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**“EASTER, 1916” AT ITS CENTENNIAL:
MAUD GONNE, AUGUSTA GREGORY AND
THE EVOLUTION OF THE POEM**

James Pethica

“Easter, 1916,” the best-known literary work responding to the Irish Rising of 24–30 April 1916, includes the date “September 25th, 1916” at the foot of the text in all canonical printings—this being the first time Yeats permanently so identified a poem’s completion to a specific day.¹ When writing a new poem, he would frequently mention this in letters to friends, and often sent partial or even full working drafts to his closest confidantes. But in this instance, after telling John Quinn and Lady Gregory in May 1916 of his plans to write about “the men executed,” his letters are notably silent on the subject over the following four months; and, additionally, no early drafts of “Easter, 1916” survive.² Yeats read a version of the poem to Maud Gonne in Normandy in late August 1916, but the first surviving manuscript is a full draft, with substantive revisions only to the final stanza, and dated September 25—on which day he was at Coole Park with Lady Gregory.³ As this essay will show, that dating was not accidental and quietly acknowledges Gregory’s significant share in the poem’s birth.

I

Readings of “Easter, 1916” have typically centered on its conflicted response to the military action taken by Irish Nationalists in the Rising, and on the uneasy mix it embodies of desire for and distancing from Maud Gonne—long his beloved, but now newly-widowed following the execution of John MacBride. The political and the personal are indeed deeply interconnected in the poem. Its core uncertainty, after all, is whether “excess of love,” in the form of patriotism or in unwavering desire for a beloved, is admirable—the precondition, in fact, for a transformation of the self, or of a nation—or whether, in its obsessive single-mindedness, such “excess” is inimical to humanity and turns the heart into “a stone.”

But the compositional history of “Easter, 1916” over the five months between the events it considers, and its completion, shows how Gonne’s influence on the poem was repeatedly offset and complicated by that of Augusta Gregory. Gregory’s essay “What was their Utopia?”—along with other writings she sent him—offered a crucial counter to Gonne in inflecting Yeats’s view of what had

taken place. The essay was written in May 1916 but is published here for the first time.⁴ Gregory was closely implicated, too, in Yeats’s personal conflicts during the writing of the poem. In his deliberations over whether to again propose to Gonne, he actively recruited Gregory—his closest friend and advisor, and, as he later termed her, “my strength and my conscience”⁵—to hold him to his resolve not to marry “unless Maud Gonne gave up all politics.”⁶

That “Easter, 1916” registers the competing influence of these two powerful women on Yeats is unsurprising. He had by this point long come to associate them as polar opposites in the functioning of his creative and emotional economy. Other pivotal women in his life would complicate or augment this core binary—with Olivia Shakespear being to the fore—and then later supercede it. But in his love poems written for or in response to Gonne up to 1917, when he married, Gregory routinely features, directly or indirectly, as a practical and emotional counterweight to Gonne, his nominal focus. Defining and articulating what he felt about Gonne almost always involved a characteristic Yeatsian division of sensibility, and he was most able to assert her singularity when comparing her with someone quite unlike her. He repeatedly represented Gregory in his writings, often quite schematically, as the orderly, supportive, nurturing friend, whose attributes were the antithesis to those of Gonne. Maud is the dangerous and alluring muse whose influence on him is creatively and erotically powerful, but also threatening, “wild” and “troubling.”⁷ She motivates Yeats to write, partly because she is unattainable and unconstrainable, and partly because she thereby productively challenges his sense of his own autonomy. Gregory, by contrast, enables rather than threatens, by providing material and psychological support, the all-important “peace” of Coole Park⁸—for Yeats, an image of fixity, tradition and creative nurturance—and a pragmatic, utilitarian perspective that cautions him against the dangers of an alluring sublimity. His sonnet “The Folly of Being Comforted,” written in 1901, is a paradigmatic early example. Gonne—with “all the wild summer in her gaze”—inspires intense feeling, while Gregory is the reality principle who critiques, counsels patience and urges the value of thought over feeling (*VP* 199–200). The sonnet’s energy comes, in characteristically Yeatsian fashion, from a debate between two systems of value, neither of which can be fully endorsed, and neither of which can stand alone; and each is directly associated with the contrary claims made on him by Gonne and Gregory.

As “Easter, 1916” approaches its centennial, a fuller account of its genesis is due, to show how deeply resonant the poem is with, and how substantially the product of, the conjunction and clash of Yeats’s personal and political responses to the two women then most important in his life.

II

Yeats was in London when the Rising began, and had spent barely more than a week in Dublin during the previous year. Tight censorship in the British press meant that he was at first significantly reliant for news on the reports sent from Ireland by his sister Lily, and then, once regular mail service was resumed from Galway, by Lady Gregory, his most frequent and substantive correspondent. As he recognized and acknowledged at once, her letters to him were of “historical importance.”⁹

Despite their differing forms of political acuity, the Rising came as a complete surprise both to Gregory and to Yeats. His initial reaction was quite circumspect, although that caution may have owed something to his expectation that his letters would be opened by censors. Writing to her on 27 April, in his first surviving mention of the uprising, he merely regretted “a tragic business that will leave Ireland different for a long time & affect our work a good deal,” before moving quickly on to give an account of new bathroom fittings at his London apartment.¹⁰ The comment recognizes that what had happened would likely have significant consequences for the Abbey Theatre and for his own and Gregory’s creative work, but it doesn’t as yet envisage the “tragic business” as radically transformative—it would merely make things “different for a long time” rather than changing them utterly. In a note written the same day to his one-time and perhaps current lover, Alick Schepeler, Yeats made no mention of the Rising, and over the following week his few references to the unfolding events express uncertainty about “how this rebellion will effect all our interests,” caution in drawing conclusions from “wild rumours” and a ready admission that he was fundamentally unsure how to respond: “the whole thing bewilders me.”¹¹

Gregory’s first letter to him from Galway, on 27 April, reports on Volunteer operations in the region, but acknowledges that she, too, at this point had no reliable news of events in Dublin other than rumours of “slaughter.” But in contrast to Yeats’s caution, her letter concludes by envisioning British reprisals against the Rising in decisive and revealing terms: “It is terrible to think of the executions or killings that are sure to come—yet it must be so—We had been at the mercy of a rabble for a long time, both here & in Dublin, with no apparent policy, but ready to take any opportunity of helping on mischief.”¹² Having been threatened, along with some of her tenants, by local armed bands who identified themselves opportunistically as “Volunteers,” she had come to regard Sinn Fein predominantly as a force for uncertainty and destabilization, and incommensurate with her own moderate constitutional Nationalism. At first, then, Gregory’s conservative instincts in favour of law and order and property rights, and the self-interest this inevitably involved for her as a landowner, was

sufficient to categorically outweigh her by then long-standing support for Irish Home Rule.

