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THE UNLUCKY COUNTRY: THE POLITICAL
ASPECT OF YEATS'S PLAYS

BY
DOROTHY FARMILOE

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the
Department of English in Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

This study is a comprehensive examination of W. B. Yeats's Collected Plays as a unified work with a continuity of theme. The critical analysis of the plays is preceded by a brief recapitulation of Irish history, particularly the Land Question and the fight for political freedom, both of which came to a head during Yeats's lifetime. This background material and Yeats's political role have not previously been integrated in relation to the Collected Plays.

Yeats's concern for his suffering country appears first in The Countess Cathleen and is intensified in Cathleen ni Houlihan. Yeats found a precedent for combining art and politics in the ancient file, a kind of poet-politician, who appears in The King's Threshold. In the Cuchulain cycle the image of the "unlucky country," underlying Yeats's desire for order in the land, is similar to the untended garden imagery running through Shakespeare's history plays. The Dreaming of the Bones, based on the Easter Rising, strengthens this theme. Yeats's later disillusion with the political scene finds full expression in The Words Upon the Window-Pane and Purgatory.

Political implications, evident in some manner in almost all the plays, are brought to a conclusion in the epilogue to The Death of Cuchulain, which closes the volume, with a reference to the Easter Rising. The political aspect, therefore, is the key that unlocks the meaning in the Collected Plays as a whole.

PREFACE

The basic text of Yeats's plays used throughout the following pages is the Macmillan edition, Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats (London, 1952); quotations from the plays are from this edition and are referred to C.Pl. Quotations from the poems are from the 1950 Macmillan edition, Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, identified as C.P. Quotations from The Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954) are referred to as Letters; other volumes of Yeats's letters are identified individually.

I would like to thank Joyce Carol Oates for her interest in this thesis and her encouragement and help in directing it, all of which I deeply appreciate. My thanks also go to Dr. Roderick Huang and Dr. John K. A. Farrell and to Brother Bonaventure Miner for his initial comments.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

One of W. B. Yeats's earliest memories--the second incident mentioned in Reveries over Childhood and Youth--is of looking out of a window in Fitzroy Road in London and seeing a boy in uniform who was going to blow the town up, or so a servant told him.¹ The poet adds in retrospect that it was probably a telegraph boy, but at the time he went to sleep terrified. Uniformed soldiers, violence, terror--all part of Irish life for centuries--reached a new phase of intensity in the struggle for freedom during Yeats's lifetime, particularly after the rise of the Fenian organization.² There were almost as many Irish in America and Great Britain after the Great famine as there were in Ireland,³ and Fenian activity had erupted in England after the

1 Autobiographies (London, 1955), p.5.

2 The Fenian Organization was conceived originally in Paris by Irish political exiles, nourished in America and implanted in Dublin in 1858. The name, apparently suggested by John O'Mahoney, one of the founders of the organization and himself a Gaelic scholar, was derived from Fionn Mac-Cuhail, a heroic warrior of Celtic legend. The Fenian Movement was also known as the I.R.B. (Irish Republican Brotherhood). See J. C. Beckett, The Making of Modern Ireland (New York, 1966), pp. 358-59.

3 Edmund Curtis, A History of Ireland (London, 1959), p. 379. Curtis was professor of modern history at the University of Dublin for many years. His History of Ireland is particularly helpful for an understanding of Yeats's violent nationalism.

abortive 1867 Irish rising. In December of that year, just prior to the Yeats family move to Fitzroy Road, a Fenian attempt to rescue a political prisoner at Clerkenwell involved an explosion in which more than twenty people were killed.⁴ This may well be the reference in the servant's caustic remark. Yeats's political colouring quite possibly derived its pigment from such incidents as this traumatic induction to violence as well as from his country's unhappy history and his own association in the 1890's with the I.R.B. It was inevitable that politics would at times motivate the writing of his poetry and plays.

As an Irish writer and nationalist Yeats was infused with a history of British oppression and land confiscation dating back to the twelfth century when the invading Anglo-Normans seized Irish land and imposed their foreign culture on the native Gaelic race. The English were first brought over to Ireland by the traitorous King Dermot who sought English aid after having been deposed in a private feud.⁵ This is the infamous and unforgiven Diarmuid who "sold his country into slavery" in The Dreaming of the Bones (C.Pl., p. 442). English persecution, sporadically opposed by armed uprisings, was intensified under the Tudors until the Tyrone War put a sudden and violent end to the old Gaelic leadership. To Gaelic Ulster the "Flight of the Earls" rather than the English victory in 1603 marked the end of the old order, and it soon came to be regarded as a national disaster.⁶ The

⁴ See Beckett, p. 361.

⁵ Curtis, p. 45.

⁶ See Beckett, p. 44.

Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell fled for the continent in 1607 with one hundred of their followers after being suspected of treason; this "Flight of the Earls" is the first of the four major events in Irish history spoken of by Yeats as Four Bells:

. . . four deep tragic notes equally divided in time, as symbolizing the war that ended in the Flight of the Earls; the Battle of the Boyne; the coming of French influence among our peasants; the beginning of our own age; events that closed the sixteenth,⁷ seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The result of the Flight of the Earls was that it gave the English an excuse for further land confiscation and colonization; six of the nine Ulster counties were opened to plantation and were speedily repopulated with Scottish and English settlers. The old English remnants of the Anglo-Norman invasion now formed an alliance with the radical Gaelic race to form the "indomitable Irishry":

. . . the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay
Through seven heroic centuries. (C.P., p. 400)

Religion also played a part in the country's unrest. The old Anglo-Normans were for the most part opposed to Henry VIII's break with the pope, while the Gaelic element remained Roman Catholic blended with the folk lore of their pagan druidism. In the armed insurrection which broke out against the English in 1534 the rebels were in constant expectation of aid from the pope or his allies on the continent. In this way the hope of enlisting foreign aid against the English was born and was to remain a potent

⁷ See Yeats's "Notes" included at the end of The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Alt and Russell K. Alspach (New York, 1957), p. 832.

force in Irish politics. However, in this particular instance as in so many subsequent ones aid did not come and the Irish were climatically defeated by Cromwell who added to the list of bitter Irish wrongs. Again, the rebellion offered an opportunity for new and more extensive plantation and anglicization. Yet the Irishry managed to maintain their individuality and "preserve their ancient deposit"⁸ while hatred of the English became part of the race memory.

The reigns of Charles II and James II with their ineffective leadership alternately raised and dashed the hopes of the Irish for religious and political consideration. After the Battle of the Boyne--the second of Yeats's Bells--Protestantism was secure as the state religion in England, and the British Parliament deliberately ignored William's intention of tolerance towards the Roman Catholics in Ireland. A new series of penal laws, rather than a policy of leniency, was embarked on. Some 270 estates comprising not far short of 1,000,000 acres were confiscated; as a result only one-seventh of the kingdom was left in the hands of the Roman Catholic landlords and the pressure of the penal laws in the eighteenth century was to reduce that proportion still further.⁹ The long range effect of continual land confiscation was the creation of a class of absentee landlords and a rack-rented, impoverished peasantry.

The rise in importance of the Anglo-Irish and the

⁸ See Yeats's "A General Introduction for my Work" in Essays and Introductions (London, 1961), p. 519.

⁹ See Beckett, p. 149.

consolidation of their power during the eighteenth century marks the beginning of modern Ireland. The influence of the eighteenth-century intellectuals--Burke, Berkeley and Swift--is pervasive throughout Yeats as Donald Torchiana's fine study demonstrates.¹⁰ Although Burke's Appeal from the Old to the New Whigs was Yeats's political bible according to Mrs. Yeats,¹¹ it was Swift "the practical politician in everything he wrote"¹² who was Yeats's master. The effect of Jonathan Swift's "dark grove" (C.P., p. 320) is particularly evident in The Words upon the Window-Pane and Purgatory.

By the time of Swift the British Parliament had ruthlessly and successfully enforced its claim to dictate government policy towards Ireland, and under pressure from English merchants and manufacturers had so restricted Irish trade that the whole Irish economy was forced to rely upon agriculture. This policy not only put the gentry in a position to oppress their tenants but gave them a strong motive for doing so since many of them were almost as poor as their peasants. Swift, who considered himself Anglo-Irish first and English second, was united with the Gaelic element in hatred of England. Because of this no jury could be found to convict him for his "seditious, factious and virulent pamphlets."¹³ His victory against Wood's halfpence can be

10 W. B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland (Evanston, Illinois, 1966). Not the least of the merits of Professor Torchiana's book is a brilliant political explication of Purgatory.

11 Ibid., p. 169.

12 Yeats, Wheels and Butterflies (London, 1934), p. 19.

13 Curtis, p. 297. He was referring to the Draper Letters.

considered the first successful political blow aimed at the unscrupulous domination of Ireland by England. Yeats maintained that Swift's Drapier Letters were responsible for practically creating the political nationality of Ireland.¹⁴

To the poverty-stricken eighteenth-century peasant the French Revolution raised the dream of freedom; consequently armed resistance against the British again broke out. Wolfe Tone's trip to France and his return to Ireland with French troops echoes James II's landing at Kinsale with French officers. Although both ventures ended in defeat, they strengthened the legend of French aid for the Irish. The Rising of '98 lies back of Yeats's third Bell and is the motivating force of Cathleen ni Houlihan, the most revolutionary of all the plays. Stephen Gwynn, after watching the first performance, said: "The effect of Cathleen ni Houlihan on me was that I went home asking myself if such plays should be produced unless one was prepared for people to go out to shoot and be shot."¹⁵

The revolt of the American colonies had produced an impact on the peasant imagination to which the French Revolution gave fresh impetus. Grattan¹⁶ had been able to make use

14 See Torchiana, pp. 123-32.

15 Quoted by A. N. Jeffares in W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet (New York, 1966), p. 138.

16 Grattan figures in Yeats's Senate speech on the divorce legislation: "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." (The Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats, ed. Donald Pearce [London, 1961], p. 99). He was referring to the Anglo-Irish tradition.

of British preoccupation with the American colonies to secure the ~~repeal~~ of Poynings' Law but was unable to prevent the Act of Union. The Union strengthened the political position of the Anglo-Irish and began the long and bitter struggle for Home Rule.

During the nineteenth century the fight for political independence was largely motivated by agrarian injustice. Irish discontent with English rule reached a crisis after the famine years of the late 1840's; the great famine was the worst of its kind in recorded European history in a time of peace. Over half the population of 8,000,000 depended for subsistence on the potato which had been introduced at the time of Cromwell to circumvent the marauding troops. (The potato, which had to be dug out of the ground, was more difficult to seize than corn or cattle.) In 1845 the potato crop failed over the entire country and the failure was repeated in successive years. The Great famine forms the historical background of The Countess Cathleen. After another but less severe crop failure and famine at the end of the 1880's tenant evictions reached epidemic proportions particularly in Donegal where Maud Gonne was working herself to exhaustion on behalf of the peasants. The figures she quotes in her autobiography are not greatly exaggerated:

During Victoria's reign alone, one million two hundred and twenty-five thousand people died of famine in Ireland; four million one hundred and eighty-six thousand emigrated; three million six hundred and sixty-three thousand were evicted from houses they or their fathers had built.¹⁷

17 A Servant of the Queen (London, 1938), p. 225.

At the end of the nineteenth century the population of Ireland was only half what it had been on the eve of the great famine.

The last Bell Yeats speaks of is the fall of Parnell. "The modern literature of Ireland," he told the Swedish Academy on accepting the Nobel prize, "and indeed all that stir of thought which prepared for the Anglo-Irish war, began when Parnell fell from power in 1891."¹⁸ Parnell's fall, he felt, was the event whose long gestation was to so greatly trouble a disillusioned and embittered land. Yeats, like James Joyce, admired Parnell and despised those of his countrymen who turned on him after he was named correspondent in the divorce action involving Kitty O'Shea, the wife of one of his followers. The scandal split the country into adamant factions and brought the civil war closer. Yet Parnell had fought doggedly and brilliantly for home rule and agrarian justice; Yeats remembered this in the poignant "Come Gather Round me Parnellites:"

He fought the might of England
And saved the Irish poor,
Whatever good a farmer's got
He brought it all to pass; . . . (C.P., p. 355)

In spite of his occasional protestations to the contrary Yeats was always interested, even if temporarily uninvolved, in current politics. During his early years he had attended the House of Commons debates as a spectator and had met Gladstone at a political evening as his letters to Katherine Tynan reveal.¹⁹ He was in all things eclectic, having picked

¹⁸ Autobiographies, p. 559.

¹⁹ Letters to Katherine Tynan, ed., Roger MacHugh (Dublin, 1953), p. 27.

up ideas from the stimulating thinkers he was exposed to in his father's studio in the 1880's. J. B. Yeats was vociferously and eloquently anti-English. One of his clients was Parnell's biographer; another was York Powell, a famous Oxford professor of history and his chief friend at this time; another client was John O'Leary.²⁰ Maud Gonne first came to the Yeats's in London with an introduction from John O'Leary.

Yet it was not Maud Gonne but O'Leary himself who first drew Yeats into the political turmoil of the 90's.²¹ The young poet was a frequent visitor at O'Leary's home in Dublin some four years before his momentous meeting with Maud Gonne. He entered politics under the influence of the old Fenian with whom he shared lodgings for a while.²² Yeats was never a dynamiter however much he sympathized with the revolutionary ends of the I.R.B., and the Dublin Fenians with whom he and O'Leary were associated spent their time not in causing but in preventing acts of terrorism. Neither he nor O'Leary ever took the I.R.B. oath.²³ During these early years he spoke on history or literature to the Young Ireland Society that met in the lecture hall of a workman's club with O'Leary for

²⁰ See the "Introduction" to J. B. Yeats's Letters to his Son W. B. Yeats and Others, ed. Joseph Hone (London, 1944), p. 6.

²¹ Most of the information on Yeats's background used in this study is taken from Joseph Hone's W. B. Yeats 1865-1939 (New York, 1943). Hone not only knew Yeats personally but he lived through the same troubled times in Ireland. I have supplemented the poet's autobiographical material with Hone's account of the same period.

²² Autobiographies, p. 209.

²³ See Hone, p. 145.

president. "From these debates," he tells us, "from O'Leary's conversation, and from the Irish books he lent or gave me has come all I have put my hand to since."²⁴ This may seem an over-simplification, but the root influence of the Young Ireland Society and of D'Leary in Yeats's thinking was to bear strong fruit in the plays. His *Cathleen* is, among other things, a prototype of Mangan's "Dark Rosaleen" picked up from the books O'Leary gave him. He turned her to revolutionary purposes in the *Cathleen* plays.

