

## CHAPTER 12

.....

# ‘EASTER, 1916’: YEATS’S FIRST WORLD WAR POEM

.....

MARJORIE PERLOFF

When Pearce summoned Cuchulain to his side,  
What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,  
What calculation, number, measurement, replied?

W. B. Yeats, ‘The Statues’

‘How does the war affect you?’, wrote W. B. Yeats’s old friend and fellow occultist Florence Farr from Ceylon in October 1914. At first Yeats shrugged it off: in Ireland, he told Farr, the war seemed more remote than in England, making it easier to concentrate on other things.<sup>1</sup> But in London some months later, he complained to his American friend and benefactor John Quinn that ‘[the war] is merely the most expensive outbreak of insolence and stupidity the world has ever seen, and I give it as little of my thought as I can. I went to my club this afternoon to look at the war news, but read Keats’s *Lamia* [*sic*] instead.’<sup>2</sup> This air of studied indifference characterizes Yeats’s irritable little lyric of February 1915, ‘On Being Asked for a War Poem’:

I think it better that at times like these  
A poet’s mouth be silent, for in truth

<sup>1</sup> Florence Farr to W. B. Yeats, 3 Oct. 1914, in *Yeats Annual*, ix, ed. Deirdre Toomey (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), 242–3. Farr was then headmistress of Ramanathan College in Ceylon.

<sup>2</sup> Yeats to John Quinn, 24 June 1915, quoted in Roy Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life*, ii: *The Arch-Poet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

FN:1

FN:2

We have no gift to set a statesman right;  
 He's 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.<sup>3</sup>

[FN:3]

[FN:4]

The request had come from Henry James, who was helping Edith Wharton bring out a collection of war poems to raise money for the Belgian refugees in Paris.<sup>4</sup> The poem, first called 'To a friend who has asked me to sign his manifesto to the neutral nations' and then 'A Reason for Keeping Silent', inspired an angry response from the strongly anti-German Quinn, who told Yeats, 'those five or six lines were quite unworthy of you and the occasion . . . I do not believe in divorce between letters and life or art and war.'<sup>5</sup>

[FN:5]

The divorce persisted, however, during the winters with Ezra Pound at Stone Cottage, where in 1914–15 Yeats studied and adapted the stylized rituals of the Noh drama and completed the first volume of his autobiography, *Reveries over Childhood and Youth*. Pound, as James Longenbach notes, was becoming increasingly caught up in the war fever, especially after the death at the Front of his great artist friend Henri Gaudier-Brzeska in June 1915. But Yeats remained aloof: his own Noh play, *At the Hawk's Well*, designed by Edmund Dulac and danced by Michio Ito, a disciple of Nijinsky from the Ballet Russe, had its first performance (4 April 1916) at Lady Cunard's at what turned out to be, ironically enough, a war charity affair.<sup>6</sup> Having launched *At the Hawk's Well*, Yeats set off for Sir William Rothenstein's idyllic cottage in the Cotswolds to spend the Easter holiday. Sir William had planned to paint Yeats's portrait.

[FN:6]

It was here on Easter Monday (24 April) that Yeats received word of the Rising. The rebellion moved him as no account of the Battle of the Somme or Verdun ever could, for the principals were mostly people he knew personally, and his own future hung in the balance. The Rising was the first decisive event to threaten Yeats's ability to advance the Irish cause from his base in London, where he had lived a large part of his life, ever since his schooldays. It was in London, after all, that Yeats's early writings were published, in London that he founded the Irish Literary Society (1891), the Gaelic League (1893), and so on. Even if he complained of being a stranger in London, Yeats held the privileged position of the Protestant Anglo-Irish Ascendancy. 'The loose federation of personalities Yeats gathered around himself', Declan Kiberd notes, 'was one of the very first groups of decolonizing intellectuals to formulate a vision of their native country during a youthful sojourn in an

<sup>3</sup> Yeats, 'On Being Asked for a War Poem', in *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Dent, 1990), 205.

<sup>4</sup> See James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 118.

<sup>5</sup> John Quinn, quoted in Albright, 'Notes to *Poems*', in Yeats, *Poems*, 579.

<sup>6</sup> See Foster, *W. B. Yeats*, ii. 40.

imperial capital.<sup>7</sup> From his perch in London, Yeats could do many things to further the Irish cause, the downside being that the poet's Ireland, at this stage, was largely invention, an imaginary homeland, characterized, in Kiberd's words, by its mix 'of Celticism and Peter Pannery'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the poet's real literary roots were planted firmly in the English Romantic tradition, especially that of Blake and Shelley.

