

## ABSTRACT

“Romantic Ireland’s Dead and Gone”: Social Criticism and Yeats’s Later Plays

Michael S. Rawl, M.A.

Mentor: Richard R. Russell, Ph.D.

In the tumultuous years following the Easter Rising of 1916, the Irish author W.B. Yeats consistently turned to drama as a primary medium through which he could reflect on the state of contemporary Irish culture. This study examines two dramatic works from Yeats’s later period—*The Dreaming of the Bones* (1917) and *Purgatory* (1938)— along with the poem “Easter, 1916” and the essay-pamphlet *On the Boiler* in order to explore the development of some of his social and cultural views. It is argued that this development is largely entropic: in the immediate aftermath of the Rising, Yeats articulated a hope for the imaginative and spiritual renewal of Irish culture in *The Dreaming of the Bones*. It is suggested that by the end of his life, Yeats came increasingly to doubt the possibility of Irish cultural renewal. This pessimism is embodied in the late play *Purgatory*.

"Romantic Ireland's Dead and Gone": Social Criticism and Yeats's Later Plays

by

Michael S. Rawl, B.A.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of English

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Dianna M. Vitanza, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Approved by the Thesis Committee

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Richard R. Russell, Ph.D., Chairperson

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Emily E. Setina, Ph.D.

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David J. Jortner, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School  
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J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

In his final published volume of poetry, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) included a poem entitled “The Circus Animals’ Desertion.” The poem is one of Yeats’s most anthologized and oft-quoted works. Its pathos derives in large part from its central trope of the poet as a ringmaster whose animals—his poetic images or power over language itself—no longer respond to his commands. In some of Yeats’s most famous lines, the speaker capitulates to his sense of a present imaginative poverty and hopelessness when he says “Now that my ladder’s gone/ I must lie down where all the ladders start/ In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (*Poems* 38-40).

To a casual reader, it may come as a surprise to learn that “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” is primarily a reflection on Yeats’s work as a dramatist rather than as a poet. In the poem’s second section, he “enumerate[s]” the “old themes,” not of his lyric poetry, but of two of his earlier plays—*The Countess Cathleen* and *On Baile’s Strand*—and his long dramatic poem *The Wanderings of Oisín* (*Poems* 9). In the context of a final summing up of his career, Yeats’s decision to reflect primarily on “players and painted stage” rather than on his life in verse provides a hint about how crucial he felt his dramatic works were in his overall *oeuvre* (*Poems* 31). That drama maintained a permanent and integral place in his imaginative life is evident by his writing for the stage without abatement throughout his life as an artist. Indeed, his career is bookended by the

drama: in 1886 Yeats published *Mosada*, a play in verse, and in 1939 he wrote *The Death of Cuchulain*, a play on which he stopped working only days before his own death.

Though Yeats saw his own plays as a central expression of his imaginative vision, equal to yet distinct from his lyric poetry, many critics have disagreed with him. Writing in 1946, Eric Bentley expresses an attitude that numerous critics since have held when he suggests that “Yeats did not submit himself to the discipline of the theater as he did to the discipline of the book. Perhaps, though he was fascinated by the idea of drama, he did not really like the actual theater” (224). For Bentley as for so many others, Yeats’s plays are undramatic in large part because they are too lyrical, their language too literary to be plausible on the stage.<sup>1</sup> This belief underlies many critics’ decision to read the plays primarily as poetry, thereby regarding the dramatic form of the plays as ornamental rather than instrumental in making their meaning. Helen Vendler’s seminal 1963 book, *Yeats’s A Vision and the Later Plays*, for example, only examines those of Yeats’s plays with sufficient lyrical content. According to her, Yeats’s “gifts in the purely theatrical direction were limited, to say the least” (194). F.A.C. Wilson, too, regards some plays, like *The Dreaming of the Bones*, as stage failures but successful dramatic poems (*Iconography* 240).

This view of Yeats’s plays as essentially lyric rather than dramatic indicates a more general view (which I share) of lyric as the more private of the two forms, with drama naturally being more public and social. On a first reading or viewing, it is not difficult to see how one might view Yeats’s plays as sharing in the more inward character of lyric poetry: instead of prose realist works like those of Ibsen or Shaw, Yeats wrote symbolic, anti-illusionist plays in verse whose staging revealed their artifice as plays and

which made no attempt to hold Hamlet's mirror up to contemporary nature. From the first, numerous critics have objected to Yeats's dramatic work in part because of these anti-realist qualities. When, for example, Yeats began producing his plays based on the Japanese Noh theatre, one anonymous reviewer condemned the plays as socially irrelevant, inward-turned and self-involved, and childish when he dubbed the plays "aristocratic pantomime" (*Critical Assessments* 309).<sup>2</sup>

As a designation of the later Yeats's theatrical practice, "aristocratic pantomime" merits some consideration for the way it simultaneously articulates a truth about the plays while distorting their achievement. On one hand, it is merely accurate to refer to the plays as "aristocratic": in his essay on "Certain Noble Plays of Japan," Yeats himself expresses admiration for the Japanese Noh drama precisely because he saw it as an "aristocratic form" to the degree that it is "distinguished, indirect, and symbolic," with "no need of mob or press to pay its way" (*Early Essays* 163). At the same time, the plays cannot be said to be "pantomime." The word connotes a degree of empty inwardness: pantomime is a self-enclosed circuit since it is more concerned with mute gesture than with actual communication. Furthermore, in England and Ireland pantomime is a comic form usually performed for children. In dubbing the plays "aristocratic pantomime," then, this reviewer highlights Yeats's aristocratic aspirations while at the same time mocking them as child's play.

In part, this study counters the assumption that Yeats's plays are mainly pantomimes or unconcerned with the social world. In what follows, I will argue that Yeats's plays, though they might seem unworldly to one whose dramatic imagination has been shaped primarily by realist dramatists—in English in the last century, the main



figure in this regard would be Shaw, but we might also include O’Casey and Behan in Irish literature—nevertheless engage in the very worldly project of social criticism. Yeats never forgot the fundamentally social character of the theatre, and the themes and issues raised in the plays reflect an ongoing—though at times oblique—engagement with the world outside the playhouse. Though numerous critics such as Vendler and Wilson have collapsed Yeats’s dramatic and lyric works into the same category, thereby occluding the public character of the plays, I believe that the plays lose much of their distinctiveness by being read in such a way. Indeed, I suggest that Yeats was acutely aware of the social dimensions of drama and so directed much of his social and cultural criticism into his plays.

In what follows, I will explore Yeats’s social criticism through a reading of two plays—*The Dreaming of the Bones* and *Purgatory*—, a seminal poem, “Easter, 1916,” and an essay, *On the Boiler*. These works span twenty-two years of Yeats’s later career. I argue that together they represent an important trajectory in Yeats’s thought regarding Irish culture. That trajectory is largely entropic: the poet-playwright initially hoped that contemporary Irish culture could achieve a measure of greatness through a renewed commitment to the heroic ideal; by 1938, the year of *Purgatory*, Yeats engages the heroic ideal not as an emblem of conduct but as the static icon of an irretrievable national past. The movement is thus a descent from prophecy to elegy.<sup>3</sup>

Though I will emphasize the centrality of the plays, it is important to place them in the context of Yeats’s overall corpus. Because drama is a more socially immediate form than either lyric or essay, I suggest that it plays a unique and integral role in the expression of Yeats’s socio-cultural beliefs. In some cases—as with *The Dreaming of the*

*Bones*, for example—drama provided a more flexible form through which he could develop the social critiques he had first advanced in other genres, as with the critique of the rebels in the poem “Easter, 1916.” I suggest that in order to fully appreciate the trajectory of Yeats’s socio-cultural beliefs, we need to pay the dramas due attention because the poet-playwright constantly returned to the theatre as a medium of reflection on the state of Irish social affairs.

Yeats’s decision to channel so much of his social reflections into the drama is part of a larger trend in which the state of the Irish stage was seen as tied directly to the state of the nation of Ireland itself.<sup>4</sup> In this respect it is important to remember that the Abbey theatre—founded by Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Edward Martyn—was originally conceived of as part of a movement to re-present to the Irish people their own literary and cultural heritage. The representation of Irish mythic and folk material on the stage was part of a cultural nationalism which sought to inculcate a sense of Irishness through art rather than through propaganda or armed violence; it was an expression of what Richard Ellmann terms a “literary” rather than a militant “nationalism” (114). The establishment of the Abbey can be seen as a social intervention on its founders’ part that reflects a conviction about drama’s deep social relevance, a conviction that is further reflected in Yeats’s use of the drama as a means to express his own social views. As James Flannery argues, Yeats used the tools of theatre—song, dance, gesture, and spoken word—to achieve “in cultural terms” the “objective” of cultural and “political independence from England” by returning the heritage of Irish culture to the stage (98). Hence Yeats himself conceived of the stage as a main site for engaging issues of Irish culture.

In Chapter Two, I explore Yeats's social criticism through the lens of his evolving depictions of heroic figures. In the works discussed—the poem “Easter, 1916” and the play *The Dreaming of the Bones*—the poet-playwright engages the question of what a genuine Irish heroism might look like in a post-Easter Rebellion Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Though Alex Zwerdling has correctly observed that “Yeats's entire career can be seen as an attempt to define and glorify the heroic man,” the period following the Easter Rising was an especially intense one in Yeats's development of his social views (1). Specifically, I argue that in “Easter, 1916” and *The Dreaming of the Bones*, the poet-playwright sets forth an imaginative critique of the militant nationalism of his day, which he saw as limiting human possibility.

“Easter, 1916” figures in my discussion for two reasons: first, it is the first major exploration of the heroic ideal after the Easter Rising; second, the poem establishes the major contours of Yeats's critique of the contemporary militant nationalism that presented itself as a revival of a Cuchulain-like Irish heroism. In the poem, Yeats interrogates the self-proclaimed heroism of the leaders of the Easter Rising and registers his unease with their fanaticism, a fanaticism which he saw as distorting the rebels' view of reality and constricting their human possibility. Though the dead have achieved heroic status among the nationalist community, the poet cannot endorse them unambiguously as heroes because of his grave reservations about the form of self-sacrifice they espoused, which Yeats saw as excessive. For him, the rebels have not simply sacrificed their biological lives for the nationalist cause; on the contrary, they had sacrificed their inner selves prior to death by consecrating themselves to the mission of militant nationalism. In so doing the poet sees them as having been made into something unnatural and

inhuman, “a stone to trouble the living stream” whose imaginations have been made thrall to something external to themselves (*Poems* 41). Though the fanaticism of the dead precludes their attaining a Yeatsian heroism, the poem ends by looking forward to an open-ended (albeit uncertain) future. The poem does not explicitly proclaim a cultural renewal, but neither does it foreclose on the possibility: the “terrible beauty” that has been born is part of a general (though ambiguous) resurrection that is evoked in the poem’s title itself (*Poems* 80).

*The Dreaming of the Bones*, which also deals with the Rising of 1916, furthers and makes more explicit the critique of the rebels’ fanaticism that Yeats presents in “Easter, 1916.” Though the play is often read as a statement of Yeats’s ideas about the afterlife, I argue that it is less about the possibility of forgiveness for Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, the legendary betrayers of Ireland, than it is about the militant nationalist Young Man refusing an opportunity for redemption. Like that of the Easter rebels, the Young Man’s imagination is constricted and he only perceives the concrete and political, thereby dispensing with the spiritual realities that also lay behind Ireland’s present condition. In being offered the choice to forgive the lovers, the Young Man is also offered a chance to expand his imaginative vision by embracing the spiritual. I argue that his choice to refuse forgiveness is not the expression of heroic courage but the result of an imaginative blindness that leads to moral failure. Like “Easter, 1916,” *The Dreaming of the Bones* continues to hold forth the hope for a future revival of the heroic character: if the Young Man has failed to reconcile the imaginative life with political commitment, others may be able to do so in what Yeats’s saw as the inauguration of a new cycle of history.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, I argue in Chapter Two that Yeats's critique of the militant nationalists in "Easter, 1916" and *The Dreaming of the Bones* extends to Irish culture itself. These figures bear synecdochal relationships to their societies because they represent the values of those societies. Hence in critiquing them, Yeats also critiques the large subset of Irish society they represent. He condemns a world-view that inhibits imaginative and spiritual vision in favor of a merely material or political form of life. Through the form of his art—especially in the symbolic and ritualistic *The Dreaming of the Bones*—I ultimately suggest that Yeats sought to ennoble his audience and so help foster the growth of imaginative vision on the cultural level; thus, he implicitly advances a program (however unsystematic) for social renewal: a return to the noble ideals of Ireland's heroic past will result in a positive transformation of Irish culture.

In Chapter Three, I move to the end of Yeats's life and career in order to reflect on how he viewed the course of Irish culture in the years following the Rising until 1938, when *Purgatory* was first written and performed. While he had been hopeful for an imaginative and spiritual renewal of Irish culture immediately after the Rising, by the end of his life he had become disenchanted with the path of Irish culture. In the years following the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922, he watched with growing alarm as Irish culture became more modern, democratic, and dominated by the middle class. To his chagrin, these trends indicated a resolute turn on the part of culture away from the kind of aristocratic, individualistic, and imaginative heroism he had espoused, embracing in the process a world-view he regarded as totally corrosive.

Yeats's bitterness at the course of Irish culture these years is reflected in two major works of his final period, the essay-pamphlet *On the Boiler* and the one-act play

*Purgatory*. *On the Boiler* is Yeats's most strident statement of his social and political views. In this essay, Yeats lays out some of his most contentious political beliefs, the most notorious of which is that Ireland has become debased through a process of miscegenation and eugenic impurity. *On the Boiler* bewails the fall of the greatness of Ascendancy Ireland; its most powerful image is that of the aristocratic Mansion House now gone to rack and ruin. *On the Boiler* is thus an extended, embittered elegy for the passing of the aristocratic form of the heroic ideal embodied by the architecture of the great eighteenth-century houses.