There is no doubt, however, that his love for Maud Gonne deepened his involvement in active politics. With her he travelled by rail to meetings in Scotland, in Dublin and the Midlands, giving his time and energy to meetings that exhausted him. He wrote to Lady Gregory at this time:

I find that Miss Gonne has to return to London for a few hours before going to Dublin. She goes to a meeting at Hanley (wherever that is). I shall go with her. We had a long and exhausting political meeting this morning and will have another tonight . . . I have been chairman of a noisy meeting for three hours and am very done up. I have a speech to prepare for tonight.²⁵

These meetings involved the '98 Commemoration Committee that planned a memorial statue to Wolfe Tone. Yeats had been working with the I.R.B. preparing the way for the Centennial celebration. By becoming president of the national committee, he was able to conciliate the warring Parnellite and anti-Parnellite camps long enough to make the statue a

²⁴ Autobiographies, p. 101.

²⁵ Letters of W. B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954), pp. 287-88.

reality. He spoke on behalf of the I.R.B. at the ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone. It was after one of these Committee meetings that he and Maud Gonne were drawn into a street mob protesting the Jubilee celebrations for Queen Victoria. His political sympathy with the motives of the crowd can be detected in the familiar description in his Autobiography:

Presently I hear the sound of breaking glass, the crowd has begun to stone the windows of decorated houses, and when I try to speak that I may restore order, I discover that I have lost my voice through much public speaking at the Convention. I can only whisper and gesticulate, and as I am thus freed from responsibility I share the emotion of the crowd, and perhaps feel as they feel when the glass crashes.²⁶

He was also writing inflammatory letters to the Dublin newspapers denouncing the Jubilee.²⁷ Yeats was much more intense and passionate than the poetry of this period would lead the reader to suspect. The flame of his political passion fires the two Cathleen plays, both of which stirred a storm of controversy when they were first produced and both of which have an underlying protest against the English.

1903 is usually referred to as the turning point in Yeats's life. It was the year of Maud Gonne's marriage to Major John MacBride, and it was the year of the "big wind" that blew down trees all over Ireland and which "changed the look of things" for the poet.²⁸ It was the year that

26 The Stirring of the Bones, Autobiographies, pp. 367-68.

27 Yeats called these his "Queen Letters" (Letters, p. 388). They were more in the nature of essays. See particularly "Noble and Ignoble Loyalties" published in the United Irishman, April 21, 1900.

28 Richard Ellmann, Yeats: The Man and the Masks, rev. ed. (London, 1961), pp. 157-63.

dramatically ended the first phase of his political activity, although he had been gradually withdrawing from the scene since the turn of the century. 1903 was a milestone also in Irish history: it was the year landlordism in Ireland involving estates of hundreds of acres came to an end²⁹ with the passage of the Balfour Act of that year.

In the years from 1903 to 1916 the energy that Yeats had poured into political demonstration he now channelled into the theatre in a long, politically-fallow period. Although he was capable of stating that politics no longer interested him and were not a fit subject for poetry, on the other hand he insisted, on being offered a Civil List pension from the government in 1910, that he would accept it only if allowed to pursue any political activity in Ireland he chose. Politics were too much a part of his nature to be renounced. The long political conditioning he had undergone in the '90's was to continue to underly some of the plays written during this period.

The King's Threshold, originally written in 1903 but drastically revised later, is a conflict between poet and authority, based on the tradition of the Gaelic bard whose political influence was so great that Anglo-Normans in Ireland were specifically forbidden by the Kilkenny Statutes of 1366 to entertain Irish bards or poets.³⁰ "The ancient right of the poets" (C.Pl., p. 128), going back into unrecorded history, included the right to speak political

29 See Curtis, p. 389.

30 Ibid., p. 113.

truths to the rulers--which constituted some danger to the English usurpers. In the plays uniting politics and poetry Yeats is maintaining a long tradition so deeply ingrained in Ireland as to form part of the national character. He very early considered himself one with "Davis, Mangan, Ferguson" who sang to sweeten Ireland's wrong" (C.P., p. 56). In the plays Yeats's expression of hatred of the English is vehement and deliberate; in 1937 speaking, in "A General Introduction for my Work," of the wars which, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries became "wars of extermination," he wrote:

No people hate as we do in whom that past is always
alive, there are moments when hatred poisons my life
and I accuse myself of effiminacy because I have not
given it adequate expression. It is not enough to
have put it into the mouth of a rambling peasant
poet.³¹

The rambling peasant poet, a refinement of Hanrahan the Red of the early stories, appears in The King's Threshold where Seanchan protests the right of the King to eject the poets from the council table. He appears again in The King of the Great Clock Tower and in The Player Queen. In order to unify the political theme Yeats grouped his plays in The Collected Plays to emphasize their content. He placed The Unicorn from the Stars (1908) next to The Player Queen (1922) and followed this by The Dreaming of the Bones (dated 1919 but written in 1916). These three plays, wildly out of order chronologically, are connected by a common revolutionary theme.

31 Essays and Introductions, p. 519.

While Yeats was holding himself temporarily aloof from the strife of the political arena, the danger of civil war was increasing. A Home Rule bill had been introduced in 1913 but after struggling through the British House of Commons it was rejected by the House of Lords. This inflamed the radical element of the Irish into direct action. The more militant nationalists had been ready to accept Home Rule as an interim measure but their real aim was the separation of Ireland from Great Britain. These separatists, or Republicans, led in 1916 by Pearse and Connolly, were composed mainly of members of the I.R.B. Pearse believed sacrificial bloodshed necessary to obtain Irish freedom, yet he was a fine Gaelic scholar, a member of the Irish bar and headmaster of a school for boys. Many of the leaders of the Easter Rising were, like Pearse, literary men as well as revolutionists.³² The peculiar Irish temperament demanded both politics and poetry.

When the I.R.B. staged the famous Post Office Rising, Yeats's long withdrawal from practical politics came to an end. He had been so much a part of the I.R.B. underground in the '90's that he felt slighted at not being informed beforehand of the Rising. His bitterness against the English surged to the surface again in the poetry and plays of this period. As mentioned above, he wrote The Dreaming of the Bones in 1916 but felt it too incendiary for release at that time. He deplored violence and bloodshed; yet nothing could have

³² For an excellent short history of the Rising with an accompanying biographical sketch of the leaders, see Edward Malins, "Yeats and the Easter Rising," Massachusetts Review, VII (Spring, 1966), 271-84.

furthered the cause of freedom more than the deliberate martyrdom of the leaders of the Easter Rising. It brought, more than any other act, the Irish Free State into being.

In January, 1919, the revolutionary element met in Dublin, proclaimed themselves the parliament of the Irish Republic and adopted a provisional constitution. With two rival governments in operation, civil war became a reality and in 1920 it rose into full flood. In 1922, six months after the treaty was signed giving Ireland status as a self-governing dominion within the empire, Yeats was appointed to the Irish Senate by President Cosgrave. The war, however, was not over and the fighting between the Free State troops and the Irregulars who wanted complete separation became more bitter than ever. Many senators attended the senate meetings at great property loss and some danger to themselves and their families. Yeats escaped this danger partly because he had powerful friends in both camps. When the senate was being formed, his name had been proposed by his friend Oliver Gogarty. In his "Introduction" to the Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats Donald Pearce describes a typical Yeatsian anecdote:

. . . when a troubled member queried why a poet should be given a political office in the Irish Free State? Gogarty's retort was swift and in the grand manner: "If it had not been for W. B. Yeats there would have been no Irish Free State."³³

Yeats's writings, his dramatic activities and his personality were among the first assets of the I.R.B. Revolutions are not made overnight; there has to be spiritual preparation, spiritual sustenance, spiritual background or

³³ Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats, p. 15.

there can be no revolution, and according to one of the conspirators himself, "Yeats was during the whole of his life one of the most revolutionary influences in Ireland."³⁴

It is no small thing for a poet to be so associated with the spirit of a successful revolution. He was given recognition for this, as well as for his work in the Irish literary renaissance, when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923. It is significant that his most political play, Cathleen ni Houlihan, was performed in his honour in Stockholm as part of the festivities. In speaking of the performance in The Bounty of Sweden, he describes the lines spoken by Cathleen as those "which always move an Irish audience powerfully for historical reasons."³⁵ It is not true, in Yeats's case, that "poetry makes nothing happen."³⁶

Yeats dropped out of the Senate in 1928 partly for reasons of health and partly because he was disappointed in the turn of affairs in Irish public life. He deplored what he now considered mob rule. In 1933 his letters to Olivia Shakespear are filled with excitement over the rise of O'Duffy's fascist "Blueshirts." Yeats had suggested the colour which gave the movement its name. (He disliked green.) He wrote a group of marching songs for them, but after his initial enthusiasm turned to disillusion, he

³⁴ P. S. O'Hegarty, "W. B. Yeats and Revolutionary Ireland of his Time," Dublin Magazine (July-Sept., 1939), 22-24.

³⁵ Autobiographies, p. 556.

³⁶ W. H. Auden, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Collected Poetry (New York, 1945), p. 50.

"increased their fantasy, their extravagance, their obscurity, that no party might sing them."³⁷ Yeats was no Fascist, although he exhibited fascist tendencies at times.³⁸

His last surge of political excitement occurred near the end of his life. On the Boiler is actually a long preamble to Purgatory and is his strongest political statement after his introduction to Words upon the Window-Pane. But as he himself realized, the poet follows no political creed but his own:

In politics I have but one passion and one thought, rancour against all who, except under more dire necessity, disturb public order, a conviction that public order cannot long persist without the rule of able and educated men Some months ago that passion laid hold upon me with the violence which unfits the poet for all politics but his own.³⁹

This seems to be the simplest summary of Yeatsian politics: desire for order, desire for rule by educated and able men. In the last analysis, perhaps, his politics were of no political party or system but were something of his own devising--raw material to be cut and shaped into art in the plays.

37 Variorum Edition of the Poems, p. 556.

38 George Orwell was the first to point out the fascist tendency in Yeats ("W. B. Yeats," Horizon, 1943. Reprinted in Critical Essays [London, 1946]). Jeffares is in error in crediting MacNeice, whose W. B. Yeats appeared in 1946, with being the first to make this observation. See also Conor Cruise O'Brien's bitterly caustic article, "Passion and Cunning: the Politics of W. B. Yeats," in In Excited Reverie, ed. A. Norman Jeffares and K. C. Cross (London, 1965). In spite of its tone, Dr. O'Brien's article is a thorough, well-documented study of Yeats's actual involvement in the politics of his day. One cannot quarrel with O'Brien's facts, but one can certainly quarrel with his interpretation of those facts. O'Brien suppresses the use Yeats made of politics in his art.

39 Variorum Edition of the Poems, p. 543.

Yeats's plays are not, as Louis MacNeice insists, "an escape from the world of action and intrigue,"⁴⁰ but an embodiment of it for a higher purpose. Yeats began to formulate his poetic creed early, asking in the 1880's: "Can we not unite literature to the great passion of patriotism and ennoble both thereby?"⁴¹ This is the same general theme that motivates On the Boiler, although this last work, like the last poetry and plays, is a far more powerful indictment of his country's government. He felt that he could expand his ideas to best advantage in the plays where he "had more room than in songs and ballads," and he was asking his own people to listen."⁴²

From The Countess Cathleen, with its nationalist background, to The Death of Cuchulain, whose epilogue refers to the Easter Rising, Yeats's plays, with very few exceptions, are concerned in one way or another with his country's political situation. His interest in practical politics allows a realistic, down-to-earth interpretation so that it is possible to approach the plays by a much less esoteric route than that taken by Helen Vendler⁴³ or Peter Ure.⁴⁴ The plays do not merit Ure's comment that "No one reads

⁴⁰ The Poetry of W. B. Yeats (London, 1941), p. 86.

⁴¹ Letters to the New Island, ed. Horace Reynolds (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), p. 155.

⁴² Variorum Edition of the Poems, p. 851.

⁴³ See Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays (Cambridge, Mass., 1963).

⁴⁴ See Yeats the Playwright: A Commentary on Character and Design in the Major Plays (New York, 1963).

The Collected Plays through from start to finish except at the risk of bewilderment and mental indigestion."⁴⁵ In the following pages I hope to show that the unifying theme of The Collected Plays is political, and that the fate of his unlucky country was Yeats's prime concern.

⁴⁵ Yeats the Playwright, p. 14.

CHAPTER II

THE TWO CATHLEEN PLAYS

Yeats's two Cathleen plays--The Countess Cathleen and Cathleen ni Houlihan--resemble each other in more ways than the name of the heroine alone would indicate. In both plays Cathleen is symbolic of long-suffering Ireland, and both plays were ostensibly written for, and around, the Maud Gonne whose revolutionary activities on behalf of Ireland had become legendary in her own lifetime. More significantly, Yeats's own political experience in the nineties influenced, not only the writing of Cathleen ni Houlihan, but also the revisions of The Countess Cathleen. Both plays contain a strong nationalist protest against England, although the inflammatory material is not as pronounced in The Countess Cathleen as it is in Cathleen ni Houlihan.

The Countess Cathleen is based partly on a West of Ireland folk tale called The Countess Kathleen O'Shea¹ in which the saintly Kathleen sells her soul to the demons in order to save the souls of her people, but her bargain is declared null by God because of her altruistic sacrifice. Yeats followed this bare outline, but to read his play as entirely

¹ The text of The Countess Kathleen O'Shea is reproduced in Classic Irish Drama, ed. W. A. Armstrong (Middlesex, Eng., 1964), pp. 59-62.

Christian, as Amy G. Stock does,² is to misunderstand both it and Yeats rather badly. In The Countess Cathleen Christianity is mere costuming for the nationalist sentiment. Yeats is, as he said of his mighty hero Hanrahan, "disguising a passionate patriotism under a love song addressed to the Little Black Rose or Kathleen the Daughter of Houlihan or some other personification of Ireland."³ He intended his symbolism to give The Countess Cathleen a political interpretation. By this time he had fallen helplessly (though not yet hopelessly) in love with Maud Gonne to whom he now offered his play in an attempt to win her. Hone has included the incident in his biography of the poet:

They went to Howth together, spent a day walking over well-remembered cliff paths, and dined at a little cottage, where her old nurse lived. He overheard the nurse asking her whether she was engaged. He read her his unpublished Countess Cathleen, and told her that he had come to interpret the life of a woman who sells her soul as a symbol of all souls that lose their fineness, in politics.⁴

Thus we have the authority of Yeats himself for the political symbolism in his play.

Yeats revised The Countess Cathleen more often than any of the other plays.⁵ The 1892 date in The Collected Plays is misleading, for the text of the first version was altered

2 See W. B. Yeats: his Poetry and Thought (Cambridge, 1961), pp. 25-32.

3 The Secret Rose (London, 1897), p. 159.

4 W. B. Yeats 1865-1939, p. 92. Italics mine.

5 See The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W. B. Yeats, ed. Russell K. Alspach (London, 1965), p. 1.

so drastically by the major revisions of 1895, 1901, 1912 and 1913, that the final version of the play barely resembles the original. Yeats's correspondence at this time reveals something of the nature of the changes. In a letter to O'Leary in 1892 he wrote that he had begun The Countess Cathleen as a mystical vehicle growing out of his occult studies.⁶ But he widened his theme in the 1895 revision in order to portray a traditional morality play of good and evil. This version was originally subtitled A Miracle Play. But by 1899 he was insisting on a more worldly interpretation:

The play is symbolic: the two demons who go thither and thither buying souls are the world and their gold is the pride of the eye. The Countess herself is a soul . . . selling herself into captivity and unrest . . . The symbols have other meanings but they have this principal meaning.⁷

The Countess who sells herself into worldly activity is a reflection of the Maud Gonne who had bound herself to revolutionary activity and climbed on wagonettes to scream for the rights of the Irish. And the "principal meaning" in the symbols, retained and re-inforced through all subsequent changes, is based on a political allegory similar to that in Cathleen ni Houlihan.

