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THE MAKING OF MEANING
YEATS AND *THE COUNTESS CATHLEEN*

ADRIAN FRAZIER

THE first performance of *The Countess Cathleen*, the seventh of May, 1899, was the Irish cultural event of the decade. Seated in the hall of the Antient Concert Rooms in Dublin were representatives of every aspect of the social and political life of the province. The play had been debated in the letter-columns of London papers between the producer William Archer and the novelist George Moore on the feasibility of literary drama (Archer said *The Countess Cathleen* would make a boring and expensive production; Yeats and Moore replied that it need not be expensive). Consequently the *Saturday Review* had sent Max Beerbohm and Arthur Symons from London to cover the play; no doubt their courtesy tickets placed them toward the front of the hall where English actors took the fit-up stage. Also present, and probably in the first rows, were people of title and demesne that Lady Gregory had persuaded to put up their names as guarantors of the Irish Literary Theatre, a blessing that seemed to consecrate Yeats's adventure as more literary than nationalist. But nationalists made the largest part of the crowd, not only officially nonpolitical nationalists like the Gaelic League's president, Douglas Hyde, but political ones too, like Arthur Griffith, editor of *United Ireland* and future president of Sinn Féin. He came to show himself in favor of what a cardinal had said no Catholic should see: a play that presented the Irish as a people eager to sell their souls for gold, that said souls came at different prices, and that illustrated as features of Irish life some peasants who stole, some who committed sacrilege, and one woman hell-bent on fornication. Perhaps huddled up in the corner of an aisle was the intriguer who raised the alarm

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about the play—F. Hugh O'Donnell. A group of Catholic students sat together close to the back of the theater to make sure that Yeats learned that “the people of the Catholic capital of Catholic Ireland” could not be “subjected to affront with impunity” (*Daily Nation*, 6 May 1899). But not all the students there came to defend the honor of Ireland or the holiness of the Catholic church: Joyce, for instance, came to bear witness to the independence of Art. Finally, lined up along the back wall, a deployment of Dublin policemen stood ready, at the request of Yeats, to protect the players in case “the mob” got out of hand.

Yeats was often quick to call his opposition a “mob” and any protest a “riot.” How many young men came to protest is a good question: Holloway, the diarist of Dublin theater, says there were twenty, all beardless idiots; T. W. Rolleston, president of the Dublin Irish Literary Society, makes their number only twelve, and says they expressed their hostility without malice or ignorance. Riot, ruckus, protest, civil demonstration of hostility, clerical bans, debate—whatever the appropriate term for the type of controversy aroused, the play was the center of excited discussion for weeks before and after its performance. In the Dublin press, through privately issued pamphlets, through student petitions against the play, at academic debates held by Trinity College's Historical Society, and in speeches after the *Daily Nation's* celebratory dinner, Ireland discussed the play's theology, plausibility, and symbolic meaning. Without doubt *The Countess Cathleen* is a fundamentally significant document in the coming to consciousness of the Irish nation.

Yet the play is now as insignificant a piece of drama as a press keeps in print. The modern reader observes the obvious: it is short but boring, trivial and bad. Critics who write books on the drama of Yeats try to put a little life into the chapter on this, his first, play by explaining it in terms of *A Vision*, the love of Yeats for Maud Gonne, his poetic development, the significance of the five revisions of the text (1892, 1895, 1900, 1912, 1919), or some law of dramaturgy. In many ways, these

critics have used the play well to enliven their interpretations, but no one has succeeded in finding an interpretation that gives life to the play. We tend to assume that meaning lives in the relation between texts; in signs of literary craft; in the comment of work on life, life on work; or in a vision of humanity. But from whatever source we draw meaning, we have found little of what the original audience found, and nothing so exciting. Where did *The Countess Cathleen* get the meanings it once had? If we could find that out in this remarkable case, we might know something about how any work comes to have significance. Certainly what once seemed an answer both obvious and good—the right words in the right order make great works great—now appears as a truism that is not true.

