

Irish Identity Politics and the Image of the Stone in Yeats's Poetry

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Abstract: The way in which Yeats uses the image of the stone throughout his poetry reflects the ambivalent and changing attitude of his political involvement, as well as his negotiation of Irish identity before and after Ireland's independence from Britain. When used in political poems, the stone becomes an image of ideological rigidity and fanaticism, which often paralyzes life itself. However, the stone often represents the place of culture and, at a more personal level, a place of shelter from political violence. Through the analysis of a selection of poems featuring this image in a political context, this paper aims to show the chronological evolution of Yeats's use of this metaphor and its inherent paradoxes.

Keywords: *Yeats, stone, Celtic Revival, identity, Easter Rising, Civil War, Catholic, Protestant, violence, nationalism.*

Resum: La forma en què Yeats utilitza la imatge de la pedra en la seva poesia reflecteix la seva actitud ambivalent i canviant pel que fa al seu propi compromís polític, així com la seva negociació de la identitat irlandesa abans i després de la independència d'Irlanda respecte del Regne Unit. Quan apareix en contextos polítics, la pedra esdevé una imatge de la rigidesa ideològica i el fanatisme, que sovint paralitza la vida mateixa. Tanmateix, la pedra també representa el lloc de la cultura i, a un nivell més personal, un lloc on refugiar-se de la violència política. A través de l'anàlisi d'una selecció de poemes on apareix aquesta imatge en un context polític, aquest treball pretén mostrar l'evolució cronològica de l'ús que Yeats fa d'aquesta metàfora i les seves paradoxes inherents.

Yeats's poetry is deeply influenced by his own political involvement. Through his poems and plays, this author contributed to building Ireland's literary image, as did many artists and intellectuals taking part in the Celtic Revival in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Most members of this movement also shared a political agenda: the Celtic Revival not only shaped a landscape and a cultural identity for Ireland on paper (Duffy 1997: 66) but it also triggered a nationalist discourse

leading to direct action towards political freedom from British rule. Yeats believed that the task of a poet, as that of any intellectual, is mainly public. However, that is not the same as saying that an intellectual needs to be a cultural partisan or a propagandist for a particular cause. On the contrary, poets make a country's cultural life richer precisely from the self-expression of their independent minds, as Yeats himself repeatedly proved through his life experience and his work (Cullingford 1984: 55).

Yeats's political ideas kept changing during his life, and his constant negotiation of national identity, both before and after independence, is noticeable in the different tones the poetic voice adopts in his poems. During the Celtic revival period, his membership of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy made him seek an image of Irish identity that could go beyond essentialist definitions, in order to dilute the historical identification of Protestants with the colonial oppressors. In fact, as Michael North points out, the traditional position of the Protestants as the privileged colonial elite made their involvement in nationalist struggle even more relevant because it came from an opportunity to "exercise the virtue of free choice" (North 1991: 54). However, Yeats's aligning with John O'Leary's inclusive nationalism, in the line of Wolfe Tone's anti-sectarian approach to insurgency, made him clash on several occasions with the governments of the Free State, due to their stress on Catholicism as an essential trait of Irish identity (Williams 2007: 83).

Another aspect to bear in mind when interpreting his poems is that his notion of politics, as well as existence in general, is dialectic. One of the most clearly romantic aspects of his poetic work is his inability to reconcile opposites such as individual and community, order and freedom, transience and permanence, and his rejection to do so (Cullingford 1984: 134-6). That is why it is difficult to assign positive or negative connotations to the images in his poems, since pairs of opposing terms are often put together through paradoxical expression. The same happens with his treatment of history and time: his nonlinear non-progressive approach to historical change and political development contributes to his criticism of colonial Western centrality (Williams 2007: 73), but also to the impossibility of reading his poetry linearly. Moreover, the imagery in his poetry is so diverse and flexible that it eschews a one-to-one relationship between each metaphor and a particular referent.

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how the image of the stone keeps shifting in time along Yeats's poetry, and how these changes have to do mostly with the poet's emotional involvement in the Irish political scene and, more particularly, with his reaction to violence. Throughout this chronological view, however, the high versatility of this image can also be perceived synchronically in many of the poems commented, since the stone is charged with different connotations at the same time.