Nonetheless, she immediately understood that the insurrection had fundamentally called into question the value of her own and Yeats’s efforts of literary nationalism. In an as-yet unpublished meditation titled “The Tragedy of Ireland,” begun around 4 May 1916, she reflected on the losses to Irish culture the previous year—when the death of her nephew, Hugh Lane, seemed to have ended his efforts to found a Dublin Gallery of Modern Art—and on the massive damage now resulting from the Rising. The forces which had drawn her into the Irish literary movement in the late 1890s—“the rebirth of the language and of literature”—had still seemed “new but a week ago,” she noted; but “even as I was writing these pages...they have been thrown back, made but a background, out of date, out of fashion, by that tragic, terrible vanity, the Sinn Fein rising.”¹³ Feeling “cut off from the world” at Coole and without “letters, papers, or telegrams” to give her news, she was, she told Yeats on 27 April, “reading straight through Shelley.”¹⁴

Once she began to find out more about what had happened, and who was involved, however, Gregory’s viewpoint quickly shifted, complicating and undercutting both her instinctive antipathy to the “rabble” and her dismissal of Rising as motivated by a “terrible vanity.” On 7 May 1916 she made a first clear distinction to Yeats between the political idealism of the insurrection’s leaders and the violence of mere opportunists: “I am sorry for Pearse and McDonough, the only ones I knew among the leaders—they were enthusiasts—The looting and brutality were by the rank & file I fancy.”¹⁵ It is a judgement laden with elitist class assumptions: characteristically, Gregory was willing to credit the “leaders” she knew personally with high-minded motives, while only the nameless “rank and file” had descended to “looting and brutality.” But this tension between deploring violence and finding a loftier dimension in the otherwise dangerous impulsiveness of “enthusiasts” would become the core consideration in her writings in the weeks ahead. As she wrote to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt on 21 May, she saw “the whole affair through as it were two different glasses,” with her recoil from the “terror” of disorder never outweighing her recognition of the transformative implications of what the Rising’s leaders had accomplished.¹⁶ More importantly, she was also quick to recognize the extent to which their direct action indicted her own and Yeats’s literary and cultural incrementalism: “Beside them we seem a little insincere, we have all given in to compromise.”¹⁷

III

Offsetting Gregory’s perspective, however, were the letters Yeats also received from Gonne in the first two weeks after the Rising. For her, the “sacrifice”

of those who had died had unequivocally “raised the Irish cause again to a position of tragic dignity” (*G-YL* 372). Both the “shelling and destruction” in Dublin and the hasty executions which were taking place in her view made the “cynicism” of British opinion and policy so manifest that she was sure the insurrection would not prove to be “in vain” either practically or politically (*G-YL* 373–4). After hearing of John MacBride’s execution she wrote decisively to Yeats on 11 May 1916 that “Those who die for Ireland are sacred. Those who enter Eternity by the great door of Sacrifice atone for all—in one moment they do more than all our effort” (*G-YL* 375). A few days later she insisted that the “deaths of those leaders are full of beauty & romance” and quoted the invocations of the Poor Old Woman in Yeats’s and Gregory’s drama *Cathleen ni Houlihan*—the role she had played in its first productions in 1902—saying that these patriots “will be speaking forever, the people shall hear them forever” (*G-YL* 377). It was between these competing views of events—Gregory’s “terrible vanity” and Gonne’s mix of “tragic dignity” and “beauty & romance”—that Yeats began to formulate his own early responses to the Rising.

His first mention of “trying to write a poem on the men executed” comes in a letter to Gregory on 11 May—the day before James Connolly and Séan Mac Diarmada became the last participants to be shot. The taut, antinomial phrase at the heart of the finished poem was already present in his mind at this early point, as he summarized his plans in a single phrase: “terrible beauty has been born again.”¹⁸ Two weeks later he told John Quinn he was planning “a group of poems” on the subject, but stressed that he would not actually carry out this intention until he left London and could get “into the country” to write.¹⁹ During a ten week stay at Colleville-sur-Mer in Brittany with Maud Gonne, from late June that summer, he duly completed a full draft of “Easter, 1916.”

It was precisely in the period between Yeats’s first mention of planning to write, and his arrival in France on 22 June 1916, that Lady Gregory’s influence on his response to events was at its height. She sent him her essay “The Tragedy of Ireland”—later published, much revised, as a chapter in her book *Hugh Lane*—some time in mid-May. It highlights the mix of decisiveness and inflexibility that had made Lane successful but also widely disliked, and it extols the “soldier’s direct methods” of another nephew, John Shawe-Taylor, whose interventions had helped bring about the Wyndham Land Act of 1903. (In “Coole Park, 1929” Yeats would term them “impetuous men” and contrast their assertive certainty with his own “timid” vacillations and John Synge’s “meditative” mind [*VP* 489]). The essay explicitly links the cost of their deaths to Ireland with the loss now caused by the executions of the Rising’s leaders, and meditates—with anxiety and some uncertainty—as to what kind of combination of direct action, creative genius, and reflective capacity would now be needed for the regeneration of Irish culture. Of Pearse and MacDonough, she

wrote: “I would that their passion for our country had left them to use their ‘fragment of life’ in some less bitter way than this which has brought death to many and brought about their own.”²⁰ If her allusion here was to the subtitle of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, this again highlights her fundamental concern with the competing claims of individual vision and of wider social responsibility and ethics, and with whether action without sufficient consideration of consequences could be justified.

