W. B. Yeats: Two Approaches

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Abstract and Keywords
This chapter discusses Yeats' works, the concealed aspects of his poetry, and his commitment to symbolism. In addition, a discussion of Yeats' interest in Spencer, his edition of Blake and other activities in which recognition of a different mode of writing and of interpretation is also present. The chapter also discusses the two movements in Yeats' works; the allegory and symbolism, both of which give insight into the discrete activities of modernism and discloses Yeats' historical position and the complex issues underlying his play, the Purgatory.

Keywords: W. B. Yeats, poetry, symbolism, Spencer, Blake, allegory, modernism

Dead on the sand dead Arabs and dead Jews.
Dead in the mud all kinds of Vietnamese.
After commercials and comedians
The Irish kill each other on the news.
Matthew Mead

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The impact of T. S. Eliot's famous endorsement of the English metaphysical poets as exemplary for the contemporary writer has been sufficiently great to mask the tensions within that historical strategy. Modernism, so deeply associated with Eliot's achievement in English poetry, and Tradition, so effectively nourished by Eliot's and Grierson's presentation of John Donne, are antagonistic terms—or so it would seem. A concern with the modernity of their generation's experience does not immediately sanction that attention to the value of a past literature which Tradition tabulates. And yet, it is undoubtedly true that Yeats, Eliot, and Pound acknowledged the crisis of their time by a particular emphasis on the culture of the seventeenth century (in England), the eighteenth century (in Ireland) or the medieval period generally.
Modernism—a catch title if ever there was one—is not to be identified with any easy acceptance of the contemporary experience. Its accepted dates—say 1880 to 1930—mark a period of transition, of change, and revolution. And Tradition may yet be shown to be less than frank and respectful in its attitude to the past. One crucial area in which these tensions were manifest was the primitive, that paradoxical discovery of high European civilization in its violent imposition upon the globe. The confident belief in European superiority was never shared by a Cezanne or a Conrad; nevertheless, the artistic obsession with primitive cultures remained ambiguously related to the gunboats and syphilis (p.294) of official negotiations. That ambiguity, in turn, contributes to the truly central place of Yeats in Anglophone Modernism, for Yeats's Ireland provided access to an allegedly primitive society which was still European. The unique political and economic structure of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland left Birmingham and Ballina open to each other's self-image. The contrast is worked out in touching detail in ‘Balla’ (Sligo) and London in Yeats's early fiction John Sherman (1891), though here we meet a bieder-meier intimacy rather than the astringency of Connemara fishermen. To see Ireland, or even parts of Ireland, as 'primitive' was a task greatly eased by the success of Protestant Ascendancy. For a start, the middle classes were evidently dismissed from the discussion by the polarized sectarianism of nineteenth-century Ireland. Second, the antique dignities and guilts which the myth of Protestant Ascendancy laid upon the landowning class rendered the invocation of medieval and feudal sources all the more plausible—one of Yeats's more ridiculous fictions was that in which he converted Augusta Persse's evangelical upbringing into a feudal apprenticeship. Finally, the de-Christianized 'Protestantism' of John Butler Yeats on the one hand, and of various Ulster Unionists on the other, rendered the presentation of a Catholic peasantry as wr-native, pagan, all the more convincing to a public denied any reliable historical discussion.
In the sixteenth section of *Autumn Journal* (1938) Louis MacNeice considers retrospectively some of the reasons why ‘we ... like being Irish’. They include membership of a ‘world that never was’, the territorial smallness of which allows one to think of the place ‘with a family feeling’, and so forth. The passage ends, unconvincingly, ‘It is selfdeception of course.’ Since the days of Spenser, it had been policy to present Ireland as comprehensively backward by comparison with England; only with the operations of Protestant Ascendancy, and the attendant moulding of a new image of Ireland in the nineteenth century, was it possible to regard Ireland as desirably primitive. In particular, the west (p.295) of Ireland accumulated in the course of the century a reputation as the repository of all that was venerable, primitive, and undeveloped in Irish culture. The Famine accelerated that process by drawing attention to the linguistic distinctiveness of the region, and the movement to restore the Irish language (the Gaelic League was founded in 1893 but it had several precursors) gave prominence to the idea of the west as the real Ireland, compared with which Belfast or Kildare were but regrettable aberrations, were indeed somehow to be treated as if they were less than real. For Yeats, the west was first and foremost the landscape of Sligo, its mountains and lakes, though John Sherman is there to remind us just how clearly he saw the provincial town and its limitations. Turning his back upon these evidences of a petit bourgeoisie and related actualities, he concentrated upon the possible intimacy of peasant and nobleman, cabin and Big House in the landscape of post-Famine Ireland. Intimacy, the experience of a bond which is not rationalized or qualified by external pressures, lent to notable scenes of western landscape a distinctiveness which the world of factories and timetables had allegedly lost. Yeats's poetry abounds in these concrete allusions to the real world of the west—Inisfree, Dromahair, Lissadell, the Seven Woods, Pairc-na-Lee, Knocknarea, etc., etc. But we underestimate the subtle reservations of Yeats's poetic perception if we mistake the possibility of intimacy for the thing itself, if we mistake the accessibility of those place-names on the map for the integration of a poet in a known and comprehensive culture. One feature of Yeats's position vis d vis this actual world, which advises caution, is the role of linguistic juncture, the extent to which place-names radiated meaning for the very reason that their language was no longer an acknowledged vernacular.
We approach Yeats, therefore, warned against a too easy acceptance of him as local celebrant. Yet the kind of foreground which topographical allusion enjoys in his poetry may alert us to a more subversive and concealed aspect of the poetry generally. Yeats was deeply indebted to French Symbolism; he wrote an essay on 'The Symbolism of Poetry' as well as one on 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry'. As against this prominent evidence of Yeats's commitment to symbolism generally, we should also note his interest in Spenser, his edition of Blake, and other activities in which a recognition of a different mode of writing and of interpretation is present. Spenser's allegorical method is decisively lodged in the period of the English Renaissance, but Blake's elaborate system is at once romantic and allegoric. The work of David Erdman and others has rescued Blake from the starry metaphysics of romantic symbolism, and related his poems directly (though not simplistically) to the social and political world in which he wrote and worked. Blake's vigorous rejection of duality rendered that rescue always possible, whereas in Yeats the possibility of such a reading is more complicated. Nevertheless, we should note what may at first seem an unremarkable yet covert element in the work—its deployment of emblems in a manner which is close to allegory. The Big House, Standish O'Grady, September 1913, Coole Park, Parnell, the Municipal Gallery—any reader's response to these elements surely includes attention to their social and historical contexts. It is wrong to see Cuchulain as allegorical of Charles Stewart Parnell; but wrong too to forget that Parnell, in other poems, is a historical figure who should not be promoted to mythological glory without attention to that historical dimension.
Perhaps two movements in Yeats's work can now be identified: (i) a movement towards rendering concrete certain vestigial or marginal aspects of social experience in a manner which lends (rather than confers) a distinctive integrity and wholeness to them; (ii) a movement towards assimilating certain prominent, recognizable, and immediate aspects of social experience in a manner which absorbs and accommodates them. The first of these can be related to allegory, the second to symbolism. The danger inherent in an emphasis on the first is the reduction of Yeats to dexterous celebrant of Irish 'realities'; with the second we run the risk of Platonizing him out of existence. What is of genuine interest is the historical conjuncture of these rival possibilities and the access they give us to an insight into the discrete activities of modernism. Yeats is more revealing of the values of Modernism than Eliot is, precisely because he (p.297) is less 'pure' a Modernist. He is of course also a great deal more prolific not only as poet and dramatist, but as critic, philosopher, and propagandist. This, together with the length of his active career as poet, renders a comprehensive account of his oeuvre impossible except in the artificial and distorting context of that oeuvre alone. What follows, there fore, is an investigation which adopts two approaches to the question of Yeats and his historical position, and beyond that a concentration upon 'Purgatory' as the classic text of the later period.
Why should the oeuvre itself be regarded as an inadequate context in which to judge the poet? There is little need nowadays to argue against the more extreme hermeticism of the New Critics, and yet in the case of Yeats particularly a warning against the dangers of an isolated criticism is timely. Firstly, we should remind ourselves that when we speak of Yeats we do not mean the biographical individual (even if the individual subject were still a viable concept in the late twentieth century) but rather the sumnum of texts bearing his name; and that these texts, properly and fully treated, are a web of relationships and not a monadic thing-in-itself. Beyond this theoretical point, there are distinct tactical advantages to be gained by some implicitly comparative method by which contrasting perspectives may be cast upon the principal area of attention. Above all such considerations however, in the case of Yeats there is the paramount responsibility to resist his prescription of the history, let alone oeuvre, in which we might see him. Not only is Yeats’s work a multifarious act of self-making and autobiography but the ramifications of that endeavour aspire to create a new history in which that undertaking appears exemplary, necessary, and accomplished. Thus Yeats, in his treatment of the eighteenth century just as in his adopting of Noh conventions, rewrites the terms upon which he would be interpreted. This is not simply a matter of invention or distortion: it involves the suppression and silencing of those avenues by which he gains access to his material. In the case of the Irish Augustans, he is obliged to suppress much of the intervening history of both Ireland and Britain; in the case of the Noh—not our principal concern here but still relevant in the context (p.298) of Celticism—he silences those Orientalist modes of European thought about Japan through which his ‘unmediated’ Noh conventions are made available.
There is a thematic and critical point to be observed here, and it reintroduces the notion of modern allegory. Yeatsian emblemism does not employ the stone in the midst of all, the nettles waving on a shapeless mound to indicate the actualities of history: instead what is posited is a substitution of myth for history, an interpretation of history which veers into the cyclical movements of the ahistorical. And yet in Yeats's work—whether considered in the particularities of a poem such as ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ or in the larger conceptual debate on Tradition—there is constantly evident the stresses and tensions of that divergence.

