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Author(s): Seán Farrell Moran

Source: *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1989), pp. 625-643

Published by: University of Pennsylvania Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2709801>

Accessed: 02-11-2019 23:06 UTC

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PATRICK PEARSE AND THE EUROPEAN REVOLT AGAINST REASON¹

BY SEÁN FARRELL MORAN

Ireland's Easter Rising of 1916 was not the result of some rational political process. It was rather the manifestation of deep-seated psychological and emotional conflicts shared by many militant Irish nationalists. Patrick Pearse's unique contribution to Irish political history derived from his personal experience of despair, irresolution, the need to escape his personal situation, failure, and ambivalence.² At the same time many nationalists had apprehensions about Ireland's future. The road to personal and national deliverance laid out and traveled by Patrick Pearse was in fact the way that the Republican movement needed to go for some kind of decisive deliverance from modernity and from Great Britain, which represented modernity.³

¹ An early version of this paper was presented on November 6, 1987 at the Twenty-Fifth Annual Atlantic Regional Meeting of the American Conference of Irish Studies at Hofstra University. I would like to thank Ruth Dudley Edwards, Alan O'Day, Maurice O'Connell, Coilín Owens, Albert Mott, and Patrick Cooke for reading this paper in its earlier form and Terence R. Murphy of American University for his gracious help with this article.

² Both the standard biography on Pearse, Ruth Dudley Edwards's, *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (London, 1977), and perhaps the most imaginative analysis of the Rising, William Irwin Thompson's *The Imagination of an Insurrection* (London, 1967), argue that Pearse's personal failure as artist, educator, and dramatist led him to embrace violent Republicanism. Three books by Desmond Ryan, *The Man Called Pearse* (Dublin, 1919); *Remembering Sion* (London, 1934); and *The Rising: The Complete Story of Easter Week* (4th ed.; Dublin, 1969), are worth considering in any analysis of Pearse and the Rising but tend to be hagiographical. A minor biography by Raymond J. Porter, *P. H. Pearse* is interesting but unreliable. Ruth Dudley Edwards's biography, originally a revisionist attempt to demythologize Pearse and the Rising, has now to be considered the standard biography. An educator, poet, essayist, and playwright, the shy and socially awkward Pearse scarcely seems to have had the makings of becoming the preeminent ideologue of twentieth-century Irish Republicanism. He has remained an enigmatic figure whose motivations are still difficult to fathom despite the good efforts of a number of scholars. Neither Edwards nor Thompson consider Pearse's fragile psychological background, despite recognizing that something was amiss, and the subject invites a psychohistorical approach. Seán Farrell Moran, "Patrick Pearse and the Politics of Redemption: The Mind of the Easter Rising, 1916" (M.A. thesis, The American University, 1984), was the first attempt to consider Pearse psychoanalytically within the context of Irish nationalism and contemporary European intellectual history.

³ The historiographical issue of modernity in Ireland has been outlined in the criticism of Patrick O'Farrell's *Ireland's English Question: Anglo-Irish Relations 1534-1970* (New York, 1971) by Joseph Lee, *The Modernization of Irish Society, 1848-1918* (Dublin, 1973). It has been most usefully addressed in Tom Garvin, "Priests and Patriots: Irish Separatism and Fear of the Modern, 1890-1914," *Irish Historical Studies*, XXV (1986), 67-81.

The revolt against modernity was hardly restricted to Ireland. At the same time that Pearse and his comrades marshaled the most violent elements of Irish nationalism for a symbolic gesture of violence, certain of their deaths, millions of Europeans marched off in defense of equally, if not more, abstract patriotism.⁴ World War I occurred after a period of intellectual revolt against reason and of escalating political violence, which bears an uncanny resemblance to political developments in Ireland during the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Yet the tendency of both Irish specialists and historians of Europe to remove Ireland's history from its general European context has relegated Pearse and the Rising to the status of a somewhat odd and parochial phenomenon.⁵ While Ireland is small, its political experience was like that of small and larger countries on the Continent with oppressed ethnic groups who struggled to achieve independence and/or hegemony. In this sense late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland is Europe in

⁴ For an analysis of intellectuals at the beginning of the war see Roland Stromberg, *Redemption By War: The Intellectuals and 1914* (Lawrence, Kan., 1982); Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York, 1975); and Jean Jacques Becker, *1914: Comment les français sont entrés dans la guerre* (Paris, 1977).

⁵ Most of the work on the Rising has tended to be political in focus, including most of the standard histories of the period. Without equal in terms of scope is F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland Since the Famine* (Dublin, 1976). Also essential are Robert Kee, *The Green Flag* (London, 1972); J. C. Beckett, *The Making of Modern Ireland* (London, 1926; repr. ed., 1963); R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600-1972* (London, 1988); and Joseph Lee, *The Modernization of Irish Society: 1848-1918*. Several works continue to pursue the political/rational perspective, seeing the Rising as the result of some developmental process: Nicholas Mansergh, *The Irish Question: 1840-1921* (3rd ed.; Toronto, 1951); George Dangerfield, *Damnable Question: A Study in Anglo-Irish Relations* (Boston, 1976); Patrick O'Farrell, *England and Ireland Since 1800* (London, 1979); and Oliver MacDonagh's *Ireland: The Union and its Aftermath* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1968). More suggestive are Sean Cronin, *Irish Nationalism* (Dublin, 1980); D. George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland* (Baltimore, Md., 1982); Clare O'Halloran, *Partition and the Limits of Irish Nationalism* (London, 1987); Leon O'Broin, *The Revolutionary Brotherhood* (Totowa, N.J., 1976); and the numerous essays by F. X. Martin and F. S. L. Lyons. The major "revisionist" points of view (after Edwards) on Pearse and the Rising are Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (London, 1972); and Francis Shaw S. J., "The Canon of Irish History," *Studies*, 61 (1972), 115-53. All of these works insist on approaching the Rising as a political or military event of some rational design and therefore miss the essential point that Pearse and his comrades were trying to make.

