

W.B. YEATS AND POLITICS:

SOME APPROACHES

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INTRODUCTION

Until recently, the politics of William Butler Yeats have received little more than cursory attention. The neglect is probably due to the assumed opposition of literary or aesthetic and political worlds, the artist having little or no claim to serious consideration in a sphere of activity not professedly his own. His political statements are more often than not dismissed as 'the amusing ramblings of eccentric genius'. A further implication is that art is related to a specialised area of human experience and that political activity or theory is outside its pale of relevance. The unrealistic character of this attitude is not more evident today than it ever was. It presents, however, a serious obstacle to the understanding of a poet like Yeats whose political beliefs and objectives were inextricably linked with his literary ideals.

One more than one occasion Yeats declared the incompatibility of politics and literature. The poet had no gift to set the statesman right and propaganda was an outrageous travesty of literary skill. Yet there are other occasions when Yeats suggests the role of the artist in the achievement of a higher political objective. In his Journal under the heading 'Calvados' is the entry:

'All literature created out of a conscious political aim in the long run creates weakness by creating a habit of unthinking obedience. Literature created for its own sake, for some spiritual need, can be used for politics. Dante is said to have unified Italy...'¹

¹ Quoted in Joseph Hone, W.B. Yeats 1865-1939 (London, 1962), pp.237-38.

In his letter to AE (George Russell) of March 25, 1913, he writes:

'We writers are not politicians, the present is not in our charge but some of the future is. Our speech will not make it very happy, but it will be even less happy than it might be perhaps if we are silent on vital points.'²

Again he wrote:

'Communist, Fascist, Nationalist, clerical, Anti-clerical, are all responsible according to the number of their victims. I have not been silent; I have used the only vehicle I possess- verse.'³

A passage in On the Boiler on the role of art in Ireland runs:

'These tours (Abbey players etc., and Irish songs and novels), when they come from a deeper life than their nineteenth century predecessors, are taking the place of political speakers, political organisations, in holding together the twenty scattered millions conscious of their Irish blood...'⁴

A passage from If I were Four-and-Twenty gives further evidence of the unity of Yeats's political and literary interests:

'I had three interests: interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality. None of these seemed to have anything to do with the other, but gradually my love of literature and my belief in nationality came together...'⁵

These comments are a far cry from the fin de siècle detachment of the romantic artist. There is a recognition, however indirect, of the poet's

² "Letters - W.B. Yeats to AE," The Dublin Magazine (July-Sept., 1939).

³ The Letters of W.B. Yeats, ed. Allan Wade (London, 1954), p.579.

⁴ On the Boiler (Dublin, 1939), p.13.

⁵ Explorations (London, 1962), p.263.

political responsibility and the recognition of a profound link between the literary and political aims of a nation.

When we approach the subject of Yeats and politics, literary statements, private jottings and communications such as those quoted above, are not all that need be considered. The actual involvement of the poet in Irish politics demands attention. Mr. Conor Cruise O'Brien's contribution in the centenary tribute In Excited Reverie⁶, has undoubtedly given the subject a focus, biased though this may be. Indeed it was after reading the essay that I became seriously interested in examining certain aspects of Yeats's politics which seem to have received scant justice at the hands of many critics.⁷ Some critics, as O'Brien suggests, have been tempted to regard Yeats's politics as somewhat 'vague and generalised' and accounts available are rightly judged as 'lacking the weight and texture of politics'. The major biographies of Joseph Hone, Richard Ellman⁸ and A. Norman Jeffares⁹, though they do give important accounts of Yeats's political affiliations and activities, cannot in the interest of structural unity escape controlled documentation of facts and ideas. This method leaves much to be explored and reassessed.

⁶ A.N. Jeffares and K.G.W. Cross, eds. (London, 1965).

⁷ vide Joseph Hone "Yeats as a Political Philosopher", London Mercury (April, 1939); Grattan Freyer, "The Politics of W.B. Yeats", Politics and Letters (Summer, 1947); Donald Torchiana, "W.B. Yeats, Jonathan Swift and Liberty", Modern Philology (August, 1963); Christopher Harvie, "Yeats and Irish Politics", Feedback, Vol.I, No. I (May, 1966). For main events of Yeats's public life see Appendix A, p.394.

⁸ Yeats: The Man and the Masks (London, 1948).

⁹ W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet (London, 1949).

When O'Brien speaks of 'real politics' as opposed to 'political philosophy', 'actual involvement' as against 'political theory', we are at once confronted with two distinct approaches to Yeats's politics, the results of which we are told are significantly different. The approach that has all along been adopted is that stressing Yeats's political thought. Most articles dealing with the subject share this approach. The ideological background is briefly dealt with and the inevitable schematised treatment of Yeats's political phases does not really contribute to a deeper understanding of the poet's work. O'Brien offers an alternative if not a corrective to this. But I feel that both approaches, when carried to extremes, can result in critical lapses of an indefensible nature. On the one hand, the theoretical approach is always in danger of sentimentalising the poet and his thought. On the other hand, the approach which concentrates on the treatment of Yeats in the context of 'actual political choices', to the exclusion of most of the poet's creative work, can degenerate into the worst form of literary gossip motivating research of an unprofitable kind. We are not, for instance, concerned with whether Yeats attended Parnell's funeral or not, or whether he was more likely to be one of the august gathering present at that of Kevin O'Higgins;¹⁰ nor can we admit conjecture into assessments and judge Yeats on what he might have said to a young poet trembling on the verge of national politics.¹¹ Admittedly a great deal of biographical reconstruction rests on arbitrary logic and surmise, the one-

¹⁰ vide In Excited Reverie, pp. 248-49.

¹¹ Ibid, p.214.

to-one correspondence between written evidence and actual occurrence for the most part taken for granted. Nevertheless, capricious personal impressions are redundant to critical evaluation and can well be excluded from consideration.

Faced with the two approaches, the one stressing the artist in Yeats, the other, the politician, I became aware that the main problem confronting both was related to the enigma of the Yeatsian self. As Ellman rightly observes: 'The more that is written, the more elusive he [Yeats] has become, as critics, friends and biographers build up a variety of unconnected pictures.'¹² There are widely divergent representations of the 'real' Yeats. Apart from the conflicting testimonies of Yeats's contemporaries, there is the fact of Yeats's extreme self-consciousness and his sense of a divided self that intensifies the quandary. He writes:

'... my character is so little myself that all my life it has thwarted me. It had affected my poems, my true self, no more than the character of a dancer affects the movement of the dance'.¹³

In 1909 he wrote:

'I think that all happiness depends on the energy to assume the mask of some other self; that all joyous or creative life is a re-birth as something not oneself, something which has no memory and is created in a moment and perpetually renewed.'¹⁴

At once the antitheses of character and personality, self and anti-self,

¹² Yeats: The Man and the Masks, p.1.

¹³ Explorations, p.308.

¹⁴ Autobiographies (London, 1966), p.503.

mask and face, action and contemplation, Hic and Ille, Robartes and Aherne, become apparent and the task of constructing bridges or divining transcending syntheses is made insuperably difficult if not impossible. Inevitably it is the weight of one facet as against another that colours critical or biographical accounts of Yeats. There cannot in fact be any arbitrary decision on whether he was as O'Brien tries to show, a 'cunning, passionate man', a true politician, combining in himself the qualities of Jesuit and revolutionary, working towards a cultural renaissance via an artistic dictatorship in Ireland; or whether there was in him the 'unshaven, drunken bartender' of his portrait by Augustus John capturing 'Anglo-Irish solitude',¹⁵ the solitude that sought its palliative in the uncompromising domain of art or the esoteric realm of the supernatural. There is ample evidence to support the contrary images.

It seems to me that without wishing to reconcile such images, it might be useful to work towards some kind of bridge between Yeats's life, his actual involvement in the social, political and literary environment of his time, and his art. An ideal assessment could arise if his living situation were imaginatively re-constructed in all its complex detail, with a description of the range of choices, political and otherwise, open to him, the choices he actually made, the tension between the freedom to choose and the inevitability of the choice, the parallel or contrast with his beliefs, the resultant friction or harmony and the ultimate transformation in art. Such an assessment could reveal the crucial connections between art and

¹⁵ Explorations, p.308.

life, between 'the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast' and the total re-birth in idea of the end product in art 'something intended, complete'.¹⁶ The method is perhaps too ideal and ambitious to be always possible. Nevertheless, I feel it could be the guiding principle of research oriented to any one aspect of the poet's life and work. It would certainly help towards understanding the nature of Yeats's politics and its relevance to his art.

Further, in order to achieve a balanced understanding of Yeats in politics and Yeats in his art, one would have to clear one's mind of preconceptions, political prejudices and related moral categories. Many critical assessments appear to have suffered from these. The most obvious example that comes to mind is the treatment of Yeats's Fascism, a subject which I find very interesting. Conor Cruise O'Brien, in the essay referred to earlier, shows that Yeats was 'in his maturity and old age generally pro-Fascist in tendency, and Fascist in practice on the single occasion when opportunity arose'. The argument as presented in the essay is somewhat tendentious. The impression left is that too much expertise has been employed to prove the rightist tendency of the poet. That the poet does in fact write for an intellectual élite and is implicitly rightist, is a fact that has not been disproved or seriously debated. Yeats may very well have been more explicit on the issue than others of his generation as Donald Davie so pertinently suggested in the course of a lecture.¹⁷ Furthermore,

¹⁶ Essays and Introductions (London, 1961), p.509.

¹⁷ Lecture delivered at the Eighth Yeats International Summer School, Sligo 1967.

the exercise of value-judgements hinging on a post-war bias is well nigh fatal to an objective analysis of Yeats's politics. It is obviously because Fascism and its execution is the political stigma that lies heavy on the European conscience that critics and biographers in general have contrived theories to expiate Yeats's association with it. Thus Jeffares observes:

'The question of Yeats's fascism has been raised by several critics; but the essentially Irish trait of using a theory for a plaything must not be forgotten, especially in Yeats's case'.¹⁸

Later he comments on Yeats's ironic attitude to the Blueshirts as revealing 'the true Yeats, detached and merely playing with his thoughts except for intervals when he wanted complete directness and accuracy.'¹⁹ It is also easy to sidetrack the issue by stating with W.H. Auden that Yeats was just being 'silly' like the rest of his generation in believing that Fascism did stand a chance of success in the political scene. So also Donald Torchiana explicitly states that 'Yeats was in truth no fascist, though fascist thought interested him'.²⁰ Conforming to the generally acceptable thesis of Yeats being drawn not really to Fascism but to some idealized 'aristocracy of eighteenth century stamp', Torchiana continues: 'He was an aristocrat who looked to an eighteenth century aristocratic Ireland, short-sighted as it might have been, that had a code of honour and a regard for intellect.'

¹⁸ W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet, p.278.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.279.

²⁰ Modern Philology, (August, 1963), p.35.

In Ellman's biographical study the matter is dealt with briefly. 'Fortunately', Ellman states, 'he [Yeats] did not go so far as to accept Fascism explicitly, but he came dangerously close...As a result of his perilous flirtation with authoritarianism, Yeats's political speeches of this period²¹ are not pleasant reading.' After quoting Yeats's speech of August 2, 1924 in which Mussolini is referred to as 'a great popular leader' and which is cautiously anti-democratic in sentiment, Ellman continues: 'But Yeats's oratory was not a complete expression of his personality and philosophy'.²²

A remarkable instance of how prejudices and moral categories interfere with critical justice can be observed in George Orwell's thesis on Yeats's style.²³ He posits that there must be some connection between Yeats's 'wayward, even tortured style of writing and his rather sinister²⁴ vision of life'. The words 'wayward' and 'tortured' are applied to Yeats's 'quaintness', affectations and 'Archaisms'. They suggest a complicated and obscure mode of writing which parallels the 'sinister vision of life'. The latter translated into political terms is the redoubtable fascist tendency. O'Brien rightly points out the error of this judgement since 'quaintness' in Yeats's style was at its height in the nineties, when 'Yeats's vision of life was, from either an Orwellian or a Marxist point of view, at its least sinister: when he was identified with the popular cause

21 1922-27.

22 Yeats: the Man and the Masks, pp.248-49.

23 Critical Essays (London, 1946), pp.114-18.

24 Italics mine.

in his own country and when in England, he sat at the feet of William Morris and looked on Socialism with a friendly eye.' Quite indirectly the prejudice is perpetuated in the suggestion that it was after the turning point of 1903 that 'Yeats's vision of life began to turn "sinister"-aristocratic and proto-Fascist- that he began to purge his style of quaintness, and his greatest poetry was written near the end of his life when his ideas were at their most sinister.' O'Brien continues: 'A Marxist critique which starts from the assumption that bad politics make for bad style will continue "not to succeed". The opposite assumption, though not entirely true, would be nearer the truth.'²⁵ Orwell's confused assessment is therefore traceable to the partial perspective. Later in his essay, however, O'Brien draws attention to the wonder of creative transformation, of the 'patter of Mussolini prose' and the 'political ugly duckling' all changed, changed utterly into the glorious Swan of a poem.²⁶ In other words bad politics can make good art. The application of moral categories to the range of ideas a poet handles or to the ambit of intellectual experience which furnishes his metaphors is obviously unnecessary. Thus the need to apologise or make allowances for Yeats's politics, to argue that perhaps the Yeats who was pro-Fascist was not the 'true' Yeats or that his brand of fascism was so unique as not to be Fascism at all, is no less misleading than the attempt to amass a heap of incriminatory evidence to prove a contrary case. In both cases the relation between the poet's politics and his

²⁵ In Excited Reverie, p.224.

²⁶ Ibid, p.274.

creative work is liable to be misrepresented.

Thus with a view to work towards a bridge between Yeats's politics and his art through a conscious rejection of preconceptions and political and moral prejudices, I proceeded to look for a suitable pattern of analysis. I was satisfied that a treatment of living personalities, in some way or other associated with Yeats's politics and assimilated as images in his art, could provide the subject with a focus. In selecting the personalities for this study, my choice fell on J.B. Yeats, John O'Leary, William Morris, Maud Gonne MacBride, Charles Stewart Parnell and Kevin O'Higgins, who were all part of the social and political context in which Yeats lived. They were also, in some way or other, connected with the development of Yeats's art and political thought. Moreover, I felt that a study of Yeats's association with them in actual fact or, as in the case of Parnell, through reconstructed images, would simultaneously entail a treatment of most of Yeats's active public life. This I imagined would avoid the error of treating either Yeats's politics or art in the abstract. I hoped it might also give me some insight into the complex interaction between Yeats's creative imagination and the political realities of his time. I cannot claim to have achieved what I had in mind when I started this work on Yeats, but I hope I have succeeded in throwing some light on significant aspects of the poet's life and work.

Chapter One

THE BEGINNINGS -
YEATS AND HIS FATHER

The influence of J.B. Yeats¹ on his son's nationalism and political disposition cannot be overlooked. A study of this influence is the appropriate starting point for any discussion on the poet and politics. In the following sections, I shall try to show how the nationalist attitudes and political choices available to the young poet were controlled by two interacting factors, namely, the Anglo-Irish tradition of the Yeatses in which J.B.Y. brought up his children, and the artistic system of values natural to his profession.

Anglo-Irish Nationalism, because of its part-English, part-Irish origins, was not popular in Ireland during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Along with a system of values which declared the unconditional freedom of the artistic conscience, it promoted an environment of thought which was unique and relatively isolated in the political and social life of the time. As we shall see, Yeats's approach to politics was moulded, at a very early stage, by this environment of thought. It was to prove favourable to the aristocratic theories of his later years.

I should also like to indicate how Yeats's nationalist ambitions were given some direction through the political experience of his father's friend Isaac Butt. In accepting the nationalist school of John O'Leary, Yeats was virtually following the only course open to him in the Ireland of the eighteen-eighties and nineties.

For the purpose of clarity, the present discussion may be divided into two main sections: the first, dealing with J.B.Y.'s Anglo-Irish background,

¹ For the sake of convenience I shall be referring to J.B. Yeats as J.B.Y. throughout the chapter.

his inherited dispositions, the reflection in his political attitudes and beliefs of aesthetic values and the way these influenced his son, and the second, dealing with the actual political choices available to Yeats at the start of his career, in view of Isaac Butt's political career and J.B.Y.'s understanding of the same.

I

J.B.Y. belonged to a distinguished Anglo-Irish stock distinct from the Irish Catholics on the one hand as from the Ulster Presbyterians of Scots origin on the other. His grandfather John Yeats, the son of Benjamin and Mary Butler Yeats, after completing his education in Trinity College Dublin, took holy orders in the Church of Ireland and became Rector of Drumcliffe, Co. Sligo. At that time, County Sligo was monopolised by Protestant landlords who gave the place an isolated character. As Lennox Robinson describes it:

'The English soldiers who settled in it were gradually to make it unique, were to make it curiously contradictory even in this country of sharp contrasts. They were destined to become a kind of island, bounded on the south by the banished Irish, on the north by Ulster and on the east by the Irish Roscommon. On the west was the wild Atlantic, and what could the little colony do save dig itself in, intermarry and consolidate its position? It was its fate to impinge, little perhaps as it knew it at first, on a country very rich in Gaelic folklore and history and tradition. There seems to be hardly a barony in County Sligo that is not linked with fairy legend or religion or ancient battle...'²

² Quoted from J. Hone, W.B. Yeats 1865-1939, London, 1965, pp.3-4.

When J.B.Y. urged his son to write a story based partly in Sligo and partly in London, John Sherman was written. In this, his only novel, Yeats tried to do for Sligo what William Allingham had done for Ballyshannon. He wrote of it to Katherine Tynan:

'It [John Sherman] is West rather than National. Sherman belonged like Allingham to the small gentry who, in the West, at any rate, love their native places without perhaps loving Ireland. They do not travel and are shut off from England by the whole breadth of Ireland with the result that they are forced to make their native town their world. I remember when we were children how intense our devotion was to all things in Sligo and I still see in my mother the old feeling.'³

These comments adequately illustrate the feelings of separateness and isolation which were part of the tradition Yeats inherited. To a large extent, they were the roots of his national identity.

J.B.Y.'s grandfather was a kindly man 'as much beloved by the poor Roman Catholics as by the sprinkling of prosperous Orange farmers and ascendancy landlords who were under his spiritual care'.⁴ The poet recalls in Autobiographies the testimony of a Sligo priest concerning his great grandfather, when 'the agent of the great landowner of his parish brought him from cottage to cottage to bid the women send their children to the Protestant school. All promised till they came to one who cried, 'Child of mine will never darken your door'. 'Thank you, my woman', he said, 'you are the first honest woman I have met today.'⁵ It is evident that religion

³ K. Tynan, The Middle Years, London 1916, p.67.

⁴ J.B. Yeats - Letters to his son W.B. Yeats and others, ed. Joseph Hone, (London, 1944), p.24.

⁵ London, 1966, p.22.

did not make him rigid and intolerant. He always took a delight in human nature.

His eldest son William Butler Yeats, father of J.B.Y. was also educated in Trinity College and was co-editor, with Isaac Butt, of the Dublin University Magazine. He later became the Rector of Tullylish, Co. Down and inherited the estate of Kildare.

J.B.Y., born at Tullylish in 1839, was brought up in the Ulster parish. His father was deeply committed to evangelical theology. Among poets he admired Shelley and read 'Shelley's antidote, Charles Lamb'. He was friend and counsellor to his son and cultivated in him a distrust of compromise and prejudice which was later to prove the foundation of the latter's artistic creed. As J.B.Y. recalls in Early Memories: 'His charm to me was his veracious intellect. He would lie neither to please the sentimentalists nor the moralists. What talent I have for honest thinking I learned from him.'⁶ The Rector regarded the Catholic Church as an enemy but never disliked it as he did the Presbyterians whose dour rigidity made their understanding of life appear inflexible and ungenerous.

It may be inferred that the home environment with its traditions of courtly manners, honest thinking and evangelical geniality of spirit left its mark on J.B.Y., giving him a sense of individuality and a belief in 'personality' which was to be such an important influence on his son. A habit of mind was formed which regarded abstract precept or logic bound creed as inimical to the development of human potential, and J.B.Y.'s

⁶ Dundrum, 1923, pp.38-39.

attitude towards most questions of the day was governed by it. It led to his rejection of organised religion and his preference, during his University years, for J.S. Mill as against Thomas Carlyle. Opinions, he claimed, were the artist's enemy. 'Ideals', he believed 'made the blood thin and took the human nature out of people.'⁷ He admired York Powell, Regius Professor of History at Oxford, because he perceived in the man the supremacy of imaginative reasoning and a deficiency of logic 'that baser form of reasoning which is the bane of the super-educated or imperfectly educated person.'⁸ He saw connections between personalities and their political allegiances and in a letter to Oliver Elton he observes:

'Powell like life and the game of life so much that he regarded any one with suspicion who wanted to reform it. Those were a poor sort of people and like vegetarians or water drinkers sitting down to a feast. I believe it was this love of human nature that made him a Tory. The tory is more appreciative of life as it is in all its plenitude. Your Radical looks at life a little sourly.'⁹

Later he wrote to his son, 'As to my philosophy I gathered it in from all sources chiefly in a way from York Powell, but never would have found it had I not been an Irishman, the son of an Irish Evangelical father...'¹⁰

⁷ Autobiographies, p.58.

⁸ J.B.Y. - Letters - to Oliver Elton, p.87.

⁹ Ibid, p.88.

¹⁰ Ibid, - to W.B. Yeats, p.126.

This inherited love of human nature and consequent inconsistency in opinions along with an unconditional faith in artistic integrity, gave J.B.Y. the status of a free agent in his private weltanschauung. He could criticise alike the English, American and Irish, Protestant and Roman Catholic. Sensitive to national differences, he discussed them in most of his letters to his son in the light of poetic and non-poetic characteristics. Thus the 'English admiration for a strong will etc., is really part of the gospel of materialism and money-making and Empire building,' which stifles a sense of humanity indispensable to the poet. Again he wrote: 'Give an Irish peasant the sweet accomplishment of verse, and he is a poet fully endowed; give it to an educated American, and he still remains a man of prose. He has not the poet's leaning which the peasant has.'¹¹ On another occasion he wrote: 'Protestantism with its enforcement of will power by the powers of superstition produces poetry which is mainly oratorical and didactic or hysterically rebellious. Catholicism produces poets in abundance, but without intellectual strength, they have no desire to think or write.'¹²

Political camps meant nothing to J.B.Y. apart from the personalities who belonged to them; these he would assess through an artist's eye, paint and interpret as he willed. Commenting on a review of the Parnell love letters in one of the English papers, he wrote:

'The fact that Parnell was a personality (though of quite a limited sort) is enough to prove that he

¹¹ J.B.Y. - Letters - to W.B. Yeats, pp.134-135.

¹² Ibid, to W.B. Yeats, p.125.

could not be modern English. Their characteristic product is the highly educated and highly efficient mediocrity, such as were Gladstone and Peel.'¹³

That he was not politically-minded is evidenced by his own admission in a letter to his son, 'You are quite right', he wrote, 'in thinking I am not a politician, nor do I attach much importance to politics at any time.'¹⁴

It is not surprising then that politically J.B.Y. appeared a heretic in the society of Trinity College notabilities and members of the Irish bar in which he moved, or that testimonies concerning his political sympathies contradict one another. Thus in the Preface to J.B. Yeats-Letters to his son W.B. Yeats, Oliver Elton states: 'Yeats [J.B.Y.], anti-English in all his traditions and convictions was not only a Home Ruler, but strong for Parnell as against the dissidents, and against Gladstone.'¹⁵ In the following memoir Joseph Hone contradicts this in his statement: 'He [J.B.Y.] was a Gladstonian if not a Parnellite- he could never quite forgive Parnell for having deposed Isaac Butt from the Home Rule leadership.'¹⁶

It is obvious that J.B.Y's political sympathies were variable. During the Boer War, he became as nationalist as his son and exulted in British reverses, shared the Irish nationalist's sympathy with France, felt miserable in London and earnestly sought the company of pro-Boers. But in

¹³ J.B.Y.- Letters - to W.B. Yeats, p.185.

¹⁴ Ibid, to W.B. Yeats, p.173.

¹⁵ p.6.

¹⁶ pp.31-32.

1915, he wrote of the possible future when Ireland could assist England:

'Ireland must help England- their [Irish] grievances are against the Irish Protestants especially the landlords and against the English middle-class, and those beastly non-conformist ministers. After the War will come a great social movement in which the Irish must help their English brothers- who certainly won't be the middle-class their old enemies. The English workman is against the Germans, therefore the Irish nationalists should be against the Germans.'¹⁷

In the above letter, he shows some weakness for the Socialist movement. But again, as his other letters indicate, he did not really find Socialist standards compatible with those of his profession.

It is interesting to observe how far J.B.Y.'s attitudes, values and inherited disposition influenced his son's approach to politics. In one of his letters to his father, Yeats acknowledged:

'...how fully my philosophy of life has been inherited from you in all but its details and applications.'¹⁸

When we analyse Yeats's political preferences and opinions on public men and events, we can recognise the validity of his acknowledgement.

Yeats certainly inherited his father's belief in 'personality' and sense of individuality. Like J.B.Y., Yeats was indifferent to particular political parties. He was primarily concerned with the personalities of their leaders. Self-expression allied to self-conquest gave to men of action the moral freedom which corresponded to style in literature. This freedom

¹⁷ Ibid, to Susan Mitchell, p.211.

¹⁸ A. Wade, The Letters of W.B. Yeats, (London, 1954), pp.548-49.

was what both father and son valued. It meant a release from the fetters of logic, opinions, creeds and abstractions. As observed, J.B.Y. admired York Powell for this quality. His son admired John O'Leary- for 'he alone had personality, a point of view not made for the crowd's sake, but for self-expression...'.¹⁹ Yeats's love and admiration for Maud Gonne was governed by the same criteria. Her beauty suggested 'joy and freedom'. Likewise his understanding and respect for Parnell was based on a knowledge of the leader's impressive personality, his capacity for self-conquest and self-possession; his adulation of Kevin O'Higgins was due to the latter's personal integrity and fearlessness which suggested freedom. Other instances of Yeats's response to personality before opinions, may be observed in his reaction to Eamon De Valera²⁰ or to Michael Davitt.²¹ Belief in personality influenced his final solution for the government of Ireland. In his last years he summarily dismissed 'Republics, Kingdoms, Soviets, Corporate States, Parliaments 'as trash, and was content to leave Ireland's future in the hands of men who inherited the greatness of her historic personalities.

An important aspect of Yeats's response to personality was the influence of the painter's eye in his assessment of people. In Autobiographies, he wrote:

¹⁹ Autobiographies, p.209.

²⁰ Wade, Letters, p.806.

²¹ Autobiographies, pp.356-359.

'It is natural conviction for a painter's son to believe that there may be a landscape that is symbolical of some spiritual condition...'

In a similar way perhaps, Yeats's understanding, or some might say misunderstanding, of individuals was guided by the impact of their external appearance. The clarity of profile or visible beauty of form suggested to him moral qualities and spiritual conditions which were, in fact, projections of an aesthetic system of belief, in no small measure inherited from his father. Thus he values 'Beautiful lofty things: O'Leary's noble head' or 'Maud Gonne at Howth station waiting a train, / Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head'²², and in his unpublished Autobiography he wrote: 'Perhaps even in politics it would be end enough to have lived and thought passionately and have like O'Leary a head like a Roman coin...'²³

Like his father, Yeats abhorred the supremacy of logic and abstract reasoning in political life. An inherited hatred of abstractions in fact determined a great deal of his political thinking. Ireland seems to be ruined through abstractions. His work for the Irish literary renaissance was oriented to re-assert the supremacy of imaginative reasoning in Irish nationalism, to give, in other words, the dry, lean political ideals of nationalist fanatics the living dimensions of imaginative truth. When Maud Gonne rejected his proposal of marriage, he saw her, as he did Ireland, as the victim of abstractions which denied her the felicities of a normal

²² Collected Poems, p.348.

²³ Quoted in A.N. Jeffares, W.B. Yeats, Man and Poet, London, 1949, p.60.

life. So he writes in 'A Prayer for my Daughter':

'An intellectual hatred is the worst,
So let her think opinions are accursed.'²⁴

His father had written in Early Memories, 'poets always know too much to give entertainment to any system of opinion'²⁵ and his son never forgot the poet's prerogative.

In 'Easter 1916', Yeats sees the tragedy of the rebellion in terms of destructive abstractions which negate the organic flow of existence:

'Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.'²⁶

Like his father he perceived how ideals could make the blood thin.

An appreciation of life in all its bewildering variety created in J.B.Y. an inherent distrust of those who desired to reform it. Yeats's distrust of political reformers arose from a similar disposition. It guided his understanding of Daniel O'Connell, the nineteenth century Liberator of Ireland. Of O'Connell, he had remarked disparagingly: 'He won certain necessary laws for Ireland. He gave her a few laws, but he did not give her patriots.'²⁷ Of his own role as poet in Ireland, Yeats could claim

²⁴ Collected Poems, London, 1965, p.213.

²⁵ p.23.

²⁶ Collected Poems, p.204.

²⁷ Quoted in D.T. Torehiana, W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland, (London, 1966), p.27.

like Martin Hearn in his play 'The Unicorn from the Stars': 'My business is not reformation but revelation.'²⁸

As indicated earlier, J.B.Y. relied on creative values and believed in artistic integrity above all things; this was responsible for the changeability of his opinions about public men and events. It seems just to appreciate that Yeats's variability in the same context is, in part, due to the same reasons. The contradictions in his political sympathies and estimates were likely to infuriate his contemporaries and today confuse the critic of his politics. J.B.Y.'s influence on his son cannot be missed. He had written: 'A poet should feel quite free to say in the morning that he believes in marriage and in the evening that he no longer believes in it; in the morning that he believes in God and in the evening that he does not believe in God, the important thing being not that he keep mental consistency but that he preserve the integrity of his soul...'²⁹ These principles functioning in the political context would lead to behaviour that could justify James Joyce's observation of Yeats's 'treacherous instinct of adaptability.'³⁰

Faith in artistic integrity left Yeats politically isolated in 1903. He had won nationalist support through his propagandist play Cathleen ni Houlihan but soon after he offended the Nationalists and Gaelic Leaguers

²⁸ Collected Plays, London, 1963, p.378.

²⁹ Excerpts from Further Letters of J.B. Yeats, ed. Lennox Robinson, (Dundrum, 1920), p.22.

³⁰ Hone, p.163.

by supporting J.M. Synge's The Shadow of the Glen. In the interests of artistic integrity he risked a protracted struggle with the Irish public over Synge's Playboy of the Western World. Such aspects of his career throw light on the nature of his political choices. These will be treated in greater detail in the following chapters. Suffice it to point out at this stage that Yeats owed to his father his lifelong tendency to place Art and its values above Nationalist politics.

Apart from a similarity in the attitudes, values and disposition of J.B.Y. and his son, one may note in their speculations on art and societal organisation a similar development from a democratic or socialist to a more aristocratic viewpoint. This was partly due to the common experience of alienation among artists in modern democratic societies, and partly due to the peculiar circumstances of the Anglo-Irish predicament in Catholic Gaelic Ireland.

J.B.Y.'s views on societal organisation are based on a consideration of the artist's relation to society. His views on democracy bear examination in this context. In a letter to his son, he comments on the nature of democratic art:

'Democratic art is that sort which unites a whole audience- Is not an oratoric democratic? and the great religious services and cathedrals and military pomp and oratory when on a large scale? I am sure that in Ancient Greece drama was democratic. You will say my recent experiences make me love a crowd. Well a coterie of discontented artists may be something like a tea-party of old maids discussing marriage and large families- perhaps it is the narrow way that leadeth to destruction. In these thoughts I think Lady Gregory ought to agree with me- she has a democratic fibre, as she ought to have

for is she not a born leader?'³¹

Later in writing of the antithesis of will and human nature he observes:

'Had Shakespeare possessed a strong will or an admiration for it he would have gone over like Browning and Wordsworth to the side of the authorities and the preceptors instead of remaining as he did among aristocratic 'publicans and sinners'...A school master might know his school boys very well, yet he could not know them or write about them as it would be done by one of themselves...My complaint is that all literature has gone over to the side of the schoolmaster and that it used to be carried by the boys themselves...'³²

A proximity between artist and society is suggested as this would preserve the former's sense of humanity. 'Unity of Being', which the poet recalled in Autobiographies was a term learnt from his father, is a related idea.

It directed Yeats's ambitions for Ireland from the very start of his career.

It drew him to Morris's Socialism and encouraged him to found a 'People's Theatre'. In 1930 Yeats recalled:

'When I was a young man I hated the solitary book, abstraction because its adepts sat in corners to pull out their solitary plums. The sight of Yvette Guilbert, a solitary, a performer to an alien crowd, filled me with distaste, for I would have seen her in some great house among her equals and her friends. I wanted a theatre where the greatest passions and all the permanent interests of men might be displayed that we might find them not alone over a book but, as I said again and again, lover by lover, friend by friend. All I wanted was impossible, and I wore out my youth in its pursuit...'³³

³¹ J.B.Y.- Letters, to W.B. Yeats, pp.108-109.

³² Ibid, p.125.

³³ Explorations,(London, 1962),p.313.

Yeats failed because modern democratic societies did not allow for the organic interrelatedness which existed between the artist and medieval society. Art could no longer be the ideal expression of a whole people. Thus while his father never lost faith in the Socialist solution for economic inequality and valued the democratic recognition of political liberty, his letters of later years show an increasing awareness of the rift between the artist and his audience. He felt that democracies with their doctrine of strenuousness were fatal to Beauty and Socialists dragged down the aesthetic sense and trampled on it:

'To them artists and poets are egoists—the word gentleman is hateful to them. Yet a society of poor gentlemen upon whose hands time lies heavy is absolutely necessary to art and literature...'³⁴

Denouncing the religion of Democracy as an easily understood one along with the easily understood morality of Protestantism, both dependent on facile conclusions of abstract reasoning, he writes of the religion of poetry where all is vision and mystery. In this context, he writes that the Catholic Church:

'...built up by individual men, aristocrats by their singularity and their intellectual culture, preaches doctrines whose mystery no one can unravel, and these the million—the impatient million—were not allowed to touch—and yet it was sufficient since the ignorant can enjoy what he cannot explain as all men enjoyed the rainbow thousands of years before Newton explained it.'³⁵

³⁴ J.B.Y. - Letters, to W.B. Yeats, p.157.

³⁵ Ibid, p.170.

The preference for an aristocracy of the intellect is implicit. So also is the acceptance of an hierarchical pattern in society. Wisdom is not a mass inheritance but becomes manifest in a few individuals who like Hugo when he turns away from the multitude, glorify experience like a 'sword of finest temper'.³⁶ Art is the expression of 'solitary man'. More than anything else, J.B.Y. began to revere the image of the bird of poesy singing 'to itself alone in the heart of the wood, persuading and coaxing and commanding and admonishing its own soul, and thinking nothing of others'.³⁷ The artist's vocation, he believed, is the cult of solitude, a contemplation of life and truth and an expression of his essential self opposed to the external and circumstantial world. He can no more be a tool of the masses than an active participant in their affairs. 'By law of his nature', J.B.Y. wrote, '[the poet] should resist his contemporaries in their actions and thoughts, since being different from them he cannot otherwise protect himself, and that his resistance should not be for the purpose of benefiting them or for any other kind of propaganda, but that he be himself.'³⁸

The development of Yeats's political thought followed J.B.Y.'s views to their natural conclusion. Thus what was expressed by his father as the solitary distinction of the artist became for Yeats the rationale for artistic arrogance and dictatorship in public life. It was ultimately applicable to the nature of political government as when he wrote:

³⁷ J.B. Yeats - Letters - to W.B. Yeats, p.168.

³⁸ Ibid, p.193.

'The whole State should be so constructed that the people should think it their duty to grow popular with King and Lord Mayor instead of King and Lord Mayor growing popular with them...'39

Yeats was disappointed with the 'People's Theatre' as it turned out to be something other than what he anticipated. In his letter to Lady Gregory, he wrote of his 'discouragement and defeat' in its success, for there were 'certain things, dear to both our hearts, which no 'People's Theatre' can accomplish.'⁴⁰ With the founding of the Abbey Theatre, Yeats adopted a dictatorial manner and claimed in later years:

'The success of the Abbey Theatre has grown out of a single conviction of its founders: I was the spokesman because I was born arrogant and had learnt the artist's arrogance- 'Not what you want but what we want' -and we were the first modern theatre that said it. I did not speak for John Synge, Augusta Gregory, and myself alone, but for all the dramatists of the theatre. Again and again somebody speaking for our audience, for an influential newspaper or political organisation, has demanded more of this kind of play, or less or none of that. They have not understood that we cannot, and if we could would not comply...'41

This brings us to consider the other factor responsible for Yeats's estrangement in Irish public life which encouraged the aristocratic turn of his thought. The Anglo-Irish artist dedicated to the ideals of Art alone in the context of the European Romantic tradition was, in modern Nationalist Ireland, an exile of his own making. This was due to the

39 Explorations, p.410.

40 Explorations, p.244.

41 Ibid, pp.414-415.

tendency of Young Irelanders, in the tradition of Thomas Davis, to use art and literature for unitive politics. It must be remembered that the Anglo-Irish predicament was a powerful motivating force behind the unitive tendency of Protestant nationalism in Ireland from the eighteenth century onwards. This tendency found its most characteristic expression in a literature that essayed to capture Celtic intensity and passion in a foreign idiom. In the uncritical adulation of Dark Rosaleen or Cathleen ni Houlihan among other national personifications, a political unity among the Irish Catholics and Anglo-Irish Protestants was envisaged. Literary and political activities became inextricably linked, not without altering their respective dimensions. Literary efforts were, by and large, oriented to propagandist ends while politics allowed for the impractical revolutionary schemes of political martyrs which reflected, however indirectly, the inflammatory heroics of chauvinistic literature. Towards the close of the nineteenth century, art that did not in some way or other promote the Nationalist cause was likely to find its audience restricted to the Unionist minority concentrated in Eastern Ulster or within the precincts of Trinity College Dublin and the leisured class of Protestant Ireland. This unbalanced reception to Irish creativity, not oriented to propagandist ends, was due to many factors most of which were political. At the time of Parnell's accession to political power, Ireland was distracted by agrarian agitations and her struggle for political independence, and it was very difficult to find a popular audience for art or literature created for its own sake. International standards of art criticism became irrelevant. The leisured minority could afford to use them but the majority could not. A cleavage

was therefore inevitable between the independent Anglo-Irish Protestant artist and the general Irish public. This was the greatest obstacle facing Yeats at the start of his career. It was one that was indeed difficult to overcome, because of the traditions he inherited.

II

In order to create his audience and be truly representative of Irish Nationalism, as he understood it, and not as interpreted by Young Ireland propagandists, Yeats determined to enter public life. But for one of his class, tradition and profession, the political choices available to him were fairly restricted.

As indicated earlier, J.B.Y. moved among T.C.D.⁴² circles and his social and national identity was linked with the leisured minority of Protestant Ireland. Like his father and grandfather, J.B.Y. was educated in T.C.D. which was the stronghold of the Protestant Unionist tradition. His distinguished friends included Edward Dowden, the literary Unionist, Professor of English Literature, George Fitzgerald the scientist, and Isaac Butt, his father's friend, Professor of Political Economy and later the founder of the Home Rule Movement in Ireland.

Nationalism among these notabilities was of a conservative nature. It was influenced by the literary, emotional and idealistic spirit of the Young Irelanders who found their mentors in patriots like Thomas Davis and Wolfe Tone. Since it was based, however, on a consciousness of nationality

⁴² Trinity College Dublin

alone, excluding thereby the other two important factors of land and religious consciousness in Irish politics, it remained peripheral in importance as a political force in the Ireland of the late nineteenth century. This was discovered, by those subscribing to it, as due to the absence of true unity among Catholics and Protestants, landlords and peasants in Ireland. According to Thomas Davis, literature alone could help to promote the unitive sensibility where all the three forces of nationality, land and religious consciousness, could win an emotional identity. For the Protestant nationalist, therefore, the literary instrument remained the only hope, the only means that could materialise the vision of an educated united Ireland. In the opinion of J.B.Y., the Irish literary movement received a just sanction in the message of Butt's political career and its disaster. The political idealism of Butt proved ineffective in Irish politics and this showed the need for a non-political movement which could tackle anew the problem of Irish unity.

Some attention must be given to the association of the Yeatses with Butt, who was an important political figure before the advent of Parnell on the Irish political scene. He influenced, to some extent, the politico-literary idealism (if such a bridge can be entertained) of the Yeatses, and his career held important implications for Yeats at the start of his career.

J.B.Y.'s love and admiration for Isaac Butt was undoubtedly inherited. He learnt much about 'the man of genius, engulfed in law and politics' from his father. Every night after the house was quiet, the clergyman would sit beside the kitchen fire and talk at length to his son of the 'men he had

known- his fellow students- of Archer Butler the Platonist, and of a man called Gray,...and of his friend Isaac Butt...'⁴³

'At this time', J.B.Y. records, Butt 'was the opponent of O'Connell and the hope of the Tories, and Disraeli had walked in the lobby of the House of Commons with his arm in his and said, "Butt we must get you into the Cabinet".' The passage continues: "Afterwards when Butt had gone over to the Nationalists, my grandmother would say, 'I have a sneaking regard for Isaac Butt, and her sister would say, 'Indeed I know you do.'"⁴⁴ Years later, J.B.Y. had written to Susan Mitchell: 'The Irish took to hatred when they deserted the statesman Isaac Butt for the politician Parnell'.⁴⁵ Still later he observed in a letter to his son: 'The pro-German anti-British Irish are moved by spite. It was spite to which Parnell appealed when he ousted Butt the statesman.'⁴⁶

There was certainly a personal bias in favour of Butt reflected in these observations. At the same time, Butt's conservative nationalism with its gentlemanly deportment in Parliament was more congenial to the Protestant tradition than the obstructionist tactics of Parnell conjoined with the heady politics of the Land League. Yet that was not all either. The Irish Parliamentary Party under Parnell brought a powerful middle class element into Irish political life which seriously threatened the exclusive

⁴³ Early Memories, pp.35-36.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.63.

⁴⁵ J.B.Y.-Letters, to Susan Mitchell, p.210.

⁴⁶ Ibid, to W.B. Yeats, p.219.

privileges of the Protestant Ascendancy class.

A brief excursus on Butt's political career in the context of Irish political history is necessary at this stage, since it may help towards a deeper understanding of Yeats's nationalism and its chosen identification with the school of John O'Leary.

Isaac Butt became a public figure in the 1840's. He was educated in literature and politics, was Professor of Political Economy at T.C.D., co-editor of the Dublin University Magazine and editor of a Tory newspaper in Belfast. Early in his life he won a position at the Bar and was subsequently to distinguish himself in the legal profession. He conducted himself in public controversies as 'a violent Orange bigot', and was remembered in these early years by some as the very type of 'ultra-domineering, narrow-minded Protestant ascendancy.'⁴⁷

In the Corporation Debate of 1843 on the case for the repeal of the union of Ireland and England, Butt represented the Conservatives in his reply to O'Connell, leader of Catholic Emancipation in Ireland. As Gavan Duffy records:

'He [Butt] reminded the Irish tribune that his claims were for the Anglo-Saxon rights; that he founded the liberties of Ireland upon the English conquest and the subversion of the ancient Brehon laws.'⁴⁸

During these years, however, Butt was not impervious to the spirit of Young Ireland and the literary nationalism of Thomas Davis, the young

⁴⁷ Quoted in David Thornley, Isaac Butt and Home Rule, (London, 1964), p.15.

⁴⁸ Charles Gavan Duffy, Young Ireland (Dublin, 1884), Book I, pp.76-77.

Protestant patriot, who was determined to win back his own class to the national cause of repeal which was for some time made subordinate to the cause of Catholic reform. The unitive idealism of Protestant patriots like Wolfe Tone met with Butt's warm approval. Along with Joseph LeFanu the literary leader of the Conservatives, he engaged himself in writing an historical romance The Gap of Barnesmore, which could serve the Davis ideal of unity by presenting the hereditary feuds of Catholics and Protestants in a juster light to their posterity.⁴⁹ Samuel Ferguson devoted his literary energies towards a similar goal and writing to Smith O'Brien, T. MacNevin's grouped the Butt-Ferguson school of young Conservatives under the heading of 'Orange Young Ireland'.⁵⁰ This conservative nationalism, however, had no scope in Ireland at that time and Butt found himself isolated by his political philosophy for a period of twenty years.

In 1852 Butt left for England but returned to Dublin a year before the Fenian trials. The Fenian Rising of 1867 was a failure and the Fenians involved were arrested and tried. Butt was given the Fenian brief and by 1868 he became the legal tribune of Nationalist Ireland. 'Not only was Butt retained for the defence of the staff of The Irish People, [the Fenian newspaper] but all the Fenians whom the Government seized in the swoop which they made after raiding the offices of the paper looked to Butt for aid.'⁵¹ His defence of the Fenians was thereafter romanticized a great

⁴⁹ Duffy, Young Ireland, p.185.

⁵⁰ Thornley, p.17. (O'Brien Papers, National Library, no.2291)

⁵¹ 'The Fenian Rising of 1867', Commemorative Supplement - The Irish Times, March 6, 1967, p.ii.

deal.

His association with the Fenians did not end there. When Gladstone made his historic offer of justice to Ireland in terms of a Liberal Alliance, Butt sided with the critics of the alliance. Chief among them were the supporters of the Nation, believers in an independent nationalist opposition, who demanded repeal and a call for amnesty to the Fenian prisoners. Butt became leader of the Amnesty Association and wrote a pamphlet presenting the case for amnesty. Writing of the national mood after the Fenian trials, he observed:

'Gradually the conviction forced itself upon everyone, that the men [Fenians] whom they saw meet their fate with heroism and dignity, were not a mere band of assassins, actuated by base motives - but real and earnest patriots, moved by unselfish thoughts, and risking all in that which they believed to be their country's cause...'⁵²

He supported the Fenians because he saw in their heroism the romantic ideal of Irish nationalism. Yeats responded to the 'Romantic Ireland' of O'Leary in a similar way.

Butt's dream of a united Nationalist party was far removed from the complex realities of Irish popular opinion. After the Land Bill of 1869, he felt constrained to start the agitation for self-government since the bill failed to satisfy the demands made. He had to balance and hold together the main currents of political sentiment at that time, viz., conservative, liberal and Fenian. Disestablishment, tenant right and denominational education were issues that demanded attention in any movement. Yet Butt

⁵² Quoted in Thornley, p.67. (Ref: Butt - Ireland's appeal for amnesty, Glasgow pp.14, 16. 1870).

imagined he could win for Home Rule the support of men who differed on every other aspect of political controversy. In this he was a visionary idealist. National unity, as he saw it, was never really practicable.

There were other aspects of Butt's political belief which showed him to be out of touch with the realities of Irish politics. He continued to advocate the need for an Irish House of Lords to preserve the Irish aristocracy when the nature of his own party had altered considerably since the inception of the Home Rule movement. The party had lost its aristocratic flavour because the combined effects of the secret ballot and the new nationalist movement afforded the entry of parliamentary representatives drawn from a lower social scale.

Further, while accepting the need for legislative independence in Ireland, he believed in the joint imperial destiny of Ireland and England. Federal Home Rule offered the most satisfactory solution; 'it was at once the thought out expression of his own emotional view of the relationship between the two islands, and an offer of partnership to Irish protestantism.'⁵³ But the federal theory was soon displaced by the more absolute demands of separation and Butt's politics were felt to be completely out-dated. Consequently, he lost command over his party.

With the founding of the New Party after the election, a conference resolution to support Parnell as candidate for the by-election in Dublin was passed. Parnell soon displaced Butt with 'obstructionist' tactics in Parliament which seemed to meet Ireland's nationalist temper more

⁵³ Thornley, p.20.

effectively. By 1878, the Home Rule movement of Butt lost its political force. He died in 1879.

As shown above, the political career of Butt was governed by the ideals of conservative Protestant nationalism. They were obviously ineffective in the politics of the day. The Unity ideal could not survive against the complexities of sectarian controversies and economic grievances in Ireland. Furthermore, his desire to preserve the Irish aristocracy and his belief in the joint imperial destiny of Ireland and England might have indicated for the militant nationalists, the questionable identity of his inherited traditions.

For J.B.Y., however, the failure of Butt was due to the fact that he was born before his time. He wrote his son: 'Butt was a man of genius, that is a man of vision. He looked beyond the mists of time and saw an Ireland educated to govern itself...'⁵⁴

On another occasion he wrote:

'...he [Butt] certainly was of the race of poets- like the true poet he sought obscurity- his visions haunted him, and my father told me it was always impossible to draw Butt into an argument, always he had other things to think about. But alas for his amazing success at the Bar, a leading Q.C. before he was thirty, his early brilliancy in politics, when Disraeli would walk with his arm through his, promising to make [him] a cabinet minister, finally the vision of a regenerated Ireland. All these drew him away- and the poor Muse could only visit him in strange places- in brothels and gaming houses she would meet her son, herself an exile; in those days banished by the respectable poets and Bishops and the old mumbling bigotries of

⁵⁴ J.B.Y.- Letters, to W.B. Yeats, p.219.

religious and social hatred...The career of Butt and its disasters is enough to prove the necessity of the Irish poetical movement.⁵⁵

Two years before the death of Parnell, Yeats predicted an intellectual movement at the first lull of politics. Much of what he did after the death of the leader was to fulfill the prophecy. It is clear that J.B.Y. and his understanding of Butt's political career, helped to mould Yeats's nationalist ambitions in accord with those of men belonging to his tradition. When Yeats entered public life, he had found a teacher whose personality was not opposed to it. This was the Fenian patriot John O'Leary.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Hone, pp.10-11.

Chapter Two

**THE FENIAN IDENTITY:
YEATS AND JOHN O'LEARY**

It was at the Contemporary Club Dublin (founded in 1885) that Yeats met John O'Leary, one of the Fenian leaders condemned to penal servitude at the Fenian trials of 1865, the handsomest old man he had ever seen. The significance of Yeats's subsequent association with the veteran patriot cannot be overestimated. In a general introduction to his work, Yeats writes: 'It was through the old Fenian leader John O'Leary I found my theme.'¹ Besides influencing the direction of Yeats's life-work by turning the young poet's imagination away from 'Swedish princesses, Greek islands, Moorish magicians, Spanish Inquisitors, Hungarian patriots, and Indian scenes' to Ireland's national legend and folk-lore, O'Leary was responsible for the distinctive nature of Yeats's political identity in Nationalist Ireland. Yeats always claimed to belong to the Nationalist school of John O'Leary, and in his last years he justified some of his political actions by this claim. A year before he died, he wrote Ethel Manin:

'Some day you will understand what I see in the Irish national movement and why I can be no other sort of revolutionist- as a young man I belonged to the I.R.B. and was in many things O'Leary's pupil...'²

and in an earlier letter of 1937, he had called himself 'an old Fenian'. The same year in a letter to Patrick MacCartan, Oliver St. John Gogarty observed:

'The wheel swings full circle: he [Yeats] is reverting to his I.R.B. days.'³

¹ Essays and Introductions (London, 1961), p.510.

² Wade, Letters, p.869.

³ Yeats and Patrick MacCartan A Fenian Friendship: Letters with a Commentary by John Unterecker and an Address on Yeats the Fenian by Patrick MacCartan, No. X of the Dolmen Press Yeats Centenary Papers MCMLXV, ed. Liam Miller, 1967 - hereafter cited as No. X. Y.C.P., p.397.

These observations supply enough evidence to encourage a closer examination of the nature of Yeats's Fenianism or I.R.B. identity. In order to bring the subject in focus, we must first review the political career of Yeats's Fenian mentor. This will involve a commentary on the history of Fenianism and its modus operandi in the Irish Revolutionary /Republican Brotherhood. Desmond Ryan rightly observes:

'The same seal is on all the Fenians, and especially on all the Fenian leaders; however adventurous their individual lives, however varied their gifts, however dissimilar their fortunes one thing is common to them all; they are subordinate to the history of their own remarkable organisation...'⁴

We shall have to look at Fenianism in both its phases, the first culminating in the rising of 1867 and the second in the Easter rising of 1916. 'The IRB of the 1860's and the IRB of the post-1898 period were, in almost every respect but in name and aim, two wholly different bodies. In both one man only, John O'Leary, occupied a position of prominence and influence.'⁵ This, in itself, is a fact of some importance when we consider the character of Yeats's Fenianism. He was initiated into the Fenian tradition during its second phase but inherited the peculiar nationalist approach of O'Leary which distinguished the old patriot from his Fenian colleagues. How far it affected Yeats's own politics will only become clear after an understanding of the approach itself as evident in O'Leary's public career and his role in the I.R.B.

⁴ The Phoenix Flame (London, 1937), p.44.

⁵ Marcus Bourke, John O'Leary (Tralee, 1967), p.235.

I

John O'Leary was born in Tipperary on July 23, 1830⁶. His father was a successful merchant. O'Leary began his education in the Tipperary Grammar school which enjoyed the protection of the ruling class and the State Church but in the summer of 1845, at the age of fifteen, he was removed to Carlow College which took no non-Catholic boys and also prepared boys for priesthood.⁷ The institution with its all-Catholic atmosphere and its policy of limited loyalty to Dublin Castle by the Irish hierarchy, did not fail to exercise a formative influence on O'Leary's character. Carlow, in fact, became known as a centre of nationalist thought.

Soon after O'Leary joined Carlow, however, he became seriously ill with typhus. While he was convalescing, he pursued his literary interests which had received some encouragement at Carlow. In the course of his readings he chanced upon a book of poems by Thomas Davis and was at once converted to the nationalist creed of the young Protestant patriot. He later acknowledged: '...what I am and have been as an Irish Nationalist I owe to Thomas Davis more than to any Irishman living or dead, and perhaps more than to all other Irishmen who have lived.'⁸

Davis was at that time the acknowledged leader of the Young Irelanders who formed an advanced wing of the Repeal Movement founded by Daniel O'Connell

⁶ Bourke, p.4. For biographical information on O'Leary I have relied, to a large extent, on this recent publication.

⁷ Ibid, p.10.

⁸ 'How Irishmen Should Feel', Lecture delivered in Cork, December 17, 1886.

in 1840. He and those who supported him found it difficult to subscribe to the short-term methods and reformist policies of O'Connell which minimised the urgency of Repeal after the attainment of Catholic Emancipation. O'Connell's policy, which in effect answered the immediate demands of Catholics, released forces of latent bigotry in the country, and Protestants formerly anti-Unionist turned Unionist after the Catholic agitation. Davis and his friends decided through the Nation (a weekly newspaper) to resuscitate a sense of nationality among the Catholic and Protestants alike, as a means to the final attainment of Repeal. They stood for Ireland's historic past, its traditions, both 'for the heroes of the Gael- Art MacMurrough, Shane O'Neill, Hugh O'Neill, Owen Roe, Patrick Sarsfield- and for those of the Seanghaill- Molyneux and Lucas and Swift and Flood and Grattan and Tone and Emmet- and they took up Tone's object and Tone's principle.'⁹ Accordingly the poems and essays published in Nation were oriented to create a sense of unity among the Irish people, to impart to them an emotional identity through a recognition of common aims and ideals.

Davis was a prolific contributor to the paper and for three years as the editor Sir Charles Gavan Duffy recalls, 'he poured out songs as spontaneously as a bird.'¹⁰ These literary expressions of an idealised nationalism- inculcating a love of self-denial, of justice, of beauty, or valour, of generous life and proud death- fired the imagination of the young O'Leary and he recalls the effect produced on him as analogous to 'what

⁹ P.S. O'Hegarty, A History of Ireland Under the Union 1801-1922 (London, 1952), p.118.

¹⁰ Duffy, Young Ireland, Vol.I, p.69.

certain classes of Christians call conversion.' Prior to reading Davis, he admits:

'I was not anti-Irish or West-British; but then I am confident I was not strongly Irish, and I am sure I was strongly ambitious, and can easily conceive that my ambition stimulated by much reading of English Literature necessarily either directly or indirectly anti-Irish in spirit, might have led me where it has unfortunately led so many of my countrymen before and since...'¹¹

After the 'conversion', O'Leary became a regular reader of Nation and inevitably came under the influence of other leading contributors, among them John Mitchel who advocated unconstitutional methods in the struggle for Ireland's freedom. O'Leary was soon convinced that the political separation of Ireland from England was the only proper objective of Irish nationalists, 'and the usefulness of every Irish political or social movement he decided on according as it helped or hindered the attainment of this goal.'¹²

In 1847 O'Leary left Carlow College and entered Trinity College Dublin with the intention of studying for the Bar. The year 1847 was a bitter one for Ireland. Hundreds died of starvation. The nationalist cause had been seriously impaired by the irreconcilable differences between the Repeal Association under O'Connell and the Young Irelanders. O'Connell's policy did not seem to make any headway in the direction of self-government for Ireland and his connections with the English government in effect compromised the nationalist cause. In order to remedy the situation, the Young Irelanders founded a new organisation in January 1847 which they called the Irish

¹¹ Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism, vol.I (Dublin, 1897), pp.2-3.

¹² Bourke, p.16.

Confederation. 'Its policy was Repeal, but Repeal to be obtained by opposition to both English parties and the avoidance of any link, however slight and personal with the Government.'¹³ It marked the end of loyalty to the English Crown in Irish nationalist life, thought and policy.

When O'Leary entered Trinity College at the end of 1847, the Irish Confederation was in full swing. He immediately joined the Grattan Club of the Confederation presided over by Thomas Francis Maegher. Among the Confederation leaders with whom he came into personal contact were James Fintan Lalor, Fr. John Kenyon and probably Charles Gavan Duffy. He admitted years later that he was not influenced by the oratory of the Confederation but was infected by its revolutionary spirit.

In 1848 O'Leary took part in an unsuccessful rising promoted by the Mitchellite wing of the Confederation. The Confederation was not a revolutionary body to start with, but famine conditions and the large-scale emigration that followed emasculated the national will and a constitutional policy was felt, in the circumstances, to be virtually useless. It was John Mitchel, then leader-writer of Nation, who broke away from the long-term educational policy of the Confederation and supported 'illegal and warlike' action. He may be said to have played an important part in motivating the insurrection. An affray at Balingarry on July 29, 1848, was the beginning and end of the rising. As a result, most of the Young Ireland leaders were imprisoned while the rest remained in hiding. Soon after, O'Leary took part

¹³ O'Hegarty, History of Ireland, p.289.

in a rescue operation planned by a young Dubliner Philip Gray. This too ended in failure and O'Leary with his contingent were arrested and lodged in Clonmel jail.

Upon his release from Clonmel O'Leary consulted with Gray and immediately set up a small secret oath-bound society in Clonmel and Tipperary which had for its aim 'the simple and obvious one of liberating Ireland from British rule by force of arms.'¹⁴ This proved to be the only oath he subscribed to in his life. Seeing that the Mitchellite policy of open defiance was unsuccessful, O'Leary found no harm in trying the Wolfe Tone plan of secret conspiracy, 'all modern precedents Italian and other in its favour.'¹⁵ While he swore-in the first members of his society in and around Clonmel, other survivors of the '48 rising were engaged in similar activities. Along with Joseph Brenan, a Corkman, and Philip Gray, O'Leary 'under the occasionally disputed leadership of James Fintan Lalor'¹⁶ provided the impetus for the '49 movement which ended in another unsuccessful rising. This movement, however, marked the beginning in Ireland during the nineteenth century of secret societies with purely political aims. As such it was important in its connection with the rise of Fenianism. There were, in fact, many similarities between the organisation of the later I.R.B. and the organisation of O'Leary's secret society and the many others of the '49 movement which were part of a

¹⁴ Bourke, p.20.

¹⁵ Recollections, Vol.I, p.26.

¹⁶ Bourke, p.20.

loose federation of such societies which stretched from Dublin down to Kilkenny, Tipperary and Waterford to Cork. These societies were peremptorily denounced by the clergy and this was responsible for O'Leary's lifelong misgivings regarding the role of priests in politics.

For some time before and during the '49 movement O'Leary was brought into close contact with Fintan Lalor, a gentleman farmer of Queen's county, whose primary interest was in the land question. O'Leary was not very hopeful about Lalor's movement but joined it 'because he felt it his duty as a patriot to do so'¹⁷ an indication of a strong sense of moral obligation which guided most of his actions then and later.

Lalor hoped to establish a new journal to spread his revolutionary gospel and discussed his plans with O'Leary and Thomas Clarke Luby, another important secret society member. A prospectus of the newspaper was prepared, but O'Leary remained critical. Even at this early stage in his career, he was fastidious with regard to style and presentation in writing. Lalor's prospectus did not measure up to his standards- 'the language was tautologous, the reasoning poor and involved, there was too much alliteration and so on.'¹⁸ After the unsuccessful rising, however, Lalor continued to seek O'Leary's assistance for the preparation of the newspaper. The project was abandoned due to the sudden death of Lalor in December '49.

If O'Leary was influenced by Lalor's agrarian ideas, it was not for very long. His attitude towards the land question remained fairly consistent

¹⁷ Bourke, p.25.

¹⁸ Loc. cit.

throughout his life. As we shall see, it influenced his stand in the New Departure and was responsible for his feelings of isolation in the Fenian movement during its second phase. Referring to the '48-'49 period in Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism¹⁹, O'Leary writes:

'...I may as well say a few words on my attitude, then and since, towards the land question, which for the last fifteen years or so has been the question of questions in Ireland, at first setting aside the national question altogether, and then connecting some vague and very definite notions of nationality with very definite notions about land. I think I had taken some tinge of agrarianism in '48, no doubt from the writings of Mitchel, and still more from Lalor himself. But when I came to detach these notions from their practical connection with an Irish insurrectionary movement with which they were always associated in the minds of Mitchel and Lalor- and when I began to discuss Lalor's theories with himself, I found my agrarian ardour fast cooling down, and finally disappearing altogether. It was not that then as now I did not feel the wretched condition of the Irish peasantry, and the too often cruel conduct of the Irish landlords; but then, as now I believed that the full remedy of that wretchedness and these wrongs could only come from freedom.'

It is fairly obvious that O'Leary shared the idealism of Protestant patriots who staked all on Nationality and treated the land question and religious consciousness of the Irish people as issues of relatively minor importance. That this implied a simplification of Irish politics has already been noted in connection with Isaac Butt. Some have argued that O'Leary's attitude towards agrarianism was influenced by the fact that he inherited a sizeable income from house property in Tipperary. But in view of the facts relating to his public career and disposition, this does not seem likely.²⁰

¹⁹ Vol.I, pp.37-38.

²⁰ Vide Bourke, pp.198-99.

By the end of 1849, the first stage of O'Leary's political life came to a close. He had entered Trinity College with the intention of going to the Bar, but when he realised he was obliged to take the oath he changed to medicine. He left Trinity College to begin studies in Queen's College, Cork in 1850. After a year in Cork, he won a scholarship to Queen's College Galway, where he remained three years. He spent a great deal of his time on non-medical reading, particularly history, biography and literary criticism. In the summer of 1853, he left Galway and returned to Dublin to attend surgery classes in the Meath Hospital. He left Dublin for London in 1854 where he continued his medical studies for another year and in the summer of 1855, he crossed to Paris. There he shared rooms with the American painter James McNeill Whistler, the poet Algernon Charles Swinburne and the English painter John Edward Poynter. Within a short time, he came into contact with the Irish living in Paris and was posted with news of the '48 fugitives John O'Mahony and James Stephens, the future founder of Fenianism. When O'Leary reached Paris, Stephens returned to Dublin and was seriously contemplating a new nation-wide conspiracy. Irish affairs during the 1850's had been depressing. The Tenant Right League, founded by Gavan Duffy in 1849 could not survive owing to the defection to the Government's side of two prominent Irish MP's. The intervention of the Catholic hierarchy in Irish politics was felt by many as truly unfortunate, and Gavan Duffy, disgusted by the state of national affairs, sailed for Australia. Stephens considered it fit to start a new secret society which would resuscitate nationalist activity in Ireland. He decided to consult some of his associates on the matter and when O'Leary returned to Dublin in 1857, Stephens approached him. But O'Leary was then,

as always afterwards, pessimistic about the proposed scheme and made another attempt to continue his medical studies.

Meanwhile, certain young men in Skibbereen under Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa formed the Phoenix National and Literary Society. The older men- the young fugitives of the '48 and '49 movements- who had scattered to the United States, Australia and the Continent after the unsuccessful risings, now became active on both sides of the Atlantic. Their activities were finally co-ordinated within a common organisation. The Emmet Monument Association in New York was founded in 1854 under the leadership of John O'Mahony and Michael Doheny. In 1858 when the time appeared convenient to renew the independence struggle in Ireland, O'Mahony communicated with Stephens who agreed to be the head organiser of the movement. A sum of ninety pounds was sent by Joseph Denieffe and with this James Stephens and T.C. Luby organised a secret revolutionary organisation with the single object of expelling the English from Ireland. The oath was framed by Luby and it was on St. Patrick's Day 1858 that the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood was formally established. Remnants of the secret society of 1849 were merged in the larger organisation. The movement came to be known generally as the 'Fenian' movement, a name taken from the army of the fabled Irish hero, Fion MacCumhail. Before the coming of St. Patrick, the 'Fenians' had been the military defenders of their island and the name was therefore considered appropriate for a movement that was primarily a military one.

The organisation was held together by a common purpose and oath of brotherhood and secrecy of an entirely moral and dignified nature. When established it was more of a separatist organisation than a Republican one

and the title 'Irish Republican Brotherhood' was not officially adopted until the Convention of 1873.

Towards the end of 1858, Stephens, now head of the secret organisation, called on O'Leary again. He told him of his plans and purposes and although O'Leary still believed that the movement had no chance of success, he was satisfied that it would be good for the morale of the country. In order to replenish the resources of the organisation, Stephens planned to go to the States to collect funds and requested O'Leary to meet him in Boulogne, after his return, to take charge of the money. O'Leary agreed to do this. It was, as he stated his 'first direct connection with Fenianism'.

Accordingly, he left for France in March 1859 and along with Luby awaited Stephens's return. Thus O'Leary, who was virtually unconnected with the inception of the I.R.B. was suddenly given charge of its financial affairs. He was, however, released from the obligation of the Fenian oath as Stephens and his successors relied on his sense of honour. This undoubtedly gives us a clue to the extent to which O'Leary was respected by his Fenian associates.

When Stephens returned from the States, he brought with him £700 for the organisation. Consequently he became very optimistic about the movement and immediately set up headquarters in his lodging to conduct a special course in military affairs. He appointed O'Leary as his personal envoy to the organisation in the United States as he understood the need of maintaining contact with the source of financial aid. It is interesting to note O'Leary's recollections of his personal response to the I.R.B. during this period:

'I could not propose to myself to travel through the States, spreading the name and fame of the IRB; for I had little knowledge of the workings of that body, and small faith as yet in its future prospects...'²¹

He explicitly states:

'I did not belong to the IRB at all; nor had I any clear or definite idea of ever joining that body, however strongly I approved of its objects and however little I objected to its means...'²²

He therefore agreed to go to the States simply to carry out ordinary official duties from O'Mahony's office. In April 1859, he sailed for America with a letter of introduction from Stephens to O'Mahony. The letter stated the purpose of O'Leary's visit and his duties as financial agent of the I.R.B. It also gave O'Mahony some impressions of O'Leary's political beliefs, which deserve comment. O'Leary, the letter stated, was an admirer of constitutional monarchy and preferred it to a rigid republican democracy. He was only willing to accept a republican form of government if it represented the national will. Stephens was therefore so suspicious of O'Leary's political allegiance that he even advised O'Mahony not to permit O'Leary to travel through the States as representative of the organisation since he had 'neither the opinions nor the faith in the cause that could ensure the requisite results'.

