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Yeats's Aestheticization of Death

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Abstract

This article examines the aestheticization of the trope of death in a number of W.B Yeats's works. In a national context, the death of the individuals becomes the impetus of conceptualizing and inventing a nation. Death is linked to the sublime in a way that breaks with familiar perceptions traditionally revolving around meanings of loss and finality. On other occasions, death turns into a decision and a tragic dignity. Challenging death becomes Yeats's personal and national motto leading him to write his own epitaph, immortalize the figure of Cuchulain as a national icon for the Irish Revivalist movement and further hopes of reincarnation. The ways Yeats deal with death in his drama and poetry border on the techniques of "defamiliarization", which reveals the role of art in mobilizing monolithic concepts, recovering salvation paths and consequently by acting upon national consciousness constructing the Irish patriotic imaginary.

Key words: Death/ aestheticization/ the Irish / nation/ defamiliarization

Since imperialism is an act of violence against the geography and the history of colonized people, the anti-imperialist resistance is not only an armed one but also cultural. The loss of land that is the geographical identity entails the alienation of other aspects of identity. Thus reclaiming one's space becomes a priority yet in the process, loss of lives, disappointments, defeats and fears are fateful encounters. One of the main tasks of the culture of resistance is to overcome these thorns that would only serve the imperial expansion.

In Ireland, the British colonial subjugation of the Irish is justified by a long stereotypical project emphasizing the weakness of the natives and their inescapable defeat and demise. Celticist, in fact, often repeat a line about the Irish: "They went forth to the battle, but they always fell". Regardless of the historical truth in this endorsed pronouncement, the line aims at attacking the psyche of the Irish from within and re-charting a non-confident subject that would be easy to conquer. That death becomes the other face of the Irish is the construction of imperialism. Therefore, the Irish aspired face becomes recoverable first through imagination. Yeats wonders if they are ways the Irish can reconceive of the notion of "death" in other than pejorative terms of defeat, loss and ending, so as to transform their understanding of death and consequently their national consciousness.

Yeats, in fact, infuses the most common experiences of receiving death as a monolithic concept, with many-sided, tangled and emancipating overtones. Notions of death are shaped to become sacrifice, power, pride and immortality. And where but in the creative works of art could this be achieved? Yeats formulates in his aesthetics an alternative to death

as commonly understood. A nation, sublime existence and knowledge, national icons can emerge and be buttressed altogether naturally more rewarding than narratives of loss and disablement.

In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, Yeats's and Lady Gregory's nationalistic play written in 1902, death is the outcome of the excess of love. The old woman symbolizing Ireland pronounces: "He died for love of me: many a man has died for love of me" (*Selected Plays*, 24).[1] The shift from the third pronoun singular to "many" when read literally becomes an exaggeration, even a folly as one wonders how can such an old woman have many lovers who died for her sake and are still dying as evidenced from the use of the present perfect tense, Peter asserts: "Her trouble has put her wits astray" (*Selected Plays*, 24). The idea that love leads to death reverberates in Yeats's later poem "Easter 1916": "And what if excess of love/ Bewildered them till they died?" (*The Poems*, 230).[2]

Later, the old woman refuses food and money explaining that "[i]f any one would give me help he must give me himself, he must give me all" (*Selected Plays*, 25). Death is synonymous with merging completely in the collectivity of the nation "I have good friends that will help me" (25). Good friends will die. However, death is presented in an extended understatement specifically and especially when compared to the reward:

> It is a hard service they take that help me. Many that are red-cheeked now will be pale-cheeked; many that have been free to walk the hills and the bogs and the rushes will be sent to walk hard streets in far countries; many a good plan will be broken; many that have gathered money will not stay to spend it; many a child will be born and there will be no father at its christening to give it a name. They that have red cheeks will have pale cheeks for my sake, and for all that, they will think they are well paid.
>
> [She goes out; her voice is heard outside singing]
> They shall be remembered for ever,
> They shall be alive for ever,
> They shall be speaking for ever,
> The people shall hear them forever. (*Selected Plays* 26-7)

Paleness of cheeks, broken plans, inability to spend one's fortune and orphanage when taken seperately speak euphemistically of death but their accumulation heaps towards an overstatement encompassing the plights of all the community together. However, no matter how dreadful the outcomes of these sacrifices for the sake of the nation, [martyrs] "will think they are well-paid". The woman proceeds to describe the reward which is in fact immortalizing the martyrs, "they shall be alive for ever" (27). The passage aestheticizes death as the dead will be remembered for ever as a nationalist icon in the Irish memory. Their "speaking forever" denotes a continuity of sacrifice, inspired by these very martyrs who'll function as models to be emulated, to be "hear[d] … forever" (27) promoting Ireland's "thoughts" and "hopes" (25) as advanced earlier by the old woman.