Two controversial works have attempted to look at the less rational forces at work: the aforementioned work of William Irwin Thompson, which considers the Rising as a work of art, and Patrick O'Farrell, *Ireland's English Question*, in which Catholic Ireland sees itself as the "holy" country besieged by an intolerant and "pagan" Britain. The problem is that O'Farrell holds that all conflict between Ireland and Britain has been due to religious perceptions and grievances to the exclusion of economic, political, and social factors. However, Joseph Lee's notion that modernization was "... the growth of equality of opportunity" goes too far in the opposite direction of O'Farrell. See Lee, *Modernization*, i.

microcosm. Nationalistic movements in Poland, Italy, and the Balkans bore close similarities to those in Ireland. Likewise, the development of the Irish Republican Brotherhood's belief that violence was not only a political but also a spiritual and moral force was but another manifestation of the "subjectification" of thought in early twentieth-century Europe. No single incident in European political history more clearly emblemizes this phenomenon than the Easter Rising of 1916.

H. Stuart Hughes argues that European social thought between 1890 and 1930 launched a major revolt against the tenets of positivistic thought. The "revolt" against reason manifested itself across many disciplines, from philosophy to the new physics, but it was perhaps strongest in social and political theory. Hughes found that this revolt "displaced"

... social thought from the apparent and objectively verifiable to the only partially conscious area of unexplained motivation. In this sense the new doctrines were manifestly subjective. Psychological processes had replaced external reality as the most pressing topic for investigation. It was no longer what actually existed that seemed important: it was what men thought existed.⁶

This revolt against positivism's "objective" standards of progress and logic found widespread intellectual and cultural expression. It was not a phenomenon from which Irish intellectuals were distinguishable: Yeats, Synge, Shaw, and Joyce were major literary lights of their day. Joyce spent most of his adult life in Europe. Yeats was at home in London as in Dublin. Irish participation in European political thought was not inconsiderable. Marx and Engels wrote about Ireland.⁷ James Connolly was a leading world socialist, one of the few working men who rose to leadership in the movement and acquired a noteworthy intellectual reputation. Little work has been done on Irish politics within this European context, but the presence of an enduring Irish contribution to European letters indicates that the dismissal of Ireland from the general consideration of European intellectual history of this period is quite mistaken.

In addition to reconsidering Ireland's involvement within the intellectual and cultural life of Europe, there is the need to consider the climate of confrontation and violence which pervaded Western societies during this period. George Dangerfield describes the collapse of Britain's Liberal Party as taking place within a climate of violence in which the politics of moderation and compromise foundered on the forces of unreason.⁸ Dangerfield believed that the period preceding the Great War was characterized by the sinking of reasonable politics into a morass of evermore polarized opinions, interests, and issues which succeeded in

⁶ *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought* (New York, 1958; revised ed., 1971), 66.

⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Ireland and the Irish Question* (London, 1978).

⁸ *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (New York, 1935).

bringing down the consensus that had marked British politics for decades. Dangerfield demonstrated how force became a tool of both coercion and repression that immobilized a political system based on the idea of rational consensus. As the pattern grew more entrenched, the ideas which were the foundations of these confrontational factions assumed the character of articles of faith.

In his *Reflections on Violence* (1907) Georges Sorel maintained that there existed “myths” which were revolutionary canons of great social movements.⁹ These myths “. . . are not descriptions of things but expressions of a determination to act.” They represent the desire to destroy the status quo, a search “. . . for a combat which will destroy the existing state of things. . . .” Sorel found the greatest example of this in the anarcho-syndicalist “myth of the general strike,” a battle of the collective proletariat to destroy the state and establish the worker’s society.

With the general strike all these fine things disappear, the revolution appears as a revolt, pure and simple, and no place is reserved for sociologists, for fashionable people who are in favour of social reforms, and for the Intellectuals who have embraced *the profession of thinking for the proletariat*.¹⁰

The myth of the general strike aims at nothing less than “complete catastrophe”—a cataclysmic overthrow of the past.

Sorel’s catastrophe is not aimless. Although its primary manifestation is destruction, the violence of the general strike is ultimately soteriological in nature and aims to save men from a world of suppression and injustice that is based on reason. Thus violence becomes the means by which justice and virtue are at last established in the world of men. Sorel’s view was that, “It is to violence that Socialism owes those high ethical values by means of which it brings *salvation* to the Modern World.”¹¹ What Sorel described is a religious idea to which men were committed by faith despite, or perhaps because of, never having seen it happen. In this sense faith in the myth is eschatological and apocalyptic, looking toward a future that can only be brought about through the violent destruction of what already exists.

Sorel conceded that there were non-socialist myths of equally compelling power. The cases he allowed for were wars of revolution or liberation—both having the psychological power which the myth of the general strike generated.¹² In Pearse’s case the myth of a noble Gaelic and Catholic Ireland won by violent and resolute action converted him to Republicanism. Violent revolution could eradicate the modern morass

⁹ *Reflections on Violence* (Glencoe, 1950), 57, 58, 140-41; for the history of syndicalism in Ireland see Emmet O’Connor, *Syndicalism in Ireland* (Cork, 1988).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 157; cf. 145, 153.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 278.

¹² *Ibid.*, 267-70.

in Irish society and culture; it could also pave the way for Pearse to reconcile opposites, and eradicate equivocations in his life.

Pearse's search for personal wholeness was a consequence of his immaturity and psychological incompleteness. As an adult Pearse was stiff, shy, and socially awkward—more comfortable with children than with most adults. An example of this immaturity was his lack of a clearly defined sexual identity. Emblematic of Patrick Pearse's confusions about his sexual identity was his youthful habit of dressing as a beggarman, old woman, or a girl. It appears that when he did so Patrick usually went out with his younger brother Willie, and aided by his sisters or a female cousin, they would roam the streets near the Pearse home in the center of Dublin.¹³

A close reading of this practice is disturbing given that the Pearse family lived for most of Patrick's early life at 27 Great Brunswick Street in an area wedged between perhaps the two most notorious red-light districts in the city. To the north, just across the Liffey River, lay the world famous "Monto," and to the southwest lay Grafton Street. In the late nineteenth century both areas had literally thousands of prostitutes plying their trade along the streets and in brothels.¹⁴ In an environment such as this the frequent wanderings of boys dressed as women suggests that Pearse had to be aware of this world.