Her letters to Yeats from around mid-May onwards undoubtedly heightened his own personal and political reasons for seeing the Rising, as she did, “through two different glasses”; and they can only have added to his consciousness of the extent to which his work of years had been marginalized. Even if the Rising’s leaders were flawed and the outcome of their actions was “bitter,” Gregory stressed, their decisive action and uncompromising leadership had radically altered the political and imaginative landscape. “It seems as if the leaders were what is wanted in Ireland—& will be even more wanted in the future” she wrote him on 13 May: “a fearless & imaginative opposition to the conventional & opportunist parliamentarians, who have never helped our work even by intelligent opposition.”²¹ In a letter to him the following day, she quoted at length from Shelley’s essay “On the Punishment of Death,” concurring with Shelley’s condemnation of capital punishment but also with his recognition of its alluring power as spectacle and in potentially allowing the condemned to claim a form of martyrdom:

He says what is very applicable to this moment: “...The death of what is called a traitor, that is, a person who, from whatever motive would abolish the government of the day, is as often a triumphant exhibition of suffering virtue as the warning of a culprit.”²²

Like Shelley, she was deeply concerned that “reason” and restraint should be the basis of just laws that upheld the social order. For her, as him, passionate feeling was seductive but ultimately dangerous. Shelley’s essay lists “love, patriotism” and “revenge” as motivations that can readily become “a passion and a duty to be pursued and fulfilled, even to the destruction of those to which [they] originally tended.”²³

IV

The most important document Lady Gregory sent Yeats during this period, however, is her essay “What was their Utopia?,” dated 16 May 1916. She mailed him a typescript copy on 29 May, stressing “don’t delay in reading enclosed,” and urged him, if he judged that “it should be printed, and would be taken,” to

“send it on to the Nation.”²⁴ She had written the essay, she added, to try and help prevent the possible execution of her long-time friend, the Irish language and history scholar Eoin MacNeill.²⁵ In the volatile political climate of the moment, the essay was refused, and remained unpublished.²⁶

“What was their Utopia?” opens with resonant echoes of the “rumour” and rebellion in the Prologue of Shakespeare’s *2 Henry IV*. The essay centers on Gregory’s uncertainty whether the Rising’s leaders had given to their high-minded plans a true “intensity of thought” and the “reasoning” needed to discipline feeling and individual motivation into coherent principles. If not, the essay worries, their call in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic for “religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens” might be merely utopian, and not a sufficient basis for laws that might “bring the serenity of order into a long disordered land” (49). Yeats’s uncertainty in “Easter, 1916” whether the rebellion was lucid in its motivations or merely a “dream” closely follows this concern. For him, however, the grounds of the leaders’ plans were by then less important than their results: “enough to know they dreamed and are dead.”²⁷

But the essay’s initial uncertainty and the interrogative mode of its title are quickly offset and complicated by Gregory’s emphatic conviction that the leaders of the Rising were unquestionably “poets.” Through their “vision” and the decisive sacrifice of their lives they had, for her, unquestionably accessed a deeper level of insight (49–50). Gregory shies from stating explicitly that they had, thereby, become the poet-legislators Shelley had called for in his “Defence of Poetry,” but the pull of this underlying conviction is clear in her quotation of Walt Whitman’s claim in “As I walk the Broad Majestic Days” that “the visions of poets” are “the most solid announcements of any.” She cites, too, from “The Mask of Anarchy,” in which Shelley placed poetry centrally as one of the essential keys to freedom:

Science, Poetry and Thought
 Are thy lamps, they make the lot
 Of the dwellers in a cot
 So serene, they curse it not. (49)

Shelley wrote this poem to commemorate and protest the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, in which British soldiers had attacked a crowd peacefully campaigning for democratic reform of the corrupt British parliamentary system, killing fifteen and injuring several hundreds in the process. Gregory’s quotation deftly implies that Britain was once again rushing to kill reformers, in a situation where thoughtful compromise would have been best for all. The Peterloo Massacre not only failed to stop reform but fuelled outrage and thus accelerated

political change. Her essay hence suggests that history was repeating itself, with violent suppression being likely to fuel a political backlash against Britain—as indeed it did. Her brief quotation from John Milton’s “The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth” (1660) heightens the essay’s implied admiration for the Republicanism of the Rising’s leaders, but also, perhaps, quietly registers her concern, as a Protestant, as to whether the religious liberty promised in the 1916 Proclamation would indeed be upheld.

Given his own deep Romantic patrimony, Yeats did not need Gregory’s promptings to have begun considering the events of Easter week through a Shelleyan lens.²⁸ But the fact that his closest friend was ready to credit MacDonagh and Pearse with a visionary power that potentially or actually eclipsed his own was surely jarring. Her translations of poems from Pearse’s *Suantraithe agus Goltraithe* in “What was their Utopia?” also undoubtedly invited him to reconsider his own earlier dismissals of Pearse, in particular, as “half cracked” (*Life* 1 46). As Gregory crisply notes in the essay, when Pearse had presented Yeats with this slim volume (in 1914) he had regifted the book to her, not least since, “being in Irish,” he was unable to read it.²⁹ Her translations from the poems strategically highlight both Pearse’s humanity—she, unlike Yeats, had been on largely cordial terms with him—and his creativity. They hence potentially offered Yeats a dual indictment. He had misjudged Pearse and the Rising’s other leaders, politically, personally and creatively, when passing them by with “polite meaningless words”; and his inability to understand Irish had in part underwritten that failure.