[1] W. B Yeats, *On Baile's Strand*, *Selected Plays* (England: Penguin Books, 1997).
[2] W.B Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Everyman's Library, 1992).

This aestheticization of "death" in a nationalistic context echoes the mythologizing of the victims of Easter 1916. In his poem of that name, Yeats exalts the memory of the dead even though his ambivalence towards the movement of the Easter Rising itself is well-known and self-referentially mythologizes the rebels in the ever immortalizing act of writing:

> I write it out in a verse
> MacDonagh and Mac Bride
> And Connolly and Pearse
> Now and in time to be
> Wherever green is worn,
> All changed, changed utterly
> A terrible beauty is born. (*The Poems*, 230)

Life comes from death itself and the ethos of self-sacrifice brings about beauty born. Likewise, in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, when Michael follows the old woman to his fateful patriotic mission forgetting about his coming marriage, she metamorphoses into "a young girl, and she had the walk of a queen" (*Selected Plays*, 28). The play registers a shift from the romance of marriage to the romance of the nation.

In both works, death becomes the impetus of inventing a nation. In the play which was Yeats's and Lady Gregory's main contribution to the Abbey theatre, the call for blood sacrifice for the sake of building and saving the Irish nation is blatant. While in "Easter 1916", blood sacrifice is chosen by a group of rebels who in the very act of killing and being killed become inscribed in the Yeatsian text. Joseph Valente brilliantly captures the idea in his article "The Bioaesthetics of "Easter 1916":

> As Fintan O'Toole has observed, "The line between Irish theatre and Irish history is not so clear after all," and, it is important to add, that line was permeable in either direction. Long before Yeats worried in "Man and the Echo," "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot," his allusive subtext in "Easter, 1916" retroactively "sent" those same men back into the larger orbit of the play, as the historical exemplars of its crowning action and a material extension of its Revivalist agenda (67).[3]

He concludes later on that "Whereas aesthetic figures had given rise to the framing of material practice, here [in Easter 1916] material practice terminates in the fashioning of aestheticized figures" (69). Therefore, whether death in the form of martyrdom is advocated by the text to fake a historical nation or historical rebels and nationalists die and are, thus, immortalized in the text, a certain aestheticization of death is at work.

W.B Yeats seems to displace the restricting connotations of death and its accompanying sense of finality: since the colonizer strives to kill the nation, its existence must be the very outcome of that brutal act. His ambition was to create a nation from the very forces that strive to end it up. Death is paradoxically embraced as the expression of life. The famous phrase "A terrible beauty is born" at the end of "Easter 1916" encapsulates paradoxically tragic fates and happy births. In fact, for Yeats, "no tragedy is legitimate unless it leads some great character to his final joy" (qtd. In Good 139). This tragic joy is defined by

[3] Valente, Joseph (2016) "The Bioaesthetics of "Easter, 1916"," *International Yeats Studies*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Ramazani as "the emotive structure and ambivalence of the sublime, since the sublime involves the conversion of affects from defeat and terror to freedom and joy" (164).[4] This metamorphosing effect of the sublime becomes an article of faith for Yeats. In fact, the attribution of the sublime to the death of the Irish rebels or to the collective death for the sake of Ireland enables Yeats to change the familiar perceptions of death and alter its normalized meaning in the human memory. The aestheticization of death enables the construction of the Irish patriotic imaginary.

Declan Kiberd in *Inventing Ireland*, explains that:

> Most nation-states existed, so to speak, before they were defined and they were thus defined by their existence: but states emerging from occupation, dispossession or denial had a different form of growth. […] Most dispossessed peoples fought a different fight. Under occupation, they could never be their distinctive selves, but in answer to Mazzini's challenge they had to seem so by an adopted attitude, an assumed style (116-7)[5].

