio Eireann, was disastrous. Yeats had helped to prepare a programme of songs and music to be broadcast from the Abbey Theatre. For Yeats one feature of the programme was especially attractive: the broadcast was to finish with one of the Casement poems. Plans

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"Music and Poetry" in Broadsides (1937), n.p.

²⁸

Letters on Poetry, p.120.

were made to send records to the B.B.C. for re-broadcasting from there, and Yeats candidly warned that the last item would prove unsuitable. However, the technical reproduction of the programme was so bad that no re-broadcast was possible. Yeats was appalled and warned George Barnes - the B.B.C. producer planning the English Yeats broadcasts - that he would have to take full responsibility for them, and even wondered about the feasibility of his own theories:

Possibly all that I think noble and poignant in speech is impossible. Perhaps my old bundle of poet's tricks is useless. I got Stephenson while singing 'Come all old Parnellites' to clap his hands in time to the music after every verse and Higgins added people in the wings clapping their hands. It was very stirring-- on the wireless it was a schoolboy knocking with the end of a penknife or a spoon.²⁹

However, the two planned B.B.C. programmes were broadcast in April 1937, involving Yeats's standard team: Yeats himself preparing the script and introducing the programme, George Barnes producing, with Yeats rehearsing Clinton-Baddeley and Margot Ruddock in reading the poems. These programmes were very much radio realisations of the Broadside concept, with English popular poetry by Belloc, Chesterton and Newbolt among others and Irish lyrics and ballads by Yeats and F.R.Higgins. Yeats was still not at all sure about the form the music should take. In the first of the two programmes, "In the Poet's Pub", musical interruption was confined to drum-rolls between stanzas and poems, an atmospheric and rhythmic effect. He was more ambitious in the second, "In the Poet's Parlour", for which Imogen Holst wrote music and rhythms for the bamboo pipe. Margot Ruddock sang the refrain to Yeats's "I am of Ireland", and

chanted a poem by Lionel Johnson. The clatter-bones were rattled as an interlude in Higgins's ballad "Song for the Clatter Bones". Yeats was experimenting with the production of strange, aesthetic effects which he hoped would heighten the beauty of the poems. His main interest was not musical but aesthetic.

The real nature of Yeats's difficulties became apparent in the next broadcast, "My Own Poetry", of 3 July 1937; this was planned along the same lines as the two previous programmes, with the difference that all the poems were by Yeats. The intention was to apply Yeats's ideas to the broadcasting of his own work. Edmund Dulac was commissioned to write music, especially a setting for "The Curse of Cromwell", Yeats's favourite among his ballads of that period. The main interest of the broadcast is that Yeats and Dulac quarrelled over the setting and its performance.

Unfortunately no recording of this programme now exists and the
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 various accounts of it are contradictory. However, it is clear that Yeats placed considerable confidence in Dulac before the broadcast; Dulac had set Yeats's ballad "The Three Bushes" to music, and it had been sung at an Academy dinner during May 1937. Yeats was certainly excited by the setting and its performance:

On Wednesday night at our Academy Dinner I heard "The Three Bushes" sung to your music. I never saw an audience more moved, a good many joined in the chorus but softly and with evident feeling. Gogarty was in the chair and made a speech about it--

'We are at a great historic moment, a moment as important as that which saw the birth of Elizabethan lyric and its music.' . . . I have had a letter from Starkie this morning praising the method of your music which unites 'poetry and music in the true original way' and is the start of 'a new movement' and 'an art of infinite subtlety of rhythms with music faintly pencilling in the rhythms of the verse.' 31

Yeats was obviously delighted by all this, perhaps especially by Starkie's last comment, which reflected Yeats's strong view that the sounds and rhythms of the verse should be the basis for any setting. He especially wanted to have Dulac set "The Curse of Cromwell", already set to an Irish folk tune Yeats thought inferior to Dulac's work.

32

Hone states that Yeats and Dulac quarrelled during rehearsal, presumably over "The Curse of Cromwell", and that Yeats "drafted an announcement to show that he dissociated himself from Dulac's setting of his words." Yet in letters to Dulac, Yeats maintained that his argument was not with the setting, but with its performance by an unnamed singer. 33

Yeats was certainly ambiguous in laying the blame, but at any rate to Dulac he insisted that he had no quarrel with his tunes:

I have never accused you of writing 'organised music' or questioned your music in any way. I have questioned a method of singing it. . . .

I want to get back to simplicity and can best do it - I believe - by writing for our Irish unaccompanied singing. Every change I make to help the singer seems to improve the poems.

.

George's dislike of the singer surprised me even more than her app-

31

Letters, p.890.

32

W.B.Yeats, p.459.

33

Evidently the singer was Olive Groves; see Bibliography, p.473.

roval of Margot. I have no doubt that I shall like your new music as much as I have liked your old when I have heard it sung.³⁴

Whether or not Yeats objected to Dulac's setting itself and so dissociated himself from it, or whether he simply objected to its performance, is uncertain. But the comments of his Irish colleague F.R.Higgins show that the basic issue was the long-standing distinction he and Yeats drew between traditional Irish modal music and the "English" diatonic scale:

Higgins came in three nights ago, approved our manifesto, said my broadcast was a failure, and blamed . . . in the main, thought his music good but . . .; said no singer trained on the diatonic scale can sing poetry; said all respectable people in Ireland sang according to that scale, but that he and all disreputables sang in the ancient modes.³⁵

Dulac was undoubtedly the object of Higgins's strictures. It was a matter of quarter-tones and chanting again; Dulac's fault was that, although a sensitive musician, he was writing the conventional tunes based on the modern scale. F.R.Higgins evidently influenced Yeats's musical ideas strongly and since the latter was musically inexpert he accepted Higgins's preferences as binding aesthetic truth. At any rate, when Yeats presented his final broadcast programme of poetry, "My Own Poetry Again", Dulac was not invited to collaborate. Yeats read some of his poems and Margot Ruddock sang two of the songs, evidently to her own tunes.

Yeats's fascination with the idea of creating a union between words and music found expression in the two sets of Broadsides, in the broad-

³⁴
Letters, p.892, 893.

³⁵
Letters on Poetry, p.141.

casts, in the singing of folk songs and ballads at the Irish Academy dinners and finally in the publication of New Poems where tunes were printed at the end of the book. In the sense that all these were part of a serious attempt to revive an art form, the attempt failed since Yeats never secured either a large enough audience or the critical attention of other poets and musicians to achieve recognition or start a movement. Although his was a concern shared by people as diverse as Cecil Sharp, who pioneered the collecting of folk music in this century, the poet Auden and the composer Stravinsky, Yeats knew none of these people well. His experiment remained private and uncompleted.

There were two distinct sides to the experiment. On the one hand, Yeats was concerned about the ballad tradition native to Ireland, and in this concern he was influenced by Higgins whose knowledge of Irish traditional music was considerable. Higgins repeatedly tried to draw Yeats away from the very different English lyric tradition which accepted the diatonic scale as the suitable musical clothing for song. On the other hand, Yeats wanted to work within this tradition too; the poems of Dorothy Wellesley and W.J. Turner and some of his own were more suited to English music such as the settings of Edmund Dulac and Turner than to modal Irish music. Yeats himself did not distinguish between these two different strands, which explains his indecision when caught between the opposing views of Dulac and Higgins.

The view that Yeats was tone deaf is now accepted widely, not least because Yeats himself frequently observed that he had no ear for music. It is certainly true that Yeats did not have a trained ear, but it is equally certain that he showed sensitivity to the human voice, whether speaking or

singing, and must have possessed some feeling for tune, even if on a simple level. His idea of music was simplistic and really determined by aesthetic ideas, such as the concept of poetry as song and the poet as a traditional bard, linking the common people to art. In the next chapter I will show how Yeats made these ideas work in the poetry itself. But his idea of music was also determined by his appreciation of verbal rhythms and the quality of the speaking voice. V.C. Clinton-Baddeley, who regularly took part in Yeats's broadcasts as a reader, wrote a book shortly after Yeats died. In this, he argued that Yeats based his views on his attitude towards poetry as words, and that he was constantly preoccupied by the need to present poetry as a spoken art transcending mere recitation.³⁶

Yeats himself said the last word about the relationship of the two arts:

. . . all that you need I think to perfect your style is to watch yourself to prevent any departure from the formula. 'Music, the natural words in the natural order.' Through that formula we go back to the people. Music will keep out temporary ideas, for music is the nations clothing of what is ancient and deathless. I do not mean of course what musicians call the music of words-- that is all corpse factory, humanity melted down and poured out of a bottle.³⁷

The last qualification is important: music meant a principle, an emphasis on the traditional aspect of poetry as a natural activity involving the voices of the people, rather than an attempt to make words reproduce musical qualities. The exaltation of this ancient art of song was for Yeats an aesthetic ideal, mirroring his praise of the hierarchical society, the marriage of the nobleman and the peasant. It was a bridge linking Irish ideals and aesthetic aims.

