The Invention of Tradition

W.J. Mc Cormack

DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198128069.003.0011

Abstract and Keywords
This chapter discusses the tradition, a significant idea introduced by T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis. This chapter discusses the problematic nature of the concept of tradition in the modernist generation and Yeats' own attempt to relate poetry to tradition in his essay of 1907. A brief discussion of the Victorian treatment of Swift, Berkeley, and Burke, including the Yeatsian landscape, is included as well. The chapter also gives a broader discussion on the nature of Anglo-Irish literature to provide a better understanding of the complex issues raised by the play Purgatory which is Yeats's ultimate interrogation of tradition.

Keywords: tradition, Yeats, Swift, Berkeley, Burke, Anglo-Irish literature, Purgatory

1. The Anxiety of Tradition
   The crime of Tradition was a new one ...

   (J. H. Blunt)
The term *tradition* has today an honoured place in literary criticism, thanks largely to its deployment by T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis. Its status has been enhanced by the manner in which some critics have discerned behind the great tradition of modern English literature a neo-Platonic tradition. In the figure of W. B. Yeats these two senses of tradition converge, together with the added vibrancy of that traditional lore which the poet absorbed from his study of Irish folk culture. ‘Traditional sanctity’,² consequently, carries with it a rich synthesis of implications. Yeatsian critics have been assiduous in assimilating these qualities to their own work, and one recent commentator on Anglo-Irish literature manages in the course of just sixteen pages to invoke tradition twenty-three times, a frequency only rivalled by the first-person singular pronoun. This nervous insistence is perhaps timely in that the values which tradition is often thought to ratify are undoubtedly under pressure in Ireland. But beyond this local anxiety there is the wider concern for the future of literary criticism itself, besieged as it is by such new disciplines as the sociology of culture, structuralism of various kinds, and a radical philosophy of literary history. In that wider struggle for the hearts and minds of Arts Faculties, tradition is a highly contentious term in which the indebtedness to continental (especially German) thought of the various challengers provides them with a drastically different perspective on tradition than that available through Eliot’s essay on ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ or Leavis’s *Great Tradition*. If tradition is frequently identified with a conservative literary history we should remind ourselves that *traditional societies* are those which have no sense of their own historicity.
In short, behind the literary critics’ valorization of tradition, the word and the social practices surrounding it carry the most varied implications. If for a moment we follow the example of Eamon de Valera and consult the Oxford Dictionary, tradition is revealed to have a series of usages we should not neglect. The first meaning is a legal one—‘handing over’. Traditio ‘was a mode of transferring the ownership of private property in Roman law.’ Here, it is worth noting the distinction between the handing over of an object or a property, and the handing over of ownership or rights to such an object or property. For while the latter possesses a normative element, in that it was thus ownership was handed over, the physical handing over of an object might well be in conflict with legal requirements. In this way tradition came to mean ‘a giving up, surrender, betrayal’ in which rights or responsibilities are subordinate to other considerations or motivations. Judas’s betrayal of his leader was ‘cryste ys tradicion and passion’, while tradition was also used to mean the ‘surrender of sacred books in times of persecution’—as for example in the reign of Diocletian. This non-normative sense of tradition (a sense generally connoting moral offence) may be secondary now to the valorized sense of tradition as legitimate ‘handing down’, but we should be alert to the precise historical conditions in which the matter is given its prominence in British literary criticism.

Etymologically entailing a ‘handing down’, tradition is too often taken as synonymous with what is handed down rather than with the social and cultural dynamics of the process of handing down, the place of this in the modes of production of the period and the historical character of that period. This tendency to identify tradition with its objects can be traced in Eliot’s subsequent reflection on his own essay. But its reassessment as a concept close to the heart of the Yeatsian aesthetic is in keeping with a scrutiny of the intensification (p. 334) of class as group or category (rather than as social formation) in the term ascendancy. Yeats’s encounter with it comes first by way of folk tradition, and it is fitting that our subsequent inquiry into his most (idiosyncratically) neo-Platonic play, Turgatory’, will involve a demonstration of the element of historical process in the timeless material he collected as amateur folklorist.
That late nineteenth-century emergence of Anglo-Irish literature requires synchronization with continental developments as well as with the changing perceptions of class inside the United Kingdom. Perhaps the most telling divergence between British and European intellectual developments was the growth of sociology in Germany, Italy, and France as the intellectual meeting-ground of urgent political, cultural, and philosophical concerns. British sociology remained indebted to the positivism of Comte and J. S. Mill, and on the islands grand schematization was reserved for the development of a British school of anthropology. It is significant that the study of primitive society became prominent in the intellectual superstructure of the greatest imperial economy the world had known, and that at a time when High Capitalism was entering its crisis. Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough* (1890–1914) and Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5) are emblems of these contrasting preoccupations.

Weber is important not solely for his attempt to correlate changes in Christian theology with economic development, but for the broader differentiation between such rationalization in industrial and developed societies and the organization of traditional societies. Traditional here signified a mode of continuity and cohesion drastically different from the pattern of climaxes and changes which progressively revolutionized post-medieval western Europe. Within the larger sense of Europe, traditional societies existed though for the most part as residual elements within political units already well advanced in their industrialization—southern Italy, for example. Given Weber's highly ambiguous attitude to the most recent rationalization to be reached in Europe—that of imminent proletarian revolution—traditional societies had for him something of that double sense present in the Latin usages of the term. Tradition was the means of transmission and succession in societies which were economically outmoded and politically subordinate: tradition also was the alternative to crisis and revolution. The first of these senses of tradition relates to a diachronic order in society, albeit a vestigial and threatened one: the second relates to an internalized apprehension of order conceived in synchronic resistance to history and its changes.
The publication of Weber's work in 1904–5 is a marker in that European nexus of which Anglo-Irish literature forms a sizeable and influential aspect. The 'protestantism' of its title serves also as a reminder of the disjunction occurring between the acquisitive ethic and reformed theology in the Irish circumstances of Protestant Ascendancy. One further area linking this marginality and the centre of European politics in the twentieth century is marked by G. B. Shaw's interest in the 'New Protestantism' of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, British apologist for Hitler and politicized racism. Yet for all that Shaw's family embody the bourgeois element in Dublin's Protestant Ascendancy, and for all his interest in the strong man theory of politics, he remains tangential to the real line of action uniting nineteenth-century Irish culture and the trauma of twentieth-century politics on the Continent. Shavian politics was by no means hostile to theory, but its preference was for practice. Notoriously, Shaw regarded traditional reputations as the material for modern satire, his treatment of Shakespeare being only the most blatant. Yet, through his "exploitation of Caesar, Shakespeare, and Napoleon, Shaw held his version of left-wing naturalism and positivism in touch with a historical dynamic." In Germany, (p.336) Nietzsche represented one particular form of historical scepticism, strongly laced as always with Nietzschean irony. It is however with the work of Martin Heidegger that antihistoricism, combined with a thoroughgoing metaphysical abstraction, that German thought made its most penetrating analysis of tradition.

Yeats's lack of interest in German culture was fairly comprehensive. Apart from Goethe and Nietzsche (whose theories of the daemonic appealed to him) no German figure earned more than his passing acknowledgement. Yet, in his last essays, On the Boiler (1939), he went out of his way to praise Edmund Husserl whose Ideas he considered a modern restatement of Berkeleyan immaterialism. That brief gesture towards the domestication of German phenomenology is characteristic of Yeatsian procedures in the construction of Irish Augustan tradition: analogy permits Husserl to be accommodated in a schema whose coherence is determined by the intensity of such gestures: analogically, Parnell becomes Cuchulain, or Swift is resurrected to reprimand the epigones of the Irish Free State. In 1909 he wrote,
Every day I notice some new analogy between [the] long-established life of the well-born and the artist’s life. We come from the permanent things and create them, and instead of old blood we have old emotions and we carry in our head that form of society which aristocracies create now and then for some brief moment at Urbino or Versailles.

