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## POLITICS, EUGENICS, AND YEATS'S RADIO BROADCASTS

Melissa Dinsman

In the opening to his 1937 BBC broadcast "In the Poet's Pub," William Butler Yeats claims: "I want to make a certain experiment." He then proceeds to explain that his experiment includes connecting spoken poetry with "musical notes" so as to "enable the [listener's] mind to free itself from one group of ideas, while preparing for another group, and yet keep it [the mind] receptive and dreaming" (*CW10* 266). The purpose of this experiment was to improve listener comprehension and connectivity. Music, which filled the spaces between poems, was intended to unite radio listeners with the broadcast and ensure that their minds did not break away from the "dream" that the radio performance cast.<sup>1</sup> Yeats had a specific vision as to how the broadcast should be performed, especially with regard to shaping the listening experience. But he also attempted to control *how* people listened to radio, an experiment in which many radio broadcasters and theorists of the 1930s were invested.<sup>2</sup>

"In the Poet's Pub" marks a shift in Yeats's radio priorities. Whereas in earlier broadcasts, such as "Poems about Women" (1932), Yeats is content to imagine his audience listening to him ("Then I remembered that I would not be reading to a crowd; you would all be listening singly or in twos and threes"), by 1937 Yeats wants to shape how the audience receives and perceives him and his poetry (*CW10* 234). While critics have argued that Yeats's desire to control every stage of a broadcast from production to reception stems from his aspiration to create a democratic listening experience, I suggest instead that the themes prevalent in Yeats's late BBC broadcasts maintain diffuse affinities with the anti-democratic and "conservative revolutionary" politics that he displayed in other contexts, through his support for the Army Comrades Association (more commonly known as the Blueshirts) in the early 1930s and his publication of the eugenicist-laden pamphlet *On the Boiler* in 1938.<sup>3</sup>

Much has been written about the right-wing politics and eugenicist sympathies of Yeats's late 1930s poetry in general and about *On the Boiler* in particular. Yeats's focus on Ireland's degeneration and his calls for its regeneration through cultural (and even biological) methods coincided with his dalliance with the para-fascist Irish Blueshirts and his frustrations with the Catholic nationalist transformations of the Irish Free State under Éamon de Valera.<sup>4</sup> However, these years also proved to be Yeats's most active in terms of radio broadcasting, with six of his nine broadcasts made between 1937 and 1938. In this essay, I read Yeats's broadcasts, in particular "In the Poet's Pub," "In the Poet's Parlour," and "My Own Poetry" alongside *On the Boiler* to show how themes of degeneration

and regeneration link these works.<sup>5</sup> While radio proved a valuable tool for promoting democratic ideals and encouraging a participatory listenership, it is also true that the medium was favored by authoritarian leaders and their sympathizers throughout the 1930s. As a medium, radio could advance the cultural degeneration and pandering to the masses to which Yeats was opposed. However, it was also within radio's capabilities to control modes of broadcasting, influencing public taste and regenerating Irish culture through the dissemination of poetry.

It is important to note that the critical response to Yeats's involvement with fascist and eugenicist ideas is far from consistent. For example, in *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*, Elizabeth Cullingford provides a thorough overview of Yeats's political evolution; however, her retreat into the argument that Yeats's poetry "escapes simple political labels because it is essentially dialectical, while his practical choices reveal the inappropriateness of the label 'fascist,'" reads as an avoidance of, rather than an engagement with, Yeats's right-wing sympathies.<sup>6</sup> Cullingford also justifies Yeats's eugenicism, which she states "in the thirties did not possess the sinister connotations now indelibly stamped upon it by Hitler's policies," but admits that "Yeats was playing with theories which in other hands were to have terrible applications."<sup>7</sup> Other critics have agreed with Cullingford's assessment of Yeats's politics. In *Yeats and Politics in the 1930s*, for example, Paul Scott Stanfield calls Yeats's interest in eugenics a "dabbling" and a departure from his standard poetic preoccupations.<sup>8</sup> And in his biography of Yeats, Terence Brown explicitly agrees with Cullingford, claiming that Yeats saw his involvement with the Blueshirts as "a last resort if the IRA and economic troubles continued to bring chaos." Instead of "rule by a Fascist gang," Brown argues, Yeats desired the reinstatement of the educated, upper-class Anglo-Irish to power. However, Brown remains critical of Cullingford's "tolerant historicizing" of Yeats's eugenics, arguing that Yeats's position on the subject spread far beyond *On the Boiler* and cannot be so easily dismissed as a "character" he was playing in the prose work.<sup>9</sup> Even critics who are quick to criticize Yeats for his eugenicism, such as Spurgeon Thompson, gloss over his interest in fascism. Thompson argues that Yeats's turn to eugenics is a result of his colonialist mentality and that *On the Boiler* "is a tract about nothing other than a colonial anxiety about the state."<sup>10</sup> Yet this line of reasoning ignores the fact that while eugenicist thinking was popular in the 1930s with both the political left and right, the more extreme version that Yeats presents in *On the Boiler* was aligned more with fascist ideologies on the rise throughout Europe, with which Yeats sympathized. W. J. McCormack is perhaps the most ardent critic of Yeats's right-wing politics and argues in *Blood Kindred* that Yeats's "self-proclaimed disillusion" with the Blueshirts should not be read as a renouncement of fascism. McCormack chastises past biographers who have been quick to "confine

