

**Yoga postures for the monstrous mob:  
W.B. Yeats's "Indic" vision, Anglo Irish occult letters,  
and the Celtic Twilight's "labors of loss."**

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**A. The In-Between and Emaciated Ones**

An old man fasts in W.B. Yeats' poem, "Heart of Spring". This is a fasting to elicit beings from the world of the occult: "this long fasting, and the labour of beckoning after nightfall with your rod of quicken wood to the beings/ who dwell in the waters and among the hazels and oak-tree" (Yeats 1897, 80). This world of the Irish occult and its attendant institutions was a challenge to imperialism. "It (the Irish monastery) had been burned down a long while before by sacrilegious men of the Queen's party." The old man notes to the "russet- faced boy of seventeen years [...] by his side", that he had stored up gold and silver for keeping the aristocracy ("earls and knights and squires") "from the evil eye and from the love-weaving enchantments of witches" (Yeats 1897, 80). The emaciated old man is an in-between figure, between that of the occult and that of the ruling elite whom he has served. The colonizer's reaction to the subaltern supernatural is one of fear, and one prone to force. But

Western infrastructures birthed or partially birthed from colonization, as with academia, have been confounded by subaltern occult practices ever since their disciplinary beginnings, and the sort of devaluing of occult influences within such figures as W.B. Yeats by literary criticism is an example of this confounding. Attempts to define occult practices through early comparative legal frameworks or comparative scholarly pursuits in such colonized areas as Ireland or India resulted in what I describe shortly as an emaciating legality of the subaltern body. Yeats's "Letters to Leo Africanus", based on his long occult mediumship with a 16<sup>th</sup> century African traveler, is a commentary on that process. The voice Yeats attributes to subaltern occult populations is elusive to the colonizer, and involves more than just an occult framework (astral travel), but also the many literary performances that such populations are deemed as having developed, especially if those populations speak the language of the colonizer. Here, I'm referring to the subversive strategies of parody, which will be discussed shortly in the sort of "literary playfulness" of such 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish literary figures as James Mangan and others undermining the notion of the literary serving to archive a "national epic".

Occult figures fasting to elicit the spiritual is something that has taken many forms. Gandhi fasted to interject spiritual practices into the nationalist cause to counter the British monarchy. The use of fasting in the realm of politics, as a challenge to imperialism, was first utilized in Ireland and India. The scholarly linkage between the two cultures along this presumably ancient practice occurs when Orientalist legal scholars such as Henry Maine, subscribing to the pan-Aryan culturo-anthropological lines (from N. India to Europe) drawn by earlier Orientalists such as Max Muller, delineated the common usage of fasting. Maine identifies fasting as one of the supposed remedies for an individual's legal claim against another, from the purported ancient Irish (Druidic) notion of fasting upon someone for recourse

(Lennon 2004, 198). It is this supposed ancient Irish legal notion that Maine then compares to the Hindu notion of *dharna* (“a mode of compelling payment or compliance, by sitting at the debtor's or offender's door without eating until the demand is complied with”; “Dharna” 1989, np). It is fitting that Maine held a similar legal advisory position to the Governor General of India that Sir William Jones had occupied a hundred years prior. They both went into the forest of India foraging for ancient texts and practices from which to devise or fine tune the colonial legal system. Maine’s comparative analysis occurs in what have become seminal essays on legal foundations, *Ancient Law*, and *Lecture on the Early History of Institutions* (Lennon 2004, 196-7). Sara Maurer’s analysis of Maine points out that his broader intent was to codify colonial law through “a description of customary precedent” instead of through the utilitarian’s celebration of “centrally authored and enforced legal codes” (Maurer 2005, 61). Comparative analysis between “ancient” indigenous practices within the context of modern legal infrastructure development attempts to draw a more “local” basis for jurisprudence, and also engender a bodily legal status at the individual subaltern level.

Though Maine ultimately dismisses fasting as “abominable” and “barbaric”, it is that referencing of the indigenous body engaged in legal expression that requires (legal) commentary for purposes of codification (Lennon 2004, 199). This intent correlates Maine to the Occult movement’s literary apparatuses, of which W.B. Yeats’s commentaries on the *Yoga Sutras* and the *Upanishads* as well as the creative work of his “Indian phase” are a specific part, and of which “Heart of Spring”, with its image of “the ancient [Irish] gods who made spears of your father's fathers,” is an aesthetic element (Yeats 1897, 80). This essay is about what the occult body offered Yeats in terms of the literary, and in terms of what he sought to say to Ireland post independence. But following occult bodies relates to the Anglo Irish literary scene of

the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in a broader way too, specifically in the way their work occultized the rapidly changing Ireland of industrial development and land reforms. Their works, whether it's Bram Stoker's *Dracula* or Yeats's poetry, are littered with emaciated "in-between" figures. As I will argue by looking at specific works, this occultizing of Ireland and the Irish populace in literary form contained political articulations that haven't been fully acknowledged by literary and cultural critics who see this literary phenomenon, such as with J.M. Synge's *The Aran Islands*, as simple acts of mystification. Furthermore, the Anglo Irish involved with the Celtic Twilight represent a unique segment of the Irish nationalist movement, one that briefly needs to be looked at.

If Irish views of India need to be analyzed separately from the Orientalism of the rest of Europe, as some critics to be addressed in this essay contend, so too should the Anglo Irish interest in the "ancient past of Eire" be separated from other Irish communities interested in retrieving its perceived lost traditions and practices. This separating out is necessary as the bifurcated "in between" cultural status of the Anglo Irish should be read for the enacting of "othering", not only those at the personal level of cultural identity, but more importantly with respect to the textual processes through which they sought to represent Ireland. By "othering", I'm referring to individual and communal sense of alienation, and to the discourses of loss that Anglo Irish figures such as W.B Yeats, Lady Gregory, J.M Synge or George ("AE") Russell sought to represent in literary form, articulated perhaps in a more intense form as a separateness from one's perceived cultural and mystical and linguistic past. No doubt, the significance of the elite Anglo Irish community in Irish letters suggests a self-perceived sense as linguistic mediators.