36

Words for Music, especially pp.154-161.

37

Letters on Poetry, pp.126-127.

III

THE IMAGERY OF MUSIC

I have shown how Yeats was preoccupied with the relationship between poetry and music, and how this preoccupation took the form of activity directed towards public presentation. Necesssarily, this aspect of Yeats's work is relatively unexplored today, because there are few recordings still in existence of Yeats and other voices reading the poems in his style and with the musical accompaniments and interruptions which he regarded as integral; nor are all the tunes written for the poems extant. The poems themselves, however, reveal that Yeats worked¹ his musical interests into his writing. A reading of the "Last Poems" section of Collected Poems presents a tapestry where the imagery of music, song and sound is interwoven into the thought and texture of many poems.

However, it would be a mistake to suggest that Yeats did not think and write in terms of musical imagery until he approached the end of his life. As one of the "last Romantics" Yeats early inherited a way of thinking and feeling about poetry from French symbolist writers, English Pre-Raphaelites and poets of the eighteen-nineties. In all these movements music was a central co-ordinating metaphor in speaking of the arts. Pater had echoed the thought and language of many when he said

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In this chapter I treat the two volumes New Poems (1938) and Last Poems and Two Plays (1939) as a single corpus, and therefore refer to their contents under the single classification "Last Poems" of Collected Poems.

that "all art aspires to the condition of music". Arthur Symon's words about Mallarmé were characteristic, and in sympathy with that poet's conception of poetry, when he wrote of his art in terms of the basic musical analogy:

. . . I find Mallarmé at the moment when his own desire achieves itself; when he attains Wagner's ideal, that "the most complete work of the poet should be that which, in its final achievement, becomes a perfect music": every word is a jewel, scattering and recapturing sudden fire, every image is a symbol, and the whole poem is visible music.²

Yeats himself employed much the same kind of analogical language in his writings on symbolism:

It is indeed only those things which seem useless or very feeble that have any power, and all those things that seem useful or strong, armies, moving wheels, modes of architecture, modes of government, speculations of the reason, would have been a little different if some mind long ago had not given itself to some emotion, as a woman gives herself to her lover, and shaped sounds or colours or forms, or all of these, into a musical relation, that their emotion might live in other minds.³

It seems that a symptom of the symbolist fever was the presence of a Wagnerian point of view about the arts of poetry, drama, painting and music--- a point of view which emphasised their identity, their aesthetic remoteness from life and their suggestiveness. Yeats thought of Unity of Being in sculptural terms but his father preferred a musical analogy even for that:

. . . I thought that in man and race alike there is something called 'Unity of Being', using that term as Dante used it when he compared beauty in the Convito to a perfectly proportioned human body. My father, from whom I had learned the term, pre-

2

The Symbolist Movement in Literature, p.69.

3

"The Symbolism of Poetry" in Essays and Introductions, p.157.

ferred a comparison to a musical instrument so strung that if we touch a string all the strings murmur faintly.⁴

Symbolists, aesthetic philosophers and Pre-Raphaelites all turned to music when they wished to find an image to suggest the purity of art and its indescribable subtlety. For a time Yeats was caught up in this world of aesthetic subtlety; Symonds dedicated his famous book on the symbolist movement to Yeats.

The ballad form was not a new discovery to Yeats in the 'thirties any more than the tendency to make use of musical imagery. One thinks especially of his early association with William Morris and of his admiration for this lover of culture and romance. Morris, Rossetti and other Pre-Raphaelites drew inspiration from a medieval concept of the balladist and balladry; they may have communicated to Yeats a ballad-type that was essentially literary and artificial, but at least he had at hand models which would serve as a basis for later development. A fuller treatment of these early influences is obviously outside the scope of this discussion; but to be aware of the continuity of Yeats's writing career is to realise how, in later life, he strengthened immeasurably his technical control of forms, imagery and language.

The metaphor of singer and song for poet and poetry has a vital relation to the subject of much of Yeats's work, his view of the role of the poet and the function of poetry. The injunctions of "Under Ben Bulbin" pointed backwards to sum up favourite attitudes of Yeats's life, and forwards to leave to his younger poet-friends what he hoped would

⁴
Autobiographies, p.190.

continue to be an Irish tradition:

Irish poets, learn your trade,
Sing whatever is well made,
Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds.
Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard-riding country gentlemen,
The holiness of monks, and after
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter;
Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay
Through seven heroic centuries;
Cast your mind on other days
That we in coming days may be
Still the indomitable Irishry.

The repeated imperative, "sing", three times forcefully introducing an injunction, stresses the bardic attitude already implied by Yeats's late ballads and poems in folk song style. The word in this context evokes the world of wandering minstrel and his audiences: the minstrel ready to sing of the heroism of the glorious past to an audience held together by the very values and traditions celebrated in those songs and ballads. In the same vein Yeats had celebrated a hero of the 1916 Easter Rising, in "The O'Rahilly":

Sing of the O'Rahilly,
Do not deny his right;
Sing a 'the' before his name;
Allow that he, despite
All those learned historians,
Established it for good;
He wrote out that word himself,
He christened himself with blood.

The O'Rahilly was an ideal hero for this kind of ballad. The admirable virtues are catalogued in the poem. He was brave, reckless and finally defeated, and so justified by his death his self-chosen aristocratic

title-- "the" O'Rahilly. In the last verse Yeats points to a particular feature of the heroic ballad, its essential purpose of recording tragedy:

What remains to sing about
But of the death he met
Stretched under a doorway
Somewhere off Henry Street;
They that found him found upon
The door above his head
'Here died the O'Rahilly,
R.I.P.' writ in blood.

This then is the purpose of the ballad, to join singer and audience in praise of the proud hero who embodies the vision of community, people or nation and who faces tragedy with equanimity. Such tragedy, Yeats often said, was not only ennobling but also joyful to the man who embraced suffering.

This backward sweep over a noble past is characteristic of much ballad art, epic poetry and tragedy, especially Greek tragedy in which the role of the chorus appears to take over that of the anonymous ballad-
5
ist. In one of the briefer epigrammatic pieces of "Last Poems", Yeats captures the anonymous tone of the balladist while suggesting the moralising quality of the Greek chorus unusual in the ballad proper:

I sing what was lost, and dread what was won,
I walk in a battle fought over again,
My king a lost king, and lost soldiers my men;
Feet to the Rising and Setting may run,
They always beat on the same small stone.
("What Was Lost")

"I sing what was lost" sums up the tone of much of the late poetry, and brings to mind the Olympian pictures of "Beautiful Lofty Things" and Crazy

5

Although a characteristic of the traditional ballad is its lack of moralising, Yeats often makes his political ballads comment explicitly on moral standards-- in the Casement ballads, for instance.

Jane crying tears down as she sees a vision of Emer and Cuchulain. The vision is painful because these heroic people are dead, and in their place Crazy Jane thinks of the feeble Bishop and a King of England who "stuck to his throne" while his young royal Russian cousins were murdered. The refrain to "The O'Rahilly" persistently hints at the relevance of bardic art by its casual question: "How goes the weather?"

In "The Old Stone Cross" music has essentially the same meaning as song in suggesting epic qualities:

But actors lacking music
Do most excite my spleen,
They say it is more human
To shuffle, grunt and groan,
Not knowing what unearthly stuff
Rounds a mighty scene.

Actually, the two metaphors of the stage and music are effectively combined here, in view of Yeats's stated convictions about the speaking of verse; music, as we have seen, did not mean trying to give verse sound which the reader or actor thought appropriate to music, but meant respecting the language of verse and its writer's intention. "Music" in verse-speaking meant equally avoiding the blatant rhetoric of the bad actor and the realism of the modernist actor. Again, the metaphors of stage and music point to the "unearthly" matter of heroic literature and drama. Yeats, like Shakespeare, uses the metaphor of acting to create his comédie humaine, his world of tragic and comic, heroic and unheroic, people. However, his own favourite world is that of the "mighty scene" where the actors instinctive-

See Jeffares, Commentary, pp.506-507. The King is George V, who Yeats thought should have abdicated after the killing of the Tsar and his family in 1918.

ly know the heroic music and have a basic sympathy with the "unearthly stuff" of drama and life. In "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" the thoughts called up by the "permanent or impermanent images" hung around the walls tell the same story "As though some ballad-singer had sung it all". This repeated use of the metaphors of music, ballad and song underlines Yeats's continual desire to achieve impersonality in his art, to bring art once more back again to the "sole test": "Dream of the noble and the beggar-man."

