Cyclical Violence

The Irish Insurrection and the Limits of Enchantment

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter takes as its scope the substantial canon of Irish literature in the first decades of the twentieth century that engaged intimately with violence. It argues that the expression of violence can be understood according to four categories, each of which the chapter develops with respect to a host of writers, whose styles and political positions are widely divergent. The categories are not entirely parallel in structure, but together provide a capacious picture of the language of violence in the period: keening (or ritual lamentation), generative violence (the mode of the Rising), reprisal (the dark doppelganger of generativity), and allegory (in which the nation or body is likened to a tree or building). In tracing these four modes, the chapter invites a loosening of the ordinary political binaries that characterize criticism of this period. Prominent figures include, for keening, Synge and O’Casey; for generative violence, Synge, Yeats, Pearse, and other leaders of the Rising such as Plunkett and MacDonough; for reprisal, Mitchel, Yeats, Synge, and O’Casey; and for allegory, Yeats. Ultimately, the chapter charts an entirely new scheme for reading the violence canon in this period, attuned to the historical shifts eventuated by uprising, war and the institution of the nation state.

Keywords: Irish Rising of 1916, generative violence, keening, Civil War, reprisal, allegory, William Butler Yeats, Easter 1916, J. M. Synge, Padraig Pearse, Sean O’Casey
... the more costly the life-generating processes are, the more squander the production of organisms has required, the more satisfactory the operation is ... The movement of human life even tends toward anguish, as the sign of expenditures that are finally excessive, that go beyond what we can bear. Everything within us demands that death lay waste to us.[\]

—Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share*¹

Revolutions are incubators of symbolic language. They incite dreams and demand hyperbole; they fictionalize beginnings and project futures; above all, they wrench from violence an abundant cultural value. The Irish Rising of 1916, perhaps more than any other event of the modernist period, conjoined violent political conditions with prolific literary imagining.² The language that surrounded it was steeped in imagery of blood sacrifice, and its combined aura of tragedy and triumph invited symbolic interpretation in its own day and for subsequent generations, within just a few years generating a story of national beginnings that was seared into the public consciousness. Indeed, the insurrection was understood and presented, at every level, in a metaphoric language, which stressed apotheosis, resurrection, and transformation. Decades of romantic, nationalist writing preceded and prepared for it to be read in such terms, its leaders deliberately chose Easter Monday as the starting point, the young poets who helped to lead the insurrection presciently invited their own transformation into martyrs, and even its moniker, “the Rising,” suggested its symbolic essence. It is thus not surprising that the canonical literary (p.132) work of the Rising, Yeats’s poem “Easter 1916,” scrutinizes the process of making revolutionary violence into the aesthetic. With the repeated phrase “All changed, changed utterly: /A terrible beauty is born,” Yeats created an especially deft and gorgeous framing for a nearly ubiquitous idea in the period, that in the cauldron of the insurgency, historical violence had forged something arresting and important, in both cultural and aesthetic terms. (As Maude Gonne described the rebels, “they have raised the Irish cause again to a position of tragic dignity.”³) With the marginalized rebellion of anarchism, literary form expressed a divergence between insurrectionist actors and their publics; in the Ireland of the Rising, by contrast, literary form found an almost exquisite match between its own processes and a readership in sympathy with its metaphors.
Nowhere, it would seem, was the enchantment of violence more available as an imaginative model than in Irish writing of these years. With the fever of self-sacrificial violence running high, and in a culture where the Christian comparison provided easy resonance, the enchantment motif was almost inevitable. Again, “Easter 1916,” which was written in the several months that followed Easter week, projects its mood with precision: “Hearts with one purpose alone/Through summer and winter seem/Enchanted to a stone/To trouble the living stream,” Yeats wrote. The “trouble” for Yeats is not only about hearts—not only that “too long a sacrifice/Can make a stone of the heart,” a vexing concern as he interacted with some feverishly devoted nationalists—but about enchantment. What are its consequences, as a cultural formula, as a convention for representing violence, as, in these months after the Rising, near doctrine for nationalists? In the last stanza of the poem, Yeats refutes the relentless tendency to metaphorize and sacralize violent death, answering the enchanting question “What is it but nightfall?” with the disenchanting, “No, no, not night but death.” Perhaps it was this refusal, alongside his ambivalent treatment of the insurrectionists (such as John McBride), that irked Gonne, ever the enchanter of violence; she bluntly declared in a letter, “No I don’t like your poem, it isn’t worthy of you & above all it isn’t worthy of the subject.”

Enchantment provides the gravitational pull for much Irish literature of these years; it seems to define the aura of the period. As we have seen, however, at the level of aesthetic form and content, enchantment and disenchantment almost always find a way to stain one another. Moreover, the aesthetics of the revolution developed from a broader constellation of effects than the dis/enchantment model alone suggests. Critics of Irish literature have overwhelmingly focused on the generative violence theme when discussing the literary culture of the Rising period, and, in the case of Yeats, have tended to view his presentation of violence through the lens of his politics (construed and valued in highly dichotomous terms, as I will (p.133) discuss later in this chapter). One central intervention I want to make in considering the language of violence in the Irish revolutionary moment, in contrast, is to argue that generative violence was only one among a series of powerful, often interlocking, and in some cases deeply contradictory paradigms for imagining violence. To read Yeats and his contemporaries as expressing a developing series of imaginative constructs around violence—in concert with the changing political situation and introducing energizing formal consequences—is to eliminate the cumbersome questions of for or against, pro or anti, radical or conservative (in relation to the developing nation, Britain, the Protestant Ascendancy, the middle classes) that have occupied scholarship in this area. Ripping right through the center of the imaginative life of this period were a host of shattering events, and to read the literature of this period in dialectical and active relationship to those realities helps to show how fully violence can lodge as the crux and pivot of the literary work, or the author’s career, or the aesthetic unconscious of a period. There is, in this situation, no final resting point or culmination, as there is, really, no beginning; instead, at each stage, literary works recognize their own temporal tentativeness, as well as their own limitations (a sense of obsolescence, the fear of contributing to the cycle of violence, a beauty that lulls where it should provoke), as they nevertheless push restlessly forward into an uncertain future.
In addition to enchantment, the three other dominant paradigms by which violence was conceived and formalized are these: “keening,” the Irish term for ritual forms of mourning, traditionally (though not exclusively) the province of women; reprisal, the dark doppelgänger of generative violence, a model of endless, unredeemable violence that became intensely pertinent in the period of the Anglo-Irish and civil wars that followed the Rising; and lastly, a turn to architectural allegory, where the image of destroyed houses and landscapes is asked to take the burden, as sign and symbol of violence, from the beleaguered body. As we have seen elsewhere in this study, the motivation to employ allegory as a container for violent histories or events is betrayed by its content, which corrodes the differentiating walls on which the form relies. Its usage in this period in Ireland is often partial, as well as collapsible, yet the slow movement in the direction of representative buildings does promise a way out of the reprisal vortex, with its feverishly disenchanted understanding of violence. We might, schematizing slightly, describe the progression this way: the core problems surrounding violence throughout the independence period were understood and filtered through the opposing possibilities of generative versus reprisal violence. In the years of war, the generative ideal was all but swallowed into the reprisal cycle, and facing this crisis, writers often envisioned one of two imaginative releases, the healing rituals of keening or the focus (p.134) on representative buildings, which are asked to carry heavy metaphoric burdens. The burdens are, indeed, enormous; the incarnational destiny of this material in the end will overtake whatever balanced literary resolution it might have invited.
In part, what I trace in these modes—various in style and not exactly parallel as categories—is a development, changing through time and partially conforming to the shifting revolutionary situations of the period. My discussion of keening is set primarily in the pre-1916 years, as the culture adapted itself, as it had for a century, to its tragic past and looked ahead to the potential cataclysm of violence that a war of independence against England might portend. Keening is not itself a structure of representing violence but a cluster of traditions for articulating a response to its ravages. Generative violence was the mode of the Rising itself: the moment in April 1916 when a small band of nationalists, leading their modestly numbered citizen militias, rose against the British and occupied Dublin, to be defeated at the end of the week, its sixteen leaders executed shortly thereafter. Technically a defeat, the Rising represented (and still represents) the symbolic origin for modern Ireland. As for reprisal, not surprisingly, its thematics drive the literary output of the years that followed the Rising when, the First World War now over, Ireland fought its more concerted independence struggle against England, followed by the Civil War of 1922–23. In both of these conflicts, targeted reprisal killings became the norm. My concluding section on landscape and architectural allegory begins in the Civil War period and pushes forward into the indefinite future of the young nation. In that sense, the discussion here lines up with the culmination of the dynamite story in the previous chapter, where the forecasting of terrorist potential into the future recalibrated the assumptions about what such explosion might mean, how it can be imagined. The representative building becomes a holder for a variety of harsh partisan and sectarian positions, yet it also projects out from the moment of bodily harm into a wider and longer panorama.

I will discuss a range of voices over the course of this analysis. Organized thematically and historically rather than by author, the chapter invites voices to return and recur in different contexts and gives a sense, I hope, that what is at stake is less any specific writer’s stance than a set of patterns and changes in the conception of literary violence across the culture. Yeats is central to the whole discussion, his extensive corpus of works on violence providing an ever-mutating body of imagery and expression over a nearly forty-year period. Pádraig Pearse, the dominant writer of the Rising, also plays a critical role, especially in defining the terms for the ideal of generative violence. Over the course of the chapter, I will also discuss other influential figures from earlier in the nineteenth century, such as John Mitchel; leaders of the Easter rebellion (next to Pearse) like Thomas MacDonagh and Joseph Mary Plunkett; and literary figures like J. M. Synge and Sean O’Casey, who, along with Yeats, helped to create a lasting aesthetics for a foundational era in Irish literary consciousness. It is a very masculine corpus, despite the significant presence of such figures as Augusta Gregory, and this is not incidental; much in the violent language of the time reverberated in terms of a resurgent anticolonial power, and this often took a marked gender turn.
This material, moreover, shares with other major engagements with violence in the modernist period an essential reckoning with the idea of excess; here, the notable structure is one we might call an “economy of excess.” In this scheme, it is giving, rather than accumulating, that represents wealth, and richness is demonstrated through neglect. The model is Dionysian rather than Apollonian; it welcomes lavishness and waste rather than frugality. Highly evocative for much of the language surrounding the insurrection, such an emphasis might also be couched in the terms enunciated by Bataille in his eclectic study of culture *The Accursed Share* (1967), from which I have taken my epigraph. What characterizes the “play of energy on the surface of the globe,” according to Bataille, is not equivalence or balance, but the need to spend “gloriously or catastrophically,” an expenditure and display that represents cultural accomplishment (Bataille, v.1, 21). In “September 1913” and elsewhere (*Where There is Nothing, The Unicorn from the Stars, “Poetry and Tradition“*) Yeats made some of these motifs canonical:

Yet they were of a different kind,  
The names that stilled your childish play,  
They have gone about the world like wind,  
But little time had they to pray  
For whom the hangman’s rope was spun,  
And what, God help us, could they save?  
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,  
It’s with O’Leary in the grave. (Var, 289)

For Yeats in “September 1913,” the profligate giving of one’s very essence in the suspended Irish cause—“all that delirium of the brave”—emblematized a romantic nationalism that had become all the more valuable for its being “dead and gone.” Contrasting the givers of the past, who had little time to pray, with a mean and niggardly modern “you,” who “fumble in a greasy till” and add “prayer to shivering prayer,” he establishes a decisive image of value as waste: “They weighed so lightly what they gave.” For Yeats, such selflessness is associated with the aristocracy, with the Fenian journalist John O’Leary who was his political mentor, and later with Lady Gregory’s son Robert, killed in the First World War. In these *associations*, he was idiosyncratic, but he stands on conventional ground when he evokes Edward Fitzgerald, Wolfe Tone, and Robert Emmet, those earlier heroes who “stilled your childish play” (Var, 289–90).
“September 1913,” indeed, articulates a notion of reckless giving that had been gathering force in Ireland for over a century (though in England only more recently). Tone himself, not one for extended figures of speech, characterized that majority of English people who opposed the French Revolution as being like “merchants,” calculating loss and benefit, while the Irish had an abundance of sympathy that could make them recklessly loyal. Their alliance with the revolution was natural, in Tone’s view; being “oppressed, insulted, and plundered,” they could, in a sense, only give. John Mitchel, one of the most radical of the nineteenth-century nationalists, carried on this tradition, deriding England (the oppressor) for being mercantile, while rebellious France (Ireland’s friend) “recognises a higher national life … than mere trading. France mints the circulating medium of thoughts and noble passions.” And for Pearse, it was “excess of love”—his ideal of national affect, and a phrase Yeats borrowed in “Easter 1916”—that best conveys this sense of abundance: “A love and a service so excessive as to annihilate all thought of self, a recognition that one must give all, must be willing always to make the ultimate sacrifice.”

“Giving, giving, giving, she had died,” thinks Lily Briscoe of Mrs. Ramsay in Woolf’s To the Lighthouse (1927) and it is really only the tone—bitter rather than ebullient—that separates her assessment of domestic, female selflessness from a masculine heroics that had permeated the Irish imagination for decades. This male economy of excess held exalting connotations of flight and martyrdom, but also, to return to Bataille, invoked the inexorable and contrasting demand that “death lay waste to us.”

The Long Past: Keening
What would war or revolution be without its language of mourning? As cultural historians have shown, the literary forms that surround mourning (elegy, ode, recitation, even epic) represent active ways for individuals and communities to engage with histories of violence, whether recent or long past. Like all major poetic forms, elegy and its counterparts have traditionally been the province of men, and yet Western culture for millennia has afforded to women the more general role of mourners. The Iliad may lavishly describe Achilles’s grief at Patroclus’s death, but the epic ends with three women’s laments, evoking a tradition that, classicists tell us, predated Homer by centuries. Mothers, above all, have the prerogative in mourning. As Nicole Loraux explains, rooting these traditions in the ancient prototypes, “from epic on, the mother is the one whose grief, suddenly expressed, gives the signal of social mourning.”

In the twentieth century, images of mourning women and mothers have had tremendous cultural life, often extending from the prime mourner, the mother, into the broader family circle, as with the globally ubiquitous images of mothers holding up photographs of dead sons for the world’s cameras. These are pietàs for a secular culture; they image the grief of the mother in religious but also in generalizing terms, a lament, in the final instance, for all humanity. As Jay Winter writes of the sculptor Käthe Kollwitz’s memorial to her son, killed at the front in 1914, “At Roggevelde [Belgium, where the memorial is situated], on their knees, Käthe and Karl Kollwitz suggest a family which includes us all; and that may be precisely what she had in mind. The most intimate here is also the most universal.” At points of national combustion especially, such as war or revolution, representations of lamenting women and families carry extra weight. The stoic female mourner, proud of her dead son and continuing to believe in the cause for which he was killed, can function as a bridge from personal loss to national gain. Or the reverse: angry, embittered, and all but destroyed by grief, she threatens the status quo, becoming a lightning rod for protest.
In Ireland, there is a rich and lovely term for the rituals of lamentation: the keen. Keening may not offer a form for representing violence, but it does register a performative language that responds vigorously and lushly to death. Keening was figured as a deeply rooted part of the Irish emotional and ritual being, a response to a tragic national history whose most poignant losses included the victims of famine in the nineteenth century, the martyrs (Tone, Emmet, and others), and, more generally, the nation’s own life, in need of symbolic mourning after centuries of occupation and economic hardship. With its ties to the national history, keening gestures toward a probably violent future; ritualizing violence in the past, it prepares for more trials to come. For J. M. Synge, the most powerful and moving exponent of ritual mourning in this period, keening performs a grief that emanates from the deepest place in the national consciousness. Thus he locates its essential presence in the far west of Ireland, especially on the Aran Islands, where Synge believed there resided a raw, primal Irish spirit. Synge took several visits to the Aran Islands, residing with a local family; he chronicled his time there in book form, and from it he derived the material for several of his most famous plays, including *The Shadow of the Glen* (1903), *Riders to the Sea* (1903), and some aspects of *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). At the end of the nineteenth century, there was little visible sense of the British presence in places like the Aran Islands—the omnipresence of the Gaelic language being the most overt manifestation of this cultural impregnability—and representations of the Islanders tended to stress not only their primitivism but their de facto freedom from the colonial condition and British influence.

Synge’s romanticism about the Aran Islands is especially lavish in his description of the islands’ keening women. He observes a funeral procession:

While the grave was being opened the women sat down among the flat tombstones, bordered with a pale fringe of early bracken, and began the wild keen, or crying for the dead. Each old woman, as she took her turn in the leading recitative, seemed possessed for the moment with a profound ecstasy of grief, swaying to and fro, and bending her forehead to the stone before her, while she called out to the dead with a perpetually recurring chant of sobs.

... This grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In this cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas. They are usually silent, but in the presence of death all outward show of indifference or patience is forgotten, and they shriek with pitiable despair before the horror of the fate to which they are all doomed.
When Synge takes up the ethnographer’s position, his tendency is to see in the Aran Islanders a place-bound consciousness; they are molded by their geography of island isolation—“winds and seas.” His interest in their rituals also bends him the other way, however, so that they come to incarnate something universally ancient. The women “possessed … with a profound ecstasy of grief” recall the priestesses of Delphi, or medieval women mystics; they harbor a kind of old European memory—perhaps Eliot would find in them “tradition”—of the deepest pain. Like Kollwitz’s sculptures, these women are at once very local representatives and vivid symbols of women’s passionate grieving across time and space. Their grief is both bruisingly local and expansively extensive. Synge notes, too, that such attributes can be accommodated, even updated, as exigencies demand, so that, for instance, at a second funeral he attends, this one of a young man, “the keen lost part of its formal nature, and was recited as the expression of intense personal grief by the young men and women of the man’s own family” (AI, 134).

(p.139) For Synge, grieving seems to define the inhabitants of the west of Ireland, and this quality of ongoing lamentation has consequences; in Riders to the Sea, also set in the Aran Islands, whole generations are lost, and it is the mother who is left to keen them. In the final lines of the play, the mother Maurya offers, in Christian terms, a version of universal keening:

They’re all together this time, and the end is come. May the Almighty God have mercy on Bartley’s soul, and on Michael’s soul, and on the souls of Sheamus and Patch, and Stephen and Shawn [bending her head] … and may He have mercy on my soul, Nora, and on the soul of everyone is left living in the world. [She pauses, and the keen rises a little more loudly from the women, then sinks away. Continuing] Michael has a clean burial in the far north, by the grace of the Almighty God. Bartley will have a fine coffin out of the white boards, and a deep grave surely … What more can we want than that? … No man at all can be living for ever, and we must be satisfied.²²

There is a substantial distinction to be made between the wild ritual keening of the women in The Aran Islands and this figuration of Christian resignation. Maurya is a figure for submission and futility; she bends her head and is satisfied.
Not everyone wanted to keep up the keen. Yeats’s *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), the most famous of the early-twentieth-century Irish plays (then and now) to represent the drama of rebellion in pointedly allegorical terms, takes an oppositional attitude toward mourning and fighting. Yeats’s political allegory in *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is direct and continuous throughout the play, with Cathleen wandering the roads asking for young men to join in her defense, expel the usurpers from her lands, fight for her, and give up their lives and families for the cause. For Yeats, moreover, the feminization of Ireland in the person of Cathleen, now aged but once goddesslike in her loveliness (and played by Gonne in the initial Abbey production), invokes a different gender association from Synge’s portrayal of the national mother. Over and over, in the nationalist literature of the period, the call is for manliness—defined in part in terms of self-denying profligacy or “delirium of the brave”—and one form such masculinity takes is the refusal of mourning. Earlier in the nineteenth century, the Young Ireland movement (in many ways a precursor of twentieth-century nationalism), with its strong cultural-nationalist program, had begun to distance its revolutionary spirit from the keening mode that characterized many traditional songs and ballads. Thomas Davis, the leader of Young Ireland, championed the development of a new ballad tradition that would move away from the “despairing” tone of the past, injecting a more robustly masculine tone into the national poetry. Yeats’s Cathleen, in calling for young men to join in her defense and leave behind their wives and families, keeps to the Davis line, and makes a staunch case against keening:

Do not make a great keening
When the graves have been dug to-morrow.
Do not call the white-scarfed riders
To the buying that shall be to-morrow.
Do not spread food to call strangers
To the wakes that shall be to-morrow;
Do not give money for prayers
For the dead that shall die to-morrow...