As chiefly a product of that Anglo Irish community, the Celtic Twilight involved the attempt to articulate mythic and occult origins for Ireland. It sought to

elicit the images of a countryside populated by the fairies and deities of ancient Eire. Several members were deeply involved with the India-based Theosophical Society, so connections were made between Irish and Indian origins. Sanskrit terms gleaned from ancient Indian texts were then deployed to articulate certain phenomena that Ireland, or that parts of Ireland such as its cultural and occult circles, were seen as experiencing. For instance, *tattwa*, Sanskrit for “reality” or “principle”, was used in both Dublin and London Theosophical Society circles to denote the practice of astral projection (“skrying”), a mostly Western practice. A.E. (George William Russell) thought that the Druids “had mastered what he called ‘the serpent power’,” which in Theosophical Society circles was language referring to Kundalini yoga and *cakras* (chakras), or “the sexual energy lying at the base of the spine” (Graf 2003, 54). Yeats used that term, but as with all Sanskrit terms he utilized, he intended a broader expression. The Sanskrit notion of *samkara*, or realization, for instance, encompassed for Yeats cultural and literary developments.

Yeats’s *samkara* will be explored further in the essay, but there were fundamental concerns transferred from the Theosophical Society to the Celtic Twilight that go beyond just terms. Much of the Theosophical Society’s rhetorical thrust in going to the East by such founding figures as Madame Blavatsky, Colonel Olcott, Annie Besant and Charles Leadbetter, lay in arguing that it was preserving spiritual elements from a “lost” or rapidly “disappearing” culture. For example, one need only look at the Theosophical Society’s mythographic construct of the “lost land of Lemuria,” a hypothetical lost continent between Africa and the western shore of India (now wholly scientifically discredited). As Sumathai Ramaswamy notes in *The Lost Land of Lemuria*, the Theosophical Society represented “a religious movement concerned with the recovery of lost ancient wisdom- a *philosophia perennis*” (Ramaswamy 2004, 57).

While the Theosophical Society was fundamentally syncretic in their worldview of esoteric traditions, many related offshoot organizations engendered interest in a world populated with more local deities and their importance to a particular culture. Several schisms within the Theosophical Society and offshoot organizations (e.g. Order of the Golden Dawn) can be attributed to a divide between the desire for a syncretic perennial philosophy of Eastern origin versus that of a desire for a more localized “pagan” mysticism that preceded Western monotheism, though both were integral aspects of the broader Occult movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is not to say that both camps operated in separate spheres, as Colonel Olcott’s visiting lecture in 1890 in Ireland shows. His presentation as second in command of the Theosophical Society dealt not on the topic of Buddhism and its revival in S. Asia (an event that has been seen as his legacy), but on “The Irish Fairies Scientifically Considered” (Graf 2003, 52).

D.H. Lawrence, who read much Occult movement material, best encapsulated this interest in “local gods” in *The Plumed Serpent*:

So if I want Mexicans to learn the name of Quetzalcoatl, it is because I want them to speak with the tongues of their own blood. I wish the Teutonic world would once more think in terms of Thor and Wotan, and the tree Igdrasil. And I wish the Druidic world would see, honestly, that in the mistletoe is their mystery, and that they themselves are the Tuatha De Danaan, alive, but submerged (Lawrence 1951, 221).

But the Theosophical Society and the Occult movement in general were involved in a much more complex process of discourse making around the past that can best be summarized by spending a couple of paragraphs on Marcel Gauchet’s *The Disenchantment of the World*. Gauchet’s discussion of Karl Jasper’s “Axial age” and the essential move in human history from polytheism to monotheism, or the transition from a world where the sacred was immanent to its conception as transcendent,

argues for considering more than just the “doctrinal content” of these new religions and the rise of prophets (Buddha, Lao-Tzu, Zarathustra and “the prophets of Israel”). The new religions brought forth by dominant *paradigmatic personalities* (and the attendant birth of philosophy with the “quest for human meaning”) “establish[es] a new equilibrium around such points as the *reinterpretation of the primordial*, the *structural link between the one and the many*, or finally the transition from illusion to truth” (Gauchet 1999, 46). Gauchet further appeals for a new scholarly basis in considering this moment in the historical conception of the sacred: “And it is through this crucial disposition, this experiential core, that we can best grasp the *metamorphosis of otherness* which constitutes the basis of the axial age [...] to reconstruct the ideal model of this transformation of how the [sacred] Other is conceived and perceived” (Gauchet 1999, 46). By offering an analytical model which views this moment as “the interaction of discontinuity and continuity” (Gauchet 1999, 45) Gauchet’s work becomes relevant to many other disciplines than simply religious studies. Once the sacred is other[ed], and discourses are instigated concerning “the beginning” and “ancient practices” that are either lost or perverted, they then engender “an open interrogation about [...] enigmatic designs” (Gauchet 1999, 53). What established the “Axial age” were not just organizations, religious infrastructures and doctrines, but also the establishing of discourses and textual processes of philosophically probing the sacred. The discussion of the textual processing of the sacred is relevant to Ramaswamy’s highlighting of the various discourses instituted by the Theosophical Society, and suggests that with their publishing houses, their “letters from the Himalayas,” they imposed a further *othering* in dissecting the eras of “local deities”, as exemplified by the presumably scientific probing of Irish fairies in Olcott’s lecture. That desire to re-establish an immanent sacred world of local deities through the discursive rubric of a world

syncretizing mode *others* that world, especially if the intent is nationalistic in certain accompanying discourses of distance. Anglo Irish figures such as Yeats and Lady Gregory attempt to rectify that distance from an immanent sacred Irish world by engaging with practices of the Occult movement, such as séances that establish an ongoing possession by spirit mediums from ancient Eire. It is in the dramas of Yeats and Synge where they came closest to eliciting an enchanted Irish populace, though that “enchantment” occurs not by engaging in occult practices but in theater riots. But concerns of bridging a distance would be expected in a society that was undergoing tremendous change in such brief span.

