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The case of W.B. YEATS: MIND, NATION AND LITERARY LANDSCAPE

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The first examples of early Irish poetry are pure nature poems, celebrating place, trees, naming. Indeed the Irish alphabet is founded on tree-lore, as the poet Robert Graves showed in his book *The White Goddess*. The literary landscape of Ireland is from the beginning imbued with descriptions of Nature, in loving detail which is spiritual as well as physical, while the idea of Ireland as a nation grew gradually as aspiration, contested continually over seven hundred years of colonialism.

The loss of the Irish language came about as a result of this colonialism, and the memory of Ireland as a nation of beautiful landscapes continued to haunt the literature of Ireland in the Irish language: the collapse of the Bardic order, with its topography, genealogy and patronage, was noted by Seathrún Ceitinn (Geoffrey Keating) and Egan O Rahilly in poems of desolation in the 17th century. In the Jacobite 18th century Ireland came to be represented as a beautiful maiden, symbolising the land, in need of rescue by the poet in a form known as the *aisling* (vision), while in the 19th century where there was a kind of naïve nationalism, such as in the discovery of the supposed Ossian poems by McPherson (some were authentic).

By the beginning of the 20th century, poets in Ireland wrote in English, in a version of late Romanticism, what was the emotional reaction to the over-cerebral philosophy which had been handed down since the Enlightenment. It would be a mistake, however, to think the Romantic poets abandoned the philosophic project of the study of the mind, what they did was to establish more securely the role of the mind and imagination in a cultural context of the gradual emergence of nation states. Two different civilisations, two different traditions, the Irish and the English literatures, began to be defined in relation to each other.

One figure who combined romanticism and the modern age was W.B. Yeats, who in his poetry attempted to create a new Irish nation in the image of the past, in what came to be known as the Celtic revival.

One of the first projects of Yeats was to equate the newly-resurgent nationalism and its literature. He did this by projecting an ideal Irish state, based on a mystical identification with the placenames which still existed, transcribed from Irish into a more phonetic English spelling. There were remnants of Gaelic speech in place names, in the phraseology and lilt of the way English was spoken in a colonised country, Ireland, and Yeats made this his focus: nationalism in the context of what, with the new communication possibilities, may have become an internationalism. As Yeats deepened his love of the Irish legends and was tying this into an imaginary Ireland and its literary landscape, he realised that he lacked a

knowledge of Irish, but through his friendship with Lady Gregory and her involvement with the life of the country people in Galway placenames became important in his work— for Lady Gregory was inspired by *dinnseanchas*, or the study of topology which had flourished in the Bardic tradition

Yeats, through her, came to see in the sound and phraseology of Irish, as it seemed in English, to have a magical quality.

If we take, for example, the poem “The Man Who Dreamed of Fairyland” (*Collected Poems*, 39) Yeats used in the first line of every verse, Irish placenames, but rendered in English spelling, for their auditory and magical qualities, e.g. Dromahair, The Ridge of the two Air Demons, (which was the site of the capital of Breifne, an ancient kingdom); Lissadell, Ring fort of the blind; Scanavin, Shadow of the mountain; Lugnagall, Hollow of the Foreigner; and he fitted the anglicised sounds into his metrical and rhyming schemes. He often spoke his poems aloud.

In “The Ballad of Father O’Hart”, from his first volume, *Crossways*, (Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 19-20) the Irish placenames are articulated in a tonal register akin to magical nomenclature, as the poet lists Colooney, meadow of hazels; Knocknarea, hill of the ring-fort; Knocknashee, hill of the fairies; Tiraragh, country of the ford; Ballinafad, (mouth of the long ford); and Innismurray (Murray’s Island). In English, these names were less important than the atmosphere they evoked in the mind of the hearer, as in “Red Hanrahan’s song about Ireland” he uses placenames in a mystical sense,

“The wind has bundled up the clouds high over Knocnarea

And thrown the thunder on the stones for all that Maeve can say.”

(*Collected Poems*, 77)

invoking a suspension of belief in naming the place but without any specific detail about what Maeve means or says.

