



THE MAN WHO TRIED TO GET THE HANG OF A JACK YEATS PICTURE.

# Republics of Difference

## Yeats, MacGreevy, Beckett

David Lloyd

Two puzzled observations: first, virtually every study of note devoted to Jack B. Yeats invokes the testimony of Samuel Beckett to the artist's singular greatness.

- 1 See Hilary Pyle, *Yeats: Portrait of an Artistic Family* (London, 1997). The epithets are selected more or less at random from her descriptions of the paintings.
- 2 Bruce Arnold, *Jack Yeats* (New Haven and London, 1998), ch. 6–8
- 3 *Dublin Opinion*, 8 (May 1929), 73

There is nothing peculiar in that: Beckett's are eloquent and authoritative statements, for reasons that have perhaps to do more with his stature than with the attention paid to his insights. Yet sketchy as Beckett's statements are, the accounts that invoke his authority make little effort to elaborate or to engage with the writer's quite idiosyncratic and solitary apprehension of Yeats's achievement and value. The invocation of the authority seems in no way to influence the approach to the paintings. Second, and no less puzzling, given the present general acceptance of the singularity and originality of Yeats's painterly technique in his later work, is how rarely critics undertake the formal analysis of it. Hilary Pyle, in her numerous and indispensable catalogues, gives us detailed accounts of each of the works reproduced, but even these remain essentially descriptive rather than analytical and are marked by the impressionistic, tonal vocabulary that has been the hallmark of Yeats criticism to date: 'exuberant', 'ruminative', 'elated', 'sombre', even 'Wordsworthian.'<sup>1</sup> Such impressionistic accounts of the paintings seek to render their undoubted force, but they do so at great cost. On the one hand, they do not pause to attend to the remarkable artifice, the compositional exactitude, of Yeats's most powerful work, giving instead an impression of Yeats's virtually naïve, notoriously untaught, spontaneity in his medium. In related ways, Bruce Arnold's peculiarly extended emphasis on the

youthful artist's childlike fascination with miniature theatres and paper boats eclipses attention to the mature artist's reflections, political or aesthetic, in a way that ultimately sells short the seriousness of his engagements.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, those impressionistic readings and the fascination with the apparent spontaneity of the artist's procedures, foreclose all too rapidly on the almost belligerent orneriness of the paintings and the unabashed difficulty with which they refuse to resolve to the viewer's gaze. Not for nothing did Yeats decline to permit reproductions of his works: prints, transparencies and digital images alike soften and flatten the sculpted dimensions of his brushwork, the stark transitions between virtually, sometimes even actually, bare canvas and astonishingly thick impasto, the unstable oscillation between the emergence of the figure and the foregrounding of the medium that dissolves even as it reveals. This difficulty that confronts the viewer has on occasion provoked hostility and mystification in face of the work and, precisely for that reason, should not be ignored or diminished. Indeed, if one wishes for an account of the difficulty of seeing a Yeats painting, an antagonistic and satirical cartoon in *Dublin Opinion* (Fig. 1) may serve better than much of what passes for art criticism.<sup>3</sup>

Where the latter seeks to make the work explicable and palatable, the cartoon has at least the virtue of capturing the labour of

Fig. 1: *Dublin Opinion*, 8 (May 1929), 73. Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland.

attention that the paintings exact and concludes, however sardonically, with an acknowledgement of their possibly unsettling effects.

But if we wish, as I believe we should, to take Yeats's not-so-modest claim to be 'the first living painter in the world' with some seriousness, we have surely to pay the paintings the more exacting attention they demand and begin at least to decipher the grounds of their originality and their continuing difficulty for the eye.<sup>4</sup> Beckett's valuation of him as being 'with the great of our time', which places him in the company of Kandinsky, Klee and Braque, amongst others, is scarcely to be dismissed: he was not given to flattery and his associations are hardly conventional.<sup>5</sup> The harder task is to decipher what Beckett's acute eye saw in Yeats's work (or, for that matter, to understand what Joyce meant in claiming that Yeats and he shared a 'method' or why an artist of the international stature of Oscar Kokoschka might have estimated Yeats so highly).<sup>6</sup> Beckett's remarks in his two published notices are not only too brief but also characteristically too enigmatic and reserved for us to do more than speculate on the grounds for Yeats's apparently powerful impact on him. This essay is, nonetheless, an attempt to understand Beckett's homage to Yeats through an approach to what he may have seen as formally significant in the paintings. Beckett's capacity for *attention* to visual work is notorious, and it is clear that his regard for the paintings that he valued was based on the significance of their forms rather than on any symbolic or allegorical meaning they might hold. Indeed, as we shall see further, the whole tendency of Beckett's writings on art (and not solely on Yeats) was antagonistic to either symbolism or allegory and even to representation itself. That antagonism places him, rightly or wrongly, in direct opposition to the predominant reception of Yeats, whether he be seen as the painter who gives expression

to the spirit of the nation or as one whose works are achieved, if enigmatic, symbols of emotional states or of individual memories. The question here is not so much whether Beckett was correct in his readings as it is to see what in Yeats's paintings might lend itself to such a radically antithetical vision.

The dominant view of Yeats in Beckett's own moment, which gave occasion for his first extended remarks on the painting, was that of their mutual friend Thomas MacGreevy. According to Beckett, the leading conviction in MacGreevy's short essay is that Jack B. Yeats is, in every sense, the most representative painter of the Irish nation. Beckett quotes MacGreevy as follows:

What was unique in Ireland was that the life of the people considered itself, and was in fact, spiritually and culturally as well as politically, the whole life of the nation. Those who acted for the nation officially were outside the nation. They had a stronger sense of identity with the English governing class than with the people of Ireland, and their art was no more than a province of English art. The first genuine artist, therefore, who so identified himself with the people of Ireland as to be able to give true and good and beautiful expression to the life they lived, and to that sense of themselves as the Irish nation, inevitably became not merely a *genre* painter like the painters of the *petit peuple* in other countries, and not merely a nation's painter in the sense that Pol de Limburg, Louis le Nain, Bassano, Ostade or Jan Steen were national painters, but *the* national painter in the sense that Rembrandt and Velasquez and Watteau were national painters, the painter who in his work was the consummate expression of the spirit of his own nation at one of the supreme points in its evolution.<sup>7</sup>

4 Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 234

5 Anthony Cronin's dismissive comments on the relationship between the two are especially egregious in this respect. Finding Yeats's work Romantic, he is surprised at Beckett's admiration and attributes it to personal needs: 'conceived as it was at a time in Beckett's life when he sadly needed someone to admire or look up to, it is a triumph of personal affection over critical or aesthetic considerations'. See Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (New York, 1997), 140.

6 For Yeats's relation to Joyce and to Kokoschka, see Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 235–36 and 220–21 respectively.

7 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York, 1984), 96; apart from adding a couple of commas, Beckett's citation substitutes 'a nation's painter' for MacGreevy's 'a national painter'. See Thomas MacGreevy, *Jack B. Yeats* (Dublin, 1945), 10. Beckett, *Disjecta*, hereafter cited in text as *D*, and McGreevy, *Jack B. Yeats* as *JBY*.

- 8 MacGreevy, *Jack B. Yeats*, 32. On representation, see David Lloyd, *Nationalism and Minor Literature: James Clarence Mangan and the Emergence of Irish Cultural Nationalism* (Berkeley, 1987), 95–98.
- 9 MacGreevy, *Jack B. Yeats*, 28
- 10 MacGreevy, *Jack B. Yeats*, 27
- 11 Though one might be tempted in each case to echo Gabriel Conroy's perplexed query, 'Of what was it a symbol?'. See James Joyce, 'The Dead', in *Dubliners* (Harmondsworth, 1975), 207.

MacGreevy's reading of Yeats's painting as 'the consummate expression of the spirit of his own nation' may itself be the consummate expression of a cultural nationalist aesthetic. Intrinsic to this aesthetic, which in Ireland dates back at least to the Young Ireland movement of the 1840s, is the conception of both the artwork and the artist as representative. As MacGreevy puts it:

Actually the peoples [sic] are represented only by disinterested men, and more particularly by artists. In resurgent Ireland the pioneer and first representative man in the art of painting was Jack B. Yeats.<sup>8</sup>

The play on the relation between the political and the mimetic usage of the term 'representation' is deliberate and explicit. The artist himself becomes representative of the national spirit by representing the life of the nation in painting. Not, as MacGreevy makes clear, that representing the national spirit requires 'strict adherence to the observed fact'; on the contrary, for a nationalist aesthetic, the transformative capacity of imagination redeems a damaged nation. One might say, drawing again on familiar Romantic precepts, that the act of representation is redemptively transformative in itself, in so far as it raises the scattered particulars to the permanent and universal, or to what MacGreevy terms 'the unchanging elements of reality'.<sup>9</sup>

In such terms, re-presentation is not mere depiction of the particular but an always transformative elevation of the particular to the universal that is a return of the nation to its essential self. The poetry of this painting is 'the splendour of essential truth'.<sup>10</sup> Even without MacGreevy's emphatic evocation of the symbolic dimensions of paintings like *In Memory of Boucicault and Bianconi*, the insistent deployment of a vocabulary of translucence — 'glowing', 'mystic brilliance', 'light and fire', 'inward intensity', 'radiance' — would be sufficient

to betray MacGreevy's investment in a symbolist reading of Yeats, a reading which has certainly been influential in subsequent readings of Yeats's work.<sup>11</sup>

In the terms of this nationalist/symbolist aesthetic, the representation of the particular is the outward manifestation of an inward spirit — the 'expression of the spirit of [the] nation', as MacGreevy puts it. An expressive aesthetic of this order thus assumes as given a discrete spirit or essence. This spirit is translucent in the outward form. The fragmented particular becomes consubstantial with the whole of which it is part. Representation here has the double sense of standing in for and of manifesting something. Thus the very process of representation restores the fragmented elements of the nation to wholeness by making each an aspect of the expression of the national spirit. In MacGreevy's account, Yeats's work answers to the need of the Irish in the early twentieth century 'to feel their own life was being expressed in art.' [JBY, 19] The very term 'life' here marks the threshold at which the expressive act is situated — on the boundary that marks the difference between and the fragile continuity of the inner life of a people (its spirit or vital force) and the outward manifestations of a more or less unreflective 'daily life' — the labours, pleasures, and habits of a people. Painting, as it were, opens a door between the damaged life of a heretofore hidden Ireland and the secret realm of its spirit.

