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YEATS'S MAGIC NATIONALISM

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ABSTRACT

This article challenges the widely-held opposition between an early Yeats and a late Yeats. This dichotomy becomes key in tracing the literary and political maturity of the writer describing his shift from an earlier imaginative nationalism to a militant one. Drawing attention to the similarity of Yeats's literary practices to the techniques of magic realism, the analysis registers an aesthetic continuity from the early to the late Yeats that shapes the writer's nationalism. The juxtaposition of the real and the mythic and the deployment of the trope of metamorphosis are articles of faith in Yeats's project of nationalism. The article concludes that while the term "imaginative nationalism" has long been used to describe Yeats's early poetry, "magic nationalism" with its reliance on "metamorphosis" as well as its mingling of the real and the mythological applies to Yeats's nationalism from its beginning to its end.

Key words: the real - the mythological - metamorphosis- magic nationalism

In the "Three Marching Songs", Yeats writes:

'A girl I had, but she followed another,
Money I had and it went in the night,
Strong drink I had and it brought me to
sorrow,
But a good strong cause and blows are
delight.' (Poems 382)¹

Yeats's nationalism; his "good strong cause"; has always been a delight. This continuous long lasting delight questions the discontinuity between what is famously referred to as early Yeats and late Yeats. The opposition between the early and the late Yeats becomes key in tracing the literary and political maturity of this Irish writer. It describes his shift from a romantic and imaginative nationalism to a militant one. Such an agreement upon Yeats's turn from his romantic dream of the unity of being to a more individualistic and politically engaged

nationalism, while not totally erroneous, seems oppressive in its totalizing conclusions. Of course, if critics keep judging Yeats's late politics against such an elusive and vague terminology as "imaginative" and "romantic", they will always end up embracing the widely-held descriptive dichotomy.

In both his early and late literature a permanent source of delight for Yeats is mythology through which the lineaments of his aesthetic nationalism are carved. In fact,

Yeats draws heavily upon mythology in his writings and juxtaposes it to the Irish quotidian; a practice that calls to mind the definition of magical realism that mingles "two conflicting, but autonomously coherent perspectives, one based on an enlightened and rational view of reality and the other on the acceptance of the supernatural as part

¹W. B Yeats, The Poems, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman's Library, 1992).

of everyday reality" (Chanady 22).² In "The Stolen Child", a faery is addressing a kid directly and there exists a possibility of physical proximity as it calls "Come away, O human child/.../ With a faery, hand in hand" (Yeats, *Poems* 44). In "A Faery Song", the fairies are singing over Diarmuid and Grania, two human newlyweds, in their bridal sleep under a Cromlech and wishing them lasting "[s]ilence and love" and "[r]est far from men" inaccessible in the real world (Yeats, *Poems* 59). In *The Wanderings of Oisín*, there exist the three isles of Dancing, Victories and Forgetfulness in parallel with real Ireland and both Niamh and Oisín could move from one land to another. In "To Ireland in the Coming Times", Yeats is nostalgic to "A Druid land, a Druid tune!" (*Poems* 71). In his Cuchulain cycle made up of two poems and five plays: "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" (1892), *On Baile's Strand* (1906), *The Green Helmet* (1910), *At the Hawk's Well* (1916), *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919), *The death of Cuchulain* (1939), and "Cuchulain Comforted" (1939) which spans Yeats's lifetime literary career, a number of mythological characters can move smoothly between the visible and the invisible, the body and the soul and the earthly and the otherworld. As such, it seems that Yeats believes in the co-existence of a real world and an unearthly one peopled with druids, fairies, heroes, the Sidhe and varied mythological figures.

Thomas L. Byrd actually notes in his book *The Early Poems of W. B. Yeats* that for

Yeats "[t]he world of immortal creatures (such as fairies) and the world of mortal creatures are really one and the same" and that "[our poet] is describing a universe in which two worlds are really one world. Man, through the process of civilization, has lost the capacity to see the 'other world'" (11).³ The quote implies two direct important things: the first is that the creatures from the otherworld besides their eternal character do not only affect our

human existence but also define it. The second implication is that our blindness to the faery world is due to the human plight of modernity. In the modern world, Man has lost touch with nature. Unable to appreciate its purity or listen to its voices, Man, for Yeats, has little or no access to the truths of the natural world where the fairies take lodging and hence remains ignorant of the otherworld which in no way means its non-existence.