By the incantation of Gaelic placenames, with their rhythmic structure, he believed he could induce mystic states: “the purpose of rhythm was to prolong the moment of contemplation” (Brown, 77) and in the fusing of these place names with the Irish landscape, in the poems, Yeats tried to create anew the memory of nature, and in answer to the materialism of the age, a new world order founded on ancient wisdom, and to give it a character in keeping with the new Irish nation.

In 1893 Yeats had published *The Celtic Twilight* with his account of the lore and legend of the Irish countryside and of its villages, in which he recounted stories told to him by the firesides of cottagers and their experiences of the other-world, which was pre-Christian and pagan, which suited Yeats’ purposes admirably. This world of portents and mystical intimations was to become the foundation of the nation state whose epic heroes and legends he was recreating, to spur the Irish people on to greatness, from their mean veniality and materialism of “fumbling in the till for pence.” (Yeats, “September 1913,” *Collected Poems*, 102)

Written in a sort of Hiberno-English, the land and landscape in the hands of Yeats undergo a strange transformation. The phonetics of English and its spelling of Irish placenames make the landscape itself exotic, an example of the Victorian tendency to make the Other – what was not English – romantic and strange almost by definition.

In *The Wanderings of Oisín*, the young poet had created, out of his troubled feelings about the modern world, a landscape and image of mesmeric beauty. In the dream-like, shimmering text, the fairy Niamh inhabits a fantastic territory of trees, birds, waters and seas, where local detail seems to hover continually between symbolism and myth (Brown, 47)

In his poetry, artifice is valued over nature, and the landscape acquires the strange tint of alchemy and art: as Terence Brown elucidates in his biography of Yeats:

“It is an Ireland of the mind, a literary fabrication. It is a world of mythic titanism, in which Deirdre is the equal of a Helen of Troy, Cuchulain an epic hero from noble saga; it is a world too where occultism and elaborate symbology find appropriate setting in a stylised version of an Irish landscape – all cloud, seas, leaves aflutter, ‘cold wet winds ever blowing’ (‘the Pity of Love’) and twilight, ‘the moth-hour of eve’ (‘The Ballad of Father Gilligan’).” (Brown 80).

Therefore, Yeats went beyond mere exoticism, as he linked the sense of strangeness to what was truly exotic – the esoteric world of alchemy, symbolism and magic. For his revival of a glorious Irish past, to go forward to the destiny of a nation, Yeats took the landscape of Ireland as his fieldwork, and for this he needed to signify Nature and its landscapes as something strange and mystical, unreal. In creating nationalist Ireland and its landscape, which came to be known as the Celtic Twilight, the occult was the vehicle by which the reader was transported to the romantic landscape and people of the new nation of Ireland.

From the beginning, Yeats was interested in a landscape that was national as well as occult. For example, in the early work, in the mystical collection “The Rose” he used the word Danaan to describe the tribes of the early invaders with their other-worldly powers. There is also considerable attention, in this volume, to the part played by the Rose, (In Gaelic Ireland, the name for the Irish nation was dark Rosaleen) and its occult meaning - in alchemy, the colour red refers to a stage in the process which is mirrored by the adept, red is the occult colour of passion. In “The Rose” (1893) Yeats writes several esoteric poems in relation to nationalism, “Fergus and the Druid”, “Cuchalain’s Fight with the Sea”, as he used the Irish mythologies in building up a sense of identity for the new Irish state. This was developed in his later work, as when writing about the deaths that occurred in the Rising for Irish independence in 1916 he refers to “The Rose Tree”

There’s nothing but our own red blood

Can make a right Rose Tree

(Collected Poems, 179)

Yeats had an even larger project, and that was to overcome the materialism and progress of the 19th century - it was materialist from its philosophical tradition since Locke and his followers, who denied all spiritual values, focused only on the senses and what they

could teach, and in the 19th century a vulgar materialism had taken over, with the progress of science, the on-sweep of industrialisation and the endless manufacturing and consumption of household goods. He wanted to transmute this materialist age into a more heroic and spiritual one, of which the new nation of Ireland was to be exemplar and leader. It was a sort of pan-nationalism, much as the work of Wagner used folk-motif and memory to limn heroic archetypes, Yeats tried to resurrect the heroes of Irish legend in a mystical landscape, to typify the battles of a noble soul in that most materialistic of centuries, the 20th century