[Yeats] to an external relationship with fascism” out of concerns that a fascist Yeats “would be a less marketable commodity.”<sup>11</sup>

Recently, scholars have begun to take a more nuanced approach to Yeats's right-wing politics, exploring its motives and arguing that its reach extends far beyond *On the Boiler*. In his extensive study on eugenics in the works of Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Virginia Woolf, Donald Childs neither apologizes nor condemns; instead, he explores the reasons why modernists were interested in eugenics, which he claims boil down to a fear of the masses and dismay over recent political attacks upon the arts.<sup>12</sup> Scholars have since expanded upon Childs's argument and have begun to connect Yeats's politics to his 1930s radio broadcasts. Emily C. Bloom, for example, discusses Yeats's eugenics in connection to his radio poem “The Curse of Cromwell.” Bloom acknowledges that “Yeats's radio work coincided with his interest in fascism;” nonetheless, she questions the critical impetus to “imagine his approach to radio as inherently authoritarian” and suggests instead that we read Yeats as “an adventurous novice in a new medium, attempting to find the best reception for his new auditory publics.”<sup>13</sup>

I would like to develop further the connection Bloom makes between Yeats's eugenicism and “The Curse of Cromwell” and show how a broader selection of the poet's radio performances includes references to social eugenicist thought (including his condemnation of Ireland's cultural degeneration and his hope for national regeneration through art). I will also argue that Yeats's eugenicism should not be read as disconnected from his praise of fascism. By doing so, I argue that the politics of Yeats's broadcasts may be more radically conservative than previously assumed. By choosing this approach, I am following the example set by David Lloyd, who writes in *Anomalous States*:

Certainly Yeats continues to cause discomfort, at least to any critic unwilling to separate the aesthetic too readily from the political. The difficulty lies most evidently, of course, in the fact that we must acknowledge, when all quibble and interpretation “is done and said”, the avowed authoritarianism, if not downright fascist sympathies, of his stated politics, while at the same time acknowledging the power of his writing to return and to haunt.<sup>14</sup>

While the terms “authoritarian” and “fascism” are too amorphous to carry much significance when reading the work of an individual writer, Yeats's conservative revolutionary politics certainly align him with much of pre-war Germany's literati who “eschewed the NSDAP's institutionalized violence and the ‘vulgar’ biological determinism in favor of persuasion through the force of cultural ideas.”<sup>15</sup> Yeats argued for the spreading of a selective kind of Irish art and culture as a means to promote national regeneration; although he also, as I show below, suggests that violence and eugenics are other potentially valuable

methods. Thus, while Yeats certainly had the ability to use his “experimental” broadcasts to promote democratic radio listening and participation in the aural arts, his broadcasts perform a conservative revolutionary politics that not only bemoans the degeneration of Irish culture and politics, but presents Yeats and his art as the antidote.

### I. A CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTIONARY

Yeats’s admiration of Benito Mussolini and Italy’s transformation under fascism has been well documented, even though, as Lauren Arrington points out, his grasp of Italian fascism was not always secure.<sup>16</sup> According to Stanfield, Yeats believed that Italy’s political path could prove a model for an Ireland still finding its footing after independence.<sup>17</sup> The poet’s interest in fascism hit its peak in the early 1930s when he became involved with the Irish Blueshirts, a paramilitary organization that arose in opposition to de Valera. Although some critics have been hesitant to categorize the Blueshirts as fascist, Yeats himself uses this term while expressing his fervent support for the organization: “Politics are growing heroic. De Velera [sic] has forced political thought to face the most fundamental issues. A Fascist opposition is forming behind the scenes to be ready should some tragic situation develop [sic]. I find myself constantly urging the despotic rule of the educated classes as the only end to our troubles” (*CL Intellex* #5915). In a letter to Olivia Shakespear, Yeats again labels the Blueshirts fascist and confirms his involvement with them: “At the moment I am trying in association with ex-cabinet minister, an eminent lawyer, & a philosopher to work out a social theory which can be used against communism in Ireland—what looks like emerging is Fascism [sic] modified by religion [sic]” (*CL Intellex* #5857).

The Blueshirts formed in 1932 as a response to the election of de Valera and the Fianna Fáil party. Composed of former members of the Free State army and the ousted Cumann na nGaedheal party led by William Thomas Cosgrave, the Blueshirts saw themselves as providing stability and authority to post-revolutionary Ireland. Fianna Fáil, however, was concerned about the threat that the Blueshirts represented and about their violent street clashes with the IRA. In iconography the Blueshirts very much resembled the Italian Blackshirts and Nazi Brownshirts.<sup>18</sup> Like other fascist movements throughout Europe, they saw themselves as the last defense of traditional values, on the one hand fighting against the spread of Communism, and, on the other hand, protecting against the return to unfettered free market capitalism, which had led to the market crash only a few years earlier. They were vocally anti-democratic and championed violence as a political method. Moreover, Blueshirts leader Eoin O’Duffy was a vehement supporter of fascist ideologies and gave very radical

and violent speeches. However, the fascism of O'Duffy and other Blueshirts elites failed to fully reach the rank-and-file followers, which ultimately resulted in fascism failing to take hold in Ireland in the same way that it did in Italy and Germany. Because of this and their eventual ousting of O'Duffy for corporatists Michael Tierney and James Hogan, who shared the economic ideologies of fascism (including the goal of reorganizing Irish society by trades) but not the social ones, the Blueshirts are perhaps more accurately described as para-fascists.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, however, the question as to what degree the Blueshirts were fascist seems to me less important than the fact that Yeats believed them to be so.<sup>20</sup> From the evidence available, it appears that Yeats involved himself with the organization precisely because of its anti-democratic ideologies and its willingness to use violence to achieve their political aims.

