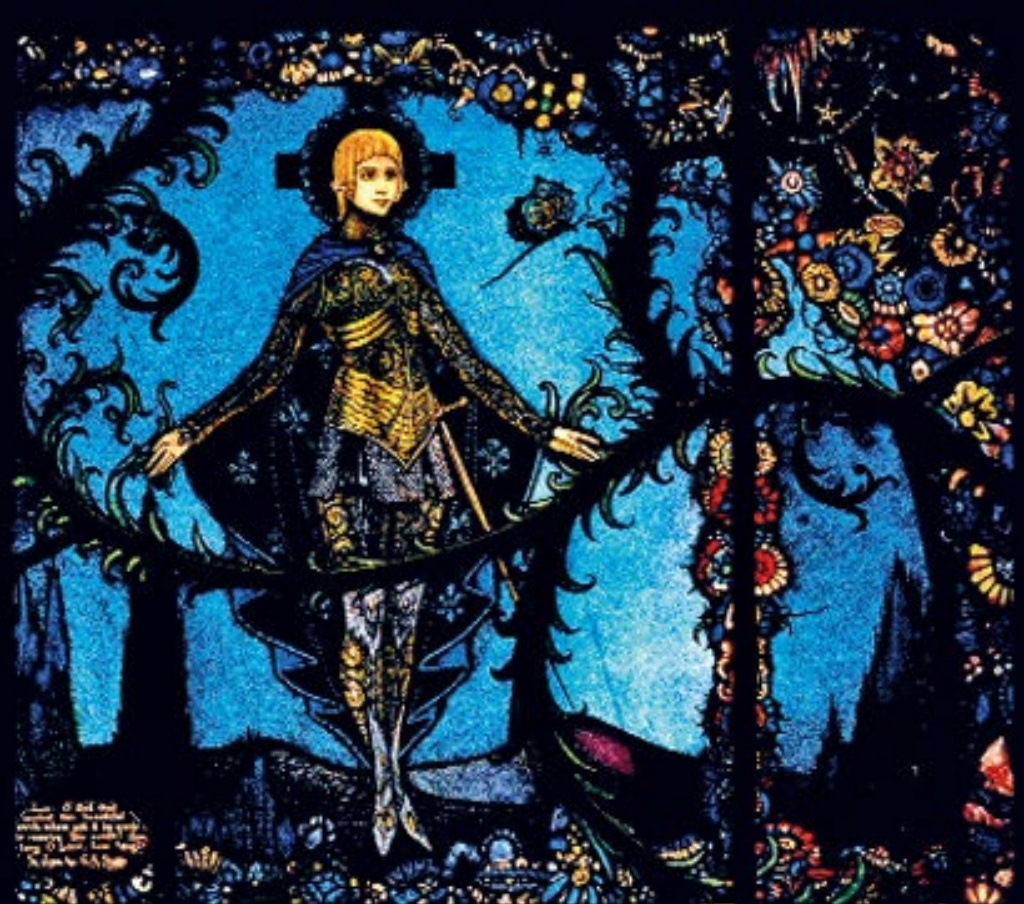




EASTER 1916
Denis Donoghue



Previous Page: *Geneva Window*, Harry Clarke, 1930. Wolfsonian, Miami. Panel 5 (third from top, left side) contains two inscriptions. The first inscription reads 'If I were to die tomorrow all I would ask from the world would be the charity of its silence' from *The Dreamers*, by Lennox Robinson. The second inscription reads: 'I have heard a sound of waiting in unnumbered hovels, and I must go down, down — I know not where', from *The Countess Cathleen*, by W. B. Yeats.

This essay is an edited version of a lecture delivered at the Yeats International Summer School, Sligo, 3 August 2015.

I

The second chapter of *Ulysses* has Stephen Dedalus teaching in Mr. Deasy's school in Dalkey. The class is reading Milton's 'Lycidas,' but Stephen also permits himself a reverie about historical facts:

*Had Pyrrhus not fallen by a beldam's hand in Argos or Julius Caesar not been knifed to death. They are not to be thought away. Time has branded them and fettered they are lodged in the room of the infinite possibilities they have ousted. But can those have been possible seeing that they never were? Or was that only possible which came to pass?*¹

In the days before the Easter Rising there were three possibilities before the initiates: one, that a Rising would not take place at all, or would be indefinitely postponed; two, that it would take place on Easter Sunday; three, that it would take place on Easter Monday. Of these, the third came to pass, ousting the other two. That third one is not to be thought away. John Bruton and others wish that it had not come to pass;² but that is a different matter, their sentiment belongs to the subjunctive mood of desire.

II

I begin with a letter from Yeats, on 7 January 1915, to Lennox Robinson about Robinson's play *The Dreamers*, which the Abbey had accepted with pleasure. It was a play about Robert Emmet's attempted Rising, in the days between July 16 and 25, 1803. The only question was whether it would be directed by Patrick Wilson or by Robinson. That was not a contentious issue: in the event, Wilson directed it. Yeats ended his letter by saying:

*I believe your play will be the making of us in Dublin this Spring. I imagine it will have many revivals. And with Pierce and McNiel flirting with the gallows tree, will be almost topical.*³

So Yeats in 1915, six months into the Great War, planned to put on in the Abbey a play sympathetic to Robert Emmet, and he warmed to it as 'the making of us' in the Spring. In January 1915 there was much talk of Home Rule and whether or not, suspended for the duration of the War, it would indeed be revived when the War was over. Some thought the War would be over by Christmas, so the question of Home Rule was current. But Dublin in 1915 hardly seemed a fitting place for an insurrectionist play. Yeats's reference to Eoin MacNeill is another oddity. It would not have been a surprise to Lennox Robinson or any one else to hear that Pádraig Pearse had been flirting with the gallows-tree: that was common knowledge from his speeches and essays. Yeats shared a platform with him in Brunswick Street on 17 November 1914, when they addressed the students of the Trinity College Gaelic Society and he listened while Pearse spoke, as he was expected to speak, of Emmet, Tone, and John Mitchel. But Eoin MacNeill had a different reputation. He was a respected nationalist, but he was not given to provocative speeches. Yeats's letter to Robinson makes a small quandary which we may put aside for the moment.

¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, edited by Hans Walter Gabler with Wolfhard Steppe and Claus Melchior (New York, 1986), 21.

² Cf. John Bruton's speech at the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin on 18 September 2014 marking the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Home Rule Bill into law: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=duhBjU4Z5E>

³ Accession Number 2576. I leave uncorrected Yeats's misspelling of the names Eoin MacNeill and Patrick Pearse.

W. B. Yeats, ca. 1920
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The remote origin of the Easter Rising is not a complex question: there are several possibilities. We might choose 1795, the founding of the Orange Order; the risings of 1798 and 1803; 1 January 1801, when the Act of Union of Great Britain and Ireland came into force; 1836, when the Ancient Order of Hibernians was founded in New York; 1858, the Irish Republican Brotherhood; 1864, the unveiling of the O'Connell monument in Dublin; 1867, the Fenian Rising; 1884, the founding of the Gaelic Athletic Association; 1893, the Gaelic League; or 1905, Sinn Féin. More immediate causes would include the Dublin lock-out in 1913, Pearse's speech at the graveside of O'Donovan Rossa in August 1915, the threat of conscription from 1915 onward. Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill was rejected by the House of Lords in 1886, but even his introduction of it caused riots in Belfast and the death of twelve people. His second attempt was rejected in 1893.

But the Parliament Act of 18 August 1911 made a dramatic difference: the power of the Lords to thwart a bill of Commons was limited to two years. Edward Carson, leader of the Unionists in the North, saw the significance of the Act at once and he revealed plans, on 23 September 1911, for a provisional government to take power in Ulster in the event of Home Rule. The Parliament Act was not put on the statute books out of any belated affection for Home Rule but to ensure that the Lords could no longer defeat a budget as they had defeated Lloyd George's budget in November 1909. Still, the Act could be used to facilitate a Home Rule Bill, and that is how Asquith used it when he introduced his Bill in the Commons on 11 April 1912. The third reading of it in the Commons was carried on 16 January 1913, but defeated in the House of Lords a fortnight later. It passed again in the Commons on 7 July 1913 and was again rejected by the Lords on 15 July.

As early as February 1912, Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, and Andrew Bonar Law were conspiring to exclude Ulster — whatever that word denoted, nine counties or less — from any Home Rule Bill. On 9 April 1912, Bonar Law pledged British unionist support for any resistance the Protestant Unionists in the north would bring forward against Home Rule. He also made a fiery speech to the same end at Blenheim Castle on 29 July 1912. On 28 September 1912, nearly a quarter-of-a-million northern unionists signed a Covenant to resist Home Rule by any available means. The third reading of Asquith's Home Rule Bill was carried in the Commons, but a few days later was defeated in the Lords. This sequence was repeated in mid-July. So the bill would not pass into law until mid-July 1915. Inevitably, the idea of excluding Protestant Unionism from Home Rule gained momentum. The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was founded on 31 January 1913 with one aim, to defeat Home Rule. On 11 August King George V urged Asquith to exclude the North from any such bill. On 24 September, the Ulster Unionist Council approved a plan by which the provisional government would take power in the event of Home Rule being enacted.

Meanwhile in Dublin, James Connolly and David Houston met by arrangement in Rev. R. M. Gwynn's rooms in Trinity College. Dismayed by the failure of the Dublin workers in their conflict with employers in 1913, they established the Irish Citizen Army on 19 November 1913. Eoin MacNeill, in response to the setting up of the UVF, wrote an article in *An Claidheamh Soluis* of 1 November 1913 calling for the creation

of an Irish Volunteer Force, not to do battle with the UVF. but to make sure that the British Government would play fair by Ireland as a whole. The response to MacNeill's call was immediate and remarkable: the Irish Volunteers was formed on 25 November 1913. By the following May, 75,000 men had joined; by September, the number had increased to 180,000. On 10 June 1914, John Redmond, leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP), demanded that his nominees be co-opted onto the provisional committee of the Volunteers, a demand reluctantly accepted a week later. England declared war on the Central Powers on 4 August 1914. On 20 September Redmond exhorted the Volunteers to be prepared to fight on England's side. The vast majority of them were; the remnant, about 11,000, stayed with MacNeill. 'The issue between Mr. Redmond and ourselves,' MacNeill said, 'is clear and simple. It is this, whether the Irish Volunteers are pledged to the cause of Ireland, of all Ireland, and of Ireland only, or are likewise bound to serve the Imperial Government in defence of the British Empire.'

⁴ His objects were to save Home Rule and to prevent Partition. But Yeats may have construed MacNeill's calling the Volunteers into existence, and his speech against Redmond, as amounting to treason, such that he might be deemed to be flirting, beside Pearse, with the gallows-tree.