II

When our friends fail to laugh at a story of something funny that happened to us, we sometimes sigh and say: “You had to be there.” Perhaps it was thus with *The Countess Cathleen* when it was performed in the Antient Concert Rooms. Not all those in attendance, however, did find the same significance, or, for that matter, any significance. When George Moore arrived for the second night, he says that he took the noise inside the hall for “the true caoine from Galway,” a stage effect to make the death of the countess more authentic, but it turned out to be the audience, howling against the play. Afterwards Yeats explained to Moore that, having been so long outside of Ireland, Moore might not understand that it was a serious matter to bring over a play that shocked people’s feelings. Moore adds in *Hail and Farewell*: “Of course, the play shocks nobody’s feelings, but it gives people the opportunity to think that their feelings are shocked.” Moore was accustomed to living in a literary beau-monde, Paris or London; but he was Irish and Catholic—what does he mean that the play shocks no one’s feelings? To us it may be nothing but dress-ups, pretty poetry, and legendary cartoons, but surely to anyone who was there it had a greater impact.

Apparently not to everyone—not to all Irishmen, nor to all Catholics, nor to all who knew the play well. In *Our Irish Theatre* Lady Gregory says that the actors themselves, being English, could not understand the excitement when there was booing and hooting from the gallery. With coaching from Yeats himself, the actors had learned the lines, mastered the movements of the characters, and carried the play to its conclusion. What, then, did they not know that made them miss the meaning of the play? They didn't know, according to Lady Gregory, that F. Hugh O'Donnell was a master provocateur, a hater of "everything decent in Ireland," such as Yeats and the Anglo-Irish, and probably anyway in the pay of the Crown; or that Cardinal Logue was the supreme authority in Ireland for the majority of its population, and that he, provoked by O'Donnell, had condemned the play. Without this knowledge, no one could find anything objectionable in the play, Lady Gregory concludes, because it is all quite harmless and lovely.

Robert Hogan and Thomas Kilroy, in their documentary history of Irish theater, allow that the mischief of O'Donnell might be the first cause of the controversy, but they add that one has to take into account two other necessary conditions, characteristics of the Irish people: 1) Ireland, still in the grip of a hyperpuritanical public morality, was quick to sense slights against religion and that morality; 2) Ireland, still a colony, though largely nationalist, was quick to sense slights to its patriotic pride. To repeat, it is nothing in the play that makes it significant, but something about the backward Irish does. It is possible, however, that where the audience took offense, offense was given.

III

Granted, without the agitation of O'Donnell, the tone of the debate might well have been more gentlemanly: he screamed from what seemed to be small wounds, if wounds at all. His pamphlet *Souls for Gold* is indeed, as Lady Gregory sug-

gests, hysterical, distorted, and propagandistic. But O'Donnell makes some just observations, though in unjustly inflated language. WBY does show peasants "crouched in degraded awe" before sowlths, sheogues, and demons; in a small cast WBY introduces one Irish thief, one Irish adulteress, and one Irish iconoclast. Both O'Donnell and Cardinal Logue are not far from the mark when they ask "Is this Irish?"

But one might well ask How much does it matter if the play is Irish? To an extent plays are meant to be read on their own terms, not by comparing them with some phantom called "reality." It mattered, however, a great deal to that audience in 1899 because WBY told it beforehand that he was going to show the Irish people for the first time on stage who they really were. In the formal statement of purpose for the Irish Literary Theatre, Yeats and Lady Gregory concluded: "We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and of easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of ancient idealism. We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us."

The howls in the gallery when *The Countess Cathleen* was staged showed just how little representation was outside the political questions that divided loyalist and nationalist, Protestant and Catholic, aristocrat and democrat. This advertisement, in fact, was likely to divide them more, because it makes contradictory promises: the authors will show the real Ireland, and the ideal Ireland. *The Countess Cathleen* certainly disappoints one of these expectations: an ideal Ireland is not so richly populated with sinners.

The real Ireland may or may not have the particular vices—and virtues—the play attributes to it; that depends on what we call "vice" and how the Irish people behaved in the nineteenth century. Then (as later in controversies over the works of Synge and Joyce) Irish nationalists claimed that their men were brave, their women pure, and their people pious. Scholars have usually followed the writers in mocking these claims,

saying that the nationalists were puritans, chauvinists, and philistines. Whatever their stock responses to drama, in order to judge *The Countess Cathleen* as a representation of reality, we need to know something about the general moral conduct of the Irish: whether the women were characteristically chaste or adulterous, the men courageous or cowardly and thieving, the people strong or weak in their faith.