The mythographic constructs by the India-based T.S. involving lost lands and lost texts, discourses of “tracing back” to reveal elements of culture and the sacred, and the search for missing links, whether geographic or philosophic (as in a “perennial philosophy”), did not stem from native concerns over Indian subjugation, nor from the likes of British colonial officials themselves. In fact, Indian native leaders such as Ramohan Roy articulated interests that lay not in preserving “ancient practices”, especially not in regards to such practices as *sati*, child brides or caste, but in making the case as a pandit of Sanskrit texts to remove those elements entirely from Indian society. It’s only in the wake of the “labors of loss” instituted by the Theosophical Society, and the discursive performances revolving around articulating lost lands and lost esoteric practices (which mysteriously appearing dubbed “letters from the Mahatmas” could elucidate) that subsequent Indian social/ spiritual reformers succeeding Roy, such as the Brahmo Samaj, Swami Vivekandanda and the Ramakrishna movement, would then argue for the notion of preserving “disappearing” ancient practices, even establishing schools that taught Sanskrit.

To speak of tracing back, in the context of European 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century discourses on the history of recovering “glorious pasts”, is, according to John Porter



in “Bring Me the Head of James Macpherson”, to engage not only in a central concept of Romanticism, but more importantly for our discussion, to engage in discourses partly derived from the Ossian matter. In other words, when T.S. claimed “authenticity” and attempted to solidify it with textual elements in the world-history of the sacred it was, in essence, telling a Gaelic tale. If, as Gauchet contends, a “reinterpretation of the primordial” in the service of “structural link[s] between the one and the many” is an indicator of “new [religious and political] equilibriums” (46), and Macpherson’s engendering of the Romantic search for a “a national ‘epic’” formed from a desire to “piece together a supposedly ‘pure’ heroic past of .... [a] people ... contained in oral poetry” ((Porter 2001, 397) then the Celtic Twilight can be said to have taken literary and ideological cues from both the Scottish Ossian matter and the mythographic constructs of the Theosophical movement. That the Celtic Twilight was perhaps more the product of the “world” Occult movement than of indigenous feelings is a topic deserving of more scholarship.

### **B. Telling Eastern tales.**

This “tracing back” to folkloric or occult origins (whether to ancient Eire or to India) through commentary was crucial for Yeats and for the Anglo Irish, but also for a burgeoning nation. It enfranchised a process of textual and historical legitimating in new cultural infrastructures (whether of the literary or governmental variety). But with a 16<sup>th</sup> century African spirit medium Yeats engaged with in mid-career, this tracing back took on a much more complex commentary on archival establishment, processes of legal certification/documentation and cross-cultural embodiment. This essay looks at all these elements in Yeats’s late work, in order to ultimately suggest that this “African voice” and all other voices of mediums were instrumental in his historical treatise, *A Vision*. But they and Indic “voices” (influences) this essay

considers were instrumental in the way Yeats came to see the literary as having the quality of a mantra, or the ability to elicit otherworldly experiences by the precise conjoining of words. If fasting relates the ascetical power of silence, Yeats's sought a power from the imparting of phrases from guru to initiate, or from fathers to sons. These "cross-cultural" voices and influences open Yeats's late work to readings of commentary on East-West foundations (and by inference, relations), which are also a commentary on power and the colonial. However, since works such as *A Vision*, *Herne's Egg* or "Supernatural Songs" from *Parnell's Funeral and Other Poems*, have been seen as part of a late mythographic construction stage, or as commentaries on the spiritual, they've been critically overlooked for possible political and social statements.

Yeats, though, was not the first Irishman to look to India for answers. As John Lennon points out in *Irish Orientalism*, Maine's "comparative discussion of the practices of 'fasting' in Ireland and India sparked discussions in Ireland and elsewhere that ultimately led to the cross-colonial practice of hunger strikes. Throughout the next century, Irish and Indian nationalists 'revived' this supposedly ancient practice" (Lennon 2004, 196). For Terry Eagleton, this "ancient Irish practice" haunted the period subsequent to the famine of the late 1840s, "seek[ing] to retrieve historical meaning from pure biological passivity, wrest[ing] significance from sheer facticity" (1995, 17). Irish historians of the 1940s such as Myles Dillon (1969, 247) and D.A. Binchy (1943, 209) also note the power of self-emaciating or "fasting as a means of enforcing legal claims" (Thornton 1979, 52-55).

In the context of Lennon's analysis, of charting the extensive history of Celtic narratives of Oriental origins for nationalist purposes, the scenario of political fasting suggest that when the Irish emaciated themselves for political purposes they were also telling an Eastern fable. The significance of fasting for political purposes has a

long and history in India, and “Western awareness” of such practice certainly precedes 19<sup>th</sup> century Ireland. David Lorenzen notes how hunger strikes (*prayopavesa*) on the part of Brahmans in the 11<sup>th</sup> century were used against the rule of Sangramaraja, and that the 12<sup>th</sup> century Kalhana noted in the *Rājataragīnī*, or chronicle of Kashmiri kings, that “the whole of the people” were “in an uproar” from these strikes (Lorenzen 1978, 67). Lennon’s broader task is to argue for breaking off the analysis of Orientalist representations in Ireland from those of English and European Orientalist representations, as the Irish ones “offered imaginative [Irish] writers a discursive clutch to disengage from the standard power relations of English-Irish relations” (Lennon 2004, xxvii). “In Ireland, Eastern origin legends burned throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, informing the cultural mythology and shaping the values within a nascent narrative” (Lennon 2004, 60-1). The earliest of these legends quite possibly was the 11<sup>th</sup> century *Lebor Gabala Erenn*, with its narrative of Egyptian origins (Lennon 2004, 11). Yeats’s comment on the “turn towards the East” highlights a feeling that may have existed in certain Irish cultural circles for some time: “It pleases me to fancy that when we turn towards the East [...] we are turning [...] something ancestral in ourselves” (*Ten Principles* 1937, 11). Likewise, he further writes that the “earliest poet of India and the Irish peasant in his hovel nod to each other across the ages, and are in perfect agreement” (Yeats 1934a, 204).