In the first printing of *On the Boiler*, Yeats published with it his penultimate play, the one-act *Purgatory*. Though critics routinely point out that the two are related, few have attempted readings of both texts in order to elucidate their specific relationship more clearly. I argue that the two texts need to be considered as integral to one another. Specifically, I suggest that each text modifies the other: *On the Boiler* contextualizes the conceptual elements of *Purgatory* while the play undermines the seeming confidence of the essay. This textual intertwining is accomplished by the appearance in *Purgatory* of many of the arguments put forth in *On the Boiler*, specifically those arguments pertaining to eugenic purity and miscegenation. The Old Man of *Purgatory*—a poor pedlar and (to borrow a phrase from “Under Ben Bulbin”) a “base-born product/of base beds”—articulates and therefore represents Yeats's views, which the reader of the essay would immediately recognize in the play (*Poems* 73).

Though many of the more offensive ideas of the Old Man are indeed identical to those expressed by Yeats in *On the Boiler*, the seemingly-straightforward relationship between the two texts is complicated by his representation of the Old Man. Unlike

Yeats's self-projection in *On the Boiler*, the Old Man is portrayed as ignorant, evil, and ultimately the victim of the cycle of his mother's purgation he claims to know so much about and which he wishes to stop. By so negatively treating what is essentially his own ideological mouthpiece in the play, Yeats conducts a severe self-criticism. Though I do not argue that Yeats's reactionary beliefs were anything other than sincere—that is an argument of another kind, and in my opinion it is an untenable one—, it seems clear that in later years he lost confidence in the efficacy of social action.

The abandonment of the poet-ringmaster's images in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" is thus a powerful metaphor for the vicissitudes of Yeats's beliefs regarding Irish culture. Like the animals, the project of Irish socio-cultural renewal had once seemed attainable, the heroic ideal a potentially-livable reality; also like the animals, those hopes ultimately abandoned Yeats in the later years of his life. In other words, the heroic ideal became not so much a prospect for the future as a decayed edifice, a survival from the past. As a social critic, then, the final stage of Yeats's development is remarkably similar to the final condition of the speaker of "The Circus Animals' Desertion": having no faith in the possibility of renewal, the playwright returns to the "foul rag-and-bone shop" of his own subjectivity, turning a scrupulous eye even upon his own position as social critic in *Purgatory*.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I tend to agree with Andrew Parkin, who argues of Yeats's plays that "The vast majority of them go beyond dramatic poetry and exist as intense one-act poetic dramas. If the poems are highly dramatic, the plays are highly lyrical; it is as if the principle of conflict in Yeats urged his dramatic imagination to find its mask in lyricism, while all the time gazing through religious eyes, alive with myth and ritual" (51).

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed review of Yeats's critical reception as dramatist, see Bernard O'Donoghue's essay "Yeats and the drama." Full bibliographic information is given in the Works Cited.

<sup>3</sup> Other plays should be considered as part of this trajectory, particularly 1930's *Words upon the Window-Pane* and *The Death of Cuchulain* of 1939. The former play is akin to *Purgatory* in its elegizing the Protestant Ascendancy; the latter play (Yeats's last) is a culminating reflection on the demise of the heroic ideal. These plays are not considered solely for reasons of space, but it is worth mentioning that they reinforce the general trajectory I am mapping in this study.

<sup>4</sup> One might also think of the riots over J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* as exemplary of the way the public saw the stage as a reflection of Ireland and Irishness.

<sup>5</sup> The two best books on the subject of the hero are, in my opinion, Alex Zwerdling's book *Yeats and the Heroic Ideal* (1965), which describes in detail the types and figures of Yeatsian heroism, and Barton Friedman's *Adventures in the Deeps of the Mind: The Cuchulain Cycle of W.B. Yeats* (1977), which offers provocative readings of Yeats's plays on the life and death of Cuchulain. Full bibliographic information is given in the Works Cited.

<sup>6</sup> F.A.C. Wilson writes: "the bird is the red symbolic bird of Mars, regent of war and in Yeats's system (as we know from the poem 'Conjunctions') of the first bloody phases of a new historical cycle?" (*Iconography* 236).



## CHAPTER TWO

### Hero and Culture in “Easter, 1916” and *The Dreaming of the Bones*

From the beginning of his literary career, W.B. Yeats was intensely fascinated by the figure of the hero in Irish legend. His early poems are haunted by mythic heroes: his long narrative *The Wanderings of Oisín*, published in 1889, registers the early centrality of mythic Irish heroes to his imagination, as do the shorter poems “Cuchulain Fights with the Sea” and “Who Goes with Fergus?”. Over the course of his career, Yeats never abandoned this obsession; indeed, he continued to write poems and plays on heroic material until very near his death. Two works based on Cuchulain—the play *The Death of Cuchulain* and the poem “Cuchulain Comforted”—were among the last he wrote.

Although his fascination with mythical heroic figures was deeply aesthetic it was complemented by an acute awareness of how the ideals those figures represented could intersect with concrete historical reality. Alex Zwerdling has cogently argued that Yeats’s conception of heroism is integral to “his concern for the revitalization of Ireland” itself (36). Zwerdling elucidates the connection between Yeats’s glorification of the heroic ideal and his social vision for Ireland when he writes that, for him, the heroic ideal is always first and foremost “an ideal of conduct, ‘heroic’ in the sense that it suggests a way of life which exploits all the finest potentialities of human nature and affords a standard or gauge by which to measure the present” (40-41). As an “ideal of conduct,” the figure of the hero crosses the boundary between fantasy and reality, offering a set of ideals that are worthy of emulation in actual life, thereby becoming at once an imaginative icon as well as a social figure. This insight goes some distance in explaining why Yeats was also

occupied with historical figures who typified a kind of attainable (because human) form of heroism. Such figures as the eighteenth-century rebel Wolfe Tone and the writer Jonathan Swift appear in Yeats's poetry and plays alongside the romantic nationalist John O'Leary and the politician Charles Stewart Parnell in part because Yeats saw in them towering examples of human possibility.

Though Yeats had long contemplated Ireland's heroes in myth and the animation of the heroic ideal in history, it was not until the latter half of his career that he was forced to examine the social relevance of that ideal in earnest. The catalyzing event in this regard was the Easter Rising of 1916, an armed rebellion in which militant nationalists attempted to cast off British rule in Ireland. Yeats's own ideals of a mythically-inspired heroism were challenged by the fact that, as Carmel Jordan puts it, "The leaders of the Rebellion belonged to a cult of Cuchulain," the very figure that had so captured the imagination of Yeats himself (14). Elizabeth Cullingford notes how Cuchulain "dominated the imagination of [Padraic] Pearse," a fact made plain by his repeated invocation of Cuchulain in his poems and prose (89). The association of Cuchulain with the participants in the Rising was made explicit after the event in Oliver Sheppard's statue of the bound and dying Cuchulain that still stands in the General Post Office (GPO) in Dublin.

For Yeats, the connection between the leaders of the Rising and an Irish hero like Cuchulain posed two crucial questions: first, did the militant nationalism they expressed reflect a revival of a genuine Irish heroism? Second, if not, what would such a heroism look like? In what follows, I will read two different works from Yeats's later career—the

poem “Easter, 1916” and the plays *The Dreaming of the Bones*—in order to explore his answers to these questions.

In “Easter, 1916” I argue that the poet establishes a central strand of his critique of militant nationalism and, by extension, the form of contemporary heroism it attempted to embody. Though Yeats acknowledges that the slain rebels have entered the company of heroic Irish dead “Wherever green is worn,” he simply cannot endorse their actions (*Poems* 78). Indeed, the poem is agitated by the awareness that the tragic grandeur of the rebels’ sacrifice was vexed by their fanaticism. This fanaticism precluded a more fully imaginative response to English oppression and resulted in what Yeats felt might have been “needless death after all” (*Poems* 67).

*The Dreaming of the Bones* is Yeats’s first and most sustained dramatic response to the Rising and to the questions of heroism it raised. The play is an extension of the critiques of nationalist fanaticism presented in “Easter, 1916.” It is structured around an encounter between a fighter in the Rising and the shades of Ireland’s betrayers, Diarmuid and Dervorgilla. If Richard Taylor is correct in his surmise that the Young Man ought to be read as “a modern culture hero,” I suggest (against Taylor) that this modern hero is of a degraded sort (154). In contrast to the ghosts, he is imaginatively impoverished, and it is this lack that leads to his moral failure of unforgiveness. The Young Man is the epitome of the stony-hearted condition described in “Easter, 1916”: unable to expand his imaginative vision, he remains steadfast in his constricting fanaticism. Thus I argue against the widely-held notion, succinctly expressed by Ronald Peacock, that the play’s central “emotion is the most fanatic Irish patriotism” (104). On the contrary, I suggest that the play is as much about the Young Man refusing an opportunity for redemption as

it is about the forgiveness of the traitorous spirits. His choice to not forgive is not a courageous moral act but stems from an inability to perceive larger realities than the immediately political one. Ultimately, I argue that the Young Man fails to attain heroic status because he remains trapped in a cycle of hatred that prohibits an expansion of vision which is essential to Yeats's vision of the heroic personality.

Ultimately, I wish to suggest that the critiques put forth in these works are directed at certain tendencies in Irish culture itself. As types of what Zwerdling dubs the Yeatsian "public hero," the Easter rebels and the Young Man of *Dreaming* are representatives of the group whose ideals they personify; they are synecdochal expressions of their culture (105). In poem and play, the critique of the nationalists leads to an apocalyptic climax in which culture itself is figured as being on the brink of significant change. In "Easter, 1916" this change is left largely ambiguous, but in *The Dreaming of the Bones* Yeats prophesies a renewal in which Ireland turns from its material, myopic, and pragmatic obsessions in order to embrace the life of the spirit and the imagination.

#### *The Easter Rising and "Easter, 1916"*

In a letter to Lady Augusta Gregory dated 11 May, 1916, a shocked and aggrieved Yeats wrote from London that "[t]he Dublin tragedy ha[d] been a great sorrow and anxiety" to him in recent days (612). The "Dublin tragedy" to which Yeats refers was the Easter Rising that had just rocked Dublin, beginning on April 24<sup>th</sup> of 1916. The Rising was an armed rebellion in which nationalist partisans took control of several key government buildings in Dublin, the most notable of which was the GPO. From a

military standpoint, the rebellion was a resounding defeat: with the rebels dispersed and English control reasserted in a matter of days, the British government proceeded to the summary execution of fifteen of the movement's leaders, including Padraic Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, John MacBride, and James Connolly in the early weeks of May 1916. The swiftness and severity of British reprisals ultimately worked against them, however; as Cullingford notes, "[p]ublic opinion in Ireland, originally hostile to the insurgents, swung violently in their favour" when the leaders of the Rising were executed one by one (96). The dead leaders of the Rising almost immediately attained heroic status in Ireland by being perceived as martyrs who emblemized the struggle for Irish independence. R.F. Foster observes that "Dublin's literati were shocked by the immediacy of what had happened: people they had known with familiarity, and even regarded with contempt, had joined, at a stroke, the mythic company of Emmet, Fitzgerald, Tone" (49). A concrete expression of this new-found mythic status is Oliver Sheppard's statue of the bound and dying Cuchulain that still stands in the GPO to commemorate the sacrifice of the Rising's leaders.

Though the deaths of the Rising's leaders had a galvanizing effect for many in the nationalist community, Yeats's attitude was deeply ambivalent. Cullingford succinctly summarizes this attitude when she writes that on one hand Yeats was "moved by the resurgence of a romantic nationalism which he had considered moribund" while on the other "he mourned the waste of life and promise. If the rebels were heroic, they were also tragic" (85). Yeats's letters from the period certainly bear out this dichotomy between admiration for the rebels and a deep sense of Ireland's tragic loss. In a letter to Lady Gregory, he cites Maud Gonne's belief that "'tragic dignity has returned to

Ireland” in the martyrdom of the rebels (*L* 613) with evident sensitivity (though not explicit approval); at the same time, he remains unable to dismiss from his mind the fact that “[w]e have lost the ablest and most fine-natured of our young men. A world seems to have been swept away” (*L* 614). The failed Rising had seemingly ushered in a social and political apocalypse in which the old world had “been swept away.” The rebels’ sacrifice, while noble, was also (in Yeats’s mind) fruitlessly tragic. The destructively apocalyptic dimension of the Rising is evident in his admission to Lady Gregory that “I am very despondent about the future” (*L* 613).

Though Yeats was acutely pained by the loss of Ireland’s “ablest and most fine-natured young men,” a further (and more enduring) source of his grief lay in a deep sense of his own guilt. This sense is exemplified in a letter to John Quinn in which he writes that “I keep going over the past in my mind and wondering if I could have done anything to turn those young men in some other direction” (*L* 614). At the heart of his guilt was the persistent fear that he had somehow contributed to the culture which could encourage and even worship the type of sacrifice exemplified by the leaders of the Rising. Though he had never been the most ferocious of Irish nationalists, some of Yeats’s early work was taken up by the militants involved in the Rising as emblematic of their struggle.

The most significant work that received the praise of the nationalist community is surely his 1902 play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. The play (as Cullingford notes) was met with approval by Pearse (91) and fervor by Countess Markiewicz (98). It depicts a ghostly encounter between a peasant family and the eponymous Cathleen, a homeless old woman who represents the oppressed and dispossessed Ireland. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* seems to romanticize and valorize personal sacrifice for Ireland’s freedom. The old woman of the

play encourages heroic self-sacrifice and prophesies the posthumous fame of those whose love for Ireland drives them to the battlefield in her name:

They shall be remembered for ever,  
They shall be alive for ever,  
They shall be speaking for ever,  
The people shall hear them for ever. (*Plays* 92).