The troubled times of Yeats's Ireland form the background of the play. In a thinly-disguised setting Yeats tells us vaguely that the action takes place "in old times"

⁶ Letters, p. 211.

⁷ Letter to The Morning Leader, Letters, p. 319.

(C.Pl., p. 3), but the references to the famine are specific and contemporary. Maud Gonne and her concern for the peasants were very much in his mind in 1892. In one of his newsletters to The Boston Pilot he quoted verbatim a speech of hers in which she spoke angrily of men and women eating the dogs, the rats and the grass of the fields during the famine of 1847, and whose deaths would call down on the English oppressors the execrations of just men everywhere.⁸ These are the same famine conditions exposed by the bitterness of Shemus in Scene I of the play:

Although I've tramped the woods for half a day
 I've taken nothing, for the very rats,
 Badgers and hedgehogs seem to have died of drought,
 And there was scarce a wind in the parched leaves.
 . . . When the hen's gone
 What can we do but live on sorrel and dock,
 And dandelion, till our mouths are green?
 (C.Pl., pp. 4-5)

Not only was the terrible famine of 1847 within the reach of memory of many of Yeats's compatriots, but also the more recent famine of 1879-80 with its accompanying civil disorders. The harvest of 1879 had been the worst since the great famine:

. . . in 1880 there were 2590 agrarian outrages and between 1874 and 1881 some ten thousand evictions. The peasants' wild justice of revenge displayed itself in the shooting of many landlords and their agents.⁹

The Land Question, approaching its angry crest at this time, had caught Yeats's father--along with most other landlords

⁸ See Letters to the New Island, pp. 149-153.

⁹ Curtis, p. 379.

large and small--in its inexorable sweep. J. B. Yeats had had to sell the small Kildare holding that had been in the family for generations and had brought him a small income. Yeats noted in his autobiography that rents had fallen more and more and "we had to sell to pay some charge or mortgage, but my father and his tenants parted without ill-will."¹⁰ Unfortunately for many others, the parting was not reached so agreeably.

Conditions were particularly bad in 1890 in Kerry and Donegal where Maud Gonne had collapsed with an attack of tuberculosis. She had been driving herself relentlessly on behalf of the poverty-stricken and starving tenants who, after the crop failure of the previous year rendered them unable to pay their annual rents, were being evicted wholesale by the agents of the absentee landlords. Her descriptions in her autobiography are all the more harrowing for the deliberately factual tone:

I was back in Donegal to keep the promise I had made to Father McFadden to return for the evictions. Father Stephens was thinner and looking more anxious than ever. What would become of his people? Over 150 Eviction decrees; that meant a thousand people homeless [in one parish alone].¹¹

In The Countess Cathleen Teigue's opening reference to the famine-struck land, seen against the historical background of the period, introduces a political undertone that Ellmann rightly calls "a nationalist description of Irish

¹⁰ "Reveries over Childhood and Youth," Autobiographies, p. 55.

¹¹ A Servant of the Queen, p. 111.

poverty under English rule,"¹² a description which fits both Cathleen plays. England is the unnamed beast of prey in whose grip "the whole land squeals like a rabbit under the weasel's tooth" (C.Pl., p. 4), and Cathleen can be seen as the political leader fighting to free her people from the economic stranglehold imposed by the English. When she asks her steward for an accounting of the "secrets of her house", the summation of gold, castles, pastures and forests suggests that Ireland's national wealth is being drained to satisfy the absentee landlords:

Cathleen. Steward, you know the secrets of my house.
How much have I?
Steward. A hundred kegs of gold.
Cathleen. How much have I in castles?
Steward. As much more.
Cathleen. How much have I in pasture?
Steward. As much more.
Cathleen. How much have I in forests?
Steward. As much more.
Cathleen. Keeping this house alone, sell all I have . . .
(C.Pl., p. 23).

This passage appeared in essentially the same words in the 1892 edition. However varied the themes that Yeats introduced in subsequent versions, the political theme was established early and developed deliberately. The revisions strengthened and maintained this undertone.

An entire dialogue scene (ll. 452-533) between Cathleen and the poet Aleel was added in 1901¹³ just after Yeats had dropped out of the I.R.B. Cathleen and Aleel can be

¹² Yeats: the Man and the Masks, p. 119. The phrase is Ellmann's, but he does not elaborate. No other critic seems to have noticed the political undertone.

¹³ See The Variorum Edition of the Plays, pp. 81-95.

seen here as opposite sides of Yeats's divided self¹⁴ questioning the efficacy of his own political role. Aleel, the dreamer, attempts to persuade Cathleen, the public figure, to forego the political life that leaves her nothing of her own: the way of the poet in conflict with the way of the politician. As this scene opens, Aleel's first words are a statement of his position and a renewed effort to induce her to "leave this castle and fly out of these woods" (C.Pl., p. 25). But Cathleen answers:

What evil is there here
That is not everywhere from this to the sea?
(C.Pl., p. 25)

Cathleen is committed to public life and will remain and fight the evils of famine and poverty in contrast to Aleel's preference for a withdrawn existence:

. . . in the hills,
Among the sounds of music and the light
Of waters, till the evil days are done.
(C.Pl., p. 25)

Cathleen carries on the debate by maintaining she cannot embrace existence in an ivory tower "where none of mortal creatures but the swan/ Dabbles" (C.Pl., p. 26). Such an existence is too far removed from the realities of Irish life. Much of the tension of the play revolves around these two conflicting positions or ideologies.

As the dialogue continues, Cathleen admits that the poet's life is the happier one and that she will never know

¹⁴ See Ellmann's excellent Yeats: the Man and the Masks. Ellmann explores both sides of Yeats's divided self--objective and subjective--that formed the basis of the doctrine of the masks.

the peace he will know. But she has her work to do, so she sends Aleel from her as the merchants return. They are, in the allegorical framework, the emissaries of the hated English who prosper on Ireland's misery. To save her people, Cathleen has sacrificed her wealth as well as her soul:

[to] buy grain from those who have stored it up
To prosper on the hunger of the poor. (C.Pl., p. 30)

The scene ends with Cathleen's:

I have heard
A sound of wailing in unnumbered hovels,
And I must go down, down--I know not where--
Pray for all men and women mad from famine; . . .
(C.Pl., p. 34)

Cathleen is the political saviour inspired by an ideal and completely dedicated to her country's cause. She has vowed to have no joy or sorrow of her own until her people have been freed:

. . . the earth burns my feet
Till I have changed my house to such a refuge
That the old and ailing, and all weak of heart,
May escape from beak and claw; all, all, shall come
Till the walls burst and the roof fall on us.
From this day out I have nothing of my own.
(C.Pl., p. 24)

Cathleen's "house" is, of course, Ireland; "beak and claw", a synecdoche for the English; the "bursting walls" and "falling roof" refer to the coming revolution. These strong lines were added to the play in 1912, long after Maud Gonne had married John MacBride and had ceased to be the active inspiration for Cathleen. The Countess is now a Cathleen ni Houlihan who embodies the author's own views.

Yeats made extensive changes for the Tauchnitz printing of 1913 that became the almost-final version of the play.

One of the main revisions for this edition had to do with the elimination of six spirits who, up to this time, and particularly in scene IV, had been "talking foolishness"¹⁵ throughout. The considerable changes Yeats made, for example, to bring just two lines--ll. 534 and 535¹⁶--to their present state concerned these spirits who are finally exorcized completely from the play. He also made changes in the wording, punctuation and stage directions too numerous to list here. The final result is to bring the play closer to contemporary reality, although it still suffers stylistically as a result of the continual revisions.

Years later, speaking of the play's shortcomings, Yeats wrote:

The Countess sells her soul, but she is not transformed. If I were to think out that scene to-day, she would, the moment her hand has signed, burst into loud laughter, mock at all she has held holy, horrify the peasants in the midst of their temptations.¹⁷

Such a mocking Cathleen could be no one but the later Yeats speaking, which is further evidence that he identified himself, or one side of himself, with her. The pendulum of his commitment in his writing swung from the subjective, escapist period exemplified by *Aleel* to the extreme objectivity poured into politics and then into theatre business. Yeats's reaction against the dream-laden atmosphere of his

¹⁵ See Russell R. Alspach, "Introduction" to The Variorum Edition of the Plays, p. xiii.

¹⁶ The revisions for these two lines require ten pages in The Variorum Edition of the Plays, pp. 93-103.

¹⁷ Autobiographies, p. 417.

own early poetry is revealed--and resolved--in The Countess Cathleen. He was aware of the change and his reasons for it:

. . . a taste fed for long on milk diet thirsts for strong flavours. In England the reaction would be vice, in Ireland it is politics.¹⁸

Thus the political undertone, introduced in the first version of The Countess Cathleen, became more pronounced in each revised edition. Spanning a twenty-eight year period, the evolution of the play shows unmistakably that Yeats's political sympathies, however dormant or denied elsewhere, remained alive in the plays. The Countess Cathleen, not an important work in itself, is flawed in characterization and uneven in thematic intent partly as a result of the long reworking. But in its final version, in which Cathleen has become something much larger than Maud Gonne, Yeats has embodied his own political attitude. The Countess Cathleen introduces Yeats's nationalist concern which is intensified to a daring degree in Cathleen ni Houlihan.

Cathleen ni Houlihan, like The Countess Cathleen, is set in the past but addressed to a contemporary audience who could scarcely fail to feel the force of its historical implications. It depends for its impact on the tradition of French aid for Irish rebellions, particularly the 1798 uprising instigated by Wolfe Tone.¹⁹ The hope of French aid persisted in Ireland as late as the 1890's. Maud Gonne tells of Irish peasants who expected the French army to arrive

¹⁸ Autobiographies, p. 468.

¹⁹ See Curtis for an account of the 1798 rebellion, p. 344.

even as she was delivering her speeches.²⁰ Cathleen ni Houlihan, written for this receptive an audience, is one of the "most powerful pieces of nationalist propaganda ever written."²¹ Yeats himself, in "The Bounty of Sweden," betrayed his pride in the effect it produced:

Lines spoken by Cathleen ni Houlihan before she leaves the cottage always move an Irish audience powerfully for historical reasons.²²

The "historical reasons" are connected with Wolfe Tone who had gone to France to petition for armed help for Ireland. Cathleen ni Houlihan, written around the results of his mission, takes place in Killala in 1798. On August 22nd of that year a force of 1,000 French Republican soldiers under General Humbert landed in Killala Bay where they were joined by a group of unarmed peasants. Marching inland they defeated a large Royalist force at Castlebar but were in turn surrounded by Cornwallis and forced to surrender. Later, of several ships that had been dispatched from France, the Hoche arrived in Lough Swilly but it, too, had to surrender to an English squadron. During this engagement Wolfe Tone was taken prisoner and conveyed to Dublin, where he took his own life, rather than suffer hanging by the British as a common

20 See A Servant of the Queen, p. 283. Rajan has discovered a topical reference for Cathleen ni Houlihan in an incident mentioned in Yeats's Dramatis Personae [Autobiographies], p. 421] in which Maud Gonne had persuaded the French War Office to take from a pigeon-hole a scheme for the invasion of Ireland; see Balachandra Rajan's W. B. Yeats: a Critical Introduction (London, 1965), p. 344.

21 Conor Cruise O'Brien, p. 277.

22 Autobiographies, p. 556.

criminal. Yeats, in his work on behalf of the Wolfe Tone Centennial Committee in 1898, was well aware that the real purpose of that celebration was to "stage the greatest possible mass demonstration against British rule in Ireland."²³ Cathleen ni Houlihan, employing the same historical associations, was written with much the same purpose in mind.

It is the simplest of all Yeats's plays to summarize: an old woman representing the spirit of Ireland comes to the home of a family who are preparing for a wedding; she calls the bridegroom to follow her to revolution and probable death; at the end she is transformed into a young woman with the walk of a queen. The play is outrageously symbolic. When the old woman comes on stage the audience have already been alerted to her significance by the title of the play. Cathleen ni Houlihan is one of the ancient literary symbols for "Ireland incarnate."²⁴ So too is "The Poor Old Woman", Cathleen's listing in the cast of characters. Elsewhere throughout the play she is simply designated "Old Woman." Jeffares draws attention to an Irish street ballad called "Shan Van Vocht" (Poor Old Woman) which preserves the tradition of French aid for Irish rebellions and in which the Old Woman symbolizes Ireland.²⁵

In the initial performances of the play Maud Gonne,

23 Ellmann, p. 112.

24 George Brandon Saul, Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Plays (Philadelphia, 1958), p. 34.

25 See W. B. Yeats, Man and Poet, p. 138.

statuesquely tall and beautiful, played Cathleen "magnificently and with weird power,"²⁶ her revolutionary activities on behalf of Ireland lending her a special empathy with the Old Woman. She deliberately disguised her beauty in the interest of the part. Yeats had high praise for her performance:

Miss Gonne played very finely, and her great height made Cathleen seem a divine being fallen into our mortal infirmity The most beautiful woman of her time, when she played my Cathleen, 'made up' centuries old, and never should the part be played but with a like sincerity.²⁷

Cathleen ni Houlihan is a "play of the captivity,"²⁸ but the characterizations, the poetry, and Yeats's play-writing ability all place it above mere protest. The Old Woman's entrance has been well-prepared for, so that there is dramatic irony and broad humour in Peter and Bridget's failure to recognize her. Seen only when "there is a war or trouble coming" (C.Pl., p. 76), the Old Woman is spotted first by twelve-year-old Patrick who has been standing at the window listening to the cheering that accompanies the French landing. In the youthful Patrick's enthusiasm, there is a fateful foreshadowing of further bloodshed by coming generations. The Old Woman's appeal is directed to the sons of the families, and she upbraids those who pay more attention to their own affairs than to hers: "There was one that

26 This is Yeats's description in Autobiographies, p. 450.

27 Collected Works, Vol. 4 (Stratford on Aven, 1908), p. 242.

28 O'Hegarty, "W. B. Yeats and Revolutionary Ireland," p. 23.

had strong sons . . . But they were shearing their sheep, and they wouldn't listen to me" (C.Pl., pp. 80-81). When the "trouble" is on her, when British oppression is too strong to be borne, she must talk to her friends--the prelude to another insurrection.

Old Woman. I have had trouble indeed.

Bridget. What was it put the trouble on you?

Old Woman. My land that was taken from me.

Peter. Was it much land they took from you?

Old Woman. My four beautiful green fields.

