On ‘Purgatory’

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Abstract and Keywords

Purgatory is a play that resembles a dialogue poem which W. B. Yeats wrote at various stages of his life. This chapter discusses Yeats’ Purgatory, its allusion and implication to Irish social history and German culture and its importance to Yeats' career. The chapter also focuses on the structure of the play, the metalinguistic aspect and metadramatic dimensions of the play, as well as on the fascistic tone that underlay Yeats' Purgatory.

Keywords: Purgatory, W. B. Yeats, metalinguistic, metadramatic, fascistic tone, Irish social history, German culture

A second chance—that's the delusion. There never was to be but one. We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.

(Henry James)¹

1. Sources and Forms
What is ‘Purgatory’? Its successful stage-career proves that it is effectively a play. On the other hand, the text itself resembles those dialogue poems which Yeats wrote at various stages of his life. For a play, it seems limited in its presentation of setting; for a poem, it seems overloaded with action. These generic uncertainties should be read positively as evidence of Yeats's full engagement in ‘Purgatory’, Yeats the dramatist, Yeats the poet. But the uncertainties also mark a crisis in modernist aesthetic categories, a railing against form or the persistent erection of one form as a bulwark against another.
This unease—the term is too bland, but let it pass—in ‘Purgatory’ has local and global implications. For, while we can show that the play draws extensively on Yeats’s experience of Irish social history, we can also point to parallels in, say, German culture. Some of these German parallels may have their own prior association in Irish literary history; others—that involving Wagner, notably—suddenly open up the entire horizon of twentieth-century European cultural crisis. With this perspective in mind, the shadowy setting of ‘Purgatory’ may stimulate once again that sense of embarrassment at the confluence of mighty reputations and marginal references which has already been discussed. Of course, (p.369) followers of Lucien Goldmann’s genetic structuralism may find in all these parallels material for an analysis of the homologies between the deep consciousness of a specific period and the structures of certain crucial works of literature. Such works are then seen to possess a ‘world-historical view’. In Le Dieu cache, Goldmann had elaborated this theory in analysing Pascal’s Pensees and Racine’s tragic drama and relating the structures of these works to the theological and social structures of Jansenism—he was, it should be noted, less successful in applying the method to twentieth-century literature. The relatively marginal position of Jansenism in France, as opposed to official Catholicism, should encourage those who are dismayed by the marginality of Ireland in relation to European affairs: not only did Yeats reproduce the proportions of marginality/centrality which Goldmann encountered in Pascal, but Yeats shared with Racine a specifically tragic outlook. It is worth noting these effective horizons within which Goldmann’s original research was conducted before accepting the fashionable dismissal of genetic structuralism and its homologies. In the Anglo-Irish field marginality is de rigueur, and in that sub-set of the field known as Yeats tragedy is pervasive. ‘Purgatory’ brings together these characteristics, together with the generic tensions outlined above.
It is crucial to Goldmann's argument, of course, that the correlation of historical period or epoch and specific literary works is based on the form of the latter and not on their contents. It is only in inferior writing that one finds simple relations between content and context, and in such novels or plays one can only encounter an 'unachieved consciousness of the time'. The resemblance between 'Purgatory' and an obscure German romantic play neatly illustrates this distinction. Zacharias Werner's 'Vierundzwanzig Februar' (1809) certainly resembles the plot of Yeats's play in several striking respects—recurrent murder within the family, the tyranny of Fate or a determined destiny, coincidence, (p. 370) etc. The appeal of German romanticism in Ireland, and especially in what has been termed 'Anglo-Ireland', was very great indeed—the notorious weakness of the German middle class and the undeveloped condition of the German state offered parallels to the Protestant Ascendancy. If the landowners of Davitt's day gave the impression of possessing a heritage as venerable as that of pre-Bismarckian Junkers in Prussia, there is plenty of literary evidence as to where this belief originated. 'Purgatory' does not derive its worldhistorical view from its resemblance to degenerate versions of Sturm und Drang:—indeed, one significant divergence between the two plays is particularly important. Werner's play makes specific the sectarian divisions of Swiss mountain society in which it is set, whereas Yeats's final version of 'Purgatory' is silent on the Protestant/Catholic antagonism. In a manuscript scenario prepared in advance of the text, however, Yeats had specified as a crucial aspect of the mesalliance at the heart of the play that the marriage between the Lady and the Groom had taken place in a Catholic church—the lady had demeaned herself not simply by marrying her stablegroom but by marrying outside the sectarian 'tribe'. Bearing this proto-history of the canonical text in mind, we confront the casual but heartfelt condemnation of 'Purgatory's' ritual of aesthetized murder as fascist. But it is not simply the manifest content of the play which relates it to epochal catastrophe; its sources and forms are far more eloquent. Evidence of the play's genesis, in the manuscript scenario and in earlier utterances of Yeats's, specifies its assumption of the Protestant/Catholic antagonism as tribal if not racial, as the operational field of taboo and totem. One crucial structural aspect of the play becomes therefore the suppression of this specified ideology in the canonical text.
‘Purgatory’ occupies a special place in the Yeatsian canon, yet its significance depends not on its uniqueness but on its centrality. Written virtually at the close of the poet’s life (p. 371) it illuminates a great deal of his drama which, without ‘Purgatory’, might seem merely experimental. And while achieving a very distinctive language at once poetic and dramatic, it succeeds also in integrating much that had appeared casual in Yeats’s prose. It is in such terms that we view the centrality of the play to Yeats’s career, and beyond that perspective it is ‘Purgatory’ above all else which reveals the nature of that modernism which Yeats did so much to render possible in English.

From the outset, heroism was at the heart of the Yeatsian aesthetic. As a consequence, dramatic technique (if not always dramatic form) closely engaged the poet’s attention. From the Cuchulain of ‘On Baile’s Strand’ (1904) to ‘The Death of Cuchulain’ (1939) the encounter which defines Yeatsian heroism is the potentially evasive nature of death itself—the hero fights the ungovernable tide, the Old Man pleads for an end to process and consequence. That death should not be frankly confrontable is the essence of the tragic hero’s dilemma: doomed, he is yet uncertain if he can trust to his own doom. Yeats’s tragedies revolve around what Fredric Jameson has described in another context as ‘heroic cynicism’. In ‘Purgatory’ Yeats finally confronts that cynicism of form which modernism depended upon.
Like ‘The Words Upon the Window-Pane’ and ‘The Death of Cuchulain’, ‘Purgatory’ deals with the burden of the past. Much of it can be seen as—inter alia—Yeats's meditation on his own previous meditation: it is a self-scrutiny, and in this it has its affinities with ‘The Dead’. Yet in its historical concern Joyce’s short story adopts what may appear to be a naive transparency in its anatomy of nineteenth-century Ireland while the play is frequently taken to evoke the famous Yeatsian eighteenth century, ‘that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion’. Like Burke’s Reflections, the play adopts as its style and form a dominant metaphor which it reveals as virtually redundant. In ‘Purgatory’ the dominant metaphor is pollution, especially hereditary pollution; the characters on stage appear to suffer the consequences of ancestral offence. The stratagem of bringing pollution to an end by killing the boy is pathetic self-deception. As with Burke's Great House, the dominant metaphor of the play turns sardonically upon itself.