This is not to suggest that Pearse engaged in conscious transvestitism; but given the character of these areas and the prevailing moral climate, he could easily have been propositioned at a time when the age of consent was a mere thirteen. The availability of child-prostitutes in Dublin could not have been much less different from other large British cities of the day where the phenomenon was extensive.¹⁵ His cousin related that Pearse dressed in his elder sister's clothes and went with her to Amiens Street, a trip which took them into the very heart of Monto.¹⁶ It is hard to believe, especially since Patrick continued this practice until he was in his teens, that these expeditions were entirely innocent. While the boy's intention was probably innocent, the surroundings were most assuredly not. For a boy as withdrawn and obviously immature as Patrick, no doubt the disguises furnished him the opportunity to participate surreptitiously in a world he was either too afraid of or not allowed to experience.

¹³ This practice of dressing up in female clothes and wandering in the street is testified to by both of Pearse's sisters and appears to have been confirmed by a female cousin. See Mary Brigid Pearse, *The Home Life of Patrick Pearse* (Cork, 1935), 40-42; Margaret Pearse, "Patrick and Willie Pearse," *Capuchin Annual* (1943), 87.

¹⁴ See Joseph O'Brien, *Dear, Dirty Dublin: 1899-1916* (Berkeley, Calif., 1982), 189-93; Peter Somerville-Large, *Dublin* (London, 1979), 270-72.

¹⁵ See George Behlmer, *Child Abuse and Moral Reform in England* (Stanford, 1982); Judith Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (Cambridge, 1982).

¹⁶ Mary Brigid Pearse, *Home-Life*, 41.

The fact that the sights to greet him were often perverse and fascinating makes his behavior all that more understandable, especially as he grew older.¹⁷

Pearse's immaturity was to affect him throughout his life. Pearse never was able to relate to women; his few relationships were strictly social ones characterized by the same distance that marked his relationships to the women he had seen in voyeuristic trips into Dublin's red-light districts. At best Pearse only knew women from afar and idealized them without ever knowing them.

Patrick Pearse's unique contribution to Irish political history was his expression of the "mythic" ideas which served as the moral basis of physical-force nationalism. He was not alone in doing so, but his success lay in the coincidence of historical events with his own search for things to believe which could make him into a whole person.

The politics, culture, and society of Pearse's Ireland were in disarray. Catastrophic depopulation, especially in rural areas, reached its peak in Pearse's early adult years. With emigration came internal migration into Dublin and Belfast.¹⁸ Not only was Irish society in distress at the turn of the century but there was also the intellectual revolution which had begun in the 1880s and would continue into the late 1930s. Intellectuals "rediscovered" Celtic mythology, folklore, and the Irish language and "revived" Anglo-Irish poetry, drama, and fiction. Whatever its considerable contribution was to Irish culture and national identity, the "Irish Literary Renaissance" represented a major upheaval in ideas and sensibilities.

While politics appeared to move toward peaceful constitutional resolution, the failure to secure Home Rule pushed many political moderates towards the same kind of confrontational politics which was becoming more evident in Britain. The political turmoil was, as Dangerfield showed, a major manifestation of the kind of polarization that was increasingly common in British politics. The apparent failure of moderate constitutional politics in the Irish case allowed the politics of revolutionary violence, which had survived unsullied by compromise, to seem increasingly legitimate as a form of political action. Irish nationalists had evolved into polarized camps: one committed to the politics of reason and accommodation, the other committed to an absolute to be won at any cost. This second party was republican and separatist; its already substantial tradition of violence had proved that it would brook no compromises, but like its constitutional counterpart, it had known only failure in 1798,

¹⁷ For an analysis of Victorian obsession with sexual perversity, see Stephen Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England* (New York, 1964).

¹⁸ Lyons, *Ireland*, 110-11.

1848, and 1867. Nonetheless, the myth of violence gave physical-force nationalism an apparent integrity which constitutionalist politics never possessed. Violence on behalf of Irish freedom came into its own through failure and death, upheld by each generation as an expression of Irish retribution, and faithfulness to a holy cause.

Pearse did not merely float on a spiritual tide that was going his way. He quickly became the leading spokesman for the Republican tradition of armed resistance. Under the tutelage of men such as the old Fenian Thomas Clarke, Pearse gave artistic expression to his new-found ideology. He became the evangelist for the Republican tradition of violence. Pearse was not alone in glorifying the myth of Republican violence, but his consciousness of the past and his psychological needs combined with Republican tradition in a context in which violence held soteriological possibilities that were both personal and national. Because of this intersection of personal experience and revolutionary tradition, Pearse's impact upon the history of his country was to be remarkable. Pearse's vision was aestheticism that expressed itself within political action. The rhetoric which he brought to bear on the contemporary situation ultimately renewed and continued the tenets of Irish Republican faith. Pearse and his fellow poets of the Rising not only gave voice to the myth but lived it in order to appropriate what was perceived to be a life-giving power.¹⁹

Pearse's critics have claimed that his vanity and self-aggrandizement were an overcompensation for his inability, and the inability of the other artists *manqués* who followed him into the Rising to face reality. According to this view, the poets of the Easter Rising self-conceitedly sought to create in political action what they could not achieve in their art, thus rendering the Rising ludicrous. The Rising was a histrionic reenactment of myth in which Pearse cast himself in the lead role.²⁰ Pearse conceived of himself as a tragic figure and sought to live out a heroic role in reenacting a myth. But he did so believing that the Republican myth had power to redeem his life and his culture. Since he did not expect to survive, Pearse's efforts cannot have been simply self-serving.