Ironically for Yeats, it was the British engagement in the Great War, an engagement he had derided as a great nuisance and distraction, that brought about the Easter Rising. The Irish Home Rule Bill, first introduced into Parliament by Gladstone in 1893 and passed by the House of Commons in 1912, requiring only the expected endorsement of the Lords to become law, was summarily tabled in Parliament. The new leader of the Irish Party, John Redmond, accepted this state of affairs. Indeed, Home Rule, in Kiberd's words, 'was to be the post-war reward for Redmond's support for England and for "plucky Catholic Belgium"'. Tens of thousands of Irishmen volunteered to fight (as they saw it) for the rights of small nations; other members of the Irish Volunteers felt in all conscience that this was not their war.<sup>9</sup> These latter now flocked to the IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood) as well as to Arthur Griffith's Sinn Féin ('ourselves alone') movement.

The scene was thus set for the Easter Rising, but neither Yeats nor Lady Gregory and her circle expected it; indeed, they reacted with shock to the news that on Easter Monday some 700 members of the IRB, led by Patrick Pearse, had occupied first the Post Office and from there the centre of Dublin, and proclaimed the founding of an independent Irish State. The Rising lasted less than a week: Pearse, appalled by the slaughter of civilians, surrendered on the Saturday after Easter; by then, more than 300 citizens had been killed, as well as more than 130 British soldiers and 70 rebels. British retaliation was severe. Between 3 and 12 May, fifteen rebel leaders were executed, 'despite', as Kiberd tells us, 'a strong consensus that they should have been treated as prisoners-of-war. Martial law was imposed and 3,500 people were arrested, more than twice the number which had actually taken part in the Rising.'<sup>10</sup>

Yeats's reaction can be traced in his correspondence with Lady Gregory, his sisters, and various friends. Despite initial suspicion of the rebels, Yeats sympathized with most of the principals: Thomas MacDonagh, a university lecturer and literary critic, had dedicated a book to him; Joseph Plunkett came from an affluent, cultured Dublin family; James Connolly was an actor at the Abbey Theatre; Constance Markiewicz had been born a Gore-Booth; she and her sister Eva represented, for Yeats, the country house gentry near Sligo. Most important: John MacBride was Maud Gonno's estranged husband. At the same time, Yeats disliked Pearse—'a man made dangerous by the Vertigo of Self Sacrifice'<sup>11</sup>—and had contempt for

<sup>7</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 100.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 113. <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 192–3. <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 193.

<sup>11</sup> Yeats to Lolly Yeats, n.d., quoted in Foster, *W. B. Yeats*, ii. 46; see also Longenbach, *Stone Cottage*, 56.

Arthur Griffith, the leader of Sinn Féin. Accordingly, his initial stance was one of caution: ‘There is nothing to be done but to do one’s work and write letters.’<sup>12</sup> And he remained in his London flat, detached from the turmoil.

FN:12

But by May, reports came in of the murder, by the British police, of the pacifist Francis Sheehy Skeffington, a popular Dublin figure, well known to Yeats. Furthermore, the wholesale execution of the rebels aroused the sympathy of Lady Gregory as well as the entire Yeats family. Those hitherto regarded with bemusement and some contempt joined the visionary company of the great nineteenth-century Irish patriots Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone. Yeats now became sharply critical of the English government. In an important letter to Lady Gregory, he wrote:

If the English conservative party had made a declaration that they did not intend to rescind the Home Rule Bill there would have been no rebellion. *I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me*—and I am very despondent about the future. At this moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature & criticism from politics . . . I do not yet know what [Maud Gonne] feels about her husband’s death. Her letter was written before she heard of it. Her main thought seems to be ‘tragic dignity has returned to Ireland’. She had been told by two members of the Irish Party that ‘Home Rule was betrayed’. She thinks now that the sacrifice has made it safe.<sup>13</sup>

FN:13

And he adds, ‘I am trying to write a poem on the men executed—“terrible beauty has been born”.’

It is interesting to observe how contradictory even this letter is. When Yeats notes that ‘all the work of years has been overturned’, he is not referring to the drive for Irish freedom but, on the contrary, to his old Gaelic League effort to ‘free’ Irish literature from all politics—an effort already made futile by the events themselves. As for the ‘bringing together of classes’, one senses that Yeats is more eager to find himself at one with the class above him, the aristocracy, than to befriend the members of the working class. And as for Maud Gonne’s aphorism on tragic dignity, it is not at all clear that Yeats agrees with it. But he could not bring himself to cross her. Indeed, after a brief visit to Dublin in early June, Yeats decided to spend the summer in Normandy, where Maud Gonne was living with her children, with the stated intention of proposing marriage to her once again. When Gonne—predictably—refused, he turned to her daughter Iseult, proposing to her as well, and again being refused. The neurotic relationship with both women dragged on until, at the end of August, Lady Gregory summoned Yeats back to Ireland and took him straight to Coole Park for a much-needed rest. It was at Coole on 25 September that Yeats finished ‘Easter, 1916’.