In *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, death is the style chosen to conceptualize a nation, to gather around one same cause achieved by sharing the same ideal. Likewise, in Easter 1916, death brings about total change "Are changed, changed utterly" (*Poems*, 230). This ethics of blood-sacrifice aiming at unifying the nation becomes a symbol around which the concept of the nation is built. This symbol does not represent or convey something as in conventional theories of symbolism, it performs and enacts what it symbolizes. A nation is born, is invented, is rejuvenated and thus blood-sacrifice, in its leading to death acquires a life of itself and turns into a signifying practice that brings about the creation of the nation. The dependent act of blood-sacrifice triggers an independent visualization of an imagined Irish community.

Yeats, always anxious to link death to some joyful interpretations, finds in the theory of the sublime an adequate space and an appropriate means to articulate his own vision of death. In his poem, "The Gyres", Yeats's paradoxical phrase "tragic joy" (Poems, 340) summarizes the sublime. Ramazani comments: "[i]t would be more nearly accurate to say that the theory of the sublime is close to being a theory of what Yeats calls "tragic joy", for the sublime transforms the painful spectacle of destruction and death into a joyful assertion of human freedom and transcendence" (163). In this poem, Yeats reports the destruction of ancient civilisations. He says: "Things thought too long can be no longer thought" (*Poems*, 340). If death and endings can be truth, then laughing is the adopted attitude to adjust to this truth. Insofar as man lives, he cannot alter the inevitability of death, but he can alter its reception. The danger of a world that receives death in "tear[s] and sigh[s]" is the submission to the familiarization of this attitude. Shklovsky explains that people tend to see familiar objects automatically, that is in a non-critical, non-appreciative or even questionable way, which entails that one's apprehension of things is mediated by others' apprehensions or, to put it more correctly by habitual apprehension. Shklovsky employs "the process of

[4]Jahan Ramazani, "Yeats: Tragic Joy and the Sublime", *PMLA* 104.2 (1989): 163-77. *JSTOR*, Web, 2 May 2011.

[5] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage Books, 1996).

"algebrization" or "the automatism of perception" (779)[6] to denote the practice of seeing familiar objects in a familiar way. While this Russian critic deals with perceiving objects, his conclusions are also helpful to decode Yeats's rhetorical strategies of perceiving and thinking of death.

Therefore, Yeats suggests "Rejoic[ing]" which is nonetheless, lively, irresistible, prioritized, a mode of energy and life as against the antithetical world of "tombs", "nightmare" and "mire" (*Poems*, 340). "Heave no sigh, let no tear drop" become Yeats's decision and knowledge because life is all what the poet yearns to experience. After all, change governs the universe and history is cyclical and the "workman, noble and saint, and all things run/ On that unfashionable gyre again" (*Poems*, 340). Only by "laugh[ing] in tragic joy" amid scenes of destruction can the poet assert his freedom of will, his openness towards non-familiarized attitudes that secure his uniqueness.

In "Lapis Lazuli", Yeats follows his sublime theme and describes Shakespearean characters who accept their fates enabling the transformation of tragedy into gaiety:

All perform their tragic play,
There struts Hamlet, there is Lear,
That's Ophelia, that Cordelia
Yet they, should the last scene be there,
The great stage curtain about to drop,
If worthy their prominent part in the play,
Do not break up their lines to weep.
They know that Hamlet and Lear are gay;
Gaiety transfiguring all that dread (*Poems*, 341).

Because "all things fall and are built again, /And those that build them are gay" (Poems,341), death takes on a radical significance for Yeats. He aspires to subvert the usual connotations of death, to reassert a certain worthiness in the experience and to reclaim the tragic as the other face of joy. Ramazani actually confirms that "Yeats most memorably conjoins the tragic and the sublime in his description of Shakespearean heroes who encounter their deaths with an ecstatic enlargement of vision, 'Heaven blazing into the head;/ Tragedy wrought to its uttermost" (163). Art here in the form of writing promises the mentioned characters an escape from mortality, a line of flight from the dullness of everyday "death", which is calibrated to a familiar perception rather than one based on the sublime. The communication between art, life and death extends to "[t]wo Chinamen, behind them a third, /Are carved in Lapis Lazuli" (*Poems*, 342). The poem chronicles an abortive attempt at destroying this work of art, an attempt which is doomed precisely because the figures on the object shield themselves in and through art and this becomes a defiant attitude towards death confining itself to pre-established definitions. Indeed "Every discolouration of the stone/ every accidental crack or dent / Seems a water-course or an avalanche" (*Poems*, 342) that further confirms the value and the permanence of this Chinese stone-carving. The stone figures "On all the tragic scene

[6] Victor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique" in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (New York: Bedford/ST. Martin's, 2007).

they stare" […] "Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes, / Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay" (*Poems*, 342).