They will have no need of prayers, they will have no need of prayers. (ellipses in original)

The premise of these lines is clear: in times of war and rebellion, the performance of women’s mourning is expected, with all its rituals and formalities, yet it must be resisted. Cathleen calls for a break with the past, and for substituting one kind of national spirit (defiant, self-sacrificial) for another (the ancient prototype of Irish mournfulness).
For Pearse, by contrast, keening is an important part of the revolutionary moment (indeed, he has a story entitled “The Keening Woman”).\textsuperscript{25} It is only natural, he will repeatedly suggest, that Ireland’s mothers be encouraged in their ancient role as keeners, even as they are exhorted to send their young men out to die.\textsuperscript{26} Most histrionic as an account of the nationalist potential of keening is \textit{The Singer}, a play written in 1915 (never performed in Pearse’s lifetime, but published soon after, in a 1917 Dublin collection of his works) that anticipates the martyrrology of the Rising in precise terms. The protagonist MacDara is a virtual incarnation of the singer persona romanticized by the ballad movement of the nineteenth century. What is more, by the end of the play he has become nothing less than a figure for Christ. “One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world,” he declares as he heads out to fight the British single-handedly, “I will take no pike, I will go into the battle with bare hands. I will stand up before the Gall [foreigner] as Christ hung naked before men on the tree!”\textsuperscript{27} MacDara is an outsized male hero, who is joined in the play’s martyrrology by his equally brave and reckless young brother, who also goes out unaided to die at the hands of the English.

But it is the women who in some sense most acutely mark \textit{The Singer}. They are keeners with a cause; their role is simultaneously to encourage and to mourn. “I am proud ... to think of so many young men,” says the reverential Sighle, MacDara’s (p.141) beloved, who knows she will be a widow even before they have been wed, “young men with straight, strong limbs, and smooth, white flesh, going out into great peril because a voice has called to them to right the wrong of the people” (\textit{PSP}, 10). Flesh, I have suggested, makes its presence uncomfortably felt at moments of enchanted violence; Sighle’s language here, though offered as a statement of awed support for those adored limbs, is perhaps too embodied, too full of desire. The life of those bodies is real and appealing, and it cannot be fully sated by the consolations of martyrdom. But Maire, MacDara’s mother, inhabits her position to perfection, calling on her fellow women to embrace their role as incipient mourners: “Weave your winding-sheets, women,” she exhorts, “for there will be many a noble corpse to be waked before the new moon!” (\textit{PSP}, 42). If Yeats’s Cathleen had dismissed mourning as counter to the cause, Pearse jubilantly celebrates it. Maire, like many mothers in his works, glories in her sorrow. To weave the winding sheets, for her, is one of the women’s primary contributions to the national cause and an act of bravery. That these woven sheets also suggest written pages is unsurprising; language, ritual, and voice are conjoined in these active mourning performances.
Keening as nationalist courage, or as resignation, or as an age-old expression of Irishness—all of these are important functions, especially in the anticipatory moment, and there is yet one more possibility, that keening offers a language for shared suffering that cuts across political lines and intimates the possibility of change. Not surprisingly, this alternative construct arises in a war-weary later stage of the national history. Here the most explicit enunciation comes from Sean O’Casey, who wrote his blistering dramas primarily during the years of the Anglo-Irish and Civil wars. His denunciation of all ideological certitudes and his suspicion of writers like Pearse, who breathed the air of nationalism and embodied its principles with romantic effusiveness, was as central to his work as was his focus on the crowded, working-class neighborhoods of Dublin. Perhaps it is this skepticism about the guiding psychic mechanisms underpinning political belief, alongside a sturdy refusal to treat either the rural Irish or mythological themes, that has made O’Casey unpopular among critics. In his most canonical work, *Juno and the Paycock* (written in 1924 and set in 1922), a scathing and ironical drama about a family’s implosion, keening cuts through the play like a knife. Where all other conventions around death and nationalism are ruthlessly pinioned, women’s lamentation offers something admirable and potent. The play presents a chronicle of tragedy and sheer bad luck for the Boyle family, residents of Dublin’s tenements and representatives, in a sense, for a people embroiled in and undone by the continuing struggle. Boyle, the Falstaffian patriarch (a loafer and malingerer who (p.142) might be a total good-for-nothing if it weren’t for his irresistibly poetic dialect and his tremendous resilience), believes he has inherited a fortune, only to squander most of it before learning that it was all a mistake; his daughter Mary, pretty, clever, and something of a new woman (she reads Ibsen and is a labor activist), falls in love with the slick, middle-class Free-Stater Bentham (a theosophist and prig, and perhaps just a bit of a parody of Yeats), who impregnates and abandons her; Johnny, crippled and desperate after the fighting of 1916, is ultimately taken out and shot by the Republicans for treachery; and finally, Juno, mother of mothers, keeps the family’s bodies and souls together with her homespun spirit, and meanwhile exerts a surprisingly powerful feminist energy. At the end of the play, having learned of her son’s brutal killing, she chooses to leave Boyle for good and to spend her future with Mary and the illegitimate baby; responding to Mary’s lament “My poor little child that’ll have no father,” she counters, “It’ll have what’s far betther—it’ll have two mothers.”29
Mothers have many burdens in the world of *Juno and the Paycock*; but perhaps most saliently, they are called upon to mourn. Juno will not be the first. Her lament for Johnny at the end of the play follows that of another resident, Mrs. Tancred, whose son’s bullet-ridden corpse had been found in a creek the night before and is now the subject of graphic newspaper accounts and much tenement conversation. The funeral procession falls exactly in the center of the play, punctuating one family’s drama with another’s. Juno is the only Boyle family member moved by the neighbor’s plight, and, as we later learn, she internalizes Mrs. Tancred’s lament, which she repeats verbatim when it is her turn to grieve, in a choral structure that comes as a surprise in O’Casey’s realist playbook:

Me home is gone now; he was me only child, an’ to think that he was lyin’ for a whole night stretched out on the side of a lonely countrystyle lane, with his head, his darlin’ head, that I often kissed an’ fondled, half hidden in the wather of a runnin’ brook. An’ I’m told he was the leadher of the ambush where me nex’ door neighbor, Mrs. Mannin’, lost her Free State soldier son. An’ now here’s the two of us oul’ women, standin’ one on each side of a scales o’sorra, balanced be the bodies of our two dead darlin’ sons…. Mother o’ God, Mother o’ God, have pity on the pair of us! ... O Blessed Virgin, where were you when me darlin’ son was riddled with bullets, when me darlin’ son was riddled with bullets! ... Sacred Heart of the Crucified Jesus, take away our hearts o’ stone ... an’ give us hearts o’ flesh! ... Take away this murtherin’ hate ... an’ give us Thine own eternal love!” (*CPI*, 54–55, first ellipses added).

This is the essence of civil war: two mothers, longtime neighbors, whose sons have effectively killed one another, staring at each other over a gaping chasm of strife which is also recognized as a mere illusion of distance. The structure is ironic, tragic, and formally arresting. In shifting to a prayer to the Virgin (another mother of a killed son) in the second half of the passage, Mrs. Tancred looks to stanch the flow of blood unleashed by vengeance and civil war by turning to the structure of Christian love and forgiveness. Mrs. Tancred’s keen is capacious, including references to the past, prayers for the future, and a language of empathy that might be unexpected at such a moment of personal sorrow and despair. We might note, moreover, her use of the word “flesh,” whose mention inevitably and instantly destabilizes the operative model of violence. To recognize the facts of flesh—to return from an exalted, enchanted state of political commitment back to a state of embodied reality—is the fervent (the only?) hope in this situation of seemingly endless killing.

The Rising: Generative Violence
In the hands of nationalists like Pearse, even such prototypically memorial forms as keening can be generative. This is the symbolic imperative of the insurrection: death must become fruitful, blood must be seen as a nourishing source, lilacs must grow from the dead land. It is not at all surprising, then, that Pearse made especially good use of the graveside as a potent locale for arousing a spirit of inspired and inspiring violence. Most notably, the burial in August 1915 of Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, exiled Fenian and exemplar of what historians call the “physical force tradition,” offered Pearse a prime location for a speech steeped in the metaphorics of blood sacrifice and enchantment.31 Pearse took his performative cues in the Rossa commemoration from works like the Gettysburg Address; in both speeches, the hallowed ground of dead soldiers becomes the mystical source for continued dedication. “I propose to you,” he enjoined his listeners, “that, here by the grave of this unrepentant Fenian, we renew our baptismal vows.” The oration is shot through with such imagery, as indeed is all of his writing: “We stand at Rossa’s grave not in sadness but rather in exaltation of spirit,” he declares, and:

Our foes are strong and wise and wary; but, strong and wise and wary as they are, they cannot undo the miracles of God who ripens in the hearts of young men the seeds sown by the young men of a former generation. And the seeds sown by the young men of ’65 and ’67 are coming to their (p. 144) miraculous ripening to-day. Rulers and Defenders of Realms had need to be wary if they would guard against such processes. Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations. (PWS, 134, 135, 136–37)

Ripening, seeds and growth, violence as a potent vitalizing force: these are the reiterated terms. Such generative symbols, in turn, are amalgamated to a continuous history of rebellion, made up of the various moments of insurrection (here 1865 and 1867, often including 1798 and 1803). Each failed uprising engenders its heroes and plays a part in developing the national story-in-waiting, bearing out the promise of violence as a productive agent in history and culture.
No one was more deliberate in his usage of such symbolism than Pearse, and no one was more influential in his conviction that nations spring from the graves of great men. Through the school he founded, St. Enda’s at Rathfarnham, his lectures, his published writings, his leadership in the insurrection, and of course through his death, Pearse came virtually to incarnate the ideal of generative violence. So, for instance, in a precursor to his famous Rossa oration, he spoke in 1913 at Tone’s grave, where he called for all assembled to breathe in the spirit of that soil, and to join him as “we set our faces towards the path that lies before us, bringing with us fresh life from this place of death, a new resurrection of patriotic grace in our souls!” (PWS, 57). Later that year, in laying out his hope for “The Coming Revolution,” Pearse wrote that “bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood” (PWS, 99). Finally, and most controversially—given the deep antagonism toward the First World War felt by many of his peers—Pearse wrote in December 1915 that “[w]ar is a terrible thing, but war is not an evil thing”; rather, “[i]t is good for the world that such things should be done. The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields” (PWS, 217, 216).

It is thus entirely appropriate that Yeats would have Pearse say, in “The Rose Tree”—the most tonally ambiguous among the insurgency poems published in Michael Robartes and the Dancer (1922)—“O plain as plain can be/ There’s nothing but our own red blood/Can make a right Rose Tree” (Var, 396). There might, in the end, be quite a bit to muddy and complicate this “plain” connotation, but in the Pearsonian mode of these years, the story of blood and fecundity was one of certainties.
It is not difficult to find instances of this mode across the period—they are endemic. Here, two slim volumes of poetry can stand as exemplary. Both published in 1916, both in a sense memorials of the Rising and epitaphs for their subjects, *Poems of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood* and *The Poems of Joseph Mary Plunkett* share with Pearse’s work a sense of distilling and perfecting the ideal of enchantment as a statement of nationalist sentiment. At twenty-eight, Joseph Mary Plunkett was the youngest of the executed insurrectionists. A poet and disciple of Pearse, he was always in poor health (he had tuberculosis), yet his short life was dominated by radical nationalist activity, including a trip to Germany in 1915 aimed at securing German aid for the insurrection and a prominent role at the Post Office during Easter week despite his compromised health. In short, Plunkett embodied the Rising’s romantic spirit. In the 1916 volume, edited and lovingly introduced by his sister, there is a great deal of blood, suffering, sacrifice, and enchantment, as one would expect, but it is largely apolitical, revolving around the address to an unnamed beloved and around Plunkett’s strong Christian aesthetic—ecstatic about Christ’s blood and stressing themes of crucifixion and resurrection. Yet several carefully placed national lyrics burst into the volume midcourse and in a sense recast the entire work as a paean to the Rising. Like the resurrection, which shadows the volume, the insurgency is prefigured as a silent and defining event of paradoxical violence—glorious as failure and eternal through its mortality.
One poem, “The Little Black Rose Shall Be Red at Last,” is especially revealing as a statement of enchanted violence. Dedicated to Cathleen ni Houlihan, “The Little Black Rose Shall Be Red at Last” follows immediately after the three most directly political poems in the volume (several of which were also included in *Poems of the IRB*) and it links their familiar lexicon—martyrs, swords, ancient heritage, defiance, mourning for lost leaders—with a Christian-leaning eroticism that characterizes the volume more generally. In addition to the connection between the rose and Ireland, the poem’s title has at least two clear reference points, both in the national tradition: a poem entitled “The Little Black Rose” (first line “The little black rose shall be red at last”) by Aubrey de Vere (1814–1902) a prominent nationalist poet in the Celtic tradition, and “The Dark Rose,” a political ballad from the sixteenth century (translated periodically in later centuries, including an influential version by James Clarence Mangan and another by Pearse), in which the title rose again turns red. In De Vere’s poem, each item in a pastoral landscape points toward political allegory. The little black rose “shall redden the hills when June is nigh”; the cow (another old national symbol) may be “mild,” but “she shall feed full fast”; and the pine tree, “long bleeding, it shall not die!” “This song is secret,” the poet declares, but the secret seems a relatively open one. As for the traditional “Little Dark Rose,” the final stanza offers an apocalypse of fruitful blood: “The Erne shall rise in rude torrents, hills shall be rent/The sea shall roll in red waves, and blood be poured out,/Every mountain glen in Ireland, and the bogs shall quake/Some day ere shall perish my Little Dark Rose!” Very clearly, Plunkett’s title calls up the enchanting tradition from within an Irish/Celtic canon.

His poem, like the countryside of the earlier poem, is full to overflowing. It begins with a conventional invocation to the beloved, a strangely personalized, sexualized opening for a song devoted to the nation (via Cathleen). The blood of two bodies, erotically overcharged, is soon merged with national iconography:

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And when my heart is pillowed on your heart
And ebb and flowing of their passionate flood
Shall beat in concord love through every part
Of brain and body—when at last the blood
O’er leaps the final barrier to find
Only one source wherein to spend its strength
And we two lovers, long but one in mind
And soul, are made one only flesh at length;
Praise God if this my blood fulfils the doom
When you, dark rose, shall redden into bloom.
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One thinks of Blake’s “The Sick Rose,” an unsurprising presence, given Blake’s heroic stature (along with Shelley) among this generation of Irish poets. But the sexual mutual destruction of Blake is here redirected toward the coming rebellion, and the darkness of Blake’s poem is reimagined as generativity, “reddening into bloom.” In short, Plunkett finds in the reddening rose a fruitful confluence: a revolutionary Irish poetic heritage, Romantically themed erotic destructiveness, Christian allegory, and a muted prophecy of the personal sacrifices soon to be made.

If the overall spirit of Plunkett’s volume grows from just a kernel of generative violence (but isn’t that the idea?), *Poems of the IRB* more directly positions itself as a poetic statement of the Rising, containing poems by four of the executed rebels (Pearse, MacDonagh, Plunkett, and Roger Casement) and beginning with a biographical introduction that helps to establish the hagiography of these figures. Interestingly, it includes only two poems by poets not directly affiliated with the Rising, an introductory lyric “The Ways of War” by Lionel Johnson and, as the final note, Yeats’s “Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland” (1894), an early poem in which Yeats comes as close as he ever will to a Pearse-like embrace of generative violence. The poem is grounded in an image of stoic resilience:

The old brown thorn-trees break in two high over Cummen Strand,
Under a bitter black wind that blows from the left hand;
Our courage breaks like an old tree in a black wind and dies,

But we have hidden in our hearts the flame out of the eyes
Of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan. (Var, 206–7)

The poem sets up the struggle as smoldering rather than active, befitting its composition date in the 1890s. Once included in the nationalist volume, however, its spirit of embodied, quiet defiance seems strategic. It is no wonder, indeed, that the IRB (the major underground nationalist group of the pre-Rising period, often also referred to as the Fenians), of which Yeats was a sometime member, would want this poem in its post-Rising compilation, since its inclusion lent Yeats’s considerable authority to an event about which he was, in fact, ambivalent. And the poem does make a strong statement about courage in the face of oppression. The subjugation of the Irish is likened in the poem to natural powers—“bitter black wind that blows from the left hand” and “wet winds . . . blowing out of the clinging air”—embodying the idea of force. Force is power; it swirls through the world fiercely and indiscriminately. Resistance, in turn, requires a paradoxical submission, for the ways of violence, in opposing force, are always those of the guerrilla. Generative violence here is not so much a statement of the present, then, as a promise for the future, figured by the smoldering flame (“we have hidden in our hearts the flame out of the eyes/Of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan”).
The IRB volume is largely melancholy and reflective rather than triumphant or resurrectory, exuding a brooding mortality, and yet its romantic spirit takes the form of enchanted violence, as one would expect. All four of the poets partake. MacDonagh, in “O Star of Death,” returns to the rose as symbol of regenerative violence:

O star of death! I follow, till thou take
My days to cast them from thee flake on flake,
My rose of life to scatter bloom on bloom,
Yet hold its essence in the phial rare
Of life that lives with fire and air,—
With air that knows no dark, with fire not to consume. (Poems of the IRB, 22)

Enchantment in this poem does not take its metaphors from the body; there is no heavy blood, as there is in Yeats’s poem, no precious ore. Instead, the images are ethereal—“life that lives with fire and air”—and this, too, is not an uncommon approach to envisioning generative violence. Ireland, the rose, and the poet’s soul are bound together, and though their sign is the “star of death,” their unity promises futurity, even immortality. In both of these 1916 volumes, then, we find a poetic of generative violence that is linked to its moment. Enchantment in these works stresses a paradoxical permanence: it is fleeting, temporal, and tied to mortality, in poems pulled magnetically toward death and melancholy, even as its effects are figured as carrying an ongoing cultural power.
With this in mind, let us return to “Easter 1916,” which expresses the promise, as well as the limits, of enchanted violence in exceptionally memorable terms. “Easter 1916” represents a breaking point in the discourse of enchantment, fully working out (and rendering canonical) the period’s generative metaphorics, and also taking stock of the troubling implications of these dynamics being fulfilled in verse. Critics have long noted Yeats’s ambivalence in the poem: the insurrectionists simultaneously heroized and treated with condescension; the poet’s role elevated as the final voice of and for the rebellion and, at the same time, marginalized and feminized; the status of transformation uncertain.41 This last I have suggested can be understood in terms of enchantment, in the sense that the poem creates an arresting aesthetic of generative violence (the shift from “casual comedy” to tragedy—“a terrible beauty is born”) and also questions the value of that commitment: “what if excess of love/Bewildered them till they died?” Perhaps more than any other issue, the poem is divided about what kind of literary strategy is appropriate and possible in relation to the Rising. Clearly, there is nothing of the disenchantment paradigm here: unlike other works by Yeats, which I will discuss in the next section, “Easter 1916” avoids any reference to actual episodes of violence. There is no evocation of the fierce week of fighting in Dublin, or of the execution of the sixteen leaders. It skips over the whole turbulent sequence, shifting from a set of pre-Rising portraits to a reflection on the status of these seemingly unremarkable people once they have been transformed by death.42 The poem is less interested in providing an account of violence, in other words, than in reflecting on its power.