Labeling Yeats a conservative revolutionary does not deemphasize the fascism of his politics; instead it contextualizes his fascism within a broader "counter-revolutionary" framework.<sup>21</sup> It also allows us to see why Yeats's traditionalist ideologies would lead both to his involvement with the Blueshirts and to eugenicist theories. Eugenics is not always tied to fascism, as numerous nations participated to various degrees in social and biological conditioning, including Britain, the US, and Sweden. However, as I have noted earlier, Yeats's eugenicism is very much tethered to his conservative revolutionary politics. Yeats was a relatively late convert to eugenicist thinking. According to most critics, it was not until the 1930s that he fully embraced eugenics, and he did not join Britain's Eugenics Society until November 1936.<sup>22</sup> At this point, the society was moving in a more progressive direction. According to evolutionary biologist and prominent society member Julian Huxley, the society sought to "transform the social system" and work toward the "equalizing of environment in an upward direction." As David Bradshaw observes, in late 1930s, society was "far from being a hot-bed of authoritarian bigots and Nazi sympathisers."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, eugenicist thinking was embraced by both the political right and left. For example, socialists like H. G. Wells and G. B. Shaw were also supporters of eugenics. Yeats's eugenicism, however, did not fully align with the more socially liberal direction the society was headed. In his detailed examination of Britain's Eugenics Society and its influence on Yeats's *On the Boiler*, Bradshaw makes a compelling case that Yeats's eugenicism cannot simply be dismissed as a commonly held position among 1930s thinkers. Instead, Bradshaw argues that Yeats deviates from the standard and more socially liberal eugenicist doctrine of the 1930s that looked to correct environmental factors, in favor of something "alarmist" and "hereditarian" that promoted "state control of genetic inheritance."<sup>24</sup> But while *On the Boiler* certainly uses the language of biological determinism, his radio broadcasts partake in a social eugenicism typical of conservative revolutionaries.

The most obviously eugenicist and anti-democratic of Yeats's texts is, of course, *On the Boiler*. While I do not wish to retread the extremely fertile critical ground of existing criticism about this pamphlet, I do want to briefly discuss Yeats's provocative positions in *On the Boiler* in order to show that his late 1930s broadcasts made use of a similar rhetoric and that the move to the radio broadcasting itself might be read more critically in light of Yeats's conservative revolutionary politics. Yeats intended *On the Boiler* to be a political tract. As he wrote to Maud Gonne in June 1938, "For the first time I am saying what I believe [sic] about Irish & European politics" (*CL Intelix* #7273). Throughout *On the Boiler*, Yeats expresses his concern that degeneration is happening throughout Europe but is being kept secret from the public. He writes: "Though well-known specialists are convinced that the principal European nations are degenerating in body and in mind, their evidence remains almost unknown because a politician and newspaper that gave it adequate exposition would lose, the one his constituency, the other its circulation" (*CW5* 228). As a poet, Yeats liked to proclaim himself free from the shackles of popularity. Thus, in *On the Boiler*, where he seeks to "write whatever interests [him] at the moment," he rants upon this theme which seemed to occupy much of his work in his final years (*CW5* 220). A major part of the degeneration in Ireland, according to Yeats, stems from the fall of the Anglo-Irish from political and cultural power. Like other conservative revolutionary elites of the time, Yeats bemoans the destruction of traditions, which includes the Anglo-Irish big house, and writes that these once grand homes of "old historic bricks and window-panes" have been "obliterated or destroyed" (*CW5* 221). This mourning for a loss of power over the land also extends to politics. Yeats, who was unhappy with de Valera's direction for Ireland, rails against a political system which "has given Ireland to the incompetent," noting that as "the nominated [Anglo-Irish] element began to die out ... the Senate declined in ability and prestige" (*CW5* 223).

Yeats offers a number of solutions to Ireland's problems. Some of these go beyond the social eugenicism favored by conservative revolutionaries to include a biological determinism similar to that put forth by fascist groups throughout Europe. A primary concern for Yeats was that the upper class was having less children than the lower class: "Since about 1900 the better stocks have not been replacing their numbers, while the stupider and less healthy have been more than replacing theirs. Unless there is a change in the public mind every rank above the lowest must degenerate, and, as inferior men push up into its gaps, degenerate more and more quickly" (*CW5* 229). Yeats's answer to his perceived need to "limit the families of the unintelligent classes" include war as well as state-mandated medical intervention (*CW5* 231, 232).<sup>25</sup> Yeats praises fascist countries for "know[ing] that civilisation has reached a crisis," but in

true elitist form he disapproves of their embrace of the uneducated masses as a disposable labor force that can “dig or march” in a future war economy. By putting “quantity before quality” the fascist nations have, according to Yeats, “accelerate[d] degeneration” (CW5 230). Like the fascist groups he admires, Yeats also sees armament as a central means of Ireland’s regeneration; a more powerful military along Ireland’s border could thwart “uneducated” immigrants from entering the county (CW5 241).