For Yeats, even more than landscape and its nationalist associations, the process of mind was uppermost: in his work, Nature exists in Ireland as a literary incantation of landscape and presence. Descriptive landscape was not enough, it needed to be imbued with a tinge of the occult supernatural, as simple communication between mind and nature was impossible for the poet. Therefore, he chose the language of symbolism. Whereas in the ancient world of Ireland, Nature had been rendered as description first, then symbolic of the Irish nation, Yeats reversed the process by privileging symbolism over the naturalistic.

Yeats' work was to create a new meaning out of decayed or forgotten symbols of the past, whose landscape was remembered in place-names only, and by the incantation of these place names, the mind was concentrated to take the hearer on to a higher plane, the ideal. Yeats, like Plato, he believed that we forget the language of archetypes and our soul, and his dedication as a poet was to give them a new energy and authenticity. Those created aural and visual images function as symbols, that is, as a pathway or door to the mind, which, with the soul, is eternal.

Kathleen Raine in her essay on "Poetry and Traditional Wisdom" makes a useful distinction between symbol and sign. A simile, or sign, are merely, she states, words which are alike and belong to the same order of being, in this case, a materialist order. A word, and another word, can describe things which are perfectly similar, and therefore no faculty of the imagination needs to possess or understand them. She describes the symbol, however, as forming a bridge from one order of things to another, therefore requiring imagination and the mind.

The mind, or imagination, is for Yeats, the greatest, and at times, the only reality. Yeats perhaps more than any other poet has written extensively of symbols and images - images are that which are present only to the mind, as Kathleen Raine recalls in the *Timaeus* of Plato as translated by Taylor:

When, therefore, an artificer, in the fabrication of any work, looks to that which always subsists according to the same, and employing a paradigm of this kind, expresses the idea and power in his work, it is then necessary that the whole of his production should be beautiful.

(Raine, *Temenos*, 30)

This is in contrast to Nature, where the actual physical world of transformation and decay was of secondary importance:

But when he beholds that which is in generation, and uses the generated paradigm, it is alike necessary that his work should be far from beautiful”

(ibid.)

Throughout his work, from the beginning, Yeats accepted this antimony, believing utterly in Plato’s Ideal Forms, and he saw as the poet’s function to find those images, which must be beautiful, and which must be remembered and renewed in every generation. This remembering, he believed, was the function of creativity in art, and art therefore takes on the appearance and aspect of a beautiful artefact, something quite distinct from Nature.

Yeats, who “saw in mere Nature a cold and alien otherness...could depend for his faith in transformative possibilities for consciousness on the complex doctrines and practices of magic” (Brown, 79).

Yeats’ Ireland and its landscape was ultimately a world of mystery, in which preternatural mind was uppermost, and the actual appearances and realities of Nature mere decoration at times.

Very early on, Yeats chose the idea of the antithesis of the self, or antithetical self as both the creator and vehicle for poetry. This was opposed to the Primary, the word he used for Nature. The poetic mind, or imagination, had to be constructed through the images that played on it, however, in nearly all these images, he preferred those of artifice and artefact to any word describing nature – for example, the words Yeats chooses for the sea are wrought in artifice, such as the “enamelled sea” in “The Indian to his Love” (Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 12) in his first volume.

Therefore, in constructing the antithetical self, Yeats, like Plato, undervalued nature. (Brown, 257). Many of his poems, which contain the signs and symbols of nature, are scored to an emotional note and tone far removed from nature, that is, to another order, to artifice itself. This was the means by which civilisations were born and were nurtured, in the images of the poetry that celebrated the imagination, as they reconstituted the ideal forms of the Platonic imagination. Augustin Martin, the editor of “Collected Poems” writes: “Yeats in his historical system saw the Byzantine empire ..as one of the high civilisations – Byzantium, dominated by antithetical values of beauty and imagination experienced that ‘unity of being’ which constituted high culture. He believed that in Byzantium ‘religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architects and artificers – though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract – spoke to the multitude and the few alike.’”(Martin, ed., notes to W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 485