Song was associated with traditional virtues, setting the instinctive wisdom of people living simple, organic lives against modernity and mediocrity. In the "Three Songs to the Same Tune" singing and marching are activities which ward off "faction" and arbitrary rule. Yeats is at his most Swiftian. In the first song, there is the grandfather's gallows song, a praise of passionate violence over money and love; in the second, the young men are called upon to justify proud men who have

Stood or have marched the night long
Singing, singing a song.

When the state has reached a stage of crisis, it is this kind of proud soldier that is needed:

Time for us all to pick out a good tune,
Take to the roads and go marching along.
March, march - How does it run? -
O any old words to a tune.

But the tune was the traditional "O'Donnell Abu", and the words were a generalised patter of defiance, praise of violence and pride.

In old age, Yeats was quite prepared to be accused of foolishness, and figures like Crazy Jane, the wild old wicked man and the roaring tinker often voiced the apparent folly of instinctive wisdom. Yeats explained to a

friend that

. . . Every writer should say to himself every morning 'Who am I that I should not seem a fool?' ⁷

and he asked this same question in a poem:

He that sings a lasting song
Thinks in a marrow bone;
.

O what am I that I should not seem
For the song's sake a fool?
("A Prayer for Old Age")

Personality was a hindrance to the poet who wanted to write of instinctive wisdom; the song was the medium of such wisdom, which created its own rules transcending time and particular persons. Poetry had to come from the innermost, unreasoning core of the poet, his marrow bone rather than his brain, which was likely to have been trained by that mass education Yeats so despised.

Music and song became one way of asserting the timeless as against flux, age-old truth against temporary excitements. In "The Statesman's Holiday" the refrain "Tall dames go walking in grass-green Avalon" evokes in the vaguest manner an atmosphere of medieval romance to set against the decline of splendour:

Some knew what ailed the world
But never said a thing,
So I have picked a better trade
And night and morning sing:
Tall dames go walking in grass-green Avalon.

Confronting squalid images of modern baseness, whether treacherous Lord Chancellor or mass-produced motor car, the singer's only answer is to take an old lute and make it produce a nostalgic tune:

Here's a Montenegrin lute,
 And its old sole string
 Make me sweet music
 And I delight to sing:
Tall dames go walking in grass-green Avalon.

The old lute may have lost most of its strings, but it is still capable of producing the sweet melody that takes the poet away from the modern ugliness.

In "Lapis Lazuli" the musician is one of a number of images integral to the meaning of the poem. The first stanza presents the opposition between the gaiety of the poet, artist and musician and the threatening terror of modern civilisation with its destructive weapons. But the secret of the artist is precisely what is needed to face the destruction of modernity, which is the theme of all tragedy: "Gaiety transfiguring all that dread". The tragic theme is immutable, an endless cycle of destruction and rebuilding, frenzy and gaiety. Ancient art images the only human response possible to tragedy, the calm wisdom of the onlooker which may momentarily break out in a paroxysm of frenzied joy. The Chinamen, carved in lapis lazuli, climb a mountain and in repose stare at the multiplicity of life above and below:

There, on the mountain and the sky,
 On all the tragic scene they stare.
 One asks for mournful melodies;
 Accomplished fingers begin to play.
 Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
 Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.

Thus the piece of lapis lazuli, and the "mournful melodies" it evokes, deepen human awareness of tragedy as they induce the timeless attitude of gaiety proper to the wise man's understanding of life.

The tragic moment, in Yeats, is a moment of utter abandonment when

the whole body expresses the mind's frenzy in song and dance. There is a whole tradition of literature built on the relationship between madness and song; Shakespeare, Blake and Wordsworth, for example, all connected song with the stark simplicity and ultimate wisdom of insanity. Yeats used Hamlet and Lear as images of the kind of tragic wisdom he also epitomised in Crazy Jane, Tom, Ribh and similar figures. In "A Crazy Girl" Yeats gave poetic expression to an incident from the life of a girl he knew, an incident which must have seemed curiously akin to the tragic illumination he had attributed to that figure Crazy Jane. The poetic formulation of this girl's temporary loss of sanity finds its metaphors in poetry, music and dancing. The girl in her madness stands "in desperate music wound", expressing her soul "in division from itself" as she dances on the sea-shore:

That crazed girl improvising her music,
Her poetry, dancing upon the shore,
Her soul in division from itself
Climbing,

Music could be a metaphor for the utter irrationality of tragedy and madness which, as in Shakespeare's King Lear, becomes the pathway by which man arrives at ultimate sanity.

In Yeats's work, music and song have other, diverse connotations. In "News for the Delphic Oracle", Pythagoras "sighed among his choir of love", and "intolerable music" fell from the cavern of Pan. In "Cuchulain Comforted", as earlier in "Sailing to Byzantium", the spirits of the other world "changed their throats and had the throats of birds". In "The Lady's Third Song" physical love is realised in the metaphor of music:

When you and my true lover meet
 And he plays tunes between your feet,

That I may hear if we should kiss
 A contrapuntal serpent hiss,

"contrapuntal" chosen not only for the strangeness of its sound, but because it suggests also the complex inter-relationships of the sexual act.

Yeats's fascination for an art he understood mainly by intuition was expressed not only through the writing of ballads and lyric poems but also in his use of song and music as metaphor in the poems themselves. But the influence of music is also apparent in Yeats's late practice of making considerable use of refrains to increase the resonance of his poems. The use of the refrain introduces a musical principle into ballad and poem alike. The refrain serves something of the same purpose as the motif in art and music, sometimes indicating a simple, persistent attitude or tone, sometimes having thematic significance. Always the refrain, whether short phrase or couplet or quatrain, channels the meaning of the poem into a single well; the meaning is intensified rather than expanded by repetition of the refrain even though its suggestions may be extended what has been said in the preceding verse. This use of the refrain is a very sophisticated one, because the poet is committing himself to a musical principle, which tempers the linear aspect of both words and music by the suggestion of a cyclic aspect in which beginning, middle and end are variations on a single theme.

In "The Apparitions" the refrain carries the theme most explicitly and forcefully:

Fifteen apparitions have I seen;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.

The word "apparition" suggests Shakespeare's Macbeth; Yeats's apparitions, like those in Macbeth, are to be seen as increasing in terror until the last and "worst" gives the ultimate lie to life. The "coat upon a coat-hanger" is a symbol revealing the emptiness of one's pretensions and the dwindling away of man, but of course its power lies in its infinite suggestiveness. It is the refrain here that sets the key, tone and pitch of the poem, its stark simplicity and formality (effective inversion in both lines) setting it off against the more leisured discursiveness of the stanzas. The refrain, like a musical theme, attracts and disperses meaning. It shocks after the first stanza, which has hinted that the mention of an apparition was merely an old man's conversational gambit; it warns the reader to intensify the apparent meaning of the second stanza, so that the picture of the lonely old man talking to a friend does not succeed in concealing profound depths of loneliness and terror; the third stanza at last amplifies the suggestion of the refrain so that the reader draws the equation between "the increasing Night/That opens her mystery and fright" and the apparition of the refrain. This is surely one of the most effective refrains Yeats ever wrote. On each of its three appearances it throws open the meaning of the preceding stanza, intensifying on its second and third appearances and taking into itself the accumulated meaning of the poem. By using the refrain, Yeats learnt to make the lyric as economical and intense as was possible.

The refrain of "The Black Tower" makes similar use of the technique of gaining cumulative meaning on each of its appearances, though here the effect is gained partly by a slight change in the first line. The theme of approaching darkness, common to several poems in the last volume, is dramatised in the stanzas and suggested in sinister, impersonal terms in the

refrain:

There in the tomb stand the dead upright,
But winds come up from the shore:
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.

After the second stanza, the tomb darkens: "There in the tomb drops the faint moonlight", and after the third there is more darkness yet: "There in the tomb the dark grows blacker". By a masterful suspension, the total blackness which will bring the old bones to life is left to the imagination, an inevitability more powerful for being left unstated. The refrain establishes itself as a motif not only by its steady recurrence, but also because of its different tone. The words of the stanzas are spoken by one of the guarding company in the tower-- "Why do you dread us so?", "Stand we on guard oath-bound"; they give the poem a context of human reality. But the voice of the refrain is impersonal, its context an unknown and irrational world. Yeats introduces into these poems atmospheres to which the closest analogy is found in the language of music.

While the refrain traditionally expands its meaning with the progression of the poem, it is also the fixed element which unifies the whole and in some poems its function is to point to the deeper meaning which supports the accumulated meanings. The refrain has this function in "Long-legged Fly" where the simile itself carries the weight of meaning of which the stanzas are illustrations:

Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

The theme itself is disciplined and simple, a particular insight into the source of human creativity; yet it is so effective because of its stark contrast with the images of the stanzas-- Caesar with his maps, Maud Gonne

practising a "tinker shuffle", Michael Angelo at work on the Sistine Chapel roof. Again, the quiet repetition of the theme can be seen in terms of a musical work with its balance of elements that recur, giving the work its cyclic nature, and elements that particularise, leading away from and towards the basic statement.