A third conclusion, in fact, issues from the two above-mentioned implications which is that the poet unlike the rest of the people doesn't lose his capacity of seeing the otherworld as he is able to report its happenings, describe its characters and analyze the threats surrounding its very being. That Yeats peoples the landscape with different mythological creatures and animates the sceneries with their actions and speeches is a refusal to describe nature as it is, offering an alternative version of it amenable to his imagination and his mystic perceptions. His practices are akin to the first moment in the history of magical realism despite its belatedness. According to the Cuban-born literary critic Roberto Conzales Echevarria, three moments trace the history of magical realism in the twentieth century. "He finds the first use of the term 'magical realism' in a 1925 article on Post-expressionist painting, attributed to German art critic Franz Roh. Roh contrasts the fantastic, exotic, transcendental paintings of the Expressionists with a return to reality emerging in art at the time, a wish to "feel the reality of the object and of space, not like copies of nature but like another creation"' (qtd. in Aldea 2).⁴

Richard Ellmann actually states that "Yeats regularly exalts all that is imagined and denigrates all that is seen if it falls short of what is imagined" (IY 58)⁵ and asserts that for Yeats "art has no content but moods" (59). It is not the object that matters in

² Amaryll Chanady, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy* (Texas: Garland Publishing, 1985).

³ Jr Thomas L. Byrd. *The Early Poetry of W. B. Yeats: The Poetic Quest* (London: Kennika, 1978).

⁴ Eva Aldea, *The Indiscernibility of Difference in Postcolonial Literature* (London: Continuum Literary Studies, 2011).

⁵ Richard Ellmann, *The Identity of Yeats* (IY) (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

Yeats's art but how to perceive of it. Yeats believes that "[t]he great Moods are alone immortal, and the creators of mortal things" (qtd. in Ellmann, IY 58). Moods, then, being immortal and eternal i.e supernatural are the cause of being of the mortal i.e the natural. The normal and the paranormal are caught in an ontological relation, whereby the first cannot exist without the imaginative power of the second. The real which is "[e]verything that can be seen, touched, measured, explained, understood, argued over, is to the imaginative artist nothing more than a means" (qtd. in Ellmann, IY 59), Yeats declares. While the quote details what the real is, one is left with the question of the whatness of "magic" for Yeats. Is it exclusively a method of perceiving the real? Is it mingling the mythological beliefs with everyday life in the space of the text? Or is the magical real?

The answer to the above-mentioned questions cannot be exclusive of any type of magic nor can it naively include all types together. It is of course well-known that our poet is a member in the society of The Golden Dawn, a secret society that teaches and practices magic and that Yeats has a strong conviction that magic is real. All sorts of mythological creatures inhabit his writings. And his imaginative perception endows objects with magical spirits that move beyond the objects themselves. "The value of the moods to his poetry", Ellmann summarizes brilliantly, "was threefold" (IY 60). He goes on to explain:

First, they exempted it from the powerful conscriptive pressure of conventional beliefs and fashionable doubts; they made imagination, whether the breeding-house or the nursery of moods, more important than reason and more permanent than emotion. 'Whatever we build in the imagination', he wrote Florence Farr in 1899, 'will accomplish itself in the circumstance of our lives.' Second, they unified the world into one imaginative substance; they replaced the matter of the scientists with the mood of the poets. Third, they made forceful asseveration possible to a man whose point of view was flexible. They admitted the poet to a world

which the scientist, the banker, the clergyman, and the philosopher, clutching like dolls their substitute-realities, were forbidden to enter. (60-1)

Again and again, imagination creates reality and not the other way round. And since it is only the poet who possesses the power of the imagination, he is privileged to produce and recognize the real while all that the scientist, the philosopher and the everyday man know is a "substitute reality".