(C.Pl., p. 81)

The "four beautiful green fields" that have been taken from her refer to the four Irish kingdoms of Ulster, Leinster, Munster and Connaught--all of Ireland, under the rule of the British. But the Irish never gave up hope of getting control of their own land back again. When Michael asks her what hopes she has to hold to, she answers:

The hope of getting my beautiful fields back again;
The hope of putting the strangers out of my house.

(C.Pl., p. 84)

The tension mounts as the appeal to Irish patriotism is intensified. The Old Woman talks of Irish heroes of the past who have given their lives in former risings against foreign domination: Red Hugh O'Donnell and Brian Boru. She speaks of her friends (the French) who are coming to help her, and if the rising is unsuccessful, if they are put down to-day, "they will get the upper hand tomorrow" (C.Pl., p. 84). At this point Michael, the son who was to be married, decides to give up everything to go with her. He has responded to her call, "if anyone would give me himself, he must give me all" (C.Pl., p. 84). There is a bitter

acknowledgement of all that the Irish patriots of the past had given before this time, and of all that had to be given again, in Michael's cancelled wedding plans. It is deeply significant that the coming bloodshed and death is juxtaposed against a wedding which is, or ought to be, a symbol of the continuation of the race. It is little wonder that the audience, with their memory of a population cut in half during the great famine, were so strongly moved.

Thomas McGreevy, a contemporary of Yeats, credits Cathleen ni Houlihan with being one of the two works of Yeats that became the literary inspiration for the 1916 Rising.²⁹ The play became a "sort of sacrament" to the leaders of the Revolution.³⁰ Passages like the following have the ring of ritual:

It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid.

They shall be remembered for ever,
 They shall be alive for ever,
 They shall be speaking for ever,
 The people shall hear them for ever.

(C.Pl., p. 86)

Scarcely has the Old Woman's singing died away than Patrick comes bursting onstage with the news that the French have landed at Killala. There is a clear call to arms in:

²⁹ See Mr. W. B. Yeats as Dramatist," Revue Anglo-Américaine, VII (1929), p. 24.

³⁰ See O'Hegarty, p. 27.

"the boys are all hurrying down the hillside to join the French" (C.Pl., p. 87). This is the most incendiary section of the play and is sufficient provocation for Stephen Gwynn's familiar comment about people going out to shoot and be shot.³¹ Cathleen ni Houlihan produced the effect Yeats must have wanted at the time, although when he had grown old, he had uneasy second thoughts about his play, wondering, in "The Man and the Echo," if it sent out "certain men the English shot" (C.P., p. 393).

Cathleen ni Houlihan ends with a magnificent transformation. Peter asks young Patrick if he saw an old woman going down the path and the boy answer:

I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen. (C.Pl., p. 88)

The transfiguration graces the play with the mystery of art and lifts it above the pettiness of mere politics. Such an ending in itself refutes Rajan's contention that the play consists of "nothing but the [political] overtones."³² On the other hand, an awareness of Yeats's nationalism, as reflected in the strong lines of this play, makes it impossible to accept Anna Balakian's esoteric interpretation that, as the curtain falls, "we know we are in the symbolist twilight zone where vision is purely subjective and time is the absolute and immutable moment."³³

The Unicorn from the Stars, under its original title Where there is Nothing, appeared the same year as Cathleen

31 See above, p. 6.

32 W. B. Yeats; a Critical Introduction, p. 52.

33 The Symbolist Movement (New York, 1967), p. 151.

ni Houlihan. Every bit as political as its contemporary, it is far more blunt and outspoken in its condemnation of the English. The most seditious lines in the play are given to Johnny Bocach whose last name means "a rascally type of nineteenth century beggar."³⁴ There is no passage in Cathleen ni Houlihan that is as openly agitative as the following passage spoken by Johnny:

Who was it the green sod of Ireland belonged to in the olden times? Wasn't it to the ancient race it belonged? And who has possession of it now but the race that came robbing over the sea? The meaning of that is to destroy the big houses and the towns, and the fields to be given back to the ancient race. (C.Pl., p. 359)

These impassioned words immediately recall Cathleen ni Houlihan's similar, but more subtly-worded, hope of getting her beautiful green fields back again and of putting the strangers out of her house. Neither Ireland nor England are named outright in Cathleen ni Houlihan which depends for its impact on the audience's knowledge of ancient Irish symbols. But The Unicorn from the Stars has passed beyond subtleties to name the usurper outright:

When he has the lion destroyed, the crown must fall and be shivered. Can't you see it is the League of the Unicorns that will fight and destroy the power of England and King George? (C.Pl., p. 356)

and again:

To put out the laws is to put out the whole nation of the English. Laws for themselves they made for their own profit, and left us nothing at all, no more than a dog or a sow. (C.Pl., p. 360)

Yet this play fails to move as Cathleen ni Houlihan moved its audience, partly because of the mystical content

34 Prolegomena to the Study of Yeats's Plays, p. 65.

involved in the theme, and partly because the insurrection in The Unicorn is spurious, ill-conceived, and unsuccessful.

Cathleen ni Houlihan, on the other hand, is one of Yeats's most successful and most straightforward plays. It has nothing in it of his complex vision, which came later; nothing, even of ancient Irish mythology. It is uncomplicated by the poetic conflict between early and late styles that plagues its companion piece, The Countess Cathleen. Cathleen ni Houlihan, the most significant of the early works, tightens the political theme, introduced as an undercurrent in The Countess Cathleen, to become the political touchstone for the other plays under discussion in this study.

CHAPTER III

THE UNLUCKY COUNTRY

If there is one event of central significance in modern Irish history, it is surely the Easter Rising of 1916, an event that, like the actions of Paul Revere and the Minute-men of Lexington, provided the emotional catalyst for the birth of a nation.¹ At the time, however, it appeared to be another unsuccessful attempt to throw off the yoke of the English in a long history of insurrections dating back seven centuries to the Anglo-Norman invasion. Yeats, who had been staying in England at the time of the 1916 uprising, wrote to Lady Gregory that he had no idea any public event could so deeply move him, and that he was very despondent about the future.² The Easter Rising provided the emotional and imaginative stimulus for a group of powerful political poems (C.P., pp. 202-208) which included "Easter 1916", and for an equally powerful play, The Dreaming of the Bones, which telescoped the cause and result of the Anglo-Norman conquest as the artist saw it.

In the long period between 1903 and 1916 Yeats had taken no part in practical politics except those connected

¹ The analogy is Edward Malins's. See "Yeats and the Easter Rising," . 275.

² Letters, p. 613.

with the theatre,³ and had written no plays of overt propaganda (with one possible exception⁴) comparable to Cathleen ni Houlihan with its rich harvest of hatred for the English. The plays of this middle period are well worth examining, however, in that they reveal an intensification of concern on Yeats's part for his unhappy country, a concern to be found consistently in the plays right from the beginning. Never completely submerged, the anguish surfaces sporadically in the Cuchulain cycle, through the image of the suffering land which was introduced in the famine scenes in The Countess Cathleen, and reaches full expression in the ruined landscape of The Dreaming of the Bones.

In the plays of the Cuchulain saga written during this time, Yeats turned back to Irish mythology for his subject matter. Yet even here, in plays seemingly remote and uninvolved with political situations, there is an underlying connective imagery of disorder and ruin in the land. In On Baile's Strand (1904) the main concern of Conchubar, High King of Uladh, is to preserve order in his kingdom that he may leave "a strong and settled country to [his] children" (C.Pl., p. 255), but the dissension between himself and Cuchulain destroys the country's peace and unity. In the play one of the singing women, in a prophetic vision, sees Cuchulain's roof-tree "leap into fire and the walls split

3 O'Brien has a succinct and, I think, accurate summary of Yeats's political phases in "Passion and Cunning," p. 264.

4 The Unicorn from the Stars, discussed above. Written in 1902 as Where There is Nothing, this play cannot properly be considered a play of the period 1903-1916. It belongs with the Cathleen plays.

and blacken" (C.Pl., p. 271).

The Green Helmet (1910) is a play that S. B. Bushrui sees as building on events in the life of the country and marking the beginning of Yeats's study of hatred in his blind bitter land.⁵ The setting of the play is early Ireland, a land where "neighbour wars on neighbour" (C.Pl., p. 255), where even the chariot-drivers and the kitchen help quarrel among themselves in "hatred each for each" without knowing "what set them to fight" (C.Pl., p. 234). Conal tells Cuchulain:

Go into Scotland again, or where you will, but begone
From this unlucky country that was made when the
Devil spat. (C.Pl., p. 227)

The following passage is a fateful foreshadowing of the civil war that, after 1916, was to tear Ireland apart:

Townland may rail at townland till all have gone to
wrack,
The very straws may wrangle till they've thrown down
the stack;
The very door-posts bicker till they've pulled in the
door, . . . (C.Pl., p. 240)

The concept of the unlucky and suffering land is carried into The Hawk's Well which is set in a desolate landscape that "the salt sea wind has swept bare" (C.Pl., 208). The dry tree is described in the Musicians' songs as "leafless" and "withered" (C.Pl., p. 220) with "boughs long stripped by the wind" (C.Pl., p. 208)--an atmosphere of physical and spiritual desolation. The dry tree becomes symbolically as important as the dry well in a setting of bare and broken

⁵ See Yeats's Verse Plays: The Revisions 1900-1910 (Oxford, 1965), p. 206.

rocks where nothing grows but wind-bitten, twisted thorn trees. One of the strongest images in all the plays is that of the bare tree, a metaphor used over and over by Yeats until, with the weight of accumulated meaning, it comes to symbolize the ruined land.⁶

In The Hawk's Well the young Cuchulain, seeking adventure, has come to an Ireland described by the Old Man as a barbarous place "where nothing thrives" (C.Pl., p. 211). It is this play, as far as the sequence of events goes, that actually begins the cycle which, according to Yeats, "made one of a series of plays based on events in the life of Cuchulain."⁷ Thus, in The Collected Plays he placed At the Hawk's Well before The Green Helmet, On Baile's Strand and The Only Jealousy of Emer, all of which were written much earlier. One of the themes of the series as a whole is "tragic heroism" which is introduced in At the Hawk's Well. Cuchulain has come in search of the fountain of eternal life, but length of life is less important, as the Musicians' songs disclose, than the kind of life lived. The play raises questions about the heroic life that are left unanswered or answered rhetorically.

The Musicians' first song, in the tradition of the

⁶ See Helen Hennessy Vendler, Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), pp. 205-206. Yeats picked up the "Dry Tree, an image of the ruined land," from William Morris; see "The Happiest of the Poets," Essays and Introductions, p. 54.

⁷ "Preface" to Plays in Prose and Verse (London, 1922), p. vi. I have followed the chronological order of the writing of the plays in order to bring out the increasing emphasis on the underlying theme of the "unlucky country".

Japanese Noh,⁸ introduces the protagonist, describes the setting and comments on the action:

I call to the eye of the mind
 A well long choked up and dry
 And boughs long stripped by the wind,
 And I call to the mind's eye
 Pallor of an ivory face,
 Its lofty dissolute air,
 A man climbing up to a place
 The salt sea wind has swept bare.
 (C.Pl., p. 208)

The second song raises the question around which the play revolves: is the short active life preferable to a long miserable one?

What were his life soon done!
 Would he lose by that or win?
 (C.Pl., p. 208)

And, in lines which prefigure the fifth stanza of "Among School Children", the argument discredits the idea that old age is in itself a commendable end. The lyrics then set up a contrast between the heroic life and an inactive one:

The heart would be always awake,
 The heart would turn to its rest

'Why should I sleep?' the heart cries,
 'For the wind, the salt wind, the sea wind,
 Is beating a cloud through the skies;
 I would wander always like the wind.'

'O wind, O salt wind, O sea wind!'
 Cries the heart, 'it is time to sleep;
 Why wander and nothing to find?
 Better grow old and sleep.'
 (C.Pl., pp. 209-10)

One important detail--stressed twice in the opening lines of the first lyric--is that this play takes place in

⁸ In the "Introduction" to Certain Noble Plays of Japan by Pound and Fenollosa, Yeats stressed the functions of the musicians as "to describe place and weather, and at moments, action." Reprinted in The Classic Noh Theatre of Japan (New York, 1959), p. 151.

the imagination, in the "eye of the mind." All the body of the play involving the action is a dramatization of the argument concerning length of life expounded in the lyrics. The Old Man is a crabbed and selfish individual who has wasted a long life waiting for the miraculous waters that bestow eternal life, but there is no indication that he could have used such a gift profitably even if it had been given to him. Cuchulain, on the other hand, is young, daring and generous. The gift of the Hawk's Well is less important to him than the means of attaining it. Rather than pattern himself on the Old Man's non-action, he prefers to come to grips with the Hawk Woman herself who can, and does, lay a spell on him that prevents his getting the water when it comes. At the end of the play, Cuchulain, "no longer as if in a dream," shoulders his spear and rushes out to engage the immortals in a battle he cannot possibly win. His final action illustrates one side of the argument in the lyrics: that a short active life is better than a long miserable one. The play at this point is less a "study of the anatomy of failure," as seen by Rajan,⁹ than an analysis of the nature of heroism.

One hundred of the 297 lines of At the Hawk's Well--over one-third--are given to the Musicians, which suggests a more-than-casual importance in the songs which open and close the play. Yeats was to insist later on, in The King of the Great Clock Tower, that the significance of his plays was embodied in the lyrics, adding that he had once written a play, and, after filling it with lyrics, had abolished the

9 See W. B. Yeats: a Critical Introduction, p. 96.

play.¹⁰ At the Hawk's Well ends with a re-iteration that the play consists of "familiar memories" (called up in the "eye of the mind"). The argument apropos the two kinds of life has been partially resolved in favour of the short heroic life with all its folly. The closing lines, however, introduce a radically different picture of unheroic but pleasant life, something not even hinted at in the play proper:

'The man that I praise'
 Cries out the empty well,
 'Lives all his days
 Where a hand on the bell
 Can call the milch cows
 To the comfortable door of his house.
 Who but an idiot would praise
 Dry stones in a well?

'The man that I praise',
 Cries out the leafless tree,
 'Has married and stays
 By an old hearth, and he
 On naught has set store
 But children and dogs on the floor.
 Who but an idiot would praise
 A withered tree?' (C.Pl., pp. 219-20).