Patrick Pearse was not the only man in Europe to think this way at the time. His poetry has thematic similarities to Rupert Brooke's romantic call to his generation in "The Soldier" (1914)—to die for the English national myth as a form of eternal service and cultural redemption. Brooke's "1914 Sonnets" emphasize the same ideas: earth and decay in

¹⁹ Thompson, *Imagination*, 124ff. For the poetry of the "Rising Poets" see Desmond Ryan, ed., *The 1916 Poets* (Westbury, Conn., 1979). Pearse's collected works are in several volumes. See Padraic H. Pearse, *Collected Works*, ed. Desmond Ryan (Dublin, n.d., but published 1917-22).

²⁰ Robert O'Driscoll, "Return to the Hearthstone: Ideals of the Celtic Literary Revival," *Place, Personality, and the Irish Writer*, ed. Andrew Carpenter (Dublin, 1977), 67-68.

“The Soldier”; the glory and redemption of violent death and the pouring out of “the Red sweet wine of youth” in “The Dead”; and war’s ability to free the captive spirit in “Peace.” The human spirit is to be freed from modernity’s clutches by means of war.

Now, God be thanked who has matched us with His hour,
And caught our youth, and wakened us from sleeping,
With hand made sure, clear eye, and sharpened power,
To turn as swimmers into cleanness leaping,
Glad from a world grown old and cold and weary. . . .²¹

For Brooke, a period of personal alienation and morbid introspection ended when he saw action in October 1914. Brooke recounted that the sight of a great city in flames and the threat of death made him feel fulfilled and upon his return to England he was moved to write his war sonnets “1914.”²²

A year earlier Brooke had gone on a trip to North America and the South Pacific, partly to overcome his melancholy with sights of the new culture. This trip was a stimulating one for Brooke, but even before he left he had come to see some things differently from the way he had seen them before. Though once a Fabian, he began to reverse what he had once believed about many modernist trends in art. Not the least of these reversals was his decision, contradicting an opinion he had expressed a couple of years earlier, that Henrik Ibsen’s “modern” drama was populist.²³ He lamented Ibsen’s abandonment of classical soliloquy and said that Ibsen was “. . . a great and dirty playwright. . . .” Brooke went so far as to take up the sword against what he now saw as the “revolt against Victorian hypocrisy.” As if to emphasize the point, Brooke voiced his admiration of Strindberg’s “honesty” in depicting human relationships especially because Strindberg would not give in to the feminism which plagued Ibsen’s work.²⁴

Unfortunately Brooke found little in America that encouraged him: American art was being ruined by its commercialization. On the whole he found the spectacular countryside melancholy because “. . . one misses the dead”—because the New World had no history to speak of and consequently “. . . it had no sense of purpose.”²⁵ Finally, before the cataract of Niagara Falls, he had the realization that he was not a modernist.

I am a Victorian after all. . . . I sit and stare at the thing and have the purest

²¹ Rupert Brooke, *The Poetical Works of Rupert Brooke*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London, 1946), 19-24.

²² Christopher Hassell, *Rupert Brooke* (New York, 1964), 467-69.

²³ *Ibid.*, 377ff.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 155-56.

²⁵ Rupert Brooke, *Letters From America*, 33-34, 38-39, 155-56.

nineteenth century thoughts, about the Destiny of Man, the Irresistibility of Fate, the Doom of Nations, the fact that Death awaits us All, and so forth. Wordsworth Redivivus. Oh, dear! Oh, dear!²⁶

For Brooke the war meant more than an escape from the prosaic and ignoble as well as the prospect of middle age and dotage. He saw the war as an opportunity to side with others who had found the modern sensibility enervating. In January 1915 he wrote to his friend, the poet John Drinkwater, that he now found the war.

... exhilarating and terrible. ... Still, its the only life for me, just now ... I'd not be able to exist, for torment, if I weren't doing it. Not a bad place to die, Belgium, 1915? I want to kill my first Prussian first. Better than coughing out a civilian soul amid bed-clothes and disinfectant and gulping medicines in 1950. The world'll be tame after the war, for those that see it. ... Certain sleepers have awoken in the heart. Come and die. It'll be great fun. And there's great health in the preparation. ... If you stay there you'll not be able to start afresh with us when we come back. [Charles] Péguy and [Georges] Duhamel; and I don't know what others. I want to mix a few sacred and Apollonian English ashes with theirs, lest England be shamed.²⁷

The war changed him not because he reveled in the prospect of violence but because the war allowed him and his generation to find the sense of purpose he had failed to find in poetry as well as modernity.²⁸ Brooke's supposed sacrifice, dying on his way to Gallipoli, was the basis of his enshrinement as the symbol of his generation which began with his obituary in *The Times*:

He expected to die; he was willing to die for the dear England whose majesty and beauty he knew; and he advanced towards the brink in perfect serenity. ...

... [H]e was all that one would wish England's noblest sons to be in days when no sacrifice but the most precious is acceptable, and most precious is that which is most freely proffered.²⁹

There are even closer parallels between Pearse, a Catholic committed to the gospel of redemptive violence, and the French poet Charles Péguy. Péguy was as obsessed as Pearse and Brooke were with the idea that his generation was the last hope, that history had presented them with an opportunity and an obligation to save what their nation and culture represented. In 1913 Péguy explained that this generation was to be offered up as a sacrifice "... because it had [had] to endure the mediocrity

²⁶ *The Letters of Rupert Brooke*, 491.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 654-55.

²⁸ Hassell, 472-73.