In a poem like "John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs. Mary Moore", the refrain insistently brings the elements of thought back to a basic tone which is elaborated in the stanzas. The lament

What shall I do for pretty girls
Now my old bawd is dead?

stands at the centre of the elaborated to-and-fro internal argument of John Kinsella; Mrs. Mary Moore was in fact his Eden, it was she who kept "the soul of man alive", she who banished age and care. Only when she is dead does he remember the priest's talk of Adam and the garden of Eden, but this after all is now irrelevant and he can only lament his old bawd's death. The refrain can achieve a simplicity and nonchalance not possible in the stanzas. It both supports and is supported by the other parts of the poem.

Yeats was adept also at the creation of a much briefer kind of refrain which is something less like a musical motif or theme and more akin to an insistent fragment of melody asserting a particular quality of experience. This type of refrain is found in "The Statesman's Holiday" and "Three Songs to the One Burden". In the first, the single line "Tall dames go walking in grass-green Avalon" evokes the whole world of lost elegance and romance, a loss consciously felt in the poems and in On the Boiler, where the poem first appeared. The economy of suggestion is characteristic of the

refrains, achieved by the two words "tall dames" (reminiscent of "High Talk": "Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches the eye"), the slightly archaic quality of "go walking" and the medieval suggestion of "grass-green Avalon". In the "Three Songs . . .", "From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen" acts as a kind of magnificent, heroic back-drop to the three sketches (in musical terms the refrain might be seen as a Wagnerian trumpet motif); at any moment the back-drop figures might come to life and the lost heroic order reassert itself.

Yet another type of refrain, fragmentary and questioning, comments on the old man's increasing scepticism about the nature of experience. "Fol de rol de rolly O", in itself a nonsense phrase, insultingly calls attention to the finally arbitrary nature of experience; it falls naturally not only from the lips of the insane but also from those of women, old men, the dead and the poet himself:

Now I am in the public-house and lean upon the wall,
So come in rags or come in silk, in cloak or country shawl,
And come with learned lovers or with what men you may,
For I can put the whole lot down, and all I have to say
Is fol de rol de rolly O.

So, in "What Then?", Yeats's own plea for a life fulfilled with happiness, industry and his work's final perfection is faintly mocked by Plato's ghost: "But louder sang that ghost, 'What then?'" This type of refrain emphasises a view of life as tragic because no finality is possible to human beings; no more than previously can the poet get the answers right to the questions that his experiences turn into. Even the vivid images of past life lived on the grand, heroic scale hint at tragedy by the questions they raise. Thus, in "The Curse of Cromwell", the embittering knowledge of the present emptiness is formulated into a desperate question:

O what of that, O what of that,
What is there left to say?

Essentially the same question has an even sharper ring when it is posed as part of a ballad praising the O'Rahilly: "How goes the weather?" The question is unanswerable because the only answer possible simply leads back to the affirmations of the poem, affirmations of tragedy: "We that look on but laugh in tragic joy."

Yeats developed the refrain so that it carried thematic significance in an economical, telling manner. In the folk songs and ballads of traditional folk-art, refrains emphasised the universal and timeless nature of the ballad as opposed to its narrative, circumstantial line; they brought the audience into the recitation at a moment given over to the inevitable summary of the narrative situation. Yeats made much more of the refrain than this. He made it thematically a part of the poem, often its basis, using it as an element of counterpoint; it could be the insistent statement of a theme or a counterpointed melody having the effect of question or negation. In the printed volumes it was Yeats's practice to have this refrain, whether single line or quatrain, printed in italics so that it stood as part of the poem yet as a distinct element. Dialogue and counterpoint emerge as an aspect of the impersonality of the writer. The contrasts, contradictions and oppositions are built into the poem much as sonata form in music is organised around the tonal opposition of two themes.

Music in a wider sense yet provided imagery for Yeats's last poetry. The ballads and other lyrics revel in man at his most instinctive, especially in his behaviour when engaged in activities like drinking, loving and fighting. Many of these activities are imaged in sounds-- the cry, shriek,

roar, laugh and knock. All these sounds express human energy expressed in instinctive action. Such admiration of physical activity was a recurring theme in Yeats's poetry throughout his life, and the images of horseman, fisherman and dancing girl are equally expressive of it. While it may well be factitious to attribute Yeats's intensive use of human sounds in the late poetry to his interest in music, the two are obviously related in some way. The flute, violin and drum were Yeats's favourite instruments. The first is all but an image for lyric sound, the second for the careless, spontaneous music of the peasant fiddler and the third for a whole gamut of percussive sounds, whether the explosion of rifle-fire or the striking of a clock or a man knocking on a wall. Percussion instruments, gong or drum, were useful in the Yeats play for reasons other than strictly musical.

"Last Poems" is full of the sounds of the human voice and other non-musical sounds, from silence to the human roar. Many of the words representing sounds are onomatopæic in effect, but even discounting such onomatopæia, this vocabulary of sound makes considerable impact because of the strongly individual words Yeats used and the meanings they suggest.

In "Roger Casement", the spreading of the slander about Casement from the forged diaries is communicated as a crescendo of human voices:

For Spring Rice had to whisper it,
Being their ambassador,
And then the speakers got it
And writers by the score.

Came Tom and Dick, came all the troop
That cried it far and wide . . . ;

"whisper", "speakers", "cried" all carry an added connotation in addition to their literal meanings. In the sequel to this poem, "The Ghost of Roger Casement", Casement gets his revenge in the same terms-- the image of sound:

What gave that roar of mockery,
 That roar in the sea's roar?
The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating on the door.

The human roar is a common image in Yeats, associated with fury, power and heroism:

The Roaring Tinker if you like,
 But Mannion is my name,
 And I beat up the common sort
 And think it is no shame.
 The common breeds the common,
 A lout begets a lout,
 So when I take on half a score
 I knock their heads about.
 ("Three Songs to the One Burden")

All these percussive sounds express great energy and fury; they are the sounds of physical action--- beating, knocking, striking, roaring and ranting. In "An Acre of Grass" Yeats asks for "an old man's frenzy":

Till I am Timon or Lear
 Or that William Blake
 Who beat upon the wall
 Till truth obeyed his call.

Even the O'Rahilly, hurrying to the Easter Rising, pictures his summons in a percussive image:

Because I helped to wind the clock
 I come to hear it strike.

The evidence of the poems points to a Yeats who celebrated the spirit of man taking its most violent form in terms that are often crude. Whether it is the Roaring Tinker beating up "the common sort", Crazy Jane seeking to renew her "ranting time" or Blake beating on the wall, there is an intensity of image and sound as though only through physical violence can man's spirit reveal itself: "Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot!"

Generally, the sounds of "Last Poems" are those of violence and

passion, but there are also more joyful sounds such as the "Porter-drinkers' randy laughter" of "Under Ben Bulbin"; and in "The Man and the Echo" it is the cry of a stricken rabbit that distracts Yeats as he hears the echoes of Rocky Voice relentlessly catching and throwing back the grim phrases of human mortality. But Yeats was equally sensitive to the silence of wisdom, and it is appropriate that he describes Dorothy Wellesley in words that capture paradoxically the music of silence:

Rammed full
Of that most sensuous silence of the night
(For since the horizon's bought strange dogs are still)
Climb to your chamber full of books and wait,
No books upon the knee, and no one there
But a Great Dane that cannot bay the moon
And now lies sunk in sleep.

Yeats was consistent in his use of these sound images. He had previously described Dorothy Wellesley in words that suggested sensuousness and the images of sleep and silence, the atmosphere of the quiet chamber are obviously suited to feminine wisdom as the ranting and roaring of Crazy Jane and the Roaring Tinker are suited to frenzy and heroic defiance.