The initial shadows that Eastern origin legends or cultural comparisons cast onto the Irish emerge “in early texts as an ancestral connection between Scythians and *Scotti*, the comparison developed through a number of other permutations from legendary to racial to political: the Phoenician and the Magogian and the Gael; the Oriental and the Celt [...]; the Swarajist and the Fenian; the Bengali and Irish” (Lennon 2004, 2). If Lennon’s historical analysis is correct, then these comparisons

develop earlier than Seamus Deane's reading of them in "Production of Cultural Space", whereby they're the result of a developing "romantic characterization" in the late 18th century (Deane 1994, 121):

For in the aftermath of the Famine, the culturally emaciated Irish community turned to [...] Young Ireland's doggerel and dogma and to the variants of heroic Celticism [...] Even magic and occultism were re-imported via a version of the Orient to specify Ireland's difference (Deane 1994, 124).

This "blank slate", or emaciated body, that Deane describes, will, according to Terry Eagleton, be the very moment from which Irish society and nationalism will undergo a "surreal speed-up of its entry upon modernity; but what spurs that process on is [...] the mind-shaking fact that an event with all the pre-modern character of a medieval pestilence happened in Ireland with frightening recentness" (Eagleton 1995, 14).

No doubt, the embodying of emaciation for purposes of cultural and national identity at the Irish social and political level occurred in various forms. All had their own currency, whether it be as the role of the emaciated practitioner who stops the move of the conqueror on the part of hunger-striking nationalists, or the emptying out of the spiritual self for the various séance possession experiences by members of the Celtic Twilight involving also Oriental mediums (as part of astral projection experiments such as Yeats's Moorish spiritual medium, Leo Africanus). All of these voluntary ones were instances of Irish nationalist/cultural elite telling "Eastern fables" with their own bodies. Irish-India associations still occur today.

"Eastern tales" by Europeans have taken many forms. It is ironic though, how this increasingly used religio-legal tool of fasting references "ancient practices" and "spiritual" to then be used against the very institutions that gave rise to it to begin with. The Eastern body that willfully diminishes, that elides legal codification, and that draws western disgust in "the gaze of the barbaric," came to elicit extensive

commentary from the jurisprudential, scholarly, and even western literary realms. Yeats' contribution to a defining process occurs in no small form as a result of his "Eastern turn" and the subsequent historical treatise, *A Vision* (1937), an attempt to historically identify those forest sages (voices for the "ancient gods who made the spears of your father's fathers to be stout in battle"; 1897, 80). It's at the latter "symbolism-system construction" stage of his career which most scholars have read as Yeats at his most abstract that he was perhaps his most anti-colonial and anti-Western, while also most concerned with telling an Eastern fable in the form of Irish history. Conor Cruise O'Brien observes, "Anti-English feeling, long dormant in Yeats, became increasingly pronounced in the period 1937-38" (1965, 266). Perhaps as a reflection of the many textual discourses of othering referred to earlier involving the Celtic Twilight, Yeats's turn towards India may have led him, ironically, to create his most nationalist of works, or works most concerned with broad articulations on Irish history and its state.

One of Yeats's embodiments of an Eastern fable, much like Maine's commentary, contains attempts at legal establishing or historical-encoding of the occult subaltern body in cross cultural "communication". Ultimately, again and again, as in many of Yeats's various figures, we will be faced with the scenario of an *emaciating* legality, or of figures beyond bureaucratic, legal or academic encoding. One of the most striking occurs in the Yeats's "Letters to Leo Africanus". Here, the Irish poet asks if the "Prithivi tatwas"<sup>1</sup> driven 16<sup>th</sup> Century African Arabic occult medium were to be involved in the act of legal deception by claiming an "English [birth] & death" from "Somerset House [...] among the certificates of birth & death" (Yeats 1982, 25). The beginning "evidence establishing" section of the Leo Africanus

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<sup>1</sup> 'mother goddess' (*Sanskrit*). Also associated with yogic progression and astral travel by Theosophical Society (Cicero 2003, 571).

letters has Yeats aware of his privileged power to legally enfranchise subaltern postcolonial spirits, while admitting that a personal distance from that privilege bestows Leo Africanus's séance narrative with greater evidentiary power (to any outsider who might doubt the mediumship):

You a secondary personality of my own mind or of Mrs [Etta] Wriedt have [...] consulted perhaps Chambers biographical dictionary. Can I make the distinction that I or Mrs Wriedt may have very likely turned its pages, but the mediums those more obscure persons have come to, are less likely to [have] rummaged Somerset House, or among the old newspapers in the British Museum (Yeats 1982, 26-7).