Ramazani puts the matter succinctly when he observes that *Cathleen* is has all the appearances of a “script for martyrdom” (63). The nationalistic stance of works like this was part of the reason that for the rest of his life Yeats brooded heavily over the question of whether he was partly responsible for the Rising. In as late a poem as “The Man and the Echo,” which was among the last that he wrote, he continues to turn over such famously pained questions in his mind as this: “Did that play of mine send out/ Certain men the English shot?” (*Poems* 11-12). In imagining *Cathleen ni Houlihan* as a call to perform self-sacrificial acts in the service of Ireland, Yeats fears that he had fostered an ultimately destructive form of heroic self-sacrifice which he himself had repudiated but which nevertheless had found some expression in his work.

Though John Wilson Foster calls his sense of guilt “somewhat contrived,” there was some justification for it, at least in the minds of some contemporaries (22). Thus Maud Gonne could say that “Without Yeats there would have been no Literary Revival in Ireland. Without the inspiration of that Revival and the glorification of beauty and heroic virtue, I doubt if there would have been an Easter Week” (qtd. in Ramazani 62). For some, then, Yeats performed an auxiliary but crucial role in shaping the Rising by contributing to a cult of hero- and- martyr-worship.

With the nearly immediate public lionization of the slain rebels and his own sense of responsibility, Yeats’s natural first response was to reflect on the character of the

recently-expressed heroism of the Rising's leaders and to examine whether it was amenable to his vision of the heroic ideal. Almost immediately after the event Yeats began work on "Easter, 1916," his first artistic response to the Rising, though its publication would be delayed until 1921's *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*.<sup>1</sup> Formally, the poem is an elegy: it meditates on the recent loss of the dead and the consequences of that loss for the living. Yet the poem is a troubled sort of elegy because it refuses to do the normal work of the form; namely, "Easter, 1916" does not unequivocally praise the dead, nor does it offer consolation to the living by depicting the rebels as continuing in a blissfully transfigured state. On the contrary, in the poem Yeats avoids "eulogistic cant" altogether by equivocating on the meaning of the Rising, seeing it as simultaneously terrible and beautiful (Ramazani 59). Indeed, the poem's central refrain subverts the elegy's transfiguration of the dead and questions the nature of their supposed heroic status.

The poem's first lines introduce a central dialectic between the slain rebels and the heroic national past:

I have met them at close of day  
Coming with vivid faces  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth-century houses. (*Poems* 1-4).

There are two operative contrasts here: first, there is a visual contrast between the vividness of the living rebels' faces and the moribund, "grey" houses. Furthermore, the nationalists are depicted as members of the much-maligned middle classes, clerks who work at "counter[s] or desks"; their relatively ignoble social status stands in contrast to the grey eminence of the "eighteenth-century houses." These houses, it should be remarked, are visual reminders of the heroic rebellions of the past, such as that led by



Wolfe Tone in 1798. Though the rebels' faces are indeed vibrant with a life that seems to resuscitate a Tone-like heroism, the poem figures them in stark contrast to the tradition of the eighteenth-century and the Protestant Ascendancy of which it was the high-water mark; indeed, the clerkly nationalists bring to mind Yeats's withering critique in "September, 1913" of those who "add the halfpence to the pence/And prayer to shivering prayer" (*Poems* 3-4).

The contrast between the heroic eighteenth-century and the rebels of the recent Rising is further exploited in the poem's balladic refrain: "A terrible beauty is born" (*Poems* 16). The force of this image derives in large part from the ambiguity of its terms: a "beauty" that is "terrible" both attracts the gaze of the observer and repels it by evoking both fear and awe, thus bordering on the experience of the sublime. What's more, this "terrible beauty" is ambiguous because of its newness; as John Foster observes, the poem "speaks of birth, not rebirth" (28).

In this connection it is important to recall a letter of Yeats's to Lady Gregory from May of 1916. In it, the poet tells his friend that he is "trying to write a poem on the men executed," the heart of which was to be the line "terrible beauty has been born again" (*L* 613). The difference between the drafted line and the one Yeats finally settled on is of great importance. In the draft version, Yeats reveals his imaginative struggle with the idea that the dead of the Rising had in fact constituted a revitalization of something like Tone's heroism, for being "born again" explicitly spells out such a reincarnation. However, Yeats's decision to expunge "again" removes precisely the sense of certainty the rest of the poem undermines. In the absence of that "again," the refrain becomes more uncertain because it denies a sense of precedence for the recent events in Dublin.

Since there is no past event by which the present rebellion can ultimately be measured, the scenario assumes an apocalyptic aspect: “All [are] changed, changed utterly” (*Poems* 15). Both the dead, who have taken on a “terrible beauty,” and the Irish cultural scene as a whole, have been transformed irrevocably into some new and unrecognizable (because unprecedented) thing.

The poem is ambivalent about this transformation. It is freighted with Yeats’s dual awareness that, on the one hand, the rebels’ passion imbued them with something approaching grandeur; at the same time, he is aware that the beauty they have now assumed is “terrible,” both awe-inspiring and a source of dread about the future. Yet for Yeats even the rebels’ positive attributes are tainted by a fanaticism which makes them cold and inhuman:

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream. (*Poems* 41-4).

Here we arrive at one of Yeats’s principle objections to the Rising and to the type of heroism it seemed to exemplify: the rebels have constricted their human possibility by living for the “one purpose” of the nationalist movement to the exclusion of the rest of life. They have not just sacrificed their lives but their very selves and so have become stagnant and unnatural, out of place and an obstruction to “the living stream,” the rest of the living world. The rebels thus have violated one of Yeats’s most cherished aphorisms, which he borrowed from the romantic nationalist John O’Leary: “‘There are things a man must not do to save a nation’” (*EE* 181). On this view, it is the individual rather than a state or cause which has ontological priority. A cause such as nationalism is harmful to the degree that it requires abstraction from the self. The fanatical commitment of the

rebels to the “one purpose” of nationalism is thus tantamount to a kind of death-in-life, an immolation of the self on the altar of an impersonal and fanatical nationalism.

This living sacrifice of the self belongs to a category of sacrifice that was, for Yeats, not part of the heroic ideal. Twenty years after the Rising, Yeats articulated the distinction between heroic self-sacrifice and a selfless doom-eagerness in his *Wheels and Butterflies*:

Here in Ireland we have come to think of self-sacrifice, when worthy of public honour, as the act of some man at the moment when he is least himself, most completely, the crowd. The heroic act, as it descends through tradition, is an act done because a man is himself, because, being himself, he can ask nothing of other men but room amid remembered tragedies.(qtd. in *Death* 13-14)

This passage is a clear crystallization of Yeats’s main critique of the rebels in “Easter, 1916”: in having as their “one purpose” the liberation of Ireland, the rebels saw themselves as becoming the representatives of (and therefore immersed in) “the crowd,” effectively subsuming their inner selves. They have allowed themselves to be imaginatively constricted by yoking themselves so inextricably to such an abstract cause which bound them to others.

The poem’s deep ambivalence about what the Rising represented surfaces again in the section following the one that details the stony condition created by fanaticism. After questioning the rebels’ sacrifice of themselves to the cause of nationalism, the poet assumes a contrasting, tender tone which still registers his unwillingness to grant them genuine heroic status. The poet writes in a double-edged voice that the task of the living is:

To murmur name upon name,  
As a mother names her child

When sleep at last has come  
On limbs that had run wild. (*Poems* 61-4)

Here, the image of the rebels has two valences: first, the dead are affectionately troped as children; at the same time their deeds are somewhat trivialized by being likened to a game. In depicting the rebels' actions as a children's game run amok, the poet counters the tendencies of heroic myth-making: the dead are not modern Cuchulains, heroically offering themselves to death in the name of some higher ideal. What motivates Yeats's elegy is the sense that the rebels' deaths are more akin to the events of a family tragedy rather than a national epic.

In what Ramazani calls a "many-tongued confrontation with death in the language of mourning" (59), the poet moves in the next lines to confront an array of questions he is ultimately unable to resolve: "Was it needless death after all?/ For England may keep faith" (*Poems* 68-9); "What if excess of love/Bewildered them til they died?" (*Poems* 71-2). In these equivocations, questions, and expressions of self-doubt, the poem reflects the fundamentally ambiguous nature of the Rising and of the heroism its leaders sought to exemplify. A more straight-forward response might be characterized by an unreflective tribute to the dead rebels, but Yeats is here grappling with an event protean in its meanings and implications.

The final seven lines of the poem enact a poetic resolution that does not, however, achieve (or even attempt) real closure. After being himself "bewildered" by his own questions and vacillating responses to the Rising, the poet recites a litany of the dead:

I write it out in a verse-  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,

Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born. (*Poems* 74-80)

These lines are enigmatic, not least because they seem at first to contrast so sharply with the rest of the poem: is Yeats here performing a *volte face*, finally endorsing the dead and their actions as heroic? Has he somehow resolved the ambiguities of his response to the Rising?

I do not believe this is the case, for the transformation these lines describe is the activity of the living rather than the dead. As he “write[s] it out in a verse,” the poet takes part in inscribing the memory of the dead on the national consciousness, but he does so on his own terms, with all his ambivalences and caveats made known. Pearse, Connolly, MacDonagh, and MacBride are now no longer men but ideas, having died into national mythology.<sup>2</sup> As ideas, they are static imaginative icons rather than heroic models to be emulated in practice, because they owe their iconic status not to their own actions but to the imagination of the poet.

If the fanaticism and self-obliteration of the Rebels precluded their being heroic figures, the poem does not foreclose on the possibility of a future heroic revival, either. “Easter, 1916” ends on a final iteration of the refrain, “A terrible beauty is born.” As we noted above, this refrain is deeply ambivalent, since it expresses both awe and dread. Of course, the poem does not conclude with a simple or hopeful vision of the future of Irish culture in which society is purged of the rebels’ fanaticism while preserving their passion, but neither does it express fatalism about that future. The ambiguity of “terrible beauty” and the uncertainty with which it is greeted renders the end of the poem a tottering on the brink of possibility: the sea-change that has been brought about by the Rising is too large to be clearly ascertained by the poet, who registers a sense of an apocalypse whose

precise character remains to be seen. Thus the poem remains fundamentally open-ended, for the future of Irish culture in the wake of the Rising is not prophesied but only awaited.

### The Dreaming of the Bones *and the Figure of the Hero*

The Easter Rising immediately took root in Yeats's imagination and his response to the event was given expression in numerous poems, such as "Sixteen Dead Men" and "The Rose Tree" in the volume *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). Yet his early reflections were not limited to his poetry. *The Dreaming of the Bones*, begun in 1917, is a powerful dramatic meditation on the heroic, mythic Irish past and the recent Rising's relationship to that past. It is one of the *Plays for Dancers*, a set of four thematically unrelated dramas tied together only by their shared use of theatrical conventions borrowed and adapted from the form of Japanese drama known as Noh. *Dreaming* depicts an encounter between a Young Man, an Irish rebel who has recently taken part in the Rising, and two otherworldly strangers who promise to lead him to a safe hiding place in the hills of County Clare while he waits for a boat to take him out of the country. His guides, as it happens, are the shades of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, the legendary betrayers of Ireland whose love affair is seen as the catalyst for seven hundred years of British oppression. The encounter between the rebel and those responsible for the oppression he fights against devolves upon the question of forgiveness, of whether the present can be free of the consequences of the past's wrongs. The answer to these questions arrives in the form of the Young Man's ardently repeated assertion: "O, never, never/ Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven" (*Plays* 314).

Of all of Yeats's later plays *Dreaming* is certainly the most politically charged, a fact that stands in sharp relief when one considers the other plays based on Noh of this period: *At the Hawk's Well*, *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, and *Calvary*. Yeats's primary concerns in these plays are mythic, aesthetic, and theological, exploring crucial moments in the lives of Cuchulain, Cuchulain's wife Emer, and Christ, respectively. While *The Dreaming of the Bones* shares the ritualized character of these other plays, it is firmly rooted in a recognizable time and place in a way that they are not: set in County Clare immediately after the Easter Rising, *Dreaming* bears obvious connections to the world outside the insular space of the theater. This connection to the outside world gives it socio-political dimensions that are absent in the other Noh-inspired plays. The political resonances were obvious to Yeats himself, who in a letter to Lady Gregory from 11 June, 1917, expresses his fear that *Dreaming* is "only too powerful politically" (L 626). This potency Yeats located not only in its subject matter but in the play's historical context; after all, the Rising had occurred barely one year earlier, and Yeats saw that the time may not have been right for the play to be produced in Ireland. Hence as Liam Miller notes, the play's "political overtones...precluded its production in Dublin for fourteen years" (240).

Formally, *The Dreaming of the Bones* is the most austere of the dramas of this period, and its austerity is achieved by the playwright's relative faithfulness to his understanding of the conventions of Japanese Noh theater. Echoing the critical consensus, Harold Bloom observes that "*The Dreaming of the Bones* [is] the closest approach Yeats made to the Noh form" (306). This closeness is derived in part from Yeats's use of Japanese source material; unlike the other plays of this period, *Dreaming*

is the only one that is loosely based on a Japanese original, which F.A.C. Wilson first identified as being *Nishikigi* (*Iconography* 213). The play also makes use of some of the more well-known features of Noh, such as the mask, the use of music, and a ritualized dance at the play's climactic moment. For Richard Taylor, the play represents a successful fusion of Noh dramatic conventions and Yeats's own aesthetic vision; he writes that "Beyond the superficial plot outline of *Nishikigi* and the use of stylization in both the journey up the mountain and the mimetic dance, the achievement is undeniably Yeats's" (155).