The first convention of MacNeill's Irish Volunteers took place on 25 October 1914. Some of his Volunteers were members of the secret IRB who hoped now to be able to drill openly in the Dublin mountains. They had a Rising in view, but MacNeill had not. In 1913 he was Professor of Early Irish History at University College, Dublin. His main publications were on early and medieval Irish culture. The documents that Father F. X. Martin published in *Irish Historical Studies* in 1961, and his book on the Volunteers, show clearly what MacNeill had in mind. He compared the Irish Volunteers to a standing army in peacetime. Such an army is maintained at a high level of efficiency even though there is no foreseeable call for its fighting services: it should be well armed, fully trained, well-disciplined: its services are otherwise ceremonial, almost decorative. But by the end of May 1915, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) members of the Volunteers, incited by Clan na Gael in New York who met with the German Ambassador and asked his assistance toward an armed rising in Ireland, appointed a military committee, composed of Pearse, Joseph Plunkett, and Éamonn Ceannt, to make plans for a rising. This committee subsequently became the Military Council, with the addition of Connolly, Tom Clarke, Sean MacDermott and Thomas MacDonagh. The council decided to plan the Rising for Easter Sunday, 23 April 1916. MacNeill was not consulted, he was not told of this plan, although he was still President of the Irish Volunteers and Chief of Staff of its military directory. By February 1916, there were rumours going around, probably carried to MacNeill by John Bulmer Hobson. MacNeill then wrote a memorandum, mainly for Pearse's eyes, setting out the only conditions on which a rebel action in Ireland would be justified. MacNeill may have relied too heavily on the theology of canon law in setting out the conditions: (1) There must be a reasonably estimated prospect of success — a condition that did not obtain, he believed, in February 1916. If the Irish Volunteers were to resort to arms against the British Government, the Government would take steps to see that the UVF would rise against the Volunteers, Irishmen killing Irishmen. 'If we can win our rights by being ready to fight for them without fighting, then it is our duty to do so.' This condition may have seemed fine-spun

4 F. X. Martin, *The Irish Volunteers 1913–1915: Recollections and Documents* (1963)



Eoin MacNeill (ca. 1914–23)
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to many of the part-time Volunteers. (2) The Volunteers must not be led into military action by poetic abstractions, figurative thought, or the rhetoric of Irish patriotic literature. ‘There is no such person as Caitlín Ní Uallacháin or Roisín Dubh or the Sean-Bhean Bhocht, who is calling upon us to serve her.’ (3) ‘The only possible basis for successful revolutionary action is deep and widespread popular discontent. We have only to look around us in the streets to realize that no such condition exists in Ireland.’ ‘I wish it then to be clearly understood,’ MacNeill concluded this Memorandum of February 1916, by saying, ‘that under present conditions I am definitely opposed to any proposal that may come forward involving insurrection.’⁵

⁵ Cf. F. X. Martin: ‘Eoin MacNeill on the 1916 Rising’: *Irish Historical Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 47 (March, 1961), 234–40.

MacNeill may have confused the issue by allowing talk of receiving arms from Germany to qualify his position. If the arms had come through safely and been received by secure Volunteer hands in Kerry, that might have made a difference. But the arms were not delivered. Worse, Roger Casement was arrested. So on

Easter Saturday, MacNeill quarrelled with Pearse about being deceived and told him he would countermand the order to rise. Pearse answered that it was too late, MacNeill's order would not be obeyed. MacNeill then arranged to put a notice in the *Sunday Independent* ordering all Volunteers to stand down; no maneuvers should take place on that day.

Pearse had indeed deceived MacNeill. The deceit was a ruse of war, so it admits a more than usually complex judgment: we may find such a judgment in one of Yeats's memoirs. In 1915, or thereabouts, Yeats was starting to write the first draft of his autobiography. At one point he recalls, as if by compulsion, the antagonism he caused when he spoke after a lecture that Stephen Gwynn gave to a meeting of the Irish Literary Society in London on 27 October 1900. Yeats has forgotten some details, but he remembers clearly enough that 'I had described the dishonest figures of Swift's attack on Wood's half-pence and, making that my text, had argued that, because no sane man is permitted to lie knowingly, God made certain men mad, and that it was these men — daimon-possessed as I said — who, possessing truths of passion that were intellectual falsehoods, had created nations.'⁶ Swift, and now — although Yeats does not mention him — Pearse, a fellow officer of MacNeill's Volunteers, became creators of nations, because of their daimon-driven lies.

The result of the last-minute quarrel between MacNeill and Pearse was a botched Rising. MacNeill did not know that his Volunteers had been infiltrated by the IRB, and that further infiltration had resulted in the Military Council, a ginger group of insurgents hot for blood, even if it was their own blood. He himself was not in the IRB. In effect, the Easter Rising was called into being by three men, to begin with — Pearse, Plunkett, and Ceannt — with the addition of four. Even if the conditions of an insurrection had been fulfilled to MacNeill's satisfaction, he would have argued for a guerrilla war, with sporadic attacks here and there throughout the country to make administration of law impossible. He would not have favoured Pearse's plan of seizing a few large buildings in Dublin and holding them for as long as possible. Pearse and his colleagues decided to go ahead with a Rising, but they had to postpone it till Monday because of MacNeill's intervention.

On that day, as also on Sunday, my uncle Séamus Ó Néill, a minor figure but not insignificant, was ready for action. He lived in Clonmel, where his father, like my own father, was a member of the Royal Irish Constabulary. Séamus, as a rebel, was second-in-command to Seán Treacy in Tipperary. They were ready to rise and to attack local police barracks as instructed. But between Pearse's yes and MacNeill's no, they were bewildered. Not knowing what to do, they did nothing. A few weeks after the Rising, however, my uncle was arrested, lodged in various jails in Ireland, England and Wales, went on hunger strike for two weeks in (I think) Frongoch internment camp, and was released in the spring of 1917. His insurgent days were over.

On the morning of Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, members of the Irish Volunteers and the Citizen Army, numbering about 400, marched into Sackville

6 W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, Denis Donoghue, ed. (London, 1972), 84. Cf. *The Collected Letters of W. B. Yeats: Volume 2: 1896–1900*, Warwick Gould, John Kelly and Deirdre Toomey, eds. (Oxford, 1997), 581, n1.