As many critics have observed, “Easter, 1916” is at its core an anxious attempt on Yeats’s part to reassert his own poetic making as meaningful in the face of a violent transformation that had disrupted his sense of his creative primacy and political acuity. The poem’s crucial echo of the phrase “excess of love” from Shelley’s “Alastor” suggests a fundamental revisiting on his part of the Romantic assumptions that had fuelled so much of his work. Given that anxiety, it is ironic that Wilfrid Blunt—to whom Gregory also sent a copy of “What was their Utopia?”—judged on first reading “Easter, 1916,” that she, rather than Yeats, must have written the poem.³⁰ This seeming mere flattery on his part is now somewhat more accountable, given the many connections between poem and essay—and given, too, the fact that Blunt had himself in earlier years published poems of hers under his own name.³¹

V

Gregory’s influence on the as-yet-unwritten poem was continued in person when she and Yeats both went to Dublin in the first week of June 1916 and together viewed the destruction in the city. The only account of their meetings

comes in her record of a dinner at which “there was a good deal of talk about the Rising...Yeats spoke against the executions, said England was stupid as usual and ought not, in her own interest, to have ‘allowed them to make their own ballads.’”³² If he had not already thought of using the ballad tradition of a litany of names to end “Easter, 1916,” her presence now heightened it as a possibility. Nationalist ballads were, by this time, a matter of real expertise for her, with her many essays on the form including “The Fenians of Our Land” (1900).³³ This quotes at length from the 19th-century tradition of memorialising the names of executed patriots, and had likely helped inspire the central invocations in their play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, in which those who have given their lives for the cause are “remembered for ever.” She began systematically collecting political ballad broadsheets in the late 1890s, compiling two large albums, and Yeats’s annotations to these confirm that he had used them as a resource.³⁴ By the time she met him in Dublin in June 1916 she had indeed already added to these albums some ballads found on a Sinn Fein Volunteer arrested in Gort just after the Rising.³⁵ In *The Kiltartan Poetry Book* (1919) she would observe, rather curtly, that Yeats had now “fallen into the tradition” of patriotic ballads—a wording that not only credits her own sense of primacy in the field, but also quietly implies a degree of tutelage on her part, or emulation on his, in his Rising poems such as “The Rose Tree.”³⁶ Even the framing image for the closing litany in “Easter, 1916,” in which Yeats proclaims that the poet’s part is “to murmur name upon name / As a mother names her child,” may have owed to her translation of Pearse’s lullaby *Crónán mná sléidhe* (“O little mouth”) in “What was their Utopia?” and Gregory’s account there of reading it to her grandchildren as they went to bed. Regardless, Yeats certainly paid heightened attention to Pearse’s writings around this time, sending Maud Gonne at least two of his poems in early June (G-YL 381). One of these was likely Pearse’s English-language poem “The Mother,” written shortly before he was shot, which imagines a mother remembering her two sons who have died fighting for Ireland: “I will speak their names to my own heart / In the long nights; / The little names that were familiar once / Round my dead hearth.”³⁷ If so, this text, too may have contributed to the maternal image in the closing litany of “Easter, 1916.”

VI

Yeats’s brief visit to Dublin in June 1916 was principally to resolve Abbey Theatre business with Gregory, but he also wanted to consult with her privately about the possibility of proposing, once again, to the newly-widowed Gonne. She endorsed his plans, but with obvious reservations, writing to him on 17 June that she hoped “for the best—but it is hard to say what that might be.”³⁸ And three days later she acknowledged that she was “anxious & think very

much of you in such a crisis in your life.”³⁹ The letters she sent during his stay in Brittany show that she continued to be a crucial active presence both in that unfolding “crisis” and in the emotional and political triangulation at the centre of “Easter, 1916.”

For Yeats, the weeks in France were emotionally turbulent ones. He proposed to Gonne a few days after arriving, only to be firmly refused. And then—in a development which suggests both resentment at this rejection (Gonne, he reported to Gregory, now suddenly seemed “older than she is”⁴⁰) and a fantasy of reclaiming something of the young woman he had failed to win when he had first asked her to marry him in 1891—he within weeks proposed to Gonne’s twenty-one-year-old daughter, Iseult, only to be refused again. The episode reflects credit on none of the principals involved; and Gregory’s reaction hardly displays much emotional acuity on her part either. Of Yeats’s failure with Gonne, she responded that she was “relieved on the whole. I was growing more & more doubtful of the possibility of its going well — it somehow seemed as if it wd separate you from the Ireland you want to work for than bring you nearer.” His creative work, rather than his happiness, is tellingly her narrow focus here. And of his speedy substitution of daughter for mother, she rather blithely told him: “I don’t think the difference of age an objection, you are young in appearance & in mind & spirit. She may look on you as but a passing friend, but I have always thought it possible another feeling may awake & in that case I see no reason why happiness might not come of it.”⁴¹

But if her counsel in this instance was lacking, her influence was nonetheless forceful in other ways. In mid-August, amidst his conflicted wooing of Iseult, Yeats reported that he was “dealing with the metaphysical sins in a way I learned from you. ‘If you do not love so & so enough, do something for them, sacrifice something & you will love them.’”⁴² A letter he sent Iseult that October confirms that this mantra was one of “three sayings” he repeated to her often during his stay in Brittany: “to give a value to things or people make a sacrifice for them.”⁴³

Given the centrality of the idea of “sacrifice” in “Easter, 1916,” and the decisive proposition that opens its final section—“Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart”—Yeats’s echo of Gregory’s mantra during the weeks he drafted the poem is striking. Maud Gonne had stressed the word “sacrifice” to him repeatedly in late April and early May 1916, but always with religious connotations. Her letter of 11 May, for instance, capitalizes “Sacrifice” and unobtrusively calls attention to its etymological connection with the word “sacred.”⁴⁴ For Gonne, the word served as an unequivocal endorsement for the redemptive power of the action the Rising’s leaders had taken. Lady Gregory’s use of the term, by contrast, is considerably more pragmatic. Giving up “something” or making “a” sacrifice is, in Yeats’s echo of her words, a means to change

one's feelings about another person—a form of self-abnegation which disciplines and heightens one's capacities, but with the deliberate aim of generating more intense forms of connection. It is thus a giving-up which is not only goal-oriented but in one sense quite calculatedly self-serving.

