the celtic consciousness

Scan of the editor Robert O'Driscoll's chapter, The Aesthetic and Intellectual Foundations of the Celtic Literary Revival in Ireland, from these proceedings of a 1978 conference in Toronto, published Canongate in Scotland, 1982. (Still available 2nd hand.)

edited by robert o'driscoll

THE CELTIC CONSCIOUSNESS

EDITED BY

ROBERT O'DRISCOLL

THE CELTIC CONSCIOUSNESS employs a diversity of scholarly approaches to examine the myth, music, history, literature, folklore, art and archaeology of the Celtic world, its place in Central Europe, and its connections with the Near and Far East. The fifty-five essays in the book contain 350,000 words and 170 illustrations.

The first section, "Peripheries of the Indo-European World," probes the connections between Indian and Celtic religion and mythology. Section two, "Beginnings in the Celtic World: Archaeological, Linguistic, Historic, and Prehistoric," examines the prehistoric monuments of the Celtic world, the early history and evolution of the Celts, their material culture and lifestyle, and the similarities between the Celtic languages and the languages of some African and Near Eastern countries. The third section, "Mythology, Literature, Religion and Art," draws on early sagas, voyages, visions, lives of the Saints, and other texts, to show how certain Celtic myths have been transmitted into literature and art. Section four, "The Celtic Continuum: Folklore, Literature, Music and Art," examines the nature of the Celtic spirit and its persistance on the periphery of Europe in beliefs, customs, and traditions that cover a time-span from the earliest recorded past down to the twentieth century. Section five, "Modern Celtic Nationalism: Literary and Political," traces the emergence of Celtic cultural and political nationalism in modern times, and the differences in the evolution of nationalism in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. Section six, "Celtic Vision in Contemporary Thought and Art," examines the manner in which artists and visionaries are attempting to counter the dehumanization of modern technology and industrialization with Celtic mysticism, meditation, and a new humanism.

The resurgence of the Celtic spirit in the twentieth century may suggest that Vico, Spengler, and Yeats were right in their belief that history moves in cycles, and that perceptions which have been pushed to the periphery in one cycle may become the spiritual nucleus of the next. *The Celtic Consciousness* directs one's vision both backwards and forwards and outwards and inwards at one and the same time, and an appropriate image of this mode of perception is provided by the illustration on the jacket cover of one of those Celtic heads, symbolizing consciousness, and looking simultaneously in several directions.

THE CELTIC CONSCIOUSNESS, which ranges from prehistoric to modern times, contains fifty-five essays written by leading authorities on the Celtic world from France, Czechoslovakia, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, England, Canada, Germany, and the United States. The book contains contributions by:

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THE AESTHETIC AND INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE CELTIC LITERARY REVIVAL IN IRELAND*

ROBERT O'DRISCOLL

> In a little time places may begin to seem the only hieroglyphs that cannot be forgotten, and poets to remember that they will come the nearer the old poets, who had a seat at every hearth, if they mingle their own dream with a story told for centuries.
>
> W. B. Yeats

I

Before the flowering of the Celtic Literary Revival in Ireland at the end of the nineteenth century, there had been much conscious and unconscious preparation for the movement. In those crevices of significant soil that progress and industrialization had passed by and where the Irish language was still spoken, Celtic traditions survived, traditions in music, myth, and folklore that stretched back hundreds, and some of them even thousands of years to pre-Christian and pre-Roman times: successive invasions by the Vikings, Normans, and English had in many ways left the native culture undisturbed. But in the parts of Ireland that had not chosen the weapons of silence and exile for self-preservation, those parts of the country that, through force, necessity or expediency had adopted the tongue of their temporary conquerors, the great Celtic traditions that had been the heritage of their ancestors were, to all intents and purposes, lost. There were, of course, points of contact, but as time progressed the Celtic civilization slipped further and further out of the literary and historical consciousness of the modern world, until in the nineteenth century the civilization had to be dramatically re-discovered: to many it was not a discovery but a revelation.

James Macpherson was in some ways the catalyst for this re-discovery, producing during the 1760's his Ossianic translations which, as every undergraduate knows, were forgeries, in that they puported to be authentic translations of a third-century poet. Nevertheless, Macpherson's work did open up Celtic literature to English and European attention, and caught off guard some scholars and historians who went so far as to deny the existence of any Celtic civilization whatsoever: the Scottish historian, John Pinkerton, for example, writes in 1789:

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*I express my gratitude to Bill and Cathy Graham for a log-cabin and a portion of Glenariff Farm, Ontario, where this paper was written. The paper was prepared for the Conference on "Canada and the Celtic Consciousness," but was not delivered because of the scarcity of lecture slots. Instead, it was delivered at the Conference of the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature in Galway, and part of it was published in Andrew Carpenter, ed., *Place, Personality and the Irish Writer* (Bucks., 1977), pp. 41-68.

> The former [the Irish antiquaries] say, their country was highly civilized, had letters and academies, as the Greeks and Roman. The latter [the European antiquaries] say, the Greeks we know, and the Romans we know, but who are ye? Those Greeks and Romans pronounce you not only barbarous, but utterly savage. Where are your authorities against this? In the name of that degree of rationality which even some beasts have, where are the slightest marks of civilization among you? Where are ruins of cities? Where inscriptions? Where ancient art or science in your whole island? The old inhabitants of your country, the Wild Irish, the true Milesian breed, untainted with Gothic blood, we know to be utter savages at this day. Can a nation, once civilized, ever become savage? Impossible![1]

The nineteenth century witnessed the gradual recovery of the Celtic civilization: it was a century of painstaking research and of imaginative flashes. Early Christian artifacts and treasures of the Bronze Age were discovered; coins and inscriptions were studied and historical records published; pioneering topographical, archaeological, and architectural investigations were conducted; philologists began to study the Irish language in its broader Indo-European context; the ancient Brehon laws were published and traditional Irish music rescued; poems in the Irish language were translated, and their metrical patterns and idioms introduced for the first time in English; Celtic legends were edited and the first expository poems based on Celtic myth were written. There were, as I say, a few flashes: by the Unionist Ferguson, who began his investigation of the literary legacy of his Catholic countrymen as an intellectual curiosity and was led into an imaginative immersion in the past: by Mangan who, in his achievement of self-expression by a passionate identification with past heroes and crucial moments in his country's history, knew instinctively the mythic mode; and by Standish James O'Grady, whose *History of Ireland* presented an imaginative reconstruction of early Celtic life and made the heroic period and mythic characters "once again a portion of the imagination of the country".[2] O'Grady's *History*, Yeats writes, did more "than anything else to create that preoccupation with Irish folklore and legend and epic which is called the Irish literary movement."[3]

II

From the faltering, painstaking, and sometimes intuitive work of the nineteenth-century poets, antiquaries, and historian to the full critical and artistic articulation of the ideals of the Celtic Renaissance was a great imaginative leap. This leap of the imagination was accomplished by the two poets and visionaries who were the spiritual leaders of the Renaissance, W.B. Yeats and George Russell (AE), and in exploring the ideals of the Revival I shall illustrate my arguments now from the one writer, now from the other: indeed, so close are their ideas that it is sometimes difficult to indicate where the first articulation of a particular perception originates.

It is difficult to say at what precise point, and in what circumstances, the being or genius or deity that shapes a national character enters once again the poetic and popular consciousness.[4] What one can say is that almost from the beginning of

their creative careers Yeats and AE recognized what they had been chosen to accomplish: they believed themselves to be mediums chosen to express the uncreated consciousness of their race, and the movement they created was not "a self-conscious endeavour to make a literature," but the spontaneous expression of an impulse that had been gathering power for centuries.[5] In the beginning of all important things, Yeats writes, "there is a moment when we understand more perfectly than we understand again until all is finished."[6] Yeats and AE cannot be dismissed as being involved in a kind of provincial primitivism, or of concerning themselves with Celtic lore and legend in order to give their work local colour: what they deliberately set out to accomplish was to lay the spiritual and intellectual foundation of the modern Irish nation, to make what was instinctive, and on the point of being lost, part of conscious art, and, by extension, once again part of the national consciousness.