The very term ‘Anglo-Irish literature’ is valid solely by virtue of the intensity of need which underwrites the analogies upon which it is constructed. In calling it a tradition, how ever, we do more to highlight those needs than to confirm those analogies. Yeatsian landscape, for example, or the con struction of Yeats’s Goldsmith, are intellectual endeavours at interpretation, interpretation shot through with specific anxieties and ambitions. Through such details as these—landscape, Goldsmith’s biography, etc.—I hope to unmask the Yeatsian tradition; in the words of Heidegger ‘this hardened tradition must be loosened up, and the concealments which it has brought about must be dissolved.’

Tradition, for Heidegger, is the entire tradition of ontology which has dominated philosophy since the days of the Greeks. It is, therefore, the most general and comprehensive sense of the term, under which the particularities of recent literary criticism may be considered separately:

When tradition thus becomes master, it does so in such a way that what it ‘transmits’ is made so inaccessible, proximally and for the most part, that it rather becomes concealed. Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial ‘sources’ from which the categories and concept handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is some thing which we need not even understand …

But for all his insistence that Being possesses ‘historiological interests’ and zeal for an interpretation which is philologically objective, Heidegger’s inquiry into the operations of tradition does not lead in the direction of history. While the political implications of Heideggerian ontology became clear after the accession of Hitler, the unmasking of tradition as cousin-german to ideology can contribute to the reorientation of Anglo-Irish literature within the broader context of twentieth-century European culture.
The Yeatsian synthesis of tradition, in which folklore, Platonism, and the Irish Augustans join forces, is badly in need of such an analysis. Yet it must not be thought that Yeats and Heidegger are at loggerheads totally: in their different ways each exemplifies an attitude to human society which is characteristic of the modernist crisis. According to Heidegger, modern man lives in a fallen world of inauthenticity; according to Yeats, man has lost that Unity of Being of which Dante spoke. But whereas Marx sought toanalyse that situation with the intention of bringing about its transformation in an active and actual future, Yeats and Heidegger saw no such solution, imminent or remote. Wrenching ontology out of its Platonic timelessness, Heidegger delivered it over to no historical process. His passive acceptance of National Socialist rule in Germany is entirely consistent with his philosophical rejection of history and his search for a primordial ‘presence’. Yeats's intermittent and yet reiterated approval of Mussolini and Hitler may have been punctuated with specific reservations and specific commendations: nevertheless, it saw the past as more authentically real than any mundane political programme. In such attitudes Hitlerian power found a convenient source of authority.

2. ‘Poetry and Tradition’ (1907)

Someone lacking a tradition who would like to have one is like a man unhappily in love.

(Ludwig Wittgenstein)12
Discussing the several versions of phenomenology which have affected literary debate, Frank Lentricchia singles out the early Yeats to illustrate the affinity between Husserl's *Ideas* of 1913 and emergent modernism. In 'The Autumn of the Body' (1898) Yeats had declared that writers all over Europe were struggling against ‘that “externality” which a time of scientific and political thought has brought into literature’. The essay concludes with an enthusiastic summary of Mallarme's manifesto in favour of a poetry dedicated to making ‘an entire word hitherto unknown to the language'; the arts will deal with ‘the essences of things, and not with things’. If the sources of this search for poetic autonomy lie deep in nineteenth-century French culture, with Flaubert as well as Mallarme, the affinity to German phenomenology can be traced clearly along three crucial lines—a vigorous anti-psychologism, the abstention from any natural standpoint in relation to perception, and the concentration instead upon ‘the eidetic reduction'. By this last procedure, the phenomenologist discards those phenomena which are inessential to the idea in question and is left with ‘a specification of the essential ones’. Thus, while Yeats was fond nding forms and transmisof recommesions of knowledge peculiar to folk-culture, or elaborated more systematically in neo-Platonic theory, there was simultaneously available a philosophy propounding a broadly similar doctrine.

Yeats's essay 'Poetry and Tradition' is a curious illustration of his phenomenologist tendencies. Like so much of his prose, it is stuffed with opinions on matters about which he felt poets should not concern themselves. One topic upon which it has remarkably little to say is tradition, and in this the essay demonstrates both the phenomenological procedure and the problematic history of Yeatsian aesthetics. It is divided into four numbered parts, and these might be given headings such as 'Irish History from Henry Grattan to John O' Leary', 'Style', 'Breeding and Freedom', and 'John O' Leary and Class'. Such headings of course would crudely distort Yeats's argument which is effective precisely because it is not signposted—in this way the evasiveness of tradition is itself masked from the reader. Those who consider the early Yeats indecisive by comparison with the single-minded rhetoric of *On the Boiler* should note the following passage from the first part:
New from the influence, mainly the personal influence, of William Morris, I dreamed of enlarging Irish hate, till we had come to hate with a passion of patriotism what Morris and Ruskin hated.\textsuperscript{16}

That commitment to positive hate will be echoed in the ‘General Introduction for my Work’ but here in the essay of 1907 its role is more puzzling. Why should patriotism provide a model for the passion of Morris and Ruskin or their Irish disciples? One answer lies in the fact that Yeats originally \textit{(p.340)} published his essay under the title ‘Poetry and Patriotism’, and that the amended title fails to reflect upon what had previously been an echo of the title. Yet the essay found the poetry of the Young Ireland school inadequate in that it was merely patriotic, and praised John O’Leary precisely because he never accepted patriotism as an end in itself.

The second part of the essay is briefer and less discursive. In it, Yeats defines style ‘which is but high breeding in words and in argument’.\textsuperscript{17} This association of literary style with pedigree and manners is expanded into a more explicit sociological prejudice: the writer ‘has at all times the freedom of the wellbred, and being bred to the tact of words can take what theme he pleases, unlike the linendrapers, who are rightly compelled to be very strict in their conversation.’\textsuperscript{18} ‘Breeding’ of course is a species of portmanteau word in which two related but distinct ideas converge: breeding may mean the deliberate genetic planning and selection of—say—pets or domestic animals; breeding may also mean refined or approved behaviour fostered by training and education. ‘Born and bred’ distinguishes between the two meanings. In his \textit{Journal} Yeats spoke of the \textit{analogy} between the ‘long-established life of the well-born and the artist’s life’, and the analogical procedure is one step along the way towards abolishing that distinction. Yeats’s commitment to spiritualism and theosophy, doctrines that deny or minimize the body, is accompanied by his constant recourse to metaphors drawn from the body and its ‘breed-ing’.

‘Poetry and Tradition’ succeeds in introducing the topic of tradition by reference to the ‘spiritism’ of Irish country people as an element in the final conflict which will reestablish lost Unity of Being:
Perhaps, too, it would be possible to find in that new philosophy of spiritism coming to a seeming climax in the work of Frederic Myers, and in the investigations of uncounted obscure persons, what could change the country spiritism into a reasoned belief that would put its might into all the rest ... We were to forge in Ireland a new sword on (p.341) our old traditional anvil for that great battle that must in the end reestablish the old, confident, joyous world.\textsuperscript{19}

This is as near to a prediction as Yeats allows himself, and significantly he predicts the old world, speaks of reestablishing the past rather than of establishing a future. Lionel Johnson is praised for his ability to relate Irish tradition to a greater tradition and ‘he was in all a traditionalist, gathering out of the past phrases, moods, attitudes ...’\textsuperscript{20} Yet these constitute virtually all the references to tradition in the course of the entire essay, the opening and closing sections of which might be more properly published under the original title, ‘Poetry and Patriotism’.