While Ellmann's analysis of Yeats's employment of moods is illuminating literarily speaking, it lacks a post-colonial stance. One cannot dissociate the opposition between moods and reason, between poet and scientist from Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature*. This British critic attributes "sentimentality", "natural magic", and "style" among other things to the Celts in contrast to the rationality of the British and the sense of "measure" of the Greeks. Arnold suggests homogenization of Celts into the British empire for the interests of both races as he claims, because for him, the latter epitomizes success and civilization. Unlike, the Celts' "*readi[ness] to react against the despotism of fact*" (102)⁶ which brings about their immanent failure and inferiority. Yeats, agrees with Arnold on the Celts' sentimental character yet he calls for an accentuation of such an attribute that renews the person and the poet's contact with nature, that is with the otherworld. What causes Yeats and Arnold's disagreement is the meaning of the real, that is equated with imagination by the first and with rationality by the second. As such, it seems that the Irish and the British are living different realities. The former inhabits the realm of the magic which is by no means unreal, the latter lives in the palpable real. Therefore, the juxtaposition of magic and real within the text can be read as an allegory of the coexistence of the colonizer and colonized on the occupied homeland. Durix insists that magical realism "must have a thematic engagement with the conflict between a local community and an imperial authority" (qtd. in Aldea 6). Yeats's dealing with this conflict takes various, sometimes contradicting and

⁶Matthew Arnold, *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1867).

confusing shapes according to different periods in his life, however, nowhere is Yeats's nationalism better elucidated than in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, nor are the techniques of magical realism, not theorized yet at that time, more dexterously anticipated.

Cathleen Ni Houlihan, Yeats and Lady Gregory's play written in 1902, describes an old woman of that name wandering from one place to another asking for help because her

"four beautiful green fields" were taken away from her by "strangers" (Yeats, *Plays* 23).⁷ She is welcomed in the house of the Gillanes who are preparing themselves for the marriage of their son Michael to the beautiful and rich Delia Cahel. The old woman praises the men who loved her and died for her sake as well as promises immortality to those who are yet-to-die. Upon her departure, Michael as if spell-bound, follows the old woman forgetting about his marriage and the dreams of his family. The old woman turns into a young girl with a walk of a queen.

The play is highly symbolic. Cathleen Ni Houlihan⁸ is the symbol of Ireland. The "four

⁷ W. B. Yeats. *Selected Plays* (England: Penguin Books, 1997).

⁸Kathleen Ni Houlihan (Irish: *Caitlín Ní Uallacháin*, literally, "Kathleen, daughter of Houlihan") is a mythical symbol and emblem of Irish nationalism found in literature and art, sometimes representing Ireland as a personified woman. The figure of Kathleen Ni Houlihan has also been invoked in nationalist Irish politics. Kathleen Ni Houlihan is sometimes spelled as **Cathleen Ni Houlihan**, and the figure is also sometimes referred to as the **Sean-BheanBhocht** (pron. Shan Van Vukt), the **Poor Old Woman**, and similar appellations. Kathleen Ni Houlihan is generally depicted as an old woman who needs the help of young Irish men willing to fight and die to free Ireland from colonial rule, usually resulting in the young men becoming martyrs for this cause. "Kathleen Ni Houlihan, Ireland Personified and Irish Nationalism", *History of Ireland*, 7 May 2016, stairnaheireann.net/2016/05/07/Kathleen-ni-houlihan-ireland-personified-and-irish-nationalism/. Web 02 May 2018.

beautiful green fields" refer to the four provinces of Ireland and the "strangers" are obviously the colonizers. The men who will die for the sake of Cathleen are therefore the martyrs meant to free the island. What is required from them, what will happen to them and what rewards they will get are detailed by Cathleen Ni Houlihan. Characteristic of magical realism, several binaries are unsettled in her speech. She says:

It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid.

[She goes out; her voice is heard outside singing]

They shall be remembered for ever,
They shall be alive for ever,
They shall be speaking for ever,
The people shall hear them for ever. (Yeats, *Plays* 26-7)

In the old woman's speech, freedom turns into commitment, living in one's country into exile, indifference into sacrifice, the individual interests into collective ones and death into immortality. All these subversions are ignited by the old woman that casts a spell on everybody who knows her. This series of transformations is a catalyst for the magical metamorphosis that will take place at the end of the play.