It is in the final lines of the poem that these crucial questions about the status of enchanted violence are worked out. Having created flashlike memories and epithets for the leaders and considered the value of the events in both personal and political terms, the poem turns, in the end, to incantation, intoning a soft, rhythmic repetition of the insurrectionists’ names:

I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (Var, 394)
The passage calls special attention to itself, with its metatextual and somewhat redundant self-description: “I write it out in a verse.” And the lines do make a surprising formal gesture. As Declan Kiberd has noted, the phrase “wherever green is worn” has about it the ring of conventionality (“jaded formulae”), suggesting, as the poem moves to its close, a reversion to a language of national culture that is, in these years of the escalating independence struggle, becoming well-worn. Even the word “verse,” as distinct from “poem,” could—if we follow the logic Meredith Martin has laid out in The Rise and Fall of Meter—seem to tag Yeats’s own line as drifting into the popular realm, verse written for consumption, as opposed to poetry written to disrupt. Moreover, we might even say that the poem’s own refrain is heading in the same direction, in the sense that it has started to feel like a confirmatory tag: beautiful, lulling, and familiar; it confirms where much else in the poem questions. It seems, in other words, that Yeats recognizes, as he is writing the poem, that its language of enchantment is destined to become a convention (as, of course, it has) and hence to function less as a stimulus to thought than as an incantation of what one already believes: that violence in the name of the nation is transformative, that it creates a special kind of beauty.

The one stanza that does not end with “terrible beauty” offers a quite different account of change, mutation, and continuity. By far the most challenging part of the poem, the third stanza imagines a Heraclitean scene of movement and flux, with images ranging from the splashing of water to the shifting shadows of birds and clouds. It is a stanza about the impossibility of fixing any moment in time, yet it is bracketed by the poem’s clearest image of stasis, the stone: “Hearts with one purpose alone/Through summer and winter seem/Enchanted to a stone/To trouble the living stream” inaugurates the stanza, and “The stone’s in the midst of all” completes it (Var, 393). Critics have noted a web of connection in this poem and elsewhere in Yeats’s works between women and stones, or, more precisely, between Maude Gonne (whom Yeats loved fiercely and often frustratedly for much of his adult life) and an image of a hardened, fierce nationalism that Yeats abhorred in part because it marginalized him in her world. The stone of course also characterizes men like Pearse, who indeed haunts the poem; thus even without the personal (and gendered) angle, the third stanza sets the terms for critiquing the underlying logic of the rest of the poem. Contrasting the most immobile with the excessively fluid, the stanza suggests that the temporality of the poem, based as it is on the ideal of transformative violence and allying with a calcifying nationalist politics, might misconstrue the way change works in the actual, nonideal world. The stanza thus acts, in part, as a bulwark against the rest of the poem, instigating a radically different model of transformation from the generative violence ideal. Yet the final stanza recovers, and from the wild changefulness of the stream, figured in a way as life itself (“Minute by minute they live”), it returns to a more restful atmosphere—indeed, to death.
The whole final stanza suggests death. The idea of falling asleep permeates its metaphors and phrases (“when sleep at last has come,” “What is it but nightfall?” “We know their dream; enough/To know they dreamed and are dead”), and its tone is dominated by a sense of hopelessness (“O when may it suffice?” “Was it needless death after all?”). Even more centrally, Yeats suggests in the poem’s final section that he sees his own work implicated in a process of transformation that has troubling (or deadening) consequences. In what Elizabeth Cullingford has called “the most famous question in Irish literary history,” Yeats would ask much later (1938), “Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?” (Var, 632), referring to Cathleen ni Houlihan. Yet “Easter 1916” is already wondering whether its poetic is contributing to the process whereby violent events become “enchanted to a stone.” Moreover, the listing of names, like the “wherever green is worn” phraseology, is conventional—a lullaby, a casualty list, a verse memorial—and has its own logic (so we get only four of the sixteen, and they must be names that scan and rhyme). It also enchants, quite literally, as if one were actually chanting the names. In other words, “Easter 1916” simultaneously enacts the ideal of generative violence—erasing the body and occluding the moment of violence, replacing these with a statement of lovely transformation—and sees that process as threatening to obliterate the kind of thought-inducing, propulsive language that Yeats always sought to create in his poetry. In “Easter 1916,” poetry is eclipsed by violence in two ways: straightforwardly, because the violent actors-cum-victims shift from ordinary people to heroes, offering up a “terrible beauty” that poetry can only echo; and, paradoxically, because the literary process of enchanting violence is so successful that it ends up diminishing its own cultural function—to intervene in the formulating of language, to make it urgent and disruptive, to force it out of sleep.
Critics have, of course, amply discussed the poem’s relationship to violence and politics, and, more generally, have considered the large questions of how to read Yeats’s approach, throughout this long career, to a thicket of questions surrounding violence, often culminating in the question of his authoritarian and fascistic leanings. Most succinctly, the debate revolves around the question of whether to understand Yeats as primarily a nationalist who sought, in his literary output no less than in his work for the theater and for Irish literary culture in general, to help establish a powerful new language for the independent nation or, conversely, as primarily an ascendency champion, whose loathing of the middle classes and idealization of the aristocracy melded with his (English) Romanticism and late fascism in a poetic that may proclaim itself national but is in fact sectarian, elitist, and, in the worst case, violently divisive. The lightning rod for this latter view was a 1965 essay by Conor Cruise O’Brien, which makes the case that Yeats’s fascism was always endemic to his politics (rather than the flirtation of an old, embittered man); that he was “cunning” and reactionary throughout his career, even with regard to such seemingly leftist expressions as his support for the Dublin workers during the 1913 strike; in short, that the national reverence for him is misguided. On the other side, Cullingford’s persuasive appraisal of Yeats as “first and foremost an Irish nationalist,” and in no interesting sense a fascist, stands as the most influential rebuttal. Cullingford sees Yeats’s romanticism as an element of his Irish commitments, and stresses his connection with many left-leaning nationalist figures, from O’Leary to Pearse (Cullingford, vii). As Jonathan Allison summarizes the debate, in a volume meant to elaborate and adjudicate the division, the key question centers on “a revaluation of the work of the Irish Literary Revival in general and Yeats in particular, whose work is sometimes seen, especially in Ireland, as an expression of an antimodernist, reactionary sensibility that has ultimately been insidious to Ireland’s self-image and that has inadvertently prolonged a quasicolonial mentality.”
And yet, a focus on enchantment shows that the elitist/nationalist polarization does not explain all that much about the complex and mutating state of violence in his works. It is clear, for instance, that the enchantment of violence can be linked to fascism and ideals of aristocratic power, and just as clearly can sustain a revolutionary politics. As Michael Tratner has argued, Yeats was inspired by the promise of generative violence to create “a new species of man ... from terror,” specifically as part of a desire to merge with the masses and to find inspiration in a broad Irish history and imaginary. For Tratner, “the problem that generated [Yeats’s] poetry” is “how to generate the myth that would make violence revolutionary and passionate, not merely chaotic,” or—Girard’s terms are helpful here—to make it sacred rather than purely destructive.\textsuperscript{49} For our purposes, the question of Yeats’s political attitudes is less central than is Tratner’s question of how, precisely, violence spurred, informed, troubled and/or anchored Yeats’s work. In fact, to seek a consistent stance over the course of Yeats’s career runs counter to my aims in this discussion, since I am arguing for a mutating, unstable relationship between literature and violence in the period, whereby each of the major forms (keening, generative violence, reprisal, architectural allegory) implicates the others and where political attitude per se is not definitive of literary outcomes. To consider the range of Yeats’s works that are oriented around generative violence is to note, first, a diversity of political positions and interests, and second, some crucial tension points around the very idea (and ideal) of generativity.
In addition to “Easter 1916,” and to a lesser degree “Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland,” the poem that offers perhaps Yeats’s most resounding and concise engagement with enchanted violence is the commemorative lyric “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death.” The poem is one of several Yeats wrote to honor Lady Gregory’s son, Robert, who had enlisted in the Royal Flying Corps and was killed in action in February of 1918. It would be difficult to overstate the confusion and devastation Robert’s death presented to his mother’s community, not only for the normal human reasons (the loss of one’s only son to war, the terrible grief surrounding smashed promise) but for more delicate political ones as well. Robert’s enlistment as an officer in the war certainly testified to the aristocratic legacy in which he had been raised, but for the son of a nationalist like Lady Gregory to fight in England’s war, and to be killed in it, created an extra level of torment and tension. The subject of Ireland’s participation in the war was always fraught and divisive, and cannot be schematized entirely as northern allegiance versus southern resistance. In August 1914, the leader of the Irish parliamentarians, John Redmond, enjoined Irish citizens of all classes to enlist, under the view that this would further Home Rule goals, yet the nationalist position, overall, was to repudiate participation, with the insurrectionists famously seeking Germany as a potential ally in the lead-up to the 1916 rebellion.\(^{50}\) And yet, loss is loss; employing an enchantment from the skies, Yeats took up these conflicts in “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” in a sense by distancing himself—and, within the poem Gregory—from the political structure of the war. Indeed, by making his metaphorics out of distance itself, Yeats was able to effect a political distancing that might be impossible to articulate directly.

Spoken in Gregory’s voice, the poem imagines death in the sky as a rarefied expression of will rather than as part of war’s slaughter or Ireland’s colonial dilemma. The poem reads:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{I know that I shall meet my fate} \\
&\text{Somewhere among the clouds above;} \\
&\text{Those that I fight I do not hate} \\
&\text{Those that I guard I do not love;} \\
&\text{My country is Kiltartan Cross,} \\
&\text{My countrymen Kiltartan’s poor,} \\
&\text{No likely end could bring them loss} \\
&\text{Or leave them happier than before.} \\
&\text{Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,} \\
&\text{(p.153) Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,} \\
&\text{A lonely impulse of delight} \\
&\text{Drove to this tumult in the clouds;} \\
&\text{I balanced all, brought all to mind,} \\
&\text{The years to come seemed waste of breath,} \\
&\text{A waste of breath the years behind} \\
&\text{In balance with this life, this death. (Var, 328)}
\end{align*}
\]
Waving away all the ordinary incitements to enlist—adherence to the cause, a feeling of enmity against the enemy, a sense of historical responsibility, anticipating conscription—Yeats instead presents Gregory as joining the RFC almost as a metaphysical incitement. He is given a robust “I” voice, very much in control of his “fate.” Even his consciousness is saturated with power: With regard to the title, for instance, we might note the effect of “foresees” as against other verbs Yeats might have selected, such as “contemplates” or “imagines.” A prophet of sorts, Gregory’s immensely capacious mind in the poem is able to contain all the antinomies and oppositions suggested by the war, which the poem’s own dichotomizing logic does much to emphasize.

More generally, the poem reads as a meditation on death as desire, life as waste, and employs a classical language of fate that is very far from the Christian, resurrectionary thematics that underpinned so many of the enchanting Rising texts. Though death is chosen, it is not for the rewards of afterlife or martyrdom. Death represents, instead, the essence of a solitary ethos, valued in and of itself, “a lonely impulse of delight.” In many of Yeats’s works, such solitariness can be connected with a form of social ostracism, invited if rued, which is connected to Yeats’s Protestant identity, to his sense of the artist’s position, and to his general reverence for an imagined aristocratic distance from the concerns of the world. Here, this infrastructure is suggested obliquely, via Gregory’s status (“My country … My countrymen”), and his solitary impulse is figured in rarified, personalized terms. The airman is simply drawn—magnetically—to death.
Despite the elevated feel of the poem, aloof from the world as its subject is aloft in the “clouds,” it is not without its economics, as with so many modernist efforts to find a structural antidote to the extremity of violence. In this case, Yeats conjures the kind of economy of excess I have called a guiding principle among many works in the Irish canon of these years, as in “September 1913.” Life is easily expended—“The years to come seem waste of breath,/A waste of breath the years behind/In balance with this life, this death.” What matters, instead of life, is “balance,” to use the poem’s term, or what we might call “the aesthetic.” The word “balance” is used (p.154) twice in the poem (“I balanced all, brought all to mind,” “In balance with this life, this death”), and, more generally, “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” is itself a beautifully balanced, controlled poem, with several “Second Coming”–like repetitions from line to line (“My country is Kiltartan Cross,/My countrymen Kiltartan’s poor”), a variety of “nor” phrases that set up crisply weighted oppositions, and a rhyme scheme that emphasizes an interesting series of oppositions that also collapse into one another: fate/hate, Cross/loss, fight(delight, crowds/clouds, and especially breath/death. To choose death in this poem is not “delirium,” it is not a call for martyrdom, and it is not about blood; it is, instead, the choice of form, an extension in the human and metaphysical sphere of the poem’s own creed of elegant equilibrium. The poem thus accomplishes something rare in this period, enchantment as form, an idiom that works its violent overload into aesthetic harmony.
“Red Hanrahan’s Song about Ireland,” “Easter 1916,” and “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death” are among a small handful of Yeats’s poems that explore forms of enchanted or generative violence without suggesting an undertow of vengeance and reprisal; among his plays, a whole cluster of works falls under that rubric, including *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the Cuchulain cycle, and several of his most stylized late works, composed for private viewings in a salon setting. These last share a central component: they generate their core energy from sexual violence. Like “Leda and the Swan,” discussed in the introduction as an instance of the relation between intimacy in violence and the unfurling of outwardly directed consequences, these plays envision a form of generative violence inaugurated by sexual violation and trauma. *The Herne’s Egg* (1938) offers a Leda-like figure in the person of the priestess Attracta, whose prime motivation in the play and in her life is an eagerness to assume her role of “bride” (i.e. object of sexual predation) of the great bird-god, the herne, a rhapsodic enthrallment with sexual violation that remains unchanged even after Attracta has been raped by seven soldiers. *A Full Moon in March* (1935) and *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1935) are similar to one another in theme and structure, both featuring the bizarre scenario of an intoxicated, ecstatic queen who dances around the severed head of her would-be lover. In all of these plays, troubling fantasies of female subservience to male power contribute to a broader image of violence as the catalyst for strange, highly formalized aesthetic patterns. These plays, abstract and figural, suggest history only in attenuated terms—but it is there. In both *A Full Moon in March* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, when the queen comes to dance before the singing severed head, her trance-like ecstasy calls to mind the ancient Bacchae, but also makes a gesture to the spirit of the Rising period, twenty years in the past, when an intoxication with death and martyrdom often took gendered forms (as in Pearse) and generally enraptured a wide public.
The further Yeats moves from historical representation of violence and politics, the more he can abstract and schematize the enchantment of violence he felt to be a defining feature of revolutionary Ireland. Politics, history, even the standard mythic history that often sustained Yeats's drama have all been depleted in these plays, replaced by a gestural language that, in the Collected Plays edition (actively edited by Yeats) takes on a life of its own. Referencing backward and forward in his stage directions and using the same props over and over, Yeats created an idiosyncratic repertoire for staging and aestheticizing violence. In this sequence of late plays, then, the treatment of violence as a symbolic center around which figures literally circulate creates an almost anthropological mood of enchanted violence. The narratives tend to revolve around old, obscure myths of bloody deeds and sexual taboos. "There is a story in my country," says the swineherd in A Full Moon in March, "of a woman/That stood all bathed in blood—a drop of blood/Entered her womb and there begat a child," to which the queen responds, "She took it in her hands;/She stood all bathed in blood; the blood begat" (CP, 393). Both the swineherd, soon to be decapitated, and the queen, soon to be seen dancing in a mimicry of "climax" around the bloody head, cooperate in bringing this ancient story to fulfillment (CP, 396). In this play, to occupy positions of mutual violation, such that one is killed and the other entranced by his blood, represents a kind of charm or spell—enchantment in that sense, too. In The King of the Great Clock Tower, similarly, the intoxicated queen will sing "He longs to kill/My body, until/That sudden shudder/And limbs lie still" (CP, 401). Her language of course recalls Leda, suggesting a double overlapping in the "sudden shudder": the queen and the imagined lover, Leda and the swan. Rape and perverse forms of impregnation underpin all of these works, providing their guiding motifs and principles of aesthetic pleasure. Attracta makes the case most forcefully:

When I take the beast to my joyful breast,
Though beak and claw I must endure,
Sang the bride of the Herne, and the Great Herne’s Bride,
No lesser life, man, bird or beast,
Can make unblessed what a beast made blessed,
Can make impure what a beast made pure. (CP, 419)

It may be difficult, as a feminist reader, to take much of this very seriously. Yeats himself seems a bit entranced, working his way out of the revolutionary history of violence by envisioning a sexually dubious enchantment. The idea that war and rape are the fuel for beauty and generation has been treated, in The Waste Land (p.156) and “Leda and the Swan,” with intricacy and depth, but here the paradigm is reduced, like the plays’ settings, to a more schematic outline.52
And yet, with his last play, *The Death of Cuchulain*, where Yeats returns both to mythic and actual history, and, not coincidentally, to a rendering of female desire that wrenches free of the trope of victimized pleasure, the generative violence frame changes—indeed, is broken altogether. Cuchulain’s death, it should be noted, is overdetermined; a reader not entirely versed in the mythic stories might well have thought it already accomplished when he appears to drown at the end of *On Baile’s Strand* (1904), and within *The Death of Cuchulain* he is wounded sequentially, his body absorbing the vengeance of many foes, before his head is cut off by a blind man who is eager for the proffered reward of twelve pennies. Like the vagrants in *A Full Moon in March* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, Cuchulain is ultimately reduced to a severed head, yet there is no frenzied, erotic circling of that icon. The image of a generative bloodletting issuing in rhythmic movement is itself severed, for Cuchulain’s death, unlike the various singers who precede him in the sequence of dramas, is layered into the twentieth-century history that remains very much in the background of these works.

When Cuchulain is finally gone, the stage darkens, and the final lines are spoken by a singer, in a summation that inevitably reaches out beyond the play itself. Like “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” the close of *The Death of Cuchulain* has the ring of self-scrutiny, a culminating statement of poetic and political work and thought. In the voice of a harlot, the singer asks some famous questions:

> Are those things that men adore and loathe
> Their sole reality?
> What stood in the Post Office
> With Pearse and Connolly?
> What comes out of the mountain
> Where men first shed their blood?
> Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
> He stood where they had stood? (CP, 445–46)
From the point of view of enchanted violence, this passage is highly provocative and also highly inconclusive. What comes out of the mountain where men shed blood, it turns out, is Cuchulain—which is to say, the mythic history of violence as envisioned, especially, by Pearse (who always elevated Cuchulain as one of the great Irish figures to emulate) and by Yeats himself. Is the poet inserting himself—as one important maker of cultural nationalism—into the Rising, at the very site of its violent, transformative being? In part, yes. And yet in the final question, “Who (p.157) thought Cuchulain,” he supplies no agent; “till it seemed” is entirely vague as to when and in whose view the intertwining of the insurrection with the (Yeatsian) mythic past became the accepted story. On one hand, to create an image of Cuchulain standing ghostlike in the Post Office, ready to be recognized as the spirit of the Rising, is to suggest that the enchantment of that event is really about the power of literature rather than the power of historical violence, hence a reversal of “Easter 1916.” On the other hand, there is a sense of inevitability in all of this. Eventually, the spirit of one era’s mythic violence, epitomized by Cuchulain, is reborn in another era’s generative violence, epitomized by Pearse and Connolly, in a sequence of historical resurrections and re-formations. In a strange way, then, violence is not so much generative as simply part of the cyclical story of nations and their icons: era after era brings forth its heroes, who are then understood as reanimating and superseding their predecessors.