To begin with, the stone is often charged with connotations of coldness, barrenness, immobility and wasted efforts. The contact with the stone paralyzes what was moving or alive. See, for example, the comparative use of the image in expressions like "I've stood as if I were made of stone" in 'The Three Beggars' (CP: 107), or "We sat as silent as a stone" in 'A Memory of Youth' (CP: 118). Accordingly, the comparison is also used to express speechlessness, for example, in lines like "Only the dead can be forgiven; / But when I think of that my tongue's a stone" in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' (CP: 243) or "And more I may not write of, for they that cleave / The waters of sleep can make a chattering tongue / Heavy like stone, their wisdom being half silence." in 'The Shadowy Waters' (CP: 423). A similar use can be found in the different sections of the poem 'A Man Young and Old'. In the first section, 'First Love', the "heart of flesh and blood" the lover expects to find in his beloved turns out to be "a heart of stone" (CP: 228). The following sections of the poem develop

different images of death, loss and madness, one of which is crazy old Madge carrying "A stone upon her breast," and nursing it, since she "Thinks the stone's a child." (CP: 231) In this case, the connection between Madge's barrenness and her emotional attachment to the stone is explicit. However, the image is highlighted again later on in the poem when the poetic persona, now an old man, puts himself in Madge's shoes and concludes that, in the same situation, he would do the same: "Being all alone I'd nurse a stone / And sing it lullaby." (CP: 233)

These examples are helpful to understand the use of this image in the poems dealing with politics. However, this is not the only meaning it can present. Even when it is usually associated with negative connotations, the stone can also become a surface for words to be inscribed on or a material to be sculpted. Consequently, stones may become the symbol for something that will endure human efforts through time. In this sense, carving stone might be seen as part of the fine arts, as it happens in 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' (CP:132), or even as a way to build entire civilizations, as shown by "the proud stones of Greece," (CP: 205) in 'The Tower'. Messages inscribed on stone also appear literally in poems like 'To be Carved on a Stone at Thoor Ballylee' (CP: 187), where the poem itself is the text to be inscribed on stone, and in the last section of 'Under Ben Bulbin' (CP: 344), where the poet portrays himself as already dead, and the poem concludes with the epitaph inscribed on his tombstone. In consequence, the stone presents a negative connotation in almost all its appearances, although it also shows a certain degree of ambivalence, as far as its relationship with repose, permanence and memory is concerned.

This tension is quite relevant in the poems where Yeats deals with political ideals and violent conflict. In this context, the stone is often associated to extreme violence, totalizing ideology and emotional paralysis. It is the case of 'Easter 1916' (CP: 176). On the other hand, there are other cases where the stone can also become a place of refuge for the poet, a space open to reflection, even when not necessarily positive in connotations. It is the case of poems like 'To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing' (CP: 103), 'A Meditation in Time of War' (CP: 187) and 'The Man and the Echo' (CP: 360), where the stone provides the poetic voice with an opportunity to come to terms with present and past events, and in that sense it marks the poet's retreat from political action. The analysis and contextualization of a set of poems containing the image of the stone may be helpful to understand how Yeats's perception of political change and his personal experience through time influences his poetic imagery.

'The Dedication to a Book of Stories Selected from the Irish Novelists' (CP: 41), first published in 1893, belongs to the Celtic Revival period. However, Yeats rewrote the poem totally in 1925 and, most significantly, the image of the stone appeared only at this final stage (Parkinson 1971: 161). The tone of the final version is much more bitter and critical with the present situation of Ireland. However, the romantic notion of a mythical precolonial past inhabited by the Celts survives in the poem as a way to create a contrast with the violence and tension of the present, so that the final result is a more mature version, through dialectical development, of the same themes and motives of the Celtic Revival.

The poem begins with the poetic persona recalling the time "When her own people ruled this tragic Eire;"(l. 2), which is immediately afterwards associated with mythical images of druids and faeries. The predominant images for this mythical past are the colour green of the branch with bells the poet carries, and the enchantment of calmness and sleep it triggers. However, the tone changes in the third stanza, where the stone is associated to violent upheaval potentially caused by the "Exiles wandering over lands and seas," (l. 9).