But Yeats also proposes arts education as a more benign option, one Bernard McKenna reads as part of a “larger cultural program” across Yeats’s writing. This program, made explicit in *On the Boiler*, includes a prolonged narrative about Ireland’s degeneration and the hoped-for regeneration through education:

If read as a whole, [*On the Boiler*] presents a dual vision: Ireland’s culture is in a state of decline that can be traced to the breaking apart of Yeats’s program of cultural nationalism, but eugenics and education are the keys to forming a new cultural nationalism that can redeem the Irish nation, that can heal society and that can unite the various factions that exist in Irish society, that, in short, can “restore the soul.”<sup>26</sup>

In the “Ireland after the Revolution” section of *On the Boiler*, Yeats makes it clear that the education he has in mind would be made possible through literature, in particular poetry. As McKenna notes, this section “articulates hope rather than despair:” “education is a way to breathe fresh life into the goals of [cultural nationalism] despite the disintegration of his old paradigm.”<sup>27</sup> The question that emerges from Yeats’s focus on poetry in *On the Boiler* is whether or not we can read Yeats’s radio broadcasts as part of his call to reeducate Ireland through literature, and thus also as part of his conservative revolutionary politics.<sup>28</sup>

## II. DEGENERATION AND REGENERATION IN YEATS’S RADIO BROADCASTS

In his reading of Yeats’s bardic aspirations, Ronald Schuchard convincingly argues that at the turn of the twentieth century, Yeats began working toward a “spiritual democracy” as a means to “redress the cultural imbalance brought by the book” and “restore personal utterance to dramatic, narrative, and lyric poetry for all the people.”<sup>29</sup> Schuchard’s claim for a “democratic” Yeats is based on the poet’s privileging of orality as a medium for the masses over the selectivity of print, as found in early texts like “Literature and the Living Voice” (1906). However, Schuchard’s argument that Yeats’s radio career was a “gradual resurrection” of a democratic impulse based in what Yeats saw as Ireland’s oral



tradition ignores not only the significance of print circulation in radio broadcasting, which Bloom discusses at length in *The Wireless Past*, but also the shift in the author's politics during the 1930s.<sup>30</sup> Forming new listening audiences and imagining new listening spaces do not cancel out Yeats's admiration and vocal support for fascism and eugenics. Instead, it could be argued that rather than democratize the airwaves, Yeats used the radio to bring his conservative revolutionary ideologies into the private, lived spaces of isolated listeners.

For example, "In the Poet's Pub," which was broadcast by the BBC on April 2, 1937, begins with Yeats explaining to listeners how he crafted the poetry reading with a mixture of song and spoken word to improve their comprehension of, and connectivity to, the broadcast. But Yeats's desire to control the listener's experience extends beyond the construction of his broadcast. He plays the part of the announcer and sets the imaginary scene at a pub, a communal location that illustrates his desire to build a connected audience: "I want you to imagine yourself in a Poet's Pub. There are such pubs in Dublin and I suppose elsewhere. You are sitting among poets, musicians, farmers and labourers" (*CW10* 267). Yeats's imagined space is an intimate one filled with people from various classes and occupations, including both the arts and manual labor. This cross-section of imaginary listeners speaks to Yeats's desire to form a new and broader audience for his work. But this idealized space, in which pub-goers listen attentively to a poetry reading, is also an illusion created to enhance the power of the broadcast. Yeats wants listeners to see what he envisions for them—"in a pub as *I* have imagined"—rather than create their own imagined space (emphasis added, *CW10* 272). Yeats does not frame his broadcast as a democratic listening experience; instead, he explicitly states his aim to control the broadcast from its output to reception.<sup>31</sup>

Yeats's radio pub broadcast provides an example of what Theodor Adorno referred to as the "illusion of closeness." According to Adorno, the intimacy that results from radio listening is a fantasy:

What is actually listened to does not depend only on the picking up and transmission of the broadcast but also on the room where it is listened to. [...] This bears upon the illusion of closeness. One might assume that it is partly due to the over-strength of a radio playing with full power in a small room. [...] The listener feels as if presented with something totally familiar, and familiar it may be indeed, yet in such a manner that it assumes an air of strangeness.<sup>32</sup>

Yeats's listening audience, tuning in to his broadcast in the privacy of their own homes, accounts for a first level of this illusion of closeness. Regardless of the imaginary setting, Yeats's voice entering the private, lived spaces of his listeners creates, as Adorno would put it, an artificial intimacy and "familiar[ity]." But

Yeats creates a second level of illusion through the imagined pub space. Not only is his audience most likely tuning in from "a small room," but they are asked to imagine that they are listening in a different small space, one made even more intimate by its fictional crowdedness and its inhabitants' increasing drunkenness. Yeats even hints at the familiarity of this imagined scene when he states that such a pub can be found in Dublin and elsewhere.