The code of the real is signalled in the play by the historical city name (Killala), the date (1798), the details of domestic everyday life (sitting at one side of the fire/ asking the priest to marry the young couple/ speaking about the suit of the wedding, money and its importance in life) while the code of

magic is represented first by the energetic old woman. Bridget, Michael's mother exclaims: "It is a wonder you are not worn with so much wandering" (Yeats, *Plays*23), depicting her as "a woman from beyond the world" (24). Later on, Cathleen Ni Houlihan is clearly anything but human. When Bridget offers her milk, she responds: "It is not food or drink that I want" (Yeats, *Plays* 25) nor does she accept money. She asserts: "This is not what I want. It is not silver I want" (25). This woman does not feed on earthly food and "If anyone would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all" (25), she affirms.

Finally, the main magical event is the metamorphosis of the old woman into a young girl at the end of the play. Magic becomes a logical outcome of what happened in reality. That the young man left his bride one day before their wedding ceremony for the sake of the old woman compels the change in the latter into a young one competitive with the young lady, attractive for the young man, inspiring allegiance in the population as any queen. When Michael asked his son Patrick: "Did you see an old woman going down the path?", the answer comes as follows: "I did not, but I saw a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (28). The transformation of the old woman into a young one is marvellous in Todorovian terms whereby "the supernatural is accepted",⁹ not explained. Yeats does not even give the audience any chance to hesitate whether what happened is real or unreal as the scene of the metamorphosis closes the play. Magic is real and this is of course unsurprisingly Yeatsian. Peter Kuch affirms that the final scene of the metamorphosis

anchors *Cathleen ni Houlihan* in the fantastic. Peter Gillane, who has seen his eldest son Michael fall under the spell of the Shan Van Vocht and turn his back on a strenuously bargained marriage settlement that would consolidate the family's holdings of land, asks his younger son if he saw his brother depart in thrall to an old

⁹Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Cornell University Press, 1975).

woman. 'I did not', the twelve-year old Patrick replies, 'but I saw a young girl and she had the walk of a queen.' And at that the curtain closes. *Cathleen ni Houlihan* exemplifies the fantastic because it refuses to explain the supernatural as anything other than self-evident. (qtd. in Allison 234)¹⁰

The power of the figure of metamorphosis is that it is both magical and natural. While the transformation of one thing into another is considered magical, the process of metamorphosis is inherent in everyday life, tadpoles for example metamorphose into frogs, caterpillars into butterflies, and so on. "Metamorphosis" as Goethe asserts "is a general thing. It manifests itself in all the transient beings of the universe" (8).¹¹ In the space of the metamorphosis, Yeats could resolve the opposition between the magical and the real. Magic as represented by the concept of the metamorphosis is, then, not dissociated from life. Since "the notion of a resolution of the contradiction between the magic and the real remains central to magic realism" (Aldea 5), *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* can be considered a magical realist text as well as other Yeatsian texts incorporating the motif of the "metamorphosis".

Kim Anderson Sasser; after surveying numerous magical realist writings, concludes that a magical realist text might take on any one or a combination of three modes of operation: subversion, suspension, and summation. In the first, magic works to subvert realism and its representative world view. In the second, magic and realism are suspended between each other disjunctively. In the third, magic functions

¹⁰Jonathan Allison, "Magical Nationalism, Lyric Poetry and the Marvellous", *A Companion to Magical Realism*, ed. Stephen M. Hart and Wen-Chin Ouyang (G.B: Atheneum Press Ltd, Gatedshed, Tyne&Wear, 2005).

¹¹My translation from the French. Goethe, *Œuvres d'Histoire Naturelle*, trans. Ch. F Martins, Abraham Cherbuliez, 1997.

summationally toward reality: it adds to it.¹²Hence, the metamorphosis takes on the summation mode of operation as magic adds beauty and pride to the old woman, and takes on the subversion mode as Yeats seeks to subvert the stereotypical image of Ireland, that of an old woman and comic ape, when the father remarks that “her trouble has put her wits astray” (Yeats, *Plays*24), into a young, proud and dignified one to serve his nationalistic project. Magic is embodied through metamorphosis and the metamorphosis is used for nationalistic purposes, it becomes legitimate to describe Yeats’s nationalism as magical.