Donald Torchiana concluded Yeats and Georgian Ireland with an analysis of ‘Purgatory’ in the context of its appearance in the poet's handbook of violent diatribe On the Boiler. As his title suggests, Torchiana is concerned to see the play as ‘the symbolic tragedy of the eighteenth century and its consequence for modern Ireland.’ While his documentation of Yeats's current interest in eugenics and Nazi legislation tactfully reminds us of the modern context in which the play was written, the acceptance of Yeats's superficial allusions to the eighteenth century successfully conceals the real logic of Yeats's relationship with fascism. Source and style, in the case of ‘Purgatory’, combine most effectively to point to the nineteenth-century origins of that historical movement which reached its apotheosis in European fascism.
The most frequently cited source for the play is *The Celtic Twilight* (the expanded edition of 1902). Here Yeats recorded many West of Ireland tales about the Devil, purgatory, the dead, and their ghosts. An informant from County Galway had confided: ‘And another time I saw Purgatory. It seemed to be in a level place, and no walls around it, but it all one bright blaze, and the souls standing in it.’ Undoubtedly, this is a source for the play—if one wishes to take a fairly simplistic view of the relationship between source and art. The immediately previous paragraph of Yeats’s account of the Galway seer offers an observation in which a more reciprocal kind of source is at work:

> I have seen Hell myself. I had a sight of it one time in a vision. It had a very high wall around it—all of metal, and an archway, and a straight walk into it, just like what’d be leading into a gentleman’s orchard, but the edges were not trimmed with box, but with red-hot metal.

(*p.373*) That Hell should be described in the terminology of a gentleman’s residence would have appealed politically to Yeats in 1902 to a degree inconceivable in 1938. Peasants’ accounts of the Devil tend to see him in the garb of their social superiors, which in turn suggests that he looks very much like a folklore collector. In 1902, however, Yeats was determined to exploit folklore as a direct communication with ‘Ireland’, and to do so he suspended attention to his own social position in Ireland. The period of his activities as a collector of lore is significant in that it coincides with the collapse of the landlord system and the eclipse of the resident gentry. We recognize ‘Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation’ (1910) as a turning-point in Yeats’s career, the point after which he resumes attention to his own position in Irish society. It has been customary to identify ‘land agitation’ as the culminating activity of tenants and propagandists; this is sentimental. Yeats was sufficiently shrewd to know that Wyndham’s Act of 1903 did more than merely codify the agitation of half a century. It signalled Government’s abandonment of the Irish Great House. *The Celtic Twilight*, in recording the gentleman’s orchard in Hell’s fire, records a specifically nineteenth-century folk-imagинаtion.
In the course of this argument I shall be concerned to show how the sources Yeats drew upon in 1938 for ‘Purgatory’ have a concentration in time which is revealing; their period is, roughly speaking, very late Victorian and Edwardian. That is to say they are located in the years when Irish politics was more evidently and palpably concerned with social issues rather than nationalist principles. Writing his *Reveries Over Childhood & Youth* in 1914, Yeats recalled his childhood excursions to Castle Dargan in County Sligo. Again, to capture the reciprocal quality of the poet’s involvement with his material, we must look beyond the familiar sentences and quote *in extenso*:

(p.374) Sometimes I would ride to Castle Dargan, where lived a brawling squireen, married to one of my Middleton cousins, and once I went thither on a visit with my cousin George Middleton. It was, I dare say, the last house hold where I could have found the reckless Ireland of a hundred years ago in final degradation. But I liked the place for the romance of its two ruined castles facing one another across a little lake, Castle Dargan and Castle Fury. The squireen lived in a small house whither his family had moved from their castle some time in the eighteenth century, and two old Miss Furys, who let lodgings in Sligo, were the last remnants of the breed of the other ruin. Once in every year he drove to Sligo for the two old women, that they might look upon the ancestral stones and remember their gentility, and he would put his wildest horses into the shafts to enjoy their terror.
He himself, with a reeling imagination, knew not what he could be at to find a spur for the heavy hours. The first day I came there, he gave my cousin a revolver, (we were upon the high road), and to show it off, or his own shooting, he shot a passing chicken; and half an hour later, when he had brought us to the lake's edge under his castle, now but the broken corner of a tower with a winding stair, he fired at or over an old country man who was walking on the far edge of the lake. The next day I heard him settling the matter with the old country man over abottle of whiskey, and both were in good humour ... At last he quarrelled with my great-uncle William Middleton, and to avenge himself gathered a rabble of wild country lads and mounted them and himself upon the most broken-down rascally horses he could lay hands on and marched them through Sligo under a land-league banner. After that, having now neither friends nor money, he made off to Australia or to Canada.

I fished for pike at Castle Dargan and shot at birds with a muzzleloading pistol until somebody shot a rabbit and I heard it squeal. From that on I would kill nothing but the dumb fish.

XI

We left Bedford Park for a long thatched house at Howth, Co. Dublin. The land war was now at its height and our Kildare land, that had been in the family for many generations, was slipping from us. Rents had fallen more and more, we had to sell to pay some charge or mortgage ...
There is much material for drama here. If the practical jokes and extraneous violence look back to Buck Whaley and the rake-hellish life of regency days, they also confirm that the Old Man in ‘Purgatory’ in asking ‘Where are the jokes and stories of a house/It’s threshold gone to patch a pig-sty?’ may not be referring to any remoter history than that of the 1870s. Here, in autobiographical form, we have the Great House deserted, the debauched master, the shameful mediation of whiskey between the classes—all features of the play of 1938. The passage also implicates Yeats himself, not only in the damage done by Land League agitation to the Yeats’s rents in Kildare, but also in the surrogate huntin’ and shootin’, soon rejected for the more discreet killing of ‘dumb fish’. Once again, a source for ‘Purgatory’ is revealed to contain a dialectical presence of the author himself; it is no mere raw material for reflection.