1. Public Opinion, from W. E. H. Lecky to ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’

‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ is characteristic of one important element in Yeats's work in that we are regularly tempted to hear the poet in his own voice, to hear the poem as expressive of attitudes directly attributable to a specific, biographical author. The seductive intimacy of Anglo-Irish literature, its adoption of the coterie as symbolic of all its transactions, has deluded us into thinking ourselves initiate to those mysteries. In more rigorous moments of thought, when the allure of cultural advertisement is resisted, we concede that poems are read and not heard, and that the expressive notion of poetry is crudely inadequate to that aspect of poetic meaning which one might describe as all that the poems significantly exclude. Curtis Bradford, who has provided us with transcripts of the early drafts of ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’, speaks of Yeats’s slow accumulation of the images he needed ‘to express the idea contained in his subject’, and proceeds to place the poem among those which ‘use variations of the I-persona’.3 This is at least more cautious than Donald Torchiana’s insistence that Yeats opens (p.299) the poem by establishing ‘the wisdom of the high-minded few among the Protestant rulers of the Anglo-Irish eighteenth-century’, as the modern counterpart of ancient classical sanctities.4 T. R. Henn, with even greater precision, locates the drunken soldiery of ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ in Galway and Clare.5 In contrast, when Harold Bloom compares the poem to work by Wallace Stevens, we are almost relieved at his ignorance of Irish history, his neglect of the Onomasticon Godelicon.6
On the whole the historians have been more sensitive to the literature than the critics have been sensitive to history, its materials and its methodology. Yet if the critics have scattered historical solecisms to left and right while the historians quote poetry with fond precision, is not the greater responsibility still lying with the historians? F. S. L. Lyons has recently acknowledged the neglect by his Irish colleagues of the whole area of *Kulturgeschichte*. Such an omission is not to be justified or even awkwardly apologized for on the grounds of its subject being merely a superstructural aspect of a social reality more concretely analysable in, say, export figures for the port of Dublin. Far from being secondary to such economic realities as Cattle and Shipbuilding, culture is a central concern of the historians, being a highly specific area not only of production but of consumption also. It is much to the point, both critically and politically, to insist on the problematic nature of literature in the productions we call Anglo-Irish relations and to emphasize the extent to which the metropolitan colony within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was devoted to the manufacture of ideology.

It would follow from these observations that what is called for here is not simply a renewed attentiveness on the part of critics to the data of historical research nor a more subtle (p. 300) reading of texts as symbolic structures. On the contrary, such objectives consolidate the merely tangential figuration of literature's relation to history or history's to literature. It is salutary to remember from time to time that history and literature are themselves conceptual formations, operating within that larger social totality which relates them. These are, however, uncomfortably large matters to handle in the present confined circumstances. The social relatedness of literature and history may be approached through a study of smaller conceptual areas. Public opinion is just such an area, with a specific historical development, and a complex but articulate set of relations with other, contiguous areas. In the Irish context, we shall be concerned with W. E. H. Lecky's *The Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland* and with Yeats's poem 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'. In their interrelatedness we will note the significance of that pre-eminent ideological formation, the Protestant Ascendancy.
However, it is with Public Opinion that we should now proceed. Though the words public and opinion are venerable, their collocation has only come into general use (with the meaning we now associate with it) in comparatively recent times. In *Felix Holt*, George Eliot has her hero address ‘a man in dirty fustian’ in the following terms:

Til tell you what's the greatest power under heaven,’ said Felix, ‘and that is public opinion—the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honourable and what is shameful. That's the steam that is to work the engines. How can political freedom make us better ... if people laugh and wink when they see men abuse and defile it?’

This is Felix's moral argument against the formal liberty promised in an extension of the franchise. It is akin to Edmund Burke's advice to Irish Catholics that they should ‘aim at other rescourses [*sic*] to make themselves independent in fact before they aim at a nominal independence.’ In George Eliot we note the combination of moral subject (what is right and what is wrong) and mechanical imagery (the steam that is to work the engines) in Public Opinion. In both Eliot and Burke we note a direction against sumptuary excess—expensive modes of living and dissipation modelled on a higher social class, in the case of Burke; drunkenness in the case of George Eliot's artisans. In both cases, moral restraint is channelled powerfully to suggest a middle-class consolidation, the legitimization of which will be the special function of Public Opinion.
Of course, opinion has cropped up often in English literature long before Eliot's day. In *1 Henry IV*, the King extols the power of opinion, but the difference between the Tudor and Victorian usages is marked. Broadly speaking, one might say that the Tudors could not speak of public opinion, because the distinction between private and public had not yet rigidified as it was to rigidify in succeeding centuries. To be sure, the early stages of that distinction are discernible in *Henry IV* and elsewhere in Shakespeare. But it is perhaps only in Shakespeare's closest approach to domestic tragedy, *Othello*, that the distinction as a frontier of complex emotional and social significance has a structural role to play in the drama. More particularly, however, *Henry IV* and *Felix Holt* are literary works which are (in the popular sense) historical: that is, they are set at a date significantly earlier than that of their composition. *Henry IV* is a late sixteenth-century play ostensibly about the early fifteenth century; *Felix Holt* was written shortly before the second Reform Act (1867) and is set in the period of the first (1832). Moreover, opinion and public opinion are invoked in each as an agency by which historical continuity across division and turbulence is effected on behalf of a specific social class.