Street — now O'Connell Street, Dublin — and took possession of the most notable public building, the General Post Office (GPO). Uncertain in number, they were certain in their aim — to declare a sovereign Irish republic. In other parts of the city, Éamon de Valera, Éamonn Ceannt, the Countess Markievicz and other commandants assembled their troops close to various target buildings, including Boland's Mills and the College of Surgeons and took possession of them. Shortly after noon, Pearse, in effect the leader of the insurgents, came out of the GPO and read a one-page document headed *Poblacht na hEireann*, followed by *The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the People of Ireland*. The statement, addressed to 'Irishmen and Irishwomen' began:

In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for her freedom.

Five brief paragraphs followed. The first called upon the support of Ireland's 'exiled children in America' and 'gallant allies in Europe,' these last unnamed but evidently referring to the German government, which in naive theory was expected to mount an invasion with troops, artillery, and ammunition. The second paragraph maintained that 'six times during the past three hundred years' the Irish people had asserted, in arms, their right 'to national freedom and sovereignty'. Standing on that right, 'and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world', the Provisional Government proclaimed 'the Irish Republic as a Sovereign Independent State'. The fourth paragraph guaranteed 'religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens,' regardless of 'the differences carefully fostered by an alien government, which have divided a minority from the majority in the past.' That is: divided Protestants in the North from Catholics throughout the island. Paragraph five said that until a permanent National Government was established, (we) 'the Provisional Government, hereby constituted, will administer the civil and military affairs of the Republic in trust for the people.' Finally the peroration: the Irish nation must 'prove itself worthy of the august destiny to which it is called.'

The Proclamation has sometimes been dismissed as a piece of window-dressing for a Rising that could not otherwise have been justified, lacking a mandate from the people. Well, some revolutions, notably the American one, had a mandate; but others, like the Russian one, had not. Some revolutions receive a mandate after the event, as the destruction of the Irish Parliamentary Party and the rise of Sinn Féin could be deemed to be a mandate in retrospect. Nor do I see any objection to the Proclamation's historical sense. I assume that Pearse is referring to 1641, 1689, 1798, 1803, 1848, and 1867.⁷ These were very different episodes, some were abject, some nearly farcical, but they were all moments that Pearse was justified in recognizing as signs of national life, vital signs, even if they failed. It was by then a long time since 1867.

So the Rising began. The officers of the Crown were taken aback, though the atmosphere in Dublin Castle, for months back, had been thick with censored letters, reports from spies, hints and guesses. The authorities needed a day

7 Cf. Liam de Paor, *On the Easter Proclamation and Other Declarations* (Dublin, 1997), 70.

or two to gather their soldiers and bring a gunboat up the Liffey, but when the army was sent into the city and started shelling the buildings the rebels held, the defeat of Pearse and his troops was inevitable. He surrendered, unconditionally, after six days, on Saturday 29 April. Roy Foster reports in *Vivid Faces*, though his precision makes me doubt the report:

*When it was all over, 450 people in total had been killed, 2,614 wounded, 9 missing; of these, 116 soldiers had been killed, 368 wounded and 9 missing, along with 16 policemen dead and 29 wounded. Out of 1,558 combatant insurgents, 64 had died.*⁸

Between 3 and 12 May, fifteen leaders were arrested, court-martialled for high treason, and executed. De Valera was not executed, because his birth in the United States was thought to raise a potential legal or a diplomatic issue. Roger Casement, arrested in Kerry on his return from an abortive mission in Germany, was brought to England and hanged in Pentonville Jail, London, on 3 August. Hundreds of men (including my uncle) and about 77 women were arrested. Most of the women were released early in May, a few were interned, the Countess Markievicz was tried by court-martial and sentenced to death, but her sentence was commuted. The men were gradually released over the next year. Internationally, a sense of outrage continued to be expressed. Bernard Shaw wrote that the insurgents should have been treated to the dignities of prisoners of war.

Botched as the Rising was, it had a dramatic effect on the attitudes of the plain people of Ireland. Or the executions had. Something like Pearse's vision came about: the sacrifice of a holy few transformed the lazy many. Within a short time, even those who were indifferent or hostile to the Rising in the beginning gave their vote to Sinn Féin and repudiated the IPP. The British threat, renewed early in 1918, to impose conscription on Ireland did much to turn Irish people against the Empire. In the election of 1918, Sinn Féin won 73 of the 105 seats. More important, a mystique began to suffuse the executed leaders, especially Pearse, which revisionist historians — the School of Irony, as I think of them — have not succeeded in dispelling. Yeats wrote in 'Sixteen Dead Men':

*You say that we should still the land
Till Germany's overcome;
But who is there to argue that
Now Pearse is deaf and dumb?*

Not that that sentiment coincided with Yeats's attitude as a citizen. As a citizen, he was bewildered by the Rising; at first he didn't know what to think. When he started to think, he regarded it as a disaster. In effect, he agreed with Eoin MacNeill. He thought that the British Government and the IPP together should have been given more time to bring in Home Rule. But in December 1913 and January 1914, Asquith had secret meetings with Carson to find some device to exclude Ulster — or part of it — from the application of any Home Rule Bill. That theme kept Parliament busy until the declaration of war on Germany and Austria on 4 August. Carson at first wanted the nine counties of Ulster, till it was

⁸ R. F. Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890–1923* (New York, 2015), 243. [Hereafter, *Vivid Faces*]

pointed out to him that if he kept Donegal, Cavan, and Monaghan, the certainty of maintaining a unionist majority in the North for the future would become doubtful. Someone suggested four counties, but in the end Carson settled for six. In any case, Partition in some form was inevitable.