In his biography of the poet, J. M. Hone records a ghost story which Yeats told at a Friday evening gathering in Charles Ricketts’s house. Hone’s commentary dates the occasion to the years immediately preceding the Great War, and connects it to the essay ‘Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places’ which subsequently appeared as an epilogue to Lady Gregory’s Visions and Beliefs of the West of Ireland. Though Hone’s version, supplied by Thomas Lowinsky, an artist who had been present for Yeats’s performance, retains marks of its transmission, there are clear suggestions of ‘Purgatory’:

Centuries ago there lived in a castle in Ireland a man and wife. To their abounding sorrow they remained childless despite prayers and pilgrimages. At last, when they had long given up all hope, the woman, to her joy, found herself pregnant. Her husband, who till then had been tender and trusting, became sullen and suspicious, often giving himself up to lonely bouts of drinking. Barely had the child been born when the man, roaring drunk, rushed into the upper chamber where his wife lay. With cries of ‘Bastard, bastard’ he wrested the baby from her breast, and with the screaming infant in his arms strode raging from the room. Down the winding wooden stairs he ran into the hall, where, all reason fled, he beat and beat the tiny thing against anything he could. From her bed the mother rose and followed ... to arrive too late. Her son was dead. Picking him up from where had had been flung, she turned and slowly climbed the spiral
stairs that led to the threshold of her room. She moved as in a trance till, through the open door, the sight of the bed brought her to earth with a spasm of despair. (p. 376) Vehemently clasping the child, in a flash she bent beneath the bar which fenced the stairs, and dropped, like a singed moth, to the stone floor below. The man, his frenzy spent, was over whelmed with grief. He sought consolation in taking another wife by whom he had other sons. Thus a family was founded and generation followed generation, each living much the same uneventful bucolic lives as those whom they succeeded. Although they cared for their castle and husbanded its land, each in turn from time to time abandoned himself to the same solitary bouts. The house as a rule was a happy place but, during those spells, when its master was saturated with drink, an ashen woman would drift past him, ascending the curved stairs. Transfixed, he would wait the tragedy that he knew he was doomed only to see when he was drunk. Always with the same simple gesture she would reach the top most step; always in the same way, pause, then bend, to drop a fluttering mass. Yet when he peered down he could see nothing. With the years the family vice grew like a cancer until it ate away their entire fortune and they were reduced to poverty. To crown their misery fire gutted the castle. The descendant to whom it belonged was without the money or the desire to rebuild. Indolent and inane, he left with few regrets to live in far-distant Dublin. Thenceforth the family and its fount seemed after countless years to have severed every bond. But destinies and traditions are hard to break and one day the grandson of this deserter was drawn to the very spot. His boon companion, killed by the kick of a horse, was to be buried within sight of the crumbling towers. Moved partly by affection for his friend, partly by curiosity to see the place whence his stock had sprung, the survivor of this long line had journeyed to attend the funeral. He met many friends and tippled with them all and, drunk, he found himself at dusk before the sombre shell of a stronghold. There being no door, he walked straight into the empty well up the wall of which had twined the oaken stairs. As he gazed he saw a fragile dishevelled form glide past him up and round the walls as though the steps were still there. Almost at the top she stopped, then with a burst of
emotion dived, to disappear. The man knew no surprise.
He felt that he had watched this melancholy scene
innumerable times before—and for an instant he dimly
understood that neither his children nor yet his
children's children could ever purge themselves of a
crime that they had inherited with their blood.\(^\text{12}\)

Many of the sparse details of the play can be found here in
narrative form—the drunken husband, the woman seen in
repetition of her trauma, the returned grandson, the notion
\(^{(\text{p.377})}\) of hereditary suffering. Even if we admit that this
last source only reaches us at third hand, it shares with \textit{The}
\textit{Celtic Twilight} and \textit{Reveries} the tone and structure of late
Victorian and Edwardian recollection. To seize upon ‘centuries
ago’ as sanctioning an eighteenth-century provenance for the
tale is to travesty the basic conventions of oral narrative,
especially of the supernatural tale. The central and significant
feature of the events at Ricketts's house is that, in 1914 or
thereabouts, Yeats found a tale of recurring and hereditary
suffering a satisfactory narrative; he found it to have \textit{form}.
When we come to ‘Purgatory’, utter dissatisfaction, a railing
against form within form, is the dominant tone.
In connection with these sources we have to ask how Yeats transforms the raw material of ghost story and childhood recollection into the tight structure of ‘Purgatory’. It might be more precise to say that it is Yeats’s recollection of this material in 1938 which can be properly regarded as the play’s source. And while this refinement would involve a further consideration of Yeats’s newspaper interview on the subject of Nazi respect for the ancient sanctities, it may be more critically profitable to concentrate on the texts in hand. A major distinction between the play and its source is that the drama specifically spurns narrative. In relation to the story told at Ricketts’s, we can see that this process is achieved by the deliberate elimination of the psychological rationale of the father’s drunken fury—his suspicion that the child is not his—in favour of class hatred. The logic of the ghost story identifies violent fury (for which no adequate justification is provided) as the cause of hereditary suffering; that the origin of this fury may be a suspicion of mesalliance is secondary. In ‘Purgatory’ of course fury and mesalliance are placed in immediate conjunction in a manner approved by (at least) the Old Man. At a structural level we can describe this transformation of the material as the elimination of all notions of linear time in favour of ‘other events that lie side by side in space [,] complements one of another’,¹³ as Yeats puts it in On the Boiler. For the agony of the different (p.378) generations in ‘Purgatory’ has only the appearance of sequence; dramatically, the Old Man and the Boy go through their violent ritual simultaneously with the Bride and Groom. In the idiom of Saussurean linguistics, the play prefers the synchronic to the diachronic axis. That preference, of course, has been pervasive in modernist literature, and even more so in the practical criticism it has begotten, being the basis of an aesthetic justifying the text as autonomous and ‘selfdelighting’.
Despite Practical Criticism and the New Criticism, that sense of autonomy was of course never absolute. Novelists such as Joyce and Thomas Mann employed an irony which is directed as much at the pretensions of artistic form as at an intractable world. Irony in Yeats, however, enjoys a less official status, and the problem is doubly sensitive in the case of ‘Purgatory’, requiring some method of responding critically to those explicit avowals of Nazi attitude which are concentrated in the interview printed in the *Irish Independent* after the first performance of the play in August 1938. In advance of that encounter with German legislation some further traces of the play’s origin may still prove valuable.

2. ‘Ascendancy with its sense of responsibility...’
The Celtic Twilight, Reveries, and the story told at Ricketts’s offer comparisons which only approximate to something in ‘Purgatory’. Each in isolation would fail to prove itself the seed from which the play grew. Nevertheless, the collocations of house, ghost, and returning degenerate heir impose themselves as evidence of a prima-facie quality. There is a plausibly insidious process by which The Tower and the many allusions to Great Houses in the poems of that period are read as a personal hallmark of Yeats, a process which leads critics to an autobiographical reading of ‘Purgatory’. Torchiana confidently identifies the lines ‘to kill a house Where great men grew up, married, died, I here declare a capital offence’ as spoken ‘in what is certainly Yeats’s own voice’. Harold Bloom has reservations about the play, and concludes: ‘Yeats is not separate enough from the old man’s rage to render the play's conclusion coherent. That hardly makes the play less powerful, but perhaps we ought to resent a work that has so palpable a design upon us.’ Now my position is delicate, and I must try to formulate it with some precision. I am pointing to the immediacy of Yeats's historical experience of nineteenth-century social change in those tales which resemble ‘Purgatory’—here the squireen relative and his Land League antics are especially relevant. I resist, however, the idea of the Old Man’s speech as a statement verbatim from the poet. I wish to show that, prior to the last despairing lines, the play, read as a dramatic text, establishes real relations with the world it comes from. Those final lines are seen as a cry of despair from within the self-regulating modernist art-work, an appeal for release from the sovereignty of the text. If the source material for ‘Purgatory’ can be shown to have its roots in the disturbed soil of nineteenth- (and early twentieth-) century social change, we may turn to an examination of style in search of Yeats's transformative method.