In the BBC broadcast that followed on April 22, 1937, Yeats restricts the listener's imaginary space even more, as he moves the fictional setting of the broadcast from a pub to a parlour. In his opening to "In the Poet's Parlour," Yeats again sets the scene for his listeners. His description emphasizes the intimacy and artistic exclusiveness of the space:

When we were in the Poets' Pub I asked you to listen to poems written for everybody, but now you will listen, or so I hope, to poems written for poets, and that is why we are in the Poet's Parlour. Those present are his intimate friends and fellow students. There is a beautiful lady, or two or three beautiful ladies, four or five poets, a couple of musicians and all are devoted to poetry. (CW10 276)

A question emerges from this change in setting: how are poems written for poets different from those written for the general population, especially when both programs are broadcast to the public? If we read these broadcasts as part of Yeats's larger mission to regenerate Ireland through poetry, then perhaps these increasingly intimate and culturally elite settings are meant to attune listeners to a cultural hierarchy. If this is the case, then it is noteworthy that the poems for "In the Poet's Pub" are all written by authors other than Yeats, including the English poets Hilaire Belloc, C. K. Chesterton, and Sylvia Townsend Warner, whereas "In the Poet's Parlour" begins with Yeats's own work.<sup>33</sup> Yeats seems to be suggesting that he is making his poetry, previously meant for the culturally elite, accessible to a larger public in order to bring them into this previously exclusionary space. Also of note is that Yeats's selection of his own poetry for "In the Poet's Parlour" focuses on themes that mirror his conservative revolutionary concerns, such as the decline of Anglo-Irish power and traditional politics, cultural degeneration, and artistic autonomy as a necessary remedy.

In the poem "I Am of Ireland," two speakers engage in a short exchange. The first speaker, an elderly female meant to represent an ancient Ireland who has seen "time run on," asks the second speaker to dance. He declines and laments that the nation's political and cultural degeneration is to blame for Ireland no longer being as seductive as she once was:

One man, one man alone  
In that outlandish gear,

One solitary man  
 Of all that rambled there  
 Had turned his stately head.  
 "That is a long way off,  
 And time runs on," he said,  
 "And the night grows rough." (CW10 277)

The "rough[ness]" of present-day Ireland, now "a long way off" from Ireland's glory days, however, are not the only reasons the "stately" speaker cannot dance. For now even the musicians, Ireland's cultural heritage, are broken:

The fiddlers are all thumbs,  
 Or the fiddle-string accursed,  
 The drums and the kettledrums  
 And the trumpets are all burst. (CW10 277)

One could also read this stanza as being about the second speaker's sexual impotence. His inability to perform sexually due to an "accursed" and "burst" instrument would, as Yeats writes in *On the Boiler*, make space for "inferior men [to] push up into [the] gaps, [and] degenerate more and more quickly" (CW5 229).

Yeats explores a similar theme in the broadcast's next poem, "The Wicked Hawthorn Tree." Here, however, the references to the decline of the landed class and aristocratic tradition are more obvious. In a conversation with a hawthorn tree, a travelling man reveals that he has seen the ghosts of the past dancing in a castle: "Yet all the lovely things that were / Live, for I saw them dancing there." The tree, however, tells the man that what he saw is no more. The "Lovely lady and gallant man" are now "cold blown dust or a bit of bone" (CW10 278). The death of the aristocracy is made concrete by the image of decayed bodies. In *On the Boiler*, Yeats concludes with a poem that contains a similar theme to that of "The Wicked Hawthorn Tree"; the poem invokes the anti-democratic fervor of Yeats's conservative revolutionary politics more directly than Yeats's radio broadcast. In this poem, an older and now retired politician reflects on former years and the current state of Irish politics:

I lived among great houses  
 Riches drove out rank,  
 Base drove out the better blood,  
 And mind and body shrank. (CW5 250)

But Yeats's fears of democratic representation also invoke a biological determinism that goes beyond both the conservative revolutionary and left-leaning

eugenicist platforms. The references to “better blood” and shrinking minds and bodies in this poem, although only alluded to in “The Wicked Hawthorn Tree,” recur in the prose passages of *On the Boiler*.

For Yeats, one method of combating Ireland's political and social degeneration involved an increased access to art, one that required the artist be free to create. Throughout the 1930s, artistic freedom became increasingly precarious in nations under fascist and authoritarian rule. Once World War II began, complaints about the inability to write became an even more common refrain, especially among British authors.<sup>34</sup> But Yeats found the threats to his artistry closer to home from both the increasing enthusiasm for leftist politics among British and Irish poets including W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Cecil Day-Lewis, as well as from the socially conservative de Valera government, which Yeats criticized in *On the Boiler*. Under de Valera, the Abbey Theatre saw a decrease in its government subsidy and further regulation by way of a government-appointed board member, who prohibited Yeats's play *The Herne's Egg* from being produced.<sup>35</sup> In his poem “Sweet Dancer,” Yeats takes up the theme of artistic freedom and pleads with the listener to defend the dancer so that she might finish her dance before being censored: “Lead them gently astray; / Let her finish her dance, / Let her finish her dance” (CW10 277). But the quest for artistic autonomy is only part of this poem. The dancer is also a symbol of Ireland's potential regeneration. In the first stanza, the speaker claims that the dancer escaped from stifling artistic conditions, which symbolize the current state of the arts in present-day Ireland: “Escaped from bitter youth / Escaped out of her crowd / Or out of her black cloud” (CW10 276). It is in the dancer's potential to complete her art that hope for Ireland's future lies. The speaker repeats his plea in the second stanza, “Let her finish her dance.” Yeats also strikes a hopeful, if not quite regenerative tone at the end of “The Wicked Hawthorn Tree,” as the tree ponders whether it might cheat death after claiming that “Nobody knows what may befall” (CW10 278).