III

For Yeats and AE, frontiers, boundaries, race, language, religion, or even blood do not define or constitute a nation: the bonds that bind a people into a nation are not physical but 'psychic'. A nation, AE writes, is "a collective imagination held with intensity, an identity of culture or consciousness among millions, which makes them act as a single entity in relation to other human groups."[7] Neither is a nation the creation of practical parliamentarians or politicians: centuries of subjective and brooding thought precede its creation, and the true architects of a nation are artists, the heroes of history, and the figures of mythology:

> A nation exists primarily because of its own imagination of itself. It is a spirit created by the poets, historians, musicians, by the utterances of great men, the artists in life. The mysterious element of beauty, of a peculiar beauty, exists in every nation and is the root cause of the love felt for it by the citizens, just as the existence of spirit, the most mysterious and impalpable thing, is the fountain of the manifold activities of the body.[8]

The figures of mythology, these writers suggest, are not an individual creation, but the communal creation of the people themselves, "through a slow process of modification and adaptation," to express their ideals and their passions, their loves and their hates.[9] For AE the figures of mythology are a gift from heaven: they "come out of the spirit," descending "from the heaven-world of the imagination into the national being."[10] It makes little difference whether these figures had any historical existence, whether they ever lived in a physical sense: the fact is that they have lived in the national consciousness, and to generation after generation, brooding and recounting their fantastic deeds, they are living presences, "as real", AE claims, "as flesh and blood."[11]

The heroes of history also contribute to the national being: when they die their heroic acts pass from earth and become part of the "immortal memory" of the nation, chiefly because of the dramatic or artistic quality of the acts themselves, or because of the way in which the heroes and their heroic acts are mythologized

by the artist. Art is, therefore, the agency through which the essence of a nation "filters into [the] national consciousness,"[12] and the artist is an instrument by which the heroes of history and the figures of mythology become living presences in the mind of the people: nothing is more important in the life of a nation "than the images which haunt the minds of its people, for it is by these they are led to act."[13] Imagination, AE writes, whether "spiritual or national, is the most powerful thing in human affairs. Intangible itself, it moves bodies. Invisible itself, it changes visible civilizations."[14] The artist too, when his work is done, enters the national imagination, is consumed into the dance or trance of his own art: "the poetry of Yeats," AE writes, "is the greatest spiritual gift any Irishman has made to his tribe."[15] And elsewhere AE suggests that Yeats and the writers of the Celtic Revival "will act through many men and women, and the birth of their imaginations will be as important in the evolution of Irish character and nationality as the fight in Easter week."[16]

A nation, therefore, is a living entity constituted "of immortal deeds and heroic spirits, influencing the living, a life within their life, moulding their spirits to its likeness."[17] Every heroic deed in the life of a nation is an act of the spirit; every perception of beauty by an artist or visionary brings the divine essence animating the nation closer to the articulated consciousness of the people, until by a sequence of heroic acts and artistic perception the "accumulated beauty" of the ages becomes more compelling than the necessities of daily life: "the dream ... [begins] to enter into the children of our race, and their thoughts turn from earth to that [divine] world in which it had its inception."[18]

IV

For the writers of the Celtic Revival the roots of Irish Nationality ran deep, deeper than the events that have shaped the Western world: the Roman empire, Christianity, the Renaissance, and the Industrial Revolution: "Behind all Irish history," Yeats writes, "hangs a great tapestry, even Christianity had to accept it and be itself pictured there. Nobody looking at its dim folds can say where Christianity begins and Druidism ends."[19] And in his lecture with the arresting title, "The Necessity of De-Anglicizing Ireland," Douglas Hyde writes, rather flamboyantly, that behind the expression of Irish nationality

> is the half unconscious feeling that the race which at one time held possession of more than half Europe, which established itself in Greece, and burned infant Rome, is now — almost extirpated and absorbed elsewhere — making its last stand for independence in this island of Ireland; and do what they may the race of to-day cannot wholly divest itself from the mantle of its own past. Through early Irish literature, for instance, can we best form some conception of what that race really was, which, after overthrowing and trampling on the primitive peoples of half Europe, was itself forced in turn to yield its speech, manners, and independence to the victorious eagles of Rome. We alone of the nations of Western Europe escaped the claws of those birds of prey; we alone developed ourselves naturally upon our own lines outside of and free from all Roman influence; we alone were thus able to produce an early art and

> literature, *our* antiquities can best throw light upon the pre-Romanised inhabitants of half Europe. . . . The dim consciousness of this is one of those things which are at the back of Irish national sentiment, and our business, whether we be Unionists of Nationalists, shoud be to make this dim consciousness an active and potent feeling. . . .[20]

The Celtic civilization, Yeats and Hyde and AE contended, was unique in Europe because it had escaped the yoke of the Roman Empire, the secularization of the Renaissance, and, perhaps more importantly, the material domination of the industrial world. But Ireland, although achieving an advanced civilization when the rest of Europe was plunged in darkness, had, at the end of the nineteenth century, not yet been born as a modern state, as a collective political unit, the reason for this being the cultural, political, and economic oppression the Irish had suffered at the hands of the British. Throughout these centuries of oppression, however, Ireland had never lost the consciousness of herself as an independent entity, and of her essential difference from the English nation.

V

The difference between the two nations was clearly apprehended by the leaders of the Celtic Revival. The English nation, they argued, had been shaped on the principles of imperial domination and material success,[21] and although the incorporated ideals of the Italian Renaissance had brought to England a sense of personality and a new emphasis on the capabilities of man, they had, when subsumed into the Anglo-Saxon mentality, resulted in a scientific approach to the world, imperialism, materialism, industrialization, urbanization, collectivization, and a false sense of progress.[22]

Imperialism, whether it be of the visible physical kind practiced by England from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, or of the subtle, even more effective, invisible variety being successfully pursued by several world powers today, imposes on the individual or nation the model of another people, and insists that all citizens have "their minds poured into the same mould," and that "varieties of gifts" and distinctive cultural traditions be obliterated.[23] This imposition of an imperialist ideal was rejected by the writers of the Celtic Revival long before the political and military leaders created a physical body for the spiritual principles:

> empires do not permit the intensive cultivation of human life: . . . they destroy the richness and variety of existence by the extinction of peculiar and unique gifts, and the substitution therefore of a culture which has its value mainly for the people who created it, but is as alien to our race as the mood of the scientist is to the artist or poet.[24]

Imperialism and materialism are closely linked. Materialism is built on the belief that matter is the sole reality, that only the limited life of the body is real, that there is no essential difference between the natural and spiritual order, and that knowledge can be discovered through observation of the external world and

the analysis of impressions derived from the five senses. Materialism contracts man's consciousness by limiting him to personal experience. Because it originates in egotism, in action for the consequences of action and for the acquisition of possessions, materialism must conclude in rigid laws, barbed-wire fences, and conspiracies.

The principles of imperialism and materialism had, Yeats and AE contended, affected the development of English literature. In the first place, English literature had no native mythology. Shakespeare had, of course, used English history as the subject of some of his plays, and had there been no Renaissance and no Italian influence, English history might, Yeats contends, "have become as important to the English imagination as the Greek myths to the Greek imagination."[25] When they attempted to use myth to express their own personalities, English writers looked therefore to Greece, Rome, or the land of the Bible, to myths of foreign lands, and to myths that had grown threadbare with use, until by the time a William Blake emerged, he was, in Yeats's words, "a man crying out for a mythology," and having no national myths, he had to invent his own.[26] England, of course, had over the centuries produced a great literature, but it was a literature of the few that had been shaped almost completely by the printing-press, and during the nineteenth century England succumbed to what Yeats called the "cold, joyless, irreligious" scientific movement.[27] Nineteenth-century English novels and the poetry of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Browning, and even that of Shelley and Swinburne, tried, Yeats claimed, "to absorb into itself the science and politics, the philosophy and morality of its time."[28] Literature, as the nineteenth century advanced, became utilitarian, rhetorical, sentimental, and journalistic: it turned to study and mimesis of the external world, to commentary on the social, humanitarian, and topical interests of the time, to moral judgement and accusation. English literature, in short, turned into a criticism of life, and began to use as its means of expression the weapons of science: observation, explanation, argument, theory, and erudition.

VI

The writers of the Celtic Revival maintained that the development of Irish literature and history and character was distinct and separate from the development of the English, that the Celtic perception of life was different from the English, and that the Irish people constituted a nation with a distinctive cultural and spiritual heritage. Indeed, so deep was the antagonism between Ireland and England that it sprang, AE claims, from "biological and spiritual necessity."[29] This antagonism had expressed itself throughout the centuries in rebellion after rebellion, and the leaders of these rebellions were, AE contends, not merely fighting for a political change, but were the "desparate and despairing champions of a culture which ... was being stifled from infancy."[30] But no amount of physical force or oppression can, AE argues in his seminal pamphlet, *The Inner*

and The Outer Ireland, kill the desire to express a national spirit, and so the Irish nation had hung on for centuries, waiting patiently for circumstance to enable them to escape their conquerors, or for the mills of God to grind the British Empire to dust, as other empires had been ground to dust before. This desire to express the national character in literature and in life may seem at times a hopeless cause, but physical death, AE argues in 1901, is preferable to spiritual defeat, or to the denial of the spirit that animates a nation: "God gives no second gift to a nation if it flings away its birthright. We cannot put on the ideals of another people as a garment."[31]