In concert with this tonal change about generative violence, the image of female desire in the play’s last lines also marks a shift from the “sudden shudder” works, if we might schematize them thus. The harlot who concludes *The Death of Cuchulain*, like Crazy Jane, is full of her own desire, real and embodied; she is no delirious recipient of male sexual predation. “I adore those clever eyes,” she says of the mythic male heroes, now long dead, “Those muscular bodies, but can get/No grip upon their thighs” (*CP*, 445). Living bodies are more troubling, naturally:

That there are still some living  
That do my limbs unclothe,  
But that the flesh my flesh has gripped  
I both adore and loathe. (*CP*, 445)
There is something wonderful about these lines, with the female speaker owning her promiscuity and her sexual ambivalence. Sex here is not a route to any form of enchanted futurity, freighted with consequence and taking its toll on the victimized body. We might say, by contrast, that it is disenchanted, belonging to limbs and “flesh”—always the keyword designating that the material body has begun to act as a counterweight to the ideal of transformation and productivity. Leda and her followers were sites and catalysts of male potency, generating culture; the harlot is all flesh, and with that change comes a wholly different relation to violence. Sex need not be violent, in this scenario, and it need not be fruitful. It is disengaged from the entire construct, just as the questions that immediately follow are new and surprising—stunningly so—in relation to the rather repetitive, weary cycle of plays that precedes The Death of Cuchulain in The Collected Plays and also to the poems of generative violence we have discussed. “What stood in the Post Office/With Pearse and Connolly” is an unanswered and unanswerable question, a stimulus to think about culture and violence according to a range of possibilities, while “a terrible beauty is born” has finality built into its beautiful phrasing, suggesting an endpoint—as “sleep at last has come/On limbs that had run wild.”

Yeats’s late plays were inspired in part by Japanese Noh drama and go far in the direction of nonrepresentational, gestural abstraction, and this allows them to think about violence as itself almost figural: a shape (the parallelogram of the severed head), or a color (red), or a style of movement (Bacchic, entranced). Generativity—the signal mode of the Rising—mutates, sheds its skin, moves in the direction of a highly conceptual expressivity. Overall, Yeats’s generative violence canon contains a range of political positions, from “Red Hanrahan’s” early song of inceptive nationalism to Cuchulain’s resurgence late in Yeats’s life; it is expressed in a variety of formal registers, from the incantatory and partially lulling “Easter 1916” to the wild sexual energy of his late plays; and, above all, it proposes a number of aesthetically mixed outcomes. For all this seeming expressive freedom, the stakes were always high when it came to representing violent national themes of any sort. As Yeats himself found with his two Cathleen plays, in the loaded period leading up to rebellion, a writer is asked to stand either for or against the national agenda, and violence is read, in polarizing terms, as uselessly disenchanting (Countess Cathleen) or as inspiring enchanting (Cathleen ni Houlihan). In the public world, it seems, the experiments in miscegenating enchantment with disenchantment that we have found to engender exquisite effects meet with little favor, as the most controversial work of these decades revealed with such clamor, Synge’s The Playboy of the Western World (1907).

In concluding this discussion of generative violence, I want to consider Synge’s enigmatic and compelling play, since it demonstrates especially clearly the relationship between generative violence and that which so often succeeds it, reprisal. The Playboy of the Western World thus functions as a segue in this
analysis, as we will turn, in the next section, from the relative promise of generativity to the vortex of vengeance, and will find that these seemingly separable forms are in fact entangled. The trajectory in *The Playboy of the Western World* from an atmosphere of generative violence to the cycle of reprisal is so operational as to be registered at the level of plot and structure. The play is set in a small community in County Mayo, in an unspecified time that appears to match the play’s composition, and concerns the fallout when a young man, Christy Mahon (the “playboy”) wanders in from the roads, seeking rest and protection. Having, he declares, killed his father with a blow to the head, he is on the run. The community is ravished by this patricide and welcomes Christy. With women swooning over him (especially the (p.159) female protagonist Pegeen Mike, who had been engaged to another man at the start of the play), while the men are either terrified or admiring, Christy becomes a local hero, winning a host of sports contests and generally stealing the hearts of the community—until, that is, his unskilled father returns and upsets the narrative. Christy is soon expelled, cursed most viciously by those who had adored him with the greatest passion. In terms of the violence narrative, we might schematize *The Playboy of the Western World* as follows: Christy happens in on a community that, unbeknownst to itself, reveres violence; he is welcomed as a celebrity for his imagined ferocity (and for trespassing a great taboo) and is offered the best that the community can give, in the form of protection and his choice of wives (he chooses Pegeen); it does not take long, however, before a counterviolence begins to develop (as, for instance, when Pegeen’s father Michael rebuffs him, worrying about the consequences of having a parricide in the family); with the arrival of Christy’s father, a storm of violence is unleashed on the playboy, taking its most disturbing form in Pegeen’s burning of her lover’s leg with a torch. Succinctly, the play figures the Mayo villagers as a community coming to terms with its internal violence. In Girard’s language, what we find in *The Playboy* is an instance of redirected violence, whereby the possibility of internal fracture within a group is warded off by the localizing of violent energy in the person of an outsider: Kiberd, in a compelling reading of the play that focuses on its imbrication of poetry with violence, employs Girard’s model: “Such a people desperately need a hero who can bring their instincts to violence into a single clear focus: a hero, moreover, whom they can then convert into a scapegoat onto whom may be visited any troublesomely violent tendencies that are still unfulfilled” (Kiberd, 166). Yet, as Kiberd argues, and as a Girardian reading would predict, the outcome of such an instance of “sacrificial crisis” can be radical and surprising. For Kiberd, what emerges from Synge’s reflection on a culture drunk with a violence that it cannot fully control is ultimately an image of a hero—Christy—who epitomizes the nation. In this reading, Christy in effect escapes from the Girardian cycle, instead embodying a Fanonian one: he displays, first, a colonial mentality (taking his self-measure from the community around him), then a national one (beginning to utilize a nationally inflected, self-created language), and, at the close of the play, arrives at Fanon’s third and final
stage of independence (commanding his father in the final sequence and spurning the villagers’ attacks on him).

And yet the national allegory is not the only endpoint for Synge’s withering interrogation of the direction violence takes in the community. The play draws an exceptionally individual portrait of a community expressing a powerful push and pull with respect to violence. That relationship is founded on several overarching premises: that, in this culture, violence is a crucial marker of masculinity (so Christy as murderer becomes an object of female desire, while the cowardly and conventional Shawn Keogh, the man to whom Pegeen had been betrothed, is viewed with universal contempt); that there is a hierarchy of forms for desirable violence (with patricide at the top, but the Widow Quinn’s slow and ambiguous killing of her husband a less admired affair); and that the line dividing glamorous from sordid violence depends largely on its remaining out of view (the villagers are awed by Christy’s description of the murder, but jeer when he later attacks his father in front of them). But what is most striking is to see how fully the community is drawn out of itself by the idea of violence. The envisioning of a terrible act awakens the villagers, who, at the opening of the play, are surrounded by death and enervation—a wake is in progress down the hill from the shebeen where the action transpires, and the imminent marriage between Pegeen and Shawn is entirely sapped of vitality. With the evocation of Christy’s killing of his father—such a blunt transgression of basic taboos, carrying an overload of political and Freudian significance—it is as if their blood is stirred, and they move from deathliness to a newly vibrant mood.
From a scene dominated by mortality and convention, then, comes the prospect of enchanted violence. Crucially, this sense of a powerful, generative violence is not the product of visitation from outside (Christy does not import it), but rather arises via the villagers’ own imaginative processes. One of the most arresting sequences in the play, for instance, comes in Act I, when the villagers slowly extract from Christy the story of his deed, pulling closer and closer to him and to it as they gradually tease the story from him. The sequence has Dantean qualities, as the villagers move through a list of more and more dangerous crimes, into deeper and deeper rungs of the criminal imaginary, and seem infatuated not only with Christy but with their own verbal process for eliciting the murder. There is something catechistic, or perhaps legalistic, about the way they question Christy, beginning with the suggestion of theft and running through forms of anticolonial and political violence (“Was it bailiffs? ... Agents? ... Landlords? ... Maybe he went fighting for the Boers...?”). The trail ends with Christy’s claim, “I killed my poor father, Tuesday was a week,” a stunning statement that brings the community together in awe and admiration.

The catechism immediately restarts after this, with the question of the weapon (“And you shot him dead? ... It was with a hilted knife maybe? ... You never hanged him...?”) and continues until the whole story has been revealed, as if the villagers cannot quite let off from expressing their unifying urge to draw near an act of ferocious violence (*Playboy*, 106). There is something magnetic in these sequences, which comes not so much from Christy’s language as from the villagers’ responses to him. Violence is not exactly enchanting here—it is not transformative, purifying, or ennobling—but it allows the villagers to feel qualities of elation and exultation that partake of enchantment, and given the symbolic overdetermination of the crime, permeates their world with a sense of significance and power.

Once the intoxication with Christy’s act of violence has spread across the community, two critical developments can then unfold: first is the creation of a robust and beautiful poetic out of Christy’s voice, which is focused primarily on his wooing of Pegeen and which borrows from an Irish idiom (he cribs from Douglas Hyde’s *Love Songs of Connacht*, as Kiberd has shown, and, more generally, represents a tour de force when it comes to imbuing the English language with a Gaelic intonation, one of Synge’s greatest accomplishments); and second is the unfurling of that enthrallment with violence into a generalized brutality that sweeps through the community and lands, eventually, back on Christy, who had elicited it in the first place. Not only is vengeance unleashed in the latter parts of the play—inaugurating a cycle of reprisal—but the community is generally diminished, so that, for instance, Michael, who was once a champion of defiance, now becomes a resigned spokesman for convention. Early in Act III he had said:
It’s the will of God, I’m thinking, that all should win an easy or a cruel end, and it’s the will of God that all should rear up lengthy families for the nurture of the earth ... A daring fellow is the jewel of the world, and a man did split his father’s middle with a single clout should have the bravery of ten, so may God and Mary and St. Patrick bless you, and increase you from this mortal day. (Playboy, 140)

Michael’s nearly blasphemous language here is provocative, full of images of sparkle and life (“the nurture of the earth,” “the jewel of the world”). By the final lines of the play, in contrast, he is reduced to: “It is the will of God that all should guard their little cabins from the treachery of law” (Playboy, 146).

It is Pegeen, however, who is given the final words; significantly, they come not from the tradition of generative violence, nor from the spiraling world of reprisal, but from the lexicon of keening: “Putting her shawl over her head and breaking out into wild lamentations,” as the stage directions say, Pegeen cries, “Oh my grief, I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only playboy of the western world” (Playboy, 146). One gets the sense, in much of the literature of this period, of a finite set of imaginative resources when it comes to violence. It is understood, most emphatically, as generative, more darkly as retributive, and, failing these, one returns to the ancient convention of keening. That overarching expression of national sorrow, embodied (p.162) by women, offers solace, for it connects the person who expresses it back in time to the shared past, and outward in space to all of Ireland. At the same time, the turn to keening reflects a form of linguistic enclosure, in the sense that the language is ritualized and prescribed; as we saw in the case of Juno and the Paycock, part of its strength derives from the fact that it can easily be lifted and substituted from person to person. The language of keening at the close of the play does not produce the kind of defeated idiom of, say, Michael’s cramped utterance, and yet there is something diminished about it. Insofar as the keen steers away from the act or expression of violence itself, it misses the spark and energy that inhere in that vibrant, originary moment. For Kiberd, the end of the play reads in bracing, postcolonial terms, as Christy stalks off the stage, embodying a masculine, independent Ireland, but he is less concerned with Pegeen, left echoing an old lament. The language of keening is, in a sense, what remains—onstage, in the domestic settings of women’s experience, in history itself—when the violent actors have walked off the stage. In the push toward a futurity of violence which, one hopes, will yield ultimate and long-lasting peacefulness, there is always an echoing language.

The Years of War: Reprisal
“A bunch of martyrs (1916) were the bomb and we are living in the explosion”: so wrote Yeats in a 1922 letter to his friend Olivia Shakespear, in a formulation that startlingly clashes with his canonical expression of the Rising’s enchanting outcome, “a terrible beauty is born.” This image of wreckage and explosive consequence has its own resonance, for it suggests a different consciousness about violence, one that found increasingly wide expression in the years following the Rising, but which in fact has roots much further back in the nationalist struggle. If Yeats’s “bunch of martyrs” formulation reminds us of the language of dynamite explosion, moreover, such a confluence is not coincidental; much in the violent imaginary of Ireland from the middle to the end of the nineteenth century coincided with the worldwide enthralment with dynamite violence. Moreover, there were historical congruencies between anarchists and Fenians. Partly a matter of technology and strategy (dynamite, prison breaks, sensational acts of violence against carefully chosen targets), this linking of Fenian violence and anarchism in the English and American public understanding also held cultural and racist connotations, since, in the English and American view, the “foreignness” of the anarchist could easily be allied with denigration of the Irish. We should thus be especially clear in our own demarcations: (p.163) not only did some Fenians (such as Yeats and O’Leary) share with many Irish people an objection to the “physical force tradition,” but the aims, political histories, and literary output of the two movements have little in common. Still, at the level of the theorizing of violence, there are overlaps. What the anarchism example helps to clarify, above all, is how extensively a tradition of reprisal violence had been written into the European imaginary of this period, with political connotations that were inevitably revolutionary and with dynamite as one symbol of its technological reach. For the Ireland of the modernist era, three elements converge in this imaginary: a general tone of nihilistic resentment, sharing some of its language with the anarchist movement; a cycle of vengeance that superseded the ideal of generativity, especially potent in the post-Rising and post–First World War years; and, perhaps most simply, the possibility of being motivated by hatred.
The gospel of hate, as everyone for a half century seemed to agree, had been spread by John Mitchel. Relatively obscure among American readers today, Mitchel was one of the most important voices for Irish revolutionary nationalism in the nineteenth century, standing as an ideological rival to Daniel O’Connor, in many ways the most renowned figure in the nationalist movement before Parnell. While O’Connor worked toward separatism from England via organizational and parliamentary means, Mitchel viewed such tactics as insufficient and fruitless. A leader of Young Ireland and founder, along with Gavan Duffy, of the primary nationalist paper of the 1840s, *The Nation*, Mitchel was arrested for sedition in 1848 and deported, spending fourteen years as a convict in Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania). His *Jail Journal*, published in 1876, became something of a sensation. He influenced all of the figures we have discussed so far, including Yeats, who evoked him in the late poem “Under Ben Bulben” (1939), and Pearse, who included him in his elite pantheon of founding voices of Irish nationalism. For both Yeats and Pearse, Mitchel is distinguished by his injunction to hate. Pearse, for instance, wrote that Mitchel’s language “flames with apocalyptic wrath, such wrath as there is nowhere else in literature” (*CWS*, 365). Mitchel calls for violence, but not of a generative or enchanted kind; his belongs to a different category altogether, and this leads even Pearse into a defensive posture. If, by the first decade of the twentieth century, it had become quite easy to laud generative violence, it was still problematic to call for the violence of hatred or of euphoric destruction.

For his part, Yeats adopted varying stances, over the course of his career, on what Mitchel represented and, by extension, on what kind of motivating violence is most productive. Writing in 1907, as he looked back on his own political arc up to that point, he indicated, along the lines of Pearse, that Mitchel stood rather simply for hate: “New from the influence ... of William Morris,” he recalls, *(p.164)* “I dreamed of enlarging Irish hate, till we had come to hate with a passion of patriotism what Morris and Ruskin hated. Mitchel had already all but poured some of that hate drawn from Carlyle, who had it of an earlier, and, as I think, cruder sort, into the blood of Ireland” (*EI*, 248). To emulate Mitchel, in this formulation, was to tap into a nationalist well of resentment and anger, but one—importantly for Yeats—with close ties to the English intellectual and political tradition represented by Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris. Twenty years later, in “Under Ben Bulben,” Mitchel looks somewhat different, carrying with his hate a glimmer of enchantment:

You that Mitchel’s prayer have heard,  
“Send war in our time, O Lord!”  
Know that when all words are said  
And a man is fighting mad,  
Something drops from eyes long blind,  
He completes his partial mind,  
For an instant stands at ease,
Laughs aloud, his heart at peace.
Even the wisest man grows tense
With some sort of violence
Before he can accomplish fate,
Know his work or choose his mate. (Var, 638)

One might read this stanza alongside “Leda and the Swan” and the other “sudden shudder” works, since, like them, it imagines productive violence in the vivid moment, a flash of personalized intensity that becomes a form of powerful subjective enhancement. Yet for all that, this is not a moment of generativity in the “Leda and the Swan” mode. The taking apart of the word “violence” into its syllabic parts—vi-o-lence—as required by the scan, indicates what the poem also demands of its readers, that we understand violence in its component parts, that we break it up and render it strange. In the next stanza, Yeats will invoke the Sistine ceiling, a work of art that shares something with the moment of contracting violence (generating a heating of the “bowels” for its “globe-trotting” viewers, which recalibrates the “grows tense” of the earlier stanza), but Michelangelo’s work, unlike Mitchel’s—which is only momentary and limited in effect—gives “Proof that there’s a purpose set/Before the secret working mind:/Profane perfection of mankind” (Var, 638–39). No perfection follows from Mitchel’s program of violence as the outcome of hate, even if Yeats and others found this state of consciousness genuinely absorbing and powerful, and not unprincipled.
In Mitchel’s own words, the injunction to violence carried suggestions of overwhelming destructiveness. Notwithstanding his privileged, Trinity-educated status, Mitchel was a real revolutionary, in many ways more complex a theorist of violence than either Pearse or Yeats admits. On the one hand, his *Jail Journal* is surprisingly erudite in style. It takes long excursions to consider the likes of Aristotle, is sprinkled with Latin and Greek quotations, and is limited in its political expressions. On the other hand, when he does make political commentary, it is vigorously violent. “[T]here is,” he writes of the Irish situation, “but one and all-sufficient remedy, *the edge of the sword*” (*JJ*, 24, italics in original). (We might note, again, the ubiquity of the sword/bayonet, anachronistic symbols for modern ferocity.) Mitchel does indeed call for “war in our time,” as Yeats puts it, fantasizing about a European cataclysm, to be set off by the French revolutionists of midcentury, which would “cut down and overthrow, root and branch, the whole government and social arrangement of England” (*JJ*, 91). War, says Mitchel, is much preferable to the slow starvation of colonized life; “to pour out your full soul in all its pride and might with a hot torrent of red raging blood” is far better than to “perish in a nation by tame beggarly famine” (*JJ*, 94). Given Mitchel’s reputation for bellicosity, one is not surprised by these hot torrents of blood. What is interesting and unexpected, however, is to find the language of revolution, indeed almost of anarchism. Creative destruction, an idea we have seen to be associated, for instance, with Bakunin, becomes the endpoint of Mitchel’s discourse on violence, which moves quickly from an encomium on war to the praising of destruction more broadly. Invoking the Book of Revelations, Mitchel likens the most terrible violence to the painful but ultimately cleansing powers of tornadoes, wildfires, and other natural catastrophes (treated as visitations form God). “Ah!” he thinks, “the atmosphere of the world needs to be cleared by a wholesome tornado,” and continues in this vein:

> In all nature, spiritual and physical, do you not see that some powers and agents have it for their function to abolish and demolish and derange—other some to construct and set in order? But is not the destruction, then, as natural, as needful, as the construction?—Rather tell me, I pray you, which is construction—which destruction? This destruction is creation: death is birth and

> “The quick spring like weeds out of the dead.”