Soon after his arrival in the States, O'Leary took part in the venture of the weekly newspaper Phoenix, the first Fenian organ. Its principal contributor was Michael Doheny and its editor was one James Roche. O'Leary

²¹ Recollections, Vol.I, p.99.

²² Ibid, p.98.

tried his hand at journalism under Roche and the experience proved useful at a later date. As temporary member of the editorial staff, O'Leary was drawn into a controversy with T.D. Sullivan, brother of A.M. Sullivan²³ who succeeded Gavan Duffy as editor of Nation. The Fenians believed that the Sullivans, on more than one occasion, attempted to sabotage their movement. O'Leary's prejudice against them, which he later transmitted to Yeats, was probably the result of this unpleasant encounter. During his stay in the States, apart from working for Phoenix, O'Leary toured a great deal and organised new circles of the Fenian Brotherhood in several places. But when he returned to France in September 1859, he writes he had 'no stronger faith in Fenianism than when I left it'. He became gradually disillusioned with the movement and although he admired and supported Stephens, he detected a 'certain flabbiness of moral fibre' in the man, of which he remained critical. Towards the end of 1859, he suddenly decided to leave Paris for Ireland and during the following three years, was only occasionally in touch with the I.R.B.

During the three years 1860-63, the I.R.B. rapidly expanded its sphere of influence. New centres were set up in Ireland and branches were established in England, Scotland and Wales. Much of this development was due to the organising capacity and indefatigable energy of Stephens. But by the spring of 1863, the supply of funds from the States diminished and the Brotherhood faced a financial crisis. In order to remedy the situation Stephens decided to publish a newspaper which could preach the I.R.B. faith as well as replenish I.R.B. funds. For a secret organisation to have an

²³ His paper played a major part in provoking the arrest and prosecution of O'Donovan Rossa and other members of the Phoenix National and Literary Society of Skibereen. This led to the long and bitter feud between the Fenians and the Sullivans.

official organ may have seemed incongruous, but the situation justified the venture, and besides, the Fenian movement during the 1860's was in fact no longer a secret conspiracy but a well known political force in the country.

Having decided to start the newspaper which would be called the Irish People, Stephens wrote to O'Leary who was at that time in London. O'Leary's assistance was considered invaluable since he was known for his literary leanings and critical sense. Accordingly, Stephens requested him to be a nominal proprietor and permanent writer of the paper. O'Leary complied and returned to Ireland immediately. Soon after, Stephens appointed him, along with Luby and Charles Kickham, to be permanent leader-writer and editor of the weekly paper. In his Recollections, O'Leary writes:

'What I could do, however, in the literary way I felt bound to do, and so my main role in Fenianism was found for me, and, in a measure, forced upon me, by all the compelling strength of circumstances.'²⁴

Once again, he seems to have taken office in the Fenian organisation, more out of a sense of moral obligation than any personal enthusiasm.

The first issue of the Irish People appeared on Saturday November 28, 1863. The paper while it lasted (less than twenty-two months) and long after, played a very important part in shaping the course of Irish affairs. It was 'the message of the IRB, of which this paper was the main-almost the sole -propaganda machine, rather than the message of the repealer, the tenant leaguer or any other non-violent agitator of the years to come, that was to prove the decisive factor in the settlement (such as it was) arrived

²⁴ Vol.I, p.239.

at between Britain and Ireland some sixty years later.'²⁵

To O'Leary, the period of his editorship of the Irish People was the summing up, in a sense, [of] all that has gone before and directly leading to nearly everything that has come after.'²⁶ He was in charge of the paper's editorials, as well as a weekly column headed 'Answers to Correspondents' and letters to the editor. It was not long before he was able to mould the Irish People after his own ideals. Among the features of the paper, which unmistakably reflected his interests and attitudes, were its general approach to the use of force and its educational and literary orientation.

O'Leary sincerely believed in the complete separation of Ireland from England and was convinced that England would not yield until some sort of force was employed. Yet he did not feel that violence in itself was a step towards achieving independence. An educated and united public opinion seemed to be a more effective weapon which could be made still more powerful if backed by military force. Thus the editorials of the Irish People concentrate on the theme of careful and quiet preparation and cannot be said to give countenance to immediate military operations. As immediate constructive measures sanctioned by its editors the paper warned its readers against the guidance of priests in politics as also the ethics of constitutionalist nationalists: it also sternly discouraged emigration. Further, a large section in 'Answers to Correspondents' was devoted to literary and quasi-educational topics and original poetry and literary

²⁵ Bourke, p.51.

²⁶ Ibid, p.68.

articles were invited for publication. It may be recalled that O'Leary was converted to Nationalism through the literature of Thomas Davis; finding himself in a position to develop a paper along the lines of Nation, he did not miss the opportunity. He became principal literary critic of patriotic contributions to the paper and also advised readers on literary subjects. Sensitive to style, sometimes at the expense of matter or content, he was harshly critical of poetic rhetoric and discouraged easy sentiment such as was evident to him in the poetry of Thomas Moore. It was thus largely through O'Leary's efforts that the Irish People earned for itself a literary reputation. Isaac Butt had observed of the paper: 'It contained literature of a very high character'.²⁷ Because of his frequent use of literary and historical allusions, O'Leary's own contributions to the paper were more likely to be appreciated by the well-educated reader. They added certainly to the prestige of the paper as evidenced in Butt's remark.

The office of the Irish People was situated outside the entrance of Dublin Castle, a position which did not promise it much safety or privacy. Furthermore two police spies remained undetected on the staff. By the summer of 1865, Dublin Castle was alarmed by the rapid progress of the revolutionary movement now assisted by an official organ. A close watch was kept over the activities of the I.R.B. men on the staff of the newspaper and on September 1865, the office of the Irish People was raided by the police. This was followed by the arrest in quick succession of all the important Fenian leaders. O'Leary along with a few others, was lodged in Richmond

²⁷ Bourke, p.65. [ref. Report of the Proceedings of the Special Commission for the County of the City of Dublin, held at Green Street, Dublin, for the Trial of Thomas Clarke Luby and Others, for Treason-Felony (Alex Thom Dublin, 1866)]

prison. On November 27, 1865, the Fenian trials began. A Special Commission was set up to try the prisoners and the Fenian brief was given to Isaac Butt.

O'Leary was tried in the first sitting of the Commission. Butt argued his client's case valiantly, but lost. When he tried to analyse the informer's evidence concerning O'Leary's editorship of the Irish People, the prisoner interrupted him from the dock 'to object strongly to what he thought was the implication in Butt's previous remarks that it was discreditable to have been connected with the paper; he for one disagreed.'²⁸ A certain moral uprightness and defiance in O'Leary's attitude is easily recognisable in this instance. The damning evidence against him, however, did not only concern his editorship of the Fenian organ. His intimate association with the financial management of the I.R.B. was given serious consideration. The Judge declared him guilty and he was sentenced to twenty year's penal servitude. Most records tell of how after the verdict was passed, O'Leary scowled contemptuously upon the court, regarding his 'presence in the dock as anomalous, ridiculous.'²⁹ A.M. Sullivan records:

'He [O'Leary] stepped to the fron (of the dock) with a flash of fire in his dark eyes and a scowl on his features, looking hatred and defiance on the judges and all the rest of them. All eyes were fixed on him for he was one of those persons whose exterior attracts attention, and indicates a character above the common. He was tall, slightly built, and of gentlemanly deportment. Every feature of his thin angular face gave token of great intellectual energy and determination...'³⁰

²⁸ Bourke, p.103.

²⁹ 'The Fenian Rising of 1867', Commemorative Supplement - Irish Times, March 6, 1967, p.ii.

³⁰ Quoted from M.F. Ryan, Fenian Memories (Dublin, 1945), p.72.

In Recollections, however, O'Leary confesses '...I was, and am, utterly unconscious of the "flash of fire in my dark eyes," and "the scowl on my features," and, if "I looked hatred and defiance on judges, lawyers, jurymen, and all the rest of them," these were certainly not the feelings with which I was at all conscious of regarding any of these entities". He writes of how he was unconscious of any other feeling save one of mild curiosity during his trial and the predominant and nearly constant feeling was that of 'interest in the game and its chances.'³¹ After the sentence was pronounced he recalls: 'Excited I no doubt was, but excessively I think not.'³² According to his own record, therefore, O'Leary seems to have been detached and inwardly calm during the proceedings. Journalistic impressions may have exaggerated his passionate defiance before the court, yet it may be fair to observe that a composite attitude of objectivity in the midst of political passion was what characterised O'Leary's entire public career. We shall see how this characteristic was appreciated by Yeats as the sign of an achieved personality.

For five years after O'Leary's removal from the dock, he was subjected to the rigours of a convict's life. With his Fenian associates, he was removed from one prison to another- Mountjoy to Pentonville to Portland. His policy throughout was one of endurance without complaint, and a large number of Fenian prisoners obeyed his wishes on this matter. Meanwhile amnesty for the Fenian prisoners along with land reform became, by the end

³¹ Vol.II, pp.219-20.

³² Ibid, p.223.

of 1869, the leading subjects for organised agitation in Ireland. Soon after the state trials, an unsuccessful Fenian rising in 1867 marked the close of the first phase of the movement. But the Fenian spirit remained undefeated and the imprisoned leaders won popular respect and sympathy. Early in 1871, O'Leary, among other Fenian prisoners, was released on the condition that he served the rest of his sentence abroad. This concession was brought about by the Amnesty Movement conducted by John Nolan under the presidentship of Isaac Butt.

On his release, O'Leary went to Belgium and later to Paris. Most of his associates sailed for America and with a view to re-establishing unity among the various Irish-American groups, they founded the Irish Confederation. The Fenian Brotherhood in the States was torn by internal dissensions, but determined to steer clear of the Confederation. O'Leary decided to leave Paris for the States to act as mediator between the rival Irish American groups. His mission was only partially successful and he returned to Paris in 1872 where he spent the following thirteen years.

During his stay in Paris, O'Leary kept himself well informed about affairs in Ireland. The general state of the I.R.B. during the early 1870's left him discouraged and more critical than ever. Butt had established the Home Rule League in 1873 and many members of the Supreme Council I.R.B. supported his movement. O'Leary rigidly adhered to the orthodox I.R.B. principle of complete separation and the achievement of freedom by physical force, and was therefore generally cynical about the Home Rule campaign. He began to lose faith in those who were gradually won over by constitutionalism in Irish politics. At the same time, he deplored those resorting to

extremist tactics and felt that O'Donovan Rossa's Skirmishing Fund which was to finance sporadic guerilla attacks on English forces, was a travesty of revolutionary ideals. He had some hope, however, in the Revolutionary Directory -a central representative body for all extreme Irish Nationalists abroad- which was established in 1877 through the efforts of the Clan-na-Gael, another powerful organisation in the States founded a few years earlier.

By 1877 the I.R.B. was completely re-organised and O'Leary was once again among its leaders. Support for the Home Rule Movement gradually declined in the ranks of the I.R.B. A Supreme Council meeting was called and a resolution condemning parliamentary action was passed expelling from the Brotherhood all who subscribed to such action. Kickham was elected president of the Council and O'Leary resumed his former post as financial manager.

Meanwhile a new direction in Irish politics threatened conservative Fenianism. The Home Rule Movement lost its political force in 1878. Parnell displaced Butt and followed an 'obstructionist' policy in the English Parliament. It occurred to some among the Fenian ranks that an alliance between physical force and constitutionalism under the leadership of Parnell could be more effective than national movements in the past. Thus a movement known as the 'New Departure' came into being. It drew its inspiration from Michael Davitt, an ex-Fenian. While not abandoning the idea of an eventual appeal to force, Davitt began to advocate that the I.R.B. should support the open movement carried on by the 'obstructionists'. John Devoy, a prominent leader of the Irish-American Fenians, was of the same opinion. At Davitt's request, he left the States for Europe to obtain

the sanction of the Supreme Council I.R.B. for the new programme. A meeting was arranged and Devoy persuaded the Supreme Council to grant the participation of I.R.B. members in the open movement so long as they did not enter Parliament. O'Leary was present at the meeting and played the role of mediator. A year later, however, when the agrarian aspect of the programme came to the fore, the sanction of the I.R.B. was promptly withdrawn.

O'Leary was not immediately opposed to Devoy's suggestions, despite the considered alliance with constitutionalism. He was impressed with Parnell's leadership and hoped that a strong and united Irish Parliamentary Party could eventually declare itself an independent Irish Parliament, if backed by a fully prepared physical-force body.

But with the progress of events, Davitt decided to place immediate issues before the people and believed that a war against landlordism was the first legitimate undertaking in the freedom struggle. Negotiations commenced between Devoy, Davitt and Parnell and in 1879 the Land League was established under the leadership of Parnell. O'Leary grew severely critical of this new move. Like Kickham and other conservative associates, he felt that agrarian agitation would compromise the revolutionary ideals of Fenianism. His denunciation of the Land League was based entirely on moral considerations. He declared its programme 'unsound and immoral' and felt that in the act of becoming members of Parliament, Nationalists perpetrated 'gross perjury'. An honest rebel movement was what he supported and he deplored it getting mixed up with one worthy of great distrust. He was opposed to the 'active' policy of the organisation and refused in his official capacity to take any responsibility for expenditure in connection with it.

As the secret service agent Major Le Caron observed: 'He was as strong and bitter an opponent to the murderous idea as one could wish to meet; and, unlike Irish patriots in general, he was not without the courage of his convictions...'³³

O'Leary's letters to John Devoy during this period are full of criticisms advanced against the organisational policy of the new movement. He found himself out of sympathy with Devoy's newspaper, the Irish Nation, again on moral grounds. He wrote Devoy:

'As to Irish Nation, I, of course, for many reasons continue and as a punishment for my sins must, I suppose, continue to read it more or less carefully, but it is becoming more of an affliction to me every day. You have, I believe, given up praising the murderous Invincible ruffians, but then you have taken or re-taken to constant laudation of a set of loose principled agitators as have ever disgraced Irish politics...'³⁴

It is not surprising that during the last years of his exile, O'Leary found himself virtually isolated. The Land League expanded in scope and influence and completely overshadowed the I.R.B. Parnell toured the States and established the American Land League and in Ireland the land issue became the centre of public attention. To counteract the influence of the League and to re-assert the I.R.B. position, O'Leary left Paris for New York in 1880. His mission failed and he made no impression on the gathering of the Clan na Gael as he reiterated the orthodox I.R.B. policy, which regarded the Land League as anomalous. On another occasion he strongly asserted:

³³ Twenty-Five Years in the Secret Service (London, 1892), p.162.

³⁴ Devoy's Post Bag, ed. W. O'Brien and Desmond Ryan, Vol.II (Dublin, 1948 and 1953), p.125.

'I will resist this dishonest and unholy alliance.
 "Freedom comes from God's right hand," and I believe
 in righteous means as well as righteous ends.'³⁵

But he was outvoted. Because of his critical conscience and moral standards, he was a source of discomfort to the more politically-minded members of the freedom movement. In Boston, he met John Boyle O'Reilly who gave an interesting account of his impressions of O'Leary in a letter to Devoy. The relevant passage may be quoted in full since it illustrates effectively why O'Leary was out of the main current of political activity at the time:

'He O'Leary is an honourable, pure minded man, I am sure; and in literature a most interesting and extensively read one. But in politics he is the most extraordinary mixture I ever met. Having listened to his dissatisfactions for a day and a half, and finding that he disapproved of everything that had been done for twenty years past, including Fenianism (for he is not a Republican at all and never was) I asked him squarely what he would be satisfied with. His answer was as great a surprise as a disappointment to me: it was merely the turning back to nationality of "the educated class" who now are drawn into Anglicanism by the bribes of office, etc.: there is no more to be done in our day than to make the Irish Irish. As a fact, I don't think O'Leary has ever taken the time and trouble to think out what he does want: strange as it really seems...It is grievous to see the influences that stand in the way of Irish revolution. O'Leary's is one of the most injurious from the very purity of the man. He is utterly impractical and he is peculiarly, indeed unaccountably to me, aggressive towards action of any existing form... He is charming as a literary man, or rather as a literary critic: but damn his politics...'³⁶

Thus when O'Leary returned to Ireland after his exile ended in January 1885, he was like a detached spectator who had his roots not in the present but in

³⁵ Quoted in Bourke, p.164.

³⁶ Devoy's Post Bag, Vol.I, pp.545-46.



a heroic past.

On his arrival in Dublin, he was elected president of the Young Ireland Society which was a literary group with I.R.B. sympathies. In his inaugural address on 'Young Ireland - Old and New', he reflected:

'Fully conscious as I am of the proverbial tendency of exile to make men look upon things not as they are, but as they were or as they would wish them to be, I mean to look about me for some time, seeking for the moment rather to receive light and if possible leading than to spread the one or take upon myself the other. Of course after a time I must necessarily see, or at worst believe I see, how and to what extent men and things have changed in Ireland even, if the why may possibly still remain imperfectly intelligible to me. Then it will be for me to realise how far I am in harmony, or can put myself in harmony, or in not too glaring discord with the current course of events and the practical action of public men, or failing all that, I have the obvious alternative of holding my tongue and dropping my pen, or using them only for purposes unconnected with the present practical politics.'³⁷

When he did determine the role he could adopt in the Ireland of the '80's, it was principally an educational one. In his Recollections, he observed: 'If Young Ireland had failed and failed definitely in her revolutionary policy, she had certainly not failed in her education and propagandist policy.'³⁸ The movement of Davis did not lose its appeal for the old patriot.

II

It was at this stage of his life that O'Leary came into contact with

³⁷ Nation, January 24, 1885.

³⁸ Vol.I, p.50.

the young Yeats, now twenty years of age and in search of a stabilising literary career. O'Leary presided over Young Ireland Society meetings which took place in a lecture hall of a workmen's club in York Street, where Yeats along with a few University students spoke and debated on Irish literature and history. 'From these debates, from O'Leary's conversation, and from the Irish books he lent or gave me has come all I have set my hand to since'³⁹ was the poet's acknowledgement of his debt to the patriot. In 'Poetry and Tradition' (1907), Yeats writes of O'Leary's and John F. Taylor's romantic conception of Irish Nationality and how 'that ideal Ireland, perhaps from this out an imaginary Ireland, in whose service I labour, will always be in many essentials their Ireland. They were the last to speak of an understanding of life and Nationality built up by the generation of Davis, which had been pierced through by the idealism of Mazzini, and of other European revolutionists of the mid-century.'⁴⁰ Against a knowledge of O'Leary's political career and revolutionary idealism discussed in the previous section, the nature of Yeats's 'Romantic Ireland' comes into focus.

Yeats's association with O'Leary covered a period of about twenty-one years (1885-1907). During the years 1903-07 when Yeats withdrew from Irish politics, it may be correct to infer that their relationship was not very close; when O'Leary died in March 1907, Yeats refrained from attending his funeral as he 'shrank from seeing about his [O'Leary's] grave so many whose Nationalism was different from anything he had taught or that I could

³⁹ Autobiographies, p.101.

⁴⁰ Essays and Introductions, p.246.

share.'⁴¹ Between the years 1885-1903, however, much of what Yeats wrote, published or organised, received the sustained encouragement and support of O'Leary. He had free access to O'Leary's library of books and became acquainted for the first time with the works of Davis, Mangan, Ferguson, Carleton, Banim, Kickham and Mitchel. When Yeats writes in 'To Ireland in the Coming Time'- 'Nor may I less be counted one/ With Davis, Mangan, Ferguson...'⁴², he is referring to an identity created for him by O'Leary. Through O'Leary, Yeats became aware of the great store of Irish legend and folklore available in the translations of Ferguson, Douglas Hyde and Standish O'Grady. O'Leary introduced him to the Pilot newspaper of Boston in 1887 and to the Providence Journal in 1888, both of which published Yeats's poems, articles and letters. Much of Yeats's writing during this period gives evidence of his conversion to O'Leary's literary nationalism. In an article in the Boston Pilot, Yeats writes:

'We of the younger generation owe a great deal to Mr. John O'Leary and his sister. What nationality is in the present literary movement in Ireland is largely owing to their influence- an influence all feel who come across them. The material for many a song and ballad has come from Mr. John O'Leary's fine collection of Irish books- the best I know! The whole house is full of them. One expects to find them bulging out of the windows. He, more clearly than anyone, has seen that there is not fine nationality without literature, and seen the converse also, that there is no fine literature without nationality.'⁴³

Thus when Yeats enjoins all Irish writers to exploit Irish themes, to master

⁴¹ Essays and Introductions, p.246.

⁴² Collected Poems (London, 1965), p.57.

⁴³ Letters to the New Island, ed. Horace Reynolds (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), pp.75-76.

before all else the imaginative periods of Irish history, when he wishes T.W. Rolleston to 'devote his imagination to some national purpose,' when he would have Irish literature purged of insincerity and political propaganda, he is reflecting, to a large extent, the constructive proposals of his Fenian mentor who believed with Davis that a literary renaissance was necessary for the attainment of freedom and nationhood.

In 1887, when Yeats moved to London, he kept contact with O'Leary and with his assistance in enlisting subscribers, was able to publish his first book of poetry The Wanderings of Oisín in 1888. Other publications such as his Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry (1888), Stories from Carleton (1889), Representative Irish Tales (1890) and Irish Fairy Tales (1892) were likewise made possible with O'Leary's advice, criticism and general assistance.

In 1891 when Parnell died, Yeats was anxious to start an Irish intellectual movement. He transformed the Southwark Club into the Irish Literary Society of London and a year later The National Literary Society was established in Dublin, with O'Leary as President. For sometime, Yeats shared O'Leary's lodging and acquired an intimate knowledge of the patriot's convictions, habits and eccentricities. Of his indebtedness to him, Yeats writes in Autobiographies:

'...without him [O'Leary] I could do nothing, for his long imprisonment and longer exile, his magnificent appearance, and, above all, the fact that he alone had personality, a point of view not made for the crowd's sake, but for self-expression, made him magnetic to my generation.'⁴⁴

The influence of O'Leary on Yeats's literary activities is thus easily recognisable. O'Leary's interest in and support of Yeats was natural. In Autobiographies, Yeats reflects:

'I often wonder why he [O'Leary] gave me his friendship, why it was he who found almost all the subscribers for my Wanderings of Oisín, and why he now supported me in all I did, for how could he like verses that were all picture, all emotion, all association, all mythology? He could not have approved my criticism either, for I exalted Mask and Image above the eighteenth-century logic which he loved, and set experience before observation, emotion before fact...I think that perhaps it was because he no more wished to strengthen Irish Nationalism by second-rate literature than by second-rate morality, and was content that we agreed in that. "There are things a man must not do to save a nation", he had once told me, and when I asked what things, had said, "To cry in public", and I think it probable that he would have added if pressed, "To write oratorical or insincere verse".'⁴⁵

This was certainly true. From what we know of O'Leary's interests since the days of his connection with Irish People, however, it is clear that for many years he was in search of a poetic 'Voice' or 'Spirit' in Ireland which could give a suitable direction to revolutionary enthusiasm. In Recollections he writes: 'Not till that "Voice" or "Spirit" appear, as some day I hope they may, can I expect to set matters anyway right.'⁴⁶ Young Ireland literature had its faults; he deplored its lack of style, its rhetoric and sentimentalism. What Ireland required was an independent literature with its own distinctive style and value in the literature of nations. It is not improbable that when he became acquainted with Yeats's poetic ability and

⁴⁵ p.213.

⁴⁶ Vol.II, p.91.

artistic convictions, he was impressed and hopeful. In the Contemporary Club, he prophesied: 'Young Yeats is the only person in this room who will ever be reckoned a genius.'⁴⁷ Thus during the nineties, when Yeats relied on his advice and guidance, he never allowed the poet to stray from the national objective. When in London, Yeats spent his time studying the occult, O'Leary sent him reproving post-cards, urging him to give all his time to writing instead.

What deserves closer examination in the present study, is the political identity and peculiar nationalist approach which O'Leary transmitted to Yeats. Having inquired into the possible reasons for O'Leary's support of Yeats, it is important to consider, at the outset, why Yeats chose O'Leary as his guide. It is indeed easy to overstress the literary interests which drew poet and patriot together. What must be given some, if not equal attention, is the political aspect of the question.

Yeats's acceptance of O'Leary's guidance may have been determined by more than one consideration. As we have seen in the previous chapter, in view of his inherited traditions, Yeats's political choices in Nationalist Ireland were fairly limited. Butt's conservative nationalism was decidedly ineffective in Irish politics towards the close of the nineteenth century. Nationalist extremism, agrarian agitation and 'obstructionist' tactics in Parliament were all indicative of a democratisation of the nationalist element which proved inimical to those of his tradition and faith. O'Leary belonged to by far the most important Nationalist element in Irish politics for nearly half a century. He proved his patriotism by

⁴⁷ Bourke, p.182.

going to jail for it and when he returned to Ireland after his long exile, no one could doubt the sincerity of his convictions and he was looked upon generally as the Grand Old Man of Irish Nationalism. But what distinguished him from contemporary nationalist trends was his favourable attitude towards the Protestant and Unionist minority at a time when a democratic middle class threatened its existence. As Katherine Tynan recalls in Memories:

'The O'Leary's were acceptable to everybody. The Unionist Irish of the cultivated kind were beginning to forget the popular violence of the Land League and to turn wistfully towards Her who after their manner they loved intensely, while never doubting that the right and necessary thing for her was to be the reluctant bride of her rich next-door neighbour. Those Anglo-Irish had a yearning over Irish rebels and rebellions, perhaps because though romantic they had never been very effective. It is always easy to love a lost cause. They liked to talk a little high-minded treason and John and Ellen O'Leary were the kind of rebels not to threaten Unionist amenities...'48

Since O'Leary found himself out of accord with nationalist politics after his return, he directed his attention, as Boyle O'Reilly had noted, to the nationality of "the educated class". This class, which O'Reilly deprecatingly views as including those 'drawn into Anglicanism by the bribes of office, etc.', was undoubtedly dominated by the Protestant and Unionist minority. O'Leary's nationalism was obviously more in line with the Protestant tradition and this is not surprising since his master was Thomas Davis. A Catholic by birth, O'Leary's Catholicism was more cultural than practical and he remained indifferent, if not hostile to the Catholic hierarchy to the end of his days. There 'was an old Fenian quarrel there';

48 (London, 1924), p.99.

he had said to the young Yeats, 'In this country a man must have upon his side the Church or the Fenians and you will never have the Church.' His own religion was the old Persian 'to pull the bow and tell the truth.'⁴⁹

Thus O'Leary's faith and politics were in complete harmony with Yeats's inherited tradition. At the same time through O'Leary, Yeats was able to come into immediate contact with the Catholic Irish tradition which was generally inaccessible to one of his class. He found himself acceptable in Catholic and Nationalist homes and this did not a little to fire his ambitions as national poet. He writes in Autobiographies:

'I had noticed that Irish Catholics among whom had been born so many political martyrs had not the good taste, the household courtesy and decency of the Protestant Ireland I had known, yet Protestant Ireland seemed to think of nothing but getting on in the world. I thought we might bring the halves together if we had a national literature that made Ireland beautiful in the memory.'⁵⁰

His literary ambitions therefore fell in line with O'Leary's definition of political nationality which derived from Wolfe Tone and Thomas Davis. It was against any form of sectarianism and aimed at a unity of Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. If towards the end of his career Yeats became increasingly conscious of his Protestant heritage, he was in part following O'Leary's prejudices in favour of it, however slight they may have been. For as early as the 1860's, during the years of O'Leary's editorship, the accent of Irish People was distinctly in favour of the Protestant minority in order to counterbalance the growing identification of Catholicity and Nationality which followed the movement for Catholic Emancipation. Moreover

⁴⁹ Autobiographies, p.211.

⁵⁰ pp.101-02.

in his Recollections, O'Leary observes:

'Lying newspapers are forever trying to connect, directly or indirectly Catholicity and Nationality, or at least what they take to be Nationality. But the claim is too patently false to take root anywhere save in the clerical mind or in the clerically-minded. Nine-tenths of the leading patriots for the last century have been Protestants, real or nominal, and, many, if not most of them, certainly only the last...'.⁵¹

Yet throughout his career, Yeats was faithful to the unity ideal and not once did he support sectarian aims. In his later years, he continued to advise:

'Preserve that which is living and help the two Irelands, Gaelic Ireland and Anglo-Ireland, so to unite that neither shall shed its pride'⁵²

and in naming Ireland's rulers, he did not ignore the claims of great Catholics in Irish history.

The unity ideal was one of the three convictions supporting O'Leary's political identity. The other two, as we have seen, were belief in the separation of Ireland from England and physical force as opposed to parliamentary action as the means to freedom.

Both convictions, as we shall see, were assimilated into Yeats's literary consciousness. What he tried to achieve in his life's work was the literary parallel to Ireland's political separation from England. Not only in his early reflection of O'Leary's literary nationalism did he strive to establish Ireland's separate identity; but as he matured, he was able to assert

⁵¹ Vol. II, p.60

⁵² Explorations, p.337.

Ireland's intellectual and spiritual separateness in a way that justified political separation as no other way could. Here again it was O'Leary who showed him the way.

Upon his conversion to O'Leary's nationalism, Yeats set about purging Anglo-Irish literature of all that partook of English style and sensibility. With O'Leary, who like many advanced nationalists was apathetic towards the Irish language, he did not consider Gaelic an essential element of Irish nationality. In answer to Douglas Hyde's lecture on 'The Necessity for De-Anglicising Ireland' which strongly urged the revival and preservation of Gaelic as a means to the goal, Yeats queried:

'Is there, then, no hope for the de-Anglicising of our people? Can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit from being English in language? Can we not keep the continuity of the nation's life, not by trying to do what Dr. Hyde has practically pronounced impossible but by translating or re-telling in English, which shall have an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm and style, all that is best of the ancient literature? Can we not write and persuade others to write histories and romances of the great Gaelic men of the past, from the son of Nessa to Owen Roe, until there has been made a golden bridge between the old and the new?'⁵³

In his attempt to create the bridge, Yeats rejected all Irish writing that took its style from English masters and Young Ireland literature in particular was exposed to a barrage of criticism. Young Ireland poets 'mingled a little learned from Gaelic ballad writers with a great deal learned from Scott, Macaulay, and Campbell...'.⁵⁴ Likewise he attacked

⁵³ United Ireland, December 17, 1892.

⁵⁴ A Book of Irish Verse, ed. W.B. Yeats, Introduction (London, 1895), p.xiii.

Trinity College poets and writers: 'Trinity College, which desires to be English, has been the mother of many verse-writers and of few poets; and this can only be because she has set herself against the national genius, and taught her children to imitate alien styles and choose out alien themes ...'⁵⁵ In rejecting eighteenth century writers, Yeats became more extreme in his nationalism than O'Leary and Taylor who always praised the century 'and seemed of it'.⁵⁶ He had his reasons: 'Goldsmith had chosen to celebrate English scenery and manners; and Swift was but an Irishman by what Mr. Balfour has called the visitation of God, and some against his will; and Congreve by education and early association.'⁵⁷ With the passage of time, however, O'Leary's preference for the eighteenth century appeared justifiable. It became evident to Yeats that modern Ireland's composite identity was truly captured by the great thinkers of that century. Thus he writes in his Diary of 1930:

'When I was a young man the eighteenth century was all round me, O'Leary and J.F. Taylor praised it and seemed of it, and I had been to a school where Pope was the only poet since Shakespeare and, because I wanted romantic furniture, ignored it. Then later on, because every political opponent used it to cry down Irish literature that sought audience or theme in Ireland, I hated it. But now I am like that woman in Balzac who, after a rich marriage and association with the rich, made in her old age the jokes of the concierge's lodge where she was born...'⁵⁸

A year later in his introduction to Words Upon the Window-Pane, he writes:

55 A Book of Irish Verse, Intro., p.xxv.

56 Explorations, p.297.

57 A Book of Irish Verse, Intro., p.xii.

58 Explorations, p.297.

'More extreme...than Taylor and O'Leary, who often seemed to live in the eighteenth century...I turned from Goldsmith and Burke because they had come to seem a part of the English system, from Swift because I acknowledged, being a romantic, no verse between Cowley and Smart's Song to David, no prose between Sir Thomas Browne and the Conversations of Landor. But now I read Swift for months together, Burke and Berkeley less often but always with excitement, and Goldsmith lures and waits. I collect materials for my thought and work, for some identification of my beliefs with the nation itself, I seek an image of the modern mind's discovery of itself, of its own permanent form, in that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion...'59

Thus Yeats established that modern Ireland's identity was created by Swift's concept of human liberty, Burke's theory of the State and Berkeley's subjective idealism, 'the Salamis of the Irish intellect'. Ireland was separate and could never share British commercial, liberal or utilitarian values. Yeats could therefore support Fenian separatism with sound intellectual convictions.

Throughout his career, whether through Gaelic themes or Anglo-Irish thought, Yeats endeavoured to pursue what can be called in this context a 'literary separatism' and his work is duly acknowledged by many Fenians. Patrick MacCartan, a fellow Fenian wrote:

'We knew of course he [Yeats] was not working in our ranks but realized that in his own field he was working on parallel lines and doing well work none of us were capable of even attempting...'60

The third conviction i.e., belief in physical force and the morally

59 Explorations, pp.344-45.

60 No. X, Y.C.P., p.428.

vivifying effects of war, as against constitutional agitation, became the supporting principle for Yeats's theory of tragic art. Agitation of any kind besides proving ineffective was found demoralising by the Fenians. On more than one occasion O'Leary in his Recollections indicates his distrust in all agitating movements. They remained for him a necessary evil involving all forms of self-seeking and insincerity accompanied by wanton violence, treachery and cruelty.⁶¹ An article in the Irish People of January 30, 1864, reads:

'Even if it [agitation] could win our independence, independence so won would do no good; for freedom, to do good, must be gained with difficulty and heroic sacrifice, in the face of perils and death. Now the entire method of action in a parliamentary agitation is inglorious...It makes the people neither manly rebels, nor good subjects. It teaches them to distrust men of independent mind, and give their ears to political sycophants and 'loafers', who debauch their souls with fulsome praise, calculated to make them think all effort at self-improvement needless...In all agitation movements, too, men are judged by a low standard. There are no grand actions...'

The annihilation of self and the attestation of manhood, the heroic act and the blood sacrifice that would purge a nation demoralised by political compromise- these were considered ends in themselves apart from the political objective in view. As Yeats observes:

'O'Leary joined the Fenian movement with no hope of success, as we know, but because he believed such a movement good for the moral character of the people...The worth of a man's acts in the moral memory, a continual height of mind in the doing of them, seemed more to him than their immediate result, if, indeed, the sight of many failures had

⁶¹ Vol.I, p.56; Vol.II, pp.57, 139, 183, 243.

not taken the thought of success...'⁶²

This ethic removed action political or otherwise, from the dictates of expediency and temporary aims, and raised it to a level where it could be judged by absolute standards of right and wrong. As can be seen in O'Leary's entire political career, his attitude towards political questions was governed by this standard alone. It became for Yeats an integral aspect of the Irish nature as he came to understand it. In his review of O'Leary's Recollections (1897), he states:

'To me it has always seemed that the passion for abstract right, which has made the letters to press, the occasional speeches, and above all the conversation of Mr. John O'Leary so influential with the younger generation, is the Celtic passion for ideas intensified by that mistrust of the expedient which comes to men who have seen the failure of many hopes; and that as Irish man and women become educated they will inherit a like passion, if not in a like degree...'⁶³

This moral emancipation from the relative and personal became the basis of Yeats's philosophy of tragedy. He understood it as a means for man's self-assertion and dignity before fate. It was the source of tragic ecstasy in art. All his life, Yeats strove to give it expression. 'I have aimed at tragic ecstasy,' he wrote in his last years, 'and here and there in my own work and in the work of my friends I have seen it greatly played.'⁶⁴ When he recalls his early years, O'Leary and Taylor come before

⁶² Essays and Introductions, pp.246-47.

⁶³ Review of John O'Leary's Recollections of Fenians and Fenianism, The Bookman, 1897, p.147.

⁶⁴ Explorations, pp.415-16.

him as the tragic figures of his youth.⁶⁵

His attitude to war is necessarily related. In O'Leary's Irish People war is supported as a necessity. The May 14, 1864 issue reads: 'War may be sometimes a great evil but it is sometimes a great good. And war is absolutely necessary to raise Ireland from her fallen state.' Thomas Davis likewise supported war in one of his essays:

'War has its heroic devotion- its wondrous deeds of mind and of body- its ennobling memories.'⁶⁶

Likewise Yeats believed 'all noble things are a result of warfare; great nations and classes, of warfare in the visible world, great poetry and philosophy, of invisible warfare, the division of a mind within itself, a victory, the sacrifice of a man to himself.'⁶⁷ Heroic self-sacrifice is the common virtue of patriot and artist. In his later years, this belief became more pronounced as Yeats looked towards the advent of a new era. Thus in A Vision, Michael Robartes recommends war:

"Dear predatory birds, prepare for war, prepare your children and all that you can reach, for how can a nation or a kindred without war become the 'bright particular star' of Shakespeare, that lit the roads in boyhood?...Love war because of its horror, that belief may be changed, civilisation renewed. We desire belief and lack it...Belief is renewed continually in the ordeal of death."⁶⁸

Again in 'Under Ben Bulbin', Yeats recalls the Mitchellite faith in open

⁶⁵ Autobiographies, p.98.

⁶⁶ Thomas Davis: The Thinker and Teacher, ed. A. Griffith (Dublin, 1914), p.70.

⁶⁷ Essays and Introductions, p.321.

⁶⁸ A Vision (London, 1962), pp.52-53.

warfare, which we may remember influenced the young O'Leary:

'You that Mitchel's prayer have heard,
 "Send war in our time, O Lord!
 Know that when all words are said
 And a man is fighting mad,
 Something drops from eyes long blind,
 He completes his partial mind,
 For an instant stands at ease,
 Laughs aloud, his heart at peace.
 Even the wisest man grows tense
 With some sort of violence
 Before he can accomplish fate
 Know his work or choose his mate.'⁶⁹

In accepting the physical force policy of the I.R.B., Yeats naturally inherited their prejudice against O'Connell and his followers. O'Connell's conciliatory policy, as we have seen, was looked upon as a betrayal of the hope sustaining the Young Irelanders that the Repeal agitation would end in a military struggle with England. The Irish who followed O'Connell subscribed to the view that 'liberty was not worth the shedding of a single drop of blood'. This was doubtless looked upon by the Fenians as an unconscionable travesty of manhood and all that Ireland's ancient military civilisation stood for. O'Connell and his school are therefore constantly derided in the numbers of the Irish People. How far the prejudice influenced Yeats, can be seen in the decidedly inferior role he assigns O'Connell and his generation in his imaginative re-construction of Irish history. O'Connell becomes the symbol of agitating, reformist movements whose leaders were

⁶⁹ Collected Poems, pp.398-99.

victims of the Benthamite philosophy of Utilitarianism which influenced Western Europe during the earlier half of the nineteenth century. In literature, O'Connell stands for comedy and rhetoric. On the other hand, the 'Romantic Ireland' of O'Leary remains a theme for poetical tragedy. Robert Emmet, Edward Fitzgerald and Wolfe Tone belong to the revolutionary movements inspired by a generation which read Homer and Virgil. In his lecture on Emmet, Yeats views O'Connell as one 'who taught the people to lay aside the pike and musket, the song and the story, and to do their work now by wheedling and now by bullying...', and in his genius he found demoralisation as well as 'the appeal -as of a tumbler at a fair' to the commonest ear, a grin through a horse collar.'⁷⁰ We shall see later how Yeats's prejudice against O'Connell influenced his understanding of Parnell's tragedy.

Likewise Yeats's prejudice against the Catholic hierarchy was inherited from O'Leary's Fenianism. As members of an oath-bound secret society, the Fenians were refused the Sacraments. Since they believed in armed resistance and accepted war, they brought upon themselves the vitriolic censure of the priesthood. The result was a strong anti-clerical bias in most Fenians.

Through his connections with the Irish National Theatre, Yeats shared with O'Leary the experience of clerical antagonism, and till the end of his literary and political career, he endeavoured to preserve a freedom that was moral for both artist and patriot. An impersonal law and emotion

⁷⁰ Quoted in *Torchiana*, p.27.

relatively free from the dictates of circumstance or the self-imposed obligations of class and creed, was the source of this freedom. In O'Leary, Yeats perceived the functioning of this law which corresponded to that determining artistic creation. Its antithesis was conceived to be the same as that of life viz., 'the special moralities of clergymen and churches, and of kings and parliaments and peoples'. The expediency of politicians and the bigotry of clergymen, that incurred the lifelong displeasure of O'Leary in the political context, were stylised as contrary principles to freedom in the system of Yeats's creative thought.

By assimilating the main principles of the I.R.B. creed into his creative system of belief, Yeats was sufficiently qualified to be considered a member of the Brotherhood. In 1933, Patrick MacCartan asked Yeats if O'Leary, as head of the Fenians⁷¹, had sworn Yeats into the organisation. 'He said he never took any oath but regarded himself as one of the party. That others too considered him as one of the party is confirmed by Maud Gonne MacBride in her autobiography.'⁷²

During the 1890's and early twentieth century, Yeats took part in Irish politics in his capacity as a member of the I.R.B. In 1897, the Young Ireland League under the chairmanship of O'Leary held a meeting of nationalists who decided to celebrate the centenary of the 1798 Rising to help resuscitate the revolutionary spirit of Nationalist Ireland. Yeats

71 O'Leary was elected President of the Supreme Council, I.R.B. in 1900

72 No. x, Y.C.P., pp.429.

was directly connected with the celebrations and was elected president of the Wolfe Tone Memorial Association. At the laying of the foundation stone of the Wolfe Tone Memorial in 1898, Maud Gonne points out in her autobiography, that 'for the sake of unity the West-British Lord Mayor of Dublin was invited to take part in the functions but "to off set him, after much discussion, Willie Yeats, as an I.R.B. man, was also asked to speak."⁷³ Further, Yeats's stand against Royal Visits was in line with his political affiliations. Again during the Boer War, he was on the Irish Transvaal Committee, under the Presidentship of O'Leary, formed to send an Irish ambulance corps to the Boers.

In his last years, Yeats took up with enthusiasm the cause of Sir Roger Casement during the diary controversy. Casement was associated with the Easter Rising of 1916 and was hanged for traitorous activity against England. The controversy as described by John Unterecker, is related to 'the authenticity of a considerable body of papers which recorded homosexual practice and which were everyone is agreed, deliberately circulated by high officials between the time of Casement's imprisonment and the time of his execution for traitorous activity against England. The effect of the circulated diaries was to discourage many prominent figures from adding their names to an already imposing list of signatories who were petitioning the government for Casement's reprieve...After Casement was hanged, strong evidence was uncovered to suggest that the diaries were either forgeries or Casement's own longhand translations of the diaries of Armando Normand, a

⁷³ Maud Gonne MacBride, A Servant of the Queen (Dublin, 1950), p.273.

man Casement met in his investigations of native exploitation in the Putumayo river region of South America.'⁷⁴ It was this evidence which was examined by W.J. Maloney in his publication The Forged Casement Diaries. On reading Maloney's findings, Yeats was roused to write his fierce Casement Ballads. In them he displays the passion for just and upright action in politics which formed the core of O'Leary's Fenianism and which Yeats believed was part of an Irish inheritance. So he wrote Dorothy Wellesley:

'...I am fighting in those ballads [on Casement] for what I have been fighting all my life, it is our Irish fight though it has nothing to do with this or that country ...When somebody talks of justice who knows that justice is accompanied by secret forgery, when an archbishop wants a man to go to communion table when that man says he is not spiritually fit, then we remember our age-old quarrel against gold-braid and ermine, and that our ancestor Swift has gone where "fierce indignation can lacerate his heart no more," and we go stark, staring mad...'.⁷⁵

What might have become apparent in the preceding discussion is that Yeats's Fenianism, notwithstanding its concurrence with orthodox I.R.B. convictions, was indissolubly linked with the personality of John O'Leary. This becomes clear if we consider some aspects of O'Leary which distinguished him and his actions from his Fenian colleagues and the practice of Fenianism in Ireland during both its phases.

To start with, O'Leary's attitude to force, in practice, was more cautious than his political affiliations would allow. We have seen how the

⁷⁴ No.X, Y.C.P., pp.353-54.

⁷⁵ Wade, Letters, p.876.

Irish People reflected his approach which relied more heavily on an educated and united public opinion backed by military force. It was this cautious attitude that in later years frustrated his Fenian colleagues who found him categorically opposed to all 'activist' trends in the movement. His approach was natural. As we have seen, he was never really connected with the military programme of the I.R.B. and therefore knew nothing of the inner workings of the organisation in that respect. His achievements for the movement were primarily of a literary and educational nature. In practical politics, he was far too idealistic to be effective. As Boyle O'Reilly observed, his very purity was injurious to the revolutionary movement. It was his cautious disposition which was responsible for his initial support of Devoy's proposals at the time of the New Departure, as also his entertainment of an impractical hope for a united Irish Parliament which could declare its independence.

From the facts available for consideration, Yeats showed precisely the same approach to force in practice. When in 1897, he was elected President of the Wolfe Tone Memorial Association, he formed a grandiose, impractical scheme for uniting the Irish political parties to constitute an independent Irish Parliament. Years later he recalled:

'I dreaded some wild Fenian movement, and with literature perhaps more in mind than politics, dreamed of that Unity of Culture which might begin with some few men controlling some form of administration.'⁷⁶

Like O'Leary, he was completely out of touch with the military workings of

⁷⁶ Autobiographies, p.362.

the I.R.B. and consequently the Easter Rising of 1916 took him by surprise. Sir William Rothenstein observes how Yeats fretted because he was not consulted. His entire disposition towards violent action is negative when action is in fact taken. This was partly responsible for his critical attitude towards Maud Gonne's 'activist' policy.

During the Blueshirt Movement of 1933, Yeats wrote for it his Marching Songs which exalted physical violence:

'...good strong blows are delights to the mind'-
but soon he decided that 'no party should sing them'.⁷⁷

O'Leary's moral fastidiousness or critical conscience was another aspect that distinguished him from his Fenian contemporaries. It gave him a distinctly non-partisan approach in politics. As observed, he criticised freely and frequently all that fell short of his standards, moral, literary or otherwise. From the very start of his association with the I.R.B., James Stephens had warned O'Mahony of his independent outlook in politics. He worked for the movement with honesty and enthusiasm but remained basically detached, and no one could rely on him to support its chance misdemeanours. This was doubtless felt by some of his colleagues as an exasperatingly negative approach. Boyle O'Reilly's letter, quoted earlier, gives some evidence in this connections.

For Yeats, however, O'Leary's detachment was indicative of an achieved personality that gave expression to moral and intellectual freedom. It gave his life 'a curious and solitary distinction'. Yeats recounts with

⁷⁷ Collected Poems, p.380.

admiration how O'Leary had taken his long imprisonment without complaining: 'Even to the very end, while often speaking of his prison life he would have thought it took from his Roman courage to describe its hardship'.⁷⁸ He was of that supreme type, wrote Yeats, 'that lives like the enthusiasts and yet has no other light but a little cold intellect.'⁷⁹ Objectivity in the midst of passion was the condition of mind which Yeats tried to capture in art at once 'cold and passionate'. As we shall see later it was to become for him the hall-mark of Ireland's rulers. It may be noted that Yeats's own approach to politics followed, like O'Leary, a non-partisan tendency. It was his way of asserting the freedom of the artist.

Finally, O'Leary remained unaffected by the Fenian alliance with Socialist activity during the second phase of its development. Yeats records how he had said "No gentleman can be a Socialist"...and then, with a thoughtful look, "He might be an Anarchist." He had no philosophy, but things distressed his palate, and two of those things were international propaganda and the organized State, and Socialism aimed at both...'.⁸⁰ Contemporary records describe him as being aristocratic and distinguished in manner and appearance. Yeats observed that 'he hated democracy, though he never used the word either for praise or blame with more than feudal hatred.'⁸¹ In his writing, as indicated, he was never conscious of popular

78 Essays and Introductions, p.247.

79 Review, The Bookman, p.147.

80 Autobiographies, p.211.

81 Loc. cit.

taste and could only be appreciated by the well-informed, educated reader. In his later years, he directed his entire attention to the 'educated class' in whom he placed the responsibility of instructing Ireland. In many respects therefore, O'Leary remained conservative and in this, as in the many ways indicated, he impressed his pupil Yeats. Thus when Yeats in his last years raged against all forms of modern government which perpetuated an artificial unity in societies, when he appeared to himself as 'the first of the final destroying horde', he was consciously following O'Leary's intellectual Anarchism⁸² and when he urged the rule of enlightened elites in Ireland, he remained in basic agreement with his Fenian mentor.

82 vide Wade, Letters, p.869.

Chapter Three

**ARISTOCRATIC SOCIALISM;
YEATS AND WILLIAM MORRIS**

EDWARD GIFFORD

THE
MORRIS

WINDSOR AND OXFORD

Yeats met William Morris for the first time in Dublin. Later when the Yeats family moved to London in 1887, the young poet was taken to the Sunday evening debates of the Hammersmith Socialist Society held in an old stable beside Kelmscott House, Morris's house at Hammersmith. He was soon to be included in the little group of visitors who dined with Morris after the meetings. This besides acquainting Yeats with Bernard Shaw, Walter Crane, Emery Walker, Sidney Cockerell, H.M. Hyndman and Prince Kropotkin, gave him the opportunity of closer contact with Morris.

Morris was at that time 'an ageing man' in his early fifties. Yeats records his disappointment in the house of the great designer who 'seemed content at last to gather beautiful things rather than arrange a beautiful house.'¹ In those years being 'in all things Pre-Raphaelite', Yeats was however satisfied by the big cupboard in the drawing-room painted with a scene from Chaucer by Burne-Jones. He had read as a boy the third volume of The Earthly Paradise and The Defence of Guenevere but his appreciation for The Man Who Never Laughed Again was marred by his father's discomfiture over his possible preference of Morris to Keats. Thereafter he questioned while he read and at last ceased to read. He was yet to read the prose romances that became after Morris's death 'so great a joy that they were the only books I was ever to read slowly that I might not come too quickly to the end.'²

Yeats's knowledge of Morris, before he visited Kelmscott House, was

¹ Autobiographies, p.140.

² Ibid, p.141.

therefore mainly literary in character. He was, through his father, brought into contact with Pre-Raphaelitism and was well aware of Morris's accomplishments in designing, decoration and the allied arts which presumably led to his disappointment in Kelmscott House. But of Morris's politics, his knowledge was slight. For almost five years (1885-1890) he was engaged in intensive readings of Irish folk lore, mythology, literature and history under the guidance of O'Leary. When he moved to London in 1887 he was still building for himself a national identity and had already, for inward sustenance, fashioned a dogma to replace the non-religious creed of Tyndal and Huxley:

'I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians. I wished for a world where I could discover this tradition perpetually, and not in pictures and in poems only, but in tiles round the chimney-piece and in the hangings that kept out the draught. I had even created a dogma: 'Because those imaginary people are created out of the deepest instinct of man, to be his measure and norm, whatever I can imagine those mouths speaking may be the nearest I can go to truth.'³

In the light of this dogma, Yeats found in the Socialist world of Morris's imagination a convincing norm. So he writes:

'I did not read economics, having turned Socialist because of Morris's lectures and pamphlets, and I think it unlikely that Morris himself could read economics. That old dogma of mine seemed germane to the matter. If men and women imagined by the poets were the norm, and if Morris had, in let us

³ Autobiographies, p.116.

say News from Nowhere, then running through the Commonweal, described such men and women, living under their natural conditions, or as they would desire to live, then those conditions themselves must be the norm and could we but get rid of certain institutions the world would turn from eccentricity.'⁴

Yeats's conversion to Morris's Socialism was inevitable. Alienated in his father's circle by the world-view of Carolus Duran, Bastien-Lepage, Tyndall and Huxley, and nurtured to a sense of the past by O'Leary, Yeats was naturally drawn to one whose contemplation of the past left him disgusted with the modern malaise of division and disunity; one who earnestly sought a remedy in social reform, because he would not have 'the pleasure of the eyes go from the world' nor 'the place of Homer to be taken by Huxley.'⁵

It is substantially evident that Morris as poet and artist rather than as Socialist, in the accepted sense of the word, won Yeats's sympathies. It was his poetic vision seen as a possible reality that necessitated social revolution; the economics of Das Kapital were subordinate. Morris's Socialism was viewed as a means to the fuller recognition of artistic values, not as an end in itself. Yeats's temporary conversion to Socialism was as incidental to his artistic vocation as, perhaps in his opinion, Morris's Socialist commitments were to his. 'I do not think', he writes in 'The Happiest of the Poets', 'he [Morris] troubled to understand books of economics, and Mr Mackail says, I think, that they vexed and wearied him. He found it

⁴ Autobiographies, p.146.

⁵ William Morris - Selected Writings and Designs, ed. Asa Briggs (Penguin Books, 1968), p.36.

enough to hold up, as it were, life as it is today beside his visions, and to show how faded its colours were and how sapless it was.'⁶

It would perhaps be safe to maintain with most critics that the lasting impact of Morris on Yeats was due to a compatibility of ideals regarding the style and content of art. Both believed in the exploitation of heroic sagas, both altered these completely in order to satisfy the demands of romantic imagination⁷ and when Yeats had completed 'The Wanderings of Oisín' Morris had said to him, 'You write my sort of poetry'. Yeats was for a considerable period influenced by the rhythms of Morris's poetry and in the general introduction to his work acknowledged: 'I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser, and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris...'⁸ In his lecture of 1958, Jack Lindsay went so far as to claim that 'without Morris it would be impossible to conceive Yeats's development into a great poet'.⁹ Likewise, Peter Faulkner in his essay William Morris and W.B. Yeats, directs attention to the literary influence of Morris on Yeats apart from his consideration of the influence of Morris's personality and hatred of Victorian industrial society on the younger poet. The politics of the great medievallist, in this context, has all along been ignored. When we are told by Yeats how after an outburst in one of the Socialist meetings over the matter of religion, he refused to return to Kelmscott House and presumably saw little

⁵ Essays and Introductions, p.63.

⁷ vide Dorothy M. Hoare, The Works of Morris and Yeats in relation to Early Saga Literature (Cambridge, 1937).

⁸ Essays and Introductions, p.519.

⁹ Peter Faulkner, William Morris and W.B. Yeats (Dublin, MCMLXII), p.4.

of Morris thereafter, we may be satisfied that Yeats's 'Socialist phase' came to an end. As Faulkner states: 'The final political and social attitudes of William Morris and W.B. Yeats are in the strongest contrast'. The materialist view of the Socialist League and the spiritual enthusiasms of the romantic Yeats were incompatible.¹⁰ In the narrow sense, this is undoubtedly true, but if we wish to probe deeper into the nature of Yeats's politics, we cannot remain satisfied with the facile divisions of political ideologies. When our subject concerns the artist in politics, both Morris and Yeats merit closer attention. The general impression left by critics of the impact of the one on the other is too bald and clear-cut to approximate the possible realities of the question.

The complex entanglement of artistic and socio-political aims was nowhere better represented than in the chequered career of William Morris. Reading J.W. Mackail's famous biography of Morris (London, 1899), with which Yeats was familiar, one becomes aware of the protracted encounter of an artist with the realities of social reform and politics, the progressive divergence of the two worlds, visionary and practical, and their final separation. The separation was inevitable since the pursuit of any utopian scheme in the every-day world entailed a systematic compromise of the Ideal all the way to its hypothetical realisation. As Yeats records, Morris would leave the discredit of transitional mistakes to the 'bourgeoisie'; by mistakes he meant vexatious restrictions and compromises, the concern for this or that measure which obscured the vision of the goal, and to 'reverse

¹⁰ William Morris and W.B. Yeats, pp.3-4.

Swinburne's description of Tiresias' the seeing of 'Light on the way but darkness on the goal.'¹¹

It is not surprising that more recent commentators like R.D. Macleod in his Morris without Mackail, or as seen by his contemporaries, (Glasgow, 1956), have found reason to comment on the quarrelsome career of Morris as Socialist. A rigid adherence to the Ideal was what politically isolated O'Leary in the Ireland of revolution and reform. It also isolated Morris in England in a parallel context. Yeats was deeply impressed by both. Admittedly, as in the case of O'Leary, it was the personality of Morris, quite apart from his public career that affected Yeats. The impact of Morris's person on the young Yeats was very favourable indeed. In Autobiographies, Yeats records:

'I took to him [Morris] first because of some little tricks of speech and body that reminded me of my old grandfather in Sligo, but soon discovered his spontaneity and joy and made him my chief of men. Today I do not set his poetry very high, but for an odd, altogether wonderful line, or thought; and yet, if some angel offered me the choice I would choose to live his life, poetry and all, rather than my own or any other man's.'¹²

The choice betrays extravagant admiration and one is prompted to analyse its rationale. By the time Yeats wrote the passage, he was well acquainted with the public and private aspects of Morris's life, his successes and failures. Morris was known as artist in a particular context, one that looked towards a socialist revolution in industrialised England. Through

¹¹ Autobiographies, p.147.

¹² Ibid, p.141.

the process of 'distancing'¹³, a selected image of Morris was distilled out of remembered impressions and, as in the case of O'Leary, the image creatively apprehended in the mind's eye was allotted a niche in the poet's personal mythologem. The life of Morris 'poetry and all' which Yeats would fain exchange his own for, could well be the elaboration of a single gesture, attitude or enthusiasm that made him as 'Dreamer of the Middle Ages' a controlled image of art; an image which apart from defining an historical context, suggested an attitude of mind or mode of belief that reflected Yeats's deepest convictions. To take it as such would give us the truth of Autobiographies which reads as the half-conscious re-fashioning of past experience. We must however consider the circumstances which may have led to the distillation of the Morris image. These simultaneously influenced and were influenced by the image and it is by conceiving the complex interaction of the realities of living and acting in historical time with the creative ordering of experience in art, transcending time, that one may gain some insight into the subject of Yeats's politics.

In view of the above observations, I would like to demonstrate that Morris's political career and ambitions indirectly helped Yeats to formulate his own designs for a regenerated Ireland. Morris's Socialism was peculiar to his personality, just as O'Leary's Fenianism was peculiar to himself, and it held a message for Yeats which was entirely in accord with the younger poet's later political thought. Thus Yeats did not have a Socialist phase, in the accepted sense of the term. He tried a socialist experiment

¹³ vide An Honoured Guest, ed. Denis Donoghue and J.R. Mulryne (London, 1965), Chapter X, pp.165-89.

in literature which failed. His later criticism of Morris is better appreciated in the light of this failure. Finally, I would like to indicate the image-making process through which Morris was absorbed into Yeats's poetry.

In order to understand the nature of Morris's Socialism, we may first review his career as artist-politician.

I

In his essay 'Art and Ideas' Yeats writes of how as a young man he would be content 'to paint like Burne-Jones and Morris under Rossetti's rule, the Union at Oxford, to set up there the traditional images most moving to young men...'¹⁴ He was referring to the young Morris who, according to the records of Canon Dixon, was a High Churchman and an aristocrat in his manners, tastes and sympathies, and nurtured in an almost medieval city such as Oxford was in the eighteen-fifties. Morris had entered into residence at Exeter College, Oxford in 1853 with the intention of taking orders. Here he met Edward Burne-Jones who had identical aims and interests. A lifelong friendship was established. Their readings in theology, ecclesiastical history and archaeology naturally led to the study of mythology, history, poetry and art. This along with a more exhaustive survey of medieval romances, chronicles and architecture brought about in Morris that invincible passion for art which in fact became the raison d'etre of all his future activities, public and private.

¹⁴ Essays and Introductions, p.347.

Soon Morris and Burne-Jones gathered about them a group of young men who were bound together by 'a common love of poetry and their indefinite literary and artistic aspirations'.¹⁵ They were later to form the Brotherhood. Carlyle, Ruskin and Tennyson were their accepted leaders in thought and feeling. University life, with the opportunities it afforded for a study of modern and secular literature, gradually led to the 'secularisation' of Morris's mind. He read Chaucer and Browning who had a lasting impact on his ideas of poetic style and content. Discovering his own creative abilities, the idea of taking orders receded into the background as art and literature occupied his immediate interests. In the summer of 1855, while on a walking tour in Normandy, Morris and Burne-Jones finally decided to give up studying for the church and devote their lives to art. Burne-Jones resolved to be a painter and Morris that he would be architect.

By the end of 1855 the social ideal was brought to the foreground of attention. As a result of a study of living conditions in Britain, carried out by two members of the group, Price and Faulkner, it was concluded that 'civilisation, with all that this word implies of freedom, art, and morality is conditioned by the physical and social well-being of the masses, and that the civilisation which leaves out of account that physical and social well-being, is not worthy of a name.'¹⁶ Upon this realisation, one of the immediate steps taken by the group was the founding of the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine which was to 'embody the new beliefs of the members

¹⁵ Anna A. von Helmholtz-Phelan, The Social Philosophy of William Morris (Duke University Press, 1927), p.7.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.11.

and to assist in the crusade of Carlyle and Ruskin.' The development of Morris's interest in public life and politics can be dated from these times.

Between the years 1876-1881, Morris immersed himself in public and political activities. He became very active in the cause of protecting ancient buildings and founded a society for the purpose in 1876. Thereafter he lectured, wrote and travelled the country inspecting monuments for the Society and served on its various committees. At the same time he became treasurer of the Eastern Question Association which was formed in response to the Bulgarian atrocities of 1875-1876. The barbaric cruelty of the Turks aroused European indignation and when Russia threatened armed intervention, there was no immediate interference from the other powers. They were however, jealous of Russia's action. The attitude of the English Government towards Russian aggression was not favourable and the Eastern Question Association was formed to counteract any propaganda which might have hoodwinked the masses into war with Russia. Morris worked fervently for the cause of the E.Q.A., without success. He was very soon to experience his first disillusionment with the political game. He lost patience with the Liberal Party and decided to give up politics altogether and return to his commitments to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and his other developing interests in tapestry, weaving, carpet-making, dyeing etc. 'As to my political career', he wrote in February 20, 1878, 'I think it is at an end for the present; and has ended sufficiently disgustingly...I shall give up reading the papers and shall stick to my

work.'¹⁷ The artist had no gift to set the statesman right.

In 1879, however, Morris was back in active politics. He became treasurer of the National Liberal League which consisted mainly of the working-class Radicals who figured in the E.Q.A. The Liberal Government returned to power in 1880 after which Morris's 'political partisanship rapidly fell away from him'¹⁸ The Irish Coercion Bill of 1881 did not a little to wear out his enthusiasm for the party. The social reforms which he had at heart, 'he saw disappearing amid an ocean of Whiggery which he no more loved than he did Toryism'.¹⁹ He was disillusioned for the second time in the political machinery. He found it vague and odious and anxious as he was for a fresh order of existence, he had no patience with the vacillation, petty compromise and unprincipled coercion of political parties. On resigning the treasurership of the League, he wrote, 'I do so hate everything vague in politics as well as in art.'²⁰ Vagueness to Morris was immoral. In politics it meant compromise and piece-meal legislation; in art it meant the absence of distinct form and an awareness of parts in place of the whole.

Once more, Morris felt compelled to retreat from politics to art. He settled down to compose lectures and those he delivered during this period contain the germinal concepts of his social philosophy. He began to look

17 J.W. Mackail, The Life of William Morris, Vol.I (London, 1899), pp.361-62.

18 Mackail, Vol.II, p.7.

19 Ibid, p.8.

20 Loc. cit.

towards the simpler societies of earlier times before the plague of specialisation truncated creative joy which was the common experience of working-men; times when the Thames-side country bumpkins produced in a simple village church a beautiful work of art. His judgement on those times did not escape sentiment:

'I know that in those days life was often rough and evil enough, beset by violence, superstition, ignorance, slavery; yet sorely as poor folks needed a solace, they did not altogether lack one, and that solace was pleasure in their work. Much as the world has won since then, I do not think it has won for all men such perfect happiness that we can afford to cast aside any solace that nature holds forth to us...'²¹

He was gradually convinced that art and its values alone could bring about social and political re-organisation for the betterment of mankind. A passage from an address which best sums up his response to the times and his proposed remedy for the sickness he observed runs:

'As I hear the yells and shrieks and all the degradation cast on the glorious tongue of Shakespeare and Milton, as I see the brutal reckless faces and figures go past me, it rouses the recklessness and brutality in me also, and fierce wrath takes possession of me, till I remember, as I hope I mostly do, that it was my good luck only of being born respectable and rich, that has put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty street, and drink-steeped liquor shops, the foul and degraded lodgings. I know by my own feelings and desires, what would have saved them from the lowest depth of savagery: employment which would foster their self-respect and win the praise and sympathy of their fellows, and dwellings which they could come to with pleasure, surroundings which would soothe and elevate them; reasonable labour, reasonable rest. There is only one thing that can give them this - art.'²²

²¹ Mackail, Vol.II, pp.20-21.

²² Ibid, p.21.

His private letters of this period show how it was the ugliness of civilisation epitomised in the welter and poverty in London that drew him to the Socialist ideal. He claimed to feel the motion of the Zeitgeist towards some colossal transformation and in a letter on New Years' day, 1881, wrote: '...my mind is very full of the great change which I hope is slowly coming over the world, and of which surely this new year will be one of the landmarks.'²³ In another letter he wrote of the 'air laden with the coming storm'. Objectively viewed, these eschatological pronouncements were part of an artist's response to the growing mechanisation of his age; an environment so hostile to his vocation provoked the threat of extinction. We are told that the atmosphere of imminent and complete change, which Morris clearly felt, was largely one of his own creation. At any rate, it is clear that it was Art not Economics that led Morris to Socialism. After he accepted Socialism he confessed: 'When I took the step I was blankly ignorant of economics; I had never so much as opened Adam Smith, or heard of Ricardo, or of Karl Marx...'²⁴ More's Utopia had a greater influence on him than all the scientific Socialist treatises of his day.

Morris's career as an active Socialist extended over a period of seven years. In January 1883, Morris joined the Democratic Federation. This was formed in 1881 by a group of conscientious English Radicals who were disillusioned by the Irish, Eastern and reformist policies of the Liberal party. They organised themselves 'to promote measures of Radical

²³ Mackail, Vol.II, p.24.

²⁴ Briggs, William Morris, p.34.

reform under the leadership of H.M. Hyndman, Herbert Borrows, Miss Helen Taylor, Joseph Cowan and others.'²⁵ The Federation became more and more socialist in principle as time went on and when Morris joined, it adopted Marxist principles and altered its title to the Social Democratic Federation. It was perhaps the immediate expression of the Socialist faith that was spreading among the young pupils of Mill, Spencer, Comte and Darwin who as Shaw described 'left aside evolution and free thought' and 'took to insurrectionary economics, studied Karl Marx and were convinced enough to fix the Revolution for 1889.'²⁶

The relation of art to Morris's new commitments, however, remained unaltered. A lecture delivered in 1884 reads:

'The cause of art is the cause of the people. We well-to-do people, those of us who love art, not as a toy, but as a thing necessary to the life of man, have for our best work the raising of the standards of life among the people...'²⁷

He did endeavour to understand the economic and scientific side of Socialism and 'even tackled Marx' but confesses that although he enjoyed the historical part of *Das Kapital*, he 'suffered agonies of confusion of brain over reading the pure economics of that great work.'²⁸

It is evident that as a notable man of letters, his membership in the Socialist Democratic Federation was an asset in drawing recruits to the

²⁵ Helmboltz-Phelan, p.65.