In *The King's Threshold*, it would be possible to read the poet's death in a similar way. Just before his death, the poet who is the main character of the play reveals: "[t]hat mankind and that leper there may know/ Dead faces laugh" (111)[7]. His oldest pupil confirms: "King, he is dead; some strange triumphant thought/ So filled his heart with joy…" (111). Being compelled to risk his life for a full affirmation of his power, the poet refuses to eat or drink knowing that this will bring about his demise and strives for a more dignified authentic self. Bearing in mind that *The King's Threshold* is written in relation to Terence MacSwiney's death, Yeats's subversion of the tragedy into a sublime ending takes on further connotations. Thomas Mac Greevey explains:

> Only a great poet could give adequate artistic expression to the revelation of the greatness and the pitifulness of the human spirit that was granted to those who had eyes to see when Terence MacSwiney went out of life a year ago. It was natural that Mr. Yeats's mind should turn in those days to that play of his in which a poet had starved rather than see his calling dishonoured by a little king and an ignorant military ascendancy; and that, in the light of MacSwiney's unalterable faith in himself, of the nobility of the impulse that drove him to the course he took, and the pitifulness of his end, Mr. Yeats changed the old pretty ending to a new one of tragic dignity (570).[8]

Death in the play bespeaks an anti-subservience gesture to power only to affirm one's inner power.

No wonder that in "Under Ben Bulben" death is not to be feared except for "[a] brief parting from those dear" (*Poems*, 373). Yeats pictures an antithetical view of death, whose very finality turns into eternalizing its subjects for "[m]any times man lives and dies/ Between his two eternities, / That of race and that of soul, / And ancient Ireland knew it all" (*Poems*, 373). Yeats 's spiritual project was to attempt to imagine death as a controllable concept which is open to personal decisions. If people accept the fatality of death, Yeats more freely chooses to write his own epitaph which grants him full control over his own death:

> Under bare Ben Bulben's head
> In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.
> An ancestor was rector there
> Long years ago, a church stands near,
> By the road an ancient cross.
> No marble, no conventional phrase;
> On limestone quarried near the spot
> By his command these words are cut:

[7]W. B Yeats, *The King's Threshold* (London: Macmillian and Co. Limited, 1937).
[8] Thomas MacGreevy, *Reviews, The King's Threshold, By W.B. Yeats, Abbey Theatre, November 15th, 1921, The Saloon, By Henry James, Dublin Drama League, November 13th, 1921*, Original Source: Old Ireland, 26 November 1921. pp. 570-571, Macgreevy.org, Web, 13 Sept. 2017.

Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by! (Poems, 373*)*

Yeats is profoundly dissatisfied with the conventional meanings and formalities accompanying death and he refuses any final homage to this ending, choosing his own burial place, declining all pompous decoration of his grave and command[ing] his epitaph. Shortly, the authority of death is displaced by the authority of the poet.

In "death", cast[ing] derision upon supersession of breath, O'Higgins whose assassination is the object of the poem intuits a radically different view of death rejecting people's usual fear of it for an unusual knowledge and prediction of such ending, being its creator:

A great man in his pride
Confronting murderous men
Casts derision upon
Supersession of breath;
He knows death to the bone –
Man has created death. (*Poems*, 284)

Higgins plays the proud man in the face of oppression, self –consciously freeing himself of the worries of man's waiting for his end with "dread" and "hope" which means experiencing death over and over. The poet attempts to seize power over death by appropriating the act of creation to Man.

