

CHATTERTON LECTURE ON POETRY

PROTESTANT MAGIC: W. B. YEATS AND THE
SPELL OF IRISH HISTORY

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IRISH historians have always had to confront Yeats, just as Yeats periodically confronted Irish historians. Both as a nationalist propagandist and as a totemic national figure, he's an enormously important presence in the establishment of Irish independence: he presided over the process, in a sense (if not the sense he later claimed). But if the historical view is taken to mean a simple chronological approach to his life that won't, in fact, answer (though it might help solve some knotty problems of dates of composition and strategies of publication): because the life was lived on so many levels, in bursts of parallel intensity. Then there is the disingenuousness of Yeats's own approach to his life: the patterns he ruthlessly imposed on it in retrospect, and the complications arising from examining the life of someone who consciously constructed a reputation for himself from—I'm now inclined to believe—about the age of fifteen.

And with the personal history is the larger question of national history, past, present and future. T. S. Eliot said, famously, that Yeats was 'one of those few poets whose history is the history of their own time, who are part of the consciousness of an age which cannot be understood without them'.¹ You can, however, stand this on its head. Yeats certainly shaped history for posterity; his widow said that one of the things which always astonished her about him was his ability to sense 'the way things would look to people later on'.² But also—and particularly for the historian—

¹ 'The Poetry of W. B. Yeats', in J. Hall & M. Steinman (eds), *The Permanence of Yeats* (New York, 1950), p. 347.

² In a conversation with Richard Ellmann; see 1978 preface to Richard Ellmann, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (2nd edition, Oxford, 1979), p. xxx.

the curious and powerful resonance of Yeats's personality and his work is inseparable from the historical tradition and social sub-culture which produced him. Literary criticism has demonstrated how Yeats made history; historians might modestly indicate ways in which history made him. There are many facets to this process, but today I simply want to look at one: the theme of his Irish Protestant background.

An Irish Protestant identity isn't necessarily what you'd expect of a nation-building Irish nationalist. And traditionally, the self-consciously Protestant Yeats emerges only in the 1920s: when, sixty years old, and after a lifetime of ostentatious Celticist and nationalist sympathy, he turned on the Catholic guardians of morality in the new Irish Free State and assailed their outlawing of divorce. Suddenly Yeats invoked the tradition which bore him: Protestant liberalism. Cruise O'Brien puts it with characteristic punchy insouciance: 'The Protestant now re-emerged with an audible sigh of relief. It had been stuffy in there, and getting stuffier.'³ I tend to think, however, that the Protestant had been battering at the walls for some time. That strain in Yeats, and its inheritance (which I'll shortly clarify) had always been a powerful factor. And I think that this aspect of Yeats, besides clarifying certain political commitments and social attitudes, can help a biographer around one of the great stumbling blocks left by the poet for those tracing his path: what Auden called the South Californian side of Yeats—his lifelong commitment to occultism and magic.

It should be grasped early on that Irish Protestantism, even in its non-Ulster, non-demonic mode, is as much a social and cultural identity as a religious one, and that it's a more complex formation than often realised. (Lily Yeats was told by the Dean of St Patrick's that a mutual acquaintance 'has no religion but is an out-and-out Protestant in everything else'.⁴) In his triumphalist and stately post-1920s Ascendancy mode, Yeats celebrated his literary and theatrical partnership with Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge, where artistic commitment was shaped by the social identity of an élite. I had hoped to get through this paper without

³ 'Passion and Cunning: an essay on the politics of W. B. Yeats', in A. N. Jeffares & K. G. W. Cross (eds), *In Excited Reverie: a centenary tribute to William Butler Yeats 1865–1939* (London, 1965), p. 222. Cruise O'Brien locates this process as beginning in the years after c. 1903.

⁴ Lily Yeats to John Butler Yeats 24 October 1909, Yeats family papers. I am indebted to William Murphy for sharing his transcripts of these and other Yeats letters with me, and to Michael and Anne Yeats for permission to quote them.

a single poetic quotation, much as the best economic history papers get through without any statistics; but I can't avoid one, and here it is, from 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited':

John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory thought
All that we did, all that we said or sang,
Must come from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
We three alone in modern times had brought
Everything down to that sole test again,
Dream of the noble and the beggar-man.

This picture disguises the variety of backgrounds, and the social fissures, which that formidable triumvirate of Abbey Theatre directors who formed the national theatre represented. Lady Gregory came from the world of country houses, vast estates, family retainers, and imperial service, in the West. Synge was the descendant of Church of Ireland bishops and secure country gentry. Yeats's forebears were merchants, rectors, professional men and lawyers. By the time of the poem I've quoted (written in August 1937), social spaces between the various levels of Irish Ascendancy mattered less (there were so few of them left). And Yeats, as I'll detail later, had elevated himself to their upper reaches by a sort of moral effort and historical sleight of hand. Much earlier in his career, however, he had been mercilessly mocked by the novelist George Moore (son of a Catholic Big House far grander than Lady Gregory's). There's one famous account of Yeats crooning over the fire about his ducal Butler ancestors; Yeatsians tend to see it mostly in terms of the poetry and memoir which this attack provoked from Yeats (and, oddly, from Ezra Pound). But to a historian the comments are worth noting for what they say, representing the analysis of a shrewd social observer who knew the Yeats background well. Moore put it even more specifically and more offensively earlier in the same recollection, when he described Yeats at a public meeting to raise money for Hugh Lane's collection of Impressionist paintings in 1904.

[Yeats] began to thunder like Ben Tillett against the middle classes, stamping his feet, working himself into a great temper, and all because the middle classes did not dip their hands into their pockets and give Lane the money he wanted for his exhibition. When he spoke the words 'the middle classes', one would have thought that he was speaking against a personal foe, and we looked around asking each other with our eyes where on earth our Willie Yeats had picked up the strange idea that

none but titled and carriage-folk can appreciate pictures. And we asked ourselves why Willie Yeats should feel himself called upon to denounce his own class, millers and shipowners on one side, and on the other a portrait-painter of distinction.⁵

As Moore pinpoints, the Yeats family, especially in the impoverishment spectacularly embraced by Yeats's artistic father, existed historically at a different level from the Gregorys and even from the Synges—though by the twentieth century an overwhelming solidarity had had to assert itself, faced with the rise of Catholic democracy. This is one of the aspects not often remarked upon in analysis of the great correspondence between Gregory, Synge and Yeats. The shared dream of the noble and the beggarman also meant a shared exasperation with Catholic demos, and a refusal to allow that element the monopoly on being 'Irish'. And this only clarified the lessons of Yeats's childhood and background.