At the root, then, of the antagonism between Ireland and England, of the historical rebellions and the literary revival, was the battle between two traditions, two ways of perceiving the world: "What is this nationality we are trying to preserve," Yeats asks in a public lecture in 1903, "this thing we are fighting English influence to preserve? It is not merely our pride. It is certainly not any national vanity that stirs us on to activity. If you examine to the root a contest between two peoples, two nations, you will always find that it is really a war between two civilizations, two ideals of life."[32] What the writers of the Celtic Revival were demanding was the freedom to express the "spiritual life" of the Irish race, the right to work out the national destiny,[33] and to manifest the national genius in a civilization that was not an echo or an imitation of another: "We ask," AE pleads, "the liberty of shaping the social order in Ireland to reflect our own ideals, and to embody that national soul which has been slowly incarnating in our race from its cloudy dawn."[34] On the outcome of this battle there was more at stake than the destiny of Ireland: the battle was not merely one of Ireland against England, not even one of people against people, but of the individual soul against bureaucracy, of spiritual forces against the forces of empire and state,[35] and a portion of the "everlasting battle" between light and darkness, good and evil, spirit and matter.[36] In the resolution of this battle, AE contends, lies the hope of humanity, the realizations of "universal human hopes," the solution of "eternal problems": the "typical humanity" of the world, AE writes "exists in germ in the spiritual and intellectual outcasts of our time, who can find no place in the present social order."[37]

VII

The Celtic Revival was deliberately created as a counter-movement to the materialism of the post-Darwinian age. Yeats and AE did not believe in evolution or progress: for these poets, change in the history of man was not slow and methodical, but sudden and miraculous, a leap of the imagination: "all life is revelation," Yeats writes, "beginning in miracle and enthusiasm, and dying out as it unfolds itself in what we have mistaken for progress."[38] Neither did they believe that literature was a criticism of visible life, but that it was a revelation of an invisible world. They saw the poet not as the servant of society, nor as a passive

commentator on the political or social concerns of the time, but as the medium of immortal emotion, writing out of a deeper life than his own, receiving his inspiration from the Collective Memory of his race, interpreting and remaking the modern world according to the impulses he receives in meditation and vision. "Talk to me of originality and I will turn on you with rage. I am a crowd, I am a lonely man, I am nothing," Yeats writes at the end of his life.[39] With Plato and Plotinus, Yeats and AE believed that individual human life was an ephemeral flower blooming from the perennial rhizone, with death returning to the great ocean of being, withering and descending into the rhizone, to bloom again in another spring, in another incarnation. Mankind is not complete, the initiator of action, but merely the foam upon the deep, merely the momentary blossom of some spiritual impulse. Through man, and more particularly through the poet, the invisible moods of the universe work their will; the great unchanging myths are constantly being enacted and re-enacted. The images that present themselves to the poet, therefore, do not originate in his individual consciousness, but are given to him from the composite mind and living memory of his race. They come, as it were, "out of the ancestral being," and are more easily apprehended in places where the traditional order of life remains unbroken.[40] This visionary communion of the individual personality and the racial memory, of the modern Irish poet and the Celtic past, Yeats and AE considered as an aspect of the Celtic approach to experience, and over and over in their work they probe the nature and significance of vision, meditation, dream, intuition, imagination, and magic.

In the beginning of the world, and in places where the plough of modern civilization had not cut too deep, as in the Celtic world, there was no separation between matter and spirit: when "a man beheld a natural object the spiritual thing it expressed came at once into his mind."[41] All of the material forms of nature were holy and haunted. But as the centuries progressed, mind and matter, the inner spiritual meaning and the outer material form, began to separate, and man turned from the expression of his own mind to the study of the external world for its own sake. Yeats and AE, on the other hand, viewed the world symbolically, seeing the visible material world as the means by which an invisible spiritual essence becomes manifest to mortal eyes, and interpreting all physical and intellectual forms, all art and nature, as the expression or embodiment of the universal mood at the centre of the universe which Yeats calls God.[42] Materialism, according to Yeats, reaches its zenith during the twentieth century, but at this point, suddenly, miraculously, the opposite of all that is characteristic of materialistic thought is born. Man, having become enchanted to the outer form, to possessions and the consequences of action, suddenly becomes sated with science, sensation, and analyses of the external world, and he returns instinctively and dramatically to the spiritual world he has neglected. Yeats links the Celtic Revival to this symbolic apocalypse that was to sweep away the concept of literature as a criticism of life and to usher in "an age of imagination, of emotion, of moods, of revelation."[43] "This revolution," Yeats writes, "may be the

opportunity for the Irish Celt, for he has an unexhausted and inexhaustible mythology to give him symbols and personages, and his nature has been profoundly emotional from the beginning."[44]

VIII

Rejecting the earlier traditions of Irish writing in English — the tradition of Congreve, Goldsmith, Sheridan, and their followers, who used England and London as a platform for the expression of Irish wit and anarchical wisdom; the tradition of Edmund Burke and Bernard Shaw who, starting from the premise that Ireland was an integral part of the United Kingdom, went on to posit that the moral purification of England and the Empire could be accomplished by Irishmen; and the tradition of the Young Ireland writers, who created "images for the affections" of the Irish people by using English literary models[45] — rejecting these traditions, the writers of the Celtic Revival turned to poetry in the Irish language, to folklore, and to myth.

Yeats was interested in Gaelic poetry because of the natural energies it celebrated, because it was not a poetry of material security, success, and complacence, but a poetry articulating the beliefs and hopes of the weak and vulnerable, and, like the poetry of the Rhymers' Club, created out of the despair and desolation of defeat. The fact that it was a poetry built on dreams linked it in Yeats's mind to the nature of all great poetry:

> poetry is the utterance of desires that we can only satisfy in dreams, and . . . if all our dreams were satisfied there would be no more poetry. . . . The children of the poor and simple learn from their unbroken religious faith, and from their traditional beliefs, and from the hardness of their lives, that this world is nothing, and that a spiritual world, where all dreams come true, is everything; and therefore the poor and simple are that imperfection whose perfection is genius.[46]

In their collections of folklore and in their work based on folklore, Yeats, Lady Gregory, Douglas Hyde, and John Synge discovered or created an approach to life that contravened the modern materialistic approach. Ireland, they maintained, was one of the last spiritual strongholds in Europe, and the Celt, they held, still retained contact with the mystery and imagination that existed before man fell a slave to the external world. In Celtic folklore, too, Yeats and AE found corroboration for their occult experiments and philosophic reading: evidence of the existence of an invisible world, of the continuance of life after death, and proof of the immortality of the soul.[47]

The Celt, in the stories collected or created by the writers of the Revival, is not concerned with probability or necessity, but only with the expression of emotion. He perceives the correspondence between sensuous form and supersensuous meaning and recognizes instinctively the spirit that gives a voice to the dumb things that surround him. Not distinguishing clearly between the natural and the supernatural, and believing that all nature is full of invisible spirits that can be perceived by those willing to look beyond the cobweb veil of the senses, the Celt

sees everything as enchanted. He is filled with reverence for the past and a sense of the sanctity and mystery of everything that surrounds him. The mythical associations of topographical sites are fresh in his mind. To the Celt in these stories the land is still holy and haunted.

The Celt, the writers of the Revival found, did not live in a shrunken over-defined world, but lingered constantly "on the edges of vision," learning to live with the spirits that haunted his solitary world, seeking to capture in imaginative idiom or tale "some high, impalpable mood," attempting to express "a something that lies beyond the range of expression"[48] creating, like the Rhymers, in the deprivation of material life a mask or compensating dream. Like great artists, these visionaries had the power to mythologize places and people, to transform mortal men and women into the immortal images of art, to transform, for example, Mary Hynes and Raftery into "perfect symbols of the sorrow of beauty and of the magnificence and penury of dreams."[49] And like great artists, these Celtic visionaries possessed a living permanent tradition that refused to surrender to the "small arrogant oligarchy" of those who merely happen to be walking around; they possessed traditional images and emotions that carried "their memories backward thousands of years."[50] They communed with the dead generations, receiving from the racial Memory images that come to meditative minds. They were fully cognizant of the tragedy and imperfections of unaccommodated man, realizing the brevity of life, accepting the conditions of life, and summoning courage and dignity when faced with defeat and death.

Alone among European nations, Ireland, Yeats claimed, possessed a wealth of folk stories and legends that had not yet been shaped into modern literature:

> Ireland has in her written Gaelic literature, in her old love tales and battle tales, the forms in which the imagination of Europe uttered itself before Greece shaped a tumult of legend into the music of her arts; and she can discover, from the beliefs and emotions of her common people, the habit of mind that created the religion of the muses. The legends of other European countries are less numerous, and not so full of the energies from which the arts and our understanding of their sanctity arose, and the best of them have already been shaped into plays and poems.[51]

The aim of the leaders of the Celtic Revival was to combine the imagination that is expressed in folklore and legend with the imagination that has produced the wrought sophisticated literature of the world, in other words to bridge the written and unwritten traditions and to establish a modern literary tradition on emotions that come from the heart of the people. The artist, they argued, must realize that he is the spiritual leader of his people, and he must adopt the "method and the fervour of a priesthood."[52] Like the priest, he must root his art in ancient ceremonies and use them to illuminate and interpret the unchanging passions of daily life. The scientific movement had pushed modern literature into one of two directions: into subservience to an external reality or a concern with rarefied essences. One type of literature was concerned with the spiritual element which the other type denied, but neglected the interest in common life with which the

other literature was too much concerned.[53] We remember Synge's famous stricture of both types in the Preface to *Playboy of the Western World*, of the literature of Mallarmé on the one hand, and the literature of Ibsen on the other. The Celtic literary Revival aimed at the reconciliation of the past and the present, art and life, the spiritual and the common, the seen and the unseen. The modern Irish poet, these writers maintained, must learn what the common people knew instinctively: sanctity of place, a sense of tradition, love of the unseen, the daring and imaginative impulse that animates folk life and legend.