In *Deirdre*, death becomes a decision. In this play, Deirdre falls in love with Naoise, one of Conchubar's knights. When she is forced to be the wife of the king, she flees with her beloved to Scotland. Later, the king pretends he forgives them and invites them back to Ireland only to slay Naoise and retrieve Deirdre. The latter's pride is greater than her life; she commits suicide to escape the king's bed. Knowing that Deirdre kills herself, the first musician sings: "They are gone, they are gone. The proud may lie by the proud" *(Selected Plays* 111). Death becomes synonymous with pride and dignity. Deirdre's decision is a refusal to sell her body while her soul is tortured: "Do not touch me", she repeats many times after the murdering of Naoise. She affirms that the demise of the body is trivial when preceded by a spiritual death. Her death also signals her superiority over the royal power destroying its illusive triumph. Conchubar says to Fergus who inquires about Naoise and Deirdre:

You have come too late.
I have accomplished all. Deirdre is mine;
She is my queen, and no man now can rob me.
I had to climb the topmost bough, and pull
This apple among the winds. Open the curtain
That Fergus learn my triumph from her lips.
[The curtain is drawn back. The Musicians begin to keen with low voices.]
No, no; I'll not believe it. She is not dead –
She cannot have escaped a second time! (*Selected Plays*, 111)

While phrases like "accomplished all", "no man can rob me", "learn my triumph" and "escaped a second time" are pronounced by the king Conchubar, they are significant to Deirdre, all enabled by her decision to kill herself.

A final recapitulating reworking of the theme of death is Yeats's Cuchulain's cycle. Cuchulain is a mythical figure in the Irish sagas and a national icon in the Irish collective memory. Yeats exploits the figure of Cuchulain in two poems and five plays. Relevant to our concern here are the poem "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" written in 1892, the poem "Cuchulain Comforted" written in 1939 and the play *The Death of Cuchulain* also written in 1939. In the above-mentioned works, there is innovative treatments of "death" whose invented, discovered and recovered meanings allow the writer to see this so-called end anew and by that very virtue help the Irish conceive differently of the failure and final defeat of their national hero.

Yeats also promises the immortality of Cuchulain's figure through avoiding the word "death" on two occasions when reworking his mythic material. The first in his 1892 poem "The Death of Cuchulain", rewritten in 1925 as "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea", and the second in 1939 just before Yeats' s death in "Cuchulain Comforted", originally called "The Death of Cuchulain". The change of the title in the first poem occurred when Yeats had already written four more works about Cuchulain and hence, the life of Cuchulain imposes itself as a poetic necessity to ensure the continuity of the character's cycle in Yeats's career; death in the second poem, however, is not the end as much as it is an inevitable joining in the cyclical human journey.

In "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea", it is important to note that the ultimate failure of Cuchulain's fighting "with the invulnerable tide" (*Poems*,57), while it affirms over and over the imperial racial tropes, is seen by Yeats through different lenses which enable the reproduction of the colonized object. He writes: "Cuchulain in the Irish folk tale had the passion of victory, and he overcame all men, and died warring upon the waves, because they alone had the strength to overcome him" (CEL)[9]. Rob Doggett sees that "Cuchulain remains true to his individualistic Irish heart, embracing, like so many Irish 'martyrs' before and after him, his tragic fate", and adds that "[w]hat remains for the nationalist artist is to transform that moment of self-destruction into art: to express, in the death of the Irish hero, the pure soul of an Irish nation ever beautiful in defeat" (33).[10] In short, conquered only by nature, Cuchulain's death becomes directly linked to the sublime, in fact, not any sublime but Schopenhaur's fullest feeling of sublime or what he calls "the immensity of Universe's extent or duration" which is "pleasure" driven "from [the] knowledge of [the] observer's nothingness and oneness with Nature" (qtd. in Politt).[11]

In "Cuchulain Comforted", the artist subversively invests the death register as a promising attempt for a new conceptualization of death. He endows the dead with movement "A man that had six mortal wounds, a man/ Violent and famous, strode among the dead" (*Poems*, 379), then equates the death experience with meditation "Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head /came and were gone. He leant upon a tree/ As though to meditate on wounds and blood" (*Poems*, 380), the next line "A Shroud that seemed to have authority" valorizes death as a site of power and he finishes with an emancipatory note through the metamorphosis of the dead into birds: "they had changed their throats and had the throats of

[9] W. B Yeats, "The Celtic Element in Literature". 1897. JeffH October 2011.Fullonlinebooks. com.Web. 28 Nov. 2016.
[10] Rob Doggett, *Deep-Rooted Things: Empire and Nation in the Poetry and Drama of William Bulter Yeats* (USA: University of Notre Dame, 2006).
[11] Ben Pollitt, "John Martin, The Great Day of his Wrath", *Smarthistory*, 09 Aug. 2015. smarthistory.org/martin-the-great-day-of-his-wrath/. Web, 02 May 2018.