I

His father, John Butler Yeats, uninterested barrister turned failed portrait-painter and world-class talker, constantly stressed the value and values inherent in 'genuine Irish Protestants'. This was all the more necessary by the time of his eldest son's youth, for the condition of the caste was already drastically changed from the palmy days of eighteenth-century ascendancy (which W. B. Yeats would later rediscover and celebrate). By the 1860s, when Yeats was born, a survey showed that Catholics now possessed five out of the twelve judgeships in the Irish Supreme Court, half the administrative power in the banks, the control of three great Irish railway lines, and were by far the largest beneficiaries of sales of landed estates in the Encumbered Estates Court.⁶ Political upheavals and land agitation from the 1870s would destroy Ascendancy power completely. But even before then, the Establishment was no longer exclusively Protestant. And the isolation, or marginalization, of the Southern Irish Protestant had been mercilessly highlighted since the 1830s—by the geographical breakdown demonstrated by religious censuses, as well as less

⁵ *Vale*, Chap. 7; text taken from *Hail and Farewell: Ave, Salve, Vale*, ed. Richard Cave (Gerrards Cross, 1976), p. 540, which reprints Moore's 1933 version of the original 1911 text.

⁶ Emmet Larkin, *The Making of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, 1850-60* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980), p. 447.

concrete demonstrations and threats. The once-ascendant Protestant minority (about 12 per cent of the population at this time) were potentially in eclipse by the year 1865, when W. B. Yeats was born in a suburban Dublin villa at Sandymount, called No. 1, George's Ville. Symbolically, the older Yeats generation still lived in a nearby dwelling called 'Sandymount Castle'—in fact a rambling, crenellated but not particularly grand old house. Thus was neatly epitomized, not only the distance between insecure middle-class present and receding aristocratic past, but also the physical uncertainty of present Protestant life. 'George's Ville' was such an inconsequent house that (though it still stands) its correct address has been squabbled over for generations, and appears wrongly on Yeats's birth certificate. And Sandymount Castle, like so many Irish castles, wasn't a castle at all: a comfortable but bogus accumulation of architectural styles, deliberately reminiscent of past grandeur.

One way of understanding the ethos of the Protestant Ascendancy is through their architecture. It's epitomized not only in the creation of a deliberately grand imperial city but also in the stylish, plain small Georgian houses scattered through rural Ireland, like Lady Gregory's Coole Park. Literary critics have on occasion referred to them as 'granite boxes' 'affronting' the Irish landscape, which I think is exactly wrong. Elizabeth Bowen, more poetically, described them as 'ships out at sea'.⁷ But they do stand for an evident need on the Ascendancy's part not only to lay claim to land recently won, but also to convince themselves that they would remain. The little battlements and Strawberry-Hill windows of a 'Sandymount Castle' may represent a declaration by its inhabitants of the antiquity of their claim to an Irish house: in an age when their right to be 'Irish' was beginning to be questioned by the new wave of Irish nationalism.

It's striking that Anglo-Irish writers obsessively use houses as symbols, almost as personifications; Elizabeth Bowen, at the end of her novel about the Irish Ascendancy, *The Last September*, refers to the 'execution' of three houses in Cork. From the inside of the demesne wall, a sense of threat was inevitable. And as the nineteenth century wore on, Ascendancy marginalization was reflected in their relation to architecture as well as to landowning.

⁷ In 'The Big House', written for the first number of *The Bell* in 1940 and reprinted in Hermione Lee (ed.), *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen* (London, 1980), pp. 25–30. The 'affronting' reference is in Antony Coleman, 'The Big House, Yeats and the Irish Context', in Warwick Gould (ed.), *Yeats Annual No. 3* (1985), p. 47.

Dublin was reduced to echoing, cavernous, half-abandoned public buildings and streetscapes. Its atmosphere is preserved in a subculture of absorbing fourth-rate fiction. In these novels, another image recurs: that of the country house barricaded against mysterious night marauders, often taking the form of an exotically-named secret society, out to reclaim the land. (In *The Kellys and the O'Kellys*, Trollope mocks this superbly in a conversation between two Irish Protestants, one of them convinced, against all rational evidence, that he has been the subject of such an attack.⁸) Later, the erosion of Ascendancy landownership under the dual onslaught of Parnellite land agitation and Gladstonian land purchase legislation is reflected in better fiction, like George Moore's *Mustlin* or Somerville and Ross's *The Real Charlotte*. In that novel of 1894, it's significant that what the grasping central character really wants is one particular little 'gentleman's house': a Georgian farmhouse, fallen on evil days, with a *déclassé* owner and a grass-grown avenue.

Yeats and his family were alive to the issue that preoccupied Somerville and Ross, and has continued to interest economic and social historians of Ireland: that is, the emergence of a successor class to the Ascendancy in the seismic upheavals of the late nineteenth century. Collaborationist strategies for the survival of the Protestant Ascendancy had been sketched out by political leaders like Isaac Butt and—more daringly—Parnell, in their movements for federalism or Home Rule. (The Yeats and Butt families were, interestingly, very closely associated.) However, in terms of economics, the writing was on the wall. The land war of the 1880s and the legislation which it precipitated may have preserved some of the landlords' property. But, together with agricultural rent and price movements which advantaged the tenants and disadvantaged the landlords, plus franchise extension and local government reform, the Ascendancy's social *raison d'être* was removed long before Irish independence: even if they were bought out at a good price. (Unlike the landless cottiers and agricultural labourers, who really lost the Land War.)

It's important not to misapprehend the nature of this conservative revolution; for the next step, politically speaking, was that the successor class would provide not only leadership of establishment politics (John Redmond), but also—with the upheavals of 1912–14— an extremist political leadership that for the first time

⁸ Anthony Trollope, *The Kellys and the O'Kellys* (Oxford, 1982 edition), pp. 491–4.

wasn't commandeered by Protestant reactionaries like Tone or Mitchel. The revolution of 1913–21 was led instead by the children of Catholic teaching orders like the Christian Brothers (metaphorically speaking, of course). Yeats's poems 'Easter 1916' and 'Parnell's Funeral' are only two of the contemporary texts which express a certain bemusement at this turn of events. Late in his life he summed it up more brutally, recalling his fellow-Senators in the Irish Free State parliament:

typical elected men, hot and vague, always disturbed, always hating something or other ... [they] had destroyed a system of election and established another, made terrible decisions ... signed the death-warrant[s] of [their] dearest friend[s] ... Yet their descendants, if they grow rich enough for the travel and leisure that make a finished man, will constitute our ruling class, and date their origins from the Post Office as American families date theirs from the Mayflower.⁹

He doesn't write as if the process greatly appeals to him.