However this high artifice repudiated nature:

Once out of nature I shall never take

My bodily form from any natural thing,

But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make

Of hammered gold and gold enamelling

To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;

*Or set upon a golden bough to sing
To lords and ladies of Byzantium
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.*

Yeats, 1928, *Sailing to Byzantium, The Tower, Collected Poems*, 199-200

which can be read as a dialogue of civilisation, its artefacts and spirits, and in the later work poet shows how the artificers themselves become prophetic of destruction as in the poem “Byzantium”

:

.....The smithies break the flood

The golden smithies of the Emperor!

Marbles of the dancing floor

Break bitter furies of complexity

Those images that yet

Fresh images beget,

That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea

(Yeats, *Byzantium*, 1930, *The Winding Stair, Collected Poems* 255-7)

which shows how the prioritisation of cultural artefacts over nature, while seemingly fruitful, end in discord and destruction of nature “that dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.”

This abjuration of nature is in direct descent from Platonic discourse which held that nature was lacking, and that there were ideal forms beyond nature, more perfect than Nature, and even if this is in some particular instances true, by placing artifice above Nature the succeeding generations have in fact undervalued Nature and failed to see in it the ground and essential focus of our existence.

In Yeats’ work, the imagination was all, it was the precursor and forerunner of mighty deeds and noble sentiments, which might make a nation such as Ireland a great one. But it was an imagination and a landscape that abjured the physical and it was haunted by apocalypse.

In his desire to recreate a vital past into a new civilisation, what prevailed in Yeats’ mind was that we were coming to the end of civilisation, that we were cast on the “blood-

dimmed tide” (Yeats, “The Second Coming” *Collected Poems*, 184). Despite his dedication to the task of recreating mythology for a nation and its people, he himself was aware, living in this filthy tide, that apocalyptic revelation was the proper response to the conditions of life surrounding him. In this poem his terror, at the most grotesque, is realised. Yeats’ fear of anarchy is in a sense more prophetic than either Blake’s or Shelley’s in that he foresaw in the rise of science the mastery of nature which was to crumble and take all in the dissolution of its power. The means he chose to do so was through a highly symbolic, intellectual, apocalyptic poetry, in which fear of the physical self was prefigured.

As Harold Bloom points out in his study of Yeats (Bloom, 317-324) there is a wilful misattribution to the title of this poem, since it is in fact about a second rebirth. Yeats’ language is that of the “adept” and by giving its symbolic form as Egyptian, he shows how far removed his vision was from the redemptive apocalypse foretold in Christianity, implicit as a parody through the phrasing of the poem. The rebirth, being entirely physical, takes on a bestial character. This gives the poem a certain horror, which vindicates but does not explain the first verse, that the falcon and the falconer are torn apart, that anarchy is loose upon the world. Indeed, qua Bloom, (op.cit.) the first image of a bird that came to Yeats’ mind was that of the eagle, but in the succeeding drafts he chose the falcon, as it belonged to the more arcane tradition of Egypt; the falconer losing that mastery of Nature in the revolutions that were to come.

To speak of the “ceremony of innocence” has provoked much commentary – can we ask if the very definition of innocence in the natural order is to do without ceremony? Given the apocalyptic time in which it was written, the poem with its dreadful concluding image creates more than anything, a horror and fear of Nature, particularly of animal nature. It is this physical dread which haunts the reader and has made the poem one of the best known of modern poems. It also measures at the time of its publication, and in our own time, the distance between ourselves and Nature, the dilemma of a new nation at the portal of becoming, and our civilisation’s complete alienation from its own physical realities and landscapes.

In Yeats’ pursuit of the antithetical self he therefore abjured Nature, hoping to erect what he thought of as more permanent symbols than those provided for in an endless flux and rebirth and reconstitution, to provide “monuments of un-ageing intellect.” (Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium,” op. cit, *Collected Poems*, 199) The word “monument” here is far from anything found in Nature such as a stone monument for commemorative purposes. However, by aligning the physical with gnomic properties, by not elucidating our dependence on nature for survival, the cost of this imagination is high, when it comes to terms and times of survival like the age we live in at present.