The date of *Felix Holt* (1866) is sufficiently close to that of Lecky's book (1861) to encourage some further exploration of that period. On the topic of Public Opinion, the first volume of Henry Thomas Buckle's *History of Civilisation in England* (1857–1861) offers a panorama which relentlessly yokes Tudor and Victorian under a positivist teleology. Starting from a hypothetical division of citizens into lay and military occupations, Buckle proceeds to tabulate the advance of civilization in England:
In each successive generation this tendency towards a separate organization was more marked; the utility of a division of labour became clearly recognized; and as by this means knowledge itself advanced, the authority of this middle or intellectual class correspondingly increased. Each addition to its power lessened the weight of the other two classes ... At present, it is enough to say, that, taking a general view, this third, or intellectual, class, first displayed an independent, though still a vague, activity, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; that in the sixteenth century, this activity, assuming a distinct form, showed itself in religious outbreaks; that in the seventeenth century, its energy, becoming more practical, was turned against the abuses of government, and caused a series of rebellions, from which hardly any part of Europe escaped; and finally, that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it has extended its aim to every department of public and private life, diffusing education, teaching legislators, controlling kings, and, above all, settling on a sure foundation that supremacy of Public Opinion, to which not only constitutional princes, but even the most despotic sovereigns, are now rendered strictly amenable.\(^{10}\)

The grand gesture by which the alleged laying-down of medieval arms leads to ‘that supremacy of Public Opinion’ in the Victorian period is of course but the appearance of historical process. Far from analysing the genealogy of Public Opinion, Buckle quite simply exemplifies its ideological function, the legitimization in terms of the past of a middle class present. As an illustration of the operations of Public Opinion he significantly chooses the repeal of the Corn Laws in the eighteen-forties:

whoever will minutely trace the different stages through which this great question successively passed, will find, that the Government, the Legislature, and the [Anti-Corn-Law] League, were the unwitting instruments of a power far greater than all other powers put together. They were simply the exponents of that march of public opinion ...\(^{11}\)
Of course, Buckle's sweeping narrative raises the question of when the English bourgeoisie did emerge—under the Tudors, or the Stuarts or the Hanoverian Georges. Such a question has a relevance for any Irish inquiry if we remember the extent to which Irish land and Irish titles became rewards (p.303) for English adventurers from the seventeenth century onwards. Yet, the historical concept of Public Opinion cannot be shuttled backwards and forwards from one stage of development to another without vitiating its historical nature. For Flaubert in the eighteen-fifties, it was already a cliche: in the *Dictionnaire des idees regues* he defined the stock exchange as ‘thermometre de l'opinion publique’. French intellectual cynicism at the stupidity of the average bourgeois casts a light upon Buckle's happy identification of these two factors in the advance of civilization in England. Such displacements help to highlight the crucial importance of uneven development in the transition from one mode of production to another. The repeal of the Corn Laws, hailed in England as a triumph of Public Opinion and the harbinger of increased agricultural prosperity, in Ireland was seen as something less universally positive. Buckle is obliged to speak of the history of civilization *in England* as distinct from the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, for Public Opinion assumes unanimity in order to impose it. One effect of Victorian Public Opinion, still powerfully evident today, was the notion that England remained intact and unaltered amid the global consequences of its colonial and imperial activity.

The psychological structure of Public Opinion is perhaps a topic too abstract and large to be investigated here. It may be sufficient to say that it operates within a strictly delimited social space (not necessarily a small one but certainly one possessing *a sense* of homogeneity), and that such spaces tend to be urban. This of course is in keeping with the strong affiliation of Public Opinion with the legitimization of a middle-class consensus which we have noted in Burke, Buckle, and Eliot. If we anticipate briefly our discussion of Lecky's four leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland, this delimited arena is immediately evident. Swift's success in the Wood's Halfpence controversy is founded on the intense exploitation of the Dublin publishing industry; furthermore, a controversy over the issue of coinage as such 'naturally' (p.304) focuses itself on that area of society in which the cash economy is most articulate. In the cases of Henry Flood and Henry Grattan, the
struggle for legislative independence and restored civil rights for Catholics is effectively transformed into the creation of a Public Opinion within the little universe of the Dublin parliament. The qualified reality of that institution measures the limits to which these achievements were really held. With Daniel O'Connell, the area of operation seems at first to be a great deal larger than that chosen by Swift or Grattan. But, by the nineteenth century the increased sophistication of the Press and (in this instance) the reorganization of the priesthood provided the conditions in which Public Opinion is capable of formulation on a national scale. Of the nineteenth-century newspaper and the Maynooth-trained priest one could argue with equal validity in either case that their influence was felt as something at once pervasive and remote. The newspaper, no longer something encountered in the coffee-shop but entering the home and read by the family generally, brought together reflections of the private and public domains in their most polar distinction. Similarly, the social origins of the Maynooth priest drew him towards the localized social experience of the mass of his lower-middle-class congregation, while the highly ultramontane loyalties of at least a significant sector of the priesthood counteracted that sense of integration between clergy and laity. Public Opinion, which assumes unanimity in order to impose it, is necessarily contradictory, and the priesthood as an agency of it is not exempt in this respect. Psychologically, therefore, one can say that Public Opinion operates precisely upon the tension engendered by the increasingly rigidified distinction between the private and public domains. At the risk of paradox, it could be asserted that the significant experience of Public Opinion is essentially private and often unconscious. The laughter which Felix Holt anticipates will greet any presumptuous insistence on explicit, formal liberties is that laughter which implies that it knows more than its victim knows. According to Buckle, parliament is the *unwitting* instrument ‘of a power far greater than all other powers put together’. In this respect, we distinguish sharply (p.305) between Public Opinion as cited by Eliot and Buckle and the statistics gathered today by opinion polls; or, to be more precise, we should observe that what the gallup-polls do is not to register and measure public opinion but rather to disseminate certain issues whose validity Public Opinion requires. Public Opinion has little to do with the headcounting of Social Democrats in this constituency or:that; it has
everything to do with the insistence on parties and constituencies as the delimitations of political action.

A similar attention to the categories inserted in the argument, rather than a simple assessing of the validity of the contents of the argument, may help us as we approach William Edward Hartpole Lecky's *Leaders of Public Opinion*. First published in 1861, and reissued at least ten times between then and 1903, the book originally contained five essays—on Jonathan Swift, Henry Flood, Henry Grattan, Daniel O'Connell, and ‘Clerical Influences’. Two important changes occur in the course of this publication history; first, the four essays on individual figures are expanded and revised for the Longmans edition of 1871; second, and more significant, the last essay on clerical influence is dropped. The effect of this latter revision is of course to steer the work towards that characteristic Victorian tendency to see history as biography writ large, but more drastically also to cast the work decisively as *history*. If we take the title of the 1903 edition at face value, we might expect to find Charles Stewart Parnell or Michael Davitt; at no point does Lecky (after the removal of ‘Clerical Influence’) assume that his area of inquiry is other than the past. It is tempting to see his objective as yet another exercise in envisioning the Irish past as a Golden Age, but there is in fact a more complex undertaking in progress. Given his inclusion of Swift, Flood, and Grattan, he quite deliberately associates these three distinctively eighteenth-century figures with the emergent Victorian concept of Public Opinion. O'Connell is there as a bridgehead to the contemporary world, and none too sound a bridgehead in Lecky's ultimate estimate. Yet the implication of this linking of past and present is cancelled, or rather reversed, by the elision of the (p.306) essay on clerical influence. As with Buckle, what is enacted here is not simply an account of Public Opinion but an exemplification of its central concern with the legitimization of ‘the intellectual class’ as a line of historical continuity.
If we consider Swift’s success in the matter of Wood’s Halfpence, Flood’s in relation to Irish Free Trade, and Grattan’s apostrophe to legislative independence, these issues in isolation constitute impressive achievements for their authors. The broader perspective insists, however, that Walpole remained Prime Minister, that Irish Free Trade remained lodged in the structures of British capitalist development, and that the Dublin parliament was internally anomalous. Had Lecky extended his list to include Edmund Burke the implications of this pattern might have been immediately evident. For Burke’s great success in turning the opinion of his party, and of the British public generally, against the principles of the French Revolution, acknowledges the irreversible changes which have come to France. The dominant metaphor of the Great House which informs Burke’s Reflections points both to the sublimity and redundancy of that architectural symbol. Furthermore, Burke’s success in awakening British opinion to the dangers of revolution stands in painful contrast to his embittered failure in attempting to persuade it that Irish Catholics were reliable allies deserving generous respect in the counter-revolutionary struggle. In Burke we would find, explicitly, that demarcation between Britain and England, England and Ireland which it is the function of Public Opinion to repress. Burke could not be accommodated in Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland first because he shatters the delimitations of social space within which Public Opinion can operate; and second because, considered in itself, his work scorns unanimity as simple-minded, inadequate, and partial.
Drawing together, therefore, the evidence of those figures whom Lecky includes (Swift, Flood, and Grattan especially) with the evidence of his significant exclusions (especially Burke, Parnell, and Davitt), we can see the underlying assumption of his notion of Public Opinion is the value of consensus. Swift, Flood, and Grattan are presented in terms of their success in creating a shared social effect. Seen within \textit{(p.307)} the delimited social space which Public Opinion requires, success may indeed be ascribed to them, but then Public Opinion has no place in the 1720s or even the 1780s. What is possible, however, is to inquire into the extent to which Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony, and his concept of the intellectual as an emergent social formation, might illuminate these contradictions.\footnote{Such an inquiry would inevitably open up other issues which have been largely ignored by historian and critic alike—the material origins in the eighteenth century of the families, institutions, and other social agencies which constellate as the Anglo-Irish Literary Renaissance, and the prominence of cultural production in the broader area of Anglo-Irish relations within the United Kingdom.}