It is, however, worth noting that metamorphosis is a mythic motif and not a Yeatsian invention, and his *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is a reworking of Celtic mythology and specifically that of the Sovereignty myth. In her survey of the Irish goddesses, Maria Tymoczko informs the readers that “the most distinctive Irish goddess is the Sovereignty, whose union with the rightful king was thought to result in fertility and prosperity of the land. Her union with the sacral king was signaled by her metamorphosis from hag to beautiful young girl” (97).¹³

Yeats's remoulding of the above-mentioned subtext remains also faithful to the image of the Sovereignty as “sexually pure” (Tymoczko 105). The old woman in Yeats's play affirms that “with all the lovers that brought [her] their love [she] never set out the bed for any” (Yeats, *Plays* 25). Tymoczko comments upon that:

Chaste herself, she leads the men who follow her to chastity. In the play Michael turns from an earthly bride to the old woman even before Cathleen's epiphany. For Yeats, Ireland in her guise as woman demands chastity in her followers. Yeats's characterization fit his times: it suited Victorian and Catholic morality and a

nationalism that courted those values. (Tymoczko 105)

Yet with all its chastity, such a nationalism admonishes sacrifice and blood sacrifice in particular. Patrick J. Keane relates the image of Cathleen Ni Houlihan, that is Ireland herself to “Dark and Terrible Mother” (16), to “the devouring womb of the grave, of the hungry earth-mother who consumes her own children and exacts their blood” (16), to “a vampire, a blood-drinking goddess of death and of war who perpetually demands total sacrifice of her warrior sons and lovers” (17) and to “a femme fatale” (21) linking it to the myth of the devouring female/mother that is Celtic par excellence.¹⁴

Irish myths, the Sovereignty included, reinforce, in fact, the concept of motherhood in relation to Ireland. Cormac Gallagher writes in his paper read to the British Psychoanalytical Society entitled *The Island of Ireland: A Psychoanalytical Contribution to Political Psychology*:

[Ernest Jones] argued that the geographic fact that Ireland is an island has played an important and underestimated part in the idea that the Irish have formed of their own country. The signifier ‘Ireland’ has become particularly associated with the unconscious maternal complex to which all kinds of powerful affects are attached and this in turn has played a part in the formation of Irish character and in the age-old refusal of the Irish to follow the Scots and

the Welsh along a path of peaceful and beneficial co-operation with England (1).¹⁵

He continues that

The practical political conclusion to be drawn from an application of Jones' ideas is that if Irish nationalists unconsciously link

¹² Kim Anderson Sasser. *Magical Realism and Cosmopolitanism: Strategizing Belonging*(UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹³Maria Tymoczko, *The Irish Ulysses* (Berkeley: University of California, 1994).

¹⁴Patrick J. Keane, *Yeats, Joyce, Ireland, and the Myth of the Devouring Female* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988).

¹⁵ Cormac Gallagher, *The Island of Ireland: A Psychoanalytical Contribution to Political Psychology*, Web, 12 April 2015.

their notion of Ireland to the primary idea of Mother, their thoughts and actions will have such a compulsive force that no amount of reasoning or concession will modify them. And those who know to play on this unconscious association— as Yeats thought he had —will always find young men who are prepared to die in the service of the cause, even if, or perhaps especially if, it is a lost one. (8-9)

Yeats's play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* has sent "certain men the English shot" (Yeats, *Poems* 392) as Yeats horribly recognizes later on, enacting a sacrificial and obedient behaviour of the islanders towards their mother/motherland.

Michael Gillane, the about-to be bridegroom of Delia almost absent-mindedly follows Cathleen Ni Houlihan despite knowing very well what fate awaits him. The series of questions that precede Michael's avowal "I will go with you" is telling. Here are the questions in order starting from: "What is it that you are singing, ma'am?" and "What was it brought him to his death?" to "Is it long since that song was made? Is it long since he got his death?", then "Were they neighbours of your own, ma'am?", "Is it in the west that men will die tomorrow?" (24), "Have you no one to care you in your age, ma'am?", "Are you lonely going the roads?" and finally "What hopes have you to hold to?" and "What way will you do that,

ma'am?" (25). Michael starts with two "w-h" questions, then a list of 6 "yes or no" questions to come back to a couple of "w-h" questions again.