For the Irish Protestant Ascendancy, their eventual marginalization manifested itself economically, politically and spiritually. Religiously, what is an Irish Protestant's country? The episcopalian Church of Ireland, tempered in the zealous fires of the Irish seventeenth century, retained certain brutally reductionist low-church characteristics, well expressed in the tone adopted by some Trinity College Dublin academics. But this ethos tended to lead to dogged stasis rather than upbeat evangelicalism: and to a certain philistinism, attacked from outside the charmed circle by both Yeats and Shaw, who put his own faults of 'vulgarity and savagery' down to having 'sat once upon a time every Sunday morning in an Irish Protestant church'. Apart from briefly picking up evangelical fervour in the 1850s, the Church of Ireland remained locked into the guardianship of its privileges. None the less it saw its parishes and revenues rationalized and its tithes commuted by one reforming British government in the 1830s, and its established status removed by another in the 1860s. By the time of the First World War, the social reality of the Ascendancy, its church and its houses, was as usual best reflected by Somerville and Ross. Here is a private letter from one of that duo, Violet Martin, written after a visit to County Galway (Lady Gregory's territory) in 1912: it's a lengthy quote, but necessary.

I was driven off to a little desolate awful church, to which the Ardrahan clergyman drives out. I have *never* been at anything so wretched—the little church quite well built, but coated with mildew and damp, the

⁹ From *On the Boiler*, reprinted in *Explorations* (London, 1962), p. 413.

decaying old prayer books stuck to the seats with fungus. The clergyman came out and dusted a pew for me before he allowed me to sit in it—I, a young man, and a policeman were the congregation. The parson gave out a hymn, started it very well; I struck in, and he and I then sang a duet. When he found that I was well set, he sang an *excellent* bass in a low baritone. The youth and the policeman listened reverently to this unique performance.

In the afternoon Tilly Redington and I drove over to Tyrone House. A bigger and much grander edition of Ross—a great square cut-stone house of three stories, with an area—perfectly empty—and such ceilings, architraves, teak doors and chimneypieces as one sees in old houses in Dublin. It is on a long promontory by the sea—and there *rioted* three or four generations of St Georges—living with country-women, occasionally marrying them, all illegitimate four times over. Not so long ago *eight* of these awful half-peasant families roosted together in that lovely house, and fought, and barricaded and drank, till the police had to intervene—about 150 years ago a very grand Lady Harriet St Lawrence married a St George, and lived there, and was so corroded with pride that she would not allow her daughters to associate with the Galway people. She lived to see them marry two men in the yard. Yesterday as we left an old Miss St George, daughter of the last owner, was at the door in a donkey trap—she lives near, in a bit of the castle, and since her people died she will not go into Tyrone House, or into the enormous yard, or the beautiful old garden. She was a strange mixture of distinction and commonness, like her breeding, and it was very sad to see her at the door of that great house—

If we dare to write up that subject!¹⁰

Much later, her collaborator did. But so, interestingly, did W. B. Yeats, who took an equally garbled version of this Galway story for his last play, *Purgatory*, which is preoccupied by decline, miscegnation, the death of a house, and the hauntings of history. Its inspiration is closely associated with the ethos delineated in Violet Martin's letter, where she locates these same elements against a background symbolized by a rotting Protestant church with a congregation of three—one of them, significantly, a policeman.

This was the point to which the once-triumphant Ascendancy was declining through Yeats's youth. But in terms of intellectual history, a process of marginalization and psychological insecurity is traceable from the early nineteenth century. As the Ascendancy took to castellating their houses, they gothicized their fiction, possibly for similar reasons. The condition of the embattled Irish

¹⁰ Gifford Lewis (ed.), *The Selected Letters of Somerville and Ross* (London, 1989), p. 294.

Protestant from the early nineteenth century was epitomized by figures like Charles Maturin, an eccentric but acute Dublin cleric and author; or another Huguenot-descended Irish intellectual, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Le Fanu was a non-practising lawyer, conservative journalist, and congenital depressive, who lived a reclusive life in Merrion Square, absorbed in Swedenborg and fears for Protestant ascendancy. And what he and Maturin had in common is striking: both, in their successive generations, pioneered the nineteenth-century tradition of Irish supernatural fiction.

Maturin created *Melmoth the Wanderer*, published in 1821, a figure who echoes Faust and prefigures Count Dracula: the undead, wandering the world to claim the issue of a corrupt bargain. Le Fanu wrote numerous classic ghost stories and one authentic masterpiece, *Uncle Silas* (1858): though ostensibly set in Derbyshire, it was long ago spotted by Elizabeth Bowen as an Irish story in disguise, dealing with exploitation, imprisonment, fractured identity, and hauntings.¹¹ He was a devoted reader of Swedenborg, as was Yeats. Le Fanu is also responsible for a prototype Lesbian vampire story, *Carmilla*. And this topic would later be carried on by yet another respectable Dublin Protestant, Abraham—Bram—Stoker.

Over forty years ago, V. S. Pritchett acutely characterized Le Fanu's ghosts as frightening because 'they can be justified: blobs of the unconscious that have floated up to the surface of the mind ... not irresponsible and perambulatory figments of family history, moaning and clanking about in fancy dress'.¹² This is true of more Irish ghost stories than Le Fanu's; and, particularizing further, the line of Irish Protestant supernatural fiction is an obvious one, though it has not been analysed as such. It leads from Maturin and Le Fanu to Bram Stoker and Elizabeth Bowen and W. B. Yeats—marginalized Irish Protestants all, often living in England but regretting Ireland, stemming from families with a strong clerical and professional colourations, whose occult preoccupations surely mirror a sense of displacement, a loss of social and psychological integration, and an escapism motivated by the threat of a take-over by the Catholic middle classes—a threat all the more inexorable because it is being accomplished by peaceful means and with the free legal aid of British governments. The supernatural theme of a corrupt bargain recurs again.

¹¹ See her introduction to the 1947 edition, reprinted in Hermione Lee, *op. cit.*, pp. 100–13.

¹² *The Living Novel* (London, 1946), p. 96.