²⁶ Loc. cit.

²⁷ Mackail, Vol.II, p.84.

²⁸ Briggs, William Morris, p.34.

Socialist cause. He was soon put on the executive board of the Federation. But by the autumn of 1883 he became aware of the conflicts within the organisation, of the spirit of compromise among some members and anarchist tendencies in others. When he signed its manifesto, events very soon made explicit that his acceptance of it had not been final. Nonetheless, he worked untiringly for the Federation, contributed to and financially supported its journal and spent his time lecturing in and out of London. Current politics continued to disgust him and it was at this time that he developed a dread of parliamentary procedures and party tactics that explained his distrust of parliamentary Socialists. 'What a spectacle of shuffling, lies, vacillation, and imbecility does the Game Political offer us!' he is recorded to have observed, 'If we ally ourselves to any of the present parties they will use us as a catspaw and on the other hand, if a Socialist candidate slips through into Parliament, he will only do so at the expense of his principles.'²⁹ Consequently, he retreated to serve the educational objectives of Socialism and decided to quit the S.D.F. Idealistically he wrote:

'I want a real revolution, a real change in society; society, a great organic mass of well-regulated forces used for bringing about a happy life for all. And the means for attaining it are simple enough; education in Socialism, and organisation for the time when the crisis shall force action upon us: nothing else will do us any good at present...'³⁰

On December 30, 1884, Morris and a few others who seceded from the

²⁹ Helmholtz-Phelan, p.74.

³⁰ Ibid., pp.74-75 (footnote).

S.D.F. formed the Socialist League. A journal, Commonweal was also started to represent its aims. Gradually Morris felt the need of an enlightened few to instruct the masses:

'What I should like to have now far more than anything else, would be a body of able, high-minded, competent men who should act as instructors: I should look to those men to preach what Socialism really is- not a change for the sake of change, but a change involving the very noblest ideal of human life and duty: a life in which every human being should find unrestricted scope for his best powers and faculties.'³¹

He was not very hopeful about the prospects of his small party newly constituted, but the realities of the present were relegated in favour of a visionary future balanced by a glorified past. On reading Richard Jefferies' 'After London', he wrote:

'I have more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future history of 'civilisation', which I know now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long: what a joy it is to think of! and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies. With this thought in my mind all the history of the past is lighted up and lives again to me...'³²

As a visionary idealist who valued the ethics of heroism in simpler societies, Morris felt a cathartic blood-letting necessary to relieve the festering sore of modern civilisation.

When a riot took place in Trafalgar Square on February 8, 1886, giving some Socialists the assurance that Revolution and change were close at hand,

³¹ Mackail, Vol.II, p.133.

³² Ibid, p.144.

Morris was, however, disillusioned. He saw clearly that the policy of the Socialist League was defeated in aimless revolutionary outbursts. In Commonweal he issued a manifesto which asserted:

'It is above all our business to guard against the possible consequences of these surprises. At the risk of being misunderstood by hot-heads, I say that our business is more than ever Education.'³³

And once again, he looked towards the creation of a small body of men who could be given the authority to guide the masses:

'But we must hope that a strong party can be so educated, educated in economics, in organization, and in administration. To such a body of men all the aspirations and vague opinion of the oppressed multitudes would drift, and little by little they would be educated by them, if the march of events should give us time; or if not, even half-educated they would follow them in any action.'³⁴

By advocating the policy of education towards Revolution, which he re-affirmed as the only way left after events culminated in the tragedy of 'Bloody Sunday' in Trafalgar Square in 1887, Morris found himself nearer the Parliamentarians and opportunists with whom he had broken a year before. He also felt himself alienated from the more extremist section of his own party who called themselves Anarchists. Although his policy suited the Parliamentarians Morris never stopped distrusting parliamentary action. In a letter of February 1887, he stated that if there were a Socialist party in England they would have to send men to Parliament but he certainly

³³ Mackail, Vol.II, p.163.

³⁴ Loc. cit.

would not be one of them.³⁵ This perhaps explains why Socialist D- of Yeats's Autobiographies suggested that Morris was an Anarchist without knowing it. But he is recorded to have had no sympathy with the Anarchists either. The throwing of bombs by followers of this faith he thought a 'deplorable and regrettable disease; first, because of the method, and second, because it disgusted people and provoked the most hostile reaction.'³⁶

Morris was therefore destined to be politically isolated. He was inevitably drawn back to his natural environment of art and literature. In 1886 he began translating the Odyssey into English, wrote The Dream of John Ball in 1887, and commenced the House of Wolfings which was the beginning of a long series of prose romances. He gathered about him a group of artists and craftsmen, not all Socialists, who worked towards the resuscitation of the dying arts and were profoundly influenced by his aesthetic ideals.

The affairs of the Socialist League in the meantime deteriorated, and in 1889, the control of the executive passed over to a group of Anarchists who deposed Morris from the editorship of Commonweal and replaced him by the extremist Frank Kitz.

With the disintegration of the Socialist League, Morris's career as an active Socialist came to a close. In 1890, however, he established with a few friends the Hammersmith Socialist Society. The hall used for its weekly meetings, was attached to his own house. The last years, 1890-1896, were spent in passive Socialism. The Sunday gatherings drew among others

³⁵ Mackail, Vol.II, pp.193-94.

³⁶ Helmholtz-Phelan, p.93.

important men of letters who dined and discoursed on Art and Life. Morris never lost faith in the cause, but gave up public campaigning and spent most of his time writing and fostering the arts.

The political isolation which terminated the career of Morris as an active Socialist, has led some to question the depth and practical reality of his political sympathies. Since the question has a bearing on our subject, it may be given some attention.

The fact of Morris's conversion to Socialism ideology via a concern for art did encourage the charge of sentimentalism advanced by the more scientific-minded Socialists of his day. There is, as noted, ample evidence to show that his knowledge of Marxian economics followed, not preceded, his conversion. This coupled with the fact that he was a capitalist, being head of a manufacturing firm and an employer of labour, made his position as professed Socialist still more vulnerable. Furthermore, the articles which he designed for production in his workshops were those that only the rich could afford. Morris defended himself in believing that the fault lay in the system. Until that was transformed, he could not escape the inconsistency of his status.

The charges of sentimentalism and inconsistency were undoubtedly supported by the observations of Morris's friends and acquaintances. Graham Robertson, who knew many of Morris's associates, said that Burne-Jones "always disliked the flamboyant form of Socialism adopted by Morris. He would never discuss it, but one day said to me, 'All that does not really belong to him at all, you know, it is merely an attitude of mind and may pass at any moment. In fact, from day to day, I expect to see him turn

completely round and rush off in the opposite direction.'"³⁷ And Theodore Watts-Dunton who was well acquainted with Morris's record over many years wrote:

'...it is not until we come to deal with his [Morris] Socialism that we see how entirely his aestheticism is the primal source from which all his energies spring. That he has a great and generous heart- a heart that must needs sympathise with every form of distress no one can doubt... yet his Socialism comes from an entirely aesthetic impulse. It is the vulgarities of civilisation, it is the ugliness of contemporary life - so unlike that Earthly Paradise of the poetic dream that have driven him from his natural work.'³⁸

The idealism of a wealthy man of letters participating in a working-class movement and the apparent incompatibility of class perspectives is testified to by Charles Whibley when he writes:

'...a sympathy with Socialism persuaded Morris, who was by blood of the bourgeoisie, by talent of the aristocracy, to declass himself. He was driven to associate with the common agitator, who patronised him without any appreciation of his worth. And the agitator had no scruples in taking advantage of Morris's practical inexperience. He forced the poet to edit his childish papers, and to speak at his intolerable meetings...and he [Morris] never saw, what was evident to his friends, that he was the instrument of self-seekers.'³⁹

That Morris himself saw the incompatibility of class perspectives, however, there can be no doubt. As observed, in his early days, he was an aristocrat in manners, tastes and sympathies and we may recall the anecdote Yeats records, when for the cause of equality he blundered in saying: 'I was

³⁷ Macleod, Morris Without Mackail, p.17.

³⁸ Ibid, p.23.

³⁹ Ibid, p.17.

brought up a gentleman but now as you can see associate with all sorts.'⁴⁰
 In the act of renouncing his class Morris was very conscious of it. When he says:

'We well-to-do people, those of us who love art, not as a toy, but as a thing necessary to the life of man, have for our best work the raising of the standard of life among the people...',⁴¹

there is a suggestion of a chivalric gesture in recognising that it is the beholden duty of the wealthier class to uplift the underprivileged and impart to them the cultural values of the minority. When he exhorts the bourgeoisie to renounce their class and cast their lot with the victims in the crisis of class antagonism, he appeals to the heroic remedy of society's ills: 'Nothing can be done till all men are made poor by common consent.'⁴² He addressed himself, therefore, to the heroism and chivalry he thought native to the upper stratum of his class. Gradually he became aware of the impassable gulf between the classes and the lack of communication between them. In one of his letters, he wrote vividly on one of his Socialist meetings:

'You would perhaps have smiled at my congregation; some twenty people in a little room, as dirty as convenient and stinking a good deal. It took the fire out of my fine periods, I can tell you: it is a great drawback that I can't talk to them roughly and unaffectedly. Also I would like to know what amount of real feeling underlies their bombastic revolutionary talk when they get to that. I don't seem to have got at them yet - you see this great class gulf lies between us.'⁴³

⁴⁰ Autobiographies, p.143.

⁴¹ Mackail, Vol.II, pp.84-85.

⁴² Helmholtz-Phelan, p.39.

⁴³ Mackail, Vol.II, p.145.

Paradoxically, in his attempt to bring about a complete transformation of society which would bridge the gulf of classes, he contemplated the cultural achievements of mediaeval society which was by no means a classless one. His Utopian romance News From Nowhere, which appeared in Commonweal during Yeats's Socialist phase,⁴⁴ suggests a society where the conditions of labour are those of the fourteenth century. He argued that the artist-workers of the Middle Ages may have experienced a slavery of the body but not of the soul, and by a paradoxical inversion of logic believed that economic security liberating all from the slavery of the body would in modern society, grant the liberty of the soul. The inconsistencies of his social philosophy are, in the last analysis, due to the fallacy of using minority values to determine the needs of the majority.

In many ways, therefore, Morris's Socialism was peculiar to himself. It was aristocratic in conception, insofar as it presupposed that the art values of a minority could serve the needs of the majority. In his early years, as noted, Morris was aristocratic in his manners, tastes and sympathies. His whole approach to Socialism was guided by this early disposition. The prosaic realities of the labour movement did indeed 'take the fire out of his fine periods' and he could never quite bridge the gulf between the classes. The impact of his Socialism on Yeats might become clearer in this light.

II

Much of Yeats's plan for the intellectual regeneration of Ireland, while

⁴⁴ Autobiographies, p.146.

it received its initial and lasting impetus from O'Leary, derived from Morris's Socialism. Yeats recalls he turned Socialist through Morris's lectures and pamphlets. The ideas expressed in these lectures and pamphlets give us interesting clues to the nature of Morris's influence on Yeats's thinking. In his pamphlet How I Became a Socialist, Morris defines his understanding of Socialism in simple terms:

'...what I mean by Socialism is a condition of society in which there should be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master's man, neither idle nor overworked, neither brain-sick brain workers, nor heart-sick hand workers, in a word, in which all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully, and with the full consciousness that harm to one would mean harm to all- the realization at last of the meaning of the word COMMONWEALTH.'⁴⁵

It was this ideal that eventually drove him to practical Socialism:

'...in my position of a well-to-do man, not suffering from the disabilities which oppress a working man at every step, I feel that I might never have been drawn into the practical side of the question if an ideal had not forced me to seek towards it...'⁴⁶

He continues that the 'type of a certain group of mind' that forced him to conceive of the ideal in the first place, found its representative thinkers in men like Carlyle and Ruskin. Their attitudes were in open rebellion against, what he terms as, 'the Whig frame of mind' natural to modern, prosperous middle-class men. Before his days of practical Socialism, Morris acknowledges it was Ruskin, who was 'my master towards the ideal'. Through him he learned to give form to his discontent which 'was not by any means

⁴⁵ Briggs, William Morris, pp.33-34.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.35.

vague'. 'Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things,' he writes 'the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilisation.'⁴⁷ He dreamed therefore of a condition of society where the workman could be redeemed from his 'skinny and pitiful' existence by the vision and realisation of a better and fuller life which was denied him in the world of bourgeois values. This vision could be communicated to the masses through art alone. Thus he concludes:

'It is the province of art to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before him [the workman] a life to which the perception and creation of beauty, the enjoyment of real pleasure that is, shall be felt to be as necessary to man as his daily bread, and that no man, and no set of men, can be deprived of this except by mere opposition, which should be resisted to the utmost.'⁴⁸

Consequently Morris wrote News from Nowhere in which he demonstrated his ideal of a 'full and reasonable life'. In this Utopian romance, with which Yeats was very familiar, the rebel heroes of the new society described by old Hammond to the protagonist, clearly belong to that 'type of a certain group of mind' suffused with the ideals of Morris and Ruskin. They are the ideal anarchists, champions of the down-trodden and their enemy is the money-making, middle-class morality of the old society. As the 'non-legal leaders' of the masses, they precipitate war and successfully overthrow the old Government and all its evils. At the outbreak of the war, these men renounce their wealth and a common saying among them is "Let the country

⁴⁷ Briggs, William Morris, pp.35-36.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.37.

be cleared of everything except valiant living men, rather than that we fall into slavery again!"⁴⁹ Summing up the Socialist movement and its culmination in the idyllic society in which he lives, Hammond tells his listener:

"...the two combatants, the workman and the gentleman, between them-

"Between them," said I, quickly, "they destroyed commercialism!"

"Yes, yes, YES," said he; "that is it..."⁵⁰

Thus in a medieval atmosphere, the workman and the gentleman followed a single dream to find it in perennial sunshine, health, happiness and goodwill. The whole revolution re-defines the aristocratic spirit which is independent of the money-measure and the bourgeois prestige of wealth and property.

It is obvious that Yeats followed a similar dream. The feudal spirit in Ireland had not yet spent itself and so he imagined a literary movement that would measure all upon the self-same medieval criteria:

'Everything down to that sole test again,
Dream of the noble and the beggarman.'⁵¹

Like Morris he believed the common enemy of both 'noble and beggarman' to be the commercial-minded bourgeoisie whose demoralising art came between 'the hut and the castle' and between 'the hut and the cloister'.⁵² As will be seen in the final chapter, it was this same distrust of bourgeois values

49 Briggs, William Morris, p.297.

50 Loc. cit.

51 Collected Poems, p.369.

52 Essays and Introductions, pp.10-11.

that led Yeats towards modern totalitarian thought. In his own way, he too remained hostile to Whiggery:

'A levelling, rancorous, rational sort of mind
That never looked out of the eye of a saint
Or out of a drunkard's eye.'⁵³

Further, Morris's aesthetic values were in complete accord with his own. When J.B.Y. made a water-colour of a consumptive beggar girl, Yeats almost quarrelled with him because:

'In my heart I thought that only beautiful things should
be painted, and that only ancient things and the stuff
of dreams were beautiful.'⁵⁴

Like Morris, he found the 'wrong of unshapely things...a wrong too great to be told'-

'I hunger to build anew and sit on a green knoll apart
With the earth and the sky and the water, re-made, like
a casket of gold...'⁵⁵

After his own fashion, he dreamed of the Land of Heart's Desire:

'Where nobody gets old and godly and grave,
Where nobody gets old and crafty and wise,
Where nobody gets old and bitter of tongue.'⁵⁶

His belief in the making of a beautiful world influenced much of his later work in the Irish Senate regarding Irish coinage, statues and the development

53 Collected Poems, p.272.

54 Autobiographies, p.82.

55 Collected Poems, p.62.

56 The Collected Plays of W.B. Yeats (London, 1963), p.55.

of the arts in Ireland. He felt that if 'the houses we live in, the public statues we look at, the coins we handle are aesthetically pleasing, houses, statues, and coins, then there is at least a chance that we will take on some of their beauty.'⁵⁷ Morris's views were not dissimilar.

As artist therefore, Yeats shared the vision of the new aristocracy in Morris's Utopia who led the working-classes towards the realisation of the ideal society. Artist, workman and gentleman share the re-defined aristocratic sensibility. It is perhaps this assumption that led him to write:

'Three types of men have made all beautiful things, Aristocracies have made beautiful manners, because their place in the world puts them above the fear of life, and the countrymen have made beautiful stories and beliefs, because they have nothing to lose and so do not fear, and the artists have made all the rest, because Providence has filled them with recklessness.'⁵⁸

Again, as artist, Yeats shared with Morris's ideal leaders their anarchistic heroic stance, their indifference to wealth and their belief in 'valiant living men'. So much of his later political thought seems to have been drawn from these ideas. Thus in his Diary of 1930 recommending as a practical rule an indifference to wealth, self-interest and modern industrialism, he writes:

'Let us become homeless, helpless, obscure, that we may live by handiwork alone'⁵⁹

57 No. X, Y.C.P., p.355.

58 Essays and Introductions, p.251.

59 Explorations, p.337.

and in his final political pamphlet, he reflects the anarchistic distrust of governments and would leave Ireland's future in the hands of her 'valiant living men'. His ideal for Ireland shares the simplicity of Morris's understanding of Socialism. He would have Ireland become a country 'where if there are a few rich, there shall be nobody very poor', where men plough and sow and reap, and 'not a place where there are great wheels turning and great chimneys vomiting smoke'.

Inevitably, Yeats's thinking along these lines led him to identify artists with potential leaders. It is in this light that he interpreted Morris's Socialist commitments in politics as also his own in literature. In accepting Morris's understanding of art in relation to an integrated society, Yeats's early ambitions were given a definite direction. The idea of a unified society reflected in art which drew its strength from the people, became central to his early plans for Ireland. The isolation of the artist with a lack of popular support had the emasculating effect of inbreeding. In one of his lectures, Morris observed how the lack of the general sympathy of simple people weighs very heavily upon the artist and makes his work 'feverish and dreamy, or crabbed and perverse.'

In a letter commenting on Swinburne's Tristran of Lyonesse, Morris wrote:

'Now time was when the poetry resulting merely from this intense study and love of literature might have been, if not the best, yet at any rate very worthy and enduring; but in these days when all the arts, even poetry, are likely to be overwhelmed under the mass of material riches which civilisation has made and is making more and more hastily every day, riches which the world has

made indeed, but cannot use to any good purpose; in these days the issue between art, that is the godlike part of man, and mere bestiality, is so momentous, and the surroundings of life are so stern and unplayful, that nothing can take serious hold of people, or should do so, but that which is rooted deep in reality and is quite at first hand; there is no room for anything which is not forced out of a man of deep feeling because of its innate strength and vision.'⁶⁰

Yeats in Ireland saw the lack in society of 'Unity of Being' and found its enemy not in the distinction 'but the isolation of occupation, or class or faculty',⁶¹ and believed with Morris that art as a monopoly of a few would lack reality and turn to abstraction. He recollects:

'I began to pray that my imagination might somehow be rescued from abstraction and become as preoccupied with life as had been the imagination of Chaucer.'⁶²

As if in answer to Morris's demand for nothing that 'is not forced out of a man of deep feeling because of its innate strength and vision', he writes in 'What is "Popular Poetry"':

'I wanted to write "popular poetry" like those Irish poets, for I believed that all good literatures were popular, and even cherished the fancy that the Adelphi melodrama, which I had never seen, might be good literature, and I hated what I called the coteries. I thought that one must write without care, for that was of the coteries, but with a gusty energy that would put all straight if it came out of the right heart...'⁶³

Following Morris's interest in medieval architecture as the quintessential expression of the fancy, imagination and aspirations of a whole people, Yeats

⁶⁰ Mackail, Vol.II, pp.74-75.

⁶¹ Autobiographies, p.190.

⁶² Ibid, p.188.

⁶³ Essays and Introductions, pp.4-5.

writes in Autobiographies:

'I knew no mediaeval cathedral, and Westminster, being a part of abhorred London, did not interest me, but I thought constantly of Homer and Dante, and the tombs of Mausolus and Artemisia, the great figures of King and Queen and the lesser figures of Greek and Amazon, Centaur and Greek. I thought that all art should be a Centaur finding in the popular lore its back and its strong legs. I got great pleasure, too from remembering that Homer was sung, and from that tale of Dante hearing a common man sing some stanza from the Divine Comedy, and from Don Quixote's meeting some common man that sang Ariosto. Morris had never seemed to care greatly for any poet later than Chaucer and though I preferred Shakespeare to Chaucer I begrudged my own preference...'⁶⁴

And later the conviction summed up a life time's effort:

'All that we did, all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.'⁶⁵

In Morris's Utopia, religion, political organisation and the arts reflected themselves each in the other. A like vision prompted Yeats's injunction 'Hammer your thoughts into unity'. 'I had three interests', he writes in If I were Four-and-Twenty, 'interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality. None of these seemed to have anything to do with the other, but gradually my love of literature and my belief in nationality came together. Then for years I said to myself that these two had nothing to do with my form of philosophy, but that I had only to be sincere and to keep from constraining one by the other and they could become one interest. Now all three are, I think, one, or rather all

⁶⁴ Autobiographies, p.191.

⁶⁵ Collected Poems, p.369.

three are a discrete expression of a single conviction.'⁶⁶ Projecting this principle of self-integration on to the larger screen of national integrity, he writes further:

'If we could but unite our economics and our nationalism with our religion, that, too, would become philosophic... and we, our three great interests made but one, would at last be face to face with the great riddle, and, might it may be, hit the answer...'⁶⁷

Accordingly, Yeats expresses what, in his opinion, was the rationale of Morris's Socialism, in 'Ireland and the Arts'. The interests that related man to his environment formed the subject of economics, political organisation and religion. They were ultimately reducible to the hard core of existential passions, 'the fear of death', 'the hope of the father in his child', 'the love of man and woman', upon which the makers of religion had established their ceremonies. The ceremonies and symbols of more ancient faiths were preserved in these, 'for fear a grain of dust turned into crystal in some past fire, a passion that had mingled with the religious idea, might perish if the ancient ceremony perished.'⁶⁸ The arts had worked in collaboration with religion until the parting of ways in modern society left them desolate and proud, having of all the passions in the world, the sexual alone for their province. They were meant to reintegrate the passions, which through a lack of philosophy, were wasted and extinguished in 'the mere business of living, of making money, of amusing oneself...'

66 Explorations, p.263.

67 Ibid, p.278.

68 Essays and Introductions, p.203.

in the modern world.

Thus Morris's involvement in the Socialist movement of his country was interpreted as the logical expression of a disturbed artistic conscience.

Yeats explained:

'In England, men like William Morris, seeing about them passions so long separated from the perfect that it seemed as if they could not be changed until society had been changed, tried to unite the arts once more to life by uniting them to use...'.⁶⁹

Morris's political commitments obviously impressed Yeats with the artist's sense of responsibility and role in the affairs of the state. Towards the close of his public career, Morris had expressed the need of a body of 'able, high-minded, competent' men who could act as Socialist instructors and guide the masses in action when the occasion arose. Since in active politics, he found himself out of accord with both the Parliamentary Socialists and the extreme Anarchists, one imagines that in practice at least the body of instructors he had in mind was not forthcoming. In his years of passive Socialism, during which Yeats met him, he established the Hammersmith Socialist Society with a small group of 'impractical visionaries' and gathered about him artists, craftsmen and men of letters in the hope of making converts among them.

'Among these men, a small body, but growing in numbers, strong in youth, ardent in assured conviction, Morris's final words on the Beauty of Life were at last working with their full force. "To us who have a cause at heart, our highest ambition and our simplest duty are one and the same thing. For the most part we shall be too busy doing the work that lies ready to our hands to let

⁶⁹ Essays and Introductions, p.204.

impatience for visibly great progress vex us much. And surely, since we are servants of a cause, hope must be ever with us.'⁷⁰

Yeats also records: 'And if we had not enough artistic feeling, enough feeling for the perfect, that is, to admit the authority of the vision; or enough faith to understand that all that is imperfect passes away, he [Morris] would not, as I think have argued with us in a serious spirit.'⁷¹ It leaves us to question whether Morris had finally looked for future instructors among artists and craftsmen who could be converted to Socialism through the cause of art as he was himself, and whether it was with them alone that he could share his vision. It is evident that Yeats viewed it as such when he writes:

'He [Morris] knew clearly what he was doing towards the end, for he lived at a time when poets and artists have begun again to carry the burdens that priests and theologians took from them angrily some few hundred years ago.'⁷³

Behind the socialistic fervour of Morris, Yeats became aware of a tacit assumption of artistic dictatorship when he wrote of him:

'His vision is true because it is poetical, because we are a little happy when we are looking at it; and he knew as Shelley knew, by an act of faith, that the economists should take their measurements not from life as it is, but from the vision of men like him, from the vision of the world made perfect that is buried under all minds.'⁷²

70 Mackail, Vol.II, 194-95.

71 Essays and Introductions, p.63.

72 Ibid, p.64.

73 Ibid, p.63.

He would have Morris believe like Shelley that 'poets were the unacknowledged legislators of the world'.

Reflecting this faith, Yeats declared his function in a manner that took Morris's class-conscious sense of responsibility one step further:

'We who care deeply about the arts find ourselves the priesthood of an almost forgotten faith, and we must, I think, if we would win the people again, take upon ourselves the method and fervour of a priesthood. We must be half humble and half proud. We see the perfect more than others, it may be, but we must find the passions among the people. We must baptize as well as preach.'⁷⁴

Thus Morris's Socialism left Yeats class-conscious with a sense of mission in Ireland. The class, however, was one of poets and artists more than anything else- an aristocracy of the intellect that could stand critically outside the economically determined upper, middle and working classes. From that non-aligned stance he dreamed of an imaginative freedom that would re-integrate the classes and in Ireland re-establish 'the old, confident, joyous world'.⁷⁵

He pursued this dream with enthusiasm and explained in his own terms the failure of Morris and Ruskin in England. As artist leaders they 'had found no passion to harness to their thought'. But in Ireland there were 'unwasted passion and precedents in the popular memory for every needed thought and action'.⁷⁶ Two passions were ready for the artist's use- love

⁷⁴ Essays and Introductions, p.203.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.249.

⁷⁶ Loc. cit.

of the unseen Life and love of Country. The negation of both, Yeats saw in the triumph of the money-measure, which distorted the expression of Irish national character. Morris had identified the death of art with the rise of commercial and utilitarian values; he raged against the possibility of all ending in 'a counting house on top of a cinder heap' and planned his social revolution. But Ireland was a poor nation with a tradition of heroic sacrifice and could yet be given her imaginative opportunity. Yeats writes in 'Poetry and Tradition':

'New from the influence mainly the personal influence of William Morris, I dreamed of enlarging Irish hate, till we had come to hate with a passion of patriotism what Morris and Ruskin hated. Mitchel had already all but poured some of that hate drawn from Carlyle, who had it of an earlier and, as I think, cruder sort, into the blood of Ireland, and were we not a poor nation with ancient courage and a barbarous gift of self-sacrifice?'⁷⁷

England was a political enemy; her commercialism was an enemy of art. For Yeats, Fenianism and the revolutionary idealism of O'Leary encouraged the one hate, Morris the other, until they turned into one. Thus he believed that the cause of art and the cause of nationality fused would grant Ireland her political and artistic freedom. Writing in Samhain, he observed:

'It is easy for us to hate England in this country, and we give that hatred something of nobility if we turn it now and again into hatred of the vulgarity of commercial syndicates, of all that commercial finish and pseudo-art she has done so much to cherish...'⁷⁸

The diversion of passion into morally vivifying channels became for

77 Essays and Introductions, p.248.

78 Explorations, p.129.

Yeats the supreme task in order to effect a resuscitation of national art and life. If in England Morris envisaged a socialist revolution to alter passions 'long separated from the perfect', he, in Ireland, would attempt an intellectual revolution to revive passions that betrayed a latent ideality. The imaginative Ideal for both artists was the same, the means different. In Autobiographies Yeats writes:

'Morris set out to make a revolution that the persons of his Well at the World's End or his Water of the Wondrous Isles, always, to my mind, in the likeness of Artemisia and her man, might walk his native scenery; and I, that my native scenery might find imaginary inhabitants, half planned a new method and a new culture.'⁷⁹

In his pursuit of the Ideal, Morris abnegated the class to which he belonged by birth. According to his theory, the bourgeoisie were to bear the onus of transitional errors and in the last stages, were to be discredited. A party of able-minded men imbued with the highest ideals would guide and instruct the proletariat and bring about the victorious revolution. In his later years when the numbers of his News from Nowhere appeared in Commonweal, he was a politically isolated artist who by right and conviction communicated to the people his conception of the Goal. As has been noted, Yeats did not miss the implication that Morris's later activities in the Socialist cause, were conducted from the viewpoint of a 'classless' aristocracy of artists the 'only aristocracy' as he wrote later, 'that has never been sold in the market or seen the people rise up against it'.⁸⁰

79 p.152.

80 Explorations, p.125.

From the same viewpoint, he accepted the 'baptism of the gutter' and decided to emulate in the Irish Renaissance the Russian movement of the early eighteen-seventies that preached a return to the people. He wrote:

'All Irish writers have to choose whether they will write as the upper classes have done, not to express but to exploit this country; or join the intellectual movement which has raised the cry that was heard in Russia in the 'seventies, the cry, "To the people".

Moses was little good to his people until he had killed an Egyptian; and for the most part a writer or public man of the upper classes is useless to his country till he has done something that separates him from his class...'.⁸¹

And again:

'Plays about drawing-room are written for the middle-classes of great cities, for the classes who live in drawing-rooms; but if you would ennoble the man of the roads you must write about the roads, or about the people of romance, or about historical people.'⁸²

When Yeats returned to Ireland after the fall of Parnell, intent on a plan for Irish regeneration, he, like Morris, determined a less mediate contact with the working people in order to communicate his hopes. He recalls in Autobiographies his first conversation 'over a butter-tub in some Dublin back street' and his visit to a workman's home in a provincial town where he had gone to lecture.⁸³ To ally himself with the reality of popular imagination and to forge for himself an identity as its spokesman, he busied himself with the verses and stories people made for themselves. He

81 Explorations, p.83.

82 Ibid, p.96.

83 Autobiographies, p.201.

would have the language of literature purged of abstraction and generalisation imbibed from the scientific movement and newspaper government and restore to it the vigour of an older world when literature took its phrases from a 'common mint', the market and the tavern. The poetry of the coteries did not differ in kind from the poetry of the people. So he believed that the collaboration of artists and people would destroy middle-class culture and cause Ireland to 'be the first in Europe to seek unity as deliberately as it had been sought by theologian, poet, sculptor, architect, from the eleventh to the thirteenth century.'⁸⁴

In effect, Yeats tried a socialist experiment in literature with the paradoxical goal of mediaeval unity in mind. His later criticism of Morris's optimism, his Irish repudiation of the 'Garden City Mind'⁸⁵, may have been largely due to the disappointment of his own hopes for the Irish Literary Movement. For he recalls in Autobiographies how at the outset of his career, while voicing doubts, regarding his plans for Ireland to a few friends, he had in reality the 'wildest hopes'; and when in the course of his lecture tours a man compared him to Thomas Davis and another likened his organising capacity to Michael Davitt- both political leaders- he thought he would succeed as they did and as rapidly. But 'theatre business, management of men' and the realities of Irish public life and politics left him disillusioned. He had opposing him from the first, 'a type of mind which had been without

84 Autobiographies, p.195.

85 Explorations, p.276.

influence in the generation of Grattan, and almost without it in that of Davis, and which has made a new nation out of Ireland, that was once old and full of memories.'⁸⁶ It characterised the hated bourgeoisie. Yeats believed he could work in imaginative association with 'the people' which, however, proved to be for all practical intents and purposes, a glorified anachronism. The Hugh Lane controversy and the 'ignominy of public manners' shown in the treatment of J.M. Synge's Playboy of the Western World, revealed to him the crux of a misunderstanding which had directed his ambitions. The force of 'the mob' as distinct from 'the people' in his mind, asserted itself until later in the bitterness of defeat the distinction became hazy and he recoiled from 'the contagion of the throng'. That he was aware of obliterating the distinction is evident in his poem, 'The People' when he suffers the reproof of his phoenix over his regretted contact with the masses. She answers:

'The drunkards, pilferers of public funds,
All the dishonest crowd I had driven away,
When my luck changed and they dared meet my face,
Crawled from obscurity, and set upon me
Those I had served and some that I had fed;
Yet never have I, now or at any time,
Complained of the people.'⁸⁷

At any rate, Yeats's socialist experiment in literature was a failure. In 'A People's Theatre' he writes:

⁸⁶ Essays and Introductions, p.250.

⁸⁷ Collected Poems, p.170.

'We have been the first to create a true "People's Theatre", and we have succeeded because it is not an exploitation of local colour, or of a limited form of drama possessing a temporary novelty, but the first doing of something for which the world is ripe, something that will be done all over the world and done more and more perfectly; the making articulate of all the dumb classes each with its own knowledge of the world, its own dignity, but all objective with the objectivity of the office and the workshop, of the newspaper and the street, of mechanism and of politics.

Yet we did not set out to create this sort of theatre and its success has been to me a discouragement and a defeat.'⁸⁸

As Yeats's sense of defeat deepened through his experience of theatre politics and controversies, he saw the error of Morris's optimism which inadvertently affected his early ambitions. In If I were Four-and-Twenty he writes:

'William Morris was and is my chief of men; but how would that strong, rich nature have grasped and held the world had he not denied all that forbade the millenium he longed for? He had to believe that men needed no spur of necessity and that men, not merely those who, in the language of Platonists had attained to freedom and so become self-moving, but all men would do all necessary work with no compulsion but a little argument. He was perhaps himself half aware of his lack [of dramatic sense] for in News from Nowhere he makes a crotchety old man complain that the novelists are not as powerful as before Socialism was established.'⁸⁹

In Autobiographies Morris is seen as one who 'knew nothing of intellectual suffering', whose intellect 'was wholly at the service of hand and eye' and who lacked self-knowledge 'having all his imagination set upon making and

⁸⁸ Essays and Introductions, p.250.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp.275-76.

doing'.⁹⁰

The making of all from sympathy and observation was what brought socialist objectivity into the drama of the People's Theatre. It made for comedy which lacked passion and subjectivity- the substance of tragic art. Through a personal sense of defeat, Yeats became convinced that Ireland's genius and unity was to find expression in tragic belief and art which could only be developed in solitude away 'from contact with many men'. Thus he felt that in the interests of logical unity, Socialism as a political reality in Ireland would not be a just expression of the national character. After the execution of James Connolly, one of the leaders of the Easter Rising (1916), Socialism seemed to be gaining ground in the minds of Irish readers. Yeats had noticed Karl Marx's Kapital in the same window with Mitchel's Jail Journal and Speeches From the Dock and he comments:

'I admit it is spirited action to applaud the economics of Lenin- in which I notice much that I applauded as a boy when Morris was the speaker- when we do it to affront our national enemy: but it does not help one to express the character of the nation through varied intellect.'⁹¹

In his opinion 'no country could have a more natural distaste for 'equality' than Ireland, 'for in every circle there was some man ridiculous for posing as the type of some romantic or distinguished trait.'⁹²

Mediaeval unity and equality experienced in the harmonious interaction

90 p.143.

91 Explorations, p.268.

92 Autobiographies, p.231.

of social elements- as of some O'Loughlin or O'Bryne, 'listening amid his soldiers, he and they at one table' while the minstrel sang of Cuchulain, or the 'exaltation of life' at some 'great table where rich and poor sat down together'⁹³ - this was the dream that Yeats believed had roused his will to its fullest intensity for it was his conviction that:

'Nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind which is, of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult to that man, race, or nation; because only the greatest obstacle that can be contemplated without despair rouses the will to fullest intensity.'⁹⁴

With the development of his theory of Mask and Image and theory of tragedy, Yeats mythologised Morris as 'Dreamer of the Middle Ages'. In doing so he artistically transcended Morris's practical defeat as also his own. The political ideology and its implementation in practical activity may have been mistakes but its rationale was based on a Myth which was its own justification. He became convinced 'that every passionate man... is, as it were, linked with another age, historical or imaginary, where alone he finds images that rouse his energy. Napoleon was never of his own time as the naturalistic writers and painters bid all men be, but had some Roman emperor's image in his head and some condottiere's blood in his heart; and when he crowned that head with his own hands he had covered, as may be seen from David's painting, his hesitation with that emperor's old suit.'⁹⁵

⁹³ Explorations, pp.205-06.

⁹⁴ Autobiographies, p.195.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.152.

Thus he sees Morris through a reproduction of his portrait by Watts:

'Its grave wide-open eyes, like the eyes of some dreaming beast, remind me of the open eyes of Titian's Ariosto, while the broad vigorous body suggests a mind that has no need of the intellect to remain sane, though it give itself to every fantasy: the dreamer of the Middle Ages. It is 'the fool of Faery...wide and wild as the hill', the resolute European image that yet half remembers Buddha's motionless meditation, and has no trait in common with the wavering, lean image of hungry speculation, that cannot but because of certain famous Hamlets of our stage fill the mind's eye...'.⁹⁶

In the image of Morris as 'dreamer of the Middle Ages', Yeats no doubt projects aspects of his own thoughts and aspirations. In a sense, therefore, the image was a poetic means of self-transcendence. Yeats was conscious of Goethe's remark: 'We do the people of history the honour of naming after them the creations of our own minds.'⁹⁷ and believed that writers approach their contemporaries in the same spirit when 'they borrow for their own passions the images of living men, and at times, external facts will be no more to them than the pewter pot gleaming in the sunlight that started Jacob Boehme into his seven day's trance.'⁹⁸

Both O'Leary and Morris, in their respective public careers, contributed to Yeats's philosophy of defeat which he strove to express in art as tragic ecstasy. Both undertook their tasks with a consciousness of failure. Yeats records how O'Leary had told Stephens 'You have no chance of success but it will be good for the morale of the country,' Morris had also expressed

⁹⁶ Autobiographies, pp.141-42.

⁹⁷ Explorations, p.144.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p.236.

his attitude in a letter:

'...while I work I have the cause always in mind, and yet I know that the cause for which I specially work is doomed to fail, at least in seeming; I mean that art must go under, where or how ever it may come up again. I don't know if I explain what I'm driving at, but it does sometimes seem to me a strange thing indeed that a man should be driven to work with energy and even with pleasure and enthusiasm at work which he knows will serve no end but amusing himself...'99

Thus the same quality of objectivity in the midst of passion discussed in connection with O'Leary is recognisable in Morris's disposition. Like O'Leary, Morris was politically isolated because he remained faithful to an independent vision of the Goal and distrusted all forms of compromise, parliamentary or otherwise. Curiously enough, in favouring revolutionary, heroic action, he like O'Leary was intellectually anarchistic. Yet he recoiled from violence in practice. He remained essentially the artist, whose visions were manifest in the expression of himself. As such he too became for Yeats a symbol of moral freedom.

With Yeats's growing interest in philosophy and the consequent ordering of human experience in A Vision, his early intuitions derived from practical experience turned to convictions, and he was able to use his images of men creatively with greater clarity and inward comprehension. Thus the image of Morris as the 'fat/Dreamer of the Middle Ages' features in one of Yeats's later poems 'The Statues' as an emerging synthesis of his own practical and imaginative experience. The influence of Morris is evident at last in the impact of his distilled image on Yeats's creative vision:

99 Mackail, Vol.II, p.68.

'One image crossed the many-headed, sat
 Under the tropic shade, grew round and slow,
 No Hamlet thin from eating flies, a fat
 Dreamer of the Middle Ages. Empty eyeballs knew
 That knowledge increases unreality, that
 Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show
 When gong and conch declare the hour to bless
 Grimalkin crawls to Buddha's emptiness.'¹⁰⁰

A passage from a letter to T. Sturge-Moore in 1929 may be quoted in full as it best explains the processes of thought which brought about the distillation of the Morris image. It reads:

'He [Frobenius] has confirmed a conception I have had for many years, a conception that has freed me from British Liberalism and all its dreams. The one heroic sanction is that of the last battle of the Norse gods, of a gay struggle without hope. Long ago I used to puzzle Maud Gonne by always avowing ultimate belief as a test. Our literary movement would be worthless but for its defeat. Science is the criticism of Myth. There would be no Darwin had there been no Book of Genesis, no electron but for the Greek atomic myth; and when the criticism is finished there is not even a drift of ashes in the pyre. Sexual desire dies because every touch consumes the Myth, and yet a Myth that cannot be so consumed becomes a spectre.

I am reading William Morris with great delight, and what a protection to my delight it is to know that in spite of all his loose writing I need not be jealous for him. He is the end, as Chaucer was the end in his day, Dante in his, incoherent Blake in his. There is no improvement: only a series of sudden fires, each though fainter as necessary as that before it. We free ourselves from obsession that we may be nothing. The last kiss is given to the void.'¹⁰¹

100 ¹⁰⁰ Collected Poems, p.375.

101 Wade, Letters, p.154.

Morris's dream of the Middle Ages was his Myth. Recalling Yeats's description in Autobiographies, he [Morris] was not aware of his dream's antithesis in daily life. He was therefore free from speculative abstractions and resembles Hamlet who, outside thought, was 'a mediaeval man of action'. At the same time his 'grave wide-open eyes' are like those of 'some dreaming beast'. Combining subjectivity and objectivity, he is thus the 'resolute European image that yet half remembers Buddha's motionless meditation.' Yeats saw Morris at last as one of those whom he believed should be perceived as if 'at the edge of a cliff, time broken away from their feet',¹⁰² free at last in the pursuance of a Myth from all prepossessions, political or otherwise. 'The last kiss is to the void'.

102 Explorations, p.360.

Chapter Four

FACT AND FICTION:
YEATS AND MAUD GONNE

In his plans to revive the Young Ireland movement, Yeats records that 'there was much patriotism and more desire for a fair woman'. On two occasions in the 'First Draft' of Autobiographies, he holds Maud Gonne responsible for his entry into the world of men and events and in 1898 he wrote: 'My outer nature was passive; but for her [Maud Gonne] I should never perhaps have left my desk.'¹

'All things can tempt me from this craft of verse:

One time it was a woman's face...'²

are the opening lines of a poem from The Green Helmet and other Poems (1910) and another from the same collection finds consolation in the acknowledged sentiment:

'O heart, be at peace, because
Nor knave nor dolt can break
What's not for their applause,
Being for a woman's sake.'³

It is evidence of this kind that supports the view that Yeats's political involvement 'was for a woman's sake'. Until recently this view was more or less accepted. It merits closer examination but not, one would think, with the purpose of setting up a counter thesis to prove Yeats a 'cunning passionate man' more politic in his own right than at first apparent.

¹ Curtis Bradford, 'Yeats and Maud Gonne,' Texas Studies of Language and Literature, iii, pp.472-73.

² Collected Poems, p.109.

³ Ibid, p.103.

One might instead attempt to determine more accurately the nature and extent of Maud Gonne's influence on Yeats's political thought and action, the conflicts engendered by romantic involvement on the one hand and a markedly different approach to revolutionary politics on the other and the resolution of these in the poet's creed and work. The task is not an easy one. A study of the interaction of personalities as vastly different as Yeats and Maud Gonne requires a balance of two perspectives i.e. one that evaluates and draws its logical inferences from the context of actions and events and the other that focusses on the nature of personalities behind actions and events. Critical assessments implicitly reliant on one or the other perspective tend to overestimate or underestimate the issue in question. For instance, if we were to rely on the practical, objective viewpoint, Yeats would be seen as relatively independent of Maud's influence in his actual political choices. This would leave out of consideration her important connection with his deeper political convictions. Contrariwise, if we were to adopt a more subjective viewpoint and focus on personality, thought and conflict behind the action and event, then Yeats's political involvement can be seen as in one way or other due to his romantic involvement with Maud Gonne. This may play down the fact that his important political choices were made before he met Maud and that his political activity could be linked with his ambition for intellectual leadership in Ireland.

The problem of perspectives can be traced to the personalities themselves. There is Maud Gonne's recognition of the actual event and preference for effective action and Yeats's introspective bent of mind with attention on personality apart from action and event. Related to this,

however, is the broader issue that comes into focus in this study. It is the contact of two important forces working for Ireland's freedom towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. One of these, as we have seen, was based on the tradition of Thomas Davis, and supported an idealised, romantic sense of nationalism. Continuing the educational policy of the Young Irelanders on a more rarefied level, it attended to a perfecting of the means of political freedom by way of moral and intellectual regeneration. It was variously manifest in the Gaelic League of Douglas Hyde and the Irish Literary Revival led by Yeats. Both undertakings were professedly 'non-sectarian and non-political' in outlook. The literary revival, it must be remembered, was largely motivated by a conservative Fenian and high-minded revolutionary who would allow no breach of ethical rectitude on grounds of expediency, one who had said: 'There are things a man must not do to save a nation.' The stress was on the means not the end of independence; if liberation were gained at the cost of weakness in the moral fibre of a nation, it were better viewed as a degradation of manhood.

The other force found expression in the activities of the Land League, SinnFein, and Labour movement, which were oriented to the immediate and practical end of overthrowing the agents of British domination in Ireland. It was in character less romantic and more realistic in confronting issues of social and economic importance directly or indirectly linked with the political objective of national independence.

Yeats worked in sympathy with one force, Maud with the other, and an interesting feature of their relationship is the way the two worlds,

represented by these forces, interacted without mutual comprehension. The sequence of events terminating in the establishment of the Irish Free State brought disillusionment on both sides. Creative self-transcendence in art was Yeats's means of confronting defeat; Maud campaigned for disappointed Republicans till the end. Their Castle of the Heroes remained unreal.

I shall attempt to study the subject, so far outlined, in two parts. The first would begin with a treatment of Yeats and Maud Gonne in their respective backgrounds and political aims, to be followed by a systematic study of their relationship against a chronology of events concentrating on the early years of Yeats's political activity. The second would focus on the art of Yeats in relation to the aspects studied. What might become evident is that there exists a psychological correlation between Yeats's personal defeat à propos Maud and the broader experience of national defeat and that a growing identification of both finds expression in poetical tragedy. It may also be seen that the mythologising of Maud interrelates with Yeats's political philosophy.

Part I

(i)

Yeats met Maud Gonne in 1889 when she visited his family in Bedford Park with an introduction from John O'Leary to J.B. Yeats. She later believed she had met Yeats earlier at the O'Leary's in Dublin and this has given rise to variants in biographical presentation and consequently to the understanding of their initial reactions. But if we take the evidence of Yeats's letters to O'Leary and Katherine Tynan, they did meet for the first

time in 1889. Before he met her, Yeats had heard in a letter from Miss O'Leary (John O'Leary's sister) of 'a most beautiful girl who had left the society of the Viceregal court for Dublin nationalism'.⁴ In order to understand the context of her political activities, we may consider briefly her background and the events that led to her adoption of nationalist aims.

Maud Gonne belonged to the English Garrison in Ireland. Her father, Colonel Thomas Gonne was an Irish officer in the British army; her mother was English and died when Maud was four years old. With her younger sister, Maud was educated by governesses and most of her childhood was spent among the upper class society of Europe. When she was fifteen an aunt of her father decided to train her for a formal début. It was the time of professional beauties and Maud was discovered as a promising candidate. When she did make an impression on the Prince of Wales, her father decided to remove her from a social environment that could be pernicious in effect. Thereafter at the age of eighteen, Maud became hostess and manager of her father's home in Ireland. In the meantime, Thomas Gonne resigned his Colonelcy and intended to enter politics as a Home Rule candidate. Before his plans could materialise, he died from cholera in Dublin.

Maud was very close to her father. In her autobiography she always refers to him as 'Tommy'. He gave her more than the security of paternal care and she remembers him as an unfailing comrade in all that she thought and did. Early in her life he advised: 'You must never be afraid of anything, not even of death.'⁵ This, she claims, was largely responsible for her

⁴ Jeffares, p.59.

⁵ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.12.

fearless disposition. She learnt to believe in the protection which a total absence of fear gave- 'a strange aloof power' which served her well in her daring political commitments of later years.

Thomas Gorne's plans to enter Irish politics could not but leave an impact on his daughter. During the eighteen-seventies when she was very young, Land League activities were in full swing. Before her father died, she was aware of his growing identification with the Irish nationalist cause and his sympathy for agrarian action. In her autobiography she records his sentiments on a particular occasion:

"Tommy and I stood together on the terrace of the Royal Barracks watching a great Land League procession with bands and banners marching up to the Phoenix Park where there would be a meeting addressed by Michael Davitt, John Dillon and William O'Brien... 'They are quite right', said Tommy. 'The people have a right to the land' and then he told me he had made up his mind to leave the army and stand as Home Rule candidate..."⁶

After her father's death, Maud and her sister were sent to live with her father's brother in London. Finding her uncle's household unbearably conservative, she escaped to take up stage training and was prepared to earn her living as an actress. Soon however, it became known that Thomas Gorne had left enough to ensure financial independence for his daughters and Maud was given the freedom she desired to live her life as she pleased. It is not surprising that she chose to work for the cause of Irish liberation since the last intended activity of her father was in the field of nationalist politics. There was, however, another factor which encouraged her choice. In her adolescent years, she had met in France

⁶ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.40.

Lucien Millevoye, politician and editor of La Patrie who was dedicated to the cause of recovering Alsace-Lorraine from Germany. According to the evidence available, he appears to have been the love of her life. Together they made a pact to destroy British Imperialism. He promised that he would help her free Ireland if she assisted him in regaining Alsace-Lorraine. She agreed to the condition and went on a secret mission to Russia which was the first step she took to serve the cause of Irish freedom.

Having chosen her course of life, Maud set about looking for nationalist work in Ireland which could engage her energies. She was faced at the outset with the anti-feminist prejudice of the era. None of the important nationalist organisations would admit women into their ranks. The Ladies' Land League under the leadership of Anna Parnell was disbanded by Parnell after his release from Kilmainhain gaol. She contacted Michael Davitt, founder of the 'New Departure' in the Fenian movement, but he did not encourage her as his political approach seemed widely different from hers. She supported the Fenian principle of physical force, but Davitt, as may be recalled, had already broken away from the original Fenian organisation by joining forces with Parnell's Parliamentary Party and establishing the Land League on the principle of non-violent civil disobedience.

In retrospect, it seems inevitable that she should have found her way to John O'Leary, one of the most distinguished of the Conservative Fenians and later President of the Supreme Council, IRB. She records in A Servant of the Queen:

'I told him [O'Leary] my people were all Unionists, that my father was dead and that I had determined to devote my life to working for Ireland, but didn't know how to begin. O'Leary was very interested. I found that along

with his hobby, the collection of rare books, his chief interest in life was getting new recruits for Ireland, especially from the Unionist element from which he wanted to form an intellectual backing to the separatist movement and I was a possible recruit... "You must read," he said, "read the history of our country, read its literature; I will lend you the books and then you must lecture."⁷

It was at this juncture of her life that Maud met Yeats. She had read and admired The Wanderings of Oisín which was published largely through the efforts of O'Leary. When she visited the Yeatses in London in 1889, she was on her way back to Paris to report progress to Millevoeye. Her beauty overwhelmed Yeats and he fell in love with her. He provides a fairly detailed record of their first meeting in his unpublished autobiography which is useful for the impression it gives of Maud during this period. It may therefore be quoted in full, also as references to it will be made later:

'Presently she [Maud Gonne] drove up to our house in Bedford Park in a hansom with an introduction from John O'Leary to my father. I had never thought to see in a living woman so great beauty. It belonged to famous pictures, to poetry, to some legendary past. A complexion like the bloom of apples and yet face and body had the beauty of lineaments which Blake calls the highest beauty because it changes least from youth to age, and stature so great that she seemed of a divine race. Her movements were the works of grace and I understood at last why the poets of antiquity, where we would but speak of face and form, sing, loving some lady, that she seems like a goddess. I remember nothing of her speech that day except that she vexed my father full always of Mill and humanitarianism, by her praise of war, for she too was of the romantic movement; I found those uncontrovertible Victorian reasons, that seemed to announce so prosperous a future, a little grey. As I look backward it seems to me that she brought into my life- and yet I saw only what lay upon the surface- the middle of the tent, a sound as if of a Burmese gong, an

⁷ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, pp.84-85.

overpowering tumult that had yet many pleasant secondary notes. She asked me to dine with her that evening in her rooms at Ebury Street, and I think that I dined with her all but every day during her stay in London of I think perhaps nine days. There was something so generous in her ways that it seemed natural that she should give her hours in overflowing abundance. She had heard from O'Leary of me. He praised me and it was natural that she should give and take without stint. She was surrounded by cages of unusual singing birds and she always travelled, it seemed, taking them even upon short journeys... I had seen upon her table Tristan of Lyonesse and she had read it with enthusiasm and she spoke to me of her wish for a play that she could act in Dublin. Somebody had suggested Todhunter's Helen, but he had refused. I told her of a story that I had found when I was preparing my Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry, and offered to write for her the play I have called The Countess Kathleen. When I told her I wished to become an Irish Victor Hugo was I wholly sincere, for, though a volume of bad verse translations from Hugo had been my companion in school, I had begun to simplify myself with great toil? I had seen in her table Tristran of Lyonesse and Les Contemplations, besides, it was natural to commend myself by a very public talent, for her beauty as I saw it in those days seemed incompatible with private intimate life. She like myself had received the political initiation of Davis with an added touch of hardness and heroism from John O'Leary. And when she spoke, William O'Brien was in gaol making a prolonged struggle against putting on prison clothes. She said "There was a time when many sacrificed their lives for their country, but now they sacrifice their dignity". But mixed with this feeling for what is permanent in human life there was something declamatory, but later in a bad sense perhaps even more unscrupulous. She spoke of desire of winning of votes in the election. Her two and twenty years had taken some colour I thought from French Boulangist adventurers, journalists, arrivistes of whom she had already seen too much, and already had made some political journey to Russia in their interest. I was full of that thought of the Anima Vagula chapter "Only the means justify the end". She meant her ends to be unselfish but she thought almost any means justified in that service. As we were seeking different things she soon found the final consecration of her youth in memorable action... I after all was anxious to discover our common state of being. Perhaps even in politics it would be end enough

to have lived and thought passionately and have like O'Leary a head like a Roman coin...'⁸

It would appear that from the very start Yeats had discerned the fundamental difference between Maud's disposition and his own. We must remember of course that Yeats's account of their first meeting was written some years after the event and his record of impressions might very well be coloured by his subsequent disillusionment in Maud's politics. Nonetheless, according to the facts available, it is clear that while Maud and Yeats were both disciples of O'Leary, Yeats was doubtless temperamentally better adjusted to the educational programme of the veteran patriot. O'Leary, as indicated earlier, was out of the main current of New Departure politics after his return from exile in 1885. He was, as Maud Gonne writes, 'a symbol of the Fenian faith, not a revolutionary leader...' In Dublin he gathered about him a little circle of poets, politicians, painters, makers of all sorts to whom he could be mentor and critic. A weekly event of those years was Ellen O'Leary's evenings at home attended among others by Katherine Tynan, the Sigersons, Richard Ashe-King, Rose Kavanagh, John F. Taylor, Douglas Hyde and Yeats. Katherine Tynan recalls how Yeats in these years was 'all dreams and gentleness', 'so passionately absorbed in literature as to have only a transient and hardly sincere interest in other matters.'⁹

⁸ Jeffares, pp.59-60.

⁹ Twenty-Five Years, pp.143-44.

In a tribute to Yeats, Maud has left a picture of their early years:

'A tall lanky boy with deep-set dark eyes behind glasses, over which a lock of dark hair was constantly falling, to be pushed back impatiently by long sensitive fingers, often stained with paint - dressed in shabby clothes that none noticed (except himself, as he confessed long after) - a tall girl with masses of gold-brown hair and a beauty which made her Paris clothes equally unnoticeable, sat figuratively and sometimes literally, at the feet of a thin elderly man with eagle eyes, whose unbroken will had turned the outrage of long convict imprisonment into immense dignity. He never spoke of that imprisonment...John O'Leary, the master, and his two favourite disciples, William Butler Yeats and Maud Gonne.'¹⁰

But if Maud was one of O'Leary's favourite disciples, she did not remain so for very long. She was influenced by her father's sympathy for the Land Leaguers and was out of accord with conservative Fenians who regarded any form of agrarian action as morally execrable. Referring to the Land League she writes:

'...to my surprise I found that John O'Leary was bitterly opposed to it, especially in its later developments, and was scathingly sarcastic about the Parliamentary leaders and their mock-heroics in refusing to wear prison clothes...'¹¹

Incidentally at the time she met Yeats, according to the latter's record quoted earlier, she voiced O'Leary's sentiments on the subject of William O'Brien's protest in gaol against wearing prison clothes. But she was later to alter her opinion on the issue which showed her progressive

¹⁰ 'Yeats and Ireland', Scattering Branches, ed. Stephen Gwynn (London, 1940), p.17.

¹¹ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.85.

departure from the school of O'Leary. She believed O'Brien had put up a great fight for the political status of prisoners and she thought 'It an equally dignified and perhaps a more practical attitude than that of the Fenians, who refused to complain, whatever the enemy inflicted on them.'¹²

In effect Maud grew impatient with the 'high-minded, clean-handed Quixotism' such as John O'Leary's school of nationalism proved to be. She found it singularly ineffective as a principle of action in contemporary Irish politics. Acting on impulse with an eye on the immediate end in view, she threw herself into Land League activities much to O'Leary's disgust. 'I was a disappointment to him', she recalls. She wrote, however, of her convictions opposing many Fenians:

'It is easy to say that the agrarian struggle appealed to personal greed, and the national cause to higher idealism, and point to Lord Edward Fitzgerald and Robert Emmet and many Young Ireland leaders graduated from Trinity. The landlords were the British Garrison and Trinity a British institution. I believed, with Davitt, that the agrarian and national struggle were inherently one; the land and the people, from whose union the national soul is born...'¹³

Accordingly she associated herself with Patrick O'Brien, M.P. to build Land League huts which were a better alternative for evicted tenants than the workhouse. She spent a great deal of time and energy in reinstating the evicted tenants of Donegal where her services and beauty were admired as of some mythical figure. In her autobiography she recounts Father

¹² MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.209.

¹³ Ibid, p.207.

MacFadden's evidence:

"They are saying you are a woman of the Sidhe, who rode into Donegal on a white horse, surrounded by birds to bring victory. No one can resist this woman; she confabbed with the Bishop, she releases prisoners, even the police can't stand against her..."¹⁴

Of her own activities she writes:

'I land-leagued a good deal on my own, in many parts of Ireland, but only in isolated cases; and my conscience is clear, for no tenant I ever advised to come out did I ever fail to re-instate back on his land; but I was not dealing in masses, I was only working as a free-lance on the fringe of what had been a great movement, ...'¹⁵

Politically speaking, Maud acted erratically and in isolation during these years. She belonged to no particular nationalist camp. By advocating physical force, she alienated Michael Davitt and the Parliamentarians and by indulging in Land League activities she antagonised conservative Fenians. Moreover, she worked in an environment where the anti-feminist prejudice proved a serious handicap. Yet her purpose was clear; she would encourage and employ any means to further the nationalist cause. 'Everyone must work according to his temperament' was her philosophy of life applied to art and politics. She writes:

'I never willingly discouraged either a dynamiter or a constitutionalist a realist or a lyrical writer. My chief occupation was how their work could help forward the Irish Separatist movement.'¹⁶

¹⁴ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.209.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.112.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.170.

The end justified the means.

Having considered Maud Gonne's background and context of political activity, we may, at the cost of some repetition, direct our attention to Yeats's, in order to get a balanced view of their relationship. Yeats's uneasiness over Maud's politics was due to more than one reason. The romantic interest and an anti-feminist disposition in accord with the social outlook of the period, were important factors and will be dealt with later; but to start with it may be recalled that his political training, which was inextricably linked with his literary ambitions, led him in a direction diametrically opposed to the principle which guided her politics. This is evident in the passage quoted earlier which records his initial reactions to Maud.

By temperament and potential Yeats was committed to the cause of art and literature. His early environment fostered the development of creative values relevant to universal and eternal interests as against those regarded as circumstantial and transient. When he met O'Leary he was already building for himself an 'infallible church of poetic tradition' to counteract the mild agnosticism of his father. This comprised of 'a fardel of stories, personages, emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians.'¹⁷ It led his imagination to 'Swedish princesses, Greek islands, Moorish magicians, Spanish inquisitors, Hungarian patriots and Indian scenes.'¹⁸

¹⁷ Autobiographies, p.116.

¹⁸ Letters to the New Island, p.11.

John O'Leary, at the time he met Yeats, was desirous for a movement analogous to that of Davis, 'but he had known men of letters and been a friend of Whistler and knew the faults of the old literature'.¹⁹

Recognising Yeats's creative genius and relative freedom from political prepossessions, he gave the young poet his subject-matter by lending him the works of Mangan, Ferguson and Davis among others. Thereafter Yeats's literary ambition found its direction joined with a political identity. He became an acknowledged nationalist of the school of O'Leary. It was this early identification of literary and political interests that enabled him always to see one in the light of the other. Converted from his rudderless pursuit of art which he had imagined was 'tribeless, nationless, a blossom gathered from No Man's Land', Yeats endeavoured to popularise his new conviction. 'There is no fine literature without nationality' is a frequent remark in his letters and articles for the press during this period. In his assessment of Irish writing he observes: 'Whenever an Irish writer has strayed from Irish themes and Irish feeling, in almost all cases he has done no more than make alms for oblivion...'²⁰

Accordingly, with Lionel Johnson and Katherine Tynan, Yeats set out to reform Irish poetry and to resuscitate for creative exploitation that vast tradition of Irish folklore and legend which was the long-neglected repository of Irish nationalism. Their art and criticism was based,

¹⁹ Autobiographies, p.209.

²⁰ Letters to the New Island, p.12.

however, on the romantic conception of Irish Nationality inculcated by John O'Leary. Reviewing their programme of literary reformation Yeats writes: '...we thought to keep unbroken the thread running up to Grattan which John O'Leary had put into our hands, though it might be our business to explore new paths of the labyrinth. We sought to make a more subtle rhythm, a more organic form, than that of the older Irish poets who wrote in English, but always to remember certain ardent ideas and high attitudes of mind which were the nation itself, to our belief, so far as a nation can be summarised in the intellect.'²¹

'Ardent ideas and high attitudes of mind' informed the actions of men like Robert Emmet, Wolfe Tone and Edward Fitzgerald who suffered and died for Ireland in a spirit of selflessness. The heroic dignity of their death and defeat provided a compelling metaphor for tragic art which for Yeats seemed the fittest imaginative expression of the Irish nation so far as it could be 'summarised in the intellect'. In other words he found in an intellectualised and romanticised nationalism fit subject-matter for high and intense forms of art; his literary apprenticeship and political initiation were harmonised in direction- 'gradually my love of literature and belief in nationality came together.'²² Consequently his ambitions for both deepened.

The generation of Grattan and Davis aspired towards Irish national

21 Essays and Introductions, pp.247-48.

22 Explorations, p.263.

unity in order to overthrow British Imperialism. The Young Irelanders attempted to achieve this by their revolutionary and educational programme. Their poets created a mass of images, those of 'Wolfe Tone, King Brian, Emmet, Owen Roe, Sarsfield, The Fisherman of Kinsale', to impart to the Irish people an emotional and political identity that could obliterate religious and secular differences. Yeats set out to do the same thing but as he writes 'in a more profound and therefore more enduring way'.²³ He began with the conviction that Unity of Culture was necessary for Ireland for an end not less aesthetic than political.

Through the socialist struggles in England, Morris dreamed of a 'mediaeval' unity in society that could give art a renewed justification in an age of commercialism and utilitarian values. Yeats, as has been noted, imagined that an integration of national passions to effect this unity was more plausible in Ireland than in England. Morris failed because in England he found no passion to harness to his thought; but in Ireland 'there were unwasted passion and precedents in the popular memory for every needed thought and action.'²⁴ In terms of literary movements, Yeats believed that the tendency which began with Chaucer's pilgrimage and ended in division and disengagement from the common goal or shrine, could be reversed. What gave rise to romantic individualism and its deployment of heterogenous elements in art could be returned to an original and final

²³ Autobiographies, p.493.

²⁴ Essays and Introductions, p.249.

unity. Ireland with her unexploited emotional intensity accruing from years of heroic suffering, could be directed to 'follow the pilgrims, as it were, to some unknown shrine, and give to all those separated elements, and to all that abstract love and melancholy, a symbolical and mythological coherence. Not Chaucer's rough-tongued riders, but rather an ended pilgrimage, a procession of the Gods!'²⁵

Her paradigm would then be the answer to the division and disunity that threatened European civilisation. Yeats writes:

'Might I not, with health and good luck to aid me, create some new Prometheus Unbound; Patrick or Finn, in Prometheus's stead; and, instead of Caucasus, Cro-Patrick or Ben Bulbin? Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that marries them to rock and hill? We had in Ireland imaginative stories, which the uneducated classes knew and even sang, and might we not make those stories current among the educated classes, rediscovering for the work's sake what I have called 'the applied arts of literature', the association of literature, that is, with music, speech, and dance; and at last, it might be, so deepen the political passion of the nation that all, artist and poet, craftsman and day-labourer would accept a common design?'²⁶

Thus in hoping for Unity of Culture, Yeats fused the political need for Irish national unity with a need for unity in art-expression.

Allied to this was the notion, later developed into a conviction, that 'Nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind which is of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult to that man, race or

²⁵ Autobiographies, p.193.

²⁶ Ibid, pp.193-94.

nation; because only the greatest obstacle that can be contemplated without despair rouses the will to full intensity.'²⁷ Yeats found in the history of Ireland a pattern of events which reflected his aesthetics of self-integration. 'I had seen', he writes, 'Ireland in my own time turn from the bragging rhetoric and gregarious humour of O'Connell's generation and school and offer herself to the solitary and proud Parnell as to her anti-self, buskin followed hard on sock, and I had begun to hope or half-hope, that we might be the first in Europe to seek unity as deliberately as it had been sought by theologian, poet, sculptor, architect, from the eleventh to the thirteenth century.'²⁸

He imagined therefore, that the moment had arrived when through a national theatre used to encourage high and intense forms of art, he could yoke national passions to images of Ireland's past and present that distilled in themselves the highest motives and energies for action. Contemplated as such, they would personalise the universal quest for perfection which was the psychological matrix of religious feeling. Ireland with her hieratic Church and 'readiness to accept leadership in intellectual things' was already adjusted to this feeling and could thus be helped to overcome her religious disunity by a new method and culture that rested on a parity of essential motives. By achieving an intellectual and aesthetic victory over practical defeat, she could ultimately gain strength to assert her independence in more than one direction.

²⁷ Autobiographies, pp.194-95.

²⁸ Ibid, p.195.

