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W.B. Yeats's economies of sacrifice: war, rebellion, and 'wasteful virtue'

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The First World War and the Easter Rebellion of 1916 both posed problems of ethnicity, class, and national allegiance for W.B. Yeats. These anxieties of allegiance manifest themselves in the paradoxical tensions of Yeats's commemorative verses for the middle-class, Catholic Easter rebels and for the Anglo-aristocratic Major Robert Gregory, who died as an airman in the First World War. In this essay, I focus on the brief allegory 'The Rose Tree' and the canonical 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death' to demonstrate how ethnicity informed Yeats's evaluation of bodily sacrifice. Although both poems seem initially to glorify death as a means of escaping closed economic or evaluative systems, Yeats ultimately privileges the airman's sacrifice above the rebels' precisely because, in its radical negation of pragmatism, it is more wasteful, and thus more virtuous.

Keywords: Yeats; Easter Rebellion; economy; value; sacrifice; ethnicity

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The unprecedented violence of the First World War and the escalation of violence in Ireland during and after the Easter Rising presented W.B. Yeats ample opportunity for the material consideration of the value of death. Furthermore, his divided ethnic allegiance and ambivalence toward both the English and Irish national projects of violence made ethnicity (and, by extension, class and religion) a lens through which to categorise bodily sacrifice. This ethnically based evaluation of sacrifice plays itself out in the commemorative poems he wrote for the Irish nationalist Easter rebels, on the one hand, and Robert Gregory, the 'Irish Airman' who died in defence of the British Empire, on the other. While Yeats initially disapproved of the Easter rebels, their executions won him over to a grudging and ambivalent respect for their accomplishment, and the poems he wrote to commemorate the Rebellion's protagonists – most famously 'Easter, 1916' – are layered with political and ideological ambiguity concerning the (meta)physical nature of their sacrifice.[1] The outspoken Yeats was revealingly reticent about the war, though, openly rejecting any supposed obligation to address the conflict.[2] Furthermore, he notoriously excluded Wilfred Owen and other highly materialist war poets from *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* in 1934.[3] But his political attitude toward the war, as it is revealed in his paeans to the young Gregory, is less ambivalent than his painstakingly noncommittal commemoration of the Easter rebels. Both sets of poems reveal how Yeats's attitudes toward Irish ethnicity are mapped onto an economics of bodily sacrifice that posits the Celtic-Irish subject as materially embodied and driven toward embodied reproduction, while the aristocratic Anglo-Irish is driven toward a more inherently noble

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immateriality, a telos of supreme negation that positions him above any economic index or replicating system, and, ultimately, outside of history.

Such valuation of sacrifice reflects Yeats's values in his middle period, as he struggles to deal with the significance of both the Great War and the Easter Rebellion. It does not, however, reflect Irish political reality. Fran Brearton has demonstrated that, although Irish historiography and commemoration clearly privilege the Easter Rebellion in retrospect, support for and enlistment in the war effort was far from solely an Ulster inclination. Brearton points out that both unionists and nationalists had clear, if different, reasons to support the war. Across Ireland, she writes, 'the desire to support fellow Catholics in Belgium and fight for "the freedom of small nations" had an obvious, and largely uncomplicated appeal for some, as did the desire to protect the British Empire against a military aggressor for others'.[4] Furthermore, the ethnic valuation that I argue Yeats imposes on the subjects of these poems is far more fluid than fixed, and certainly not inherent. As Brearton points out, the belief in martial valour and nobility that inspired leaders such as Pearse to embrace violence is almost indistinguishable in its rhetoric from the values made famous by Rupert Brooke at the outset of the war.[5] In general, many nationalists borrowed their rhetoric from the hyper-masculinist discourse that constituted the general war fervour before the battle of the Somme (in which, as Brearton reminds us, Ulster casualties were immense) made such enthusiasm impossible throughout Europe.[6]