Nevertheless, the order of the four sections, like the alteration of the title, has its particular significance. Having muffled William Morris's socialism, and shifted from a discussion of O'Leary's approval of artistic integrity to the definition of style as breeding, Yeats returns in the final section to deliver a more extended judgement on O'Leary and his times:

I could not foresee that a new class, which had begun to rise into power under the shadow of Parnell, would change the nature of the Irish movement, which, needing no longer great sacrifices, nor bringing any great risk to individuals could do without exceptional men, and those activities of the mind that are founded on the exceptional moment. John O'Leary had spent much of his thought in an unavailing war with the agrarian party, believing it the root of change, but the fox that crept into the badger's hole did not come from there. Power passed to small shopkeepers, to clerks, to that very class who had seemed to John O'Leary so ready to bend to the power of others, to men who had risen above the traditions of the country man, without learning those of cultivated life or even educating themselves, and who because of their poverty, their ignorance, their superstitious piety, are much subject to all kinds of fear.\textsuperscript{21}
If this sounds like ‘épater les bourgeois’ one should remember (p. 342) the difference between French and Irish social life—Ireland, despite well-publicized rake-hellish elements, had no bohemianism on which to base an assault on public opinion. Yeats's analysis is a mixture of unconscious Protestant Ascendancy views on history and class, and a conscious but unconfessed anti-Catholicism. What is more important, of course, is the manifest unoriginality of the complaint—which is rather more amusingly presented in Maria Edge-worth's Absentee.

The strategies of ‘Poetry and Tradition’ are now more evident. A historical statement about the nature of change in Irish society between the time of Grattan and the death of Parnell is interrupted by two briefer, more intense statements on style and artistic freedom. Style is breeding, the artist is an aristocrat by vocation. The blatancy of historical interpretation is modified by the positioning of the two sections dealing with style: indeed, the insertion of these suggests a breakdown of historical continuity which is reproduced in the alienation of the poet from a new bourgeois and philistine public. That this new element is not so new is disguised by the sectional divisions of the essay, and the result is to emphasize that qualitative break which characterizes all readings of Anglo-Irish modernism. Style is breeding—this is Yeats's own highly distinctive way of dealing with the embarrassment of literary inheritance. Officially, the argument might have been more aptly titled ‘Poetry or Patriotism’ but unofficially Yeats is unwilling to relinquish all rights to the impurities of politics. ‘Poetry and Tradition’, however, is an apparent misnomer also, for there is little on the subject of tradition per se. ‘Poetry from Tradition’ would be more accurate both in the implication that poetry derives much of its power from that source, and for the more important suggestion that poetry results from an experience of separation from that source, that apparent unity of belief and action which Yeats refers to as ‘the traditions of the countryman’. By positing a historical continuity from the late eighteenth century to the era of O'Leary and Parnell, and by then intruding into that continuity with the claims of style and aristocratic freedom, Yeats at once takes the first steps towards the enunciation (p.343) of his Irish Augustan tradition and concedes the less than unproblematic nature of this identification of history and that tradition. Yet his final choice of title, and the preceding decisions and eliminations, enact that process of eidetic reduction which confers upon tradition that hypnotic intensity which it has long possessed for literary critics.
There is no one canonical statement of Yeats's Anglo-Irish tradition. It may be clearly traced in a variety of texts, poems such as 'The Seven Sages', the play 'The Words Upon the WindowPane', and the introduction to that play, 'Pages from a Diary in 1930', etc., etc. The sources I have named are all relatively late, and there is a certain logic in seeing Yeats's Augustanism as part of his reaction to developments in the Irish Free State—that is, his eighteenth century was conceived as a counter-truth to a new semi-independent Ireland. As we have seen, however, elements of the theory may be found certainly as early as 1907, and the basic 'aristocratic' assumptions on which it depends stem from his campaigns in favour of Lady Gregory and John M. Synge as inheritors of Parnell's tragic mantle. The poem 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation' (1910) is a turning-point, a recognition of altered economic relations and modes of production, and of impending modifications of relation between the elements of the United Kingdom.

Given this diffused statement of Yeats's tradition, it may be useful precisely to indicate my own approach to the problem here. In the first section of this chapter, I have stressed the problematic nature of the concept of tradition in the modernist generation. In the second I have dealt with Yeats's own attempt to relate poetry to tradition in his essay of 1907. The next section will deal briefly with the Victorian treatment of Swift, Berkeley, and Burke, and this introduced by a consideration of Yeatsian landscape as a form of urgent memory. The fourth section will follow on this by demonstrating in more detail how Goldsmith's biography was constructed in the nineteenth century, and how the figure of that name in Yeats's poems is part of a dramatic strategy based on a repressed sectarian psychology. Finally, we come to a broader discussion of that much-postponed topic, the nature of Anglo-Irish literature itself. Only by such preparation can we hope to do justice to the complex issues raised by the play 'Purgatory' which I take to be Yeats's ultimate interrogation of tradition.

3. Constructing the Eighteenth Century

I wish someone would one day attempt a tragic history of literature showing how the various nations, which now take their highest pride in the great writers and artists they can show, treated them while they were alive.
As literary hero, Jonathan Swift possesses two complementary but contrasting qualities. He is himself immovably a man of integrity though one frequently moved in his emotional response to human folly. He acts as catalyst upon those whom he meets, changing their lives and accelerating their proper advance, yet he remains sequestered in his own obscurity, a darkness not of his own making though it mirrors the Christian humility his public mask too often fails to express. Among Irish authors, Sheridan Le Fanu, Thomas Caulfield Irwin, W. B. Yeats, Denis Johnston, Austin Clarke, and Sybil Le Brocquy have responded to the mystique of Swift as fictional hero. In essence, Swift is a shorthand term for crucial romantic themes, and the historical reasons why a writer born in the seventeenth century should take on this romantic role from the 1840s to the 1960s undoubtedly involve Swift’s tangential relation to Augustanism, a relation which is itself an aspect of the entire political nexus of Anglo-Irish relations to which Swift devoted so much of his energies after his fall from grace in London. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode has provided a cautionary account of how ‘fictions can degenerate into myths whenever’—they are not consciously held to be fictive—and the case of Swift (not to mention the notoriously elusive and omnipresent Goldsmith) illustrates the extent to which Anglo-Irish culture is haunted by ghostly fictions who still pack considerable mythic punch. That such revenants do not always take the form of the individual human figure is evident if we consider the fond attention lavished on so-called eighteenth-century architecture. The deeper exchanges between architecture and human society lie, however, beyond the horizons of this present study.
Nevertheless landscape mediates between these terms, and in a way which can be rendered historically vital once more. Between the abolition of the Irish parliament in 1800 and the Treaty of 1921, Ireland had become an anomaly in which a heightened consciousness of distinguishing features flourished. Allegedly, at one end of the social scale (or rather, somewhere just below the middle), insurgent claims to social and political authority emphasized certain interpretations of the past as the facts of an argument; near the other, a superannuated elite stressed their perceptions of time and landscape as evidence of their survival. (The analysis of class implied in these observations is far from adequate, yet it serves to underline a common attachment to ‘fact’.) Joyce's *Ulysses* is not only a celebration, by way of parody, of the encyclopaedic method: it is the initiation rite accorded to certain social ‘facts’—the arrival of the urban *petite bourgeoisie*, the impact of consumerism, etc. etc. The landscape of Yeats's early poetry—and of much that he wrote later also—is a synthesis of geographical, linguistic, historical, and mythological reference to ‘facts’. All such facts, whether Joycean or Yeatsian, exist in a state of perpetual challenge or permanent change, for they are part of an undefined culture, subject to the (seemingly) arbitrary manipulations which the colonial system requires. This effect is not restricted to the physical territory of Ireland, it pervades the social fabric of the United Kingdom as a whole. In *Reveries Over Childhood & Youth*, the young Yeats's experience of London topography is recorded:

(p.346) No matter how charming the place (and there is a little stream in a hollow where Wimbledon Common flows into Coom be Wood that is pleasant to the memory), I knew that those other boys saw something I did not see. I was a stranger there. There was something in their way of saying the names of places that made me feel this.25

To contrast this simply to the landscape of home is to miss all the subtleties of Yeats's implication of class and history in such passages. There is a passage in Yeats's introduction to Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* which reveals the sense of urgent mediation in such readings of the landscape:
We Irish should keep these personages much in our hearts, they lived in the places where we ride and go marketing, and sometimes they have met one another on the hills that cast their shadow upon our doors at evening. If we will but tell these stories to our children the Land will begin again to be a Holy Land, as it was before men gave their hearts to Greece and Rome and Judea. When I was a child I had only to climb the hill behind the house to see long, blue, ragged hills flowing along the southern horizon. What beauty was lost to me, what depth of emotion is still perhaps lacking in me, because nobody told me, not even the merchant captains who knew everything, that Cruachan of the Enchantments lay behind those long, blue, ragged hills.26

It is not difficult to see that the true significance of these words is all but the precise opposite of their literal meaning. For those for whom the hills automatically had mythological references, those who needed no dictionary to decode place-names, there was little sense of any creative discovery in the landscape. The obvious requires no statement. But to Yeats it was precisely the barrier, which he came to recognize between his childhood experience and those obvious meanings, which generated a poetic significance. To accomplish this transformation by which a knowledge of ignorance becomes art Yeats performs certain adjustments to the facts of his own life—‘the house’, posing as the family (perhaps, ancestral) home, was in reality a place of holiday resort owned by relatives: ‘the merchant captains’, demythologized, were (p. 347) those relatives. Any reassessment of Yeats must acknowledge the primal authority for him of his belief that such facts are subject to the transformation of art. In acknowledging this, we go no further than the orthodoxies of romanticism. But the adjustments to Yeats’s place in Irish society, to what is conveniently if inadequately called class, should advise us that the specifically Anglo-Irish manifestation of romanticism-becoming-modernism will involve political matters of the greatest weight. For the argument rests precisely on that fatal line distinguishing between Kermode’s fictions and his myths. It is one thing for Yeats to fudge his history for artistic purposes: it is another for critics, tourists, and other politicians to accept those fictions as effective myths.
Central to any such re-assessment is Yeats's own historical position vis-a-vis the eighteenth century. The impression that the tradition of Swift and Burke was his discovery is of course part of a dramatic technique pervasive in Yeats's mythologizing. Neither Swift, Berkeley, Goldsmith nor Burke required resuscitation as individual reputations, though undoubtedly Yeats's association of the four added a new dimension to each. As a corollary, his lack of interest in Henry Brooke, Edward Malone, and R. B. Sheridan is a further conditioning factor in the isolation of those who will come to exemplify the traditional role. Even more drastically, Yeats was prone to identify his own comparative ignorance of Gaelic culture with objective judgement, and his lack of curiosity on this question left him open to an uncritical inheritance of Victorian views of the Irish past, especially in the case of Goldsmith. Finally, while we should recall that Yeats's attitude between 1890 and 1930 swung from a rejection of the Irish Augustans as irrelevant to the Celtic Revival to a veritable establishment of Swift and Burke as the unofficial opposition in the politics of the Irish Free State, it is also true that association, lack of interest, rejection, and veneration proceed in a historical continuum.

Although Swift disturbed the Victorians, a decidedly sympathetic account of his life appeared in Lecky's *Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*.21 Lecky saw his subjects as mediators between the imposed order of colonial government and the impotent politics of Jacobite resentment. Yeats in the course of time came to accept Swift and with him a neo-Jacobitism of his own. In the 1890s, however, he had no use for a mediator with the people of Ireland; they were accessible, he felt sure, through folklore and a literature based on folk tradition. Yeats's respect for Swift is not without precedent in Lecky's early work, and indeed the same author's monumental study of the Irish eighteenth century is an integral part of the historical readjustment which Yeats dramatizes in his work.
Turning to Burke we are of course returning to the origins of this inquiry into Anglo-Irish literature and its political connotations. Burke's Victorian reputation is too well known to need repetition here; half a dozen biographies testify to his position in British thought, and Disraeli's choice of title (Earl of Beaconsfield) was a visible appropriation of Burke's place in political history. By 1882, however, a new reading is emerging: in *Irish Essays and Others* Matthew Arnold had taken as his chief witness to Irish conditions and the Irish psyche the author of the *Reflections*. We have seen that there is little paradox in the principal ideologue of the new imperialism—for it was thus the Victorians read Burke—becoming a key figure in Arnold's investment in Celtic culture. Was it not Burke himself who taught us to love the little platoon we belong to as our first duty towards humanity? The particularism of *Lyrical Ballads* was not absent from the *Reflections*, it was simply stated in universal terms. With Arnold, it is stated more explicitly in global terms.
With Berkeley the altering terms of debate are less publicly accessible. In 1824 Maria Edgeworth had corresponded with an American lady on literary matters, and recommended ‘that most amiable man and bishop’ whose _Querist_ inquiries ‘are all or almost all applicable at the present day to the state of Ireland’\(^{28}\) Two points should be noted, the less important (p. 349) being that the American had read nothing of Berkeley. More importantly, Maria Edgeworth considered Berkeley’s contribution to be a fundamentally utilitarian one, an analysis of economic and social questions affecting the well-being of Ireland. Later, in 1865, we find Isaac Butt—who was shortly to initiate the Home Government Association which affected the development of cultural tradition in a far wider sphere than the strictly economic—choosing Berkeley as the subject of a prestigious afternoon lecture in Dublin.\(^{29}\) There is perhaps nothing entirely original in Butt’s assessment of the Bishop of Cloyne, yet in contrast to Maria Edgeworth he sees Berkeley’s work as a unified view of reality in which economics, optics, and metaphysics are aspects of one central argument. Furthermore, he links this idealism to Wordsworth’s ‘Immortality Ode’. Butt is echoing on the one hand certain contemporary philosophers who had resurrected some of Berkeley’s views on sense-perception and, on the other, a distinctly Victorian and pious interpretation of romanticism. Nevertheless, the projected solipsism of Berkeley’s philosophy and the protectionism which Butt read into his economics are welded into a kind of comprehensive account of Berkeley. A more determinedly objective view of the philosopher resulted in the publication in 1871 of an edition of his works, including for the first time the _Commentaries_ from which Yeats culled the anti-Lockean tag. ‘We Irish do not hold with this.’\(^{30}\)
Discussing Berkeley then, we can trace a specifically Irish (p. 350) prologue to Yeats's enthusiasm; stages of which are Maria Edgeworth's strictly practical reading, Butt's more comprehensive account marked by strictly period emphases on piety and poetry, and finally Yeats's own early discounting of Berkeley (with Swift) as a significant exemplar for the Celtic Revival. Closely following this last declaration, there is the second Fraser edition of 1901. However, a broader background immediately presents itself. The polar extremes of Berkeley's reputation as either ultra-empiricist or supreme idealist were observed by Coleridge even within the pages of one work, Siris, which is 'announced as an Essay on Tarwater, which beginning with Tar ends with the Trinity'. Donald Davie, writing in 1955, claimed that Berkeley ‘until twenty or thirty years ago, was regarded as a pro to-Romantic philosopher, one of the fathers of subjective idealism; and Yeats became interested in him at just about the time when Berkeleyans began to challenge this reading of him, ...’. But the challenge to Berkeley as subjective idealist was part of a larger revision of British intellectual history, the reassertion by Bertrand Russell, G. E. Moore, and others of the empiricist tradition eclipsed in the latter half of the nineteenth century by neo-Hegelian idealism. Fraser's editions of Berkeley in 1871 and 1901 virtually delimit the period of idealist dominance in Cambridge. That later date of course takes us close to a further change in the history of philosophy to which we have already alluded, the origins of phenomenology and the general crisis of European culture known as modernism. One is tempted to seize on A. D. Nuttall's advice to the reader approaching Berkeley—'do not allow yourself to be elevated by the dexterous, liberating thought you are about to watch; only remember that you will end exactly where you began.'