I detail this material, much of it familiar to Yeats students, so as to help the reader understand that a political poem like ‘Easter, 1916’—or, for that matter,

<sup>12</sup> Yeats to Lolly Yeats, n.d., quoted in Foster, *W. B. Yeats*, ii. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Yeats to Lady Gregory, 11 May 1916, in *The Letters of W. B. Yeats*, ed. Allen Wade (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954), 612–13; my italics.

Yeats's later 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' and 'Meditations in Time of Civil War'—responds to particular situations in all their ambiguity. Today, when 'anti-war poems' are usually written by those whose knowledge of the war in question is largely derived from the media and whose positions are usually both simple and clear-cut (for example, 'The Iraq war was motivated by the lust for Middle Eastern oil'), the political complexity of modernist war poetry must come as a great surprise.

It is the common wisdom that modernism was 'aestheticist', that its autonomous art was far removed from 'life', and that this 'great divide', as Andreas Huyssen called it in his book of that title, must be broached by a *rapprochement* between 'high' and 'low' art, between art and popular culture. But the more one studies the great modernist poets and fiction writers, the more dubious this postmodernist proposition seems. Indeed, Yeats's writing demonstrates—as does that of Eliot and Pound—how readily so-called ideological positions are contaminated by extraneous factors, in Yeats's own case, by his lifelong passion for Maud Gonne, herself a fiery revolutionary, so devoted to the Irish Nationalist cause that, in later life, she condoned Hitler's actions, declaring that at least the Germans hated the English as much as she did. Gonne was also virulently anti-Semitic.<sup>14</sup>

FN:14

Yeats, in any event, tried to write a poem on the Rising that Gonne might admire even as it would also satisfy the Dublin public and convey his own ambivalence toward the events of 1916. As a poet, moreover, whose readership in England and the United States was at least as large as that in his native Ireland, Yeats faced the difficult challenge of presenting as tragedy an event that, given the larger war picture of 1916, was hardly considered to have major import. On 1 July, after all, the Battle of the Somme began, a battle best remembered for its first day, on which the British suffered 60,000 casualties (20,000 deaths). It was the bloodiest day in the history of the British Army, and the battle, dragging on till November, produced over 460,000 casualties altogether. How to process the horror of such a set of circumstances? 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold,'<sup>15</sup> as 'The Second Coming' has it, but how and why?

FN:15

Yeats was a great mythographer. The Sligo countryside, as literary tourists know, is hardly beautiful or even especially distinctive, but Yeats manages, throughout his poetry, to transform it into one of poetry's Sacred Places even as he makes readers long to see Lissadell (the home of the Gore-Booth sisters), Ben Bulbin, and Coole Park. In 'Easter, 1916', the trick is to immortalize the rebels, not as heroes in the abstract, but as agents of *change*—change by no means all positive, but dramatic in the mere fact of its taking place. And drama is the key word here, for Yeats presented

<sup>14</sup> See Foster, *W. B. Yeats*, ii. 344–5, 468–9. 'Gonne, years after the post-war revelations of genocide, was still saying that if she had been German, the only thing that would have stopped her becoming a Nazi was their exclusion of women from positions of power; she also boasted of telling Richard Ellmann ("a young American Jew") that, compared to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Hitler's death-camps were "quite small affairs".'

<sup>15</sup> Yeats, 'The Second Coming', in *Poems*, 235.

his characters as actors playing out a script largely beyond their control, actors caught up in a street theatre in which their individual identities are subordinated to a larger communal drive, Easter itself symbolizing the power and possibility of wholesale renewal.

Numerology plays an important part in the poem. ‘Easter, 1916’ has four stanzas of 16, 24, 16, 24 lines respectively, covertly embodying the Rising’s date—the twenty-fourth day of the fourth month of the year 1916—even as its metre offsets these multiples of four with a trimeter or, more properly, a three-stress line, the number of syllables varying between six and nine.<sup>16</sup> Yeats makes his trimeter dramatic by introducing regular trochaic substitutions, as in

Coming with *vivid faces*

as well as overstressing his lines and introducing caesurae—

All changed, || *changed utterly*

—where only one of the six syllables receives no stress, creating the effect of an insistent drumbeat. The use of fricatives and voiced and voiceless stops in the refrain makes these heavily stressed syllables even more emphatic:

All *changed, changed utterly:*  
A *terrible beauty is born.*

And the rhyme, *ababcdcd*, reinforces the four-part structure of the poem, its sense of eternal recurrence in the midst of seeming change.