Goody distinguishes between the above-mentioned types of questions as follows: "Questions which are answered only with *yes* or *no* are already complete propositions, which only need confirmation or denial, as opposed to w-h questions for which the answer provides the missing clause to the incomplete proposition" (qtd. in Hamilton, 84).¹⁶ Accordingly, for Michael, at the very beginning he

needs completely new information to understand the situation and the real motives that voluntarily led and are still leading people to die. Karol Janicki explains that "w-h" questions "elicit ... significantly more information" and "this may result in more openness of interpretation" (139),¹⁷ that is at this stage, in Michael's case, a certain flexibility of thought can be applied to the issue. The character can ponder over the events, discuss them or even analyze them as he is still collecting data about who died and how and for what.

Once he is consciously convinced with the cause and unconsciously attached to it, he needs no further real inquiries as much as confirmations or denials serving as incentives to back up his already-starting mental and psychological engagement in the national cause. Karol Janicki states that "yes or no" questions "simplify reality, pressing complex issues into binary oppositions" (139). This type of questions here is introducing an essentialist nationalism that views the Irish as the opposite of the "strangers" i.e the colonizers. And the

Irish, like Michael, are left with one choice or the other: to be on the side of the old woman or to be against her, to "come nearer" (Yeats, *Plays* 24) or to go away. "If any one would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all" (Yeats, *Plays* 25), Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan summarizes. There are no midways, no in-betweens, only clear-cut distinctions as one must be either Irish or English.

The two last questions, despite being "w-h" ones, are different from the first ones in that they look more like confirmations than questions. As if Michael desired to hear over and over the noble mission he is going to take part in which is pronounced by the old woman: "The hope of getting my beautiful fields back again; the hope of putting the strangers out of my house" (25) — briefly the promise of freedom and independence. The ultimate question of "what way will you do that,

¹⁶Heidi Ehernberger Hamilton, *Conversations with an Alzheimer's Patient: An Interactional Sociolinguistic Study* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

¹⁷Karol Janicki, *Language Misconceived: Arguing for Applied Cognitive Sociolinguistics* (USA: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006).

ma'am" is announcing Michael's full submission to the dictates of the woman. Her answer recapitulates Yeats's early conception of the nation as a unity. She says:

I have good friends that will help me. They are gathering to help me now. I am not afraid. If they are put down to-day they will get the upper hand to-morrow. [She gets up]. I must be going to meet my friends. They are coming to help me and I must be there to welcome them. I must call the neighbours together to welcome them (25).

Michael in a trance-like fashion conceives of himself as a member of a national unity or collectivity advanced by a cluster of words such as: "friends", "gathering", "neighbours", "meet" and "together". "Yeats consistently", Marjorie Howes asserts, "chose the model of a group mind that was comprised of many minds but looked and functioned like a single consciousness". She adds that "[t]his image emphasized the permeability of individual subjects, unconscious connection rather than conscious choice, and the creation of an organic

whole rather than a constructed aggregate or an abstract relation between individuals" (69).¹⁸

Michael is totally absorbed by, and dissolved into, the nation.

The magical effect of the old woman upon Michael is felt by all his family members. His mother Bridget addressing her husband comments: "Look at him, Peter; he has the look of a man that has got the touch" (27). Delia, his fiancée cries: "Michael! [He takes no notice.] Michael! [He turns towards her.] Why do you look at me like a stranger?" (27). Peter Michael's father remarks towards the end of the play: "It is no use. He doesn't hear a word we're saying" (27). Michael himself is transformed into an agent of the nation forgetting about his marriage that is going to take place the next day. He exclaims: "What wedding are you talking of? What clothes will

¹⁸Marjorie Howes, *Yeats's Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (UK, Cambridge University Press, 1996).

I be wearing to-morrow?", then asserts: "I had forgotten that" (27). In short, the romance of the marriage is replaced by the romance of the nation.

The sacrifice of the individual brings about the rejuvenation of the country symbolized in the final metamorphosis of the old woman into a young one. The magical effect is also intensified as *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* is a one-act play. For the young Yeats, the event of the metamorphosis is an end in itself which differs from the Ovidian metamorphoses that are the rule in the mythic world and the exact opposite of Kafka's metamorphosis of his protagonist at the opening of the story with that title. Kafka is interested in the aftermath of the event of the metamorphosis considered an ailment of the modern man in capitalist societies while Yeats's event of transformation is the positive and fantastic outcome of the collaboration of a community, a reward for thinking as a unity.