It would be unwise to push a musical interpretation of "Last Poems" too far, because obviously music is one source of imagery among others. Yeats drew on imagery from all the arts for his poetic purposes. Dancing, stagecraft, art and sculpture are also profitable sources of imagery and appropriate as points from which to survey "Last Poems". But for special purposes music was an obvious source of inspiration. Yeats's study of the Anglo-Irish ballad with F.R.Higgins and Frank O'Connor led him beyond his own ballads in praise of Irish heroism and culture to the discovery of a technique which integrated musical features into lyrical poetry; his use

of refrain, a feature of the late style he employed with singular distinction, was probably derived from these experiments with the ballad style. Ultimately the musical point of view must be traced back to his conception of the Irish personality as it confronted gay life and heroic death. The old heroes combined the nonchalance of the ideal man and the peasant musician; they

Stood, took death like a tune
On an old tambourine.
("Three Marching Songs")

IV

TWO FINAL DRAMATIC STATEMENTS

In his writing for the theatre Yeats gave his themes their most public expression. Dramatic form forced him to delineate sharply, to objectify and to create precise contexts which would clarify his favourite themes. The two last plays, Purgatory and The Death of Cuchulain, though very different from each other, are similar in their tight construction and the ruthless simplicity by which all the dramatic elements are made to cohere in a singleness of vision. The plays are linked, too, in that each emphasises and rounds off an aspect of Yeats's preoccupations, the one his lament for a vanished order of life and his examination of the nature of the pathway between life and death, the other a culmination of his fascination with the heroic Cuchulain theme. Both plays show Yeats formulating possible responses to the fact of death, as he continued to do in the poetry; taken together, they suggest the inability of Yeats to arrive at any ultimate stance: in Purgatory, man yields his pride to God; in The Death of Cuchulain, Cuchulain defines the nature of his heroism as he faces ignominious death.

The plot of Purgatory is the basis for its simplicity. The story is clearly defined, its turning points swiftly and clearly marked. An Old Man returns to the house of his youth, accompanied by his son. His mother had betrayed the family heritage by entering into a ruinous marriage with a stable groom addicted to drink. She died after giving birth to the Old

Man. The marriage had initiated a train of consequences to which the Old Man hopes to put an end by killing his bastard son, as he had killed his father in the burning house years previously. A visit to the ruined house is the obvious prelude to this second murder, because here the Old Man sees his mother re-living her transgressions, the circumstances of the marriage-night, the night of his begetting. The Old Man stabs the boy just after the latter has tried to steal his father's money-bag while the window is lit up for the re-enactment of the marriage-night. The crisis occurs very quickly. The boy dies, the window darkens, the tree is now bathed in white light so that the Old Man rejoices that he has terminated his mother's purgatorial "dreaming". But hoof-beats are heard approaching the house, a sign that the mother's purgatory continues. The Old Man prays to God for appeasement, for both "the misery of the living" and "the remorse of the dead".

The economy and precision of Purgatory would make it an effective stage production. There is the economy of setting, by which "A ruined house and a bare tree in the background" establish with one stroke three essentials: the scene, or context, itself; the means by which past, present and future are drawn together and brought into a meaningful identity; and the resources for a powerful historical symbolism which operates throughout the play. For the student of Yeats, the house and tree establish a context already familiar from earlier usage. That the ruined house encompasses the death of a tradition presupposes not only the meanings emerging from the play, but also those positive values Yeats attributed to the culture of the Great House in poems like "A Prayer for My Daughter" and "Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation". In the latter

poem he had asked:

How should the world be luckier if this house,
Where passion and precision have been one
Time out of mind, became too ruinous
To breed the lidless eye that loves the sun?
And the sweet laughing eagle thoughts that grow
Where wings have memory of wings, and all
That comes of the best knit to the best?

Similarly, Yeats's increasingly harsh evaluation of the post-Great House era, from The Tower to On the Boiler (which Purgatory concludes) makes the impact of lines from the play unmistakable:

Where are the jokes and stories of a house
Its threshold gone to patch a pig-sty?

But there is sufficient telling detail in the play itself to convince us that Yeats had in mind a whole culture rather than mere nostalgia for vanished aristocracy. It is this culture that is established in the first lines of the play, with the Old Man's reminiscences of the house,

. . . its jokes and stories;
I try to remember what the butler
Said to a drunken gamekeeper
In mid-October,

and his memory of the tree as it had once stood, full of "fat, greasy life". The Boy's undisguised contempt for and ignorance of this culture, his estimation of it solely in terms of the luck of material possessions, ironically point up this cultural richness, and the impoverishing effects of its dislocation from within, symbolised in the play by the marriage of the Old Man's mother to the drunken groom. Thus while it is possible to interpret much of the play as historical allegory, the house and tree, seen at one moment in the living vitality of their past, and at the next as mere ruined properties, assert their significance as symbols containing the immanent past, the barren present and the portentous future.

This economy of setting makes possible economy of character.

Within the stage setting there are two worlds, and it is the ruined house which seems to make commerce possible between these two worlds. On the stage itself, as representing the path along which the Old Man and the Boy wander, the knowable, present world of human action prevails. Behind the facade of the ruined house is a quite different world, that of a past, present and future which has a separate existence. The Old Man imagines that he has the power to effect what happens in this other world, but in fact he has not. When he kills his son, believing that by so doing he will free his dead mother from her purgatorial torment, he ironically vindicates the Boy's modern scepticism that things are only what they seem. Such a conclusion leads to the traditional prayer that ends the play, a prayer that issues from the Old Man's recognition that his world and the world inside the ruined house are separate. Yet paradoxically this recognition is also a discovery of the ultimate identity of the two worlds; the Old Man might be Marlowe's Mephistopheles when he says "Why this is Hell, nor am I out of it". The prayer recognises the "misery of the living" as well as, what the Old Man already knew of, the "remorse of the dead". Beyond the ruined house, the Old Man's mother must continue to suffer because of the consequences of her act upon herself, while outside the ruined house her son must still suffer the transmitted consequences of the false marriage; the stabbing of his own son had been one such of these.

The play, with its elaborated symbolism of house and tree and its familiar images, impresses its Irish theme without recourse to a systematic elucidation of it as historical allegory. This Irish theme had in

fact preceded the play in On the Boiler, and Yeats himself drew attention in that book to the connection between the play's meaning and the themes of the tract, without explaining just what that connection was. He was more explicit in some comments he made after its performance in the Abbey Theatre:

In my play, a spirit suffers because of its share, when alive, in the destruction of an honoured house; that destruction is taking place all over Ireland today. Sometimes it is the result of poverty, but more often because a new individualistic generation has lost interest in the ancient sanctities.¹

This strong comment goes far toward explaining why Yeats linked dramatic exposition of the theme of the loss of national tradition with "theological" material;² the Old Man is to be taken quite seriously when he states that

. . . to kill a house
Where great men grew up, married, died,
I here declare a capital offence.

The Old Man's father, a drunken stable groom, had killed the house by setting it alight in a drunken stupor. But the Old Man's mother had prepared for that by her betrayal of the family estate, hence her purgatorial remorse. All the misery in the play derives from murder, whether of family house or family. Yeats was raising the national situation to the level of a deeply religious issue, treating it with shocking intensity. If one has

¹
Quoted in Torchiana, W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland, p.357.

²
I use the word "theological" in the sense established by F.A.C. Wilson in his W.B. Yeats and Tradition. Wilson claims that, "in approaching Purgatory from the point of view of its theology, I am documenting it as Yeats would have wished." (p.137)

in mind Yeats's injunctions to Ireland's artists in "Under Ben Bulbin",

Bring the soul of man to God,
Make him fill the cradles right,

then there is no ground for complaint that Yeats mixed two distinct themes by setting the struggle of the Old Man to finish the remorse of his dead mother's spirit in the context of a play about Irish history. Yeats increasingly made it his practice to bring private and public themes together. From another point of view too, he followed a sure instinct in his choice of matter for the spirit's remorse. By marrying into base blood the mother had severed "nature" in the Shakespearean sense; her act had been more unnatural than the Old Man's two murders, because he acted with the sound intention of preventing further evil consequences:

I killed that lad because had he grown up
He would have struck a woman's fancy,
Begot, and passed pollution on.
I am a wretched foul old man
And therefore harmless.

The subsequent twist of the plot must, of course, be explained in terms of Yeats's doctrines rather than those of Shakespeare, but the Old Man's first recognition of the unnatural act was sound, by his creator's views. The malaise was that articulated by the persona in "The Statesman's Holiday":

I lived among great houses,
Riches drove out rank,
Base drove out the better blood,
And mind and body shrank.
.....

So I have picked a better trade
And night and morning sing:
Tall dames go walking in grass-green Avalon.

The theme of the mad old man is central to On the Boiler; undoubtedly this

3

man owes much to Shakespeare's *Lear*, old and raving, yet arriving at ultimate wisdom. The Old Man of Purgatory thinks he has completed the tragic cycle by restoring some measure of balance to nature, but it is Yeats's intention that he realise both that only God can act so decisively where the life of spirits is concerned, and that only God can "appease/ The misery of the living". Restoration of the "ancient sanctities" lay beyond the scope of man; old men could go mad, but that was simply another of the miseries engendered by the tragic inheritance.