I should at this point declare a minor interest. I have long thought of myself as a nationalist. I have hoped – or hoped against hope – to live long enough to see Ireland, all 32 counties, united as an Irish republic. I thought – at least for some time – that northern unionists might be persuaded to join, sinking their differences. My experience as a Catholic boy growing up in Warrenpoint, living in the police barracks where my father was the local sergeant-in-charge of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, may have encouraged that notion, or sometimes refuted it. But of late I have been daunted by the history of Carson and the Ulster Covenant. On 23 September 1911, he addressed fifty thousand unionists at Craigavon, calling on them, in the event of Home Rule passing, to take up the government of ‘the Protestant Province of Ulster.’ In the week beginning 19 September 1912, 218,206 men and 228,991 women signed the Ulster Covenant, pledging to ‘use all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland.’ Given passage of the Government of Ireland Act (including Partition) on 23 December 1920, and King George V’s opening of the Parliament of Northern Ireland (six counties) at Stormont on 22 June 1921, there was no rational hope of a 32-county Republic. Even if Pearse had survived, there was nothing that he or any subsequent Taoiseach could have done to sweet-talk Protestant unionists into joining a republican parliament in Dublin. That, too, is not to be thought away.

Near the end of ‘Easter 1916,’ Yeats has these lines:

*Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.*

This is usually, and correctly, taken to mean that the English Government would live up to its promise to bring forward the suspended Home Rule Bill as soon as the War was over. I have no worthwhile opinion on that, but I see that Ronan Fanning judges that there is no good reason to think that the Government intended taking any such action. I would add that the only faith that England kept, most clearly from 6 February 1912, when Lloyd George and Winston Churchill proposed, in cabinet, to exclude the North from any Home Rule Bill, was the inviolable character of Protestant Unionism. That could not be touched. Dublin would have to put up with it. Indeed, it has put up with it from that day to this. The Good Friday Agreement, signed on 10 April 1998, repeated the guarantee in favour of the North ‘unless and until’, but the unless and until are empty gestures, a majority in the North in favour of joining the Republic could not happen from here to eternity. I can’t forget the Ulster Covenant.

III

I have referred to Yeats as citizen. Despite his early membership of the IRB he was never a threat to British rule in Ireland. His poems, stirring as they are, do

not bring crowds into the streets. He wrote four poems in a more-or-less direct relation to the Rising: 'Easter 1916,' 'The Rose Tree,' 'Sixteen Dead Men' and 'On a Political Prisoner.' Then there are the late poems on Roger Casement and The O'Rahilly. Some of these give Yeats the release of expressing a single-minded attitude to the rebels, as in 'Sixteen Dead Men' and 'The Rose Tree,' as if it were too late for the niceties of ambivalence, the tiring adjudications of 'Easter 1916'. But if we could rise to the occasion of that poem, we would do much.

It is sometimes said that Yeats, having finished 'Easter 1916' by September 25 in that year, cautiously held it back from publication till 1920 when he published it in *The New Statesman* of 23 October and *The Dial* of November. That is not entirely true. Before the end of 1916, he allowed his friend Clement Shorter to print up twenty-five copies of the poem, to be given to Yeats's friends. This may not be publication in the standard sense, but you do not keep a secret by circulating it among twenty-five friends. We know that this charmed circle was broken at least once by a Chicago journalist who wrote to Yeats about the little book. The secret, if it was a secret, was out.

'Easter 1916' is an elegy, a song of loss: as such, it is supposed to issue in a cry of sorrow for the dead. And so it does. But there is more in the poem than that cry, and some reluctance to utter it. Benedetto Croce said that 'every true work of art has violated some established kind.'⁹ I think he wanted to make room, in every genre, for extraneous matter; for such matter in 'Lycidas' and 'Paradise Lost,' for instance. There is extraneous matter in 'Easter 1916', such as the speculation about needless death. This is not to say that the poem would be better if such matter were removed — not at all. But it leads to a difficult argument about pure and impure poetry, and I am persuaded by those who say that impure is better.

Suppose we were reading 'Easter 1916' for the first time. We have a poem of eighty lines in four stanzas of unequal length. There is a metrical unit of four lines — a quatrain — rhyming a-b-a-b to begin with, the pattern of which persists throughout the poem, though some of the rhymes barely deserve the name, such as the rhyme of 'I' — the first person singular — with the last syllable of 'utterly.' The unit of sense or sentence is more various, running from one line to as many as nine, by my count. A first reader would not know who the 'them' are in the first line. 'Counter' or 'desk' would suggest that they are clerks, perhaps minor civil servants. But Yeats hardly knew such people well enough to allow them to interrupt his walk, even to the extent of his saying a few polite, meaningless words. They were not the kind of people he would have met in the Stephen's Green Club. The metre of this stanza is iambic trimeter, modified by a frequent change to anapestic, to make the ballad-measure more rapid. This note of easy discourse continues until the two last lines of the stanza, when the reference to the comedy of motley propels us into the sudden tragedy of 'All changed, changed utterly: /A terrible beauty is born.' It is a remarkable moment in the poem. We have to ask how Citizen Yeats moved from denouncing the Rising, in letters to Lady Gregory, to such a transcendent acknowledgement of the opposite case, the case for its validity. The philosopher F. H. Bradley noted that 'we are compelled to take partial truths as being utterly true.'¹⁰ Yeats's first response to the Rising was that it was damaging to the causes that Lady Gregory and he cherished. That made

⁹ Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetic As Science of Expression and General Linguistic*, translated by Douglas Ainslie (Boston, 1978), 37.

¹⁰ F. H. Bradley, *Essays on Truth and Reality* ([1914] Cambridge, 2012), 258.