First of all it is a fact everywhere in evidence and by all acknowledged that the Irish of the last half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century were remarkably reserved in their sexual behavior. Up to the Famine, apparently, they played more, married younger, and scamped about a bit (after the Famine, the average age of marriage rose to about 65 for men, 35 for women). The Famine came in a fashion that seemed to many a punishment for having too many children, and, with the help of Jansenist theology and Victorian morality, it brought about a truly virginal nation. By the end of the nineteenth century the purity of Ireland's women had become a plank in the nationalist program: every province is bound to be thought of as a slut—Ireland alone, though poor, was pure. Critics may mock the status of chastity as a virtue, but one cannot deny its importance both to Irish nationalist thought and in Irish behavior.

As for the second and third sins representing the faults of the Irish in the play—robbery and sacrilege—they are even less characteristic than adultery. No doubt some Irishmen at some time stole property, but for cultural reasons the Irish of the nineteenth century did not make much use of the small opportunities for larceny a poor country provides. To steal a sheep in Ireland was not just to make yourself one sheep richer: it would quite possibly have been to starve your neighbor. For this reason the Irish queerly regarded assault, and even murder (of certain persons), as less serious crimes than theft. (This peculiarity, of course, provides the basis of Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*.) As for sacrilege, Yeats included a spectacular scene in which a peasant kicks a shrine of the Virgin Mary to pieces, just after beating his

wife. The audience did not object to him beating his wife, but they did not at all like seeing the man crush a statue of the Virgin under his boot. The Irish did commit sins, but they typically did not commit *those* sins singled out in the play—lechery, robbery, and iconoclasm.

The plot of *The Countess Cathleen* called for sins of some sort in the scene during which the demon-merchants price the souls of the peasants by adding up their sins. The playwright might have provoked less reaction from his audience if he had made one sinner a miser, another an incendiary, and a third a believer in faeries—typical vices of the people in the nineteenth-century Irish novel, and in the eyes of the church. But for Yeats superstition was not a sin but a strength of the peasant; incendiarism suggested the possibility of peasant anguish and revolt, which he tended to ignore; and miserliness contradicted his thesis that the Irish, unlike the English, were a spiritual people, caring little for material gain.

IV

The Catholic “mob” that objected so much about the vices that Yeats gave the Irish masses did not much mention the virtues he assigned to the play’s representative of the Irish classes, but it could have. The picture of the countess was so flattering, and that of the peasants so amusing, that the ladies of the Viceregal Lodge—Lady Balfour, the Countess of Fingal, Valentine Grace, and others—begged Yeats to let them perform the work as nine tableaux vivants six months before the performance scheduled for the Antient Concert Rooms. Yeats wrote his sister that of course, as a nationalist, he could not go anywhere near the chief secretary’s lodge, much less take part in the performance; but as a gentleman he did not refuse to meet the ladies in Betty Balfour’s house to advise them about costumes. This performance was a complete success: it was such fun for the gentry to act the peasants, who must have seemed like fabulous talking beasts out of Grimm. The chief secretary also found a pleasant satisfaction in the

graceful way the Countess of Fingal, as Countess Cathleen, died to save the peasants who could not save themselves. Certainly the chief virtue in the ethical scheme of the play is *generosity*, a quality most accessible to the rich. The main virtue to which the poor may aspire is gratitude—as in the one blameless peasant character, Maire, who shows exaggerated respect and thankfulness to the countess, then dies of starvation.

These differences between the “quality” (the Anglo-Irish word for the upper classes) and the peasants did, however, attract the attention of theological critics. A sensible Catholic reviewer for the *Daily Express* (9 May 1899) concludes that Yeats, though “a king in Fairyland,” is completely ignorant of the way an Irishman thinks: “the central conception of the excessive value of the beautiful Countess’s soul” is “foreign to anything” that can be called Irish “in spiritual outlook.” In the play the highest price any peasant’s soul brings—that of an ugly old woman—is two hundred gold pieces; but for the soul of the countess the demons are glad to give five hundred thousand. When Yeats was attacked on this score, he claimed the opinion belonged to the devil, not to him. But actually, as the *Daily Express* reviewer notes, the entire play is constructed on this conception. Not only do the demons assay certain values, but they pay the gold pieces. And the peasants show no surprise that one soul is worth more than another, or that the soul of the countess is worth many times more than all others. Indeed, at the end of the play, God himself, deciding that the countess is too valuable a property to go down to the house of hell, repossesses her soul.