But in the following program, “My Own Poetry,” broadcast on July 3, 1937, Yeats suggests that cultural education may not be enough to save Ireland. In the first “political” poem of the broadcast, “The Rose Tree,” Yeats argues that violence and war are needed to rejuvenate Ireland's revolutionary spirit (CW10 286). In “The Rose Tree,” originally published in the *Dial* in 1920, Yeats presents a fictional discussion between two leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising: James Connolly and Padraig Pearse. Using horticultural imagery, Connolly proposes that Irish nationalism (the rose tree) needs to be tended to and cultivated in order to survive: “It needs to be but watered; / [...] / ‘To make the green come out again’” (CW10 284). Pearse, however, disagrees and in the final words of the poem claims that without the resources to grow the nationalist spirit, the only answer is violence: “O plain as plain can be / There's nothing but our

own red blood / Can make a right Rose Tree” (CW10 284). Although originally published almost two decades earlier, by broadcasting the poem in the late 1930s, Yeats recasts the poem as significant to contemporary politics. Considered in its 1937 context, Yeats’s choice to give the nationalist Pearse the final word over the socialist Connolly suggests Yeats viewed political violence, and more specifically revolutionary violence that installs nationalist policies, as the answer to Ireland’s “withered” political and cultural state. (This is an idea Yeats also proposes in *On the Boiler* (CW5 241–42).) But it also seems to reflect the poet’s conservative revolutionary politics. Yeats not only saw violence as a viable means to keep socialism at bay but also believed that romantic nationalism (which he had once found in the Blueshirts) was the rightful inheritor of Ireland’s revolutionary past.

By reading Yeats’s radio broadcasts in light of his political affiliations during the 1930s and *On the Boiler*, it becomes apparent that the influence of Yeats’s conservative revolutionary principles extend beyond a single pamphlet and instead spread across different genres and modes of mass communications. Although Yeats’s turn to radio allowed him to experiment with a new medium and reach a different and more diverse listenership than his print work, it also enabled him to disseminate in more bite-sized and appetizing chunks the eugenicist and para-fascist narratives that reemerge in a more violent form in *On the Boiler*. This reading of Yeats’s radio work is not intended to diminish the value of Yeats’s aesthetics nor take away from his attempts to reach a broader audience. However, by placing his broadcasts within a larger historical and literary context, we can begin to see how Yeats’s radio work not only voiced conservative revolutionary ideologies in *On the Boiler* but also performed the cultural education program that he saw as a necessary therapy for a degenerating Ireland.

### Notes

1. Emilie Morin argues that Yeats’s “poetry broadcasts, whose conventions were as yet unformalised, granted Yeats the freedom to conceive new relationships between musical speech and non-vocal sound.” See Emilie Morin, “‘I Beg your Pardon?’: W. B. Yeats, Audibility and Sound Transmission,” *YA* 19 (2013): 204.
2. For example, in his radio play *The Flight Across the Ocean* (*Der Ozeanflug*), which was originally broadcast as *Der Flug der Lindberghs: Ein Radiolehrstück für Knaben und Mädchen* (or Lindbergh’s *Flight: A Radio Learning Play for Boys and Girls*), Bertolt Brecht choreographed a call-and-response broadcast as a means to alter the listener’s interaction with the broadcasting station. Walter Benjamin also experimented with training people to listen to the radio with his *Radau um Kasperl* radio play, while Archibald MacLeish sought to create a controlled imaginary mental space through aural images, a process he theorizes in his Foreword to *The Fall of the City: A Verse Play for Radio* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1937), x. For a more detailed reading of broadcasters seeking to control the listening experience, see

Melissa Dinsman, *Modernism at the Microphone: Radio, Propaganda, and Literary Aesthetics during World War II* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