I
I have met them as close as the day
coming, with vivid faces
From worlds or dark among, grey
lighter centres, whose
shen pained with a nod of the head
or subtle meaningless words,
or have lingered & chide I said
Right meaningless words
as thought before I had done
of a mother, this is a gift
To them a contrivance
around the fire of the club,
then, under the sky & I
But that the mother is gone:
all changes, changed utterly,
a terrible beauty is born

II
That woman at child would be like
my similar argument,
Had ignorant good will
all that she got. she spent
her charity, but is found
when young and beautiful
she had hidden well to know

C
From cloud to tumbling cloud
moments by moment change;
A shadow of cloud on the stream
the changes moments by minutes
a horse-hoof slides on the brain
and a horse flashes when is
the low, lesser most here, die
and here to move with all;
moments by moments they live:
The stone & stone's in the midst of all

IV
To long a sacrifice
~~Chances of the heart the heart~~
~~Can change to a stone~~
~~Can change to a stone~~
~~Can change to a stone~~
~~Can change to a stone~~
That is the heart, our part
The murmur name of name,
as a mother's hand of her child
then sleep is lost has come
on limbs that had run wild.
What is it but night fall?
No no not night but death.
Was it meeten death after all?
The English ^{many} keep faith still
For all she has ^{done} I said

B
The man had managed & school
and one might meet some there;
The other his father & friend
was coming, not his form
He never had lost face in the land
so serious his nature seemed
so daring and sweet his thought.
The other man I had dreamed
a drunken exultant lord,
He had done more better words
To some who were near my heart
yet I remember him in the song
He too has resigned his part
in the count comedy.
His love has been changed in his line,
Transformed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born

III
Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer & winter, seem
enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.
The horses that come from the west,
The rider, the birds that range

D
We know their dream: enough
To know their dream & died;
And that if eases of love,
Nought dead than all they die.
I met it once in a man
MacDonagh, MacBride
and Connolly, & Pearse
now & in time & he
when an open is worn
an change (change) utterly;
A terrible beauty is born.

Sept 25. 1916

it deplorable, but it also made the judgement partial. His later judgements between April and September acknowledged other conditions, other partialities: that is what makes the structure of the poem so difficult. It allows for the partialities, and brings them to an end. The end may be yet another partiality, but it comes with imperative force, it cannot be repelled.

I concede that a simpler explanation of the transition in Yeats's poem is its movement from the comedy of social appearance to the sublime. Edmund Burke says, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, that 'whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime.'¹¹ The main quality of the sublime is that it is not answerable to the standard criteria of reason, it cannot be held accountable, indeed it makes reason feel ashamed of itself. We can witness its signs, but we cannot domesticate them or subject them to a normative judgment. Yeats's middle style administers reasonable considerations until they are transcended by the sublime of the 'terrible beauty'. Pearse does not refute MacNeill, he transcends him. This is the structural principle of the poem, the mode of energy which propels the poem from first word to last: the picturesque or the beautiful is transcended by the sublime. Reason is confounded.

In the second stanza, starting with 'That woman's days,' Yeats begins to be indicative, short of naming names. He doesn't name the Countess, but he gives her seven lines of description: she had been beautiful, had a sweet voice and rode to harriers, but later became shrill from argument. All he says about Pearse in two lines is that he ran a school and wrote poems. MacDonagh was his assistant, a promising young man. The man we know as John MacBride is given the most elaborate and the most personal description, still without being named, before being included in the ultimacy of 'the song'. At the end of the poem, Yeats names Pearse, MacDonagh, MacBride and Connolly, the last of whom he hasn't described. MacBride has been 'transformed utterly', as if his sins had been purged as he was transformed into a figure of myth and legend. Again, the middle style describes, indeed praises, the Countess, Pearse, and MacDonagh, without naming them, but in the end — but only in the end — these, too, are transcended by MacBride, who is harshly described until, with the word 'Yet', the stanza turns to acknowledge the higher reason-beyond-reason, the sublime tragedy of MacBride's death-and-resurrection. The repetition of 'He, too' speaks insistently to those who would deny him his sublimity.

The third stanza begins with the most tendentious lines:

*Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone
To trouble the living stream.*

11 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Paul Guyer, ed. (Oxford, 2015), 33.

Critics, at this point in their commentary, usually quote a passage from 'J. M. Synge and the Ireland of His Time' to show that Yeats meant what he said. The passage reads, in part:

*After a while, in a land that has given itself to agitation over-much, abstract thoughts are raised up between men's minds and Nature, who never does the same thing twice, or makes one man like another, till minds, whose patriotism is perhaps great enough to carry them to the scaffold, cry down natural impulse with the morbid persistence of minds unsettled by some fixed idea... . They no longer love, for only life is loved, and at last a generation is like an hysterical woman who will make unmeasured accusations and believe impossible things, because of some logical deduction from a solitary thought which has turned a portion of her mind to stone.*¹²

It is strange that Yeats, susceptible as he was to magical enchantments, should use the word 'stone' in a negative sense here, but he does, and he puts 'enchanted' in a strong position, the first word in its line. He repeats 'stone' twelve lines further down:

*Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart.*

It is not surprising that this motif caught Maud Gonne's attention and became the gist of her dissent. 'No I don't like your poem', she said, and went on to become specific: 'it isn't worthy of you & above all it isn't worthy of the subject':