Yeats’s kinder critics, such as T. P. Gill and the reviewer for the *Daily Nation*, charitably assumed that he had a poor grip upon the theological principles of Catholicism; but the real problem came from his powerful hold on certain beliefs about society, not about God, beliefs which the majority of his audience could not accept. The fact is that Yeats believed some people to be more valuable than others—more beautiful, thus more noble, thus more virtuous; or, in the words of the peasant

Maire, more wealthy, therefore more wise. Catholic members of the audience could no doubt see for themselves that beauty, wealth, and status were important facts of life, but they did not take them as facts of the afterlife as well. For them the values of this world stood opposed to those of the other world; for Yeats they seemed sometimes to be the same. This belief in a natural social hierarchy is the very reason he hated democracy.

In the debate over the play Yeats denied that the play had any proper historical setting or that it said anything about the social character of the Irish people. All the characters, he said, were just symbols—the countess of subjective life, the bad peasants and demons of material life. But the revisions of the folktale made in the course of dramatization actually made the countess and the peasants more identifiable as historical Irish types, if not accurately representative of them.

For example one oddity often noticed in the play's action is the entrance of the countess in a peasant's cottage. First she comes in for the queer reason that she is lost, though she is in her own demesne, not far from the immense castle the peasants mention in awe. Many take this as clumsy dramaturgy, but there were plenty of Irish lords and ladies, either absent from Ireland, or garrisoned in Great Houses, who could not have found their way around their own property, had they ventured into it.

Second, when the Countess comes into the cottage, she arrives accompanied by a lutanist and other musicians, which causes the "bad peasant" Shemus to rumble "What, music! music!" After all, his family is starving, and all he has in the kitchen is a dead wolf. This seems a heavy-handed way for the playwright to establish that the countess suffers a spiritual sorrow only music can soften, while the peasants cannot do better than suffer a physical hunger. But once again there is a kind of historical accuracy: the immense social distance between the Protestant Ascendancy of Ireland and its Catholic peasantry appears in the highly cultured loneliness of the rich and the brutal, ignorant suffering of the poor.

Third, here for the first but not last time in the play, we notice how little there is for the heroine to do. She wanders in, empties a few last coins from her purse, and wanders out, sorrowful she cannot do more. She does not struggle for anything, against anyone. In the end, of course, she offers herself for sale, and in her highest act signs her last will and testament (with a quill from the cock that crowed when St. Peter—the first pope—betrayed Christ!). Here too the play idealizes the life of a class that had little to do but leave a smaller fortune behind at their death. Yeats's defense after the play that the characters were "purely symbolic" because "literature is the expression of universal truths" in this instance seems to have been offered to obstruct an inquiry into the more particular truths—and untruths—embodied in play. The aesthetic argument, in other words, was offered for a political purpose.

V

In fact there was a political purpose to *The Countess Cathleen*, over and above the eulogy on the landlord and libel on the peasants that appear in the characterization. This purpose is found in the setting and plot of the play: in a famine peasants sell their souls until they are saved by their landlord. In *Hail and Farewell* George Moore reports a conversation with T. P. Gill, editor of the *Daily Express*: the setting and plot of *The Countess Cathleen*, Gill said, were "calculated to wound the religious susceptibilities of the Irish people." And Moore says that Gill, "while stroking his beard, . . . continued to speak of the famine times and of proselytising by Protestants: memories like these were too deep to be washed away by mere poetry." "Memory" indeed is too weak a word to express how the Irish psyche was convulsed by the Famine that began in 1845—by its end, the population was cut by half, millions dying, millions emigrating. Meanwhile the Protestant landlords offered to give the Catholic people soup if they changed their religion. Not many changed it, either, and those that did

are remembered and ridiculed today . . . “soupers,” they are called.

Though Yeats denied the association between the setting of his play and the Great Irish Famine, his adaptation of the source, “The Countess Kathleen O’Shea” (collected in WBY’s *Irish Folk Stories and Fairy Tales*), actually enforces this association. In the original a “dearth” is mentioned, but only a few times, and then not until almost half the tale is done. In the play famine is the premise from start to finish. What Yeats had done was to transvalue the greatest national experience of the Irish, turning a Protestant moral catastrophe into a miracle of benevolence, and one of the world’s remarkable cases of a people’s devotion to a faith into wholesale infidelity.