Some conclusions about Public Opinion might now be hazarded. First, it points towards and consolidates a middle-class perspective, in which moral integrity in the individual and moderate conduct in disadvantaged groups is approved. Second, it is dependent on the bourgeois emphasis on a strict demarcation between private and public domains. Third, and virtually as a reformulation of these points, its moment of emergence is mid-Victorian. There are, however, equally important contradictions to be noted; of these we are most concerned with the retrospective insertion of the concept of Public Opinion in accounts of the past. This may strike some people as a harmless anachronism, as when one refers to Burke as a conservative or \textit{Gulliver's Travels} as a best-seller. Walter Benjamin's 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' concludes with an intense appeal for the practice of history in a manner at once Messianic and materialist—'Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well.'\footnote{This arrest of thought through the construction and deconstruction of concepts allows the inquirer to draw together aspects of history which narrative holds apart.}
Public Opinion calls out to Protestant Ascendancy, and in two senses. The belief that Irish society reaches its summit in ‘the Anglo-Irish landed ascendency’, ‘a numerically small Protestant landed ascendency’, ‘the influence and authority of the Protestant ascendency’ is sufficiently widespread to deserve acknowledgement as a tenet of Public Opinion. More than that, from the Williamite Settlement ‘until the impact of the French Revolution … the “protestant ascendency” was to rule unchallenged.’ More specifically, Swift is recognized as having articulated in *The Drapier Letters* (1724–1725) ‘the watchword of the protestant ascendency’. Yet a close scrutiny of Protestant Ascendancy reveals a second sense in which its affinities to Public Opinion takes on added significance. This is not the place to rehearse all the evidence available to plot the trajectory of the term Protestant Ascendancy; it is sufficient to say that, far from dating from the reign of William and Mary, or the pages of *The Drapier Letters*, we do not find the phrase occurring before January 1792 when the Corporation of Dublin adopted it as an anti-reform slogan. Despite its emergence in the revolutionary 1790s, and sponsored by the guild members of a city corporation, Protestant Ascendancy is destined to become the title of a venerable, veritably aristocratic, rural and landed elite. This back-dating of Protestant Ascendancy is probably not under way until the middle decades of the nineteenth century when O’Connellite democracy is forcing a reassessment of the eighteenth century. A version of this revisionism may be detected in Lecky’s essay on Swift and the Wood’s Halfpence incident:

There is no more momentous epoch in the history of a nation than that in which the voice of the people has first spoken, and spoken with success. It marks the transition from an age of semi-barbarism to an age of civilisation—from the government of force to the government of opinion. Before this time rebellion was the natural issue of every patriotic effort in Ireland. Since then rebellion has been an anachronism and a mistake. The age of Desmond and of O’Neil [sic] had passed. The age of Grattan and of O’Connell had begun.

The succeeding paragraph begins, ‘Swift was admirably calculated to be the leader of public opinion in Ireland …’.
If we turn now to Yeats's poem 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' it is not to give an exhaustive formal analysis of its imagery and structure, as to suggest how the interrogation of a concept (even so unpoetic a concept as Public Opinion) can point to the full feasibility of exhaustive analysis both historically and critically. John Holloway has written of such poems of Yeats's that they 'produce the poetic effect of being, by the totality of what is in them, not a mere reflection of some external reality, but an independent reality with a nature of its own.' It is just such praise of Yeats which excites the literary historian to suspect Yeats, without checking to see if this praise in any adequate sense is based upon a reading of the poem, and not upon an a priori preference for poetic autonomy.

It would be folly to concede that analysis per se now supersedes historical and conceptual investigations, as if the latter were only a framework for the former. A comprehensive reading of the poem is comprehensive to the extent that it establishes the mediations between literature and history, language and form, draft and text, and so forth. Perhaps Pierre Macherey is guilty of French extremism when he writes that 'the critic, employing a different language, brings [p.310] out a difference within the work by demonstrating that it is other than it is.' Critics following T. R. Henn certainly jeopardize any such distance; Donald Torchiana's reading of the poem's content as the poem's meaning is in this sense undifferentiating:

The so-called world of that poem has been nearly altogether missed. However, all I would draw attention to is the relevance of the exalted Protestant ideal from eighteenth-century Ireland to the world of revolution in 1919 ... Yeats opens [the poem] by pointing to those sacred and ornamental classical safeguards (for the multitude) whose modern counterparts—impartial law, humane habits, enlightened public opinion—have vanished. The wisdom of the high-minded few among the Protestant rulers of the Anglo-Irish eighteenth century also had its unpopular counterpart here in the continuing ideal of public service that had marked Irish, English, and European governments before the revolutions now come to a head in the year after the Great War's end.
This is not so much criticism as paraphrase, and paraphrase based on the assumption that the speaker of the poem may be identified with Yeats himself. Moreover, such commentary has its allegiance to a specific reading of the history of the Protestant Ascendancy, as we shall see. As against such interpretations, I would prefer Daniel Harris's view of the speaker as possessed by inexpiable guilt while the poem itself shows Yeats's gradual recovery of constructive imaginative power. Harris insists, 'Reiterating the public pronoun “we”, the speaker makes himself the scapegoat of an entire coterie.' Though we may want to extend some of these terms, and indeed question the nature of Yeats's recovered power, this discriminating formal analysis is useful.

Let us consider the most fundamental linguistic aspect of the poem, its title. Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen not only names the poem it implicitly places it in relation to history. Lest this point should be lost, the poem—like very few of Yeats's—is dated after its closure with the numerals 1919.

(p.311) This post-scriptum date at once helps to confirm the title as a placing in history, and to draw attention to the particular form adopted in the title. The title employs words, not numerals, but it employs one of several possible verbal formulations. It prevents us from particularizing the year as One Thousand, Nine Hundred and Nineteen; it prevents us from slurring it to a loose Nineteen Nineteen. Thus, the element Nineteen is repeated but not emptily so, for we are directed to the middle term, indicative of the completed nineteenth century and its nineteen year excess. The postscriptum date, on the other hand, is unpronounceable or at best variously pronounceable.
All this may seem tangential to the poem itself, but is not so. First of all, the signatory date is false for the poem was not finished until 1921, and underwent modifications for the collection *The Tower* in 1928. It is thus more a ratifying prescriptum date, repeating in mocking conclusive miniature the title at the head of the poem. Second, the poem’s title as originally published in *The Dial* and *London Mercury* in 1921 was ‘Thoughts Upon the Present State of the World’. Thus the evolution of title and signatory date is an admission of historical focus combined with a falsification of compositional history. Within the poem there are two particular moments when this attention to dating is articulated: Section IV reads in *toto*:

> We, who seven years ago
> Talked of honour and of truth,
> Shriek with pleasure if we show
> The weasel’s twist, the weasel’s tooth.\(^{26}\)

What is crucial here is not so much the fixing of a ‘setting’ in time for the poem, as it is the acknowledgement of time passing with man’s alteration as its measure. For, in Section II we have read:

> So the Platonic Year
> Whirls out new right and wrong,
> Whirls in the old instead;\(^{27}\)

*\(^{\text{p.312}}\)* the Platonic Year being a cycle of about 25,000 years in which the heavenly bodies were supposed to move through all their possible positions and return to their original relative positions. With this vast cycle offering at once perfect optimum movement and the absence of ultimate change, the changes of seven years are powerfully contrasted. If these suggest that only deterioration results from time-passing, the image of the weasel leads us back to the first section of the poem:

> The night can sweat with terror as before
> We pieced our thoughts into philosophy, And
> planned to bring the world under a rule,
> Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.\(^{28}\)

Such an echo manifestly is not to be read as symbolic patterning. Repetition proliferates in the poem; the lines just quoted reach back to
Public opinion ripening for so long
        We thought it would outlast all future days.
        O what fine thought we had because we thought
        That the worst rogues and rascals had died out.  