The nationalist view of art, in which a political and an aesthetic *parti pris* are combined, that governs MacGreevy's essay on Yeats, could only be anathema to Beckett. His review of the work articulates what appears to have been a longstanding and a well-understood difference in the two writers' approaches to Yeats and to art in general. Pointedly distinguishing in the subtitles of his review between the aspect of Yeats that MacGreevy emphasizes as *The National Painter* and that which he himself promotes as *The Artist*, Beckett insists that

the ‘national aspects of Mr. Yeats’s genius have ... been overstated’ and proceeds to imply, briefly, curtly even, both the interested or aesthetically ‘impure’ grounds for that overstatement and reasons to suspect the validity of ascribing to Yeats an ‘imaginative sympathy’ with the Irish people (‘How sympathetic?’, the review almost maliciously enquires). In fact, the term Yeats himself invoked was ‘affection’. As he puts it in ‘The Future of Painting in Ireland’, a brief lecture included in the appendix to this essay, ‘And every day there are more Irish artists painting their own country and their own people, with the greatest equipment of the artist, affection. That affection for their fellows and for every rock, every little flash of water, every handful of soil, and every living thing in Ireland.’ There is little doubt that in his sceptical approach to the question of ‘imaginative sympathy’, Beckett reads Yeats against his grain, if only to shed light on other qualities in his work. [D, 96]

In what must be one of Beckett’s most resonant locutions, he dismisses any notion that Yeats’s paintings might represent a doorway between inner truth and outer reality, preferring instead a powerful image of closure: Yeats ‘is with the great of our time ... because he brings light, as only the great dare to bring light, to the issueless predicament of existence, reduces the dark where there might have been, mathematically at least, a door.’ [D, 97]

Beckett’s image here is at once deft, succinct, and devastating. The very valence of light, as that which shines through the particular to imbue it with possibly universal meaning, is reversed here, as the light becomes a dimly demystifying force, reducing darkness only to expose the absence of communication, of doors in or out. Not only does the image uncannily predict Beckett’s later short texts and plays, like *Lessness* (1970) and *The Lost Ones* (1970), *Not I* (1972) or *Eh Joe* (1966), it also catches the ambiguous quality of many of Yeats’s paintings, where the angled beam of light seems to be no conventional

indicator of optimism or hope, but a baleful and melancholy illumination, that serves only to enhance the gloom.

Clearly, for Beckett, what is illuminated in the imaginative glow of Yeats’s painting is not the particular restored to wholeness, but a series of disjunctive images deprived either of connection or determinate significance and expressive only of the missed encounter:

The being in the street, when it happens in the room, the being in the room when it happens in the street, the turning to gaze from land to sea, from sea to land, the backs to one another and the eyes abandoning, the man alone trudging in the sand, the man alone thinking (thinking!) in his box — these are characteristic notations ... [D, 97]

Beckett’s terse and uncompromising statement of his utterly different apprehension of the painter can scarcely have surprised MacGreevy. Beckett had already made his understanding of Yeats clear in letters (to some of which MacGreevy alludes) that emphasize, in similar tones, his perception of the paintings as images of alienation, suspension, disjunction — anything but representations of the continuity of artist and people, inner and outer, spirit and body. Beckett’s view of Yeats resonates rather with the post-Cartesian predicament of scission and disaggregation, between mind and matter, subject and object, that notoriously informs all of the writer’s work. As he wrote to MacGreevy, even as the latter was composing the first draft of the essay on Yeats:

I find something terrifying for example in the way Yeats puts down a man’s head and a woman’s head side by side, or face to face, the awful acceptance of 2 entities that will never mingle. And do you remember the picture of a man sitting under a fuchsia hedge, reading with his back turned to the sea and the thunder

Fig. 2:  
Jack B. Yeats  
*A Storm*  
1936  
oil on canvas  
46 x 61 cm  
private collection



12 Beckett to MacGreevy, 14 Aug. 1937, cited in James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York, 1996), 267–68

13 Beckett to MacGreevy, in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 267

14 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 755n.

clouds? One does not realize how still his pictures are till one looks at others, almost petrified, a sudden suspension of the performance, of convention of sympathy and antipathy, meeting and parting, joy and sorrow.<sup>12</sup>

It is probably impossible to tell to which of Yeats's paintings Beckett is referring to in recalling 'puts down a man's head and a woman's head side by side, or face to face', though the second painting is identifiable as *A Storm* (1936; Fig. 2). But it is clear that what holds his attention is precisely not what MacGreevy celebrates in the painter — 'movement and colour', fluidity and, of course, translucence of expression. [JBY, 27] It is, rather, this quality of petrification and suspension that seems to him quite antithetical to the 'sympathy' that

MacGreevy names as a dominant quality in Yeats. In the same letter, Beckett insists on the separateness, not only of human beings from one another, but also of the human and the natural in Yeats's work: 'What I feel he gets so well, dispassionately, not tragically like Watteau, is the heterogeneity of nature and the human denizens, the unalterable alienness of the 2 phenomena.'<sup>13</sup> Unlike the painting of Constable or Turner, whose 'nature is really infested with "spirit"', Yeats's 'final quale' is 'the ultimate *inorganism* of everything'. This inorganism is for Beckett not merely a quality of the represented of the paintings, but a matter of what the *forms* of the paintings articulate: 'A painting of pure inorganic juxtapositions, where nothing can be taken or given and there is no possibility of change or exchange.'<sup>14</sup> Nothing could be

further it seems, from MacGreevy's assertion that Yeats's 'concern with the natural scene itself was a human concern. He occasionally depicted it unpeopled, a solitude, but such a solitude as could clearly provide an enlargement of one's human experience.' [JBY, 12]

Such intense differences in perception and in the evaluation of the paintings signal, perhaps, the capaciousness of the paintings themselves, their openness to divergent readings that Yeats himself is known to have desired. At the same time, they derive from a marked difference in the aesthetic *and* the political assumptions of each writer. For MacGreevy, as we have seen, Yeats is the first and quintessential national painter; for Beckett, Yeats explores rather what he had described in a 1934 review, 'Recent Irish Poetry', as 'the new thing that has happened, or the old thing that has happened again, namely the breakdown of the object' or 'the breakdown of the subject' — in either case, the rupture of communication. [D, 70] Awareness of this situation makes it the artist's task to achieve a statement 'of the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects.' And, already in 1934, it is 'a picture by Mr. Jack Yeats' that he invokes, alongside T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, as exemplary of this awareness. MacGreevy appears to assimilate Yeats to a nationalist agenda, emphasizing the representative status of both the artist and his figurations, foregrounding those elements of his work that can be read as expressive of the national spirit, appropriating Yeats to an aesthetic that affirms the continuity of the spirit in the face of the disintegrative force of an *unrepresentative* colonial power. Beckett emphasizes rupture and discontinuity and the radically unreconciled relation of subject and object, and appropriates the painter no less forcefully to his apprehension of the 'issueless predicament of existence'. Yeats's paintings become the contested zone of two radically opposed conjunctures of aesthetic and political principles.

But doubtless, in following the terms that Beckett establishes in his review of MacGreevy on Yeats, one is drawn to exaggerate the differences, stark as sometimes they are. MacGreevy's essay is in some ways a much less coherent production than at first appears, and is marked by contradictions and countercurrents that trouble its ostensibly nationalist agenda. While Beckett's contempt for the Saorstát (the post-treaty Irish Free State) has often been emphasized, less has been made of the longstanding republicanism that MacGreevy and Yeats shared and which forms a barely occluded subtext of the essay. In the wake of the Civil War, which pitted republican radicals against the forces of the new Free State — to which MacGreevy refers disparagingly as 'the little almost republic of Ireland' — the identification of nationalism and republicanism is no simple matter.