Within this elaborate formal structure, the colloquial dominates, at least in the poem’s opening, which begins, not with an account of the Rising itself—indeed, that tale is never told—but with the word ‘I’, placing the poet, and his attempt at understanding what has happened, at centre-stage:

I have met them at close of day  
Coming with *vivid faces*  
From counter or desk among grey  
Eighteenth-century houses.  
I have passed with a nod of the head  
Or polite meaningless words,  
Or have lingered awhile and said  
Polite meaningless words,  
And thought before I had done  
Of a mocking tale or a gibe

<sup>16</sup> This structure was first noticed by one of Helen Vendler’s students, Nathan Rose. See Vendler, ‘Technique in the Earlier Poems of Yeats’, in *Yeats Annual*, viii, ed. Warwick Gould (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 20 n. 4; cf. Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 233–4. I have discussed the verse form and structure *vis-à-vis* Matthew Arnold’s ‘Haworth Churchyard’, in ‘Yeats and the Occasional Poem: “Easter 1916”’, *Papers on Language & Literature*, 4/3 (Summer 1968), 308–28.

To please a companion  
 Around the fire at the club  
 Being certain that they and I  
 But lived where motley is worn:  
 All changed, changed utterly:  
 A terrible beauty is born.<sup>17</sup>

**FN:17**

'The power of [Yeats's] poem', writes Declan Kiberd, 'derives from the honesty with which he debates the issue, in the process postponing until the very last moment his dutiful naming of the dead warriors: this had been, of course, the practice of bards after a battle, in which they invariably claimed that the land had been redeemed by the sacrifice. Yeats's entire lyric is a sequence of strategies for delaying such naming.'<sup>18</sup> The delay of naming—the almost contemptuous use of 'them' in the opening lines—has another effect: it brings the reader squarely into the poet's radius of discourse, as if to say, 'You know who these guys are, better than I do'. Their 'vivid faces' stand out against the backdrop of the twilight, like actors on a darkened stage. In line 3, Yeats designates their status with the economical synecdoche of 'counter or desk'—shop or office. And those shops and offices—ordinary workplaces—are what the elegant 'Eighteenth-century houses' of Dublin have come to house. Ordinary people coming home from ordinary jobs: the poet recalls exchanging no more than 'polite meaningless words' with these Dubliners, later making fun of their remarks to his friends at the club, 'Being certain that they and I / But lived where motley is worn'—motley, the fool's variegated garment.

**FN:18**

In his 1915 letter to Quinn cited above, Yeats talks of retreating to his London club and reading Keats's *Lamia* rather than listening to the war news. The English–German War, he repeatedly insisted, was not his concern. But ironically, in inuring himself from the Great War, Yeats had also remained aloof from the recent Irish troubles: at Stone Cottage, the Pound–Yeats curriculum was heavily weighed to such exotic arts as the Noh theatre, the irony being that war looms large in precisely these Japanese plays. 'All changed, changed utterly': however the Rising was to be judged, its sudden intrusion into the daily round of Dublin life, captured by the 'round' of the rhyming trimeter stanza, marks a momentous change—a cataclysm oddly mirroring what was happening on the Western Front, unanticipated as the deadly trench warfare of 1916 had been in the idyllic summer when war broke out.

In the second stanza, Yeats dramatizes the complex meaning of the Rising in a roll-call of four of its yet unnamed 'heroes':

That woman's days were spent  
 In ignorant good-will,  
 Her nights in argument  
 Until her voice grew shrill.

<sup>17</sup> Yeats, 'Easter, 1916', in *Poems*, 228–30.

<sup>18</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 213.

What voice more sweet than hers  
 When, young and beautiful,  
 She rode to harriers?  
 This man had kept a school  
 And rode our winged horse;  
 This other his helper and friend  
 Was coming into his force;  
 He might have won fame in the end,  
 So sensitive his nature seemed,  
 So daring and sweet his thought.  
 This other man I had dreamed  
 A drunken, vainglorious lout.  
 He had done most bitter wrong  
 To some who are near by heart,  
 Yet I number him in the song;  
 He too has resigned his part  
 In the casual comedy;  
 He, too, has been changed in his turn,  
 Transformed utterly:  
 A terrible beauty is born.