IX

When we turn from folklore to myth and to the problems in creating a modern literature out of old myths, we find ourselves on a more difficult terrain. The scientific explanation of the phenomenal world, separating as it did the intellect from emotion and the imagination, did not satisfy the whole being: it left the senses cold. We can trace the horror of the poet caught in a scientific age without the resources of myth in two of the characteristic poems produced in England during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *In Memoriam* and *The Waste Land*. Myth is created by the imagination acting on the evidence of the senses and is a pre-rational attempt to explain human life and the universe. Since, as Professor Lorna Reynolds argues, the new areas of human experience that Yeats and his fellow-writers were elucidating were part of the subconscious deposit of the pre-rational development of man, they turned instinctively to myth.[54] Myth is sensuous and tactile: it explains and dramatizes events in the external world in terms of the "unconscious drama" of the human psyche:[55] the adventures of mythic heroes, AE explains, may "correspond to adventures of the spirit, conflicts between the bright power and the dark powers in ourselves."[56] Without a traditional mythology, a writer must rely on the inventiveness of his own mind; his creations, consequently, must be arbitrary and original. Through myth, on the other hand, an artist is brought beyond the limitations of his individual being, beyond the accidental forms of the world to the essence that these forms embody and to the imaginative events and characters in which these essences were first expressed in the national consciousness. A modern man living without myth is, Jung writes, "like one uprooted, having no true link either with the past, or with the ancestral life which continues within him, or yet with contemporary human society. He ... lives a life of his own, sunk in a subjective mania of his own devising, which he believes to be the newly discovered truth."[57] Myth provides an extravagant expression of pure emotion — of love, terror, joy, friendship — a means of re-shaping the world according to the impulses and desires of the human psyche working in communion with the collective Memory of the race, and without any regard to prudence, practicality, probability, or necessity.[58] It deals with imaginative events and characters which, having been brooded upon by generations and tested throughout the centuries, are "steeped in emotion;"[59]

characters and events created at a time when "the elemental virtues" were prized[60] and which have been brought to a kind of perfection because they are not the work of one mind but of many minds, the same feature, incidentally, that attracted Yeats to Byzantine mosaics. With myth, therefore, and a literature created from myth, modern man is released from the despair of an industrialized Iron age, and is provided with a link between his own age and the heroic age of the past, between his own individual consciousness and the consciousness of his race.

A race does not change in essentials: only the circumstances of life change. What was embodied in the Celtic mythic heroes may, AE argues, still be natural and innate in the character of the race. Cuchulain, AE goes on to suggest, must be restored to the twentieth-century consciousness at the precise point when the modern Irish nation was beginning to form, because he embodies "all that the bards thought noblest in the spirit of their race.[61] Myth is concerned with the heroic, and in their work the writers of the Celtic Revival consciously created for the popular mind heroic models of human behaviour and encouraged the nation to emulate these models through all the vicissitudes of earthly life.[62] One does not have to search deeply in Yeats's work to discover what he thought characteristic of the heroic approach to life: self-possession, acceptance of the conditions of life, abandonment to impulse and emotion, to whatever impulse is most immediate and pressing, courage when confronted with impossible odds, gaiety in the face of terror and defeat, indifference to death. One should also consider in this context the way in which Yeats contributes to the imaginative entity that we have called a nation by celebrating and mythologizing the heroic acts and character of his contemporaries, the gallery of living presences he creates in his poetry by releasing his contemporaries from cold history and time, capturing each in his most characteristic pose, making out of mortal men and women symbols to be brooded over in the coming times: Maud Gonne, Roger Casement, Patrick Pearse, The O'Rahilly, John Synge, John Butler Yeats, Robert Gregory, MacGregor Mathers, and many others.

Myths are also connected with places that men still inhabit, places sanctified by the passions enacted there in ancient times, and which still retain emotional residues of that passion: "in our land," Yeats writes,

> there is no river or mountain that is not associated in the memory with some event or legend. . . . I would have our writers and craftsmen of many kinds master this history and these legends, and fix upon their memory the appearance of mountains and rivers and make it all visible again in their arts, so that Irishmen, even though they had gone thousands of miles away, would still be in their own country. . . . I would have Ireland re-create the ancient arts, the arts as they were understood . . . in every ancient land; as they were understood when they moved a whole people and not a few people who had grown up in a leisured class and made this understanding their business. . . . I would have . . . [scholars and artists] begin to dig in Ireland the garden of the future, understanding that here in Ireland the spirit of man may be about to wed the soil of the world.[63]

By rooting his art in places with mythic associations, an artist makes his country live in the imagination of his own people and in the imagination of the world. We

are familiar with the way in which Yeats mythologizes places in many of his poems, capturing the light and colour of the Irish climate and scenery, restoring to places their mythological associations, and giving them new levels of poetic association,[64] while some of his plays — *The Dreaming of the Bones*, *The Words Upon the Window-Pane*, and *Purgatory* — derive their dramatic strength from being set in places where human passions played out in ancient times prove more powerful than the presence of the living.

X

"In a little time," Yeats writes, "places may begin to seem the only hieroglyphs that cannot be forgotten, and poets . . . will come . . . nearer the old poets, who had a seat at every hearth, if they but mingle their own dream with a story told for centuries."[65] What the writers of the Celtic Revival attempted to do was to knead the qualities that animate myth and folk literature into the circumstances of the life of an Irish artist living in the twentieth century, to produce a literature that retained the idealism of country people without "renouncing the complexity of ideas and emotions which is the heritage of cultivated man."[66] We may cite a few examples from Yeats's work to indicate how he used myth to dramatize moments or situations that have become or are becoming part of the twentieth-century approach to experience: the juxtaposition of intense vision and orthodox concerns which forms part of the art of the 1937 *Vision*, *Ideas of Good and Evil*, and the occult stories he produced during the eighteen-nineties. In *The King's Threshold*, the hunger strike is, I gather, used for the first time in modern life or literature to gain a personal or political objective. Deirdre, Yeats makes symbolic of twentieth-century woman and of woman's liberation from domestic and sexual enslavement, of her right to choose her fate, and having chosen it, to face heroically the consequences of that choice: Deirdre, Yeats writes, "might be some mild housewife but for her prophetic wisdom."[67] *On Baile's Strand*, a play filled with emotion of multitude, is one of the first plays of the absurd, where we have a true juxtaposition of incongruities: of the spiritual and the common, the Golden Age and the Iron Age,[68] the heroic impulse and the material betrayal of that impulse all caught in one moving moment at the end of the play.

In rooting his art in myth, the artist, Yeats suggests, may be responding to impulses which "have been accumulating for centuries,"[69] but once he has chosen his subject he must be concerned with nothing further than the expression of his own personality: he must, in Yeats's words, "think of nothing but giving it [his subject] such an expression as will please himself. . . . He must make his work a part of his own journey towards beauty and truth."[70] Personality is the expression of the energy that is unique to an individual engaged in active life or literature,[71] an expression unmotivated by ulterior advantage, material advancement, or that "last infirmity of Noble mind," what John Milton calls "Fame." Personality is the living personal element that animates action, language, and thought. It is what makes one man's perception of the world different from another, originat-

ing in the uniqueness of each individual, and expressing itself in action or in a work of art with an energy that remains after the dictates of logic and necessity have been satisfied.[72] Initially the artist's vision may seem at variance with his countrymen's preconceptions, for he presents his images as he sees them, not as his people expect him to see them.[73] The battle between the artist and his audience, and Yeats's defence of the right of the artist, whether he be a Synge or an O'Casey, to embody his own vision without regard to any utilitarian or obviously nationalistic cause, could be traced in another paper.[74] A national literature, Yeats writes, is created by writers "who are moulded by influences that are moulding their country, and who write out of so deep a life that they are accepted there in the end."[75] And in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Joyce writes: "This race and this country and this life produced me. . . . I shall express myself as I am."[76] By expressing his own personality an artist inevitably expresses the deeper thoughts and emotions of his race. To be national is to be personal.