This legal-certifying concern for the investigative purposes of the renowned Psychological Research Society, themselves seeking to establish the "truthfulness" of Yeats's mediumship by "scientific means", involves a legitimizing of this cross-cultural occult body (Leo Africanus) within the developing infrastructures of scientific, academic and bureaucratic apparatuses of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. So it seems that there are two investigative bodies at work in establishing Yeats's own position by way of elements of Leo Africanus's occult narrative: academic and Psychological Research. The de-occultizing evidentiary-based processes of demarcation, of eliciting occult poets and subaltern bodies from their marginality, is not just an infrastructural concern for engendering new areas/ "bodies of study", but also for the apparatuses of social bureaucracies and new nations. What I suggest of codifying intents for emergent states is nothing new though. As we saw, there were legal battles being fought in the forests of India when the British East India company sent out the likes of William Jones and Charles Wilkins to retrieve the adequate narratives of religio-legal origins capable of serving as tools for judicial domination. The legal status of the colonized was always part of the equation. Yeats's desire for an historicity for a new state from those "men of the forests" (Lloyd 1996, 263) is nothing new; as

Raymond Williams points out, the “project of historical representation [...] combines [...] to desire the derivation of emergent from residual practices” (Williams 1977, 121-7). The initial legal/philological foray by Jones and others ultimately accompanied the latter occult movement’s spiritual narratives of Himalayan treks and (initiatory) forest origins. It is the desire to articulate the emergent from the residual that shows the Theosophical Society and the translating efforts of the British East India company to have been on parallel paths.

The history-laced textual parodies of cultural transactions with non-Europeans from the likes of James Mangan and Macpherson referred to earlier may have been a way of highlighting the “‘burden’ of history” (“through [the] unrestrained fictionalizing and mythologizing” to fill in “gaps”; Lacapra 1983, 63), or of the expectations of historical/literary texts in newly forming cultural and educational entities concerned with “establishing national identity” (Lacapra 1983, 63). This self-ironizing mode is the reverse of the ways in which some of the much more broadly-received 19<sup>th</sup> century literary Gothic actually enfranchised new modes of rationalist-reductive historiography by creating a binary between new “documentary approaches” of a growing academic discipline (history) vs. sensual/occult/demonized [barbaric] history (ala mythologized modes such as the sanskrit *Puranas*, to be discussed shortly in regards to Yeats’s *A Vision*) (Lacapra 1963, 33).

There are various types of the Gothic, including “colonial gothic”; however, it is this specter of the arrival of new bodies (cultural or previously famished human ones) and new national identities that elicits greater comment/ parody on a presumed past, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Irish literary scene. But there are other figures in Irish letters at this time who resonate with Yeats’s occult world of historical elisions, emaciation and legal diminutiveness. Janina Nordius notes how such literary figures, as with the central one from Irishman Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (that figure set for an

arrival from primitive spaces to among the “teeming millions” of London), contained “anxieties [within them that] would concern, for instance, the persistence or the return of supposedly abandoned savage practices despite the dominance—or perhaps even under the cover—of modern progressivism” (Nordius 2005, 40-41). These *figures*, however, will “sit themselves:” more and more among the pages of Irish letters in the latter 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century and seek historical recourse, and none became more haunted by them than Yeats, Synge, and Stoker. What I propose is an occultizing in Irish letters whose origin can be found in the social narratives of Ireland’s tumultuous and alienating land reforms, in the almost free-for-all dynamic of burgeoning nationalism, and the waves of exiling that was the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a whole, the writings are suggestive of aesthetic ways of reacting to dramatic social events, and not their avoidance as Eagleton has proposed. In fact, Eagleton’s *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* sets forth from the onset the very image I see as haunting Yeats and Synge. Whereas I see the work of Yeats and Synge haunted by the subaltern, the starved, and the colonized, Eagleton sees the work of the Revival as turning away from the reality of such things as the Great Hunger towards something he terms as artistically “programmatically non-representational” (meaning the archaic and mythic), and driven by culturally-alien “Anglo-Irish” fears themselves (1995, 13). Eagleton sees this “turning away” or “non-representation” as occurring in Yeats’ intricate system and “mythicizing” mode, or in Synge’s self acknowledgement as an outsider in the archaically-construed space of the *Aran Islands* (which Eagleton notes “had a fishing industry directly linked by large trawlers to the London markets”; 1965, 279). But in relating the avoidance of the Irish famine in subsequent art to the “burst[ing] through the bounds of representation as [...] Auschwitz [...] for Theodor Adorno”, Eagleton is judging Ireland’s late-19<sup>th</sup> century artistic reaction in a post-W.W. II European context as well as presuming that a “decorative”, “abstract”, or



“mythic” artistic mode would be incapable of voicing the horrific. Eagleton’s intellectual nurturing occurs in the wake of an Adornian analysis of such cultural trauma and how such events affect the arts. Eagleton’s view is perhaps limiting when he writes that Yeats “ideology is chrystallized, in the very forms of the work itself, in practice and production rather than in the text” (1965, 306). A “real” literary expression of Ireland’s social context would’ve been more “overtly” political in a way deemed publically apparent (or translatable). One of Eagleton’s specific points occurs in Yeats’s “Easter 1916” poem. Eagleton contrasts what he sees as “the patrician art” of the “sacred” that gathers “the Post Office rebels into the artifice of eternity” with the “mere empty, homogenous time of, say the *Playboy* [*of the Western World*] riots” (1965, 307). The critical inadequacy of comparing an “artistic take” of an event (“Easter 1916”) with an event precipitated by an artistic take, such as the *Playboy* riots, overlooks the *contextualizing* that comes from naming, one of the central themes of Yeats’s poem: “...Heaven’s part, our part [/] To murmur name upon name, [/] As a mother names her child [.../] I write it out in verse-/MacDonagh and MacBride/ And Connolly and Pearse” (Yeats 1994, 180).