²⁹ *The Times* (London), 26 April 1915. Robert Wohl comments upon the irony of Brooke's death from an infection (without seeing combat) and the icon he became after the war. See Wohl's excellent *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge, 1979), 91-92.

of contemporary history.”³⁰ For Péguy redemption could only be found in a commitment to faith and belief in the nation of France restored to its glory—this was the source of personal spiritual integrity without which men lost themselves and the time for commitment was upon his generation. “We are the last. Almost beyond the last. Immediately after us begins another age, a quite different world, the world of those who no longer believe in anything; those for whom this is a source of pride and glory.”³¹

The idea of the French nation as the last repository of noble values so attracted Péguy in the last years before the first World War that he condoned violence in service to the nation, and he implied approval of the assassination of Jean Jaurès because it was a patriotic act. Péguy’s notion of the good evolved into one in which integrity, will, and faithfulness determined everything. “The Péguy of 1914 valued constancy over morality. In his eyes even a murderer had become a good man when he killed for the sake of principle.”³²

Péguy had come to see the defense of Catholic France as a divine mission against the modern spirit.

... [O]ur Christian sanctities ... [are] plunged into the modern world, in this *vastatio*, in this abyss of incredulity, of disbelief and unfaithfulness ... isolated like beacons vainly assailed during well-nigh three centuries of raging furious sea. ... The holy war is everywhere. It is ever being waged. All of us stand in the breach today. We are all stationed on the frontier. The frontier is everywhere.³³

Péguy posited a myth of the nation to stand against this modern tide. He attempted to raise Joan of Arc as the myth incarnate, both as the spirit of France and the refutation of the modern age. For Péguy the battle was between the national myth against the corrupting reason of positivism and the way was to be won by violence. “Our positivists will learn metaphysics as our pacifists will learn war. Our positivists will learn metaphysics by the firing of rifles.”³⁴ What the national myth required was willful self-sacrifice, without which men were doomed to an impotence which robbed them of their humanity. “Nothing is as murderous as weakness and cowardice. Nothing is as humane as firmness.”

The mythic idea of the nation was served by men who willingly sacrificed themselves on its behalf. Péguy made his sacrifice on behalf of

³⁰ Cited by Wohl, 249.

³¹ Charles Péguy, *Charles Péguy: Basic Verities, Prose and Poetry*, tr. Ann and Julian Green (2nd ed.; New York, 1943), 103.

³² Hans Schmitt, *Charles Péguy: The Decline of an Idealist* (Baton Rouge, La., 1967), 174.

³³ Péguy, *Basic Verities*, 177.

³⁴ Charles Péguy, *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, tr. Julien Green (New York, 1950), 159, 155.

the myth and died early in the war leading a suicidal charge against a German machine-gun position.³⁵ Péguy, like Brooke and Pearse and many others, believed that violence in service to a myth had powers of individual and cultural redemption. Serving the myth onto death meant eternal joy and beatification.

Happy are those who die for a temporal land,
When a just war calls and they obey and go forth,
Happy are they who die for a handful of earth,
Happy are they who die in so noble a band.

Happy are they who die in their country's defense,
Lying outstretched before God with upturned faces.
Happy are they who die in those last high places,
Such funeral rites have a great magnificence.³⁶

The outbreak of the first World War led even moderates to view the coming blood-letting as a joyous end to the decadence of a corrupt era. In August 1914 Thomas Mann wrote his brother Heinrich that whatever the war might bring it was a great opportunity not to be denied or avoided. "What a visitation! What will Europe look like, inwardly and outwardly, when it is over? . . . Shouldn't we be grateful for the totally unexpected chance to experience such mighty things?"³⁷ Mann was to write later that in 1914 he had believed that the war was to be ". . . a purification, a liberation, an enormous hope. . . . The victory of Germany will be a paradox, nay a wonder: a victory of soul over numbers. The German soul is opposed to the pacifist ideal of civilization for is not peace an element of civil corruption?"³⁸ There is little doubt that Mann at the beginning of the war saw the conflict as a cosmic clash in which Germany represented something old that was seeking liberation in the modern age.

Ernest Jones records that the normally pacifistic Sigmund Freud was no more immune than Mann was to these war enthusiasms in 1914. The declaration of war reinvigorated Freud.

[Freud's] response was rather one of youthfulness, apparently a reawakening of the military ardors of his boyhood. He said that for the first time in thirty years he felt himself to be an Austrian. . . . He was quite carried away, could not think of any work, and spent his time discussing the events of the day with his

³⁵ Marjorie Villiers, *Charles Péguy: A Study in Integrity* (New York, 1966; reprint ed., 1975), 382.

³⁶ Charles Péguy, *The Myth of the Holy Innocents*, tr. Pansy Pakenham (London, 1956), 93.

³⁷ Thomas Mann, *Letters of Thomas Mann: 1889-1955*, tr. and ed. Richard and Clara Winston (New York, 1971), 69.

³⁸ Cited in Hans Kohn, *The Mind of Germany* (New York, 1960), 253.

brother Alexander. As he put it: "All my libido is given to Austria-Hungary." He was very excitable, irritable, and made slips of the tongue all day long.³⁹

Pearse was, like many European intellectuals, concerned about the kind of life promised by modernity. Because of this he believed that the Easter Rising was not only a strike for Irish freedom; it was also a revolt against the kind of world which he believed was represented by England. By 1916 Pearse had come to see that armed rebellion was necessary to save traditional Ireland from the ravages of materialistic, rationalistic, and all too modern England. Denis Gwynn claimed that this idea occupied Pearse in the years before the Rising. Pearse "used to recur continually to the assertion that the people had lost their souls and were becoming vulgarized, commercialized, anxious only to imitate the material prosperity of England."⁴⁰ At one point Pearse, sharing the feelings of many who attended and rioted at the first production of the play, criticized J. M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* because he found the realistic dialogue to be "morally repugnant."⁴¹

Pearse found the source of Irish ills in English influence. As England was responsible for the increasing materialism of the Irish people, so it was also responsible for the institutions which acted to subvert Irish values and culture. As an educator and head of an "Irish-education" school for boys Pearse saw the English system as the culprit which had made Irish children into "willing slaves" in more than just the political and economic sense.⁴² Ireland was losing its soul to Great Britain's modernity and the educational revolution of which he felt himself to be a part represented something much bigger.⁴³ Pearse was the person who made Ireland's national cause into a matter of duty and a moral imperative against the modern world represented by the Empire which held Ireland against her will and corrupted her spirit.⁴⁴

Two signal points were stressed by Pearse that helped to establish him as the important figure he has been in Irish nationalism. Both points are revealing of the political climate of the time and also Pearse's personal development, demonstrating that the resolution and wholeness he sought personally spoke to the needs of radical Irish Republicans.