3. I am borrowing the term "conservative revolutionary" from Matthew Feldman, who uses it to define those writers and philosophers who found kindred spirits in fascism's longing for a resurgence of traditional culture and renewed national spirit, but found Nazism violence and crudeness distasteful. Matthew Feldman, "Between Geist and Zeitgeist: Martin Heidegger as Ideologue of 'Metapolitical Fascism,'" *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no. 2 (2005): 175–98, 176. See also Armin Mohler, *Die Konservative Revolution in Deutschland 1918–1932* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994).
4. "Para-fascist," which Roger Griffin describes in a footnote as "interwar European regimes which created an elaborate fascist façade while remaining at heart conservative," seems the most accurate term to describe the Blueshirts, which incorporated elements of fascism (the iconography of the shirts and salute; violent scuffles with the political left, including the IRA; and anti-democratic values) but was not successful in bringing fascism to Ireland in the same way that fascism succeeded in Italy and Germany. Roger Griffin, "Hooked Crosses and Forking Paths: The Fascist Dynamics of the Third Reich," in *A Fascist Century*, ed. Matthew Feldman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 83–113, 233.
5. Although I am only discussing a handful of poems from three of Yeats's radio broadcasts, Yeats's politics extend to his other radio poetry. For example, "The Curse of Cromwell," broadcast as part of "My Own Poetry," contains references to Ireland's degeneration and the loss of Anglo-Irish power. Emily Bloom discusses this poem's multimedia history extensively in *The Wireless Past* and also touches on eugenics in the poem. See Emily Bloom, *The Wireless Past: Anglo-Irish Writers and the BBC, 1931–1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 53–63.
6. Elizabeth Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism* (New York: New York University Press, 1981), viii. Cullingford echoes this position again a decade later in *Gender and History on Yeats's Love Poetry*, where she argues that Yeats's interest in eugenics is tied to his notions of class, rather than to his interest in fascism. Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 84.
7. Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*, 229.
8. Paul Scott Stanfield, *Yeats and Politics in the 1930s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 187.
9. Terence Brown, *The Life of W. B. Yeats: A Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 341, 367.
10. Spurgeon Thompson, "Yeats and Eugenicism: The Garrison Mentality in a Decolonizing Ireland," in *W. B. Yeats and Postcolonialism*, ed. Deborah Fleming (West Cornwall, CT: Locust Hill, 2001), 27–49, 30.
11. W. J. McCormack, *Blood Kindred: W. B. Yeats—the Life, the Death, the Politics* (London: Pimlico, 2005), 8–9, 378.
12. Donald J. Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001), 18–19. Susan Johnston Graf offers a third possible reason for Yeats's eugenics, namely his interest in the occult and sexual magic; see Johnston Graf, "An Infant Avatar: The Mature Occultism of W. B. Yeats," *New Hibernia Review* 9, no. 4 (2005): 99–112.
13. Bloom, *The Wireless Past*, 36, 63. See n5 above.
14. David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Movement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 60, 59.
15. Feldman, "Between Geist and Zeitgeist," 176. It is difficult to define fascism because its expression is often rooted within local conditions and fascist movements took on different forms in Germany, Italy, and indeed the Irish Free State. Commenting on newer scholarly understandings of fascism, Feldman writes that Nazism must be understood as "part of a larger politico-cultural movement, one that includes permutations as varied as the CR

[Conservative Revolutionaries], Italian Fascism, the Romanian Iron Guard, the British Union of Fascists, and so on. Each of these revolutionary clusters can be usefully viewed in terms of prevailing inter-war sentiments of decline and expected collapse" (177). McCormack also notes that fascism's roots begin in the nineteenth century and should not be read only in the context of its more successful twentieth century versions. According to McCormack, we should not "define fascism by reference near-exclusively to successful fascism, to those instances where fascist movements acquired governmental power" as in Germany and Italy, but to also see similar conditions for its growth in Denmark, Switzerland, Britain, and Ireland. McCormack, *Blood Kindred*, 337.

16. Lauren Arrington, "Fighting Spirits: W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and the Ghosts of *The Wind-ing Stair* (1929)," *YA* 21 (2018): 269–93. Arrington notes that in the early 1920s both poets turned to Italy as a political model; Yeats, notably, quoted Mussolini in his Tailteann Games speech. Although Yeats's relationship to Italian fascism was "less direct" than Pound's, who thought he might become Mussolini's "literary advisor," Arrington observes that Yeats's relationship to Italian fascism was "nonetheless troubling" (276). In his discussion of Yeats's Tailteann Games speech, Roy Foster points to a draft version that suggests that the industrial strikes in Ireland "which had nearly sabotaged the opening of the Games" were part of the reason why Yeats saw Italian fascism, which had outlawed the right to strike, as a potential solution to Ireland's continued upheaval. Moreover, in this speech Yeats praises authoritarianism as an antidote to the "widening of liberty" that had occurred in the nineteenth century (*Life* 2 265–66). Arrington, however, points out that Yeats's focus on family and the individual was also at odds with political structures like fascism and communism, which require submission to "the supremacy of the corporate state" (274, 277). Thus Yeats's praise of Mussolini's authoritarianism did not always align with his belief in individualism.
17. Stanfield, *Yeats and Politics*, 58. Stanfield, however, quickly shifts his ground on Yeats's fascism, calling the Blueshirts only "superficially fascist" and claiming that "there are good reasons for not considering this episode especially significant" (40). Cullingford also downplays the fascism of the Blueshirts and states that "Irish fascism, indeed, was always far more Irish than fascist." Cullingford argues that Yeats's involvement with the Blueshirts stems from his fear of communism and the further breakdown of the Irish economic system. While this may have been his motivation for supporting the organization, it does not make the group any less fascist, nor does it make Yeats's praise of the group any less problematic. Such political and economic fears were shared by Nazis in Germany as well as other para-fascist groups across Europe. See Cullingford, *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*, 200, 204. See n4 above for a discussion of para-fascism.
18. Mike Cronin argues that on the whole the Blueshirts did "possess certain fascist traits" which he locates in "the liturgical identity, the fascistic policies of the Blueshirts, the violent activities of their followers, and the perception by others in the Free State that the Blueshirts were a fascist body." Cronin, "The Blueshirt Movement, 1932–5: Ireland's Fascists?," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995): 311–22, 312.
19. Cronin, who also turns to Griffin's definitions of fascism and para-fascism, suggests that the Blueshirts were "potential para-fascists" because they "never achieved control of the country" and thus their para-fascist potential remained "underdeveloped." Cronin, "The Blueshirt Movement," 325, 326. As noted above, however, critics like McCormack have suggested that political success should not be the bar by which one defines fascism. For further information on the social and economic politics of the Blueshirts, see Fearghal McGarry and Brian Hanley, "The Blueshirts—Fascism in Ireland?" interview by Cathal Brennan and John Dorney, *Near FM*, May 18, 2012; Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy: A Self-Made Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Eugene Broderick,

*Intellectuals and the Ideological Hijacking of Fine Gael, 1932–1938* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010).