Besides *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, "The Song of Wandering Aengus" also uses the motif of the metamorphosis. Many critics see in this poem a reworking of an old legend into a personal myth; the "glimmering girl" (Yeats, *Poems* 77) is Maud Gonne; Yeats's beloved, "fire" symbolizes love and the girl's running away from the poet till old age is reminiscent of Gonne's refusal of his several proposals in his lifetime. O'Hegarty and Jonathan Allison, however, offer an additional nationalistic perspective to the song. In "The Song of Wandering Aengus", a magical metamorphosis of a fish into a girl takes place. The girl runs away into the wilderness after calling the name of Aengus and the latter vows to find her and kiss her. While the supernatural element in the original tale is preserved in the new poem, Allison notes that there is a "strategic adaptation" (233) in Yeats's reworking of the myth. "In the original, Oenghus finally caught his fairy bride ... His catching up with her and the final consummation ... [however], is not the subject of Yeats's lyric. In his personal life, longing was an important feature" (233). O'Hegarty asserts that "the nation itself ... is still in the longing phase" (qtd. in Allison 233), and Allison concludes that for O'Hegarty the song is "about a liminal phase of national development, with the protagonist caught

between perception of the image of the future and fulfillment of that future" (233).

In the two metamorphoses figuring in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* or in "The Song of Wandering Aengus", Yeats is conceiving of, imagining as well as fashioning the image of the nation as a young girl with a walk of a queen and as a glimmering girl with "the silver apples of the moon" and "the golden apples of the sun" (*Poems* 77). These images or dreams are tethered to ancient mythology, immersed in romantic and fantastic visions and grounded in his early belief of the unifying power of Irish legends which appropriately give his nationalism the epithet "imaginative". For the young Yeats: "[G]reat legends... are the mothers of nations" (UPI 104). However, his efforts to foster a national unity through Celtic mysteries and stories were "ill-fated", to use Marjorie Howes's adjective (*Yeats's Nations* 70). His disappointment marks a milestone in his literary career and he starts to look for alternative literary and political paths.

It is worth noting, however, that despite Yeats's later disillusionment and shunning away from his early dream of the unity of Ireland, he passionately clings to mythology and dexteriously adheres to the mythological motif of metamorphosis. "Easter 1916", for example, masterfully employs the concept of metamorphosis as images of blood and death turn into beauty in the oxymoron "terrible beauty", insisting on the nobility of sacrifice and the romance of the nation. Jonathan Allison speaks about Yeats's ability "to transform (as in "Easter 1916") the grey quotidian of Dublin street, in which men go to their desks and offices, into a sublime and "terrible beauty"; a manifestation of national resurgence, at once natural and supernatural in its cause" (231). He also speaks about Yeats's belief in the capacity to meet the marvellous in everyday life. He quotes Yeats:

The fall of Parnell and the wreck of his party and of the organizations that supported it were the symbols, if not the causes, of a sudden change... Those who looked for the old energies, which were the utterance of the common will and hope, were unable to see that a new kind of

Ireland, as full of energy as a boiling pot, was rising up amid the wreck of the old kind, and that the national life was finding a new utterance. (231)

The belief in metamorphosis in political and cultural everyday life is originally a mythic motif which enables Yeats to mythologize the quotidian by elevating and spiritualizing it, while it also helps him demythologize mythology by rendering the impossible possible. "Miracles are the work of an all-powerful energy" (UPII, 199),¹⁹ Yeats claims. Magic, then, springs from the real. As a matter of fact, in its journey to maturity, the "metamorphosis" motif shifts from being dreamy and imaginative to being active and political without ceasing to be magical. While the term "imaginative nationalism" has long been used to describe Yeats's early poetry, "magic nationalism" with its reliance on "metamorphosis" as well as its mingling of the real and the mythological applies to Yeats's nationalism from its beginning to its end.

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¹⁹W.B Yeats. *Uncollected Prose, Vol. II*, ed. John P. Frayne and Colton Johnson (New York: Macmillan, 1975).

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