³⁹ *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and abridged Lionel Trilling and Stephen Marcus (New York, 1957), 336-37.

⁴⁰ Denis Gwynn, "Patrick Pearse," *Dublin Review* (1923), 93.

⁴¹ *An Claidheamh Soluis*, 2 Sept. 1907.

⁴² Padraic Pearse, *The Collected Works of Padraic Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches*, ed. Desmond Ryan (Dublin, n.d.), 16.

⁴³ Patrick Pearse to W. P. Ryan, 18 March 1915, Patrick Pearse Papers, University College, Dublin.

⁴⁴ Shaw, "The Canon of Irish History—A Challenge," 122-25, contending that Pearse's political ideas were unoriginal and lacked profundity (115), objecting to the monopoly of Pearse's legacy in Irish Republicanism, which has fixed its vision upon the Rising and its tactics, and questioning Pearse's Catholic orthodoxy.

The first point had to do with Pearse's belief in the need to act in some fashion. He thought, as did many of his contemporaries, that the arming of Orangemen in the North was spiritually the same thing as Fenianism, the difference being only one of goals.⁴⁵ Pearse believed that action by Irishmen was more important than anything. He came to see that his generation had an obligation from which, like generations of Irish patriots before, it had to discharge.⁴⁶ He grew to feel the pressure to act more and more, and this anxiety found expression in his writing and speeches. He was not above talking about it to friends either, as he told Denis Gwynn, "I would sooner see all Dublin in ruins than that we should go on as we are living at present."⁴⁷ Pearse desired an apocalypse which could release him and his generation from a present which was shameful.⁴⁸ Soon Pearse began to speak of violence as a means of freeing Ireland not only from Britain but also from its own inaction and lack of will.⁴⁹ Ireland was not free because it had allowed itself to be emasculated, and this emasculation had led to an acceptance of the impotence and dishonor of peace. This peace had to be overthrown because it was a peace which was "the devil's peace, peace with sin, peace with dishonor. . . ." ⁵⁰

For Pearse as for Péguy, and Brooke, and others, the way out was through self-immolation, to become, and die, a hero. Only then, he believed, could his "generation" (obviously a term for himself) no longer be ashamed because of its failure to act.⁵¹ Pearse believed that the means of overcoming had its own Irish precedent. What he wished to appropriate for this was the heroic ideal, which he believed had existed in the old Gaelic Order. But there are obvious problems with *choosing* myth as the basis of any course of political action in the twentieth century. The values of that myth, those exemplified in the eighth-century Irish epic, the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, were those of an archaic warrior elite. While Cúchulainn, the child-hero-redeemer of the *Táin*, wins his battle for glory, he loses the battle on earth. While he wins eternal triumph and renown, he is killed by his enemies. While he is vulnerable and mortal, he remains invincible. The idealization of this myth meant an acceptance of the heroic ideal and also of the hero's fate. The acceptance of death on behalf

⁴⁵ Bulmer Hobson, *History of the Volunteers* (Dublin, 1917), 198.

⁴⁶ Pearse, *Political Writings and Speeches*, 198.

⁴⁷ Gwynn, "Patrick Pearse," 94.

⁴⁸ Pearse, *Political Writings and Speeches*, 91-92.

⁴⁹ P. J. McGill, "Padraic Pearse in Donegal," *Donegal Annual*, 3 (1966), 78. For this theme in Pearse's poetry see his poem "The Renunciation," *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Plays, Stories, Poems*, ed. Desmond Ryan (Dublin, n.d.), 324-25.

⁵⁰ *Political Writings and Speeches*, 195, 218.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

of one's fellow man led Pearse to see Cúchulainn's death in defense of his country as a work of atonement like that of Jesus Christ.⁵²

From this came Pearse's celebrated notion of the blood sacrifice on behalf of Ireland. The power of the Crucifixion, so much a part of the Irish Catholic theology, Pearse joined together with the idea of Cúchulainn's noble death in the defense of Ulster. In both cases it was the shedding of blood which won the eternal battle and was, in Pearse's word "a cleansing and sanctifying thing."⁵³ Pearse thought he had seen this demonstrated when, on 26 July 1914, four nationalist supporters were killed and thirty-seven wounded by British troops. The "Bachelor's Walk Massacre" had, according to Pearse, served to "re-baptize the movement," and the bloodshed had served to rescue the Irish Volunteers from balking at fighting the terrible conflict that was to come.⁵⁴ In the midst of the Rising Pearse wrote that the sacrifices of the rebels served as "... a redemption of Dublin from its innumerable sufferings. . . ."⁵⁵ By 1916 Pearse believed not only that Cúchulainn's fate had meaning but also that it offered an example to be emulated which could rescue Ireland from its shameful present and Great Britain.⁵⁶ Thus the Rising was an attempt to embrace the power of the myth in the service of a chiliastic vision.

Patrick Pearse saw in Cúchulainn heroic violence sanctified. . . . Resurrected in the present, Ireland's past glories, pagan and Christian, gave birth to a new messianism which looked forward to that future time when a new Ireland would rise equal to the old.⁵⁷

This identification of Irish political and cultural hopes with the heroic fatalism of the *Táin* and Christian soteriology had greater ramifications than just the revolutionary syncretism of Celtic paganism and Christianity. The marriage of these elements in such a self-conscious way as an apocalyptic solution indicates just how difficult the search for an Irish political identity had been. The example of the Gaelic Order was bound to be fraught with peril in a modern world and the adoption of it as the core of a political commitment was clearly absurd. The synthesis of

⁵² O'Farrell, 262ff.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁵⁴ Patrick Pearse to Joseph McGarrity, 28 July 1914, Patrick Pearse Papers, National Library of Ireland.