The rhetorical question in these last two lines is answered ironically. Only those who are "idiot" enough to risk their lives when young rather than sacrifice everything for an ignominious old age can find anything to praise in their desolate and ruined land. They alone prefer heroic life to inactivity. Both Cuchulain and the Old Man represent the reality of existence--the only two kinds of life possible in Yeats's Ireland in 1916 in that unlucky country. The full significance of the play is unfolded in the picture

¹⁰ See the "Preface" to The King of the Great Clock Tower (New York, 1935), p. v.

of peace and prosperity which is a third, and ideal, existence, but not the one possible at that time. When the mythological cloak is pulled aside, we can see Yeats's naked desire for peace in his suffering land. The burden of his political thought, by his own admission, was desire for order in public life, and "rancour against all who, except under more dire necessity disturb public life."¹¹ Yeats, therefore, did not condemn taking up arms when it was a "dire necessity," even though it was against impossible odds (as Cuchulain demonstrates), and he sided with those who wanted freedom from England. At the time The Hawk's Well was being written, Ireland was gearing for civil war:

The Ulster Unionists, with a well-equipped and disciplined volunteer army, 100,000 strong, were preparing to establish a government of their own. In the rest of Ireland, Redmond's authority was slipping from his grasp, and the revolutionary forces that he had hitherto held in check were threatening to capture the whole nationalist movement. They were no less willing to fight for independence than the protestants to fight for union; and in the summer of 1914, Ireland was on the edge of civil war.¹²

When At the Hawk's Well is seen in its historical frame of reference, the reason for the emphasis, in the final lyrics, on a peaceful and settled life, becomes clear and ought to dispel the "confusion" Helen Vendler complains of.¹³

The running imagery of the suffering country in the Cuchulain cycle, underlying the desire for order, is strongly reminiscent of a similar theme that runs through Shakespeare's

¹¹ See above, p. 17. Italics mine.

¹² Beckett, p. 419.

¹³ Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays, p. 213. Miss Vendler also notes that her interpretation of the play leaves her unsatisfied.

history plays in the form of the untended garden.¹⁴ Carolyn Spurgeon demonstrates how the garden images in Shakespeare's history plays point up all the "horrors suffered by England under the civil wars, shaken and frightened as she was by murders and battles, scheming and treachery" ¹⁵ In the essay "Stratford-on-Avon" Yeats tells of the week he spent at Stratford where he saw Shakespeare's history plays "played in their right order, with all the links that bind play to play unbroken."¹⁶ He was much impressed, so much so, in fact, that a case could be made for the influence of Shakespeare on the Cuchulain plays, the first of which was begun two years after his trip to Stratford. But Yeats's concern for his unhappy country had been expressed earlier than this. The theme of the suffering land looks back to The Countess Cathleen where "the whole land [Ireland under British rule] squeals like a rabbit under a weasel's tooth" (C.Pl., p. 4).

Centuries of brutal and often ruthless injustice-- and what is worse when you are dealing with a high-spirited and sensitive people, centuries of insolence and insult--have driven hatred of British rule into the very marrow of the Irish race.¹⁷

These words were spoken, not by an Irishman, but by Lloyd George himself, addressing the British House of Commons on March 7, 1917, a year after the famous Easter Rising. The

14 See Carolyn Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells us (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 216-23).

15 Ibid., p. 222.

16 Essays and Introductions, p. 97.

17 Quoted by Dorothy Macardle in The Irish Republic, rev. ed., (New York, 1965), p. 210.

hatred of British rule spoken of in this passage had motivated, over the centuries, the shedding of the blood of Irish rebels described by the young patriot in Yeats's next play, The Dreaming of the Bones:

. . . their blood has returned to fields
That have grown red from drinking blood like mine
(C.Pl., p. 437)

Blood had been shed, in the 1916 Rising, in other parts of Ireland besides Dublin. Some of the heaviest fighting took place in the west, in the Clare-Galway area. At Athenry in Galway, near where The Dreaming of the Bones is set, a rebel force under Liam Mellows had been temporarily successful. Dorothy Macardle has described Mellows's part in the rebellion:

He gave the signal on Tuesday to the local volunteers. From every part of the wide county they came out, attacked barracks and destroyed bridges and telegraph wires. They seized the town of Athenry and there manufactured bombs. On Thursday the Republican force assembled around Athenry numbered nearly one thousand men. There had already been many encounters with the enemy and loss of life on both sides.¹⁸

Eventually the Volunteers were surrounded by the military and forced to surrender, but Mellows himself, like the Young Man in Yeats's play, escaped to the Clare-Galway hills.

The little village of Abbey, included in the setting of the play, is about 15 miles from Athenry, near the Clare-Galway border. County Clare itself has a history of resistance to English domination, having led the campaign for Catholic emancipation in 1828 by returning Daniel

¹⁸ The Irish Republic, p. 179.

O'Connell to Parliament, pledged against the Test Oath.¹⁹ Thus, in Yeats's play, the Young Man's words, "I should not be afraid in County Clare" (C.Pl., p. 437) have historic significance. In this play Yeats has dropped all pretense of ancient disguise and set his play during Easter week, 1916. The hero is a young revolutionist who fought in the Post Office and if taken "shall be put against the wall and shot" (C.Pl., p. 435) as the rebel leaders were shot in Dublin. In the west also the unlucky country felt the iron fist of English vengeance:

Is there no house
Famous for sanctity or architectural beauty
In Clare or Kerry, or in all wide Connacht,
The enemy has not unroofed? (C.Pl., p. 439)

The desolate landscape of rock and thorn-tree, as bleak and forbidding as in At the Hawk's Well, is no longer merely suggestive of exploitation, but is openly critical of the malfeasance of the "English robbers" who

Cut down the trees or set them upon fire
For fear their owners might find shelter there.
(C.Pl., p. 436)

Into this barren west-coast setting stumbles the young freedom fighter to be confronted by the ghosts of the two guilty lovers who were responsible for bringing in the Anglo-Norman invaders seven centuries earlier. They had set in motion the whole tragic wheel of events that reached its crisis in 1916.

Critics have tended to stress the importance of the Noh

¹⁹ The Irish Republic, p. 176.

features of The Dreaming of the Bones, relegating the immediate political references to a secondary position,²⁰ whereas the emphasis might profitably be placed the other way around. In this play the objective reality of time and setting is a new note as David Clark has observed.²¹ The ghosts of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla appear in the play primarily for the purpose of explaining the historical origin of Ireland's subjugation that resulted in the seemingly abortive bid for freedom in the Easter Rising. Seven centuries previous, the lovers, being "blind and bitter and bitterly in love . . . brought a foreign army from across the sea" and "sold their country into slavery" (C.Pl., p. 442). Yeats's facts are based on the actual incident in Irish history:

In 1152 Dermot [Diarmuid] carried off Dervorgilla from his house at Dromhair; twelve years later her husband took a revenge which ruined not only Dermot and himself, but all Ireland with them, for Dermot, defeated, sailed for England and returned with the Anglo-Norman invaders.²²

This "most miserable, most accursed pair" (C.Pl., p. 442) are responsible for forging the first link of the tragic chain. Both Yeats and the historians insist on one thing: the Anglo-Normans were the ruin of the land. In a

20 See David R. Clark, W. B. Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality (Chester Springs, Pa., 1965), pp. 43-59; also Leonard E. Nathan, The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats (New York, 1965), pp. 209. In Yeats's Iconography (London, 1960), F. A. C. Wilson accords more importance to the political implications, but even he insists on the pre-eminence of the ghost theme; see pp. 204-240.

21 W. B. Yeats and the Theatre of Desolate Reality, p. 49.

22 Edmund Curtis, A History of Medieval Ireland, 1110-1513 (London, 1923), p. 38.

long, outspoken passage, the Young Man declaims bitterly against the continuing desecration caused by the enemy:

I can see
 The Aran Islands, Connemara Hills,
 And Galway in the breaking light; there too
 The enemy has toppled roof and gable,
 And torn the panelling from ancient rooms;
 What generations of old men had known
 Like their own hands, and children wondered at,
 Has boiled a trooper's porridge. That town had lain,
 But for the pair that you would have me pardon,
 Amid its gables and its battlements
 Like any old admired Italian town;
 For though we have neither coal, nor iron ore,
 To make us wealthy and corrupt the air,
 Our country, if that crime were uncommitted,
 Had been most beautiful. (C.Pl., p. 443)

In this passage, the theme of the ruined and suffering land, built up through the Cuchulain plays, reaches its denouement. Hardened by his recent experience in the Post Office, the Young Man repeats for the third time his terrible and uncompromising sentence: "never, never shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven." The long spoilation of the unlucky country has been "their handiwork" (C.Pl., p. 444).

In The Dreaming of the Bones, as in At the Hawk's Well, the body of the play is a dramatization of the theme of the Musicians' songs, and it is the closing lyrics that contain the full significance of the theme:

At the grey round of the hill
 Music of a lost kingdom
 Runs, runs and is suddenly still.
 The winds out of Clare-Galway
 Carry it: suddenly it is still.

I have heard in the night air
 A wandering airy music;
 And moldered in that snare
 A man is lost of a sudden,
 In that sweet wandering snare.

What finger first began
 Music of a lost kingdom?

They dream that laughed in the sun,
 Dry bones that dream are bitter,
 They dream and darken our sun.

Those crazy fingers play
 A wandering airy music;
 Our luck is withered away,
 And wheat in the wheat-air withered,
 And the wind blows it away. (C.Pl., 444-45)

These stanzas constitute a condensed version of the theme and plot of the play. The heritage of Ireland's lost kingdom, clinging to the bleak landscape of Clare-Galway, is now but a whispered tune on the wind; in the stillness of the supernatural atmosphere the Young Man meets the ghosts of the guilty lovers bitterly "dreaming back"²³ their past; the results of their ancient unpardonable crime continue to darken the sun of the present, particularly the Easter Rising from which the "luck" seems withered away. The withered wheat is a variation of the famine symbols in The Countess Cathleen and of the general cycle of devastation begun by the "crazy fingers" of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla.

The closing lyric is in two parts. Part I, above, is concerned with the past as it affects the present; part II contains a veiled reference to the future:

My heart ran wild when it heard
 The curlew cry before dawn
 And the eddyng cat-headed bird;
 But now the night is gone.

²³ Yeats wrote that he derived his concept of the "dreaming back" from the "world-wide belief that the dead dream back for a certain time, through the more personal thoughts and deeds of life," adding that the lovers in The Dreaming of the Bones had lost themselves in a "self creating labyrinth of conscience" (Four Plays for Dancers [New York, 1921], p. 129).

I have heard from far below
 The strong March birds a-crow.
 Stretch neck and clap the wing,
 Red cocks, and crow! (C.Pl., p. 445)

The red bird of March, bloody herald of the god Mars, is primarily a symbol of imminent revolutionary change within the context of the Easter Rising.²⁴ The dark night of the past is over; there is a sense of exultation, of pride in the Post Office incident, of hope for the future, derived from a diction of "strong", "stretch", "clap" and "crow". In this stanza there is no allusion, as Wilson notes, to "ghosts, daybreak or returning normalcy."²⁵ The play does not end as a ghost story but as a rededication to the revolution.

Although an apparent failure at the time, the Easter Rising turned out to be the first fiery step on the road to independence. The executions of the fifteen captured insurgent leaders lit a flame of martyrdom that burned throughout Ireland transforming the temper of a people who had been, on the whole, opposed to violent action up to this time. Ireland was "changed, changed utterly" by the insurrection and its aftermath.

Yeats's young rebel in The Dreaming of the Bones embodies not only the qualities of the Irish revolutionist, but also the cast of mind of a transformed populace determined to gain its freedom and to revenge its dead heroes. It was a generation that Dorothy Macardle has called "enlightened,

²⁴ See Wilson's explication in Yeats's Iconography, pp. 236-40; also Rajan's brief comment in W. B. Yeats, a Critical Introduction, p. 102.

²⁵ Yeats's Iconography, p. 238.

disciplined, high-spirited and self-reliant, inspired with a boundless determination and with readiness to sacrifice and endure."²⁶ Discussing the after-events of the Easter Rising, she writes:

Easter [1917] was an occasion of fearless demonstrations of adherence to the insurgents' memory and their cause. People wore armlets with the tricolour ribbon on black. The Republican Proclamation was reprinted and posted on walls, the Republican flag was everywhere to be seen. Public meetings were prohibited and the police were on the streets in force.²⁷

Yeats felt that The Dreaming of the Bones was "only too powerful politically"²⁸ for release at such a time and held it back for two years; yet significantly enough, when he did publish it in 1919, the civil war was raging in full force. This would seem to bear out O'Brien's contention that Yeats had a "politician's eye and a politician's sense of timing,"²⁹ since it was recognized by this time that Ireland would get some kind of Home Rule, and Yeats had come out publicly on the side of the rebellion.

Based on the Easter Rising, The Dreaming of the Bones gave Yeats a culminating focal point for the nationalist sentiment running through the earlier plays, particularly the Cuchulain cycle. (Had not Pearce gone out to die calling upon Cuchulain?) The Rising remained the central event in

26 The Irish Republic, p. 252.

27 Ibid., p. 212.

28 Letter to Lady Gregory, June, 1917, Letters, p. 626.

29 "Passion and Cunning: the Politics of W. B. Yeats," In Excited Reverie, p. 219.

his imagination during these years. He was to return to it again in the closing lyric of the play he was working on near the end of his life--The Death of Cuchulain. Here he achieved a final synthesis of myth and politics:

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? (C.Pl., pp. 704-705)

The Rising continued to motivate, if not to inform, most of the plays and revisions (to be discussed in the next chapter) that Yeats wrote during the revolutionary period in Ireland.

CHAPTER IV

THE VOICE OF THE RAMBLING PEASANT POET

As we have seen, Yeats was a poet-politician whose passionate concern for his country's fate was inevitably embodied in some manner in the plays. In the revised version of The King's Threshold published in 1922, he poured all the disillusion he felt following the Easter Rising. (He came to feel that mob rule had taken over.) In the revised version of the play, where the setting can again be seen as a disguise for modern Ireland, he is outlining the position of the poet in relation to the worsening political situation of his own day.

As an Irish writer and patriot Yeats was always interested in the role of the poet in public life. As early as 1898 he wrote to George Russell (AE) advising him that the poet should absorb Ireland and her tragedy to be the poet of the people, "Perhaps the poet of a new insurrection,"¹ a role he himself was to fulfil later. To the end of his life, in spite of occasional protestations to the opposite, he had not changed his opinion of this function of the poet except to wish he had put into the mouth of his "rambling peasant poet" more, not less, nationalist sentiment. In 1937, referring in "A General Introduction for my Work," to a history of

1 Letters, p. 295.

English persecution in Ireland, he was writing:

No people hate as we do in whom that past is still alive, there are moments when I accuse myself of effeminacy because I have not given it adequate expression. It is not enough to have put it into the mouth of a rambling peasant poet.²

Yeats's composite poet-spokesman in the plays was originally Hanrahan the Red who appeared in the early short stories in The Secret Rose.³ He created Hanrahan during his Pre-Raphaelite phase as a protest of withdrawal against everything the English stood for:

[Hanrahan] cut a cudgel out of the hedge and journeyed on and on doing a day's work here and singing a song for his lodging there; and as the English tongue and English manners died behind him, he became a new man: for was he not the last of that mighty line of poets which came down unbroken from Sanchan Seanchan Torpeist⁴

In The King's Threshold Seanchan, the ancestor of Hanrahan, is one of the ancient poets in a tradition stretching back through the centuries to the dim, partially-recorded history of the fili, the forerunners of the bards.