Although Purgatory involves only two actors there are actually four characters in the play. The spirit of the Old Man's mother is present from the beginning, when her pedlar son tells the Boy that "there is somebody in that house." The Boy's grandfather is doubly present, as a shadowy spirit but also as his blood seen as it has been transmitted to his grandson. The Boy, to the Old Man, is the living symbol of the degradation introduced by the unnatural marriage. Yeats's consciousness of generation as an instrument of pollution and degradation colours much of his later writing. In "The Old Stone Cross", the "man in the golden breastplate" speaks with much the same bitterness as the Old Man of Purgatory:

Because this age and the next age
Engender in the ditch,
No man can know a happy man
From any passing wretch:
If Folly link with Elegance
No man knows which is which,

3

Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition, p.159, claims that the lines,
I am a wretched foul old man
And therefore harmless,
constitute a "deliberate reminiscence" of Lear's "I am a very foolish, fond old man" (King Lear, IV, vii, 60).

and the Old Man, too, had done his begetting in a ditch:

I gave the education that befits
A bastard that a pedlar got
Upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch.

Not all Yeats's wandering poor embody the nobility of beggary: while some are in possession of traditional wisdom, others are the unthinking destroyers of it, reducing the Great House to patching for a pig-sty.

The Old Man actually shares the qualities of both kinds of Yeatsian beggar, but Yeats has emphasised the wisdom of this Old Man rather than his folly, for which he was hardly to blame. The play makes no overt comment on the second needless murder, beyond the Old Man's "Twice a murderer and all for nothing" so that the audience is not meant to speculate on his morality at this point. The murder of the Boy is tragic just in so far as it becomes another of the consequences of the base marriage; in itself it is of no great moment and can hardly be seen as tragic. Its function is to lead to the inevitable recognition that to end the actual consequences of a spirit's earthly mistakes is not to end that spirit's suffering.

What is important is the process of discovery itself: during the play the Old Man exchanges one kind of knowledge for another. He is a dispossessed man, his bitterness deriving from his awareness of the heritage he was cheated of. He can speak in tones of elegiac reverence,

Great people lived and died in this house;
Magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament,
Captains and Governors, and long ago
Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne.
.....

There were old books and books made fine
By eighteenth-century French binding, books
Modern and ancient, books by the ton,

revealing an intense devotion to the heritage he was cheated of. But this

tone changes very rapidly to one of bitter denunciation, pointing up the sense of what had been irrevocably lost:

I gave the education that befits
A bastard that a pedlar got
Upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch.
When I had come to sixteen years old
My father burned down the house when drunk.

This rapid fluctuation between the two tones of elegy and denunciation is the same as that found in Yeats when he speaks in propria persona, the change between, say, the tone of "The Municipal Gallery Revisited" and the prose text of On the Boiler. It seems likely, then, that Yeats succeeded in distancing his emotion and cooling its heat by accepting the stance he gave to the Old Man when the latter finally asks God to

Release my mother's soul from its dream!
Mankind can do no more. Appease
The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead.

In arriving at this detachment, the Old Man had transcended the unsatisfactory, fragmentary education of his youth, the ability to read given by a gamekeeper's wife and the Latin imparted by a Catholic curate. In its place he had learned humility by recognising the tragic nature of the living and the dead.

Commentaries on Purgatory have tended to examine the play as a dramatic projection, either of Yeats's late Irish theme⁴ or of his "theological" convictions⁵ (and one eccentric exegesis describes it as a parable

⁴ See Donald R. Pearce, "Yeats's Last Plays: An Interpretation", ELH, XVIII (March 1951), pp.71-75, and Torchiana, W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland, pp.340-365. Torchiana (p.359, fn.29) remarks that "Those who deny the importance of Ireland to the play may also be denying Yeats's intention of placing Purgatory at the end of On the Boiler."

⁵ Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition, pp.137-161; see fn.2 above.

6

of the artistic imagination⁶), but few critics have stressed its dramatic form. Clearly, Yeats used his various key themes as material for lyric poems, plays and prose, and it is important to interpret his work in the light of formal criticism if one is to avoid the fallacy of regarding the particular form as just another vehicle for the writer's thought. In Purgatory the function of dramatic form in structure, symbolism and dramatic verse is to localise, rather than generalise, the play's meaning. As David Clark points out, writing about The Words upon the Window-Pane and Purgatory,

. . . the essential Noh play form lingers skeletally . . . after more superficial characteristics of the dance plays have proved perishable. There are no dancers or chorus of musicians, yet the plays have the movement of a Noh play, from an eternal situation in this world, to a moment of vision.⁷

What the songs and dances achieved in The King of the Great Clock Tower the lighted house and the ritualistic actions of the Old Man achieve in Purgatory; the moment of achieved stasis is approached inevitably from the context of the play, and is dependent on its dramatic presentation for full understanding. No plot summary or commentary can substitute for an essentially ritualistic experience.

It is not the possible allegorical parallels with periods of Irish history nor the theological philosophy of Purgatory which would emerge as the crucial meanings from a performance but rather the total effect of the elements of dramatic symbolism and ritual. Of these, the house and tree are central and co-ordinating. The Old Man establishes the pattern of this

6

H.H.Vendler, Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays, pp.195-202.

7

W.B.Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality, pp.102-103.

symbolism when he says to the Boy:

The moonlight falls upon the path,
The shadows of a cloud upon the house,
And that's symbolical.

The house and tree seem to metamorphose, but their transformations are momentary devices to bring past, present and future into a moment of vision. The house is lit up to reveal the Old Man's mother on her wedding night and again to show his father pouring whisky, but after the murder of the Boy the sound of hoof-beats is sufficient to indicate that the rhythm of re-enactment in the ruins will continue. The tree changes too when it is surrounded by white light but its effect is to mock at the Old Man's misguided aspirations. The Boy had earlier said that the tree was like "a silly old man", and the Old Man at this point compares it to "a purified soul"; in fact, it remained throughout the barren, riven tree of the desolate present. At the end, as at the beginning, the house is in darkness, but the returning hoof-beats tell the Old Man that he cannot control the house's apparent moments of re-birth. The house's transfiguration is a painful continuing process like the mingled pleasure and remorse of the sexual act which brought him into the world. The moonlight bathing the tree momentarily in white light was symbolical, though only of the Old Man's hopes.

Two earlier uses of the images of beggar and transfigured Great House provide a background for the use of these images in Purgatory. In The King of the Great Clock Tower the two attendants sing a dialogue between the "wicked, crooked, hawthorn tree" and the "rambling, shambling travelling-man" pointing to the gulf between mortality and immortality:

O, but I saw a solem sight;
Said the rambling, shambling travelling-man;
 Castle Dargan's ruin all lit,
 Lovely ladies dancing in it.

The travelling-man needs this vision, for it assures him that "all the lovely things that were/live . . .". In "The Curse of Cromwell" the beggar's similar vision leads to a more pessimistic conclusion:

I came on a great house in the middle of the night,
 Its open lighted doorway and its windows all alight,
 And all my friends were there and made me welcome too;
 But I woke in an old ruin that the winds howled through;
 And when I pay attention I must out and walk
 Among the dogs and horses that understand my talk.
O what of that, O what of that,
What is there left to say?

Wilson links these three uses, and comments that

Always in Yeats's poetry, the lit house is the symbol for the supernatural world and the beggar represents fallen humanity, sustained by this vision of its source.⁸

While this is true enough, it seems necessary to add that the vision in Purgatory is ironic to the point of tragedy. Mingled pleasure and remorse perpetuate what fragmentary life there is in the ruin, but they lead the Old Man to a deep despair in which the boundaries between the supernatural world and the fallen world seem to disappear; neither the "misery of the living" nor the "remorse of the dead" can be relieved by the vision, and only God could provide that deliverance which the Old Man searched for.

In Purgatory Yeats allowed the Old Man to voice what was almost certainly one of his own attitudes--- that of the pessimist. As we have seen, it was not characteristic of Yeats to dramatise one stance without elaborating one seemingly opposite. As he had remarked in the "Commentary

on A Parnellite at Parnell's Funeral", "I am Blake's disciple, not Hegel's:
 'Contraries are positive. A negation is not a contrary.' " ⁹ Purgatory
 seemed to come close to a Christian attitude of prayer; in The Death of
Cuchulain the prevailing tone and attitude are pagan. In the poem
 "Vacillation", having given some sympathy to the Christian philosophy
 represented by Von Hugel, Yeats had declared that "Homer is my example and
 his unchristened heart"; so he moved from a play sympathetic to orthodox
 Christianity to one which draws on the pagan epic material of Ireland as if
 he knew the necessity of demonstrating forcibly that the pagan spirit was
 more than the mere creation of his poetic imagination:

Are those things that men adore and loathe
 Their sole reality?
 What stood in the Post Office
 With Pearse and Connolly?
 What comes out of the mountain
 Where men first shed their blood?
 Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
 He stood where they had stood?