20. Cronin, "The Blueshirt Movement," 313.
21. David Dwan provides an even longer historical analysis of Yeats's nationalism, which he puts in conversation with the Young Irishlanders of the 1840s and the Irish political thinker Edmund Burke, among others. Dwan notes that Yeats's "counter-revolutionary" impulses ultimately sought "the end of a democratic age and the establishment of authoritarian rule across Europe." *The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2008), 135.
22. Cullingford, Stanfield, and Bradshaw suggest that Yeats did not become a eugenicist until the 1930s. However, Childs argues that Yeats's interest in eugenics started much earlier and dates Yeats's "earliest acquaintance with eugenics" at the turn of the century, when he was asked to review Allan Estlake's *The Oneida Community*. See Childs, *Modernism and Eugenics*, 170. One can also see Yeats's fear of Anglo-Irish degeneration in his earlier poetry, including, for example, the "My Descendants" section of his *Meditations in a Time of Civil War* (1923–24): "And what if my descendants lose the flower / Through natural declension of the soul, / Through too much business with the passing hour, / Though too much play, or marriage with a fool?" (CW1 207).
23. David Bradshaw, "The Eugenics Movement in the 1930s and the Emergence of *On the Boiler*," YA 9 (1992): 189–215, 191–92.
24. Bradshaw, "The Eugenics Movement," 190. In his essay, Bradshaw examines the influence of R. B. Cattell's *The Fight for our National Intelligence* on Yeats's *On the Boiler* and *Purgatory*. Although Cattell's work found favor with Yeats, it was dismissed by Huxley and the Eugenics Society for its "penchant for rhetorical excess and tub-thumping alarmism" (197) which are the very qualities that attracted Yeats to it.
25. Although Yeats is not specific about what this medical intervention would look like, it could include everything from birth control to forced sterilization.
26. Bernard McKenna, "Yeats, *On the Boiler*, the Aesthetics of Cultural Disintegration and the Program for Renewal 'of our Own Rich Experience,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 35, no. 4 (2012): 88.
27. McKenna, "Yeats, *On the Boiler*," 84.
28. The manuscript drafts of *On the Boiler* provide an interesting rhetorical connection between *On the Boiler* and Yeats's radio broadcasts. Of the many changes that *On the Boiler* underwent, one of the titles considered was "Poets' Corner." This is a remarkably similar title to two of Yeats's broadcasts: "In the Poet's Pub" and "In the Poet's Parlour." Bradshaw notes that in the "Poets' Corner" version of *On the Boiler*, Yeats explicitly advocates war and sterilization as a means to control the "unfit." Bradshaw, "The Eugenics Movement," 204, 207–08.
29. Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels: Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 191.
30. Ronald Schuchard, *The Last Minstrels*, 336.
31. The introduction to "In the Poet's Parlour" speaks to Yeats's desire to control audience reception. Here he explains how the broadcast was crafted in order to teach his audience *how* to listen to poetry performed over the radio. The directions include, "there will be music to rest and hold your attention" and "whether we speak or sing, our sole object is to fix your attention upon the words" (CW10 276). Yeats also exerted tremendous influence over the creation and production of his broadcasts. As Schuchard notes in *The Last Minstrels*, after his "Modern Poetry" broadcast, Yeats was granted the authority to "write the scripts, choose the poems, and have them spoken or sung as he liked, using a variety of musical instruments according to his directions and excluding professional singers, the BBC orchestra, and chamber music of any kind" (375). But such control did not always end well. Colton



Johnson writes that during the rehearsals to “My Own Poetry” Yeats’s creative demands offended not only Margot Ruddock, but also the singer Olive Groves, the harpist Marie Goossens, and the musical composer Edmund Dulac, the result being that a subsequent radio appearance by Yeats was cancelled (*CW10* 407).

32. Theodor Adorno, “The Radio Voice,” in *Current of Music: Elements of a Radio Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 345–91, 348.
33. “In the Poet’s Parlour” begins with Yeats’s “Sweet Dancer,” “I am of Ireland,” and “The Wicked Hawthorn Tree” before moving on to poems written by other authors.
34. Writing in her diary on September 6, 1939, only three days after the war’s outbreak, Virginia Woolf bemoans that “all creative power is cut off.” Taking a more public approach, George Orwell warned in a 1941 radio talk for the BBC Overseas Service that the spread of totalitarian regimes would result in the end of literature as democratic societies have come to know it. Others, like Cyril Connolly, argued that the act of writing itself was a form of resistance. This argument would later be pithily encapsulated by Elizabeth Bowen, who asked: “I wonder whether in a sense all wartime writing is not resistance writing?” Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, vol. 5: 1936–1941*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 235; Orwell, “Literature and Totalitarianism,” in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters vol. 2: My Country Right or Left, 1940–1943*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Boston: Nonpareil Books, 2000), 134–37; Connolly, “Comment,” *Horizon* 1, no. 5 (May 1940): 314; Bowen, “Preface,” *Ivy Grippled the Steps and Other Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), x.
35. Stanfield, *Yeats and Politics*, 33.