XI

In modern Ireland the relation between literature and politics is a profound one. The economist Maynard Keynes writes: "The political fanatic who is hearing voices in the air has distilled his frenzy from the work of some academic scribbler of a few years back."[77] When we are dealing not merely with an "academic scribbler" but with a community of great artists, the voice that stirs the fanatic to political activity may be irresistible. The language that Yeats and AE used to advocate cultural and political separation from Britain was as uncompromising and as calculated to stir the soul of the nation as the language of Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, and their revolutionary associates. In *The National Being*, published in 1916, AE writes:

> when national ideals have been created they assume an immeasurably greater dignity when the citizens organize themselves for the defence of their ideals, and are prepared to yield up life itself as a sacrifice if by this the national being may be preserved. . . . There are occasions when the manhood of a nation must be prepared to yield life rather than submit to oppression, when it must perish in self-contempt or resist by force what wrong would be imposed by force. . . . We are standing on the threshold of nationhood.[78]

Earlier, in 1903, a year after the stirring production of *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* with Maud Gonne playing the lead, Yeats stated in a public lecture which is as yet unpublished:

> When I speak to myself those names that are rated upon the rosary of our national life; when I repeat to myself the name of Parnell, that haughty and austere spirit, or the name of Wolfe Tone, that joyful spirit, who kept his triumph and [triumphant?] air even under the shadow of death; when I think of the Red Man of the O'Donnells and of that Hugh O'Neill, who seemed, even when a lad, to be born to be a prince of men, who was born, the chronicler said, for the great weal or woe of his country; when I think of those men I say to myself that the greatest sin a man can commit against his race and against mankind is to bring the work of the dead to nothing.... We all hope that Ireland's battle is drawing to an end, but we must live as though it were to go on endlessly. We must . . . pass on into the future the great moral qualities

> that give men the strength to fight . . . . It may be that it depends upon us to call into life the phantom armies of the future. If we keep that thought always before us, if we never allow ourselves to forget those armies, we need have no fear for the future of Ireland.[79]

Through the power of the imagination of the leaders of the Celtic Revival, Cuchulain, a Bronze Age hero, suddenly re-appears in the twentieth century, and he appears not only in literary works, but he becomes a living image and presence, a model for the expression of the heroic impulse. Cuchulain provides the inspiration for one of the most significant historical events in the twentieth century, the Easter Rising of 1916 which heralded the break-up of the mightiest empire ever forged in the history of the world.

The Rising was itself conceived and enacted as a theatrical event, and the theatrical aspects of the occasion are clear in the time and setting chosen for the event, and in the dress, actions, and theatrical concerns of the major participants. Many of the leaders — Pearse, Plunkett, and MacDonagh — were, as we know, poets and playwrights, and perhaps more importantly, they had directed plays. F.X. Martin directs our attention to the conspicuous theatrical element in their dress and public gestures: MacDonagh with his sword-stick and cloak; Eamonn Ceannt with his kilt and bagpipes; Plunkett with his immense Celtic rings and bracelets and marrying in a midnight ceremony the night before his execution at dawn; the dying Connolly tied to a stretcher to be shot; Countess Markiewicz "concluding her activities in Easter Week at the time of the surrender by ostentatiously kissing her revolver and Sam Browne belt as she handed them over to the British Officer"; and Pearse himself reading the Proclamation of the Irish Republic with the "classical front" of the General Post Office and its "Ionic pillars and portico" serving as a background, and the night before his execution writing the final moving poem to his mother.[80]

The theatrical aspect of the Rising was also apparent in the choice of setting, the seizing of the public buildings in Dublin which, although disastrous choices as military headquarters, meant that the insurrection would cut across the routine life of the city. The time chosen for the event was also theatrical, spring and April being associated with the emergence of new life from the dead of winter, and Easter with the traditional religious associations of the Resurrection.

Viewing the Rising from the inside of the Post Office, Michael Collins said that "it had the air of a Greek tragedy."[81] The rebels in many ways seemed to have conceived of themselves as characters in a tragedy; in casting themselves in their self-appointed roles, in imagining themselves as sacrificial heroes, they were conscious of re-enacting myth, and when the moment of reckoning came, as was inevitable, they refused to shirk the responsibility that was involved in living up to the roles that they had chosen. When facing the might of the British Empire in an insurrection that had no possibility of succeeding in the way that we understand success, the insurgents were conscious of the spirit of Cuchulain when he too faced impossible odds: Pearse and his companions imagined themselves as sacrificial heroes and gave up their lives not only to free their country, but to demonstrate that heroes still could be found in the modern world:

> When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,
> What stalked throught the Post Office? What intellect,
> What calculation, number, measurement, replied?[82]

The Rising was a calculated theatrical gamble and a daring success in that it ignited the political imagination and energy of the country. One of the reasons, perhaps, why Ireland was so easily galvanized into coherent resistance after 1916 may be because the British, by shooting the insurgents, and chiefly the artists, had defiled something far more holy than the human body — the imagination of a people. The survivors of the Rising did not make the military mistakes that the initiators had made, and in their successful achievement of Irish independence they pioneered the techniques of modern guerilla warfare, and opened the way in which many other oppressed small nations secured their independence. It has indeed been suggested that the three greatest experts on guerilla tactics were Tom Barry, Ché Guevara, and Ho Chi Minh, and Tom Barry's *Guerilla Days in Ireland* was Ché Lynch Guevara's bible and source book.

XII

The figures of mythology are created early in the life of a nation and not only continue to live in people's imaginations, but are embodied in each generation.[83] It was the power of the literary interpretations of the figures of myth that led to the creation of the modern Irish state:

> What was in Patrick Pearse's soul when he fought in Easter Week [AE asks] but an imagination, and the chief imagination which inspired him was that of a hero who stood against a host. . . . I who knew how deep was Pearse's love for the Cuchulain whom O'Grady discovered or invented, remembered after Easter Week that he had been solitary against a great host in imagination with Cuchulain, long before circumstance permitted him to stand for his nation with so few companions against so great a power.[84]

In any movement, as William Irwin Thompson demonstrates in his brilliant book *The Imagination of an Insurrection*, the artists come first. They are the antennae of the nation, picking up impulses before they can be perceived by what Coleridge patronizingly call the poor, loveless, ever-anxious crowd. AE states clearly:

> It was our literature more than our political activities which created . . . a true image of our nationality, and brought about the recognition of a spiritual entity which should have a political body to act through.[85]

After the artists come the politicians and parliamentarians who create a physical body for the spiritual and intellectual ideals, then finally the murderous mob who repeat what once was a discovery until it becomes a dead cliché, a hollow and meaningless formula:

> The night can sweat with terror as before
> We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,
> And planned to bring the world under a rule,
> Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.[86]

XIII

What is happening in Northern Ireland in the nineteen seventies and eighties may indeed be the inevitable working out of the Irish system of the ideals that led to the creation of the Irish Literary Renaissance and the Republic of Ireland. That noble ideals should have this end is perhaps the way of the world, but our condemnation of the violence to which ideals sometimes lead should not necessarily entail a condemnation of the ideals themselves: to do so would be to condemn us forever to the *status quo*.

NOTES

[1]John Pinkerton, *Inquiry into the History of Scotland* (London 1799), 11, 18-9.

[2]*History of Ireland: Heroic Period*, 1 (London 1878), p. v.

[3]*Uncollected Prose of W.B. Yeats*, ed. John Frayne, 1 (London 1970), p. 368.

[4]AE, "Nationality and Imperialism," in *Ideals of Ireland*, ed. Lady Gregory (London 1901), p. 15.

[5]*Uncollected Prose*, p. 348.

[6]*Essays and Introductions* (London 1961), p. 111. Subsequent references to this volume will be abbreviated to *E & I*.

[7]*The Living Torch*, ed. Monk Gibbon (London 1937), p. 134.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 183.

[9]*Uncollected Prose*, p. 273.

[10]*The Living Torch*, p.135.

[11]*Idem.*

[12]*Ibid.*, p. 184.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 259.

[14]*Ibid.*, p. 197.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 263.

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 135. Elsewhere AE writes: "Yeats has made the name of his country shine in imagination to the rest of the world a hundred times more than any of the political notorieties whose name are on every lip here, but who have rarely uttered a sentence which could be taken up and echoed by people in other lands and made part of their thought. It was by the literary movement of which Yeats was the foremost figure that Ireland for the first time for long centuries came to any high international repute" (*Ibid.*, pp. 256-7).

[17]*The National Being* (Dublin 1916), p. 12.

[18]*Ideals in Ireland*, p. 15.

[19]*E & I*, pp. 513-4.

[20]*The Revival of Irish Literature*, ed. Charles Gavan Duffy (London 1894), pp. 124-6. For a different view of this we can turn to the eighteenth-century historian, David Hume: "The Irish, from the beginning of time, had been buried in the most profound barbarism and ignorance; and as they were never conquered or even invaded by the Romans, from whom all the western world derived its civility, they continued still in the most rude state of society, and were distinguished only by those vices, to which human nature, not tamed by education nor restrained by laws, is for ever subject." (*History of Great Britain*, 1 (London 1767), p. 454).