On first thought it might seem that a spiritually-oriented, symbolic art such as Noh would be an unaccommodating vehicle for any form of social commentary; since it is anti-realistic and largely non-mimetic, Noh is not a self-evidently useful vehicle for commenting on contemporary social realities. Yet Bernard O'Donoghue is certainly correct that one of the central accomplishments of *The Dreaming of the Bones* is that it "mix[es] the symbolic and the historical successfully within the stylistic framework of the Noh" (109). This successful mixture is brought about in large part through Yeats's selection of a subject that could accommodate his political goals while at the same time remaining faithful to Yeats's (admittedly limited) understanding of the symbolic, spiritual orientation of Noh. His choice of the legendary lovers Diarmuid and Dervorgilla and their betrayal of Ireland as the basis for the play furnished him with precisely such a subject.

Yeats had long been interested in Diarmuid and Dervorgilla; in 1897 he had written a story entitled "Hanrahan's Vision" in which the poet Hanrahan encounters the shades of the damned lovers on the summit of Ben Bulbin. What initially attracted him



to them is their profound, Dantean pathos; as Wilson argues, Yeats saw in the lovers “a Celtic parallel to the legend of Paolo and Francesca” (*Iconography* 207). Like Dante’s lovers, Diarmuid and Dervorgilla “go wandering together for ever,” eternally unable to embrace one another because of the violence they caused in life (*Mythologies* 251). Yeats’s return to this material twenty years later in *Dreaming* was felicitous in resolving the dilemma between his social commentary and the symbolic character of Noh: on one hand, Diarmuid and Dervorgilla personify the forces that led to the British rule in Ireland which the Rising attempted to overthrow; at the same time, the tragic grandeur of the eternally frustrated lovers is the very substance of the kind of Noh play that most attracted Yeats.

The use of the Diarmuid and Dervorgilla legend solves another formal and dramatic problem, which is that of staging an encounter between the present and the past as they relate to the question of the hero in contemporary Ireland. Michael McAteer has written that “A significant feature of *The Dreaming of the Bones* is that the Rising was imagined in conflict with elevated figures of Gaelic antiquity, unlike ‘Easter 1916’ where the leaders enter into the elect of Irish mythology. The attitude to mythic heroism is deeply ambivalent in the play” (139). Though I disagree with McAteer’s suggestion that “Easter, 1916” does not place the Rising “in conflict with elevated figures” of the Irish past and therefore is less ambiguous than *Dreaming*, he is nevertheless right to highlight the importance of the past/present dialectic in *Dreaming*. In the play, Yeats takes the militant nationalist (by default heroic in certain circles) and places him in contradistinction to the heroic past as represented by the ghosts of Diarmuid and

Dervorgilla. In the process of being set against the past, the Young Man is revealed to be myopic, unimaginative, and ultimately inhibited by his fanaticism.

The crucial relationship between the past and present is powerfully figured by Yeats's use of the mask characteristic of Noh theater and in his decision to leave one of his principal characters unmasked. In Yeats's other dance plays—if not necessarily in traditional Noh theatre itself—the mask serves to create a level of estrangement and distance between the actors and the audience, the latter of whom would have been largely unaccustomed to the practice of masking stage actors. *The Dreaming of the Bones* is unique among the *Plays for Dancers* in that it features a main character who does not wear a mask: the Young Man. In her reading of the play, Katherine Worth suggests that the Young Man goes without a mask in order to suggest his likeness to the audience: he “is the only figure in the landscape with a vulnerable human face” (171). The masks of the ghosts set them against the audience and the Young Man; they are emissaries of another age. By contrast, the Young Man resembles the members of the audience, and they recognize themselves in his bare face. In encouraging the audience's identification with the Young Man, Yeats extends his critique of him to include the audience and the society they represent as well.

In addition to dramatizing the past/present dialectic, the contrast of the masked ghosts with the maskless Young Man has vital resonances when placed in the context of Yeats's philosophical reflections on the mask as a concept of personality. The first articulation of the mask is in the essay *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, which was published the same year *Dreaming* was completed.<sup>3</sup> In that essay, Yeats sets out a doctrine of the mask as an “antithetical self,” without which a person cannot express one's genius or

“Daemon” (*LE* 10-11). Underlying this notion is a doctrine of Heraclitus’ that Yeats constantly quoted and elaborated on throughout his life, expressed in the Greek philosopher’s gnomic formulation: “Immortals are mortals, mortals immortals: living their death, dying their life” (52).

For Yeats, the self reaches its full potentiality only when it meets with and incorporates its opposite, and the wearing of the mask is his metaphor for this union; as he puts it, the mask is “an opposing virtue” to its wearer (*LE* 5). To demonstrate this idea, Yeats gives as one example J.M. Synge, a “gentle and silent m[a]n” who nevertheless “made, to delight his ear and his mind’s eye, voluble dare-devils” in his plays (*LE* 5). The “opposing virtue” of Synge’s mask—expressed in the dare-devilry of his characters as against his own personal gentleness—allowed him to create art through a fecund union of divergent impulses.

Applying the concept of mask to *Dreaming*, we can see more clearly how the masklessness of the Young Man tropes his status relative to that of the ghosts; they are his opposites in Yeats’s scheme, and by extension they clearly represent what the Young Man needs to incorporate into himself if he is to achieve the heroic character. A stage direction makes clear that the ghosts represent a heroic age: “*A Stranger and a Young Girl, in the costume of a past time, come in. They wear heroic masks*” (*Plays* 308). Strictly speaking, this direction is redundant: in the other dance plays, the mask always carries with it a connotation of heroism, as Cuchulain’s did in *At the Hawk’s Well*. By explicitly drawing attention to the heroic quality of the masks, Yeats highlights the maskless soldier’s need for heroism, because his lack of this quality is symbolically figured in his own bare face.

According to the system of *Per Amica*, the Young Man is in a felicitous position to assume the heroic mask; as Yeats says in that essay, “The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat” (*LE* 12). Having been routed by the English forces in the recent Rising, the Young Man enters the hills of County Clare in a condition of defeat and is therefore more susceptible to an encounter with his mask of the heroic character. As Nathan observes, however, this opportunity is not realized “because the objective man cannot rise to the occasion, cannot don a mask” (210). The reason for this failure to “don a mask”—the Young Man’s imaginative and moral poverty—is integral to Yeats’s critique of him and, by extension, the culture he represents.

As noted above, the fundamental characteristic of the relationship between the mask and its potential wearer is that of need, and reciprocal need is the central theme of *Dreaming*. When the Young Man first appears on stage, we are given a powerful image of his immediate need for a guide which bespeaks the generally precarious nature of his position in the world of the drama:

A young man with a lantern comes this way.  
He seems an Aran fisher, for he wears  
The flannel bawneen and the cow-hide shoe.  
He stumbles wearily, and stumbling prays. (*Plays* 308)

These lines register the Young Man’s weakness and relative ignorance of the terrain, as he “wearily” stumbles among the rocks of rural County Clare. The plodding, heavy syntax of the line “He stumbles wearily, and stumbling prays” emulates the awkward steps of the Young Man and draws attention to his acute need of a guide. When he tells the ghosts that “[I] would break my neck/ If I went stumbling there alone in the dark,” he recapitulates the Musicians’ description of him as “stumbling,” thereby reinforcing the image of him as in need of help (*Plays* 309).

The need of the Young Man runs deeper than his need for a guide; morally and imaginatively, he is impoverished and in need of a widened perspective. Indeed, he epitomizes the stoniness of heart Yeats condemns in “Easter, 1916”: like the rebels of that poem, he has sacrificed his inner life to the cause of Irish nationalism, and this sacrifice has led to an inability to empathize and imagine creatively. His mind is so occupied by his political commitments and by hatred that he consistently reads all forms of texts—conversation, the condition of the landscape, etc.—myopically.

This aspect of the Young Man’s character is first hinted at early in the play when the Stranger tells him he knows of good hiding places among the rocks; he tells the Young Man “We know the pathways that the sheep tread out.../And that they had better hiding-places once” (*Plays* 309). This is the first reference of many to the British occupation of Ireland in the play, yet it is important to recognize how utterly devoid it is of fury. Instead of rage, the note struck here is one of sorrow, for the Stranger knows himself to be responsible for the loss of these “hiding-places.” The Young Man ignores the ghost of guilt that haunts behind the Stranger’s words and immediately interprets his meaning politically: “You’d say they had better before English robbers/ Cut down the trees or set them upon fire” (*Plays* 309). The Young Man imports an intent (“You’d say”) to the Stranger that matches his own political fury but does not accurately reflect the content of the Stranger’s words. His myopia returns him to his sole obsession with Ireland’s occupation by the British and causes him to miss the keener sounds underlying the Stranger’s confession.

If the Young Man displays a certain deadness to the sorrow in the Stranger’s words he also exhibits what would be for Yeats a profound dearth of imagination. He is

pragmatic and has a taste for the concrete and factual, largely treating the tales of his guides with suspicion. One episode in particular draws attention to the concrete nature of the Young Man's mode of perception. As the ghosts lead him up the hill to his hiding place, they describe to him the fate of the dead in their purgatorial state. The Stranger tells him that dead re-live their former lives:

In a dream;  
And some for an old scruple must hang spitted  
Upon the swaying tops of lofty trees;  
Some consumed in fire, some withered up  
By hail and sleet out of the wintry North,  
And some but live through their old lives again. (*Plays* 310)

As Wilson points out, all this is simply sound Yeatsian doctrine about the life of the soul after death, an area of speculation he obsessively worked in throughout his career (*Iconography* 212). Though this is the case, the Young Man can barely disguise his contempt for what he regards as the Stranger's superstitious twaddle. His response to the Stranger's description is telling and merits being quoted in full:

Well, let them dream into what shape they please  
And fill waste mountains with the invisible tumult  
Of the fantastic conscience. I have no dread;  
They cannot put me into gaol or shoot me;  
And seeing that their blood has returned to fields  
That have grown red from drinking blood like mine,  
They would not if they could betray. (*Plays* 310)

The Young Man, whom some critics have implicitly assumed to be Yeats's mouthpiece, here diverges from his author so sharply that any presumed shared identity between the two becomes questionable. In this passage the Young Man ironically reverses the metaphor of the Musicians in the first chorus, who had described the atmosphere of the village on nights when the dead dream in this way: "And many a night it seems/That all the valley fills/ With those fantastic dreams" (*Plays* 308). In the Musicians' hands this

metaphor evokes the sense of dread that pervades the play, but for the Young Man it expresses his sense of the pointless superfluity of the Stranger's beliefs. The dreams of the dead are like the mountains they fill, excess waste with no bearing on the world of physical, political reality; for him, only those that can "put me into gaol or shoot me" should be feared.

If we are tempted to forgive the Young Man his lack of spiritual vision it is important to recognize that the imaginative poverty it bespeaks characterizes his entire world-view. Unlike the ghosts, who are able to perceive imaginatively, the Young Man's mind is dominated by his fixed commitments which render him incapable of acknowledging other accounts of reality. Specifically, he betrays a deep inability to recognize any other cause for Ireland's present state than British oppression.

This lack of a broad perspective is subtly yet powerfully highlighted in a crucial exchange.<sup>4</sup> As the Young Man and his ghostly guides make their way up the mountain, the Stranger describes the nearby Abbey of Corcomroe in the following way:

The Abbey lies amid its broken tombs.  
In the old days we should have heard a bell  
Calling the monks before day broke to pray[.] (*Plays* 311)

The Young Man angrily responds with what might be taken by the unwary reader as the play's programmatic statement:

Is there no house  
Famous for sanctity of architectural beauty  
In Clare or Kerry, or in all wide Connacht,  
The enemy has not unroofed? (*Plays* 311).

This exchange is significant for the way it highlights the conflict between imaginative and practical forms of perception. When the Stranger describes the Abbey and its tombs as "broken," he does so without ascribing a cause to their brokenness; their state is

merely a given fact. Noting the absence of explanation, the Young Man seizes the opportunity to inscribe his master-narrative onto the conversation; according to him, the blame for the brokenness of Ireland's great buildings and the desolation of its countryside is laid squarely on the British. He reads the text of the land in a selective way by refusing to acknowledge the presence of other factors for the present state of Ireland.

Interestingly, when he responds to the Young Man the Stranger refuses to address his exclusive blame of England, choosing instead to provide an oblique counterbalance to the rebel's narrowness of vision. After the Young Man's outburst, the Stranger simply continues his description of the scene, but with the difference that now he enumerates at least some of the causes of the surrounding desolation: "Close to the altar,/ Broken by wind and frost and worn by time/ Donough O'Brien has a tomb, a name in Latin" (*Plays* 311). In one line, the Stranger rapidly enumerates some of the forces responsible for the Abbey's brokenness: wind, frost, and time. The Young Man sees all destruction in terms of political conflict, for all the houses that have been "unroofed" have been destroyed solely by "the enemy." The Stranger, by contrast, recognizes the sweep of history and does not think in such binary terms. He knows that there are other forces at work in the world that cause great buildings to crumble.

This tension between an imaginative perception of reality and one dominated by the concrete and political is central to an understanding of the play's climax in which the Young Man refuses forgiveness to the lovers. Naturally enough, this climax has been the locus of most of the critical discussion surrounding the play, but I am aware of no reading that takes fully into account the ways in which the Young Man's refusal stems from an inherent inability to imagine creatively, a facet of his character that Yeats repeatedly



draws attention to throughout the play . Helen Vendler’s otherwise incisive reading, for example, falters when she discusses the play’s climax. Using the final scenes as a springboard, she claims that the play is centrally about how the “mind cannot cast out remorse for some reason or other, cannot come to terms with the events in its own memory” (189). Yet Yeats implicitly gives the “reason” throughout; it is neither vague nor a source of mystery. The Young Man’s moral failure has its roots in a profound imaginative lack that, though he is repeatedly offered opportunities to expand his vision, he fails to do so.