These exiles are described as "planning, plotting always that some morrow / May set a stone upon ancestral Sorrow!" (l. 10-11) Therefore, it is difficult not to read the reference to exile and dispossession in a political key. The stone, in this case, would stand for revolution against colonial oppression triggered precisely by the nostalgia for this precolonial past. The following stanzas reinforce the comparison between present and past, where joy and sadness are put together in tension, in the last two stanzas, so that the poet is unable, in the end, to choose between them (l. 21). Therefore, even after its reshaping in 1925, the poem expresses the idea of a unified "innocent" Ireland (l. 22) that can be regained, if not through the direct action evoked by the stone, at least through remembrance of this past time of innocence. As such, the poem remains extremely pessimistic about the possibility of putting this ideal in practice beyond the minds of those who remember (Parkinson 1971: 162). Even so, through the use of a set of images that clearly follow the line of the Celtic Revival and do not recall any specifically Catholic or Protestant traits, the poetical voice evokes a picture of unified nationalism, and contributes to an image of the land directly linked with this constructed identity.

'Easter 1916' (CP: 176-8) was published in 1921, although the poem had been written in September 1916. The impact the Easter Rising had in Yeats, due to the fact that he knew personally most of the revolutionaries involved in it and later executed, made him rethink his position on romantic nationalism (Ross 2009: 88). The ideas of direct action he had thought dead with John O'Leary in 1907 —see the poem 'September 1913' (CP: 102)— had resurged with unexpected force. Although Yeats sympathized personally with the revolutionaries' political project, he also feared and regretted the ideal of blood sacrifice he had contributed to creating through his play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in 1902, and whose pursuit would continue during the Civil War (Cullingford 1984: 85). This bitter experience around the violence involved in political change sets the tone of 'Easter 1916'.

In the third stanza of this poem, the stone embodies the purpose of the revolutionaries, whose hearts have been hardened by their long struggle. That is how "Hearts with one purpose alone" (l. 41) appear "Enchanted to a stone / To trouble the living stream." (l. 43-4) The contraposition of the immobility of the stone with the living stream suggests a negative reading for the stone, identified with political inflexibility and fanaticism. The idea is reinforced along this same stanza through all the images of movement and change, contrasted with the stone in its final line: "The stone's in the midst of all." (l. 56) Again, the fourth stanza opens with this same image of hardened hearts: "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart." (l. 57-8). This pair of lines reads as criticism of the idea of blood sacrifice. However, the images suggested in 'Easter 1916' are quite ambivalent. Yeats chooses to give the poem the form of a lament for the dead (Cullingford 1984: 96), recalled by the poet through the repetition of their names (l. 61-2). Therefore, even when Yeats questions the necessity of the sacrifice, in trust of England keeping its promise of political freedom for Ireland (l. 68), the poem ends as a celebration of the executed heroes, led to death, after all, by an "excess of love" (l. 72-3). The idea of change is pervasive through all the lines, as well as this change giving birth to a new reality: the "terrible beauty" evoked in the refrain at the end of stanzas 1, 2 and 4. Therefore, it is difficult for readers to identify the revolutionaries totally with the immobility and hardness of the stone: even after their death, they are changed (l. 79). In spite of its mournful tone, the poem remains a celebration of nationalist ideals: the reference to "wherever green is worn," (l. 78), and its contrast with the "motley" of line 14 at the beginning of the poem point in the direction of a transition towards national freedom (Ross 2009: 90).

'A Meditation in Time of War' (CP: 187) was also published in 1921. It is a very short poem

conveying the mood of isolation and alienation from action that affected Yeats during the war years (Cullingford 1984: 102). In this poem, the stone has no negative associations: it just marks the place where the poet sits to reflect. However, the poem deals again with an opposition between life and stillness: "I knew that One is animate, / Mankind inanimate fantasy." (l. 4-5) Even when the referent for 'One' is not made explicit and remains open to interpretation, its relation with the "throb of the artery" (l. 1) that triggers the poet's discovery associates it to life in its most direct sense: that of here-and-now subjective experience. Therefore, the last line is quite conclusive: 'mankind', qualified by the poet as "inanimate fantasy", stands for a conceptual or abstract formulation of humanity for political purposes.