Though Yeats became negative towards the *Playboy* riots in seeing them as harboring censoring attitudes, to frame his work as becoming opposed to Irish nationalism seems counter to much of Yeatsian criticism’s view of him as a nationalist playwright (of “Mother Ireland” in the Old Woman of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, or of the starving Irish in *The Countess Kathleen*, who “held a hollow hand among the others”; Yeats 2010, 5). If we consider Lloyd’s following statement on Mangan’s “translations” as pertinent to my reading of *Leo Africanus*, then we can come to understand how “conversion” has been placed on a poet more known for his pro-nationalist dramas than for the ways in which he actually sought to question burgeoning Irish nationalist/cultural infrastructures: “The object of his critique would

be not merely the relatively superficial question of the reliability of any given translation, but rather the ideological function of translation at his historical moment” (Lloyd 1986, 30). But this parodying of cross cultural translations presents the image of inaccessibility at the very moment that European-inspired state structures were being conceived of by Irish nationalist for a postcolonial Irish scene. Cultural and state infrastructures such as trade, maritime exploration, foreign relations, and geographical and historical societies are founded upon some measure or conception of cross-cultural accessibility and, if they are propelled by nationalist-supremacist concepts, they can carry a desired dominance in military and legal domains. However, spaces outside of institutional enfranchisement are subaltern, and these *voices* have much deeper resonance in the literary themes of the evolving Irish cultural landscape that was the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most poignant works in regard to that outside Irish voice, *Dracula*, by Stoker, was also one of the century’s well-known Gothic works. In “‘Ever Under Some Unnatural Condition’: Bram Stoker and the colonial fantastic”, Brian Cosgrove notes the novel’s social context of “agrarian violence [...in] unleashing the forces of a barbaric, repressed past” (Cosgrove 1995, 112).

### **C. The monstrous, yet familiar mob.**

Of gothic works by J.M. Synge, Bram Stoker, and Yeats, it’s important to take measure of some well-circulated postcolonial analyses of the Irish scene resonant with Eagleton’s reading of the post-famine years. Gregory Castle presents a provocative reading when he refers to “the image of the Anglo-Irish Revivalist salvaging [of] a primitive culture, speaking for it from privileged positions of social and cultural power” (Castle 1997, 267). These analyses of “privileged” Anglo-Irish literary figures as they’re applied to Yeats are perhaps pertinent in less complicated

pro-nationalist works of the Celtic Twilight like *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, or in the very Irish mythologically-laden Cuchulain plays. Aside from the serious problems of the many analyses pinning “Anglo-Irish privilege” onto the actually very modest-raised, west-Irish bred Stoker (which Joseph Valente points out in “Double Born”; 2002, 633), Castle’s point is less applicable to Irish works taking the more heightened forms of parodic, performative, and even Gothic ways of dealing with history. The disruptive processes of these Irish works are buttressed not by idealized images of a more “local” or “originary” informed level of “authentic” existence relevant to any sort of communal/social practice but more frequently by elusive voices that exceed representation. Of these “haunting forms”, Yeats notes “What moves [him...] is a vivid speech that has no laws except that it must not exorcise the ghostly voice” (Yeats 1961, 524).

That which “has no laws” is also that which stands beyond the understanding of state laws. This point on the subaltern in Yeats’s work is important since Jean Camoroff shows class differences in occult interests in postcolonial or near postcolonial societies. Despite the Celtic Twilight’s partial construction of the idealized Irish otherworld and the spiritualized peasant that has been critically highlighted by figures as Edward Hirsch (in “The Imaginary Irish Peasant”), some of the writers mentioned above were able to capture a measure of the “occult expression” occurring among the lower Irish classes (1991, 1126). Of importance is J.M. Synge’s vivid portrayal of the Aran Islands as a place with people who “make no distinction between the natural and the supernatural”, and who exist “between the misery of last night and the splendour of today [...] create[ing] an affinity between the moods of these people and the moods of varying rapture and dismay that are frequent in artists” (Synge 2008, 332). Aran is a daemonic informed island. In occultizing Aran, Synge presents us with a magically-entranced people: “My

intercourse with these people has made me realize that miracles must abound wherever the new conception of law is not understood” (Synge 1992, 67). What’s interesting is the way in which the quote suggests that a belief in the abounding of miracles occurs *after* a law is not understood, and not necessarily part and parcel of a pre-existing “ancient practices” mindset. To see the imposition of new overarching (codifying) structures as eliciting responses from the subaltern in ways deemed as reactionary is, perhaps in some measure, to occultize them. Furthermore, in detailing Parnell celebrations on Aran island Synge portrays crowd formations in both an occult and political way more indicative of the mass aestheticized political hysteria seen in industrialized societies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (ala fascism):

A wild crowd was on the platform, surging round the train in every stage of intoxication. It gave me a better instance than I had yet seen of the half-savage temperament of Connaught. The tension of human excitement seemed greater in this insignificant crowd than anything I have felt among enormous mobs in Rome or Paris (Synge 1992, 78).

They are a people who, for Synge, seem at the whim of the return of the dead, and as we’ll see in *Playboy of the Western World*, of occult reappearances too. Given the way in which the “Irish mob” and those “closer to the land” were asserting themselves in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to frame them in uncanny ways was not without literary or aesthetic accompaniment. If Stoker’s *Dracula* is the voice of a repressed primitive past making a claim on the land, then, by inference, it’s that agrarian Irish mob that Stoker too is reading in an occult and uncanny way. Whether identifying with agrarian rioting mobs or opposing them, Irish letters at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is rife with their image. We should ask what these “repressed occult” forces represent in the scheme of discourses of distance and loss instituted by the Celtic Twilight? Gauchet makes clear that increased representation of a distance in the sacred, or an otherness that culture *must* reference, is used by the state to

enfranchise certain political dimensions such as myths involved with the founding of the state (namely, that unleashed forces are essential to understanding new structures). So despite the critique of Lloyd and Deane, that there was a turning away from politics by Yeats and Synge, articulations aimed at the sacred through poetic constructs has relevance for evolving states, whether those articulations come to represent “interpretable” form or not. The state itself never turns away from the sacred.