The repetition of thought discredits thought. It is as if Yeats were aware of the American usage ‘weasel-word’, that word in a sentence which drains it of significance as weasels drain eggs. Repetition, like the vast planetary monotony of the Platonic Year, implodes throughout ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’. ‘Weasels fighting in a hole’ just fails to evoke Swift’s letter to Bolingbroke of 21 March 1730 in which he expressed the wish not to ‘die here in a rage, like a poisoned rat in a hole’. Later, Thomas Kinsella’s ‘Nightwalker’ will also use the weasel as allegorical of Ernest Blythe, sometime Free State minister for finance and inheritor of Yeats’s Abbey Theatre. To an even greater degree, Kinsella exactly (p. 313) reflects his subject by a poetics of inadequacy, for ‘Nightwalker’ sees its locus as the Sea of Disappointment. The distance between Yeats and the speaker of his poem transforms potential disillusion into something different from the satire of Kinsella and the vituperation of Swift.

It was Harold Bloom who remarked that the circumstances in which the poem arose had a cleaner bitterness than the civil war and its poems. Yet the evolving title of the poem, and the retained counterfeit date, indicate that the perception of that contrast was necessarily gradual. That title minimally avoids the sterile repetition of Nineteen Nineteen, just as the Platonic Year is juxtaposed with the seven years of palpable alteration. The poem is felt to shift in history, but hardly to move with it. Yet that grudging miniature is perhaps closer to a real historical understanding of the poem than T. R. Henn’s autobiographical paraphrase:

The great age of that society had, I suppose, been the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; from the 1850s onwards it seems to have turned its eyes too much towards England, too conscious of its lost influence in its hereditary role of The Ascendancy. By 1912 it was growing a little tired, a little purposeless, but the world still seemed secure.

Stanza 2 then follows as the most natural thing in the world.
Far from embodying this attitude Yeats, by the ironic means of his speaker, exposes it. We may say that the Ascendancy, far from having its great age in the eighteenth century, is conceived in its last decade, and conceived in very different circumstances from the landed culture evoked here and elsewhere by Henn and critics who adopt his history. And, far from losing its grip from the 1850s onwards, it is from mid-century onwards that Protestant Ascendancy acquires its identification with a rural, landed elite of longestablished Protestant families. ‘Lost influence in its hereditary role’ is precisely the motivation of that retrospection. When the speaker points to

(p.314) Public opinion ripening so long
We thought it would outlast all future days

the organic metaphor points to the false consciousness of a class, or class fraction, projecting itself into the past and erecting a contradictory and illusory delimitation of social space within the effective economy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Returning to Daniel Harris’s useful formulation, we can agree that through the public pronoun ‘we’ the speaker makes himself scapegoat of a coterie. But it is necessary to add that the speaker does not limit his confessions to aesthetic self-indulgence. On the contrary, he is a man

lost amid the labyrinth that he has made
In art or politics;

And the public pronoun ‘we’ is better regarded as the collective pronoun, the pronoun of a social speaker who transcends the single generation to allude to Swift, Phidias, Loie Fuller, Shelley. To read the poem solely in terms of the year 1919 is simple-minded historicism, to read it in eighteenth-century terms an exercise in myth.

Drafts of the poem indicate the difficulties Yeats experienced in formulating its multivocal levels. Curtis Bradford has substantially printed three manuscripts, all late (i.e. 1920–1), which document the poem’s evolution. Yet in the first manuscript of the first section, the line ultimately referring to Public Opinion still reads:

No swaggering soldier on the public ways
Who weighed a man's life lighter than a song;
Here ‘public’ is still used in a pre-nineteenth-century sense—there are no private ways. In the third manuscript this has altered momentarily to a half-line ‘A public conscience’ which is immediately cancelled and followed by the line virtually as it is published in *The Dial* for September 1921. What is significant here is that Public Opinion gradually (p.315) emerges to crystallize a consensus of long-ripening habit, faith in the future, and ‘knowledge’ of the past which is evoked mockingly in the first two stanzas. In so far as the speaker evokes an eighteenth-century hegemony—and it strikes me as not far—public opinion is relevantly anachronistic, given its relentless retrospective self-justification. In so far as the speaker looks behind the late Victorian and Edwardian traces to the nineteenth century, then Public Opinion is central to that entire first section of the poem and the consensus it displays and explodes. Indeed it is not too much to say that from the insertion of the phrase into the poem much else takes its new bearings. However, the mediations between draft and canonical text continue to be active in the totality which the literary historian looks for. For the speaker public opinion acts in the poem; for the reader—or as Macherey would have it, the critic—the genealogy of Public Opinion is reactivated and exposed.

The speaker is multivocal, historical as well as contemporary, despairing in his deterministic view of the Platonic Year as well as dreading the freedom seven years uncover. So much seems certain, unshakeable, included throughout the poem. Numerological methods tempt us to see the iterated nineteens of the title and the signatory date as indicating a nineteenth-century preoccupation which the text itself never articulates; thus, the nineteenth century becomes the significantly excluded meaning of the poem. This view is attractive and, within its limitations, valid. It does however bypass a more obvious and subtle omission or exclusion, and that is the elimination in the final section of ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ of the speaker, the I-persona in any variation whatsoever. Nowhere in Section VI is there a discernible first-person singular or plural; instead the cumulative imagery builds upon wearisome circling and the return of evil, to conclude:

But now wind drops, dust settles thereupon
There lurches past, his great eyes without thought
Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,
That insolent fiend Robert Artisson

(p.316) To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler
brought
Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her
cocks.36

It is concretely this fourteenth-century witchcraft which is followed by the resilient dating ‘1919’ in the poem’s printings. But with the tense juxtaposition of remote and ostentatious history with a (doctored) contemporaneity, there goes hand in hand the elimination of the public ‘we’ and the private T of the previous sections. The abolition of the speaker enacts the central contradiction of Public Opinion, its valorization of the privatized Ego and the elimination of the contextualized Self. The result is a subject-less narcissism, which the sequence of sections in ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ rationalizes.

This eclipse of the bourgeois individual voice, with his colonizing interest in a multivalent claim upon the past, raises an issue in specifically Irish terms which has already been touched upon in relation to the emergence of Public Opinion in Great Britain. The function of Public Opinion was to legitimize a family tree for middle-class hegemony, at last asserting itself in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Of course, the notion of a middle class had been viable in Britain centuries earlier, but the issue of its hegemony in Ireland had (perhaps tactically, and in the manner of rugby scrums) been retained in the maul of a different political vocabulary. The various levels of historical allusion in Yeats’s poem posit a choice of historical moments at which bourgeoisie politics might be seen as emerging in Ireland—plantation in the seventeenth century, merchant prosperity in the eighteenth, Catholic democracy in the Victorian period, Sinn Fein protectionism in the early twentieth century. None of these can be chosen, for the poem is poised between the disguise of one bourgeois element as Protestant Ascendancy (in 1919 virtually redundant) and the adoption of populist nationalism by another bourgeois element not yet fully emergent in institutional terms.
Beyond this one may point to a larger issue, which Public Opinion encapsulates and does not answer, and that is the (p. 317) real nature of the differing modes of production coexisting within the United Kingdom of Great Britain. Lecky's work points to the divergent definitions of Public Opinion in Ireland and Britain, while Yeats's ultimately demonstrates the centrality of cultural production in those relations.

2. Sons and Fathers
In 1893, when he was fifty-five years of age, Henry James published a short story called 'The Middle Years' dealing with a middle-aged novelist who had just published a novel called *The Middle Years*. Such meta-formalism, of course, has a long and noble ancestry in, for example, Shakespeare's use of the masque within his plays. More recently, 'Hamlet' has itself been incorporated into many works of literature; to consider only the novel, one may point to Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and Joyce's *Ulysses*. In such recent literature the allusion to an earlier work of art may serve two purposes—the elaboration of an internal thematic coherence which is felt (for whatever reason) to lack resonance, and the implication of a universalizing validity for the novel itself. In this latter instance, the argument apparently runs that, if art is illusion, then art-within-art is an illusory illusion—akin to reality. Such a chemistry of internal and external objectives is bound to be an anxious undertaking.