The fili belonged to the oes dāna, or learned class, a remarkable institution whose adherents came eventually to be regarded as a subclass of nobles.⁵ At first, however, they wandered about the country haunting the courts of the kings and attended by a band of followers sometimes numbering as

² Essays and Introductions, p. 519. Also, see above, p. 13.

³ See particularly "The Twisting of the Rope and Hanrahan the Red," The Secret Rose (London, 1897), pp. 142-55.

⁴ Ibid., p. 142.

⁵ See Myles Dillon, The Celtic Realms (London, 1967), pp. 96-97.

high as one hundred. Their influence was immense, since it was believed that by their satires they could inflict blemish or evil upon the subject of their scorn, or by their poetic exhortations bring victory to a patron. They demanded, and got, rich rewards for their services.

In a lecture delivered before the National Literary Society in Dublin in 1913, Osborn Bergin drew attention to an important extension of the qualifications of the file:

He discharged the functions of a modern journalist. He was often a public official, a chronicler, a political essayist, a keen and satirical observer of his fellow-countrymen.⁶

It was in this capacity that the poets exercised their "ancient right" spoken of in The King's Threshold (C.Pl., p. 114), which included the right to sit at the King's council table. Eventually each court had a supreme file. After the Anglo-Norman invasion the fili were replaced by the bards who continued to praise the Gaelic champions of the old order and to pour contempt upon the English. They became so troublesome in their exhortations to save their Mother Erin that the English were forced to pass laws against them.⁷ Yeats had, in all this, a clear precedent for interfering in his country's affairs and a tradition to maintain as a poet-politician.

One of the most famous of the early fili was Senchan Torpeist, whose history is recorded in the Trondam Guaire

6 "Bardic Poetry," Journal of the Ivernian Society, Vol. 5 (1913), p. 154.

7 Curtis, p. 113.

Manuscript of the twelfth century. This Senchan went with his followers to visit King Guaire who prepared a great welcoming feast. Senchan, annoyed by the behaviour of the other guests, refused to eat and insulted those whom Guaire sent to him with special dainties. The following account is in Myles Dillon's Cycles of the Kings:

He satirized the mice for eating an egg which had been offered him, and then satirized the cat for not catching the mouse. The king of the cats came to avenge the satire and carried Senchan off on his back. As they were passing a forge at Clonmacnois Saint Ciaran happened to be there and threw a piece of red hot iron at the cat killing it and thus delivering Senchan. Senchan, however, cursed the hand that saved him because he would rather have died so the poets could have the opportunity of satirizing Guaire.⁸

This, of course, is the genesis of The King's Threshold. In the original account it was Senchan's arrogance that the narrator himself was satirizing, but Yeats was satisfied to take only what he needed. In comparing the two works we note three important similarities in addition to the obvious resemblance of name and plot: first, the power of the poets at that time was greatly respected as shown by the King's deferential treatment of Senchan and his followers; second, there is an unexplained conflict between the poet and the King; third, Senchan, is willing to die in order to counteract the dictatorial power of the King. Yeats took these three aspects of the episode and bent them to his own use, not only to show the conflict "between worldly

⁸ Myles Dillon, Cycles of the Kings (London, 1946), pp. 93-94.

power and poetry" as Dorothy Hoare has pointed out,⁹ but as an actual protest and piece of political propaganda against the English who, when the play was written, were still the overlords in Ireland. Yeats is putting into the play his nationalist sentiment to uphold the sanctioned right of the Irish poet to raise the voice of protest in the political affairs of the nation.

In the first published version of The King's Threshold Seanchan, like Senchan Torpeist, does not die at the end after defeating the King.¹⁰ Comparing his first version to the original source Yeats said: "I have twisted it about and revised its moral that the poet might have the best of it."¹¹ In this 1903 version the tale, on the narrative level, is a simple one. The poet has gone on hunger strike because of the refusal of King Guaire to accord him the right to dine at the King's table. Aware of Seanchan's prestige, the King attempts to coax him to eat lest he die on the threshold of the palace and disgrace him. A series of temptations are presented to persuade the poet to bow to the King's will: the poet's pupils appeal to him, then the mayor of his hometown, followed by the King's chamberlain, then the young princesses and finally Fedelm, Seanchan's sweetheart. After they all fail, and Seanchan refuses to capitulate, the King

9 See The Works of Morris and Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature (Cambridge, 1937), p. 120.

10 For the complete text of this version, see Collected Works in Verse and Prose of William Butler Yeats, Vol. III (Stratford-on-Avon, 1908), pp. 1-57.

11 Ibid., "Appendix III," p. 255.

succumbs. He yields his crown to the poet who graciously returns it and leaves the scene triumphant. In the revised version the dining table has become the council table, and the ending has been changed to one of martyrdom and death for the poet in order to bring out a contemporary political relevance. When the new version of Yeats's play was performed in 1921, the hunger strike had become a powerful political weapon in Ireland.¹² The changes Yeats made were deliberately inserted to emphasize this reality.

Dorothy Hoare maintains, mistakenly I think, that the observation of real life comes "accidentally"¹³ into the artificial air of The King's Threshold. She sees the line, "our mowers mow with knives between the stones" as a strange disrupting contrast to the purely musical and decorative effect of lines like those at the ending:

O silver trumpets be you lifted up
 And cry to the great race that is to come.
 Long-throated swans upon the waves of time
 (C.Pl., p. 143)

Actually, the insertion concerning the mowers and the knives is deliberate, not "accidental," and serves several purposes. It carries through the play the contrast between the two kinds of poetry discussed in the King's opening speech. Also, it reflects the conflict in Yeats the artist between

12 See Dorothy Macardle, The Irish Republic. Though strongly biased in favour of the Republican faction, Miss Macardle has a most exhaustive account of the hunger strikes. See particularly pp. 391-92, 344-45, 361.

13 The Works of Morris and Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature, p. 121.

the early aesthetic poetry and the later more realistic work. It is a stage in the development of the artist toward the sharp surgical precision of a late play like Purgatory.

In The Countess Cathleen Aleel is the wandering poet seeking to withdraw from reality in a negative protest against the influence of the English--much like the early Hanrahan--whereas Cathleen is the active politician. In The King's Threshold the position of the poet has been radically altered from that in The Countess Cathleen; it is now Seanchan who prefers to fight injustice to the death even as Cathleen did. Using political diction the King repeats Seanchan's plea for the poets' rights "established at the establishment of the world" (C.Pl., p. 109), but he listens to the common politicians:

Bishops, Soldiers, and Makers of the Law--
 Who long had thought it against their dignity
 For a mere man of words to sit amongst them
 At the great council of the State and share
 In the authority. (C.Pl., p. 108)

(The objection of these politicians to having a poet sit amongst them prefigured by almost twenty years the same objection raised against Yeats when he was offered a seat in the Senate in 1922.¹⁴) Both The King's Threshold and The Countess Cathleen have an underlying protest against the agrarian injustice that had resulted in famine (in The Countess Cathleen) and near-famine (in The King's Threshold).

¹⁴ See the "Introduction" to the Senate Speeches of W. B. Yeats, ed. Donald Pearce, p. 15.

In this latter play the mayor's words, all the more potent for being put in the mouth of a fool, contain a direct topical reference to conditions in Ireland at the turn of the century:

The King was said to be most friendly, and we had good reason for thinking that he was about to give us those grazing lands we so much need, being so pinched that our mowers mow with knives between the stones. We asked for nothing but what was reasonable.
(C.Pl., p. 116)

Victoria's son and successor, Edward VII, was popularly called "the friend of Ireland." An Irish audience could scarcely interpret this passage as less than an appeal to the Crown for the return of their own land, a request that they considered as "nothing but what was reasonable." "He was about to give us those grazing lands we so much need" is probably a reference to the Balfour Act which became law in 1903 and which was being legislated at the time Yeats was writing his play. This act helped to solve the vexing landlord question by offering, among other inducements, a bonus to landlords who would sell, thus facilitating the breaking-up of entire estates.¹⁵

The mayor's words, in the following quotation, underline the near-famine conditions that prevailed during these troubled transition years:

You have not heard, it may be, having been so much away, how much cattle died last winter from lacking grass, how much sickness there was because the poor had nothing but salt fish to live on through the winter. (C.Pl., p. 119)

¹⁵ See Curtis p. 388. The Balfour (or Wyndham's) Act was a stop-gap effort, however, and did little to slow the coming revolution.

Yeats himself, having been "so much away" from reality in his early poetry, has now come to grips with the actual situation in Ireland. This background of contemporary conditions informs and fires the play with an undertone almost as incendiary as Cathleen ni Houlihan. In The King's Threshold there is a pointed reference to the insurrections of the recent past, to the Fenian uprisings that failed because of lack of arms:

. . . What do the great
and powerful care for rights
That have no armies? (C.Pl., p. 122)

Except as nationalist propaganda there seems little excuse for inserting such a passage at this point in the dialogue. On this level The King's Threshold can be seen as political allegory--though the poetry saves it from being so in the worst sense--with a hierarchy of British officials topped by the King, followed by the Chamberlain as the prime minister, then the mayor as the obsequious tool of the English. They are lined up for us in the Chamberlain's unctuous words:

How many days
Will you keep us this quarrel with the King,
And the King's nobles, and myself, and all,
Who'd gladly be your friends if you would let them?
(C.Pl., p. 123)

The English power structure is opposed by Seanchan, followed by the Oldest Pupil, then the Youngest Pupil, and finally Brian. At the end of the play, Seanchan's adherents are united behind him, ready to give their lives for the cause, although they had not been so decided at the beginning. Seanchan knows that he is fighting not only for freedom from

tyranny in his own time, but that he may inspire other poets who come after him to do the same:

But I am labouring
 For some that shall be born in the nick o' time,
 And find sweet nurture, that they may have voices,
 Even in anger, like the strings of harps.
 (C.Pl., p. 113)

These important lines emphasize that there are times when it is necessary for poetry to cry out in anger, as well as in joy. When the King finally stands revealed for what he is and removes the velvet glove from the iron fist ("he [Seanchan] may die, but you shall all die with him"), the Pupils exclaim, in a very moving testimony, "Die, Seanchan, and proclaim the right of the poets" (C.Pl., p. 140).

The Church, invariably on the side of the government in past uprisings in Ireland, has been embodied in the Monk whom Seanchan at one point actually accuses of being "in the King's pay" (C.Pl., p. 129). Of all the characters in this play the Monk is the most callous, the only one who refuses to try to persuade Seanchan to eat. (Even the soldier can be swayed in this respect.) The Monk, who cares nothing for the rights of Seanchan, fares rather badly under Yeats's pen; he symbolizes the rancorous, dogmatic cast of mind the poet hated. The Monk is concerned only that "the country is full of noise, and King and Church neglected" (C.Pl., p. 129).

The conflict between the opposing forces is further reflected in the conversation of the two cripples. The first takes Seanchan's side maintaining it would serve the King

right if the poet drove away his luck; the second supports the King saying there is something queer about a man that makes rhymes. The self-mockery of this last line is evidence of Yeats's maturity and looks forward to the full-blown irony of The Player Queen. (Yeats was thirty-eight years old in 1903, though we are inclined to think of The King's Threshold as an early play.)

The mayor in The King's Threshold is one of Yeats's most successful comic creations, little better than a buffoon, to whom Yeats, in a magnificent burst of dramatic irony, has given the most seditious lines in the play, as well as embodying in him the satiric portrait of all traits most obnoxious to an Irish patriot. He is the grovelling petty politician who parrots "Long live the King," and who is five times "much honoured" to be pushed around by his superiors. The Chamberlain shoves the mayor, the Mayor shoves Brian, and all this time Seanchan keeps his face to the wall. The exasperated Chamberlain finally turns to Seanchan with:

Well, you must be contented, for your work
Has roused the common sort against the King
And stolen his authority. The State
Is like some orderly and reverend house
Wherein, the master being dead of a sudden,
The servants quarrel where they have a mind to,
And pilfer here and there. (C.Pl., p. 123)

Here we learn the reason for the King's concern: he is afraid of the power of the poet to rouse the populace against him. The play at this point is a prophetic foreshadowing of the Civil War. "Having roused the common sort

against the King," Yeats the poet is about the politician's business--to paraphrase O'Brien¹⁶--conscious of his own advice to George Russell that it is the function of the poet to be the spirit of a new insurrection.

Between the first published version of The King's Threshold and the text as it appears in The Collected Plays, tremendous and, for the poet, soul-searing changes had taken place in Ireland. The revised ending of the play is directly connected with the following incidents that occurred during the civil unrest of the revolutionary years.¹⁷ In 1918 the city of Cork elected a Fenian, Thomas Curtin, as mayor. He was assassinated and was replaced by Terence MacSwiney. When MacSwiney was arrested for sedition in August, 1919, he went on hunger strike and died seventy-four days later to become yet another Irish political martyr. MacSwiney had been a poet, "easily the most literary member of the Cork Literary Society,"¹⁸ author of at least five plays and a number of poems. His best-known drama, The Revolutionist, depicted the low state of affairs in Ireland after the hypothetical establishment of Home Rule by the English, and insisted on total and uncompromising revolution. During 1921 funds were

¹⁶ "Passion and Cunning: the Politics of W. B. Yeats," p. 220.

¹⁷ See Thomas McGreevy, "Mr. W. B. Yeats as Dramatist," Revue Anglo-Américaine, p. 23; also, Haskell M. Block, "Yeats's The King's Threshold: the Poet and Society," Philological Quarterly, XXXIV (Oct., 1955), p. 214. For a full account of the revolutionary years see Dorothy Macardle, The Irish Republic.

¹⁸ This estimation is attributed to Daniel Corkery and is quoted by Block, p. 215.

raised in MacSwiney's name to carry on the war against the English. In February of that year his play had been presented at the Abbey Theatre with MacSwiney's widow in attendance to receive the homage of the audience. The play was acclaimed as stirring propaganda and a repeat performance was given in October, 1921.

All this is behind the revised ending of The King's Threshold. In November, 1921, the new version of Yeats's play, which had not been performed for years prior to this time, was put on at the Abbey Theatre following The Revolutionist by one month. The audience was greatly moved by the resemblance of Yeats's play to the recent historical events involving MacSwiney.¹⁹

Yeats brooded over the worsening of public affairs in Ireland, particularly over the treatment of artists who, like MacSwiney, happened to be politicians also. The martyred leaders of the 1916 Rising, with one exception, had all been literary men of distinction. Those that Yeats celebrated in "Easter 1916" were:

Padraic Pearse, the Commandant-General, thirty-six at the time, a member of the Irish Bar, founder and Headmaster of St Enda's School for Boys at Rathfarnham, which Yeats had visited, a fine Gaelic scholar and a lively orator. Thomas MacDonagh, the best-known to Yeats, was an M.A., tutor of English literature in University College, Dublin, a minor poet and dramatist, whose play, When the Dawn is Come, had been performed at the Abbey Theatre in 1908. Connolly was the labour poet²⁰

¹⁹ See Block, p. 216.