Although I see the same drama of fraught allegiance that I examine below played out in 'Sixteen Dead Men' and 'Easter, 1916' on one side, and 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' on the other, for this essay I will focus on only two poems to make my larger point: the brief allegory 'The Rose Tree' and the canonical 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death'. Both of these poems seem initially to glorify death as a means of escaping closed economic systems, a thanatotic valuation of death's negation elaborated, in different ways, by both Georges Bataille and Jean Baudrillard.[7] While Yeats's poems express this by glorifying the destruction of discourse and symbolic exchange through self-sacrifice, their expression in the wholly *discursive* and highly *symbolic* form of lyric poetry presents a paradox, and the way these poems engage and attempt to resolve that paradox reveals Yeats's own ethnic valuations of sacrifice. 'The Rose Tree' contains an implicit tension between the optimistic nationalist ideals that Yeats presents in the poem's central image of a revived and self-regenerating Ireland, and Yeats's ethnically over-written representation of his protagonists. Despite its explicit hagiography, 'The Rose Tree' re-inscribes middle-class stereotypes, showing the aesthetic limitations of the Easter rebels' pragmatically valuable sacrifice. Conversely, his poeticisation of Robert Gregory allows Yeats to elaborate and praise the 'wasteful virtue' of an aristocracy with which he increasingly allies himself against the Dublin middle class, ultimately celebrating 'needless death, after all' over death that achieved specific political (but middle-class) aims.

'The Rose Tree' constitutes a negative image to that 'wasteful virtue' of heroism in a useless cause that Yeats introduced in the opening lines to *Responsibilities*, significantly to describe the qualities of his own Anglo-Irish (but middle-class) ancestors. The ethos of wasteful virtue indicates a noble, qualified way of life, the extra-corporeal extreme of Aristotle's fully humanised *bios* over the corporeal and undifferentiated *zoe*. As willing maximum symbolic expenditure for minimum utile gain, it also represents a romantic reversal of the capitalist paradigm.[8] The wastefully virtuous risk all pragmatic value for a pragmatically useless symbol or principle. Jahan Ramazani has described 'wasteful virtue' as a way of 'momentarily … triumph[ing] over death' by remaining unaffected by its immediate proximity or possibility, and in these poems, the death at stake is not individual, but the collective death of Anglo-Irish culture at the hands of an invigorated Catholic

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middle class.[9] A few examples of 'wasteful virtue' in Yeats's poetry of the 1910s include, at the individual level, risking one's life for a battered hat (in the *opening rhymes* that introduce the term) and, at the collective level, the greater importance of appropriating funds for an art gallery (in the myriad poems about Hugh Lane's proposed Municipal Gallery) rather than for more materially useful ends, such as feeding Dublin's impoverished.[10]

To Yeats, 'wasteful virtue' is a quality of life which is inherited and cultivated as an Arnoldean superlative: the best way of life and thought that is known and practised, open only to those who are born and grow within it.[11] The Easter rebels' natal class bars them from any such virtue, as do their materialist motives and passions.[12] Hence, in the logic of 'The Rose Tree' and other Easter Rebellion poems, their material destruction is necessary not just to effect change, but because the absence of the middle-class material economy that they represent is necessary for Ireland to become the semi-feudal 'right rose tree' that Yeats really desires. 'The Rose Tree' implies this in materialist terms, situating the corporeality of the body and its economies of sexuality (through the sexually over-determined poetic symbol of the rose) and death at the centre of the Rebellion's pragmatic political value. The brief poem is worth presenting in its entirety:

'O Words are lightly spoken,'
Said Pearse to Connolly,
'Maybe a breath of politic words
Has withered our Rose Tree;
Or maybe but a wind that blows
Across the bitter sea.'

'It needs to be but watered,'
James Connolly replied,
'To make the green come out again
And spread on every side,
And shake the blossom from the bud
To be the garden's pride.'

'But where can we draw water,'
Said Pearse to Connolly,
When all the wells are parched away?
O plain as plain can be
There's nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right rose tree.'

The intertextual relation to Blake's 'The Sick Rose', and the primacy of purely aesthetic motives, metaphors and symbols in 'The Rose Tree', demonstrates that the poem celebrates the will toward an escape, via indeterminacy, from the circular track of rigidly determined symbolic value, as it exists in the pragmatic realms of politics or the marketplace, two forces that Yeats saw as encroaching on Ireland's pastoral potential and destroying the fertility of the Irish artistic imagination.