A central passage from the Old Man's exposition reads:

Great people lived and died in this house;  
Magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament,  
Captains and Governors, and long ago  
Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne.  
Some that had gone on Government work  
To London or to India came home to die,  
Or came from London every spring  
To look at the may-blossom in the park.
The Old Man commends these great people and their relationship with the house; the offence he condemns most eloquently in his father is that ‘he killed the house ...’. For this passage we can find remarkable parallels in two sources. The first is in Yeats’s own voice, his ‘Commentary on “A Parnellite at Parnell’s Funeral”’:

The influence of the French Revolution woke the peasantry from the medieval sleep, gave them ideas of social justice and equality, but (p.380) prepared for a century disastrous to the national intellect. Instead of the Protestant Ascendency with its sense of responsibility, we had the Garrison, a political party of Protestant and Catholic landowners, merchants and officials. They loved the soil of Ireland; the returned Colonial Governor crossed the Channel to see the May flowers in his park, the merchant loved with an ardour, I have not met elsewhere, some sea-board town where he had made his money, or spent his youth, but they could give to a people they thought unfit for self-government, nothing but a condescending affection. They preferred frieze-coated humanists, dare-devils upon horseback, to ordinary men and women.17

Edmund Burke was our starting-point, and let us now briefly return to Burke. No passage from Yeats echoes the author of the Reflections more clearly than that quoted above; its rhythm integrates the particular and the abstract in a manner Burke would have approved. And the vocabulary of social distinction derives from Burke’s writings on Irish history. Yet here we must scrutinize Yeats closely: the terms are Burkean but their meanings have undergone a process of interchange which acknowledges (at least) the intervening century. Ascendancy and Garrison are, then, terms common to Burke and Yeats. In his letter of 1792 to Sir Hercules Langrishe, Burke employs ‘garrison’ to describe the role of the Protestant settlers prior to the constitutional reform of 1782; Britain, he claims,
saw that the disposition of the *leading part* of the nation would not permit them to act any longer the part of a *garrison*. She saw that true policy did not require that they ever should have appeared in that character; or if it had done so formerly, the reasons had now ceased to operate. She saw that the Irish of her race were resolved to build their constitution and their politics upon another bottom.\textsuperscript{18}

The garrison, for Burke was the means by which Ireland was held to the crown, before the reforms of 1782 granted a measure of equity in trade and liberty in law-making. At another level the garrison was the condition in which Ireland existed within the king’s dominions.

(\textit{p.381}) Burke’s garrison resented their condition: Yeats's, however, clung to theirs as the only means by which they might attach themselves to their lands. For Burke, garrison is Ireland before 1782; for Yeats it is Ireland after 1800. But if garrison is an older term than Yeats admitted, ‘ascendancy’ has the more exciting history. Coined in the 1790s, it was for Burke virtually the equivalent of junto or clique, and denominated the arrogant political undertakers of the College Green parliament:

New *ascendancy* is the old mastership. It is neither more nor less than the resolution of one set of people in Ireland to consider themselves as the sole citizens in the common wealth; and to keep adominion over the rest by reducing them to absolute slavery under a military power.\textsuperscript{19}

For Burke, ascendancy is jobs, for Yeats responsibility.
In the ‘Commentary on “A Parnellite at Parnell’s Funeral”’ Yeats is not writing history; so much is clear. He is perhaps engaged with one more of those antinomies which run through his imagination, wisdom against power, the wisdom of the old ‘national intellect’ at war with the new power of O’Connellite democracy. But the commentary, ostensibly upon ‘Parnell’s Funeral’, more explicitly is echoed in ‘Purgatory’—‘the returned Colonial Governor [who] crossed the Channel to see the May flowers in his park’ becoming ‘Some ... came from London every spring To look at the may-blossom in the park’, while the Governor retains his place in the play alongside magistrates, colonels, Members of Parliament. The most zealous literary metaphysician, whether sceptic or structuralist, could hardly deny the congruity of the two passages. And the tone of the commentary is as evidently not commending as the Old Man’s speech is commending. Here we have congruity and contradiction at once. It seems that if the speech is ‘certainly Yeats’s own voice’, we must find some higher authority for the prose commentary, or—better still—find some larger notion of the author’s relationship with his drama.

If we pass by ‘the Protestant Ascendency with its sense of responsibility’ we come to Yeats’s garrison, the political party of landowners, merchants, and officials. The tone here does not seem to hide any reserve of ambiguity. It is true that there is an element of wistful regret that the Ascendancy should have declined to such a condition; it is appreciated also that, unable to offer more than condescending affection to the population of Ireland, the merchants and governors loved its soil. And yet having taken these subordinate issues into account, we still find that Yeats sees these figures as smaller imaginations, diminished presences.
This transvaluation, occurring between the commentary and the play, is all the more remarkable when considered in the light of their common source. In her journal on 3 June 1922 Lady Gregory had written: ‘I have been out till after 9 oc. Everything is beautiful, one must stand to look at blossoming tree after tree; the thorns in the Park that W. used to come over from London to see at this time of year best of all’. Yeats, who visited Coole two days later, saw and remembered the entry. Donald Torchiana notes that Mrs Yeats felt sure the poet thought such trips of Sir William Gregory’s all too typical of Garrison irresponsibility and sentiment. The career of Sir William, some time governor of Ceylon and MP for Galway, is also that of the succession of proprietors invoked in ‘Purgatory’; his father having been permanent head of the Irish civil service in the 1820s, the contribution of officials is accommodated also. Yet the careers of these Gregories lie exclusively within the nineteenth century, after the Union, after the Ascendancy had given way to the Garrison.

‘Purgatory’ may well have been written with Coole Park in mind, but Yeats did not entirely transform his notion of Garrison irresponsibility into Ascendancy celebration. The text, approached carefully, can reveal its own mordant perspective upon the Great House.

Let us look closely at the play, in particular its recital of previous proprietors in the Great House— ‘magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament, / Captains and Governors’. Does Yeats have in mind here the Resident Magistrate of Somerville and Ross's stories, the well-meaning and vaguely comprehending Major Yeates? Almost certainly not. And yet the R.M. stories can serve to remind us that the magistracy was an institution of less than absolute dignity. Until the Whig reforms of the 1830s, it carried no salary, and its patronage was restricted to the resident gentlemen of a county. Through them, rights of property and a simplified jurisprudence were administered to the tenantry. Magistrates were not necessarily men of great substance, intellect or learning; William Le Fanu recalled a ‘stirring’ magistrate of the 1820s whose utter devotion to authority and partial grasp of literacy led him to begin all his reports ‘Dear Government …’. With the introduction of a stipendiary magistracy, the social base of the office was broadened and a less thoroughly Williamite interpretation of law admitted. Needless to say, the Garrison resented this development.
And so to the colonels. Defined by the dictionary as the superior officer of a regiment, the colonel was traditionally a man most immediately regarded as a soldier's leader, generals being unconnected to any one regiment. However, in the large number of civilians who retained the rank as an honorific, many were not the retired commanders of regular army regiments, but of county militias or yeomanry corps. Colonel Henry Bruen, the long serving MP for Carlow in the first half of the nineteenth century, was of this latter kind. Colonels, then, may be either the heroes of foreign battlefields or takers of the salute at local coat-trailing reviews.