²⁰ Edward Malins, "Yeats and the Easter Rising," Massachusetts Review, p. 274.

And so on. These men were all in the tradition of the file, the poet as the voice of protest in Irish politics.

Yeats published, in April 1922, a small booklet called Seven Poems and a Fragment,²¹ in which the "fragment" was the revised ending to The King's Threshold, lines 842-893 in the present edition. The volume also contained the poem "Thoughts Upon the Present State of the World," later renamed "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," one of the most pessimistic and disturbing of his poems of the revolutionary period. In his "Notes" to this poem Yeats comments, "Now that the times worsen, give way to worse,"²² which carries back to the almost identical line in the revised "fragment" of The King's Threshold, which reads "although the world be changed from worse to worse" (C.Pl., p. 142). Thus we have a direct link between the "worsening situation" in The King's Threshold and the civil war disorder of the poem "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." The contagion Seanchan speaks of is the plague of revolutionary change afflicting not only Ireland but spreading throughout Europe--the "blood-dimmed tide" of anarchy loosed in "The Second Coming" (C.P., p. 210), which was written during the same period. Yeats is no longer the idealist. Faced with the actual situation brought about by the change of power, he swiftly

21 The Cuala Press (Dundrum, 1922) published Yeats's Seven Poems and a Fragment which included, besides the revised ending to The King's Threshold, several poems reflecting the civil disorders of the period.

22 Ibid., p. 23.

became disillusioned and struck out the naive ending of the earlier version of his play.

That a man of MacSwiney's stature, a poet and playwright, could be allowed to die for political reasons profoundly disturbed Yeats. He saw it as the death of the old tradition that had honoured the poets for their part in the practical affairs of the country. The installation of the new order was all politics and no poetry, as the Youngest Pupil points out after Seanchan has died:

The ancient right is gone, the new remains,
And that is death. (C.Pl., p. 142)

The new death-like atmosphere in Ireland--the State deprived of the influence of the poet--is thrust home when the Pupils are refused admission, in a symbolic tour-de-force, to the Palace. The harshness of the young soldier, who threatens physical violence against the poets, epitomizes the changed attitude of the authorities towards them:

Begone before the men-at-arms are bidden
To beat you from the door. (C.Pl., p. 142)

The play has gone bitterly beyond satire to become tragedy. Yeats must have felt the situation warranted no less in a world "changed from worse to worse."

The Player Queen, the next of Yeats's plays having to do with the rambling peasant poet, is an ironic reversal of The King's Threshold which began as comedy and ended as tragedy; The Player Queen began as tragedy and ended as comedy. Helen Vendler efficiently summarizes the plot of this enigmatic play as follows:

Briefly put, Septimus the poet is deserted by his wife Decima because he has been unfaithful to her. She takes a new husband, the Prime Minister, and, by her own arrogant confidence makes herself queen, banishing Septimus, his mistress Nona, and the troupe of players, whose play about Noah's ark never takes place. The timid former queen retires to a convent and Decima and her commoner-husband inaugurate the new regime.²³

George Brandon Saul sees The Player Queen as the most representative of Yeats's plays in that Yeats has embodied, and satirized, himself as Septimus.²⁴ There might well be autobiographical implications in the play, for one of the questions raised concerns the position of the poet in society after he becomes "obsolete,"²⁵ and we have seen Yeats's identity reflected to some extent in Aleel and Seanchan. The Player Queen is an ironic comment on The King's Threshold in which the power of the poet was at least respected by the King and in which the Youngest Pupil maintains that the influence of the poet will continue after his death:

For coming times will bless what he has blessed
And curse what he has cursed. (C.Pl., p. 143)

There is no such certitude in The Player Queen. The poet is no longer the central figure--that role has passed to Decima. And the play depicts in general a rather cynical deterioration of the poet as well as of society. Septimus, supposedly the "most famous poet in the world" (C.Pl., p. 391), is drunk most of the time; he has a bad wife; in his

²³ Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays, p. 125.

²⁴ See "Yeats Dramatic Accomplishment," W. B. Yeats, 1865-1965, ed. D. E. S. Maxwell and S. B. Bushrui (Ibadan, Nigeria, 1965), p. 147.

²⁵ Vendler, p. 125.

own words he is left to "lie down in the open street . . . drenched with cold water . . . to be run over, to be trampled upon, to be eaten by dogs . . ." (C.Pl., p. 390). Only the bad popular poets receive acclaim. The supreme irony lies in the fact that, in Ireland after the revolution which Yeats, poet and playwright, had helped to bring about, the poet has no place in the new society. The brittle cynicism of the play is a new note, as is Yeats's disparagement of the common element from which the new prime minister springs. Both the tone of The Player Queen and the deteriorating status of the poet look forward to The King of the Great Clock Tower and its fraternal twin, A Full Moon in March, the other two plays in which the rambling poet appears and which are, conceptionally, the same play.

The King of the Great Clock Tower chronologically precedes A Full Moon in March, although the order is reversed in The Collected Plays. The lyrics, in The King of the Great Clock Tower as in The Dreaming of the Bones, are the most germane parts of these plays relative to this analysis, for that is where the political implications lie. When Yeats re-wrote The Great Clock Tower, he removed the lyrics, tightened the theme, and gave the new version a new title. However, in the "Preface" to the first edition, he reveals that he wrote the prose dialogue of the play that he might force himself to write its lyrics,²⁶ insisting that this is where the significance of the play lies:

26 See The King of the Great Clock Tower (New York, 1935), p. v.

Plays like The Great Clock Tower always seem unfinished but that is no matter. Begin plays without knowing how to end them for the sake of the lyrics. I once wrote a play, and after I had filled it with lyrics, abolished the play.²⁷

In The King of the Great Clock Tower the lyrics are sung by the severed head of the poet through the mouths of the first and second Attendants. Yeats's first rambling peasant poet, Hanrahan the Red, served as model for the stroller who had the lower part of his face hidden by a red beard. Again, the play takes place during the time of revolutionary change as the hands on the face of the clock approach midnight. And again, the new dispensation will be a destructive force:

O, but I saw a solemn sight;
Said the rambling shambling travelling-man;
Castle Dargan's ruin all lit,
Lovely ladies dancing in it. (C.Pl., p. 640)

Both these lines and the "gap in the wall" (C.Pl., p. 641) look ahead to Purgatory, Yeats's most political play.²⁸ Yeats himself equated the ruined house in Purgatory to the destruction taking place all over Ireland at that time.²⁹ Donald Torchiana's explication of Purgatory brings out, through the political symbolism, Yeats's bitter disillusion with contemporary Ireland.

"The Alternative Song for the Severed Head," in The King

27 The King of the Great Clock Tower, p. vii.

28 See Donald Torchiana's explication in W. B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland, pp. 360-61; also Donald Pearce, "Yeats's Last Plays: an Interpretation," in English Literary History, XVIII, pp. 67-76.

29 Quoted in "Dramatists's answer to U.S. Priest's Query," The Irish Independent (August 13, 1938); see Torchiana, p. 357.

of the Great Clock Tower, has several lines that tie this lyric to its political bedfellows in The Collected Poems where it appears next to a group of political marching songs which in turn follows "Parnell's Funeral." Yeats included "Parnell's Funeral" in his "Commentary on 'The Great Clock Tower'" in the introduction which he wrote for the play when first appeared. He considered Parnell's death the last of "Four Bells, four deep tragic notes" in Irish history (see above, p. 3). He has worked this into the refrain of the "Alternative Song for the Severed Head":

And all alone comes riding there
 The King who could make his people stare,
 Because he had feathers instead of hair.
A low slow note and an iron bell.
 (C.P.I., p. 641-42)

In this context the "low slow note and the iron bell" (the italics above are Yeats's) are clearly a reference to Parnell's death. Parnell, 'the Uncrowned King' of Ireland,³⁰ the "King who could make his people stare," is the last of the tragic heroes to join the meet on the mountain side. Yeats has mythologized the "solitary and proud Parnell"³¹ whose "feathers instead of hair" reveal him as the inaugurator of a new dispensation, or era, in Irish history. Thus the severed head of the rambling peasant poet continues to sing its political songs in the true tradition of the file.

Donald R. Pearce sees Yeats's last plays--The Herne's

30 See Beckett, Chapter XX, pp. 389-404.

31 This is Yeats's description of Parnell in "The Trembling of the Veil," Autobiographies, p. 195.

Egg, Purgatory and The Death of Cuchulain--as a "savage indictment of modern Ireland"³² in which the poet's concern moves rapidly from anxiety to admission of defeat. This is an interpretation which applies equally well to the progression of concern expressed in the plays under discussion here. Seanchan's leprous moon in the revised ending of The King's Threshold has spread its contagion of revolutionary change not only throughout Ireland but over most of Europe as well:

O, look upon the moon that's standing there
 In the blue daylight--take note of the complexion
 Because it is the white of leprosy
 And the contagion that afflicts mankind
 Falls from the moon. (C.Pl., p. 141)

Although Yeats deleted most of the political implications, including the original lyrics, from A Full Moon in March during its metamorphosis, nevertheless the title retains the symbolism of revolutionary change. His 1935 collection of poetry, also called A Full Moon in March, opens with the group of political poems already mentioned (C.P., pp. 319-25)

This chapter involving the rambling peasant poet has been concerned mainly with bringing out the political implications in the concept of the poet as the traditional voice of protest in Irish public affairs. In the four related plays discussed here, the undercurrent of nationalist concern moves from negative protest in The Countess Cathleen, through the idealistic phase of the early King's

³² "Yeats's Last Plays: an Interpretation," p. 67.

Threshold, into irony in The Player Queen, then to savage indignation in the revised ending of The King's Threshold and The King of the Great Clock Tower. In this last stage, however, the poet was not repudiating his concern for Ireland. Though he lost his youthful idealism, he never lost his passionate interest in the political fate of his country. Whether we agree or disagree that politics are a proper subject for poetry, we are forced to acknowledge that Yeats himself found a powerful precedent in the ancient tradition of the file. His plays involving the rambling peasant poet bear this out.

CHAPTER V

JONATHAN SWIFT'S DARK GROVE: WORDS UPON THE WINDOW-PANE AND PURGATORY

In 1938 Yeats published On the Boiler, a strange pot-pourri of simmering ideas in which he said he intended to set down "whatever interests me at the moment, trying, however, to keep some kind of unity and only including poem or play that has something to do with my main theme."¹ The interests he set down embrace eugenics, arts, education and politics; the play he included is Purgatory. The theme of On the Boiler is the degeneration of modern Ireland, and a preliminary analysis of this pamphlet is almost a prerequisite for a meaningful reading of the play.

Yeats felt himself qualified to speak out against the political changes that had occurred in Ireland after the revolution:

I was six years in the Irish Senate; I am not ignorant of politics elsewhere, and on other grounds I have some right to speak. I say to those that shall rule here: if ever Ireland again seems molten wax, reverse the process of revoltuion. 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. It does not matter how you get them, but get them. . . . These men, whether six or six thousand, are the core of Ireland, are

1 "Preface," On the Boiler (Dublin, 1938), p. 8.

Ireland itself.²

This passage is one of several typical utterances in On the Boiler that have provided ammunition for the charge of proto-fascism hurled at Yeats by his severest critics,³ although if taken back into the context as a whole, it merely confirms his concern with what he considered a decline in the political life of the country in that the most able men were not ruling. The time had come for plain speaking. "For the first time," he wrote to Maud Gonne concerning On the Boiler, "I am saying what I believe about Irish and European politics."⁴ In his letters to Dorothy Wellesley and Ethel Mannin at this time he says much the same thing, calling the document his Fors Claveriga.⁵ He borrowed the name from Ruskin's Fors Claveriga (fortune bearing a club), a series of letters to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain. Yeats, like Ruskin, was asking his countrymen to listen. On the Boiler became, as O'Brien has rightly pointed out, his final political testament.⁶

It begins with an explanation of the title. Yeats remembers, from his childhood in Sligo, a mad old ship's

2 "Preliminaries," On the Boiler, p. 13.

3 See O'Brien, p. 224.

4 Letters, p. 910.

5 Ibid., p. 903, and 911.

6 "Passion and Politics," p. 271. It is difficult, in view of Yeats's own pronouncements about On the Boiler, to accept Ellmann's consensus that it is chiefly a "declaration that politics is irrelevant" (Yeats: the Man and the Masks, p. 282).

carpenter who used to climb on a rusty boiler to denounce the general wickedness. In the symbol of the boiler the politician Yeats found a soapbox from which to deliver his last bitter attack on his own age. He has little hope, however, of effecting the changes he advocates. His opening poem in On the Boiler introduces the pessimistic attitude:

And when they know what old books tell
And that no better can be had,
*Know why an old man should be mad.*⁷

The mad old man of the last line is a composite of the Sligo ranter, the Old Man in Purgatory, Swift--and Yeats himself.

In the following section, "Preliminaries," Yeats expresses dismay at the intellectual ignorance he saw around him, particularly as evinced in library committeemen who refused to allow Shaw's books in a public library, and in a fourteen-year-old girl, a product of the school system, who had never heard of Parnell or the Land Bill.⁸ Disenchanted with Irish education and Irish democracy, he registers disgust at a representative system that "has given Ireland to the incompetent."⁹ He notes that when the Senate of the Irish Free State was first formed, the senators had been appointed by President Cosgrave, but "as the nominated element began to die out . . . the Senate declined in ability

7 Introductory poem, untitled in On the Boiler, p. 9. Included in Collected Poems as "Why should not old Men be Mad," p. 388. The italics above are mine.

8 On the Boiler, p. 11.

9 Ibid., p. 11.

and prestige."¹⁰ Thus his main theme concerns the deterioration he feared was taking place all over modern Ireland.

Having completed the "Preliminaries," he takes his text for the next section from a treatise on eugenics. This part is central to his main topic in both On the Boiler and Purgatory:

Since about 1900 the better stocks have not been replacing their numbers, while the stupider and less healthy have been more than replacing theirs. Unless there is a change in the public mind every rank above the lowest must degenerate, and as inferior men push up into its gaps, degenerate more and more quickly. The results are already visible in the degeneration of literature, newspapers, amusements¹¹

He hammers his theme home with these blunt savage strokes, castigating not only the democracies but also "the Fascist countries [who] offer bounties for the seventh, eighth or ninth baby and accelerate degeneration."¹² (Yeats's own words here are a significant refutation of the charge of Fascism levelled against him; his politics, while blending many strange hues, reflect no particular party colours.) He sees war, rather than a passive acceptance of decay, as a partial answer for European civilization. The approbation of violence in On the Boiler helps explain the actions of the Old Man in Purgatory, who, realizing his son's inferiority, attempts to stop the deterioration from progressing

¹⁰ On the Boiler, p. 12.

¹¹ "Tomorrow's Revolution," On the Boiler, p. 18. Again, the italics are mine.

¹² Ibid., p. 19.

through succeeding generations. The sacrificial murder of the boy is a voluntary, if brutal, form of controlling hereditary "pollution".