Increasingly throughout his career, and particularly the middle period in which he wrote these poems, Yeats was convinced that the arts could only be debased by mere considerations of how they might be used as political, or, worse, economic, means.[13] The exceptionality of aesthetics to quotidian systems of symbolic exchange that this poem in particular, and esoteric metaphysical symbolic systems in general, seems to embrace, however, is, according to Barbara Herrnstein Smith, a myth derived from the indeterminacy of value that aesthetic representations create. Although the value of the poetic symbol is indeterminate, Smith argues, it is, like *all* value, fundamentally bound to an economic system:

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> All value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things but, rather, an effect of multiple, continuously changing, and continuously interacting variables or, to put it another way, the product of the dynamics of a system, specifically an *economic* system.[14]

The values of the many symbols in 'The Rose Tree' are, thus, highly contingent, but that does not differentiate them from other value signifiers: they remain within an economic system.

Smith goes on to demonstrate that traditionally there has been an instinct in Western culture to 'protect certain aspects of life and culture, among them works of art and literature, from consideration in economic terms' and that this imagined separation of the arts from the system of symbolic exchange has resulted in its mystification.[15] This mystification contributes to what Walter Benjamin describes as the 'aura' that surrounds a work of art and gives it an unreal aspect of the non-material excess of subjective emotion over objective use value. Both suggest that much of the affective power of artistic symbolism comes out of its *seeming* to occupy a space outside of the closed and logical circle of economic exchange. The contingencies of value for a work of art may alter radically, Smith suggests, but it will never be analogous to the pragmatic contingencies of value that govern the marketplace or the political arena, for example. The arts, therefore, represent a realm in which objective value is nearly exterminated in the popular imagination, but is still very much present.

For Yeats, aesthetic value is complicated by the intricacies of an extremely esoteric symbolism (culled from the occult, Eastern religions, Blake, Swedenborg, and others) of excessive and/or indeterminate valuation that creates infinite contingency. Every recurring symbol has a range of connotations, and while the rose is highly privileged, its value is rendered ambiguous by its use so far outside the context of Yeats's earlier, more florid period, when the rose stood hopefully for a Romantic Ireland that he had more recently consigned to the grave.[16] The resurrection of this symbol, and of this florid style, then, is appropriate to the hagiography of the poem. It stands in a direct and marked contrast, though, to Yeats's more recent stylistic innovations, which favoured coldness, austerity, and a certain version of rigorous masculinity. The brief manifesto poem 'A Coat', which closes *Responsibilities*, has Yeats casting off the baroque symbolism of his youth. But the rose of 'The Rose Tree' need not simply be read as a return of the rose of Yeats's Rosicrucian period.[17] The value of the rose is always in excess of any discrete or singular meaning and invested with metaphysical value in excess of its own symbolism, which changes not only from reader to reader but also in juxtaposition against any number of other artistic creations by Yeats, or inspirational to Yeats, which use the same symbol. Making the symbolic rose central to a poem for the first time in twenty-one years, 'The Rose Tree' renders indeterminable the value of the sacrifice of the Easter rebels by tying the value-laden symbol so biologically and materially to Pearse and Connolly through physical economies of nourishment and waste, birth and death: 'There's nothing but our own red blood / Can make a right rose tree' (lines 17–18). As their blood waters the rose tree, so it physically becomes the rose tree, and the custodians of the symbol of Ireland are transformed from the discourse surrounding the symbol into the symbol itself, bringing the rose tree out of the immaterial aesthetic realm and into the system of exchange value as Pearse and Connolly give their lives for political ends: the rose not as aesthetic symbol, but as materially realised fact. Furthermore, it must be remembered that this is a rose *tree*, and so pits one of Yeats's earlier symbols of mystic beauty and Irish nationalism against one of his later privileged symbols of conservatism and stability, this one borrowed from Burke: the slowly maturing, deep-rooted tree of the aristocratic state.[18] The unexpected rapidity

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of the Rebellion, the forcing of growth from immaturity, stands symbolically in contrast to Yeats's ideal of the (seemingly) natural evolution of aristocracy.