This disrespectful analysis should be kept in perspective. It is not to the point to prove that Yeats's pantheon consisted simply of well-dressed rogues or impostors. What is significant, however, is that the magistrates and colonels are not necessarily ‘great people’ in any open, social sense. Being succeeded by

Some that had gone on Government work
To London or to India came home to die
Or came from London every spring
To look at the may-blossom in the park ...  

they are not excluded from Yeats's prosaic contempt for Garrison sentiment. Loving the land and condescending to the tenantry, nineteenth-century estate owners enacted in their emotions the precarious social relationships underlying property. Latter-day absenteeees, they were too marginally in possession to risk the open ridicule of Ireland which had characterized Maria Edgeworth's Clonbrony. In so far as ‘Purgatory’ is amenable to historical analysis—and we are certainly not restricted to such an approach—it reveals evidence of specifically nineteenth-century social patterns. Because Yeats has elsewhere spoken warmly of the eighteenth century, and because the Old Man of the play is taken literally as Yeats's oracle, the lines above are read as an objective (and yet Yeatsian!) eulogy of the ‘one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion’. Indeed darkness and confusion is the condition of ‘Purgatory’ as understood by the Old Man.

3. Metalanguage, Metadrama
If we turn for a moment to the structure of the play, some illustration of the nature of its modernist anxiety may emerge. I have said that, formally, the play employs Platonic and Swedenborgian concepts of ‘dreaming back’ or phantasmagoria to describe the experience of the dead. But ‘Purgatory’, far from serving to make accessible some ‘radical innocence’, actually reveals ineradicable guilt; there can be no end to the consequence upon themselves of the Bride and Groom’s *mesalliance*. This late admission of Yeats’s is central to the problematic nature of modernism with its enthusiasm for the self-delighting integrity of the literary text. However, aspirations to Renaissance completeness—the same enthusiasm in thematic guise—may be the best evidence of its unavailability. ‘Purgatory’ abandons such assumptions of integrity and self-completeness in the final lines where Plato and Swedenborg are cast aside:

    O God,
    Release my mother’s soul from its dream!
    Mankind can do no more. Appease
    The misery of the living and the remorse of the
dead.  

(*p.385*) The appeal to God is neither Yeats’s acceptance of theism nor the character’s surrender to established values. In these last lines ‘Purgatory’ is forced to appeal beyond itself for some order which will bring to an end, to completion, its intolerable self-generation. The modernist aesthetic finally reaches out in supplication from the isolation of the work of art to a world it had thought to apply itself to. The God of ‘Purgatory’ is blatantly not that of the churches, though it may have some affinity to Blake’s divinity. Maybe the appeal is directed to *us*, the audience to whom Prospero needs appeal at the conclusion of ‘The Tempest’ for release and meaning, the audience to whom Timon bequeathed his own wild and contradictory epitaphs. Such a self-consciously metadramatic device is in keeping with much of the play’s structure.
To suggest that the dominant metaphor of a work turns in upon itself may be to do nothing more than point to a pervasive irony. And irony is no exclusive property of modernism. But the particular manner in which ‘Purgatory’ implodes is not simply ironic: it employs devices closely identified with modernist technique—metalinguistic and metadramatic reference. To take metalinguistics first, we can begin by noting how the play draws attention to the verbal nature of its settings, implied and explicit. The Old Man’s speech gradually transforms the House into a human metaphor:

... he killed the house; to kill a house
Where great men grew up, married, died,
I here declare a capital offence.\(^23\)

This speech is the culminating focus of a movement away from larger perspectives (the theory of phantasmagoria, the social background of Bride and Groom), and the ruined house is directly available to the audience as man’s condition. However, within the speech, a further interiorization is already at work. ‘All The intricate passages of the house’ refers immediately to the complex architecture of the building known from within; it also posits a metaphorical \(^{(p.386)}\) interpretation according to which the house is a difficult text, its intricate passages obscure to our understanding. This metaphor is supported throughout the play not only by the Old Man’s initial command ‘Study that house, I think about its jokes and stories ...’ but also by the recurring references to his own incomplete education, his own limited ability to decipher what is before him. As the one who burnt the house he is the ‘author’ of its ruined condition. We call this delineation of the house metalinguistic because, within the verbal ordering of the play, it is further identified with other verbal constructs—‘what the butler said’, and

old books and books made fine
By eighteenth-century French binding, books
Modern and ancient, books by the ton.\(^24\)
This metalinguistic aspect of the play is—most people will agree—unobtrusive. It is part of the deception to which Harold Bloom ascribes the play's success. Certainly ‘Purgatory’s’ concentrated unity is in part due to the manner in which the setting and the text act mutually as tenor and vehicle one for the other. Yet this unity is also a form of radical division, for being so hermetically complete the play distinguishes itself drastically from all that it is not. As the Old Man creates the Great House by his speech, the play presents him as achieving Coriolanus' vain wish that a man be author of himself. Yet the House and the Tree stand radically apart from him and apart from each other. These, the primary elements of the setting, are at one and the same time static and mutually repelling. This congruence of unity and disunity can be traced in the texture of the play's style. A passage such as

It's louder now because he rides
   Upon a gravelled avenue
   All grass to-day.  

achieves its effect of drawing past and present, event and re-enactment, into a single image by the elision of the connective—'a gravelled avenue [that is] all grass to-day'. (p.387) Placing the two nouns together Yeats suggests their identity, and it would seem that style and content are at one. However, the conclusion of the play will reveal that this effect is appearance merely, and so we notice in addition that, though the two nouns are indeed brought together; they are held in tension, held reservedly apart by the line division:

   Upon a gravelled avenue
   All grass to-day.  

A refined tense exploitation of line-division indicates the poetic (as distinct from dramatic) text, and the use with it of what amounts to a dual syntax recurs in ‘Purgatory’; a further striking example is the elision of ‘should’ from the lines

   And if he [should] touch he must beget
   And you must bear his murderer.,  

and the corollary applies a few lines later:

   If I should throw
   A stick or a stone they would not hear ...

where the ‘should’ draws attention specifically to the subordinate role which the Old Man believes himself to have in the drama he is watching.