These schemes, based as they were on a highly sophisticated and abstract reasoning, outdid in many ways the relatively simple, politically oriented programme of the Young Irelanders. Yet paradoxically the Ireland on which Yeats based his unitive metaphysics had the simple social structure represented in her sagas, and her history became for him immediately real in the aspect of a scholarly, clean-handed revolutionary venerated for a noble past. When Yeats tried to translate theory into fact, he eluded the comprehension of many of his more practically-minded nationalist contemporaries. Ironically the woman closest to his heart was one of these. For her it would not be end enough to 'have lived and thought passionately and have like O'Leary a head like a Roman coin'; not if it did nothing to further the Separatist cause.

'My darling cannot understand
What I have done, or what would do
In this blind bitter land...'²⁹

was Yeats's despairing recognition years later.

(ii)

Having considered Yeats and Maud Gonne in relation to their respective backgrounds and nationalist aims, we may proceed to study their relationship on the lines indicated earlier.

Between the years 1889-1891, Yeats had many opportunities of meeting Maud. She was busy working for Fenian prisoners in English jails; she had

²⁹ Collected Poems, p.101.

heard of their deplorable living conditions from the brilliant journalist Wickham Steed and immediately determined to improve their lot. In Dublin she established herself in rooms in Nassau Street 'with peaceful faded carpets and not too comfortable armchairs and her Great Dane, Dagda, as sole chaperone'. She made frequent trips from Dublin to London and Paris in order to establish contacts and secure assistance for carrying out her life's mission. While travelling she was always surrounded by 'cages full of birds, canaries, finches of all kinds, dogs, a parrot and once a full grown hawk from Donegal'.³⁰ All this seemed mere eccentricity or obvious inconvenience, but Yeats wrote in justification: 'It was years before I could see into the mind that lay hidden under so much beauty and energy.'³¹

He had begun writing The Countess Kathleen by April 1889 and the 'First Draft' of Autobiographies relating to this period indicates that she was very much in his mind. He was also at this time commissioned by an American publisher to compile a selection of Representative Irish Tales from the Irish novelists and he records how their plots were painful to read since they so often reflected his apprehensions regarding Maud's political commitments. He began to interpret her life in the light of what he read and had a clairvoyant perception of some immediate disaster:

'I can remember that all the tribulation of those heroes but reminds me of the dread. They too according to a fashion of writing of the early Victorians had been so often without father and mother into a world of deception

³⁰ Autobiographies, p.123.

³¹ Ibid, p.124.

and they too were incurably romantic...³²

He was a Romantic and his head was 'full of the mysterious women of Rossetti, and those hesitating faces in the art of Burne-Jones' and when he thought of women 'they were modelled on those in my favourite poets and loved in brief tragedy, or like the girl in The Revolt of Islam, accompanied their lovers through all manner of wild places, lawless women without homes and without children'. Maud was perceived in the light of these fantasies; her beauty gave them a concrete dimension. It was not unnatural for a poet to find in her a theme as it was testified by all who met her that she was uncommonly beautiful. 'A natural born queen, Helen of Troy', Helena Molony observed. Geoffrey Winthrop Young remembered her as the most beautiful person he ever saw and H.W. Nevinson in Chances and Changes records how he, like everybody else, was overwhelmed by her beauty. 'Tall she was, and exquisitely formed; the loveliest hair and face that ever the sun shone on.'³³

'Tall and noble but with face and bosom

Delicate in colour as apple blossom.'³⁴

In an age when women were admired for being beautiful but hardly encouraged to participate as equals with men in the affairs of state, Yeats could not have been alone in his apprehensions regarding Maud. As stated earlier, she was discouraged by most of the leading nationalist organisations which she

³² Jeffares, p.60.

³³ R.M. Fox, Rebel Irishwomen (Dublin, 1966), p.14.

³⁴ Collected Poems, p.85.

approached for advice and direction in political work. Being in love, however, Yeats saw the world of politics and intrigue to which she lent herself, more as a threat to her beauty and innocence. It was a world of deception and she was alone.

He tried to divert Maud's interests to synchronise with his own by introducing her to the London Theosophists. Being superstitious by nature and predisposed to a belief in re-incarnation, she gladly sought their acquaintance. But if she indulged in theosophical activities she did not allow herself to be dominated by them. She was versatile and knew herself well enough to be wary of letting her attention stray from the political goal she had set before her life. In her autobiography she quotes an estimate of her nature by Madam de Sainte Croix which she recognised as true: 'When you have one thing in your head you forget everything else'.³⁵ She thus felt constrained to discipline any of her interests outside the scope of the nationalist cause. Yeats did not understand this self-imposed discipline and grew more anxious about what seemed an obsession with politics. Her situation, frustrating his desire, resolved itself into the ethical enigma that gave The Countess Kathleen its orientation: Must a soul sacrifice itself for a good end? It was her political stance counterpoised with his own.

On a visit to Ireland in 1891, Yeats had heard that Maud was in Dublin. He called at her hotel in Nassau Street and wrote of the occasion:

'At the first sight of her as she came through the door her great height seeming to fill it I was

³⁵ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.239.

overwhelmed with emotion and intoxication of pity. She did not seem to have any beauty, her face was wasted, the force of the tour showing, and there was no life in her manner. As our talk became intimate she hinted at some unhappiness, some disillusionment. The hard old resonance had gone, she had become gentle and indolent. I was in love once more and no longer wished to fight against it. I no longer thought what kind of wife would this woman make, but of her need for protection and peace.'³⁶

The following day he left to spend the day with Charles Johnston in County Down but after a week on receiving a letter from Maud communicating some measure of her unhappiness, he returned to Dublin and proposed marriage. She declined the offer, 'she could not marry, there were reasons she could not marry'; her words were 'not of a conventional ring' and she asked for Yeats's friendship. They spent the next day upon the cliffs at Howth after which Yeats wrote 'The White Birds' published in the National Observer of May 1892. He read her the unfinished text of The Countess Kathleen. He told her that after their meeting in London he had come to understand 'the tale of a woman selling her soul to buy bread for her starving people as a symbol of all souls who lose their peace or their fineness or any beauty of the spirit in political service, but chiefly of her soul that seemed to him incapable of rest.' But presently there came a message from a French revolutionary society recalling her for some political undertaking and feeling obliged to honour her commitments, Maud left for Paris.

One might infer that at this stage while Yeats grew eloquent on a spiritual exegesis of her situation and wished like some medieval knight to rescue her soul from the bartering game of demons, she, having knowledge of

³⁶ Jeffares, p.67.

his literary plans for the Nationalist Cause, found in him a useful ally. As observed earlier, she believed in a concerted effort of all nationalist forces to realise independence. Accordingly she recognised the validity of an Irish literary movement. With feminine tact and practicality she retained Yeats's friendship while rejecting his offer of marriage. The friendship, however, encouraged the combination of two mutually exclusive nationalist forces in Irish politics.

To return to the chronology of events. In Paris Maud adopted a little boy Georgette. On his sudden death she wrote to Yeats telling of her grief and proposed return to Ireland. In October 1891, Yeats went to Kingston Pier to receive her. The mail boat on which she travelled also carried the body of Parnell. Yeats did not go to the funeral though Maud did and later she told of the star that fell when Parnell's body was lowered into the grave. It gave Yeats an image for his poem on the leader's funeral. At the time, however, he had already composed a poem for the occasion - 'Mourn- and then Onward'- an inconsiderable composition that appeared in the October 10, 1891 issue of United Ireland, the Dublin weekly journal which Parnell, before his death, had wrested from his enemies. It is suggested that the publication of the poem was a calculated gesture through which Yeats sought public recognition for himself at what appeared to be an opportune moment; it was not an instinctive reaction and hardly intended to please Maud Gonne. There may be some measure of truth in this, considering Yeats's acknowledged desire to fulfill his prophecy of an intellectual movement at the first lull in politics; yet his interest in Parnell at the time of his downfall may not have been entirely calculated.

The question will be given attention in the following chapter. For the present, suffice it to say that Yeats may have been affected by many of his close associates who were for some reason or other strongly Parnellite during these years. Maud Gonne was one of these. She records in her autobiography:

'And I, who had never been enthusiastic about Parnell, had, when Gladstone ordered the Irish people to go against him, become violently Parnellite, to the point of quarrelling with Stead and Healy and almost with Michael Davitt...'³⁷

Yeats spent a great deal of time with Maud after her return from France. She told him of her sorrows and once again he attempted to divert her interests into other-worldly channels. They went to London and Yeats who by now was a fairly well-established member of MacGregor Mathers' Order of the Golden Dawn - a society of Christian Cabbalists - , encouraged her to become a member. When she told him of an apparition of a woman in grey, he decided that it was an evil influence which if made visible through the power of symbol, could be banished by the intellect. He interpreted it as a spirit personality that sought reunion with Maud and created the turbulence in her soul that gave her an appetite for violence and excitement. The woman in grey appeared 'as if palpably present' and Maud was eager to make use of her by sending her abroad to influence people in her campaign against British Imperialism - another instance of the way her orientation differed from Yeats. On realising again, however, that co-ordination with a super-sensory being would endanger her will, she 'put on blinkers' and ignored

³⁷ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.79.

the woman until at length the image was driven from her experience.

Maud passed four initiations of the Order of the Golden Dawn but soon began to tire of the members. When she discovered that the Order shared a code with the Freemasons, she promptly resigned her membership. 'Freemasonry as we Irish know it is a British institution and has always been used politically to support the British Empire', she wrote. Yeats's persuasion that the Golden Dawn was related to the Rosicrucians and not the Freemasons left her unconvinced as she detected MacGregor Mathers' familiarity with the Masonic code through a test. Yeats was discouraged, but persisted in a study of the mystical life on different grounds. He claimed it held the same relation to his work as the philosophy of Godwin held to the work of Shelley - it was 'the revolt of the soul against the intellect.'

During the period following, Yeats alternated between hope and despair with regard to his relationship with Maud. He was assured of her friendship and hoped he would eventually win her, but practically there could have been very little ground for such expectations. She was in close touch with Millevoeye, whom she helped to take up the editorship of La Patrie after General Boulanger's death, and also started a "little paper" L'Irlande Libre. These were her years of ceaseless activity and an emotional involvement with Yeats could not but have been subordinate in her hierarchy of interests. She worked for the Amnesty Associations in England and Scotland and had joined Patrick O'Brien in building huts for the evicted tenants in Ireland. She founded a French society called the Friends of Irish Freedom which consisted of the descendants of those who had accompanied Hoche's expedition

to Ireland in 1796. As usual, she was constantly on the move. She did not forget the cause of evicted tenants, forgotten by the political parties after the fall of Parnell, and she also continued work for dynamite prisoners in English jails. She overstrained herself in working for the peasants of Donegal who were overcome with famine. Threatened with consumption, she was medically advised to take rest, so she spent some time recuperating at St. Raphael. She was amused when Yeats, learning of her condition, sent her an epitaph which 'he had written with much feeling'. She made a good recovery and continued working as before, lecturing, writing and collecting funds in the service of her Cause. The loss of Parnell may have deflected the interests of young intellectuals away from politics towards literature and the arts, but Maud's aim remained consistently political.

Maud's actions did not conform to any particular political camp and were thus easily viewed as wilful and capricious by many of her nationalist confederates. Her versatility was remarkable and with beauty as an added asset, she gained access to organisations that were manifestly opposed to one another on matters of principle and practice. It is not without reason that Sarah Purser said to Yeats, 'Maud Gonne talks politics in Paris, and literature to you, and at the Horse Show she would talk of a clinking brood mare'. Others, like O'Leary, saw in her versatility a wanton pursuit of excitement; when she went to the formal opening of New Tipperary he had said, 'She is no disciple of mine, she went there to show off her new bonnet.'³⁸ Yeats consistently defended her although he was full of disquiet. Maud's nationalist policy of virtual non-alignment gave her the kind of freedom that he recognised as expressive of an impersonal energy gone astray. It was

³⁸ Hone, p.87.

potentially allied to the force that gave Morris and O'Leary a moral independence and strange isolation in the world of politics. 'None of you understand her force of character', he reiterated to her critics and continued to compensate the misery of being rejected with his personal interpretation of her psychology.

The death of Parnell gave Yeats an opportunity to lead an intellectual movement. Accordingly he launched his programme for the Irish Literary Revival. He was in his mid-twenties and in his ensuing commitments there may indeed have been 'much patriotism and more desire for a fair woman'. But in retrospect, it appears that he would have endeavoured to revive the Young Ireland movement even if he had not met Maud. His father, O'Leary, Morris and diverse contacts with poets and writers in England and the continent had helped him formulate his desires for art in a nationalist context. Maud certainly gave an added impetus. In his desire to re-shape Irish national life was also a desire to canalise as collaborating force, the passionate energy of Maud which seemed to be dissipating itself in the absence of an integrative principle. He imagined she would be the 'fiery hand of the intellectual movement'.

In pursuance of this programme Yeats established the National Literary Society in Dublin in 1892, with O'Leary as President, and affiliated it with certain Young Ireland Societies in country towns which seemed anxious to accept its leadership. He writes:

'I had definite plans; I wanted to create an Irish theatre; I was finishing my Countess Cathleen in its first meagre version, and thought of a travelling company to visit our country branches; but before that

there must be a popular literature.'³⁹

Then followed the fierce disputes with T.W. Rolleston and Sir Charles Gavan Duffy over a series of Irish books which Yeats had arranged for publication through Fisher Unwin and his reader Edward Garnett. Yeats dreaded the return of a movement that had turned literature into the handmaid of politics, one that saw the past as a melodrama with Ireland 'as blameless hero and poet'. So he fought for original literature that could stand the test of independent critical judgement. This brought him into direct conflict with Gavan Duffy who wanted to complete the old movement that flourished on propagandist literature. Maud did not take the quarrel seriously. Yeats's genuine apprehensions over the matter obviously eluded her and she viewed the issue as merely a difference among friends.

Plans were drawn up about the same time for small libraries of Irish literature in connection with the Society's country branches; books and money were collected and a lecturer sent to every branch. Half the proceeds of the lecture was set aside for buying books. 'Maud Gonne whose beauty could draw a great audience in any country town had been the lecturer'.⁴⁰ But, Yeats records, how certain young men of Dublin were jealous of him and the country branches that had gained so much notice. The books were appropriated for some Dublin purpose and the scheme as a result was abandoned much to his bitter disappointment. He began to despair of the lack of intellectual freedom in Nationalist Ireland and decided he needed

³⁹ Autobiographies, p.200.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.229.

a hostess more than a society to help him vindicate its claims:

'I tried to persuade Maud Gonne to be that hostess, but her social life was in Paris, and she had already formed a new ambition, the turning of French public opinion against England.'⁴¹

Thus the first phase in Yeats's association with Maud in public affairs may be said to have terminated in 1893. On discovering his personal and politico-literary aims thwarted, he returned to Bedford Park and did not actively re-enter Irish public affairs till 1897.

Yeats's withdrawal from public activity may be seen against a background of causes, practical and personal. Although Maud was very helpful in founding the Society's country branches, lecturing and collecting books, Yeats realised that it 'was no longer possible for her to become that "fiery hand" of the movement that he had so hopefully desired. She apparently never found time to share Yeats's anxiety over the intellectual future of Ireland. Working among starving peasants and evicted tenants, the cause of literature must have appeared somewhat remote and that of political independence one of immediate importance. She approved of Yeats's work but could not dedicate herself to it. They quarrelled seriously as a result. There are two episodes in the years of crowded activity (1893-1895) which Maud does not relate. She bore Millevoe two children; one died in infancy and the other, a girl, was named Iseult.'⁴² This may lie behind the scandal associated with her name which caused Yeats much distress. If it did, Yeats's personal sense of defeat may have been more overwhelming than is at

⁴¹ Autobiographies, p.230.

⁴² Elizabeth Coxhead, Daughters of Erin (London, 1965), p.35.

first evident. He wrote, however:

"...I heard much scandal about her [Maud] but dismissed the grossest scandal at once and one persistent story I put away with the thought 'She would have told me if it were true'. It had come to seem as if the intimacy of our minds could not be greater and I explain the fact that marriage seemed to have slipped further away by my own immaturity and lack of achievement..."⁴³

The intimacy of their minds, which he claimed to have existed, may have been exaggerated to circumvent defeat, for he was to recognise later,

'The folly that man does
Or must suffer, if he woos
A proud woman not kindred of his soul.'⁴⁴

But if Yeats's withdrawal from public affairs, at this stage, was precipitated by a defeat of his hopes for Maud, there were other more practical causes that were directly related. In pursuing his difficult programme of literary nationalism, Yeats experienced a sense of alienation in Dublin. His programme was not easily understood particularly as he began by criticising the rhetorical style of Young Ireland writers who were, for him, 'as much occupied with Irish virtue as with the invader's vices'. They 'had but one object, that we should hiss the villain, and only a minority doubted that the greater the talent the greater the hiss. It was all the harder to substitute for that melodrama a nobler form of art, because there really had been, however different in their form, villain

⁴³ Jeffares, p.89.

⁴⁴ Collected Poems, p.267.

and victim.'⁴⁵

His preoccupation with the autonomous standards of art brought on him the wrath of those who felt it ignominious to flout publicly propagandist literature that was for so long the sole expression of nationalist sentiment.

When the young men of Dublin had turned against him O'Leary had told him that it was his own fault. He should not have lived on terms of intimacy with those he tried to influence. He thus learnt from his first contact with the Irish people that intellectual freedom was incompatible with social equality. He also learnt that Ireland was not naturally inclined to accept equality:

'No country could have more natural distaste for equality, for in every circle there was some man ridiculous for posing as the type of some romantic or distinguished trait.'⁴⁶

These early impressions and experiences were integral to the formulation of his political convictions years later. At the time they were responsible for a temporary setback in public activity. Yet another factor was involved which requires some attention.

In 1893 the Gaelic League was founded with Douglas Hyde as its first President. The purpose of the League was to revive the Irish language from the state of disuse into which it had fallen. While being self-consciously non-political and non-sectarian in its aims, it inadvertently encouraged separatist feeling 'in precisely the same way as the revival of Magyar earlier in the century, and of the Czech, Polish and Croat later

⁴⁵ Autobiographies, p.206.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p.231.

on, stimulated the ambitions of the nationalists within the Hapsburg Empire.'⁴⁷ Its appeal was immediate to the majority of Irishmen in a way in which Yeats's programme of literary nationalism by comparison was not. Moreover, it was the first Irish National Society which accepted women on the same terms as men. 'From the beginning women sat both on branch committees and on the Coisde Gnotha, and played an active part in the classroom as well as at the tea-table.'⁴⁸ It was evident to Yeats that Hyde was to create a great popular movement far more important in its practical results than any movement he could have made. When Hyde drew public attention to the illogical position of men who dropped their language to speak English, Yeats replied in defence, 'Can we not build up a national tradition, a national literature, which shall be none the less Irish in spirit for being English in language?'⁴⁹ But the effects of the language revival remained and with it Yeats's growing awareness of Anglo-Irish solitude.

Seen against this background of causes, Maud Gonne's responsibility for Yeats's withdrawal from public activity in 1893 can perhaps be more fairly assessed.

Yeats re-entered Irish public affairs in 1897. By this time he had refined the unitive theories which were a framework of his ambitions for Ireland. He had made a natural retreat into esoteric speculations regarding

⁴⁷ Nicholas Mansergh, Ireland in the Age of Reform and Revolution (London, 1940), p.217.

⁴⁸ Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916, ed. F.X. Martin, p.229.

⁴⁹ United Ireland, December 17, 1892.

the evocative powers of image and symbol and was encouraged by his uncle George Pollexfen with whom he spent a great deal of time. On a visit to Douglas Hyde, Yeats had seen Castle Rock, as it was called, in Lough Kay. It was an 'island all castle' and not very old. Yeats describes how

'the situation in the centre of the lake, that has little wood-grown islands, and is surrounded by wood-grown hills, is romantic, and at one end, and perhaps at the other too, there is a stone platform where meditative persons might pace to and fro.'⁵⁰

Thereafter he conceived of a mystical Order which should buy or hire the castle and keep it as a place 'where its members could retire for a while for contemplation, and where we might establish mysteries like those of Eleusis and Samothrace'. For ten years, Yeats claimed, his most impassioned thought was a vain attempt to find philosophy and to create a ritual for that Order. Young Ireland, he imagined, could be initiated into a mystical philosophy. He believed that instead of thinking of Judea as holy 'we should [believe] our own land holy and most holy when most beautiful.'

Knowledge of the mystics encouraged his hopes:

'I had an unshakable conviction, arising how or whence I cannot tell, that invisible gates would open as they opened for Blake, as they opened for Swedenborg, as they opened for Boehme, and that this philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature, and set before Irishmen for special manual and Irish literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind, and turn our places of beauty or legendary association into holy symbols. I did not think this philosophy would be altogether pagan, for it was plain that its symbols must be selected from

50 Autobiographies, p.253.

all those things that had moved men most during many, mainly Christian, centuries.'⁵¹

He became convinced of the reality of Anima Mundi described by Platonic philosophers and in modern times by Henry More. It was the supporting hypothesis for his plans concerning Unity of Culture defined and evoked by Unity of Image. He speculated:

'Is there nation-wide multiform reverie, every mind passing through a stream of suggestion, and all streams acting and reacting upon one another, no matter how distant the minds, how dumb the lips? A man walked, as it were, casting a shadow, and yet one could never say which was man and which was shadow, or how many the shadows that he cast. Was not a nation, as distinguished from a crowd of chance comers, bound together by this interchange among streams and shadows; that Unity of Image, which I sought in national literature, being but an originating symbol?'⁵²

He thus believed that the Truth he was seeking would arrive at a moment of passionate experience through the right image or images and to this end he would direct his own and national activity by the establishment of the mystical Order.

He spoke of his aspirations to Maud and writes:

'Maud Gonne entirely shared this idea and I did not doubt that in carrying this out I should win her for myself. Politics were merely a means of meeting her but this was a link so perfect that would restore at once even in a quarrel the sense of intimacy.'⁵³

51 Autobiographies, p.254.

52 Ibid, p.263.

53 Jeffares, p.109.

Plans for the Order of Celtic Mysteries, as it was to be called, were interrupted, however, by political activity in which Maud featured as an important influence. But once again Yeats's initial commitment was made independently without any thought of Maud. The facts are well known as recounted by Joseph Hone in his biography of Yeats, and may be repeated in the interests of the present discussion.

After Yeats moved into rooms in Woburn Buildings, in 1896 he met T.W. Rolleston who informed him of the new developments in the Irish Republican Brotherhood of which Yeats, as disciple of O'Leary, always regarded himself a member. The new development was the endeavour on the part of the IRB to assume control not only of Fenian propaganda but of the Irish Parliamentary party which was still torn by internal dissensions after Parnell's death. Yeats accepted Rolleston's suggestion that he should help the 'new movement'. The idea appeared favourable to his desire for some sort of unity in Irish politics and he feared the scheme would be ruined if left in the hands of fanatics or ignorant men. Accordingly, he was introduced to Dr. Mark Ryan, chief of the IRB in London 'in whom he discovered a touching benevolence'. He imagined his thought would be understood by men of such nature. Unrealistically, he took the new political movement as an opportunity for furthering the scope of Irish intellectual regeneration. But shortly after this Rolleston, who had introduced him to it, resigned from the IRB.

In the meantime, Maud Gonne was sworn into the IRB by Dr. Ryan and was immersed in political work. She had agreed to go on a lecture tour in the States in order to collect money for the young Dublin Nationalists who planned a monument to Wolfe Tone in Commemoration of the 1798 Rising. The

tour was organised by the Clan na Gael, in America, which was sharply divided between the so-called 'Triangle' group who advocated terrorist activities in Britain and those under Devoy who preferred a more patient policy until the time was ripe for an armed insurrection in Ireland. The split was faithfully mirrored in Ireland. John O'Leary favoured Devoy and his following while Dr. Mark Ryan supported the other section, Maud was refused authorisation for the tour by the Dublin Committee headed by John O'Leary, because of the split. She informed Yeats about this while passing through London and he decided to intervene on her behalf. He called a meeting and passed the necessary resolution which enabled her to leave for the States. He learnt at this meeting that the new political movement was supported by one of the violently opposed sections into which the Clan na Gael had split. It was the same section that organised Maud's tour, i.e. the 'Triangle' group which was accused by the Devoy section of the murder in 1889 of a certain Dr. Cronin. The Dublin Committee represented Devoy and the friends of Maud and Yeats, the supposed murderers. The Dublin Committee could not be made to understand that the money collected by Maud would go to the movement and not to any section of it. It occurred to Yeats that if he accepted the Presidency of the British Committee for the memorial, he might avert a public quarrel and make a great central council possible. His name was put forward and he was elected. Unrealistically, he began formulating a grandiose plan which for him could eventually encourage an imaginative movement in Ireland. The Dublin and London Committees could, when the time drew near for the unveiling of the statue, act as a kind of Irish Parliament and invite the four parties in Ireland- the Parnellites,

anti-Parnellites, official Unionists and a new party of progressive landlords- to present a statement to this Parliament or Convention. An Executive Committee could then be appointed to direct Irish policy and report from time to time. The total withdrawal of Irish members from Westminster had been proposed but Yeats thought they could be sent there, not as an independent power but as a delegation, and only when and for what purpose the Convention might decide. He writes:

'I dreaded some wild Fenian movement, and with literature perhaps more in my mind than politics, dreamed of that Unity of Culture which might begin with some few men controlling some form of administration.'⁵⁴

When Maud returned from the States she actively repudiated the dissensions that beset Parnellite and anti-Parnellite parties and hoped, like Yeats, for some kind of unity in the new movement. But she was beginning to tire of parliamentary tactics and their circuitous, time-consuming methods. 'More and more I realised', she writes, 'that Ireland could rely only on force, in some form or other, to free herself.'⁵⁵ What she communicated to the Irish-Americans in the States was on much the same lines:

'What I had to say could not always have been pleasing, for I had to tell people to hope for nothing from the parliamentary party whose leaders they had hero-worshipped and generously financed. Before Parnell had been finally broken by the British intrigues of which Kitty O'Shea was the heroine and centre, his force had gone from him when he broke with the physical force party and repudiated the acts of violence of the Land League.'⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Autobiographies, p.362.

⁵⁵ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.215.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.189.

Yeats was curiously unaware of Maud's activist preference for physical combat if he imagined she supported his fanciful scheme. But he overheard her conversation and discovered that 'she commonly urged the entire withdrawal of the Irish Members, or if she did refer to my scheme, it was to suggest the sending to England of eighty ragged and drunken Dublin beggars or eighty pugilists "to be paid by results"'.⁵⁷

Yeats's scheme was never realised. He saw himself aiming for a 'premature impossible peace' between the two devouring heads of Cerberus that symbolised Irish politics. He knew he was sedentary and thoughtful, but Maud was not, and while he abandoned plans on assessing the odds against them, she carried out every plan that she conceived. In her capacity he perceived the 'purity of a natural force' and 'courage equal to desire' and so continued to admire what he lacked. An example of her daring of these years was the way she wrested relief measures from the Castle for the workers of Mayo. Accounts of her spirited defiance of authority became well known and the common people eulogised her heroism. The violence of her political methods, which Yeats disapproved by natural inclination and political training, was curiously absorbed into his aesthetics of tragedy. This made her all the more an object of desire and during these years he helped and shared most of her activities.

The year 1897 was that of Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee. The '98 Commemoration Committee decided to prevent Dublin loyalists from celebrating the occasion. James Conolly, representative of the Irish Socialist Republican Party, and Arthur Griffith, future founder of Sinn Fein, were

⁵⁷ Autobiographies, pp.362-63.

the moving spirits of the Committee. Maud's political engagements brought her into contact with both. With Yeats she assisted them in their anti-British activity on the occasion of the jubilee. She had gone to lay a wreath on the tomb of a political martyr at St. Michael's Church and was refused admission because of the jubilee. Thereafter she spoke at a meeting and after telling of the incident added, 'Must the graves of our dead go undecorated because Victoria has her Jubilee?' and the crowds went wild. Connolly and his associates organised a procession carrying black flags with slogans headed by a coffin with the words 'British Empire' upon it. Crowds accompanied the Council on their way to the National Club after a meeting in the City Hall. In Rutland Square a magic lantern showed statistics of the evictions, deaths and prosecutions during Victoria's reign. Decorated windows were smashed and people grew excited. Yeats who endeavoured to restore order discovered he had lost his voice and freed thus from responsibility he recalls how he shared the emotion of the crowd and perhaps felt what they felt when glass crashed. Amid the frenzied masses, Yeats observed how Maud Gonne had a look of exultation as she walked 'with her laughing head thrown back.'⁵⁸ Later there was an inevitable clash with the police; the coffin was thrown contemptuously into the Liffey. Maud who was at the National Club was instantly stirred to join the people who were battered by the police, but was restrained by Yeats. She told him he had made her do the only cowardly thing in her life.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Autobiographies, p.368.

⁵⁹ Jeffares, p.117.

That evening, he remembered, more than two hundred people were taken to the hospitals, an old woman was killed and two thousand pounds' worth of decorated plate-glass windows had been broken.⁶⁰ Someone had shouted accusingly at Maud Gonne and hoped that she was satisfied with the destruction caused. Years later Yeats wrote:

'I count the links in the chain of responsibility, run them across my fingers, and wonder if any link there is from my workshop.'⁶¹

And perhaps there was, in however indirect a way. Two worlds, Maud's and his, had crossed without mutual comprehension and their contact was partly responsible for the ignition of public feeling. Yeats was leading one of the de-Anglicising movements oriented to create a love and respect for national literature and culture and the ideal of self-sacrifice perpetuated by all who died for Ireland's sake. This was to balance a hatred for all that Morris and Ruskin hated- commercial and utilitarian values, that also informed all movements incapable of self-sacrifice. Maud, who by her deeds had gained direct contact with the people, invested her oratory with romantic imagery that was for Yeats a means of establishing Unity of Culture. She spoke of 'Mother Ireland with the crown of stars about her head', but her purposes were different. She favoured immediate and effective action against the British in order to wrest political independence for Ireland. Heroic defiance perhaps led to the organised protests on Victoria's Jubilee but the destructive riots ensued as a result

⁶⁰ Autobiographies, p.368.

⁶¹ Loc. cit.

of a fundamental confusion in signals to the people. It was the beginning of tendencies in Irish politics that later found expression in the Easter Rebellion of 1916 and the Civil War of 1922.

After the Jubilee riots Yeats, in his capacity as President of the '98 Commemoration Association, accompanied by Maud on a tour among the Irish in England and Scotland. These months, he describes, were among the worst in his life. Maud records her impressions of him during this period:

'He hated crowds, I loved them. His generous desire to help and share my work brought him into contact with all sorts of people, men from the country and men from the towns, working for Ireland's freedom. I hardly realised then how important that contact was for him, and sometimes felt guilty at taking so much of his time from his literary work... I remember Willie's astonished pleasure when, after a meeting, some shy boy would come up and shake his hand because he had read his poems and loved them; I knew that contact was good for him...'62

The contact certainly gave Yeats the confidence he required when later he directed a theatre. He never shirked the boredom of committee meetings and when technical forms gave him time to deliberate, he had great influence and was generally the governing mind. With Maud he managed the financial affairs of the '98 Association with remarkable efficiency.⁶³

Meanwhile his romantic interest in Maud remained unabated. He confided in Lady Gregory and kept her informed of Maud's attitudes and inclinations. In the course of the tour, he wrote from Manchester: 'She [Maud] is very kind and friendly but whether more than that I cannot tell...'

⁶² Scattering Branches, pp.27-28.

⁶³ Hone, p.151.

After the tour when Maud left for the States she wrote Yeats addressing him as 'friend'; she never seemed to give him any reason to regard her as otherwise. Yeats remembered:

'My devotion might as well have been offered to an image in a milliner's shop, or to a statue in a museum, but romantic doctrine had reached its extreme development.'⁶⁴

The '98 Commemoration ceremonies were not as successful as anticipated. There was a great procession headed by the majority of the Council and their friends. They were followed by Maud Gonne's waggonette and with her were Yeats and Cipriani, an Italian sympathizer. The Parnellite and anti-Parnellite parties followed in the rear. Yeats was invited to speak on behalf of the IRB, but when he credited the people with having created a movement which answered England's delusion regarding Irish subservience, there were calls from the crowd, 'No, no, it is Maud Gonne that has made it.' Yeats's admiration for her beauty and power was unbounded and in his frame work of creative nationalism, her symbolic significance was intensified.

After the celebrations, Maud began to work towards a continental coalition against England. The Boer war fired a great deal of anti-British sentiment in Ireland and the continent and she saw this as an excellent opportunity to overthrow British Imperialism. An agent of the French Military Intelligence travelled to London carrying her letters of introduction to the IRB who were to supply information on the subject. The plan proved abortive. The agent was entrusted to Frank Hugh O'Donnell, an old enemy of Maud and Yeats, and was subsequently arrested. Another plan

⁶⁴ Autobiographies, p.399.

suggesting the insertion of bombs in the coal of British troopships through a Boer agent in Brussels, was likewise fruitless. Again a sum of money appropriated to Maud for revolutionary work in Ireland was never fully realised. Consequently Maud's reputation and the credit of Irish revolutionaries suffered a serious setback in France. Her alliance with Millevoeye came to an end. When he met her, he talked of the change that had come over her since she had taken up with those absurd Irish revolutionists who would never do anything and who would let her down.⁶⁵ After a disagreement with the IRB over O'Donnell, both Maud and Yeats resigned from the Brotherhood.⁶⁶

Maud's role as a conspirator caused Yeats great distress. In 1899 when he visited her in Paris, he tried once again to persuade her to leave politics and marry him. Her answer was the same. She also told him that marriage was impossible because "I have a horror and terror of physical love."⁶⁷ Yeats was miserable and his letters to Lady Gregory reflected his distress. He wrote:

'...I have little to set against what he [Russell] says but a few omens. I would not so much lament but I am sure that if things remain as they are she will never leave this life, which a vision I made her see six years ago told her was her deepest hell, and contrasted with the life of labour from the divine love which was her deepest heaven.'⁶⁸

⁶⁵ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.277.

⁶⁶ As we have seen earlier, however, Yeats remained true to the founding principles of the I.R.B. till the end of his days.

⁶⁷ Bradford, T.S.L.L., p.461.

⁶⁸ Ibid, p.455.

And again:

'...she [Maud] has told me the story of her life, telling gradually, in more detail, all except a few things which I can see are too painful for her to talk of and about which I do not ask her. I do not wonder that she shrinks from life. Hers has been in part the war of phantasy and of a blinded idealism against eternal law.'⁶⁹

He later commented how the dread of normal love had spoiled her life, 'checking natural and instinctive selection, and leaving fantastic duties to take its place.'⁷⁰

Yeats had many opportunities of seeing Maud in London after his visit to Paris. On one occasion they shared a vision. Maud saw herself as a great stone statue through which passed flame and Yeats felt himself becoming flames and mounting up through and looking out of the eyes of a great stone Minerva.⁷¹ These experiences gave Yeats his metaphors for 'Easter 1916'. Maud gave him the powerful image that synthesized for him his experience of Nationalist politics as well as the frustration of personal desire through a woman's association with it. Hearts enchanted to a stone 'trouble the living stream'.⁷² Thus he wrote of how 'Nationalist abstractions were like the fixed ideas of some hysterical woman, part of the mind turned into stone, the rest a seething and burning'- a description which recalls elements of the visionary flaming statue. Through the image

⁶⁹ Coxhead, p.43.

⁷⁰ Bradford, TSL, p.465.

⁷¹ Ibid, p.461.

⁷² Collected Poems, p.204.

he expressed his understanding of female psychology and the processes of creative self-surrender that for him went awry in women who indulged in politics or lent themselves to abstractions. He wrote about it at length:

'Women, because the main event of their lives has been a giving themselves and giving birth, give all to an opinion as if it were a terrible stone doll...to women opinions become as their children of their sweethearts, and the greater their emotional capacity the more do they forget all other things. They grow cruel, as if in defence of lover or child, and all this is done for 'something other than human life'. At last the opinion is so much identified with their nature that it seems a part of their flesh becomes stone and passes out of life...Women should have their play with dolls finished in childish happiness, for if they play with them again it is amid hatred and malice.'⁷³

The turn of the century saw a feminist upsurge in Nationalist politics. It created a whole generation of political women which, for some, was a nightmare. During the war they earned the censure of many and were rated by historians like P.S.O'Hegarty as 'unlovely, destructive-minded, arid begetters of violence'.⁷⁴ Others saw their role in the first awakenings of Irish independence as significant if not commendable. But Yeats's attitude remained consistently denunciatory. Anti-feminism in Ireland gave women very little scope to participate in nationalist activities after the dissolution of the Ladies' Land League which was the first organised body of women established for political action. John O'Leary spoke a gentle epitaph on the League: 'they may not have been right, but they were suppressed because they were honest and more sincere than men'⁷⁵, and gave Maud the

⁷³ Autobiographies, p.504.

⁷⁴ Martin, p.227.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.228.

necessary impetus to work determinedly for the feminist ideal. She declared: '...I don't like this exclusion of women from the national fight, and the fact that they should have to work through back-door influence if they want to get things done.'⁷⁶

For Yeats nurtured on the Pre-Raphaelite aestheticism of the 'nineties, the incorporation of women in the political world was anathema. Woman was romantic and mysterious, 'still the priestess of her shrine, our emotions remembering the Lilith and the Sibylla Palmifera of Rossetti... It could not be otherwise, for Johnson's favourite phrase, that life is ritual, expressed something that was in some degree in all our thoughts, and how could life be ritual if woman had not her symbolical place?'⁷⁷ Thus he mourned the desecration of feminine loveliness and charm which politics had effected in the lives of two sisters Eva Gore-Booth and Constance Markievicz. They led, in their way, useful and dedicated lives and were representative figures of female emancipation in Ireland.

'Two girls in slik kimonos, both
 Beautiful, one a gazelle.
 But a raving autumn shears
 Blossom from a summer's wreath;
 The older is condemned to death,
 Pardoned, drags out lonely years
 Conspiring among the ignorant.

⁷⁶ Martin, p.229.

⁷⁷ Autobiographies, p.302.

I know not what the younger dreams-
 Some vague Utopia- and she seems,
 When withered old and skeleton gaunt,
 An image of such politics.'⁷⁸

Yeats's bitterness is obviously traceable to personal frustration. After the failure of her French plans and her renunciation of Fenian politics, Yeats, though by this time engaged with 'theatre business, management of men', was still hopeful for a future with Maud. Lady Gregory, who in these years was to prove herself an unfailing friend and guardian, intervened on his behalf and asked Maud of her intentions. She answered: 'I have more important things to think of than marriage and so has he.'⁷⁹

Far from renouncing political activity, Maud struck out in new directions. She began to work in close association with Arthur Griffith who in 1899 became the editor of United Irishman, a new nationalist weekly journal. It was a natural sequel to the mood of the '98 Celebrations and in adopting the nationalism of 1798, 1848 and 1867, the journal was avowedly separatist and a bold challenge to the established order of things. Maud resolved to act as a double link between Griffith and Connolly- (they had been the guiding spirits of the '98 Association and the co-ordination of labour and nationalist forces was to become one of increasing significance)- and between Griffith and Yeats and the literary and dramatic societies. Her intention was, as ever, to bring about an association of all the

⁷⁸ Collected Poems, p.263.

⁷⁹ Hone, p.165.

nationalist societies to form an open separatist movement. In addition to this, she gave a distinct form to the hitherto inchoate feminist drive that was beginning to be felt in the nationalist movement, by the establishment of a women's organisation- Inghinidhe na hEirann or the Daughters of Erin in 1900. She wrote that it began at 'a meeting of all the girls who, like myself, resented being excluded, as women, from nationalist organisations. Our object was to work for the complete independence of Ireland.' Classes in Irish history, literature, dancing etc., were part of the programme for the organisation but its primary aim at the time of the Boer War was to thwart the enlistment campaign. 'Leaflets urging Irish girls not to consort with soldiers were pressed on couples strolling the Dublin streets, pacifist pamphlets were dropped in the wake of the recruiting sergeants...'⁸⁰ The appeal of the Inghinidhe to the women of Ireland was immediate. It operated three halls in Dublin and had branches in Ballina, Cork and Limerick, and 'was more markedly and more typically feminist in atmosphere than its strongly nationalist bias might suggest.'⁸¹ One wonders with what private misgivings Yeats viewed these new developments. Nonetheless, he helped Maud in drawing rules for the organisation and continued to admire the extraordinary energy with which she worked.

But if Yeats did not overtly disapprove of Maud's anti-enlistment campaign on anti-feminist grounds, it was probably because like his co-directors in the Irish Literary Theatre, Edward Martyn and George Moore, he

⁸⁰ Martin, p.230.

⁸¹ Loc. cit.

was appreciably moved by the events of the Boer War. Even his father, J.B. Yeats grew political and exulted in British reverses. John O'Leary was reported to have expressed a cheerfulness over the war, such that he had not felt for twenty years. Hone records how 'Moore, Martyn and Yeats vied with each other in maledictions and accusations of the cold egoistic policy of England in South Africa.'⁸²

In 1900 Queen Victoria was scheduled to visit Ireland. Yeats was voluble in his protests against its implication...He sent letters to the Nationalist Press attacking the visit as a recruiting tour. In the Freeman's Journal of March 20, 1900 he wrote:

'The advisers of the Queen have not sent into Ireland this woman of eighty-one, to whom all labours must be weariness, without good reason, and the reason is National hatred- hatred of our individual National life; and, as Mr. Moore has pointed out, the necessities of Empire. She comes, as Mr. Moore has said, 'to do the work her recruiting sergeants have failed to do 'with a shilling between her finger and thumb and a bag of shillings at her girdle and it is the duty of Irish men who believe Ireland has an individual National life to test with as much courtesy as is compatible with vigour...'

He proposed a great meeting to be summoned in the Rotunda on the day of the visit, to protest against the Union and to dissociate Ireland from the welcome that 'the Unionists or the time-servers may offer to the official head of that Empire in whose name liberty is being suppressed in South Africa. as it was suppressed in Ireland a hundred years ago.' Yeats further suggested O'Leary to be the chairman of the meeting in the hope that dignity and order might prevent the confusion which he witnessed on the Jubilee

night of 1897.

Maud Gonne's activities were in perfect accord with this spirit of protest. She wrote bitterly against the 'Famine Queen' and incensed Dublin loyalists by her counter-demonstrations. The queen's visit included a treat for 15,000 school children at the Vice-Regal Lodge. Nationalists organised a counter 'Patriotic Treat' and it was reported that Maud with Maire Quinn led a two mile procession of some 30,000 children through the streets of Dublin to Clonturk Park. Yeats recalls how in the presence of a priest of their Church, they swore to cherish towards England, until the freedom of Ireland had been won, an undying enmity.⁸³

Years later Yeats was to reflect with dismay how the Nationalist movement degenerated into an assault and hatred of 'little persons and little things' instead of growing into a more profound hatred of 'great and lasting things' on which he could construct an intellectual movement. It was once again the result of the dangerous interaction of two forces, discussed earlier. In Yeats's oratorical outburst against the Queen's visit, one may detect the full impact of Maud's political methods in its incitement of public hatred. The Dublin Daily Express referred to the deplorable policy of Yeats towards the royal visit and quoted a letter of his which may well have come from the pen of a nationalist fanatic. Yet his ulterior purposes were different.

Why, one may ask, did Yeats commit himself to take a public stand against the Queen's visit, particularly as it meant losing the literary

83 Autobiographies, p.368.

support of prominent Unionists? Was it merely to please Maud Gonne already engaged in an anti-enlistment campaign? Influenced by the climate of opinion regarding the Boer War and the attitudes of his father, O'Leary and theatre colleagues, one may conclude that Yeats's response to the Queen's visit was for the most part sincere and spontaneous. Yet in retrospect there may have been other motivating factors. His experiences as founder of the literary movement and director of the Irish Literary Theatre was one of them.

In producing the Countess Cathleen in 1899, Yeats was faced with a bitter theological controversy over the alleged heretical and un-Catholic flavour of the play. The row that followed, though not overwhelming, was sufficiently disturbing to be a threat to the unitive aims of the literary movement. A protest against the Queen's visit, in flagrant opposition to Unionist sentiment, was an opportunity to win back nationalist support among the Catholics. Moreover, at the outset of the literary movement, he had attacked popular Young Ireland writers and later reflected: 'If I must attack so much that seemed sacred to Irish Nationalist opinion, I must, I knew, see to it that no man suspect me of doing it to flatter Unionist opinion.'⁸⁴ Thus after his two letters to the Nationalist Press, on the subject of the royal visit, dated March 20, 1900 and April 3, 1900, a letter to Lady Gregory of April 10-12, '00 reads:

'I don't think we need be anxious about next year's theatre. Moore talks confidently of finding the money, and I feel sure that our present politics will have done more good than harm. Clever Unionists will take us on our merits and the rest would never like us

⁸⁴ Autobiographies, p.233.

at any time. I have found a greatly increased friendliness on the part of the young men here. In a battle, like Ireland's which is one of poverty against wealth, one must prove one's sincerity, by making oneself unpopular to wealth. One must accept the baptism of the gutter. Have not all teachers done the like?'⁸⁵

Maud Gonne turned Catholic and consequently was brought into closer identification with the people. Yeats tried other means. His policy towards the Queen's visit was a continuation of his part in the '98 Celebrations and it would seem that in directing the political conduct of the nation, an intellectual leadership would be rendered more acceptable. He never forgot his role as a teacher nor his aims for Ireland which in essentials remained unaltered throughout the course of his life.

Thus in an article entitled 'Noble and Ignoble Loyalties' published in the April 21, 1900 issue of United Irishman, after using the Queen's visit as incitation to national hatred, Yeats attempts once again to transform that hatred into one of 'great and lasting things', of all that Morris and Ruskin hated:

'...I see all round me among the young men who hold the coming years in their hand, a new awakened inspiration and resolve. It is for the best that they should have the two loyalties, loyalty to this English Queen, loyalty to her we call Kathleen ni Hoolihan, called up before them, that they may choose with clear eyes the harder way, for man becomes wise alone by deliberate choice and deliberate sacrifice. There is commandment in our hearts that we shall do reverence to the overflowing goodness, wisdom, and genius, and to nobler kinds of beauty, and to those immortal ideals that will accept none but arduous service and to the Maker of these things; and that

⁸⁵ Wade, Letters, p.339.

we shall do reverence to nothing else under Heaven. Was it for any of these that those thousands stood cheering by the roadway...[the Queen] who unlike the great kings and queens of a greater time, has certainly used her example and her influence to cherish mediocrity in music and in painting and in literature...this royalty comes among us, with all the bribes of the world upon its knees, and a shopkeeper has but to cheer loudly enough and to fly flags enough, and he will fill his shop... It is because of these things that the cheers Royalty buys go down the wind so soon. They do not come out of any high resolve, but are the bought service of intellectual sloth and self-applauding egotism. Contrast this loyalty with the loyalty that has been the supreme emotion of so many thousands of poor Irish men and women. It gave them nothing, but the peace of heart that comes to those who serve high things, and for its sake they have gone to prison and exile and death and endured the enmity of the great and the wealthy. What can these Royal Processions mean to those who walk in the procession of heroic and enduring hearts that has followed Kathleen ni Hoolihan through the ages? Have they not given her their wills and their hearts and their dreams? What have they left for any less noble Royalty?'

One is immediately aware in these letters and articles of Yeats's deliberate repudiation of the wealthier classes and this, as was observed in the previous chapter, was part of his method for a socialist experiment in literature. But Maud's indirect influence in this direction deserves mention. As indicated earlier, she became in these years, a double link between Griffith and Connolly on the one hand and Griffith and Yeats on the other in an effort to bring about a co-ordination of forces for the freedom struggle. Irish politics during this period saw the re-unification of the Parnellite- and anti-Parnellite Nationalist parties under John Redmond. But this re-united Parliamentary Party aimed at Home Rule and was thus distinct from the unorthodox, non-constitutional forces manifest in Griffith's

separatist programme, the IRB and the Socialist movement under Connolly. Griffith's programme at first received the sympathetic support of the IRB, but more significant were the numerous indications of growing co-operation between Socialist and Separatist forces in Ireland. A year or two later this was evident in Griffith urging his supporters to vote Connolly in a local government scheme.

If Yeats was convinced after his experiences of mob violence in the '98 Commemoration, that the Irish Parliamentary parties were the only people with the slightest political training, it must not be forgotten that constitutional politics remained for him a method of compromise opposed to the Fenian tradition of heroism into which he was initiated by O'Leary, and which was linked to his artistic creed. He was thus naturally associated with the unorthodox, non-constitutional nationalist forces and Maud was largely responsible for maintaining the link at this stage. It is possible to assume that Yeats, influenced by Morris with a not too profound comprehension of the Labour movement, saw the just discernible socialist tendency within the nationalist movement as favourable to an ethos of non-materialist values, one that would precipitate the intellectual regeneration he dreamed of. Thus Ireland's battle was one 'of poverty against wealth' and the patriotism of the Irish poor was indicative of latent spirituality.

A composite awareness of these elements in Irish National consciousness enabled Yeats to produce a play that turned out a skilful but dangerous synthesis of Maud's nationalism and his own. Cathleen ni Houlihan was written for Maud and was 'an imaginary presentation of Ireland's desire for

freedom rising phoenix-like from the ashes of many unsuccessful rebellions'.⁸⁶
 It was performed very successfully in 1902 and was strongly supported by the Gaelic League and the young men and women of Griffith's following. Maud consented to act the title-role and St. Teresa's Hall on the nights of the performance was packed to capacity with working class audiences. In its powerful impact, the play was momentous in the history of the dramatic movement. Maud's acting was impressive and Yeats recalls how she 'made Cathleen seem like a divine being fallen into our mortal infirmity.'⁸⁷

The play doubtless had its esoteric implications. Yeats's beliefs in literature, nationality and philosophy were gradually being welded through the crucible of private experience. In the patriotism of the poor he saw the passion of poetical tragedy, as also the answer to the spiritual cry that 'calls beyond the limits of the world'. When Cathleen, who is Ireland herself, recalls the generations who died avenging her:

'They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for
 my sake, and for all that, they will think they are
 well paid',⁸⁸

Yeats is writing of tragedy where 'we watch the spectacle of some passion living out its life with little regard for the trouble it is giving.'⁸⁹
 But for a working class audience the implication of the play was as explosively propagandist as Maud would have desired it to be. She was

⁸⁶ Jeffares, p.137.

⁸⁷ Hone, p.175.

⁸⁸ Collected Plays, p.86.

⁸⁹ 'The Freedom of the Theatre,' United Irishman, November 1, 1902.

already well identified with political activism and uncompromising separatism and in her brilliant performance the message must have seemed clear enough.

Stephen Gwynn had observed:

'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. Yeats was not alone responsible; no doubt but Lady Gregory had helped him to get the peasant speech so perfect; but above all Miss Gonne's impersonation had stirred the audience as I have never seen another audience stirred.'⁹⁰

English critics, like Arthur Quiller-Couch, were disturbed by the 'political heresy' of the play and lamented writers, like Yeats, who trammelled their art with political propaganda. Yeats himself was to question years later:

'Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?'⁹¹

The Irish National Theatre was formed after the performances with Yeats as President and George Russell, Douglas Hyde and Maud Gonne as vice-presidents. But having once attained in his work a remarkable proximity to public sentiment (P.S. O'Hegarty stated that Cathleen ni Houlihan was to those who witnessed it in the '90's and early twentieth century, 'a sacrament'. 'In it surely the spirit of Ireland spoke to us, and we listened... Everything that we dreamed, hoped and planned is in that play'.⁹²) Yeats was to find it increasingly difficult to maintain his independence as an artist.

⁹⁰ Irish Literature and Drama (London, 1936), pp.158-59.

⁹¹ Collected Poems, p.393.

⁹² 'W.B. Yeats and the Revolutionary Ireland of his Time,' Dublin Magazine (July-Sept. 1939), p.23.

It presaged a series of misunderstandings with the Irish public which culminated in the riots over the production of Synge's Playboy of the Western World. It was also the beginning of the end of his political collaboration with Maud in the nationalist movement. 'The whirlpool of life had sent the current of our activities wide apart',⁹³ Maud wrote. The basic incompatibility of their literary and political principles was brought into focus after the success of Cathleen ni Houlihan, and this was perhaps the initial cause.

In 1903 Griffith formed a compact body out of the Cumann na nGael, called the National Council, to counteract demonstrations of loyalty to King Edward VII on his visit to Dublin. It was to form the nucleus of Sinn Fein. Members of the Council included Yeats, Maud Gonne, Edward Martyn and George Russell and this was significant as it suggested the intended co-operation between literary and political groups. Yeats wrote to the Freeman's Journal on the subject of the King's visit associated with the passing of the Land Bill.⁹⁴ But political gestures of this kind became, on his part, more and more infrequent. Inevitably there was a rift between the literary and political factions which gradually widened. 'I had withdrawn from politics', Yeats wrote 'because I could not bear perplexing, by what I said about books, the simple patriotic men whose confidence I had gained by what I said about nationality.'⁹⁵

⁹³ Scattering Branches, p.25.

⁹⁴ Monday, July 13, 1903.

⁹⁵ Autobiographies, p.448.

He alienated the Gaelic Leaguers and Sinn Fein public when he supported, on artistic grounds, Synge's first play The Shadow of the Glen in which a married peasant woman has a lover. This seemed to be a regrettable aspersion on Irish womanhood and Maud Gonne walked out of the first performance in protest. She could not understand Yeats's pre-occupation with artistic criteria in the context of a national struggle for independence. The editorial columns of Griffith's United Irishman grew severely critical:

'Mr. Yeats does not give any reason why if the Irish National Theatre has now no propaganda save that of good art it should continue to call itself either Irish or National...'96

Maud herself contributed an article on the National Theatre attacking Yeats's viewpoint. She wrote:

"It is for the many, for the people, that Irish writers must write, and if the Irish people do not understand or care for an Irish play, I should feel very doubtful of its right to rank as national literature, though all the critics in England were loud in its praise and though I myself might see beauty in it...Yeats writes: 'Literature is always personal, always one man's vision of the world, one man's experience, and it can only be popular when men are ready to welcome the visions of others. A community that is opinion-ridden, even when those opinions are in themselves noble, is likely to put its creative minds into some sort of prison'. But Mr. Yeats forgets that the national struggle for independence is one in which the majority of the people of Ireland are personally engaged, and the thoughts of that struggle are habitual to them, and plays and poems that speak of it are plays and poems which go directly to their hearts and appeal to them as no other plays or poems can..."97

96 October, 24, 1903.

97 Loc. cit.

The misunderstanding was complete. In an earlier letter to Yeats she had written, 'All I want of you is not to build up an imaginary wall of effort between yourself and life- for the rest the gods will arrange -for you are one of those they have chosen to do their work.'⁹⁸ The 'imaginary wall of effort' seems to have implied his vast metaphysical ambitions for Ireland - 'the fascination of what's difficult'.

Yeats's withdrawal from politics in 1903, however, was precipitated by a personal crisis. This was the marriage of Maud to Major John MacBride. It was a patriotic wedding. John MacBride had led the Irish Brigade with the Boers and was at the time of the marriage the secretary of Laffan's Bureau in Paris. His gallantry was universally acknowledged and he was willing to risk his life in any fight against England. Apparently after Millevoeye, he seemed best fitted to work in accord with Maud's life mission.

Yeats was on a lecture tour in the States when the news reached him. He was deeply hurt and shocked. In 1902 he had once again offered Maud his protection and she had written: 'I should not need and could not accept protection from anyone, though I fully realise and understand the generous and unselfish thoughts which were in your heart and I love you for them...'
Earlier as a solution to his dilemma Yeats had entered into a 'mystical marriage' with her and he had remained faithful to the 'deep sworn vow'. Her marriage to MacBride therefore seemed perfectly meaningless. It is evident that her attitude towards Yeats which was always affectionate, comradely and detached was imperfectly understood by him. Through the

⁹⁸ Coxhead, pp.51-52.

creative employment of her image in his works she had become an imaginative possession; the fact of her marrying another demanded the dispossession of an inspirational source:

'Some may have blamed you that you took away
The verses that could move them on the day
When, the ears being deafened, the sight of the eyes blind
With lightning, you went from me...'⁹⁹

That he lived most of his love in poetic imagination throws light on certain aspects of his nationalism which, in these years of political activity, was associated with it.

Two years after her marriage, Maud looked for a separation from her husband. Yeats was deeply sympathetic and while the case for a judicial separation remained undecided, he gave Maud all the support she needed. By this time he had alienated, still further, the nationalist parties associated with him by establishing the Abbey Theatre (1904) in the interests of nationalist art as against nationalist propaganda. He had foreseen the difference in his position 'at the time of the Countess Cathleen row' and had written to Lady Gregory in 1901: 'I imagine that as I withdraw from politics my friends among the Nationalists grow less and my foes more numerous...'¹⁰⁰ But when Maud was hissed by MacBride's partisans at a première at the Abbey, Yeats was disgusted and decided peremptorily that he could no more indulge in popular politics.

⁹⁹ Collected Poems, p.102.

¹⁰⁰ Autobiographies, p.448.

In looking over the period 1897-1903 we may assess briefly the combination of factors responsible for Yeats's re-commitment to and withdrawal from the world of Irish politics. There was obviously more than one determining factor. Maud was an important though not exclusive factor. His initial commitment to the 'new movement' was, as we have seen, motivated by a desire to lead a unitive movement in Irish politics. Maud's participation in the '98 Celebrations gave an added impetus and hope. She could not be 'the fiery hand' of the intellectual movement', but she could be such in a political movement, which unlike others of its kind, would lay the foundations of intellectual regeneration. His involvement in the counter-demonstrations on Queen Victoria's Jubilee and endurance of some of the worst years of his life touring England and Scotland as President of the '98 Commemoration Association, seem easily attributed to his desire to be with Maud. This was largely true and yet there is evidence that all was a deliberate courtship of incompatible experience for no other purpose but that of self-integration -to win the freedom that came from Unity of Being. Writing of this period in Autobiographies Yeats writes:

'Every enterprise that offered, allured just in so far as it was not my business. I still think that in a species of man, wherein I could myself, nothing so much matters as Unity of Being, but if I seek it as Goethe sought, who was not of that species, I but combine in myself, and perhaps as it now seems, looking backward, in others also, incompatibles. Goethe...could but seek it as Wilhelm Meister seeks it, intellectually, critically, and through a multitude of deliberately chosen experiences; events and forms of skill gathered as if for a collector's cabinet; whereas true Unity of Being, where all the nature murmurs in response if but a single note be touched, is found emotionally, instinctively, by the rejection of all experience not of the right quality,

and by the limitation of its quantity. Of all this I knew nothing, for I saw the world by the light of what my father had said, speaking about some Frenchman who frequented the dissecting-rooms to overcome his dread in the interest of that Unity. My father had mocked, but had not explained why he mocked, and I for my unhappiness had felt a shuddering fascination. Nor did I understand as yet how little that Unity, however wisely sought, is possible without a Unity of Culture in class or people that is no longer possible at all.'¹⁰¹

Written in retrospect, this may seem a justification of an unsuccessful political involvement, but as early as 1898, a letter to George Russell, persuading him of the value of his work for the Agricultural Co-operative Movement, offers encouragement to a fellow artist to absorb in the interests of self-conquest and freedom, the incompatible experiences that Ireland had to offer:

'...But remember always that now you are face to face with Ireland, its tragedy and its poverty, and if we would express Ireland we must know her to the heart and in all her moods. You will be a far more powerful mystic and poet and teacher because of this knowledge... You are face to face with the heterogenous, and the test of one's harmony is our power to absorb it and make it harmonious. Gradually these bars, hotels and cottages and strange faces will become familiar, gradually you will come to see them through a mist of half-humorous, half-comical, half-poetical, half affectionate memories and hopes. The arguments you use, and the methods you adopt, will become familiar too and then your mind will be free again.

When I began speaking on politics first my mind used to be absorbed for days before and very anxious, and now I hardly think of what I am going to say until I get to the meeting, and when it is over it goes straight out of my mind..' ¹⁰²

101 pp.354-55.

102 Wade, Letters, pp.294-95.

Thus the record in Autobiographies of experiences during the early years of political activity, is in the form of discrete fragments. They suggest the confrontation with 'the heterogenous' - a challenge to creative harmony.

Yeats's opposition to the Queen's visit, as analysed earlier, was due to the combined influence of a number of factors. It was partly an attempt to retain nationalist support and the occasion was used to enlarge Irish hate into the hatred 'of great and lasting things'. The climax was reached with the production of Cathleen ni Houlihan, after which Yeats's independence as artist was jeopardised. Maud's marriage in 1903 and the response of MacBride's partisans to her intended separation two years later, finalised Yeats's decision to withdraw from Irish politics. But his withdrawal was evident before Maud's marriage and, in the context of nationalist politics, was inevitable.

The final phase of Yeats's relationship with Maud may be said to cover the years after 1908 when he visited her in Paris and renewed their spiritual ties. During these years, however, their activities grew wide apart and Maud's influence on Yeats was a result of 'remembered passion' more than anything else. Yeats's preoccupation with the affairs of the Abbey Theatre and intransigence towards his critics, Unionist and Nationalist alike, left him isolated in the Irish literary world in much the same way as Morris was in the Socialist movement or as O'Leary was in the Fenian. In Maud's opinion, Yeats gradually lost touch with the forces working towards Ireland's freedom:

'His search for hidden knowledge had led him so far among strange paths that at times he almost forgot

the object of the quest. He found himself among the comfortable and well-fed, who styled themselves as the "upper classes", but whom Willie, shuddering at the words and discriminating even among them, called "Distinguished Persons"; and some undoubtedly deserved the title.¹⁰³

His nationalism became aristocratic and exclusive in reaction to the great misunderstanding of his intentions when the Irish public had rebuked the genius of Synge. Maud became for him a symbolic aid to re-assess the past, a means of objectifying defeat or making intelligible the unresolved passions of his youth.

During the years following her separation from John MacBride, Maud was away from Ireland for most of the time. As a result she was temporarily outside the context of active politics. Her activities, if any, were probably linked with the social work programmes of the Inghinidhe, (she was approached by James Connolly in the winter of 1910 to start a campaign to give school meals for necessitous children in Dublin). The leadership of the women's separatist movement in Ireland had passed into the hands of outstanding feminist Nationalists like Helena Molony, Countess Markievicz and Mrs. Sheehy Skeffington and Maud's role became ancillary. This made it easier for Yeats to contemplate Maud without a friction with his ideals which her politics caused. He could identify her enemies with his own and numbering her among the proud, heroic and high-born, could make her integral to his own design and dream for Ireland. He visited her often both in Paris and Normandy and wrote many poems (e.g. 'Against Unworthy Praise' and 'Peace') in which Maud remained the source of inspiration.

¹⁰³ Scattering Branches, pp.28-29.

But political events and Maud's response to them compelled Yeats to recognise that she did not really understand his 'plans or notions or ideas'. Her attitudes in politics remained the same. While Yeats withdrew from 'the contagion of the throng' and devised a programme for art 'that may help some man some day to make, a feeling of exclusiveness, a bond among chosen spirits, a mystery almost for leisured and lettered people', her sentiments were drawn closer to Constance Markievicz's socialist identification with the working classes. Labour discontent in Ireland was on the increase and James Connolly, Labour leader and mentor of the Countess, aimed at a co-ordination of Labour and Nationalist forces in the freedom struggle. In 1913 when the industrial strife came to a head in the great Dublin lock-out, Maud wrote a piece for The Irish Worker strongly in support of the workers associated with Jim Larkin's Irish Transport and General Worker's Union. So also did Yeats. The factors motivating his action have already been analysed by Joseph Hone¹⁰⁴ and Conor Cruise O'Brien¹⁰⁵ and need not be repeated here. It is unlikely that Maud had any direct influence in the matter.

The differences between the political approaches of Yeats and Maud became more pronounced in their later years. The news of the Easter Rebellion drove Maud 'wild with delight' and she wrote to Yeats that 'Tragic dignity is restored to Ireland'¹⁰⁶. Yeats, unlike her, was profoundly disturbed by the

¹⁰⁴ Hone, p.268.

¹⁰⁵ In Excited Reverie, pp.228-38.

¹⁰⁶ From the Royal Societies Club, May 12, 1916. (Jeffares, p.186).

news and wrote to Lady Gregory of 'the heroic, tragic lunacy of Sinn Fein'. A year after the rebellion, Yeats was both critical and apprehensive about Maud. He feared she would once again be driven to do something wild. He wrote Lady Gregory:

'Maud Gonne...is in a joyous and self-forgetting condition of political hate the like of which I have not yet encountered.'¹⁰⁷

It is not surprising that the Irish Civil War found Yeats and Maud on different political camps. It may be noted, however, that Maud did initially acquiesce to the signing of the Treaty which ended the war with England in December 1921 and which was looked upon by Republicans, as a betrayal. She was a friend of Arthur Griffith and was somewhat indifferent to President De Valera. It was after the Provisional Government executions of the four Republican leaders who occupied the Four Courts, that she took up the Republican cause and became a sworn enemy of the Cosgrave régime. She felt that in carrying out the executions the Government clearly turned against its own people and was therefore indefensible.

Thus when Yeats became Senator of the Free State Government, she found it hard to forgive him. She writes in her tribute to Yeats:

'We quarrelled seriously when he [Yeats] became a Senator of a Free State which voted Flogging Acts against young Republican soldiers seeking to free Ireland from the contamination of the British Empire, and for several years we ceased to meet..¹⁰⁸

She resolved to harass the Cosgrave Government in every possible way and

107 Wade, Letters, p.631

108 Scattering Branches, p.25.

organised a series of demonstrations in O'Connell Street. Inevitably she was arrested and imprisoned at Kilmainham in January 1923. She went immediately on hunger-strike and increased Yeats's apprehensions over her condition. Yeats appealed to Mr. Cosgrave for her release but was unsuccessful. Worried about Maud's health, he decided to arrange for a supply of warm blankets for her use in prison. But although he never failed Maud was a friend, Yeats was privately more disillusioned than ever with the course of her activities. Thus he wrote Olivia Shakespear on January 5, 1923:

'I cannot write any more as I have just learned that Maud Gonne has been arrested and I must write to Iseult and offer to help with the authorities in the matter of warm blankets. The day before her arrest she wrote to say that if I did not denounce the government she renounced my society forever. I am afraid my help in the matter of blankets, instead of her release (where I could do nothing), will not make her less resentful. She had to choose (perhaps all women must) between broomstick and distaff and she has chosen the broomstick - I mean the witches' hats.'¹⁰⁹

In politics, therefore, Yeats was completely independent of Maud's influence during his later years. But till the end he continued to admire her beauty and when after De Valera's return to power in 1932, she campaigned for young gunmen who fought to end the Partition in Ireland, he was impressed, as before, by her indomitable energy. They met for the last time at Riversdale in the late summer on 1938. Much to her surprise he spoke of the ends they had once pursued together. A few weeks later on reading that a letter signed by her was found by the English police on one of their I.R.A. captives, 'he threw up his arms in elation. "What a woman!" he exclaimed.

109 Wade, Letters, p.697.

"What vitality! what energy!"¹¹⁰ Politics apart, she remained the beautiful enigma that had fired his youthful imagination:

'No dark tomb-haunter once; her form all full
 As though with magnanimity of light,
 Yet a most gentle woman; who can tell
 Which of her forms has shown her substance right?
 Or maybe substance can be composite,
 Profound McTaggart thought so, and in a breath
 A mouthful held the extreme of life and death.'¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Hone, p.470

¹¹¹ Collected Poems, p.382.