In Yeats's view of the twentieth century, to "think Cuchulain" represented
 the greatest leap men could accomplish in attempting to encompass
 opposites. Throughout the play, it is this leap that is achieved; from
 prose prologue to final song, it is the heroic spirit of Cuchulain, rather
 than his words and actions, that imposes unity. This spirit asserts itself
 the more strongly for meeting its final conflict in sordid circumstances.
 The Morrighu, war-goddess, casually arranging the dance, plots a subdued,
 ignominious role for Cuchulain.

The most striking feature of Yeats's technique in The Death of
Cuchulain is the way in which Cuchulain's stature as heroic paradigm is

asserted. The Morrigu's final statement, "I arranged the dance", is remarkably casual, and it is characteristic in a play which rarely rises above the low-keyed. The circumstantial casual tone, set first by the Old Man who speaks the prologue, prevails until aesthetic distancing has been achieved by the final song, which sets the events in Yeats's planned perspective. Cuchulain himself, reckless as his actions are, prepares for death with the nonchalance proper only to the true hero. If the audience is to regard him as reaching towards some kind of transfiguration throughout the play, it must not look for such heroic evidences as Cuchulain "fighting the ungovernable tide", but rather identify the heroic spirit in his imaginative, leisured appreciation of human points of view. In this sympathetic vein, he shows concern for Aoife's beautiful veil when she goes to bind him with it, as he encourages the Blind Man to kill him for the gain of twelve pennies-- "What better reason for killing a man?" This nonchalance is very different from intentional irony; a man who can see the shape his soul will take after death, an incongruous shape for a "great fighting-man", can afford to see his own death from the point of view of a hungry blind man. Yeats has contrived a context in which the gods' scheming, human pettiness, and a hero's misunderstanding are all seen from a perspective above humanity and daringly interpreted by a harlot.

The harlot is perhaps given the final word about Cuchulain because¹⁰ she has a natural, profound receptivity to the nature of human reality, and has access to the vital metaphysical truths that elude ordinary people; Crazy Jane was wiser than the bishop. This harlot makes the distinction

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For a full discussion of the "symbolic meaning . . . of the harlot" in Yeats's work, see W.B. Yeats and Tradition, pp. 176-180.

familiar to readers of the "Supernatural Songs", between sexual encounter of humans, which must be a mixture of adoration and loathing, and that encounter between human and non-human (or spirit); only in this relationship can there be true, unmixed adoration. Of course, as the harlot admits, such an encounter is not thoroughly sexual, because she "can get/ No grip upon their thighs". The Old Man who spoke the prologue was emphatic about the kind of dancer he had wanted to dance before Cuchulain's severed head, "the tragi-comedian dancer, the tragic dancer, upon the same neck love and loathing, life and death". Emer may show something of this mixed emotion in her dance, but those of later ages who "thought Cuchulain" could do so only if their emotion was single. As an effective aesthetic gesture in accomplishing the transfiguration of the hero, Yeats liked to use dancer and severed heads as he had done in The King of the Great Clock Tower. The stage effect of this particular dance-moment can only be described as suggestive in a powerful way of the complex subconscious states involved in love, mixed counter-emotions of attraction and repulsion, physical and spiritual, suggestive in a ritualistic, primitive manner.

This strangely moving final song explains much that would otherwise remain merely obscure in the body of the text, namely the varied relationships between the women of the saga and Cuchulain. Even so, there is no reason that Emer should make her one entry to dance in adoration of Cuchulain and indignation against his slayers, except the one rather obvious one that this is, in fact, her one appearance. Her role in the play is altogether indefinite, but perhaps the dance is effective in stressing her deep loyalty to a husband who has ceased to be attracted by her; perhaps appropriately, it is she who hears the "few faint bird notes" uttered by

Cuchulain as he joins the spirit world. Aoife was strictly justified in seeking to revenge her one-time lover for his slaying of their son, but a suggestion of thwarted sexual attraction emerges from their strange dialogue before she leaves him, temporarily as she imagines, tied to the stone post. Cuchulain, reasoning simply and acting instinctively in love and war, certainly does not realise what strange and deep emotions impel the women in his life to lead him to his death. Thus he attributes to Eithne Inguba the simplest of motives for betraying him to the Morrighu, that of wishing to replace him as her lover. His own view of the relationship between man and woman is quite simple, as evidenced when he tells a servant to take good care of Eithne:

. . . protect her life
As if it were your own, and should I not return
Give her to Conall Caernach because the women
Have called him a good lover.

Cuchulain himself is not complex. The traditional warrior-hero asks that a man be a brave warrior and good lover, that a woman be a loyal companion, pleasant bed-fellow and good mother.

It has been argued that The Death of Cuchulain is imperfect because¹¹ unfinished, but even if this is so some of those aspects which show it to be unfinished make for its individual and mystifying effects. For instance, while Purgatory is a very compact play, tightly and impersonally constructed, The Death of Cuchulain combines sections of such construction with sections

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Vendler, Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays (p.247), says of the play that "its obscurity and confusion heavily counterweigh its occasional 'authentic cadence': I prefer to consider the play a rough draft, and to read it as a tentative final statement rather than as a finished piece of work." Of course, there is no more reason to read it as "a tentative final statement" than there is to regard it as a "rough draft".

of more discursive material, and some of the heightened, stylized effects which Yeats learned from the Noh play. The Old Man's prologue is discursive and personal, and allows Yeats to indulge in some faintly self-mocking irony. The Old Man, "looking like something out of mythology", largely represents Yeats as narrator and introducer, coming closer to Shavian technique than he had ever done previously. However, the Old Man is unlike Yeats in his infusion into the mask of the irascible out-dated man of the seer's agelessness:

I have been selected because I am out of fashion and out of date like the antiquated romantic stuff the thing is made of. I am so old that I have forgotten the name of my father and mother, unless indeed I am, as I affirm, the son of Talma, and he was so old that his friends and acquaintances still read Virgil and Homer.

The apparently self-directed irony of the Old Man is of course really aimed at the audience, if not that ideal, small audience actually present by implication, then the absent crowd of self-educated, opinionated play-goers who would find Mr. Yeats's play antiquated. "The antiquated romantic stuff" is actually the very stuff of Irish values, timeless like Rameses the Great. The discursive prologue is a master-stroke, ironically underlining the play to follow.

Two brief sections follow, the first centering around the argument between Cuchulain and Eithne Inguba, the second moving forward to Cuchulain's death at the hands of the Blind Man after Aoife's conversation with the slayer of their son. Both these sections are economical in construction with some pointed, fine dialogue, but the criticism that too many characters are introduced by name in such a brief compass is certainly justified. But the dialogue-narrative section is only one part of an inter-related pattern and not the key part. In a sense, Cuchulain's last words as he

talks about his soul, "I say it is about to sing", is what the play is all about. In construction, the play is similar to The King of the Great Clock Tower, in which the dialogue-narrative portion is cut to its barest essentials. Yeats did not want his audience to find the dramatic situation interesting in its development, since the surface psychology of journalism was what he most despised in the theatre. Even what seems to be the core of this last play is little but necessary introduction.

Three sections follow Cuchulain's death. First, after the fall of the curtain, the Morrighu enters and introduces Cuchulain to the dead, giving the details of his wounding but omitting mention of the Blind Man's part in the slaying. To her, all has been as a play, for which she has "arranged the dance". Here the play seems to sink to its pessimistic nadir, with the Morrighu's speech cynically reducing the scope of human roles in the action. But Emer's dance, arranged or not by the passionless Morrighu, raises the action above the level of narrative. "Emer must dance, there must be severed heads - I am old, I belong to mythology - severed heads for her to dance before," the Old Man had said. This dance projects the play further beyond the process of history to an archetypal situation in which the multiplicity of the action and characters becomes the single relationship between the woman and the transfigured man. Emer begins by raging "against the heads of those that had wounded Cuchulain", moves as "if in adoration or triumph" and then hears the "few faint bird notes" which are the song of Cuchulain's spirit. Then, in the final song episode, we hear "the music of some Irish Fair of our day"; as the Old Man promised, Cuchulain's saga has become "the music of the beggar-man, Homer's music", the song of a harlot accompanied by the beggar music of pipe and drum. In

these last three episodes Yeats has presented the indifference, mixed horror and adoration, and tragic ecstasy proper to those who witness the transfiguration of the hero from a man among warriors and women to a man among the immortal.