In general, the failure of numerous critics to adequately address the play’s climax is due to the fact that their readings tend to isolate it from the rest of the play. As we have seen, Yeats continuously draws attention to the cast of the Young Man’s character throughout the play, thereby allowing us to anticipate his final refusal as being the sort of thing he would naturally do. Yet in partitioning the play into body and climax, many critics have failed to properly contextualize the play’s final moments, a process which usually leads to partial or inadequate readings. For example, Andrew Parkin isolates the climax and claims that “the Young Man’s denial of charity is politically, realistically and dramatically right,” and he does so without offering any other evidence than the fact that “Yeats’s art is eclectic” (62). While I agree with Parkin’s assertion that the “denial of charity is...dramatically right,” I cannot agree with his limited account for this fact. On the contrary, I want to argue that *because* the play’s ending is dramatically right—that is, it stems organically from the preceding parts of the play and thus contributes to the whole—it plays a crucial role in Yeats’s overall critique of the Young Man is therefore not an endorsement of his refusal of forgiveness.

To adequately address the climax, we must do it contextually. The final portion of the play begins with the first lines spoken by the Young Girl. Until this point, the dialogue had been strictly between the Young Man and the Stranger, so the entrance of the Young Girl marks a significant shift within the play. After the Stranger describes Donough O'Brien's tomb and elicits the Young Man's angry response, he recedes into the background and the Young Girl takes on his role as guide. Unlike the Stranger, who has largely described the landscape and its history, the Young Girl tells the rebel soldier of the sufferings of the dead in painful detail, and it is through her narration that the ghosts' identities are revealed. It is important to recognize that the Young Girl's function, like that of the Stranger, is to challenge the Young Man's imaginative poverty; in this case, she addresses herself to his capacity to empathize with others, for empathy too requires an imaginative act since it requires one to go out of oneself in concern for another.

When the Young Girl first speaks, she arrests the Young Man's attention in a way that it had not been held hitherto. As she describes the sorrows of the dead, the Young Man becomes increasingly interested: he asks questions and is eager to learn the details of those in a state of purgatorial suffering. His interest notwithstanding, the Young Man ultimately fails of true empathy because of his inability to credit the spiritual: hearing of the ghosts, the soldier consistently qualifies his interest with phrases that register his reluctance to believe like "if what seems is true" and "I have heard" (*Plays* 312). He thus does not allow himself to fully enter into the truth of the Girl's narration.

The tentative balance struck between his incredulity and his interest is broken when it is revealed that the dead the Young Girl has been speaking of were "Diarmuid

and Dervorgilla, who let the Norman in.” On hearing these names, the soldier immediately dismisses the effect of the Girl’s tale and accuses her of manipulating him:

You have told your story well, so well indeed  
I could not help but fall into the mood  
And for a while believe it was true. (*Plays* 314)

As he did when the Stranger suggested alternative perspectives on the present state of Ireland, the Young Man refuses to entertain the idea of forgiveness for Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, the mere mention of whom causes his rage to re-surface and so suffocates any burgeoning impulse towards compassion.

The Young Girl’s narration of her and the Stranger’s suffering (and the Young Man’s refusal to credit it) serves as a prelude to the final scene of the play in which the rebel is most dramatically faced with the choice between enlarging his imaginative empathy and standing firm in his fanaticism. The play’s climax comes as the ghosts—whom the Young Man still believes to be living beings—arrive with the soldier at the mountaintop. In this archetypal place of revelation, it seems for a moment that the Young Man will experience a moment of imaginative vision when he describes the prospect from the heights:

So here we’re on the summit. I can see  
The Aran Islands, Connemara Hills,  
And Galway in the breaking light [.] (*Plays* 314)

This lovely poetry of place-names is only an abortive prelude to yet another of the Young Man’s polemical laments for the present condition of Ireland. The nearly-visionary quality of these first lines starkly contrasts with what follows: meditating on the crime of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, the Young Man says:

For though we have neither coal, nor iron ore,  
To make us wealthy and corrupt the air,

Our country, if that crime were uncommitted,  
Had been most beautiful. (*Plays* 314)

Bloom correctly remarks that the image of coal “corrupt[ing] the air” is “imaginatively deadly” and seems to impute the sentiment to Yeats himself (308).<sup>5</sup> He is right to register the lines’ aesthetically disappointing effect, but I think it more probable that Yeats means to draw attention yet again to the Young Man’s imaginative weakness, for he cannot sustain the visionary poetry with which he begins this speech; on the contrary, he falls back into the relative ugliness of this image of pollution.

As the Young Man meditates on Ireland from his vantage atop the mountain, the ghosts begin the dance that will offer him a final chance to escape the paths his political obsessions had worn for him. It has taken the soldier the length of the play to realize that his guides “are not natural,” that they are the shades of Diarmuid and Dervorgilla, and when he finally does he experiences a true crisis of vision (*Plays* 315). When the shades begin to dance, the Young Man is momentarily, and for the first time in the play, able to forget himself and his fury as he watches. The dance captures his gaze to the exclusion of all else; as he says, “All the ruin,/ All, all their handiwork is blown away.../ Because their eyes have met” (*Plays* 315). The Young Man goes on to describe the dance in this way:

They have dropped their eyes,  
They have covered up their eyes as though their hearts  
Had suddenly been broken—never, never  
Shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven (*Plays* 315).

The modulations of the Young Man’s thought are caught finely here: when the dance turns mournful, expressing the sorrows of unfulfilled desire, he is sympathetically and deeply engaged. He is brought nearest to forgiveness when he describes the breaking

hearts of the phantoms, but at this crucial moment he again fails to expand his imagination. In the face of an unfamiliar sympathy with the ghosts, the soldier has to shore up his rage by reaffirming to himself the necessity of refusing forgiveness by repeating “never, never/ shall Diarmuid and Dervorgilla be forgiven.” The repetition of this injunction sounds more like the chant of the convert whose faith has been shaken than it does a courageous resolution to do right. Indeed, the Young Man’s refusal is less a choice than a reflex, a function of his generally unimaginative cast of mind.

Bloom remarks that when the soldier flees, he “ends in an ugly obduracy,” unable to forgive and therefore unable to be transformed through forgiveness (308). The essentially static character of *Dreaming* owes itself to its depiction of an abortive encounter between the heroic and the unimaginatively fanatical.<sup>6</sup> Diarmuid and Dervorgilla—representatives of a heroic past in which imagination and action were united—embody what the Young Man needs and lacks, a need troped by their masks and his masklessness. The failure of the Young Man to forgive is rooted in his lack of imagination, the expansion of which he refuses at every turn. The Young Man sees imagination and empathy as inimical to the active life of the body. Ultimately, the soldier does not attain heroic status because he is not a self but an amalgam of social ideas and political commitments; he fails to unite in himself the pragmatic and imaginative.

As a critique of militant nationalism, *The Dreaming of the Bones* is a deepening of the more implicit charges of “Easter, 1916”; specifically, the play is a critique of a kind of political engagement that stifles human possibility and turns the “heart to stone/ To trouble the living stream” (*Poems* 43-4). As he did in that poem, Yeats in *Dreaming*

takes the dominant contemporary image of the hero—the militant nationalist—and interrogates the quality of his apparent heroism. His method in play and poem is similar: Yeats sets up a dialectic between a past heroic ideal and demonstrates how the present nationalism deviates from that ideal. The Young Man of *Dreaming* and the rebels of “Easter, 1916” both imagine themselves the inheritors of heroic traditions, but Yeats undermines this assumption by revealing their relative imaginative poverty and their lack of self-possession, qualities heroic predecessors—such as Tone or Parnell—had in abundance.

Another important similarity between “Easter, 1916” and *The Dreaming of the Bones* is necessary to point out, and that is the works’ stance towards the future of Irish culture. In the poem, we saw how the refrain “A terrible beauty is born” expresses both dread and a tentative apocalyptic hope that Irish culture may ultimately be transformed (*Poems* 80). Though the critique of fanatical nationalism is more strident and thorough in *Dreaming*, the play also expresses a more intense, more clearly articulated expression of apocalyptic hope for a sea-change in Irish culture. The play’s final chorus culminates in this hopeful plea:

I have heard from far below  
The strong March birds a-crow.  
Stretch neck and clap the wing,  
Red cocks, and crow! (*Plays* 316).

In his reading of the play, Taylor associates this speech with Yeats’s theory of the gyres of history when he remarks that “The dawn-crowing of the Cock represents the annunciation of a new cycle, the fullness of time in conceiving its own opposite” (154).<sup>7</sup> If, as we have suggested, the Young Man represents the present cycle and the people who inhabit it, the dawning of the “opposite” age would indubitably entail a return to the

imaginative, heroic age represented by the Young Man's opposites, the masked ghosts. The play thus ends with a plea that is an expression of yearning for the coming of a new cultural epoch for Ireland itself.

Before concluding this discussion, it is important to recognize how the formal dimensions of *The Dreaming of the Bones* reinforce Yeats's hope that Irish culture could be renewed through the expansion of the imagination; in order to do this, we need to reflect briefly on his broader views on the socially transformative power of aesthetic form. From the earliest phases of his career to his death, Yeats held that the productions of the imagination could affect real and tangible change in those who viewed, read, or listened to them. In his discussion of Yeats and eugenics, Paul Stanfield succinctly summarizes the poet-playwright's beliefs when he writes that, for him, "the imaginings of poets created the human race as it now exists, and... the imaginings of poets will eventually create an even greater race" (151). This idea is given powerful expression in the early play, *The King's Threshold*, which dramatizes the question of the poet's place in society. In that work, the poet Seanchan asks his pupil the following question: "What evil things will come upon the world/ if the Arts perish?" His pupil gives definitive expression to Yeats's belief in the shaping power of art:

If the Arts should perish,  
The world that lacked them would be like a woman  
That, looking on the cloven lips of a hare,  
Brings forth a hare-lipped child. (*Plays* 125)

Yeats's beliefs regarding the transformative power of art are, of course, more complex than this brief summary suggests, yet even in outline it furnishes us with an important tool in returning to the question of form with which we started this discussion of *Dreaming*; now, however, we can ask a slightly modified version of the same question:

why did Yeats cast this play in the conventions of the Noh, and what did he hope to accomplish by doing so? To answer this question we need to recall that what attracted to him to the form is the fact that, for him, it is a fundamentally “aristocratic form,” abstracted from life and therefore capable of transcending it (*EE* 163). This designation is crucial when we keep in mind Yeats’s belief that the viewer of art is transformed by the character of what is beheld: by presenting a symbolic, ritualized, and “aristocratic” drama, Yeats hopes to inculcate specifically aristocratic and noble qualities in his audience. Indeed, the imaginative lack he critiques in the Young Man’s character is the same that he is trying to negate in his audience through the symbolic richness of his chosen form. The play itself, then, is meant to have a transformative effect by ennobling the audience, thereby contributing to a culture that is amenable to the kind of imaginative heroism Yeats envisioned.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> R.F. Foster argues that, although Yeats registers his “doubts about the utility of self-immolation and the dangers of fanaticism” in “Easter, 1916,” the poet was nevertheless sensitive to the timing of the poem’s publication, for, as Foster notes, “in 1916 it would have read principally as a passionate endorsement of the rebels’ cause” (*Yeats* 63-4).

<sup>2</sup> An interesting comparison could be made on this point between these lines and the final lyric of Yeats’s final play, *The Death of Cuchulain*. The relevant passage reads:

Are those things that men adore and loathe

Their sole reality?

What stood in the Post Office

With Pearse and Connolly?

What comes out of the mountain

Where men first shed their blood?

Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed

He stood where they had stood? (*Plays* 554).

As in the poem, Yeats here suggests the intervening power of art (in this case Oliver Sheppard’s statue of Cuchulain, which makes it “seem/He stood where they had stood”).

<sup>3</sup> Though numerous critics, notably Nathan, have profitably used *A Vision*’s articulation of the concept of the mask to understand *Dreaming*, I think *Per Amica* is the more natural choice. As noted, its composition was contemporary with that of *Dreaming*; furthermore, *A Vision* represents a later, much more systematized scheme than that presented in *Per Amica*. This more rigid systematization was the result of Yeats’s wife Georgie famously beginning automatic writing soon after the two were married in 1917. The use of *A Vision* as a source-text for *Dreaming* strikes me as somewhat anachronistic, for the system it expresses had not yet hardened into the form it would take when the book was first published in 1925.

<sup>4</sup> David Clark observes that here the ghosts are “more conscious of the past than of the present” and that they “remove the mind to an ancient scene, leaving the landscape of the present a ‘faint shadow’” (54). For Clark, the ghosts’ subjective speeches act as a formal foil to the realistic speeches of the Young Man, the latter of which constantly toll us back to the grim realities of the present moment. Clark reads the juxtaposition between the characters at the formal level of subjective versus objective forms of speech. I supplement Clark’s argument at this point by expanding on what he leaves out of his discussion: namely, that the formal device of contrapuntal speech types (realistic versus subjective) reflects the dominant thematic concern of the Young Man’s opposition to (and need of) the subjective perception represented by the ghosts.

<sup>5</sup>F.A.C. Wilson shares Bloom’s reading of these lines to the extent that he imputes the feeling they express to Yeats himself. He makes the unusual claim that in this passage Yeats is expressing “his advocacy of small self-contained communities on the renaissance model” (*Iconography* 212). Such a reading seems unlikely to me, if only for the fact that it is unsupported by anything else in the text.

<sup>6</sup> There is a parallel between the sexual frustration of the ghosts—tortured as they are by their inability to embrace one another—and the essentially unconsummated character of the encounter of opposites the play depicts.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson also reads the crowing of the cock apocalyptically (*Iconography* 236).