Part II

It is now appropriate to study the effect of Yeats's relationship with Maud on his art and the development of his political thought. The subject is vast and engaging and I shall therefore concentrate on a few significant aspects relevant to the present study.

I would like particularly to draw attention to the mythologising of Maud which covers a whole range of experience- emotional, aesthetic, political, religious and philosophical. The Maud image, in however disguised a form, sustains an effective aesthetic control over diverse currents of feeling. It provides a suitable focus through which one might follow Yeats's conscious struggle to hammer his thoughts into unity. Through his use of the image, we can also appreciate the effect of Maud on his personal feelings and experiences and this, as I shall try to show, was closely related to his political thought and experience and the way in which they were integral to his larger creative vision.

The early and most important years of Yeats's relationship with Maud were also years of political involvement. An awareness of the coterminous nature of his personal and political experiences is invaluable when we consider the complex syntheses of personal and political emotions in his art. Yeats's experience of Maud's rejection was linked with his experience of her political world. She thus became a dynamic centre of reference influencing much of his later political speculations and ambitions for Ireland and the arts. Losing her through politics, in which he had no scope, indicated a need for change in Irish political life which he tirelessly

expressed in his writings. A woman lost to normal life through a commitment to abstractions is a recurrent image used to justify such a change as he desired, whereby Ireland could strive towards Unity of Being. Defeat in love and politics also deepened a personal rationale for the celebration of poetical tragedy and the 'Romantic Ireland' of O'Leary which drew its energy from a tradition of political martyrdom. The deliberate abnegation of success which Yeats increasingly theorised about was a compensatory tragic faith rooted in a disturbing awareness of practical defeat. His knowledge of Ireland's tragic history was a suitable screen on which he could project personal tragedy in the act of which the dimensions of both could be increased and rendered more meaningful. Yeats, like Vico, Swift, Hegel and Balzac, apprehended history as personal experience and in the self-effacing service to woman, cause or state he found a natural means of self-assertion through self-sacrifice.

It is, I believe through observing this process of projection and identification that one may appreciate more fully the core of emotional and imaginative energy behind many of Yeats's patriotic poems and plays where the love of woman and love of country become interchangeable facets of emotional experience. Myth and symbol emerge as powerful condensations of thought and feeling. Gradually through their imaginative coherence and malleability they supersede the realities of the poet's life that initially generated their use-

'Players and painted stage took all my love,
And not those things that they were emblems of.'¹¹²

¹¹² Collected Poems, p.392.

Sometimes biographical connections appear remote if not preposterous at first sight, and the critical value of investigating these same may be open to question. Yet, I believe, it is by risking the tedium of relating an artist's recorded life with his work, albeit through imaginative reconstruction and hypothetical inference, that one can gain some understanding, however slight, into the psychology of creative transformation and the rationale of all art. In the present context, Maud's influence can best be assessed against some understanding of the mechanism of creative transformation in Yeats's work. In the previous section I have tried to present Maud's life and personality as recorded by her contemporaries as also by herself in her autobiography 'A Servant of the Queen'. The contrast of this image to Yeats's poetic delineation brings us to the crux of the problem of influence. How far did Yeats's self-created image of Maud approximate the historical Maud and to what extent did the interaction of the two realities find expression in his art and political thought? We may at best indicate an answer by analysing Yeats's use of the Maud image in certain poems and plays.

Yeats's initial understanding of Maud was dominated by the impact of her beauty- 'A complexion like the bloom of apples and yet face and body had the beauty of lineaments which Blake calls the highest beauty because it changes least from youth to age and stature so great that she seemed of a divine race.'¹¹³ She appeared as a physical manifestation of an inward state

¹¹³ Jeffares, p.59.

of being closest to his own or so he imagined. When she revealed a disposition vastly different from that which he preferred, he decided that her mind was without rest due to the tyranny of circumstance and that she was an innocent victim of a deceiving world. His clairvoyant perception or obvious deduction of immediate disaster awaiting her was perhaps rooted in personal apprehension over her deserting a path he had mentally constructed for her. He entertained hopes of transforming her but through a developing poetic image retained an imaginative control over her psychology to compensate what was not possible in reality. The shaping of this image began with The Countess Kathleen.

Yeats confessed to Maud that after their meeting in London, he had come to understand 'the tale of a woman selling her soul to buy bread for her starving people as a symbol of all souls who lose their peace or their fineness or any beauty of the spirit in political service.'¹¹⁴ He was encouraged to write a play based on this tale which could turn on the query: 'Must a soul sacrifice itself for a good end?'

'I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,
So did hatred and fanaticism enslave it,
And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
This dream itself had all my thought and love.'¹¹⁵

The origin of the play is, however, not as easily explained, as Peter Ure has shown in his analysis of its textual history. He observes how 'none of

¹¹⁴ Jeffares, p.69.

¹¹⁵ Collected Poems, p.392.

the versions of The Countess Cathleen offers us a protagonist whose selling of her soul can possibly be interpreted as self-destruction through fanaticism or hate; nor can the Countess's bargain, in its context, be easily read as a symbol of the loss of peace and fineness through political activity. Whatever the part, played by 'personal thought and feeling', as developed in Yeats's relation to Maud Gonne, in The Countess Cathleen, it was much less forthright than 'The Circus Animal's Desertion' suggests and much more gradually infiltrated through successive versions than the story of the play's origin at first implies."¹¹⁶ This is certainly true. What concerns us here is the way the successive versions of the play increase the symbolic implications of the Countess à propos Maud and allow Aleel, as Yeats's mouthpiece, to become more articulate. The textual history of The Countess Cathleen in fact adumbrates the interaction of the two realities indicated earlier- Yeats's self-created image of Maud and the historical Maud in relation to Yeats. We may turn to the play itself for illustration.

The plot of the play is simple. Ireland is stricken with famine and two demon-merchants try to buy the souls of the starving peasants with gold. The Countess Cathleen gives all her property and finally sells her soul to prevent this disaster. The purity of her motive outweighs the sin committed and when she dies she enters Heaven undefiled. The play went through five revisions. In the first version the Countess is the 'shadow sweet woman' who unwittingly succumbs to the evil designs of the demon merchants. She is hardly exposed to the exigencies of choice between dreams and responsibility

¹¹⁶ Yeats the Playwright (London, 1963), pp.17-18.

or the conflict between the forces of good and evil. While she is asleep a demon merchant plots:

First Merchant: A great plan floats into my mind -no wonder,
 For I came from the ninth and mightiest Hell,
 Where all are kings. I'll wake her from her sleep,
 And mix with all her thoughts, a thought to serve.¹¹⁷

Thereafter she awakens to a sad resolve:

'I have heard
 A sound of wailing in unnumbered hovels,
 And I must go down, down, I know not where.'¹¹⁸

Parallel to Yeats's early interpretation of Maud, the Countess is the innocent victim of a deceiving world, cheated of a normal claim to domestic felicity. When she is on the point of selling her soul, bard Kevin, who voices Yeats's sentiments, intervenes:

'You shall yet know the love of some great chief
 And children gathering around your knees. Leave you
 The peasants to the builder of the heavens.'¹¹⁹

When she dies a young peasant reports:

'I peered out through the window in the passage,
 And saw bard Kevin wandering in the wood,
 Sometimes he laid his head upon the ground.
 They say he hears the sheogues down below

117 The Countess Cathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics (London, 1892), p.58.

118 Ibid, p.66.

119 Ibid, pp.79-80.

Nailing four boards,'¹²⁰

The biographical link is evident when we recall Yeats's 'An Epitaph' which he sent Maud at St. Raphael:

'I dreamed that one had died in a strange place
Near no accustomed hand;
And they had nailed the boards above her face,
The peasants of that land...'¹²¹

Maud had worked tirelessly for the starving peasants of Donegal and as a result was threatened with serious illness. The Countess Cathleen as it first appeared, was a simple reflection of Yeats's pity for her condition and a celebration of her virtue and beauty drawn in accord with his early imaginative heroines. Kevin's role is singularly ineffective. His relationship with the Countess is ambiguous. When he grieves for her and would dispense with his own soul seeing it cannot help her, he remains part of a peripheral theme not in any forceful opposition to the main sequence of events affecting the Countess. 'More beautiful than the great stars', 'a saint with the sapphire eyes', she fulfils her destiny unopposed until she is ready to sign the fatal bond. This lack of dramatic tension is perhaps indicative of Yeats's premature interpretation of Maud's disposition. He was after all in the early months of their acquaintance anxious to discover a common state of being. He had recognised, he confessed later, the variance of their political methods. For him in life or politics only the means justified in that service. Yet her dedication and purity of motive and

¹²⁰ The Countess Cathleen, p.83.

¹²¹ Collected Poems, p.47.

seeming isolation in the world of her choice, suggested a moral force comparable to that directing a passionate exclusiveness in the choice of means. She was beautiful, romantic and without protection and could still be persuaded to find with him a life that better expressed her potential. Since the fate of the Countess in the play does not follow upon choice, conflict or opposition, there is no real appraisal of the subjective life of self-affirmation vis-à-vis the objective life of self-surrender. It was left to the successive versions of the play to develop this appraisal in the light of personal and political experience.

Kevin is replaced by Aleel in the second version (1895) whose role becomes more explicit with each successive version. A love-scene introduced at the beginning of Act III in the third version (1901) indicates more clearly his relationship with the Countess. Increasingly articulate as votary of the subjective life, he throws into relief the inexorable fate of the Countess through the world of her choice. She rejects the love of Aleel and is at once a victim of evil machinations. The biographical purport is transparent. Yeats was consistently rejected by Maud. Desire became an unendurable torture and he had confessed like Launcelot, 'I loved a queen beyond measure and exceeding long.' His frustrated love is expressed in Aleel's utterance:

'Impetuous hearts be still, be still,
Your sorrowful love can never be told,
Cover it up with a lonely tune.'¹²²

¹²² Collected Plays, p.35.

Yeats's disappointment in love, as observed earlier, was closely associated with disappointment in his hopes for intellectual regeneration in Ireland through his experience in practical politics. By the time he produced the third version of the play, he had been exposed to the wanton violence of the Jubilee riots (1897) and accompanying Maud on a tour in England and Scotland in his capacity as President of the '98 Commemoration Association, had endured some of the worst months in his life combatting hecklers and facing crowds. The crucial difference between Maud's personality and his own became obtrusively evident. As she observed: 'He hated crowds, I loved them' and again:

'I never indulged in self-analysis and often used to get impatient with Willie Yeats, who, like all writers, was terribly introspective and tried to make me so. 'I have no time to think of myself,' I told him which was literally true, for, unconsciously perhaps, I had redoubled work in order to avoid thought.'¹²³

The historical Maud in relation to Irish politics transformed Yeats's dream image of her and this is to some extent observable in the Countess Cathleen of later versions. In the first version, she is responsive to the call of the sidhe and confesses to Oona:

'Would that like Adene my first forbear's daughter,
Who followed once a twilight piercing tune,
I could go down and dwell among the shee,
In their old ever-busy honeyed land.'¹²⁴

But in later versions the pre-Christian ethos of subjectivity that sustains

¹²³ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.295.

¹²⁴ p.39.

the world of Aleel, is for her mere distraction, and she remains uncommitted to it. Through an importunate desire to serve, psychically rooted in spiritual restlessness, she releases herself from natural human ties to assist the impersonal masses:

Cathleen: Come, follow me, for 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.

....

Oona: She has found something now to put her hand to,
 And you and I are of no more account
 Than flies upon a window-pane in winter.¹²⁵

In contradistinction to the way of self-knowledge that found its peace in revelation not reform, the way of the Countess would objectify the self to effect a change in the order of the world. Aleel pleads:

Let Him that made mankind the angels and devils
 And dearth and plenty, mend what He has made,
 For when we labour in vain and eye still sees,
 Heart breaks in vain.¹²⁶

But the Countess resolves to pray before the altar till her heart

¹²⁵ Collected Plays, p.24.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p.26.

Has grown to Heaven like a tree, and there
 Rustled its leaves, till Heaven has saved my people.¹²⁷

For Yeats in religion and politics, reformist and humanitarian zeal had shown itself bound to 'what is past or passing or to come' and was thus au fond the mainspring of perishable desires, defenceless before the forces of 'hatred and fanaticism'. The soul or nation that had not realised itself was perennially vulnerable to such negative forces. Yeats's experience of Irish nationalism taught him this. In Samhain (1904) he writes of the opposition between propagandist and creative dispositions -the one devoted to change and reform and the other to 'a reverie about the adventures of the soul, or of the personality, or some obstinate questioning of the riddle' - and attributes the failure of the Irish intellectual movement to the dominance of the former in the mental climate of the nation. There was no time to savour personality or to be interested in men and women for their own sake. He quotes a writer in The Leader who elaborated this argument observing how they were driven into injustice 'not wantonly but inevitably, and at call of the exacting qualities of great things. Until this latter dawning, the genius of Ireland has been too preoccupied really to concern itself about men and women; in its drama they play a subordinate part, born tragic comedians though all the sons and daughters of the land are. A nation is the heroic theme we follow, a mourning, wasted land its moving spirit.' In this context Yeats writes of his play:

'When I wrote my Countess Cathleen, I thought, of course, chiefly of the actual picture that was forming before me,

¹²⁷ Collected Plays, p.27.

but there was a secondary meaning that came into my mind continually. "It is the soul of one that loves Ireland", I thought, "plunging into unrest, seeming to lose itself, to bargain itself away to the very wickedness of the world, and to surrender what is eternal for what is temporary", and I know that this meaning seemed natural to others...'128

The symbolic implications of the Countess were thus enlarged considerably. Her rejection of Aleel is expressive not only of Maud's personal rejection of Yeats but also of Irish intransigence in Maud and nationalist politics that repudiated the way of the poet which craved self-knowledge and Unity of Being above all else. Destruction and violence were the attendant dangers of Irish nationalism. Fed on the rhetoric and false reasoning of a generation, it waived the value of the individual to foster an insatiable appetite for abstractions. In the final version, therefore, Aleel's vision of disaster, after Cathleen signs the bond, attains a vast and terrible magnitude. In it Yeats's personal fears for Maud and Ireland find dramatic expression:

'The brazen door stands wide, and Balor comes
 Borne in his heavy car, and demons have lifted
 The age-weary eyelids from the eyes that of old
 Turned gods to stone; Barach, the traitor comes
 And the lascivious race, Cailitin,
 That cast a Druid weakness and decay
 Over Sualtim's and old Dectora's child;
 And that great king Hell first took hold upon

When he killed Naiose and broke Deirdre's heart;
 And all their heads are twisted to one side,
 For when they lived they warred on beauty and peace
 With obstinate, crafty, sidelong bitterness.¹²⁹

In spite of many revisions Yeats was dissatisfied with the play. The message was obscure and provoked irrelevant controversy. His growing distaste for the world of secret agents and political agitators to which Maud had voluntarily committed herself, and his bitterness over what seemed an incredible waste of so much beauty and grace, required stronger emphasis; but the awkward construction of the play made this impossible. Thus in Dramatis Personae he writes:

'The play itself was ill-constructed, the dialogue turning aside at the lure of word and metaphor, very different, I hope, from the play as it is to-day after many alterations, every alteration tested by performance. It was not, nor is it now, more than a piece of tapestry. 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.'¹³⁰

In the light of these observations, the development of Maud's image in the Countess through the many revisions of the play, referred to above, affords perhaps one of the most interesting examples of Maud's influence on the thematic orientation of Yeats's art as well as his attitude, contained in it, towards Irish nationalist politics. At the cost of some repetition, it

¹²⁹ Collected Plays, p.45.

¹³⁰ Autobiographies, pp.416-17.

may be worthwhile to trace the development of the image in relevant poems and plays of the early, middle and later periods to supplement the above discussion.

The love poems that appeared with The Countess Cathleen in 1892 naturally reflect Yeats's early interpretation of Maud. She was then his self-created image cast in the shadowy light of imaginative heroines and placed in a medieval, archetypal context. A beautiful woman awaited release from demon forces through the gallant intervention of a knight. The symbolic implications were reversible: the knight in pursuance of the Ideal was thwarted by demon abstractions that kept him from his Love. All could be resolved if a common state of being were achieved in the union of lady and knight, if demon forces were successfully allayed or if self-revelation through meditation and a peaceful life, were assured. Yeats felt Maud's fate inextricably bound with his own and his expression of her needs in his poetry is, in fact, a projection of his own. 'The Two Trees' reads as a repetition of Aleel's plea to the Countess:

'Beloved, gaze in thine own heart,
The holy tree is growing there;
From joy the holy branches start,
And all the trembling flowers they bear...'¹³¹

The way of self-knowledge and a life of love and peace is set against the threat of demons with their subtle guile leading to a life of temporal

¹³¹ Collected Poems, p. 54

action, of politics and hatred:

'Gaze no more in the bitter glass
 The demons with their subtle guile
 Lift up before us when they pass
 Or only gaze a little while;
 For there a fatal image grows
 That the stormy night receives,
 Roots half hidden under snows,
 Broken boughs and blackened leaves.
 For all things turn to barrenness
 In the dim glass the demons hold,
 The glass of outer weariness,
 Made when God slept in times of old.¹³²

The 'holy tree' growing the heart of his Beloved is the Tree of Life, emblematic of the ancient pole of the heavens or symbolic frame of the universe, with fruit and flower encompassing the brilliance of the stars and the glory of spiritual essences.

Seen in the context of Yeats's thought and reading at the time, the extravagant imagery of these early poems suggest the fluctuating confines of his experience as lover and mystic poet. Desire for Maud is depersonalised into the artist's desire for the kingdom of heaven or the realisation of metaphysical Essences celebrated by Spenser and Shelley, Conversely, the desire for perfection is personalised in love for a beautiful woman. The

¹³² Collected Poems, p.55.

resultant complexity in symbolic imagery is evident in the rose poems. In his notes, Yeats explains:

'The rose is a favourite symbol with the Irish poets. It has given a name to more than one poem, both Gaelic and English, and is used, not merely in love poems, but in poems addressed to Ireland, as in De Vere's line 'The little black rose shall be red at last' and in Mangan's 'Dark Rosaleen'. I do not, of course, use it in this sense.'¹³³

And again in his notes to The Wind Among the Reeds:

'The Rose has been for many centuries a symbol of spiritual love and supreme beauty. The Count Goblet D'Alviella said that it was once a symbol of the sun, - itself a principal symbol of the divine nature, and the symbolic heart of things... One finds the Rose in the Irish poets, sometimes as a religious symbol, as in the phrase, 'The Rose of Friday', meaning the Rose of Austerity, in a Gaelic poem in Dr. Hyde's 'Religious Song of Connacht'; and, I think, was a symbol of woman's beauty in the Gaelic song, 'Roseen Dubh'; and a symbol of Ireland in Mangan's adaptation of 'Roseen Dubh'... If the Rose was really a symbol of Ireland among the Gaelic poets, and if 'Roseen Dubh' is really a political poem, as some think, one may feel pretty certain that the ancient Celts associated the Rose with Eire, or Folla or Bamba- goddesses who gave their names to Ireland- or with some principal god or goddess, for such symbols are not suddenly adopted or invented, but come out of mythology.'¹³⁴

Yeats's choice of a flexible symbol with spiritual, patriotic and romantic associations was far from accidental. Its use was highly advantageous for a poet ambitious to lead the imaginative life of his country by gaining acceptance into its tradition, who at the same time was in love with the most beautiful woman of his time and earnestly in search of the mystical life after the manner of Swedenborg, Boehme and Blake. A passage in

¹³³ The Countess Cathleen, p.140.

¹³⁴ The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, ed. G.B.D. Allt and R.K. Allsop (New York, 1957), p.811 - hereafter cited as Variorum.

Autobiographies is illuminating:

'I had an unshakable conviction, arising how or whence I cannot tell that invisible gates would open as they opened for Blake, as they opened for Swedenborg, as they opened for Boehme, and that this philosophy would find its manuals of devotion in all imaginative literature and set before Irishmen for special manual an Irish literature which, though made by many minds, would seem the work of a single mind, and turn our places of beauty or legendary association into holy symbols. I did not think this philosophy would be altogether pagan, for it was plain that its symbols must be selected from all those things that have moved men most during many, mainly Christian centuries. I thought for a time I could rhyme of love, calling it The Rose, because of the Rose's double meaning; of a fisherman who had 'never a crack' in his heart; of an old woman complaining of the idleness of the young, or of some cheerful fiddler, all those things that 'popular poets' write of, but that I must some day- on that day when the gates began to open- become difficult and obscure. With a rhythm that still echoed Morris I prayed to the Red Rose, to Intellectual Beauty...' 135

Maud Gonne MacBride has testified that the Rose poems were also written to her. Indeed the Maud image is behind much of the passion generating the symbolic complex in the poems. Her living form gives metaphoric anchorage to rarefied, abstract thought. Thus in 'The Rose of the World' spiritual beauty or love is manifest in the beauty of a woman:

'Who dreamed that beauty passes like a dream?
 For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,
 Mournful that no new wonder may betide,
 Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,
 And Usna's children died.' 136

135 p.254.

136 Collected Poems, p.41.

We notice here the inchoate beginnings of the mythologising process that identified Maud with Helen of Troy. In 'The Rose of Peace' the apotheosis of feminine loveliness promotes a mystic harmony of opposites- 'a rosy peace' of Heaven with Hell. Once again the image of Maud seems relevant. Metaphorical connections with later poems more specifically about her supply the evidence. In this case the opening stanzas:

'If Michael, leader of God's host
When Heaven and Hell are met,
Looked down on you from Heaven's door-post
He would his deeds forget.

Brooding no more upon God's wars
In his divine homestead,
He would go weave out of the stars
A chaplet for your head.¹³⁷

....

connect the poem with the later 'Broken Dreams' in which Maud is the explicit subject:

.....for your sole sake
Heaven has put away the stroke of her doom,
So great her portion in that peace you make
By merely walking in a room.¹³⁸

The point to be made is that at an early stage in Yeats's poetry an associative link was developed between the images of Maud and aesthetic perfection or some spiritual desideratum, and this through a symbol that

137 Collected Poems, p.41.

138 Ibid, p.173.

was traditionally emblematic of Ireland as well. It is not surprising therefore if in later years Maud's image should sustain the highly complex syntheses of disparate experience. Yeats's spiritual experience, sexual frustration and political failures were emotionally bound together and produced in maturity a deepening sense of reality. The associative links in his youthful imagination that unified vague and tenuous desires, were never broken; they were only tightened to bear the weight of accrescent images.

Bearing this in mind, the psychological impact of Yeats's relationship with Maud on his response to other spheres of experience becomes more intelligible. Yeats's experience of Maud's consistent rejection, for instance, stimulated the passionate intensity that for him characterised human desire for all things unattainable. She parallels a spiritual Ideal or Platonic prototype always beyond reach, or Ireland's freedom for which men went to battle but always fell. His understanding of her disposition in terms of his own was also, to a large extent, governed by this fact of unattainability. He was emotionally disposed to interpret her dedication to Ireland's cause in the light of an artist's longing for an impossible life to escape the obligations of prosaic living: 'As for living, our servants will do that for us.'

Thus he commended Maud's 'pilgrim soul' and magnified her interest in the supernatural as a mystic search for Eternal Powers, comparable to his own. But her primal aim, as we have seen, was far from mystical for she relegated all her versatile interests before the concrete goal of Irish political independence.

The theme of longing for an impossible life became, however, an established theme for more than one play. Yeats wrote 'The Land of Heart's Desire' with Maud in mind. The world of faery calls to Mary Bruin and she grows restless and dissatisfied with a life of homely joys and cares:

'Come, faeries, take me out of this dull house!
 Let me have all the freedom I have lost...
 For I would ride with you upon the wind,
 (Run on the top of the dishevelled tide,)
 And dance upon the mountains like a flame.'¹³⁹

The play reiterates in a different context the theme of The Countess Cathleen. Shawn Bruin and Aleel, like Yeats, are deprived of their loved ones who, tormented with vague desires, renounce all chances of earthly happiness. In the dramatic treatment of Mary Bruin there is, as with the Countess at this stage, no implicit judgment, only wonder and pity. Mary is beautiful- 'How beautiful it is-your broad pale forehead
 Under a cloudy blossoming of hair!'

Her husband understands her great unrest as no one else does:

'Would that the world were mine to give it you,
 And not its quiet hearths alone, but even
 All that bewilderment of light and freedom,
 If you would have it.'¹⁴⁰

But the Faery Child enters and Mary is lost to Shawn forever. She follows the Child and dies. Body and soul have surrendered to something other than life and Shawn is left with a mere image in his arms as Bridget

¹³⁹ Collected Plays, p.61.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, p.62.

describes:

'You have thrown your arms about a drift of leaves,
Or bole of an ash-tree changed into her image.'¹⁴¹

The biographical parallel is clear. With Maud's commitment to a cause that left her no time for marriage, Yeats was left to possess her image alone, not her living self.

Just as the rose is the symbolic complex used to unite disparate aspirations, so also the theme of repudiating normal living for something greater is the common substratum of plays explicating political, spiritual, philosophical or romantic experience. As shown above, it was biographically relevant. Yeats himself was constrained to renounce the normal life for 'a barren passion's sake'; in place of a home he was given a nation to serve and as artist in search of perfection in work, he was denied that in life. Maud was imaginatively represented both as the subject (e.g. Countess Cathleen, Mary Bruin) and object (e.g. Cathleen ni Houlihan) of this renunciatory theme.

The political connotation of the theme was in perfect harmony with Yeats's nationalism at the time. In the act of renunciation there was a measure of heroism that Yeats recognised and admired. Educated in the nationalist school of O'Leary and fed on Irish heroic sagas in an age of utilitarianism and constitutionalism in politics, the disregard for personal life and common interests implicit in the theme, was instructive. Thus with an awareness of the psychological context outlined so far, one may

¹⁴¹ Collected Plays, p.71.

appreciate more fully the genesis of his patriotic play Cathleen ni Houlihan. I cannot believe, as some may suspect, that the play was conceived with a calculated political aim and am inclined to accept Yeats's statement on the subject:

'I am a Nationalist, and certain of my intimate friends have made Irish politics the business of their lives, and this made certain thoughts habitual with me, and an accident made these thoughts take fire in such a way that I could give them dramatic expression. I had a very vivid dream one night, and I made Cathleen ni Houlihan out of this dream. But if some external necessity had forced me to write nothing but drama with an obvious patriotic intention, instead of letting my work shape itself under the casual impulses of dreams and daily thoughts, I would have lost, in a short time, the power to write movingly upon any theme. I could have aroused opinion; but I could not have touched the heart, for I would have been busy at the oakum-picking that is not the less mere journalism for being in dramatic form...'¹⁴²

To substantiate the point still further we may recall another explanatory passage which best illustrates the thematic fusion of Yeats's creative sources:

'Ireland is, I suppose, more religious than any other European country, and perhaps that is the reason why I, who have been bred and born here, can hardly write unless I write about religious ideas. In 'The Land of Heart's Desire', a dreamy girl prefers her own dreams and a wandering voice of the night to the priest and his crucifix. In "The Hour Glass"... it is the proud spirit that is defeated by the belief that has seemed folly to the wise. And in "The Countess Cathleen" the commandment of mercy is followed to the forgetting of all else. In "The Shadowy Waters" human love, and in "Cathleen ni Houlihan" love of country, become through their mere intensity a cry that calls beyond the limits of the world.'¹⁴³

¹⁴² Explorations, p.116.

¹⁴³ United Irishman, November 1, 1902.

Passion for a woman of ageless beauty 'living out its life with little regard for the trouble it is giving',¹⁴⁴ becomes the symbolic projection of patriotic self-sacrifice in Cathleen ni Houlihan. The play concerns itself with the visit of an old woman to a cottage where a young man amid well-being and firelight hopes to be married. The old woman is Ireland herself and she talks of the wrongs done her and of those who have helped her who have died for her sake and for all that thought 'they were well paid'. The young man is affected and follows the woman to the forgetting of all else. His younger brother enters shouting that the French were landing at Killala. Asked if he met an old woman on the way he answers:

'I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen.'¹⁴⁵

Written for Maud, the play marks an important stage in the development of her image. Identified with the spirit of Ireland, she fuses Yeats's love for a woman and love for his country. The distracting power of her beauty which Yeats expressed earlier in, for example, poems like 'He tells of a Valley Full of Lovers', is now symbolically identified with the spirit of Ireland's freedom that lured national heroes to battle and strife.

It may be recalled that by the time Yeats wrote the play, he had accompanied Maud on her many tours and to innumerable meetings at which she spoke for Ireland's cause, passionately enjoining all to rise to action and work for Ireland's freedom. She seemed a beautiful disturber of peace with a natural command over the masses who came to hear her. Already she

¹⁴⁴ United Irishman, November, 1, 1902.

¹⁴⁵ Collected Plays, p.88.

was mythologised; a priest of Letterkenny told her in her first Donegal exploit:

'They are saying you are a woman of the Sidhe, who rode into Donegal on a white horse, surrounded by birds to bring victory.'¹⁴⁶

Writing of this period at a later date Yeats indicates how her beauty seemed linked with freedom:

'Her power over crowds was at its height, and some portion of the power came because she could still, even when pushing an abstract principle to what seemed to me an absurdity, keep her mind free, and so when men and women did her bidding they did it not only because she was beautiful, but because that beauty suggested joy and freedom.'¹⁴⁷

It was not difficult, therefore, to perceive Maud as the living embodiment of the nationalist cause which personified by a woman in the Irish imagination, had inspired so many poets and writers in the past. A nation's identity created in terms of idealised womanhood canalised the valiant emotions of its citizens. As Yeats wrote in his Journal:

'A great statesman, let us say, should keep his conscious purpose for practical things but he should have grown up to find about him always, most perhaps in the minds of women, the nobleness of emotion, created and associated with his country by its great poets.'¹⁴⁸

Maud's beauty and noble dedication synthesized for Yeats what was best in the Romantic, political Ireland of his youth. The medieval archetypal situation of

¹⁴⁶ MacBride, A Servant of the Queen, p.128.

¹⁴⁷ Autobiographies, p.364.

¹⁴⁸ Hone, p.238.

a beautiful lady imprisoned by demon forces was metaphorically applicable to Ireland in bondage.

Cathleen ni Houlihan (1902) marks the end of the early phase of the development of the Maud image. In 1903 Maud married John MacBride and Yeats's dreams were shattered. In the same year she vindicated her nationalist position more firmly in relation to Yeats's literary movement by walking out of the first performance of Synge's The Shadow of the Glen arranged by the Irish National Theatre. She was brutally frank in her opposition to art for art's sake and when Yeats continued to support Synge on literary grounds, she openly sided with Yeats's critics - among them Arthur Griffith, Gaelic enthusiasts and the Sinn Fein following. Isolated both in his personal and political life, the succeeding years for Yeats were those of private re-evaluation and adjustment to a world in which the poet's vision was misunderstood. He gradually recognised that his understanding of Maud, as also the Ireland evoked by her image, was misdirected under the influence of his own feelings and aspirations. The common state of being, which he envisaged as a possible reality in his relationship with Maud, was imagined through the naive and literal application of creative reasoning that equated physical beauty with sophisticated moral understanding. The historical Maud became partially visible only after all hope of winning her was lost. This intrusion of objective reality gave rise to greater self-knowledge through a reappraisal of the creative function. Yeats was able to distinguish the separate realities of Maud as an extension of his own desire and Maud as the living revolutionary, beautiful and impetuous and far

less complex than imagined. The dimension to her poetic image that hitherto reflected the amorphous content of a projected mental image was gradually measurable in terms of concrete bodily perfection. Her beauty set him dreaming for her as for Ireland. She did not really understand his thoughts:

'My darling cannot understand
What I have done, or what would do
In this blind bitter land...'149

Certain prose passages read as a kind of rationale for his youthful passion suggesting the power of the artist's vision over reality. He writes in 'The Tragic Theatre':

'And when we love, if it be in the excitement of youth, do we not also, that the flood may find no stone to convulse, no wall to narrow it, exclude character or the signs of it by choosing that beauty which seems unearthly because the individual woman is lost amid the labyrinth of its lines as though life were trembling into stillness and silence, or at last folding itself away? Some little irrelevance of line, some promise of character to come, may indeed put us at our ease, 'give more interest' ...but should it come, as we had dreamed in love's frenzy, to our dying for that woman's sake we would find that the discord had its value from the tune. Nor have we chosen illusion in choosing the outward sign of that moral genius that lives among the subtlety of the passions, and can for her moment make her of the one mind with great artists and poets...'150

Thus in 'Old Memory' Maud's strength is only half hers:

'O thought, fly to her when the end of day
Awakens an old memory, and say,
'Your strength, that is so lofty and fierce and kind,

149 Collected Poems, pp.100-01.

150 Essays and Introductions, pp.243-44.

It might call up a new age, calling to mind
 The queens that were imagined long ago,
 Is but half yours: he kneaded in the dough
 Through the long years of youth, and who would have thought
 It all, and more than it all, would come to naught,
 And that dear words meant nothing?...¹⁵¹

In the same strain he writes in 'Poetry and Tradition' of how the artist

'...is known from other men by making all he handles like himself, and yet by the unlikeness to himself of all that comes before him in pure contemplation. It may be that his enemy or his love or his cause set him dreaming, and certainly the phoenix can but open her young wings in a flaming nest; but all hate and hope vanishes with the dream, and if his mistress brag of the song or his enemy fear it, it is not that either has its praise or blame, but that the twigs of the holy nest are not easily set afire. The verses may make his mistress famous as Helen or give victory to his cause, not because he has been either's servant, but because men delight to honour and remember all that have served contemplation.'¹⁵²

With these recognitions that formed part of his philosophy of tragedy, Yeats was able to transcend practical defeat in love and politics. They facilitated a certain measure of detachment from the subject of his passion. As a result, the creative image was a synthesis based on the interaction of poetic myth and historical reality.

The Maud image seen in the context of violence in Irish politics found poetic justification in the myth of Helen. In this way, the destructive aspect of beauty presented itself in Yeats's imagination. Maud's essential simplicity and activist bent in contrast to his own passive, complex nature,

151 Collected Poems, pp.86-87.

152 Essays and Introductions, p.255.

suggested an elemental force of mind that destroyed all before it. It was as the beauty of vision that ruthlessly burned away the heterogenous to reduce all to some pristine unity:

'Why should I blame her that she filled my days
 With misery, or that she would of late
 Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
 Or hurled the little streets upon the great
 Had they but courage equal to desire?
 What could have made her peaceful with a mind
 That nobleness made simple as a fire,
 With beauty like a tightened bow, a kind
 That is not natural in an age like this,
 Being high and solitary and most stern?
 Why, what could she have done being what she is?
 Was there another Troy for her to burn?'¹⁵³

Maud is a 'woman Homer sung' and her form 'could show what Homer's age/
 Bred to be a hero's wage'. In relation to Yeats's personal and political experience the Homeric legend was doubly significant. The destruction of a civilisation occasioned by the seige of Troy - all for 'the face that launched a thousand ships' - was a mythical sequence of events dramatically appropriate to what Yeats felt might take place in Ireland. The rejection of Synge by the Irish public and the failure of the intellectual renaissance in promoting the ideal of 'Unity of Being' among the people, convinced Yeats that the Irish nation had dissipated itself through a dedication to abstractions. Guided by the compelling logic of vision, he anticipated a resurrection into unity after the fall into disunity, and a sense that the

¹⁵³ Collected Poems, p.101.

world was awaiting a revelation imminent on the destruction of the old order became an obsession. In this context Maud as Helen was the destructive agent. The conjunction of beauty and violence became a powerful symbol foreshadowing perhaps the aesthetic rationale of 'Easter 1916'. A certain fierce quality is incorporated in the Maud image, disguised or undisguised. She 'had fiery blood' and her strength 'is so lofty and fierce and kind'. She is Queen Aoife in 'On Baile's Strand', 'the fierce woman of the camps with 'stone-pale cheek and red-brown hair' who bore Cuchulain's son. When Cuchulain describes Aoife's beauty it is in terms of Maud Gonne leading the crowds of the Jubilee riots as she walked 'with a look of exultation' with 'her laughing head thrown back'. ¹⁵⁴

Ah! Conchubar, had you seen her
With that high, laughing turbulent head of hers
Thrown backward...¹⁵⁵

Destruction and violence therefore animate Yeats's maturing creative vision. It is as if the experience of political violence with Maud became translatable on a metaphysical plane. Love or the perception of truth springs from conflict, opposition- is as 'a kiss/In the mid-battle' 'A brief forgiveness between opposites/That have been hatreds for three times the age/Of this long-'stablished ground', ¹⁵⁶ and celestial music is the violent 'clashing of swords'. As always Yeats's experiences were bound together in a way that had created in his youth a conscious desire to 'hammer his thoughts into unity'. It was indeed the sometimes inept fusion

¹⁵⁴ Autobiographies, p.368.

¹⁵⁵ Collected Plays, pp.258-59.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, p.259.

of esoteric and exoteric levels of experience that led to that prolonged misunderstanding with the Irish public that was a source in old age of regret and disappointment. It was also a source of anxiety:

Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?¹⁵⁷

Through contact with Maud on a political level, Yeats became aware of the danger of fusing the two levels in a country that had not realised itself. While in his art and thought he unknowingly came to care for nothing but impersonal, spiritual beauty and tirelessly pursued the heroic theme of renouncing the normal life for the unattainable ideal, he was encouraging in the more exoteric level a commitment to something outside life that could be its dangerous negation. The less complex mind could be inveigled into a facile surrender to pernicious abstractions- particularly nationalist abstractions, these being more readily available than others, through the Young Ireland rhetoric of a generation. Recognising the error in relation to himself, he writes in 'Discoveries',

'Without knowing it, I had come to care for nothing but impersonal beauty. I had set out on life with the thought of putting my very self into poetry, and had understood this as a representation of my own visions and an attempt to cut away the non-essential, but as I imagined the visions outside myself my imagination became full of decorative landscape and of still life ...Then one day I understood quite suddenly, as the way is, that I was seeking something unchanging and unmixed and always outside myself, a Stone or an Elixir that was always out of reach, and that I myself was the fleeting thing that held out its hand...we should ascend out of common interests, the thoughts of the newspapers, of the market-place, of men of science, but

only so far as we can carry the normal, passionate reasoning self, the personality as a whole. We must find some place upon the Tree of Life for the phoenix's nest, for the passion that is exaltation and the negation of the will, for the wings that are always upon fire, set high that the forked branches may keep it safe, yet low enough to be out of the little wind-tossed boughs, the quivering of the twigs.'¹⁵⁸

Through perhaps an objective appraisal of personal renunciation in Nationalist politics, Yeats observes in 'Estrangement':

'...personal renunciation is not now sufficient or the hysterica passio of Ireland would be inspiration, or perhaps it is sufficient but it is impossible without inherited culture. For without culture or holiness, which are always the gift of a very few, a man may renounce wealth or any other external things, but he cannot renounce hatred, envy, jealousy, revenge.'¹⁵⁹

Yeats's perception of the disastrous contact between the visionary artist and a divided nation finds expression in the play The Unicorn from the Stars (1908). Although it does not directly concern itself with the Maud image, I shall use it to illustrate the recognised interaction of Yeats's vision and what was virtually Maud's Ireland.

The play was a rewriting of Where There is Nothing. Paul Rutledge is replaced by Martin Hearne, a young coachbuilder who has a vision of the trampling unicorns which as symbolic beasts of the new dispensation will destroy the old order of things. Following the purport of the message on the exoteric level in a country demoralised through famine and political hatred, he encourages drunken disorder, violence and destruction. He recoils from the error, regrets the tragic misunderstanding and testifies to an

158 Essays and Introductions, pp.271-72.

159 Autobiographies, p.489.

esoteric vision of mystical reality that transcends the limitations of apatio-temporal existence. But it is too late; he is shot and dies.

Once again, the circumstances of Yeats's life give the play its imaginative intensity. Martin like Yeats feels that he was not made to work for a commercial, materialist world- 'this crowded slippery coach-loving world', for he is a man of vision. Misguided through the literal application of a mystical truth to objective reality, Martin takes up the cry of a beggar just as Yeats celebrated his socialist myth of the peasant. In Act I Johnny Bocach's voice at the window is heard:

'A poor person I am, without food, without a way, without portion, without costs, without a person or a stranger, without means, without hope, without health, without warmth-' 160

and when he cries, 'Destruction on us all!' Martin conceives it as a divine injunction proceeding from personal nihilism for Johnny has nothing to encourage the worldly sense of self:

'It may be that this man is the beginning. He has been sent- the poor, they have nothing, and so they can see Heaven as we cannot. He and his comrades will understand me. But how to give all men high hearts that they may all understand?' 161

The vast misunderstanding begins. Deprivation in fact makes the beggars, Bidy, Johnny, Nanny and Paudeen, opportunists; given the slightest encouragement, they expose their rapacious instincts. Moreover they are accustomed to violence in the name of abstractions. Martin's cause is one of

160 Collected Plays, p.344.

161 Ibid, p.346.

many; in the same way the significance of Yeats's aim 'to re-establish the old, confident, joyous world' that was lost in the chaotic aftermath of Parnellite politics, agrarian agitations, Ribbonism, Orangism and the like. Martin's symbol sounds strange to the beggars but is immediately interpreted in the context of national movements. Thus when he decides to paint a unicorn on his banner, the beggars observe:

Biddy: That sounds to be a queer name of an army. Ribbons I can understand, Whiteboys, Rightboys, Threshers, and Peepo'Days, but Unicorns I never heard before.

Johnny: It is not a queer name but a very good name (Takes up lion and unicorn.) It is often you say that before you in the dock. There is the unicorn with the one horn, and what is it he is going against? The lion of course. When he has the lion destroyed, the crown must fall and be shivered. Can't you see it is the League of the Unicorns is the league that will fight and destroy the power of England and King George?

Paudeen: It is with that banner we will march and the lads in the quarry with us, it is they will have the welcome before him! It won't be long till we'll be attacking the Square House! Arms there are in it, riches that would smother the world, rooms full of guineas, we will put wax on our shoes walking them; the horses themselves shod with no less than silver!¹⁶²

The noble hatred of great and lasting things degenerates into ppettiness and robbery through the understanding of beggars. We may recall a supporting autobiographical passage in 'Poetry and Tradition':

'We were to forge in Ireland a new sword on our old traditional anvil for that great battle that must in the end re-establish the old, confident, joyous world. All the while I worked with this idea, founding

societies that became quickly or slowly everything I despised, one part of me looked on mischievous and mocking, and the other part spoke words which were more and more unreal, as the attitude of mind became more and more strained and difficult. Miss Maud Gonne could still gather great crowds out of the slums by her beauty and sincerity, and speak to them of 'Mother Ireland with the crown of stars about her head'; but gradually the political movement she was associated with, finding it hard to build up any fine lasting thing, became content to attack little persons and little things.'¹⁶³

Thus when Martin would destroy the force of life-negating abstractions that kept men from the wildness of the 'clean green earth', he is repeatedly misunderstood. When he attacks the Law as original sin, 'the first mouthful of the apple', Johnny interprets:

It is what I say, 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.¹⁶⁴

When Martin attacks the Church that destroyed, would leave life to become a 'flame of fire, like a burning eye...' Johnny once again declares:

'It is Luther's Church he means, and the hump-backed discourse of Seaghan Calvin's Bible. So we will break it, and make an end of it.'¹⁶⁵

Accordingly destruction and chaos follow and the beggars ransack the Big House of the Brownes, exulting in the loot. But when they would be led against the barracks of Aughanish to carry on the work begun, they are appalled that Martin, arising from his second trance, cannot lead them any

163 Essays and Introductions, p.249

164 Collected Plays, p.359.

165 Ibid, p.360.

any more. The situation is perhaps an imaginative transposition of the frustration and puzzlement of Maud and her nationalist friends when they discovered that Yeats would not produce propagandist plays after the fashion of Cathleen ni Houlihan to provide the political cause of Irish freedom with active literary leadership. When Paudeen exclaim, 'It is you yourself will have freed all Ireland before the stooks will be stacks!'

Martin replies:

'Listen, I will explain- I have misled you. It is only now I have the whole vision plain. As I lay there I saw through everything, I know all. It was but a frenzy, that going out to burn and to destroy. What have I to do with the foreign army? What I have to pierce is the wild heart of time. My business is not reformation but revelation.'¹⁶⁶

It will be observed that the attack on the Big House, in the play, is historically relevant. The Land League (1879-81) and associated sporadic agitations were contributive to the drawing together of Socialist and Nationalist movements in Ireland. The power of the Protestant landed Ascendancy was greatly weakened as a result. This was for Yeats a tragic disruption of harmony between peasant and landlord, a serious negation of unitive co-existence indispensable to the nation's growth. His dream of medieval unity in Ireland was after all based on the harmonised antithesis of 'noble and beggarman'. Like Martin he recoiled from the error of identifying himself too closely with nationalist agitations. The prestige of Lady Gregory's demesne that was a sanctuary for creative intellects and a veritable stronghold of 'traditional sanctity and loveliness', was

¹⁶⁶ Collected Plays, p.101.

dangerously threatened by the sentiments of Maud's political movements. These 'hurled the little streets against the great'¹⁶⁷ and coarsened the national spirit. In rejecting them, his nationalism was naturally suspect. Maud Gonne is reported to have cynically observed that when writers returned from Coole they seemed less passionately interested in the national struggle than in their own lack of money. By this time, however, Yeats had alienated Unionist sentiment through literary association with the Nationalists and participation in anti-Royalist demonstrations. He was virtually isolated as, in a sense, Martin is in the play.

The Unicorn from the Stars thus marks Yeats's cognisance of the irreconcilable differences between Maud's Ireland and the Ireland of his dreams.

Two years following her marriage, after obtaining a legal decree of separation from her husband, Maud partially withdrew from Irish politics to devote herself to the upbringing of her children. This, for Yeats, was temporarily favourable to abstracting her image from an odious context. By this time his thinking was more in line with existentialist thought as against the early dedication to impersonal essences. Thus he recalls the passion of his youth in terms of the more tangible aspects of Maud's beauty. He dreams that he had brought,

"To such a pitch my thought
That coming time may say,
'He shadowed in a glass
What thing her body was.'"¹⁶⁸

168 Collected Poems, p.100.

Against her life of tumultuous activity, he perceives her beauty as the expression of an antithetical self; aloof and distinguished, it is emblematic of aristocratic power and solitude. One suspects that the image becomes a screen on which Yeats projects his now more explicit aristocratic turn of mind nourished by the luxury of Coole and association with 'learned Italian things.' Maud's partial retreat from popular politics, that may have been precipitated by Dublin slander over her unfortunate marriage, supported his image of the proud and lonely suffering at the hands of the mob. The image was already relevant to Parnell, Synge and himself. Hence common experience, if not a common state of being, reinforced the bond in his relationship with Maud. She complemented rather than reproduced his state of being. Through an imaginative understanding, her lack of complexity and introspective awareness was tantamount to the simplicity of a child, while her lack of inward conflict in pursuing action balanced the creative turmoil in the mind of the artist. His work incomprehensible to 'knave and dolt', finds justification in the uncommon commitment of harmonious spirits:

'Enough if the work has seemed,
 So did she your strength renew,
 A dream that a lion had dreamed
 Till the wilderness cried aloud,
 A secret between you two,
 Between the proud and the proud.

....

The labyrinth of her days
 That her own strangeness perplexed;
 And how what her dreaming gave
 Earned slander, ingratitude,

From self-same dolt and knave;
 Aye and worse than these.
 Yet she, singing upon her road,
 Half lion, half child, is at peace.'¹⁶⁹

What is interesting is the way Yeats find Maud's support of the poor in full accord with the noble-beggarman antithesis, in that the 'immoral Irish bourgeoisie' is the common target of censure; His phoenix acknowledges:

'The drunkards, pilferers of public funds
 All the dishonest crowd I had driven away,
 When my luck changed and they dared meet my face,
 Crawled from obscurity, and set upon me
 Those I had served and some that I had fed;
 Yet never have I, now nor at any time,
 Complained of the people.'¹⁷⁰

In 'Her Praise' he recognises:

'Among the poor both old and young gave her praise'.¹⁷¹

Further, in the light of the idealised interaction of noble and beggarman in medieval society, he interprets Maud's beauty as the aristocratic norm which is intimately linked with the aspirations of the populace. Thus, recalling Maud's early political activity, Yeats writes in Autobiographies:

'...there was an element in her beauty that moved minds full of old Gaelic stories and poems, for she looked as though she lived in an ancient civilisation where all superiorities whether of the mind or the body were a part of public ceremonial, were in some way the crowd's creation, as the entrance of the Pope

169 Collected Poems, pp.103-04.

170 Ibid, p.170.

171 Ibid, p.169.

into Saint Peter's is the crowd's creation. Her beauty, backed by her great stature, could instantly affect an assembly, and not, as often with our stage beauties, because obvious and florid, for it was incredibly distinguished, and if- as it must be that it might seem that assembly's very self, fused, unified, and solitary- her face, like the face of some Greek statue, showed little thought, her whole body seemed a master work of long-labouring thought, as though a Scopas had measured and calculated, consorted with Egyptian sages, and mathematicians out of Babylon, that he might outface even Artemisia's sepulchral image with a living norm.'¹⁷²

By celebrating Maud's beauty as a superior norm, however, Yeats in fact expresses his concept of the superior function of art in society. In this way Maud's beauty, as seen through his art, finds a new justification. He believed that Art had the prescriptive function of upholding images of perfection to guide the sexual and religious instincts of a nation. When Seanchan in The King's Threshold asks his oldest pupil why poets were to be honoured in society, the latter answers:

'... poets hung
 Images of the life that was in Eden
 About the child-bed of the world, that it,
 Looking upon those images, might bear
 Triumphant children...

....

If the Arts should perish,
 The world that lacked them would be like a woman
 That, looking upon the cloven lips of a hare,
 Bring forth a hare-lipped child.'¹⁷³

172 Autobiographies, p.364.

173 Collected Plays, pp.111-12.

In Ireland the tradition of Raftery, the Gaelic poet, preserved the imaginative freedom of the people who, amid their ignorance and violence, responded to the idea of the noblest beauty. The poet through his verses perpetuated the myth of Mary Hynes blotting out stain and blemish with the elegance of his mind, till the old men and women who remembered her 'spoke of her as the old men upon the wall of Troy spoke of Helen, nor did man and woman differ in their praise... And there were men that told of the crowds that gathered to look at her upon a fair day, and of a man 'who got his death swimming a river', that he might look at her." The theme is treated in 'The Tower' when the artist's vision becomes the rationale of tragedy, when subjective myth in apposition to historical truth is always fleeing the triumph of realisation; the very act of realisation consumes the myth and testifies defeat:

'.....the tragedy began
 With Homer that was a blind man,
 And Helen has all living hearts betrayed.
 O may the moon and sunlight seem
 One inextricable beam,
 For if I triumph I must make men mad.'¹⁷⁴

So Yeats imagines himself remembered as the 'poet who stubborn with his passion' sang of a lady when 'age might well have chilled his blood.'¹⁷⁵ Repeatedly he records Maud's physical perfection in the light of poetic myth and saga:

'She might, so noble from head

¹⁷⁴ Collected Poems, p.220.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, p.173.

To great shapely knees
 The long flowing line,
 Have walked to the altar
 Through the holy images
 At Pallas Athene's side...¹⁷⁶

Among 'Beautiful Lofty Things' she is 'Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head' and in 'His Phoenix' her perfection, that may be reborn in another age, recalls a passage in Sigurd the Volsung describing the new born child that lay in bed and looked 'straight on the sun':

'There'll be that crowd, that barbarous crowd, through all
the centuries,
 And who can say but some young belle may walk and talk men wild
 Who is my beauty's equal, though that my heart denies,
 But not the exact likeness, the simplicity of a child,
 And that proud look as though she had gazed into the burning
sun,
 And all the shapely body no tittle gone astray.'¹⁷⁷

Yeats's celebration of form had a broader application, in his mind, for the world and the future building of nations. In 1903 he wrote to AE:

'The close of the last century was full of a strange desire to get out of form, to get to some kind of disembodied beauty, and now it seems to me the contrary impulse has come...'¹⁷⁸

This belief was obviously in line with his personal development explicit in the treatment of the Maud image. It was to emerge in his final political speculations as a concern for eugenical research in national programmes.

176 Collected Poems, p.172.

177 Loc. cit.

178 Wade, Letters, p.402.

The artist becomes virtual dictator with power over and above kings and politicians. He sets the paradigm for man's sexual choice that will influence the breed of families. So he writes in 'If I were Four-and Twenty',

'When a young man imagines the woman of his hope, shaped for all uses of life, mother and mistress and yet fitted to carry a bow in the wilderness, how little of it is mere instinct, how much has come from chisel and brush. Educationalists and statesmen, servants of the logical process, do their worst, but they are not the matchmakers who bring together the fathers and mothers of the generations nor shall the type they plan survive.'¹⁷⁹

Maud's face that 'showed little thought', whose proportions displayed a triumph of number and calculation, was a poetic image that substantiated the direction of a more profound movement in the world:

'There are moments when I am certain that art must once again accept those Greek proportions which carry into plastic art the Pythagorean numbers, those faces which are divine because all there is empty and measured. Europe was not born when Greek galleys defeated the Persian hordes at Salamis; but when the Doric studios sent out those broad-backed marble statues against the multiform, vague, expressive Asiatic sea, they gave to the sexual instinct of Europe, its goal, its fixed type.'¹⁸⁰

The middle phase in the development of the Maud image, so far indicated, reveals its subtle variations through the interaction of subjective myth and historical reality; they sometimes justify, sometimes transcend Yeats's sense of defeat, simultaneously affect and are affected by his religious, aesthetic and political thought. Together they move towards what may be

179 Explorations, pp.274-75.

180 Ibid, p.451.

termed the final phase, though such divisions are hardly satisfactory.

In the final phase, the tone of Yeats's treatment of the image is not always justifying or eulogistic, although a fresh integration of poetic myth and historical reality does emerge in 'A Bronze Head'. Various factors were responsible for this. Yeats's experience of final rejection, his own marriage, the certainty of Maud as 'the woman lost' to him, and a simple loss of contact were important factors. But as we have seen, political events and Maud's response to them were in no small measure responsible for Yeats's changing attitude. He became increasingly critical of Maud's reaction to the Easter Rising, her stand in the Civil War, her political imprisonment and her continued involvement with the Republican cause against the Free State Government. In his imagination, she becomes emblematic of Ireland that was ruined by abstractions; contrariwise Ireland is seen as a woman lost to normal life through political hatred which bred the habit of sexual abstinence. Yeats's memory of sexual frustration through the imposed separation of spiritual from carnal love and Maud's acknowledged horror of physical love was projected in the national context. The stone image enters his poetry as a negation of the living stream and that Unity of Being which was his dream for Ireland and Maud:

'Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.....

.....

Too long a sacrifice

Can make a stone of the heart.'¹⁸¹

In the previous section the link with Maud's vision of herself as a stone statue 'through which passed flame' was indicated. Maud in her tribute to Yeats records how after the Easter rebellion Yeats visited her while she was marooned in France by the World War and 'implored me to forget the stone and its inner fire for the flashing changing joy of life';¹⁸² she found his mood hard to understand for she was convinced that 'tragic dignity had returned to Ireland'. For Yeats the tragic misunderstanding was perpetuated. In his essay on 'J.M. Synge and the Ireland of his Time', he had written:

'After a while, in a land that has given itself to agitation overmuch, abstract thoughts are raised up between men's minds and Nature, who never does the same thing twice, or makes one man like another, till minds whose patriotism is perhaps great enough to carry them to the scaffold, cry down natural impulse with the morbid persistence of minds unsettled by some fixed idea.... They no longer love, for only life is loved and at last a generation is like an hysterical woman who will make unmeasured accusations and believe impossible things, because of some logical deduction from a solitary thought which has turned a portion of her mind to stone.'¹⁸³

The image of Maud in politics is obviously relevant to Yeats in this context. So in 'A Prayer For my Daughter, he sees her as:

'....the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty's horn
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good

181 Collected Poems, p.204.

182 Scattering Branches, p.31.

183 Essays and Introductions, pp.313-14.

By quiet natures understood
 For an old bellows full of angry wind?'¹⁸⁴

The stone image recurs in 'A Man Young and Old' with the theme of remembered passion:

First Love

'Though nurtured like the sailing moon
 In beauty's murderous brood
 She walked awhile and blushed awhile
 And on my pathway stood
 Until I thought her body bore
 A heart of flesh and blood.

But since I laid a hand thereon
 And found a heart of stone
 I have attempted many things
 And not a thing is done...'¹⁸⁵

In The Friends of His Youth, the image of Old Madge with a stone upon her breast epitomises Yeats's view of women in politics who give themselves to opinion 'as if it were a terrible stone doll':

'For that old Madge comes down the lane
 A stone upon her breast,
 And a cloak wrapped about the stone,
 And she can get no rest
 With singing hush and hush-a-bye;
 She that has been wild

¹⁸⁴ Collected Poems, p.213.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, p.249.

And barren as a breaking wave
 Thinks that the stone's a child.'¹⁸⁶

In Yeats's opinion, hatred and sterility had corrupted Ireland and also kept Maud away from a normal life. This justified a complete transformation of Irish education. In his last years, therefore, Yeats recommended for Ireland the educational system of Giovanni Gentile which aimed at a discipline of the whole being. Yeats was aware of Goethe's description in Wilhelm Meister of 'a saintly and naturally gracious woman, who, getting into a quarrel over some trumpery detail of religious observance, grows- she and all her little religious community- angry and vindictive'. In the same way, he sees Maud:

'A Helen of social welfare dream
 Climb on a wagonette to scream.'¹⁸⁷

The theme of surrendering the normal for an impossible life returns but, through the prolonged misunderstanding of a nation and a 'woman not kindred to his soul', is criticised rather than admired.

¹⁸⁶ Collected Poems, p.252.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, p.388.

Chapter Five

LEADER AND VICTIM:

YEATS AND PARNELL

Yeats wrote four poems directly concerned with Charles Stewart Parnell - the Irish leader whose tragic death and fall furnished one of the most dramatic chapters of Irish history. They were 'Mourn-and then Onward', 'To a Shade', 'Parnell's Funeral' and 'Come Gather round me Parnellites'. They were composed over a period of many years (twenty-one years intervened between the first and second compositions and another twenty between the second and third) and show an interesting development in Yeats's understanding of the leader. It is my purpose to trace the evolution of Parnell's image in Yeats's creative imagination with the help of these four poems. The evolutionary stages will naturally be treated against Yeats's developing knowledge of Parnell, through biographical and other sources, and the concomitant processes of selection, assimilation and identification whereby the Irish leader became a part of the poet's living experience. As in the preceding chapters, the interaction of historical and subjective reality in Yeats's creative vision will be brought into focus.

I

On October 11, 1891 Yeats went to Kingston Pier to meet the mail boat arriving at six in the morning. He was expecting Maud Gonne but met as he writes 'what I thought much less of at the time, the body of Parnell.' He did not attend the funeral as he tells us since, being in his sensitive and timid youth he hated crowds and what crowds implied,¹ but Maud went. She told him on her return, of the star that fell in broad daylight as Parnell's body

¹ Allt, G.B.D. and Alspach, R.K.: The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats, (New York, 1957), p.834.

was lowered in the grave. Standish O'Grady described the event years later:

'I state a fact- it was witnessed by thousands. While his followers were committing Charles Parnell's remains to the earth, the sky was bright with strange lights and flames. Only a coincidence possibly, and yet persons not superstitious have maintained that there is some mysterious sympathy between the human soul and the elements, and that storm, and other elemental disturbances, have too often succeeded or accompanied great battles to be regarded as fortuitous...Those flames recall to my memory what is told of similar phenomena said to have been witnessed when tidings of the death of St. Columba overran the north-west of Europe.'²

Yeats's poem 'Mourn- and then Onward' appeared in United Ireland, the Dublin weekly journal which Parnell had a few months before his death wrested from his enemies. It is an inconsiderable poem and is excluded from the definitive edition of Yeats's works. For the purposes of the present discussion, it may be quoted in full:

'Ye on the broad high mountains of old Eri,
Mourn all the night and day,
The man is gone who guided ye, unwearied,
Through the long bitter way.

Ye by the waves that close in our sad nation,
Be full of sudden fears,
The man is gone who from his lonely station
Has moulded the hard years.

Mourn ye on the grass-green plains of Eri fated
For closed in darkness now

² Quoted by Yeats, Variorum, p.834.

Is he who laboured on, derided, hated
 And made the tyrant bow.

Mourn- and then onward, there is no returning
 He guides ye from the tomb;
 His memory now is a tall pillar, burning
 Before us in the gloom!³

The poem is doubtless cliché-ridden and ironically fits into the Young Ireland tradition of verse-writing which Yeats criticised for its employment of stale metaphor and jejune sentiment. The use of the Old Testament 'ye' for 'you' creates a certain stiffness in expression and the poet's personal involvement with his theme remains ambiguous. The literary merits of the poem do not concern us here; it is significant insofar as it indicates the direction of Yeats's later understanding of the leader. In order to determine this direction, of which the poem was the earliest expression, we must re-assess the nature of Yeats's Parnellism at the time of Parnell's fall and death. This would place the poem in its appropriate context. Yeats sent a copy of 'Mourn- and then Onward' to his sister Lily and the covering letter reads:

I send you a copy of United Ireland with a poem of mine on Parnell written on the day he died to be in time for the press that evening. It has been a success.

The Funeral is just over. The people are breathing fire and slaughter. The wreaths have such inscriptions as "murdered by the Priests" and a number of Wexford men were headed by a man I know promising to remove a Bishop and seven priests before next Sunday. To-morrow will bring them cooler heads I doubt not.⁴

³ Variorum, pp.737-38.

⁴ Wade, Letters, p.179.

Yeats appears here relatively detached from the Irish scene; his tone is that of a disinterested chronicler. This may well invite aimless speculation as to whether the poem was a genuine expression of grief or a calculated effort to win public attention at an opportune moment, whether it was an oracular pronouncement on the Deliverer of the Irish people or a simple expression of the times. To clear the ground, we can only attempt to examine Yeats's attitude in the context of diverse influences in order to elucidate why his 'Parnellism' became apparent when it did, and why it was not as passionate then as it was to become later.

Yeats was twenty-six when Parnell died. Under the influence of O'Leary, and Morris among others, he was adapting from adolescence to an adult consciousness of vocation and identity in Ireland. Two years before Parnell's death, he predicted an intellectual movement at the first lull in politics. The fall of Parnell came as a shock but he was emotionally unscathed, unlike his friend Katherine Tynan whose devotion to the leader was intense and passionate. In The Middle Years, she observes how in the Parnellite year (1890-1891) Yeats in London 'came and went':

'He always became abstracted at the dinner table when politics were uppermost and retired into himself murmuring poetry. Within the precincts he would escape gladly into the open sea of poetry.'⁵

His overwhelming interest at that time was in Occultism. His correspondence with Katherine Tynan began to slacken around 1890, when the Tynans became involved in the politics of the Parnellite Split, and in 1891 his letters

⁵ London, 1916, p.21.

to her make no mention of the death of Parnell.

Yeats was aware of events relating to Parnell but he remained emotionally detached. An example of his attitude can be seen in his response to the Pigott case. In 1889, as a result of the investigations carried out by the Special Commission, the Dublin journalist Richard Pigott broke down in the witness-box and confessed the forgery of letters published in the Times under 'Parnellism and Crime'. The popularity of the Irish leader shot up considerably as a result. Yeats kept himself informed of the Special Commission reports but his reaction to the proceedings was one of amused indifference and compassion for Pigott. 'Poor Pigott!' he wrote Katherine Tynan in February 6, 1889, 'One really got to like him, there was something so frank about his lies. They were so completely matters of business, not of malice. There was something pathetic, too, in the hopeless way the squalid latter-day Errinyes ran him down. The poor domestic-minded swindler!'⁶ After the divorce proceedings in 1890 when Parnell was still at the height of his power, Yeats wrote O'Leary:

'This Parnell business is most exciting. Hope he will hold on. As it is he has driven up into dust and vacuum no end of insincerities. The whole matter of Irish politics will be the better of it.'⁷

In Autobiographies, Yeats records his support of Parnell among the workmen in William Morris's gatherings.⁸ Yet apart from such instances which illustrate his positive response to Parnell, one gets the impression that

⁶ McHugh, Roger (ed.), W.B. Yeats: Letters to Katherine Tynan, Dublin, 1953, p.84.

⁷ Quoted in Ellman, p.102.

⁸ Autobiographies, p.140.

Yeats's attitude was basically neutral.

There were certain reasons for this. Yeats's residence in London kept him away from the centre of Irish activities. Further, he was not exposed through his immediate family to inordinate enthusiasm for the leader; his father who remained critical of Parnell's intellect, never forgave the latter for deposing Isaac Butt from the Home Rule Leadership. Apart from personal grievance and criticism, however, J.B. Yeats approved of Parnell's subsequent politics so long as they brought Home Rule within the range of possibility. Again, Yeats's knowledge of Parnell and his political strategy at this stage was cursory. This, in all likelihood, may have been due to the fact, recognised by most of Parnell's biographers, that after 1886 the actual conduct of Irish affairs had fallen into the hands of Parnell's lieutenants- John Dillon, William O'Brien, T.M. Healy and Thomas Sexton. One is reminded that in 1887 when Yeats records his visit to the House of Commons in a letter to Katherine Tynan, he refers to T.M. Healy and Dillon who evidently were the more important spokesmen of the Irish Parliamentary Party at that time. Their leader remained inscrutable and elusive. His career was marked by periods of total inactivity and inaccessibility attributed variously to ill-health, Kitty O'Shea and political strategy. After 1880, his residence in Ireland was singularly erratic and there were periods during which he deliberately chose to remain in the background.⁹

It is thus interesting to note, in passing, Yeats's positive response to

⁹ In a letter to Katherine O'Shea on January 11, 1882, Parnell wrote: "There is nothing in the world that I can do in Ireland, nor is it likely that I shall be able to do anything here for a long time to come. Certainly until the Coercion Act has expired I will not speak here again..." (O'Shea, K., Charles Stewart Parnell, London, p.140).

For main events of Parnell's political career see Appendix B, p. 399.

Timothy Healy's speech in the House of Commons. He commends Healy's speech as 'the most rugged, passionate speech, the most human thing I heard. I missed Dillon, however. Altogether I was delighted with Healy; the others on both sides were sophisticated and cultivated. In him there was good earth power.'¹⁰

The praise seems ironical in the later context of events, yet at the time it was not unnatural. The Parnell Split was unforeseen in 1887 but by 1891 when Parnellite wrangles monopolised Irish politics Yeats was influenced by the Irish leader who castigated the 'foul-mouthed Tim Healy' in a speech which appeared in the Freeman's Journal of March 30, 1891.¹¹ Twenty-one years later, during the Hugh Lane controversy, Yeats saw Parnell's enemies- the Healys, Sullivans and William Martin Murphy- as enemies of greatness and excellence. Thus he addresses the Shade of Parnell reiterating the old appellation:

'Your enemy an old foul mouth, had set
The pack on him.'¹²

Yeats's interest in Parnell was certainly stimulated by the fall of the leader. More than one factor was responsible for his attitude. Herbert Howarth in his book The Irish Writers 1880-1900,¹³ has observed how the Irish

¹⁰ Letters to K. Tynan, p.27.

¹¹ 'Can you make any one of them a leader?...Can you select the foul-mouthed Tim Healy?...' (Quoted in Lyons, F.S.L., The Fall of Parnell, London, 1960, p.264).