Indeed, a strong theme in Protestant Gothic is a mingled repulsion and envy where Catholic magic is concerned. The Jesuit order in *Melmoth* manipulates darker forces than the eponymous hero. In *Dracula*, Van Helsing is a Dutch Catholic who brings the Host, with a papal dispensation, to combat the undead at Whitby. Yeats, who read about vampires in Ennemoser's *History of Magic*, wrote about demon children in *The Land of Heart's Desire* who flinch from the crucifix; the undead in *The Shadowy Waters* cast no shadows; his fairies cannot be watched eating, and are invisible in mirrors. If you have accompanied Jonathan Harker through Dracula's castle, none of this is new to you. Yeats knew Stoker; he inscribed a copy of *The Countess Kathleen* to him in 1892,¹³ read *Dracula* with Ezra Pound, and was only put off a proposed visit to Dracula's original castle (though Yeats thought it was in Austria, not Transylvania) by the outbreak of a world war in 1914.¹⁴

Equally Stokerish is Yeats's interest in Catholic versus Protestant magic. He wrote to Lionel Johnson in 1893: 'My own position is that an idealism or spiritualism which denies magic, and evil spirits even, and sneers at magicians and even mediums (the few honest ones) is an academical imposture. Your Church has in this matter been far more thorough than the Protestant. It has never denied *Ars Magica*, though it has denounced it.'¹⁵ By 1909, however, he had decided that the Protestant mind was readier to accept magic. The pedantry of Irish Catholic education, he wrote in his journal, 'comes from intellectual timidity, from the dread of leaving the mind alone among impressions where all seems heretical, and from the habit of political and religious apologetics. This pedantry destroys religion as it destroys poetry, for it destroys all direct knowledge. We taste and feel and see the truth. We do not reason ourselves into it.'¹⁶ This theme appears in the stories he published as *The Secret Rose*, where magical insight is defined against unthinking Catholicism. Here too there are echoes of *Melmoth*: the invented text, the esoteric book, the idea of esotericism as aristocratic domination, perhaps—for an Irish Protestant—the reclamation of an élite authority. 'The dead', he

¹³ Now in the Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

¹⁴ See James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 108–9, Yeats claimed that the book interested him no more than any other sensational story, but he stayed up all night reading it.

¹⁵ [After 16 February 1893] in John Kelly & Eric Domville (eds), *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats, Volume I 1865–1895* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 355–6.

¹⁶ Denis Donoghue (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: Memoirs* (London, 1972), (hereafter cited as *Memoirs*), pp. 195–6.

once wrote, 'remain a portion of the living'.¹⁷ A critic as imaginative as Terry Eagleton might see the crowds of dead people whom Yeats or Elizabeth Bowen discern walking the roads of Ireland as the souls of dispossessed tenants. I don't; but, while accepting the Neoplatonic and Swedenborgian pedigree of ideas about the dead partaking of the life of the living, I still think the particular appeal of the supernatural for Irish Protestants deserves decoding.

Yeats was a man of his late-nineteenth-century time in being influenced by the general occult revival of the late 1880s, unequalled until the 1960s. Eliphas Levi's *Mysteries of Magic* had been translated in 1886, Cornelius Agrippa's *Natural Magic* a few years later. An explosion of public interest in Rosicrucianism had affected Europe. MacGregor Mathers's *Kabbalah Unveiled* and A. P. Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism* were sacred books for a certain element of the avant-garde. (Sinnett's book was presented to Yeats by a Sligo Protestant aunt.) There was a belief in a coming dawning of wisdom which would rout eighteenth-century rationalism and nineteenth-century materialism. But Yeats already had his reasons for repudiating these beliefs: they had helped bring about the decline of the Protestant ascendancy. And he had access to his own occult tradition too.

Irish occultism was often identified by Yeats, for public purposes, as part of the Celtic mind-set; but the superstitiousness of Irish Protestants was legendary. A fear of three candles burning together, or the unlucky colour green, or a hotel bedroom numbered 13, governed the private life of Charles Stewart Parnell.¹⁸ Elizabeth Yeats would never allow her publishing company to begin printing a book on a Friday.¹⁹ In the houses of Yeats's Pollexfen relations at Sligo, a long-dead greatgrandfather and his four-year-old daughter, victims of the cholera, walked in the garden of an evening, and the dogs ran to greet them. The Dublin Protestant middle-class had frequent recourse to fortune-tellers and wise women, long before AE and Yeats tried to bring

¹⁷ See Steven L. Adams & George Mills Harper (eds), 'The Manuscript of Leo Africanus', in R. Finneran (ed.), *Yeats Annual No. 1* (1982), and 'Swedenborg, Mediums and the Desolate Places', in W. H. O'Donnell (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: Prefaces and Introductions* (London, 1988), where this idea recurs.

¹⁸ Testified to by numerous authorities: see J. H. Parnell, *C. S. Parnell: A Memoir* (London, 1916), p. 263; A. Kettle, *The Material for Victory* (Dublin, 1958), p. 26; T. M. Healy, *Letters and Leaders of My Day* (London, 1929), Vol. 2, pp. 169-70; F. S. L. Lyons, *Charles Stewart Parnell* (London, 1977), pp. 24, 183-4, 235, 249, 597, 601, 612.

¹⁹ *Memoirs*, p. 212.

them theosophy, seances and astral travel in the 1880s. And Yeats's early fellow-occultist and schoolfriend, Charles Johnston, came from the last redoubt of Protestant extremism, a Northern Irish Orange stronghold called Ballykilbeg: where, Yeats noted, 'everything was a matter of belief' in Protestant salvation and Catholic damnation.²⁰

It doesn't seem frivolous or irrelevant to locate Yeats in this context—Protestant marginalization—as much as in the world of international occultism, Byzantine studies, Indian mysticism, and London bohemianism: for it antedated these influences on him, as so did his interest in supernaturalism. 'Without the arbitrary', he wrote, 'there cannot be religion . . . because there cannot be the last sacrifice, that of the spirit.'²¹ For a Catholic, religious authority provided the arbitrary; an Irish Protestant had to look elsewhere. Yeats found it in magic. As he himself wrote of Blake, 'he was a man crying out for a mythology, and trying to make one because he could not find one to his hand. Had he been a Catholic of Dante's time he would have been well content with Mary and the angels'.²² But the supernatural dimension of the Irish Protestant subculture provided a further impulse—less personally, more historically, derived: and one which he shared with several similarly marginalized members of his increasingly marginalized class and caste.

II

It's worth looking in some detail at the specific case of Yeatsian marginalization—a concept always present in Yeats's own work. (His own favourite among the stories in *The Secret Rose* is called 'The Crucifixion of the Outcast'.²³) What was the family's background? The Yeats side were classic clerical-bourgeois Irish Protestants, land-agents rather than landlords, fallen on poorer times. Yeats's own grandfather, after whom he was named, resigned his living under a cloud. On his mother's side the Pollexfens were Protestant businessmen, millers and shippers, of

²⁰ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London, 1955), (hereafter *Autobiographies*), p. 91.