Kathleen Raine, a Yeats scholar, following Plato, finds no idealic beauty in Nature, as she quotes from the Preface to Blake’s “The Blast of Abel”:

Nature has no outline, but imagination has, Nature has no tune, but imagination has. Nature has no supernatural, and dissolves. Imagination is eternity.

(Raine, *Temenos*, 31)

concluding:

Whatever beauty we see in Nature is the reflected image of the soul.

(ibid.)

It is true that the mind, soul and intellect seek order, and that order exists as part of a greater mystery of which the symbol is a synecdoche or expression of part of the whole.

Therefore, in privileging the mind above all else, particularly over Nature, a certain distance from physicality is necessary for the poet. This distance is not the reductionism of the secular materialists which found its apogee in the Oxford philosophy of the mid-twentieth century: rather it is a form of animism, of nature inhabited by a demonic spirit, which the mind fears and tries to overcome.

That a higher order exists beyond mind is more difficult to prove, since modern philosophy denies the reality of anything outside the mind, to the point that even the mind itself cannot be verified, or its contents, and this would include perceptions of nature that are present to the mind. The philosophical answer, to prove that by kicking a stone so that you can feel it, the outer world of nature can exist in a Johnsonian sense. But the higher order, the ultimate reality is harder to access, but can be reached, as Yeats and other poets have done, through the creation and recreation of art.

What is pertinent to our idea of a national imaginary tied to a literary landscape is that we may find in nature itself more order than was granted to it by the Platonists, and that the trajectory of Yeats' art for the nation as he imagined it was ultimately tragic. We may find that nature in its changing forms may yield an order higher than Yeats had imagined.

In quoting Plato, that Nature has no tune, we might counter with what we hear in bird-song, and perhaps note its harmonic perfection. We can listen to the sound of rain falling on earth and stone, and note how it affects us. It may ultimately be foolish not to name these sounds as sweet, pleasing and harmonious.

Has Yeats, in positing mind as the only reality, undervalued Nature? A reading of "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 55), an early example of the brilliance of Yeats' technique, might guide us here. The poem is important because it tries to create out of mystical landscape the material out of which legends for the new Irish nation might be born.

The poem can be read as an intermediary between the world of imagination, and the natural world which is beginning to take its toll on his physical nature, ten years after he had met his true love, Maud Gonne, and before he had spent his life for a "barren passion's sake." The love poems show that it was not a barren passion: yet looking at the unfulfilled love, and its cost to Yeats, we detect how early on Yeats' privileging of the imagination and denial of the physical had a heavy emotional cost. The physical was denied because at root Nature was denied.

I will posit a reader who is innocent of Yeats' later tormented project and abhorrence of the physical, and will attempt a literal reading of the symbols in the poem to discover the nature behind the words, and whether what lies behind that order remains occluded.

I went out to a hazel wood,

Because a fire was in my head,

(ibid.)

The hazel wood is the seat of the Druids, of magic, and the poet went there in the persona of Aengus to quell a fire in his head – usually interpreted as anger, an emotion, usually against a person who has frustrated the poet.

And cut and peeled a hazel wand,

And hooked a berry to a thread;

(ibid.)

The hazel wand was used for divining, and is noted for its beautiful pale green sheen, so why would the poet want to peel it, save in an act of destruction? Is he saying that he wanted to destroy what was both beautiful and magical?

Hooking a berry to a thread is an old method of catching a fish, but through poisoning it. A poisoned fish would not be of use to anyone – or perhaps reading it purely as a symbol, the fish as Christianity, is Yeats going to poison that faith which has so entrapped his countrymen, denying the reality of sexual love?

And when white moths were on the wing,

And Moth like stars were flickering out,

I dropped the berry in a stream

And caught a little silver trout

(ibid.)

Now, his anger spent, he laid the fish on the floor, and went to blow the fire aflame, presumably cooking it, or giving full vent to his anger,

But something rustled on the floor,

And someone called me by my name:

It had become a glimmering girl

With apple blossom in her hair

Who called me by my name and ran

And faded through the brightening air.