If, instead of looking within the Old Man's speeches, we look at the relationship between them and the Boy's contribution to the dialogue a very different aspect of ‘Purgatory’ comes to light. On several occasions early in the play, the Old Man continues his exposition across the interjection of the Boy's lines, as if the Boy did not exist. For example,

\[
\text{Old Man} \quad \text{The souls in Purgatory that come back} \\
\quad \text{To habitations and familiar spots.} \\
\text{Boy} \quad \text{Your wits are out again.} \\
\text{Old Man} \quad \text{Re-live} \\
\quad \text{Their transgressions, and that not once} \\
\quad \text{But many times.} \quad \text{28}
\]

Here, the commencement of the Old Man's second speech with a finite verb draws attention to the first and its grammatical incompleteness as a sentence. And yet the maintenance of a poetic line (rhythmically thus, ‘Your wits are out again. Re-live’) makes a formal acknowledgement of the Boy's perspective. We find a dichotomy between speech and action which is gradually both exposed and resolved by the murder of the Boy. Yet the killing only achieves a state of affairs which, in one stylistic respect, the Old Man had initially assumed. The circularity of ‘Purgatory’ is evident in its minutest stylistic details.

These features of the play take on a greater significance if we move on to its metadramatic dimensions. Just as the Old Man creates the setting by establishing its verbal nature, so he is involved in establishing the original sin of social \textit{mesalliance} as a drama whose performance he now perforce witnesses:

\[
\text{He has gone to the other side of the house,} \\
\text{Gone to the stable, put the horse up.} \\
\text{She has goned own to open the door.} \\
\text{This night she is no better than her man} \\
\text{And does not mind that he is half drunk,} \\
\text{She is mad about him. They mount the stairs.} \\
\text{She brings him into her own chamber.} \\
\text{And that is the marriage-chamber now.} \\
\text{The window is dimly lit again.}
\]

And later
The window is lit up because my father
Has come to find a glass for his whiskey.
He leans there like some tired beast.²⁹

For us, the Old Man makes accessible areas we cannot see; or, if we see certain scenes we cannot, without his commentary, interpret them. There are two levels of this original drama, or drama of origins. First, there is the historical marriage and mating of Bride and Groom, which reaches us through the Old Man's exposition. Second, there is the re-enactment in the soul of the Bride of her offence as she ‘dreams back’ (p.389) through the events of her life in search of peace or ‘radical innocence’; this reaches us by virtue of the Old Man's attendance as audience. By such elision of verbs as we have noted, the play places these two levels side by side: the Old Man watches at once the bridal night, his own conception, and the endless repetition of these offences in the dreaming back. The result is of course that he is more than the audience at the drama, he is an absent character in it:

Go fetch Tertullian: he and I
Will ravel all that problem out
Whilst those two lie upon the mattress
Begetting me.³⁰

The Old Man exists in a multiple dramatic relation. He is a character in the play we are watching; he is audience to Bride and Groom in their re-enactment, and he is also a character in the original drama. But further, he is the dramatizer of these wr-events; it is he who renders them drama by transmitting them to us in speech synchronized to their performance. He is, on this level, both dramatist and audience. His attendance before the Great House and the Tree is not accidental, but part of the script to which he repeatedly draws our attention, the House as ‘intricate passages’, as ‘Purgatory’.

4. The Fascist Charge

The stage shows the middle of a room.
A great ash-tree thrusts its branches through the roof. Downstage right is the hearth with, behind it, a store room.
Back centre the great entrance door ...
This is not the set for some avant-garde production of ‘Purgatory’ in which the familiar elements of the play's sparse design have been juggled about to achieve exciting notices in the theatrical press. It is the opening scene of Die Walkure, the second opera of Richard Wagner's mythological cycle Der (p. 390) Ring des Nibelungen. The elements are indeed similar—house and tree are crucial in each scene. But Wagner's tree merges with the roof, and its trunk is in effect the pillar upon which the house rests. Yeats, in stark contrast, separates the two elements, and places his characters between, as it were, the polar antagonism of Nature and Artefact.
I invoke Wagner because the issue of Yeats’s compact with fascism should be kept in perspective. As early as 1898 Shaw had elaborated an anti-capitalist interpretation of *The Ring* which, if it does nothing else, demonstrates the common idiom of German romanticism in Marx and Wagner. And it was Nietzsche, arch-romantic and bitter opponent of German militarism, who recognized Wagner as the author of the origin myths at the heart of the Second and (later) the Third Reich. These German allusions are not exotic: the movement in European culture which gives meaning to Gaelic revivalism, to the Victorian Irish gentry’s interest in philology, is German romanticism. (Synge’s predecessors include Zeuss and Windisch as well as O’Grady and O’Donovan.) We are mistaken if we accept nineteenth-century notions of history as biological science, and, as a consequence, literature as unreflective truth: this way lies the *Volk* and the burning of *Ulysses*. If interpretation is truly a critical relation between text and reader, we should acknowledge that, just as the text is a specific form of a social production (language), so the reader is a particular member and expression of a known culture. In the case of ‘Purgatory’ our reappraisal of the play’s historical nature is not some positivistic rebuke to Yeats. Far more important than any adjustments of our estimate of the poet as historian is a revitalized consciousness of our own historical predicament. The nadir of the Anglo-Irish elite in the Irish Free State found many expressions, the burnt-out house being the most celebrated. In that period it was appropriate to see ‘Purgatory’ in terms of that elite’s eighteenth-century heyday. In critical terms the play was read as a neo-classical elegy for neo-classicism. The philistine Victorian bourgeoisie excoriated by Yeats in his early (p.391) journalism was, by its own aesthetic, entitled to think of its past as aristocratic, noble, proud. But this should be distinguished from the habit of some present-day commentators of seeing pre-independent Ireland as the playground of belted earls and ‘droit de seigneur’. The need of senescent nationalism to conjure up an aristocratic past is rooted in its own bourgeois condition, a condition it shares with its alleged historical foe. ‘Purgatory’ therefore is now the focus of a critique directed at the romantic reading of history. Modernism as the culmination of romantic philosophy is its proper context.
In conclusion, some examination of key structures in
‘Purgatory’ may take place in the arena between philosophy
and literary technique. ‘Dreaming back’, the phantasmagoria
of Plato and Swedenborg, is symbolically integrated in the play
because it is Yeats's account of history. While the surface of
‘Purgatory’ emphasizes causality almost to the point of
obsession, the result is not an unambiguous view of history as
process: the metadramatic complexity of the Old Man ensures
that the successive events of history are also accessible
simultaneously, as events that lie side by side, complements
one of another. In this view of history we find an idealism
fraught with solipsistic anxiety; in this simultaneity we find a
preference for synchronic order at the expense of diachronic
logic. The Old Man of the play (not unlike figures in
Tennyson's dramatic monologues) is poised tensely upon a
penultimate moment. The play is eschatological in that it
attends to ‘the last things’, but its attendance can never quite
be transformed into presence, because in the presence of
those last things, speech, especially dramatic speech, is
inconceivable. The Old Man approaches the condition of
Cuchulain, but if tragedy is a joy to the dying hero, there is
neither joy nor death. In so far as he articulates a cynical
acceptance of his doom the Old Man retains a vestigial
heroism; however, if we permit ourselves to anticipate ‘The
Death of Cuchulain’ we are made aware of the drastic
distinction between Hero and Old Man which Yeats resorts to;
in his last play, the complexities of the Old Man's role, as
director of the play he announces, amount to formal cynicism.
The Yeatsian hero is finally permitted to (p.392) die, but the
price paid is acknowledged in terms of the text's cynical
rejection of its own form.
T. R. Henn has complained, mildly enough, that ‘Purgatory’ suffers perhaps ‘from the disadvantage that we must accept Yeats's theory that past actions are recreated by the dead in time’. But the phantasmagoria is more closely associated with Yeats's idealistic notion of history than this would suggest. Furthermore, the doctrine of purgatory is no theological donnee upon which the playwright may perform strictly limited variations. The soul in purgatorial fire experiences precisely the same frustration as the hero to whom death is elusive: both possess consciousness without vision, both must recoil from that which is longed for. If one were to translate this terminology into secular or classical allusion, one would see Yeats as concerned essentially with the daemonic. Romantic literature, Shelley as much as Goethe, has seen in the mediate condition of the daemon an image of the artist's attempt to transform material into method, and method into action.