(p.351) 4. Oliver Goldsmith: Traditional Biography
And yet when I arrived at page two of the narrative I saw the extreme putridity of the social system out of which Goldsmith had reared his flower:

(James Joyce)
In dealing with Goldsmith's biography there are two crucial historical moments. The first of these is the collection of documents preserved in Trinity College Dublin, and known as the 1641 Depositions. In due course, we shall exhume material from The Reverend John Goldsmith’s account of his sufferings during the Irish rebellion of that year, and relate the suppression of such genealogical traces to the question of the construction of a Goldsmith biography. The other historical moment is likewise textual, the following lines of Yeats's:

Oliver Goldsmith sang what he had seen,
Roads full of beggars, cattle in the fields,
But never saw the trefoil stained with blood,
The avenging leaf those fields raised up against it.\(^{35}\)

The historical Goldsmith stands midway between these two moments, but the ideological nature of the biographical enterprise is not best revealed by strict adherence to chronology. Instead let us turn to John Forster's Victorian life of the poet. Forster published *The Life and Times of Oliver Goldsmith* in 1871. When he had earlier ventured into the field, he had been attacked by a rival biographer, James Prior, essentially on a charge of plagiarism. Returning to the question in 1871, Forster declared that the attack had been on Prior's part ‘nothing less than the claim to an absolute property in facts’.\(^{36}\) As to his own work, he continued: ‘Not only are \((p.352)\) very numerous corrections to every former publication relating to Goldsmith here made, and a great many new facts brought forward, but each fact, whether old or new, is given from its first authority.’\(^{37}\) This talismanic addiction to facts (and to the word ‘fact’) permits Forster to ignore entirely the question of Goldsmith's origins and the larger perspective of his place in the formation of Anglo-Irish society. Given the date at which he is writing, Forster does not have to concern himself with the issue of Anglo-Irish literature or the Irish Augustan tradition. And yet the Victorian Goldsmith (like the Victorian Swift) is one source for the Yeatsian model of the same name.
The lines I have quoted from ‘The Seven Sages’, in common with Yeats's usual placing of Goldsmith, are explicitly dramatic. Goldsmith is seen or accounted for in dramatic relation to Swift or Burke. He represents the happy imperception of imminent revolution which is counterbalanced by Swift's involuntary witnessing of ‘the ruin to come’ in ‘The Words Upon the Window-Pane’. Each figure acts in complementary relation to others, and Goldsmith is consistently seen ‘sipping at the honey-pot of his mind’. The Yeatsian universe is always a matter of antinomies, and Goldsmith's permanent, partial function is to embody a transitory unity between antinomies. Thus he unites expression and perception, sings what he sees, and his vision specifies the beggars as well as the noblemen. Goldsmith, in Yeats's system, contributes permanence with inadequate acknowledgement of that process inherent in permanence; Swift, one might say, stands for the reverse—an excessive awareness of the process of imminent ‘ruin’ unchecked by the actual. Unable to see the bloodstained trefoil (shamrock and gibbet?), Goldsmith embodies a state of pre-lapsarian harmony, pristine innocence, the perfect conjunction of word and object, signifier and signified. As against this, we see Swift as fallen, knowing, self-divided, ironic, savage.
It is worth emphasizing at this point the degree to which this Yeatsian view of the Irish eighteenth century is a (p.353) Romantic construct, in which a Victorian positivism and a Nietzschean opposition of knowledge to power are all but explicit. That Yeats celebrates the age as ‘that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion’ is no abdication from such a dualism. Swift and Berkeley, Goldsmith and Burke may be recruited as dramatis personae in an enactment of this play, yet it is admitted (tacitly) that they too were a reversal of the age, that Swift was evicted from court circles, Berkeley sequestered in remote Cork, Goldsmith jeered into eccentricity, and Burke held in continued opposition. Thus, while the eighteenth century shows up the ‘darkness’ of the nineteenth, Swift and Goldsmith by their knowledge and innocence show up the tawdry mechanical achievements of the Augustan hegemony. As Swift rarely ceased from saying, pre-eminent among these mechanical achievements was the administration of Ireland whose land was largely owned by those Berkeley characterized as ‘vultures with iron bowels’. Properly indifferent to questions of localized setting and the preoccupation with naturalism, Joyce could read a few pages of The Vicar of Wakefield and diagnose the kind of culture in which Goldsmith worked—but in 1905 Joyce was also unaffected by the imminent Yeatsian myth of the Anglo-Irish Augustans. Looking at the symmetry of Swiftian knowledge and Goldsmithian innocence, we come finally to recognize the intensity of ideological investment in this myth.
The Protestant tradition which Yeats thus creates is to be seen in the historical moment of its articulation and not of its alleged setting alone. That is to say, it follows upon the dead Parnell, and the exertions of Augusta Gregory and Horace Plunkett after the turn of the century. By extending these values as exemplary to the new Free State, it contributes a family tree to that version of Victorian philanthropy which Yeats disguises as aristocratic service. This ‘non-political’ service may be elevated into a tradition by the invocation of a sequence of such figures—from Swift to Burke. The contradiction at the centre of this formulation is precisely this, that its sequence is not historical but mythic, and its order dramatic rather than diachronic. Add to this, the by now self-evidently oppositional nature of this service and Yeats’s tragic aesthetic is seen as the vehicle by which a specifically fin de siecle social dichotomy is provided with a resonant history, an Edenic past from which it is a falling away nobly transformed.

Here we may resume contact with the issue of Goldsmith's biography and its metamorphosis. Yeats's categorization of Irish society, like his periodization of its history, required polar terms, and these he found in the Catholic/Protestant antagonism. From the 1790s onwards, these terms had gradually shifted from a relationship of mutual hostility (i.e. rival versions of the same creed) to one of mutual exclusivity. In this the deployment of sectarian feeling contributed to the perception of a rigidly stratified class system in Ireland, in which class is intensively perceived as a group rather than as the complex relations of a social formation. Goldsmith, within the Yeatsian schema, while embodying an innocent harmony of the ‘seen’ and the ‘sung’, is required to remain within a back-dated eighteenth-century reflection of this essentially post-revolutionary sociology.

