

Introduction

One can only reach out into the universe with a gloved hand,
and that glove is one's nation, the only thing one knows even a
little of.

LNI, 174

You cannot keep the idea of a nation alive where there are no
national institutions to reverence, no national success to admire,
without a model of it in the mind of the people. You can call it
"Cathleen ni Houlihan" or the "Shan van Voght" in a mood of
simple feeling, and love that image, but for the general purposes
of life you must have a complex mass of images, something like
an architect's model.

AY, 334-5

Yeats's Nations sets out the changing ways Yeats imagined Irishness. I argue that each one depends upon specific configurations of gender and class. In order to focus on the interactions between Irishness and other categories, this book recasts the question of the poet's nationalism as the question of his diverse conceptions of nationality. The question of nationalism tends to produce reductive analyses that are largely confined to attacking or defending Yeats's politics or to revealing the presence or absence of nationalism. The question of nationality, in contrast, emphasizes the particular structures of his various conceptions of Irishness, their relation to social, political and cultural discourses, and their changes and continuities over time. This shift also enables re-evaluations of Yeats's representations of women and the role the occult plays in his thought and work.

My approach produces models of the nature and shape of Yeats's career that are at odds with much Yeats criticism. While I do point out Yeats's initial embrace and subsequent rejection of popular Irish

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Excerpt

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nationalism, for example, I am more interested in tracing what new deep structures emerged in his representations of nationality as a result. Yeats began his career believing that the individual and the nation were or should be homologous, and therefore harmonious; Irishness was a resource and support for individuals. Later he moved to formulations that complicated such propositions and emphasized conflict between individual and nation and the potential violence embodied in conceptions of Irishness. My analysis also goes against the grain of Yeats scholarship that imagines a progress from his early writings, which treat physical desire and women romantically, evasively, and through a haze of literary and occult conventions, to the later works' sexually explicit portrayal of unadorned lust and frank, assertive women. In contrast, I examine the ways in which the late Yeats's constructions of sexuality represent the partial subjugation of desire and female personae to larger systems or purposes such as theology and eugenics. Finally, I suggest that Yeats's occult and metaphysical preoccupations were crucial components of his national and political concerns rather than a separate sphere in which he could either escape or represent those concerns.

I have chosen the term "nationality" rather than "nationalism" to designate the changing phenomena *Yeats's Nations* seeks to describe, partly because it is a term that Yeats himself used consistently, though not exclusively, and partly to indicate several of the principles that inform this book. One of these principles is illustrated in Benedict Anderson's generative and influential suggestion that we treat nationalism "as if it belonged with 'kinship' and 'religion,' rather than with 'liberalism' or 'fascism.'"¹ In other words, we should analyze nationalism not as a particular ideology, but as a virtually universal aspect of modern social organization that can be structured in varying ways with varying political implications and results. Nationality may involve nationalism as the desire for separation and self-determination, or nationalism as the imperialist aggrandizement of national territories, or neither. While the question of Irish nationality preoccupied him for most of his life, over time and according to his mood Yeats's style of wrestling with that question varied in form, content, and intensity. As the epigraphs suggest, for Yeats, Irish nationality was both a fixed origin and an elusive utopian end; it was a way of seeing or knowing, a mode of feeling, a set of institutions, and a mass of images – a national symbolic.² It provided the inspiring resources of tradition for the

artist, and was also always in the process of being created through new cultural productions. Yeats's nations incorporated a wide range of issues: the lineaments of national character, the bases, scope and forms of national community, the individual's relation to that community, the production and functioning of national symbols and tropes, and the sources and expressions of national culture. When he formulated Irish nationality in his writings on the theatre, Yeats was preoccupied with collectivity and intersubjectivity. In contrast, his meditations on Anglo-Irish nationality rejected horizontal collectivity and imagined nationality as a solitary gesture of inter-generational solidarity with those who are similarly isolated.

Eve Sedgwick has proposed the term "habitation/nation system"³ to indicate the enormous variations in the discursive construction of nationality, an idea that finds its corollary in Gayle Rubin's foundational substitution of "sex/gender system" for "patriarchy."⁴ Both formulations rely on a notion of mediation between a natural and given raw material, biological sex or "the physical fact that each person inhabits, at a given time, a particular geographical space,"⁵ and a set of discursive structures that shape and organize the raw material.⁶ I prefer nationality for several reasons. First, I wish to avoid the connotations of "system," which suggests singularity and coherence. Rather than a single system grounded in a particular geographical space, this book examines a series of formulations with varying degrees of attachment to the idea and the material realities of place. Given the volume and rapidity of various exchanges across national borders and the importance of migration, exile and diaspora in national discourses, geographical space functions as a particular foundation for nationality to varying degrees. Nationality also suggests an appropriately Yeatsian dialectic between desire and necessity. Unlike nationalism, nationality cannot be refused altogether; it combines the voluntarist connotations of nationalism with the determinism suggested by "national origins." Since the establishment of "nation-ness" as, in Anderson's words, "the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time,"⁷ virtually every institution, ideological stance or identity must constitute itself in some relation to nationality, even if primarily in negative terms, as in Marxist internationalism.