Go to:—the revolutionary leveller is your only architect. (*JJ*, 96, 98, italics in original)
To be sure, the passage evokes generative violence (“death is birth”), but Mitchel’s primary leaning here is in the direction of a different mode of destruction, one that (p.166) overlaps with images of the mystic terrorist discussed in the last chapter. The term “leveler,” for instance, was a favorite of anarchists, since it brings together the idea of social equalization with an image of total destruction—social classes erased, the human world razed. Mitchel here is thinking less about generative, symbolic moments of violence—which might be imagined as having significant political, cultural and aesthetic consequences—than about a great overthrow, in revolutionary terms, of the social order, and not in enchanting terms.
There was one important insurrectionist who shared Mitchel’s revolutionary tendencies, though in a more sustained and organized form, who has an important part in the violence narrative of these years: James Connolly. Readers of Yeats might be forgiven if they primarily associate Connolly with Pearse, since their names typically appear side by side in Yeats’s poetry (“Easter 1916,” “Sixteen Dead Men,” “The Rose Tree,” The Death of Cuchulain), but Yeats puts them together more for reasons of scansion and sound than for historical reasons; in fact, Connolly represents quite a different kind of nationalism from Pearse’s—and a markedly different approach to violence. Where Pearse was a Romantic, striving in his literary output and political activism toward a mythic ideal of Irishness and enthralled by the notion of generative violence, Connolly was, above all, a militant socialist. His Citizen’s Army, an active force in the Rising, was founded in response to the 1913 lockout of Dublin’s striking dockworkers, and though he always claimed the two causes to be mutually sustaining and deeply intertwined, he arrived at a position of leadership in the Rising via his labor activism, and there were at times tensions between him and other leaders like Pearse. The outbreak of war, for instance, highlights their contrasting thoughts about violence. Though both staunchly opposed Irish participation in what they viewed as imperial Britain’s war, they parted company on the subject of how to understand its violence. Pearse, we recall, used enchanting language to praise war, writing that “the old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields,” while a deeply dispirited, caustic Connolly responded with a fierce articulation of disenchantment. Of the mutual demonizing of warring enemies, he wrote that “it all depends ... upon whose houses are being bombarded, whose people are being massacred, whose limbs are torn from the body, whose bodies are blown to a ghastly mass of mangled flesh and blood and bones.” As for Mitchel, Connolly may not have shared his adulation for the hot torrents of blood unleashed by war, but he revered him as a true revolutionary: “There are no John Mitchels left in Ireland,” he wrote in Workers’ Republic in 1915; “we are not revolutionists. Not by a thousand miles!” (Connolly, 104). In other words, while Connolly was no preacher of creative destruction, he was a leveler, and in that sense he helped to carry forward into the insurrectionary moment an element of Mitchel’s destructive ideal.
Mitchel’s work demonstrates a trajectory from hate (of the English tyranny over Ireland) to a wider destructive goal, reminiscent of anarchism; this movement, in turn, also illuminates two of Yeats’s closely connected and relatively obscure plays, *Where There is Nothing* (1902) and its later incarnation, *The Unicorn from the Stars* (1907). Both plays are notable for their embrace of mystical violence. At the center of both works is a powerful endorsement of destruction, imagined in religious terms. Both dramatize the situation when a young man, full of unorthodox religious fervor, transgresses a range of conventions—dismissing family, mingling with the lowest in the social order (tinkers and beggars), in *Where There Is Nothing* joining and then breaking from a monastery, creating his own renegade order; in *The Unicorn from the Stars* leading a brief anti-British rebellion. Yeats had been reading Nietzsche when he wrote the first play, and one certainly can see in Paul Ruttledge and Martin Hearne, the respective protagonists of the two works, a Nietzschean attitude: heterodox, mystically inclined, defiant of ordinary social codes and constraints, and endorsing a massive overthrow of the social and religious order. In addition to Nietzsche, Katherine Worth also notes, in introducing the plays, the relevance of Blake, Tolstoy, and various occult groups, but she does not mention that Yeats gives voice, especially in *Where There Is Nothing*, to language reminiscent of anarchism. The protagonist Paul, for instance, employs the phrase “pull down” to describe his goal of demolishing the social order, language very close to what we have seen in anarchist writings. “Sometimes I dream I am pulling down my own house,” he says, “and sometimes it is the whole world that I am pulling down…. I would like to have great iron claws, and to put them about the pillars, and to pull and pull till everything fell into pieces” (*WN*, 59). At this early stage in Act I, Paul is just beginning to formulate his destructive ideal, which will expand and develop over the course of the two plays—from pulling down he will move to extinguishing, and in the later play, Martin employs metaphors of battle, culminating, in the last instance, in an almost nihilistic vision of ecstatic leveling. For Paul, the destructive dream is exemplified in his final sermon (after which he is expelled from the monastery), where he compares destroying the world to blowing out candle after candle: “At last we must put out the light of the Sun and of the Moon, and all the light of the World and the World itself … We must destroy the World; we must destroy everything that has Law and Number; for where there is nothing, there is God” (*WN*, 101, 102). And in Martin’s terms in *The Unicorn from Stars*, “All is clear now…. I am to destroy; destruction was the word the messenger spoke…. Ah, if one could change it all in a minute, even by war and violence!” (*WN*, 138).
These expressions of radical violence evoke Mitchel’s revolutionary ethos of destruction, the two plays framing this attitude in different ways. In Where There Is Nothing, the frame is religious—the “World” Paul wants to destroy is in part a figure for worldliness—and Paul squarely inhabits the mystic’s position, to be crucified, as one might have predicted, by the people. In The Unicorn from the Stars, the catalyst that turns Martin’s urge to destroy into action is the British presence in Ireland, against which he leads a ragtag, doomed brigade. Whether the narrative is mystical or nationalist, however, there is one key element linking these plays to their ancestor Mitchel, but, even more strikingly, showing their distance from him and erecting an obstacle to their being easily read in nationalist terms: “where there is nothing, there is God.”

Though the desire for nothingness—for a wiping clean and a wiping out—is raised by Mitchel in his creative-destruction diatribe, such a motivation is difficult to reconcile with an activist program of any kind, and certainly not with a national one. Aspiring nations do not want nothingness. The ideal of nihil belongs to those hoping to escape from the state, not those committed to its creation.

In The Unicorn from the Stars, the problem is reconciled, at least in part, by a turn to allegory. Allegorical reading, in this play, marks a bridge between a destructive ideal and a nationalist one, since it provides an avenue for interpreting Martin’s bewildering, otherworldly visions in accordance with the restive mood of the play’s vagrant characters, seeking an outlet for action in the real world. Several of them interpret his prophecy in directly nationalist terms, as in this sequence, in which Martin consults a fortune-teller:

Martin:

What is it? What is it I have to do?
Biddy:

I see a great smoke, I see burning ... There is a great smoke overhead.
Martin:

That means we have to burn away a great deal that men have piled up upon the earth. We must bring men once more the wildness of the clean green earth.
Biddy:

Herbs for my healing, the big herb and the little herb, it is true enough they get their great strength out of the earth.
Johnny:

Who was it the green sod of Ireland belonged to in the olden times? Wasn’t it to the ancient race it belonged? And who has possession of it now but the race that came robbing over the sea? The meaning of that is to destroy the big houses and the towns, and the fields to be given back to the ancient race.
Martin:
That is it. You don’t put it as I do, but what matter? Battle is all. (WN, 145, ellipsis in original)

(p.169) If Biddy the fortune-teller is plying her trade with all the vagueness it demands, Johnny, a tinker and a rebel, reads in the one-to-one style of the national allegorist. Yet the allegorical model is only partially successful in *The Unicorn from the Stars*. Martin himself does not seem to understand this interpretation—“you don’t put it as I do”—and the rebellion he leads is strangely disjunctive. While he chases a mystical message from God, his followers hope to overthrow the British and better their own lives. Martin’s obscure mystical vision is intensive to the point of Gnosticism; in looking to pry from such subjective obscurity some real revolutionary fodder, the play’s characters take their own formal direction. The result has something in common with works like Wilde’s *Vera, or the Nihilists*, discussed in the last chapter for its conjoining of melodramatic with urbane styles; in both plays, the thematics around violence engender disjunctive and irreconcilable sensibilities among different character groupings.

The move to allegory is not complete in these plays, and yet, neither is the darker possibility that hovers around their destructive fantasies: cycles of killing. As we saw in *The Playboy of the Western World*, the biggest threat to a world that praises and enchants violence is that the ideal of generativity will give way to mob mentality and, above all, to a cycle of reprisal. Violent energy is imagined in the works we have been discussing as a generalized frenzy, which takes the form of war or anarchist-like leveling. But such outcomes in a sense represent a byway, a channel, in the Irish imaginary of these years. What transpired in Ireland after the Rising was not a cataclysm of destruction but the targeted terror of reprisal. First came the execution of the sixteen leaders; after the First World War, the British escalated reprisal violence, carried out especially ruthlessly by the Black and Tans, and Irish insurgent forces responded; and finally, reprisal became commonplace in the Civil War, on both sides.

In keeping with this new structure of violence in the world, we can begin to track what we might call a stylistics of reprisal. Keening has its rhythms and structure; generative violence yields a recognizable language of enchantment; and reprisal, too, is not only visible at the level of theme, but also produces its own patterns and formal directives. Yeats’s poem “Sixteen Dead Men” provides a point of entry into the reprisal mode, since it is ordered, thematically and structurally, by the idea of back-and-forth violence. The poem was written in 1917, and already registers a pointedly different structure of violence from the generativity of “Easter 1916.” It begins:

O but we talked at large before  
The sixteen men were shot  
But who can talk of give and take,
What should be and what not
While those dead mean are loitering there
To stir the boiling pot? (Var, 395)

These lines suggest that the logic of “give and take” belongs only to the living; “those dead men” would naturally not be thinking in such restricted terms (indeed, their stirring of the “boiling pot” might imply a Mitchel-like destruction). Logic itself might be a style of mere mortality, the poem suggests, asking of the limited, living, politicized world: “And is their logic to outweigh/ MacDonagh’s bony thumb?” Along the lines of “September 1913,” “Sixteen Dead Men” would thus seem to promote an economy of excess, condemning a mercantile model of consciousness (and of literary approaches to violence).

But such conclusions, it turns out, are premature, as the poem’s final lines envision the dead engaging in their own form of reciprocity:

How could you dream they’d listen
That have an ear alone
For those new comrades they have found,
Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone,
Or meddle with our give and take
That converse bone to bone? (Var, 395)

If “our give and take” looks petty and ephemeral in comparison with whatever these heroes might be discussing in their afterworld, still, there is little structural difference between “give and take” and “bone to bone.” “Sixteen Dead Men” has a curiously light tone, a singsong quality that reflects its oscillational patterning. Yet that should not obscure the fact that its structure parallels the model of reprisal. It is meter, especially, that creates the reprisal stress. The word “converse” is the pivot; it must be pronounced with the emphasis on “con,” rather than “verse,” and this oddity in the pronunciation reminds us that the ineluctable return to a this-for-that model really is a function (or a description) of “verse.” This verse is fully lodged within a negative (“con”) structure, one that insists on setting up con-tests, a world lined up by pro and con. Even after death, the poem indicates, there is no escape from a style that matches bone-to-bone—or eye-for-eye.
Yeats wrote two major poems about reprisal violence, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Reprisals,” both of which make significant, moving statements about the relationship of literature to political violence, and employ a language of disenchantment as part of their diverse imaginary. In fact, we might read these poems as responding to earlier and more canonical ones from the (p.171) enchanting tradition, “Easter 1916” and “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death,” respectively. In the latter case, the revisiting is clear and undeniable, in the former more general; for both, Yeats’s poetic moves in concord with a general cultural pattern, from a focus on generativity and enchantment to a darker mood where unredeemable, cyclical violence makes urgent claims on the moral and poetic consciousness. These are hauntingly violent poems, punctured by depictions of murder, exceedingly sad and dispirited. “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” especially, stands alongside such landmarks as The Waste Land and Guernica as among the richest accounts of disenchanted violence in the modernist era. Like those works, it needs to be read for its exquisite intertwining of enchantment within a disenchanting idiom, and of resonant, symbolic power within a bleak statement of despair.

More than any other work we have considered in this chapter, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” disenchants violence. After several opening stanzas that critique political hope as naive complacency, the poem catapults us into a present that could never lull or placate:

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;
The night can sweat with terror as before
We pieced our thought into philosophy,
And planned to bring the world under a rule,
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole. (Var, 429)
All of the elements of a viscerally disenchanting poetic are here: an image of blood that belies any symbolic or generative associations; the presence of terrifying, unconstrained force; the creation of a violent tableau that punches through the literary work unexpectedly and without consolatory surroundings. A reader might wonder, too, if there is not some contradiction here: how can a “murdered” woman “crawl in her own blood”? The answer is that Ellen Quinn, the woman whose murder by Black and Tans is dramatized in the poem—pregnant, she was also holding a child in her arms at the moment when she was hit—lived for several hours after being shot by the passing Tans, who were drunk in their truck and presumably shot her by mistake: “She was out at the gate watching for [her husband] to come back,” an eyewitness wrote, “The lorries passed and shots were fired; the maid ran out and found her lying there. ‘Oh, I’m shot!’ she said. The whole place was splashed with blood like a butcher’s shop…. She lived a few (p.172) hours in terrible pain.” Yeats had very likely read these lines, since they were transcribed by Lady Gregory, in one of a series of diary-style weekly columns she contributed to the London-based The Nation, all of which chronicle horrendous Black and Tan violence. In the keening tradition, the mother is the emblem of the nation’s sorrows; here she represents those sorrows in quite a different way—shockingly, as she writhes in “terrible pain,” and without any of the ritual or aesthetic solace offered by the keen. Violence occasions here a terrible collapse of categories, as the mother-mourner becomes instead the victim, and the potential for healing evaporates.

To disenchant, however, is not to depoliticize. The murder of Quinn became, as Cullingford points out, a political lighting rod (Cullingford, 106). Lady Gregory’s series of exposés of Black and Tan violence includes language that is nearly unreadable for its graphic description of terrible violence, as she powerfully and bluntly details a situation of intimidation and terror in the community. Yeats’s allusion to the murder in his 1921 poem can thus be understood, in part, as a political statement of Republican, anti-British affiliation. It would have been impossible, when the poem was published, to read these lines and not register their disenchantment in partisan terms. And it would be impossible, at any time, to read them and not be sickened and outraged. They thus might be said to occupy a parallel position, in Yeats’s poem and in a broader Irish discourse of these years, to Woolf’s invocation of the Spanish photographs in Three Guineas: a representation of violence that, via its disenchanting visual insistence, promises both to activate and to generalize, creating a violent reaction in the present whose ultimate message is one of universal horror at unmerited victimization in any setting.
Significantly, Yeats embeds this virulently political, historically motivated moment of disenchantment into a stanza (and, more broadly, a poem) that works according to other logics as well. “Now days are dragon-ridden”: for all its presentness, the stanza’s opening line connotes a generalized state of modern terror, in accord with the poem’s original title “Thoughts on the Present State of the World.” The “drunken soldiery,” of course, will reappear in “Byzantium,” another poem with a frenzied, violent feel, yet one whose historicity is muted and rendered dreamlike. The dragon, moreover, with its mythological associations, points ahead to the poem’s last stanza:

Herodias’ daughters have returned again,  
A sudden blast of dusty wind and after  
Thunder of feet, tumult of images,  
Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind;  

And should some crazy hand dare touch a daughter  
All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries,  
According to the wind, for all are blind.  
But now wind drops, dust settles; thereupon  
There lurches past, his great eyes without thought  
Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,  
That insolent fiend Robert Artisson  
To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought  
Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks. (Var, 433)

The metaphors here are abstruse, as Yeats turns for his final image to an obscure corner of Medieval Irish lore, in the form of Artisson. The image of Herodias’s daughters, also nontransparent, suggests sexual violence, yet not in the “sudden shudder” tradition. Like the earlier portrayal of Quinn’s murdered body, these sisters resist any narrative of generativity, their “purpose” being only “in the labyrinth of the wind.” Equally obscure and frightful, the specter of Artisson was described by Yeats, in a note to the poem, as an “evil spirit,” as indeed he is. Inevitably, too, Artisson conjures up a Yeatsian cousin, the “rough beast” from the closing lines of “The Second Coming” (written and published two years prior to “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”). Both poems close with harrowing visions that meld the historical with the mythic, in the form of a lurching, semiblind being that seems simultaneously to represent and to elude history.
If the rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem offers one form of a monstrous birth, a darkly prophetic answer to the generative violence of the 1916 era (including Yeats’s own poem of that tradition), Artisson seems to create havoc with a reading of history as progressive or of violence as productive. He is conjured, after all, from “a sudden blast of dusty wind,” not the sexual shudder of climax but the sudden blow that, as we have seen, sets in motion the intimate, visceral experience of historical violence, begun in the body and moving out from there. In several respects, indeed, the poem reads largely as a meditation on the question of historicity. What does it mean to write from and for a historical moment when war is erupting, and when the logic of reprisal is becoming fixed? How can these new realities be squared with such questions as the cultural accomplishments of a civilization, the recent political history of the emerging nation, one’s own life’s work, and, most generally, the power and limits of the imagination in the face of exceptionally callous, nongenerative violence? Rob Doggett, in a wonderful reading of the poem, sees “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” largely as a representation of historical fracture at a very particular moment of political instability, a violent (p.174) space of national self-definition “between the actual community and the imagined community, between a history waiting to be written and a history that has been written.”73 And Michael Wood, whose splendid meditation Yeats and Violence is largely a reading of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” writes that “violence as Yeats understands it [particularly in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”]—whether personal, political, or apocalyptic—is always sudden and surprising, visible, unmistakable, inflicts or promises injury and is fundamentally uncontrollable” (Wood, 20). For our purposes, what is most significant about the poem is the way it simultaneously disengages violence from the modes of thought in which it had been most powerfully lodged in Ireland in the two preceding decades—that of keening and of generative violence, and, to a lesser degree, of destructive utopianism—and asks, in the absence or refutation of these forms, where violence can possibly stand, how it can be part of culture, part of art, part of historical narrative.
Perhaps it will tell us something about the poem’s searching and scorching relation to violence that “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” for all its referencing of Greek culture, is guided less by such a model—not by Homer, for whom bodies fall and chariots are made, in a cycle of productive war and art—than by Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, which is referenced repeatedly in the poem (as in “mock mockers after that/that would not lift a hand ... To bar that foul storm out” [Var, 432]). Yeats’s suggestion that violence represents perhaps the most intimate and shattering experience of living in history shares a great deal with Shakespeare’s penetrating and exhaustive consideration of violence in *King Lear*, which always sees violence in material terms—acting in the world and on people, destroying and creating. The poem contains some phrases as memorably spare as Lear’s own—“What is there more to say?” or “Violence upon the roads; violence of horses”—which seem to stand alone and apart, and it also comprises the Learian bellow, now figured as a caustic assessment of political possibility: “We, who seven years ago/Talked of honour and of truth,/Shriek with pleasure if we show/The weasel’s twist, the weasel’s tooth.” (Var, 431). There are, moreover, wonderful images of wild movement in the poem, and dizzying suggestions of flight, as, for instance, “The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven.”

Yeats does not ground his swan, whose flight turns instead into a new sign of destruction, reminiscent of the apocalyptic visions of *Where There Is Nothing* and *The Unicorn from the Stars*:

> The swan has leaped into the desolate heaven:  
> That image can bring wildness, bring a rage  
> To end all things, to end  
> (p.175) What my laborious life imagined, even  
> The half-imagined, the half-written page;  
> O but we dreamed to mend  
> Whatever mischief seemed  
> To afflict mankind, but now  
> That winds of winter blow  
> Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed. (Var, 431)
Part of the ferocity of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” derives from its sense of self-deception in the past, another Learian motif. As in this stanza, it often melds I’s into we’s, suggesting that Yeats—in tandem with the cultural project to which he subscribed in the years before reprisal killing and internal war became the norm—ought to have known better, ought to have known not to dream. This is not just pessimism or self-critique; it represents a judgment about a whole approach to cultural and political change, including the theory of generative violence. Indeed, Yeats draws much closer in this poem to Mitchel’s destructive idea than to the idea of enchantment, but without the joy or sense of futurity associated with Mitchel. He even uses Mitchel’s key term: “Come let us mock at the great/That had such burdens on the mind/…/Nor thought of the levelling wind.” Leveling emblematized Mitchel’s radicalness, but Yeats’s leveling is not revolutionary; its destruction lacks not only euphoria but a motivating political belief. Still, the leveling wind, a pervasive image in the poem, provides an apt metaphor for its mood.