(ibid.)

The final verse of the poem envisages the poet as “old with wandering,” having fulfilled his love, kissing her lips and taking her hands, walking, perhaps more serenely, among long dappled grass:

And pluck till time and times are done

The silver apples of the moon,

The golden apples of the sun.

(ibid.)

Once again, Yeats has chosen an artifice over the natural – it would be natural to feast on the apples, just as it was to consummate love for the girl. Instead, using alchemical symbolism, Yeats takes us to a higher, more secret order, where the final meaning is elusive. The promise of artifice over Nature, of the alchemical silver and gold, has been preferred, and stated, and his neglect here of the physical nourishing apple is a foretaste of what will haunt him in years to come, the frail paltry thing, “a tattered coat upon a stick” (Yeats, “Sailing to Byzantium” *Collected Poems*, 199) that a dying body becomes.

This is most explicit in the last lines of this poem, where he addresses the sages in “God’s holy fire”

To consume his heart away; sick with desire

And fastened to a dying animal

It knows not what it is, and gather me

Into the artifice of eternity.

(op. cit.)

This extraordinary phrase, *the artifice of eternity*, is nascent in his work from the very beginning. His choice of mind, and its images, have more reality for him than any reality of the natural world. When “words alone are certain good” (Yeats, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd,” *Collected Poems*, 5-6) we can recognise the opportunities for transcendence, for they are a metaphysical means to a world beyond the senses, beyond Nature. We may recall that the ancients believed that the world was created out of sound. But the meanings of these words depend on our place in nature, in landscape, and in nation. So a concept like “eternity” being described as an artifice or man-made, denies the reality of nature at root, and in the end, actually reverses the order of creation, by placing the artefacts of humankind before that in which they have their birth and being: the timeless, the eternity, which cannot be portrayed as an artifice since it precedes and succeeds all life and creation, and is eternally present in the “now”. Even art as high and serious as Yeats’ must take its place in Nature, the underlying whole.

So, the symbolic order, founded on magic, and delineated in the occult practices of alchemy, on a system of correspondences which is constructed partly through the abstract powers of the mind, may not be a true and epistemological book of Nature.

If Yeats had been able to read Irish, he may have become more aware of the very close link between Irish identity and the natural landscape, he could have gone straight to the texts to discover that the relationship he so desired in the Irish nation actually existed in historical time, before colonialism had obscured the marks of the earlier civilisation.

However, the difference between Yeats and the old Irish poetry was their understanding of nature. The poetry written in Irish of the early age put no distance or shield between nature and its celebrant – between text and reader. There is a direct address by the poet to his subject:

Fáilte 'on éan is binne ar chraoibh

Labhras ar chaoín na dtor le gréin

An Seabhach, ed., *Fíon na Filíochta* 143

Welcome to the bird who is sweetest on the branch

Who sings delicately from the bush with the sun's rising)

(translation)

There is reference, while celebrating nature, to the heroes and legends of old, as in “The Praises of the Hill of Éadair (Howth)” An Seabhach, ed., *Fíon na Filíochta* 205)

How sweet to be on the Hill of Éadair

Truly sweet above the white wave

A hill that is plenteous, with its full and plenty of boats

A hill that is wine-filled, desirable, valiant

(translation)

In this old Irish poetry, the Irish language and the Irish landscape are virtually one and the same thing, as the whole language is oriented towards the celebration of naming places and the abundance of flowers, vegetation, animals and birds. In the Fenian cycle, the landscape as well as being exuberantly lush is directly related to its heroes, to the naming and memory of Fionn and the Fianna, the mythological warrior and his band, and his lover, Gráinne, (Gráinne eloped with a younger man, Diarmuid in a separate tale of their pursuit)

And it goes on to praise the hill with its hunter's peaks, bold with rugged and bushy greens, intoxicating with its uncultivated lofty mounds – pungent, nutty, tree-filled.

Seamus Heaney, particularly in his translations of early Irish poetry, achieves comparable effects of lushness of greenery in the literary landscape of “Sweeney Astray,” for example:

*The bushy leafy oak tree
is highest in the wood,
the forking shoots of hazel
hide sweet hazel-nuts.....
The blackthorn is a jaggy creel
stippled with dark sloes;
green watercress in thatch on wells,
where the drinking blackbird goes*

(Heaney, 39)

But he has no epic heroes, only the poetic bird-like figure of Sweeney.