Yeats's echo of Gregory's words might be taken as an effort on his part to persuade himself that he might indeed be able to love Iseult Gonne "enough," amidst his doubts over the propriety of proposing to a young woman thirty years his junior—she was still, he admitted, in her "joyous childhood"⁴⁵—and who was in some respects quite palpably a substitute for the mother who had so often refused him. But given his consistent, vaunting insistence throughout his career on the necessity of imaginative and practical self-assertion—"strength shapes the world about itself" whereas "weakness is shaped about the world" (*CLA* 9) he had insisted, for instance, to Maud Gonne in 1904, when she was in his view being passive during her battle to effect a legal separation from MacBride—this is not a fully convincing possibility. His repetition of the mantra to Iseult suggests, instead, a wish to persuade her that she could, and should, sacrifice herself to his interest in her.

His private negotiations of these two incommensurate conceptions of "sacrifice" while in Brittany with the Gonnés certainly register in "Easter, 1916." In the rising crescendo of questions the poem poses in its final stanza, the first is the most awkward and the most easily overlooked: "When may it suffice?" Neither Gonne's nor Gregory's viewpoint is endorsed here. Some degree of sacrifice is acknowledged as necessary; the difficulty is in determining at what point it ceases to be disciplining and beneficial, and at what point it becomes destructive. Much as in Gregory's essay "What was their Utopia?" the crux is identifying and attaining the "intensity of thought" and "reasoning" needed to discipline strong feeling into coherent and ordered principles. The final stanza of the poem embodies this crux in its image of the mother naming her child when sleep has finally come to "limbs that had run wild." In its "wild" running energy, the child is reduced to the anonymity and formlessness of mere "limbs" and can only be assigned selfhood when it comes to rest. The image deftly implies that the Rising's leaders, too—Lady Gregory had initially termed them "enthusiasts"—may have been insufficiently artful or self-conscious to have pressured their thoughts beyond youthful wildness into order and unity.⁴⁶ But the image also notably evokes the "wild" but sublime power in Gonne that both inspired and troubled Yeats, and the "excess of love" for her he feared in himself. As has long been recognized, his figure of the mother "naming" her child is resonant with the primal, Adamic power of language. The poem overall aspires to recover the possibility of clarity and power for words in a world in which they have become merely "polite" or "meaningless," and to achieve a form of naming—"I write it out in a verse"—which might generate some

degree of order for feelings that are fundamentally conflicted in the face of “terrible beauty.”

During his weeks in Brittany with Gonne, Yeats quite self-consciously explored the powerful opposing claims Gonne and Gregory had long exerted on him, when writing a memoir covering the 1890s. It is a text which oscillates sharply between sections recalling his turbulent meetings with Gonne during the period of their “spiritual marriage” and recollections of the first summers at Coole when he came to rely on Gregory’s counsel and patronage.⁴⁷ That process of autobiographical exploration, along with Gonne’s refusal of his last proposal to her on or around 13 July 1916, must have progressively helped clarify the tense choices at stake both in “Easter, 1916” and in his private life.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, his absorption in his “personal crisis” was sufficiently pronounced that Gregory actively chided him to creative purpose towards the end of his stay in Brittany. Having apparently registered his failure to mention any new poetry, and his increasingly scant references to Easter Week, she on 20 August declared herself “a little puzzled by your apparent indifference to Ireland after your excitement after the rising” and urged that “there must be some spiritual building possible just as after Parnell’s fall, but perhaps more intense.”⁴⁹ Exactly when he completed an initial full draft of “Easter, 1916” is unclear given the absence of early manuscripts, but by Maud Gonne’s account he read a first version of the poem to her near the end of his stay at Colleville. She took it to be, in part, a form of last emotional appeal to her: “he had worked on it the night before, and he implored me to forget the stone and its inner fire for the flashing, changing joy of life.”⁵⁰ As she also recognized, when subsequently reading the poem, it explicitly rejected her intense conviction of the value of the Rising’s leaders’ “sacrifice,” and its content was enough to make immediately clear to her where his priorities lay (*G-YL* 384–5). He informed Gregory on his return to London merely that “Maud Gonne quarrelled with me rather seriously because I was too pro-English”⁵¹; but the disagreement surely also reflected the more complex reality of Yeats’s speedy transference of his desire from her to Iseult, and what was effectively his final refusal to bind himself to her.

With the failure and perhaps folly of his proposals weighing on his mind, the 51-year-old bachelor arrived at Coole Park to stay with Lady Gregory on 16 September 1916. It was, as he had guiltily observed from Normandy, “the first time for nearly twenty years” he had not been at Coole “at the end of August,”⁵² and he came, it seems, with a renewed sense of commitment to the political and personal viewpoints he most admired in her, and which had—just—held sway for in him in Normandy. It was an allegiance Gonne had already long resented, and she settled the score, after Gregory’s death, with a cutting dismissal of her rival—depicting Gregory as “queer little old lady, rather like Queen Victoria,”

crudely possessive in her patronage of Yeats, and unambiguously deleterious in her influence on his politics.⁵³

Nine days after arriving at Coole, Yeats marked “Easter, 1916” as finished when placing “25 September 1916” under its closing line. Critics have justly asserted that the date calls a reader’s attention to the time lapse between the Rising itself and the poem’s moment of completion, thereby heightening our sense of the political and personal ambivalences the poem takes as part of its theme.⁵⁴ But the specific date also quietly acknowledges that for Yeats this completion came while he was at Coole, with Gregory, and not while with Gonne, or in London, or elsewhere. The account offered here of Gregory’s influence on the poem and of Yeats’s negotiation of his conflicted respective loyalties to Gregory and Gonne, suggests why “Easter, 1916” indeed couldn’t be officially “finished” in his view until he had shown it to Lady Gregory, discussed it with her, and until she had in some sense sanctioned it. The fair copy she made, to which she added the notation “Copy before printing—A.Gregory” and then, tellingly, placed and kept in the second volume of her ballad books, marks her sense of participation, as well as her pride, in that final stage of the poem’s emergence.⁵⁵

VII

After 25 September 1916 Yeats made only relatively minor textual revisions to “Easter, 1916.” He sanctioned a private printing of twenty-five copies of the poem in 1917, sending these to select friends, but he withheld it from his Cuala volume *The Wild Swans at Coole* later that year, and did not allow its open circulation until November 1920. This delay was nominally so as not to damage Lady Gregory’s campaign to win the return of the Lane pictures from the London National Gallery, but also surely reflected his uncertainty as to the long-term political consequences of the Rising. The contexts of the poem’s codification as “finished” on 25 September, however, require significant further consideration.