²¹ *Memoirs*, p. 147. For Yeats and the arbitrary see also 'Magic' in *Ideas of Good and Evil* (London, 1914), especially p. 46.

²² From 'William Blake and the Imagination', in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, pp. 120–1.

²³ Or so he claimed in his dedication to John Quinn's copy of volume VII of his *Collected Works*.

fairly recent Irish vintage. The Yeatses were sociable, easy, graceful, unsuccessful; the Pollexfens were money-minded, puritanical, introverted, with great reserves of feeling. Or so John Butler Yeats read them. He was obsessed with the distinctions, contrasts and dissonances between the two families, and so, in his way, was W. B. Yeats.

To a certain extent, Yeats's father's obsessive commentary has created and preserved the idea of two clashing family cultures which produced, by some sort of Hegelian dialectic, the poet. More to our purposes is the way that the Yeatses and Pollexfens, taken together, epitomize the varieties of social identification across the Protestant middle class. The Yeatses were very conscious of their Protestant tradition, in the sense of social caste rather than religious commitment; they treasured the aristocratic Butler component, John Butler Yeats also noted, again and again, Pollexfen shortcomings which he attributed to their business background. Nor was he the only one. Another element of social marginalization stemmed from the social distance between the Pollexfen world and the great houses of the neighbourhood like Hazelwood, Markree and Lissadell. Yeats's autobiographical writings preserve the litany of names, the grey ancestral roofs glimpsed through trees and across high walls. Yeats's youth has usually been seen refracted through a Celtic mist. Reading his memories, it recalls something very different: the Combray childhood of the good bourgeois Marcel in *A la recherche du temps perdu*, wandering along the hawthorn paths by unattainable demesnes. And Yeats, like Marcel, would later conquer their inhabitants through charm and the social power of art. The county lady Violet Martin, hearing about Yeats on a visit to Lord Morris in 1901, picked up the impression that: 'He has a sense of humour, and is a gentleman—hardly by birth, I fancy—but by genius.'²⁴ That had been the option open to him, and he had taken it.

The Pollexfen house, Merville, looks large enough to us now; it was certainly a step up from the old Pollexfen residence on Union St., Sligo, and Yeats emphasized the length of its avenue,²⁵ a rigorous test of gentility since the days of Jane Austen. But as Jack Yeats remarked, 'we had no gate lodges and no carriage drives'.²⁶

²⁴ Violet Martin to Edith Somerville [fragment, 1901] in Gifford Lewis, op. cit., p. 240.

²⁵ *Autobiographies*, p. 14.

²⁶ Jack Yeats to Thomas McGreevy in E. Mikhail (ed.), *W. B. Yeats: Interviews and Recollections* (1977), Vol. 2, p. 409.

And John Butler Yeats wrote to Rosa Butt (herself from the marginalized and financially insecure Protestant middle class):

One reason why I am so incensed against class distinctions is because these very small gentry round Sligo always excluded the Pollexfens from their friendship. Because they were engaged in business they were not fit company ...²⁷

And when W. B. Yeats finally visited Lissadell socially in 1894, he remembered it as a cause of great pleasure to the Pollexfens.

He can be seen, then, as a figure at odds with his various contexts; and in this he expresses the wider dislocation of his caste. The Yeatses, unlike the Gore-Booths, did not have a demesne to cultivate when the Land Acts turned their tenants into proprietors. The heavily mortgaged farm at Thomastown which provided John Butler Yeats with his meagre private income disappeared before the turn of the century. The Yeatses, in fact, didn't even have a house, specially in the Irish sense. John Butler Yeats rented a series of seedy Dublin houses, remembered with horror by his son. 'We lived in a villa where the red bricks were made pretentious and vulgar with streaks of slate colour, and there seemed to be enemies everywhere.' Elsewhere: 'That Rathgar villa where we all lived when I went to school, a time of crowding and indignity.'²⁸ There is the authentic Ascendancy shudder, and the authentic Ascendancy fear of the enemies outside the walls.

Blenheim Road in suburban London's artistic Bohemia was the only real home, rented though it was; and it went in 1901. Yeats's only base thenceforth was a couple of rooms near Euston Station: and, for every summer from 1897, his collaborator Lady Gregory's house, Coole Park.

Coole was the epitome of the small Irish Georgian house which Yeats had once dismissed as 'ugly and box-like' before he re-discovered the eighteenth century as 'that one Irish century that escaped from darkness and confusion'²⁹—and a time when Yeatses were Yeatses. At Coole he discovered 'a life of order and of labour', of ceremony, of libraries (the people who opposed Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, said Yeats, 'had no books in

²⁷ John Butler Yeats to Rosa Butt, 31 October 1910, letter no. III of a series held at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

²⁸ *Autobiographies*, p. 83; W. B. Yeats to Augusta Gregory, 1 March 1902, Berg Collection, New York Public Library.

²⁹ Introduction to *The Words Upon The Window-pane* reprinted in *Explorations* (London, 1962), p. 345.

their houses³⁰). Coole was an imperial house, memorializing generations of service to the Empire. Here Yeats rediscovered the Protestant virtues. It's less often remarked that he also rediscovered a robust contempt of Catholic values, reflected in many off-the-cuff remarks in Lady Gregory's letters, and culminating in Yeats's Senate speeches in the 1920s. There was also his admiration of Lady Gregory's autocratic way with Lord-lieutenants. ('What many old Abbey Theatre actors remember most about being in the presence of Yeats and Lady Gregory', one researcher has found, 'is simple fear.'³¹)

Vitality, Lady Gregory provided Yeats with a house where he could be, for the summers, a resident; where he could attempt to go fishing, like any country gentleman; where he could belong. Houses, and an insecurity about whether they will last, pervade Yeats's writings as they do Elizabeth Bowen's. In 1894, the idea of burning down landlords' houses horrified him; by the time of *Purgatory* he could write

... to kill a house
Where great men grew up, married, died,
I here declare a capital offence.

With marriage and a certain amount of worldly success, he could get his own house; so, of course, he moved to a castle (even if it were only 'a tower/Half dead at the top'). And as Lady Gregory tartly remarked to her American friend John Quinn, 'he already feels such a real Irish landlord that he has begun by putting a mortgage on it'.³²

This, as much else, was a deliberate reassertion of an Irish Protestant identity denied him by historical and family circumstances. In youth, his reaction had been to over-compensate: he attacked Unionist Dublin as resembling 'that fabled stony city of Arabia'³³ and preserved a special animus against the quintessentially Protestant institution of Trinity College, Dublin. In his angry youth Yeats said that the only instinct for religious veneration experienced by Irish Protestants was directed towards Trinity

³⁰ Mikhail, op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 54.