It is at this point that the first of our historical moments should be considered, the 1641 Depositions:
John Goldsmith, parson of Burrishoole, in the county of Mayo, sworn and examined, says that between three and four years before the last rebellion in Ireland began, Francis Goldsmith, the deponents brother, who is a Romish priest of good account, living at and being Captain Maior of the castle of Antwerp in Brabant, wrote and sent a letter to this deponent ... which was delivered to him, this deponent, by one Father Richard Barret, a Jesuit and Spanish preacher ... This letter, as this deponent has heard, was first delivered at Antwerp aforesaid to Malone, the arch-Jesuit that dwelt in Dublin ... he is hereby persuaded that the said Malone had forewardly revealed the intended plot of rebellion to this deponents said brother which induced him so earnestly to write for this deponent, his wife and children to leave the kingdom and so escape the danger thereof which this deponent did not suspect, nor in any way understand, until the latter end of July next ... 41

(p.355) Even as historical evidence of the rebellion, this document contains serious defects—as legal testimony it is and was less than worthless. Nevertheless, together with the subsequent confession of ‘having been formerly a romish priest and converted to the protestant religion by the light of God’, it establishes our poet's family's origins as including active Catholics. More surprisingly, the resemblance of The Reverend John Goldsmith’s experiences in 1641 to the conventional view of poor Nol has not been noted. (To have had three-and-a-half years' notice—on good authority!—of a rebellion universally execrated for its precipitative treachery, and yet to have been pathetically embroiled as victim, this indeed is worthy of Oliver Goldsmith's reputation for thriftless vulnerability.) One reason for this failure to note Goldsmith's Catholic pedigree may be identified in Sir John Temple's omission of such associations in reporting the case of The Reverend John Goldsmith—though he was not averse to using them in other instances. 42 That the document was known to biographers almost from the outset cannot be denied: James Prior cited it at some length in the opening pages of his 1837 Life. 43 Prior, however, was also the biographer of Burke (1824) and was well aware of Burke's contemptuous dismissal of the Depositions as propaganda. 44
Prior uncritically cites the Depositions in 1837, but John Forster has entirely eliminated them by the time his Life first appeared in 1848. Forster's laundering of Goldsmith's ancestry, while it superficially appears to remove crude (p. 356) innuendo and self-contradictory evidence of a bygone controversy, is a far more damaging blow to genuine historical veracity than Prior's unanalytical citations of the Depositions. However, the onward march of a sectarian sociology of Ireland (together with a romanticizing of the eighteenth century in retrospect) required the elimination of the admission that Goldsmith's ancestor had been a Catholic priest, and that in the 1630s there had been affable correspondence between the Goldsmith brothers, one Catholic, one Protestant. It is true of course that the poet and his brother told Thomas Percy about a forebear called Juan Romeiro, a Spanish tutor who settled and married a good Protestant Miss Goldsmith. 45 That 'tradition' of course is a conveniently narrative explanation (John the Swordfish) of a more significant social transformation occurring between the early seventeenth and late eighteenth century. The late Gerald Simms observed in this connection that 'Oliver Goldsmith's Irish background was very different from that of Jonathan Swift ...' 46 and we might add that these differences amount to a demolition of the ironically nationalistic model which Yeats imposed on Goldsmith and Swift as a rebuke to De Valera and Cosgrave. However, such exercises as these are meaningless if they do not also establish the historical continuity which led to the Yeatsian model. Instead of Yeats's Goldsmith, we substitute no seemingly pristine Goldsmith's Goldsmith, but instead seek to recover every stage of the process by which Johnson, Percy, Prior, Forster, and others contribute to the neo-romantic Goldsmith of 'The Seven Sages'. Our reading of the poet does not itself recover that figure, rather it contributes a further element to the object of its own attention. In this way, tradition successively ratifies and condemns itself.

(p.357) 5. The Anglo-Irish Literary Tradition
The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them …

(Karl Marx)47

Can we therefore come at last to a conclusion, lay the ghost of Yeats's tradition, define the limits of Anglo-Irish literature within newly ratified frontiers, and … so to bed? It is not so easy. For one thing, we have yet to confront the ultimate Yeatsian working out of tradition (in ‘Purgatory’), the moment at which the local politics of Catholic Nationalism and Protestant Ascendancy throw vast shadows cast by the ghastly light of Europe. For another, revisionism which unmasks one system in the pretence of establishing none leads either to densely annotated scepticism or simply to a rearranged schedule of events. Literary history requires more, because more is required of it in the peculiar circumstances of Irish culture.
A literature which includes Yeats and Joyce is in no imminent danger of neglect; they, together with Synge, Shaw, O’Casey, Wilde, and Moore, ensure the viability of Anglo-Irish literature as an academic industry. And, though there are difficulties attaching to the term ‘Anglo-Irish literature’, it is too late to purge it from our critical vocabulary. There is of course a general linguistic ambiguity lying behind the specifically Anglo-Irish problems—there are the multiple ways in which the word ‘literature’ is used. Though the sense of ‘imaginatively composed and formally organized written works’ predominates, there is also the looser (or larger) (p. 358) sense of ‘written works about, or commentaries upon, a subject or topic’—thus there is the literature of industrial disputes, of parapsychology, and so forth. This ambiguity is a radical one for it brings together in the one term the rival claims of form and content, manner and matter, style and theme. But there is another dimension: by English literature we mean at times the literature produced by the English people or the English nation, and the moment of English literature’s emergence can be related to specific developments in English politics and social institutions; at other times, however, English literature is the sum of texts (wherever written) in the English language. Anglo-Irish literature, therefore, is not so much a description or a definition, but an eclectic convenience. We must take care that we do not attempt false analogies on the basis of the term’s outward resemblance to ‘English literature’. For to do so would be to disclose a curious instability in the noun ‘Anglo-Ireland’ and its adjectival derivative, an instability which might suggest a route to discovering contradictions in our implicit notions of Ireland, England, Britain, etc.

One previous attempt at a theory of Anglo-Irish literature deserves notice here. For Daniel Corkery, literature was national in so far as it dealt with the experience of the Irish people. His concept of the Irish people, their experience, and the way that literature ‘deals with’ experience, was fundamentally crude—exile, non-Catholicism, a neglect of local setting were sufficient to disqualify a Shaw or a Moore. But to see that Corkery was not without distinguished predecessors in this approach, one has only to consider Yeats's early quarrel with Edward Dowden and his rejection of Swift and Berkeley (in the 1880s) as irrelevant to the new rural consciousness, the new nationalism. And yet there is something curiously abstract
about the notion of an Augustan tradition in Ireland. Even if we leave aside the question of Yeats's debt to the Victorians in his construction of the Goldsmith of ‘The Seven Sages’, it remains true that the common identity which the Irish Augustans possess is the paradoxical sharing of isolation. (This becomes evident at a further level if one considers the relationship of Gaelic literature to Berkeley, say, or Grattan.) We should be careful that we do not replace nationalist or Yeatsian myths with a museum curator's display model of history. The idea that research can reconstruct a miraculously untarnished and unchanging work of art, the ‘ding-an-sich’, is ludicrous. Every act of criticism and interpretation is an attempt to bring together past and present, and we should be cheated if we were to accept literature simply as the graph of history. Robert Weimann has suggested that ‘it is surely no idealism to assume that the work of art is not merely a product, but a “producer” of its age; not merely a mirror of the past, but a lamp to the future’, and he associates this approach with Marx’s ‘special forms of production—as in the sense that the work of art can produce its audience, and influence their attitudes and values’. This is sensible as far as it goes; it is perhaps advisable to emphasize that literature is not only a form of knowledge which might be translated into others—into statistical data, social analysis, or political history. Literature is a special form of knowledge in that it not only knows but informs; it both longs for and imposes order. It is simultaneously a form of knowledge and a knowledge of form. The idea of Corkery and Marx in cahoots is perhaps fanciful, and yet neither gave sufficient attention to the special forms of production which might operate in an advanced colonial society in which the manufacture of literary ideology in the modernist period became pre-eminent.