'Meditations in Time of Civil War' (CP: 206-13), written in 1923 and published in 1928, is a very complex poem. It includes seven sections which are more or less independent from one another, but also keep some continuity when read together. Like in the rest of poems published in *The Tower*, here Yeats develops his conception on the role of the Protestant Ascendancy, keen on perpetuating their own values of aristocracy and family pride as deeply rooted in the Irish landscape (North 1991: 53) while, at the same time, required to negotiate their own difference within the national project. In this poem, there is a constant tension between the "sweetness" and "gentleness" (CP: 207) created within the house and the violence unleashed in order to do so. On the other hand, the poem also keeps in tune with Yeats's lack of commitment with any side in the Civil War (Cullingford 1984: 112).

The first section, 'Ancestral Houses' (CP: 206-7), begins with the image of a stream or fountain that is characterized by being alive and giving life to "a rich man's flowering lawns" (l. 1): "Life overflows without ambitious pains; / And rains down life until the basin spills," (l. 3-4). The image is developed in the second stanza, through the evocation of "the obscure dark of the rich streams," (l. 14), again in clear connection with the image of the 'living stream.' The third stanza of this section, however, sets a contrast between this creative stream and the violence with which "architect and artist" (l. 18), characterized as "bitter and violent men" (l. 19), "might rear in stone, / The sweetness that all long for night and day," (l. 19-20). Therefore, the stone is associated with violence even when no political action is being described. In this case, the stone is the means through which ancestry and lineage will be perpetuated through inheritance of the house and monuments created by these artists. On the other hand, this effort is identified with violence through the questions made at the end of the fourth and fifth stanzas in this section.

The second section, 'My House' (CP: 207-8) deals with the contents of the house, in which the Stone is a prominent material. In the first stanza, the stone is displayed in contrast with the growth of a living being: "An acre of stony ground, / Where the symbolic rose can break in flower," (l. 3-4). This rose stands for the lineage that will be perpetuated inside the house, as it is seen through the connection created with the "flower" in the fourth section, 'My Descendants' (CP: 209-10). Here the poet's anxiety for his family line being broken begins to appear: "And what if my descendants lose the flower, / Through natural declension of the soul," (l. 9-10). If that happened, the house would become "a roofless ruin" (l. 14). However, at the end of the section these fears are dismissed through the permanence of the stone house itself: "These stones remain their monument and mine." (l. 24)

In the last two sections of the poem, these initial anxieties become more and more apocalyptic when related to images of war. In the sixth section, 'The Stare's Nest by My Window' (CP: 211) the outburst of Civil War takes place outside the house while the family waits inside: "We are closed in,

and the key is turned / On our uncertainty;" (l. 6-7). In this section the stones in the previous stanzas are counterbalanced with "A barricade of stone or of wood;" (l. 11), which clearly stands for political violence. The last section, 'I See Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart's Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness' (CP: 211-2) opens with an image evoking the house already in a ruinous state: "I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone," (l. 1). However, this section displays a succession of images of natural elements, violence and fantastic visions, which end up with the poet retreating again into the house, in the last stanza, in order to resist the violence outside. In this poem, therefore, the role played by the stone is paradoxical: the stone, in the shape of the house, is a place of refuge and retreat for the poet and his family, whereas at the same time it is linked to the violence in its creation and the violence outside brought about by the war.

In this same line, 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen' (CP: 213-7) also published in *The Tower*, is another "poem of apocalypse" (Ross 2009: 175) in Yeats's corpus. At the beginning of section I in this poem (CP: 213-4), the image of the stone stands for culture and civilization, which are now at stake because of the brutal savagery of war. In days qualified as "nightmare" and "dragon-ridden" (l. 25), the fruits of human thought and culture and the dream of political order are destroyed by "drunken soldiery" (l. 26) who can murder an innocent mother and "go scot-free" (l. 28). As in the previous poem, there is a reference to the "mighty monument" (l. 38) that civilization leaves behind: however, here "He who can read the signs" (l. 33) must know that "no work can stand, / Whether health, wealth or peace of mind were spent / On master-work of intellect or hand," (l. 35-7). The last stanza of this section ends up recalling the end of the first stanza: the ruins of Greek civilization mentioned at the beginning are burnt and broken by an "Incendiary or bigot" (l.45).