Yeats's roll-call is carefully calculated. Of the seven men who actually signed the Proclamation of the Republic—Padraic Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, James Connolly, Eamon Ceannt, Joseph Mary Plunkett, Sean MacDermott, and Thomas Clarke—only the first two figure here. Pearse, however fanatical Yeats took him to be, was something of a poet, and his transformation from sideline spoiler to leader of the rebellion certainly merited attention. MacDonagh was more sympathetic: the poem pays tribute to his literary gift and his sensitivity, although Yeats had earlier suggested that Ireland gave MacDonagh no breathing room, that he should have moved to England in order to realize his potential.<sup>19</sup>

FN:19

But it is the first and fourth actors who get the most attention: Constance Markiewicz, *née* Gore-Booth, once a beautiful, aristocratic young horsewoman, whose grace and charm, so the poet posits, have been destroyed by revolutionary zeal, is, as Elizabeth Cullingford has noted, a stand-in for Maud Gonne, whom Yeats regularly castigated for her 'shrill' and all-consuming political activism.<sup>20</sup> Gonne, living in France, could not be listed since she played no actual role in the

FN:20

<sup>19</sup> In his 1909 diary 'Estrangement', Yeats writes, 'Met MacDonagh yesterday—a man with some literary faculty which will probably come to nothing through lack of culture and encouragement . . . . In England this man would have become remarkable in some way, here he is being crushed by the mechanical logic and commonplace eloquence which give power to the most empty mind because, being "something other than human life", they have no use for distinguished feeling or individual thought' (Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 488).

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 121–5. The Gore-Booth sisters are the subject of one of Yeats's great elegies, 'In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz', which I discuss in my 'Spatial Form in Yeats's "Lissadell" Poems', *PMLA*, 82 (Oct. 1967), 444–54. Markiewicz's death sentence was commuted



Rising, but it is Gonne whose 'terrible beauty' is Yeats's concern. And here that 'drunken, vainglorious lout' John MacBride comes in. Neither a major figure in the Rising, nor, like Markiewicz, Pearse, and MacDonagh, a symbol of tragically wasted potential, MacBride has a purely personal significance for Yeats: he was the man Maud Gonne eloped with in 1903, the estranged husband who 'had done most bitter wrong', so Yeats felt, to the woman he himself adored (and possibly to her daughter Iseult as well).<sup>21</sup> MacBride is thus the one person here whose transformation has evidently been for the better: 'he too has resigned his part / In the casual comedy'. Yeats's 'Yet I number him in the song' is meant to be an expression of generosity, calculated, no doubt, to impress Gonne with the poet's fair-mindedness, the irony being that MacBride could only be 'Transformed utterly' by giving up his life. The 'terrible beauty', in other words, is that of death itself. The roll-call thus ends on a high dramatic note, more theatrical than accurate. Were documentary truth the aim of 'Easter, 1916', Yeats would have omitted Con Markiewicz and John MacBride in favour of such unexpected casualties of the Rising as Francis Skeffington or Roger Casement, the latter condemned to death for his part in the Rising—he had tried to enlist German support for the Irish cause—despite his last-minute opposition to the Easter events.<sup>22</sup>

FN:21

FN:22

More mythography than 'realistic' document, the poem abruptly shifts ground in the third stanza from narrative to nature imagery—specifically, the imagery of stone and stream:

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream.  
The horse that comes from the road,  
The rider, the birds that range  
From cloud to tumbling cloud,  
Minute by minute they change;  
A shadow of cloud on the stream  
Changes minute by minute;  
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,  
And a horse plashes within it;  
The long-legged moor-hens dive,  
And hens to moor-cocks call,  
Minute by minute they live:  
The stone's in the midst of all.

because of her sex. The poems devoted to Maud Gonne's 'unfortunate' political radicalism are too many to name; a whole series is found in *The Green Helmet* (Churchtown, Dundrum: Cuala Press, 1910).

<sup>21</sup> See *The Gonne—Yeats Letters 1893–1938*, ed. Anna MacBride White and Norman Jeffares (New York: Norton, 1994), 161–2.

<sup>22</sup> See Foster, *W. B. Yeats*, ii. 51–2.

The great feat of this stanza is to introduce a concept of *change* entirely different from that commemorated in the refrain of the first two stanzas. Change in nature is gradual, ‘Minute by minute’, a ‘shadow of cloud on the stream’. In the natural world, birds, horses, and streams are in perpetual free motion: there is constant sliding, plashing, and mating as ‘hens to moor-cocks call’. ‘In the midst of all’ this Heraclitean flux sits the stone symbolizing the ‘enchanted’ or betrayed ‘heart’, frozen so as ‘To trouble the living stream’. The stone deflects the stream’s flow, changing its course irrevocably.