³¹ James Flannery, *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* (London, 1976), p. 228—a generalization based on countless interviews.

³² Augusta Gregory to John Quinn, 3 June 1917, Berg Collection, New York Public Library: with permission of the Berg Collection and the Gregory estate.

³³ John P. Frayne (ed.), *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats Volume 1* (London, 1970), pp. 404–5.

College. In a public letter of 1900 he referred to 'that Death whose most manifest expression in this country is Trinity College . . . and which has already turned our once intelligent gentry into readers of the *Irish Times*'.³⁴ That journal was the quintessential Unionist newspaper and perhaps it's relevant to cite a short story in *The Celtic Twilight*, where a country woman is vouchsafed a vision of the devil, disguised as a newspaper blowing along the road: 'she knew by the size of it that it was the *Irish Times*'.³⁵ A supernatural view of Irish Protestant institutions looms into view once more.

Yeats's relationship to Trinity continued highly charged. He didn't attend the college (where his father and grandfather had won prizes) for a number of rather disingenuously expressed reasons. He continued to rail against the Trinity establishment, sometimes referring to it as 'the middle class'. In a carefully recorded dream, he visualized 'a certain portentuous professor of Trinity' as a lap-dog set to guard the gates of hell.³⁶ Most of all, he assailed one emblematic figure with Oedipal passion: the Professor of English Literature, his father's friend Edward Dowden. Dowden, whom Yeats took as the personification of Protestant Dublin, had been an early supporter of his poetry. In later life Yeats felt a little guilty about all this, and wrote nervously to his father that he had treated Dowden rather unfairly as 'a little unreal, a specious moral image . . . [a symbol] for the whole structure of Dublin, Lord Chancellors and all the rest'.³⁷ In the same mode, at the same time, he would reject Swift and Berkeley as not really Irish, while claiming Blake and Emily Brontë as countrymen. In the act of classifying a canon, anything that smacked of Trinity was illegitimate. But, just as later he discovered Swift and Berkeley as intellectual ancestors, and exponents of Ascendancy *virtu*, so too he came near capturing the castle that was Trinity. In 1910 and again in 1913 he was canvassed (not very enthusiastically) for the succession to Dowden's chair, and found himself very interested. So was his father, who fantasized happily about Yeats walking in the front

³⁴ To Standish O'Grady; reprinted *ibid.*, p. 243.

³⁵ W. B. Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*, with an introduction by Kathleen Raine (Gerrards Cross, 1981 edition of the 1902 text), p. 6.

³⁶ Frayne, *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 310.

³⁷ These letters of late 1915 and early 1916 are in Allan Wade (ed.), *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1954), pp. 603–6; the more accurate transcriptions quoted here may be found in W. Murphy, *Prodigal Father: The Life of John Butler Yeats (1839–1922)* (London, 1978), p. 446.

gate of Trinity in such august circumstances. Yeats never became a Trinity professor. But here too, by about 1913, a wheel had come full circle and a reconciliation with a tribal tradition had been made.

There was, moreover, another aspect to the Dowden connection, which raises yet again the Irish Protestant predilection for the occult. Dowden's pioneer scholarship was devoted to the Shelley circle; in the mid-1880s he read to Yeats and his father parts of his unpublished life of Shelley. And the works of Shelley's circle included not only Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* but also Polidori's Byronic tale, *The Vampire*. It was Dowden's set-piece account of Shelley's experiments with demonic invocation at Eton that inspired Yeats and AE to attempt spirit-raising in the mid-1880s.³⁸ And Dowden's star student was the brilliant son of a professional Dublin Protestant family, Trinity Gold Medallist, Auditor of the College Philosophical Society, Double First and civil servant—Bram Stoker.

Stoker's first book, long in use, was called *Duties of Clerks of the Petty Sessions*. Only an Irish protestant could have graduated so easily from that to *Dracula*. The genesis of the latter masterpiece has only recently been demonstrated, with the discovery of Stoker's working notes, now deposited in Philadelphia. They represent seven years of Yeats-style research into folklore, myth, armchair anthropology, medieval history, and magic—particularly diabolism.³⁹ Stoker had even found a treatise on the peasants of Transylvania which remarked on their 'many points of resemblance to our friend Paddy. He is grossly superstitious, as the number of crosses by the roadside and on every eminence testify; and, like his prototype, he lives in abject terror of his priest, of whose powers he has the most exalted ideas'.⁴⁰ The Irishness of *Dracula* must be left aside here. But Dowden's influence had a part in Stoker's imagination—as it did in Yeats's. And when we see Yeats setting out on his lifelong path to constructing occult alter egos, to membership in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, to the long parade of mediums and seances and occult evocations, this path may be lead back not to studios in Fitzrovia in the 1890s, but earlier: to Dowden's large villa on

³⁸ Peter Kuch, *Yeats and AE: The Antagonism That Unites Dear Friends* (Gerrards Cross, 1986), p. 51.

³⁹ See Clive Leatherdale, *The Origins of Dracula: the background to Bram Stoker's Gothic masterpiece* (London, 1987).

⁴⁰ From Major E. Johnson, *On the Track of the Crescent* (London, 1885), pp. 250–1.

Bushey Park Road, Rathgar, Dublin, where in the early 1880s the mutinous young Yeats and his irrepressible father used to visit Dowden for breakfast and then walk argumentatively into the city together: the young Yeats dropping off at the High School, Harcourt Street, the elder continuing on to his studio at Stephen's Green, while Dowden alone— symbolically—terminated his journey at the Grand Mosque of Irish Protestantism, Trinity College Front Square.

III

As his career developed from this marginalized base, Yeats re-made an Irish identity in his work and in his life. In the process he reclaimed Ireland for himself, his family and his tradition. He began by asserting a claim on the land—particularly the Sligo land—through its people: the discovery of folklore and fairy belief. Difficulties arose: he could, for instance, be attacked as incapable of interpreting Ireland religiously, as he was a *Protestant* mystic. But folklore and anthropological interests, besides being often connected in the 1890s with theosophical or occult investigations, opened a way into nationalism via 'national tradition' (as Scott and others had shown long before). It could also demonstrate the links between Yeatses, Pollexfens and the 'real' Irish people around them. Landed Irish Protestants had always had a special relationship (for better or worse) with Ireland—denied to the landless bourgeoisie whence Yeats was sprung. So he claimed the land in his own way. And the process could assert, yet again, intuitive, organic traditional forms of wisdom—even 'secret' wisdom—against scientific, 'rational' modes of thought, and against an increasingly Establishment Catholicism. Defending his views against an antagonist in *The Outlook* as early as 1898 he wrote: 'If your paragraphist, who is, perhaps, a Catholic, will wait until I have completed the series of essays . . . he will find that the Irish peasant has invented, or that somebody has invented for him, a vague, though not altogether unphilosophical, reconciliation between his Paganism and his Christianity.'⁴¹ Perhaps that was the function of the Irish Ascendancy occultist? In the same year, he prophesied that Art in Ireland would usurp the role of religion: artists must 'take upon themselves the method and fervour of a priesthood . . . we must baptise as well as preach'.⁴² In early

⁴¹ See Wade, *op. cit.*, 297–8. I am grateful to Deirdre Twomey for pointing out that Yeats probably knew the paragraphist was T. P. Gill.