## CHAPTER THREE

### Yeats as Social Critic in *On the Boiler* and *Purgatory*

Over the course of the years between 1917 and 1939, Yeats observed Irish culture as it underwent some of the most drastic political changes in the nation's history. In the span of a few years, Ireland had gone from being a possession of the British empire to a Free State with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in January of 1922 in what R.F. Foster calls "a decisive stage in the Irish revolution" (Yeats 205). While the Treaty had established the Irish Free State, it also provided for the six counties of Ulster to opt-out of the new Irish government, which they did. The separation of Ulster from the twenty-six other counties of Ireland was one of a number of causes of a brief civil war between pro-and-anti-Treaty nationalist factions that ensued later that year. It was also during this time that Yeats served as a senator in the new government for six years, in the process becoming more intimately acquainted than ever with the political life of his country.

For his part, Yeats had become increasingly disenchanted with contemporary Irish culture. The heroic renewal he had prophesied (and hoped to engender, at least in part) had not occurred; in place of the ennobling of Irish character through the integration of imaginative and social aspects of life, he saw to his horror that his country had been given over to an anti-aristocratic democratic government as well as to the surging middle classes. Yeats saw these social developments as deleterious to culture in large part because he believed they placed too much value on a materialism

which deadened in the self the sense of the beautiful and noble in much the same way the political fanaticism of the Easter rebels had caused them to become stone-like and unnatural. Yeats's convictions regarding the effects of such a materialism find their emblematic image in the late play *The Death of Cuchulain*; there, he depicts the quintessential Irish hero—powerfully imaginative and deeply self-possessed—murdered at the hands of the perniciously materialistic and grotesque Blind Man for a paltry “twelve pennies,” a killing that inaugurates a cycle of cultural degeneration that persists to the present day (*Plays* 552).

In his final years, Yeats directed his bitterness at Ireland's cultural decadence into his writings, but nowhere more abrasively than in the essay-pamphlet *On the Boiler*. The essay is unique in Yeats's oeuvre for the candidness with which he lays out his contentious and controversial socio-political views on eugenics, class, and government. In a letter to Ethel Mannin, he described the tone he would take in the essay as purposefully acidic, for it would express the “barbarism of truth” (*Letters* 903).

Among the numerous essays Yeats wrote in his life, *On the Boiler* is unique in that it also served as the primary first publication venue for one of his plays. In his preface to the pamphlet—which he planned to be the first of an ongoing periodical series—Yeats announces his plan to maintain an integral unity in each issue by “only including poem or play that has something to do with my main theme” (*Later Essays* 220). In the first and only issue, Yeats published his one-act play *Purgatory*, thereby establishing a crucial link between the essay and the play. Somewhat oddly, the play has not often been read in the light of *On the Boiler*; though it is no secret the two texts

are related, scholars have routinely failed to offer a sufficiently detailed account of what the nature of their relationship is.

In this essay I will explore the cultural views set forth in *On the Boiler* and their relevance to the play *Purgatory*. In particular, I will focus on Yeats's arguments in both texts regarding the decline of the values represented by the Protestant Ascendancy as a result of a materialism, democracy, and eugenic mistakes that have weakened Irish culture. Though *Purgatory* echoes *On the Boiler* in numerous crucial ways, I argue against seeing the play as merely a dramatization of the essay; on the contrary, I suggest that, when considered together, *Purgatory* modifies our understanding of *On the Boiler* and vice versa. Specifically, I suggest that Yeats's strident confidence in the essay is undermined by his self-representation in *Purgatory*: the Old Man is Yeats's ideological mouthpiece in the play, but he is also deliberately rendered untrustworthy, evil, and ultimately powerless to effect any change. Thus I will argue that, though he seems to maintain philosophical certainty in *On the Boiler*, Yeats in *Purgatory* undermines that certainty by emphasizing the Old Man's fundamentally evil character.

Ultimately, I suggest that, when the play and essay are taken together, the combination forms a picture of the terminus of Yeats's social critique. The Old Man's intervention on behalf of the shade of his mother—his murder of the Boy—is analogous to the prescriptions of social action in *On the Boiler*, and it is indeed informed by the arguments presented in the essay. The Old Man's barbarous act is an attempt to impose order on the external world, an attempt to intervene in the historical processes of guilt and expiation. The eugenically-driven intervention of the Old Man is ultimately ineffective, which suggests that in *Purgatory* Yeats abandons hope in a

conception of socially transformative action. Indeed, we might imagine the playwright hopelessly admitting with the Old Man that “Mankind can do no more” in the face of history (*Plays* 544).

### On the Boiler *and* Purgatory: *Critical Soundings*

Critics of *Purgatory* have largely followed the pattern set by critics of Yeats’s plays more generally, which is to say they are most interested in the play’s esoteric dimensions. Specifically, the major tendency has been to translate the concrete images and characters of the plays back into the arcane symbolism of Yeats’s *A Vision*, which is the author’s most thorough-going articulation of his personal mystical system. F.A.C. Wilson is an exemplary early critic in this mode; for Wilson, *Purgatory* provides another opportunity to discuss Yeats’s theories of the afterlife. In his system, the play is merely the dramatization of ideas presented in *A Vision*. For example, he writes casually of “elaborat[ing]” the play’s “argument from *A Vision*” (141). That Wilson sees the play primarily as an “argument” suggests his relative disinterest in questions of form and representation, a disinterest that ultimately weakens his reading. Though *Purgatory* does present “arguments”—specifically, those of *On the Boiler*—it is a mistake to view these arguments as somehow abstracted from the dramatic character they take in the play. On the contrary, the arguments presented in it are significantly altered by the media of characterization and narrative; as we will see, the fact that it is the Old Man who voices Yeats’s arguments has dire consequences for a reading of both the arguments themselves and the play as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

While Wilson and others have rightly emphasized *A Vision*'s importance in understanding the theological or aesthetic dimensions of the play's fictional universe, I think it is mistaken to rely on *A Vision* as the sole or even principle extra-textual context for understanding *Purgatory*. For one thing, the insistence that *A Vision* is essential to comprehending the play at even a basic level downplays Yeats's sharp sense of what is theatrically viable, which is to say what works independently on the stage. Liam Miller emphasizes the playwright's discernment in this matter when he argues of *Purgatory* that, although Yeats's "philosophical structure underlies the lines of the play," it "never interferes with the theatrical validity of Yeats's text, which is spare and taut" (303). In this *Purgatory* is not unusual. Throughout his career as a dramatist Yeats had staged his esoteric beliefs on a deeply subtextual level that did not usually inhibit immediate understanding of the play in question; he rarely expected his audience to be familiar with any aspect of his arcane symbolism.<sup>2</sup> Thus I agree with Katherine Worth's assertion the plays are "entirely accessible to [a] modern audience and do not depend on special knowledge either of Yeats's theories or of his Irish material" for understanding (4). When he did overtly dramatize some aspect of his system, as he does in *Calvary*, Yeats often included some form of note or explanation that provides sufficient philosophical context. *Purgatory* includes no such note. Thus in the case of this play we might say that, while *A Vision* illuminates some of its themes, Yeats did not expect his regular audience to be at all conversant in that book's system. Indeed, *Purgatory* would most likely not have enjoyed the success it did if understanding or enjoying it depended even mostly on familiarity with Yeats's esoteric doctrines (Jeffares 275).

Secondly, the overemphasis on *A Vision* has occluded the play's relationship to other of Yeats's texts; *Purgatory* ought to be supplemented, not only by *A Vision*, but by his tract *On the Boiler*. As Harold Bloom points out, *On the Boiler* is *Purgatory*'s "proper context," not least because it is the play's most immediate literary context (426). To claim *On the Boiler* as the context for understanding *Purgatory* is not to contradict my argument above that the play does not require any knowledge of Yeats's personal beliefs because *On the Boiler* and *A Vision* are rhetorically, thematically, and intentionally vastly different. Whereas the latter was printed in a limited run and was addressed to only those who already had an interest in the subject matter, *On the Boiler* is a polemical essay designed to have the attention of a wide readership. The essay is hardly esoteric, and, as unpalatable as parts of it are, it is a public document in ways that *A Vision* is not: as William O'Donnell points out in his textual introduction to *On the Boiler*, the pamphlet "was to be produced by a commercial printer and then be published under the imprint of the Cuala Press, thus avoiding the limited print runs, higher production costs, and slower speed" of a more expensive and smaller press (*LE* 488). Yeats's desire for a more economical production method bespeaks his desire to have the pamphlet widely distributed and readily accessible, two things that *A Vision* was certainly not.

Finally, by reading *Purgatory* alongside *A Vision* rather than *On the Boiler*, critics have ignored not only Yeats's stated intention but the whole publication history of the play and essay, all of which points to his desire to have the two texts set beside one another. In her edition of the manuscript materials of *Purgatory*, Sandra F. Siegel provides a brief narrative of *On the Boiler* and *Purgatory*'s publication history. She

points out that “Yeats’s writing of *Purgatory* was so fused with the composition of “*On the Boiler*,” the printing of the two so inextricably linked, that it is impossible to consider the history of one without considering the history of the other” (14). Of particular interest to Siegel is Yeats’s desired timing of the publication of the essay and the first performance of the play in 1938; according to her, his wish to have “the essay and play reach the public simultaneously” was due to “his concern about their reception,” presumably because the two pieces shed such light on one another (15). As Siegel’s essay makes clear, Yeats was eager to present *On the Boiler* and *Purgatory* as an integral whole; these plans were temporarily frustrated, however, by the interference of inexperienced printers and Yeats’s own death, though, as Siegel notes, he did live to send the corrected holograph proofs of the essay to the printer (14).

Though numerous critics such as Bloom and Siegel have pointed out *On the Boiler*’s relevance to *Purgatory*, few studies have provided a substantial treatment or comparison between the texts. This fact probably owes itself not least to the unsavory character of the ideas presented in *On the Boiler*. The following remark by Vendler is typical of the amount of critical attention given to the essay in relation to *Purgatory*: “One has only to glance at *On the Boiler* (in which *Purgatory* was first printed) to understand how greatly Yeats’s imagination was imbued with rage and hatred” (201). The notion that *On the Boiler* merits “only” a “glance” serves to deemphasize its importance and undermines the vital unity that Yeats himself saw existing between the play and the essay.

Against relegating *On the Boiler* to the status of eccentricity, Elizabeth Cullingford argues for contextualizing it in order to better understand it. For her, the



essay “appears gratuitously offensive” only when “taken in isolation,” but when it is seen in its proper biographical and historical contexts, “some of its statements appear in a different and more comprehensible light” (216). Though Cullingford does not explicitly mention *Purgatory*, the play does form a crucial part of the context for understanding *On the Boiler* even as the essay sheds light on the play.

### *Yeats's Social Vision and On the Boiler*

Because *On the Boiler* is so densely constructed, it defies easy summary and analysis, so perhaps the best way to discern the relevant arguments is by following the patterning of the essay itself and by starting with the beginning. Yeats introduces his central argument regarding contemporary Irish cultural decadence by describing a postcard he had received from Dublin’s Lord Mayor. The postcard depicted an eighteenth century Protestant Ascendancy house named Mansion House, “as it is today” (*LE* 221). Yeats describes with acidic contempt the present decayed state of the once-glorious house: it is marred by a “cast-iron porch,” its walls ruined by “stucco,” and its front made vulgar by “plate glass”; indeed, the House’s “sole fitting inhabitant” is “that cringing firbolg Tom Moore cast by some ironmonger—bronze costs money—now standing on the other side of Trinity College near the urinal” (*LE* 221- 2). Mansion House is a hybrid of great ugliness: half modern, half traditional, for Yeats it is a total monstrosity.

Yeats’s outrage at the house’s decay seems out of all proportion until we recognize that it stands symbolically for an ideal, aristocratic Ireland that has been eroded by the tides of modernity.<sup>3</sup> For Yeats as for so many other Irish writers and

thinkers, the eighteenth-century represented the high-water mark of Irish culture, not least because it was the golden age of the Protestant Ascendancy. Historically, the Ascendancy refers to an Anglo-Irish gentry in Ireland which had strong ties to England, but it is important to remember that it was not an aristocracy in the way that England's landed elite was. R.F. Foster provides a helpful way to understand the term when he writes that it "defined a social elite, professional as well as landed, whose descent could be Norman, Old English, Cromwellian, or even (in a very few cases) ancient Gaelic...They comprised an elite who monopolized law, politics, and 'society'" (*Modern Ireland* 170).

For Yeats, the Ascendancy represented a world of leisure, art, and cultivation, but numerous critics have pointed out that his construal of the Ascendancy is largely fictitious. Donald J. Childs points out, for instance, that "What Burke saw as a plebeian oligarchy, and what William Ewart Gladstone saw as a noxious growth, Yeats regarded as Ireland's aristocracy" (171). Childs goes on to summarize Seamus Deane and Michael North's critiques of Yeats's views on this point, both of whom accuse him of occluding the Ascendancy's exploitative character in favor of a view that held the Ascendancy as a model for artistic cultivation through landed leisure (171). Thus for him, the Ascendancy represents an aesthete's aristocracy, part of his pastoral vision of an ideal society from which contemporary Irish culture has so harmfully deviated.

Whatever factual problems one finds in Yeats's account of the Ascendancy, the urgency of his critique in *On the Boiler* arises in large part from his conviction that the dominant forces at work in modern Ireland were attacking the values he saw the Ascendancy as representing. His description of the debased Mansion House powerfully

concentrates his more general critique of contemporary Irish culture, so it is here we must begin. For him, one of the main forces contributing to the loss of Ascendancy values of cultivation and nobility was what he considered the hordes of the vulgar middle classes. Describing the present state of Mansion House, he writes that “All Catholic Ireland swells out in that pretentious front. Old historic bricks and window-panes obliterated or destroyed, its porch invented when England was elaborating the architecture and interior decoration of the gin-palace” (*LE* 221-2). Yeats saw “Catholic Ireland” as being closely associated with the middle class of shopkeepers, pub owners, and the like, for which he harbored a lifelong antipathy.