This transvaluation of the historical roles of the classes is cunningly worked into the plot. Frederick Jameson’s explanation of V. Propp’s morphology of the folktale elucidates the changes Yeats made in his source. Propp, the first to break folktales down into their signifying elements and to define the rules of combination for those elements, found that most tales begin with privation in the home. The hero is then driven out by this initial problem either to do battle with a malignant enemy or to carry out a series of perplexing tasks. Jameson observes here that the main reality of a world of scarcity is not just that one cannot meet one’s needs without work, but that one’s very existence—as one who eats and strives to gather food—is a threat to the existence of others. Therefore one is presented the bleak choice of either competing with others (doing battle with the villain) or working (carrying out the perplexing tasks) when both ultimately have the same meaning: the war of man upon man. The fairy tale reflects this world of scarcity by making the Other, the figure outside the family circle, appear as a primal enemy or supernatural friend, there being no such thing as a natural friend. The great value for societies of this popular form is in the sturdy hope of the standard denouement. As Bruno Bettelheim emphasizes in *The Uses of Enchantment*, folktales teach self-reliance: the hero who sets out at the start always ultimately brings home

the boon that fills the initial lack, even if he has a bit of heavenly help along the way.

In *The Countess Cathleen* the initial situation is typical: there is no food in the home, and the father is out foraging. When he returns, he tells his wife of his failure to find anything to eat, except for the wolf he killed before their door. At this time, half a scene into the play, the countess enters with her "fantastically dressed musicians." Now, in this situation of famine, and a war of man upon man, the starving peasants, having made depredations upon one another's flocks, then having turned to violence against one another, at last recognize that the estate of the countess offers a way through to the next harvest. In act 2 Cathleen learns from the gardener that peasants are stealing her apples, and from the herdsman that they have rustled her sheep. This recognition that her wealth can save them is only a short step from another perception for the peasants: the countess creates the Famine—her immense wealth causes their poverty. But before this perception can break upon the mind, Yeats turns the tale so that the countess is not the villain, but the supernatural donor, and then, more than the donor, the tale's one true hero. The shape of the play's plot makes a compelling depiction of the masses as helplessly dependent.

In Yeats's source, "The Countess Kathleen O'Shea," this message of peasant helplessness does not come through because in that version there is no peasant family at the start, just a generalized Irish town populated with unspecified townspeople; the first named and individualized character is the countess, who is thus seen from the start as the heroine. But in *The Countess Cathleen* Yeats puts Shemus, the father of the family, in the position of hero—the first character developed, the first to journey forth, and the first to struggle with the demons—and then makes him fail, allowing the countess to take over the role of hero. In this way, rather than being the natural enemy of the peasants, the landlord becomes their supernatural savior. Furthermore the demons are suggestively transformed from being the supernatural villains to appear-

ing like the natural enemy of the Irish, the British—strangers with good manners who operate on principles of Free Trade even in times of famine. A social contradiction (harmony of aristocracy and peasantry in time of scarcity) is turned into an imaginary unity by means of gathering the potentially opposed classes together against an external enemy: under the leadership of the Protestants, Ireland will be saved from England. Therefore Yeats can be seen to have colonized a typical narrative expression of the poorer classes, altering its plot and thus its social meaning, with the apparent goal of uniting Ireland against England and subordinating the peasantry to the landlords. Yeats was a nationalist, but he was not a democrat.

VI

We now know something of what the play meant to different parts of the audience (Nationalist, Catholic, and Ascendancy), what it means in relation to Irish history and its folklore basis; we must next consider if the political statements implied in the play are what Yeats himself meant to say. We also need to decide whether such statements are the main blow the poet wished to deal, a passing sideswipe, or just an unintentional if bruising collision with the sensitivities of a part of his audience. In either of the first two cases—as a main or a subordinate intention—such statements would be propaganda: writing that aims to shape opinions and attitudes. Yeats himself declared many times that his work was not propaganda but art, and that he was not interested in forming the opinions of people.

This distinction between art and propaganda may be a useful rhetorical trope in certain kinds of political argument, but logically it is false. Any work of art can become propaganda if it is used in a certain way; any work of propaganda can become art if viewed in the right light. Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, for instance, becomes propaganda if a minister of propaganda sends it to British troops in the Somme to show them

the light grace and cultural refinement they are fighting for. And works can take on quite contradictory functions as propaganda in different settings: *The Playboy of the Western World* in its first production was antinationalist propaganda about the Protestant virtues of wildness and extravagance, about the falsity of prim Gaelic League views of the peasant, and even about the freedom of the Protestant artists from political interference. Many years later, produced at the state-owned Abbey Theatre, the same play becomes nationalist propaganda about the tolerant union of hearts in the new nation and about its modern sophisticated view of its own past. In its 1899 production Yeats's play is certainly propaganda as well as art; the questions are what sort of propaganda and for what purpose.