The opening stanza contains many other such symbols of indeterminate or excessive value which comment, in the content of the stanza, on the inadequacy of a discourse that does not recognise the contingent value of words: 'O Words are lightly spoken, / Said Pearse to Connolly.' Here, words are clearly diagnosed as symbols that are used too easily as simple and determined value signifiers, and without proper regard to their indeterminate value. This 'light' use of words is contrasted to the dense layering of symbolism in the next four lines of the stanza, which situates the words in a sliding and highly contingent scale of value. As value symbols, they are heavily loaded by cross-references and connotations which make their symbolic value, in the context of Yeats's work of this period, highly ambivalent, if not wholly indeterminate.

For example, the slippage between signifiers and the value of what they signify can be seen in the first word of the poem, which is the same as that of its companion piece, 'Sixteen Dead Men'. More than establishing the direct connection between the two poems, which express similar anxieties about the possible exchange value of the rebels' deaths, this opening sound of lamentation is pre-discursive, and so establishes an implicit comparison between lightly spoken words and heavily moaned interjections of linguistically unmediated emotion. 'O' is an onomatopoetic word that signifies *only* emotion. Because the word 'O' signifies a sound, it is voice before it is language, the excess of *phone* over *logos*. Also, the shape itself, the closed circle, represents the closed track of the circular discourse of revolution that the Easter rebels desire to escape through their deaths, which can take them outside the closed loop of discourse.[19] The possible value of the 'O' to the remainder of the poem is determined, among other things, by its relation to 'Sixteen Dead Men', which immediately precedes 'The Rose Tree' in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, and by how it is employed as a signifier of pre-discursive feeling.[20] Additionally, the 'O' is a point of connection between this poem and Blake's 'The Sick Rose', which is invoked as an exegesis on the sexual dynamic in 'The Rose Tree' and links that sexuality to death, a point to which I will return below.

A consideration of this 'O' in comparison to the opening 'I' of 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death' highlights the ethnic basis of value judgement in Yeats's distinction between the implications of Gregory's death and the death of the Easter rebels. 'I' is a fundamental signifier of absolute and *almost* immediate value. It is the primary logos, representing the first differentiation between interiority and exteriority, or self and other. Similarly, the opening 'I' of 'Easter, 1916' sets Yeats and his value system in opposition to, and above, the Catholic middle class 'them'. The Anglo-Irish airman, with whom Yeats shares his ancestry and his sympathy, is as much an Anglo-Aristocratic stereotype as Connolly and Pearse are Catholic and middle class. 'The Rose Tree's' central image of the blood literally becoming food to nourish the land recalls perhaps the bitterest point of schism between the two types of Holy Communion, that of transubstantiation and the literal versus symbolic embodiment of Christ in the Host. Furthermore, in the context of symbolic exchange versus pragmatic exchange, the literalness of Catholic transubstantiation takes on the connotations of materialism against which Yeats railed in many of his anti-middle-class poems of the period.[21] The airman is excessively 'English' in his taciturnity and masculinity, embodying the prominent English mythology of imperturbable coolness and detachment which Linda Colley has interpreted as a cultural value bred in the English national character in distinct opposition to Irish and Continental emotionality and Catholicism.[22] He adheres absolutely to these mythically English characteristics throughout the poem:

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> I know that I shall meet my fate
> Somewhere among the clouds above;
> Those that I fight I do not hate,
> Those that I guard I do not love;
> My country is Kiltartan Cross,
> My countrymen Kiltartan's poor,
> No likely end could bring them loss
> Or leave them happier than before.
> Nor law, nor duty bade me fight,
> Nor public men, nor cheering crowds,
> A lonely impulse of delight
> Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
> I balanced all, brought all to mind,
> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind
> In balance with this life, this death.