Indeed, MacGreevy's essay on Yeats not only makes no secret of his own political affiliations, but insists on articulating both a republican interpretation of recent Irish history and his sense of the relation of Yeats's work to republicanism. This subtext ranges from references to 'the tanks and lorries of imperial terrorists' to an openly republican interpretation of partition:

The end of the prolonged struggle was that Ireland had not the one parliament that it wanted but the two it didn't want imposed on it. *Divide and rule*. The country was partitioned. The imperial connection remained. And with the adroitness of experienced politicians the imperialists laid the final odium of moral defeat on the Irish themselves. Ireland was launched on a civil war. [JBY, 25]

In this context, the discussion, or even the invocation of several paintings of Yeats's, gains implicit political significance: *Bachelor's Walk, In Memory* (1915), with its reference to the murder of Irish nationalists by the British army; *Singing the Dark Rosaleen, Croke Park* (1921), which

- 15 On this episode, see Mike Cronin, *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic Games, Soccer and Irish Identity since 1884* (Dublin, 1999), 87–88.
- 16 See Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford, 1997). Sean Kennedy, in his essay “‘The Artist who Stakes His Being is from Nowhere’: Beckett and Thomas MacGreevy on the Art of Jack B. Yeats”, in *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, 14 (Fall 2004), 61–74, collapses this crucial distinction between the official nationalism expressed in the Free State and the more recalcitrant republicanism espoused by MacGreevy and, it appears, Yeats. He also collapses both Yeats and MacGreevy with the views of Daniel Corkery which a reading of MacGreevy’s text or Yeats’s paintings does not really sustain. For Beckett’s critical relation to Corkery, see my ‘Writing in the Shit: Beckett, Nationalism and the Colonial Subject’, in *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin, 1993), 41–58.

depicts the singing of that patriotic ballad at the Gaelic sports arena that had become infamous for the Black and Tan massacre of Bloody Sunday the year before the painting’s completion;<sup>15</sup> *Communicating with Prisoners* (c.1924), which represents a group of women shouting up to republican women prisoners in Kilmainham Gaol during the Civil War; *The Funeral of Harry Boland* (1922), commemorating the death of the prominent republican leader; and, in the postscript of 1945, the peculiarly sombre painting *Going to Wolfe Tone’s Grave* (1929), of which MacGreevy parenthetically and somewhat redundantly remarks ‘the national note is struck as clearly as ever in the past’. [JBY, 37] As if it were necessary, that last remark serves to underline the significance of this canon of Yeats’s paintings and the kind of historical and political claim that is entailed in the assertion that Yeats is the preeminent Irish painter. In the first place, by establishing that the painter’s work affiliated him with republicanism and that his claims as an historical painter rest on paintings that commemorate the high points and the defeats of republican struggle, MacGreevy links Yeats’s own trajectory as an artist to disaffiliation from the present order and to a more or less proleptic relation to the nation he represents. Betrayed by the collusion with its imperial saboteurs of the nation that claims to be ‘once again’, the republican artist represents the nation that is ‘yet to be’, the still damaged but recalcitrant people. If, in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War, ‘fact and poetry had parted company’, it becomes inevitable that ‘Jack Yeats’s work became a passionate recall to poetry’. [JBY, 27] It is to this moment also that MacGreevy dates the major ‘modification of technique’ that begins to constitute Yeats’s later, more aesthetically uncompromising style. Both stylistically and politically, MacGreevy suggests, Yeats’s work is a refusal of the *status quo*, of the state that is in being. This trajectory of Yeats’s work, which

MacGreevy understands as belonging with the ‘subjective tendency’ of post-war Ireland, correlates to an ‘objective tendency’ both in the painter’s work and in Ireland itself. In these tendencies, we might say, republicanism withdraws into a kind of permanent if ‘obscure’ and dispersed opposition. The objective tendency, which is ‘to insist on the need for a definitive solution of Ireland’s political and, more particularly, social problems’, maintains the legacy not only of Pearse, but also of Connolly. Its oppositionality, in the moment, is ‘that it fulfills the perennial need to check up on authority’s liability to abuse its privileges.’ [JBY, 26] What may appear here as a strangely muted version of republican ideals in fact embodies an understated but no less significant principle of non-domination that, as Philip Pettit has argued, is critical to the specific understanding of freedom that is articulated throughout republican political thought.<sup>16</sup>

If the ‘subjective tendency’ of the movement manifests itself in the formal changes in Yeats’s work, the objective tendency appears in the content of his work. However, the changes are less marked than the continuity. Yeats’s longstanding devotion to depicting the common people of Ireland links him to the radical tradition of republicanism. MacGreevy’s implication, scarcely muted here, is that Yeats’s work has always allied him to the left-wing republicanism of ‘the sociologist [*sic*], James Connolly’:

It is not likely that Jack Yeats has remained untouched by this objective tendency. But as he has always painted the people, ‘the workers,’ in town and country, it would be difficult to trace any such influence as a new thing in his art. It is not yesterday or today that Jack Yeats discovered labouring humanity. At the Celtic Race Congress in Paris in 1923, he read a paper in which he gave it as his opinion that the most stirring sights in the world are a man ploughing



and a ship on the sea. He still paints the people, and with an even more passionate directness in recent years than in his earlier days. Sometimes there is more outward calm but more inward intensity, fire and imagination than there used to be. I think here particularly of the timeless figure of *The Breaker-Out*. Impassive now, but still desperate, he might be the child of *The Big Turf Fire* painted twenty-five years later.

[JBY, 26–27]

MacGreevy's final allusion connects the 1925 oil of a departing sailor, *The Breaker-Out*, with an early sketch of unmistakable political import that he analyzes earlier in the essay:

Jack Yeats found no occasion to go outside of the everyday scene for his material and there is no excess of emphasis in his statement. We may read satire and revolution into that early sketch in which a ragged boy tries to gain a few coppers standing on the roadside on a stormy night singing, of all songs, *The Big Turf Fire*. His arms are raised above his head in a wild gesture of desperation as he marks the rhythm with a pair of bones in his hand. But the artist was more than a satirist or revolutionist in the everyday sense. The incident was one of a variety of incidents he noted, and he perceived the import of it and found the appropriate statement of it as he perceived the import and found the appropriate statement of others that were utterly dissimilar. Of course every genuine artist is a revolutionist by the mere fact of being a genuine artist. Genuineness, truth, however peaceable, is always revolutionary — it is usually the counter-revolutionaries who make revolution bloody. [JBY, 23]

The 'truth' that is so revolutionary, and that the Irish counter-revolution of the Civil War period had bloodily suppressed, entails a different Ireland than that established and

made respectable by the official and conservative Catholic nationalism of the Free State. The Ireland mobilized by the left wing republicanism of Mellows, O'Malley, O'Donnell, Markievicz and Gonne was not that of the big farmers and graziers, the 'nation building' class of the new order, nor that of the small and larger business interests that, as Connolly had always predicted, would ultimately continue to serve the interests of British capital — what MacGreevy termed 'imperial masters' — even in a formally independent nation. It was, rather, the Ireland of the dispossessed, of the landless labourers and the workers who had fought for unionization and, in some cases, for soviet-style co-operatives, of the marginal people, the 'tinkers' and tramps, the rogues and derelicts, the ballad singers and roving musicians that populate Yeats's pre-war images of Ireland and who, in actual practice, so often proved recalcitrant to assimilation into the official nationalist movement with its need to refine and purify the spirit of the nation.<sup>17</sup> In this respect, Yeats's art could be seen to continue the traditions of recalcitrance to the law that MacGreevy sees as characteristic of an Irish anti-colonial mentality, so that his later painting projects decolonization as a process beyond the moment of formal independence. MacGreevy was right; Yeats saw his own work as an act of decolonization of the Irish visual imagination. As he puts it in 'The Future of Painting in Ireland', 'If he is a free man in a free country his eye is open and free. If he become a slave in a slave country he need never open a full eye. His masters will see all for him, and he becomes unable to express himself, except as the earth and stones express themselves.'

It is, indeed, no accident that when MacGreevy seeks to characterize the mentality of the dispossessed Irish on the eve of the War of Independence, it is not to a conventional historian that he turns but to the recently published memoir of Ernie O'Malley, the republican guerrilla,

17 See David Lloyd, 'Adulteration and the Nation', in *Anomalous States*, 88–124.

18 *JBY*, 17, cites O'Malley's *On Another Man's Wound*, published in 1936.

19 Terence de Vere White remarks: 'Most people by then [1920s] knew a drawing of a donkey by Jack Yeats. It was printed by the Cuala Press, which his sisters managed. The people who were disapproving of Bohemians would have wished that one Yeats should continue to reproduce that pretty little donkey, and the other the lake-isle of Innisfree, over and over again.' See 'The Personality of Jack B. Yeats', in Roger McHugh, ed., *Jack B. Yeats: A Centenary Gathering*, (Dublin, 1971), 23.

20 For example, Luke Gibbons, 'Synge, Country and Western: The Myth of the West in Irish and American Culture', in *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork, 1996), 23: 'The equation of rural life with all that is truly Irish has dominated the work of many modern Irish painters, but is particularly evident in the work of Jack Yeats, Paul Henry and Seán Keating.' Gibbons associates this with 'the idealization of the west', though his essay does much to complicate that equation in the case of Synge. Yeats's difference from either Henry or Keating will be suggested later in the present essay.

imprisoned by the Free State during the Civil War, who became a close friend of the painter and one of the earliest commentators on his work.<sup>18</sup> The pointers throughout the essay ask us to re-examine the pre-1922 body of Yeats's work in Ireland, on which — rather than on the later and most formally innovative paintings — his reputation as Ireland's foremost national painter is still based. Indeed, in so far as its broad public acceptance is concerned, that reputation probably rests on a mere handful of works, and principally those most frequently reproduced under his sisters' Cuala Press imprint and in subsequent mass-produced reproductions. Little wonder that in the 1930s he refused to permit reprints of those editions and, indeed, virtually repudiated them. Even his determined, if fruitless, attempt to ban reproductions of his work beyond his own death signals his vivid appreciation of the function of selection in defining — and domesticating — the reception of his *œuvre* as much as it does his desire to preserve the artistic integrity of his paintings *as paintings*.