¹² Collected Poems, p.123.

¹³ London, 1958.

literary movement was shaped at its earliest stage by the tradition of rebellion and the hopes for a Messiah and pervaded by images like these. Furthermore, the Theosophical Society in Dublin which attracted Yeats at a very early age was bound up with the promise of a Messiah, the revolutionary context of his coming, and 'the belief which Fenians like John Mitchel and James Stephens had held, that oppressed peoples become free during an international conflagration'.¹⁴

Such Messianic interests were further stimulated when in London Yeats was initiated into a society under MacGregor Mathers that sometimes called itself 'The Hermetic Students' (1887) and as he recalls 'being at a most receptive age', he was 'shaped and isolated'. He became acquainted with the Real History of the Rosicrucians by Arthur Edward Waite which gives a short account at the beginning of the second chapter of the expectation of a Messiah early in the seventeenth century and the earlier prophecies of Paracelsus, notably his declaration that the comet of 1572 was the sign and harbinger of approaching revolution.¹⁵

In 1889, Yeats was studying Blake who sharpened religious prophecy with the accents of the revolutionary. We have already noted in an earlier chapter how Morris, who was an important influence on Yeats at this time, expressed a consciousness of an hour of reckoning that seemed near at hand.

Under these influences, Yeats began to perceive Ireland as the microcosm of world tendencies. Reflecting the psychology of an oppressed race, he and

¹⁴ pp.10-11.

¹⁵ p.11.

other Irish writers of his generation envisioned a glorified role for Ireland in the future. She was to be emblematic of a modern Israel delivered from a Pharoanic Egypt that was England. As a chosen race the Irish were to be led by one after the manner of Moses, Christ, Golem, Barbarossa or Charlemagne. There are many instances in Yeats's writings during the period under consideration and later, where the comparison between Ireland and Judea is either implied or explicit. He had hoped when Ireland turned to Parnell that she would be the first in Europe to seek Unity of Being and be thereby a paradigm for all nations to emulate. Later in 1901 when he wrote of the failure of the Arts in Ireland, he communicates the hope he had entertained of the Irish being 'a chosen race, one of the pillars that uphold the world.'¹⁶

Other areas of analogy were found in Garibaldi's Italy, the Homeric people and Wagner's Germany.¹⁷

In view of this trend of thought among Yeats and his contemporaries, the fall of Parnell and the upheaval it created in Irish politics, naturally assumed significant proportions. Yeats's poem 'Mourn- and then Onward' seen in this context, is in perfect accord with the prophetic spirit prevailing among writers and thinkers at that time. In the last verse:

'Mourn- and then Onward, there is no returning
He guides ye from the tomb;

¹⁶ Essays and Introductions, p.210.

¹⁷ Yeats became familiar with the works of Wagner through his association with W. Ashton Ellis and Arthur Symons. The former was the author of Theosophy in the Works of Richard Wagner (No.11 in Transaction of the London Lodge of the Theosophical Society).

His memory now is a tall pillar, burning
 Before us in the gloom!

Parnell is treated in terms of a quasi-Moses image, whose memory becomes his resurrection. Yeats's tone is comparable to that of artist-prophet, carrying out an ancient function of communicating to his people the portentous significance of crises and events.

Yet there were other reasons for Yeats's 'Parnellism'. Most significant among these was his association with the veteran patriot John O'Leary. Yeats's commitment to the Irish leader insofar as he identified Parnell's enemies with his own was, at this early stage of his career, more a matter of being influenced by Fenian sentiment. The school of John O'Leary despised the association of agrarian with nationalist aims and consequently forbade allegiance to Parnell who accepted the leadership of the Land League in October 1879. But it must not be forgotten that in the last phase of his career Parnell earned the support of many Fenians and two of the most well-known were James Stephens and John O'Leary himself. O'Leary wrote strongly in his support during an election (Freeman's Journal, December 3, 1890, United Ireland, December 20, 1890). There are vivid accounts of O'Leary's sentiments over the Parnell Split in Katherine Tynan's Memories and Reminiscences. She observes how O'Leary was no longer in touch with Irish politics before Parnell's fall and 'it was a great thing for him when the Parnell Split brought him back into active politics.' She continues:

'The hill-side men, as we called the Fenians, represented all that was most high-minded in the politics of that day. Mr. Parnell had been in touch with them more than once, and in the hour of his being 'flung to the wolves' they forgave him the Land League. Anyone of us at that time would rather

have had the hill-side men with us than any other body of public opinion. John O'Leary said "Good God in Heaven! when he was ruining the morals of the country they were all with him: now that it is only a question of his own they are all against him."

During that great year of 'exultations, agonies' a bigger interest than the literary and artistic welded us together. Now the Sunday gatherings at Whitehall were passionately political. Woe betide the anti-Parnellite who strayed into that circle. The priests forsook us for the time or we forsook them. John O'Leary was in the midst of those passionate discussions, with a serene air of riding the whirlwind.¹⁸

Again in Twenty-Five Years she records:

'I remember when the days of the Parnell Divorce case and the debacle came John O'Leary's fierce comment, "Good God in Heaven you can't depose a man for gallantry", using the word in its French sense.

Neither brother nor sister had any sympathy with the Land League, and I doubt indeed the movement satisfied anybody who possessed ideals. But it had to come, as Mr Parnell said when he found it the weapon to his hand and it had to go before better things could come, which by the way is not yet.

John O'Leary interviewed Mr Parnell after he came back to Dublin, or Mr Parnell interviewed him. They fell apart at that time, but when the split happened John O'Leary and his hill-side men, with all that was honest in Irish Nationalism, stood at Parnell's back.¹⁹

Yeats, who received his political initiation from O'Leary, was doubtless influenced by Fenian attitudes to Parnell during this period. In one of his letters to O'Leary during the Parnell crisis he writes:

'It seems as though Parnell's chances had greatly improved these latter weeks. His last two speeches were wonderfully

¹⁸ Memories, (London, 1924), p.105.

¹⁹ pp.194-195.

good. I wish I was over in Ireland to see and hear how things are going...My father is bitterly opposed to Parnell on the ground chiefly, now, of his attacks on his followers. To me, if all other reasons were absent, it would seem plain that a combination of priests with the 'Sullivan gang'²⁰ is not likely to have on its side in political matters divine justice...'²¹

The Fenians distrusted both the priests and the 'Sullivan gang' long before the Parnell Split. Past actions on both sides were responsible for their cold feud. Yeats had not yet suffered greatly at their hands, so his prejudice against them was obviously, through his early political commitment, part of an inheritance.

Thus from a combination of Messianism, transmitted prejudice and a fairly limited knowledge of the Irish leader, Yeats's 'Parnellism' emerged in the early eighteen-nineties. Over the years that followed, the image of the leader was shaped, developed and very gradually assimilated into the poet's creative mythologem. The interaction between his increasing knowledge of Parnell and his personal experience of Irish public life, led to comparison and identification with the great leader, a practice that extenuated the pain of defeat or assuaged the hidden fears of his self-created solitude.

II

In 1913, twenty-one years after the composition of 'Mourn- and then

²⁰ Note in Wade: The Sullivan gang consisted of the Sullivans and the Healys. A.M. Sullivan had secured control of the Nation, a very influential nationalist weekly, after Gavan Duffy left Ireland, and he and his brother, T.D. Sullivan, were both MP's. The Healys were Tim and Maurice, both MP's and connected with the Sullivans by marriage. All were very bitter against Parnell (p.163).

²¹ loc. cit.

Onward', the image of Parnell appeared in 'To a Shade', a poem which was part of a collection entitled Poems written in Discouragement. They were composed in response to the Hugh Lane controversy of 1912-13 in which Yeats took a prominent part. Parnell's image, by this time, had gathered new associations for Yeats. He is not so much the representative of the Irish people as he is the symbol of aristocratic Protestant leadership in Ireland. In order to appreciate fully this development in Yeats's understanding of Parnell, we may digress briefly to consider the political and cultural context of Ireland in relation to Yeats, at the time of the Lane controversy.

The cultural context:

As is familiar, Hugh Lane, Lady Gregory's nephew, had made a collection of modern French paintings which were part of a Modern Art Gallery founded in Dublin in 1905. The paintings had become famous and Lane considered it important that they be housed properly by the Dublin Corporation. A design made by Edward Lutyens, an English architect for a bridge gallery spanning the Liffey, met with his approval but encountered violent popular opposition. Yeats took up Lane's cause with great enthusiasm. He was particularly incensed against Lane's critic the Independent newspaper whose proprietor William Martin Murphy was an anti-Parnellite of earlier days. The construction of the gallery required financial support from private subscribers as well as from the rate-payers. Public hesitation and a general reluctance among subscribers to support the cause of art and culture in Ireland infuriated the poet. It was an indication for him of bourgeois frugality that would sooner substitute mediocrity for excellence than serve at any personal expense.

Popular feeling was aggravated by Lane's continued demand for the bridge site and his threat to transfer the paintings to London if financial support was not forthcoming. He and his friends were derided as 'self-seekers', 'self-advertisers', 'picture dealers', 'log-rolling cranks and fanatics'. The pictures were compared to the Trojan horse which destroyed a city. Someone asked that instead of 'the eccentric Manets and Monets, they should be given pictures like 'those beautiful productions displayed in the windows of our city shops'.²²

Yeats was appalled by what appeared to be a singular lack of taste among the middle-class leaders of popular opinion and the concomitant ineptitude of the upper classes in modern Ireland. He was faced for the third time by a public controversy that left him conscious of his total alienation from the interests of the new middle class. It was a class which he attacked as the creation of the counting-house, 'men who had risen above the traditions of the countryman, without learning those of cultivated life or even educating themselves, and who because of their poverty, their ignorance, their superstitious piety, are subject to all kinds of fear'²³ - the same class that O'Leary castigated for never producing leaders or patriots,²⁴ the class in England against whose values Morris tirelessly

²² Hone, p.266.

²³ Essays and Introductions, p.260.

²⁴ "In Tipperary at a great meeting of farmers O'Leary on his coming out of prison said: 'The landlords gave us some few leaders, and I like them for that, and the artisans have given us great numbers of good patriots, and so I like them best: but you I do not like at all, for you have never given us anyone.'" (Essays and Introductions, note on p.259)

raged as artist-socialist. Slowly Yeats learned the impact of this class on the general response to his movement and its flowering in the genius of Synge. It prevented national integration and was largely responsible for his failure to realise Unity of Culture in Ireland. The accumulated wrath of many years found expression in the poems of 1913. His notes to the poems give us an understanding of the context:

'In the thirty years or so during which I have been reading Irish newspapers, three public controversies have stirred my imagination. The first was the Parnell controversy. There were reasons to justify a man's joining either party, but there were none to justify, on one side or on the other, lying accusations forgetful of past service, a frenzy of detraction. And another was the dispute over The Playboy. There may have been reasons for opposing as for supporting that violent, laughing thing, though I can see the one side only, but there cannot have been any for the lies, for the unscrupulous rhetoric spread against it in Ireland, and from Ireland to America. The third prepared for the Corporation's refusal of a building for Sir Hugh Lane's famous collection of pictures...These controversies, political, literary, and artistic, have showed that neither religion nor politics can of itself create minds with enough receptivity to become a wise, or just and generous enough to make a nation...In Ireland I am constantly reminded of that fable of the futility of all discipline that is not of the whole being. Religious Ireland- and the pious Protestants of my childhood were signal examples- thinks of divine things as a round of duties separated from life and not as an element that may be discovered in all circumstance and emotion, while political Ireland sees the good citizen but as a man who holds to certain opinions and not as a man of good will. Against all this we have but a few educated men and the remnants of an old traditional culture among the poor. Both were stronger forty years ago, before the rise of our new middle class which made its first public display during the nine years of the Parnellite split showing how base at moments of excitement are minds without culture.-1914.'²⁵

The levelling tide of democracy had, for Yeats, dissipated the culture

of the mind that resulted from the distinction, as apart from the isolation, of faculties and the genuine supremacy of religious truth. Church and State, as he contemplated later, had degenerated into quantitative functional units erratic as the mob itself, abandoning order, hierarchy, balance and discipline. The new middle class had come between the hut and the castle, between the hut and the cloister²⁶ and obviated that communion of psychic opposites which for the individual as for a nation preceded self-realisation and Unity of Being. Yet he hoped for a reversal of the tide; he did not forget the impact of Parnell's leadership and the way the Irish people had turned to one so unlike themselves:

'I had seen Ireland in my own time turn from the bragging rhetoric and gregarious humour of O'Connell's generation and school, and offer herself to the solitary and proud Parnell as to her anti-self, buskin followed hard on sock, and I had begun to hope or half-hope, that we might be the first in Europe to seek unity as deliberately as it had been sought by theologian, poet, sculptor, architect, from the eleventh to the thirteenth century.'²⁷

Aristocratic as against bourgeois leadership was the need of the hour and Yeats had his own definition of the aristocrat. Parnell now became, for him, the last great figure of Protestant Ireland, the aristocrat who, finding a lack of 'hereditary passion' among those of his own class, called in the 'peasants' tenacity and violence' to resuscitate the national struggle. For some time after Parnell's death, Yeats believed 'the peasants had stood aside and waited, hoping that their old masters might take their

²⁶ Essays and Introductions, pp.10-11.

²⁷ Autobiographies, p.195.

leadership again.'²⁸ But Protestant Ireland, that could claim most of Ireland's distinguished patriots, proved devitalised and ineffective.

Since politically the class proved impotent, Yeats envisaged a leadership that might operate via the cultural route. Patronage of the arts was one avenue through which Ireland could be instructed to attain her moral stature and identity among independent nations of the future. Therefore, during the Lane controversy, when representatives of the upper class showed an undue reliance on popular opinion in the matter of subscriptions for the gallery, Yeats felt they were forgetting their privileges and were throwing away an opportunity to take over the leadership of the country.

The political context:

The Irish policy of the Conservative Government, that came to force in 1886, was to 'kill Home Rule by kindness'. Material reforms were introduced in the hope that the advantages gained thereby would blur the prospect of Home Rule if not dispose of it altogether. In pursuance of this policy the Wyndham Act was enforced in 1903. It was natural successor to the Land Act of 1881 in assuring peasant proprietorship in Ireland. This gave rise to the new, predominantly Catholic middle class. A class struggle ensued which brought the new middle class into direct hostility with the working class. Irish Nationalists were to a large extent drawn from the middle class (Arthur Griffith evoked the strongest support from their ranks) and their aims distinctly contradicted the socialist orientation of the

28 Autobiographies, p.419.

working class. Lenin, as a foreign observer, believed that:

'National oppression and Catholic reaction have transformed the proletarians of this unhappy country into paupers and the peasants into toil-worn, ignorant and dull slaves of priestcraft, they have transformed the bourgeoisie into phalanxes of capitalists and despots over the workers masked by nationalist phrases, and finally they have transformed the administration into agents accustomed to every kind of violence.

At the present moment the Irish Nationalists (i.e. the Irish bourgeoisie) are the victors: they are buying out their land from the English landlords; they are receiving national home rule (the notorious home rule for which the long and stubborn struggle has been waged between Ireland and England), they will govern "their" land in conjunction with "their" priests.'²⁹

The observation is biased, but it is evident that Yeats thought on much the same lines although his motivations were different.

Between the years 1910-1913 the Sinn Fein movement was practically moribund.³⁰ The Parliamentary Party and Nationalist politics as the monopoly of the middle class, were listless and uninspiring. Romantic Ireland seemed dead and gone. The Conservative policy in Ireland had the desired effect of sapping the vitality of the nation's original objective. 'Immediate victory, immediate utility, became everything...'³¹

Meanwhile the Labour movement gathered momentum. The situation left the Protestant upper class, with which Yeats was inclined to identify himself, very much in the background. Yet he imagined their isolation, as

²⁹ Quoted in Mansergh, N.: Ireland in the Age of Reform and Revolution, p.206. (Ref: Collected Works, Vol.XVI)

³⁰ Ibid., p.208.

³¹ Essays and Introductions, p.260.

also his own, could be used to advantage. Political forces, enervated through disparate party interests, could only be mobilised through a leadership where patriotism was a matter of choice, an expression of the disinterested intellect giving rise to disciplined and steadfast emotion as against hysterical obsession. He unrealistically hoped that the authority of the obtrusive middle class could be displaced by an arrogant assertion of aristocratic taste and excellence in Irish cultural life. 'A discipline of the whole being', the long-term objective of such an assertion, could eventually influence the texture of political life as also the economic structure of the nation. He had not forgotten O'Leary's belief that the Irish people who want nourishment for their imagination will take the best if they are but offered it.³² The poor peasants, in Yeats's imagination, were robbed and cheated by hateful bourgeois values and were deprived of their antithetical principle in aristocratic leadership. It is in this light that the image of Parnell became highly relevant. When revolutionary and constitutional forces were the incompatibles of Irish politics dissipating the nation's resources, Parnell's dramatic leadership, independent and disinterested, provided an ingenious synthesis of motives that brought Ireland in sight of the Promised Land. Was this possible again if constitutionalism and the incipient revolutionary force of the Labour movement could be welded under the effective guidance of an implicitly 'superior' force? Yeats's logic seemed to be working towards its possibility.

³² Autobiographies, p.316.

Against the reality of facts and figures, his was a far-fetched solution to Irish problems. But it must be remembered that Yeats had withdrawn from Irish politics in 1903. Maud Gonne MacBride felt that after 1903, 'he had lost contact with those who were working for Ireland's freedom';³³ consequently, he could only speculate against the fairly intimate knowledge of Irish politics which he gained during the years of the Parnellite Split. With the passage of time, as he moved away from the complexities of practical politics, the significance of Parnell's 'reign', his fall and the aftermath, grew proportionately greater in Yeats's imagination. It gave him an imaginative focus through which he could reconstruct the history of his generation.

In the light of the above commentary on the Irish cultural and political context in relation to Yeats, it is simple to observe how the Lane poems are an implicit appeal to the aristocracy to remember their privileges through a proud affirmation of their identity - an identity which in the last poem is defined through an evocation of Parnell's shade. The first poem is addressed 'To a Wealthy Man who promised a Second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures'. Yeats's intentions in the poem were transparent to his contemporaries, as we may infer by considering the response of the press. An article entitled 'Art and Aristocracy' appearing in the Irish Times of January 11, 1913 reads:

'It [the poem] is a reproach to a friend who waits to see

³³ Gwynn, Stephen (ed.): Scattering Branches, (London, 1940), p.31.

whether there is a "considerable popular demand" for the pictures before he will send a larger subscription than his first. The point is clear enough. There is no use in being angry with "the people". We are asked to clear our minds of democratic cant.

Mr Yeats's poem lifts the discussion out of the region of sentimentality. There is, it implies, no popular demand for good art. Ireland, we infer, is in no worse a case than any other European country. It will not be a bit disgraceful if the pictures leave us. But the gentlemen of Ireland will have lost another opportunity...He [Yeats] reminds our aristocracies of birth and wealth, not of their duties, but of their privileges. This reproach to a friend is really the most subtle of compliments. It is among the friend's privileges to- "Look up in the sun's eye and give

What the exultant heart calls good..."

Ercole d'Este, Duke Guidobaldo, Cosimo de Medici, the greatest patrons of the liberal arts the world has known, were more than patrons of the liberal arts. They illustrate for all time an attitude which must be that of aristocracy if the word has any meaning. Deprived temporarily of his political power, Cosimo did not grow embittered, or forget that it was still his prerogative to patronise Michelozzo. Who can say that Mr Yeats's analogy is impertinent to Ireland today?'

In 'September 1913' Yeats attacks the Catholics and Nationalists of contemporary Ireland and contrasts their 'petty acquisitiveness and petty piety' to the romantic tradition of patriotism which he had inherited from O'Leary:

'What need you, being come to sense,
But fumble in a greasy till
And add the halfpence to the pence
And prayer to shivering prayer, until
You have dried the marrow from the bone?
For men were born to pray and save:

Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.³⁴

In recounting the names of Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet, Wolfe Tone - men who 'were of a different kind' and describing the exalted character of their disinterested service- 'They weighed so lightly what they gave'- Yeats was reminding Ireland of her real leaders. The free Ireland of their imagination, that motivated rebellion and sacrifice, was their victory, the intellectual re-creation of all that exterior fate snatched away and so that fate's antithesis.³⁵ The distance between desire and reality evocative of the polarised existential tension which was the substance of tragedy, precipitated for them creative transcendence and self-mastery that gave their lives the dimensions of heroic gesture and form. The implicit comparison between what they dreamed and what contemporary Ireland appeared to be - 'a little greasy huxtering nation groping for half pence in a greasy till'³⁶ - was an extension of the same tragic antithesis:

'Was it for this the wild geese spread
The grey wing upon every tide;
For this that all that blood was shed,
For this Edward Fitzgerald died,
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,
All that delirium of the grave?

³⁴ Collected Poems, pp.120-121.

³⁵ Autobiographies, p.189.

³⁶ Quoted in Jeffares, pp.171-172.

Romantic Ireland's dead and gone,
It's with O'Leary in the grave.³⁷

Did Yeats through this provocative reprimand to 'the people' as against 'the aristocracy' of the first poem, hope to rouse them to self-realisation through the actions of their collective anti-self? This may have been the case in view of his ambitions for the Ireland which offered itself to the 'proud and solitary Parnell' as to its anti-self.

From a developing sense of tragedy in his personal and public life, Yeats was encouraged to reconstruct Ireland's tragedy in terms of the Anglo-Irish predicament. Ireland's political consciousness, her sense of form and moral energy in public life that gave her the right of independence, was the gift of Protestant Ireland. In a Journal begun in December 1908, Yeats wrote:

'The lack of the moral element in Irish public life...comes largely from the badness of Catholic education, and the small number of Catholic families with traditions. The sense of form, whether that of Parnell, or Grattan or Davis, of form in active life, has always been protestant in Ireland. O'Connell the one great Catholic figure was formless. The power of self-conquest, of elocution has been protestant, or more or less a thing of class- all the tragedians were protestant, O'Connell was a comedian.'³⁸

In the lives of Protestant patriots there was nothing to negate the heroic tradition of Ireland's Gaelic past and yet a genuine integration of national consciousness had not occurred; the nation passed 'to and fro' between

³⁷ Collected Poems, p.121.

³⁸ Quoted in Torchiana, D.T.: W.B. Yeats and Georgian Ireland, (London, 1966), p.32.

'mechanical opposites'.³⁹ Catholic and Nationalist Ireland seemed to forget or make irrelevant the tragedy of Protestant sacrifice; the victims are exiles imagined: 'In all their loneliness and pain...'⁴⁰

The greatest victim of sacrifice in modern Ireland is addressed in 'To a Shade', the last poem in the Lane series of 1913. It seems at first sight strange that Parnell should be invoked in the context of a cultural controversy. Nothing could be more incongruous. For if Parnell were alive during the Lane controversy, he would doubtless have treated the whole matter with categorical indifference. That an art connoisseur should be likened to him- 'A man/Of your own passionate serving kind...'- is not less strange; for Parnell was acknowledged to have no interest in paintings, a disregard for literature and an absolute dislike for music. J.B. Yeats had always reproved his cultural shortcomings. The only common ground seems to be the common enemy:

'Your enemy, an old foul mouth, had set
The pack on him.'⁴¹

Yet in the light of the preceding discussion the invocation of Parnell is relevant. Parnell and Hugh Lane were representatives of the one-time ruling class that was now being displaced by an aggressive new middle-class. During the controversy when everything for Yeats suggested a contrast between

³⁹ Autobiographies, p.360.

⁴⁰ Collected Poems, p.121.

⁴¹ Collected Poems, p.123.

'the heroic and commonplace', the aristocratic and the bourgeois, the image of Parnell as an example of the one as William Martin Murphy was of the other, afforded a suitable parallel to Lane and the Independent. Furthermore, we are told, Yeats gratified Lady Gregory, who was now for some time his guardian and patron, by comparing Lane's fate to that of Parnell.⁴²

In the interests of the present discussion, however, it may be worthwhile to examine more closely why the image of Parnell reappeared in Yeats's poetry after a period of twenty-one years. From a consciousness of Parnell's political significance (he 'made the tyrant bow') there seems to have been a subtle transition to an awareness of the leader's artistic function - à propos the Yeatsian mechanics of national integration. From the impersonal lament of 1891, there is a development to a sense of kinship in the personal address of 1913. Artist and leader have shared the same experiences of rejection and solitude; Yeats discovers his identity. That Parnell is invoked in the context of a cultural controversy confirms an ingenious transference of Parnell's significance from the purely political to the socio-cultural sphere. He is absorbed into Yeats's living experience as a powerful ally, an aid in personal integration as also in realising the great ends of art. Parnell no longer guides the mournful masses from the tomb, but is enjoined in the sympathetic accents of an artist-prophet to return to the tomb, for his hour had not arrived:

'Go unquiet wanderer,
And gather the Glasnevin coverlet
About your head till the dust stops your

⁴² Hone, p.267.

The time for you to taste of that salt breath
 And listen at the corners has not come:
 You had enough of sorrow before death-
 Away, away! You are safer in the tomb.⁴³

Parnell's rejection and betrayal through 'the old foul mouth' and his class is conveyed in terms of Ireland's rejection and betrayal of the artist. Yeats has implicitly taken over control of the leader's memory; the boundaries of national leadership in politics and art are fused.

To supplement the above observations, we may trace the development of Yeats's knowledge and image of Parnell after 1891 until the period under consideration as this throws some light on the way his exegesis of the leader's role in modern Irish history is inextricably linked with his own search for identity and significance as artist-leader. For the sake of convenience, I shall treat the development in two phases, the first extending from 1891 to 1901 and the second from 1901-13.

1891-1901

Two years before the death of Parnell, Yeats predicted an intellectual movement in Ireland at the first lull in politics and after the leader's death in 1891, he wished to fulfill his prophecy. In Dublin he founded the National Literary Society. O'Leary was President of the Society and various clubs throughout the country were affiliated to it. Members were Parnellite in their political sympathies unlike those of the Irish Literary Society in

⁴³ Collected Poems, p.123.

London, founded by T.W. Rolleston with Yeats's assistance, who were largely Anti-Parnellite and Unionist. Consequently, when Rolleston and Sir Charles Gavan Duffy disagreed with Yeats over the nature of books to be published for the movement, the altercation which ensued was quasi-political. Yeats ranged the Parnellites on his side. Inevitably, he witnessed the bitterness of feeling which animated both Parnellite and Anti-Parnellite ranks. That he did not altogether escape its influence over the years is evident in his recollection of 1898; while listening to John Dillon, who had opposed Parnell, at a Mansion House Banquet, he felt the abstract passion of hatred rise within him and, almost overpowered by an instinct of cruelty, he longed to cry out, 'Had Zimri peace who slew his master?'⁴⁴

At the same time, through his political affiliation, Yeats was exposed to a great deal of discussion concerning the nature of the late Irish leader. Reports both accurate and exaggerated, anecdotes, impressions and dramatic mystifications surrounded the memory of Parnell among his followers. These supplied the raw material out of which Yeats was to fashion his own image of the leader. In Autobiographies, he relates how 'in the conversations of the small hours' at the inception of his movement:

'...whenever we did not speak of art and letters, we spoke of Parnell. We told each other that he had admitted no man to his counsel; that when some member of his party found himself in the same hotel by chance, that member would think to stay there a presumption and move to some other lodging; and, above all, we spoke of his pride, that made him hide all emotions while before his enemy. Once he had seemed callous

⁴⁴ Autobiographies, p.366.

and indifferent to the House of Commons- Forster accused him of abetting assassination- but when he came among his followers his hands were full of blood, because he had torn them with his nails.⁴⁵

Presumably before 1891, Yeats was acquainted with certain glorified aspects of Parnell's personality through Katherine Tynan; now he encountered the solitary and proud image cherished by the Parnellites of his literary movement. As Conor Cruise O'Brien has observed, the Parnell legend was a contemporary phenomenon. The editorial of the Freeman's Journal of July 21, 1890, described him as 'one of those men with that strange atmosphere, that indefinable fascination, the nimbus by which those beings are surrounded that have the mighty force of will to control the minds of multitudes of their fellow men.'⁴⁶ The legend was perpetuated years after.

The ability to control the minds of multitudes was recognised by Yeats as indispensable for the implementation of an Irish risorgimento. That he felt a conscious desire to mould and influence is evident in his recognition 'through a moment of supernatural insight' that Ireland after Parnell's death was 'to be like soft wax for years to come' and that the hour for him to act had arrived. We may assume therefore that his emulation of the late leader began early in his career.

When Yeats began, what I have described in an earlier chapter as a socialist experiment in literature, he went among the common people in Dublin back-streets, talked in public bars and late into the night at many

⁴⁵ Autobiographies, p.232.

⁴⁶ Parnell and his Party, 1880-1890, (Oxford 1957), p.247, footnote.

men's houses showing all his convictions to men that were ready to listen, and used conversation to explore and discover among men who looked for authority. He did not know then, as he states in Autobiographies, that intellectual freedom and social equality were incompatible.⁴⁷ Yet it is interesting how his initial plunge into public affairs was, inadvertently perhaps, parallel to Parnell's tactical move at the start of his career. Parnell took up the peasants' cause at a time when agrarian grievances threatened nationalist aims. Under the shadow of abstract sentiment and patriotic hysteria created by the rhetoric of the Young Irelanders, agrarian and nationalist passions commingled and presaged a 'movement of abstraction and hatred'. By accepting the leadership of the Land League Parnell diverted a formidable force towards the goal he pursued. The national unity he achieved through the sheer impact of his indomitable will and mysterious personality, was phenomenal. Yet it collapsed after his tragic fall which was precipitated by a misdirection of the violent national energy he had liberated. However, the lesson of national unity through the imaginative appeal of a single figure was not lost for Yeats. Imaginative unity brought about through Art on a more profound level, could remedy the breakdown of political unity. Yeats was primarily dedicated to the cause of Art just as Parnell's principal aim was Irish independence and the establishment in Ireland of Grattan's Parliament consisting of King, Lords and Commons.

He believed that literature 'created for its own sake, for some eternal spiritual need, can be used for politics.' But literature in Ireland could

⁴⁷ p.229.

not flourish without the security of popular support or the creative exploitation of popular imagination. Thus he began by harnessing the energy of Gaelic Catholic Ireland to his cause. Little did he realise then that the Land Acts of 1880 and 1881 had altered 'the people' of his imagination whose art he believed was in essential harmony with the art of the coteries. When he saw his literary movement give rise to the 'Popular Theatre', he admitted defeat and disappointment because it was different from what he had envisaged. The dumb classes were made articulate but all was objective 'with the objectivity of the office and the workshop, of the newspaper and the street, of mechanism and of politics.'⁴⁸ The subjective vision of solitaires like Synge and Yeats himself was rejected:

'We thought we could bring the old folk-life to Dublin, patriotic feeling to aid us, and with the folk-life all the life of the heart, understanding heart, according to Dante's definition, as the most interior being; but the modern world is more powerful than any propaganda or even than any special circumstance and our success has been that we have made a Theatre of the head, and persuaded Dublin playgoers to think about their own trade or profession or class and their life within it, so long as the stage curtain is up, in relation to Ireland as a whole. For certain hours of an evening they have objective modern eyes.'⁴⁹

In the same way, Parnell by allowing his movement to harness the force of agrarian agitation and the class it gave rise to, created for himself the anomalous position of independent dictator within a democratic set-up. While he desired Grattan's Parliament, Ireland during his 'reign' veered

⁴⁸ Explorations, p.249.

⁴⁹ Explorations, p.253.

towards the idea of a Republic.

Yeats erred as did Parnell before him. Whether the initial action of the poet was carried out in conscious emulation of the political leader we cannot tell. But his comparable failure heightened Yeats's sense of identification with the leader in later years. He was able to re-create Parnell's image through the tragic vision of a rejected artist or subjective man in a modern, objective age.

Other less ambiguous instances of Yeats's emulation of Parnell's political strategy or art of leadership can be traced in the early years. When Yeats created enemies among the young men in Dublin at the start of his career, O'Leary reproved him for living on terms of intimacy with those he wished to influence. He recommended him to study Parnell's aloofness and Hone observes it was advice which Yeats did not really find very difficult to follow.⁵⁰

Further, in order to uplift the standards of art and literature in Ireland, as also in the interests of artistic leadership, Yeats followed a policy of independent criticism in relation to both Unionists and Nationalists. He recalls in Autobiographies:

'I never met with, or but met to quarrel with, my father's old family acquaintance; or with acquaintance I might have found, and kept among the prosperous and educated class, who had all the great appointments at University or Castle; and this I did by deliberate calculation. If I must attack so much that seemed sacred to Irish Nationalist opinion, I must, I knew, see to it that no man suspect me of doing it to flatter Unionist opinion.'⁵¹

50 p.98.

51 p.233.

The policy was curiously parallel to Parnell's policy of 'independent opposition' in relation to the English parties and his shrewd handling of revolutionary and constitutional forces at home. It is not surprising to find Mr. E.R. Walsh, one time guest of Yeats at the Nassau Hotel, Dublin, observe in his reminiscences:

'On the political side of his character Yeats, I think, resembled Parnell...'⁵²

A basic detachment from the interests of any one particular group and an attitude of playing with political parties, was common to both. Parnell's freedom of action, as Yeats came to understand it, was the freedom of achieved personality, 'the completed arc' which it was the business of literature to cherish and celebrate. Yeats aimed at synchronizing the active and imaginative life in a way which could render them comprehensible in terms of creative existence. His politics did not contradict his understanding of the artist vis-à-vis life. Parnell's political strategy and consequent dominance was comparable to the 'deception' of the artist/lover of the world. 'Deceit' implied detachment, a removal from the necessities of common law, which gave a moral radiance to action and style to art and letters.⁵³ Thus the image of Parnell's mastery and dignity as leader of a nation became Yeats's expression of himself in relation to his work.

An important source of knowledge for Irish writers concerned with the image of Parnell was Richard Barry O'Brien's two-volume life of Parnell

⁵² Quoted in Hone, p.232.

⁵³ Essays and Introductions, p.272.

which appeared in 1898. We may presume that Yeats read the biography as did James Joyce among other writers. It is true that in Autobiographies, written at a much later date, Yeats relates O'Leary's story concerning Parnell and the Land question thinking it was not yet published. The story, however, had already appeared in Barry O'Brien's biography. Either Yeats had forgotten the published version or he was unfamiliar with O'Brien's work. The latter possibility seems unlikely since Yeats's interest in the Irish leader increased rather than diminished over the years following 1891. Moreover, Barry O'Brien was a leading member of the London Irish Literary Society and Yeats had already recommended his edition of Wolfe Tone's Autobiography in a reading list appearing in The Bookman (October 1895).

The biography offered the first detailed account of Parnell's political career. But it is significant in another respect. It offers a selection of statements about Parnell made by his important colleagues and contemporaries. The enquiry into the nature of Parnell's leadership and the subsequent orientation of reported statements in the work, suggest to the reader a stress on Parnell's almost uncanny assertion of power. O'Brien's treatment of Parnell's despotism certainly influenced James Joyce's conception of the leader. How far it influenced Yeats's image of Parnell may not be so obvious, but can be determined by careful inference. Certain aspects of Parnell, exposed in the biography, seem to influence or illustrate Yeats's creative thought concerning Irish history and the mystique of leadership. These may be referred to briefly as they are also useful, for later reference, in suggesting the material available for Yeats's selective

assimilation of the leader's image.

'Parnellism' in politics was an equivocal and elusive term since it combined constitutional and unconstitutional methods. Barry O'Brien's biography, however, makes it clear that Parnell was essentially a man of action, preferring, from the start, a policy of war to Isaac Butt's policy of peace. For all his constitutionalism, Parnell could never be accused of being 'moderate or Whiggish'. He is referred to as a 'revolutionist working with constitutional weapons'.⁵⁴

We are told that Parnell's interest in Irish affairs was awakened through the Fenian movement. His sister Fanny and brother John were contributors to The Irish People. Consequently, Fenianism influenced Avondale, the home of the Parnells. Parnell's first significant political gesture was the defence of the Manchester Martyrs in the House of Commons which immediately attracted the attention of the Fenians. When he entered politics his interest in agrarian matters was secondary to the goal of self-government in Ireland. 'What had Parnell, a landowner and a haughty man, to do with the peasant or the peasant's grievance?' was Yeats understanding of the fact.⁵⁵ Parnell's message was clear to the Fenians when he stated:

'I do not wish to attach too much importance to what can be gained by the action of your members in the House of Commons. Much good has resulted, and much good will result, from an independent parliamentary representation,

⁵⁴ Vol.I, p.182.

⁵⁵ Autobiographies, p.358.

but I have never claimed for parliamentary action anything more than its just share of weight.'⁵⁶

Seen in this light, his final appeal to the 'hill-side' men was not as inconsistent as it appeared to his more constitutionally minded colleagues. It is not unnatural that the Fenians claimed him as one of their own leaders, in the year of his fall and after.

Another aspect brought to light which explains the ambiguity of 'Parnellism', is Parnell's flexibility in his employment of means to achieve his end. Mr. Chamberlain pronounced him as 'unscrupulous like every great man.'⁵⁷ His reasoning was always direct and simple; in the opinion of one of his admirers, he was 'always going straight to the point, and not caring much how he got there, so long as he did get there.'⁵⁸ Far from quibbling over the ethics of an action, he was satisfied to appraise it by pragmatic criteria. 'He was content to call the dynamitards fools, and to laugh at the moral pretensions of the House of Commons...'⁵⁹ Yet he was wary of principles which he would never sacrifice to the expediency of the scheming politician. In a speech at Drogheda April, 15, 1884, he was reported to have said:

⁵⁶ Quoted in Barry O'Brien, Vol.I, p.378.

⁵⁷ Ibid, Vol.II, p.131.

⁵⁸ Ibid, Vol.I, p.146. The admirer is referred to as 'X'.

⁵⁹ Ibid, Vol.II, p.32.

'I prefer, as I always have done in public life to deal with principles, and not with men.'⁶⁰

His opportunism, therefore, was action at the right moment and this offered an important clue to his genius of leadership.

When Barry O'Brien enquired of Justin MacCarthy the reasons for Parnell's ascendancy, the reply was:

'He [Parnell] owed his ascendancy to his strength of will and his readiness to see what was the right thing to do at a given moment. He was not liked by the party as a whole...But like or dislike, all bowed to him because all felt that he was the one man who knew what to do in moments of difficulty, and that he was always right. He had the genius of Commander-in-Chief. It was that which gave him power...'⁶¹

Other comments on the nature of Parnell's leadership stress his separateness from those he dealt with. Sir Charles Dilke attributed his success to

'...his aloofness. He hated England, English ways, English modes of thought. He would have nothing to do with us. He acted like a foreigner. We could not get at him as at any other man in English public life. He was not one of us in any sense. Dealing with him was like dealing with a foreign Power. This gave him immense advantage, and, coupled with his iron will, explains his ascendancy and success.'⁶²

His separateness was heightened by his haughty reserve and cold indifference to the praise or blame of those he wished to influence. After his release from Kilmainham when he returned to Avondale, he was welcomed effusively but

⁶⁰ Ibid, Vol.II, p.35.

⁶¹ Ibid, Vol.I, p.224.

⁶² Ibid, p.225.

he remained unmoved. 'He was like a statue'.⁶³ Again when cheers greeted him in the House of Commons after the Special Commission findings concerning the Pigott case, he remained totally unconcerned, and Gladstone characterised him as an 'intellectual phenomenon'. His frigid courtesy gave him power over those who disagreed with him. He influenced Michael Davitt by 'the spell of irresistible fascination'. After the Kilmainhain Treaty, Parnell disbanded the Ladies' Land League and was strongly opposed to any fresh land agitation. Davitt differed from him. "He tried to convert Parnell to his views. He failed and submitted."⁶⁴

Another related anecdote concerning his complete indifference to conventional propriety is his acceptance of Dublin's 'tribute' cheque without a word of thanks. Likewise he frequently absented himself from meetings without excuse or apology.

Parnell's domination as leader of the Irish people was apparently unprecedented in the history of Ireland. His understanding of the English surpassed that of Butt or O'Connell. His difference from other leaders was observed by Gavan Duffy, quoted in the biography:

'I could not fail to see that Mr. Parnell possessed one gift in perfection- that great and rare gift of dominating and controlling men. I had had much experience of Irish parties at home and abroad, and I had seen no one who possessed such mastery of a race among whom individuality is a passion.

⁶³ Ibid, p.349.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.377.

Grattan did not long control the Parliament which he made independent; O'Connell among men whose position depended altogether on his will was a joyous companion, among the gay, loud-speaking Celts, or at the highest a peer among peers; but the proud, silent, isolated attitude of the new dictator was something altogether different. And it increased the manner of his authority that he possessed none of the gifts by which his predecessors had won popularity. He had not a gleam of the eloquence of Grattan, or the passion and humour of O'Connell, or any trace of the generous forbearance by which Smith O'Brien aimed to efface himself in the interest of his cause, or of Butt's exact knowledge of Irish interests and annals, but he ruled with more unquestioned authority than any of them had done.⁶⁵

In the final phase, Barry O'Brien observes how Parnell used himself the idea of sacrifice - of being thrown to the lions or the 'English wolves howling for his destruction'.⁶⁶ He accepted the contemporary legend around his name and eventually saw himself, as did his followers, as a tragic hero or man of destiny. Youthful imagination in Ireland was captured by the tragic drama of his fall;

'The hearts of the Irish boys and girls had gone out to Parnell because he had stood in the breach for Ireland. He had sinned. His own people, strong in the possession of those domestic virtues, had pardoned the sin because the sinner had served and suffered for the nation. Was he now to be thrown to the 'English wolves' because an Englishman forsooth had cast the first stone?'⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid, Vol.II, pp.60-61.

⁶⁶ In his Manifesto which he presented his colleagues on November 28, 1890, Parnell stated: "The threat [Gladstone's letter] compels me to put before you information...which will enable you to understand the measure of the loss with which you are threatened unless you consent to throw me to the English wolves now howling for my destruction."- Quoted in Barry O'Brien, Vol.II, p.258.

⁶⁷ Barry O'Brien, Vol.II, p.273.

Biblical associations continued to surround the image of the leader. One of the stalwarts said:

'I will go into the desert again with Parnell. Was it not he who brought us out of the desert, who brought us within sight of the Promised Land?'⁶⁸

The impression left by the biography is clear. Parnell was indeed 'the uncrowned king' of Ireland whose despotism was unqualified and absolute. His tragic fall was brought about by the fatal hamartia of his passion for a woman, and Irish imagination was faced with the meaning of tragedy in its classical dimensions.

The many aspects of Parnell - as a man of action with a lifelong reverence for the Fenian faith; his flexibility regarding the means to his end and passionate directness in acting at the right moment, but enduring respect for principles; his separateness from and frigid manner towards his colleagues and consequent assertion of power; his difference from other Irish leaders and his idea of tragic sacrifice - all are recognisable in the development of Yeats's image of Parnell and his understanding of Irish history and leadership. His own actions at the turn of the century and after, and his theories concerning Ireland's imaginative needs are comprehensible in their light.

Parnell's image gradually became indispensable for Yeats on two levels of psychic integration, i.e. the personal and the national. We may therefore proceed to trace its development in view of these levels. We must also bear in mind the interaction between the poet's personal

68 loc. cit.

experience of public life and the extended biographical data on Parnell available for selection and re-construction.

Yeats's early political activities, described in the previous chapter, are significant in the way they show the artist-leader assume the prerogatives of a political leader. As President of the Wolfe Tone Memorial Association, Yeats contemplated the grandiose scheme of a unified Irish Parliament which could send Irish Members to Westminster, not as an independent power but as its delegation and only when and for what purpose it might decide. He was dreaming 'of that Unity of Culture which might begin with some few men controlling some form of administration.'⁶⁹ But he was not a man of action and could not see his plan carried out in the existing circumstances. He was 'sedentary and thoughtful' but Maud Gonne was not; she was all action and little thought and Yeats had observed how, before some great event, she did not think but became exceedingly superstitious. He asks:

'Are not such as she aware, at moments of great crisis, of some power beyond their own minds?'⁷⁰

Yeats was already formulating his ideas on the nature of psychic opposites. He pursued diverse activities 'just in so far as it was not my business' as he observes in Autobiographies.⁷¹ His understanding of self-integration or the achievement of Unity of Being was as yet immature and he only

⁶⁹ Autobiographies, p.362.

⁷⁰ Ibid, p.263.

⁷¹ p.354.

succeeded in combining incompatibles in himself. His understanding of Maud in this respect became part of his understanding of Parnell as like natures whose active lives resulted from an absence of discursive reasoning, while a radical simplicity made them susceptible to superstitions. (Barry O'Brien relates Parnell's superstition regarding the number thirteen, his caution regarding a measure having thirteen clauses).

In Maud's beauty, Yeats saw the Other or 'the power' beyond her mind that could influence an assembly. It seemed that assembly's very self 'fused, unified, and solitary'. Maud's actual politics contradicted the solitary and distinguished nature of her beauty, but Yeats's principle was more literally realised in the figure of Parnell. Parnell's fine appearance, proud and solitary nature and forthright active life combined subjective and objective natures in a distinguished whole. As such he inevitably became the symbol used by Yeats for the expression of himself. The leader's pride, passion and solitude was akin to that of the artist, while in his active nature Yeats discovered his anti-self. A synthesis of artist and man of action had won Ireland's imagination. The sacrificed synthesis could be restored imaginatively for nation-wide integration through the creation in literature 'of unyielding personality, a manner at once cold and passionate'. Ireland would be prepared for the second coming.

In this way, Yeats's emulation of Parnell, reconstructed, continued on a psychological level, while public events further heightened his sense of identity with the leader.

1901-1913

By 1901, Yeats had alienated the Unionists by his attitude towards Queen Victoria's visit and his attack on the Academic Class and the culture of Trinity College. His attack on his father's friends and others of the Protestant Ascendancy was in line with Parnell's hostile attitude towards members of his own class. In an article appearing in Samhain (1901), his reference to Parnell in this connection is veiled but certain. The artist/political leader as deliverer of the people is considered parallel to Moses whose image by this time was associated with Parnell. He writes:

'Moses was little good to his people until he had killed an Egyptian; and for the most part a writer or public man of the upper classes is useless to his country till he has done something that separates him from his class.'⁷²

Further identification with Parnell was facilitated perhaps by Yeats's contact with the clergy. When he began work for the Irish Literary Theatre Yeats experienced the unpleasant interference of the Church. There was a vigorous attack on the orthodoxy of The Countess Cathleen. The Shadowy Waters (1900) was even less acceptable to the clerical party. Clerical condemnation of Parnell's moral lapse was known to have precipitated the leader's downfall. The dispute over morals that tore Ireland apart during the year of the Split, was an Irish variation on a theme which was common enough in late nineteenth century Europe- the reaction of modern man against the claims of the Church.⁷³ Yeats was aware of the reaction. When he

⁷² Explorations, p.83.

⁷³ Lyons, p.270.

encountered clerical attacks, his defence was vigorous and sustained in a series of Press letters and prose papers some of which became part of Plays and Controversies. In explaining the principles which inspired him to start the theatre the modern reaction against clerical law and influence which began with the fall of Parnell, was continued. In his efforts to re-interpret Irish heroic literature or to re-establish tragic art oriented to achieve tragic ecstasy and the catharsis of emotions, Yeats was indeed writing, as he claimed, under the shadow of Parnell - the proud and solitary tragedian of modern Ireland. The vicious attitudes and bitter feelings created by the Parnell controversy convinced Yeats that in Ireland, religion and politics without cultural refinement, were not enough to equip her for freedom. A revolution in moral values was imperative and this could only be effected by an appreciation of serious and noble forms of art.

Literature could free the mind from political prepossessions or undue servility to institutional law. Literature rather than the Church was the creator of values, 'the principal voice of conscience'. It was 'to give us that foundation of understanding and charity for whose lack our moral sense can be but cruelty. It must be incapable of telling a lie as Nature, and it must sometimes say before all virtues, "The greatest of these is charity"'. In Yeats's imagination, Ireland's lack of charity dragged Parnell down. The impact of the Split was powerful and enduring. In 'Literature and Conscience', he writes:

'A great writer will devote perhaps years, perhaps the greater part of a lifetime to the study of the moral issues raised by a single event, by a single group of characters. He will not bemoralise his characters, but he will show as no other can show,

how they act and think and endure under the weight of that destiny which is divine justice. No lawgiver, however prudent, no preacher, however lofty, can devote to life so ample and so patient a treatment. It is for this reason that men of genius frequently have to combat against the moral codes of their time, and are yet pronounced right by history.'⁷⁴

The image of Parnell was not irrelevant.

When Yeats formed the Irish National Theatre in 1902, he believed that the events of the previous decade had brought about a spirit of self-criticism and a search for truth, that 'unreality calls up reality' that life had been sufficiently perilous to make men think. Through the haze of political abstractions, he hoped that the Irish would value once again the 'permanent character of their race.' This he perceived in terms of achieved personality, that quality of freedom and self-expression with which literature concerned itself. He writes:

'If one remembers the men who have dominated Ireland for the last hundred and fifty years, one understands that it is strength of personality, the individualising quality in a man, that stirs Irish imagination most deeply in the end. There is scarcely a man who has led the Irish people, at any time, who may not give some day to a writer precisely that symbol he may require for the expression of himself.'⁷⁵

Parnell's image was once again relevant. Leader and artist were kindred spirits.

In 1903 Yeats suffered an emotional shock through Maud Gonne's marriage

⁷⁴ "Literature and Conscience", United Irishman, December 7, 1901.

⁷⁵ Explorations, pp.147-148.

to John MacBride. In public life he had by this time antagonised both Nationalists and Unionists. Consequently he was isolated, rejected and misunderstood both in public and private life. He withdrew from Nationalist politics when it interfered with his literary programme and his support of Synge. He sustained an 'unmeasured attack' of the Irish National Theatre by The Independent newspaper (Prop. William Martin Murphy). In his defence he wrote:

"I had asked in Samhain for audiences sufficiently tolerant to enable the half-dozen minds who are likely to be the dramatic imagination of Ireland for this generation to put their own thought and their own characters into their work. That is to say, I had asked for the amount of freedom which every nation has given to its dramatic writers. But the newspaper hopes and believes that no 'such tolerance will be extended to Mr. Yeats and his friends.'"76

He had now experienced through his support of drama, 'the most immediately powerful form of literature', 'those enemies of life, the chimeras of the Pulpit and the Press.' Slowly he began to interpret the forces that played against unity in Ireland, the forces that contradicted his literary ideals, the same that destroyed Parnell.

As isolated Protestant poet facing a growing Catholic Nationalist movement, supported by the new middle class, Irish history became comprehensible for Yeats as a dialectic of contraries. He sought his identity among the tragic and unsuccessful figures of Ireland's past and opposed to them the more successful politicians. Thus Robert Emmet, the Protestant patriot was seen as the contrary principle to Daniel O'Connell,

76 Explorations, p.122.

Catholic Emancipator. O'Connell's generation was countered by Yeats's own. He expressed these ideas in a lecture on 'Emmet the Apostle of Liberty' delivered in the States early in 1904. His letter to Lady Gregory about it is important in as much as it illustrates his awareness of re-interpreting Irish Nationalism:

'I am dreadfully busy over my Emmet lecture...It is indeed, as you say a sword dance and I must give to it every moment. I had no idea until I started on it how completely I have thought myself out of the whole stream of traditional Irish feeling on such subjects. I am just as strenuous a Nationalist as ever, but I have got to express these things all differently.'⁷⁷

Yeats was already prejudiced against O'Connell through O'Leary's influence. After witnessing Ireland's rejection of serious and noble forms of art, however, he censured the Liberator's influence on an entire generation that exhibited a taste for comedy and rhetoric. Later, in 1914, he held O'Connell responsible for Parnell's tragedy:

'The policy of O'Connell had brought great reforms, but his personal influence had been almost entirely evil...When at the Clare election, he conquered the patriots of a previous generation by a slanderous rhetoric, he prepared for Committee Room No.15 and all that followed. In his very genius itself, there was demoralization, the appeal- as of a tumbler at a fair- to the commonest ear, a grin through a horse collar.'⁷⁸

In counteracting this influence, Yeats's adoption of Parnell's dictatorial manner became more pronounced than ever.

⁷⁷ Wade, Letters, p.432.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Torchiana, p.27 - 'Tribute to Thomas Davis (Cork, 1947), p.15.

When Miss Horniman's gift, the Abbey Theatre, began to function, the National Theatre Society was turned into a limited company with Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge as directors. Yeats wrote of the change to John Quin in terms which suggested a new assertion of power:

'I think we have seen the end of democracy in the theatre, which was Russell's doing, for I go to Dublin at the end of the week to preside at a meeting summoned to abolish it. If all goes well, Synge, Lady Gregory and I will have everything in our hands...'⁷⁹

Yeats's assertiveness earned him many enemies and the criticism of relatives and friends. According to his father, in the strong assertion of will, he was attempting an impossible synthesis of imaginative artist and man of action. J.B. Yeats wrote reprovingly:

'You are haunted by the Goethe idea, interpreted by Dowden, that a man must be a complete man. It is a chimera, a man can only be a specialist.'⁸⁰

Yet, as suggested earlier, for Yeats the synthesis was half-perceived in Parnell who shared with the artist a distinguished solitude. Now through closer identity of experience in public life, the leader's autocratic exercise of will became the artist's possession. When the production of Synge's Playboy of the Western World caused riots in the theatre, Yeats announced 'that neither the house nor the race that bred him had given him a pliant knee and he was not going to bend before the populace.'⁸¹

⁷⁹ Quoted in Hone, p.207.

⁸⁰ Hone, J.B. Yeats - Letters to his son W.B. Yeats and others; London, p.97.

⁸¹ Hone, W.B. Yeats, p.217.

He cultivated that fine arrogance which, through his own impatience with public rage, became the dominating feature of Parnell's image.

By 1909, Synge was seriously ill and it was clear his end was near. For Yeats he was yet another victim of misunderstanding and rejection. Ireland had forsaken genius. In his Journal (December 1908) he wrote:

'If he [Synge] dies it will set me wondering whether he could have lived if he had not had his long bitter misunderstanding with the wreckage of Young Ireland...'⁸²

The Playboy controversy stirred his imagination as did Parnell, and in his exegesis of Synge's art and genius, we may observe him working towards a composite image of unquestionable authority in the art and life of a nation. His understanding of Parnell's aristocratic leadership in terms of art now achieved clearer expression. The mystique of unitive power both sacred and secular, found its rationale in separateness, distance, coldness, strangeness or unpredictability. Thus he writes in a way that through association recalls the Moses image:

'Great art chills us first by its coldness or its strangeness, by what seems capricious, and yet it is from these qualities it has authority, as though it had fed on locusts and wild honey.'⁸³

The dictates of the populace were irrelevant to creative minds; they were 'among the moulders of their nation and are not made upon its mould, and they resemble one another in this only - they have never been foreknown or fulfilled an expectation'.⁸⁴

82 Ibid, p.229.

83 Essays and Introductions, p.339.

84 Explorations, pp.158-159.

Synge's authority in art, as Yeats perceives it, is recognisable in Parnell's authority in politics: 'Only that which does not teach, which does not cry out, which does not persuade, which does not condescend, which does not explain, is irresistible...'⁸⁵

Further, Synge and Parnell as exemplars of tragic reality became part of Yeats's creative vision. The cold, wild art of Synge and the frigid, statuesque form of Parnell were the manifest complements of powerful, hidden passion. Each was the result of invisible warfare, 'the division of a mind within itself, a victory, the sacrifice of a man to himself.'⁸⁶

By May 1913, Yeats began moulding his image of consolation that combined in itself 'the cold and the passionate'. It was projected in a figure such as the Fisherman of Connemara. As Howarth observes, Yeats began on the 'model of the self dedicated to stay in Sligo, but he finished it in the image of Parnell.'⁸⁷ The 'cold' and 'passionate' qualities, referred to at the end of the poem, were, as we have seen, characteristic of Parnell, and this perhaps justifies the inference. The fisherman is Yeats's non-intellectual hero, a man of action who maintains the artist's solitude:

'Maybe a twelvemonth since
Suddenly I began,
In scorn of this audience,

⁸⁵ Essays & Introductions, p.341.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.321.

⁸⁷ p.138.

Imagining a man,
 And his sun-freckled face,
 And grey Connemara cloth,
 Climbing up to a place
 Where stone is dark under froth,
 And the down turn of his wrist
 When the flies drop in the stream;
 A man who does not exist,
 A man who is but a dream;
 And cried, 'Before I am old
 I shall have written him one
 Poem maybe as cold
 And passionate as the dawn.'⁸⁸

Against the detailed commentary on the development of Parnell's image in Yeats's creative imagination from 1891 to 1913, the use of the leader's image in an artistic controversy becomes more comprehensible. By the time of the Lane dispute, Parnell had indeed become a part of the poet's living experience and could be addressed in terms of a kindred spirit.

III

In 1933, about twenty years after the Lane controversy, Yeats wrote 'Parnell's Funeral' in which he rhymed passages from a lecture, dealing with Irish history, which he had delivered in America. He had spoken of

⁸⁸ Collected Poems, p.167.

Four Bells, 'four deep tragic notes equally divided in time, so symbolising 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, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.' His historical knowledge, he stated, began with the Second Bell. He claimed to have heard the first note of the Fourth Bell 'forty years ago on a stormy October morning' when he met the body of the dead Parnell at Kingston Pier.⁸⁹

In order to appreciate the significance of Parnell's image in the poem of 1933, we must first understand in less cryptic terms Yeats's interpretation of Irish history and the place he accorded Parnell as the dominating figure of modern Ireland.

Yeats's lifelong assimilation of Irish history and legend for creative purposes, equipped him to interpret modern Ireland in terms of a crisis of self-realisation integral to an historical dialectic of contraries. His concept of metaphysical antinomies drew out its parallels in historical events and personages. The eternal interplay and irreconcilability of opposites explained contemporary history and the impracticability of his youthful dream of Unity. Catholic and Protestant sensibilities were the inextricable contraries of Ireland. The Battle of the Boyne marked the impact of Protestant intellect on Gaelic/Catholic consciousness; it 'overwhelmed a civilisation full of religion and myth, and brought in its place intelligible laws planned out upon a great black-board, a capacity for

89 Variorum, p.833.

horizontal lines, for rigid shapes, for buildings, for attitudes of mind that could be multiplied like an expanding book-case: the modern world, and something that appeared and perished in its dawn, an instinct for Roman rhetoric, Roman elegance. It established a Protestant aristocracy, some of whom neither called themselves English nor looked with contempt or dread upon conquered Ireland.⁹⁰ Molyneux, speaking in their name, affirmed the sovereignty of the Irish Parliament. Ireland's political nationality was established by the quarrel with England over the wool trade, a protestant monopoly. She had found new masters and was to discover for the first time in her history that she possessed a cold, logical intellect. That intellect declared its independence when "Berkeley, then an under-graduate of Trinity College, wrote in his Commonplace Book after a description of the philosophy of Hobbes, Newton and Locke, the fashionable English philosophy of his day, 'We Irish do not think so.'"⁹¹ An intellectual minority became proud and confident as a result. 'The historical dialectic trampled upon their minds in that brutal Ireland, product of two generations of civil war...they were the trodden grapes and became wine.'⁹²

The influence of the French Revolution awakened the peasantry to a consciousness of their rights. There followed a period disastrous to the national intellect. The Protestant Ascendancy with its sense of responsibility

⁹⁰ Explorations, p.347

⁹¹ Variorum, p.833.

⁹² loc. cit.

gave way to the Garrison, the half medieval peasantry to agrarianism. Literature was poisoned with rhetoric and insincerity; Irish virtue struggling against English landlord crime became the principal theme. A defective interaction of sensibilities gave rise to abstractions and hatred in public life. Religion and politics divided and diverted national passion from one channel to the other until a nation essentially religious developed a most irreligious intellect. Ireland personified as Dark Rosaleen or Cathleen ni Houlihan harnessed religious emotion and fulfilled a theological function in politics; but the lack of control or discipline and the invasion of materialist thought caused unnecessary murder, violence and martyrological sacrifice.

It is evident that Yeats felt a potential fertilisation of contraries in Parnell's leadership resting as it did on the tension of paradox. Parnell was an aristocrat leading a predominantly middle-class party, a Protestant at the head of an overwhelmingly Catholic movement, a Landlord against landlordism, a man of action staking all on constitutional methods. The Split when it came broke through the separating walls of Nationalist and Unionist feeling created by agrarian passion, and precipitated thought and a search for truth through the bitter and violent confrontation of the nation with itself. The claims of the Church faced the claims of national identity and independence; catholics turned against catholics in support of one claim or the other. 'The accumulated hatred of yeats was suddenly transferred from England to Ireland.' Yeats refers to the dinner scene in James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,⁹³ when after a violent quarrel about

⁹³ Penguin Modern Classics (1966).

Parnell and the priests, the host, Mr. Casey, his head upon the table, sobs: 'My dead King.' The dinner scene does in fact illustrate the main issues in question at the time of the Parnell split and after. One of the characters, Dante, attacks 'renegade catholics' for supporting Parnell against the Church; she declares: 'God and morality and religion come first.

God and religion before everything! Dante cried. God and religion before the world.

Mr. Casey raised a clenched fist and brought it down on the table with a crash.

- Very well then, he shouted hoarsely, if it come to that, no God for Ireland!'94

Here was the crux of conflict. The dominance of institutional law and the dictatorship of priests was gravely shaken just as the superiority of English philosophical thought was arrogantly questioned in the eighteenth century.

For Yeats, therefore, Ireland seemed to be groping towards the assertion of a new identity founded on an independent search for reality- a re-birth of consciousness in accord with the dialectical rhythm of her history. From the 'bragging rhetoric and gregarious humour of O'Connell's generation' she offered herself to 'the solitary and proud Parnell...'

'...O'Connell, the great Comedian, left the scene the tragedian Parnell took his place.

When we talked of his pride; of his apparent impassivity when his hands were full of blood because he had torn them with his nails, the preceding epoch with its bonhomie, seemed to grin through a horse collar. He was the symbol that made apparent, or made possible...

that epoch's contrary...'⁹⁵

In Yeats's creative vision, opposites were everywhere face to face 'dying each other's life, living each other's death.' Applied to an imaginative understanding of history, Ireland, in wooing her opposite Parnell, prepared for symbolic death in order to beget a stronger life. The image of Parnell became recognisable as the tragic victim of a sacrificial rite. The star that fell over his grave symbolised an accepted sacrifice. Messianism in the 'nineties' was justifiable.

The fallen star had gathered many associations, for Yeats, by the time he wrote 'Parnell's Funeral'. These may be referred to briefly. In 1896, during his stay with Edward Martyn at Tulira Castle, Yeats had seen a vision of 'a naked woman of incredible beauty, standing upon a pedestal and shooting an arrow at a star. At the same time a story called The Archer was sent to the Savoy by Fiona MacLeod (William Sharp). Someone in the story 'had a vision of a woman shooting an arrow into the sky and later of an arrow shot at a faun that pierced the faun's body and remained, the faun's heart torn out and clinging to it, embedded in a tree.' Yeats discovered further evidence in the report of a child who had seen a woman in the garden shooting an arrow into the sky.⁹⁶ AE (George Russell) was writing of his vision of the Gods returning to Eri. The coming of the Messiah or the event of national re-birth preceded by the Armageddon seemed credible. For Yeats as for AE, Ireland was a symbolic picture of the world. The apocalyptic vision

⁹⁵ Variorum, p.835.

⁹⁶ Autobiographies, pp.372-373.

found expression in Yeats's *The Valley of the Black Pig* (1986):

'unknown spears

Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes,
And then the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries
Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears...'⁹⁷

Later in 1902 in the title poem of the collection '*In the Seven Woods*', Yeats endures the 'unavailing outcries and the old bitterness/That empty the heart' and 'the new commonness/Upon the throne and crying about the streets' (he was facing the opposition of the Church and the bitterness of politicians) because he knows that:

'Quiet

Wanders laughing and eating her wild heart
Among pigeons and bees, while that Great Archer,
Who but awaits His hour to shoot, still hangs
A cloudy quiver over Pairc-na-lee.'⁹⁸

Expectation and preparation, on his part, evidently remained. The eating of the wild heart and the image of the Great Archer offered symbolic assurance of an appointed hour. The light that flamed over Parnell's grave was imaginatively linked with the star of Bethlehem and the comet of 1572.⁹⁹

Writing of his vision of 1896 in *Autobiographies*, Yeats added extensive

⁹⁷ Collected Poems, p.73.

⁹⁸ Ibid, p.85.

⁹⁹ Howarth, p.14.

notes on its esoteric ritualistic significance. The shot star seems to have symbolised Kether attributed to the sun. The woman seems the "Mother-Goddess, whose representative priestess shot the arrow at the child, whose sacrificial death symbolized the death and resurrection of the Tree-Spirit, or Apollo. 'She is pictured upon certain Cretan coins of the fifth century B.C....'" The heart of the sacrificed child in an ancient ritual, was taken from the body to be placed in the chest cavity of an image associated with re-birth.

The explored imagery appears, in all its awesome significance in the opening stanzas of 'Parnell's Funeral', forty years after the related event:

'Under the Great Comedian's tomb the crowd.
 A bundle of tempestuous cloud is blown
 About the sky; where that is clear of cloud
 Brightness remains; a brighter star shoots down;
 What shudders run through all that animal blood?
 What is this sacrifice? Can someone there
 Recall the Cretan barb that pierced a star?

 Rich foliage that the starlight glittered through,
 A frenzied crowd, and where the branches sprang
 A beautiful seated boy; a sacred bow;
 A woman, and an arrow on a string;
 A pierced boy, image of a star laid low.
 That woman, the Great Mother imaging,
 Cut out his heart. Some master of design
 Stamped boy and tree upon Sicilian coin.

An age is the reversal of an age:
 When strangers murdered Emmet, Fitzgerald, Tone,
 We lived like men that watch a painted stage.
 What matter for the scene, the scene once gone:
 It had not touched our lives. But popular rage,
Hysterica passio dragged this quarry down.
 None shared our guilt; nor did we play a part
 Upon a painted stage when we devoured his heart.¹⁰⁰

An ancient myth was actualised in Ireland with Parnell as sacrificial victim. The ritualistic sequence was predestined but the counterbalance in existential choice, placed on the Irish the burden of tragic guilt. They had actively participated in the sacrifice. Yet the expiatory rebirth of the nation seemed a fiction. Public life moved from violence to violence or from violence to apathy. Yeats's own work that looked towards the prophecy of a Messiah preceded by the Armageddon or at the very least a cathartic regeneration of national intellect, was deprived of its significance; the myth was disproved:

'Come, fix upon me that accusing eye
 I thirst for accusation. All that was sung,
 All that was said in Ireland is a lie
 Bred out of the contagion of the throng,
 Saving the rhyme rats hear before they die,
 Leave nothing but the nothings that belong

100 Collected Poems, p.319.

To this bare soul, let all men judge that can
Whether it be an animal or a man.'¹⁰¹

The artistic messianism of Yeats and AE was followed by the political messianism of Padraic Pearse and the rebels of 1916. The sacrifice was repeated but by men vastly different from Parnell:

'I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteen century houses...'¹⁰²

Somewhere the sacred resolution of the myth was betrayed. Yeats had questioned:

'Was it needless death after all?'¹⁰³

Then followed the ignominious anti-climax of the Irish Civil War. Ireland once again turned against herself. Eamon de Valera in withholding his assent to the Treaty accepted by his colleagues, drove a weary people to wasteful violence. The Parnell Split was re-enacted. William Cosgrave's government existed precariously against Republican intransigence and the unleashed hatred of the masses. It failed to win the imagination of Ireland and when Kevin O'Higgins tried, single-handed, to restore the authority and dignity of self-government, he was assassinated. In 1932, it fell from

¹⁰¹ Collected Poems, p.320.