The other sections of this poem are shorter and keep developing images of dynamism, like the Chinese dancers' long cloths moving in the air (section II) or the swan ready for flight (section III). These images are subsequently counterbalanced with images of brutal violence. The last section in the poem, section VI, describes how violence is unleashed on the streets by horses with handsome riders (l. 1-2), in an apocalyptic image of destruction. Once the storm passes, when "wind drops, dust settles;" (l. 13), Robert Artisson, an allegorical image of the poet (North 1991: 61), stands on the desolation staring with empty eyes (l. 14).

The poem is highly ambivalent, therefore, on the role civilization has in unleashing violence. On the one hand, art and culture resist the strikes of violence through their permanence in time, even when they are not eternal; on the other hand, they represent a fixed conception of civilization that might well create the social tensions giving way to violence. Accordingly, North reads the figure of Robert Artisson at the end of the poem as Yeats's acknowledgement of his own complicity with the political situation of the country at the time, both as a poet and as a member of the Protestant Ascendancy (North 1991:61).

After the war, Yeats became involved in the institutions of the new Irish Free State as a senator between 1922 and 1928. His hope of the Irish Republic becoming "a modern, tolerant and liberal nation" (Cullingford 1984: 183) clashed with the conservative backlash into an image of Ireland that was mainly traditional, rural and Catholic. The new Free State governments resisted anything that sounded pro-British, and accordingly banned divorce and established cultural censorship. Yeats read these decisions as an attack to individual rights and freedoms and as a turn into fanaticism. As a senator, Yeats took part in crucial debates about the legislation for the future Republic, in which education was one of his main interests. However, after this period of intense political activity, the 1930s were marked by Yeats's strong disappointment at the Irish political scene. Unable to change a

political atmosphere he did not feel comfortable with, the tone of his poems became much more bitter and disenchanting.

'Spilt Milk' (CP: 248) is a very short poem that appeared in 1933. Although it might be read as a reflection on existence in general, rather than a political poem, it is also true that the opening of the poem "We that have done and thought, / That have thought and done," (l. 1-2) strongly suggests political involvement on the part of the poetic voice. All this activity is compared to milk spilt on a stone. Again, a contrast takes place between a fluid substance like milk —connected to nurture and, therefore, to life— and the rigidity of the stone. The contrast is quite similar to that created in 'Easter 1916' between the stone and the 'living stream' (CP: 177). However, whereas in that case Yeats's position remained divided between the criticism of the sacrifice and its celebration, now the tone of disappointment dominates the poem, since all the efforts of thought and action are deemed as wasted.

In 1938, Yeats publishes a series of four short poems under the title *Fragments*, all four featuring the same bitter, sarcastic tone (Ross 2009: 103). 'Parnell' and 'What Was Lost' (CP: 327) are two of these. Parnell's political downfall as a constitutionalist leader had been brought about by the Catholic Church's disapproval of his private life, rather than for political reasons. The attack was read as evidence of bigotry and fanaticism by nationalists like Yeats, who took him as a symbol of the kind of liberal and modern Ireland they desired. It was this branch of nationalism that turned him into a martyr-like figure after his death in 1891 (Cullingford 1984: 34). Parnell's words in 'Parnell' show his closeness to common people. The image of "breaking stone" stands for the hard labour that is still necessary independently of any political discourse about freedom (Ross 2009: 103). Hard labour, even if not necessarily wasted, may often go unnoticed or unacknowledged.