⁵⁵ Patrick Pearse, *The Letters of P. H. Pearse*, ed. Seamus O'Buachalla (Atlantic Highlands, N.J., 1980), 372.

⁵⁶ Patrick O'Farrell (230-32) demonstrates that these kinds of feelings against modernity as represented by Britain were widespread in pre-Rising Ireland and popularly disseminated in the novels of Canon Patrick A. Sheehan. Cf., Patrick A. Sheehan, *Luke Delmege* (New York, 1901).

⁵⁷ O'Farrell, *Ireland's English Question*, 239.

Cúchulainn and Christ⁵⁸ required a leap of faith; nevertheless, this synthesis furnished an example which Pearse fashioned into a sacrificial modality for Republicans to reaffirm in their own sufferings and deaths. The fact that these ideas have endured demonstrates how important they are within Irish culture.

Embracing the world of the *Táin* meant that Pearse saw the need to accept all of its values and ideals. He maintained that his “Irish” school at St. Enda’s had been established to resurrect the old Gaelic Order’s system of education in order to “regenerate Ireland.” Pearse saw his school as a bastion standing in the way of the surrender to English values, the very values of corrupting civilization itself, the “... biggest impediment to these [i.e., ancient Irish] ideals.”⁵⁹ These ideals were to save Ireland and renew it through disciples who would be willing to fight and die with them in mind. In an odd Christmas reflection written from the school in 1910 Pearse declared that the student of St. Enda’s was being trained to be “an efficient soldier, efficient to fight, when need is, his own, his people’s, and the world’s battles, spiritual and temporal.”⁶⁰ To fight battles so would mean suffering and death, but it was only through sacrifice that Cúchulainn’s reward of salvation could pass down to new generations. In the words Pearse quoted from the *Táin* for the school’s motto, the means and the goal were clear: self-sacrifice on behalf of Ireland would assure eternal fame. “I care not though I were to live but one day and one night provided my fame and my deeds live after me.”⁶¹

This ritualistic courting of death and violence borders on the psychopathic.⁶² Pearse, and those who followed him to certain destruction, came to believe that their actions appropriated the transcendent power of the myth. Pearse failed to see that what he was really doing was attempting to reinvent the myth mimetically. Since myth is by definition impossible to invent, the reasons behind living a myth out in life seem to be irrational if not pathological. It is doubtful that myths can be,

⁵⁸ This fusion can be seen in several places in Pearse’s plays and poetry. The clearest dramatic examples can be found in “The King” and “The Singer.” Pearse’s self-identification with Christ can be seen in his poems “The Mother” and “A Mother Speaks.”

⁵⁹ Patrick H. Pearse, *A Significant Irish Educationalist: The Educational Writings of P. H. Pearse*, ed. Seamus O’Buachalla (Dublin, 1980), 331.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 339.

⁶¹ Martin Daly [Stephen MacKenna] (Dublin, Pamphlet in the National Library of Dublin), 17.

⁶² Seymour Byman, “Ritualistic Acts and Compulsive Behavior: The Pattern of Tudor Martyrdom,” *American Historical Review*, 83 (1978), 624-43. See also Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (New York, 1973), and Karl Menninger, *Man Against Himself* (New York, 1938). Invariably the Rising brings up questions of either actual or subintentional suicide, but with the exception of my “Patrick Pearse and the Politics of Redemption” (143-45, 192-93), the issue has gone largely untouched by serious scholars. I address this question more fully in a chapter to be published in a volume edited by Yonah Alexander and Alan O’Day.

except perhaps in a psychotic state, *consciously* experienced. Patrick Pearse appears to have sought what his rational mind could not furnish by living out the sacrifice that is at the heart of the myth. Through a ritualization of the hero's death Pearse hoped to experience the personal transformation which would make his incomplete life whole and establish his renown.⁶³

Pearse suffered severe psychological conflict which made the prospect of going out to die on Easter Monday 1916 seem attractive, even compelling. The most obvious conflict was his sexual backwardness and uncertainty. Pearse's sexual immaturity was severe, and in adulthood the behavioral aberrations of his youth and adolescence gave way to embarrassing paeans to the beauty of young boys and a compulsive interest in their welfare.⁶⁴ Like Rupert Brooke's, Pearse's writings are full of negative images of middle and old age, and his heroes are almost always children. The erotic imagery in his poetry as well as the mores and values of his culture suggest the possibility of sexual anxiety and tension.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, neither his sexual ambivalence nor his eroticization of death and violence was wholly unusual for his time; moreover, these traits manifested themselves thematically in the works of Pearse's fellow poets of the Rising.

In addition to his sexual immaturity, Pearse had been unprepared psychologically to take up adult responsibilities.⁶⁶ His father, who represented what would have been the normal model for establishing the young man's sense of autonomy and ideals, was notably absent from Patrick's emotional life. It does not seem accidental that Patrick, like so many Irish revolutionaries, should suffer from an English parent, and that he rebelled against his father's Englishness while embracing his mother's Irish heritage. Trained as a barrister, most likely because of his father's wishes, he began to pursue another career immediately after his father died and tried only one case.

Pearse suffered from the smothering attentions of his female relations throughout his life.⁶⁷ He declined to marry, and there is nothing to indicate that either he or his brother ever had romantic or sexual relationships with women. Nonetheless, in his dreams Pearse was often alone and away

⁶³ See Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, tr. Beatrice Hinkle (New York, 1916), esp. the chapter devoted to the heroic ideal and its unconscious origins. For an analysis of heroism from a Jungian perspective see Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York, 1949), and Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (New York, 1932).