Is this a good or a bad thing? ‘The changes of cloud, birds and riders seem more vital than the unchanging stone,’ writes Declan Kiberd, ‘but they only “seem” so, for without that stone in its fixity no ripples could vibrate at all.’<sup>23</sup> This is certainly the case, and readers have often argued that the stone symbolizes the firmness of purpose and strength of mind of the patriots, that the ‘troubling’ of the revolution is necessary if there is ever to be real ‘change’ in the life of the nation. Natural change, by this argument, is all very well, but if human beings do not interfere with nature, there can be no civilization, and certainly no progress. But the difficulty is that the imagery of cloud and stream has nothing if not positive connotations, and that the next stanza begins with the lines ‘Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart’. Kiberd gets around this emphatic assertion by arguing that ‘the poet, with scrupulous exactitude, claims only that sacrifice “can” make a stone of the heart’, not that it necessarily does so, and he suggests that ‘By refusing to change the rebels have, in fact, changed everything, even if in that recognition the poet is still not convinced that they were right’.<sup>24</sup> There is no way of being certain how the poem wants us to judge the role of the ‘troubl[ing] stone’.

When we read Yeats’s stanza in the context of his correspondence and related writings, the overall picture becomes no clearer. True, Maud Gonne herself gives the following account:

Standing by the seashore in Normandy in September 1916 [Yeats] read me that poem [‘Easter, 1916’]; he had worked on it all the night before, and he implored me to forget the stone and its inner fire for the flashing, changing joy of life; but when he found my mind dull with the stone of the fixed idea of getting back to Ireland, kind and helpful as ever, he helped me to overcome political and passport difficulties and we travelled as far as London together.<sup>25</sup>

Here the meaning of ‘stone’ is quite clear, as it is in the ‘The Death of Synge’ (1909), where Yeats refers to a politically radical woman of his acquaintance as one who has taken up ‘an opinion as if it were some terrible stone doll’, and declares that the flesh of such women ‘becomes stone and passes out of life’.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 214.      <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Maud Gonne, ‘Yeats and Ireland’, in Stephen Gwynn (ed.), *Scattering Branches: Tributes to the Memory of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1940), 31–2.

<sup>26</sup> Yeats, ‘The Death of Synge’, in *Autobiographies*, 504.

But in the poem itself there is no such clarity. The order of nature—birds, plashing horse, clouds, stream—with its minute-by-minute change is all very lovely, but it is not, after all, the poet's order, as the first two stanzas have made only too clear. The voices of hens calling to moor-cocks do not grow 'shrill', and no 'polite meaningless words' are exchanged. Accordingly, when, in the fourth and final stanza, the assertion 'Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart' is followed by the burning question 'O when may it suffice?', we have to take the poet's perplexity wholly at face value. Whatever Yeats may have said to Maud Gonne, whatever he may written about 'stone dolls' in his *Autobiographies*, in 'Easter, 1916' the presence of the stone 'troubl[ing] the living stream' remains ambivalent, the one reality being that the two kinds of change presented are antithetical.

Bards, in any case, can't solve the problem: 'O when may it suffice?' is answered by the words 'That is Heaven's part', 'our part' being merely 'To murmur name upon name, / As a mother names her child / When sleep at last come / On limbs that have run wild'. But this display of stoic acceptance will not quite do either. And so we move to the climax:

What is it but nightfall?  
 No, no, not night but death;  
 Was it needless death after all?  
 For England may keep faith  
 For all that is done and said.  
 We know their dream; enough  
 To know they dreamed and are dead;  
 And what if excess of love  
 Bewildered them till they died?  
 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.

The nightfall of the rebels is not that of the peacefully sleeping child of lines 62–4. The insistent 'No, no, not night but death' explodes that image and leads to the terrifying question, 'Was it needless death after all?' This is the question asked of all revolutions and wars: was the death 'worth it'? The poet is here debating with himself, asking himself whether it isn't just possible that 'England may keep faith / For all that is done and said'. And there's the rub.

Studies of the Easter Rising, including Charles Townshend's recent definitive *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion*, suggest that it was less the original rebellion than the public outcry about the English suppression of that rebellion that led to later IRB initiatives—initiatives that may have hastened the passage of the Home Rule Act of 1920. Then again, as Yeats worries, by then the English might have acted anyway.

Who can tell? And there is still another question on the poet's mind: 'what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?' Here Yeats seems to be thinking of his own excessive love for Maud Gonne—a love that certainly clouded his judgement for years. In a similar sense, the rebels' excess love for their cause, their fanaticism, may have 'bewildered them', hastening their noble but empty gesture and thus their death.