[21]"It is possible to argue," AE writes, that Shakespeare's imagination of Henry V was "the first imperial mood in English literature and the begetter in millions of men's minds of like moods" (*Living Torch*, p. 135). Yeats, also, comments on the part that Shakespeare's imagination of Henry V played in the shaping of the imperialistic consciousness (see *E & I*, pp. 104-5).

[22]The growth of cities, AE argues, cuts the cord that connects man to Nature, the Great Mother: "life shrivels up, sundered from the source of life. . . . [I]n the cities there is a slow poisoning of life going on day by day. . . . It is only in Nature, and by thoughts on the problems of Nature, that our intellect grows to any real truth and draws near to the Mighty Mind which laid the foundations of the world." (*National Being*, pp. 62-3). Yeats also argues that life in cities "deafens or kills the passive meditative life," and that modern education merely "enlarges the separated, self-moving mind" and makes our souls less sensitive to supernatural influences (*E & I*, p. 41).

[23]AE, *Thoughts for a Convention* (Dublin 1917), p. 10.

[24]*Ibid.*, p. 7. AE wrote these words after the 1916 Rising, but he had made the same point several times earlier in his writings.

The rejection of the imperialist ideal is the recurring theme of an important, often overlooked book, *Ideals in Ireland*, edited by Lady Gregory in 1900, and containing contributions by Yeats, AE, Douglas Hyde, George Moore, Standish O'Grady, and D.P. Moran. AE argues that acceptance of the imperialist ideal threatens the destruction of the Irish national being, and he rejects the desecration of Irish traditions and the sacred earth with a passion and persuasion that any politician would envy:

> A few ignoramuses have it in their power . . . to train the national mind according to British ideas . . . and are trying their utmost to obliterate the mark of God upon a nation. It is not from Shelley or Keats our peasantry derive their mental nourishment, now that they are being cut off from their own past. We see everywhere a moral leprosy, a vulgarity of mind creeping over them. The Police Gazettes, the penny novels, the hideous comic journals, replace the once familiar poems and the beautiful and moving memoirs of classic Ireland. The music that breathed Tir-nan-og and overcame men's hearts with all gentle and soft emotions is heard more faintly, and the songs of the London music halls may be heard in places where the music of fairy enchanted the elder generations. The shout of the Cockney tourist sounds in the cyclopean crypts and mounds once sanctified by druid mysteries, and divine visitations, and passing from the mortal to the immortal. Ireland Limited is being run by English syndicates. It is the descent of a nation into hell, not nobly, not as a sacrifice made for a great end, but ignobly and without hope of resurrection" (pp. 19-20).

George Moore also makes the same point in *Ideals in Ireland*, which was, of course, produced during his phase of enthusiasm for the Revival:

> Those who believe that dreams, beauty, and divine ecstasy are essential must pray that all the empires may perish and the world be given back to the small peasant states, whose seas and forests and mountains shall create national aspirations and new gods. Otherwise the world will fall into gross naturalism, into scientific barbarism more terrible than the torch and the sword of the Hun (p. 50)

Yeats writes of the counter-balancing effect of the Celtic Revival against the influence of England: he refers to the "subtle net of bribery which England has spread . . . by Courts, by Colleges, by Government offices, by a social routine, and they fold and unfold their net before us that they may make us like themselves, and we have answered by discovering an idea, by creating a movement of intellect, whose ever-growing abundance, whose ever-deepening energy, would show their education its sterility, their wealth its raggedness" (p. 106).

[25]*E & I*, p. 109.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 114. In *Literary Ideals in Ireland* (Dublin 1899), Yeats writes: "Modern poetry grows weary of using over and over again the personages and stories and metaphors that have come to us through Greece and Rome, or from Wales and Brittany through the Middle ages. . . . The Irish legends, in popular tradition and in old Gaelic literature, are . . . numerous, and . . . alone among great European legends have the beauty and wonder of altogether new things (pp. 18-9).

[27]*Explorations*, ed. Mrs. W.B. Yeats (London 1962), p. 205.

[28]*E & I*, p. 190.

[29]*The Inner and The Outer Ireland* (Dublin 1921), p. 5.

[30]*Thoughts for a Convention*, p. 6.

[31]*Ideals in Ireland*, p. 20.

[32]Unpublished Lecture in the possession of Senator Michael Yeats. The lecture is one of four lectures which are to be published by the Cuala Press in 1982.

[33]AE writes: "If the universe has any meaning at all it exists for the purposes of soul, and men or nations denied essential freedom cannot fulfill their destiny, or illuminate earth with light or wisdom from that divinity without them, or mould external circumstance into the image of the Heaven they conceive in their hearts" (*The Inner and The Outer Ireland*, p. 15).

[34]*Ideals in Ireland*, p. 18. In the same collection of essays, D.P. Moran writes: "A literature steeped in the history, traditions, and genius of one nation is at best only an imperfect tutor to the people of another nation" (p. 31).

[35]On this point AE writes: "The battle which is going on in the world has been stated to be a spiritual conflict between those who desire greater freedom for the individual and think that the state exists to preserve that freedom, and those who believe in the predominance of the state and the complete subjection of the individual to it and the moulding of the individual mind in its image" (*Thoughts for a Convention*, p. 27).

[36]AE writes: The "struggle is in reality not against flesh and blood, but is a portion of the everlasting battle against principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places, which underlies every other battle which has been or will be fought by men" (*Ideals in Ireland*, p. 21).

[37]*Ideals in Ireland*, p. 17. See also p. 22.

[38]*E & I*, p. 171.

[39]*Ibid.*, p. 522.

[40]*Ibid.*, p. 36 and p. 42. In his essay on "Magic" Yeats argues that the images which present themselves to the poet from a deeper life than his own bear a "definite relation to dominant moods and moulding events" of his own age. When the poet looks beyond the external and the superficial, however, these images or visions seem "symbolical histories of these moods and events, or rather symbolical shadows of the impulses that have made them" (*E & I*, p. 36).

[41]Yeats and Ellis, *The Works of William Blake*, 3 vols. (London 1893), 1, 291.

[42]*Ibid.*, pp. 241-2. See also my Dolmen monograph, *Symbolism and Some Implications of the Symbolic Approach: W.B. Yeats during the Eighteen-Nineties* (Dublin 1975), pp. 10-19.

[43]*E & I*, p. 197. In his essay, "John Eglinton and Spiritual Art," contributed to *Literary Ideals in Ireland* in 1899, Yeats writes:

> I believe that the renewal of belief, which is the great movement of our time, will more and more liberate the arts from "their age" and from life, and leave them more and more free to lose themselves in beauty, and to busy themselves like all the great poetry of the past and like religions of all times, with "old faiths, myths, dreams," the accumulated beauty of the age. I believe that all men will more and more reject the opinion that poetry is "a criticism of life," and be more and more convinced that it is a revelation of a hidden life.... I believe, too, that, though a Homer or a Dante or a Shakespeare may have used all knowledge, whether of life or of philosophy, or of mythology or of history, he did so, not for the sake of the knowledge, but to shape to a familiar and intelligible body something he had seen or experienced in the exaltation of his senses (pp. 36-7).

[44]*Uncollected Prose*, p. 377.

[45]*Explorations*, p. 313. The poetry of the Young Irelanders, Yeats contends, was shaped at a moment in history when it was "the desire of everybody to be moved by the same emotions as everybody else" (*Ideals in Ireland*, p. 88), and at a moment in Irish history when the whole country was attempting to unite in order to accomplish one thing: freedom from England. Literature to the Young Irelanders was designed, therefore, to express the "common will." As a consequence, their ballads and stories were calculated to excite immediate and universal emotion and were focused on certain simple and recurring subjects: they wrote about "the need of unity against England, about the martyrs who had died at the hand of England, or about the greatness of Ireland before the coming of England" (*Ibid.*, p. 87). Their subjects, although stereotyped, related to the destiny of Ireland, but the metrical models and style in which they chose to express these stirring subjects were the "formal and conventional" rhythms "which would give the most immediate pleasure to ears that had forgotten Gaelic poetry and not learned the subtleties of English poetry;" they turned from native Irish models to English models — Burns, Macaulay, Scott, and Campbell.

Despite the fact, however, that Ireland's popular ballads in the nineteenth century had derived so much in form from an alien literature, Yeats was moved by the emotional intensity of the poetry, by its love of the land, by its celebration of defeat not victory, of "visions of unfulfilled desire" and not "the sordid compromise of success" (*Ibid.*, p. 101). The danger came when the poetry of Young Ireland came to be regarded as the only model for the expression of national feeling. Images and ideas which could make the nation secure during a period of deprivation became with constant repetition separated from the tradition and life they were designed to express. Literary characters were created which were supposed to be typical of the nation but which were interchangeable and stereotyped; generalizations were substituted for individual man and women; abstraction, rhetoric, and sentimentality were born; language became habitual, and bitterness and restlessness were born in the minds of those who condemned all that did not conform to pre-ordained formulas:

> abstract thoughts are raised up between men's minds and Nature, who never does the same thing twice, or makes one man like another, till minds, whose patriotism is perhaps great enough to carry them to the scaffold, cry down natural impulse with the morbid persistence of minds unsettled by some fixed idea . . . and at last a generation is like an hysterical woman who will make unmeasured accusations and believe impossible things, because of some logical deduction from a solitary thought which has turned a portion of her mind to stone. (*E & I*, pp. 313-4)

The predictability of thought and argument that emerged, the perpetual apology and defence of pre-ordained virtues, the substitution of casuisty for first-hand passionate experience, and the enchantment of the popular mind to nationalistic images and abstractions, stifled individuality and natural impulse and created a tension between the practical propagandist and the truly national writer. With the Celtic Revival, Yeats contends, the literature that was designed to express the "common will and hope" was replaced by a literature designed to express the personality of the individual writer, and the new writers were intent on moulding, "without any thought of the politics of the hour, sane utterance of the national life" (*Ideals in Ireland*, p. 90).