Yeats's place in that tradition has long been recognized. Yet if we look more locally at the materials of his work as poet and playwright, we will find in the history of the Victorian Anglo-Irish elite a daemonic reading of their experience which is relevant to all those sources of ‘Purgatory’ we have examined. Before he discovered the method of art to be virtually the nature of language itself, J. M. Synge struggled to express this history in a play which he called ‘When the Moon Has Set’. Like the temporal dimension of ‘Purgatory’, the title of Synge's play acknowledges two potential movements neither of which is endorsed: neither greater darkness nor greater light. In one version of the play, Synge's alter ego comments: ‘I suppose it is a good thing that this aristocracy is dying out. They were neither human nor divine.’ It is a strictly inartistic line. Nevertheless it concentrates a historical reality with which Yeats had to struggle over many years. Only in ‘Purgatory’ did he exploit the daemonic as a metaphor for the distinctive sociology from which his work rose in an act of self-identification and reflection.
If, then, we distinguish sharply between Yeats's attention to the decline of Ireland's landed gentry and Wagner's role as celebrant of Teutonic assertiveness, may the accusation of fascism brought against the poet be at last dismissed? Certainly, since Conor Cruise O'Brien published his essay ‘Passion and Cunning’ in 1965, no account of Yeats's ideas has been able to avoid the topic. In the pre-war period, and no spectacular trial or incarceration concentrates the issues for us. An interest in Yeats's fascism, one might say, has its own historical locus and is not unrelated to the altering politics of Ireland from the mid-sixties onwards. The trouble has been that most accounts rely almost exclusively on Yeats's utterances about Mussolini, ‘modern heterogeneity’, and so on, without reference to questions of history and form. Yet history and form cannot be ignored as we turn to look at his own reported commentary on ‘Purgatory’.

The play was first performed at the Abbey Theatre on 10 August 1938 in the course of a Festival during which the directors of the theatre, speaking through Lennox Robinson, were anxious to stress the Abbey's national status and national preoccupations. Yeats participated in a discussion of his new play, and his comments to an interviewer were published in the Irish Independent of 13 August. Donald Torchiana has veryvaluably drawn attention to the importance of these comments for an interpretation of the play, though his re-publishing of the heart of the interview has not led many others to take it into consideration in assessing Yeats's politics. As reported by the paper Yeats declared:

allegory in ‘Purgatory’, nor, so far as I can remember, in anything I have written … William Blake said that allegory is made, not by inspiration, but by the daughters of memory. I agree, and have avoided it.

(p.394) Symbolism is another matter. There is symbolism in every work of art. A work of art moves us because it expresses or symbolizes some thing in ourselves or in the general life of men.
Father Connolly said that my plot is perfectly clear but that he does not understand my meaning. My plot is my meaning. I think the dead suffer remorse and re-create their old lives just as I have described. There are mediaeval Japanese plays about it, and much in the folklore of all countries.

In my play, a spirit suffers because of its share, when alive, in the destruction of an honoured house; that destruction is taking place all over Ireland today. Sometimes it is the result of poverty, but more often because a new individualistic generation has lost interest in the ancient sanctities.

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

In Germany there is special legislation to enable old families to go on living where their fathers lived. The problem is not Irish, but European, though it is perhaps more acute here than elsewhere.  

[35]
Yeats postulates three means by which houses have been destroyed. The first of these is poverty, upon which he has nothing further to say, not even to the effect that this poverty must inevitably have constituted a reverse of fortune in a family possessing such a house. The second, perhaps incorporating the first, is public sale, or sale at least conducted without apparent regret or reservation. ‘Old’ is now repeatedly emphasized as if to achieve an antiquity which is otherwise unreliable. When we recall the uncertain scale of the Irish ‘Big House’, the recent emergence of ‘the Protestant Ascendancy’, and the essentially Victorian sub-text of allusion in the play, this emphasis is noteworthy. It may be that Yeats had in mind the destruction of Coole Park after Lady Gregory’s death: if this was so, then the house’s origins (p.395) in mercantile profits from the East India Company should be noted also. But if sale—whether reluctant or otherwise—unquestionably results in destruction of the house—whether old or not so old—we should note Yeats’s assumption that the house and the family are virtually identical, are metaphor one of the other. The transmission of the house by sale, even if it is to another family or another owner, does not count. This assumption is all the more significant when we come to the third means of destruction—mesalliance—for the second has already been infused with the notion of house and family as one flesh, as sacramentally a blessed union. It is not enough to say, as Dr Cullingford proposes as a general thesis, that in such matters Yeats follows Burke rather than Mussolini or Hitler—between 1791 and 1938 the whole ideology of a bonding between blood and place (Lebensraum) had taken on different overtones. Mesalliance is a prejudicial term which fails to announce precisely what it is prejudiced against—class inferiority, ‘racial’ difference, sectarian difference. To see that the term has ambiguous force even today in Irish affairs one has only to consult Brian Friel’s significantly titled play, *Translations*:

Do you know the Greek word *endogamein*? It means to marry within the tribe. And the word *exogamein* means to marry outside the tribe. And you don’t cross those borders casually—both sides get very angry. Now, the problem is this: Is Athene sufficiently mortal or am I sufficiently godlike for the marriage to be acceptable to her people and to my people?
To a degree which he has perhaps not recognized the speaker is an endogamist, and the entire cultural tension between Synge's 'When the Moon Has Set' and Yeats's 'Purgatory' is the tension between an exposition of exogamy within a sectarian culture and a dramatization of the consequences of such exogamy in a setting which has masked its sectarian ideology.