¹⁰² Ibid, p.202.

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.204.

power and de Valera won the elections. But the country seemed restless. Members of the fallen party under General O'Duffy started organising a paramilitary movement on Fascist lines. The movement proved ineffective. All this, for Yeats, defeated the symbolic logic of his vision and work for Ireland. In his imagination, the historical evolution of the Irish nation was prevented because none of her contemporary leaders understood or recognised its laws. History was unrelieved necessity after the death of Parnell. Martyrological passion had worn itself out and deprived the sacrificial act of its freedom. A conflagration of choice and chance was yet to come. Virtue, predestinate and free, had not found its vessel. Yeats was increasingly convinced that the exemplars of such freedom or 'naked beauty displayed' that marked historical rhythms, were to be found among the men of the eighteenth century, the 'saeva indignatio' of Swift's spirit, and the arrogant intellect of Berkeley. He also found them in O'Leary and certainly in Parnell.¹⁰⁴ O'Connell and his generation were determined machines.

'The rest I pass, one sentence I unsay,

Had de Valera 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,

¹⁰⁴ Explorations, p.336.

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.¹⁰⁵

The image of Parnell was at last reconciled with the eighteenth century that became, for Yeats, most relevant in contemporary Ireland. Parnell and Swift are companions and Yeats's identity is simultaneously extended and made continuous over Irish history.

There has been a development in the dimensions of the Parnell image since 1913. As sacrificial victim, Parnell provided Yeats with all that was living in the Irish imagination. The early-quasi-theological associations surrounding the leader, matured and were assimilated in a larger vision. Juxtaposed with the prosaic realities of Irish independence after 1922, they gave Yeats his tragic theme. The freedom that Swift served, that Parnell exemplified, that Yeats himself dreamed for Ireland, was of a different kind.

The ritualistic feature of the image becomes comprehensible against Yeats's prose writings of this period that dwell on the nature of human freedom and cosmic order. The freedom of Parnell was one whose stark confrontation with necessity made history sacred and imparted to its

¹⁰⁵ Collected Poems, p.320.

moment that tragic splendour the contemplation of which liberated the human mind from its mechanical servitude to chance. The conjunction of choice and chance, of life and death is the heart of creative ritual. It may be observed that the evolution of Parnell's image in Yeats's imagination was marked by his reception of Katherine O'Shea's biography of Parnell which appeared in two volumes in 1914. He was particularly impressed with the Brighton Pier episode. In Autobiographies dealing with Ireland after Parnell, he writes:

'What excitement there would have been, what sense of mystery would have stirred all our hearts all through the country, where there was still, and for many years to come, but one overmastering topic, had we known the story Mrs. Parnell tells of that scene on Brighton Pier. He and the woman that he loved stood there upon a night of storm, when his power was at its greatest height, and still unthreatened. He caught her from the ground and held her at arm's length out over the water and she lay there motionless, knowing that, had she moved, he would have drowned himself and her. Perhaps unmotivated self-immolation, were that possible, or else at mere suggestion of storm and night, were as great evidence as such a man could give of power over self, and so of the expression of the self.'¹⁰⁶

This among other aspects revealed by the biography, gave direction to his classification of Parnell in A Vision:

'He, too, if he triumph, may end ambition through the command of multitudes, for he is like that god of Norse mythology who hung from the cliff's side for three days, a sacrifice to himself.'¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ p.232.

¹⁰⁷ London, Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1962, pp.123-124.

Kitty O'Shea tells of Parnell's religious sense and consciousness of fate:

'He personally believed in a vast and universal law of "attraction," of which the elemental forces of Nature were part, and the whole of which tended towards some unknown, and unknowable, end, in immensely distant periods of time. The world, he considered, was but a small part of the unthinkably vast "whole" through which the "Spirit" (the soul) of man passed towards the fulfilment of its destiny...' 108

She also tells of his affirmation of self: 'What I am, I am, what I am not I cannot be', and its natural invulnerability: 'No one could flatter Parnell, neither could anyone humiliate him'. 109 He understood as few did the 'ethics of kingship.' These facts helped Yeats to project on his image of the leader, his own deepening sense of reality and understanding of the nature of the Self. 110

One of the most significant aspects of Parnell's 'reign' described in the biography, is his awareness of controlling contrary forces at a threatening balance. The power of hate was the overwhelming reality of Irish political history; Parnell had this great force to reckon with-

'the force of centuries of cruelty, wrong and oppression that had bred an irresponsibility and callous disregard of suffering, nay, rather a vindictive madness and lust of destruction in Ireland. In his seeking for a weapon to use for the betterment of England's government of Ireland Parnell had discovered this underlying force of hate, and, using the influence of his

108 Charles Stewart Parnell, Cassell & Company Ltd., London, 1921, p.309.

109 p.303.

110 Yeats's readings of the life and adventures of Shri Purohit Swami and acquaintance with the Yoga systems of Patanjali, encouraged his investigations along these lines.

personality, he strove to direct it into the service of the Ireland that he loved.

But he afterwards stood appalled at the intensity of the passion that he had loosed, and no one but he- and I with him- knew the awful strength of that force of destruction that was only held in subservience by the sheer dominance of his will.'¹¹¹

In embodying Ireland's historical being in the evolutionary process, men of the stature of Swift and Parnell, inherited in their constitutions the hatred of generations. But imaging the rule of form or the authoritative assertion of the intellect, they exercised a personal antithetical force over the contraries of discipline and violence, love and hate, madness and sanity. All depended on the holding down of hysterica passio, the 'stirring of the beast underneath'. Thus, as Kitty O'Shea relates, the notes of a political speech became unrecognisable pulp in Parnell's hand because of his controlled passion in public; he remained seated when a picture crashed from a wall, his chair held 'in a grip that showed his knuckles white'; she describes 'that low, broken monotone, that with him always betokened intense feeling strongly held in check.' A similar operation of contrary forces was evident in Swift, a man of strong passions who swore never to marry, whose love was torn with hate, ('I hate lawyers, I hate doctors, though I love Dr., So-and-so and Judge So-and-so')¹¹² and who recognised in his blood something that he did not wish to transmit. By daring to maintain a threatening balance over anarchic reality, they were

¹¹¹ pp.163-164.

¹¹² Collected Plays, London, 1963, p.602.

aware of their fate. They were unrecognised victims of a terrible sacrifice. This, for Yeats, was the meaning of Anglo-Irish solitude; the 'dark grove' which imparted a 'bitter wisdom'.

Yeats was conscious of having partaken of it himself. When Augustus John painted his portrait, he was amazed:

'Always particular about my clothes, never dissipated, never unshaven except during illness, I saw myself there an unshaven, drunken bar-tender, and then I began to feel John had found something that he liked in me, something closer than character, and by that very transformation made it visible. He had found Anglo-Irish solitude, a solitude I have made for myself, an outlawed solitude.'¹¹³

Like Parnell, he also suffered the torment of responsibility:

'Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot?'¹¹⁴

Did he, like the solitary hero before him unleash the violent energies of the nation? Those were the questions Yeats asked himself and in their answers re-affirmed his identity. As creative artist he asserted:

'...we hold down as it were on the sword's point what would, if undefeated, grow into the countertruth, that when our whole being lives we create alike out of our love and hate.'¹¹⁵

He too had experienced the hate that overwhelmed Swift and destroyed Parnell:

113 Explorations, p.310.

114 Collected Poems, p.394.

115 Explorations, p.309.

'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 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. Then I remind myself that though mine is the first English marriage I know of in the direct line, all my family names are English, and that I owe my soul to Shakespeare, to Spenser and to Blake, perhaps to William Morris, and to the English language in which I think, speak, and write, that everything I love has come to me through English; my hatred tortures me with love, my love with hate. I am like the Tibetan monk who dreams at his initiation that he is eaten by a wild beast and learns on waking that he himself is eater and eaten. This is Irish hatred and solitude, the hatred of human life that made Swift write Gulliver and the epitaph upon his tomb, that can still make us wag between extremes and doubt our sanity.'¹¹⁶

Yeats had discovered himself and, misled by the Parnell Split, he imagined the Irish nation had discovered itself in like terms.¹¹⁷

IV

Yeats's final ballad (1936) on Parnell was written at the request of Henry Harrison the author of Parnell Vindicated. It carries the popular Parnellite sentiment and was composed partly out of a sense of duty:

'I asked what I could do, for who listened to a poet until he was dead, but he [Harrison] insisted that words of mine would reach somebody or other he could not. A couple of days ago the verses... came into my head, and I thought that they might suggest to somebody that there was nothing discreditable in Parnell's love for his mistress and his wife.'¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Essays and Introductions, p.519.

¹¹⁷ 'We had passed through an initiation, that of the Tibetan ascetic, who staggers half-dead from a trance, where he has seen himself eaten alive and has not yet learned that the eater was himself.' Commentary on "Parnell's Funeral", Variorum, p.835.

¹¹⁸ Essays and Introduction, p.486.

By this time Yeats had fully explored the potentialities of the leader's image and was not really concerned with wrangles of politicians over the divorce proceedings, or the subsequent verdict on morality:

'I was once enough of a politician', he writes, 'to contemplate politics ever since with amusement. The leading articles, the speeches, the resolutions of the shocked Irish and English politicians, the sudden reversal of all the barrel-organs, the alphabets running back from Z to A, sycophantic fiction become libel, eulogy vituperation, what could be more amusing?'¹¹⁹

He was content to transmit to posterity the simple devotion of Parnellites now all well advanced in years

'Come gather round me, Parnellites,
 And praise our chosen man;
 Stand upright on your legs awhile,
 Stand upright while you can,
 For soon we lie where he is laid,
 And he is underground;
 Come fill up all those glasses
 And pass the bottle round.

 And here's a cogent reason,
 And I have many more,
 He fought the might of England

119 Essays and Introductions, p.487.

And saved the Irish poor,
 Whatever good a farmer's got
 He brought it all to pass;
 And here's another reason
 That Parnell loved a lass.

And here's a final reason,
 He was of such a kind
 Every man that sings a song
 Keeps Parnell in his mind,
 For Parnell was a proud man,
 No prouder trod the ground,
 And a proud man's a lovely man,
 So pass the bottle round.

The Bishops and the Party
 The tragic story made,
 A husband that had sold his wife
 And after that betrayed;
 But stories that live longest
 Are sung above the glass,
 And Parnell loved his country,
 And Parnell loved his lass.¹²⁰

We countenance in Yeats's final composition on Parnell a simplified image of an Irish leader who hated England and assisted the Irish poor, who was a proud inheritor of the Irish race and whose chivalrous love for a woman was something to be respected. One suspects that the Parnell of popular tradition had become for Yeats, at this stage, a figure different from his private recreated image of the leader, who as part of his creative mythologem, shaped modern Irish history, as he understood it, and helped him to discover his identity.

Chapter Six

THE FASCIST PINK

YEATS AND KEVIN O'HIGGINS

Yeats's fascism has been approached from various angles. Some writers and critics are embarrassed by it, while others are encouraged through it to locate a sinister streak in the poet's personality.

In the introduction, I pointed out certain unsatisfactory approaches to the subject. Post-war perspectives are likely to tip the balance, one way or other, in the presentation of facts, and this is not unnatural. The horrors of Fascism in Europe are not easily forgotten and the association of one of the greatest poets of the century with its ideology has received attention either in veiled apologetics, or in the nagging accusations that urge further thought and investigation into the matter. It is only through an objectivity, accruing from a distance in time, that one can hope to understand the cause and effect, or stimuli and response of human thought and action at particular moments of history. A too close involvement releases the forces of personal loyalties to class, party or nation, and judgement remains imprisoned through partial experience. Further, the ideologies of an era are so often categorised as separate streams of thought and are held individually responsible for particular crises. While simplifying the work of a social historian, this approach gives rise to distorted judgements which rest on the application of limited formulae to the unlimited dimensions of empirical reality.

There is always something unreal in classifying men under labels, political or otherwise, and also in apportioning attributes in accord with a personal disposition towards the selected label. Yet more often than not, our judgements on men and events partake of this unreality.

When we approach the political thought and action of a creative

artist we must be doubly cautious for ideological categorisation becomes strangely irrelevant. We must make an imaginative leap into that uncommon awareness which fuses in itself the particularity of the historical moment and the universality of human experience. How it works in practical circumstance may be judged by positivist, realist or idealist criteria, and could be found wanting. But its unique power is visible in creative expression that resolves in its vast ambit the demands of vision and reality, man's morality and immorality, war and peace, good and evil -- in short, the unqualified wholeness of existential experience.

With this in mind we may approach Yeats's 'fascism'. We would have to clear ourselves of every prepossession that could blur our understanding of a creative mind in contact with the violent forces of a tumultuous era. Its response may be appraised against an imaginatively recreated historical context; its acceptance of the most dangerous faith, its expectations and disillusionments may be seen, without censure or approval, in this context, counterpoised by its particular historical consciousness which embraced past, present and future in a single vision.

In the following sections, I shall attempt to treat Yeats's 'fascism' on the lines suggested and shall close the discussion with a brief treatment, in its light, of Yeats's admiration of Kevin O'Higgins, Minister of Justice in the Free State Government and known to some as the 'Irish Mussolini'. O'Higgins is the last personality selected for study, in this work, since he provides a suitable focus for Yeats's later political predilections. But more significantly, O'Higgins is linked with the Irish greats -- Swift, Berkeley, Burke, Grattan and Parnell -- in Yeats's last

prose piece 'On the Boiler'. He is one of 'the true Irish people' among whom Yeats established his identity.

In order to recreate the historical context in which we may appraise Yeats's fascist predilections, we must examine the Irish political situation of 1916 and after, and view this against the principal streams of European political thought which influenced Yeats's thinking.

The period between the death of Parnell and the Easter rebellion of 1916 was one 'in which nothing happened besides a revolution in land ownership, the beginning of a national quest for a lost language and culture and the preparation of the two successful rebellions which were, among other things, to tear Ireland in two.'¹ Ireland was under the resolute government of the Conservatives who were determined to sap the vitality of Home Rule. Nationalist ranks were in a state of chaos through internecine strife. In 1905, however, the Unionist government fell. The Sinn Fein movement was established in the same year.

By 1913 Yeats, as we have observed in previous chapters, was systematically disillusioned about his programme for effecting Unity of Being in Ireland. The three public controversies concerning Parnell, Synge and Hugh Lane, convinced him that, in Ireland, religion and politics were, by themselves, not sufficient to 'create minds with enough receptivity to become wise, or just and generous enough to make a nation.'² The

¹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, The Shaping of Modern Ireland (London, 1960), p.13.

² Collected Poems, p.530.

conformist conscience in both spheres of activity operated on superficial levels of utility and hardly effected the discipline of emotion and sentiment integral to meaningful existence. By the time of the Playboy riot, Yeats's thinking took a definite aristocratic turn. He was virtually isolated and according to Maud Gonne MacBride, totally out of touch with the political forces working for Ireland's freedom. The new middle class controlled the Nationalist movement. Protestant Ireland had lost its opportunity that, for Yeats, lay in the control of the nation's cultural life. The sacrifice of Parnell, recalling the heroic lives of Protestant patriots of the past, was, for him, devalued in the triumph of mediocrity ('great Art beaten down') and its representatives like William Martin Murphy and The Independent. Romantic Ireland was dead and gone 'with O'Leary in the grave.'

The Easter Rising of 1916 took Yeats by surprise. He was not alone in this. On Easter Monday 1916, the interest of the majority of Irish was focussed not on the G.P.O., but on the Fairyhouse Racecourse. Dublin Castle saw the Rising as an ineffectual outburst of revolutionary idealism led by a handful of immature, impractical men. Augustine Birell, Britain's Chief Secretary for Ireland, wrote of it to the English Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith:

'The leaders, both fighting leaders and stump-orators, are criminals to whom short shrift should be given. A great haul of prisoners has been made today, and I hear that some of the instigators and inspirers of this mad revolt are taken. A great many young fools from the National University! are amongst them. It is a small combination of the old Physical Force Party, one or two Labour men like James Connolly, now in the Castle badly wounded, and idealistic youths sick of the

Freeman's Journal, plus an idle crowd who have made this Revolution.³

After the executions conducted by Sir John Maxwell, those in Ireland initially out of sympathy with the Rebellion reacted in fury. All sympathies were transferred to the victims of the terrible sentence and the revolutionary spirit of the IRB allied to Sinn Fein spread like fire.

Maxwell himself observed:

'That there is a strong recrudescence of Sinn Feinism is true; young priests and innocent women...encourage this in every possible way. Though the rebellion was condemned it is now being used as a lever to bring on Home Rule, or an Irish Republic.

There is a growing feeling that out of Rebellion more has been got than by constitutional methods, hence Mr. Redmond's power is on the wane, therefore his desire to curry favour with the people on the part of the M.P's by agitating for the release of Sinn Feiners.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between a Nationalist and a Sinn Feiner...'⁴

It became evident that the Rebellion brought the curtain down on Home Rule and the employment of constitutional methods for winning Ireland's freedom. From thenceforward, revolutionary force was considered the only effective weapon with the aid of which Ireland could strike for lasting freedom. The Rising proved, to many observers, that the IRB was not dormant after all and that the Irish passion for insurrection persisted.

To some like Maud Gonne MacBride, the Rebellion restored 'tragic dignity' to Ireland.

³ Leon O'Broin, Dublin Castle and the 1916 Rising (Dublin, 1966), p.120.

⁴ Ibid, p.142.

Yeats was staying with Sir William Rothenstein in Gloucestershire when news of the Rising reached him. He wrote to Lady Gregory:

'...I am trying to write a poem on the men executed 'terrible beauty has been born again'. If the English Conservative Party had made a declaration that they did not intend to rescind the Home Rule Bill there would have been no rebellion. I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me and I am very despondent about the future. At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics...' 5

In another letter to Lady Gregory he referred to the 'heroic, tragic lunacy of Sinn Fein' and to Rothenstein he spoke 'of innocent and patriotic theorists carried away by the belief that they must sacrifice themselves to an abstraction.'⁶

Yeats's intellectual and emotional response to the Rising was extremely complex and intense. The event held powerful implications for Ireland's future nationhood such as he imagined it to be. The poem 'Easter 1916' features a deliberate ambivalence in his exegesis of the revolt and its aftermath. Romantic Ireland was indeed not dead as the idealism of Pearse and Connolly went to prove. The economic categories and utilitarian standards that slowly infected British and European sensibility through the impact of classical liberalism in the nineteenth century, was not yet victorious in Ireland as he prematurely concluded in 'September 1913':

'All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.'⁷

⁵ From the Royal Societies' Club, 12 May, 1916; Quoted in Jeffares, p.186.

⁶ Hone, p.299.

⁷ Collected Poems, p.203.

A nation in bondage could still claim the lost virtues of unity and self-sacrifice in striking for its freedom, and this is what the aftermath of the revolt disclosed. Commercial values were powerless before a tradition of heroic self-sacrifice. The idea of a blood-sacrifice had all the elements of ancient ritual which reflected the integration of earlier organic societies. So Yeats wrote of the symbolic Rose Tree:

'It needs to be but watered,'

James Connolly replied,

'To make the green come out again

And spread on every side,

And shake the blossom from the bud

To be the garden's pride.'

'But where can we draw water,'

Said Pearse to Connolly,

'When all the wells are parched away?

O plain as plain can be

There's nothing but our own red blood

Can make a right Rose Tree.'⁸

The idea of nationality was revived and Yeats was deeply moved. It was what he tried to accomplish through an Irish Risorgimento, one that, he envisaged, could harness the political energies of the nation. After the Rising, he saw the idea emerge but not through the channels he desired. Here lay his defeat.

He had seen the release of destructive energy in the name of political

abstractions through his early political involvements with Maud Gonne. In his desire to counteract democratic individualism and commercial values that destroyed a receptivity to traditional and serious forms of art, he too had used national personifications (Cathleen ni Houlihan) to cultivate a religious sense. But since then he had matured. In 1906, he noted in Discoveries how he understood quite suddenly that 'I was seeking something unchanging and unmixed and always outside myself, a Stone or an Elixir that was always out of reach, and that I myself was the fleeting thing that held out its hand.'⁹ Nationalism was expressed in the same way and it was not until Ireland's repudiation of Synge that Yeats realised the error of creating Ireland in terms of a Holy City in the imagination which bred one abstraction after another. A firmer grasp of existential reality brought about his renunciation of vague essences. Now he saw in the deliberate sacrifice of the rebels a resuscitation of political energy and in their dream of the Irish Republic he divined the explosive potential of a political abstraction. Did he foresee the Civil War?

'Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream...'¹⁰

Protracted questioning and mature reflection contribute to the mood of the poem. The notion of heroic self-sacrifice that gave dignity to the Romantic

⁹ Essays and Introductions, p.271.

¹⁰ Collected Poems, p.204.

Ireland of O'Leary was turning into a deliberate negation of life:

'The horse that comes from the road
 The rider, the birds that range
 From cloud to tumbling cloud,
 Minute by minute they change;
 A shadow of cloud on the stream
 Changes minute by minute;
 A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
 And a horse plashes within it;
 The long-legged moor-hens dive,
 And hens to moor-cocks call;
 Minute by minute they live:
 The stone's in the midst of all.'¹¹

Pearse and Connolly were both driven by an intense consciousness of failure in their lives and through death they sought immortality in an age which denied them their identity. Yeats was struck by their conscious undertaking to die. In a letter to his mother Pearse wrote:

'We are ready to die and we shall die cheerfully and proudly. Personally I do not hope or even desire to live, but I do hope and even believe that the lives of all our followers will be saved including the lives dear to you and me (my own excepted) and this will be a great consolation to me when dying.'¹²

This was indeed the testament of one among those who went 'proud, open-eyed

¹¹ Collected Poems, p.204.

¹² Leon O'Broin, p.135.

and laughing to the tomb'. Why then did Yeats have his misgivings? It was perhaps because he understood, in his own terms, the motivation of their sacrifice and felt it was likely to breed a predilection for violence for its own sake or a martyrdom that escaped the responsibility of nation-building when self-government seemed near at hand.

His interpretation of their motivation was, in all likelihood, based on his personal knowledge of the rebels. In the year of Queen Victoria's jubilee (1897) when Maud Gonne was in the height of her power over crowds, he observed a melancholy young working-man who requested her to speak at a Socialist meeting. The man was James Connolly who at the time was living in fairly stringent circumstances.

In extracts from a Journal kept in 1909, included in 'Estrangement', we find Yeats's record of his meeting Thomas MacDonagh:

'Met MacDonagh yesterday - a man with some literary faculty which will probably come to nothing through lack of culture and encouragement.'

He further tells of how MacDonagh had lost faith in the Gaelic League and observes how -

'He is being crushed by the mechanical logic and commonplace eloquence which give power to the most empty mind, because, being 'something other than human life', they have no use for distinguished feeling or individual thought. I mean that within his own mind this mechanical thought is crushing as with an iron roller all that is organic.'¹³

In the same journal Yeats records how MacDonagh was despondent about Ireland as he found a barrier between himself and the Irish-speaking peasantry, who

¹³ Autobiographies, p.488

are 'cold, dark and reticent' and 'too polite'. He had also spent nine years in the monastery.

These men then were in the nature of social rejects whose surrender to abstraction seemed their only salvation. It was this perhaps that lent their deaths the dimension of tragedy. The poignant extremes of human action in the teeth of fate evoked, for Yeats, the powerful oxymoron - 'terrible beauty'. He was warmly sympathetic towards adolescent heroism but this does not preclude adult questioning:

'Too long a sacrifice
 Can make a stone of the heart.
 O when may it suffice?
 That is Heaven's part, our part
 To murmur name upon name,
 As a mother names her child
 When sleep at last has come
 On limbs that had run wild.
 What is it but nightfall?
 No, no, not night but death;
 Was it needless death after all?
 For England may keep faith
 For all that is done and said.
 We know their dream; enough
 To know they dreamed and are dead;
 And what if excess of love
 Bewildered them till they died?'¹⁴

¹⁴ Collected Poems, pp.204-05.

An understanding of Yeats's response to the Easter Rebellion is of the utmost importance in determining the direction of his later political thought and action. The Rebellion inadvertently ushered in a period of brutal violence and chaos such as the country was not equipped to face. Behind the fire and smoke of attack and reprisal emerged the insecure Provisional Government of the Irish Free State. For some this was the first courageous glimmering of self-government, for others a dastardly compromise unworthy of many sacrificed lives.

Historical accounts of the Irish Civil War are invariably biassed either in favour of or against the much debated Treaty of 1921. Writers with Republican sympathies would naturally see Yeats's acceptance of a Senatorship in the Seanad Eireann of the Free State Government as a betrayal indicative of 'a treacherous instinct for adaptability', since his early political involvements were in association with many post-Treaty Republican extremists - Maud Gonne MacBride being an obvious example. Some account of the events leading to Civil War may be appropriate, at this stage, to facilitate an understanding of Yeats's responses in context.

When Sir John Maxwell ordered the executions of the 1916 rebel leaders, he put an end to English domination in Ireland. The country rapidly turned pro-insurrection and supported the Sinn Fein movement without really knowing what Sinn Fein was about, except that it stood generally for Irish independence in the old, complete way, the way in which the Irish Parliamentary Party had not stood for it. But what passed for Sinn Fein were revolutionary elements quite distinct from it, viz. the Volunteers and the IRB who were opposed to the dual-monarchy objective of the Sinn Fein leader Arthur Griffith.

Inactive Sinn Fein branches, however, sprang to life and the emotional climate of the nation was propitious for carrying out a united freedom movement. It combined those educated in Sinn Fein, Gaelic League and IRB principles in a loose but genuine whole. A new Sinn Fein was brought into being. Arthur Griffith, however, did not bind himself to contend for a Republican form of Government. Neither did Eamon De Valera who now became the focus of public attention. He had taken part in the Easter Rising and though opposed to the insurrection he fought during the whole week. He was the last Commandant to surrender and the only one to escape execution. When he was released from prison in 1917, he was received as leader of the prisoners and embodied in the public mind all that the insurrection stood for. His political career began with sweeping victories. At the Clare election, which he won, he declared the objectives of the movement:

'We want an Irish Republic because if Ireland had her freedom, it is, I believe, the most likely form of government. But if the Irish people wanted to have another form of government so long as it was an Irish government, I would not put in a word against it.'¹⁵

And again:

'Clare voters do not want to see their sons shot down in a futile and insane attempt to establish an Irish Republic.'¹⁶

Soon De Valera was in control of the military (as President of the Volunteers) and civil divisions of the Irish movement.

The general elections of 1918 revealed that the whole of Nationalist Ireland had gone over to the Sinn Feiners who aimed at nothing short of complete independent sovereignty for Ireland.

¹⁵ Dorothy Macardle, The Irish Republic (Dublin, 1951), pp.223-24.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* n.22L.

In January 1919, the elected Sinn Feiners arranged to convoke the first Dail Eireann or Irish Parliament in Mansion House at Dublin. De Valera was absent as he was imprisoned in Lincoln Gaol, in response to a British command for arrest of all important Sinn Feiners and suspects of a German plot against England. With the help of Michael Collins and Harry Boland, however, he escaped and sailed for America in June 1919. Earlier, in April, he was unanimously elected President of Sinn Fein. As such his intention in America was to rally support there and to encourage subscriptions to a National Loan as the 'shadow government' of Ireland was in great need of funds.

Meanwhile the situation in Ireland took a violent turn. The policy adopted by the Dail supported an unqualified attack on the British forces in Ireland that would leave England with the alternative either 'of evacuating the country or holding it by foreign garrison, with a perpetual state of war in existence.'¹⁷ For this purpose the military forces of the Irish movement were co-ordinated and reorganised. They comprised the Volunteers and the Irish Republican Army. Under the leadership of Michael Collins and Cathal Brugha, the general military policy of the movement began to develop into guerilla war against the British army. Michael Collins formed a body of armed Volunteers who, in the summer of 1919, began a systematic shooting of members of the British Police Intelligence department who refused to quit the country. The 'Squad,' as this body was called, had no official uniform, and there were many who 'could not reconcile themselves to the idea of an army who could not be identified, soldiers who shot, hid their guns and mixed

¹⁷ Dorothy Macardle, The Irish Republic (Dublin, 1951), p.291

with the crowd.'¹⁸

By the end of 1919, Ireland was a 'nation of combatants'. As an historian observes:

'A quality native to Gaelic character came into play - a character inbred in the race by centuries of unequal conflict; danger seemed the natural element of the Republicans, conspiracy a game of skill, and death in the cause of freedom the secret dream of the young.'¹⁹

A Special Correspondent of The Times stated:

'The citadel of Sinn Fein is in the minds of the young. The prospect of dying for Ireland haunts the dreams of thousands of youths today...you can neither terrify nor bribe Sinn Fein...'²⁰

The result was an increase of violence on both sides. It was further intensified by the arrival in Ireland of the British Auxiliary Police and forces known as the Black-and-Tans whose terrorist activities were sanctioned by the Government without qualification. Wanton destruction of life and property became the order of the day.

The situation continued through most of 1920. In the meantime, Moderates hoped for some kind of settlement with Lloyd George's proposals for Dominion Home Rule. But the Republicans ignored these possibilities.

In November 1920, however, the Partition Bill securing a separate government for the six counties of Northern Ireland was passed. Through this the position of Ulster became unassailable.

¹⁸ Terence de Vere White, Kevin O'Higgins (London, 1948), p.30.

¹⁹ Macardle, p.315.

²⁰ Ibid., p.319.

By 1921, Southern Ireland was subject to a renewed programme of suppression. Martial law was established throughout the country. Irish Volunteers were executed; reprisals were fierce and the British Customs House was destroyed. When conditions became well nigh unbearable, the English Prime Minister made an offer of negotiation to De Valera, Prime Minister of the still chimerical Dail Eireann. This was the beginning of the protracted tiresome debate over settlement between the two countries which ended in the Irish Civil War.

A Truce was declared before the commencement of negotiations and the Irish people, in general, were relieved. Living in a state of constant war was felt by many to be demoralising and wasteful. The young Volunteers, however, did not see the Truce as a settlement and continued to prepare for further battle in the name of Irish freedom.

After some ineffectual negotiation between Lloyd George and De Valera, the latter, as representative of the entire nation, decided in view of the replaceable nature of the Dail Ministry, to elect a number of Plenipotentiaries who could be sent to negotiate peace, on certain principles, with the British Government. The proposals they arrived at could be submitted to the Irish Cabinet and finally to the House. If the Ministry was in disagreement, the majority would rule. Accordingly a delegation was elected with Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins as leaders.

In view of the British alternatives for settlement, the leaders were faced with what amounted to a dangerous impasse. They were vested with the responsibility of 'safeguarding the Republic for which such immense efforts and sacrifices had been made, and at the same time, of averting from the

country the menace of renewed and more merciless war' for which it was certainly unprepared. The unity of Ireland was at stake for an All-Ireland Parliament, which the Republicans dreamed of, could only be accepted by Ulster if Crown and Empire were given allegiance, and this the Republicans were not willing to concede.

After wearisome debate, the Irish delegation returned with a draft of the proposals which did not meet the approval of De Valera and two colleagues, Cathal Brugha and Austin Stack. The document was modified and under pressure was signed by the delegation on December 6, 1921. The Cabinet remained divided on the issue and Civil War became inevitable.

The signed Treaty provided Dominion status to the Irish Free State with power of secession granted to the six northern counties. For De Valera and extreme Republicans, this was a travesty of political freedom which should have been repudiated by Ireland despite the threat of war. To others led by those who signed, the Treaty was 'the best bargain' obtainable 'for the time being'. It was believed that the people, by and large, desired peace and would not take arms over the question of allegiance.

During the extensive Treaty debates that followed in the Dail, Griffith declared that he followed Thomas Davis when he signed the Treaty, and Collins affirmed that he would not be one of those who would commit the people of his country to war without their consent.

On the other hand, the women who had sacrificed themselves for the Republican cause (Mary MacSwiney, Constance Markievicz, Maud Gonne etc.) felt that these were cowardly justifications unworthy of Ireland's dignity. Both sides seemed, to an impartial observer, both right and wrong. Besides:

'Every circumstance that could cloud vision and distort judgement was present. Ancestral passions, reaction and exhaustion, hatred of England, dread of responsibility, respect for the patriot dead, loathing of War, fear of the taunt of "traitor," fear of yielding to that fear, personal loyalties, all were at work and all were expressing themselves in the form of reasoned advocacy of this or that clause. Party spirit, for the first time, split the Dail into two factions, violently antagonistic each to each.'²¹

On January 6, 1922, De Valera offered his resignation. He declared his position by supporting the 'men who rose in Easter week' who, he believed, represented the hearts and souls and aspirations of the Irish people.²²

Upon his resignation a Provisional Government of the Irish Free State was set up as the Treaty was eventually passed (64 votes to 57). When De Valera sought re-election he won 58 votes and lost 60. Earlier, a motion on a plebiscite was made in order to determine whether the people would have a Free State or a Republic. But this was prevented and an anomalous situation of two co-existent governments, Free State Provisional and Republic Dail, was allowed to develop. The result was a serious threat to Ireland's peace.

By April 1922 the Anti-Treatyites showed their indifference to the verdict of the electorate by seizing the Four Courts, Kildare Street Club and other positions of importance in Dublin. De Valera expressed grave qualifications of the principle of majority rule. 'There are rights which a minority may justly uphold, even by arms against the majority,' he said, 'the people have

²¹ Macardle, p.617.

²² Ibid, p.638.

never a right to do wrong.²³ He and those who followed him believed that the people had been deceived and that they required enlightened guidance.

Army divisions and disputes, in the meantime, precipitated violence on both sides. The Irish Republican Army broke into two. The Irish Volunteers followed suit and seceding Volunteers were known as the 'Irregulars'. The IRA under Rory O'Connor became independent of both governments and progressed on the lines of a military dictatorship. The Free State Army, consisting of disbanded Irish regiments of the British Army and the Royal Irish Constabulary, Volunteers and members of the IRA faithful to Michael Collins, was now used against the Republicans. The country was critically divided against itself and the fighting began.

Arthur Griffith, first President of the Provisional Free State Government, died in August 1922. Ten days later Michael Collins was shot. Confusion knew no bounds. Army men faithful to Collins were enraged and attacked the extremists with greater savagery than before. A general deterioration of national morale was inevitable, but the fighting continued unabated.

In this atmosphere of bitterness and violence, the new Government of the Irish Free State was formed with William Cosgrave as President. The new Constitution made provision for the composition of two houses - the Senate and the Dail. Of the sixty members composing the Senate, thirty nominated members were to represent the minorities and distinguished aspects of the nation's life. Yeats's claims, in this respect, were recognised and he became Senator in December 1922.

²³ Quoted in De Vere White, p.86, from Irish Independent, March 20, 1922.

Against the above review of events leading to Civil War, we may examine Yeats's political thought and responses.

During the years 1917-1919, when Ireland, inspired by the rebels of 1916, prepared to strike for her freedom once again, Yeats was deeply involved with the framing of his 'system', ultimately published in 1925 as 'A Vision'. The 'system' was in the nature of a stylistic arrangement of a series of intuitive experiences gained through his interests in Theosophy, Magic, Swedenborg, Boehme, Astrology, Philosophy and allied fields.

He was married to Miss Hyde-Lees on October 20, 1917 and claimed that 'A Vision' was started on the basis of communications received through his wife's automatic writing, four days after their marriage. He had, in fact, already worked out his theory of Masks, self and anti-self, in a series of philosophical essays entitled Per Amica Silentia Lunae which he completed during the winter 1916-1917. Now through his wife 'the unknown instructor' elaborated his theme and made it relevant to two levels of imaginative reality. The first saw humanity categorised under various phases of the moon, the second saw history as a deterministic pattern of alternate historical cycles whose paths were symbolised by gyres. It would seem that Yeats had, at last, created his own belief in an age of growing disbelief; he had constructed 'something upon which to rejoice'. The pattern of the movement was conceivable in geometric design. Interacting cones made up of revolving gyres intersecting each other at various angles and perpetuating a motion of wheels within wheels, symbolised that conflict and union of opposites, 'each dying each other's life, living each other's death' which being contemplated could precipitate, through a supreme act of religious faith, a vision of all reality in an eternal instant.

It was Yeats's way of asserting the artistic vision which operated 'apriori in pure perception' the hypothetical constructs of scientific reality. As distinct from scientific knowledge of the 'Become', his artistic vision was meant to reveal through dynamic symbols, the wholeness of 'Becoming'. Vision through contemplation was man's freedom within the deterministic cycle. The awareness of limitation, finiteness, or relativity was itself a dimension of human liberty. The intuitive core of A Vision was in effect a poet's rebuke to the melioristic assumptions of the liberal tradition and the rationale of scientific democracy. In its own terms, it was in accord with the Zeit geist which in varied ways, reactionary and Marxist, contradicted the rational premises of the French Revolution.

Working on A Vision afforded Yeats a fresh access of creative power. The systematic arrangement of a lifetime's experience helped him 'to hold in a single thought reality and justice' and he was able to affirm that his subsequent poetry gained in 'self-possession and power'. It is against the security of his 'system' that one may understand the pertinence of conscious irony in his writings or the quality of philosophic poise that offsets his passionate involvement with contemporary history. His attitude towards the events leading to Civil War and after may be appreciated in this light.

As observed earlier, Yeats's response to the Easter Rising was ambivalent. With the rise of the new middle class infected by utilitarian values and bourgeois morality, he witnessed in Ireland, what for him was the triumph of the inorganic. In this context, martyrdom or more correctly suicide, was symptomatic of anomie or social disintegration where the human experience of rejection and loneliness was the reductio ad absurdum of nineteenth century

individualism. Mob violence in the name of abstractions became inevitable; what could not create unity among the living, united men in death.

It was perhaps this disposition towards the idea of fatal insurrection that influenced Yeats's response to De Valera, Commandant in the Rising, when he heard him at a big meeting in New York in May 1920. He wrote of him:

'A living argument rather than a living man. All propaganda, no human life, but not bitter or hysterical or unjust. I judged him persistent, being both patient and energetic, but that he will fail through not having enough human life as to judge the human life in others. He will ask too much of everyone and will ask it without charm. He will be pushed aside by others.²⁴

The year 1919 saw the convocation of the Irish Dail Eireann by elected Sinn Feiners and a period of unprecedented violence that followed after. Yeats spent the summer of 1919 in Ballylee where he purchased a Norman tower from the Congested Districts Board a few months before his marriage. It now provided a suitable setting for a poem for his daughter born in February 1919. In 'A Prayer for My Daughter' (June 1919), parental desire and tenderness becomes poignant against a sombre foreknowledge of 'growing murderousness in the world':

'Once more the storm is howling, and half hid
under this cradle-hood and coverlid
My child sleeps on. There is no obstacle
But Gregory's wood and one bare hill
Whereby the haystack-and roof-levelling wind,
Bred on the Atlantic, can be stayed;

²⁴ Quoted in Hone, p.323.

And for an hour I have walked and prayed
 Because of the great gloom that is in my mind.

I have walked and prayed for this young child an hour
 And heard the sea-wind scream upon the tower,
 And under the arches of the bridge, and scream
 In the elms above the flooded stream;
 Imagining in excited reverie
 That the future years had come,
 Dancing to a frenzied drum,
 Out of the murderous innocence of the sea.²⁵

Through 'A Vision' Yeats envisaged a period of direst cruelty and disorder. It was to herald the close of the 'primary, objective era', accompanying the widest expansion of its life gyre, which would be supplanted through the motion of an interior gyre, by the 'antithetical, subjective era'. In other words, the present 'scientific, democratic fact-accumulating heterogenous civilisation' understood as the ultimate decadence of the Christian era had worked itself out. Christ ushered the 'fabulous, formless darkness' that counteracted Graeco-Roman decadence and repudiated 'Platonic tolerance' and 'Doric discipline'. Now His age itself had grown devitalised as 'frozen bubbles in a pond' - 'mathematical Babylonian starlight' - and through the influx of irrational force and startling revelation craved replacement by its opposite which could be seen waking to life in the rule of élites - 'organic groups, covens of physical or intellectual kin melted out of the

²⁵ Collected Poems, pp.211-12.

frozen mass'.²⁶

With this awareness, Yeats observed Ireland. In his poem for his daughter, the juxtaposition of desire and contemplation and the dual consciousness of freedom and necessity finds expression in the descriptions - 'excited reverie' or 'murderous innocence'. The howling storm looks towards the anarchy of the second coming; the 'haystack-and roof-levelling wind' becomes the forceful emblem of a democratic age; 'Gregory's wood and one bare hill' and the tower are counter symbols. His prayer for his daughter reflects his anticipation of the new era when 'pure thought' would once again be unified and released from abstractions and the neurosis of modern individualism. The soul would recover 'radical innocence' when hysterical ego affirmation gave place to the higher authority of a deeper Self.

Yeats's exegesis of contemporary events in the light of his system found its most powerful expression in 'The Second Coming', also written in 1919. We may recall that in Ireland, during this time, the Dail sanctioned an attack on the British forces; Michael Collins' military 'Squad' began shooting members of the British Police Intelligence Department. The relationship between civil and military forces was chaotic. Army men went about executing their duties in civilian clothes and the country steadily approached a state of war. The influx of irrational force was made manifest:

'Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

²⁶ A Vision, p.213.

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst
 Are full of passionate intensity.²⁷

The widest expansion of the cyclic gyre accomplished, Ireland as also Europe
 awaited the revelation which would be harsh and surgical:

'Surely some revelation is at hand;
 Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
 The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
 When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
 Troubles my sight: somewhere is the sands of the desert
 A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
 A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
 Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
 Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
 The darkness drops again; but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?'²⁸

²⁷ Collected Poems, pp.210-11.

²⁸ Ibid, p.211.

Fascism approximated the anticipated movement and one could say with Stephen Spender that in the poem Yeats refers to its coming. Yet the expected revelation creatively perceived in the image of the 'rough beast' draws its terrible aspect from the violence of contemporary events and is somewhat distinct from any precise forthcoming political movement.

When the British Auxiliaries and Black-and-Tans struck Ireland, Yeats was appalled. He heard of the atrocities at Gort from Lady Gregory and was moved to write 'Nineteen-Hundred-and-Nineteen'. Life and property were ruthlessly destroyed and all that he had planned and hoped for Ireland seemed, at last, impossible:

'Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;
The night can sweat with terror as before
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,
And planned to bring the world under a rule,
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.'²⁹

In his speech at the Oxford Union (winter 1920-1921) he vehemently denounced the savagery of the British forces. He declared that 'law had never broken down in Ireland' only 'English law had broken down' and that Sinn Fein justice was real justice, Irish reprisals were inevitable and Ireland was bound to support them. He could not say which lay more heavily on his heart - 'the

²⁹ Collected Poems, p.233

tragedy of Ireland or the tragedy of England'.³⁰ Behind his passionate involvement in the events of the hour, however, was an overwhelming sense of fatality and awareness of the European situation which would be well worth examining. Yeats began to see how reality frustrated human desire which brought all things under rule and concept; when desire reached the limits of these hypothetical constructs, irrational force reigned and destroyed all monuments of man's intellect. Desire exhausted would be desire renewed ad infinitum:

'Man is in love and loves what vanishes,
What more is there to say?'³¹

Europe had seen the disappearance of many 'ingenious lovely things', the destruction of 'Phidias' famous ivories' and the replacement of a homogenous civilisation. To the modern consciousness, it seemed that there was a recreation in 'pretty toys', a semblance of rule and discipline and the eradication of violence:

'O what fine thought we had because we thought
That the worst rogues and rascals had died out'.³²

Contemporary events negated all such hopes, driving the man of vision to his perpetual solitude:

³⁰ Jeffares, p.328.

³¹ Collected Poems, p.234.

³² Ibid, p.233.

'He who can read the signs nor sink unmanned
 Into the half-deceit of some intoxicant
 From shallow wits; who knows no work can stand,
 Whether health, wealth or peace of mind were spent
 On master-work of intellect or hand,
 No honour leave its mighty monument,
 Has but one comfort left: all triumph would
 But break upon his ghostly solitude.'³³

Christianity, by democratising the teachings of the laws of nature and establishing its rationale in the 'common lot', rejected the mastery of the intellect, and ultimately issued in that activist, altruistic, centrifugal ethic which was an inversion of collective egoism. Reality was objectified, and imaginatively conceived the world was changed into a featureless dust which could be run through the fingers.³⁴ A loss of identity balanced by hope and promise of salvation was also an inversion of self-interest. Irrational force was side-tracked and man lost his antagonist and subsequently his power of self-affirmation. In 'Dove or Swan' of A Vision Yeats writes:

'We say of Him Christ because His sacrifice was voluntary that He was love itself, and yet that part of Him which made Christendom was not love but pity, and not pity for intellectual despair, though the man in Him, being anti-thetical like His age, knew it in the Garden, but primary pity, that for the common lot, man's death, seeing that He raised Lazarus, sickness, seeing that He healed many, sin, seeing that He died.
 Love is created and preserved by intellectual analysis, for we love only that which is unique, and it belongs to contemplation, not to action, for we would not change

³³ Collected Poems, p.234.

³⁴ A Vision, p.275.

that which we love. A lover will admit a greater beauty than that of his mistress but not its like, and surrenders his days to a delighted laborious study of all her ways and looks, and he pities only if something threatens that which has never been before and can never be again. Fragment delights in fragment and seeks possession, not service; whereas the Good Samaritan discovers himself in the likeness of another, covered with sores and abandoned by thieves upon the roadside, and in that other serves himself. The opposites are gone; he does not need his Lazarus; they do not each die the other's life, live the other's death.'³⁵

With the degeneration of the Christian ethos and the secularisation of religious authority in 'mitre and crown', man's search for identity became hysterical in an imbroglie of abstractions. Thought having reached its climax, a release of destructive energy was inevitable. Martyrdom or suicide, as the illogical emulation of the initial Sacrifice, mob violence and wanton murder were signals for a transvaluation of human values:

'It seemed that a dragon of air
 Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round
 Or hurried them off on its own furious path;
 So the Platonic Year
 Whirls out new right and wrong,
 Whirls in the old instead;
 All men are dancers in their tread
 Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.'³⁶

³⁵ A Vision, p.275.

³⁶ Collected Poems, p.234.

The impact of martyrological passion in Ireland (Easter 1916), the Black-and-Tan terror, Irish reprisals and World War I, on Yeats's imagination assumed a new and powerful significance in the context of a larger vision. As creative artist 'who read the signs', he chose for his image the swan-symbol of subjectivity - whose solitude and passionate pride give it the strength/'to play, or to ride/ Those winds that clamour of approaching night'.³⁷

When news of De Valera's opposition to the Treaty (December 1921) reached Yeats, he was troubled and pessimistic about the future. He wrote Olivia Shakespear:

'I am in a deep gloom about Ireland for though I expect ratification of the treaty from a plebiscite I see no hope of escape from bitterness, and the extreme party may carry the country. When men are very bitter, death and ruin draw them on as a rabbit is supposed to be drawn by the dancing of the fox.'³⁸

Yeats felt that the Treaty conferred effective freedom on Ireland and he found the protracted debate over its terms most disconcerting, particularly as the country seemed to be re-enacting the Parnell Split on a larger scale. When he visited Dublin in March 1922, he was greatly disturbed by the bitterness on both sides. When Lady Gregory asked him to make a political pronouncement, he felt he could not say anything until he found his own thought. He wrote:

'I will never like any position in life where I have to speak but half my mind, and I feel that both sides are responsible for this whirlpool of hate. Besides, only action counts or can count till there is some change.'³⁹

³⁷ Collected Poems, p.235.

³⁸ Wade, Letters, p.675.

³⁹ Quoted in Hone, p.345.

He was writing a series of poems, 'Thoughts suggested by the present state of the world' which appeared as 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'. He described them as 'not philosophical, but simple and passionate; a lamentation over lost peace and lost hope. My own philosophy does not much brighten the prospect so far as any future we shall live.'⁴⁰ The Civil War broke out when he was at Ballylee which was cut off from the outside world:

'We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned,
Yet no clear fact to be discerned.'⁴¹

The triumph of abstractions was self-evident in murder:

'A barricade of stone or of wood;
Some fourteen days of civil war;
Last night they trundled down the road
That dead young soldier in his blood:
.....
We had fed out hearts on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare;
More substance in our enmities
Than in our love...'⁴²

⁴⁰ Quoted in Jeffares, p.227.

⁴¹ Collected Poems, p.230.

⁴² Ibid., pp.230-31.

In 'I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness', the impress of contemporary violence produces a powerful cluster of 'monstrous familiar images'. Yeats foresees the sinister power of a neutral force that would cause the reversal of an era:

' ... Nor self-delighting reverie,
 Nor hate of what's to come, nor pity for what's gone,
 Nothing but grip of claw, and the eye's complacency,
 The innumerable clanging wings that have put out the moon.'⁴³

At such a time, nothing provided a more glaring contrast to action and events than the vita contemplativa. It seemed, as creative artist, Yeats was denied active participation in the historical process. Yet in the modern context, the democratic levelling process threatened every triumph of communication and a poet, in fundamental opposition to popular sentiment, was condemned to solitude - his price for identity:

'I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair
 Wonder how many times I could have proved my worth
 In something that all others understand or share;
 But O! ambitious heart, had such proof drawn forth
 A company of friends, a conscience set at ease,
 It had but made us pine the more. The abstract joy,
 The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,
 Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy.'⁴⁴

⁴³ Collected Poems, p.232.

⁴⁴ Loc. cit.

The yearning for participation was, however, ever present. When the poet encountering an 'affable Irregular', 'a brown Lieutenant and his men', begins to count 'those feathered balls of soot/ The moor-hen guides upon the stream' to silence the envy in his thought,⁴⁵ it is not out of any private political sympathy, nor only because they are young and he is old, but because through his vocation, he is denied participation and its self-forgetting, and therefore must experience the pain of rejection.

When in April 1922 the Anti-Treatyites under De Valera defied the verdict of the electorate, Yeats's interest was immediately aroused. He wrote Olivia Shakespear:

'The whole situation in Ireland interests me. We have here popular leaders representing a minority, but a considerable one, who mock an appeal to the vote... One saw the same thing in Russia when the Communists dissolved the Constituent Assembly. On the other hand I hear that the Free State party will bring in a Constitution especially arranged to put power into the hands of able men who could not expect election in the ordinary way... In other words, out of all this murder and rapine will come not a demagogic but an authoritarian Government.'⁴⁶

Again in October 1922, when Civil War still racked the Irish scene, he wrote:

'The situation here is very curious - a revolt against democracy by a small section. Under the direction of an Englishman Childers, they burn houses that they may force the majority to say 'It is too expensive to remain Free State, let us turn republican'. At any rate that is believed to be the policy. I have met some of the ministers who more and more seem too sober to meet the wildness of these enemies; and everywhere one notices a drift towards Conservatism, perhaps to Autocracy.

⁴⁵ Collected Poems, p.230

⁴⁶ Wade, Letters, pp.681-82.

'I always knew that it would come, but not that it would come in this tragic way. One wonders what prominent men will live through it... We are entering on the final and most dreadful stage. Perhaps there is nothing so dangerous to a modern state, when politics take the place of theology, as a bunch of martyrs. A bunch of martyrs (1916) were the bomb and we are living in the explosion...'47

In November 6, 1922, he wrote H.J.C. Grierson:

'We are preparing here, behind our screen of bombs and smoke, a return to conservative politics as elsewhere in Europe, or at least to a substitution of the historical sense for logic. The return will be painful and perhaps violent, but many educated men talk of it and must soon work for it and perhaps riot for it. A curious sign is that 'A.E.' who was the most popular of men is now suffering some slight eclipse because of old democratic speeches - things of years ago. I on the other hand get hearers where I did not get them because I have been of the opposite party... The Ireland that reacts from the present disorder is turning its eyes towards individualist [i.e. Fascist] Italy.'48

In December 18, 1922, he stated:

'Democracy is dead and force claims its ancient right, and these man, [Irregulars] having force, believe that they have [the] right to rule. With democracy has died too the old political generalizations. Men do not know what is, or is not legitimate war.'49

The above extracts from letters indicate quite explicitly the connection of Yeats's thought and response to the Irish situation with the rise of Fascism in Europe. Two determining conditions are, however, equally clear. Firstly,

47 Wade, Letters, p.670.

48 Ibid, p.693.

49 Ibid, p.695.

De Valera's grave qualification of majority rule did release an anti-democratic temper which sanctioned violence. The Free State Government in suppressing the Republican revolt was also, in the eyes of many, following an anti-democratic line. The exigencies of the Civil War were responsible for provoking conservative thought in different camps. Secondly, in Europe since World War I, currents of political thought had begun a counter-movement to the rationale of the liberal democratic tradition. The struggle first began far from the political arena as a philosophical controversy with the rationalism, individualism and materialism of the nineteenth century. Life as a 'primal given' beyond which the mind could not penetrate was the idea used to jettison rationalist speculations. It supported the image of heroic man 'bound to the forces of blood and soil' to counteract the petty images of merchant and shopkeeper which outlined 'bourgeois' ambitions. The idea of the charismatic leader was a natural development. His power was not dependent on the electorate but was its own justification. Developing alongside in political literature, was the notion of élitism as an objective necessity for the maintenance and development of social institutions and culture. The disease of contemporary society was diagnosed as 'mass behaviour'. Ideologies, vastly different, converged on the problem of execution. Communists (Lenin's theory of party élites), Fascists, Nazi, social scientists of managerialism were all one in urging the necessity of an enlightened élite to guide, manipulate or instruct the unenlightened, undifferentiated masses. The development of Yeats's thought towards Fascism in the particular Irish and general European context becomes comprehensible. His interest in Fascism cannot be regarded as eccentric or sinister if we remember that his weltanschauung from the very start of his

career, was in harmony with contemporary trends of thought which encouraged Fascist ideology. These may be reviewed briefly.

Towards the close of the nineteenth century, Messianism and the exploitation of myth and saga in literature became the distinctive features of nations seeking to affirm their identity or independence. Both characterised the Irish intellectual renaissance led by Yeats. Like Morris who re-told Icelandic sagas, Yeats re-interpreted Irish saga and folk myth which proved in its simplicity and heroic realism a suitable antidote to modern complexity. While a new image of heroic man was being created in European literature with traits from the age of Vikings, the Renaissance or the Prussian military - an image such as the German hero Siegfried who was a projection of the ideal of joyous power - Standish O'Grady in Ireland re-told the story of Cuchulain, Lady Gregory translated the whole body of Irish heroic legend in Cuchulain of Muirthemne and Gods and Fighting Men, and Yeats himself began developing his self-projecting hero-image of Cuchulain in his plays. The idea of Volk (folk) in nineteenth century German thought, based on the writings of Johann Herder, was becoming increasingly popular among thinkers exasperated by the utilitarian ethos. As one writer described:

'Blood rises up against formal understanding, race against the rational pursuit of ends, honor against profit, bonds against caprice that is called "freedom," organic totality against individualistic dissolution, valor against bourgeois security, politics against the primacy of the economy, state against society, folk against the individual and the mass.' 50

The anti-materialist bent of this new thought was most congenial to Yeats who, in his youth, had refused to surrender belief in the supernatural while his

50 Quoted in H. Marcuse, Negations (London, 1968), p.3, from Ernst Krieck, National politische Erziehung (1933), p.68.

father's contemporaries and friends commended Huxley and Tyndall. The 'myth of progress' was always distasteful to him since it combined scientific-materialist and utilitarian ends in an odious complex of self-seeking. Thus he strove in his Nationalist programme for Ireland to identify hatred of England with hatred of commercial values - of all that Morris and Ruskin hated.

As observed in an earlier chapter, Morris had also instilled in Yeats a love of the Middle Ages with its hierarchical pattern of society. Through defeat in his own socialist programme, Morris impressed on Yeats the necessity of an instrumental élite which could carry on the revolutionary programme. Morris was poet and artist and it was simple for Yeats to interpret Morris's intention in terms of an artistic élite carrying the 'burdens that priests and theologians took from them angrily some few hundred years ago.'⁵¹ Love of the Middle Ages and the notion of élites was also prevalent among writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century who represented conservative thought. The form of élitism that was slowly developing had certain superficial affinities with Platonism. Organisation was to mass what idea was to matter in Plato's theory - 'that which imparted form to the formless'. Yeats's acceptance of these ideas was further encouraged by the European Aesthetic Movement which was the literary-aesthetic parallel to political reaction. The autonomy and implicit superiority of the artist was posited by many of its distinguished advocates, among them Baudelaire, Goethe, Schiller, Stefan George and Oscar Wilde.

Related to this was the notion of 'superior man' - Carlyle's hero and Nietzsche's 'Superman'.

51 Essays and Introductions, p.64.

All these tendencies created 'a tradition of discourse' distinctly hostile to democratic liberalism and Yeats, through early influences, the nature of his Nationalism and his vocation, was committed to it. We have seen how J.B. Yeats, while opposing aristocratic theories in politics, believed in the aristocracy of the intellect and how Yeats's political mentor John O'Leary hated democracy and could not 'speak such words as 'philanthropy', 'humanitarianism', without showing by his tone that they offended him."

It becomes clear that in assessing Yeats's response to ideological trends in Post-War Europe and his explicit interest in Fascism over a period of roughly ten years, certain determining conditions, given some attention so far, must be kept in mind. They are the permanent aspects of his weltanschauung, the systematic working out of his historical system in A Vision after 1917, his personal sense of rejection and desire for participation, and finally his knowledge of Irish politics and the European situation.

In 1919, Yeats's essay 'If-I-were-Four-and-Twenty' appeared in 'The Living Age'. The essay is significant insofar as it discloses Yeats's subtle awareness of the forces threatening Europe and his recognition that the interests of artists were not endangered by conservative modes of twentieth century totalitarianism.

Having outlined a creative integration of his beliefs in literature, nationality and a form of philosophy, he proceeds in the essay to work out parallel implications for Ireland. The European crisis invited a re-evaluation of social structures and systems and Yeats believed his doctrine of unity of being, so far thwarted in Ireland, became increasingly relevant. The French playwrights, Claudel and Peguy, whose works he finds instructive, belonged

to a tradition of thought initiated by the prominent reactionary theocrats of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century - Joseph de Maistre and Louis de Bonald. These thinkers discovered in organization the antidote to the disorders of post-revolutionary France and admired the subtle blend of 'power, belief, and solidarity' in medieval society. They were impressed by the functional importance of religion and recognised the service of medieval Catholicism in providing a centre of authority for the preservation of society. The literary adaptation of these ideas found expression in Le Mystere de la charite Jeanne D'Arc of Peguy, Claudel's L'Annonce faite a Marie and L'Otage or the poems of Jammes, where an 'intellectual patriotism is not distinct from religion'. As Yeats observes:

'A school of literature, which owed something perhaps to Hauptmann's exposition of the symbolism of Chartres Cathedral, had begun to make Christianity French, and in Peguy's heroic patriotism had prepared young France for the struggle with Germany. These writers are full of history and the scenery of France. The Eucharist in a continually repeated symbol makes them remember the wheat-fields and the vineyards of France; and, when Joan of Arc is told that the Apostles fled from Christ before the crucifixion, she, to that moment the docile shepherd girl, cries: "The men of France would not have betrayed Him, the men of Lorraine would not have betrayed Him".' 52

These writers, Yeats believed, countered nineteenth century individualism by creating emotional rather than intellectual agreement through the celebration of what constituted the 'other' or 'not-self', the 'given' not the 'chosen' of social existence. Their example could be followed with profit in Ireland, an essentially religious nation.

So he imagines, if he were younger, though not a Catholic, he would go

52 Explorations, pp.264-65.

upon both of Ireland's great pilgrimages - to Croagh Patrick and to Lough Derg - to revivify the country's pagan and Christian faith in its history and landscape:

'I would try to create a type of man whose most moving religious experience, though it came to him in some distant country, and though his intellect wholly personal, would bring with it imagery to connect it with an Irish multitude now and in the past time.' 53

The only modern mind to have effected the synthesis, according to Yeats, is Balzac, whose thought achieved 'unity of being' comparable to that of Dante. His 'whole purpose was to expound the doctrine of his Church as it is displayed, not in decrees and manuals, but in the institutions of Christendom.' 54

Balzac's social theory contradicted the optimism of Utopian Socialism, of the Fourierist brand or otherwise, because he would not abolish the struggle. His social order is the creation of two struggles, 'that of family with family' and 'that of individual with individual' and the nature of politics depended on the dominance of either struggle in the people's imagination. The individual struggle drew attention to 'equality of opportunity, 'the career open to talent', on the premise that rank and wealth was 'fortuitous and unjust', while the family struggle concerned itself with social privilege and the rights of property. Yeats commends Comedie humaine because it illustrated how 'the more noble and stable qualities, those that are spread through the personality, and not isolated in a faculty, are the results of victory in the family struggle, while those qualities of logic and of will,

53 Explorations, pp.267-68.

54 Ibid, p.269

all those qualities of toil rather than of power, belong most to the individual struggle' and ultimately 'one finds it hard to admire deeply any individual strength that has not family behind it.'⁵⁵

In Balzac then, Yeats found support and clarification of much of his own thought. Against his symbolic pattern of interlocking cones and moving gyres suggesting eternal conflict, he could see the plausibility of Balzac's vision. It was in accord with the creative vision of the old masters Dante, Villon, Shakespeare and Cervantes. Reality was the struggle that did not exclude evil. The optimists following reason chose to dwell on the good alone and lost a sense of drama, whereas in serving that which is not chosen, one transcended the dictates of reason and discovered the permanent springs of human existence.

The artist's function in this context of thought assumes great significance. Since emotional unities, requisite for the stabilisation of society, found their definition through the image rather than through the rational process, the responsibility of the artist as image-maker was greater than that of educationalists and statesmen. To a large extent the artist moulded forms in which 'the soul' worked. Yeats was aware of Soloviev's doctrine of the 'spiritualisation of the soil' and understood by 'soil' all 'the matter in which the soul works, the walls of our houses, the serving-up of our meals, and the chairs and tables of our rooms, and the instincts of our bodies...'⁵⁶

Towards the close of the essay, Yeats argues in favour of leisure, the

55 Explorations, p.270

56 Ibid, p.273

preservation of property and family ambition. He finds the solution of the social question in Balzac's belief in personal charity. He also accepts the co-operative basis of divided property supported by Soloviev. His solution for Ireland was the synthesis of her economics, nationalism and religion. The combination would make her religion philosophic 'as religion is in the East' and 'we, our three great interests made but one, would at last be face to face with the great riddle, and might, it may be hit the answer.'⁵⁷

An examination of 'If-I-were-Four-and-Twenty', makes certain facts clear. Yeats was aware of the Communist threat in Europe and the possible repercussions of Socialist thought on art as a vocation, the status of genius and the life of contemplation. All three were in peril. The quarrel with liberal individualism for some writers ended in extreme 'functionalist' theories. These implied the principle of exclusion; elements in the social structure which could be classed as 'dis-functional' were to be excluded. So Yeats comments on one of Balzac's characters - a chiropodist 'who while cutting the corns of some famous man speaks of the coming abolition of all privilege: "genius too is a privilege we shall abolish".'⁵⁸

In Ireland itself, Yeats was conscious of the Labour movement and the impact of Marxist Socialism on the younger generation:

'Now our young men sing The Red Flag, for any bloody catastrophe seems welcome that promises an Irish Republic. They condemned Morris's doctrine without examination.

57 Explorations, p.278.

58 Ibid, pp.271-72.

Now for the most part they applaud it without examination; but that will change, for the execution of Connolly has given him many readers. I have already noticed Karl Marx's Kapital in the same window with Mitchel's Jail Journal and and with Speeches from the Dock...⁵⁹

Yeats reacted to the situation from his viewpoint as creative artist and also on the basis of his understanding of Ireland's political character. We can therefore follow his thought from these two angles. Liberal economy was not basically hostile to vocations requiring leisure won through toil. From the standpoint of the creative artist within the liberal framework, the drastic overhauling of the economic structure, proposed by Marxist Socialists, seemed an unnatural sequence in the historical process. It denied the realities of human nature that clung to habit, custom, institution and the contingency of the ruler-ruled relationship. Related to this was its denial of the prescriptive function of the arts effecting social consolidation. Ireland as a conquered nation, essentially religious in character, was for Yeats, singularly ill-equipped to assimilate the Marxist viewpoint for its own. So he writes:

'I admit that it is spirited action to applaud the economics of Lenin...when we do it to affront our national enemy: but it does not help one to express the character of the nation through varied intellect.'⁶⁰

Ireland could not share the internationalism of Socialist thought since it was still struggling to realise its national identity and independence. In the struggle, nationalism had become a religion and politics had fulfilled the function of theology. Liberalism through the individualisation of reasoning,

59 Explorations, p.268.

60 Loc. cit.

in this context, degenerated into a confusion of ends obscured in humanitarian and political abstractions. This was the contemporary malaise evident in anarchy and collective violence. The dialectical reaction in anti-liberal, totalitarian thought offered one possibility among solutions, and Yeats's prescription for Ireland seems to follow its lead. Its antidote to modern disorder was the revitalisation of central authority through the State, leader or king, not 'chosen' but 'given', with a purely existential or ontological justification. The basic organisation of society through private enterprise on the basis of the recognition of private property and the private initiative of the entrepreneur, which was characteristic of the liberal economy, remained unaltered in its scheme. As dialectical contrary and not as negation of the previous era, Yeats was satisfied that the reversal would be in the realm of moral values and the struggle one of weltanschauungen. As an artist, he found in them his main concern. Thus when he celebrates mysterious life, fortuitous Nature or existential Being deriding logic that 'drew its deductions from what every dolt could understand', when like Balzac he glorifies the bitter struggle and elevates the notions of blood and 'soil', family pride and privilege, religious self-denial and organic inter-relatedness, or when he encourages the primacy of the Irish race as a whole over its members, not only is he continuing the Nationalist programme, he set out with in the eighteen nineties, by countering the rationalist, utilitarian ethos to establish Ireland's identity; he is also appropriating the most significant modes of twentieth century totalitarianism.

As such, his interest in the rise of Fascism was inevitable.

When we consider Yeats in relation to the political tensions in Ireland

during 1922, the situation is further clarified.

It must be remembered that the Civil War was by no means a clear-cut combat between ardent Republicans and loyal subjects of King George. To make it appear as such would be a serious misunderstanding of the political choices open to the contemporary. As de Vere White observes:

'There were many who took sides against the Treaty who had their spiritual home on the constitutional side and there were those who followed Collins who would have been equally happy on the hillsides. And thousands took arms against the Government who had taken no part in the fight against the British.'⁶¹

In all the confusion of the time, however, a single, dominant tendency to rule by force prevailed on either side. As indicated earlier, anti-democratic sentiments were recognisable among both Republicans and Free Staters. To Yeats this was indicative of an historical crisis in values which he had already anticipated. The dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in Russia by the Communists suggested the same crisis. With the support of his system, he predicted the replacement of demagogic by an authoritative government.