In this poem of reprisal, Yeats returns, over and over, to the whirlwind. He is, of course, famous as a poet of spirals—“Turning and turning in the widening gyre”—and of circling patterns—“of what is past, or passing, or to come” (Var, 401, 408). Here those patterns are replaced by a form of wild movement that is troubling and chaotic, even brutal. In the opening stanza, the moon, often for Yeats the instigator of ordering patterns, “pitches common things about.” As the poem progresses, we have “those winds that clamour of approaching night,” the “wildness” of the swan and its rage, the “winds of winter,” “the levelling wind,” the “foul storm,” the whirlwind imagery surrounding Heordias’s daughters, and this stanza:

> When Loie Fuller’s Chinese Dancers enwound  
> A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,  
> It seemed that a dragon of air  
> Had fallen among dancers, had whirlèd them round  
> Or hurried them off on its own furious path;  
> So the Platonic Year  
> (p.176) Whirls out new right and wrong,  
> Whirls in the old instead;  
> All men are dancers and their tread  
> Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong. (Var, 430)
It is curious to find Loie Fuller among the likes of Shakespeare and Phidias in the poem, the only contemporary artist mentioned, and a woman no less. Fuller’s performances, with their Asian-inspired dance motifs and their trademark swirling swaths of cloth, created a sensation in Paris in the 1890s and beyond, but did not, I think, suggest permanence, and her joyful presence hardly matches the poem’s atmosphere. One wonders why her magically transforming colors would conjure the dragon, except that in this era of reprisal violence, even a formalized, aesthetic spectacle of windlike imagery swirls “the old” back into itself, not only the old of this poem’s span (say, seven years ago, or further into the speaker’s history, or even back to the time of Phidias) but back to a more primordial past, where the barbarous gong represents a very basic musical impulse. At an earlier moment in Yeats’s and Ireland’s career, “all men are dancers” might have been a welcome suggestion, along the lines of the various faery works that signal dance as an escape from the drudgery of the world. Instead, the poem’s agony swells into every corner of its imagery, the destructive wind an emblem and progenitor of force in a raw and unappeasable form. The swirls that return violence into artifice enact reprisal; they show that even the poem’s aesthetic dreams have succumbed to reprisal’s indelible logic.

I have suggested that “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” revises “Easter 1916” in spirit; its title suggests a corrective (writing out the numbers, the only Yeatsian poem to do so, and of course eliminating the sanguinary Christian reference point), and its wholesale reconsideration of violence casts doubt on the premise of the earlier poem, that moments of convulsive violence can create a lasting aesthetic and cultural legacy. In turning now to Yeats’s most direct engagement with reprisal, we find a much more aggressive reengagement with his past history of enchanting violence: “Reprisals” bluntly and bitterly revisits “An Irish Airman Foresees His Death,” substituting disenchantment for enchantment. Like “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” “Reprisals” was composed between 1919 and 1921, a bleak time for people like Yeats who still held some allegiance to England, and for anyone with a sensitivity to “violence on the roads.” In response to the same epidemic of Black and Tan violence that stood behind the “days are dragon-ridden” stanza of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” Yeats wrote a new poem for Robert Gregory, this one without a trace of enchantment. He never published “Reprisals” during his lifetime, in accordance with Lady Gregory’s wishes. Readers today will not find it in the most widely read of his collections (M. L. Rosenthal’s Selected Poems and Three Plays) or in the Norton Anthology of English Literature, and this marginality in the canon has perhaps contributed to the relative critical obscurity of reprisal as a significant mode and pattern in Yeats’s work, and in the period more generally.
Yeats is well known to have repudiated the style of First World War poetry associated with figures like Owen and Sassoon, writing in his 1936 introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* that “I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the great war ... I have rejected these poems ... [because] ... passive suffering is not a theme for poetry,” yet “Reprisals” reads uncannily like those lyrics, in both style and content. Like the famous war lyrics, “Reprisals” is structured according to a logic of ruptured belief:

- Some nineteen German planes, they say,
  You had brought down before you died.
  We called it a good death. Today
  Can ghost or man be satisfied? (Var, 791)

These opening lines set up the terms that the poem will expand, as it expresses an increasingly troubled sense that the war “that we/Imagined such a fine affair” was in fact an earlier iteration of the horrifying killings perpetrated by the Black and Tans in the postwar years. There is something a little smug in that opening statement—as if bringing down planes had no human content—and the invocation several lines later of “battle joy” suggests that the “we” of the poem had remained stubbornly and startlingly idealistic on the whole question of the war, right through to its end. Now, however belatedly, the mood is angry, and its trajectory of disillusionment culminates in the chilling last lines of the poem: “Then close your ears with dust and lie/Among the other cheated dead” (Var, 791). If the war itself is not the precise object of condemnation, the Britain for which it was fought most certainly is, indicating a continuity with other war poems, where the British government, like the war’s general staff, is held accountable for the carnage. Too, the poem shares with many disenchanting war texts the selective display of shocking moments of violence, represented in blunt terms (“shot,” “murder” “murdering”). And, finally, it envisions the dead rising from their graves to shame the present, another fantasy that was enunciated by many World War One writers. Wrote Sassoon in 1926, “Well might the Dead who struggled in the slime/Rise and deride this sepulcher of crime,” while for Yeats the commandment is to “rise from your Italian tomb” and return to the district of Coole, where:

(178) Half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery
  Are murdering your tenants there.
  Men that revere your father yet
  Are shot at on the open plain.
  Where may new-married women sit
  And suckle children now? Armed men
  May murder them in passing by
  Nor law nor parliament take heed. (Var, 791)
The relation to World War One poetry is helpful in showing how closely Yeats hews to a widely available disenchanting idiom, but, of course, the context that gives "Reprisals" its bite is Yeats's own earlier enchantment of violence, as expressed in poems like "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death." There, we recall, death was welcomed for its aesthetic appeal; it was the choice of balance and form, or what Kundera would later call "the unbearable lightness of being." Written in the first person, "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" had credited its subject with the power to "foresee," indeed to control, his own future; "Reprisals," with its jarring, almost aggressive, second-person voice, retakes that agency from Gregory. Even he, it now seems, has been duped. Invoking Gregory's father reminds the reader of the traditional role of the aristocratic patron in the community, as Yeats idealized it—guardian of its poor and vulnerable, representative of its ethical high ground—and returns Gregory's family situation to the center of the poem's outrage. At this moment of visible English tyranny, Yeats is desperate to imagine an Anglo-Irish aristocracy that could fill the power vacuum, even well past a time when such would be politically conceivable. The poem takes a nostalgic stance with respect to a past when power was firmly held by the Protestant elite. Yet, of course, that power was always intertwined with the British, whose ruthless murderousness in the present casts a long shadow back through the ascendancy. It is an irony for Yeats, if a familiar one in his corpus, that the good guardians (Gregory, his father, their loyal followers) have been nullified and superseded, where the bad guardians (the British) have been emboldened. Politically, the poem thus straddles the line between the Republican passion of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," with which this poem shares a great deal (the Ellen Quinn murder, the drunken soldiery, the Black and Tans operating with impunity) and "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," which quite literally elevated the aristocracy to a position in the sky. Yeats's poetics of reprisal comes very close, in the end, to the antiwar poetry that would soon become canonical, yet it holds the reins even tighter, refusing at every turn to enchant or mystify, where, as we have seen, those lyrics tended to (p.179) operate precisely by appropriating an enchanting aesthetic for a disenchanting purpose. And there is good historical reason for this difference: in Ireland after the uprising, reprisal is what followed, historically and imaginatively, from generative violence, and hence its life spelled the death of enchanted violence. "Was it for this?" Yeats had asked in "September 1913," the ineluctable logic of balance facing the poem's lauded economy of excess, while Owen had pressed further, wondering if all human life is not futile ("Was it for this the clay grew tall?"). In "Reprisals," the question is not directly asked, yet its aura is near; it is, perhaps, more an answer than a reiteration of the question: "Then close your ears with dust and lie/Among the other cheated dead."
Yeats’s “Reprisals” in many ways epitomizes the literary engagement with the ferocious realities of reprisal, but it is Sean O’Casey whose works are most consistently guided and tormented by its logic. To read them next to Yeats shows how fully the reprisal structure—in theme, tone, stylistics—belongs to this period, in works that represent divergent political and formal modes. O’Casey’s most admired works, *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), and *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), are all underpinned by the structure of reprisal, and all exemplify an ironic, deflationary attitude toward generative violence. As I have suggested, O’Casey in many ways represents a spirit of opposition to any sanguinary approach to violence. His socialist affiliations are apparent throughout his plays, which exude a deep understanding of the language, spirit, and psychology of the Dublin tenement world where they are typically set—but they have little space for a Romantic view of violence. O’Casey was a disciple of Connolly (a member of the Citizen Army until 1915, when he resigned, not taking part in the Rising) rather than of Pearse, and this difference is manifest at every turn. His plays take generative violence as one more cultural fact to scrutinize and—in his reprisal mode of the 1920s—dismiss.
Most directly engaging with the Rising is *The Plough and the Stars*, whose first half is set in Dublin several months before the events, and whose final, bloody acts take place during Easter Week itself. Without actually scorning the revolutionists, the play nevertheless carries a tone of caustic dismissal of the historic events; there is no transformative beauty here. If this is O’Casey’s answer to “Easter 1916,” as in some ways it surely is, it is a defiantly antimeliorist one. Not surprisingly, it drew protests from the Abbey audiences who first viewed it in 1926 (at the same time, the trilogy in general was very successful and helped to revive the fortunes of the Abbey when they began running there). As usual in O’Casey’s work, it is women who are given the most interesting and substantial personalities in *The Plough and the Stars*, and their dilemmas dramatize the conflicts of the Rising in the only really salient terms of the play. Most compelling are Nora, the spoiled, selfish young bride of one of the insurrectionists, who desperately tries to keep her husband out of the fight and loses her sanity when he is engulfed in it, and Bessie Burgess, the histrionic, pro-British outlier, whose son is at war in France (by the final act, we learn, he is on his way home with a shattered arm), who also undergoes something of a transformation during the harrowing week of fighting. Nora’s madness feels slightly Gothic—sleepwalking in her nightdress, her hair disheveled, with a wild and almost supernatural air—but in general her breakdown is depicted in empathetic and not entirely unrealistic terms. Though a person of limited intellectual and spiritual capacities, Nora is nevertheless genuinely destroyed by the rebellion, by fear and love for her husband. But it is Bessie who gets the prototypical O’Casey treatment. In the first few acts, she is an offensive, Rule Britannia shrew, but in the last act, she turns to caretaking, and selflessly nurses the shell-shocked Nora through harrowing days and nights. In the end, she takes a bullet for her; rushing to pull the raving Nora from the window in fear of British gunfire, she is hit in her stead. But Bessie will be no martyr. Her final lines are as full of unmannered rage as were her diatribes in the first part of the play. She spits antagonism and defiance at Nora and at the audience, who might have been ready to read her in transformative or heroic terms: “Merciful God, I’m shot, I’m shot, I’m shot! … Th’ life’s pourin’ out o’ me! [To Nora] I’ve got this through … through you … through you, you bitch, you!” These are her first (shocking) words after being hit, to be followed, a few lines later, by: “This is what’s aftter comin’ on me for nursin’ you day an’ night … I was a fool, a fool, a fool! Get me a dhrink o’ wather, you jade, will you? There’s a fire burnin’ in me blood!” (*CPI*, 258, ellipses in original). Bessie is not about to become a saint. Regretting her sacrifice in bitter terms, she dies entirely unglorified.
Still, there is a running discourse of generative violence in *The Plough and the Stars*, articulated by various men as they rile themselves up for the fight, and as they hope to find some consolation in defeat. Mostly this mode is relayed through Pearse’s words. Though mentioned by name in Act III, during the fighting, Pearse’s most substantial appearance comes earlier in the play, as the men are rallying to the cause. An unnamed man is seen in shadow in a window above the pub where the action takes place, and his voice is heard intermittently. What we hear in bits and pieces is something of a greatest hits from Pearse’s published works, including clips from his oration at Rossa’s funeral and his praise of war, both of which we have seen to offer an exemplary language of generative violence. O’Casey is judicious in his treatment of Pearse; using his own words and showing their effectiveness, he gives credence to the idea that generative violence offered the insurrectionists a powerful, motivating idea, supporting them in what they knew would be a losing battle. (That said, the fact that Pearse is seen from the vantage of a pub, scene of prostitutes and other questionable folk, raised hackles among audiences.) In a sense, O’Casey leaves generative violence to the men in the play—some of whom behave with real courage, moved to the end by Pearse’s words. All of this really remains at the level of a sketch, however, even caricature, with the fighters entirely out of touch with complex human catastrophes like Nora’s mental breakdown or Bessie’s rich contradictoriness. From the vantage point of a decade later, *The Plough and the Stars* presents enchanted violence as a rather thin edifice, easily dispatched by the shattering effects of a violence that was never really explained in its terms. For O’Casey, generative violence is, in a word, framed—almost a relic of its era—and hence aptly figured by the silhouette of Pearse, himself framed in a window.
The Shadow of a Gunman, set several years later, in the thick of Black and Tan brutalities, takes terror and reprisal as the state of Dublin existence, and only considers generative violence through layers of irony and literary referentiality. The play takes place over the course of a single day and night in a Dublin tenement, the scene, in the second act, of a Black and Tan raid. There are no real rebels in the play—the Republicans are stowing their weaponry on the premises, but the cast of characters in the play is resolutely on the margins of the national struggle. Nevertheless, the language of Romantic nationalism and generative violence abounds, now stripped of its potency. It has become a kind of shared, armchair vocabulary, a language of violence and nationalism with none of the transformative power imagined by the rebellion writers we have discussed. O’Casey insists that the heroic spirit to which the play continually refers—it opens with a discussion of Shelley—is not so much “dead and gone,” as Yeats had thought it in 1913, but a self-promoting fiction. The play borrows its central premise from The Playboy of the Western World: that the populace, and especially women, always worships men it (wrongly) believes to be violent. In this case, the false celebrity is Donal Davoren, an indigent poet with no political convictions who is mistaken for a Republican on the run. Given that this misunderstanding awakens the sexual desire of Minnie Powell, the lovely young woman who comes, somewhat implausibly, to inhabit the play’s moral center, he is willing to let the misapprehension stand. Donal and his roommate Seumas Shields are skeptical of the whole Republican ideal. As Seumas explains it:

I wish to God it was all over. The country is gone mad. Instead of counting their beads now they’re countin’ bullets; their Hail Marys and paternosters are burstin’ bombs—burstin’ bombs, an’ the rattle of machine-guns; petrol (p.182) is their holy water; their Mass is a burnin’ buildin’; their De Profundis is “The Soldiers’ Song,” an’ their creed is, I believe in the gun almighty, maker of heaven an’ earth—an’ it’s all for “the glory o’ God an’ the honour o’ Ireland.” (CPI, 131)

Amidst the various enthusiasts in the play, the sentiments expressed by Seamus, and to a lesser degree by Donal, stand out as intelligent, reasonable responses to a nightmare situation. And it is, almost literally, a nightmare that transpires in the play’s second act, with the raid happening late at night. In the play’s crescendo, which takes place offstage, the Black and Tans, having arrested Minnie (she courageously stored a bag of bombs in her room to protect Donal), shoot her in the chest.

For all the emphasis given to Donal and Seumas as they respond to the violent situation around them, the play’s presentation of violence hinges not on them, but on Minnie. Early in the play, Minnie seems poised to be caricatured as one more simpleminded, self-deceived patriot, eroticizing violence and imagining herself as a revolutionary hero, while Donal articulates the playwright’s own skeptical position:
Minnie:

Poetry is a grand thing, Mr. Davoren, I’d love to be able to write a poem—a lovely poem on Ireland an’ the men o’ ‘98.

Davoren:

Oh, we’ve had enough of poems, Minnie, about ‘98, and of Ireland, too.

Minnie:

Oh, there’s a thing for a Republican to say! But I know what you mean: it’s time to give up the writing an’ take to the gun. (CPI, 107)\(^82\)

By 1920, O’Casey suggests, Minnie’s attitude has become the stuff of comedy. And yet, when faced with the raid, Minnie is the only person among the tenants to act with courage and integrity. She hides the bombs, stands up to the soldiers, betrays no one, and dies in that spirit. Indeed, Minnie could almost be said to urge the play from its tone of dark comedy toward tragedy, in the direction, that is, of a terrible, transformative beauty—except that O’Casey refuses to promote any such formula.\(^83\) “Oh, it was horrible to see the blood pourin’ out, an Minnie moanin’” is the only account given of Minnie’s death: disenchantment. And several lines later, the play ends, with Donal appropriately self-lacerating for cowardice (“Oh, Donal Davoren, shame is your portion now”) and with Seumas’s superstitious comment: “I knew something ud come of the tappin’ on the wall!” (CPI, 157). In the end, O’Casey is willing to establish Minnie as a figure in the spirit of martyrdom, but not to credit that spirit with any lasting power or meaning. In the absence of any (p.183) kind of apotheosis, the belief in generative violence ends only in another pool of blood.
Indeed, in O’Casey’s world, the further removed one is from the Rising, the more untenable its metaphorics of violence become. *Juno and the Paycock*, the first among this violent trilogy to have been composed and performed, but the latest one in terms of its setting—it takes place two years after *The Shadow of a Gunman*, in an Ireland now at civil war—shows no vestige of belief in generative violence. I have discussed the play already, focusing on its depiction of keening as a shared language of mourning that might also be imagined as a force for change. Here I want to note how fully it imagines a language and structure of reprisal. In the play’s final words, uttered in Boyle’s inimitable lexicon, O’Casey seems to sum up the condition of Ireland in the midst of civil war: “th’ whole worl’s … in a terr … ible state o’ … chassis! [chaos]” (CPI, 89). But it’s not really chassis—not the violence of whirlwinds or leveling winds—that O’Casey chronicles in *Juno and the Paycock*. This is a state of reprisal, eye for eye, bone to bone, and there is nothing chaotic or unpredictable about how that works: first the Tancred boy is shot by the Free Staters; later Johnny, who betrayed him, will be killed by the IRA in retaliation. Nothing, really, could be simpler, and, indeed, the play’s whole structure is predictable: we know the family will never get its legacy; we know Mary will be abandoned by Bentham; we know Johnny will die. What determines all of this, I would contend, is not so much O’Casey’s indebtedness to melodrama—though Kiberd, for one, makes a convincing case for the centrality of stage melodrama in O’Casey’s works in general and *Juno* in particular—as his attachment to a stylistics of reprisal. Such a structure, as we have seen in the case of Yeats’s “Sixteen Dead Men,” is a style of fatal predictability—as Lady Gregory put it in 1920, “death answering to death like the clerks answering to one another at the Mass.” And so we find the back-and-forth:

Johnny:

Are yous goin’ to do in a comrade?—look at me arm, I lost it for Ireland.