Those who write of walls between Yeats and the rising nationalist mobs in Yeats’s late stage respond to his well-known comments of distaste for this element of Irish independence. The public discomfort that Yeats felt with the mob does not mean he avoided their representation within his poetic symbolisms. The seven part “Meditations in Time of Civil War” contains one such attempt in the ending poem, “I see Phantoms of Hatred and of the Heart’s Fullness and of the Coming Emptiness” (Yeats 1994, 205). Hart’s own reading of “I see Phantoms of Hatred”, partly based on Jonathan Allison’s notion of “magical nationalism”, proposes that Yeats’s poem gives an “easternness [to...] the phantoms”:

I climb to the tower-top and lean upon broken stone,  
A mist that is like blown snow is sweeping over all,  
Valley, river, and elms, under the light of a moon  
That seems unlike itself, that seems unchangeable,  
A glittering sword out of the east. A puff of wind[...] (Yeats 1994, 205).

Hart sees the “Monstrous familiar images [that] swim to the mind’s eye” of the last line of this stanza as “an image of cultural strangeness [further...] interpreted as an image of the subaltern supernatural which is always threatening to break down the stability of the empirical here-and-now” (Hart 2007, 414). Warwick Gould suggests that the motif of the monstrous in the latter part of Yeats’s career presents “inconceivable event[s] that humiliates history and makes nonsense of finite order”

(Gould 2001, 4).

The “sword out of the east” is reminiscent of the ever-perfect and unchanging 500 year-old sword of Sato from “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”, but also “unlike itself”, bridging two realms- the metamorphic and the timeless aesthetic form (Yeats 1997b, 97). But this image of a sword from the East in a “Time of Civil War” recalls Yeats’s famous response to the question posed of him as to what message he had for India:

‘Let 100,000 men of one side meet the other. That is my message to India, insistence on the antinomy.’ He strode swiftly across the room, took up Sato’s sword, and unsheathed it dramatically and shouted, ‘ Conflict, more conflict’ (Hone 1962, 459).

That he would turn to a sword after being questioned about India is not surprising for this time period immediately following the publication of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), which contains both the “Easter 1916” and “Meditations” poems. Mair Pitt’s convincing argument for the influence of Tagore on Yeats occurs in pointing out how Tagore’s *Gitanjali* “LIII” poem contains images and wording that will become evocative in Yeats’s two poems, especially in “Easter 1916” famous “a terrible beauty is born” line: “thy sword, O lord of thunder, is wrought with uttermost beauty, terrible to behold or think of” (Tagore 1916, 27). Transcendent images that span heaven and earth are occupied by the “cloud-pale unicorns”, which gives “place to an indifferent multitude” and “To brazen hawks”. But it’s a transcendent and mythic quality in relation to the Irish landscape that is both “unlike itself” and yet “unchangeable”, strange and yet familiar. The poem refers to Jacques Molay (“Vengeance for Jacques Molay.”), the holder of the Knight’s Templar’s esoteric secrets in Freemason mythology and the one who gained most of his symbolic identity from being aligned with the East’s Hiram Abiff (King Solomon’s Temple architect). This reference in “I See Phantoms of Hatred” contrasts

Eastern aesthetic/esoteric-influenced with what the Irish civil war was giving rise to, but it also presents the mob as responding to images from the concerns of a world occult movement that involved Freemasons, Theosophists, Golden Dawn(ers), Luciferians, and a whole host of others who at times intersected with each other and at other times, as with Alister Crowley, were one and the same. This newness of form/phenomenon “sweeping over all” gains the same stature as the transcendent quality of the Eastern aesthetic and esoteric. These are the writings of an “ageing man” viewing the emptiness of the mobilization of the mass:

‘Vengeance upon the murderers,’ the cry goes up,  
[...]  
Trooper belabouring trooper, biting at arm or at face,  
Plunges towards nothing, arms and fingers spreading wide  
For the embrace of nothing; and I, my wits astray  
Because of all the senseless tumult, all but cried  
For vengeance on the murderers of Jacques Molay (Yeats 1997, 84).

This mass has an esoteric quality, but also a re-familiarizing quality. The context of the coming “indifferent multitude” post-independence period is an entity without “self-delighting reverie,[/] Nor hate of what’s to come, nor pity for what’s gone,[/] Nothing but grip of claw, and the eye’s complacency” (Yeats 1997, 84). But this “emptiness” is not as simple as it sounds. If we recall how the fight against nothingness (“Plunges towards nothing”) occurs in similar fashion in “The Only Jealousy of Emer”, sword aright in the hand of Emer, plunging towards “the deathless sea” (Yeats 1964, 116) (after he realizes he has slain his son), we’re torn over whether it’s meant as an Eastern or a Western imagery, or perhaps both in a poetic syncretic version of the Theosophical Society. Does the wave-like image articulated in the Introduction of the play when it was published as “Fighting the Waves”, “[...] like that of the *Samkara* [...] deluge of experience breaking over us [...] wherein,] man

in himself is nothing” (Yeats 1934b, 65), give us phenomena of an esoteric meditative self-absorption and self-realization (as in sanskrit *Samkara*, the “loosen[ing of] itself from the clutches of the material world and immerge[ing of] itself with the One Supreme”; Sarker 1996, 70), or is the emptiness suggestive of a murdering of one’s own offspring in post-independence Ireland indicative in Emer’s act? The mob demanding vengeance for Jacques Molay suggest a fantasy on Yeats’ part of Irish mobs deprived of (world) occult knowledge, seeking recourse, and classless in nature too (“In cloud-pale rags, or in lace”; Yeats 1994, 205). But Elizabeth Cullingford’s reading notes how “reverie”, “turmoil”, and “unrolling images” were all used in a 1919 Yeats letter where he comments on occult-transmission narratives he had read, as well as on his “Meditations” poems (Cullingford 1983, 769). This supports the idea that occult transmission is indeed an image in “I See Phantoms”, intertwined with images of the burgeoning mob, however much this self-entrancement is not associated with the transmission of knowledge from the myths/archives of old:

The ladies close their musing eyes. No prophecies,  
Remembered out of Babylonian almanacs,  
Have closed the ladies’ eyes, their minds are but a pool  
Where even longing drowns under its own excess;  
Nothing but stillness can remain when hearts are full  
Of their own sweetness, bodies of their loveliness (Yeats 1994, 200).