The tension between these needs is not dissimilar to another tension in modern literature. If we look towards the area of characterization, a tension between primary relations is increasingly evident. Again, 'Hamlet' is exemplary, for the Oedipal conflict which we now see as unavoidable in reading the play is more explicitly at work in *Ulysses* and *Sons and Lovers*. If we are seeking a more complex—if not more concentrated—instance of the meta-formalist device coinciding with the father/son conflict, then *Under Western Eyes* surely fits our requirements. There Conrad, with a delicately modulated crudeness, engineers a scene in which (p.318) a parcel containing the journal that is the narrator's source is handed by one character to the narrator. And in the same novel, Razumov's parentage remains obscure though it is his shadowy and influential father who determines much of the hero's fate.
The notion of determinism is central to the tense characterization of this modern fiction. It obsesses Razumov for whom the Czarist bureaucracy is some intimate and ghastly extension of his own bodily existence, controlling his consciousness and bending him to its service even when he perceives his own separate existence. That his acknowledged father links him to this mechanism is Conrad's irony, for the Father is supremely the necessary cause which the Son may identify as having made him as he is. Freud's explication of the Oedipal base of western psychology is no timeless statement of eternal fact, but a symbolism of the determinist science which characterized so much nineteenth-century historical and philosophical thought. The condition, it might be said, was capable of formulation only in the interrogative mood. Or perhaps we should suggest that the very different answers provided by James, Yeats, and Freud address themselves to a central inquiry.

The connection between characterization (understood in this larger sense) and the device of meta-form is explicit in Henry James. A recent critic has summarized a recurring preoccupation of the novelist's in terms of recurring images:

The central symbol in James's work is thus the cage, trap, box, mold, cadre in which the free soul is fixed ox placed, compelled to sit motion less, like a still life, a work of art. And the symbolism evolves from the antithesis of freedom and slavery, motion and immobility, life and automatism or mechanism, nature and art.\(^{38}\)
The idea that a man or woman should feel outraged, threatened or on the verge of annihilation by the possibility of reduction to a mere thing is neither new nor profound. What is perhaps missing from this peculiarly modernist account of such feelings is the near-total absence of that positive awareness of the creative implications of such a sea-change, the absence of Keats's confident vision of a new world of potentiality lying ahead of the mere self. If the Jamesian character resents the aptness of 'still life' as an account of his existence, it is because such meta-formal images insist that he is not a human personality but only the depiction of such a personality, the depiction indeed of the appearance only of a human being. In 'The Middle Years' the intimacy between character and art-within-art is very close, close but inverse. As Dencombe's health diminishes, so the reader gradually comes to appreciate the quality of what is now evidently Dencombe's last novel. It is not too much to say that The Middle Years grows in achievement and stature as its author approaches dissolution and death. In keeping with this, a further adjustment, change, revelation is at work in the story, the recognition by Dencombe and Dr Hugh that each fulfils some essential, symbolic role in the life of the other. This too is available in dual form, either as master-artist and sympathetic reader, or as (quite simply) father and son. I advance these as alternative views, alternative hypotheses, for James's irony operates subtly to suggest that certain imprecisions in the one interpretation render the other necessary if tentative also.
Yet behind this duality there is an implied reading of the relationship as constituting James’s account of the relationship between art and artist. Just as the Father is author of the Son, so the writer or painter creates the novel, play or portrait. This relationship takes on greater complexity when, by virtue of the Chinese box of artifice-within-artifice, the writer draws attention to a heightened reality to which access is, however, formally remote. There is a body of work which I associate with a characteristic modernist anxiety in which endangered, or obscured, or decomposed relations between father and son reveal the anxious relation of the artist to his world and to his work. In so far as the artist looks to his world, to exterior reality, he is a son, created and made (perhaps determined) by all that he is not. In so far as he looks to his work, he is the father, creator at will. In *Ulysses* and *Under Western Eyes* the fillial relation is biological and estranged: in ‘The Middle Years’ its psychological reality tends towards the symbolical. As we return to Yeats’s *oeuvre*, (p.320) we realize the potency with which these tensions operate for him as for James.

It is, however, Yeats’s drama which most immediately reveals its affinity to this modernist condition: from the Cuchulain of ‘On Baile’s Strand’ (1904) to the Old Man of ‘Purgatory’ (1938) Oedipal conflict takes its inverted place in the plays. In both cases the apparent cancellation of Oedipal rebellion against the father is allied to the father’s despairing encounter with his own elusive doom; in this, perhaps, sons take a satisfactory revenge. If Yeats’s poetry declines to accept such elemental forms, we should not conclude that it differs in essence from the drama. In so achieved a poem as ‘Ancestral Houses’ we should admire the skill with which residual Carlylean notions of the hero as a model of cultural transmission, and Darwinian acceptance of biology as a science of causation, are deployed in their own transvaluation:

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man  
Galled architect and artist in, that they,  
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone  
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,  
The gentleness none there had ever known;  
But when the master’s buried mice can play,  
And maybe the great-grandson of that house,  
For all its bronze and marble, ‘s but a mouse.39
Yeats, despising science and rationalism, chose to acknowledge nineteenth-century biology under the name of heredity. The social nuances of that choice may be petty—‘Is not all charm inherited?’—but it is for the same reason irreducible. We are mistaken if we think that he had some privileged access to Castiglione, or even to Lord Chesterfield. There is a temptation, on the other hand, to mock at what appears to be day-excursions to the Italian Renaissance. With so dialectical a mind as Yeats's neither position is either entirely true or false. Having heard all the evidence, we cannot doubt that he did in truth labour to obtain the past, to represent it (p.321) in his own day. In middle age he composed A Vision as his own personal philosophy of history, according to which great spiritual figures throughout the ages might be seen congruently, as it were, at the round table of the moon's phases. But A Vision has more the appearance of dealing with history; in essence it is a tabulation of humours, a psychology elaborated in terms of certain timeless attitudes or forms.

Duality in Henry James's fiction is expressed in the polarities of character and symbol, nature and art, garden and home. In Yeats's work the gemini are history and symbol, process and permanence. Denis Donoghue sees the last stanza of 'Among School Children' as the acme of these unions, 'Life assumes the freedom of art, art the fullness of life ... Symbolism has become secret history, and history is transfigured.' The role of history in the oeuvre has been discussed by Thomas Whitaker and by Daniel B. Harris; as with so many other dialogues in which Yeats participated, it is not so much a matter of participation as of contradiction, more argument than dialogue. 'Meru', a poem of 1934, looks back to a Journal entry of February 1909. The retrospect is not complacent; having pronounced upon the Incarnation, Yeats had concluded:

All civilisation is held together by a series of suggestions made by an invisible hypnotist, artificially created illusions. The knowledge of reality is always by some means or other a secret knowledge. It is a kind of death.
Secret history, secret knowledge ... What is the secret? Given the material symbolism of Yeats’s work, we can see that the heart of the matter is myth, for in myth history and symbol, character and symbol presume to unity. Because it is non-rational and non-individual, the experience of myth is never conscious. In the work of Yeats’s contemporary, Freud, it is made clear that the most potent myth of the age is that of which the conscious mind knows nothing—innocent guilty Oedipus. A decade earlier, and attending to the literary and philosophical aspects of Greek myth, Nietzsche (p.322) had frankly declared that ‘the chances are that almost every one of us, upon close examination, will have to admit that he is able to approach the once-living experience of myth only by means of intellectual constructs’. Nor is it enough to bemoan industry and education as destructive of the old acceptance of myth. The chasm runs much deeper into human history than the circulating libraries and factories which Yeats disliked. It is a discrepancy which Nietzsche located in the very survival of the Greek drama, ‘the myth, we might say, never finds an adequate objective correlative in the spoken word.’ Indeed, the possibility of such a correlation is often rejected or ignored in modernist fiction: Lawrence, in an essay on Edgar Allan Poe, fulminates against the craving to know: ‘Keep KNOWLEDGE for the world of matter, force and function. It has got nothing to do with being’. In Joyce’s Ulysses, the proliferation of styles emphasizes the absence of any central style, any purely matter-of-fact manner, and this is in keeping with the unconsciousness of Bloom that he is Odysseus, Stephen that he is Telemachus.