The most cursory survey of Yeats's earlier drawings, paintings and illustrations of Irish material indicates how the selection and dissemination of his work has operated to contain and limit its range. The tendency of the reproductions is to emphasize the element of gentle whimsy in his depictions of Irish rural life, or the elements of fanciful, even boyish romanticism in the Cuala Press prints and broadsides.<sup>19</sup> A full sense of his engagement with a certain demotic, or even daemonic energy in the margins of Irish life (the sort of energy MacGreevy indicates in his description of *The Big Turf Fire*, an energy of contradiction and deprivation) seems to slip away through the refining filters of selection. This loss is not merely a matter of the *content* of the representations, though it is true that a principle of selection that emphasized his rogues and derelicts would give a quite different impression of his

understanding of the 'national spirit'. It is also a matter of what gets lost if one overlooks the compositional qualities that underwrite the scenes that energize him, qualities that emphasize an unruliness and insubordination that MacGreevy may be right to find more deeply internalized in the post-1922 paintings. As with his friend and travelling companion J. M. Synge, whose works on Aran and west Kerry and whose articles on the Congested Districts of Connemara he illustrated, it would prove too easy for even the most acute of critics to dismiss Yeats's work in this area as mere ethnographic romanticization.<sup>20</sup> The ethical comfort with which by now we dismiss the supposedly ethnographic gaze of early twentieth-century nationalists, as if they were simply primitivizing in the manner of Robert O'Flaherty, or as if the undoubted element of projection in their critiques of modernity fell on nothing more than a blank screen, risks missing their perception of more complex and subversive dynamics in the West's negotiations with modernity. But even as gently comic a drawing as *The Poteen Makers* (1912; Fig. 3), with its deft caricatures of the magistrates and of the onlookers — at once sympathetic and malicious — secretes an observation on Irish social life that easily passes unnoticed. For its focus on the magistrates' bench distracts from the peculiar fact that the accused themselves, whom the picture claims by its title to depict, are strangely absent from the scene. Their backs are turned to us; it is as if they abscond from our gaze as, perhaps, they seek to elude the force of the law that condemns them. Or in *The Wake House* (c.1908; Fig. 4), the scene of the crowded room frames the intent figure of a speaker occupying the vital site of the hearth, the mourning of the dead deflected, or, it may be, more fully realized in what seem to be the passions of political speech.<sup>21</sup> The faces of the crowd are again turned from artist and viewer, disregarding the act of representation as if the focus of the action is tangential or oblique to the gaze that seeks

to render and make sense of the occasion.<sup>22</sup> Or, to end with but one more of dozens of such images, in *The Felons of our Land* (1910; Fig. 5), as in the later *Singing the Dark Rosaleen*, the action of the ballad-singing is depicted at the margins of the sporting event, the ragged and derelict-looking assembly taking place at the edges of the main social gathering in which a nationalist like Daniel Corkery, or even MacGreevy himself on occasion, would have traced the image of the nation performing itself.<sup>23</sup> The title of the drawing in turn nicely poses the ambiguity as to whether ‘felons’ refers to the ballad itself or to those who sing and listen to it.

My point is, of course, that there is something in such works, modest in their ‘appropriate statement’ as they are, that already exceeds the merely ethnographic, as it does the simply nationalist, precisely by foregrounding what MacGreevy seems also to have observed, that ‘in Ireland, the whole people were below the law’. [JBY, 15] There is something in these events that defies the force of the law, the social order of the state and the gazes of its representatives, whether the police, the magistrate, or the ethnographic stranger — including ourselves as viewers. As these are representations of those who ‘cannot represent themselves’ and therefore ‘must be represented’, they are also no less representations of that which

eludes representation, which disappears from representation even in the glare of what it renders visible.<sup>24</sup> It is no paradox, then, as MacGreevy seems to suggest, that the condition under which Jack Yeats becomes the representative national painter is precisely one of a failure of representation in which the *petit peuple* is set over against ‘an unrepresentative possessing class’ and in which ‘those who acted for the nation officially were outside the nation.’ [JBY, 9, 17] The counter-revolutionary Free State does not, from a republican perspective, overcome that rift in representation, but in a sense exacerbates it, dividing the people from itself rather than unifying it, as a decolonizing nationalism seemed to, against the imperial power. The rift cannot be healed by the official nationalist means of offering a symbolic common ground, an idealized West, for example, in which difference might appear to be sublated. For this reason, MacGreevy could never consider Paul Henry as a potentially representative Irish artist in the same way as he did Yeats. For in Henry, more often than not, the effect of Irishness (the spirit of Ireland, in nationalist terms) is rendered through the evacuation of the landscape of the population that works it, fights over it, fights for it, that makes it a site of struggle rather than of reconciliation or repose. Or, where the peasants are represented, they are represented as an element, if a naturally

21 Travellers in Ireland, like Thomas Croker and Mrs. S. C. Hall, who witnessed keening and wakes in the nineteenth century, generally regarded them as probable sites of sedition, political talk, and general impropriety. See David Lloyd, ‘The Memory of Hunger’, in David L. Eng and David Kazanjian, eds., *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2003), 208–12.

22 See John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730–1840* (Cambridge, 1980).

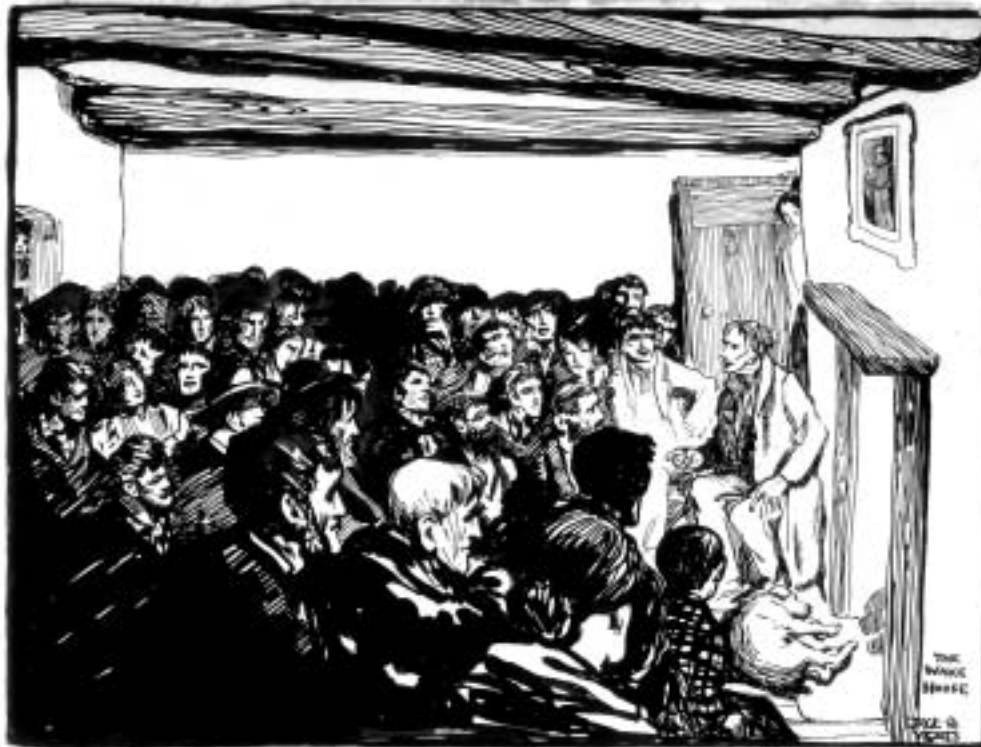
23 For Daniel Corkery’s use of such a scene as an instance of the ‘life of this people’, see his classic *Synge and Anglo-Irish Literature* (Cork, 1966), 22. I have commented on Corkery’s cultural nationalism and on Beckett’s distance from it in ‘Writing in the Shit: Beckett, Nationalism and the Colonial Subject’, in *Anomalous States*, 43–44.

24 Gibbons, ‘Synge, Country and Western’, 27, in the context of the American homesteader cites this famous formula of Marx’s *18th Brumaire*. All this suggests that, for Yeats, to be outside representation, in the position of the ‘subaltern’, is in no unambiguous way to occupy a position of disempowerment.



Fig. 3:  
Jack B Yeats  
*The Poteen Makers*  
1912  
pen, ink and  
watercolour on card  
30.5 x 19.5 cm  
National Gallery of  
Ireland, Dublin

Fig. 4:  
 Jack B. Yeats  
*The Wake House*  
 c.1908  
 pen and ink on paper  
 22.5 x 29.4 cm  
 National Gallery of  
 Ireland, Dublin



embattled element, of the landscape itself, as in *The Potato Diggers* (1912; Fig. 6).