The middle class was threatening to Yeats in part because he saw it as representing a spiritually destructive materialism; as Cullingford puts it, Yeats’s disgust was principally with “the creeping uniformity of modern materialist civilization” (11). Indeed, Yeats saw in materialism a deadening of aesthetic sense which he viewed as hazardous to character, and he saw its spread through western civilization as a disease. Drawing on his reading of Yeats’s play *The King’s Threshold* and the essay “If I were Four-and-Twenty,” Paul Stanfield points out that Yeats found modern art and architecture repellent because they do not “represent...an imaginary ideal, but ‘life’ in all its blotched imperfection” (168). For Yeats, Stanfield goes on to observe, “Art educates desire, causes the best to breed with the best, and so slowly brings human kind towards perfection” (168). Materialism is by its nature antithetical to Yeats’s “ideal art”: in validating the expedient over the beautiful (the statue in Mansion House is iron, not bronze, because “bronze costs money”), materialism contributes to the decay of modern culture through its rejection of the ideal in favor of the sordid details of

quotidian life, thereby rejecting the will to transcendence. A materialistic art cannot “educate desire” because desire itself—conceived in materialistic terms—becomes merely the urge to what is most useful, not necessarily what is the most beautiful.

In its more vulgar inclinations, materialism was for Yeats inextricably linked to democratic societies. This linkage is suggested by Grattan Freyer, who writes that “All his life he had opposed both the modern democrat’s belief that material advance was the aim of political action” (114). For Yeats, materialism and democracy were of a piece with the middle class and represented analogous urges to uniformity and the deadening of aesthetic sensibility and imaginative power. In one portion of *On the Boiler*, Yeats describes the six years he served in the Irish senate and reflects on the character of the men with whom he served in order to point out inherent defects in democracy. He makes a sharp contrast between senators chosen by high-ranking government ministers and those who were elected by the people through democratic processes. Yeats writes that “The thirty men nominated by President Cosgrave were plainly the most able and the most educated” (*LE* 224). Against the image of these more stately nominated men Yeats describes “some typical elected man,” whom he described as “emotional as a youthful chimpanzee, hot and vague, always disturbed, always hating something or other” (*LE* 224). Like materialism, Yeats believed democracy was a capitulation to the baseness of modern life. Furthermore, just as materialism streamlines the process of perception by rendering all objects the same, democracy levels social reality in ways that are harmful to the individual self. Childs articulates Yeats’s deep conviction that “In the liberal state, every person is theoretically the same abstract self with the same abstract natural rights—politically

identical units independent of time and place” (169-70). Yeats’s own expression of this idea is a good deal more forceful: according to him, democracy “substitut[es] for the old human its unique irreplaceable individuals something that can be chopped and measured like a piece of cheese” (*LE* 237).

As the titles of *On the Boiler*’s different sections make clear—“Tomorrow’s Revolution” and “After the Revolution,” especially—the bulk of the essay is given to Yeats’s prescriptions to the problems raised by the decline of culture brought about by democracy and materialism. These solutions are incremental in severity, beginning with the question of education. He begins his educational portion anecdotally: a library committee in Galway had met some years before to discuss the issue of whether Bernard Shaw’s works ought to be kept in the libraries. After some deliberation, the committee decided that “the books of Shaw be not kept” and proceeded to burn the available copies of the works, as this was the only way to be rid of them (*LE* 222).

Yeats introduces the episode in order to address the question of who should be educated and who should not. For him, the Galway library committee should not be overly-criticized for burning the books because they were put in their position by forces not under their control. In a mixture of conciliation and condescension, Yeats writes that the members of the committee “are probably clever, far-seeing men when ploughing their fields, selling porter, or, if they make their living by teaching class, when they have shut the school doors behind them, but show them a book and they buzz like a bee in a bottle” (*LE* 222). The real problem is that these men have been taken out of their parochial states by being educated against the decrees of nature and above their innate abilities. Teaching the lower classes is not a universal prerogative; it

is rather an infringement upon the universal principle of hierarchy. He makes the somewhat startling claim that “Forcing reading and writing on those who wanted neither was a worst part of the violence which for two centuries has been creating that hell wherein we suffer” (*LE* 223). Educating those unsuited for it merely provides them with enough ability to become upwardly socially mobile. This state of affairs ultimately leads to the unsuited gaining positions of political power and spreading their low-born modes of life and perception. Thus Yeats writes, “Our representative system has given Ireland to the incompetent. There are no districts in County Galway of any size without a Catholic curate, a young shopkeeper, a land-owner, a sawyer, with enough general knowledge to make a good library committee”(LE 223). Universal education destabilizes society because it helps raise those who should not have them to positions of social influence.

With the question of whom to educate Yeats raises one of the main concerns of *On the Boiler*, and one that is also the most contentious of Yeats’s beliefs: eugenics. Though Stanfield points out that eugenics was hardly a new interest for Yeats, the stridence with which he advances a eugenic program in *On the Boiler* is unprecedented anywhere else in his canon (146). In relation to the issue of education, the crux of Yeats’s eugenic argument involves what Yeats calls “innate intelligence” or “mother-wit,” which, as its name implies, has everything to do with the quality of blood in a given family (*LE* 228). “Innate intelligence” is the prime determining factor in deciding an individual’s potential, as it is mother-wit that determines who should be educated. Since the lower classes have less mother-wit, they are not fit for education because they lack the foundation for it. To educate them would merely be to encourage

their aping the genuinely learned; therefore, according to Yeats, they should be kept from being cultivated above their capacities.

The issues of education and eugenics contribute to the overall structure of Yeats's arguments about social organization. According to him, mother-wit does not only determine one's fitness for education, it also determines one's socio-economic status. Yeats argues that "if you arrange an ascending scale from the unemployed to skilled labour, from skilled labour to shopkeepers and clerks, from shopkeepers and clerks to professional men, there is not only an increase of mother-wit but of the size of the body and its freedom from constitutional defects" (*LE* 229). Such an argument lends itself very well to Yeats's aristocratic leanings; as he notes, "this ascending scale has another character which may, or must, turn all politics upside down; the families grow smaller as we ascend" (*LE* 229). An obvious implication here is that, since power should only be given to those with high mother-wit, it should be given only to the very few at the top of the social ladder.

The most troubling aspects of *On the Boiler* are Yeats's proposed solutions to the problem of cultural degeneration in Ireland, since merely refusing education to the lower classes is hardly enough to turn back the tide of decay, so more drastic eugenic measures must be taken. The heart of the matter is Yeats's belief that the "unintelligent classes" must be "limit[ed]" by government intervention (*LE* 232). Yeats sees this intervention as necessary in a scientific age: in older days, there was a "great mortality among the children" which ensured that over-population would never be a serious threat (*LE* 232). Thus Yeats argues that, "if our Government cannot send them doctor

and clinic it must, till it gets tired of it, send monk and confession-box” because there is now no natural check upon the growth of the lower classes (*LE* 232).

A yet more drastic element of his argument is his vision of a violent, apocalyptic clash between the upper and lower orders of civilization. He posits a scenario in which the ruling class ought to seize control of “all necessities of life” so that the “uneducatable masses” cannot proliferate (*LE* 231). Yeats sees, however, that “The drilled and docile masses may submit, but a prolonged civil war seems more likely...The danger is that there will be no war, that the skilled will attempt nothing, that the European civilization, like those old civilizations that saw the triumph of their gangrel stocks, will accept decay” (*LE* 231). Eugenic violence thus takes on an apocalyptic coloring, the last refuge of a dying culture. As he had previously hoped the Easter Rising had ushered in a new cycle of history, Yeats again expresses his hope that violent upheaval may restore some natural balance in civilization that modernity had nullified. Quoting from *A Vision*, he writes:

Dear predatory birds, prepare for war, prepare your children and all that you can reach...test art, morality, custom, thought, by Thermopylae... Love war because of its horror, that belief may be changed, civilization renewed. We desire belief and lack it. Belief comes from shock and is not desired (*LE* 231).

#### *Purgatory: Criticizing the Social Critic*

These themes—the degeneration of an idealized Irish hierarchical society and the rise of vulgar materialism, eugenic theories of familial and social decay, and regeneration through eugenic violence—form the bedrock upon which *Purgatory* is built. Before proceeding, a brief summary of the play will help us establish, in broad strokes, how it reflects the arguments *On the Boiler* before proceeding to a closer



reading of the text. The play's main characters—an Old Man and his son, the Boy—are poor wanderers traveling the roads of Ireland. The action begins when they come upon a ruined aristocratic house and a riven tree. The Old Man reveals that the house was his childhood home and that it had been great once. His family on his mother's side was comprised of wealthy Ascendancy stock, but his mother made the mistake of marrying a dissolute stable groom, whose gambling and drinking squandered the family fortune. The Old Man's mother, now dead, suffers eternally in the house by reliving the moment of her crime, which was the conception of her son that inaugurated a tainted blood line. The Old Man believes that if he can stop the consequences of her sin he can release his mother's soul from suffering, and it is in this belief that he murders his son to keep polluted blood from passing on. Yet the murder is to no avail; the play ends with the Old Man's realization that nothing he does can help end his mother's purgatory, a realization expressed in his anguished admission to God that "Mankind can do no more" and his final plea to "Appease/the misery of the living and the remorse of the dead" (*Plays 544*).

Writing of *Purgatory*, Richard Taylor observes that "In the context of destroying an aristocratic tradition of refinement and taste as symbolized by the great house, the action also becomes a paradigm for the loss of heroic values and the present vulgarity in contemporary Ireland" (195). The play begins with a subtle announcement of this central theme by evoking the destruction of the great Ascendancy houses. It begins in darkness, with the silence of the theater broken by the voice of the Boy complaining to his father:

Half-door, hall door,  
Hither and thither day and night,

Hill or hollow, shouldering this pack,  
Hearing you talk. (*Plays* 537)

This highly effective introductory passage manages to convey much crucial detail in a tightly compressed way. The repeated aspirants—“half,” “hall,” “hither,” “hill,” and others—powerfully evoke the Boy’s breathless exasperation with his father, thereby suggesting their strained relationship. Also, the Boy’s various references subtly establish the play’s concern with the decline of culture from the ideal represented by the Ascendancy big house; as Wilson observes, the reference to “half-doors” evokes “the peasantry” which contrasts with the “hall door” of the great Ascendancy families (153). Thus David Clark also points out that “The theme of the play, the guilt of leveling the great houses with the little ones, of destroying a high way of life to make way for a mob without traditions... appears implicitly in the first line” (95). Furthermore, the Boy’s exasperation communicates something of the obsessive character of the Old Man’s ruminations; as the use of the present participles “shouldering” and “hearing” suggest, the Old Man’s speeches are always and forever returning to the topic which dominates his mind, which is the decline and fall of the great Ascendancy traditions.

As Yeats himself does in *On the Boiler*, the Old Man demonstrates a powerfully bitter response to the decay of the great Ascendancy houses. His first lines, an *ubi sunt* for the glories of the past, register his profound sadness at the present state of things: “Where are the jokes and stories of a house,/ Its threshold gone to patch a pig-sty?” (*Plays* 537). The house is identifiably one of the Ascendancy big houses, as evidenced by the Old Man’s central speech:

Great people lived and died in this house;  
Magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament,  
Captains and Governors, and long ago  
Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne.  
Some that had gone on Government work  
To London or to India came home to die,  
Or cam from London every spring  
To look at the may-blossom in the park. (*Plays* 539)<sup>4</sup>

The house for the Old Man is a synecdoche for the “great people” who “lived and died” there. They embodied a storied tradition of Protestant nobility and bravery, having been men on the winning side of history at the epoch-making Battle of the Boyne in 1690 in which William of Orange defeated the Jacobite forces and put down the possibility of Catholic, independent rule in Ireland. Thus his tender recollections turn to poisonous wrath when he remembers that his father “killed the house”; he goes on to say that “to kill a house/Where great men grew up, married, died,/ I here declare a capital offence” (*Plays* 539). As Yeats did in discussing Mansion House in *On the Boiler*, the Old Man turns his fury upon the one responsible for the degradation of the great house. The Old Man here takes Yeats’s anger a step further by likening the fall of a great house to the murder of a person.

The aristocrats who lived in his family’s great house are admired by the Old Man because they are paragons of a nobility that maintained social cohesion by a strict adherence to rigidly defined codes of conduct. Reflecting on his mother’s marriage to his father the stable groom, the Old Man says that his grandmother “Never spoke to her [his mother] again, /And she did right” (*Plays* 539). The Old Man’s grandmother recognized the social transgressiveness of the union and acted accordingly, with the Old Man’s approval. That such a union was possible to begin with indicates the decadence of contemporary Irish culture in that the greater social mobility (deplored by

Yeats as a “threatening...Jacob’s ladder” in *On the Boiler*) of Ireland’s more democratic society has created the conditions by which a stable groom could, without apparent shame, marry so far above his own social station (*LE* 238). Miscegenation is thus a two-edged sword: not only was it shameful for his mother to marry a drunken stable groom, it was also the fault of society itself to allow a man like him to pass into the social elite without obstacle or censure.

In his character the Boy embodies some of the social forces Yeats and the Old Man view as culturally and spiritually destructive. In contrast to the Old Man’s worship of the noble codes of behavior of the fallen aristocracy, the Boy’s only criteria for admirable conduct are pragmatic and material. For instance, when the Old Man tells his son that his grandmother “did right” in cutting off contact with his mother, the Boy responds “What’s right and wrong?/ My grand-dad got the girl and the money” (*Plays* 539). The Boy’s moral relativism stems from his belief (which Yeats associated with democracy) that the good is defined solely by material gain. He completely disregards the Old Man’s disgust with his father, exclaiming, “My God, but you had luck! Grand clothes/ And maybe a grand horse to ride” (*Plays* 539). The negative consequences of his grand-mother’s union are totally lost on the Boy, who sees in the past wealthier and therefore better days.