[46]*Ideals in Ireland*, p. 94.

[47]In *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*, Lady Gregory writes:

> if by an impossible miracle every trace and memory of Christianity could be swept out of the world, it would not shake or destroy at all the belief of the people in Ireland in the invisible world, the cloud of witnesses, in immortality and the life to come. For them the veil between things seen and unseen has hardly thickened since those early days of the world. . . . Here in Connacht there is no doubt as to the continuance of life after death. (New York Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 190.

[48]*The Celtic Twilight* (1893), pp. 24-5 and p. 20. For the earlier quotation in this sentence, see *E & I*, p. 42.

[49]*Mythologies*, p. 30.

[50]*E & I*, p. 6.

[51]*Ideals in Ireland*, p. 98. Elsewhere Yeats writes:

> 'The Celtic movement', as I understand it, is principally the opening of this fountain, and none can measure of how great importance it may be to coming times, for every new fountain of legends is a new intoxication for the imagination of the world. It comes at a time when the imagination of the world is

as ready as it was at the coming of the tales of Arthur and of the Grail for a new intoxication. The reaction against the rationalism of the eighteenth century has mingled with a reaction against the materialism of the nineteenth century. . . . The arts by brooding upon their own intensity have become religious, and are seeking, as I think Verhaeren has said, to create a sacred book. They must, as religious thought has always done, utter themselves through legends. . . . [T]he Irish legends move among known woods and seas, and have so much of a new beauty that they may well give the opening century its most memorable symbols. (*E & I*, pp.186-7)

[52]*E & I*, p. 203.

[53]In his essays on "The Irish Dramatic Movement," published in *Explorations*, Yeats explores this question at length. The change which had begun in the Renaissance was completed, he argues, by the "newspaper government" and scientific movement of the nineteenth century (p. 149). The external world was no longer seen as an expression of an invisible essence, but as an entity in itself; man no longer believed that the "root of reality" was in the centre, in his own breast, but was somewhere in the "whirling circumference," in the external world (p. 150). With this decline of faith in an unseen reality, literature turned to study and mimesis of the external world. Dramatists strove to present on the stage the "sensation of an external reality" (p. 167), whether of action or character or language: action was crushed into the "narrow limits of possibility" (*E & I*, p. 275); characters were created to resemble as closely as possible average men and women, and were made to speak as people speak in the streets. The change in stage design, from platform to proscenium, with its consequent emphasis on scenery and costumes; the development of the scenery at the expense of the actor, and the attempt of the actor to superimpose meaning on the words through gesture and intonation rather than allowing the emotion to speak through the words themselves; the choice of subjects of contemporary interest, and the presentation on the stage of what an audience would be expected to approve or disapprove — all sprung from a desire of the dramatist to picture an external reality, and all were, Yeats contends, a denial of the true impulses of drama. Situations had become stereotyped; language had become clichéd; literature had become abstracted from what it was designed to express, the deeper life. Science and civilization, the persistent and predictable repetition in art of what once were "real discoveries" (p. 185), the substitution of moderation for excess, and the tendency on the part of artists to copy surface thought and action had destroyed what once was natural, instinctive, and beautiful. The interest of beauty, Yeats concludes, is exhausted by the "logical energies of art" (*E & I*, p. 289):

A civilization is very like a man or a woman, for it comes in but a few years into its beauty, and its strength, and then, while many years go by, it gathers and makes order about it, the strength and beauty going out of it the while, until in the end it lies there with its limbs straightened out and a clean linen cloth folded upon it. (p. 150)

With the concern of modern literature for an external reality, the best writers, Yeats argues, cut themselves off from contemporary life and contemporary literary trends and concerned themselves with states of pure mind and imagination, with intellectual essences and impossible purities. This is how Yeats viewed his own work and the work his contemporaries produced during the eighteen-nineties:

I was interested in nothing but states of mind, lyrical moments, intellectual essences . . . I had not learned what sweetness, what rhythmic movement there is in those who have become the joy that is themselves. Without knowing it, I had come to care for nothing but impersonal beauty. I had set out on life with the thought of putting my very self into the poetry, and had understood this as a representation of my own visions and an attempt to cut away the non-essential, but as I imagined the visions outside myself my imagination became full of decorative landscape and of still life . . . I was always seeking something unchanging and unmixed and always outside myself, a Stone or an Elixir that was always out of reach, and that I myself was the fleeting thing that held out its hand. (*E & I*, p. 271)

This type of literature, Yeats came to recognize, was too subtle, too spiritual, too abstracted from life. The artist was separated from what he presented in his work: "It is life in the mirror, and our desire for it is as the desire of the lost souls for God" (p. 163). Aspiration was separated from a delight in the body and in the things of common life, and art sought to achieve loftiness and "marmorean stillness" by choosing for its scenery "strange and far-away places" (*E & I*, p. 296). This movement culminated in the disdainful cry of Villiers de L'Isle Adam with which Yeats was so enchanted during the eighteen-nineties: "'As for living, our servants will do that for us.'" During the eighteen-nineties Yeats himself was concerned with rarefied essences, but during the first part of the twentieth-century Synge helped him to restore the proper balance between art and life, the spiritual and the common.

[54]"Response to the Assessors," one of the documents which formed part of the *Yeats Studies* Application to the Canada Council (1975-6), as yet unpublished.

[55]*The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung*, ed. Violet Staub De Laszlo (New York 1959), p. 289.

[56]*The Living Torch*, p. 244.

[57]*Basic Writings*, p.5.

[58]Yeats writes:

> Its events, and things, and people are wild, and are like unbroken horses, that are so much more beautiful than horses that have learned to run between shafts. . . . The great virtues, the great joys, the great privations come in the myths, and, as it were, take mankind between their naked arms, and without putting off their divinity. Poets have taken their themes more often from stories that are all, or half, mythological, than from history or stories that give one the sensation of history, understanding, as I think, that the imagination which remembers the proportions of life is but a long wooing, and that it has to forget them before it becomes the torch and the marriage-bed (*Explorations*, p. 10).

Elsewhere Yeats writes:

> There is . . . something in their tumultuous vehemence, in their delight in sheer immensity, in their commingling of the spirit of man with the spirit of the elements, which belongs to the wild Celtic idealism rather than to the careful, practical ways of the Saxon. The heroes of 'The Idylls of the King' are always merely brave and excellent men, calculable and measurable in every way; but the powers of Cuchulain are as incalculable and immeasurable as the powers of nature (*Uncollected Prose*, p. 350).

[59]*E & I*, p. 114.

[60]*The Living Torch*, p. 240. AE writes:

> As that extraordinary bardic literature, so much richer in imagination than the ballad poetry which influenced Scott, becomes more widely known, may we not hope Irish writers of genius will see in its legendary heroes and demigods the noblest symbols of their own emotions? That bardic literature was written at a time when little was prized except the elemental virtues, and the study of it excites the spirit in an age of complex thought, when people are praised for scientific attainment or intellect (*The Living Torch*, pp. 239-40).

[61]*The National Being*, p. 12.

[62]"Our political life in the past," AE writes, "has been sordid and unstable because we were uncultured as a nation. National ideals have been the possession of the few in Ireland, and have not been diffused. That is the cause of our comparative failure as a nation. If we would create an Irish culture, and spread it widely among our people, we would have the same unfathomable sources of inspiration and sacrifice to draw upon in our acts as a nation as the individual has who believes he is immortal, and that his life here is but a temporary foray into time out of eternity" (*The National Being*, p. 136).

[63]*Essays and Introductions*, pp. 205-10. Yeats makes this point several times throughout his work. In *Literary Ideals in Ireland* he writes:

> Our legends are always associated with places, and not merely every mountain and valley, but every strange stone and little coppice has its legend, preserved in written or unwritten tradition. Our Irish Romantic movement has arisen out of this tradition, and should always, even when it makes new legends about traditional people and things, be haunted by places. It should make Ireland, as Ireland and all other lands were in ancient times, a holy land to her own people (pp. 19-20).