Refusal of the subordination of the human figure to the landscape or, by the same token, of the heroic domination of the landscape by the human, is intrinsic to Yeats's work, according to both MacGreevy and Beckett. Indeed it is precisely here that both critics converge, in their recognition of Yeats's recalcitrance to any mode of premature reconciliation. Where Beckett apprehends this in terms of the 'petrification' of figure and landscape, MacGreevy approaches it through what he understands as Yeats's singular innovation in the history of painting, the striking of 'a new balance between the landscape and the figure':

With Jack Yeats, the landscape is as real as the figures. It has its own character as they have theirs. It is impersonal. They are the reverse. But the sense of the impersonal is an enrichment of the humanity of the figures. And conversely, the opposition heightens the sense of the impersonal character of the landscape ... I do not think I am claiming too much for Jack Yeats when I say that nobody before him had juxtaposed landscape and figure

without subduing the character of either to that of the other ... Association and apartness at one and the same time have never been more clearly stated in terms of art. [JBY, 13–14]

This is an extraordinary insight by MacGreevy into what provides the underlying dynamic of so many of Yeats's later works. It is an observation that I would want to extend from the relation of landscape to figure (its justness here being exemplified by any number of paintings, from *O'Connell Bridge* [1925], where the landscape is urban, to *Men of Destiny* [1946] or *Many Ferries* [1948]) to other relations, formal and figurative, in the paintings — from the relationships among figures themselves to the relation of figuration to the material aspects of the medium itself. What MacGreevy variously comprehends as balance, or as 'association and apartness', seems to me to lie at the heart of the dynamic tensions that trouble the viewer's gaze before the most achieved of these canvases. It is as if the recalcitrance to representation that was depicted over and again as a quality of the figures *in* the early works is drawn into the very process of figuration, as if, to bend MacGreevy's terms

only slightly, an objective tendency in relation *to* representation becomes a subjective tendency *of* representation.

It is well known that the most immediately striking aspect of the transformation of Yeats's style through the 1920s and 1930s is his gradual abandonment of line. The early oils are marked by the predominance of sharp outlines bounding the figures and the visual foci of the image, what Bruce Arnold aptly refers to as 'drawing in oil paint'.<sup>25</sup> This is true not only for the illustrations to *Irishmen All*, whose technical qualities Arnold nicely analyses, associating them with the line drawing of *A Broadside* or with Yeats's experience of poster-work. It is no less true of free-standing oil paintings like *Bachelor's Walk* or *The Double Jockey Act* (1916; Fig. 7). In the former, the figures of the flower girl and the boy at her side stand out starkly from the street, the pavement and the walls behind them, as if backlit, or even as if collaged onto the already-painted scene (Yeats's miniature theatres come to mind at once). Facial features and the divisions of skin from fabric, as well as from the background, are clearly delineated. Here figure stands out from its ground emphatically. In *The Double Jockey Act*, painted only a year later, already *within* the figures a freer brushwork seems to be emerging — the skewbald horse and the features and clothing of the jockeys and the clown have lost sharpness of definition and boundary in a way that



Fig. 5:  
Jack B. Yeats  
*The Felons of  
Our Land*  
1910  
ink and watercolour  
on card  
30.5 x 19.5 cm  
National Gallery of  
Ireland, Dublin

Fig. 6:  
Paul Henry  
*The Potato Diggers*  
1912  
oil on canvas  
51 x 46 cm  
National Gallery of  
Ireland, Dublin



25 Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 180. See also 198 and 229–30 for further remarks on the transition in Yeats's work away from line and on the later oil technique that emerges with that break.

26 Pyle, *Yeats*, 204, comments on a number of these features in the painting.

27 Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 191

contributes to the demotic sense of energy that radiates from the painting. The effect of the very visible brushstrokes here, and of the pointillistic texture of the arena floor, begins to oppose the tendency to bounding line.<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, the overall composition is strongly delineated, the red-striped canvas of the tent and the upright poles clearly distinguishing and outlining the various fields and depths of vision. There is a distinct tension in the work between the impulse of the draughtsman and that of the painter.

Just as the sharp illustrator's outlines make the often-reproduced drawings of *Life in the West* and other Irish scenes susceptible, if wrongly, of an ethnographic or a

sentimentalizing appropriation, so the clear outlines and the relief into which they throw the figures against the background predispose a painting like *Bachelor's Walk* to being 'used as a nationalist ikon, and a symbol'.<sup>27</sup> The very 'standing forth' of the human figures projects them into a representational status that is both their 'standing for' the nation as its types *and* a mode of pictorial clarity or accessibility. Nothing obscures the significance of the act and its pathos. Indeed, by a kind of visual pun one might say that the clarity of outline correlates with the clarity of expressive visual communication, the translucence of the meaning in the image, of the general in this particular, that composes the symbol. In such a painting, in fact, Yeats comes

closest to the formal qualities of an epic historical and unambiguously national painter like Seán Keating, whose canvases are marked by strong typological figuration, deliberate symbolic, even allegorical significance, and, above all, a stark outlining of figure against background.

This is not intended as a reductive comparison, but rather to mark the technical and formal transfiguration of Yeats's work in both its radical nature and its political significance. Neither of them lies simply in a shift in content or subject matter, from 'a perception of countrymen in relaxation' to 'the loneliness of the individual soul', as Ernie O'Malley put it, or from specificity to images 'less firmly fixed in time and space', as John Rothenstein claimed.<sup>28</sup> There is, obviously, nothing intrinsically less poetic or less lonely and individual, or even more specific, in *The Circus Dwarf* (1912) or *Derelict* (1910) than in *No Flowers* (1945) or *A Morning in the City* (1937). We are obliged, rather, to turn to the significance of the actual mode of representation rather than to the objects represented to grasp the import of the paintings, the way in which they seize and work on the viewer's gaze.

Any number of Yeats's later paintings would serve to exemplify the activity of the gaze that his canvases demand and provoke. We will focus on two here that manifest somewhat different aspects of the painter's technique and its effects. *Two Travellers* (1942; Fig. 8) is one of Yeats's better-known paintings, partly because the Tate Gallery purchased it, partly because it has been associated with the set of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>29</sup> Thematically, the painting resumes many of Yeats's visual preoccupations. Two men, in well-worn clothing, encounter one another on a rough track in a coastal landscape. Heavy clouds suggest an imminent rainstorm, though the skyscape is lighter over a choppy sea in what is presumably the West, where a faint

rose light illuminates the clouds and falls on one traveller's face. The encounter remains an enigma: are they strangers or acquaintances? Of what do they speak? How far are they travelling? What brings them to this otherwise desolate and apparently uninhabited terrain? Where is each headed? In this respect, the painting is of course susceptible either of Beckett's understanding of Yeats's images as disjunctive and suspended, or of MacGreevy's reading of this painting as 'an apparently casual encounter in a world of mystery', revealing a new 'exalted tragic consciousness'. [*JB*, 37] It is also potentially open to Brian O'Doherty's dismissive criticism of Yeats's romanticization of the figure of the traveller, in the course of which he effectively reduces the later work to identity with the early illustrations and broadsides, all equivalent in their representation and mythologization of the national character as that of the outsider.<sup>30</sup> And yet to turn from the thematic paraphrase of the painting (the aspect of the painting that reproduction tends to foreground by flattening out the texture of the medium) to its formal and technical qualities is to engage with a much less stable phenomenon that obliges what Beckett calls the 'labour' that is engaged 'between such a knower and such an unknown'. [*D*, 95] The obligation to labour constitutes the difficulty that obtrudes in almost every instance of the later painting between a thematic statement that can be reduced for conventional consumption or, as O'Doherty complains, national self-flattery, and the work itself, in every sense of that word. That labour evoked by the work departs markedly from the lucidity of representation that makes earlier paintings like *Bachelor's Walk* so much more readily available for iconic use.

Confronting *Two Travellers*, one is almost certainly struck at once by the paint surface itself and by the difficulty of resolving the image out of the paintwork. The same effect

28 Ernie O'Malley, 'The Painting of Jack B. Yeats', in McHugh, *Centenary Gathering*, 68; John Rothenstein, director of the Tate Gallery, quoted in Arnold, *Jack Yeats*, 231

29 See, for example, Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 378–79. Peggy Phelan, in her article 'Lessons in Blindness from Samuel Beckett', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 119, 5 (Oct. 2004), 1279–92, which appeared as this essay was in press, sees Yeats's *The Graveyard Wall* (1945) as a possible source for the play. I cannot corroborate her sense, but am pleased to see how closely her description of Beckett's 'rhythm of looking' correlates to my own sense both of Beckett's gaze and of Yeats's mature style and the demands it makes of the viewer. She writes: 'It oscillates between seeing and blindness, between figuration and abstraction, between the void at the center of sight and the contour of the slender ridge that brooks it.'