But even the archives of mythological knowledge no longer entrance. Or rather, phenomenon is now beyond occult knowledge, as in “Shepherd and Goatherd”, where “All knowledge lost in trance” (Yeats 1994, 145). The sense of a disconnect with world occult knowledge shows perhaps a sense of the Irish revolution slipping out of the hands of Yeats’s mimetic capabilities (as well as those various occult organizations that encompassed the national and esoteric interests of the Celtic



Twilight and the Theosophical Society). There is a movement from occult mob seeking action, to the ascetic trance indicative of “closed” eyes, to the eventual “stillness” of the aesthetic and sensory, in “hearts full [...] bodies of their loveliness” (Yeats 1994, 206). For Shamsul Islam, the culminating “stillness” of Yeats’s late-stage poetry too is more indicative specifically of a sensory-laden state of *nirvana* (Islam 1973, 284). He finds this, for instance, in the romance-themed “The Chosen” poem, where Yeats “diverge[d] from Vendantic Hindu thought by making the lovers attain *nirvana* through the senses” (Islam 1973, 285): “I take/ That stillness for a theme/ Where his heart my heart did seem/ And both adrift on the miraculous stream” (Yeats 1994, 272). Islam notes in looking at the lines, “The lot of love is chosen [...] / Before I had marked him on his northern way”, this poem is also filled with images of reincarnation. But reincarnation in late-stage poetry, as we further see in “An image from a past life” with its line of how “A Sweetheart from another life floats there”, “[...] forced to linger/ From vague distress/ Or arrogant loveliness”, presents transcendence with the specter of returns and an entrancing aesthetic (Yeats 1994, 178). What’s interesting about this poem is the way in which it too, like “I See Phantoms”, begins with a stream in moonlight and gothic-like images of “Monstrous familiar images”:

The elaborate starlight throws a reflection  
 On the dark stream,  
 Till all the eddies gleam;  
 And thereupon there comes that scream  
 From terrified, invisible beast or bird:  
 Image of poignant recollection. (Yeats 1994, 178).

Images of return haunt Yeats’s late work, and it’s this he metaphorizes in the many textual revisions that mark the late stage (“in esoteric religious doctrines valorizing trance, revelation, and serial reincarnation”; Smith 1998, 223). Perhaps this

is the most *Eastern* of elements Yeats attempted to embody. Yeats's version of returns involves an antithesis between occult and rational mentalities, as we see in 1931's *The Resurrection* play: "What if there is always something that lies outside knowledge, outside order? What if at the moment when knowledge and order seem complete that something appears? [...] What if the irrational return? What if the circle begins again?" (Yeats 1964, 138). The 50 battles between Congal and Aedh in the reincarnation plot of *A Herne's Egg* present repeated beginnings, as in the *Bhagavatam Purana* where Lord Parasurama and Lord Nrisimha "displayed unusual opulence by killing the disobedient kshatriyas twenty-one times" (Yeats 1964, 138).

Fearful returns and aesthetic entrancements carry social commentary. What's intriguing about aligning the motif of deluging waves with *Samkara* is that it is used not only to read the Irish social landscape indicative in Emer's act but also read into Western aesthetic/literary developments themselves, as is suggested in considering the first part of the *Samkara* reference quote from above: "*Ulysses*, Mrs. Virginia Woolf's *Waves*, Mr. Ezra Pound's Draft of *XXX Cantos*-suggest a philosophy like that of the *Samkara* school of ancient India [...]" (Yeats 2004, 65).

The mob seeking recourse, whether the entranced mobs that Yeats both idealizes and fears or Synge's Parnell-celebrating pagan Aran mobs, ghostly morph into other aesthetic forms. As Elizabeth Howe's reading of Yeats's "possession narratives" notes below, the rioting theatrical mobs of the Jubilee and Playboy riots eluded Yeats's control, however much his conception of a ritual theatre attempted to capture them towards a certain initiation, or however much he saw it as working against his artistic intent:

More generally, 'expressions of concern about supernormal possession existed alongside—and were bound up with—World War I anxieties about the invading Other'. For Yeats, this is configured less as a German threat than a Gaelic Irish one. Both a second self and a determined threat in the emerging Free State, the

Gael during the first half of the twentieth century became, for Yeats, less of an idealised peasant figure of the early folktale collections and more of a threat of mob rule, tyranny and violence (Howe 1996, 78).

It's ironic to consider the notion that that which was most perplexing to Yeats may have been the most occult of manifestations in "everyday" Irish society. It's the dramas of the Anglo Irish that perhaps most evoked that entrancing sacred immanence of the Irish otherworld they sought to elicit in their involvement with the Celtic Twilight. But the mob itself was the very thing that Yeats spectered and sought to control, but also the very thing that could not be *othered*. Furthermore, it may be ironic that the most aesthetically encapsulating of this phenomenon may have been the Irish writer deemed least occult, J.M. Synge, with both his hysterical, Parnell-celebrating mobs of daemonic-driven Aranites, and the theatre-inspired mobs of the *Playboy* riots. So it is at this moment of occult mobs, of nationalist demands, and of the specter of the return of savages and the reincarnate, that Yeats turned more heavily Eastward, attempted to tell an "Eastern fable" in the form of his treatise on history, *A Vision*, and did what many westerners have done in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when confronted with Eastern philosophies: he opened a yoga studio.

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