⁴² 'Ireland and the Arts', first published in *United Irishman*, 31 August 1901, and republished in *Ideas of Good and Evil*, p. 223.

works like his collection of *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* there is a highly charged mixture of calculation, belief and proselytism.

Even before Lady Gregory's more expert tutelage, Yeats was a committed gatherer of folklore, and an equally committed enemy of rationalizing folklore scholarship. Folktales embodied a secret truth, of the sort denied by the priests but asserted by the hero and the country people in Yeats's unfinished novel *The Speckled Bird*.

One of the young priests [from Maynooth] asked if the fishermen were attentive to their religious duties, and Michael began to praise them for their sense of an overhanging spiritual life and went on, without weighing his words, to speak of apparitions they had seen.

One of the priests said, 'People used to imagine they could see things of that kind, but they are too well educated now', and the other priest added, 'These superstitions are all dead, I am glad to say.'

Michael, thinking that some chance had kept them ignorant of what was his greatest interest in life, said: 'You are entirely mistaken. I have spoken to many who have seen such things.'

The priest who had first spoken was silent for a minute and then said in the heavy voice of one who is repeating a lesson, 'They may tell such things as stories, but they no longer believe in them.'⁴³

It was necessary for Yeats passionately to adhere to the idea that Sligo people did believe in fairies and talked about them all the time. So they did, of course—to *children*, as Lily Yeats remembered.⁴⁴ The difference was that her brother expected to go on being talked to about them. This tendency towards infantilism is powerfully connected with laying claim to the lost domain of childhood, epitomized for all the displaced Yeats children by Sligo, their one rooted place. Still obsessively discussing this lost Eden in 1936, Yeats said to his sister Lily: 'No-one will ever see Sligo as we saw it.'⁴⁵ The lost world of childhood also stood for a long-lost world of social dominance.

Folklore also asserted another identity; the gentry's liking for the disappearing type of 'pure' Irish peasant memorialized by the plays of Synge. Strong farmers, cattle dealers, gombeen men and

⁴³ W. B. Yeats, *The Speckled Bird*, ed. William H. O'Donnell (Toronto, 1976), p. 33.

⁴⁴ See her scrapbook TS in the Yeats family papers, p. 13. The Merville servants 'played a big part in our lives. They were so friendly and wise and knew so intimately angels, saints, banshees and fairies.'

⁴⁵ Reported by Lily Yeats to Ruth Lane-Poole, 23 June 1936, transcript in the possession of William Murphy.

enforced emigration do not characterize Yeats's landscape; mysterious, self-confident, independent (but polite) people living in close communion with dhouls and fairies do. Like Douglas Hyde, from a similar background, Yeats recurs to the class distinctions among the Irish faery: tall well-made aristocratic Sidhe, attended by pygmy plebeian smiths, cattledrovers and shoemakers. 'Folk art is, indeed, the oldest of the aristocracies of thought ...'

Yeats's autobiographies asserted this view of the countryside of his youth, much as he re-wrote the history of Ireland during his adulthood. He had learned from one of his seedy occult mentors, MacGregor Mathers, that 'images well up before the mind from a deeper source than conscious or unconscious memory';⁴⁶ a trained spiritual visionary had access to a sort of universal random memory bank, and thus the visionary poet was the ideal historian.

In Yeats's influential version, the quarter-century from 1891 to 1916 was 'the stirring of the bones', and the 1916 Rising the inevitable apocalypse—gestated almost supernaturally in the transference of energy from politics into culture after the death of Parnell, a process midwived by Yeats and his friends. I believe this to be unconvincing and ahistorical;⁴⁷ but it had the advantage of putting Yeats at the centre of Irish history. 'Did that play of mine send out/Certain men the English shot?' he asked in a famous couplet; his *Autobiographies* provide an extended, affirmative answer. (I myself side with a recent version by the Ulster poet Paul Muldoon: 'If Yeats had saved his pencil lead/ Would certain men have stayed in bed?', and answer no.⁴⁸)

The Yeats version distorts the continuing power of the constitutional political movement, ignores the context of World War I and the contingent nature of the 1916 Rising, and wrongly identifies cultural and political revolution as fundamentally the same thing. But the process welds the marginalized Yeats into the mainstream of Irish history and presents him, not only as the cultural founding-father which he came to be, but as the political patriarch which he certainly wasn't. The reality of Yeats's public position (and the attitude of mainstream Ireland towards its

⁴⁶ *Autobiographies*, p. 183.

⁴⁷ See my 'Anglo-Irish literature, Gaelic nationalism and Irish politics in the 1890s', in *Ireland after the Union: Proceedings of the second joint meeting of the Royal Irish Academy and the British Academy, London, 1986* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 61–82.

⁴⁸ '7, Middagh Street' in Paul Muldoon, *Meeting the British* (London, 1987).

marginalized Protestant intellectuals) is probably more accurately preserved in a coded newspaper attack on Yeats and AE in 1901:

The type of Non-Catholic Nationalist to whom we refer has been pampered in vanity. He could not be a mere Home Ruler, so he found it necessary to differentiate and be a Protestant Home Ruler; he thinks that Ireland practically never had a leader who was not a Protestant—that is one of the fruits of commencing Irish history at the year 1782; he sometimes writes poetry which no Irishman understands or rather which no Irishman troubles his head to read; he thinks Catholics are superstitious and believes in spooks himself; he thinks they are priest-ridden and he would like to go back to Paganism; he is a bigot who thinks that he is broad-minded; a prig who thinks he is cultured; he does not understand Ireland—a fact which would not be of much import if he did not firmly believe that he is a philosopher. However, he means well.⁴⁹

By this stage, condescension was exercised by the Catholic middle class towards the Ascendancy, instead of the other way round. Notwithstanding, Yeats's continuing preoccupation with the occult did enable him to lay a claim upon Irishness, while retaining a hold upon his own marginalized tradition. His own occult short stories, like 'Rosa Alchemica', aren't often enough seen as contributions to the Protestant Gothic tradition, continuing the Maturin-Le Fanu-Stoker theme of occultism as a strategy to compete with Catholicism, and to deal with the hauntings of Irish history (including spectres from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries).