Besides emphasizing the constructed and variable nature of even the most apparently "natural" aspects of nationality, this book argues that it is always characterized by conflict, multiplicity and

contradiction. The model of the nation as imagined community does not always illuminate fully the struggles that surround it. Hegemonic versions of nationality often emerge after pitched battles over definitions and values, and are constantly haunted by the remnants of defeated constructions and threatened by the emergence of new alternatives. This is particularly true of the Ireland Yeats knew,⁸ which gave him a keen sense of nationality as the subject of overt political struggle. That struggle was waged through various forms of Irish nationalism – cultural, parliamentary, revolutionary – and it was punctuated by savagely memorable events, including the land war, the Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish War, and the Irish Civil War. Early in his career, Yeats helped found some of Irish cultural nationalism's most important institutions, he had personal relationships with nationalist radicals such as John O'Leary, Constance Markievicz and Maud Gonne, and he lamented the fall of Parnell and the subsequent disarray of the Irish parliamentary party. As a Free State senator, he participated in the postcolonial project of nation-building, ran some risk of being shot by republicans, and confronted his own isolation in the new Ireland.

Yeats's works also highlight the internal contradictions that mean nationality is never identical with itself. He had a complicated personal relation to several nationalities; a middle-class Irish Protestant by birth and upbringing, he sought to ally himself with invented versions of the Catholic Irish peasantry and the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. As an Irish poet heavily influenced by the English literary tradition and writing in English, Yeats had little purchase on or interest in a purist or exclusionary conception of Irish national culture. In "A General Introduction for my Work" (1937) he described the combination of love and hatred he felt for England and English culture and observed "Gaelic is my national language, but it is not my mother tongue" (*EI*, 520). His cultural nationalism also demanded a vigorous cultural internationalism. Homi Bhabha's work offers an influential and extensive formulation of the constitutive ambivalence of national discourses.⁹ But Bhabha's largely textualist model sometimes tends to make the instabilities of all constructions of nationality look alike;¹⁰ my analysis focuses on uncovering different kinds of ambivalence, various ways for nationality to lack identity with itself. Thus chapter 2 describes an ambivalence produced by the conflict between competing Irish

nationalisms, chapter 3 discusses an ambivalence organized around the dangerous erotics of an intersubjectivity that threatens to dissolve the subject, and chapter 4 examines an ambivalence about the necessary repetition of a founding gesture.

By focusing on nationality, rather than nationalism, I hope to intervene in current debates about what is generally termed Yeats's "politics." These debates have gone hand in hand with an increasing interest in his "Irishness." Questions of nationalism and nationality have occupied a central but insufficiently examined role in the controversy which started with Conor Cruise O'Brien's famous essay¹¹ and continues today. Some critics follow O'Brien, characterizing Yeats's "true" nationality as Anglo-Irish Protestant and indicting his political opinions as elitist and authoritarian; others seek to exonerate him by reading him as an Irish nationalist, and/or by painting him as a liberal humanist and individualist. Still others map his transition from Irish nationalist to Anglo-Irish reactionary.¹² Some recent additions to the debate are informed by postcolonial theory, which casts a more critical and sophisticated eye on nationalism. Edward Said's reading of Yeats negotiates between a leftist critique of nationalism and praise for Yeats as a "poet of decolonization" by treating nationalism as a potentially regressive but necessary stage in struggles for national liberation.¹³ In a related venture, another group, including Seamus Deane and Richard Kearney, base critiques of Yeats on the claim that he espoused a particularly damaging kind of nationalism, with tendencies towards mythology, mystification and blood sacrifice.¹⁴

Obviously, such differences have as much to do with a lack of consensus about the values and meanings of "politics" and "nationalism" in current literary and cultural studies as they do with Yeats's work, which is nevertheless varied and ambiguous enough to generate conflicting interpretations. In general I have tried to avoid the disabling project of either attacking or defending "Yeats's politics." Rather than emphasize the questions of partisanship and judgment that still inform much Yeats criticism – was Yeats a nationalist? was his nationalism liberatory or bloodthirsty? did he "mean it" when he embraced fascism and celebrated violence? – I suggest that in analyzing Yeats's nations and his politics it is more fruitful to foreground questions of form, quality, and complexity. Thus chapters 1 and 2 do not focus on the question of whether or not Yeats's early Celtic nationalism was complicit with British imperialism and