Seven days after that date, Yeats wrote to William Bailey—Estates Commissioner for the Irish Land Commission, and a legal advisor to and shareholder of the Abbey Theatre—inquiring whether the Congested Districts Board would allow him to purchase “Ballylee Castle,” a property he had “coveted” for “years.”⁵⁶ And in this same week he also began composing “The Wild Swans at Coole.” The earliest printed version of that poem is dated “October 1916” and its present-tense descriptions of the dry autumnal paths, low lake-water and “October twilight” confirm that the first surviving manuscripts drafts were written at Coole prior to his departure for London on 7 or 8 October.⁵⁷

This conjunction of events, and their relation to the completion of “Easter 1916” has surprisingly been overlooked. As has long been recognized, Yeats’s purchase of Ballylee—the first property he had ever owned—was in part an affirmation of his long partnership with Gregory, rooting him as her near neighbor in the Galway landscape where they had begun collecting folklore together nearly two decades earlier. Critics have also often observed, too, that the purchase was effectively a declaration of recommitment to Ireland in the wake of the Rising. But Yeats’s acquisition of Ballylee was also, as Lady Gregory herself quickly intuited, in part a declaration of independence—he would subsequently reside there during his summers, rather than with her at Coole—and in part a gesture of appropriation, since the property had until recently been part of the Gregory estate.⁵⁸ Although she actively facilitated his acquisition of Ballylee, wrote with some ceremony to send him “signs & markers of your possession” when the purchase was legally finalized, oversaw renovation work, and acted as *de facto* agent and caretaker for him over many years, even her earliest responses to the purchase register elements of unease and disapproval on her part.⁵⁹ On the one hand, she manifestly wanted to implicate herself more closely, both practically and creatively, with his ownership of the property; but at the same time she intuited that Yeats, hitherto “her” court poet, was now in some sense intent on slipping the leash.

If Yeats had returned to Coole conscious that his alignment and friendship with Gregory had held sway, and then taken clear primacy, during his turbulent visit to Colleville—and had thus waited to codify “Easter, 1916” as completed under her roof—“The Wild Swans at Coole” suggests that he arrived also with a heightened awareness of the limitations, and indeed constraint, inherent in his relationship with Gregory. The poem is a self-elegy, which acknowledges the beauty and security of Coole, but which also implies that to stay there would be a passive falling back into long-standing habits. The autumnal leaves, dry paths and “October twilight” he encounters there intensify his consciousness of age, while the swans he observes on Coole lake have a “wild” power and mobility he, by implication, now lacks, and craves. Envious of their possibility of building and breeding elsewhere—an early draft imagines their “eggs” amongst the “rushes”⁶⁰—he is the more alert to both his own failure to “build” and his own comparative inaction: the word “still” appears four times in the poem’s thirty lines, with overlapping primary resonances of stasis and temporal continuation. Rather than finding “peace” and comfort as he had so often done at Coole, his return is now, by implication, a source of indictment as he reflects on the consequences of his failure to make a decisive move emotionally with either *Gonne* or her daughter.

The poem thus indirectly expresses the intent and desire that motivated his letter to Bailey on 2 October—for independent ownership of a place where

he could and would plan decisive changes in his life. It is consequently a veiled elegy for Coole itself, which can no longer be a fully satisfactory home, as well as for his earlier self. The first reference Yeats makes to himself in the poem is a passive construction—"The nineteenth autumn has come upon me"—a phrasing which deftly conveys his consciousness of loss of agency and wasted time, and sets the tone for the poem's plangent, but indirect, meditation on his own feelings of "drift" and the need to "awake." While writing his memoir of the 1890s in France, Yeats had told John Quinn he hoped the work would "lay many ghosts" or would "purify my own imagination by setting the past in order."⁶¹ If he left Normandy having permanently ended his long-held hopes of union with Gonne, the return to Coole, too, involved a deliberate recognition that his long-standing partnership with Gregory also needed to change. His purchase of Ballylee was merely the first manifestation of this resolution; and in the following months, as Roy Foster has observed, his relationship to Coole and Gregory indeed "changed dramatically"—culminating in his marriage to George Hyde-Lees the following September (*Life* 2 121). Yeats would declare in "To be Carved on a Stone at Ballylee" in 1921 that he had "Restored this tower for my wife George" (*VP* 406)—and that declaration, duly carved on a plaque, is now part of the fabric of the tower itself. But his purchase categorically predated his thought of marrying her. Having been rejected by both Maud and Iseult Gonne, and in turn resolved to permanently end what he had already recognized was at root always a "barren passion" (*VP* 270), he had retreated to Coole to a heightened awareness that Gregory and Coole, too, could no longer be the centre they previously had been: his peace must now be self-made, and not dependent either on the uncertain course of Irish politics or on the powerful women who had respectively refused him and enabled him.

That "The Wild Swans at Coole" echoes "Easter, 1916" has been often noted. Its acknowledgement that "All's changed" and its evocation of stones amongst the "brimming water" of Coole lake, in particular, offer powerful resonances with the "All changed, changed utterly" and the iconography of "stone" and "living stream" in the earlier poem. But the extent to which the two poems emerged in intimate and dialogic relation has been obscured by their distant placements in Yeats's canon. It is perhaps the "wild" in the title of the later poem that is most arresting in this respect. While at Colleville, Yeats had termed the events of Easter week a "wild business" and a "wild rising,"⁶² and this word, with its resonances of disorder, uncontrolled energy, lack of constraint, and even lack of self-consciousness or reason, is crucially present in the image of the "limbs run wild" in "Easter, 1916." But whereas it is a term redolent with danger there, in the later poem "wild" is used more approvingly, and with some yearning. The swans on Coole Lake are figures for a form of passion and possibility of transcendence that avoids the inhuman fixity ascribed to the stone

in “Easter, 1916.” Alive and mobile, they nonetheless achieve or constitute aesthetic shape, and so seem to partake both of the living and the eternal. They can be precisely numbered and observed, but remain “Mysterious” and defy reduction either into complete orderliness or complete aestheticization as they “scatter wheeling in great broken rings” (VP 322–23). The poem, in effect, seeks a reconciliation of the forces that had remained in such acute and unresolved tension in “Easter, 1916”—a productive union between order, stillness and “peace” and the contrary but necessary and redeeming forces of wildness and passion. If the earlier poem embodies a conflicted rejection both of Donne’s Republican politics and his continuing personal commitment to her, with his allegiance to Gregory taking sway, the later poem considers what needs to be reclaimed from that choice, and, in its turn, begins to negotiate the very considerable limitations in his relationship with Gregory.