Second Irregular:

Commandant Tancred lost his life for Ireland. (*CPI*, 84)

With reprisal, the patterning is as inevitable as it is crushing.
This is always, even tautologically, the situation with reprisal: it has no end or, to put it differently, we know exactly how it ends—with more killing. It also has no beginning, or rather, each side contends the other was the original assailant. Politically and personally, the catastrophe of cyclical violence cannot be overstated. For artists, there are really only two possibilities: to express this situation (and this often (p.184) takes the form of a severe disenchantment) or to imagine some form of imaginative redirection. Girard argues, as we have seen, that the function of sacred violence is to stanch the flow of reprisal’s endless call for blood, to redirect reciprocal violence into some different channel, where it can be contained and managed. But this is not really possible in the Irish example, because it was generative violence, imagined in sacred terms, that offered the initial, justifying language, now discredited. With no such imaginative space available, and with the historical present in a nightmarish struggle, writers tended to look back to keening, with its detachment from the violent event itself and its ties to the ancient world, or outward into an architectural or geographic model that might make imaginative sense of the nation’s pains. These turns imply an active reconceptualizing, an effort, at the figural and formal level, to break the stalemate of generative versus reprisal violence.

Past, Present, Future: Architectural Allegory
In looking to new imaginative arrangements by way of conclusion, I want to consider two powerful symbols in the iconography of nations, the great tree and, especially, the representative building (usually a house or mansion). There is no more conventional image of a nation than the grand old tree. With regard to the English literature of this period, one thinks readily of the elm in Forster’s *Howards End* (1910)—symbol of all that Forster cherishes in mystical, rural England, and all he sees as threatened by homogenization and modernization—or of Woolf’s play with the trope in *Orlando* (1928), where the oak tree (along with the gigantic house) provides continuity, comfort, and pleasure over four centuries of novelistic fantasy. In Ireland, the imperative to find unifying national icons was pressing, and the tree offered an obvious choice: organic, ancient, formidable, and nondivisive, it could stand for a united, powerful, richly flourishing Ireland, with roots in the ancient land. We find images of great rooted blossomers not only in Yeats’s poetry but throughout the literature of the Gaelic revival, including the nineteenth-century ballad tradition and the literature of the Rising. Standish O’Grady, whose enormously influential *History of Ireland* (1878–81) was read and admired by all the writers we have considered in this chapter, describes Fergus, one of the legendary kings of old Ireland, as “a great sheltering tree,” and the image itself seems organic, given that the warriors of Ireland’s mythic past, including Cuchulain, are known as “the Red Branch.” Or we might point to a poem by MacDonagh entitled “The Oak,” from a 1904 volume, in which the tree functions as an obvious allegory for Ireland. “Behold this oak which stands alone/And crowns the crag, and (p.185) scorns the earth!” it begins, and then details the tree’s struggle through adversity (when a mere acorn, it is pecked at by an eagle, and that’s just the beginning) on to its ultimate triumph: “It lives, this giant of the hills,/One day to sway in lordly state.” What distinguishes MacDonagh’s oak, above all, is its capacity for resistance. And this is true more generally, especially with respect to violence; the tree is that which withstands and survives, projecting forward to a glorious future, “one day to sway in lordly state.”
Buildings, by striking contrast, become emblems of the shock of violence. Symbolically, they work almost in reverse of the tree, suggestive of all the divisions and vulnerabilities of a nascent nation, sites of personal and family memory, signs of class difference, and ultimately the victims of revolutionary rage. This victimization was real; the destruction of buildings was a central feature in the War of Independence and throughout the Civil War. The First World War left whole towns in ruins, miles and miles of land blasted. Reprisal violence in Ireland was different. It involved targeted destruction, with people attacking individual storehouses, businesses, institutions, and especially homes. The burning of buildings was typically registered in local terms, leaving strange, gaping holes in familiar landscapes, creating pockets of ruins within otherwise functioning locales. Destruction of buildings often took place at night, so that the image of a fiery glow against the dark sky carried its connotations, whether as a cause for celebration or as an image of terror. In the imaginative literature of this period, the burned home worked simultaneously as a realist depiction of reprisal violence, guerilla attack, and civil war, and in allegorical terms as a rendering of the long history of violence in Ireland. Because that toll had so often been taken on the human body, at the same time that the house-as-nation was an inescapable association, the allegory of the destroyed house pointed in two directions: toward a capacious image of the nation, and toward an intensive, individual figuration of the wounded or dead body. Ultimately, the richest and most haunting works in this tradition are characterized by a mutuality and interspersing of these two modes.
During the independence and civil wars, one particularly salient target was the Anglo-Irish estate or "big house," where wealth and power had for centuries been consolidated.\textsuperscript{87} The big house, a shrine for Yeats and others with Ascendancy affinities, an admiration for the aristocracy, and a taste for eighteenth-century style, had been a flashpoint in the Irish struggle for decades before the war years. In particular, the land war of the 1870s–'90s, which contributed to the slow dissolution of the estates in the twentieth century, had focused on the Anglo-Irish landlord as the local representative of the despised British landowning system, which created ruthless inequities in wealth and had contributed to the famines of midcentury. If boycotts by laborers and purchasers, as well as Fenian attacks against landlords, held a primary place in the public imagination of the land war—hence overlapping with anarchism in some respects—in the 1919–23 era, the house itself became the object of violence.\textsuperscript{88} Thus, in \textit{The Last September} (1929), Elizabeth Bowen’s powerful novel of an Anglo-Irish world painfully encountering its own obsolescence—the novel is set in 1920 in an acute period of insurgency against the English—it is the aristocratic Naylor family seat, Danielstown, that takes the ultimate blow.\textsuperscript{89} The house, which is full of splendid hollows and spaces of absence (as are the characters themselves), has always been signified by an aura of emptiness. Moreover, as Lady Naylor will say to a neighbor after the death of one of the protagonists, “the house feels empty”—suggesting, via syntax, that the house itself is doing the feeling.\textsuperscript{90} This seems right, not so much because Danielstown has functioned in anthropomorphic terms up to now, but because, like the rest of the landscape at this terrific moment of tension before violence—at the violet hour—it is about to do so:

For in February, before those leaves had visibly budded, the death—the execution, rather—of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel, occurred in the same night. A fearful scarlet ate up the hard spring darkness; indeed, it seemed that an extra day, unreckoned, had come to abortive birth that these things might happen. It seemed, looking from east to west at the sky tall with scarlet, that the country itself was burning; while to the north the neck of mountain before Mount Isabel was frightfully outlined. The roads in unnatural dusk ran dark with movement, secretive or terrified; not a tree, brushed by wind from the flames, not a cabin pressed in despair to the bosom of the night, not a gate too starkly visible but had its place in the design of order and panic. (\textit{LS}, 303)
Here again, the violence of reprisal is not chaotic, but designed; not a form of
cwildness, but of order. When the house is executed, “it seemed ... that the
country itself was burning,” but of course, it is not—a crucial distinction in
demarcating among different forms of war and terror. If the whole region has
paradoxically come to life (“a fearful scarlet ate up the hard spring darkness”),
that vividness is a result of the specificity of the destruction. What brings all of
this piercing vitality to the world around the burning house is the fact that only
individual houses are gone, leaving a gaping vacancy. Now, perhaps, it is the
turn of the country to “feel empty.”

Yeats, too, registered poignancy and inevitability in the emptiness left in the
wake of the big house; like Bowen, he was taken with the idea of the threatened
house as image of national violence, and like her, he invested these spaces with
(emotive life). They reverberate; they “feel” their emptiness—but also,
for Yeats, their fullness. “I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,” Yeats
wrote of the swans at Coole, “and now my heart is sore,” and this mournful
mood about the loss of the aristocratic estate in the era of land redistribution
and reprisal attacks is a recurrent one in his works (Var, 322). More than any
other single poem, Yeats’s sublime “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” published
in the same volume as “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” elaborates this mood
and reflects on its meaning and consequences. As its name suggests, the poem is
emphatically concerned with the present—concerned, that is, to think about
violence in the present moment, and it does so via a “meditation” on a series of
built structures. Like Bowen in The Last September, the poem takes the big
house as an allegory for the nation and for the threatened human body. It
includes features common to Yeats’s reprisal poems, such as irruptions of
disenchanted violence, but its critique is ultimately of a different kind: with the
focus shifted from body to building, the poem asks (inconclusively) how a
language of violence might function if it is disengaged from the motif of
enchantment and the structure of reprisal.

Like all big houses in these years, the “ancestral houses” that entitle the first
section of “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” are a target of violence; more
surprisingly, in this rendering, they are also its product. Yeats imagines
the inception of the estate in terms familiar to us from the Homeric model of
enchanted violence (and Homer is referenced early in the poem), where, we
recall, it is men at war who fuel the artistry of a civilization:

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man
Called architect and artist in, that they,
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,
The gentleness none there had ever known (Var, 418)
Here is a central contradiction, one we have confronted repeatedly in this study: that violence and bitterness can bring forth “sweetness” and “gentleness”—Arnoldian terms that connote the intellectual and aesthetic virtues, rather than muscular or potent ones. The creation of homes is metonymically linked with the creation of class (“gentle” of course representing birth as much as sensibility), and both, it would seem, are the product of violence. Later in the poem, Yeats will offer another image of intertwined violence with aesthetics in the form of “a changeless sword,” a Japanese emblem of both warfare and artistry. The sword, even more directly than the house, works on the Homeric enchantment model, whereby war and the creation of lasting works of art are reciprocal processes.

The ancestral house, then, is a site of vexed beauty, the lovely product of an ugly past; it is also a place with no active relation to the present. In a poem strongly committed to imagining the particular “times,” this obsolescence creates a conundrum. The house may showcase the culture’s proud history, but “the great-grandson of that house” is “but a mouse.” Even more centrally, its very essence belongs to a mode of existence that Yeats has always insisted is “dead and gone.” The opening stanzas of “Ancestral Houses” invoke the economy of excess Yeats affiliated with the Romantic past, in an imagery of overflowing abundance:

Surely among a rich man’s flowering lawns,
Amid the rustle of his planted hills,
Life overflows without ambitious pains;
And rains down life until the basin spills … (Var, 417)

Yeats makes the lushness as sensory as he can, the l’s and s’s themselves overflowing. Still, if the language of excess usually adduced to the old martyrs is here marshaled to depict the aristocracy, such a conflation is an act of willful imagining; its ephemerality is everywhere felt. “Mere dreams, mere dreams!” opens the next stanza, as the poet begins to recant his opening invocation of abundance. For the “glittering jet” or “fountain,” he now substitutes “some marvelous empty sea-shell flung/Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams” as symbol of the house (Var, 417). One could say much about the resonance of this object, with its Woolfian qualities of sea-made translucence, its whirlpool-like suggestions of changefulness and enchantment, its continuity with (rather than distinction from) the richness of the house in the first lines, its interesting emptiness, and more. The poem is, in sum, anchored at its front end by the ancestral house as a locus for various forms of aesthetic and cultural power, simultaneously created and threatened by the violence that “shadows the inherited glory of the rich” (Var, 418).
In the poem, however, the ancestral house—fountain or seashell—quickly gives way to “my house,” the title of the next section and the setting of the poem through to its close. Yeats’s tower home carries its own symbolic overload, offering a wholly different significatory system from the seat of privilege and “gentleness” that was the big house. On its ground, for instance, “the symbolic rose can break in flower,” the rose, as we have seen, being one of several overdetermined symbols for Ireland, mobilized by the Rising poets and by Yeats himself in many of his works. In his stark tower, the poet keeps his own company, in a time of war seeking (and finding) there, “befitting emblems of adversity” (419, 420). It is not only the emblems that are exceptionally fitting; the phrase itself creates an almost perfect circle, a satisfying rendition of the dynamic (if deeply troubled) relation between violence and achievement that the poem largely explores.

Both the ancestral house and the tower, different as they are, stand out as something of a bulwark against the bleak reality of war. We are told, for instance, of an earlier resident who once “founded here. A man-at-arms/Gathered a score of horse and spent his days/In this tumultuous spot,” hoping to elude the “long wars and sudden night alarms.” Now, of course, that tradition is reenacted by Yeats:

We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned,
Yet no clear fact to be discerned (425)

With their affinity to The Waste Land (“We think of the key, each in his prison/Thinking of the key” [TWL, 413–14]), these lines have a quintessentially modernist flavor, evoking the psychic imprisonment and sense of linguistic enclosure so often ascribed to early-twentieth-century thought and affect. And yet, of course, it is all quite literal, as the immediate transition to political conditions insists. The key is turned for good reason.
“A man is killed, or a house burned”: what kind of difference is expressed in that caesura? The line has a pause in its center, and as we pause with it, we might consider what that “or” is carrying. Perhaps it should be read in a large sense, not only as an additive (men are killed and houses are burned) but, from an imaginative point of view, as a shift. If the “or” functions in this way, then “a house burned” would reflect literal and imaginative conditions different from those of a killed person. The fact that the two halves of the line are imbalanced around the “or” (“a house is burned” would be the parallel metric), contributes to this sense of slide. When a man is killed (the present tense resonates), whirlwinds of destruction or cycles of violence ensue. When a house is burned, the consequences are terrible, as the poem sorrowfully attests, but the poetic output might be productive in a different way. Bowen would write, in The Death of the Heart, that “the destruction of buildings and furniture is more palpably dreadful to the spirit than the destruction of human life,” but the calculus here is somewhat different, as Yeats works to evade the worse/better accounting, while forging in that uncertain space a sense of thoughtful reconsideration. From “A drunken soldiery ... can go scot free” in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” we move to “yet no clear fact to be discerned”—the former an expression of gruesome injustice, the latter almost a depiction of Yeats’s own style. The burning of houses, perhaps, creates a poetic that is more in the meditative than in the weasel-shrieking mode. And yet, such a lull is (p.190) soon broken, and the following stanza returns to the disenchanting idiom of the reprisal poems: “Last night they trundled down the road/That dead young soldier in his blood” (Var, 425).
“Meditations in Time of Civil War” is a poem that does and does not want to be allegorical. Insofar as “a man is killed,” the poem rekindles the style and metaphors of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” with the disenchanting language, the self-critique (“We had fed the heart on fantasies”), the invocation of broad destruction (“levelled lawns and gravelled ways”), the wild cry for “vengeance upon the murderers” (of an obscure fourteenth-century templar, in this case), even the final turn to “daemonic images.” But when a house burns, another kind of poetry suggests itself, where the life of the house stands in for the killed body, and of course for the nation whose creation and character is at the base of all these conceits. Part of the poem’s meditation about civil war, in fact, involves this division between body and house as locus of poetic emphasis. Over and over, it offers the house as the replacement for the body, as, for instance, in the section entitled “My Descendants,” where one might expect physical heirs, or at least poems, to be the outcome, but where the stanzas inevitably end instead with the tower: “whatever flourish and decline/These stones remain their monument and mine” (Var, 423). There is something powerful and satisfying about “these stones,” as there is in the tower’s ancient masonry and stony ground, yet stones for Yeats are perhaps always affiliated with death, and moreover the recourse to the house is as conventional a poetic trope as Yeats could find. Architectural metaphors, we might say, provide the imaginative refuge that buildings in the real world also offer, and yet Yeats understands that there is a kind of retreat in this move. “I turn away and shut the door;” begins the poem’s final stanza, and the question here, as in “Easter 1916,” is not only about what the metaphor of the building and door are doing (a sign of the retreat from politics, for instance) but about the poem’s formal principles and their consequences: is the architectural allegory simply operating, or is it being offered in the poem for critique? As he asks at the end of “Ancestral Houses,” in taking leave of their capacious spaces:

What if the glory of escutcheoned doors,
And buildings that a haughtier age designed,
The pacing to and fro on polished floors
Amid great chambers and long galleries, lined
With famous portraits of our ancestors;
What if those things the greatest of mankind
Consider most to magnify, or to bless,
But take our greatness with our bitterness? (Var, 418)
The problem with seeing the ancestral house as the nation, or with allowing it to absorb the shocks of violence that surround it historically and in the poem, is that it does not adequately handle “our bitterness.” Or maybe the problem revolves around a reading of the last line such that the house takes away both the culture’s greatness and its bitterness. In that case, the house might do the work of encapsulating and redirecting violence (“take ... our bitterness”) but at the same time siphons off what is best in a culture (“take our greatness”). There is, in the final instance, no free allegory: if the house can replace the pressured body, it does so at the cost of hoarding too much of the nation’s soul along with it. And this sense of formal insufficiency reverberates throughout modernism, as attempts to create distanced models for formalizing violence are almost invariably confronted (and toppled) by the body’s presence, its sheerness, vitality, insistence, flesh.

Yeats may have been ambivalent in the Civil War period about presenting the representative building as a figure for a nation and for the body, but in his late play *Purgatory* (1938), he returns energetically to the scheme, investing it with a new urgency and showing how fully this metaphor can work to express the conjunction of violence, private desire, and a sense of the future and past as mutually constitutive and consuming. In general and overarching terms, the play can be read as itself an allegory, as its title suggests, with the life span of the person and of the new nation likened to a term in purgatory, still awaiting release and apotheosis, with the killing of the father a sign of the break with England, and so on; and this structure allows an otherwise dreamlike and altogether strange work to be approachable (it is one of Yeats’s most anthologized plays). Like many of Yeats’s late works, *Purgatory* has the aura of self-summation, and here he turns a ruthless and withering eye on the double frame of house and tree as national figures. With its Beckett-like stage set consisting of “A ruined house and a bare tree in the background,” Yeats indicates from the outset that the play’s versions of these conventions will be anything but heroic or enchanted (CP, 430). Ruin, instead, is the key term. If the house at the center of the play’s collective unconscious is Ireland, it is a place of defeat from within, the site of familial purging, where a son kills his father and a father kills his son (*The Playboy* run amok), and where cross-class sex breeds violence and loss; it has long been burned to the ground, a casualty of the drunkenness of its none-too-legitimate owner. On one hand, then, the house represents an Ireland where class miscegenation has bred only vulgarity and violence, and where the nation itself is no more glorious an entity than a patricidal son. The big house is long gone, as the play’s primary speaker, the old man, dolefully declares:

(p.192) 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. (CP, 431–32)
For the old man who was born in the house and whose unconscious life it plays out in shadow, the burning down of the house is unforgivable, much worse than murder, which he commits rather freely: “to kill a house/Where great men grew up, married, died,/I here declare a capital offence” (CP, 432). In this play about intergenerational struggle—where each is at war with all—the house might have been the source of a national tradition and national memory, in a cosmopolitan key: “There were old books and books made fine/By eighteenth-century French binding, books/Modern and ancient, books by the ton” (CP, 432). This function is now left to the unreliable and ever-violent men who wander the roads, revisiting sites of history and personal meaning, only to perpetrate new acts of violence on the spot. In their hands, the reprisal motif comes to ferocious life. Blood demands more blood, as the speaker (in comically gruesomely form) relishes the return of an endless family instinct to purge, a wild internalizing of reprisal’s logic, culminating in the play with his second intergenerational murder: “My father and my son on the same jack-knife!” (CP, 435).

In the voice of the old man, Purgatory rants and raves about the whole bloody situation he is damned to replay. Purgatory was first performed at the Abbey in 1938, and Yeats appended it to his controversial prose work On the Boiler later that year. In the brief preface to On the Boiler, he maintains that “in this new publication I shall write whatever interests me at the moment,” and it seems appropriate that Purgatory, which has something of the feeling of an id to much of Yeats’s ego, would be included in this defiant work, which Yeats framed as the uncensored outpouring of a mad old man, and which has upset critics ever since with its eugenic themes and its unrestrained elitism and authoritarianism. And the two works do harmonize, especially in their shared obsession with racial impurity. As he writes in On the Boiler, "Since about 1900 the better stocks have not been replacing their numbers, while the stupider and less healthy have been more than replacing theirs. Unless there is a change in the public mind every rank above the lowest must degenerate, and, as inferior men push up into its gaps, degenerate more and more quickly” (OB, 18). And in Purgatory: “I killed that lad because had he grown up/He would have struck a woman’s fancy,/Begot, and passed pollution on” (CP, 435). This theme of pollution, in turn, is connected to the architectural metaphors, since in both works the destroyed big house and the racially destroyed nation go together.