As one not directly involved in Irish politics at the time, Yeats's acceptance of Senatorship in the Irish Free State Government in December 1922, was determined by certain easily detectable considerations.

The most obvious of these was Yeats's renewed hope of participation in Irish public life after years of virtual isolation. He enjoyed the favour of the new Ireland created by the 'Treaty'. He was nominated by the Ard Fheis of Sinn Fein as a delegate to an Irish Race Congress held in Paris in January 1922. Trinity College in the same year issued a testimonial,

⁶¹ p.165.

and the degree of Doctor of Letters in Dublin University was conferred upon him. His appointment to the Senate was brought about by the efforts of his friend Dr. Oliver Gogarty. His election rested more upon the fact of his having been a member of the IRB than upon his literary distinction. At any rate, he felt he could share in the exciting work of creating national institutions. In December 1922 he wrote to Edmund Dulac:

'We are a fairly distinguished body...and should get much government in our hands.'⁶²

He had plans for a State Theatre, an Irish Academy of Letters subsidised by the Government and the creation of a Ministry of Fine Arts. Since his early, discredited Nationalist programme for Unity of Being in Ireland found accord with certain contemporary trends of thought, already referred to, Yeats envisaged the time had come when his work would be found relevant and significant. He wrote to Lady Gregory:

'If we write our best, the spiritual part of the new Ireland will be in our books and the Free State's struggle with the impossibilists may even make some of our unpopular struggles shine with patriotic fire.'⁶³

As Senator in the Free State Government, Yeats supported the stern measures adopted against the Republicans and this was at a time when Fascism was making considerable progress in Europe. Kevin O'Higgins, Minister for Home Affairs, later known as the 'Irish Mussolini' was the 'strong man' of the government who introduced in 1923 the Public Safety Bill which

⁶² Wade, Letters, p.694.

⁶³ Quoted in Hone, p.344.

prescribed flogging as punishment for arson and armed robbery. Such ruthless measures were looked upon by some with distaste and horror, by others as a grim necessity for order and security. Yeats belonged to the latter category; he admired the strength and determination of Kevin O'Higgins to re-instate law and order in Ireland. To the pro-Republican or Post-war writer, such an attitude is likely to cause much alarm; Yeats can be branded as a fascist, the term applied with all its hateful connotations. But removed from the issues through distance in time, we can review the circumstances determining Yeats's attitude with greater objectivity and can give priority to understanding rather than to judgement.

During the period under consideration, acts of violence had become the order of the day; petrol and dynamite were household words and there were many social misfits who took to crime as an escape from the discipline of law in normal times. Ireland was facing a critical juncture in her history. The tradition of her politics compelled the patriot to oppose the law. Now the fight against the Free State Government very easily assumed the proportions of the fight against the British. An objective understanding of the Civil War contentions, however, indicates that there were thoroughly sincere men on both sides. What then determined Yeats's reactions?

An indicated earlier, Yeats's response to the Easter Rising was ambivalent. For him the tyranny of abstractions ruined the possibility of Ireland achieving Unity of Being. The rebellion that led to Civil War clung to the principle of Republicanism. At the time of the split, De Valera (one-time Commandant in the Rising) announced his position, to be in line with 'the men who rose in Easter Week'. They died for the Irish Republic and satisfaction with

anything short of the same was looked upon as a betrayal of Ireland's patriots. To Yeats, this attitude was indicative of Irish intransigence developed through political rhetoric and abstractions. In terms of his historical system, it was also indicative of the unfortunate climax of democratic individualism which brought about social disintegration and collective suicidal urges. Meanwhile in Europe, totalitarian ideologies were gaining ground. The tide appeared to have turned from democratic to authoritative government. Yeats was reported to have said:

'Authoritative government is certainly coming, if for no other reason than that the modern State is so complex that it must find some kind of expert government - a government firm enough, tyrannical enough, if you will, to spend years in carrying out its plans...

I see the same tendency here in Ireland towards authoritative government. What else can chaos produce even though our chaos has been a very small thing compared with the chaos in Central Europe. The question in Ireland, as elsewhere in Europe, is whether the authoritative Government which we see emerging is the short reaction that comes at the end of every disturbance, lasting ten or fifteen years, or whether it is, as I think, a part of a reaction that will last one hundred and fifty years; not always of the same intensity, it is, still, a steady movement towards the creation of a nation controlled by highly trained intellects.' 64

The Free State Government, in adopting ruthless measures against the Republicans, was therefore reflecting the new centripetal movement that marked the reversal of an era. Yeats was aware of Ireland in the context of Europe and Europe in the context of his larger historical vision. When we ask whether Yeats desired or exulted in the possibility of a ruthless autocracy or oligarchy, we are at once faced with the disarming irony of his

64 'From Democracy to Authority: Paul Claudel and Mussolini - A New School of Thought,' Irish Times, Saturday, February 16, 1924.

prose writings on the subject:

'Do I desire it or dread it, loving as I do the gaming-table of Nature where many are ruined but none is judged, and where all is fortuitous, unforeseen?'⁶⁵

There was perhaps another factor determining Yeats's support of Free State policy. An appreciable proportion of Republicans were sympathetic to Socialist aims. This was, in part, due to James Connolly's role in the Easter Rising. His most notable achievement lay in the junction he effected between revolutionary Labour and revolutionary Nationalist forces represented respectively by the Citizen Army and Irish Volunteers. He had said: 'Only the Irish working-class remain as the incorruptible inheritors of the fight for freedom in Ireland.' In the opening number of the Workers' Republic he had announced: 'We are Republicans because we are Socialists.'⁶⁶

Although after the Treaty, Labour deputies took their seats in the Dail of the Free State Government and supported Mr. Cosgrave's programme, it seemed that the more belligerent Socialists had gone over to the Republican camp. Hone records how after the Treaty debates, Yeats rejoiced at the defeat of Madame Markievicz and other non-jurors, whose influence upon Irish affairs he had always dreaded.⁶⁷ Constance Markievicz was a devoted admirer of Connolly and during the Treaty debates she maintained that capitalist interests in England and Ireland were 'pushing the Treaty to block the march of the working people in England and Ireland.'⁶⁸ When Griffith acknowledged

⁶⁵ Explorations, p.280.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Mansergh, p.209.

⁶⁷ Hone, p.340.

⁶⁸ Macardle, p.630.

the services of Southern Unionists who were to be given some representation in the Government, she attacked him 'for trucking with Unionists'. Yeats had already written of her mind becoming 'a bitter, an abstract thing, /Her thought some popular enmity:/ Blind and leader of the blind /Drinking the foul ditch where they lie?'⁶⁹

As already observed, Yeats did not believe that Ireland's solution lay in Socialism of any kind. The materialist premises of Marxist Socialism were, for him, totally untenable and inapplicable to the Irish context. In his opinion, a government was justified only insofar as it embodied the nation's historical being. As such, revolutionary Republicanism appeared an unfortunate offshoot of the general crisis which heralded a new era. Its suppression was painful but necessary.

It becomes appropriate, at this stage, to examine the relation between Yeats's fascist predilections and Italian Fascism.

Soon after Mussolini's march on Rome (October 22, 1922) Yeats wrote that reactionary Ireland turned its eyes towards individualist Italy. After De Valera's 'Cease Fire' order to Republican troops in the summer of 1923, the Free State Government looked towards a period of relative peace and quiet progress. Yeats could claim to have a share in the 'slow, exciting work of creating institutions...'⁷⁰ During this period (1923-1925) the Fascist regime was being consolidated in Italy and Yeats made frequent references to Mussolini

⁶⁹ Collected Poems, p.207.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Hone, p.355.

in his letters, articles and speeches. He was working during these years over the completion of his philosophical system in 'A Vision' (first published 1925) and was consistently persuaded that the power accruing to the Italian Fascisti was indicative of a reversal in historical rhythms. In the article 'From Democracy to Authority', he is reported to have related the literature of Claudel and Peguy with the rise of Fascism:

'It [Paul Claudel's L'Otage] expresses something which is apparent all over the world today. What Peguy put into speeches and essays is now being expressed in political and democratic forms by other writers. They are giving expression in literature to the same movement that has brought Mussolini into power in Italy and that threatens France...

We find in these plays [Claudel's L'Otage and Peguy's trilogy Joan of Arc] the same emotions which give Mussolini his great audiences in Italy. When I was under thirty, it would seem an incredible dream that 20,000 Italians, drawn from the mass of the people, would applaud a politician for talking of the 'decomposing body of liberty', and for declaring that his policy was the antithesis of democracy.'

Seeing events in terms of 'A Vision' he continued:

'Everything seems to show that the centrifugal movement which began with the Encyclopaedists and produced the French Revolution, and the democratic views of men like Mill, has worked itself out to the end. Now we are the beginning of a new centripetal movement. It has appeared more clearly because of the war, but it was not made by the war.

L'Otage and Peguy's great work were published before she even began, and Charles Maurras, the political philosopher of the movement in France, had already written his principal works...'

Thus Yeats's response to Mussolini's initial success is less as one directly concerned with the dictator's projects than as an historian proving a theory:

'The astonishing thing about Mussolini's utterances is not that he should think or say those things - other men have thought them before - but that he should be applauded for saying them. We may see the importance of that without admiring Mussolini or condemning him. Socialists in modern Europe have as little respect as he for the decomposing body

of liberty. One observes the change in European thought as one observes the day changing into night or the night changing into day.'⁷¹

The transvaluation of values which he foresaw in 1919, when the Black-and-Tan terror struck Ireland, seemed to be in sight. Its shattering impact occasioned a serious questioning of political concepts. So in a speech in August 1924 Yeats said:

'It is impossible not to ask ourselves to what great task of the nations we have been called in this transformed world, where there is so much that is obscure and terrible. The world can never be the same. The stream has turned backwards, and generations to come will have for their task, not the widening of liberty, but recovery from its errors - the building up of authority, the restoration of discipline, the discovery of a life sufficiently heroic to live without the opium dream.'⁷²

The crisis also occasioned powerful metaphors for poetry. Yeats was, at this time, preoccupied with the Leda myth and his attempt to draw a mythological parallel between Grecian legend and Christian doctrine. He found Leda and the swan appropriate metaphors for the new annunciation and wrote a poem for a political review:

'A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast against his breast.

⁷¹ 'From Democracy to Authority', Irish Times

⁷² Quoted in Hone, p.365.

'How can those terrified vague fingers push
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
 A shudder in the loins engenders there
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
 And Agamemnon dead.

Being so caught up,
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?⁷³

The poem is not so much a transmutation of 'Mussolini prose' as it is the creative expression of a gifted sensibility faced with a powerful, contemporary phenomenon. The final query in the poem is significant insofar as it suggests Yeats's response to the strange, new, inexorable experience and the anticipated reversal of values. The 'indifferent beak' suggests the amorality of a neutral force which seemed embodied alike in Communist and Fascist dictatorships. The question regarding the compatibility of knowledge and power remains ironically unanswered. It could lead some to suspect that those in power were not necessarily wise and perhaps that is why AE felt the poem was likely to be misunderstood by conservative readers.

In 1925, Yeats was in Rome and Hone recollects a morning spent in searching the bookshops with Mrs. Yeats for works dealing with the spiritual

⁷³ Collected Poems, p.241.

antecedents of the Fascist revolution, 'an event which Yeats considered... as at least equal in importance to the proletarian conquest in Russia.' He had attended lectures in London by Douglas Ainslie on Benedetto Croce's Estetica and already knew something of the new original thought of Italy. In 1924, he had read Croce's Philosophy of Vico. As Hone recalls one of the books he wanted was Giovanni Gentile's Reformia dell Educazione, a work which ensured for its author the post of Minister of Education in one of Mussolini's early cabinets. Yeats read the work in Din Bigorgiari's translation with an Introduction by Croce. Later, through Wildon Carr's translation, he acquainted himself and admired for its logic Gentile's Teoria generale dello Spirito come Atto puro. Thus, as Hone observes, his philosophic as opposed to his occult background was formed by the modern Italians, with a foundation of Plato and Plotinus, Boehme and Swedenborg.

Giovanni Gentile, whose thought had a profound influence on Yeats, was one among many in the Italian intelligentsia who joined Mussolini's party in the early stages of the Fascist regime. At the time Gentile joined the Fascist party, he wrote Mussolini:

'As a liberal by deepest conviction, I could not help being convinced, in the months in which I had the honor to collaborate in the work of your government and to observe at close quarters the development of the principles that determined your policies, that liberalism as I understand it, the liberalism of freedom through law and therefore through a strong state, through the state as an ethical reality, is represented in Italy today not by the liberals, who are more or less openly your opponents, but to the contrary by you yourself. Hence I have satisfied myself that in the choice between the liberalism of today and the Fascists, who understand the faith of your Fascism, a genuine liberal, who despises equivocation and wants to stand to his post, must enroll in the legions of your followers.'⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Quoted in Marcuse, *Negations*, p.11, from Aufbau, ed. F.Karsen, IV(1931),p.233.

In order to appreciate why Mussolini won the support of metaphysicians like Gentile, we must see, in perspective, the principal causes for the rise of Fascism in Italy. This would indirectly throw light on the crux of the present discussion, i.e. the extent of Yeats's knowledge and acceptance of the Fascist programme.

Frederici Chabod in A history of Italian Fascism⁷⁵ has explained how Fascism is a highly complex phenomenon which cannot be explained by any rigid formula. Its success in Italy was due to a large number of interacting factors. These may be reviewed briefly in order to clarify the choices open to the contemporary intellectual.

The war ended in 1919 with the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the Hapsburg Empire, which was always regarded as the greatest enemy of Renaissance Italy. But, ironically, this was a 'mutilated victory' for Italy. She now faced the bitter disputes regarding the frontier territories of Dalmatia and Fiume to which Yugoslavia put forward claims against her. The Peace conference at Paris did not ease matters and bitterness on both sides of the Adriatic continued.

Italy was committed to war through the Treaty of London (April 26, 1915) brought about by her Foreign Minister Sonnino. Now there were many who felt their national pride injured as their efforts in the war did not seem appreciated. People who thought that the end of the war would bring peace and tranquillity were disappointed. National resentment was stirred and certain army officers and men took part in D'Annunzio's March on Fiume (September 1919). For the first time the Italian army faced a split in its ranks. Besides patriotic resentment, there were unfortunate socio-economic consequences of the war. Italy faced a financial crisis, as war proved too heavy an under-

⁷⁵ London, 1963.

taking for a young state. The hardest hit were the 'small and medium bourgeoisie' i.e. those engaged in liberal professions, in trade and industry, and owners of property and small landowners. The burden of taxation fell on them. While some faced economic ruin, others found themselves suddenly wealthy - a 'new rich' society was rising while the old well-to-do bourgeoisie collapsed.

The cost of living rose and general disorder became inevitable. People from the towns attacked warehouses where supplies were stored. Further the men who fought in the war had to face unemployment in civilian life and were embittered by the censure of non-combatants who had to face the economic crisis.

Then there was the agrarian problem. Italy was at that time a predominantly agricultural country. The braccianti or agricultural labourers found themselves unemployed due to the crisis on farming and agricultural prices affecting the landowners. The peasants who formed the backbone of the army during the war expected recompense in land after the war. The war ended but the recompense was not forthcoming. Labour agitation was unavoidable and in July and August 1919, hordes of peasants with red flags occupied waste land belonging to big landowners. Some peasants belonged to the General Labour Confederation and the Red Unions, others took part in the agrarian movement which shook Italy in 1919-20, which was described as 'White Bolshevism'. They were Catholics who prescribed solutions not very different from the Communists.

In the Industrial sphere, working-class masses, by 1919, already represented a strong body. After the Paris Commune, there was general fear of a 'red explosion' in Western and Central Europe. Now Italy faced the peril. In 1920, the General Confederation of Labour in the hands of Socialists led a

membership of over two million. For the workers especially the élite in the big industrial towns, the watchword was Russia. There was much talk of Lenin, factory councils and the abolition of capitalism and the desire for political revolution increased.

Italy was torn between two forces viz. the peasants and the working classes and the petty bourgeoisie. The latter were often hostile to working class attitudes which devalued the notion of 'patria', for among Socialists it remained a dispensable bourgeois concept.

In Italy's political life, the old regime of Giolitti faced a similar threat. The Socialist Party gained in strength along with the new Catholic party - the Partito Popolare. Meanwhile there was a split among the Socialists themselves. The extreme Left formed the Communist Party in 1921 and wanted to start an effective programme which could overthrow the bourgeoisie and conquer the State. Other Socialists were, however, satisfied with reform. Continuous strikes and disorder remained as evidence of the general struggle against the bourgeoisie.

In this state of affairs, it was difficult to run the government on the old lines, so Giolitti called a General Election in May 1921 and in the 'national blocs', favoured by him, the Fascists made their appearance. Between 1919 and 1922, there were five different governments. No government could claim a solid majority. Strikes continued to disrupt the country's peace. The most serious one resulted in the occupation of the factories by the workers in September 1920. This led many to fear the next step which could be the revolution. It was, however, the culminating point of revolutionary energy for the danger of revolution was well past. Yet contemporaries could hardly

be expected to have known the exact position and fear of the revolution only increased among the bourgeoisie. Towards the end of 1920, Fascism made its sudden and successful appearance.

Mussolini had no specific doctrinal plan. He believed in action alone. He gathered around him the ex-servicemen who were unemployed and humiliated, those attracted to action and adventure for its own sake and those who were responsible for an agrarian reaction i.e. the landowners. Others who followed him were the 'small bourgeoisie' who joined the party because of wounded national pride. They feared the Communist revolution and the strike of September 1920 heightened their dread. They took Giolitti's passive control for weakness in the State which, in their eyes, needed strengthening at all costs. The educated bourgeoisie who followed him were motivated by patriotism. They were conscious of their cultural heritage and looked upon the Risorgimento and the unification of Italy as the outstanding achievement of their forefathers. The masses, in their opinion, blasphemed against the 'patria' by subscribing to the internationalism of Socialist propaganda. Other factors, more spiritual or sentimental controlled their choice. Most important among these concerned the status of the Church of Rome. By the conclusion of the Lateran pacts with the Holy See on February 11, 1929, Mussolini had fastened on to a deeply rooted sentiment in the Italian bourgeois mind. An Italy at peace with the Papacy guaranteed their 'spiritual quiet and interior tranquillity'. Pope Pius XI addressing Catholic students after the Lateran agreements affirmed: 'We have also been nobly and abundantly supported from the other side. And perhaps there was need for a man (Mussolini) such as Providence has caused to encounter...'⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Quoted in Chabod, p.70.

It is clear that the threat of the Communist revolution, however illusory as it appears today to the historian, was real at the time. Intellectuals like Gentile were attracted to Fascism as it promised through its acceptance of the Roman Church and its opposition to Italian Socialism, a suitable counter-force to the disorder of the times which could re-instate the prestige of the State and affirm spiritual reality against the economic categories of dialectical materialism. As Gentile's letter to Mussolini, quoted earlier, adequately illustrates, liberalism was re-interpreted in the new world-view but not overthrown. The common enemy was Marxist Socialism. It is largely in this context of thought that Yeats understood Italian Fascism. The Communist threat in Ireland can now be assessed as baseless, but to the contemporary, during the nineteen twenties, it may not have appeared quite as innocuous. Certainly Socialist propaganda in Ireland attracted Yeats's attention, as can be inferred from his frequent reference in letters, essays and articles to its untenability. As early as April 1919, he wrote George Russell (AF):

'What I want is that Ireland be kept from giving itself (under the lunatic faculty of going against everything which it believes England to affirm) to Marxian revolution or Marxian definitions of value in any form. I consider the Marxian criterion of values as in this age the spear-head of materialism and leading to inevitable murder.'⁷⁷

We have seen how his response to the Republicans was guided, to some extent, by this awareness.

In Gentile's philosophy of education, Yeats found a system of thought which accorded well with his own theories of Unity of Being. Thus in his Diary of 1930, he prescribed for the Ireland of the future, the educational system of Italy. What has perhaps not been fully appreciated so far, is the

⁷⁷ Wade, Letters, p.656

fact that Yeats interpreted the Fascist 'ideal' less through the activism of Mussolini than through the philosophy of Gentile. When in 1933 he worked on a social theory which could be used against Communism in Ireland, one that he described as 'Fascism modified by religion', the educational aim of Gentile was not far from his mind.

Gentile's system was profoundly idealistic. Briefly stated, it maintained that it was only thought which gave material reality any true unity and that matter as multiple was an abstraction. Gentile's starting point was therefore diametrically opposite to that of the dialectical materialists. The world, for him, lived in the spirit. Culture or the life of the spirit was 'constant becoming', 'in no manner comparable to a moving body in which the body itself could be distinguished from motion'. It is equated with the whole body of education 'which continues to form, develop, and thus to live'. The dance of the spirit was 'motion without mass' or 'gazing motion'. The gaze is one of joy, and culture is the blossoming of self-awareness, an aspiration to a truth which is good and an answer to 'a call to duty shared by all men'. Education therefore is ethical and divine. In Gentile's ideal education 'the spirit is in that it becomes, that it becomes in so far as it acquires self-consciousness, that its being therefore is consciousness in the act of being acquired.'⁷⁸ The subject is identified with the object, the spirit with culture, the pupil with his education. The separation between subject and object causes the sorrow of knowledge. The true aim for the subject is to recognise itself in the object and feel its own infinite liberty. As he

⁷⁸ Quoted in In Exalted Reverie, ed. A.N. Jeffares and E.G.W. Cross, p.134 from Giovanni Gentile, The Reformation of Education (London, 1923), p.226.

explains:

'This dialectic in which the spiritual becoming unfolds itself (subject, object, and unity of subject and object), this self-objectifying or self-estrangement aiming at self-attainment, - this is the eternal life of the spirit, which creates its immortal forms, and determines the ideal contents of culture and education...'⁷⁹

On the strength of the triple division (i.e. subject, object and unity of subject and object) Gentile relates the functions of art, religion and philosophy. Thus art is the self-realisation of the spirit as subject. Religion is complete self-abstraction through self-immersion in the object of worship. The concrete spirit is neither subject nor object. 'It is a self-objectifying subject, and an object which becomes the subject in virtue of the subjectivity that alights on it as it realises it... It is the synthesis, the unity of these two opposites, ever in conflict and yet always intimately joined. And the spirit, as this unity, is the concreteness both of art (reality of the abstract subject) and of religion (reality of the abstract object). It is philosophy.'⁸⁰ In reality art, religion and philosophy are indissolubly conjoined. Any separation would destroy their spiritual character 'and put in its place mechanism, which is the property of all that is not of the spirit.'⁸¹

The ideal philosophy, however, is never fulfilled, and Gentile recognises the paradox. It is man's 'own spirit, his very self, which to live must grow,

⁷⁹ The Reformation of Education, p.230.

⁸⁰ Loc. cit.

⁸¹ The Reformation of Education, pp.230-6.

and which must constitute itself as it develops. And therefore this philosophy cannot help being man's ideal, which is always being realised and which is never fulfilled'.⁸² The fragmentary men were aesthetes, superstitious worshippers and stargazers unaware of the pit under their feet. They were to be pitied. The ideal of Gentile's education would be, as Torchiana puts it, 'an exalted, superhuman, cosmic dancer attuned to the infinite vibrations of life at every moment of its becoming.'⁸³

It is easy to recognise elements in Gentile's thought which Yeats found useful for the articulation of his own understanding and vision of reality. The ultimate reality as the eternal conflict of contraries indissolubly linked, gradually attained a certain sharpness and clarity in his mind. His integrated beliefs in literature, nationality and philosophy suggested parallels to Gentile's triple division. In his diary of 1930, there are numerous implicit references to the spiritual dialectic which for him exposed the limitations of dialectical materialism. He experienced the artistic and religious impulses in himself and saw all history in terms of the dynamic of subject-object relationships:

'I am always, in all I do, driven to a moment which is the realisation of myself as unique and free, or to a moment which is the surrender to God of all that I am. I think that there are historical cycles wherein one or the other predominates, and that a cycle approaches where all shall [be as particular and concrete as human intensity] persists.'⁸⁴

82 The Reformation of Education, p.239.

83 In Excited Reverie, p.137.

84 Explorations, p.305.

And again:

'The ultimate reality must be all movement, all thought, all perception extinguished, two freedoms unthinkably, unimaginably absorbed in one another. Surely if either circuit, that which carries us into man or that which carries us into God, were reality, the generation had long since found its term.'⁸⁵

Gentile's triple division is also recognisable in Kant's three convictions:

Freedom, God and Immortality. Yeats quotes these in his Diary and states:

'The first nation that can affirm the three convictions affirmed by Kant as free powers - i.e. without association of language, dogma, and ritual - will be able to control the moral energies of the soul.'⁸⁶

It is, therefore, in terms of the spiritual dialectic that Yeats understood the Fascist programme as well as the Marxist which under Lenin was becoming more centralised. He writes:

'The Fascist, the Bolshevik, seeks to turn the idea of the State into free power, and both have reached (though the idea of the State as it is in the mind of the Bolshevik is dry and lean) some shadow of that intense energy which shall come to those of whom I speak.'⁸⁷

Rejecting the Marxist premise, he continues:

'An idea of the State which is not a preparation for those three convictions Freedom, God, Immortality a State founded on economics alone, would be a prison house. A State must be made like a Chartres Cathedral for the glory of God and the soul.'⁸⁸

85 Explorations, p.307.

86 Ibid, p.334.

87 Ibid, p.335.

88 Loc. cit.

The Fascist idea of the 'State as an ethical reality', quoted by Gentile in his letter to Mussolini, was obviously closer to Yeats's expressed belief than the Communist belief in the instrumentality of the State.

In determining a solution for Ireland, Yeats worked out the implications of the Fascist experience. As he saw it, modern Ireland, in the historical crisis, was faced with a choice. He was convinced of his country's spiritual character and heritage and in 1933 set about constructing the social theory, which he described as 'fascism modified by religion'. In 1930 he had written: 'No modern man can accept a conclusion that confounds red and white armies alike.'⁸⁹ He had made his choice.

He found Ireland's identity in the eighteenth century greats - Swift, Berkeley, Burke and Goldsmith - whose works he studied with increasing enthusiasm - '...I read Swift for months together, Burke and Berkeley less often but always with excitement, and Goldsmith lures and waits'.⁹⁰ Ireland, like Italy, had her own tradition of conservative thought. He wrote: 'Swift's A Discourse of the Contests and Dissensions between the Nobles and the Commons in Athens and Rome is more important to modern thought than Vico and certainly foreshadowed Flinders Petrie, Frobenius, Henry Adams, Spengler, and very exactly and closely Gerald Heard.'⁹¹ He was struck by Swift's interpretation of the saying 'vox populi vox Dei' as the 'universal bent and current of the people, not of the bare majority of a few representatives, which is often procured by a little art, and great industry and application;

89 Explorations, p.318.

90 Ibid, p.344.

91 Ibid, pp.313-14.

wherein those who engage in the pursuits of malice and revenge are much more sedulous than such as would prevent them.'⁹² Swift's concept of freedom seemed relevant. So Yeats writes:

'Liberty depended upon a balance within the State, like that of the 'humours' in a human body, or like that 'unity of being' Dante compared to a perfectly proportioned human body, and for its sake Swift was prepared to sacrifice what seems to the modern man liberty itself.'⁹³

Yeats's application of his philosophy of unity to his understanding of Swift's notion of liberty is perhaps parallel to Gentile's description of 'freedom through law' apropos Fascism.

The rule or guidance of élites was a natural conclusion. Both Communists and Fascists alike accepted it. So Yeats observes:

'Both Sorel and Marx, their eyes more Swift's than Vico's, have preached a return to a primeval state, a beating of all down into a single class that a new civilisation may arise with its Few, its Many, and its One. Students of contemporary Italy, where Vico's thought is current through its influence upon Croce and Gentile, think it created, or in part created, the present government of one man surrounded by just such able assistants as Vico foresaw.'⁹⁴

The opportunity for the practical application of these ideas in Ireland momentarily appeared, for Yeats, in the Blueshirt Movement of 1933. In order to understand the reasons for his hopes, we may review, very briefly, the practical politics at the time.

⁹² Explorations, p.292.

⁹³ Ibid, p.356.

⁹⁴ Ibid, p.354.

Yeats's Senate career came to a close in 1928. By his position regarding the Divorce and Censorship Bills, he earned the antagonism of the Catholic hierarchy and was once again politically isolated. Through his experience in the Senate, he recognised the precarious status of the Protestant minority in modern Ireland. Anglo-Ireland and Catholic Gaeldom remained tragically un-integrated. The design of Griffith, O'Higgins and Collins - architects of the Irish Free State - who recognised the services of Anglo-Ireland and aimed at preserving the Davis ideal of Irish unity, seemed forgotten by the late twenties. Just as he reminded Catholic Ireland of Protestant sacrifice in 'September 1913', so also the peroration of his speech on divorce was a reminder of Ireland's Protestant heritage. Thus he declared his identity:

'We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke: we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of its political intelligence.'⁹⁵

Force, which was bringing moral unity in the fascist countries, was considered applicable in Ireland. With this in mind, he wrote:

'We have not an Irish nation until all classes grant its right to take life according to the law and until it is certain that the threat of invasion, made by no matter who, would rouse all classes to arms... Only when all permit the State to demand the voluntary or involuntary sacrifice of its citizens' lives will Ireland possess that moral unity to which England, according to Coleridge, owes so large a part of its greatness.'⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Quoted in In Excited Reverie, p.254.

⁹⁶ Explorations, pp.338-39.

In 1932 De Valera's party won the Elections and took over the Government. Yeats voted for the defeated party. Some members of the defeated party set about organising a paramilitary movement, on Fascist lines, to overthrow their opponents and recover lost power. The uniform adopted by the members was the blueshirt and the movement was named accordingly parallel to the Blackshirts of Italy and the Brownshirts of Germany. General Eoin O'Duffy, who was dismissed as Commissioner of the Civic Guards by De Valera, became the leader of the Blueshirt Convention that called itself the 'National Guard' on July 20, 1933. Yeats became acquainted with the movement through a certain Captain Dermot MacManus, a student of Eastern mysticism who had fought in the Great War and Irish Civil War. He was a member of the Army Comrades Association which was remodelled as the civil unarmed body pledged to give disciplined service to the country.⁹⁷

The movement appealed to Irish conservatives 'and it seemed for a moment that something like a counter-revolution, which would fuse Ireland into a nation was on foot.'⁹⁸ Yeats's interest was immediately aroused. He invited O'Duffy to his house 'and expiated on Hegel and Spengler'. The declared intention of the National Guard appeared promising. Their official organ The BlueShirt of August 12, 1933, stated:

'The National Guard does not favour any form of Socialism... It stands for the right of private property and believes in the necessity of individual initiative... ..it believes that the state should fix the constitution of various unions and federations and take care that they are controlled by men of good character, public spirit and sound national aims.'

⁹⁷ Hone, p.435.

⁹⁸ Loc. cit.

It further stated that by the Corporative System (which by then was favoured in Italy, Austria, France, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Norway, Lithuania and Greece) the Blueshirts of Ireland had 'undertaken to sponsor the only political system capable of meeting and triumphing over Communism.'

Against the background of Yeats's political philosophy and historical vision, it is easy to see why he became interested. He agreed to write songs for the launching of the movement. To Mrs. Shakespear he wrote in July 23, 1933:

'The great secret is now out, - a convention of Blueshirts - "National Guards" - have received their new leader with the Fascist salute, and the new leader announces Reform of Parliament as his business. When I wrote to you the Fascist organiser of the Blueshirts had told me that he was about to bring to see me the man he had selected for leader that I might talk my anti-democratic philosophy. I was ready, for I had rewritten for the seventh time the part of A Vision that deals with the future...Italy, Poland, Germany, then perhaps Ireland. Doubtless I shall hate it (though not so much as I hate Irish democracy) but it is September, and we must not behave like the gay young sparks of May and June.'99

In August 1933 he was still hopeful:

'Whether it [BlueShirt Movement] succeeds or not in abolishing parliamentary government as we know it today it will certainly bring into discussion all the things I care for...'100

By September 1933, however, he was able to call the movement 'our political comedy'. When the police began to oppress the Blueshirts, the movement

99 Wade, Letters, pp.812-13.

100 Loc. cit.

acquired importance and Mr. Cosgrave surrendered the leadership of the Opposition to O'Duffy as a consequence. A new party called 'United Ireland' was formed for which Yeats wrote his marching songs to the tune of O'Donnell Abu. On realising that the party did not really have the same aims as his own, he decided to rewrite the songs. In his 'Commentary on the Three Songs' he explained:

'...if any Government or party undertake this work to break the reign of the mob it will need force, marching men (the logic of fanaticism whether in a woman or a mob is drawn from a premise, protected by ignorance and therefore irrefutable); it will promise not this or that measure but a discipline, a way of life; that sacred drama must be to all native eyes and ears become the greatest of the parables. There is no such government or party today; should either appear, I offer it these trivial songs and what remains to me of life. (April 1934)'

Later in a postscript he added:

'Because a friend belonging to a political party wherewith I had once had some loose associations told me that it had, or was about to have, some such aim as mine, I wrote these songs. Finding that it neither would nor could, I increased their fantasy, their extravagance, their obscurity, that no party might sing them. (August 1934)'¹⁰¹

The Fascist experiment in Ireland ended in failure. By 1935 Mussolini's expansionist motives were regarded by many as a betrayal of the Corporative State, social peace and justice. Fascist violence in Germany was on the increase. Political ideologies seemed to be working towards unsatisfactory conclusions. The achievement of 'Unity of Being' seemed no less unreal than the Utopias and milleniums of more optimistic faiths; Yeats's tragic sense deepened. He became disillusioned with political systems in general. In April 8, 1936 he wrote Ethel Mannin:

¹⁰¹ Variorum, pp.836-37.

'Do not try to make a politician of me, even in Ireland I shall never I think be that again - as my sense of reality deepens, and I think it does with my age, my horror at the cruelty of governments grows greater... Communist, Fascist, Nationalist, clerical, anti-clerical, are all responsible according to the number of their victims. I have not been silent; I have used the only vehicle I possess - verse.'¹⁰²

Again in another context, in November 30, 1938, he wrote:

'...why should I trouble about communism, fascism, liberalism, radicalism, when all, though some bow first and some stern first but all at the same pace, all are going down stream with the artificial unity which ends every civilisation.'¹⁰³

The historical vision re-asserted itself. The change was yet to come. His contempt for forms of government lasted to the end for they appeared, to him, as transitional modes of a disintegrating age. Thus in his last prose piece, he reiterates:

'Republics, Kingdoms, Soviets, Corporate States, Parliaments, are trash, as Hugo said of something else, "not worth one blade of grass that God gives for the nest of the linnet"..'¹⁰⁴

His basic convictions regarding the government of nations, however, remained unchanged. Instructing the Ireland of the future, he returns to the classical prescription i.e. the rule of creative élites:

'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 Ireland itself.'¹⁰⁵

102 Wade, Letters, pp.850-51.

103 Ibid, p.869.

104 Explorations, p.414.

105 Loc. cit.

When Yeats recommended the unqualified rule of creative élites in Ireland, he did not feel he was offering the country an impracticable solution. He wrote with two certainties in mind:

'...first that a hundred men, their creative power wrought to the highest pitch, their will trained but not broken, can do more for the welfare of a people, whether in war or peace, than a million of any lesser sort no matter how expensive their education, and that although the Irish masses are vague and excitable because they have not been moulded or cast, we have as good blood as there is in Europe. Berkeley, Swift, Burke, Grattan, Parnell, Augusta Gregory, Synge, Kevin O'Higgins, are the true Irish people, and there is nothing too hard for such as these...'¹⁰⁶

The last named is the only Catholic and Gaelic name on the list. Kevin O'Higgins Minister of Justice in the Irish Free State Government, is the last personality I have chosen to study in relation to Yeats for reasons indicated earlier. He was referred to by An Problacht as 'one of the most blood-guilty Irishmen in our generation'¹⁰⁷ and it also became the fashion in Ireland to call him the 'Irish Mussolini'. It was declared that he had signed the death warrant of his friend who was best man at his wedding. He was hated by many and he is known to have remarked to his wife: 'Nobody can expect to live who has done what I have'.

Yeats's acknowledged admiration for O'Higgins is easily associated with the poet's fascist leanings. O'Higgins' policy of ruthless severity, his stern defence of seventy-seven executions and his introduction of the Public Safety Bill which prescribed flogging as punishment, are doubtless the outstanding facts of his career that come to mind. Yeats's support of his policy and his description of O'Higgins as Ireland's 'sole statesman'¹⁰⁸ may lead one to infer

¹⁰⁶ Explorations, pp.441-42.

¹⁰⁷ De Vere White, p.131.

¹⁰⁸ Collected Poems, p.320

that because O'Higgins carried out measures appropriating Fascist practice, Yeats admired him. Against the above discussion of the nature of Yeats's 'fascism', however, such an inference would appear somewhat facile and ill-considered.

Yeats's association with O'Higgins was on a fairly personal level. On his assassination, Yeats wrote Olivia Shakespear:

'... The murder of O'Higgins was no mere public event to us. He was our personal friend, as well as the one strong intellect in Irish public life...'109

O'Higgins returned Yeats's sympathy, and as Hone suggests, 'there can be little doubt that his powerful influence in the Cabinet would have been used - if not openly, at least secretly - on Yeats's side in such matters as Censorship, etc., had he lived.'¹¹⁰ As such Yeats's naming O'Higgins among Grattan, Parnell, Swift and Berkeley was based on a knowledge that exceeded such as could be available to him through mere official acquaintance. In the following section, I shall try to show how certain aspects of O'Higgins' personality, brought to light by his biographer Terence de Vere White, formed an integral part of Yeats's concept of the 'true Irish people', such as it was developed through his association in his formative years with John O'Leary, his knowledge of the eighteenth century Anglo-Irish tradition and his understanding of Parnell. Yeats certainly admired O'Higgins for his 'authoritarian' leanings, but there were certain other important characteristics of the Minister which were responsible for the poet's generous estimate. An examination of the same may

¹⁰⁹ Wade, Letters, pp.726-27.

¹¹⁰ Hone, p.382.

facilitate a clearer perspective not only on Yeats's fascist predilections but also on his permanent sensitivity to the impact of personality as against political creed or opinion in public life. This is particularly pertinent in view of the fact that O'Higgins was related to the Healys and Sullivans who, for reasons stated earlier, were not acceptable to Yeats.

It may be pointed out, at the outset, that the biographical impressions of O'Higgins, are derived from a single source¹¹¹ and therefore may be one-sided. With this caution in mind, however, relevant aspects may be analysed for what they are worth in enhancing our understanding of Yeats.

In order to understand the aspects of O'Higgins' personality relevant to this study, it is necessary to keep in view the main events of his career which may be reviewed briefly.

Kevin O'Higgins was the grandson of T.D.Sullivan editor of Nation. His father, Dr. Higgins, was an admirer of Timothy Healy. He was brought up in an environment which was nationalist without being revolutionary. Educated in Clongowes Wood College and St. Patrick's College, Carlow, he obtained his degree in Arts at the old Royal University of Ireland. Intended for Law, O'Higgins served his apprenticeship as a solicitor with his uncle Maurice Healy (brother of Timothy Healy). During that period of his career, he threw himself into the new revolutionary movement of Sinn Fein and became

¹¹¹ To my knowledge, the biography of O'Higgins by De Vere White is the only one available to date.

a faithful disciple of Arthur Griffith. Griffith's theory of revolution appealed to the realistic turn of his mind. As such he inherited the Davis ideal of Irish freedom and unity which guided Griffith till his end.

In 1917, owing to some seditious speeches, O'Higgins was imprisoned in Mountjoy Prison and De Vere White observes how 'he never referred to his imprisonment or complained about it.'¹¹² After his release from prison, he was sent as Sinn Fein candidate for Queen's County in the general election of 1918. As representative, he always showed greater interest in Irish independence than in an Irish Republic. For a while, he became a member of the IRB but did not take the oath.

First Irish Parliament Dail Eireann 1919

A department of Local self-Government was formed by the first Irish parliament - Dail Eireann - in January 1919 under Mr. Cosgrave and O'Higgins was selected to be an assistant to Cosgrave. Meanwhile the policy of force was adopted by the Dail and Michael Collins set about organising the 'Squad'. When the Black-and-Tans struck Ireland, O'Higgins strongly supported Irish reprisals. He had, like all Sinn Feiners, nothing but contempt for Redmond's constitutionalism.

The Treaty 1921

When the Treaty was signed, O'Higgins wrote a triumphant letter home. Of course like all separatists, he may have been disappointed that a complete separation between Ireland and England was not effected. Nonetheless he felt

¹¹² De Vere White, p.24.

that the Irish delegates had struck a reasonable bargain. When De Valera, Austin Stack and Cathal Brugha withheld their assent to the Treaty, he was perturbed. For him the essential matter of the hour was national unity - 'if the Cabinet could work together, the best could be got out of the Treaty.' He pleaded with De Valera to avoid a split which could like the Parnell Split ruin the Irish cause. He was anxious to maintain the moral dignity of Ireland such as he conceived it to be. As his biographer puts it:

'In the crisis he had only one impulse - to put aside any feeling of disappointment, to keep a united front, and to embark on a policy of construction in the country. He had no doubts whatever as to whether it was better to implement this Treaty, make a constitution for the country, take over immediate control of its government and resources, or to embark on a further period of guerilla war, impending bankruptcy and general demoralization. Against a policy which was endorsed by Griffith and Collins, he was not prepared to jib. He respected one, he hero-worshipped the other.'¹¹³

Moreover, he anticipated, like Yeats when nominated Senator, the exciting task of nation building.

During the prolonged Treaty Debates, his argument in favour of the Treaty rested on the idea of principle:

'To ratify this Treaty, it has been said, would constitute an abandonment of principles,...would be a betrayal to those who died for Irish independence in the past... Now, principle is immortal. If the principle of Ireland's nationhood could be vitally affected by the action of a representative body of Irishmen at any time, it has died many deaths... The Irish chieftains had sworn allegiance to George III. Irish members at Westminster had pledged like allegiance for 118 years. Never was it suggested that the men who

went out fighting for a Republic were bound, or behaved, dishonourably because of the allegiance sworn by their ancestors.'114

O'Higgins believed that Ireland, after the bitterness of rebellion, was less suited to revolution than to the peaceful evolution of her own government. This, he felt, would guarantee the protection and welfare of the Irish people who were to take precedence, in the minds of politicians, over the dictates of creed and opinion.

Provisional Government,

Irish Free State 1922

O'Higgins was elected Minister of Economic Affairs in the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State. The Dail continued to operate and this was fatal to the maintenance of order in the country. A split in the Army aggravated matters. Seceding members of the IRA under Rory O'Connor formed an independent military division. The severity of O'Higgins' undertakings as Government official is best explained through the light in which he saw Ireland in 1922. So he described:

'...it is necessary...to remember what a weird composite of idealism, neurosis, megalomania and criminality is apt to be thrown to the surface in even the best regulated revolution. It was a situation precipitated by men who had not cleared the blood from their eyes, and re-inforced by all the waywardness of a people with whom, by dint of historical circumstances, a negative attitude had tended to become traditional. With many it was a reaction from a great fear. With others it was fanaticism pure and simple. With others still it was something neither pure and simple; an ebullition of the savage primitive passion to wreck and loot and level when an opportunity seemed to offer to do so with impunity. Instincts of that kind are

114 Quoted in De Vere White, p.74.

not an Irish monopoly. They are universal to human nature, but in the conditions which exist in modern civilised States, they are, for the most part successfully, held in check, manifesting themselves only in occasional isolated outrages of a revolting character or in sporadic local outbreaks, easily countered by the organised forces of the State. But in Ireland in 1922 there was no State and no organised forces. The Provisional Government was simply eight young men in the City Hall standing amidst the ruins of one administration, with the foundations of another not yet laid, and with wild men screaming through the keyhole.'115

As Minister in the Provisional Government, he declared:

'I stand now for getting the best out of the Treaty, for making the fullest use of the power and opportunity it gives us to develop to the utmost the moral and material resources of the nation. I have not abandoned any political aspirations to which I have given expression in the past, but, in the existing circumstances, I advise the people to trust to evolution rather than revolution for their attainment.'116

O'Higgins' approach to and understanding of the Irish situation was regarded by members of the Provisional Government as mature, balanced and realistic. With Griffith and Collins, he could claim to number among the architects of the Irish Free State.

Irish Free State Government 1922

Arthur Griffith died in August 12, 1922, and Michael Collins was shot soon after. Members of the Army who were faithful to Collins were infuriated and disorder increased. A new Government was formed and Kevin O'Higgins was elected Minister for Home Affairs. A new constitution was enacted and much

115 'Three Years' Hard Labour', (Dublin, 1924), p.7.

116 De Vere White, p.99.

of the work fell on O'Higgins. He had an uncompromising manner and firmly supported any Government measure. Consequently, he was soon recognised as 'the strong man of the government and the originator of its policy.'¹¹⁷

To re-establish order in the state, O'Higgins supported General Mulcahy's order for army executions. He believed the 'nation's life is worth the life of many individuals'. Other charges to his discredit in the eyes of many, included his introduction of the Public Safety Bill in 1923 which prescribed flogging as punishment. He ordered the flogging of recalcitrant Republicans. It was this practice that grieved Lady Gregory who, among others, believed in the efficacy of less ruthless measures. O'Higgins supported the Bill by saying: 'It is not a popular Bill, but it is a just Bill, an honest Bill, and some of us did not come into politics for popularity.'¹¹⁸

Another act of ruthless severity was his assent to the shooting of four Republicans who were in custody. One of these was his friend Rory O'Connor, who was best man at his wedding. He believed that all government is based on force, and 'must meet force with greater force if it is to survive'. Belief in this principle was the rationale of his actions. Thus after the shooting of the Republicans, he defended the Government:

'There was never an act done through personal vengeance, and never an act done in hot blood. We have no higher aim than to place the people of Ireland in the saddle of Ireland, and let them do their will, but we will not acquiesce in gun-bullying, and we will take very stern and drastic measures to stop it. Personal spite, great heavens! Vindictiveness! One of these men was a friend of mine.'¹¹⁹

117 De Vere White, p.107

118 Quoted in De Vere White, p.174.

119 De Vere White, pp.130-31.

After the speech, he broke down for the first time in public. De Vere White observes: 'He was a man who would not have lifted a finger to save his brother in the same circumstances. The type is not common. O'Higgins belonged spiritually to another age...as such he was destined to the loneliness of all men who transcend human weaknesses, for we do not love those who are stronger than ourselves.'¹²⁰

Significant features of O'Higgins' policy were his complete, personal disregard for popularity on the one hand, and his unflinching support of the democratic principle on the other. Thus while he earned the hatred of many, he believed as he stated: 'Insofar as we carry out the will of the Irish people, we have authority: if we flout that will, we have none.'¹²¹

Another feature, which deserves mention, was his approach to the Southern Unionists or members of the old Protestant Ascendancy. Of them he said:

'The fears of the Unionists may be unfounded. We here may think that there is very little substance in them but of the reality of those fears there can be no doubt...I think it was true statesmanship that dictated to the late President the taking of very considerable concessions along that line... We now know no political party. We have taken quite definitely a step forward in our resolution towards completion of nationhood. These people are part and parcel of the nation, and we, being the majority and strength of the country...it becomes well from us to make a generous adjustment to show that these people were regarded, not as alien enemies, not as planters, but that we regard them as part and parcel of this Nation, and that we wish them to take their share of its responsibilities...'¹²²

He was unaffected by agrarianism and when the matter of protecting the property of a certain Mr. Lewin came up before the Dail, he declared:

¹²⁰ De Vere White, p.131.

¹²¹ Quoted in De Vere White, p.96 from Official Report, p.463.

¹²² Quoted in De Vere White, pp.115-16.

'Some little stress was laid on the fact that Mr. Lewin was a landlord. For many a long day we have been seeking in this country a time when one man would be as good as another, and we have it now; and Mr. Lewin's home and property will be defended as sternly and as rigidly as the home of any poor man, or tenant, or labourer in the country...¹²³

The Davis ideal is clearly recognisable in his sentiments which immediately recall O'Leary's statement in the Dublin University Review of December 1886 regarding 'Some Guarantees for the Protestant and Unionist Minority'. The old Fenian had asserted: 'The root of the whole matter lies in the very simple fact that we are all Irishmen, and that we should all strive to become "kindly Irish of the Irish, neither Saxon nor Italian." This land is ours, from the centre to the sea, and as such, however rogues or fools may gabble, the land of a Protestant and a landlord as of a Catholic and a farmer.'

Last Phase

O'Higgins had definite designs for the future of Ireland. He saw immense possibilities in a British Commonwealth. He imagined 'a group of states absolutely free, each a kingdom, each linked with each by virtue of a common king. In such a polity the individual states would pursue their own interests, but would confer in order to secure co-operation where the interests of all were involved.'¹²⁴ In holding the monarchical principle, he was obviously following the theories of Griffith. The unity of Ireland was one of his most cherished ambitions and he firmly believed it was attainable. It was this belief which guided his negotiations with the British on the Boundary issue,

¹²³ De Vere White, p.116.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p.189.

during his last years.

In 1927 he was assassinated. Before the tragedy, he had remarked to his wife: 'You know enough about natural history to understand how the coral insects make their beautiful little islands. I do be thinking that the part some of us may have to play is to leave our bones like the coral insects behind us for others to build upon.'¹²⁵

He 'was gay in the face of death' because he was prepared for it. 'Of course, I shall be assassinated,' he used to say to colleagues as one would speak of an evening engagement,¹²⁶ and to his wife he had remarked:

'Nobody can expect to live who has done what I have.'

The above sketch of O'Higgins' disposition and career could show, on analysis, how in many respects the Minister combined in himself the attributes of O'Leary and Parnell that moulded Yeats's understanding of Irish character. They were attributes which contributed to a certain moral independence and isolation in the world of men and events. As evidenced in earlier chapters, it was the same that Yeats recognised in William Morris and potentially in Maud Gonne. It was, in the last analysis, an expression of a state of mind, an awareness psychically antithetical to the Irish masses and therefore indispensable for Irish 'Unity of Being'. In his later life, Yeats triumphantly located it in the eighteenth century Anglo-Irish tradition of Swift, Berkeley, Burke and Goldsmith. We have seen how he established his

¹²⁵ Quoted in De Vere White, p.239.

¹²⁶ Ibid, p.185.

identity among those of his experience who shared it. O'Higgins was the only Catholic in modern Ireland who seemed to partake of it. When in 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited',¹²⁷ Yeats writes of those who shared in the glory of Ireland's passions, he describes 'Kevin O'Higgins' countenance that wears/ A gentle questioning look that cannot hide/ A soul incapable of remorse or rest', and as such his description recalls the indefinable quality of emotion that characterised the saeva indignatio of Swift as also the proud solitude of Parnell. His admiration for O'Higgins was possibly more deep rooted than is generally supposed. Some reference to the attributes would make this clear.

O'Higgins' physical appearance, like O'Leary and Parnell, was impressive. In his early days, one friend described him: 'Like a Rembrandt portrait, all shadows and depth.'¹²⁸ 'The youthful Kevin O'Higgins', wrote Winston Churchill, 'a figure out of the antique cast in bronze'.¹²⁹ The statuesque quality of his appearance could not have missed Yeats whose response to personalities, as we have seen, was more often than not, guided by his aesthetic sense ('Beautiful lofty things: O'Leary's noble head' or 'Maud Gonne at Howth station waiting a train,/ Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head').

O'Higgins' magisterial manner recalled Parnell. As his biographer

¹²⁷ Collected Poems, p.368.

¹²⁸ De Vere White, p.4.

¹²⁹ Quoted in De Vere White, p.131.

describes, 'he spoke, as it were, from a height. This had a different effect on different people: to some it conveyed compelling moral purpose; to others imperiousness.'¹³⁰ We can be quite sure that for Yeats it suggested moral force, the same that he detected in O'Leary. It found expression in a steadfast support of principle in political life. It made no allowance for political expediency as a guide for public conduct. Through his association with O'Leary, Yeats was already convinced that this ideal was characteristic of the Irish race. Thus in his review of O'Leary's Recollections in 1897, he had written:

'To me it has always seemed that the passion for abstract right, which has made the letters to [the] press, the occasional speeches, and above all the conversations of Mr. John O'Leary so influential with the younger generation, is the Celtic passion for ideas, intensified by that mistrust of the expedient which comes to men who have seen the failure of many hopes; and that as Irish men and women become educated they will inherit a like passion, if not in a like degree...'¹³¹

Yeats's views remained unchanged in this respect and in 1932, we find him writing of his interview with De Valera with the same convictions in mind:

'They [English] decide moral questions in the interest of their parties and express their decisions with a complacency that rouses other nations to fury. Here I think we are generally troubled about right and wrong, we do not decide easily...'¹³²

¹³⁰ De Vere White, p.70.

¹³¹ The Bookman, 1897.

¹³² Quoted in Hone, p.426.

O'Higgins' personal disregard for popularity was allied to this passion for principle. Bryan Cooper wrote of him: 'I am certain that if he woke up some morning and found that he was popular he would examine his conscience...'¹³³ Through his experiences of public life, Yeats came to believe that an indifference to the dictates of the mob was the supreme test regarding the moral freedom of artist and ruler alike. As such O'Higgins was the true successor to O'Leary, Parnell and the eighteenth century greats who despised the tyranny of the Many. Significantly, O'Higgins had described himself as 'one of the dictators who answer daily here to the representatives of the people.'¹³⁴

Like O'Leary and Parnell, O'Higgins was extremely sensitive to the moral dignity of his country. As we have seen, the unity of Ireland was what he aspired to achieve. Like O'Leary, he wished to integrate Protestants and Catholics, landlords and peasants into a single nation. In an address to the Catholic Truth Society: 'The Catholic Layman in Public Life', he declared:

'There is little point in opposing other religious denominations. Men like Grattan, Davis, O'Leary, Mitchel, were by no means last in the race of Irish public men with a high and valiant social code. The word catholic signifies, literally universal and Catholic and Protestant and Presbyterian are alike catholic insofar as they give beneficent public service.'

He quoted with approval, O'Leary's declaration that 'he had but one religion, the old Persian - to bend the bow and tell the truth.'¹³⁵ It is superfluous to labour the observation that Yeats and O'Higgins belonged to the same

¹³³ Quoted in De Vere White, p.172.

¹³⁴ Ibid, p.157.

¹³⁵ Ibid, pp.181-82.

tradition of thought. They were both devoted to the Davis ideal of unity. When the Irish Free State was established, they were both enthusiastic about the creation of national institutions to further the ideals they had in mind. When Yeats wrote Edmund Dulac: 'Dublin is reviving after the Civil War, and self-government is creating a little stir of excitement...People are trying to found a new society. Politicians want to be artistic, and artistic people to meet politicians, and so on', it is not improbable that he had O'Higgins in mind, who regularly attended the Abbey Theatre on Saturday afternoons.

Like Yeats who described the work of creating national institutions - 'All coral insects but with some design of the ultimate island',¹³⁶ O'Higgins too, as we have seen, conceived of his work in like metaphors. His style and conception of an evolving state was comparable to that of Burke. He was therefore, to Yeats, Ireland's 'sole statesman' for he shared a knowledge of her historical being.

His ideal of freedom in the political sphere was what Yeats strove to establish in the artistic. 'He had in particular, a dislike for that relic of conquest - the slave mind, whether it manifested itself by subservience or unnecessary combativeness, an excessive desire to imitate or an unnecessary striving after difference.'¹³⁷ Much of Yeats's efforts in the Literary movement were directed to overcome these tendencies in Irish literature.

Among O'Higgins' personal attributes which probably linked him with O'Leary, Morris and Parnell, were his medieval notions of chivalry. His

¹³⁶ Quoted in Hone, p.355.

¹³⁷ De Vere White, p.175.

approach to women was always respectful and courteous. In these and many other ways he seemed to his opponents to be a survival from another age.

Perhaps the fact that associated O'Higgins most significantly with Parnell, in Yeats's imagination, was his heroic confrontation with Irish hatred. He was conscious in his lifetime of 'a wall of hate' closing round him and expected to be assassinated. This consciousness of death and fearlessness before its certainty, became for Yeats a powerful symbol of man's tragic victory and spiritual affirmation. O'Higgins' attitude became for him a fitting tribute to Berkeley's subjective idealism - the Salamis of the Irish intellect. The comparison is not as incongruous as might first appear, for in a letter to 'Defargus' in May, 1920, O'Higgins had affirmed:

'The whole history of the world is the triumph of mind over matter. We are backing our Idea against aeroplanes and armoured cars.'¹³⁸

Against an understanding of Yeats's 'fascism', as developed in this thesis, it is easy to see why he could support O'Higgins' policy of force. Such a policy was unavoidable in terms of his 'system'. It preceded the advent of a new era.

Yeats was roused to write two poems after the assassination of Kevin O'Higgins i.e. 'Death' and 'Blood and the Moon'. In the first, O'Higgins is the symbol of man's spiritual victory:

'Nor dread nor hope attend

A dying animal

¹³⁸ Quoted in De Vere White, p.38.

A man awaits his end
 Dreading and hoping all;
 Many times he died,
 Many times rose again.
 A great man in his pride
 Confronting murderous men
 Casts derision upon
 Supersession of breath;
 He knows death to the bone -
 Man has created death.¹³⁹

In the second, the assassination of Ireland's 'sole statesman' calls to Yeats's mind the paradox of Ireland's self-awareness. Her intellect 'the arrowy shaft' remained untainted:

'Seven centuries have passed and it is pure
 The blood of innocence has left no stain.'¹⁴⁰

Swife, Berkeley, Burke and Goldsmith are custodians of her spiritual identity and Yeats's tower becomes a 'powerful emblem' of their ruling power. Yet the nation, like the tower, is 'half' dead at the top'. O'Higgins had inherited the power of the Irish intellect, but he could not survive:

'Is every modern nation like the tower,
 Half dead at the top? No matter what I said,

139 Collected Poems, p.264.

140 Ibid, p.269.

For wisdom is the property of the dead,
A something incompatible with life; and power,
A property of the living...¹⁴¹

As such Yeats arrives at a variation of the same query posed in 'Leda and the Swan' ('Did she put on his knowledge with his power?'). The paradox of human fulfilment became only too sharp as men and events in Ireland deepened his sense of reality.

¹⁴¹ Collected Poems, p.269.

APPENDIX A

Reference outline of W.B. Yeats's political activities and interests
1885-1939.

1885-1903

Yeats met John O'Leary at the Contemporary Club (founded 1885). O'Leary had just returned from exile. He believed that the Young Irelanders, notwithstanding their failure in the political arena, had an important role to play in the education of Ireland. He therefore urged the younger generation to devote their energies towards that end. He found a disciple in Yeats besides T.W. Rolleston and J.F. Taylor. Yeats's interest in active nationalism and readings of Irish history and literature dates from his meeting with the Fenian patriot.

In 1887 the Yeatses moved to London. Yeats attended the Socialist lectures on Sunday evenings at Kelmescott House, the home of William Morris.

In 1889 Yeats met Maud Gonne who was eager to dedicate her life to the cause of Irish freedom.

In 1891, C.S. Parnell died. Yeats's poem on Parnell 'Mourn and then Onward' was published in United Ireland October 10, 1891. Thereafter Yeats became very active in the intellectual movement which he predicted would come about at the first lull in Irish politics.

The Irish Literary Society in London was established in 1891 and the National Literary Society of Dublin in 1892. The former consisted of Unionists and Anti-Parnellites under the direction of Rolleston and this was partly the cause of his dissensions with Yeats who ranged the Parnellites on his side.

In 1896, as member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, Yeats was made President of the Wolfe Tone Memorial Association. In his capacity as President, Yeats conceived of the grandiose plan to establish some kind of unified Irish Parliament. His plan failed.

1897 was the year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. The '98 Committee decided against celebrating it in Ireland. Yeats supported the decision. After the Jubilee riots, as head of the '98 Association, Yeats toured among the Irish in England and Scotland.

The Irish Literary Theatre was established in 1897 and was supported by Unionists and Nationalists. Yeats, Edward Martyn and George Moore were the directors. The Irish National Theatre was formed in 1902.

In 1903 Yeats withdrew from active politics. He continued to be involved, however, with theatre politics and controversies.

1903-1916

The Abbey Theatre was opened in December 1904. Militant Nationalists and Catholics reacted violently against the production of plays which marred the image of Ireland. Yeats took a firm stand during

the crisis over the first production of John Synge's Playboy of the Western World and defended 'nationalist art' against 'nationalist propaganda'.

The Hugh Lane controversy occurred during 1912-1913. Yeats took a prominent part in this.

In 1913 Yeats took a stand in the great Dublin Lock-out. William Martin Murphy, as leader of the Dublin employers, tried to 'starve the Dublin workers into submission in order to break Jim Larkin's Irish Transport and General Worker's Union. Yeats vehemently protested against this in a letter to the Irish Worker. He charged the Dublin Nationalist newspaper and the Unionist Press of Dublin with connivance and the Dublin Daily Express and Irish Times with indifference.

During the war, Yeats's sympathies were with the allies. He accepted the view, however, that Irish Nationalists should co-operate with England in the European crisis.

1916 was the year of the Easter Rebellion. Yeats's poem 'Easter 1916' was printed almost immediately by Clement Shorter. The poem along with three others viz., 'Sixteen Dead Men', 'The Rose Tree', and 'On a Political Prisoner', was not published for the general public until 1920.

1916-1928

During the years 1918-1919 Yeats organised a series of lectures at

the Abbey Theatre which brought George Bernard Shaw to Dublin to speak on Socialism.

In February 1921 Yeats denounced the activities of the Black and Tans and supported the Sinn Fein in his speech at the Oxford Union.

The Anglo-Irish Treaty allowed for a Free State without the six counties of the north-east. This was felt as a betrayal and Civil War commenced in 1922. President Cosgrave nominated Yeats to the Irish Free State Senate in December 1922. With a view to terminate the struggle between the Free State Forces and the Republicans, Yeats suggested to the Ministers that the Treaty be amended so as to enable Eamon de Valera to enter the Dail without loss of principle. He supported, however, the policy of the Free State Government towards the Republican forces.

In 1922 Yeats was nominated delegate, by the Ard Fheis of Sinn Fein, to an Irish Race Congress held in Paris.

During his Senate career Yeats took a firm stand against the Divorce and Censorship Bills. He was a member of the Joint Committee under the chairmanship of his friend S.C. Brown, K.C., to recast 'an impossible bill' on Patent and Copyright Law. In 1926 he was appointed Chairman of the Committee set up to advise the Ministry of Finance on the new coinage. Among the Ministers Yeats particularly admired Kevin O'Higgins, Minister of Justice. The sympathy was mutual.

In 1928 Yeats's term in the Senate came to an end.

1928-1933

Yeats withdrew from political activity.

1934-1939

In 1932 Mr. Cosgrave's party fell from power. De Valera's party won the General Election and took over the Government. Yeats's vote was cast for the defeated party. Some members of the fallen party began to plan a counter campaign on Fascist lines. These were the Blueshirts under the leadership of General O'Duffy. Yeats was interested in the movement at first and wrote marching songs for it. These he later altered so that no party could sing them.

Yeats wrote his 'Fors Clavigera', On the Boiler just before he died. It was published by the Cuala Press in 1939.

APPENDIX B

Reference outline of the public career of C.S. Parnell - 1867-1891.

1867

Two Fenian leaders were arrested in Manchester. A plan for their rescue failed and executions followed. The Fenians involved were known ever since as the Manchester Martyrs and Parnell defended their cause in the House of Commons.

1875

Joseph Biggar, one time Fenian, began a policy of obstruction in the House of Commons. Parnell followed Biggar's policy and with the support of Fenians displaced Isaac Butt from the Home Rule Leadership.

1879

Parnell accepted the leadership of the Land League founded by the ex-Fenian Michael Davitt. Consequently, he became leader of a great popular movement in Ireland.

1881

Gladstone, who returned to power in 1880, proposed the Land Act which provided for dual ownership of land and the three F's viz., fair rents, fixity of tenure and the right of the tenant to a free sale of his interests in his holding. This was a serious threat to the Land League. Parnell voted against the second reading of the Bill and kept his party together by not cordially accepting the Land Act. At the same time he tried to secure the best

administration of it in the interests of the tenants.

He launched a powerful propaganda weapon United Ireland attacking the policy on coercion and attacked Gladstone in his speech at Wexford. He was arrested and sent to Kilmainham gaol. Treaty negotiations followed between Gladstone and Parnell. The Kilmainham Treaty provided for a satisfactory Arrears Bill. Parnell was released and he decided to slow down the agitation. He disbanded the Ladies' Land League led by his sister Anna Parnell.

1892

He founded a new organisation the Irish National League.

1885

Before the general election of 1885, Parnell played with Gladstone and the Tories by applying the English tactic of 'divide and rule' to their own parties. As a result the Irish question became the centre of the political arena and English parties depended on the Irish vote.

1886

Gladstone moved the first reading of the Home Rule Bill. The bill was defeated and he resigned. Lord Salisbury succeeded as Prime Minister, and after 1886 the Liberal Alliance became essential to the Irish Parliamentary Party since Home Rule could only be obtained from the Liberals.

The Plan of Campaign was published in United Ireland (October 1886)

It involved collective bargaining on individual estates. Parnell's part in this was negligible according to his testimony. The real leaders were John Dillon and William O'Brien. Gradually the actual exercise of power on the Party devolved upon Dillon, T.M. Healy and Thomas Sexton.

1887

The Times published forged letters under the heading 'Parnellism and Crime', designed to establish a complicity of the leader with the Phoenix Park murders. A Special Commission was set up to investigate the case.

1889

Richard Pigott, a Dublin journalist, broke down in the witness-box and confessed the forgery of the letters. Parnell's popularity increased considerably as a result.

In December 1889, Captain O'Shea filed a petition for divorce which named Parnell as co-respondent. Parnell's liaison with Mrs. O'Shea extended over a period of ten years. At first there was an attempt to separate public from private issues and the members of the Irish Party stood firm behind Parnell. But soon the tide turned against him. T.D. Sullivan controlling Nation, declared against the moral offence of Parnell. The Church attacked Parnell. Michael Davitt, founder of the Land League, was gravely disillusioned. To Gladstone both moral indignation and political expediency seemed to point to the exit of the leader.

1890

Parnell resolved to 'stand to his guns'. He issued a Manifesto which ignored the Liberal Alliance and implied the continuation of the earlier policy of 'independent opposition' à propos English political parties. Gladstone sent a letter, intended for publication, which placed before the Irish Party a choice between Home Rule and their leader. The vital passage stated that 'if Parnell did not go Gladstone's leadership of the Liberal Party would be reduced to nullity.' The Irish Party Split followed. Parnell refused to surrender. The battle between Parnellites and Anti-Parnellites became inevitable. Parnell demanded Irish independence on the land question and control of the Irish police after which he declared he would resign. A meeting of the Party in Committee Room No.15, beginning with a bitter attack of Parnell by Timothy Healy, ended in pandemonium. Forty-four members of the Irish Party deserted their leader. Parnell continued to fight. He turned for support to the Fenians or the 'hillside men' as they were called, and they supported him.

1891

Parnell began to preach in different parts of Ireland the doctrine of independent opposition and his interest turned to the working-classes. He lost the elections in Kilkenny and North Sligo. The rift in the Party continued to widen. Hatred and bitterness controlled Irish politics.

In October 1891, Parnell died in Brighton. His body was taken to Ireland to be buried in Glasnevin cemetery.

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