'What Was Lost' is a complex poem despite its shortness. Its message is concise, evoking in a more condensed form the imagery of 'Easter 1916'. In this sense, the reference to "the Rising" in line 4, even when it literally stands for the East as a cardinal point, easily suggests the Easter Rising as a historical event. The first line of the poem introduces an interesting contraposition: "I sing what was lost and dread what was won," (l. 1). The attitude of celebrating defeat is similar to that displayed by the poet in the last stanza of 'Easter 1916'. It also keeps in tune with the nationalist discourse of failure, a literary tradition Yeats recycled from ancient Greek and Norse mythologies alike (Cullingford 1984: 74). On the other hand, the attitude of dreading what has been won sets a more critical tone towards the Irish Free State. During his Senate period, Yeats grew increasingly estranged from the Catholic-biased policies that Cosgrave's and de Valera's governments started to apply, and tried to defend the political liberalism that was being identified at the moment with the Protestant tradition (Cullingford 1984: 182). After independence from Britain, Yeats experienced the Irish project as "the failure of nationalism to include difference within identity" (North 1991: 67). According to North, he perceived this as personal failure as well. In short, what had been won after independence was a divided nation.

This idea of collective failure in what has been won is reinforced in the following lines of the poem: "I walk in a battle fought over again, / My king a lost king, and lost soldiers my men;" (l. 2-3). These lines introduce the idea that the poet is trapped in the repetition of a battle already fought in the past. Its outcome can hardly be positive at the light of the conclusion exposed in the last two lines of the poem, where the presence of the stone becomes totally revealing: "Feet to the Rising and Setting may run, / They always beat on the same small stone." (l. 4-5) The stone of intransigence has appeared again to hinder the movement of human activity. David Ross identifies

the lost king as Parnell, and reads line 4 as a reference to the cyclical movement of the sun. For this reason, the poem becomes a reflection of the cyclical nature of politics (Ross 2009: 103). At the same time, one of the striking contrasts in the poem is the magnitude of the violence evoked, through words like "dread", "battle", "soldiers" and "lost", when compared to the smallness attributed to the stone.

'The Old Stone Cross' (CP: 332-3) was also published in 1938. It is one of the many poems in ballad form Yeats published at the time, most of them with a sarcastic and extremely mordant tone against the Catholic Church, but also against the Anglican Church and the British government. A fact that contributed to this growing bitterness was the renewed controversy around Roger Casement's diaries, which made Roger Casement a martyr-like figure, just as had been the case with Parnell (Cullingford 1984: 224). Yeats's angry tone, as well as the ballad-structure, is easily perceived in poems such as 'Roger Casement' (CP: 320), 'The Ghost of Roger Casement' (CP: 321) and 'Come Gather Round Me, Parnellites' (CP: 324).

In 'The Old Stone Cross', the stone takes on a particular shape, that of a religious symbol that presides the whole poem. Under it, an ancient figure of mythical authority, "the man in the golden breastplate", presents a series of attacks against the political scene of the moment, such as politicians and journalists telling lies (l. 1-4), and exhorts people to "stay at home and drink your beer / And let the neighbours vote," (l. 5-6). Yeats's disappointment at democracy itself, which he began to associate with 'the mob' (Cullingford 1984: 193-4), is made evident through this first stanza. In the second stanza the tone grows even more political, as the poetic voice attacks both the present and the past: "Because this age and the next age / Engender in the ditch," (l. 7-8). The third stanza finally attacks the world of art: "But actors lacking music / Do most excite my spleen," (l. 15-6). In the end the poem remains inconclusive, giving free rein to this mood of extreme dissatisfaction.

The last poem to be commented here, 'The Man and the Echo' (CP: 360-2), was written in 1939, the year of the author's death. Here the tone is much more intimate and calm than in the previous poems, although the poetic voice remains in struggle, now with itself. The stone acts as dumb interlocutor for the poet's regrets about the past, although it interrupts his course of thought twice in the shape of an echo. The role of the stone in this poem resembles that of a much earlier poem, 'To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Nothing' (CP: 103), where the poetic voice exhorts his friend to go "Amid a place of stone" and exult at failure. The stone, in these cases, stands for both a destination and an addressee. Like in 'A Meditation in Time of War' (CP: 187) the stone becomes a place of retreat and intimacy for exploration of the past and the present.