'O when may it suffice?' Only after his fourth nervous, staccato question, does Yeats step back and memorialize the patriots, now for the first time naming them. The ending of 'Easter, 1916' has been justly praised for its drama: 'I write it out in a verse', the poet declares, paving the way for those famous but previously withheld names and the now thrilling repetition of the refrain, where 'Pearse' rhymes so memorably with 'verse'. What has been 'born' is indeed a 'terrible beauty'—sublime, awful, irreconcilable, as critics on both the Left and the Right have frequently remarked. 'The paradox of "Easter, 1916"', writes David Lloyd, 'is that the achievement of such politically symbolic status, the transformation of lout or clown into martyr which brings about the foundation of the nation, is seen to produce not reconciliation but a troubled tension.'<sup>27</sup> Or, in the words of Donald Davie:

FN:27

The most impressive thing about the whole poem is that the 1916 leaders are mourned most poignantly, and the sublimity of their gesture is celebrated most memorably, not when the poet is abasing himself before them, but when he implies that, all things considered, they were, not just in politics but in human terms, probably wrong.<sup>28</sup>

FN:28

Here, then, is a poem commemorating a controversial revolutionary moment that satisfied readers of the most varying persuasions. Or almost: Maud Gonne did not like it. 'My dear Willie', she wrote on 8 November 1916, 'No, I don't like your poem, it isn't worthy of you & above all it isn't worthy of the subject . . . you who have studied philosophy & know something of history know quite well that sacrifice has never yet turned a heart to stone though it has immortalized many & through it alone mankind can rise to God.' And she goes on to praise MacDonagh and Pearse as 'men of genius', insisting that even 'my husband' (MacBride) 'has entered Eternity by the great door of sacrifice which Christ opened and has therefore atoned for all'.<sup>29</sup> For Gonne, a great public poem, one that 'our race would treasure & repeat', must have a clear message, a clarion call to action. Perhaps this is why she herself was not capable of writing poetry, whereas Yeats understood that 'We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry.'<sup>30</sup>

FN:29

FN:30

<sup>27</sup> David Lloyd, 'The Poetics of Politics: Yeats and the Founding of the State', in Jonathan Allison (ed.), *Yeats's Political Identities: Selected Essays* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 393.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Davie, "'Michael Robartes and the Dancer'", in Denis Donoghue and J. R. Mulryne (eds.), *An Honoured Guest: New Essays on W. B. Yeats* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1966), 87.

<sup>29</sup> Gonne to Yeats, 8 Nov. 1916, in *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, 284–5.

<sup>30</sup> Yeats, 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', in *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1962), 331.

The great poem cannot take sides: its endurance depends precisely on its suspension of disbelief, allowing for such disparate critics as Lloyd and Davie to praise 'Easter, 1916' as a major work.

But to return to the writing of the First World War. The oxymoron 'terrible beauty', to which Yeats subscribed, explains why he could not endorse the English 'war poets'—Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, and so on—whom he dismissed in his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) in a notorious comment:

I have a distaste for certain poems written in the midst of the Great War; they are in all anthologies, but I have substituted Herbert Read's *End of a War* written long after. The writers of these poems were invariably officers of exceptional courage and capacity . . . but felt bound . . . to plead the suffering of their men. In poems that had for a time considerable fame, written in the first person, they made that suffering their own. I have rejected these poems for the same reason that made Arnold withdraw his *Empedocles on Etna* from circulation; *passive suffering is not a theme for poetry*. In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced.<sup>31</sup>

FN:31

Few contemporary readers will approve of that last sentence: the notion that 'tragedy' can breed 'joy'—an idea that Yeats makes much of in his late poem 'Lapis Lazuli'—seems callous in the face of what was happening in Europe in 1936, not to mention the horrors of trench warfare, as experienced by Owen (who died in one of the last battles of the war in 1918) and Sassoon. Nevertheless, Yeats's comment about 'passive suffering' not being 'a theme for poetry' points to something important. Elegy, after all, is traditionally a form in which lament is balanced by consolation. Without the latter, the lament, whether personal or public, can seem merely lugubrious. Yes, we say, it is very sad that X was shot dead yesterday, but what is the larger context in which we are to understand that death?

A great elegist himself, whether mourning and commemorating a special friend (Robert Gregory), a great house (Coole Park), or a public event (the Easter Rising), Yeats had difficulty not only with the young war poets, but especially with Sean O'Casey's 1928 play *The Silver Tassie*. O'Casey's earlier plays for the Abbey Theatre dealt with material closely related to Yeats's own 'Easter, 1916', and the poet had staunchly defended *The Plough and the Stars*, even though many Irish critics found the play too irreverent toward the Nationalist cause.<sup>32</sup> But *The Silver Tassie*, which turned its attention from Ireland to the Great War and was written in London, where O'Casey had come into contact with Expressionist theatre, struck Yeats as mere programmatic didacticism. The 28 April letter he sent O'Casey, rejecting *The Silver Tassie* on behalf of the Abbey, is vitriolic.