Jacques Ellul has made the best classification of propaganda. In his terms Yeats's play would be "sociological" rather than "political" propaganda. In political propaganda an organization uses techniques of influence to achieve a specific change in society; in sociological propaganda an individual who has assimilated a dominant ideology uses it to form what he takes to be spontaneous, natural, and right judgments of value, expecting that his work will, among other things, confirm the audience in a set of values it already honors. In particular Yeats picked up certain attitudes from a group of upper-class nationalists—right-wing figures like Standish O'Grady, Lady Gregory, and the younger Edward Martyn—about the value of tradition, noble manners, and the whole feudal way of life. He gave expression to such values as if they were universal truths rather than the beliefs of a class.

Yeats offered his dramatization of these values as what Ellul calls "integration propaganda" rather than "agitation propaganda." Agitation is subversive work opposed to the status quo; integration tries to conserve the status quo and create contentment with it. One way to describe the clamor over *The Countess Cathleen* is to observe that what Yeats offered as integration and sociological propaganda was taken

by the nationalist part of the audience as political and subversive propaganda. They had become accustomed to a nationalist view of the Irish people as valiant and pious rebels winning a war against an unjust social system, and Yeats's idealization of the status quo antebellum struck them as a move by a powerful minority to recapture control of the political momentum in the country. They refused to assimilate the values of the aristocracy as their own. Furthermore, because the setting of the Famine became the key by which they interpreted the play, they did not credit Yeats for the progressive side of his nationalism: his suggestion that the landlords could increase their glory by serving their tenants, and even selling off a part of their estates to enlarge peasant small holdings.

The political meaning imbedded in the play appears in a comparison of the picture of Irish society Yeats painted and the picture most of his countrymen saw before them. They looked upon an Ireland with an irresponsible aristocracy and a rebellious tenantry, struggling for equality and independence; he exhibited for their admiration an Ireland with a conscientious aristocracy and a suffering misguided tenantry, at last happy to settle back down into their position in the hierarchy. But the audience did not admire his utopia: the world of *The Countess Cathleen* was neither what Ireland really was, nor what the audience wanted it to be. Yeats certainly produced propaganda, but the first production did not succeed completely because it was recognized to be propaganda.

Not a complete success at first. In the end it became one. During the controversy after the first production, and even before it, Yeats argued that every civilized country should permit free artistic expression, that every work of art deserved a fair hearing from a tolerant audience, and that his play was a work of art and should be appreciated, or at least tolerated, as one. If Yeats could get the public to come to his play, sit quietly through it, and comment principally upon its dra-

matic verse, scenery, and acting, then he could achieve a situation in which sociological and integrationist propaganda could work. The political values of the play might then be assimilated by part of the audience simply through the habit of aesthetic suspension of disbelief. When the case was argued on these grounds, Yeats found his supporters and made his brief. As Lady Gregory proudly declares, "We won that battle," because the play was produced several times later at the Abbey and no one made any protest at all. Of course it has to be added that when the significance the audience first found in the work is excluded from discussion, there is little left in the play to resent, and less to admire; it has become a thing to tolerate.

In 1899 those who saw *The Countess Cathleen* as the object of an argument between artists asking for freedom and clerics requiring censorship came to the defense of Yeats. Joyce, seated in the gallery on the first night, for instance, liked the lyric "Who Goes With Fergus," didn't mind the depiction of peasants as ignorant and superstitious (he thought they were too), and clapped vigorously at the end of the play. James Cousins—another young Catholic intellectual—also came to root for writers. In *We Too Together* he says: "In the duel of hiss and cheer, cheer won. I give my word for the victory, for I was one of the victors, and possessed as spoils of conquest a hat with a broken rim through which I had clenched my fingers when waving it in wild applause at nothing in the play but something in the rising spirit of the Arts in Ireland as against the spirit of obscurantism and dishonest censorship." With such foot-soldiers Yeats and Lady Gregory indeed had their victory, but at a price: people cheered at nothing in the play; their "wild applause" was for art in the abstract. In fact, from this report, it is a wonder that anyone made anything of the play itself, the room being filled with hisses, cheers, boos, verse-speaking, and musical interludes. But ultimately what mattered, and perhaps what always matters, is the argument over the work of art, not the argument in it.