The first part of the poem sets the conflict. The poet stands "Under broken stone" (l. 2), an expression quite similar to the "Upon broken stone" in the last section of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' (CP: 211), and stops to "shout a secret to the stone." (l. 5) The following lines develop this conflict: the poet is haunted by questions that take shape from "All that I have said and done," (l. 6) which points directly to political involvement. These questions make the poet unable to sleep: "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" (l. 11-2), in a reference to Cathleen ni Houlihan and its direct relationship with the ideal of blood sacrifice and, consequently, with the Easter Rising. The two other questions, concerning Margot Ruddock's mental collapse and Lady Gregory's loss of Coole Park (Ross 2009: 148-9) are much more personal. This first stanza finishes with a clear contrast between the poet's sleeplessness and his longing for death: "And all seems evil until I / Sleepless would lie down and die." (l. 17-8) The stone's answer, then, reinforces the idea of

death as a necessity for the poet.

The second part, after the echo's first intervention, acts as counterbalance for the first one and puts forward reconciliation and acceptance of death. In this part of the poem, there seems to be a possibility for the poet to get redemption or, at least, to come to terms with the past: "Nor can there be work so great / As that which cleans man's dirty slate." (l.13 23-4). The poet keeps contrasting sleep, as connected to the body, with death, which cancels out any function connected to the body, including sleep: "But body gone he sleeps no more," (l. 29). Before death takes place, then, the "intellect" (l. 30) strives to attain a final vision: "That all's arranged in one clear view," (l. 31). The last lines of this second part convey the idea that the poet willingly and peacefully surrenders a life of intellectual struggle: "And, all work done, dismisses all / Out of intellect and sight / And sinks at last into the night." (l. 34-6) In this last line, the night becomes an image of death, inexorable and all-encompassing. This identification is reinforced by the echo's repetition of "Into the night." (l. 37).

In spite of this sense of closure hinted at by the motif of reconciliation, or "the unity of self-understanding and self-forgiveness" (Ross 2009: 149), the third part of the poem opens up disturbance again. After his reflection, the poet addresses the stone directly: "O Rocky Voice, / Shall we in the great night rejoice?" (l. 37-8) The idea of rejoicing highlights the sense of fearless acceptance on the poet's part present in the poem so far. Final certainty seems to come not in the shape of theoretical abstraction, but as barefaced acknowledgment of the voiceless interlocutor: "What do we know but that we face / One another in this place?" (l. 39-40) However, this line of thought is interrupted by the cry of a dying rabbit killed by "some hawk or owl" (l. 43), another recurrent motif in Yeats's poetry. On the one hand, it becomes a foreshadowing image of death, as Ross (2009: 149) points out; on the other hand, it recalls the anxious cry of the poet at the beginning of the poem. That is how the poem remains inconclusive in the end: the trail of rational reflection ends up disrupted by this open, existential cry.

In conclusion, it is impossible to give linear interpretations of Yeats's imagery, because in his poetry opposites most often assume and complement each other. The case of the stone is clear in this context: its rigidness and inflexibility, as opposed to the living stream, clearly identify this image as political fanaticism triggered out by rigid ideological assumptions. On the other hand, the stone also stands for endurance and permanence of culture and civilization throughout time and, therefore, it becomes an element to be integrated within the national discourse. To make things even more complex, this image of the permanence of civilization as represented by the stone does not deny the latent component of brutality and violence at the heart of civilization itself. At the same time, the stone is also possible as a place of refuge or shelter, even when it does not protect the poet from the existential anxiety triggered out by political turmoil. As a symbol, it works rather as a negative image: it has no voice of its own, even when it is the surface against which the voice of the poet reverberates. Accordingly, this inherent duality or ambivalence in Yeats's imagery can be read as an expression of his negotiation of identity along his career: as a member of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, there is an effort in his work to present an anti-sectarian image of nationalism during the Celtic Revival period and, from the outburst of the Civil War onwards, to assert Protestant identity as a necessary piece in the construction of the Republic. Through his expression of anger and disappointment at a political project perceived as too narrow for his liberal aspirations, Yeats goes on to prove through his poetry that the project of negotiating identity might be even more complex and elusive than just embracing a fixed idea of nationalism. His final questioning of his whole political career may be read as an attempt at being at peace before death, but it also proves

that political involvement is an unquestionable part of his vital attitude and is present in his mind until the very last moments of his life.

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