The airman logically justifies his death drive by positing it as an exchange of nothing for nothing, and so no exchange at all. His impulse is lonely – he gains and loses himself for and to himself alone. His poor countrymen (and we should read the 'my' as possessive in *every* sense) stand to lose or gain nothing not just through the airman's actions but also through the entire conflict. Yeats thus yokes the aristocracy to the peasantry, placing them both beyond the give and take of political and economic exchange. The pointlessness and wastefulness of the war serve not as a polemical target, as in an anti-war poem, but as the occasion for a display of comprehensive aristocratic superiority.[23] As Ramazani points out, 'the speaker encounters his death with anticipatory resoluteness'.[24] Indeed, his annihilation is carefully 'balanced', wilfully 'brought to mind' and embraced with an attempted empirical understanding of what it is and what it means, despite the paradoxical fact that value significations are presented by the poem as indeterminate or meaningless. When the airman makes his decision, he does not base it on discourse but on a super value-laden and equally value-indeterminate 'all' that only he can access. These enigmatic lines are a good example of what Declan Kiberd points out as the tendency for 'many of Yeats's most memorable lines [to be] striking without being lucid', for the 'all', it seems, encompasses that against which it is balanced, and by which it is evidently outweighed.[25] Thus, the paradox of this poem is that it relies on a perfectly balanced metrical economy to describe an act of balance that rejects economy and balance entirely. Three terms clearly repeat in a strikingly balanced chiasmus: 'balanced … the years … waste of breath/waste of breath … the years … balance.' The first and last terms of this sentence can also be said to mirror each other, however, as the 'I' that had commenced the poem becomes the 'death' that ends it. Breath, death's ubiquitous rhyming twin and symbolic opposite – and the vehicle of discourse as well as the signifier of life – appears here, as it did to Yeats's Pearse and Connolly, as a petty thing. It is also linked to the populous and its 'public men', like Pearse and Connolly, that the airman sets himself metaphorically and literally above. The 'all' is so all-encompassing that it signifies *nothing*, in particular, and so theoretically destroys the possibility of assigning value. What the speaker of the poem overtly cherishes is entirely pre-discursive and pre-symbolic aesthetic or physical sensation. His desire is for an absolute and wholly individual (lonely) annihilation, not a reconstituted, resurrected or regenerating life, and is therefore much closer to what Bataille's notes on general economy describe as non-productive expenditure, with absolute loss as its end.[26]

Because he chooses it, the airman has agency over his own inutile and, if only to him, apolitical death. His fate is the noble birth that compels him toward a fatal display of

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'wasteful virtue' in a death that he sees as his aristocratic birthright. The war is ostensibly incidental to this inherited fate. Although Yeats's later unpublished poem 'Reprisals' would largely reverse (and politicise) this evaluation of Gregory's sacrifice, reading it instead as pointedly productive, but for irresponsibly wrong ends, 'An Irish Airman' posits and admires death as a wholly autonomous escape from the circle of exchange.[27] Taken in this light, Yeats's admiration for the overtly political actions of the Easter rebels probably has more to do with their achieved means – their own destruction – than their desired ends of establishing a new government; not only do they need to die to inspire the nation, but they themselves, and the capitalist middle class they represent, need to be got out of the way. Seamus Deane correctly argues that in the poems on the Rebellion Yeats is concerned with the potential, though ultimately unrealised, 'demonic return to Ireland of what he believed to have been effectively repressed', i.e. the pagan/Celtic spirit of the folk.[28] But the class that affects this potential return is the middle class, which intercedes between the supposedly spiritually unified peasantry and aristocracy, and lacks the inherited access to those pre- or anti-modern potentialities. 'An Irish Airman' presents the opposite ends of the Easter sacrifice, though privileging the same means, and the fundamental nihilism at its core rejects the possibility of any return. The airman is entirely committed to the destruction of symbolic and discursive exchange, a desire characterised by the taciturn and allegedly Anglo-aristocratic *sprezzatura* with which he throws his life to the (bitter, empty) wind.

The erotic economics of these poems are as revealing as their thanatotic dimensions. As Slavoj Žižek argues, 'sexuality is characterised by the universal capacity to provide the metaphorical meaning or innuendo of any activity or object', and so occupies a space outside of determinate value signification.[29] Because sexuality has a 'universal surplus' of meaning, anything has unquantifiable sexual symbolic value. Sexuality functions in this conceit as death functions for Baudrillard: an end to quantifiable value. 'An Irish Airman' focuses on the pure sensation of sexuality, and to the orgasm as a signifier of death. The masturbatory act of the airman does not have the sexually generative effect of the Easter rebels' productive act. It is more perfectly useless because it does not carry with it the promise of reproduction, and therefore does not privilege the propagation of humanity or offer any benefit to the social body. The airman, as a member of an aristocratic class, must spend his luxury; to Bataille, luxury is the excess energy that the social body must cast off 'willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically'.[30] This luxury, which Bataille sees as an excess of capitalist production and consumption, has entirely different ramifications for the aristocratically sympathetic Yeats. Its expenditure is far from one of absolute loss, for it generates those Arnoldean superlatives much celebrated in middle and late Yeats. The airman is the perfection and synthesis of the great attributes of the privileged and luxurious way of life whose decline or impossibility in modernity is mourned in Yeats's Big House poetry.[31]