⁶⁴ Moran, "Patrick Pearse," 174-78. "Peter Panism" was perhaps at a height during the period. J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* was first produced in 1904 and published in book form in 1911.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 224-25, and Chapter IV, "Ireland and the Politics of Redemption."

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 57-75 passim; 157-60; 64-72; and see Edwards, 44-48.

⁶⁷ Moran, 57-61.

from his inescapable family and the realities of this world: he was a child again, strong, capable, and free. As he wrote sometime in late 1914:

When people have been talking to me about national policies, I have been listening to the flickerings of the wings of flies on a window-pane that I once knew; in the midst of military plans and organizations I have been watching myself as a child come out of a certain green gate into a sun-lit field; or as a lad breasting great breakers beneath the moon, striving with strong white shoulders, wet and glistening.⁶⁸

Pearse talked constantly about failure, betraying his sexual impotency, emotional inadequacy, intellectual deficiency, and other perceived defects. The most compelling idea in his life was his often stated need to act—not only to express himself but also to act decisively in order to redeem himself. In Irish culture the idea of personal redemptive transformation was everywhere. It existed in the transformation symbolism of the Eucharist, and in the *Táin*, where Cúchulainn was transformed into an unstoppable warrior by his warp spasm. In both the Christian and Celtic concepts of transformation, base elements are miraculously changed into heavenly and divine ones.⁶⁹ In both cases the elements' potentiality was realized, a potentiality locked within their own natures, waiting to be liberated for some divine purpose. These ideas were utmost in Pearse's mind shortly before his death when he saw himself dying, as Robert Emmet had in 1803, for a divinely ordained purpose—a sacrifice for Ireland like Christ's on the Cross.⁷⁰ It was the transforming power of myth that attracted Pearse; he wanted to accept its offer of a wholeness which destroyed all self-doubts and inadequacies. Ultimately that wholeness came from a death which coupled the dead with the nationalist martyrs of the past and those who suffer for it in future.⁷¹ It was at this point that Pearse spoke of the need of a man who would shed his blood to redeem the nation and hand on the cause, now well served by one's own generation, to those that were to follow.⁷² While death was the inevitable payment for this redemption the martyr could die with the assurance that "Life springs from death. . . ."⁷³ In 1915 Pearse even went so far as to claim that Ireland could well learn from Europe the transforming power of death.

⁶⁸ Patrick Pearse, "My Childhood," *The Home Life of Patrick Pearse*, ed. Mary Brigid Pearse (Cork, 1934), 8.

⁶⁹ See C. G. Jung, "The Transformation Symbolism of the Mass," *Psyche and Symbol*, ed. Violet S. de Lazlo (New York, 1958).

⁷⁰ *Gaelic American*, March 1914.

⁷¹ Pearse, *Speeches*, 86.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 286. In a farewell speech to his students given shortly before the Rising, Pearse said: "As it took the blood of the Son of God to redeem the world, so it would take the blood of Irishmen to redeem Ireland" (*Political Writings and Speeches*, 98).

⁷³ Patrick Pearse, *Pearse and Rossa*, ed. Kevin T. McEneaney (New York, 1982), 10.

The last sixteen months have been the most glorious in the history of Europe. On whichever side the men who rule the peoples have marshaled them. . . . It is policy that moves the governments; it is patriotism that stirs the peoples. . . . It is good for the world that such things should be done. The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed by the red wine of the battlefields. Such august homage was never being offered to God as this, the homage of millions of lives given gladly for love of country.⁷⁴

The hard-bitten socialist Connolly bitterly attacked the anonymous author's tribute to death: "No, we do not think that the old heart of the earth needs to be warmed with the wine of millions of lives. We think anyone who does is a blithering idiot."⁷⁵ However, within months even Connolly was to agree, as were so many others, with Pearse's vision of blood-sacrifice and redemption. In an editorial written two months before the Rising Connolly embraced Pearse's vision. "Without the slightest trace of irreverence but in all due humility and awe, we recognize that of us, as of mankind before Calvary, it may truly be said 'without the shedding of Blood there is no Redemption.'"⁷⁶

Patrick Pearse spoke to a time and a society in which many had come to believe as he believed, and they followed him in his desperate action. His life was emblematic of that lived by many of his contemporaries, and his search for wholeness was mirrored in their search for spiritual wholeness in an age of rationality. Pearse sought to create through destruction, and his rejection of the modern age which faced Ireland came in a violent refutation of the politics and culture of reason. His personal need for the approval of history, a kind of eternal justification and sanctification, has been granted. His impact on history has been far greater in death than it was in life. By reconciling life and death in his violent search for wholeness, he paved the way for other Irish revolutionaries to follow.

The failure of Irish nationalists to find any pragmatic and peaceful solution to their search for cultural and political independence led many of them to seek solutions that were not bound by the notions of reason. It was Pearse who came to couch the solution in chiliastic terms which promised to free Ireland and to save Ireland from the modern spirit that England represented. With Pearse to inspire them these nationalists won their greatest victory through the self-destructive yet regenerative and liberating act of self-immolation. In all of this Pearse pointed the way; his lack of maturity and insight did not hinder him from taking on a role that a portion of his society was all too willing to grant him.

Pearse won in death what he sought in life, and his success marked a turning point in the history of modern Ireland. His contribution to

⁷⁴ *Spark*, December 1915.

⁷⁵ *Worker's Republic*, 25 December 1915.

⁷⁶ *Worker's Republic*, 5 February 1916.

that history should not, however, eclipse the fact that he brought to Irish politics concerns which were not limited to Ireland. Patrick Pearse was not a parochial enigma; like many of his generation, he was deeply concerned that modernity represented a threat to values and culture. By embracing the subjectivity of myth over the received dictates of reason and pragmatism, Patrick Pearse came to articulate the Irish rejection of modernity at that critical moment. That Pearse was Irish should not hide the fact that his vision was one that he shared with European intellectuals of the day. This should secure him a place in European intellectual history.

Montgomery College.