However, in Yeats poetry, along with the mystical landscape prefiguring nationhood, as referred to above, the heroes in Irish myth in became the inspiration for the rebellion for nationhood, leading directly to the Rising of 1916, and bloodshed.

*There’s nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right Rose Tree.*

(Yeats, “The Rose Tree”, *Collected Poems*, 179) (op. cit).

Yeats expressed the complexities of real-life heroism and the poet’s part in it, in the poem “Easter 1916” (*Collected Poems*, 176), where he describes the rebellion as a “terrible beauty” being born. The landscape he had conjured as a vehicle for the new nation had become the template of the new glorious Irish race, whose adepts would listen to the ancient legends as retold by Yeats, as they became imbued with a whimsical wish-fulfilment, which had the propensity to turn a dream landscape into one of blood-letting and revenge.

*We had fed the heart on fantasies,
The heart’s grown brutal from the fare*

(Yeats, “The Stare’s Nest by my Window”,
Collected Poems, 211)

Despite the beauty of making poetry out of the remnants of the earlier culture and of living speech, Yeats, because of his dependence on half-realised literary models, and projections from a material age which he tried valiantly to eschew, he ultimately failed to make an ethical conjunction with the nation state and with nature. Perhaps such a conjunction only existed in the nation’s literary landscape, and was an irretrievable and

totally imaginary golden age, which could only be revived as a form of proto-realism, where the cartoon manifestations of subliminal power, the fetishisation of personality, became in the heroic poetry of Yeats more important in the national story than the landscape, Nature herself.

Yeats' imprisonment of the self in a hieratic and hierarchical structure, led to a stasis of metallic sublimation, a stage in alchemy which corresponds to the power of the soul. To be critical of this process is not to say that the symbolic order does not exist: from the correspondences of high art and beauty we can appreciate that it does, and, we can live in the hope of finding perfect correspondences like Yeats:

What the world's million lips are thirsting for

Must be substantial somewhere

(Yeats, *The Shadowy Waters, Collected Poems*, 433)

Yet, there has to be recorded a failure.

Even those most sceptical of Yeats' intentions and methods cannot deny that he achieved his objectives of beauty and ideal form, that he was a master of metre; that in his work, both the exigencies of rhyme and syntax are in complete harmony: however there are times when the meaning eludes us, or beckons us on to further readings and further contemplations which do not yield up any particular signification. And to read Yeats' poetry in this light, is to be, at times, frustrated. In the reflective mind, his refusal of the physical, and its imprisonment in a stasis of metallic sublimation, *the alchemical silver and golden apples*, may cost us access to Nature, in that in seeking art and artifice, we have failed to respect Nature's laws, with a huge cost to earth itself, and perhaps to the future of humanity.

In constructing a literary landscape, a sense of environmental ethics would lead us to find a path where a bridge can be built from our moment when mired in a nation or a culture, we need a springboard to action. . This is not an easy task, it takes a leap of faith to move from poetry to praxis, but that may be what is required of us at this point in history. "Such a leap of faith belongs to the imperfection of everything human that man can only attain his desire by passing through its opposite." (Soren Kierkegaard)

This praxis becomes an urgent task in our time, in our present ecological and existential crisis, perhaps we could emphasise that such a naturalistic, rather than an alchemical reading is necessary: we could ask if Yeats' vision is sufficient for us now, as we contemplate the destruction of Nature itself, and what he himself warned of – apocalypse. Since we live in a finite earth, and are creatures of nature on that earth, we have an imperfect mind and body that has to be answered in human and natural terms, and we may find in the imperfections of landscape, nationhood, and Nature itself a sufficiency for our purposes.

That the aesthetes and the atheists of modernism had their influence in a time of economic expansion may have been ultimately detrimental to the planet, and to natural balance. Putting Nature centre-stage might right this balance and put Mind, where it belongs, in nature, not outside or beyond it.

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