'The Rose Tree', however, contrasts the sterile loop of discourse with the affective and linear action of reproductive sexuality and growth. While the airman's death is rendered detached and abstract by his calm tone and airy environment, the rebels' deaths are much more viscerally presented through the organic and earthy imagery of blood and vegetation.[32] 'The Rose Tree', indeed, is all wet with bodily fluids, and the poem's manifold intertextualities reveal the sexual valuations ascribed by Yeats to the sacrifice. The 'politic words' and the 'bitter wind' of the first stanza work together to present a sexual degeneration and disease similar to that of William Blake's 'The Sick Rose', the 'politic words' recalling first Hamlet's 'certain convocation of politic worms' who make a lunch of Polonius, the human embodiment of sterile and impotent, but long-winded,

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discourse.[33] The 'bitter wind' that represents the discursive destruction of foreign influence on Ireland is the same bitter wind of Yeats's 'A Prayer for My Daughter', in which the wind of foreign discourse is a 'storm' that is 'howling' and is 'bred on the Atlantic'. The storm, which Yeats fears will descend upon the sparsely protected Ireland, generally, and his symbolic home at Thoor Ballylee, specifically, is not simply that of the howling world war but the destruction of the whole rootless modernity from which he wants to shield his daughter and his nation. The 'invisible worm/that flies in the night/through the howling storm' (lines 2–4) to destroy William Blake's sick rose is invoked as a symbol for the threat to Ireland, a threat of both a sexual and sterilising disease that needs to be countered with a healthy, regenerative sexuality.[34] The rose tree is simultaneously dry from a lack of youthful stimulation and vigour, at the mercy of any destructive foreign agent that may infect it, and a victim of centuries-long English penetration from across the sea.

However, the rebels, despite their virile supply of fluids, are *incontinent* in a way that the airman is not. While they are contrasted to the masculine worm of destruction, they, too, become its vulnerable, prostrate victims. The sexuality of their act is neither wholly active nor wholly passive, but in order for it to be regenerative it must first be wholly destructive. They must die, both literally and in the sexually metaphoric sense, as a result of their excessive exertion. Their expenditure is productive, however; it is the substitution of their material bodies for material political gain.

But is the airman's death as gloriously non-productive as Yeats makes it seem? When Smith engages Bataille's view of excess and death within economic systems, she demonstrates that what he had defined as a 'nonproductive *expenditure*' which results in 'absolute *loss*' is no such thing because it is still formulated in the same economic terms that Bataille had thought to escape.[35] Smith critiques Bataille's introduction of this kind of expenditure as merely an inversion of the already familiar terms of utility and symbolic economy. Examining Bataille's examples, Smith writes: 'In every case, Bataille indicates that there is a gain in the economy of the individual or the community.'[36] That gain renders the expenditure productive in some way. Thus, Bataille has not been able to think beyond the circularity of economic exchange and has reached the same paradox inherent in 'wasteful virtue' – namely, that any display of 'wasteful virtue' has use value *as* a display of itself. The stupefying excesses of the First World War, which would become the modern paradigm of worthless expenditure, uselessly or not, support Bataille's notion that luxury is an excess in an economy, and thus something which must be purged in the purely destructive and fatal expenditure of war.[37] In that regard, the airman's death is itself a symbol for a global purging of excess as European empires collide and divest themselves of resources in fantastic displays of destruction. The airman is a symptom of a will towards death in a much larger economy than just that of Ireland.