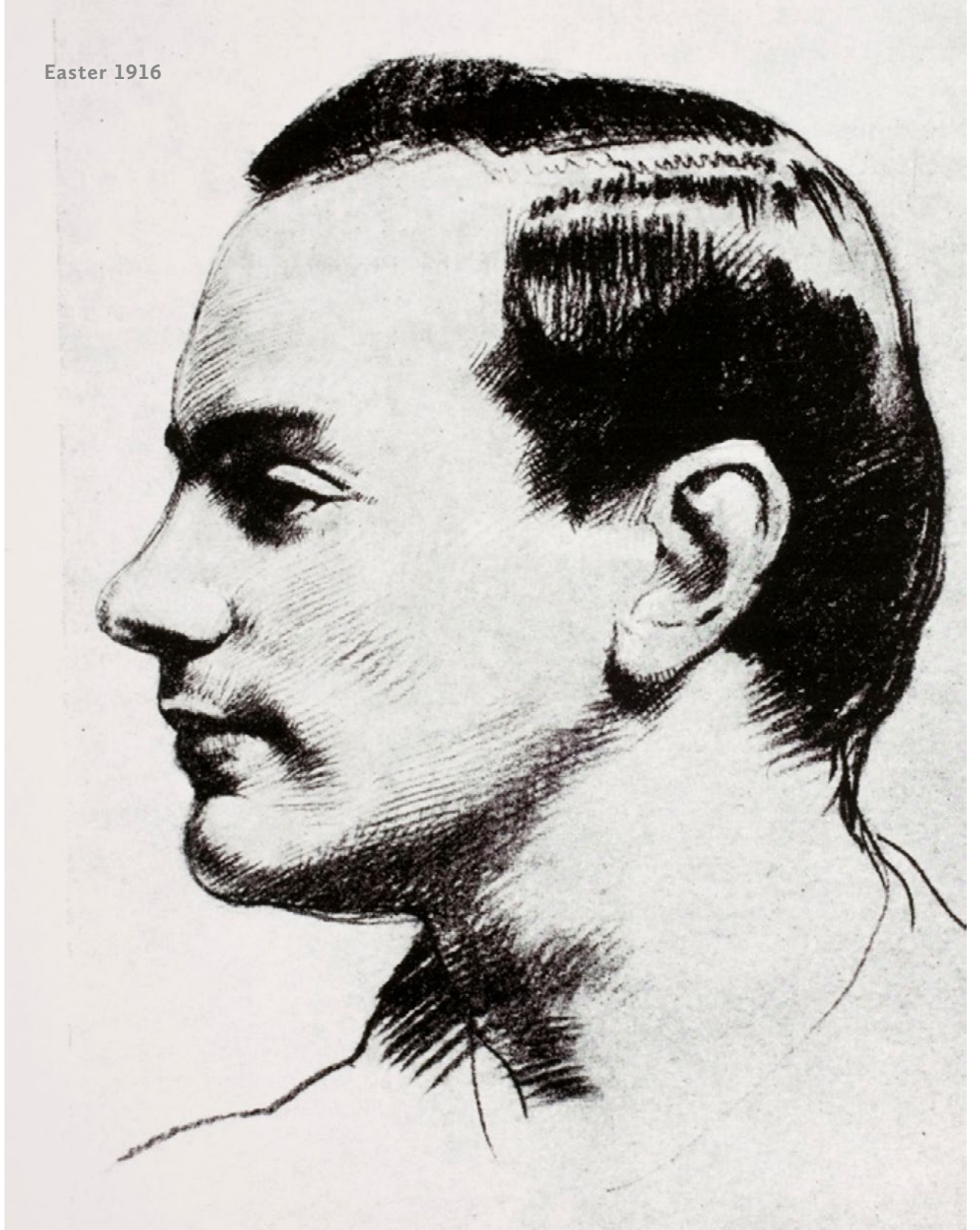
*Though it reflects your present state of mind perhaps, it isn't quite sincere enough for you who have studied philosophy & know something of history know quite well that sacrifice has never yet turned a heart to stone though it has immortalised many & through it alone mankind can rise to God.... But you could never say that MacDonagh & Pearse & Conally were sterile fixed minds, each served Ireland, which was their share of the world, the part they were in contact with, with varied faculties and vivid energy!*¹³

This criticism seems to me entirely just. Ireland was indeed 'their share of the world, the part they were in contact with', so they could not be accused of having lived a fantasy. The justice of Maud Gonne's comment did not make Yeats change a word of the poem. His motif of stone is itself a fixed idea, a prejudice. 'Too long a sacrifice'. How long is too long? Three hundred years? Yeats leaves it to Heaven to say when enough is enough. The lines, in this third stanza, between the first reference to stone and the second and third, are those in which he personifies Nature, given a laudatory personal form in the essay on Synge as one who never does the same thing twice. Maud Gonne refers, accurately indeed, to Yeats's 'theory of constant change & becoming in the flux of things'. But these lines, in the poem, invoke not only Nature but Culture — horse and rider, besides birds, cloud, the living stream, and the sexual call of moorhens to moorcocks. It is our

¹² Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London, 1961), 313–14.

¹³ Maud Gonne, Letter of 8 November, 1916: in *The Gonne–Yeats Letters 1893–1938*, Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares, eds. (New York, 1993), 384.

*part to murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.*



Padraig Pearse, by Sean O'Sullivan,
1936.

This murmuring of 'name upon name' is the ritual by which the rebels of Easter Week will be turned into heroes, martyrs, figures of a mythology companionable with Cuchulain. Many years later, in 'The Statues' and 'A General Introduction for My Work', Yeats found the right words for Pearse's prayer:

Sometimes I am told in commendation, if the newspaper is Irish, in condemnation if English, that my movement perished under the firing squads of 1916; sometimes that those firing squads made our realistic movement possible. If that statement is true, and it is only so in part, for romance was everywhere receding, it is because in the imagination of Pearse and his fellow soldiers the Sacrifice of the Mass had found the Red Branch in the tapestry; they went out to die calling upon Cuchulain:-

¹⁴ Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 515.