“Easter, 1916” as published reveals relatively little of these private tensions so crucial to its evolution. That is surely appropriate, since the poem is fundamentally about how a personal way of seeing and feeling on Yeats’s part, and a mode of political understanding, have both been “changed utterly” by the transforming consequences of the Rising. As so often in Yeats’s finest work, his celebrated proposition that “we make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric” but “of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” holds true here; and that proposition, notably, was one he crafted very soon after the poem’s completion, or just possibly during its last stages of drafting.⁶³ The poem’s nuanced uncertainties negotiate—amongst many other things—the sharp contrast between Donne’s praise for the “beauty” of the Rising’s leaders’ deaths, and Gregory’s sense of their “terrible vanity” and visionary power; but that contrast and conjunction remains a buried history, changed in its turn by Yeats into a verse more enduring.

Notes

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1. See Nicholas Grene, *Yeats’s Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 9–16. Grene notes that two earlier Yeats poems had specific dates accorded to them in first newspaper printings, though they were not so dated in subsequent volume printings. Of “The Gift,” dated “January 8th. 1913” when first published in *The Irish Times*, he observes that “it is clear this is not a date of composition” but rather “a means of foregrounding the poem’s topicality and function as part of the propaganda campaign for the [proposed Hugh Lane] Gallery [in Dublin].” Of “The Ballad of Earl Paul,” dated “Sligo, April 4th” for its appearance in the *Irish Weekly Independent* in 1893, he notes that the “topography as much as the [date]

may have been the most important feature here: the poet is signing in from his West of Ireland home.” The format of the date at the foot of “Easter, 1916” varies somewhat between canonical printings, being “Sept. 25, 1916.” in the Shorter edition, for instance. I follow the format of the first Cuala Press printing here.

2. Yeats to Gregory (hereafter AG), 11 May 1916, *CL InteLex* #2950; Yeats to Quinn, 23 May 1916, *CL InteLex* #2960. The only poem Yeats directly reports writing during this period was “In Memory of Alfred Pollexfen,” a draft of which he sent to his sister Lily on 24 August, *CL InteLex* #3026. He told Quinn in a letter of 1 August 1916 “I write lyrics from time to time” but without identifying his subject-matter; *CL InteLex* #3012.
3. *Michael Robartes and the Dancer: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 68–75.
4. Emory. The opening and closing sections of the essay were published by Ann Saddlemyer in her essay “Augusta Gregory, Irish Nationalist” in *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature*, ed. Joseph Ronsley (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1977), 29–40.
5. WBY to Rossi, 6 June 1932, *CL InteLex* #5684.
6. WBY to AG, 21 June 1916, *CL InteLex* #2987.
7. For “wild,” see, for instance, “He Wishes his Beloved were Dead” (*VP* 176). Yeats notably described his first meeting with Gonne as the moment when “troubling of my life began” (*Mem* 40).
8. See, for instance, *Diaries* 151.
9. See WBY to AG, 25 May 1916, in which he probably refers specifically to her letter to him of 27 April. WBY sent this on to Robert Gregory, and then asked repeatedly for its return (*CL InteLex* #2964 and #2953, 2954).
10. WBY to AG, 27 April 1916, *CL InteLex* #2934.
11. Yeats to Schepeler, 27 April; to Susan Yeats, 2 May; to Ruth Shine, 1 May; to Elizabeth Corbet Yeats, 30 April. *CL InteLex* #2933, #2938, #2937, #2935.
12. Berg. Gregory also referred in her chapter “The Rising” in *Seventy Years* to the “village tyrants” and “armed bullies who have been terrorizing the district for the last couple of years”; see *Seventy Years: being the autobiography of Lady Gregory*, ed. Colin Smythe (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1974), 546. And to John Quinn she wrote, more sympathetically, on 27 April 1916: “I’m afraid a great many foolish young lads have been drawn in, believing they were doing something for the country” (Berg).
13. Berg.
14. Berg.
15. Berg.
16. AG to Blunt, 21 May 1916 (Berg).
17. *Ibid.*
18. WBY to AG, 11 May 1916, *CL InteLex* #2950.
19. WBY to John Quinn, 23 May 1916, *CL InteLex* #2960.
20. Berg.
21. Berg.
22. Berg.
23. *Shelley’s Prose* ed. David Lee Clark (New Amsterdam Books, New York: 1988), 154.
24. Berg.
25. MacNeill, who had countermanded the order for the Rising and did not participate, was subsequently sentenced to life imprisonment but released in 1917.
26. Yeats likely received the essay on 30 or 31 May 1916, but his next surviving letter to her, written on 1 June, makes no mention of it, possibly since he was preparing to leave for Dublin the following evening and would hence see her in person soon (*CL InteLex* #2974).