birds" (*Poems*, 380). Only through death are the soul and the body enabled to take other forms and to experience freedom. After all, Yeats believes in the reincarnation, therefore, death imaginatively conceptualized as he says in the poem, is but an abandonment of this life probably to enter other orders of realities. In "Yeats and the Idea of Revolution", Seamus Deane explains the importance of the concept of reincarnation as follows:

> Reincarnation seems to have been the most fervently held of all Yeats's private beliefs. By virtue of it, death was both contemplated and overcome. Politically, one could say that the revolutionary thrust of his attack on empiricism and its social constellation in the middle classes was constantly parried by his defence of traditional social and religious systems which were, for him, valuable because they were reverential towards the notion of reincarnation. Like Greece, Ireland was for him a holy land because the spirits of the dead were given imaginative housing on every rath and hill. The haunted groves and sacred woods of the earth were made accessible either by folk belief or by art. (41)[12]

In the play *The Death of Cuchulain*, the same theme of reincarnation continues carrying the same overtones of liberty. Cuchulain about to die pronounces "There floats out there/ The shape that I shall take when I am dead/ My soul's first shape, a soft featherly shape" (*Selected Plays*, 279). The play closes on a song praising Cuchulain as the best representative of a race and proceeds:

> What stood in the Post Office
> With Pearse and Connolly?
> What comes out of the mountain
> Where men first shed their blood?
> Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
> He stood where they had stood? (*Selected Plays*, 272)

The General Post Office in Dublin is the scene of the Easter Rising of 1916, that is the symbol of martyrdom, independence and sacrifice. The very act of monumentalizing the mythological hero and writing about him along with the main participants of the Rising is an aestheticisation of that historical moment of failure that nonetheless has the noblest of meanings. Besides, the dead heroes are consequently mythologized. Patrick Bixby reports that "[o]n April 21, 1935, Irish Prime Minister Eamon de Valera commemorated the nineteenth anniversary of Easter Rising by dedicating a statue of the mythic hero Cuchulain at the Dublin General Post Office, where the Irish rebels had proclaimed their country's independence from British rule and made their courageous but ill- fated stand" (1). Cuchulain actually embodies the heroic ideals of Ireland and the 1916 Rebellion and though the latter proved not victorious with thousands of dead people, the very act of monumentalizing Cuchulain beats death itself. Henri Lefebvre remarks that "monumental imperishability bears the stamp of the will to power. Only Will, in its more elaborated forms — the wish for mastery, the will to will — can overcome, or believe it can overcome, death" (221).[13]

[12] Seamus Deane, "Yeats and the Idea of Revolution" (p38-50), *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1890* (North Carolina: Wake Forest University Press, 1985).
[13] Henri Lefebvre, *The production of Space*, 1974, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

The ways Yeats deploys to represent death in his literature moving from its aestheticisation, its link to the sublime, its being a decision and man's creation to its mythologization border on the technique of "defamiliarisation" and becomes "a special way of thinking" (qtd. in Shklovsky 775) to use the words of Ovsyaniko-Kulikovsky which is essentially the work of art and particularly poetry. In fact, the aestheticisation of death through defamiliarizing techniques becomes ideological. It converts a once-disabling concept into a life-nourishing formula restoring energy and hope. Another, even greater appeal for interpreting death in a non-familiar way is saving the nation as a whole from the debilitating and restrictive notion of death as failure in wars of independence and loss which entails the legitimatization of the British expansion and the subjugation of the Irish. Instead the death of individuals in a national context and particularly in a post-colonial nation becomes synonymous with the life of the nation itself, turns into beauty, preserves dignity, links to the sublime and mythologizes martyrs which is, in all aspects, the very antithesis of familiar death narratives. Aestheticizing the trope of death opens for the Irish new paths for self-realization both on an individual and national level. Michael Clune affirms that "defamiliarizing literature discloses the possibility that things might be different" (447)[14]. And it is within the reach of Yeats as a dramatist and a poet to alter archetypes, shatter old forms and contents and subvert stereotypes which permits the breakthrough of innovative perceptions and unknown possibilities liberating both the individual and the nation from the too-familiar, too-deadening overtones of death.

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