*Fall, Hercules, from Heaven in tempests hurled
To cleanse the beastly stable of this world.*¹⁴

In 'Easter 1916', Yeats glances at a question: 'And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?' This is the heroic excess that defined the Romantic Ireland of 'September 1913', the Ireland of Robert Emmet, Wolfe Tone, Lord Edward Fitzgerald, and John O'Leary, even though it may also entail, as an equivocation, 'the delirium of the brave'. No matter. He doesn't need to answer his rhetorical question. 'I write it out in a verse' could not be more decisive.

I have referred to Yeats in his role, however ambiguous, as citizen. As poet, the poet of 'Easter 1916', his thinking had reached a point of sympathy with the executed leaders. 'The sublime' trumps the civic considerations he has been expressing; three times, indeed, culminating for final emphasis in the last lines of the poem. Lines 15 and 16, repeated at 39 and 50, and finally at 79 and 80: whatever he says three times in one poem, he means.

The structural principle of this poem, as I have called it, is the conflict between the amenities of nature and culture in the third stanza and the sublime, which never for long leaves the other stanzas. It is the conflict between 'changed' and 'transformed', two words of different emphasis, a conflict enabled but not resolved by the word 'utterly' that intensifies each of them. Yeats is drawn to both values, but those in the beautiful third stanza do not transform. They change, but Yeats does not establish change as a value, he takes it for granted on the presumed authority of Nature. Change is what Nature does, therefore it is good. Clouds change their shape, yes, but it doesn't matter. Horse and rider may move in a different direction; it doesn't matter. The call of hens to moorhens matters, but it doesn't transform. What matters is the sublime act that changes mere Patrick Pearse into 'Pearse', mere John MacBride into 'MacBride', the surnames that, as Helen Vendler has noted, these men 'will bear in the history books'.¹⁵ Transformation is what culture does.

IV

For people of my origin and generation, Yeats's 'Easter 1916' might well be an anthem. Not his most achieved poem, it oscillates between for and against, one perhaps and another, without quite engaging the conflict I have mentioned. Each value is given its due, but the conflict remains a principle, it does not fight for its cause. Citizen and poet remain apart. As a citizen, Yeats believed that if the British Government had renewed, as a promise in 1915, its intention of bringing forward Home Rule at the end of the War, there would have been no Rising. That is yet another 'perhaps'. In *Vivid Faces*, R. F. Foster quotes part of a speech made by Redmond in Wexford a year before Easter 1916:

*People talk of the wrongs done to Ireland by England in the past. God knows standing on this holy spot it is not likely any of us can ever forget, though God grant we may all forgive, the wrongs done to our fathers a hundred or two hundred years ago. But do let us be a sensible and truthful people. Do let us remember that we today of our generation are a free people. We have emancipated the farmer; we have housed the agricultural labourer; we have won religious liberty; we have won free education ... we have laid broad and deep the foundations of national prosperity and finally we have won an Irish parliament and an executive responsible to it.*¹⁶

¹⁵ Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), 20.

¹⁶ Quoted in Foster, *Vivid Faces*, 2.

Foster comments that the Home Rule Bill ‘gave the projected Irish parliament fairly wide powers of autonomy, while firmly retaining imperial supremacy.’ He adds:

*The bicameral Irish parliament was not to have power over matters affecting the Crown, peace and war, the army and navy etc., though they would control the police after six years, and could also claim control over matters such as old-age pensions and insurance. There would still be a Lord Lieutenant, with veto powers, and the Imperial parliament retained amendment powers. Revenue, apart from the Post Office, was to be initially managed through the Imperial Exchequer.*¹⁷

If that is what Home Rule denoted, it seems to me a miserable gift. But I think my uncle, if he had had a vote, would have accepted it and voted for the Treaty predicated on the Home Rule Bill and the London agreement; accepted it as a first step toward independence, and assuming that other unspecified steps would follow. That was Michael Collins’s position, but not de Valera’s. Some would have rejected any treaty based on the exclusion of the Six Counties and the compulsory taking of the Oath of Allegiance to the imperial Crown.

There is a strange passage in *On the Boiler*, among the many strangenesses in that book, where Yeats is reflecting on his experience in the Senate and the bizarre people he met there. Then he goes on to say: ‘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 origin from the Post Office as American families date theirs from the *Mayflower*.’¹⁸

I have wasted some idle moments in which I think that, had I stayed in the civil service – where I won my first job – I might have raised myself to become one of the ruling class to which Yeats refers. That class – Charlie Haughey, Brian Lenihan, Dick Spring, Garret Fitzgerald – had much the same origin that I had, except that they had more money and came from more notable families. For the most part they were middle-class Catholics, often with a degree in law, which was my own first choice, the career I wanted for myself but for the obvious fact, which I discovered after my first week in Dublin, that my father could not have afforded to make me a barrister. All things considered, I date my origin from the Post Office. Not from the Civil War. The Post Office is my origin, even though I acknowledge that Eoin MacNeill might have prevailed had he been more assertive. In September 2014, a few days after John Bruton gave his lecture in an attempt to restore the faded reputation of John Redmond, Enda Kenny intervened to say that his party, Fine Gael, had a right to claim access to Easter 1916. He was justified in that claim. Many of the members of what became Fine Gael, including Richard Mulcahy, had been in the republican movement, just like my uncle. Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael did not yet exist in the Post Office, they arose from the split following the Treaty: they were born in the Civil War.

In conclusion: I hope to see all the political parties, in 2016, celebrating without embarrassment their origin in the Post Office. And celebrating the fact that the Free State government and all subsequent governments in Ireland joined to retain democratic values, at least in principle if not always in practice, and to reject the Blueshirt forces that might have issued in Yeats’s ‘rule of kindred’ or some other form of cruelty.

¹⁷ Foster, *Vivid Faces*, 336.

¹⁸ Yeats, *Explorations*, selected by Mrs. W. B. Yeats (London, 1962), 413.

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