- Gregory subsequently sent the essay to Wilfrid Blunt on 14 June, remarking that “I sent it to The Nation but they wouldn’t print it” (Berg).
27. Perhaps recalling Gregory’s essay, he would dismiss Eva Gore-Booth’s politics as a “vague Utopia” in his 1927 elegy “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz” (VP 475).
 28. See, especially, Borstein, *Yeats and Shelley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
 29. This presentation copy from Pearse is now in the Berg Collection.
 30. Blunt, diary for 25 November 1916, Fitzwilliam Museum, cited by Elizabeth Longford in “Lady Gregory and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt”; see *Lady Gregory: Fifty Years After* ed. Ann Sadlemyer and Colin Smythe (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), 95.
 31. See, for instance, Pethica, *ibid.*, 98–100.
 32. Gregory, *Seventy Years*, 547.
 33. *Cornhill Magazine* (May 1900), 622–34.
 34. The two albums are now at Princeton. As his letter of 15 April 1915 confirms, Yeats had contributed to Gregory’s collection: “I send you a great bundle of Old Irish ballads under another cover. I bought them for your collection when you [were] in America & forgot to bring them to Dublin” (CL *InteLex* #2630).
 35. The later of the two ballad volumes includes a copy of verses “found on P.J.Pigot [sic] Georges St Gort on 4–5–16” (Princeton). Patrick Piggott was Adjutant of the Gort Battalion of the IRA from 1916 to 1920.
 36. Gregory, *The Kiltartan Poetry Book* (New York and London: Putnam, 1919), 6.
 37. P. H. Pearse, *Poems* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1918), 333. Gonne translated one of the poems Yeats had sent her—“The Wayfarer”—into French, and this was published in *La Mercure de France* as “Le Voyageur” in July 1916.
 38. Berg.
 39. Berg.
 40. WBY to AG, 3 July 1916, CL *InteLex* #2996.
 41. AG to WBY, 8 July 1916, Berg.
 42. WBY to AG, 14 August 1916, CL *InteLex* #3017.
 43. *Letters to W. B. Yeats and Ezra Pound from Iselt Gonne: a girl that knew all Dante once*, ed. A. Norman Jeffares, Anna MacBride White and Christina Bridgewater (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), 65.
 44. G-YL 375, and see also 372–3, 384.
 45. WBY to AG, 3 July 1916, CL *InteLex* #2996.
 46. Lily Yeats had termed the Rising “childish madness” and its leaders “clever children” in a letter to John Quinn on 22 May 1916 (*Life* 2 45).
 47. See, especially, *Mem* 101–134. Writing to Gregory on 19 August 1916, Yeats summarized the memoir as recalling “a general impression of turbulence” (CL *InteLex* #3022).
 48. In a letter of 20 August 1916 to WBY, AG shrewdly noted that his revisiting of the ‘98 celebrations might “be all a help” in his thinking about the effects of the Rising (Berg).
 49. AG to WBY, 20 August 1916, Berg. In his essay “After I am hanged my portrait will be interesting,” Colm Tóibín nicely implies that the this was something of a whipping-in letter on her part; *London Review of Books*, 31 March 2016, 11–23.
 50. Maud Gonne, “An Account of Yeats,” cited by Foster in *Life* 2 62. The recollection dates from 1939, and Gonne misremembers the reading as occurring in September 1916, though Yeats left Colleville near the end of August.
 51. WBY to AG, 10 September 1916, CL *InteLex* #3033.
 52. WBY to AG, 19 August 1916, CL *InteLex* #3022.
 53. Maud Gonne MacBride, *A Servant of the Queen* (London: Gollancz, 1974), 332–33.
 54. See Wayne Chapman, “Yeats’s Dislocated Rebellion Poems and the Great War: The Case of *The Wild Swans at Coole* and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*” (YA 16), especially pp. 78–9

where Chapman summarizes key critical responses to the delay in publication of “Easter, 1916” as marking a “combination of uncertainty, indifference, wishfulness, and cunning” on Yeats’s part.

55. This manuscript was in the possession of one of Lady Gregory’s grandchildren when I first saw it in 1997. It was tucked into the rear of the second of Gregory’s ballad books, and had been overlooked on the assumption that it was merely a copy she had made from the 1917 Clement Shorter printing of the poem prior to its inclusion in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* in 1921. However, it follows the working draft Yeats dated “Sept. 25 1916,” and clearly predates both the fair manuscript copy Yeats sent Shorter on 28 March 1917 (*CL InteLex* #3024) and the first surviving typescript identified in George Yeats’s hand as the “First-typed copy with W. B. Yeats’s corrections in his own hand.” It bears one emendation in Yeats’s hand to line 71 (“and died” becomes “are dead”). This parallels the change Yeats made on the fair copy he sent to Shorter. If this emendation was made at Coole, it would have been entered prior to Yeats’s departure on 6 October 1916, since he was not thereafter at Coole with Gregory until his return in April 1917 (although he was briefly there as Margaret Gregory’s guest that November while negotiating the purchase of Ballylee). Gregory’s notation on the manuscript makes it more likely that she made the fair copy in London, possibly on or near 7 December, when Yeats recited the poem aloud to her and Lady Margaret Sackville. All known drafts of the poem other than this “Gregory” manuscript are detailed in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer: Manuscript Materials* ed. Thomas Parkinson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994); and see also *CL InteLex*.
56. Yeats to William F. Bailey, 2 October 1916, *CL InteLex* #3043.
57. *The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).
58. See Pethica, “Yeats’s ‘perfect man,’” *Dublin Review* 35 (Summer 2009), 37–39 and *passim*.
59. Gregory to Yeats, 13 June 1917, Berg; in a letter of 11 August 1917 to John Quinn she concurred with him that Yeats “little knows what he is in for” with the property, and she unleashed a salvo of criticisms regarding the purchase: “I never encouraged him to buy it, and would have actually opposed it but that it seemed ungracious, being in our neighbourhood. He has a roofless castle and a dilapidated cottage” (NYPL).
60. *The Wild Swans at Coole: Manuscript Materials*, ed. Stephen Parrish (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 11.
61. Yeats to Quinn, 1 August 1916, *CL InteLex* #3012.
62. Yeats to Edward Gordon Craig, 1 August 1916; to Florence Farr, 19 August 1916, *CL InteLex* #3013 and #3021.
63. CW5 8. The “Anima Hominis” section of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* is dated 25 February 1917, but Yeats may have begun preliminary work on the volume while still at Colleville the previous summer (see letter to Florence Farr, 19 August 1916, *CL InteLex* #3021); regardless, as Foster notes (*Life* 2 79) the “influence of Colleville” is manifest in the completed text, not least in its religious language, and in Yeats’s concern with sanctity and morality in the original wording of the aphorism.