30 Brian O'Doherty, 'Jack B. Yeats: Promise and Regret', in McHugh, *Centenary Gathering*, 80–81 and *passim*

Fig. 7:  
Jack B. Yeats  
*The Double Jockey Act*  
1916  
oil on canvas  
61 x 46 cm  
National Gallery of  
Ireland, Dublin





can be observed in many of Yeats's late paintings, notably, for example, *Grief* (1951; Fig. 9) or *Above the Fair* (1946; Fig. 10): it is often extremely difficult to achieve a total image of the painting no matter where one stands before the canvas, and wherever one stands, one has the impression of seeing the work at a different depth of focus, so to speak. It is as if the represented of the painting continually dissolves back into the medium of the representation, resisting totalization and renewing the work of the gaze at every turn.<sup>31</sup> In *Two Travellers*, not atypically, the layering of the oils is at very different thicknesses, ranging from the thinnest of layers to a dense impasto. The grey cloudscape that stretches from the expanse of sky in the upper left corner across the line of the hill or mountain that becomes an abrupt cliff to the right is a thin film through which the bare canvas can at points be glimpsed. To the far mid-right, the dark blue of the sea is thickly layered, but scored at points by brush handle or palette knife to reveal bare canvas, producing the effect of lines of surf foam at the cliff's base. Just right of centre, along the side of the road or path that

bisects the painting, an extraordinary stretch of primary colours — predominantly yellow, red and green — is dashed unmixed and thickly on to the canvas and apparently, from the lack of brushmarks, applied directly from the tube or perhaps the finger to the canvas. Similar patches of bright primary colour appear to the left of the two figures, but in neither case do these vivid and heady patches of colour resolve into the conventional outlines of the vegetation they must be taken to represent. The thickest impasto composes the two figures. In evident contrast to the earlier oils, however, no firm bounding lines enclose them. On the contrary, they are composed largely out of the same oil tones as the landscape immediately surrounding them; at points, such as the right leg of the left-hand traveller, they are literally carved out of the depth of the paint by, presumably, the tip of the brush handle. The figures seem at one moment to be sculpted almost three-dimensionally out of the surface of the oil paint, at another to merge back into it, the figure becoming consubstantial with the medium. In such a technique, 'drawing in oils' takes on an entirely new meaning.

31 This is precisely the effort that the *Dublin Opinion* cartoon captures: see Fig. 1.



Fig. 8:  
Jack B. Yeats  
*Two Travellers*  
1942  
oil on wood  
91.5 x 122 cm  
Tate Gallery, London

Fig. 9:  
Jack B. Yeats  
*Grief*  
1951  
oil on canvas  
102 x 153 cm  
National Gallery  
of Ireland, Dublin



The mobility of the gaze that is obliged by this highly plastic application of the oils is reinforced by the overall composition of the painting. With an effect that is again largely lost in the flattening of reproduction, the canvas appears to be constructed of overlapping and competing zones of focus. While at one moment the two figures in the foreground appear to dominate, the eye is almost immediately led either to the upper left quadrant of the lowering sky by the figure's vertical posture, or by the intense primary colours to the roadway and then, by a sharp rightward turn of the line described by those pigments at the base of the cliff and its continuation in a fine line of red, to the sea- and skyscape of the upper right quadrant. These various zones of focus are not discrete, however, but overlap and penetrate each other while being linked by the roadway whose line of sight projects diagonally from the lower left through the standing figures towards the upper right. The effect of these distinct but overlapping compositional zones is to prevent the eye from coming to repose. In this sense, the painting forcefully confirms MacGreevy's insight, based on earlier work of Yeats's, as to the 'balance' between figure and

landscape, but does so in a way remarkably more dynamic in every respect. It is not only that within the representation the eye moves without dominative hierarchy between what would otherwise be 'figure' and 'ground', but that the gaze moves, is obliged to move, simultaneously between the representation, the image in the painting, and the medium of the representation, the material of the painting. The dimension of artifice, the material that composes the image, is not subordinated to the image: rather, its surfaces, depths and plastic textures are foregrounded in a way that dissolves the figure even as they supply the medium through which it emerges. The oscillation of the eye between material and representation produces the paradoxical effect of suspension to which Beckett refers, like a sustained tremolo in musical composition.

In this relative autonomy of medium and representation, Yeats's rejection of reproductions is aimed at the preservation of the work *as work*, as the difficult locus of an unachievable labour of looking. The rejection does not have as its aim a reactionary preservation of aura, in which the symbolist translucence of the image

through the transparent medium might be maintained. Instead it is based on the wish to retain the sometimes vertiginous oscillation between the image and its material medium. The relation here between the visual 'content' and the formal or technical means is much as Theodor Adorno describes the relation of content and technique with regard to the new music that was emerging more or less contemporaneously with Yeats's career as an artist:

Content and technique are both identical and non-identical because a work of art acquires its life in the tension between inner and outer; because it is a work of art only if its manifest appearance points to something beyond itself ... The unmediated identity of content and appearance would annul the idea of art. For all that, the two are also identical. For in composition, that which has been made real is all that counts. Only philistines can entertain the notion of a ready-made and self-contained artistic content that is then projected into the external world with the aid of a

technique conceived of in similarly thing-like terms. Inner experience and outer form are created by a reciprocal process of interaction.<sup>32</sup>

This dialectic of content and technique is less formally implied in Yeats's own remarks to interviewer Shotaro Oshima concerning the stylistic changes in his work: 'Things in the external world may seem always the same to some people, but an artist finds them different when a change is brought about in him. He must not try to go against this inner change.'<sup>33</sup>

What this conception of the mutual autonomy of content and technique suggests is no less that every occasion, every image to be produced, requires a different technical solution; that composition, in painting as in music, requires different modes of deployment of its medium, specific to that occasion. To turn from *Two Travellers* to *The Old Walls* (1945; Fig. 11) is to see Yeats deploy a similar repertoire of techniques modified for a quite different conjunction and to equally different effects. Here, a solitary figure stands enclosed by a

32 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Music and Technique', in *Sound Figures*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Stanford, 1999), 197–98

33 Shotaro Oshima, 'An Interview with Jack Butler Yeats', in McHugh, *Centenary Gathering*, 52–53



Fig. 10:  
Jack B. Yeats  
*Above the Fair*  
1946  
oil on canvas  
91 x 122 cm  
National Gallery  
of Ireland, Dublin

Fig. 11:  
Jack B. Yeats  
*The Old Walls*  
1945  
oil on canvas  
46 x 61cm  
National Gallery of  
Ireland, Dublin



space of ruins, the whole being suffused by a yellow light that is totally appropriate to those melancholy light effects that I referred to earlier. If the dark patch to the left of the standing figure is, as it appears to be, his shadow rather than a bush or clump of weeds, then the light that enters the ruined structure is the low light of a rising or setting sun. This painting, which Beckett could have seen on his immediate post-war visit to Ireland, shares some of the colour tones of *A Storm*, on which he commented in his letter to MacGreevy and of *A Morning* (1935–36), that he had purchased from Yeats in the mid-1930s. Here, the variation in the application of the oils is no less marked than in *Two Travellers*, but to quite different tonal effect. The figure upper-centre and his shadow to the left are zones of thick, dark impasto while the walls that constitute the upper segment and the sides of the painting are composed of an astonishingly thin layer of paint, in many places consisting of virtually bare canvas. There is a certain bravura in this willingness to compose so much of the painting from the exposed canvas that underlies the image,

pushing what MacGreevy refers to as the ‘swift and summary ... brushwork’ that shapes his figures to a further limit. [JBY, 15] Here, however, the treatment is not of the figure, but of the walls between which the figure stands, a structure that becomes attenuated to apparent translucence: it is virtually the formal antithesis of the two paintings that MacGreevy singles out on account of the disappearance of the figures into, respectively, background and motion, *Going to Wolfe Tone’s Grave* and *The Salt Marshes* (n.d.). In *The Old Walls* it is the human figure that bears the substance of the painting, while the ruins around him seem to fade and dissolve from representation. It is an effect that recurs with remarkable frequency in the later paintings, where even what appear to be still-whole structures lose substance and solidity in relation to the light and to the human figures that move across them (see, for example, *The Breakfast Room* [1944], *A Silence* [1944], *The Music Room* [1946], *In the City’s Heart* [1950], or *Grief* [1951]). The paradoxical effect of this is, on the one hand, to make the human figure seem more solid and substantial than its

material environment: we might then see the contemplative figure of *The Old Walls* standing out against the structures he has outlasted; on the other, it is to make the human presence seem, by virtue of its very solidity, a ghostly remnant of things that have passed away, seeking to summon them once more to presence.<sup>34</sup> The very application of the paint thus enacts the oscillation of memory and loss, representation and the evanescent present, staging technically the insubstantiality of substance and the accumulated patina of perception and reflection that makes memory a filter or screen rather than a translucent medium. The formal as well as iconic tension that insists here between the figure and its ground transforms the ‘balance’ between landscape and figure that MacGreevy noted into a reflection on the medium of representation itself. The canvas as painted becomes in its technical bravura an index of the extent to which the opacity of the subject, with its dense layerings of memory, obtrudes between the representation and the object that eludes it, fading ultimately into ruination.

This rigorous foregrounding of the technical problems of representation constitutes the enduring difficulty of viewing Yeats’s paintings as visual totalities: standing before his canvases, one is constantly forced to move back and forth between technique and image, figure and medium, undecided as to which dominates. This recalcitrance to visual consumption of the image belies equally those who seek to celebrate Yeats for his romantic nationalism and those who, like Brian O’Doherty, deprecate him for the same. Both appropriations of his work are as reductive of the aesthetic concept of romanticism as they are of the paintings themselves, levelling one to mere fanciful idealization and the other to mere iconic thematics. Yeats’s painting defies every effort to reduce it to figurative translucence, whether in the form of the translucence of the symbol that informs a nationalist

aesthetic or in that of a classical painting in which, as Louis Marin has argued, ‘the material “canvas” and “real” surface must be posited and neutralized in what is essentially a technical, theoretical and ideological assumption of transparency’.<sup>35</sup> On the contrary, Yeats’s painting foregrounds its material conditions of representation with an effect that is the antithesis of mimetic reflection of the world. It is to this formal recalcitrance of Yeats’s painting, rather than simply to any contingent affinity with his representations of tramps, clowns or derelicts, that we can most fruitfully trace Beckett’s high estimation of the painter. The period during which Beckett befriended and engaged most closely with Yeats was also that in which he was beginning to articulate his own approach to art and was singularly exercised by the problem of representation and with the problematic relation, already cited, of subject to object. Where for Yeats the difficult relation of representation to represented was articulated in a painting that foregrounded the tension between figure and medium, for Beckett, most notably in his critical essays of this period and throughout the restless experimentation of his writing, an analogous tension first emerges in the relation between language and its objects. For Beckett, that relation later ceased to be phrased as a question of *two* distinct domains — whether of language and self-consciousness or of language and percepts — and became (as for Adorno and Yeats) more precisely a question of *one* domain in which medium and representation are undecidable aspects of the work. From at least *The Unnamable* on, there can be no distinction between medium and content: representation is what is represented; what can be represented is representation.