Every lake and mountain in the land where a people live must, Yeats writes in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, be made "an excitement of the imagination" (*E & I*, p. 209). And in *The Cutting of An Agate*, Yeats writes:

> Until the discovery of legendary knowledge and the returning belief in miracle, or what we must needs call so, can bring once more a new belief in the sanctity of common ploughland, and new wonders that reward no difficult ecclesiastical routine but the common, wayward, spirited man, we may never see again a Shelley and a Dickens in the one body.... I am orthodox and pray for a resurrection of the body, and am certain that a man should find his Holy Land where he first crept upon the floor, and that familiar woods and rivers should fade into symbol with so gradual a change that he may never

discover, no, not even in ecstasy itself, that he is beyond space, and that time alone keeps him from Primum Mobile, Supernal Eden, Yellow Rose over all (*E & I*, pp. 296-7).

[64]Yeats writes: "I sought some symbolic language reaching far into the past and associated with familiar name and conspicuous hills that I might not be alone amid the obscure impressions of the senses" (*E & I*, p. 349).

[65]*Ideals in Ireland*, p.100.

[66]*Ibid.*, p. 91. AE maintains that the Celtic Revival, which was an assertion of the "spiritual personality" of Ireland, produced a literature that was both ancient and modern, ancient because it was rooted in the "almost forgotten fountain of Gaelic culture," and at the same time "intensely modern" in that it had "enough of the universal in it to win recognition from lovers of literature in Europe and America" (*The Living Torch*, p. 247).

[67]*Explorations*, p. 11.

[68]With myth, and a literature created from myth, Yeats and AE argue, we have a sense of the Golden Age balancing the Modern age. Yeats writes: "romantic art is . . . about to change its manner and become more like the art of the old poets, who saw the golden age and their own age side by side like substance and shadow" (*Ideals in Ireland*, p. 99). AE claims that with myth we "feel . . . that we are travelling in the realms of gold . . . the Golden Age has never passed away but is always about us, and it is a vision which can be regained by any who will light some of the candles in the many mansions of the spirit" (*The Living Torch*, 240-2).

[69]*Uncollected Prose*, p. 360.

[70]*E & I*, pp. 206-7.

[71]"I have always come to this certainty," Yeats writes in 1906, "what moves natural men in the arts is what moves them in life, and that is, intensity of personal life, intonations that show them, in a book or a play, the strength, the essential moment of a man who would be exciting in the market or at the dispensary door" (*E & I*, p. 265).

[72]See *E & I*, pp. 253 ff. See also my essay, "Yeats's Conception of Synge," in *Sunshine and the Moon's Delight: A Centenary Tribute to John Millington Synge 1871-1909*, ed. S.B. Bushrui (Gerrards Cross, Bucks 1972), pp. 159-71, and my essay, "Yeats on Personality: Three Unpublished Lectures," in *Yeats and the Theatre*, edd. Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds (Toronto 1975), pp. 4-59.

[73]See the "Introduction" to my *Theatre and Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Toronto and London 1971).

[74]Yeats's essays on "The Irish Dramatic Movement," published in *Explorations*, focus on this problem: the gulf that inevitably develops between national expectations and the artist who has the courage to express his own vision. Literature, Yeats argues in these essays, needs no "external test" beyond the artist's delight in the beauty he creates (p. 152); truth and beauty need no justification beyond themselves; pure joy can never come from anything "indentured" to a cause (p. 103); a sincere work of art is a "portion of the conscience of mankind" (p. 111), and the morals it presents will undoubtedly contravene the morals with which men to that point have been content. The creative impulse need no political or social justification, and should seek no foundation beyond individual life and the human heart. If an artist puts into his art the life in which he is actively involved, he will inevitably create characters which could not have existed at any other point in history. Life, Yeats claims, never remains static, is never the same at any particular moment in history, is "always taking some new shape, always individualising" (p. 120), and a literature that presents a vivid image of individual life must of necessity be opposed to the generalized personifications presented on the political platform, in the pulpit or the press. Indeed Yeats contends that the struggle of all fine literature is the struggle between what has been accepted and established, the law, and what is not accepted or established, individual life. If a writer's work is dictated by external necessity, or some obviously patriotic intention, if he attempts to express thoughts and emotions which are calculated to appeal to others, he is guilty of insincerity, and it is, Yeats contends, only when literature is sincere and free, when it expresses without regard to compromise or consequence the vision that consumes the artist's heart that it has power to move a nation:

> Literature is . . . the great teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of all values, and it is this, not only in the sacred books whose power everybody acknowledges, but by every movement of imagination in song or story or drama that height of intensity and sincerity has made literature at all. Literature must take the responsibility of its power, and keep all its freedom: it must be like the spirit and like the wind that blows where it listeth; it must claim its right to pierce through every crevice of human nature, and to describe the relation of the soul and the heart to the facts of life and of law, and to describe that relation as it is, not as we would have it be; and in so far as it fails to do this it fails to give us that foundations of understanding and charity for whose lack our moral sense can be but cruelty (p. 117).

Always, therefore, the centre of creative activity must be the artist himself, the life he has experienced, the "symbolism of incident and scene" he has discovered and mastered (p. 160). He may be denounced by the practical propagandists for creating exceptions, characters not "typical" of the nation, but, as Yeats contends, it is only in exceptions, in individuals, in "the few minds where the flame has burnt . . . pure," that one can see the "permanent character of a race" (p. 147). One can only create characters which are typical of one's own way of thinking, and in expressing what is true of oneself one is inevitably expressing what is true of the nation of which one is a part. Truly national writers, therefore, do not satisfy an "expectation," are not made upon the national mould, but are the "moulders of their nation" (p. 158), and a truly national literature is not committed to a cause nor to an approach to life that everybody accepts; it is not created from the surfaces of national activity but is an indifferent explosion of a deeper buried life and is created by writers "who are moulded by influences that are moulding their country, and who write out of so deep a life that they are accepted there in the end" (p. 156). By "deep life" Yeats says he means that men have "put into their writing the emotions and experiences that have been most important to themselves" (p. 157). An artist, therefore, who is true to the vision in his own heart and who has the courage not to allow this vision to be tempered by the political or social exigencies of the time must inevitably overturn the law of his time, and must in the process create a new way of looking at the world.

Because the business of the established order is to preserve and build, and the business of the artist is to shatter forms which have become habitual, controversy becomes inevitable. An original image of individual life instigates the opposition of the established order, and the established order attacked the new literature because it did not conform to its own stereotyped images of Ireland.

[75]*Explorations*, p. 156.

[76](London 1964), pp. 204-5.

[77]Quoted in J.R. Talmon, *Political Messianism: Romantic Phase* (New York 1960), p. 256. I am grateful to William Irwin Thompson for bringing this quotation to my attention.

[78]*The National Being*, pp. 134-40. AE does go on to argue, however, that moral and economic forces are "more powerful than physical" ones (p. 153): the "military and political institutions of a small country are comparatively easy to displace," but it is a task "infinitely more difficult to destroy ideals or to extinguish a national being" (p. 135). He advocates the application of the disciplines one learns from military training, the sacrifice of the individual for the general welfare, to civil life. AE is, indeed, more interested in the creation of "intellectual and spiritual" armies: "some time in the heroic future," he writes, "some nation in a crisis . . . will oppose moral and spiritual forces to material forces. . . . [N]othing will put an end to race conflicts except the equally determined and heroic development of the spiritual, moral, and intellectual forces which disdain to use the force and fury of material powers" (pp. 154-6).

[79]"The Intellectual Revival in Ireland." in the possession of Senator Michael Yeats, pp. 2-17.

[80]See F.X. Martin, "1916 — Myth, Fact, and Mystery," *Studia Hibernica*, No. 7 (Dublin, 1967 [1968]), pp. 10-11.

[81]Rex Taylor, *Michael Collins* (London 1958), p. 77.

[82]Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 375. The question that inevitably arises is, of course: why were not Yeats and AE in the Post Office? It is not simply a case of the artist being a contemplative man and the politician being a man of action, but rather a matter of the politician becoming enchanted by the abstraction of his own ideals, while the artist is full of a sense of the complexity and the ever-changing patterns of human life. Yeats

explores this in *Easter 1916*, and in *The Living Torch* AE writes: "The poet always has his heart fixed on life in its fullness, on the complete man, and will not starve life for the sake of the patriotic man, and he is a truer patriot than those who have nothing else but patriotism. Our spiritual, intellectual and economic life, all that is necessary to our humanity and its fullness, has been ravaged by those who have set abstractions above humanity" (p. 167).

[83]"They are immortals," AE writes, "and find bodies from generation to generation" (*The Living Torch*, p. 134).

[84]*The Living Torch*, pp. 134-44.

[85]*Ibid.*, p. 247. Elsewhere AE writes: "The spirit which brought about national independence was a spirit created by the artists in life [i.e. heroes and great men of history], but the poets, the musicians, the architects, and, in some way, those who struggled for freedom were inspired and sustained by thoughts and images created by the artists in life and associated with the national being" (*Ibid.*, p. 184).

[86]Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 233.