The Death of Cuchulain is formally very different from Purgatory, yet there are analogical similarities in the forms of the last two plays. Yeats achieved concentration in Purgatory through the symbol-properties of house and tree, which memorably gather the implications of the tight plot into aesthetic images. In his last play, he achieves this concentration through more traditional Noh elements, dance and song. In both plays transformations are characteristic, present into past, present into future in Purgatory, and in the Cuchulain play a chain which begins and ends in the present, but also encloses the vanished world of mythology and the eternal world of spirits. In The Death of Cuchulain Yeats instinctively pushed dramatic form in the several directions of a modernity independent of contemporary influences, and traditional form as he saw it elaborated in the Noh play. The prose prologue effectively employs the device of exploiting the audience's knowledge that the world of the play is fabricated. This is precisely the knowledge which the play-goer expects the play to negate, yet the prologue shows that by integrating the presence of the audience into the structure of the play, its events and meaning can be made more immediate and marvellous. The effect of the concluding song is to awaken the audience from a trance in lines that vividly stamp Cuchulain's continuing presence:

No body like his body
Has modern woman borne,

But an old man looking back on life
 Imagines it in scorn.
 A statue's there to mark the place,
 By Oliver Sheppard done,
 So ends the tale that the harlot
 Sang to the beggar-man.

The form of the conclusion is fittingly folk and traditional, a "tale that the harlot/Sang to the beggar-man"; but the tale unfolds the artist's reality, finally sculpted in the Dublin post office.

Yeats's drama is elaboration, taking a simple plot and forcing it to yield the maximum of aesthetic universality through a marriage of the arts. Yeats himself explained that the design of his plays aimed for

. . . contemplative emotion left to singers who can satisfy the poet's ear, exposition of plot to actors, climax of the whole to dancers; in one play at the beginning and end a scenic dance. Tradition has shown that music and the dance, unlike music and the words, can elaborate themselves, dance into its utmost, music into all but its utmost subtlety, and yet keep their union.¹²

In the stage plays, Yeats subordinated the element of plot, the acted story, to the other requirements of drama: natural music, symbolism and lyricism. It is not surprising that he wrote, in "The Circus Animals Desertion",

Players and painted stage took all my love,
 And not those things that they were emblems of.

Yet two lines from the same poem describe the dramatic purpose simply and modestly:

Character isolated by a deed
 To engross the present and dominate memory.

The plot, prologue, dance and song, in The Death of Cuchulain, are a fine elaboration of the resources the dramatist has to hand, but they are used for the single end of isolating the heroic character and fixing it in the

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"Music and Poetry" in Broadsides (1937), n.p.

memory.

Yeats wrote these two plays during the last year of his life, dramatising characteristic themes for the most popular audience a work of art can have. In the Old Man's prologue to his last play, he indicated subtly that he knew why his plays could not command the audience that other modern plays did: his themes were "antiquated stuff", out of mythology. In an earlier poem, he characterised himself as a "last romantic":

We were the last romantics-- chose for theme
Traditional sanctity and loveliness;
Whatever's written in what poets name
The book of the people.
("Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931")

Thematically, then, Yeats faced little challenge in his last period. He believed that the true artist had one task, that of celebrating "traditional sanctity". Form was a greater challenge, that of making modern language and forms suitable instruments for the elaboration of this theme, whether in prose, lyric or play. Working against the grain of modern times Yeats persevered in finding models from earlier days: from the mythological past of Ireland, where he found Cuchulain, the defiant warrior and lover; from a more recent Ireland, that of the Great House, noble and beggar-man; from an eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish tradition which offered Swift, Burke and Berkeley as political and philosophical models; from a modern Ireland whose true heroes were men like Parnell and O'Higgins, proud, contemptuous of the common ruck, intelligent.

Purgatory and The Death of Cuchulain admirably sum up the character of Yeats's last years of life and work. Ancient Ireland and the Ireland of the vanished Great Houses assert the dignity of the heroic life and offer a

vision for the lonely artist who decries the modern chaos. The spirit of a young bride suffers purgatorial torment and Cuchulain sees the shape his soul will take after death; Yeats proclaims a heterodox yet traditional philosophy in which man's life is not bounded by death. All this was the creation of an old man nearing his death who created masks suitable for confronting the present. His book was the "book of the people", and its tradition held together the world of artist, noble and beggar-man in an Ireland which mirrored the world.

APPENDIX

THE COMPOSITION OF "PARNELL'S FUNERAL"

Ellmann, in the chronology of poems appended to his book The Identity of Yeats, gives April 1933 as the date of composition of "Parnell's Funeral".¹ Close examination of the evolution of Yeats's political thought during 1933 and 1934 leads me to believe that only part I was completed in April 1933 and that part II was written after August of that year, and possibly not until after May 1934. It is important to note at the outset that part II first appeared in print in the Spectator of October 19, 1934; there the two parts appeared together, part I as "A Parnellite at Parnell's Funeral", part II as "Forty Years Later". Thus even as late as October 1934 Yeats regarded the parts as separate but related poems.

Three references in the Letters almost certainly apply to part I, the poem called "A Parnellite at Parnell's Funeral". On March 14, 1933, Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespeare that "Tomorrow I begin a longish poem which should last me until I start for London." He had completed this poem some time before April 19, as he wrote to Olivia Shakespeare again: "I have been in a dream finishing a poem, the first I have done for perhaps a year." Later, in August 1933 he commented that "Now for a year I have written some twenty or thirty lines in all";² "A Parnellite . . ." was a poem of

¹
P.293.

²
Wade, Letters, pp.808-814.

thirty-one lines. Up to August 1933, then, part I can be documented from the letters, but there is no mention of a second part.

In May 1934 Yeats sent this poem to Patrick McCartan, with an appended commentary which had evidently been attached some time previously, but probably not before August 1933 when Yeats had drawn attention to the poem he had completed. Unterecker, who has documented this section of the poem's history,³ does not say whether or not the second part was appended to the commentary as it was when, in October 1934, the volume The King of the Great Clock Tower was printed; but the implication of his comments is that it was not:

The poem and comment that Yeats had offered Campbell for the Irish Review was the first part of "Parnell's Funeral" and the commentary on it.

Unterecker mentions differences in the poem's text at this stage, but he does not refer to part II at all. If we can assume that what was sent by Yeats to McCartan was the first part of the poem plus the commentary but without the appended second part, then it seems clear that this second part of three quatrains, in a very different style from the first part, was written between May 1934 (when Yeats sent the poem and commentary to McCartan) and October 1934 (when he submitted both parts to the Spectator). In any case, Yeats's comment of the previous August about the poem of "some twenty or thirty lines" establishes that its composition was at least four months subsequent to that of the first part.

The establishment of a later date for the writing of part II, "The

3

Unterecker, Yeats and Patrick McCartan, pp.364-367. McCartan had requested an unpaid contribution for a short-lived journal, Campbell's Irish Review.

rest I pass, one sentence I unsay" (after August 1933 and possibly after May 1934) certainly makes sense in terms of Yeats's developing thought as discussed in Chapter One. Part I, arising out of the American lecture, lights up the sacrificial moment - the interment of Parnell - which brought into being modern Ireland; part II is a disillusioned commentary on the failure of modern Ireland. Its mood is similar to that of the "Three Songs to the Same Tune" and its commentary, as is its conclusion: that government had fallen into weak hands, that the mob was ruling, that the people of Ireland had refused to learn from the heritage of Swift, Parnell and O'Higgins. Yeats wrote the original versions of the "Three Songs . . ." late in 1933 and revised them in April 1934; in August he added a postscript with the bitter poem "Church and State" appended. The mood of part II of "Parnell's Funeral" is similarly bitter and disillusioned in mood to "Church and State", and like it was attached to the end of a commentary, suggesting after-thoughts. The second part of "Parnell's Funeral" did not develop from the thoughts of its preceding commentary; it expressed the thought of the prose accompaniments to the "Three Songs . . .".

The most convincing textual evidence for this argument is the presence of O'Duffy in the quatrains of part II. Yeats did not meet O'Duffy until July 1933. By September he seemed rather amused by O'Duffy's pre-⁴tensions as a leader. That is why, in the second part of the poem, O'Duffy is referred to somewhat slightly:

Had Cosgrave eaten Parnell's heart, the land's
Imagination had been satisfied,
Or lacking that, government in such hands,
O'Higgins its sole statesman had not died.

Had even O'Duffy - but I name no more -
Their school a crowd, his master solitude;
Through Jonathan Swift's dark grove he passed, and there
Plucked bitter wisdom that enriched the blood.

Even O'Duffy: the implication is clear. O'Duffy had at first seemed a hope for the Irish nation, but Yeats had quickly seen through him; he was not a man of the stature of Cosgrave, De Valera or O'Higgins. Part II of "Parnell's Funeral" records the difference between Yeats's attitude to his Ireland when he returned from America early in 1933, and his attitude - of disgust and disillusionment - late in that year and in 1934 when he was writing the bitter commentary for his "Three Songs to the Same Tune". In more ways than one, "Parnell's Funeral" began with Parnell and ended after O'Duffy.

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