But through the 1930s and 1940s, Beckett continues to articulate the problem of the writer through what may have been for him at first a necessary distinction between the two. As he writes in 1937 to his German friend Axel Kaun:

34 This may be especially true of *A Silence*, which has been seen as an assembly of dead and living friends, including, in the foreground, J. M. Synge.

35 See Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*, trans. Mette Hjort (Chicago, 1995), 47.

And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it ... As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling in disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it — be it something or nothing — begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. Or is literature alone to remain behind in the old lazy ways that have been so long ago abandoned by music and painting? [D, 171–72]

Language for Beckett at this point remains conceived of metaphorically as a *veil* between the object external to it and the representation that it constitutes, although the counter-analogy with music and painting suggests that he may already be grasping for a notion of an art in which there is no distinction between form and matter.

As he proceeds, he articulates a project that, though the analogy here is to music, remarkably resembles Yeats's use of his artistic materials:

Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved, like for example the sound surface, torn by enormous pauses, of Beethoven's seventh Symphony, so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence? [D, 172]

And it is, in fact, to painting that Beckett most consistently turns to find analogies for his own predicament as a writer. What is striking, however, is that despite the antagonism to representation and to expression that informs his criticism of MacGreevy and his art criticism in general,

Beckett does not turn for a solution to abstraction, as one might expect, but rather to artists who seem to be linked only in their exploration of the limits of figuration: Yeats, Bram Van Velde, and, later in his life, Avigdor Arikha. He remarks in his review of Denis Devlin's *Intercessions* that 'it is naturally in the image that this profound and abstruse self-consciousness first emerges with least loss of integrity ... First emerges.' [D, 94] That insistent repetition (separated from the first instance by several sentences, thus requiring a noticeable effort of recall) is also a qualification. Beckett's fascination with the qualities and paradoxes of the image remains a constant of his work, so much so that the images he isolates from Yeats's paintings remarkably anticipate those of the short texts and plays of the 1960s. But the condition of the image's emergence, as the representative of self-consciousness, is no less the condition of its fading, a point on which those texts, with their cyclical fadings in and out of visibility, insist. This is already for Beckett in his writings on painting, the crux of the gaze that painting obliges in its staging of the undecidable relation between image and medium:

Whence comes this impression of a thing in the void? Of artifice [*de la façon*]? It's as if one were to say that the impression of blue comes from the sky. [D, 125; *my translation*]

This perplexity as to the object of representation, in representation, and to its referents is bound up with the act of looking itself, in which the viewer's disequilibrium becomes a kind of self-referential slapstick. Beckett's 'amateurs' in the museum or gallery 'look first from far away, then close up, and ... in particularly thorny cases, assess with their thumbs the depth of the impasto.' [D, 120; *my translation*] Though this passage concerns painting in general and the Van Velde

brothers in particular, perhaps no better or more succinct account of the process and difficulty of looking at a Yeats painting could be achieved.

But none of this resolves the question of the relation of the medium to the represented. Which is it that is recalcitrant, the figure that insists on its emergence or the medium into which again it dissolves before the oscillating gaze? For Beckett, this 'issueless predicament', the aporia into which so reflexive an artwork throws the viewer, is thoroughly melancholic. It is a condition that leads him to speak, writing still of the Van Veldes, Geer and Bram, of *le deuil de l'objet*, mourning for the object (or the mourning of the object — the ambiguity of the French genitive is carefully poised). This mourning is not one that can be alleviated, least of all by abandoning the attempt to represent:

It seems absurd to speak, as Kandinsky did, of a painting liberated from the object. That from which painting is liberated is the illusion that there exists more than one object of representation, perhaps even of the illusion that this unique object would let itself be represented ... For what remains of representation if the essence of the object is to abscond from representation? [*D*, 136; *my translation*]

The persistence of an obligation to represent, because painting cannot be freed from the very object that eludes it, leads to a painting whose condition is a ceaseless unveiling that reveals only further veils, as if the medium cannot dispense with the medium that hinders its ends, any more than language, as the Unnamable will discover, can put an end to the obstruction of language: 'An endless unveiling, veil behind veil, plane on plane of imperfect transparencies, an unveiling towards the ununveilable, the nothing, the thing yet again.' [*D*, 137; *my translation*] This thing

that insists and is at once no-thing, this thing that eludes representation, remains the melancholic 'core of the eddy', encrypted beyond the reach of a subject that nonetheless cannot abandon the urge to capture it.<sup>36</sup> 'Siege laid again to the impregnable without,' as Beckett later writes of his friend Arikha. [*D*, 152] Though it may seem absurd to align Jack B. Yeats with the Van Veldes, whose work in quite different ways pushes the boundaries between figuration and abstraction to the very limit, yet it is the association that Beckett makes from the outset. All are painters whose work, like 'the best of modern painting', is a critique, a refusal 'of the old subject-object relation'. In each case, and not least in Yeats's, it is the dynamic oscillation between material and image that sets that critique in play.

The dynamic of Yeats's paintings, then, is the enactment of a failure of representation, a failure either to retrieve or to abandon the object. The formal means employed in this virtually obsessive work of representation are at once the analogue and the performance of that predicament. It is a predicament to which Beckett himself continually recurs in his writings and that links his own profoundly obsessive, or single-minded practice with Yeats's own. His critical works, from *Proust* (1931) to the *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (1949), repeatedly address it, and the early writings in English through *Watt* (1953), continually thematize it, but it is not until the trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*, 1951–53) that he will with assurance achieve the capacity to enact in writing the utter imbrication of medium and representation that Yeats's paintings assume in their own domain. It is well known that Yeats produced these paintings through acts of memory, the records of which are the voluminous sketchbooks that he mined for later treatment.<sup>37</sup> This is, of course, a remarkable transition for an artist whose

36 The phrase comes from Beckett's essay, 'Proust', in *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London, 1976), 65–66.

37 Pyle, *Yeats*, 24, quotes a letter of Yeats to Joseph Hone: 'No one creates ... The artist assembles memories.' She also remarks on the collection of small notebooks in which he kept sketches from which later paintings could be 'assembled'; see *Yeats*, 26.

- 38 Pettit, *Republicanism*, 101
- 39 For an historical account of the emergence of this cultural and political formation, see Paul Thomas and David Lloyd, *Culture and the State* (London, 1997). For the Irish context, I have elaborated some of these terms in the introduction to *Nationalism and Minor Literature*.

early work was, often perforce, based on the rapid notation of daily events. Painting from memory, even without the intermediary of the retrieved sketch, is inevitably the representation of an object already internalized, the representation of a (mental) representation, rather than that of an object presented to view. It is painting as anamnesis rather than mimesis. Memory here is neither the retrieval of time past nor the repossession of a lost object, but the performance of that occultating light in which the figure merges and dissolves. Thus many of Yeats's later paintings foreground a figure watching, gazing, as if the painter's or the viewer's gaze passes perforce through another's. Beckett's term 'suspension' again seems utterly apt, rendering acutely not only the sense of the figure's apprehensive fixation before the scene, but also the suspension in turn of the viewer's gaze as the medium dissolves the specular image of the gazing figure, even as it emerges. In these paintings, memory is presented, not as the past regained, but as an enigma for the present. And that enigma is only reinforced by the teasing, highly literary titles affixed to the paintings, titles that seem to allude to an explanatory framework outside the canvases, to a tale in which they might become clear, but which yet eludes the viewer. They transform what might have been symbols into allegories, but into allegories that cannot be reduced to conceptual clarity, to interpretative mapping. This is a figuration without a possible turn to the literal.