Part of Yeats's discovery of the eighteenth century involved a discovery of the one figure who could enable him to square the circle of reconciling Augustan values with scepticism about 'rationalist' apprehensions of reality: Bishop Berkeley. Occultism also enabled him to make common cause with the Protestant Freemason tradition, epitomized by his uncle George Pollexfen in Sligo—friend of his father's youth, seer of visions, caster of horoscopes, initiate of the Order of the Golden Dawn, and pillar of the Masonic order. Freemasonry, a vital presence in Irish Protestantism, hovers in the background of *fin-de-siècle* occultism; Yeats's own hermetic order, the Golden Dawn, was begun by three Freemasons, and Maud Gonne left it because of these associations. For an Irish Protestant, of course, the Masonic order continued to offer one of the few convenient avenues to the irrational, the arbitrary, and the sense of a secret society (except in Ulster, where they had their own routes to these destinations).

⁴⁹ *The Leader*, 27 July 1901.

Yeats cannot have been unsympathetic. Perhaps this predisposition lay behind the otherwise surprising fact that one of the few enthusiastic reviews of Yeats's occultist handbook, *A Vision*, appeared in *The Church of Ireland Gazette*.

By 1913, not yet fifty, Yeats had begun to write his memoirs and rewrite his past. He was well embarked on his development into a new and uncompromising tradition, in poetry as in stagecraft: encouraged by his secretary and companion, Ezra Pound. He would look to the East, to Europe and eventually back to Ireland. And like Pound, he found his way to a literary culture which could embrace a politics of conscious, unashamed and authoritarian elitism. This again had its Irish Protestant echoes. His 1909 journal is preoccupied by aristocracy, anti-egalitarianism, and occasionally anti-Catholicism, tutored by Lady Gregory and by what Yeats conceived as the lesson of Synge's life and death. 'Friendship is all the house I have.' The baseness and intellectual corruption of Catholic education is stressed; the adherence of Protestantism to form, and Catholicism to formlessness;⁵⁰ he is even on his way to a sneaking sympathy with Protestant fears about Home Rule becoming Home Rule.

IV

That same 1909 journal repeated his belief that 'national feeling' was dying out, and his disillusionment with the Irish ethos.⁵¹ Later he would have to rewrite this, as part of his interpretation of modern Irish history inevitably setting hard towards the Rising of 1916. The poet, after all, *was* the ideal historian. He had, much earlier, wondered whether Ireland's 'whole history' might 'be fiction ... sung out of the void by the harps of the great bardic orders'.⁵² (Many modern scholars would be in general agreement.) In any case, by the first publication of his great collection entitled *Responsibilities* in 1914, Yeats's approach to history, Irishness and Protestantism was more or less set—well before *A Vision*, or the 1916 Rising, or his political experience as a Senator of the Irish Free State.

This *tour d'horizon* of some general as well as specific circumstances surrounding Yeats's life may beg some questions, but I think it answers others. It may, for one thing, present some

⁵⁰ *Memoirs*, pp. 161, 212–3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 183–4.

⁵² Frayne, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

excuses for a historian taking on the biography of a poet. It may make some sense of Yeats's 'finished' image or persona as the reconstructed Protestant gentleman from his fifties on. A home first in Merrion Square (like Sheridan Le Fanu),⁵³ then a suburban estate at Rathfarnham (which he bought just after Coole was broken up); summers in the West; the Kildare Street Club; Horse Show Week; Punchestown races, even; worries that if his son goes on to the new-look Trinity after his prep school (St Columba's), he may meet and marry a Catholic. If this is a marginalized existence, it had become, at last, marginalized in much the same way as others of his tribe who lived on under the Free State.

And at the same time, the other Protestant tradition was sustained: the Yeatsian variety of occultism. A ceiling in the Merrion Square house was painted with mystical gold stars (and afterwards the decorator was often seen stopping outside the house with a friend, pointing at it, and laughing loudly). Mrs Yeats, miraculously adept at automatic writing, summoned up voices and messages from the spiritual void. Mystic familiars made their presence known, to Yeats at least, through magic auras and unexplained perfumes. He proudly wrote to Ezra Pound that he was 'making a sensation' by publicly debating spiritism with a Catholic priest: 'I am confident that I finished him off.'⁵⁴

I quoted Eliot on Yeats at the beginning of this paper, and as I reach the end another remark of his comes to mind. (It is, after all, his centenary too.) Speaking in Dublin in 1936, he expressed regret that Yeats 'came to poetry from a Protestant background', since that might account for his 'wanderings among oriental philosophies and dubious mysticisms, journeys unsafe for any but the Christian, and which the Christian informed about the historic wealth of his faith has least need to make'.⁵⁵ This may be Eliot at his most insufferable. But certainly, to understand Yeats it seems necessary to recapture and combine aspects of the curious sub-culture from which he came: an insecure middle-class, with a

⁵³ Always denounced by his father as the epitome of haut-bourgeois solidarity. 'I have no longer any hopes of her [Miss Cox]. A person living in Merrion Square will be as others there. In those magnificent abodes I am as a tainted person ...' [Letter to Rosa Butt, 1902]; also: 'One reason why I get irritated with Merrion Square is that it is full of class people' [same to same, 17 July 1908]; Bodleian Library, Oxford.

⁵⁴ 'He was very quaint when I got to sinistrari he quivered with agitation and cried out "O this should never be spoken of"': W. B. Yeats to Ezra Pound 3 February [1919], Beinecke Library, Yale University.

⁵⁵ Quoted in A. Walton Litz's introduction to T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the practice of poetry', in *The Southern Review*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Oct. 1985), p. 873.

race-memory of elitism and a predisposition towards seeking refuge in the occult. He's too often seen as someone who is an 'advanced nationalist' in the 1880s and 1890s and later retreats into being a 'reactionary'. The process of retirement into a cultural 'Big House' of his own building is far more deeply rooted than that. *Pace* recent commentators like Edward Said, the Irish traditions which Yeats was conditioned by and reclaimed were not automatically those supposed 'nationalist' (at least in the sense of Anglophobic, Gaelic-revivalist and puritanically Catholic-Republican). And there are those of us who would argue that, bizarre as Yeats's Irish subculture is, it is no less distinctively Irish for that.