The fall of the great family of *Purgatory* owes itself to more than a poorly-made marriage from a social standpoint; the decline from the aristocrats of the past to the coarse and materialistic Boy is due primarily to the introduction of bad blood into the family line. The importance of this eugenic dimension to the play’s structure cannot be overstated: first, it furnishes *Purgatory* with its central image of the ghost of the mother

eternally reliving the painful and passionate moment of her sexual union with her husband that resulted in the birth of her son, now the Old Man. Furthermore, the play derives its pathos mostly from the Old Man's obsession with eugenic impurity. His mind is haunted by his mother's primal crime and sees the consequences of that sin as culminating in his son, whom he ultimately murders.

The parallels between the treatment of eugenics in *On the Boiler* and *Purgatory* come into sharp focus in several key passages spoken by the Old Man. For example, when the Old Man bitterly recalls how his father, "to keep me on his level.../Never sent me to school," his son responds with what seems to us justified anger: "What education have you given me?" (*Plays* 540). Disregarding the justice of the question, the Old Man ferociously replies that:

I gave the education that befits  
A bastard that a pedlar got  
Upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch. (*Plays* 540)

The Old Man here recalls Yeats's argument in *On the Boiler* that only those with high mother-wit ought to be given an education. In the case of the Old Man, what piecemeal education he received was only given him because he was half his mother's son, therefore only half worthy of it. To his mind, the Boy is the product of a fully base union, a fact the Old Man takes evident delight in rehearsing to his son; he does not deserve even a scant education.

*Purgatory* also invokes what is one of the most troubling ideas of *On the Boiler*, which is that of regeneration through eugenic violence. In the essay, Yeats had prophesied societal renewal if civilization would purify itself through a civil war in which "the skilled" would achieve dominance over the base-born. In *Purgatory* this

idea takes the form of the Old Man's murder of his son, which is the climax of the play.

The seeds of this action can be found early on, when the Old Man explains to the Boy

the fate of those in purgatory. The dead:

Re-live  
Their transgressions, and that not once  
But many times; they know at last  
The consequence of those transgressions  
Whether upon others or upon themselves;  
Upon others, others may bring help,  
For when the consequence is at an end  
The dream must end; if upon themselves,  
There is no help but in themselves  
And in the mercy of God. (*Plays* 538)

Vendler points out that in this passage “we are tempted...to believe that the Old Man can indeed cut short his mother's suffering” (199). Certainly this is the belief of the Old Man, for he sees his mother's sin as being primarily against others, the rest of the family. Thus he believes that the “others” sinned against can help ease the suffering of her soul.<sup>5</sup> According to the system put forth here, the mother's ghost can be put to rest since the “consequence of those transgressions” can be eliminated.

The grim logic of the above passage eventually leads the Old Man to murder his son. After he has stabbed his son repeatedly, the Old Man turns reflective as the stage grows dark, save for a light on the riven tree. He intones:

Study that tree.  
It stands there like a purified soul,  
All cold, sweet, glistening light.  
Dear mother, the window is dark again,  
But you are in the light because  
I finished all that consequence. (*Plays* 543).

The final phrase—“all that consequence”—ties this portion of the play rhetorically to the one quoted above. Hence what was implicit earlier here becomes explicit: the Old

Man sees the Boy as embodying the “consequence” of his mother’s sin, a consequence that can be removed and so erased. He believes, momentarily, that in killing the Boy he has released his mother’s soul from her eternal and painful repetitions of the moment of her sin. The riven tree stands as an image of the “purified soul,” purified because eugenic violence has at last made sufficient payment for the primal sin of the mother.

Though *Purgatory* clearly dramatizes many of *On the Boiler*’s arguments, it is necessary to consider more fully the ways that Yeats complicates this intertextual relationship. As we have seen, the overlap between the play and essay is considerable: the Old Man shares many of Yeats’s views, such as his disgust with modern Irish culture, his worship of an idealized past, and his belief in eugenic sin and the ability of violence to renew those implicated in that sin. Yet Yeats’s rhetorical usage of the Old Man becomes extremely complicated once we recognize that he is not, even for the playwright, to be taken as a moral or even sane guide to the issues the play raises. He undermines his character by ironizing him. The Old Man is tragically unaware of his implication in the “consequence” of his mother’s crime and is totally ignorant of his own evil. More damningly, however, is the fact that he is mistaken in his attribution of his mother’s crime as being against her family instead of herself. His sacrifice of his son has no saving power, and he is left pleading with God in desperate impotence.

In his discussion of the play, Andrew Parkin makes the salient observation that in *Purgatory* as “in a Greek tragedy the doom of the house implies also the doom of the city or land” (157). Parkin goes on to link the Old Man of *Purgatory* with a specific character from Greek tragedy, Oedipus (158). This observation is striking and worthy of some development. Like Oedipus, the Old Man fails to recognize that he is fully

implicated in the sin which he wishes to root out, but he has no prophet to tell him that “you are the murderer you hunt” (Sophocles 180). Though he believes, for example, in the primacy of blood-purity in determining the value of a person, the Old Man does not apply the standards he uses in evaluating his father and his son to himself. This contradiction is evident when the Old Man claims that his father “never sent me to school” because he wanted to keep him “on his level” (*Plays* 539). Implicit in the Old Man’s complaint is his disregard for his own tainted blood, which, according to Yeats’s ideas sketched above should have precluded him from education in the first place. The Old Man ignores the conclusion that should be drawn from his own eugenic principles, which is that education could not have possibly raised him above his father’s “level” because his portion of tainted blood determines the limits of his potential.

Furthermore, Yeats undermines the Old Man by ironically contrasting his admiring obsession with aristocratic, heroic codes of behavior with his own conduct. Nowhere is this contrast in sharper relief than in the play’s climactic moment when the Old Man kills his son. After he has stabbed the Boy, the Old Man starts to sing a lullaby whose theatrical effect is to provide a devastating counterpoint to the brutality of his action: “Hush-a-bye baby, thy father’s a knight,/ Thy mother a lady, lovely and bright” (*Plays* 543). The Old Man, manic, unstable, and remorseless, here invokes knights and ladies with the unintentional effect of shining even greater light on the horror of his calloused act: the placid world of courtly heroism stands in diametric opposition to the sordid quality of the murder of a poor pedlar boy at the hands of his deranged father. The passage reveals that the Old Man’s mind is so warped, his ideals so perverted that he cannot distinguish between himself and what he admires. He is



hardly a knight, and the boy's mother was a "tinker's daughter" rather than a high-born lady.

As Yeats wrote and revised *Purgatory* he deliberately emphasized the disparity between the Old Man's expressed beliefs and his actions. In Sandra Siegel's presentation of the manuscript materials, one can observe as Yeats gradually shapes the consciousness of the Old Man into one that does not admit to its own degradation. In the early stages of composition, for example, Yeats consistently casts the Old Man's thought in terms of evil. In Siegel's transcription of the scenario draft, for instance, we can see how the Old Man obsessively uses the word "evil": "He is evil you are evil...if you do great evil...I am the most evil of [? them] this boy that is most evil still...There is a dark evil, a curse that was never broke is born, begins---it corrupts man after man woman" (*Purgatory Manuscript Materials* 47, sic.). As the play reached completion, however, Yeats systematically removed all of the Old Man's references to "evil", changing at least two instances of it to the word "consequence." Siegel observes that "[a]lthough Yeats deliberately and consistently eliminated the Old Man's view of himself as evil, he did not alter the Old Man's behavior from one version to the next" (5). In not altering the Old Man's behavior—he murders his son in all draft materials, with only the method being altered—while changing how he conceives of that behavior, Yeats does not alter the Old Man's character but his consciousness. We might be justified, then, in saying that Yeats's references to the Old Man's evil in the drafts represent his own view of the character, and that his elimination of the word "evil" from the Old Man's vocabulary is simply meant to highlight the character's obliviousness rather than to indicate a more fundamental alteration.

Perhaps the most striking component of Yeats's undermining of the Old Man is in his rendering the character completely powerless. Throughout the play the Old Man presents himself as an authority, educating his son on the fate of the dead in the afterlife and ruminating on socio-cultural decline as if he were one who understands the movements of history. Yet he is fundamentally mistaken in his notion, discussed above, that he can actually help the ghost of his mother. In his attempt to cleanse the family of impure blood and so release his mother from suffering, he kills the Boy in what turns out to be a fruitless action. Almost immediately after he calls attention to the tree that stands "like a purified soul," the Old Man hears the sounds of his father's ghost riding towards the house to repeat his mother's purgatorial moment. The Old Man cries out, "Hoof-beats! Dear God,/ How quickly it returns—beat—beat!/ Her mind cannot hold up that dream" (*Plays* 544). The play ends without catharsis and with nothing more than the Old Man's recognition of his own failed efforts to aid his mother. He has been "a murderer all for nothing" because he has failed to understand what Vendler has described as the "Yeatsian doctrine that only self-forgiveness can halt the obsessive rehearsing of guilt," which pragmatically means that "it is the sufferer who has to accept past events, and exterior help is useless" (199). The Old Man is thus an ironic image of an impotent God whose sacrifice of his only son is in vain, for it has no saving power.

The question that remains to be answered is this: if our argument that *Purgatory* parallels *On the Boiler* fairly closely is accurate, and if Yeats simultaneously dramatizes his own views in the Old Man then undermines the character's credibility, what is the purpose? I suggest that the answer returns us to the imaginative unity of the

two texts. Siegel, writing of Yeats's revision process in working on *On the Boiler* and *Purgatory*, argues that "If Yeats had revised neither the play nor the essay, it would probably be fair to say that *Purgatory* is the animation of his conservative beliefs about eugenic reform. The final versions of *Purgatory* and "On the Boiler," however, allow for a different reading" (13).

Siegel herself does not advance this "different reading," but her claim opens the door for my own: in placing many of the beliefs expressed in *On the Boiler* into the mouth of the Old Man of *Purgatory*, Yeats intends the reader to align the author with his dramatic creation. In so doing, he undermines the certainty he had projected in *On the Boiler* by associating his ideas with such a character. It would be mistaken to assume that *Purgatory* undoes the arguments of the essay or to suggest that the play proves Yeats did not really believe in what he claims to; however, the complexities created by this intertextual relationship certainly does modify both texts involved. In my view, *Purgatory* represents the final endpoint of Yeats's social critique. While in *On the Boiler* Yeats presents himself as a confident political man, suggesting government policy changes and looking forward to "Tomorrow's Revolution," *Purgatory* expresses an entirely pessimistic vision. The Old Man certainly represents Yeats's views because he espouses them so perfectly, yet he chooses to undermine the Old Man's authority and leave him utterly helpless at the play's end. In this self-representation, it seems that Yeats abandons the efficacy of his own (or, for that matter, any) social program, and thereby he implicates himself in his own critique. In the Old Man, Yeats criticizes social intervention itself as the anguished expression of helplessness by a people who are the victims of uncontrollable historical forces. Thus

Yeats does not retract the views set forth in *On the Boiler* so much as he abandons the notion that human beings can affect change at all. In the end, his posture as social critic is simply another expression of his will to play: like old McCoy atop the boiler, Yeats voices his convictions for the simple sake of voicing them.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Other critics, such as Helen Vendler and Leonard Nathan, also see the play in terms of *A Vision*. Unlike Wilson, Vendler sees *A Vision* as less a personal theology than as a systematization of Yeats's aesthetics and theories of the imagination. Thus in tying the play to *A Vision* Vendler naturally argues that it dramatizes the "imagination at work" (198). Reading the play as "a parable about the imagination," Vendler criticizes it as "thin and unsatisfying" (201). In his more traditional reading of *A Vision*, Leonard Nathan emphasizes Yeats's cyclical theories of history in order to argue that *Purgatory* represents "objective phases of a dying cycle in which men become reduced to fragmented beings" (240).

<sup>2</sup> Yeats was well aware that he needed to strike a balance between his personal, esoteric beliefs and his dramatic work. Writing to Ethel Mannin of *The Death of Cuchulain*, he says that "I am writing a play on the death of Cuchulain, an episode or two from the old epic. My 'private philosophy' is there but there must be no sign of it; all must be like an old faery tale. It guides me to certain conclusions and gives me precision but I do not write it" (L 917-18).

<sup>3</sup> The later Yeats's obsession with the fall of the Ascendancy mansion (and what it represents) is perhaps most forcefully dramatized in the play *Words upon the Window-Pane* (1930). In that play, Yeats depicts a séance that is held in the former house of "Stella," the lover of Jonathan Swift. Swift's spirit intrudes on the proceedings and does not allow the other spirits to speak as it rehearses the reasons he chose not to marry. As Michael Steinman argues, Swift was for Yeats a paragon of "Anglo-Irish aristocratic solitude" and a "heroic" precursor to Yeats himself (121). The heroic/aristocratic age of Swift is contrasted with the moribund state of the house, which is now a "lodging house" (*Plays* 465). A final point worthy of note in connection with *On the Boiler* and *Purgatory* is the fact that *Words* also has questions of eugenics at its heart; Swift refuses to marry because "I have something my blood that no child must inherit" (*Plays* 476).

<sup>4</sup> This passage can be fruitfully compared with another meditation on the fall of the Ascendancy Big House, the poem "Coole and Ballylee, 1931" in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Ure, in an attempt to account for this speech, argues that "it could not have been spoken by an entirely naturalistic character. If the old man really 'knew' all that, he would not have acted as he does, or at least would not have been surprised that his action was ultimately without effect in releasing his mother's shade from its dream" (109). I think this is beside the point. As so much of the play indicates, the Old Man is not to be taken as sane; for someone whose mind is so split as the Old Man's, it is quite "natural" indeed to hold contradictory positions.

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