We face, then, an *œuvre* that answers in advance to Beckett's desire for an art that abandons the 'possessional' drive that has continually renewed western representational art. [*D*, 135] The internal dynamics by which figure and ground, material and image, technique and content are held in suspended, oscillating equilibrium correlates to a refusal of domination that is the aesthetic counterpart

of a radical republicanism, a republicanism, that is, that remains profoundly at odds with the representational structures that undergird the cultural projects of nationalism and the modern state. I do not, evidently, mean to suggest that either Yeats or, least of all, Beckett, programmatically set out to subserve the political projects of Irish republicanism, though Yeats's commitment to depicting the marginal sectors of Irish social life, urban and rural, has often enough been understood in those terms. It is, rather, that the post-colonial disaffection of both artists from the nation-state that emerged stands not only as an acknowledgement of the failure of a certain political promise but also spells the disintegration of a coeval aesthetic project of representation. Pettit has suggested that the displacement of a long-standing tradition of republican thought by the emergence of political liberalism and representative forms of democracy in the early nineteenth century follows from the radicalization of republicanism in the late eighteenth century into a will to extend the principle of non-domination universally, rather than restricting it to white men of property.<sup>38</sup> This displacement in political thought coincides with the emergence, no less in reaction to radical republicanism, of an aesthetic and cultural philosophy that detours the antagonistic and potentially revolutionary claims of democratic social movements into and through representation. In this tradition, which runs most evidently from Kant and Schiller in Germany through Mill and Arnold in Britain, distinct domains of representation are conjoined and articulated together to produce a field of identities in which the disinterested ethical citizen willingly learns to be represented. Aesthetic representation prefigures political representation, regulating the identification of the subject with the common ground of the state.<sup>39</sup> One might say that the whole tendency of the aesthetic that is devoted to the moment of representation, in which the



formal supervenes on the material, derives from and corresponds to the continuing anxiety provoked by the radical claims of a republicanism of differences. The need for an aesthetic education to produce in the spectator that disposition by which he (she) becomes representative of the species is no other than the moment in which Kant responds to the French Revolution by proclaiming a republic that would be restricted to the learned, to the philosophers. In each case, the subordination of the singular, potentially eruptive manifestation of difference to a narrative of representation establishes a trajectory whereby the spectre of intractable elements can be contained and assimilated to identity. Realism, in which the multiplicity of social forms is disciplined into narrative resolutions that integrate the individual into the 'second nature' of the social, and symbolism, in which the particular stands in, translucently, for the universal, are the twin stylistic modes of this trajectory.

Cultural nationalism by and large reproduces that model in forms complicated by the need that MacGreevy acknowledges to find in culture alternative institutions to those that the colonizer occupies politically. This at first insurgent cultural nationalism seeks to enter into representation a people that has never before been represented, and to regulate the forms of representation in such a way that the unity and identity of a heterogeneous population can be produced and affirmed. The failure of the national project thus throws into relief both the logical contradictions of the drive to representation, revealing the necessarily selective requirements of its inclusive claims, and the dominative ends that subtend it. The nationalism that proclaims the unity of the people in difference from the imperial state cannot accommodate the proliferation of difference that constitutes the inner space of the popular. And in so far as the

contradictions of nationalist culture repeat those of the metropolis, only in forms writ larger by the exacerbated conditions of the colony, the foundering of this model of representation in the periphery resonates at the centre also. It is no accident that the modernist critique of representation was so often generated from peripheral cultural locations, since it was at the margins and in sites of more or less violent struggle that the aesthetic politics of the nation-state began to unravel.

The critical aesthetic impulse that draws together Yeats the painter and Beckett the writer dwells, with a certain compulsion born of necessity, on the ruin of representation that follows in the wake of the national project. It is not that either artist promotes an immediately cognizable political aesthetic. On the contrary, it is rather the inevitable imbrication of the political with the aesthetic within nationalism that makes of their intense preoccupation with the conditions of representation a deeply implicit political affair. The disengagement of the aesthetic from apparent political ends serves in their case no longer as the means to furnish the separate space for aesthetic formation in a well-articulated state. We might view it rather, to borrow a term from Pettit, as the aesthetic correlative of a 'deontological republicanism', one that regards the foundations of 'freedom-as-non-domination' rather than the institutions that promote or safeguard its realization. In other words, where an aesthetic of representation that had become tied to a mode of political thinking becomes, along with the political state, a means to domination, only in the ruins of that aesthetic can an alternative be excavated. The excavation that follows is at once positive and negative: positive in its making space once more for the recalcitrant, for figures of those that had been denied representation: the tramps, rogues and derelicts that populate both artists' works;

negative, in the relentless interrogation of the means of representation that both engage formally and technically. However, it is precisely the tension between the act of figuration and its formal questioning that prevents the dimension of the political in either artist's work from ever congealing into a concrete utopian project. The space of their work is, rather, the place made over and again for the unfit in representation, for those that dwell only among the ruins. In the ruins of representation alone, where the nation meets its end, the anticipatory trace of a republic emerges as that thing that yet eludes representation. ■

This is a version of a paper given at the Notre Dame Irish Studies Summer Seminar in 2003.

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1 Library of the National Gallery of Ireland, Jack B. Yeats Archive/Yeats Museum Y17-1: this four-page typescript, signed by Jack B. Yeats, is the text of a lecture given at the Celtic Race Congress, Paris, 1923; it was formerly in the papers of Robert Brennan, Irish ambassador to the US in World War II, whose granddaughter Yvonne Jerrold donated it to the library in 1993; transcribed by Heather Edwards.

## APPENDIX

### The Future of Painting in Ireland<sup>1</sup>

**Jack B. Yeats**

When a country lifts itself up under the sun, a country where the people live for Life in this world and beyond, where conventions for the sake of conventions are not appraised beyond their value, and where the old rules of the copyists and the new rules of the searchers for a *hokus pokus allacupain*, with which to open the treasure house door, are taken at their face value only. In that country painting will rise also.

In the eastern loop of the Atlantic Ocean an island people are ready to rise up and take their own. This island and its people are better equipped to lead painting to the ground where it must stand if it is to be the mighty force it should be, for a mighty force it should and will be. Painting is the memory and communication of all which lives within the eyes' sweep. This nation, though some of its people are sometimes, for a little while, lead [*sic*] to accept what is forced upon them at the giver's valuation, always turns again with a bitter and assaying eye. In the end it looks every gift-horse in the mouth. And so this country has only staggered, not fallen, under the enervating waves of false ideas as to the meaning and end of painting.

Here is a curious little fact. The comic opera 'Patience' with its velvet-coated aesthetes has all over the world dealt a blow to the prestige of the painters from which they have not yet recovered [*sic*]. Before that they have been wild, impecunious, and tattered figures. But 'Patience' made them ridiculous. Now, that wave of ridicule did not reach Ireland with any force and the position of the painter in Ireland to-day is one of dignity.

For a time the Irish painters were anxious to do what was ‘being done’ in other countries, largely because most of the painters were of Dublin where the imitation mind of the children of the Pale still made the Pale pace. But though the said Irish painters of the past turned with humility to imitate the painters of other countries every now and then the native eye and the native memory would take charge. And every day there are more Irish artists painting their own country and their own people, with the greatest equipment of the artist — affection. That affection for their fellows and for every rock, every little flash of water, every handful of soil, and every living thing in Ireland. I believe this power of wide affection is racial with the Irish. All the finest Irish painters of the past — even when they painted other lands — had this affection.

The imitativeness of the artists of the Pale came partly from servile humility and partly from a feeling that it was more polite to have a something of the amateur about them than to be as the painter who painting from himself is ready to stand or fall by his work. Responsibility and irresponsibility meet in him. His eye sees and his spirit catches up the wonders which are about him. But he did not invent those wonders, how could he? He is himself a part of them. If he is a free man in a free country his eye is open and free. If he become a slave in a slave country he need never open a full eye. His masters will see all for him, and he becomes unable to express himself, except as the earth and stones express themselves. But if he has in him the spark of freedom he will lose nothing, but time, while silent in the soil. He will rise again strengthened and take up again the responsibility of the true painter, part of his own day and his own land, with whose flood he rises and with whose ebb he falls.

I read the other day in a review an extract from a book on the Evolution of Civilization:—

Great Art — or periods of great Art — belong to the earlier phases of civilization. The possibility of them seems to grow fainter as the intellectual part of man grows stronger ... The Artistic future in general must consist of raising the sentiment for Art, the power of appreciating Art in the mass of the people. That would be an immeasurably greater service than a new galaxy of artistic Geniuses.

In fact UPLIFT, and I never fully realised before where the poison lay in Uplift. Under the Uplifter's banner mediocrity is to be encouraged and genius smothered, for the genius might take the bit in his teeth and clear for the mountain tops, beyond the reach of the Uplift instructor, and before his Department could get out a sedative pamphlet.

But the painters of Ireland will not be content to mildly and lazily browse in the valleys, occasionally enjoying a little feeling of superiority by drawing some dull one's attention to the distant and unattainable mountain top. We will not sit smirking over the old lovers' anthologies. We will make our own love-songs. But when this writer on Civilization wrote that Great Art belongs to the earlier phases of civilization I think, without knowing what his definition of civilization is, that perhaps he wrote the truth.

Now, Ireland's civilization as far as the pictorial arts are concerned is an arrested civilization. Before the Normans came an individual decorative Art had grown to power, but it sank away; and the native strength of the Irish painters has since lain under the weight of a super-imposed civilization. But the finest of the Irish painters had that selflessness which makes the painter look on himself not as the journey's end, but as the vehicle which conveys the wonders and the mysteries he meets upon his way. The danger lay where sometimes this very selflessness lead [*sic*] the painter to become the bravo of paint itself.

Literature is enfeebled. Words have been nearly squeezed dry in the linotype machines, and the hour has come for communication by the memory of the eye to take its rightful place. And painting is the poetry of the eye. It is not necessarily patriotism to paint your own country. It is but commonsense to paint the only country which you are part of. But it is patriotism to paint with all your power. True painting must be national and the true painter will be no compromiser. Now there is a something in the Irish nation which refuses to compromise, and its painters — springing from such a nation — will stand out boldly and paint what they see and what they feel. They will lead and not follow. They will cut out their own floatation [?]. ■