Anglo-Irish domination. They ask what shape that complicity took, what heuristic value it has, and how particular conceptions of gender and class functioned within it. Similarly, chapter 4 argues that as ambivalent as Yeats's views of the Protestant Ascendancy were, none of the several ambivalences in his Big House poems can be said to conduct a liberal political critique of aristocracy. The political interest of these poems lies elsewhere; they enable an analysis of how discourses of sexuality, family and genealogy often function to naturalize national claims and institutions. Of course, this approach does involve judgments about Yeats's politics, and some readers may find evaluations here that strike them as harsh. But such assessments are a small part of my analysis, rather than its goal. I have endeavored to sort out more and less politically and intellectually useful moments, strands and gestures in an extremely complex body of work. In that sense, this book is less about the politics or Irishness of Yeats the person or intentional author than it is about the rich, fascinating multitude of resources and problems his work offers to readers who are interested in the histories (and current formations) of those things.

This book also seeks to move beyond the terms of current thinking about Yeats's representations of women, gender and sexuality. Yeats belongs to a poetic tradition for which, as Mario Praz remarked, sex was "the mainspring of works of imagination"¹⁵ and to a historical period during which the discourses of gender and sexuality in Ireland and England were more prolific and more sharply contested than ever before. He is famous for his many friendships with women, his early devotion to the conventions and ideals of romance, his unrequited love for Maud Gonne, his elaborate exploration of the metaphoric potential of gender difference and sexuality, his late preoccupation with "lust and rage" (*VP*, 591), and his vasectomy in search of sexual rejuvenation. But there has been surprisingly little serious feminist criticism of Yeats; Elizabeth Cullingford's groundbreaking *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* is an important exception.¹⁶ Otherwise, there are a few archetypal studies that trace the appearance of such figures as femme fatale, queen, harlot and hag through his work, and a few discussions that chart a progress over time from idealized, romantic representations of women to supposedly more realistic and independent female figures.¹⁷ Other critics explicate the work through references to Yeats's relationships with Katharine Tynan, Olivia Shakespear, Florence Farr, Maud

Gonne, Georgie Yeats, Lady Gregory, Margot Ruddock, Ethel Mannin and the other women who were important figures in his life.¹⁸ While not denying the interest and importance of biography, this book suggests that if Yeats had not met Maud Gonne, he would have invented her. I argue that to explain the actual shape and texture of Yeats's representations of women, we must look to the culturally and historically specific interactions between gender, sexuality, and the other categories this study takes up.

Gender and nationality have an especially intimate relationship in the material analyzed here. They are not interdependent in the same way in all texts or moments. The exchanges between them are uneven, assume various forms, and are shaped by their relations to other categories. In addition, Yeats's works do not merely reflect the interactions between gender and nationality in larger cultural discourses; his engagement with them ranges from exaggeration to appropriation to resistance. But by the time Yeats began his career gender and nationality had acquired the status of "two of the most powerful global discourses shaping contemporary notions of identity,"¹⁹ as the introduction to the recent collection, *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, puts it. So the fact of their intense mutual embeddedness was constant despite variations in its form. While the development of the two as discourses of identity did not occur entirely simultaneously or along parallel lines, in general they both began to acquire this status towards the end of the eighteenth century, and consolidated it throughout the nineteenth. Most historians agree that the modern conception of the nation has only been around since the late eighteenth century.²⁰ As the nineteenth century progressed, the nation came to be discussed and defined increasingly in terms of language, ethnicity, territory and historical memories.²¹ In this sense, from the mid-nineteenth century on, virtually all nationalisms were "cultural" nationalisms.²² Nationality became more than a matter of location, affiliation or loyalty; it was an essential fact of being. All aspects of an individual's life, behavior and circumstances became available as potential markers of nationality, including gender roles and sexuality. During this period discourses of gender also acquired an unprecedented relation to identity. As Foucault and other scholars have argued, the notion that one's sexual behaviors and preferences constituted an "identity" is largely an invention of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²³

Most of the arguments in this book depend on discovering

intersections of various kinds between nationality, gender and class, rather than on drawing analogies between them. The act of constructing parallels between, for example, women and the Irish as corresponding oppressed groups or identities is part of the material to be analyzed here, not one of the conceptual tools to be employed. This is not to deny the heuristic value of noting that gender and nationality in particular share some features; clearly they do have much in common. Both gender and nationality are universally accepted categories of identity whose discursive organization involves claiming that they are based on innate differences; in fact, however, they are discursively constructed in relation to still other categories, and their precise organization and content varies nearly infinitely. Both have been instrumental in the emancipatory struggles of the groups they name, and have confronted them with the dilemma of choosing between asserting difference, which threatens to collude with hegemonic designations of otherness, and claiming sameness, which threatens to erase or deny the differences which have a very real existence and which form the basis for potential political solidarities. In addition, feminist and postcolonial theory often find or advocate similar means of representation and strategies of resistance, such as appropriation, mimicry, metonymy, and hybridity.