This hostility between myth and the word—the word, that is, as the microcosm of all intellection and formal organization—is the greatest of the many obstacles Yeats confronted in his career. Despite the apparatus of the Great Memory, he initially faces his world through the medium of intellectual constructs, and the method of poetic composition which he developed to overcome the chasm, by advancing from prose summary towards a numinous ideal, relies upon that from which it would escape:

I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.
(p.323) *Numen*, from *nuere*, the Latin verb ‘to nod (assent)’, is an objective which by definition lies beyond words. The encounters with reality which such poems posit may yield a secret knowledge, but the contradictions of that term remain crucial. The Yeatsian heroes, Oisin, Cuchulain, the Old Man of ‘Purgatory’ dramatize such encounters by inhabiting a ‘kind of death’. In formal terms we may see them as having reached Lukacs's great door—through which there is no passage. And in terms of the plays' *dramatis personae*, the Yeatsian hero achieves definition through a problematic relationship with ‘primary relations’, most frequently, fathers and sons. These relationships, I suggest, are the equivalent in modernist literature to the attenuated relations between the artist and his world, the artist and his creation.

It may seem that I am deliberately accepting a modernist insistence on the autonomy of the literary text in distinguishing so particularly between the artist, his world, and his creation. Nevertheless, any distinction between text and society—for that is the issue at stake—is, willy-nilly, a relationship however reluctant or coy. The hypostasized text is only possible in a society conceived in hypostasized terms, whether biological or mechanistic.48 The continuum of language in which poetic form may achieve unique effects alerts us to the fact that to pose the problem exclusively as a dichotomy between text and society is to frustrate its solution. Just as the architectonics of eighteenth-century antithesis contributed much to the *content* of political thought, indicating the range and limitation of possibility so to speak, so dichotomy in the modernist period characterizes an inability or unwillingness to conceive of literature in positive relationship with social and political energies. In historical terms, of course, the experience of society as hypostasis necessarily obliges the reader of modernist literature to grant a relative validity to the distinction.
With so many themes invoked—the self-conscious artefact (p. 324) of modernism, the relation of myth to history, German romanticism, and Anglo-Irish poetry—it is as well to choose some single, central area for a more detailed examination. That area will inevitably lie at the crossing of two paths, and it is wise to take our bearings carefully. That Yeats was the contemporary of Freud, his early work coinciding with the maturity of James and the eclipse of Nietzsche, is a legitimate statement of a comparative analysis. Many who prefer what they regard as the dynamics of literary history—often no more than a calendar of literary events—choose to see Yeats the Anglo-Irish poet as J. J. Callanan writ large. It is true that he wished to be accounted one of a company including ‘Davis, Mangan, Ferguson’, and no less true that Lecky and Le Fanu helped him towards the form which that allegiance took—there is no closed shop in the matter of poetic influence, prosemen have their part to play also. However, in looking at Yeats's place at the head of a nineteenth-century tradition of Irish writing we do not place him back in that tradition. Nothing in nineteenth-century Irish writing predicts Yeats, and nothing in Yeats requires that body of work; without him it has no more claim to validity as tradition than a wallet of expired cheques. Karl Marx, in the ‘Eighteenth Brumaire’, emphasizes that while men do make their own history they make it ‘under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted’. Yeats's recourse to the Irish past is not the effect of some magnetism in that past but of the historical conditions of his own day, conditions which cannot be defined in purely local terms.

A few examples may suffice to demonstrate the principle, the first taken from The Wanderings of Oisin. At the close of Book II, the daemon Niamh murmured to Oisin:

‘Love, we go
To the Island of Forgetfulness, for lo!
The Islands of Dancing and of Victories Are empty
of all power.’
‘And which of these
(p.325) Is the Island of Content?’
‘None know,’ she said;
And on my bosom laid her weeping head.50
Yeats had built his poem on a nineteenth-century English translation of Michael Comyn's eighteenth-century Gaelic rendering of an older, legendary poem. The third island which Oisin will visit before returning to Ireland represents the principal innovation which Yeats introduced into his inherited material. Before Yeats's hero returns to an Ireland in which the Fenians are superseded by the Christian dispensation, he has need to seek a further transcendence, a third island in which memory of ‘intellectual constructs’ is dissolved. If the introduction of the third island marks Yeats's transformation of his inheritance from the nineteenth century, it does so by assimilating the poem as a whole to the wider anxiety of European modernist literature. Though Niamh may take Oisin to the Island of Forgetfulness, his desire to know which of these realms may reconcile knowledge and action—for that is what content must mean for Oisin—calls forth a comprehensive denial of knowledge, ‘none know’. Though the first island has offered ‘always more anxious sleep’, the vision ends with an admission that even here ‘the kingfisher turns to a ball of dust’—an evolutionary obsolescence in poetic speed-up worthy of Wells's *Time Machine*. At the end of each voyage Oisin indeed confronts a kind of death, but he nevertheless is destined to return to Patrician Ireland and saintly rebuke. For there is a dialectical interplay between these figures which establishes them as more intimately connected than the spokesmen of rival ideologies. The conclusion of the Fenian hero’s long account of the Island of Forgetfulness—an account riddled by poignant memory—takes the argument to Patrick, who is pressed

Speak, you too are old with your memorie
man surrounded with dreams.51

Oisin had been preserved in the mythic youth of the Islands: (p.326) he only succumbed to his three hundred earthly years when he fell from the saddle to the ground. In the dialogue he has been both the elder and the younger of the two participants: as Fenian hero he looks down on Patrick's age-obsessed evocations of Hell; as fallen revenant he recognizes the younger faith's present reality. For Oisin, modern Ireland is a kind of death.
If we see Patrick merely preaching Hell-fire and Oisin fondly declaring his allegiance to the long-dead Fenian heroes, the debate in The Wanderings' cannot be resolved. The irresolvability is not irresolution: rather it is a narrative attempt to give form to a more complex dilemma.

Through his investigation of myth, drawn from Irish sources and from the work of anthropologists such as Sir James Frazer and Andrew Lang, Yeats came to present this heroic condition in more specifically dramatic terms. ‘On Baile's Strand’ opens with a repeated evocation of Cuchulain's state of being as it was prior to the action of the play: the Blind Man and Conchubar both testify to the fact that Cuchulain is preoccupied by the question of his having a son. The king knows Cuchulain to the bone:

I have heard you cry, aye in your very sleep,
‘I have no son’, and with such bitterness
That I have gone upon my knees and prayed
That it might be amended.52

As the Blind Man knows, Cuchulain does have a son, the Young Man who has at this moment landed from the sea to challenge the hero to mortal combat. The ‘wildness’ Cuchulain must abjure by his oath of allegiance to his king is precisely a state of unknowing: he is to be drawn into that ‘secret knowledge’ which is civilization, rule of law, rule of illusion. Against the weight of the king’s polity, the hero repeatedly invokes the image of a hawk. The intimacy with which the hawk is conjured up justifies its recognition as Cuchulain’s totem, that is, the species in nature with which he is identified. Yeats had encountered totemism in Lang’s (p.327) Custom and Myth and, crucially, in Frazer’s four-volume Totemism and Exogamy.53 The central principle of totemism should have prohibited Cuchulain from killing the Young Man because the latter has, at the outset, announced the hawk to be his totem also:

I will give no other proof than the hawk gives
That it's no sparrow.54
Read even superficially, the play reveals a greater subtlety of conflict than the dispute in The Wanderings. Cuchulain is caught between two obligations—to kill the challenger of Conchubar's authority, and to respect his own totemic identity as announced in the challenger's imagery. The dilemma might be formulated as the rival claims of civilization and nature, obligation and affinity; it meets, perhaps, the minimal requirements of A. C. Bradley's contemporary discussion of tragedy in that it presents a conflict of good with good. This depth of conflict is rendered possible by Yeats's introduction of the totemic convention into Irish source material for which the totem was an exotic borrowing from Frazer's researches on aboriginal religion in Australia. As with the third island of 'The Wanderings of Oisin', the innovation has the effect of drawing the local and the historical into participation with a broader aspect of European cultural inquiry.
Cuchulain's position, however, is more comprehensively tragic than the Bradleyan parallel suggests. As he dimly begins to recognize—unknowing having been abjured—the Young Man is his son, born to Aoife, ‘one of those cross queens that live in hungry Scotland’.56 Aoife too has as her totem the hawk—‘At the Hawk's Well’ subsequently provides this proto-drama to ‘On Baile's Strand’. And totem-ism is closely related to exogamy, the obligation to mate outside the tribe and outside its totemic imagery. We see therefore that, prior to the action of the play, Cuchulain has broken the prohibition forbidding sexual union within the totemic group, and that as a consequence he is obliged to kill his own son. In these two vital offences we see Cuchulain enact precisely the same offences which characterize Oedipus—that is the overvaluing of blood (or totemic) relationship in sexual union, and the undervaluing of such relationship in killing the father (or son). It is true that by killing his son Cuchulain appears to deviate most significantly from the Oedipal pattern, but the binary system of overvaluing and undervaluing a primary relationship is strictly maintained. Cuchulain's oath of allegiance to Conchubar, signally his acceptance of civilization in the place of totemic identity, does not liberate him from his original offence but rather brings with it knowledge of that offence extended and intensified by the complementary offence of killing his son. The schematism of this underlying structure is most effectively transformed by Yeats into a dramatic tension of great poignancy: Cuchulain's near-knowledge is confirmed by the Fool and the Blind Man, as the hero sits on the bench with them after the fight:

_Cuchulain._

I had rather he had been some other woman's son. What father had he? A soldier out of Alba? She was an amorous woman—aproud, pale amorous woman.

Blind Man.

None knew whose son he was.

Cuchulain.

None knew! Did you know, old listener at doors?

Blind Man.

No, no; I knew nothing.

Fool.
He said a while ago that he heard Aoife boast that she'd never but the one lover, and he the only man that had ever come her in battle.  
(Pause.)

_Blind Man._

Somebody is trembling, Fool! The bench is shaking. Why are you trembling? Is Cuchulain going to hurt us? It was not I who told you, Cuchulain.

_Fool._

It is Cuchulain who is trembling. It is Cuchulain who is shaking the bench.

_Blind Man._

It is his own son he has slain.

_Cuchulain._

’Twas they that did it, the pale windy people. Where? where? where? My sword against the thunder!57

**(p.329)** This initiation into knowledge and the price paid for civilization finds its dramatic conclusion when Cuchulain, killer of his own son, attacks his symbolic father, Conchubar:

_Blind Man._

What is he doing now?

_Fool._

O! he is fighting the waves!

_Blind Man._

He sees King Conchubar's crown on every one of them.

_Fool._

The waves have mastered him.
Here, of course, we find a version albeit indirect and oblique of the classic Oedipal patricide. And it is a kind of death for Cuchulain also. The dramatic character, having annihilated his son, his longed-for form and permanence, turns upon the author of his offence, the authority to whom he has sworn himself in abjuring totemic identity. Yet it is significant that inhibitions and censorings are evident here. The act of selfannihilation (as the Fool reports it naturalistically) cannot be made specific, cannot be brought directly into the drama. Its sources so deeply embedded in Cuchulain's existence, his death may only be reported to the audience. And, as The Death of Cuchulain' will reveal, the report is in any case premature, incomplete, indirect. But there is a more significant cause of this off-stage 'kind of death' which Cuchulain rushes towards, and that is its coincidence (so to speak) with his attack, as he believes, upon the heads of Conchubar. This more explicit form of Oedipal undervaluing of relationship is admittedly symbolic—Conchubar is not the hero's 'real' father—but for this reason it participates in the symbolism by which we see the hero as hero/artist tragically placed between the hostilities of that which makes him as he is and that he has made (and destroyed). Such effective dramatic identity of divergent perspectives—the Fool's and Cuchulain's—should not disguise the manner in which Cuchulain hypostasizes separate worlds of the determinant and the created.

Yeats's innovation in introducing the third island into his inherited schema for 'The Wanderings of Oisin', like his elaboration of tragic conflict in 'On Baile's Strand', exemplifies his transcendence of literary history as mere debt and of tragic genre as a timeless category. In this early work he maintains a distinctive perspective on the problematical nature of modernism, while demonstrating that this perspective, by taking its material from his experience of nineteenth-century Irish culture, is not an isolated or eccentric one. At the end of his career we shall find a counter-truth to 'On Baile's Strand' filling out its play; the Old Man of 'Purgatory', having killed his father, futilely seeks to end consequence by annihilating his son. And in one of the last letters which Yeats wrote, he emphasized once again the dichotomy of knowledge and being, 'Man can embody truth but he cannot know it.'
These two approaches to Yeats can now be related to each other more explicitly, and the pressure leading to their initial separation identified as one existing within Yeats's work itself. In analysing ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’, we found that the meaning of the poem lay close to its excluded subject, nineteenth-century Public Opinion, and the consolidation of bourgeois hegemony, complicated in Ireland by the ideology of Protestant Ascendancy. Ostensibly lamenting the passing of an uncommon civilization, the poem in practice exposes its merely ornamental evidences of culture. The ironic, guilt-wracked speaker invokes surrogate-aristocracy and medieval chaos, but the poem advances other historical placings of itself. In analysing ‘On Baile’s Strand’ and ‘The Wanderings of Oisin’, we found that the modernist preoccupation with the primitive—the crucial alliance of myth, pre-historical setting, and primary relations—can be obliged to manifest more up-to-date themes such as biological entropy. Yeatsian Augustanism and Yeatsian primitivism are the two sides of a more recent coin. The importance of this interdependence, or mutual definition, can be gauged by the extent to which Yeats’s critics strive to keep the two apart, either through the periodization of his career, or through the autonomy imposed upon texts.
But here, as elsewhere, Yeats out-maneuvers his foes and (p. 331) in ‘Purgatory’ we find the ultimate coming-together of that surrogate aristocracy and those primary relations. True the aristocratic evidences will be shown in ruins, and the primary relations even more centrally inverted, but the late dramatic poem brings together elements which have been held apart previously. Eighteenth-century primitivism, a Cuchulain who murmurs ‘Hush-a-bye, baby’—these are Yeats’s conclusive images. In these two preliminary approaches, however, no such synthesis is yet possible. ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ required especial attention to its content, the historical language which it variously rearranges round the concept of ‘public opinion’. ‘On Baile’s Strand’, in contrast, demanded attention to its tragic form and to the contribution of a primary genealogy to its tragic climax. Those rigid categories have their validity of course, but the ultimate analysis of ‘Purgatory’ is intended to counterbalance them. For it is a persistent theme of Ascendancy and Tradition that the modernist symbolism of primary relations, of Oedipal and anti-Oedipal tension, and the modernists’ preoccupation with political racism, needs to be unmasked historically. In place of the genealogy which is valorized so often in Yeats, we need to locate the historical genesis of such texts. ‘Purgatory’ can be persuaded to give up a more comprehensive view of Yeats’s modernism but that view will involve both quintessentially literary concepts such as Tradition and extraliterary concerns such as fascism and eugenics. It remains to be seen how Anglo-Irish modernism provides a suitable context in which the interaction of these forces can be measured in the second last decade of the twentieth century.

Notes:


(3) Curtis B. Bradford, Yeats at Work (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), pp. 12, 17


(11) Ibid.


(13) op. cit.


(18) Ibid.
(19) The *glissade* from ascendancy to aristocracy as a description of the Anglo Irish background is more evident among literary scholars than historians; see e.g. p. 12 above.


(21) *dem.*


(24) op. cit.


(27) Ibid.

(28) Ibid., p

(29) ibid.


(32) op. cit.

(33) W. B. Yeats, ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’, op. cit., p. 233.

(34) Ibid.

(35) op. cit.

(36) op. cit.


(41) Denis Donoghue, Yeats, Fontana Modern Masters series ([n.p.]: Fontana Collins, 1971), p. 89

(42) W. B. Yeats [Journal, 12 February 166.


(44) Ibid.


(48) The OED’s notion of the verb ‘to hypostasize’—to make into or treat as a substance—refers back to its definition of ‘hypochondria’ as ‘morbid depression of spirits’. The abnormality of conceiving relations and continuing processes in static and individualized terms is here regarded as resulting in hypostasis.


(50) W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems, p. 431

(51) Ibid.


(56) W. B. Yeats, ‘On Baile’s Strand’, *Collected Plays*, p. 252

(57) Ibid.

(58) Ibid.


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