In the section entitled "Private Thoughts" Swift's Ireland is held up as the norm, in contrast to the materialistic twentieth century. This ties in with the Old Man's hatred of the marriage of his aristocratic mother to the drunken commoner, his father. For Yeats, this represented a symbolic compromise between the two cultures, and therefore a falling-off from the ideal. But even in Swift's time, he notes, the inevitable end was in sight:

Instead of hierarchical society, where all men are different, came democracy; instead of a science which had re-discovered Anima Mundi, . . . came materialism: all that whiggish world Swift stared on till he became a raging man.¹³

Yeats modelled much of his political philosophy on the "bitter wisdom" of Swift whom he considered a "practical politician in everything he wrote,"¹⁴ and whom he came to regard as his phantom mentor.¹⁵ Many of the ideas in On the Boiler are foreshadowed in the "Introduction"¹⁶ to The Words Upon the Window-Pane, his savage accolade to Swift;

13 "Private Thoughts," On the Boiler, p. 25.

14 "Introduction," Words Upon the Window-Pane, Wheels and Butterflies (London, 1934), pp. 18-19.

15 See Torchiana, "Imitate him if you Dare," Yeats and Georgian Ireland, pp. 120-167.

16 Wheels and Butterflies (London, 1934), pp. 5-28.

consequently we would do well to look at this play before turning to Purgatory.

Yeats's admiration for the eighteenth century, "the one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion,"¹⁷ is verbalized in The Words Upon the Window-Pane by the play's Cambridge student John Corbet who is writing an essay on Swift for his doctorate and whose thesis is, of course, Yeats's own:

. . . that in Swift's day men of intellect reached the height of their power--the greatest position they ever attained in society and the State, that everything great in Ireland and in our character, in what remains of our architecture, comes from that day (C.Pl., p. 601)

The Fascist-like philosophy of Yeats's last years embodied in "the One, the Few and the Many," was influenced by Swift's Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens and Rome¹⁸ in which Swift, Yeats felt, successfully argued the case against democratic government. He saw the Roman ideal, where the voice of the aristocrat prevailed, as having come to the fore again in eighteenth-century Ireland. But it was short-lived; Swift himself predicted the decay of civilization. All this is given to us in detail in the "Introduction" to The Words Upon the Window-Pane and is embodied in the play in John Corbet's analysis of Swift's political philosophy: His ideal order was the Roman Senate, his ideal men

17 Wheels and Butterflies, p. 7.

18 Ibid., pp. 15-18.

Brutus and Cato. Such an order and such men had seemed possible once more, but the movement passed and he foresaw the ruin to come, Democracy, Rousseau and the French Revolution; that is why he hated the common run of men. (C.Pl., pp. 101-102)

Swift's disintegration in The Words Upon the Window-Pane symbolizes the historical decline,¹⁹ but the play is more powerful than its symbolism suggests. At any rate, it scarcely merits Helen Vendler's dismissal as merely a "case study for Yeats's convictions about the power of memory and imagination."²⁰ If the play is about anything, it is about Swift's fear of madness and the causes for that fear, which Yeats tells us is the theory of his play.²¹ The Words Upon the Window-Pane reaches beyond pessimism to a societal despair based on some "clairvoyant vision of Swift's own life, for Swift saw civilization pass from comparative happiness and youthful vigour to an old age of violence and self-contempt."²²

Yeats brought the authority of Swift into his play most brilliantly by having his spirit appear at a contemporary séance held in an eighteenth-century house where Stella had once cut into the window-pane some lines from a poem of hers:

'You taught how I might youth prolong

19 See Leonard E. Nathan's interpretation, The Tragic Drama of William Butler Yeats, p. 213.

20 Vendler, Yeats's Vision and the Later Plays, p. 194.

21 "Introduction" to Words Upon the Window-Pane, p. 27.

22 Ibid., p. 18. These are Yeats's words.

By knowing what is right and wrong;
 How from my heart to bring supplies
 Of lustre to my fading eyes.'
 (C.Pl., p. 601)

Swift has taught Stella what neither he nor Yeats could teach Ireland: how to prolong the positive values of the eighteenth century.²³ Stella herself does not appear in the play, although Swift's voice addresses her at one point. The significant dialogue during the séance takes place between Swift and a Vanessa who represents the common element in their departure from Swift's teachings. Taught to think once as Cato or Brutus, she now behaves "like some common slut with her ear against the keyhole" (C.Pl., p. 609).

As chief representative of the intellect of his era, Swift refuses to marry and mix his blood with Vanessa's-- which would constitute a corruption of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy--merely for the sake of propagation. Even if his diseased blood is mixed with a healthy but non-intellectual strain this would in itself represent a lowering. Swift, in despair, cries out to God to let him leave nothing to posterity but his intellect. In the highly dramatic ending, after the séance is over and the stage is bare of everyone but the medium, Swift's spirit returns to cry out in agony, "Perish the day on which I was born" (C.Pl., p. 617). Swift's despair is that of the prophet who has envisioned the grim future but is unable to save either himself or his people.

23 Torchiana, p. 135.

The Words Upon the Window-Pane can scarcely be discussed separately from its "Introduction" nor can Purgatory be read intelligibly apart from On the Boiler; the same dark philosophy runs through all four works. The political and intellectual degeneration of Ireland, the beginning of which is explored in The Words Upon the Window-Pane, is brought to a brutal and cynical conclusion in Purgatory. This latter work is one of the briefest of plays, yet its tight, concise dialogue manages to compress three centuries of historical evolution and revolution in Ireland, as well as containing Yeats's bitter comment on the changes. The historical implications in the play have been pointed out in detail by others,²⁴ but the best authority is still Yeats himself:

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 to-day. Sometimes it is the result of poverty, but more often because a new individualistic generation has lost interest in the ancient sanctities.

I know of old houses, old pictures, old furniture that have been sold without apparent regret. In some few cases a house has been destroyed by a mesalliance. I have founded my play on this exceptional case, partly because of my interest in certain problems of eugenics, partly because it enables me to depict more vividly than would otherwise be possible the tragedy of the house.²⁵

The tragedy of the house is the tragedy of Ireland. In the play the Old Man and his sixteen-year-old son have

²⁴ John Heath-Stubbs was the first to point out the symbolism; see The Darkling Plain (London, 1950), p. 205. See also Torchiana, pp. 359-60, and Pearce, p. 73.

²⁵ "Dramatist's Answer to U. S. Priest's Query," Irish Independent, August 13, 1938. This is an interview Yeats gave to a reporter from the Irish press.

returned to the ruined and gutted house where the Old Man, son of an aristocratic mother and a drunken, stable-groom father, was born. After the mother died in childbirth, the groom squandered the estate and burned down the house. The unquiet ghosts of the mother and her drunken husband appear in the window of the ruined house to re-enact their wedding night. In an attempt to end his mother's remorse and prevent the hereditary pollution from being passed on, the Old Man kills his son with the same jack-knife he had used to kill his father. But it is a futile attempt. The mother's ghost appears again in the lighted window; the Old Man has been twice a murderer and all for nothing.

This is the stark outline of the play, but we know from the interview quoted above that Yeats intends much more than the action alone would indicate. The three generations--mother, son and grandson--represent three eras in Irish history beginning with the eighteenth century. The mother portrays the aristocratic Anglo-Irish tradition and her marriage to a commoner initiates the debasement of the intellect foreseen by Swift in The Words Upon the Window-Pane. Her ghost is haunted, like Dervorgilla's, by her guilty part in Ireland's tragedy, and like Dervorgilla, her crime is so enormous that the dreaming-back brings no release, nor any hope of release, from the torment, especially since pleasure and remorse still struggle for supremacy in her memory. The unrestrained sexual passion of these women traitors, feared by Swift when it manifests itself in Vanessa, is a contributing factor to the debacle in

Purgatory:

This night she is no better than her man
 And does not mind that he is half drunk,
 She is mad about him. (C.Pl., pp. 685-86)

The Old Man, who is watching the scene of his own conception, is a mixture of both parents. He is now a foul-mouthed peddler of limited intellect who tries to remember what went on in the big house, but at times cannot. He has, however, had a smattering of classical education; because of his mother, a gamekeeper's wife taught him to read and a curate taught him latin. There were books "with eighteenth-century binding, books modern and ancient" for him to read, that gave him an awareness of the past. He still exhibits vestiges of the gentility inherited with his mother's blood, and he is old enough to remember when the bare tree (symbol of the ruined land) was green and growing:

I saw it fifty years ago
 Before the thunderbolt had riven it,
 Green leavesl ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter,
 Fat greasy life. (C. Pl., pp. 681-82)

Torchiana has demonstrated that, if the scenario was written in 1938, the destruction of the house by the drunken father, when the Old Man was sixteen, would have occurred at the time of the death of Parnell.²⁶ The thunderbolt, like the last of Yeats's four tragic bells, signified the end of an era in Irish history--the Anglo-Irish supremacy--and brought in the last and worst period. Likewise, calculating from the time the play was written in 1938, we find that the sixteen-year-old boy was born in 1922, the year

26 Yeats and Georgian Ireland, p. 360.

the Irish Free State was founded.²⁷ The Old Man explains to the Boy:

When I had come to sixteen years old
 My father burned down the house when drunk
Boy. But that is my age, sixteen years old,
 At the Puck Fair.

Old Man. And everything was burnt;
 Books, library, all were burnt. (C.Pl., p. 684)

The boy, because of his distance from the eighteenth century, is unable to appreciate anything the Old Man tells him. He typifies Yeats's view of Ireland after the revolution, a generation Yeats hated. In "Under Ben Bulben," which was written at the same time as Purgatory, Irish poets are exhorted to:

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.
 (G.P., p. 400)

The base-born Boy, end product of the grandfather he admires "who got the girl and the money," is a coarse, materialistic individual without any redeeming qualities--in short, a personification of twentieth-century democracy as the author of Purgatory saw it. The Boy's education, befitting a "bastard that a pedlar got upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch" (C.Pl., p. 684), reminds us of Yeats's expressed disgust with modern education in On the Boiler. The terrible irony of the lullaby the Old Man croons during the stabbing stresses the separation of both father and son

27 See Pearce, p. 74.

from their cultural roots:

'Hush-a-bye baby, thy father's a knight,
Thy mother a lady, lovely and bright.'
No, that is something I read in a book.
(C.Pl., p. 688)

The symbolism is most marked, however, in the tragedy of the ruined house. The Old Man insists on a symbolic interpretation right at the beginning, when the shadow of a cloud falls across it. It is the potent image for Ireland's lost greatness:

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.
Some that had gone on Government work
To London or to India came home to die,
Or came from London every spring
To look at the may-blossom in the park
But he killed the house; to kill a house
Where great men grew up, married, died,
I here declare a capital offence.
(C.Pl., p. 683)

In denouncing the drunken groom (the common element) who destroyed the house (Ireland), the Old Man speaks with the angry authority of Yeats himself. The tearing-down of Lady Gregory's house at Coole Park, where Yeats had spent so many pleasant summers, probably influenced the choice of symbol. Coole Park was, for him, the stuff of Ireland's greatness; he had celebrated the "glory that those walls begot" in "Coole Park, 1929" (C.P., p. 273). In the destruction of the house by fire, there is undoubtedly also a reference to the burning of the Big Houses in 1922-23.²⁸

Purgatory is no mournful elegy for the passing of an era;

²⁸ See Torchiana, p. 361.

it is a harsh and bitter accusation against those whom Yeats considered responsible for the ensuing degeneration.

Purgatory ends, like The Words Upon the Window-Pane, with a cry of utter and uncompromising despair: "Twice a murderer and all for nothing" (C.Pl., p. 689). There is none of the tragic joy that lifts the other late plays and poetry above mere cynicism. There is only the despair. Man-kind can do nothing to appease the misery of the living and the remorse of the dead. Yeats evidently felt more keenly about the fate of the "unlucky country" than about any of his other themes.

Purgatory has probably received more critical attention than Yeats's other plays, and Wilson's commentary is typical of the opinion of the majority of Yeats scholars:

He [Yeats] clearly thought of it as a ghost play, even if with political and social involvements; and in approaching it from the point of view of theology, I imagine I am documenting it as he would have wished.²⁹

Yet this is to ignore the strongest evidence we have that Yeats thought otherwise: Purgatory was written and published, not in conjunction with A Vision, but as an integral part of On the Boiler, Yeats's most vehement political statement; also, the views expressed are the same as those which form the basis of his interview with the reporter from the Irish Independent. These two documents express Yeats's views, not

²⁹ W. B. Yeats and Tradition, p. 137. See also Vendler, p. 197, Rajan, p. 166, also Alex Zwerdling, Yeats and the Heroic Ideal (New York, 1965), pp. 98-99. These must be balanced against the view of Torchiana and Pearce.

about theology, but about the disappearance of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy from the political scene. To follow the political channel carved by Yeats through the earlier dramas, is a fitting preparation for the reading of Purgatory that he intended--a reading inseparable from On the Boiler.

Two major root systems combined in Yeats, as brought out in this examination of the plays, to inform his political ideology; these two are Irish mythology, particularly the Cuchulain saga, and Anglo-Irish aristocracy, whose ruin is marked in Purgatory. We note, without surprise, that both these roots were nourished in the rich soil of the Young Ireland Party with which Yeats was associated in the nineties. Curtis describes the Young Irelanders as:

full of the Romantic liberal nationalism of the time; . . . they stood for the principles of Wolfe Tone and also honoured Grattan, they drew their inspiration from far back in Irish history and the Gaelic and Norman past, . . . it was a revival of the Gaelic, militant and aristocratic spirit.³⁰

"Gaelic, militant and aristocratic" describes the tone of the plays, and it also describes Yeats's political tendencies. Purgatory, the most harshly realistic of all the plays, was written near the end of his life when he had seen his expectations for the new Ireland bearing bitter fruit. He had hated the idea of English rule in Ireland; yet he had loved, like Swift, individual Englishmen and Englishwomen. Clearly he had wanted Ireland's separation from England; just as clearly, he had not wanted the common

30 A History of Ireland, pp. 266-67.

element to take over the political scene so completely.

This study has been devoted to an analysis of the political aspect of the plays without attempting an examination of the other themes. By viewing the plays against the political activity of Yeats's life and times, we add an extra dimension to the Collected Plays as a whole, in which his concern for the fate of his unhappy country appears to constitute the controlling theme. If the interpretations offered here seem allegorical at times, it is because I believe Yeats so intended certain plays to be seen, yet never do the politics overbalance the artistic and imaginative handling of the material.

Any references, in these pages, to the poetry have been incidental, even though many of Yeats's poems, particularly the last ones, are filled with political figures. One poem, "Parnell's Funeral," forms an appropriate conclusion not only to The Words Upon the Window-Pane and Purgatory, but also to this investigation as a whole, for it transforms into art the political thought of a lifetime:

The rest I pass, one sentence I unsay.
Had deValéra eaten Parnell's heart
No loose-lipped demagogue had won the day,
No civil rancour torn the land apart.

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 his blood.

(C.P., p. 320)

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