Mesalliance is a prejudicial term then, and no universal equation of mesalliance and destruction can stand without (p. 396) the vigorous implementation of that prejudicial element. In the play the mesalliance is ostensibly one of class, allied to moral habits (drunkenness etc.) not unknown among all classes. But in the draft of the play, sectarian mesalliance had been admitted: vestigially it survives in the Old Man's reference to learning Latin from the Catholic curate. The suppression of that sectarian reference leads in the Irish Independent commentary to Yeats's decision to found his play on the exceptional case, partly because of his interest in eugenics. The biological concept of race, of selective breeding, replaces that of sectarianism, while at the same time retaining a strong element of class-hatred. The mesalliance of 'Purgatory' can never be specified purely in terms of race or class, because the repressed ideology of sectarianism vitiates these alternatives. And if the parentage of the Boy accidentally recalls the parentage attributed to John Giffard, the Dog-in-Office, then we can posit Protestant Ascendancy as an absent meaning of 'Purgatory', and acknowledge too that nothing is accidental in Yeats's philosophy of history. Yeats's own marriage to an Englishwoman provided him with the material for a passionate concentration on his own alienation from the Irish linguistic past.
Elizabeth Cullingford finds Yeats not guilty of fascism, but her neglect of all discussion of what fascism is and was renders the acquittal doubtful. Grattan Freyer disagrees and significantly describes Yeats's political place in ‘the anti-democratic tradition’.

Both Cullingford and Freyer are silent on ‘Purgatory’ and ignore the Irish Independent interview which Torchiana had made available fifteen years earlier. The essays in On the Boiler which were excluded from Explorations when Mrs Yeats was overseeing the publication of an interim collected works certainly provide additional evidence of Yeats's strongly authoritarian opinions—and ‘Purgatory’ was first published in On the Boiler. There is, however, a far more accessible statement of Yeats’s political position in the late 1930s, in the final paragraph of ‘A General Introduction for my Work’:

When I stand upon O'Connell Bridge in the half-light and notice that discordant architecture, all those electric signs, where modern heterogeneity has taken physical form, a vague hatred comes upon out of my own dark and I am certain that wherever in Europe there are minds strong enough to lead others the same vague hatred rises. In four or five or in less generations this hatred will have issued in violence and imposed some kind of rule of kindred. I cannot know the nature of that rule, for its opposite fills the light; all I can do to bring it nearer is to intensify my hatred.
The passage deserves comparison to the interview: in both Yeats shifts his ground. To the *Irish Independent*, he said that ‘the problem is not Irish, but European, though it is perhaps more acute here than elsewhere.’ In the introduction, he identifies his hatred with that of European strong minds whose ultimate rule he cannot know because its opposite now fills the light, or half-light, in Ireland, now. If Yeats approved fascism because he disliked de Valera, fascism is not thereby abated in its ‘vague hatred’. But it is pointless to seek explicit endorsements of Mussolini or the Nazis in the manner of Ezra Pound: Yeats's involvement in fascism is a projection of certain latent developments in his inheritance of Protestant Ascendancy, a projection which is necessarily distorted and contradictory, but also for those reasons, valid. That is, his political judgements contain a revelation of the objective of their subject, even at the expense of consistency. This is not to say that Protestant Ascendancy was protofascist, but rather to identify the manner in which Yeats imaginatively enacts the connections and disconnections between that Irish ideology within the United Kingdom and the broader European movement of fascism.
The shifts on ground are therefore symptomatic. We concentrate on style here for a variety of reasons. (It is 13 August 1938, Germany mobilized for the invasion of Czechoslovakia on 12 August, Yeats is interested in eugenics and Nazi legislation.) We have found a revealing intimacy between style and substance in Yeats, even when that intimacy was violent. The sentence concerning old families in Germany certainly approved the Nazi attitude to inheritance and blood continuity in the sense that it proves its presence in Yeats's mind. And a great deal of Yeats went further than such strict approving. Yet the style of the sentence is helpful: 'to go on living' is one of those club-footed phrases we find in Yeats when he is shuffling round uncertain topics. The Yeatsian 'ancient sanctities' cannot be legislated into the future, nor can Cuchulain be 'enabled' to survive. This rhythmical betrayal of the cause is not to be taken as the poet's innocence, evidence that he never really knew what he was doing in his fascism. On the contrary it is proof of his perception of the spurious nature of fascist aristocracy, Hitlerian authority. Thus, it is not enough to say that he saw through fascism: there is the permanent suspicion that he would have been prepared to see it through, had he lived. His point of perspective, however, was O'Connell Bridge, rather than the bridge of sighs.

The editor of 'A General Introduction' annotates the final paragraph with a quotation from the 1930 'Pages from a Diary'—'tradition is kindred.' The modernist valorization of tradition is part and parcel of the susceptibility to extreme right-wing politics which affected Yeats, Eliot, and Pound. As a barrier between history and the Now, tradition facilitated the rewriting of literature in terms of order and the transmission of power. In 'Pages from a Diary' the guts of the matter are displayed without affectation; that preference of genealogy over historical genesis, of biology and over-determined blood-relationship over social dynamics, is one statement of the fascist longing to resolve all contradictions in a single conflagration. The intellectual sources of Yeats's fascist loyalties may be various, but the ideology of Protestant Ascendancy anticipated in certain restricted circumstances several of these preferences.
The noble past invoked in ‘Purgatory’ is revealed by the play to be in part bogus. The manner in which sources for the play may be traced in Yeats's prose allows the reader to document the poet's stylistic transformation of an unclear Irish bourgeois history into the permanence of aristocratic value. Yet the play insists on permanence as process, process as permanence, and it sends its audience once more in quest of release to history—the text's dramatic context, its theatrical occasion (together with the internal emphasis on metadrama), is in this respect crucial in liberating ‘Purgatory’ from the charge of aesthetizing ritual murder. That Yeats's prose, drama, and poetry incorporate such evidence is a mark of his artistic greatness, of his integrity. No one who has ignored the authentic dramatization of his inauthentic tradition in ‘Purgatory’ may easily point the finger at Yeats as fascist. Just as Joyce's therapeutic fictions establish him as a critical modernist, in that his work contains a critique of modernist aesthetics, so we may say of Yeats's political dramas that they constitute a critical fascism. Beyond that, of course, it is necessary to add that the active reader's reception contributes to and modifies and (potentially) transforms any such essentialist definition of the work's meaning.

Notes:


(3) Ibid.


On ‘Purgatory’


(8) op. cit.


(10) *Irish Times* ibid.


(14) op. cit.


(22) Ibid.

(23) Ibid.

(24) Ibid

(25) Ibid.
On ‘Purgatory’

(26) Ibid.

(27) Ibid.

(28) Ibid.

(29) Ibid.

(30) Ibid.

(31) G. B. Shaw, The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Ring of the Nibelings (London, 1898)


(35) Torchiana, op. cit., pp. 357–8, was the first to publish this material, which is also included in A. Norman Jeffares and A. S. Knowland, A Commentary on the Collected Plays of W. B. Yeats (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 275. For the original interview and some related material see Irish Independent, 13 August 1938, p. 9.


(39) On the Boilerop. cit.

(41) *Irish Independent*, 13 August 1938, p. 9; see n. 35, above.

(42) Callan, ed., *Yeats on Yeats*, p. 73.