(p.193) For its part, On the Boiler also features an ancestral house in decline, this one the Mansion House in Dublin, which Yeats portrays as a great Protestant edifice, now defaced and degraded by its Catholic occupants.
Let [the Lord Mayor] threaten to resign if the Corporation will not tell the City Architect to scrape off the stucco, pull down the cast iron porch, lift out the plate glass, and get the Mansion House into its eighteenth century state. It would only cost a few hundred pounds, for the side walls and their windows are as they should be, and Dublin would have one more dignified ancestral building. All Catholic Ireland, as it was before the National University and a victory in the field had swept the penal laws out of its bones, swells out in that pretentious front. (OB, 10)

It is not at all surprising, given the tendency to equate nations with buildings, that Yeats can easily turn a reasonable suggestion about architectural restoration into a sectarian and class-based diatribe against all he finds objectionable in contemporary culture. The key point, perhaps, is to see how the architectural allegory works: on one hand, by becoming the site of violence, the ancestral building relieves the body of that function, providing a literary analogy to its function in the actual world—this is the structure, to some degree, of “Meditations in Time of Civil War.” On the other hand, in its representative role the house takes on all the divisions of the culture—this is what happens in Purgatory. In On the Boiler, the war between a stately Protestant structure (still solid) and an ugly Catholic façade (easily dismantled) promises continuing disjunctiveness across the new nation, while the house in Purgatory, even in ruins, engenders violence and produces trauma, in an ongoing cycle.

And yet, for all the political trouble that the house-as-body or house-as-nation constitutes, there is something deeply attractive, in the midst of historical violence, about the extensive mode it indexes. Perhaps this is why allegory has found a way to adapt to all of the formulae for conceptualizing violence we have discussed—keening, generative violence, and reprisal. “Study that tree,” the old man in Purgatory commands his son as he kills him, “It stands there like a purified soul,/All cold, sweet, glistening light” (CP, 435). Earlier, the old man had enjoined the boy to “Study that house,” but there was no similar postscript to suggest sublimity. This tree may not be flowering, nor is it a great-rooted blossomer—Yeats’s metaphors stress Arnoldian principles of intellectual purity rather than Pearsean principles of generativity—but, for all that, it cannot help but invoke so many other representative trees in Ireland’s recent history. Purgatory calls on us to “Appease/The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead”; to do so, it seems, we need (p.194) to find “cold, sweet, glistening light” where, in the past, we have found enchantment, or reprisal, or leveling winds, or, in the last instance, ruined houses (CP, 436). “Here, there were no more autumns,” Bowen had written ten years earlier, “except for the trees” (LS, 302).
The move to architectural allegory is thus no panacea; it has its own costs and consequences, returning to the subject of violence a very immediate political partisanship. In that sense, it loses its allegorical utility altogether, and indeed *Purgatory* is replete with a claustrophobic sense of implosion or collapse, with death itself figured as “a bundle of old bones” (*CP*, 435). It is not free, moreover, from disenchantment, as, for instance, when the old man reminisces about the original patricide, “They dragged him out, somebody saw/The knife-wound but could not be certain/Because the body was all black and charred” (*CP*, 432–33). One of the characteristics of the other three forms we have discussed in this chapter—ritual lamentation, generative violence and even reprisal—is that, formally, they do not correlate to any political position; on the contrary, they offer themselves, at least in part, as symbolic forms for overcoming political difference. But with the ancestral house, a sense of division and rivalry is, as it were, built into the very architecture. There is a dual impulse at the root of this play: to lay bare the stark, destructive, indeed primordial lineaments that underlie and determine the creation of a nation; and at the same time, to see such violence in terms of the intimately personal, suggestive life of the unconscious mind, and the family history. For all the play’s venom, *Purgatory* enfolds these two realms with passion and power; the audience simultaneously inhabits the tortured and grisly psyche of its violent protagonist and recognizes that such a locale must also be understood by analogy to the nation, via its iconographic stand-ins, tree and house.
Let us conclude by recalling a poem that even more elegantly merges the intensive with the extensive, one that sweeps together many of the principles of violence we have encountered in this chapter, “Leda and the Swan.” It is a poem that can, all at once, be generative, allegorical, exultantly destructive, and full of the vengeful energy of reprisal. The sudden blow of the poem’s rape, at this point in our discussion, seems almost a primal scene of generative violence, while the poem’s allegory is both rewarding (a scene of archetypal power) and imprecise (with all those unanswered questions). It thus differs from *The Unicorn from the Stars*, where allegorical reading suggested an overly-schematic approach, and from *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, which Yeats feared was all too efficacious in its message. The poem’s excess of destruction, moreover, is suggested not only in the “shudder in the loins” but in its outcome of “broken wall” and “burning roof and tower.” As for reprisal, could anyone do better than Leda, via her daughters? The poem puts it simply, in keeping with reprisal’s formal proclivity: “And Agamemnon dead.” “Leda and the Swan” thus paints an almost complete picture of the language of violence in the period, except for one thing: it does not keen. There is nothing mournful, in the end, about the propulsive expressions of violence that continually break through in this literary history. They lunge, for better or for worse, into the future. “Cast a cold eye/On life, on death,” Yeats wrote in the late poem “Under Ben Bulben,” scripting his own epitaph, “Horseman, pass by!” (Var, 640, italics in original). (p. 196)

Notes:


(2) Something like this might be said about the First World War, but what differentiates the Irish rebellion from the war, in this regard, is that its literary and political expression can be understood in more finite terms, bounded by national and temporal parameters. Also, a note on terminology: in accordance with ordinary usage, I employ “the Rising” specifically to refer to the events of Easter week, 1916. Other terms (insurrection, insurgency, rebellion, anticolonialism, etc.) refer to broader phenomena in the period and beyond.


Where There Is Nothing

The Unicorn from the Stars


Yeats would later concede that he had failed, in “September 1913,” to recognize the vitality of romantic nationalism, as it would be embodied in the Rising. In a note to “September 1913,” he wrote that “‘Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone’ sounds old-fashioned now. It seemed true in 1913, but I did not foresee 1916. The late Dublin Rebellion, whatever one can say of its wisdom, will long be remembered for its heroism. ‘They weighed so lightly what they gave,’ and gave too in some cases without hope of success. July 1916” (*Var*, 820).


H. Pearse, *Collected Works: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin: Maunsel and Roberts, 1922), 25

Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1981), 149


(16) Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 113

(17) One thinks of Cindy Sheehan, the mother of an Iraq war soldier who was killed in combat in 2004; she became the leader of an antiwar movement.


(19) A well-known anecdote claims that Yeats originally sent Synge to Aran, a site of pilgrimage in the heyday of the Gaelic revival (though this account has been disputed). It was their first meeting, in Paris, and Yeats depicts himself as poised to give advice to the younger writer:

I said: “Give up Paris. You will never create anything by reading Racine, and Arthur Symons will always be a better critic of French literature. Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression.” I had just come from Aran, and my imagination was full of those grey islands where men must reap with knives because of the stones. (Yeats, *EI*, 299)

(20) Linguists, too, were drawn to the Aran Islands. Despite the widespread fiction of an untouched land, entirely secluded from modernizing Europe, the Aran Islands were often visited by travelers looking precisely for such purity, and by linguists from all over Ireland and other parts of the world.


(23) See, for instance, Thomas Davis, *Essays and Poems* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1945), 93–109. We might also note, in this regard, John Mitchel’s introduction to a collection of poems by Clarence Mangan, which presents Mangan’s verse, in part, as embodying what I am calling the keening mode: “The very soul of his melody,” writes Mitchel, “is that plaintive and passionate yearning which breathes and throbs through all the music of Ireland.” See John Mitchel, introduction to *Poems of James Clarence Mangan*, by James Clarence Mangan (Dublin: O’Donoghue, 1903), xxxvii.


(25) It is perhaps not surprising to find Pearse comfortably amalgamating these two traditions, since it became his goal, by the time of the Rising, to embrace a full span of nationalist positions. For instance, though he was initially critical of *The Playboy of the Western World*, by 1913 he called Synge “a man in whose sad heart there glowed a true love of Ireland,” and regretted the initial disparagement (*PWS*, 145).


(28) Seamus Deane, for instance, usually a generous (as well as brilliant and capacious) reader of different literary styles among Irish writers, has little to say in praise of O’Casey’s works. There is, he writes, “a coarsening element in his work related to his attempt to make sense of contemporary political situations in the light of an imperfectly conceived moral system” (*Deane, Celtic Revivals*, 108). And David Lloyd—also prolific as a period synthesizer—does not mention O’Casey at all in *Anomalous States*.

(30) The passage also carries classical associations: the image of the fondled head, desecrated in war, recalls Hector in the *Iliad*; the sense of parallelism in warring families has broadly Greek associations; the scales of sorrow suggest Zeus.

(31) By “physical force tradition,” I mean the view that parliamentary and political means alone would never secure independence and that violence/insurgency must play a role in the national struggle. In the nineteenth century, it was John Mitchel, above all, who represented this tradition. I will discuss Mitchel in part iii, “Reprisal.”

(32) Deane, *Celtic Revivals*, 63–74

(33) *April and May* Thomas MacDonagh, *April and May; with Other Verse* (Dublin: Bryers and Walker, 1904)


(35) Aubrey de Vere, *Poems from the works of Aubrey de Vere* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1904), 102

(36) *sic* Pearse, *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Songs of the Irish Rebels and Specimens from an Irish Anthology* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1918), 25

O! the Erne shall run red
With redundance of blood,
The earth shall rock beneath our tread,
And flames wrap hill and wood,
And gun-peal, and slogan-cry,
Wake many a glen serene,
Ere you shall fade, ere you shall die,
My Dark Rosaleen!
My own Rosaleen!
The Judgment Hour must first be nigh,
Ere you can fade, ere you can die,
My Dark Rosaleen!


(39) Interestingly, this printing of the poem is not mentioned in *The Variorum Edition*. As for Lionel Johnson, he and Yeats were friends from Yeats’s years in the Rhymers’ Club in London. Yeats included “The Ways of War” in *Poetry and Tradition* (EI, 258).

(40) Here is Pearse:

I turned my back
On the dream I had shaped,
And to this road before me
My face I turned.
I set my face
To the road here before me,
To the work that I see,
To the death that I shall meet. (*Poems of the IRB*, 25)

(41) Another crux question involves the timing of the poem’s publication: having written it and circulated it privately in the heat of the post-Rising months, why did Yeats wait four years before publishing it? Foster plausibly suggests political considerations: under some suspicion of being “pro-German,” for his support of Roger Casement (who attempted to procure arms from Germany and was executed by the British), Yeats did not feel it advisable to publish a poem viewed at the time as highly pro-Nationalist. (See Foster, Vol. 2, 59–65.) Also, there was the continuing issue of Hugh Lane’s bequest to the National Gallery: Lane, an Anglo-Irish collector of impressionist art who died in 1915 (aboard the *Lusitania*), had left his collection, in a codicil to his will, to Dublin. Yet the organization responsible for city government, the Dublin Corporation, prevaricated and nearly lost the collection to London, whose National Gallery eagerly offered to build a wing for it. Yeats wrote several poems about this mess, and his concern with it may have made him wary of large political statements in this period.

(42) This omission might be said to correspond to the historical fact that Yeats himself was not in Ireland when the Rising occurred (he was in England, no less) and was taken completely by surprise.

(43) Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 216–17


(45) Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*, 85

(46) Foster treats the fascism question rather quietly, seeing Yeats’s politics in the thirties as entirely subject to other urgent poetic and personal questions.
Cyclical Violence


(51) In constructing these refrains, Yeats may have been thinking, among other things, of Wilde’s play *Salome.*


(56) Kiberd, for instance, has noted that despite this conventional linkage of violence with masculine sexual desirability, Synge’s representation of masculinity and femininity in the play is quite unconventional, even radical.


(58) One might consider, in this regard, the concluding paragraphs of “The Dead,” where Joyce also imagines a unifying national consciousness around the prospect of death. Whether the spellbinding ending of “The Dead” and *Dubliners* ultimately envisions a paralyzing, deathlike stasis or a purifying transformation is left open.

(60) The term leveler has historical connotations as well, to which Mitchel perhaps alluded. The Levellers were a seventeenth-century English dissenting group, dedicated to reform of the franchise, religious rights, and the prison system; they were often misportrayed by their contemporaries as wildly radical (proto-anarchists hoping to overthrow the social order).


(62) Unlike some of his pairs of plays, such as *A Full Moon in March* and *The King of the Great Clock Tower*, both of which Yeats included in the collected edition, he opted to omit *Where There Is Nothing*, which he felt had been superseded by *The Unicorn from the Stars*, which he co-wrote with Lady Gregory. The two are quite different, and, as the editor of *Where There Is Nothing* argues, there is good reason to make the earlier play available.


(64) Yeats makes an oblique reference to Mitchel in *The Unicorn from the Stars*: one of the beggars sings a song about being arrested and deported, “For to plough Van Diemen’s Land,” the penal colony where Mitchel served his fourteen-year sentence (Yeats, WN, 142).

(65) That nihilism had wide appeal in nineteenth-century Russia is as one would expect: to the tyranny of the absolutist state, nihilism stands in perfect opposition. It seems that the early emphasis on nihilism was something Yeats wanted to disown, as he distanced himself from the first play and built a robust national plot into the second version, perhaps at the behest of Lady Gregory, who collaborated in the rewriting.

(66) I will discuss *Guernica* in the final chapter.

(67) For a wonderful reflection on “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” see Wood, *Yeats and Violence* (indeed, his volume is slightly misnamed, since it is primarily a study of that poem).

(68) For discussion of whether her name was in fact Ellen or Eileen, and for more details about the shooting and inquest, see Wood, 20–22.

(70) . The symbolism of the mother was clearly important to Yeats. Had he been looking primarily for gruesome injustice, he might have found it in a column of Gregory’s from a month later, where she reports on the horrendous murder of two boys from a small town in the west of Ireland (Shanaglish). In one account she quotes a witness saying, “the flesh was as if torn off the bones,” and in another “the body of one was ‘all charred and most of the skull badly fractured, part of it being missing. The flesh was hanging on the legs and arms’” (*The Nation*, December 18, 1920, 413, 414).

(71) . Herodias was the wife of King Herod, and their most famous daughter was Salomé, a figure who hovers in the background of those of Yeats’s plays that feature a woman dancing around a severed head. As for the plural “daughters,” the reference is less certain. Yeats had mentioned Herodias’s daughters in his note to “The Hosting of the Sidhe,” as figures for wild movement, and as illustrations of the tendency for a populace to transpose mythical beings from one era to another: “Sidhe is … Gaelic for wind, and certainly the Sidhe have much to do with wind,” he explains; “They journey in whirling winds, the winds that were called the dance of the daughters of Herodias in the Middle Ages, Herodias doubtless taking the place of some old goddess” (Yeats, *Var*, 800).

(72) North, *The Political Aesthetic of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound*, 61


(74) . Yeats would have seen Fuller in Paris in 1890. See Foster, Vol. 1, 109.

(75) . In addition to these two poems, Yeats also wrote a more traditional elegy for Gregory, “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” which ends with the heartbreaking stanza:

I had thought, seeing how bitter is that wind
That shakes the shutter, to have brought to mind
All those that manhood tried, or childhood loved
Or boyish intellect approved,
With some appropriate commentary on each;
Until imagination brought
A fitter welcome; but a thought
Of that late death took all my heart for speech. (*Var*, 327–28)

On Yeats’s relation to the war, Foster takes the embittered, sulky poem “On Being Asked for a War Poem” as the key statement:

I think it better that in times like these
A poet’s mouth be silent, for in truth
We have no gift to set a statesman right;
He has had enough of meddling who can please
A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
Or an old man upon a winter’s night. (Var, 359)

In a 1914 letter, moreover, Yeats described his response thus: “It is merely the most expensive outbreak of insolence and stupidity the world has ever seen ... and I give it as little thought as I can” (quoted in Foster, Vol. 2, 5). On Yeats and the war, see T. R. Henn, *W. B. Yeats and the Poetry of War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), and Samuel Hynes, “Yeats’s Wars,” *Sewanee Review* 97:1 (Winter 1989): 36–55. For Ireland and the war more generally, see note 50 above.

I hope readers will not find it confusing that I have chosen to discuss the plays out of their chronological order. Since I am arguing that generative violence gives way, imaginatively, to reprisal, it seemed helpful to present the plays in terms of their internal time frames (1916, 1920, 1922) rather than in their compositional order. They were composed in relatively quick succession, in any case.

There are, however, two counterexamples, where O’Casey employs a robust language of generative violence; both of these, significantly, focus on heroic labor. First is a 1919 history of the Citizen Army (a labor-based militia founded after the lockout of 1913, which eventually merged with the Irish Volunteers and played a central role in the Rising), of which he was a member until 1915. See P. O Cathasaigh [i.e., Sean O’Casey], *The Story of the Irish Citizen Army* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1919). And the second is the late play *The Star Turns Red* (1940), which features the heroic figure of “Red Jim,” who, along with other loyal communists, courageously fights against a fascist-supported state. See Sean O’Casey, *Collected Plays, Volume Two* (London: MacMillan, 1950). For an assessment of O’Casey and the representation of violence, see Bernice Schrank, “Sean O’Casey and the Dialectics of Violence,” in *Shadows of the Gunmen: Violence and Culture in Modern Ireland*, eds. Danine Farquharson and Sean Farrell (Cork: Cork University Press, 2008), 38–62.

(81) If this conflict reminds readers of some similar issues in First World War literature, where there is a rift between supporting the war and recognizing the depth of psychic response to battle and war loss—one thinks of Journey’s End, for instance—such a parallel is not far from the mark. O’Casey’s next play, The Silver Tassie (1928), which focuses on a disabled war combatant, takes up this exact dynamic.

(82) Notably, Yeats’s Cathleen ni Houlihan is set in 1798.

(83) The Silver TassieKiberd, Inventing Ireland, 224

(84) The Nation, December 4, 1920, 333.

(85) Standish O’Grady, History of Ireland, Volume I: The Heroic Period (New York: Lemma, 1970), 116

(86) Thomas MacDonagh, April and May, 37

(87) Vera Kreilkamp, The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998)

(88) The word “boycott” in fact dates from the late nineteenth century. It was the successful disruption of the estate belonging to one Captain Boycott that gave the practice its name, and also, incidentally, helped cement the early political fortunes of Parnell.

(89) For an especially luminous discussion of The Last September, with resonance here for its argument about how colonial violence was imagined in the period within a larger frame of stunted progress, see Jed Esty, “Virgins of Empire: The Last September and the Antidevelopmental Plot,” Modern Fiction Studies 53:2 (Summer 2007): 257–75. See also Kreilkamp, The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House, 141–73. For Bowen’s reflections on the subject, see her essay “The Big House,” in Elizabeth Bowen, The Mulberry Tree (London: Virago, 1986), 25–30.

(90) Elizabeth Bowen, The Last September (New York: Random House, 2000), 300

(91) Some of this poignancy is undoubtedly personal, as evident in her 1942 memoir named for her family estate, Bowen’s Court.

(92) Bowen, Mulberry Tree, 27

(93) The actual tower is Ballylee, which Yeats purchased in 1916 and where he lived intermittently until 1928. It is featured in many of his poems of these years, and gives its name to both a single poem, “The Tower,” and to the volume.
Cyclical Violence


(95) W. B. Yeats, *On the Boiler* (Dublin: Cuala, 1971), 80B

(96) The Mansion House, built in 1710 and acquired soon after as the official residence of the Lord Mayor of Dublin, has a central place in the events of the revolutionary period, including the 1919 signing of the Declaration of Independence and meeting of the first Dáil session there. Architecturally, Yeats objected to a metal canopy added in 1896 to the entry area in honor of Queen Victoria’s (controversial) visit to Dublin. In the 1930s, a plan to demolish the Mansion House was discussed, but never enacted.