Conversely, in 'The Rose Tree' the gain for both the national and international communities is explicit. Pearse and Connolly wish 'To make the green come out again/and spread on every side/And shake the blossoms from the bud/To be the Garden's pride' (lines 9–12). Not only does this optimistic endeavour envision a fruitful and productive future for Ireland, it also presents the children of the revolution as buds with the potential to make Ireland into a revered and respected independent nation within the global, or at least European, 'garden'. In this future, Ireland would have a specific national value in the index of nations. Again, Pearse and Connolly promise a materialist bourgeois goal, and the future Ireland's value in the global economy is as positively defined as the airman's death is negatively defined.

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Despite its inability to actually escape an economic index, the airman's end is more consistent with Baudrillard's conception of death, as well as Bataille's. According to Baudrillard, each new system contains, through its exclusion, the system that it replaced.[38] The absolute loss that results from the airman's expenditure nearly circumvents this]circularity, and this is precisely where 'The Rose Tree' undermines the ability of the Easter rebels' gesture to actually subvert existing economies of value. If, in Baudrillard's terms, the accomplishment of the rebels was their subversion of the economy of symbolic exchange, then their gift of death would have to end this cycle by annihilating law. The death of the sixteen rebels would place their action outside of the cycle of revolution and into an economy that contains no vestige of what it replaced, a gift economy with no value index or code of value symbols. This is where the airman wants to end up, for his death would exist in an indexless vacuum, a wastefully virtuous and invaluable gift, were it not so symbolically valuable to Yeats.

Finally, as in most of Yeats's poems of commemoration, mourning for the decline and degeneration of the Anglo-Irish class and the achievements of its culture is presented through personal elegy to either an idealised and inaccurately rendered acquaintance or through stereotypical renditions of the Catholic middle class that ultimately damn through faint praise. The airman's thanatotic gesture stands for the will to self-annihilation of an entire culture, a means by which Yeats can recuperate and justify the decline of his own ethnic group, and Yeats presents it as loaded with all the literally invaluable heroism incumbent on such a massive gesture. The Easter rebels and their values, however, represent the future, the inevitable rise of a modernity that Yeats sees as necessarily mediocre and exclusive of his own symbolic value as national poet. There is more than ambivalence in Yeats's celebration of the pragmatic victory of a class that will ultimately leave no room for the way of life that he had idealised as the best possible (during his middle and later period), and the context of the Easter Rebellion poems reveals elements of admonition that outweigh their admiration. The airman's response to modernity is the one that Yeats must necessarily cherish the most, for it is the most austere, the most fruitless, and the most wasteful.

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Notes

1. Terry Eagleton influentially analysed the ambiguity of 'Easter, 1916' in his 1971 essay 'History and Myth in "Easter, 1916"'. Roy Foster also deals with the poem's ambiguity in *W.B. Yeats: A Life, vol. II: The Arch-Poet*, 50.
2. See 'On Being Asked for a War Poem', *Collected Poems*, 155. Fran Brearton points out how disingenuous this poem is, considering how frequently Yeats made poetic use of politics and conflict. Also, she demonstrates that he changed the title (from 'A Reason for Keeping Silent') to underscore his unwillingness to address the war (Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, 54–5).
3. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: A Life, vol. II: The Arch-Poet*, 554.
4. Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, 9.
5. Ibid., 17.
6. For decades before the war, as well, Irish nationalists had been inspired, sometimes indirectly, by the putatively English characteristics of resolve and physical toughness (Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 239).
7. Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (1949, first translated into English in 1991); Baudrillard, 'Symbolic Exchange and Death'.
8. The origins and interests of the war were widely recognised as middle class, and thus antithetical to the values that a socialist such as James Connolly represented. Connolly even pointed out that Germany's actions were understandable from a capitalist perspective (Brearton, *The Great War in Irish Poetry*, 10–11). The middle-class motives of the war may have been one reason why Yeats refused to engage with the war openly; in the poems under

consideration here, however, Yeats demonstrates his opposition to all *materialistic* politics, including capitalism and socialism.

9. Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, 33.
10. See especially 'To a Wealthy Man who promised a second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures' (*Collected Poems*, 107) and 'September, 1913' (*Collected Poems*, 108).
11. Matthew Arnold argued that criticism should be engaged in 'a disinterested endeavor to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world . . . '. See 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time', 23. Yeats shared this non-democratic view of the arts.
12. For James Connolly, at least, the Rebellion was all about material reality. Liz Curtis writes that he was a Marxist who 'campaigned for an Ireland not only politically free but also socially transformed' (Curtis, *The Cause of Ireland*, 161). Pearse's politics, however, were highly aestheticised, as is Yeats's treatment of the Rebellion.
13. Again, the Municipal Gallery poems make this quite clear, as do his numerous battles with critics and other authors about the political and artistic function of the Abbey Theatre.
14. Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, 30.
15. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', 33.
16. In 'September, 1913' (*Collected Poems*, 108).
17. Yeats's involvement in Rosicrucianism in the 1890s no doubt affected his poetic use of the rose as symbol: the rose is titular to four poems from the 1893 volume *The Rose* and two from that volume's 1899 successor *The Wind among the Reeds*. 'The Rose Tree', from 1921, is the last poem to use the symbol in its title, suggesting that the rose was among the adornments the poet cast off in his 1914 poem 'A Coat'.
18. A crucial symbol, for instance, in 'Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation' (*Collected Poems*, 95), 'A Prayer for my Daughter' (*Collected Poems*, 188), and 'Among School Children' (*Collected Poems*, 215).
19. According to Baudrillard, all revolutions within systems of symbolic exchange 'index themselves on the immediately prior phase of the system', so there cannot be a revolution that destroys that system (*Selected Writings*, 121).
20. 'Sixteen Dead Men', which begins 'O but we talked at large before / the sixteen men were shot', also makes clear the distinction between immaterial discourse and corporeal matter.
21. See, for example, 'To a Wealthy Man who promised a second Subscription to the Dublin Municipal Gallery if it were proved the People wanted Pictures' (*Collected Poems*, 107), 'September 1913' (*Collected Poems*, 108) and 'Paudeen' (*Collected Poems*, 109).
22. Colley, *Britons*.
23. And it is a poem that is antithetical in sentiment and style to the majority of the anti-war poems written by combatants such as Owen, Sassoon and Rosenberg.
24. Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, 85.
25. Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, 312.
26. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 11.
27. 'Reprisals' begins by assigning a definite and quantifiable physical value to Gregory's sacrifice: 'Some nineteen German planes, they say / you had brought down before you died. / We called it a good death.' Gregory has got a good deal for his life, at an almost twenty-to-one exchange rate, but he has spent himself on a cause less worthy than protecting his tenantry. Gregory's death, in 'Reprisals', is unambiguously brought down to an earthy and physical level, with the airman now situated in his 'Italian tomb' and finally commanded to 'close [his] ears with dust' against the cries of his people, whom he can no longer help.
28. Deane, *Strange Country*, 174.
29. Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, 127.
30. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 21.
31. This is evident in the poem immediately preceding 'An Irish Airman Foresees his Death' in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*. 'In Memory of Major Robert Gregory' presents a series of virtues associated with Yeats's dead friends, the memory of whom cause the poet to ruminate on the virtues he desires for Ireland. The poem ends, however, with a reflection that recalls the 'bitter wind' of iniquitous foreign influence, and sobers the poet, rendering him incapable of continuing. Lionel Johnson's extreme erudition, the inquisitive and analytic mind of J.M. Synge, and the chivalry, athleticism and taciturnity of George Pollexfen are all bested by Gregory's seemingly superhuman perfection and synthesis of each virtue. In this poem,

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Gregory is a distinctly Anglo Nietzschean Superman who perfects all of these traits and is therefore too glorious to outlive his youth. He is a model of unrealisable perfection, unattainable now as the Anglo-Irish ascendancy sinks further into degeneration.

32. The image of flowers feeding on the blood of the sacrificed is also a motif in some First World War poetry, most notably in Isaac Rosenberg's 'Break of Day in the Trenches', which Paul Fussell regards as 'the greatest poem of the war' (Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 250). The crucial difference, of course, is that in Rosenberg's poem the flower is a poppy, the symbol of oblivion.
33. William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, IV.iii.19–21.
34. Blake, 'The Sick Rose', lines 2–4.
35. Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, 135.
36. Ibid., 136.
37. Ibid., 23.
38. Baudrillard, 'Symbolic Exchange and Death', 121.

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