VII

One who saw him in action in the “Playboy” row, Mary Colum, said that she never saw a man fight so hard as Yeats fought, nor one who had so many weapons in his armory. But by fighting for his work as art and only art, and winning that fight, Yeats began the unmaking of the meanings made out of *The Countess Cathleen*. The critical tradition that finds in this work only verses, gestures, eternal emotions, and allegories of the spirit begins right here with Yeats’s own argument against the nationalists. A play or a poem is not essentially an artifice, and what it stands for is not eternity. In the case of this play the result of splitting the aesthetic from the political, and the philosophical from the historical, is a general erasure of significance. The meanings Yeats put into the play and provoked around it he himself dispelled.

Yeats was a great genius, and remains one, because of his magisterial ability to create and control the interest of his readers. Some of that management of interest occurs through figures of speech and the hosts of other literary effects within the work, but more of it occurs in the activities of the poet around the work—in manifestoes, charters for committees, newspaper editorials, press releases, prefaces, lists of guarantors, costume designs, actresses, musical interludes, symbolic treatises, folklore collections, etc. And once he has directed our attention to certain things he says are in the work, and away from others, the ways in which the work is discussed are changed forever. This is the perpetual conundrum of the inside and the outside, one every magician and symbolist must master: to make a thing that is nothing in itself signify many things, to make the swan “a concentration of the sky.”

An encomium on Yeats in an unpublished work on theater (1912) by Edward Martyn illustrates how much Yeats’s work as public figure adds to his stature as phrase-maker. Martyn is trying to understand why his own literary career aborted

after *The Heather Field* was produced on that opening night with *The Countess Cathleen*, and Yeats's dramatic career became so prominent. This decline in his own fortunes must have been especially puzzling to Martyn because his own play received much kinder, if shorter, notices than Yeats's did. Looking at the success of the Abbey from 1904 to 1912 before considering how to take up a new theatrical plan for himself, Martyn apologizes: "I am humbly conscious of my inferiority as an impresario to the two experts [Yeats and Lady Gregory] whose feats I have the temerity to imitate." *Impresario* is exactly the word for the type of artistic genius Yeats grandly is. And not only Yeats: if Martyn could not excite interest in his work—through being fashionable, controversial, or somehow relevant—he could not be a good writer. For a work to make an impression, the impresario has to create the ways in which the work is perceived, not simply the work itself, which may well remain invisible until one is taught how to see it.

Indeed the very materials of the work—the words of the language—always already belong to a polity of discourse about many topics that seem external to the work; and using those words, the writer is performing an act of power on others, defining how they are seen, and how they see themselves, just as in receiving those words from others, the writer is an effect of the way others have constituted a world and him out of words. From the first word that is written, then, the author enters upon a long conversation that continues until the last word is said, a conversation that is continuous with other acts of language and acts of power in the society. The immense volume, scope, and ambition of Yeats's activities in every aspect of this polity of discourse is a main reason his plays and poems have such great meaning for us. Discussion of the work of art, in a simple sense, makes the meaning of the work, if not its capacity for meaning.

This conclusion may seem debunking, but that is not my meaning. The public-relations work of Yeats had a greater result than raising an audience or increasing sales figures for his books. It made his writing an enduring object of our atten-

tion. We may refuse to discuss the work in the terms he proposes, but we will continue to discuss it. Some years ago Denis Donoghue looked back over the collected poetry of Yeats in the *New York Review of Books*. With coy judiciousness Donoghue decided that there were five or six excellent poems out of the lot: the rest were period pieces, inchoate symbolic ruminations, or exercises in personal mannerism. The reason Yeats had been taken for a great poet on such small achievement, Donoghue said, is that he had mixed his poetry up with a legendary biography (especially the unrequited love for Maud Gonne) and with the history of his nation. I think Donoghue is right—Yeats did enhance his poetry by giving it a backdrop of Irish history and a cast of noble-looking figures. But that does not make him less a poet; that makes him a great poet. A jar in Tennessee, a mirror in the roadway, or a swan in the sky: what is in the work comes from what we make of it with what lies around it.