FN:32

Yeats begins by praising Act 1 (in which the exploits of the hero, a simple young football star who joins the infantry, are juxtaposed with the ominous news of war

<sup>31</sup> Yeats, 'Introduction', in Yeats (ed.), *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892–1935* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), p. xxxiv.

<sup>32</sup> See Foster, *W. B. Yeats*, ii. 304–9.

deaths in France), but he dislikes the abstract, Expressionist turn in Act II, where the speeches are largely choral commentaries on the horrors of war. And so he argues:

You were interested in the Irish Civil War, and at every moment . . . wrote out of . . . your sense of its tragedy . . . and you moved us as Swift moved his contemporaries.

But you are not interested in the great war, you never stood on its battlefields or walked its hospitals and so write out of your opinions. You illustrate those opinions by a series of almost unrelated scenes as you might in a leading article, there is no dominating character, no dominating action, neither psychological unity nor unity of action . . . The mere greatness of the world war has thwarted you, it has refused to become mere background and obtrudes itself upon the stage as so much dead wood that will not burn with the dramatic fire . . . Among the things that dramatic action must burn up are the author's opinions.<sup>33</sup>

FN:33

This letter, coming as it did from Yeats the Senator and Nobel prize winner, caused a huge *brouhaha* in Irish literary and political circles and marked O'Casey's furious departure, not only from the Abbey but from Dublin; he never lived in Ireland again.

For our purposes here, the issue is not whether Yeats's estimate of *The Silver Tassie* was right or wrong—certainly, the play has had its persuasive defenders<sup>34</sup>—but whether Yeats's argument itself has any merit. The answer, I think, is twofold. The reproach that 'you never stood on its battlefields' seems obviously misguided; indeed, Yeats had criticized Owen and Sassoon for precisely the opposite—for being themselves on the battlelines and hence sentimentalizing 'passive suffering'. Yeats knew perfectly well that a poet need not witness a particular event in order to write about it. The charge that 'the mere greatness of the world war has thwarted you' is more serious. If there have been few great poems dealing directly with the First World War (or the Second World War, for that matter), it is surely because the significance and import of such large-scale events cannot be readily digested—especially not into the lyric fabric. Describing the horrors of war, the poet is too often left with nothing to do but point to its hapless victims and find someone to blame.

FN:34

Perhaps this is why Yeats himself chose such smaller-scale subjects as the Easter Rebellion and the subsequent civil war. For one thing, the Dublin family drama, involving those that poet and reader know so well they need not be named, served as a displacement for that other or 'Great' War, too overwhelming to write about, except by mythologizing it as Yeats does with subtle indirection in 'The Second Coming' or in 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'. What makes 'Easter 1916' such

<sup>33</sup> Yeats to Sean O'Casey, 20 Apr. 1928, in *Letters of W. B. Yeats*, 740–2.

<sup>34</sup> Declan Kiberd, e.g. finds O'Casey's achievement in *The Silver Tassie* 'of a high order'. 'O'Casey', he writes, 'demonstrates with rare empathy, how the demobbed soldiers hated returning home, because they were tortured by their inability to describe the war to relatives. . . . [Harry's] isolation is an eerie continuation of his condition in the war-zone, where each soldier stood on a spookily silent set and "only flashes are seen. No noise is heard"' (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 244).

an important representative of its genre is that it takes into account the inevitable ironies that even the most 'tragic' events produce. While, for example, the 'heroes' are meeting their death, their elegist is using the occasion to rekindle a lost romance. Certainly this was Yeats's case in his response to Maud Gonne's conviction that 'tragic dignity has returned to Ireland'. No memorial poem, in short, is ever entirely disinterested.

Uterior motives, however, do nothing to destroy the poem's integrity *qua* poem. 'Easter, 1916' dramatizes Yeats's own genuine ambivalence towards the rebel cause, his own admiring but troubled assessment of the value of the Rising. He knew only too well that the issue was prickly, so he allowed only twenty-five copies of 'Easter, 1916' to be printed in 1917, and these were for private circulation. In the interval between its composition and its publication in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1921, the Great War ended, and the outlook for the end of colonial rule in Ireland became brighter, even as factionalism in Ireland itself became more extreme. By 1922, a year after the publication of *Michael Robartes*, Home Rule became a reality, but no sooner had the Irish Free State been created than the country descended into the abyss of civil war. Yeats wrote eloquently about that conflict in the poems of *The Tower* (1928), but perhaps never again quite as stringently as he had in 'Easter, 1916'. The questions posed in that elegy remained, in any case, the pressing ones: 'O when may it suffice?', and especially 'Was it needless death after all?' Great war poetry always asks these questions, but can never quite answer them.