T. S. Eliot's famous essay ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ appeared in 1919 and leads directly into the post-war phase of English-language modernism. At work on ‘The Waste Land’, Eliot is concerned in the essay to relate the modernism and traditionalism of his values:
What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives, for order to persist after the supervision of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.49

Here we have the declarative heart of an essay which began tentatively enough, ‘In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deplopping its absence.’ From this cautious opening Eliot proceeds in a way which has been inadequately noted to deal with literature through the metaphor of works, that is mental objects rather than the relations or processes conveniently summarized and concentrated in the metaphor of their being separate things. Wishing to establish relations between contemporary literature and that of the past, he is prepared to minimize the relational existence of literature per se. Here, the valorization of the past as more real than the present and the increased autonomy of the modernist work of art are shown to be hand in hand. In a later essay, Eliot reformulates his fundamental point but significantly conceives a series of great artists whose genius is apparently quantifiable: ‘Whenever a Virgil, a Dante, a Shakespeare, a Goethe is born, the whole future of European poetry is altered.’50 By 1948, the modernist emphasis on the ability of the present to change the past has dwindled to this less exciting announcement. The truth is that every event in literary history is potentially a present event, and the past cannot simply be inherited; as Eliot rightly observed in 1919, ‘if you want it you must obtain it by great labour.’51

The continuing process of representing the past, of achieving a re-vision of it, is indeed asserted by Yeats himself, thus sanctioning the eclipse of his own assertion:

Civilisation is hooped together, brought
Under a rule, under the semblance of peace
By manifold illusion; but man’s life is thought,
And he, despite his terror, cannot cease
Ravening through century after century,
Ravening, raging, and uprooting that he may come
Into the desolation of reality.\textsuperscript{52}

To refer these lines to Nietzsche, to a modernist aesthetic, to Yeats's interest in a secret or symbolist history, is in each case possible. Possible also is it to demonstrate that, with these lines available to us, we can now re-read that splendid, nervous passage from Burke's \textit{Reflections on the Revolution in France} opening with the assertion that 'society is indeed a contract', proceeding to elevate that contract into a universal, moral imperative, and concluding with a staccato evocation of the 'antagonistic world of madness, discord, vice, confusion and unavailing sorrow which must follow any violation of the contract'.\textsuperscript{53} In other words, we could now come at last to the conclusion that the Anglo-Irish tradition begins with Burke rather than Swift, Burke rather even than Maria Edgeworth. Yet to do so would be to abdicate from the business of identifying the operative historical points of focus through which literary history becomes effective, in favour of yet another chronology.

Leaving aside, then the question of Burke and Yeats, we can concentrate more profitably on the method rather than the material. Three historical points of focus are involved, the first revolving round the reader's specific responsibilities. In \textit{Truth and Method} Hans-Georg Gadamer has provided guidance in this connection:

\begin{quote}
The reader does not exist before whose eyes the great book of world history lies open. But nor does the reader exist who, when he has his text before him, simply reads what is there. Rather, all reading involves application, so that a person reading a text is himself part of the meaning he apprehends. He belongs to the text that he is reading.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}
The term which Gadamer provocatively uses for the characteristic (p.362) which the reader brings to his text is *prejudice*: there can be no view of past literature which is not positively affected by the prejudices of the reader. Because, for Gadamer, all experience is experience of human finitude it follows that the reader is obliged to be aware of his own position in the historical process: by prejudice he means a consciousness of all those attitudes, needs, abilities, and inadequacies which characterize the reader as he confirms his relationship with the past by the act of reading. And the term which Gadamer uses for this relationship is properly *dialectic*, that is, question and answer, dramatic conversation. 'Tradition is not simply a process that we learn to know and be in command of through experience; it is language, i.e. it expresses itself like a “Thou”. A “Thou” is not an object, but stands in relationship with us.' Only through such a revised concept of reading itself can we begin to discover a new tradition, a tradition in which the future is acknowledged as real. In my final chapter I hope to say something about the condition in which the reader of Anglo-Irish literature finds himself, about the prejudices he must recognize as he applies himself to the ‘handing down’ which is tradition.
The second historical point of focus through which literary history can become effective centres on the question of the nature of the literary text. One can see that the tacit assumption of Eliot's modernist aesthetic was that literature consists of artefacts, objects or works which possess a degree of autonomy criticism has no need to challenge. Now that the moment of the New Critics has passed this concept of the work of literature probably has few serious advocates. With the renovation of psychoanalysis in France and elsewhere, and with other related practices emphasizing other forms of repression as active within and around the official contours of an artwork, it is more profitable now to consider if significant absences do not constitute a meaning of literature and art. The genesis of a text is a function of the text's meaning, just as the reader too contributes his application in the act of reading. It is not enough, however, simply to regard all texts from the canon as equally susceptible to these altered procedures: in order to identify the text which forms an operative historical point of focus one needs to draw upon a historical materialism which reads history as possessing more than a determined past. In other words, the entire political unconscious which underlies the extensive cultural production we have called Anglo-Irish literature must be articulatable through the reading of this text, if the text is effectively an operative focus. In the following chapter I take Yeats's play 'Purgatory' to be such a text, and in analysing it I hope to show that its significant absences also throw light on the repressed history of Yeats's tradition, the history which has been betrayed by the ideological operations of Protestant Ascendancy. Using Edmund Burke and W. B. Yeats as the poles of an argument, and concluding with an examination of 'Purgatory' seen as the ablation of this tradition, I read the play as the supreme statement of Yeats's tradition, but I require the term 'ablation' to convey the play's complexity in both defining and destroying the tradition it brings to completion. Far from employing such terminology to divert attention from an inquiry into the social base of Irish culture, and the modes of production therein, I hope to ground my argument very solidly on the evidence of the author's social experience. Perhaps one might say that this experience influenced the play. It is preferable to speak of the text's genesis through this experience and through the broader medium of the language in which it finds itself. There is a penseSe of Pascal's which can summarize the position for us:
Since everything then is cause and effect, dependent and supporting, mediate and intermediate, and all is held together by a natural though imperceptible chain, which binds together things most distant and most different, I hold it equally impossible to know the parts without knowing the whole, and to know the whole without knowing the parts in detail.\textsuperscript{56}

But there is a third historical point of focus, larger than reader or effective text. It is not simply the epoch, as Hippolyte Taine argued, though 'Purgatory's' place in the era (p.364) of fascism can hardly be passed over without comment. It is rather the suppressed history of such crises, the business of the literary historian being the identification of that suppression as it turns the larger historical sequence towards a particular ideological purpose. In charting the Victorian construction of a Goldsmith biography, we have already observed the obverse of this suppression. In examining 'Purgatory' we will encounter a particularly pure form of this suppressed Victorian history. A full account of Yeats's place in the history of Victorian thought remains to be written: here in looking briefly at Lecky, Arnold, Forster, or even Dowden as precursors we are not bound to seek for verbal echoes or to document loans and borrowings. Yeats is the culmination of a mid- and late-Victorian rereading of the Irish eighteenth century, a rereading which can be conveniently dated from Arnold's Oxford lectures \textit{On the Study of Celtic Literature} given in the year of the Irish poet's birth. However, there is silence in Yeats's rhetoric also: hand in hand with the invocation of Swift and Burke there are elisions and lacunae. Take, for example, a passage where he seeks a universal metaphysic which yet retains the appearance of the concrete world, one of those visions of the disembodied and yet muscular world to which his phenomenological tendencies led him:

\begin{quote}
It was indeed Swedenborg who ... discovered a world of spirits where there was a scenery like that of earth, human forms, grotesque or beautiful, senses that knew pleasure and pain, marriage and war, all that could be painted upon canvas, or put into stories to make one's hair stand up.\textsuperscript{57}
\end{quote}
The probability exists here that Yeats has the fiction of Sheridan Le Fanu in mind, for in *Uncle Silas* and in the short stories of *In a Glass Darkly* Le Fanu explicitly used Swedenborgian doctrines in his sensational plots. Nevertheless, Yeats's prose remains inscrutable, refusing to divulge a name. Now, Liam Miller has revealed that the earliest draft of 'The Words Upon the Window-Pane' connects the theme of the play to Le Fanu's fiction, especially the tales of *In a Glass Darkly*58. The point is not simply that Yeats suppressed the nineteenth-century avenue by which he sought to approach Jonathan Swift, the central (and absent) character of the play. Le Fanu had indeed family links with Swift (through the Sheridans) and had inherited a number of relics of the Dean's. More significantly however, the specific function of Swedenborgianism in Le Fanu's fiction was to provide a symbolism through which neurosis was analysed; and while the characters of the stories seem discrete and private when considered individually, the over-all structure of *In a Glass Darkly* transforms their personal symptoms into a cultural malaise explicitly related to the French Revolution and 'the ruin to come'. The suppression of the Le Fanu reference and its attendant apparatus is dramatically effective; more specifically, its effect is of a consciously tragic kind. Without the intervention of Le Fanu's bourgeois neurosis, the image of Swift is projected directly on to the audience's imagination with the minimum of historical or narrative mediation. That is, the dean is caught in the truth of his own prophecy.

The elimination of the Le Fanu reference from the early stages of the play's genesis is not just a negative feature of the play, something we know by virtue of our scholarly prurience. In ‘The Words Upon the Window-Pane’ Swift's tragic vision of civilization's end is prefaced and produced by the vulgarity of table-rapping and a distinctly *petit-bourgeois* cast of spiritualists. As they discuss their contributions to the seance, practise their lines for the longed-for encounter with departed spirits, and criticize their fellows, the figures constitute a play-within-the-play. They may also be regarded as an audience awaiting Swift's performance, though ironically they will have departed before his spirit speaks through Mrs Henderson.

Their departure, the elimination of the play-within, the obliteration of Mrs Henderson's voice by that of Swift, enacts the suppression of those historical connections by which Yeats reaches Swift. The discarding of Le Fanu's *In a Glass Darkly* is an integral part of the structure and meaning of the play.
What then is the significance of this suppressed history? What particular value has The Words Upon the WindowPane' as a demonstration of this suppression? Despite (or perhaps because of) the immaturity and unevenness of his work, Le Fanu was the literary spokesman of the Irish Victorian middle classes, a formation uniquely affected by the notions of Protestant Ascendancy. In Marx’s terms one might see Le Fanu’s colleagues timidly conjuring up the spirits of the past to help them. What Yeats’s play achieves—and with a vengeance!—is to take that metaphor of spiritconjuring seriously and to eliminate the timid bourgeois who foolishly have recourse to such theatrical props. The redundancy of the so-called Ascendancy, the prevalence of exile settings, the location of identity solely in guilt—these are the hallmarks of Le Fanu’s fiction. Swedenborg’s solipsistic cosmology allowed him to reveal the purposelessness of the Great House in Uncle Silas, while in In a Glass Darkly the same doctrines provided an analysis of individual neurosis. What Le Fanu and his characters find unacceptable, unintelligible, is their merely contingent existence, their bourgeois condition. Yeats’s exclusion of all this stems from his recognition of the validity of Le Fanu’s diagnosis, validity that is within the circumstances (the prejudices as Gadamer would have it) of Yeats’s own historical position as reader. In order that Yeats may artistically acknowledge his own origins in the self-destructive world of Le Fanu—and to transform those origins artistically—he must expunge them from his work. They form a negative mould, an antithetical shape from which Yeats’s imagination releases itself. To be specific, one can see the sequence of events in ‘The Words Upon the Window-Pane’ as an implied or desired causation: the departure/suppression of the petit-bourgeois cast will allow unmediated access to aristocratic tradition in Swift, but that revelation is necessarily tragic in itself, and admonitory to us.
And the notion of tradition is peculiarly relevant here, especially if we note Freud's radical reinterpretation of the artistic urge. Connecting individual neurosis and civilization (Kultur) he argues that 'neuroses ultimately reveal themselves as attempts to solve on an individual basis the problems of wish compensation that ought to be solved socially by institutions.'\(^{59}\) For Freud, Kultur only shows the ways men have attempted 'to bind their unsatisfied wishes under the varying conditions of fulfilment and denial by reality ...'\(^{60}\) I have already suggested how reality in Ireland underwent a continuous process of obfuscation, or was atomized into a scintillation of facticity. Thus, it is doubly true that in colonial Ireland tradition offered a publicly sanctioned compensation for necessary cultural renunciations.\(^{61}\)

Marx … Eliot … Gadamer … all three perspectives cited here are called into being, called into question, by the concentration and purity of ‘Purgatory’. The sight of conjured spirits dramatizes once again the tragedy of Protestant Ascendancy, but not in the aesthetic self-congratulation of ‘The Words Upon the Window-Pane’—there is no Swift to bolster the pretence that this drama is remediable history. As Eliot astutely observed, after the supervention of this novelty the whole pre-existing order is modified, however slightly, modified and changed by the apparent dramatization of unchanging process. Finally, we read this text applying ourselves to its meaning, finding our meaning there in murderous consequence of endogamous pride.

Notes:


\(^{(3)}\) Except where otherwise stated all citations in this paragraph may be found in the Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. ‘tradition’.


\(^{(5)}\) H. Stuart Hughes, Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890–1930 (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979)
The Invention of Tradition

(6) op. cit. passim


(11) Ibid.


(17) Ibid.

(18) Ibid.

(19) Ibid.

(20) Ibid.

(21) Ibid. *The Cutting of an Agate*


(23) For an authoritative but succinct account of this complex area see J. A. Downie’s new biography of Swift (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).


(37) Ibid.

(38) W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 268.


(41) Trinity College, Dublin, MS 831, fo. 145 etc. Some of this material was included in Mary Hickson, Ireland in the Seventeenth Century, 2 vols. (London, 1884).

(42) Sir John Temple, The Irish Rebellion; or, an History of the beginnings and first progress of the general rebellion raised within the kingdom of Ireland, upon the three and twentieth day of October, in the year 1641. Together with the barbarous cruelties and bloody massacres which ensued thereupon (London, 1646), pp. 67, 116–18. The most dispassionate analysis of Temple’s unreliability, and of the Depositions generally, is still W. E. H. Lecky in his History of Ireland in the Eighteenth Century (London, 1896), vol. i, pp. 72–6.


(46) I am grateful to Dr Hugh Shields who provided me with a copy of an unpublished paper (from which I quote here) delivered by his father-in-law, the late Professor J. G. Simms, at a Goldsmith centenary celebration in 1974.


(52) W. B. Yeats, ‘Mem’ (Supernatural Songs), *Collected Poems*, p. 333.


(55) Ibid.


(57) Yeats, *Explorations*, p. 32.


(60) Idem.
This sentence is in part a rephrasing of Habermas on Freud (Habermas, p. 276). The later chapters of *Knowledge and Human Interests* suggest the broad application of the method of psychoanalysis as a literary hermeneutic, because ‘Freud always patterned the interpretation of dreams after the hermeneutic model of philological research’ (p. 214).