In other respects, however, nationality, gender and class operate differently as categories, and these differences have received less critical attention than their similarities. We need to be cautious and discriminating about drawing parallels lest they obscure more than they reveal. For example, Anderson comments on the “formal universality of nationality as a socio-cultural concept” by observing, “in the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender.”²⁴ Putting aside for the moment the question of whether everyone “has” a gender, it seems to me that having a nationality is constructed differently in several respects from having a gender. For one thing, there is a more prominent voluntarist strand in modern discourses of nationality. Immigrants are simultaneously promised and denied equal access to “national” status in their new homes, and expatriates often reject their native lands only to find their social identities determined by the “ex,” the mark of that rejection. In both cases the process of assimilation or rejection is necessarily ambivalent and incomplete; on one level the modern discourses of nationality deny the possibility of exchanging one nationality for another. On another level, however, the hege-

monic discourses of nationality, especially in the United States, do offer such mobility, largely through access to the universal, abstract rights of citizenship. Thus nationality has a network of connections to heavily naturalized categories such as race, ethnicity and family, but it also has links with the universalizing discourses of citizenship and human rights. Clifford Geertz has suggested that a similar tension between what he calls primordial and civic ties is both a central driving force in modern discourses of nationality and a major obstacle to their development and stability.²⁵ This dialectic between (to use Yeats's terms) the chosen and the fated operates differently in modern discourses of gender, and often involves designating sexuality and sexual orientation as the sphere of individual choice and variation.²⁶

A related point is that modern discourses of gender are more rigidly binary than those of nationality. Both nationality and gender are constructed in relation to "others," but they use different techniques and structures of othering. While nations define themselves against a series of national others, or against several nations at once, in the modern period femininity has been discursively constructed in relation to masculinity and vice versa. While the definitions of each term are contested and changeable, in hegemonic discourses of gender the specular relation between them is much less so. Of course, in reality femininity is defined in relation to a number of categories besides masculinity, for example, class, race and nationality, but gender difference gets coded *as a binary* in a way that national difference, which can also be constructed as a global plurality of nations, does not.

Both gender and nationality are invoked in emancipatory struggles. It is less true, however, that both were instrumental in the oppression of the groups they name. While discourses of gender were always key instruments in enforcing the subordinate status of women, modern conceptions of nationality are, to a certain extent, bound up with modern ideas of rights, self-determination and territorial integrity, so that the notion of a nation of slaves or a nation, as opposed to a native population, subordinate to another nation is something of a contradiction in terms.²⁷ Of course, various states and powers have consistently oppressed groups who could or did claim to have a distinct nationality, but often the discourses of race, rather than those of nationality, served the purpose of designating difference that demanded political repression. While women were often said to

merit second-class status because they were women, the Irish were said to merit it because they were members of an inferior race, and because they were not a “true” nation.

The specificities of class demand attention as well. While there have been a number of excellent studies of the cultural construction of bourgeois identity, such as Stallybrass and White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*,²⁸ in some respects class functions differently in relation to identity than nationality and gender. Although socialist projects seek to mobilize oppressed classes on the basis of shared suffering, interests and aspirations, class struggles do not generally engage in the kind of identity politics that characterize political movements based on gender, race, nationality, or sexual orientation. In academic circles, identity politics are currently critiqued as often as they are embraced, and one could argue that gender, nationality and class are all categories whose usefulness to the struggles they name will end if those struggles are successful. However, critics who want to make this argument about gender or nationality often do it by comparing them to class.²⁹ In general, nationality and gender are more intimately moored, albeit unstably, to identity and culture than class. One reason for this may be that gender and nationality remain implicated, with varying degrees of mediation, in theories of biological determination.³⁰ In the material studied here, class lacks the naturalizing power of gender; falsely naturalized constructions of gender and sexuality are most often employed to guarantee class and other differences.³¹ Yeats's representations of class often revolve more around the cultural productivity of material conditions like wealth and poverty than around questions of identity. Class also usually lacks the emotive and erotic mobilizing potential of nationality. Anderson comments dryly on the absurdity of trying to imagine the erection of a Tomb of the Unknown Marxist,³² though the iconography of the Soviet Union, particularly during the early post-revolutionary period, suggests at least a partial exception. Class functions as an explicit and consciously held identity and as a hidden interest or agenda, a double role that is less important in the formations of nationality and gender here.

The intersections between nationality, gender and class I examine are more complex and more concrete than simple parallelism or homology between separate spheres. Fredric Jameson's controversial reading of third-world literature as national allegory both points the