

## Mock Mockers: Cynicism, Suffering, Irish Modernism

Ronan McDonald 

*Cynicism styles itself as the answer to the mental suffering produced by disillusionment, disappointment, and despair. It seeks to avoid them by exposing to ridicule naive idealism or treacherous hope. Modern cynics avoid the vulnerability produced by high ideals, just as their ancient counterparts eschewed dependence on all but the most essential of material needs. The philosophical tradition of the Cynics begins with the Ancients, including Diogenes and Lucian, but has found contemporary valence in the work of cultural theorists such as Peter Sloterdijk. This article uses theories of cynicism to analyze postcolonial disappointment in Irish modernism. It argues that in the “ambicolonial” conditions of early-twentieth-century Ireland, the metropolitan surety of and suaveness of a cynical attitude is available but precarious. We therefore find a recursive cynicism that often turns upon itself, finding the self-distancing and critical sure-footedness of modern, urbane cynicism a stance that itself should be treated with cynical scepticism. The essay detects this recursive cynicism in a number of literary works of post-independence Ireland, concluding with an extended consideration of W. B. Yeats’s great poem of civilizational precarity, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.”*

**Keywords:** cynicism, affect, Ireland, modernism, Yeats, Joyce, Sloterdijk

Mock mockers after that  
That would not lift a hand maybe  
To help good, wise or great  
To bar that foul storm out, for we  
Traffic in mockery.  
—W. B. Yeats, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”

This article understands cynicism as an attitudinal response to suffering. It uses theories of cynicism to understand the literature of post-revolutionary disappointment and torpor, specifically that of Irish modernism. Whether Ireland was ever a colony is a contested question, nowhere more so than within Irish studies itself. On the one side, Ireland’s undoubted historical experience of conquest, dispossession, and cultural and linguistic erasure looks amendable to colonial and postcolonial analysis. On the other, Ireland’s political union and geographical proximity to Britain, the high representation of Irish people in the British army and its imperial institutions, and the relative ease with which Irish writers, including cultural nationalists, deployed Irishness as a mode of

Ronan McDonald holds the Gerry Higgins Chair of Irish Studies at the University of Melbourne.

acceptable alterity would trouble the applicability of the category.<sup>1</sup> Some commentators have reached for intermediary handles—“semi-colonial” or “metro-colonial.”<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the major Irish modernists—Yeats, Joyce, Beckett—have all been subjects of influential postcolonial readings, even as that triumvirate also seems to qualify as metropolitan and European writers. Postcolonial readings of major Irish writers are often indebted to Edward Said’s 1986 essay, “Yeats and Decolonization,” a full-throated reclamation of the Irish mage as “one of the great nationalist artists of decolonization and revolutionary nationalism,” alongside Tagore, Senghor, Neruda, Vallejo, Césaire, Faiz, and Darwish.<sup>3</sup> The postcolonial analyses of Yeats, like Joyce and Beckett, has usually been understood in terms of their aesthetic responses to the politics of nationalism and nation building, with a lot of emphasis on their ambivalent or outright hostile response to binary, imitative, or essentialist ideas of Ireland or Irishness, such as that allegedly advanced in the Irish revival at the fin-de-siècle.<sup>4</sup> Alternately, critics have highlighted the diverse scorn of these writers for the repressive pieties and imaginative impoverishment of the Irish state after independence (or the cultural nationalist movement more generally), or their aesthetic response to uneven social development, or the disruptive clash between the archaic and the *avant garde* in Irish social conditions that putatively results in experimental and nonrealist artistic forms in its literature.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Irish modernism is regarded by its postcolonial interpreters as intimate with the disappointments of Irish independence and the distance between the ideals of

1 Often this was refracted through the revisionism-nationalism debate that marked Irish studies as postcolonial studies rose in the international academy and the Troubles raged in Northern Ireland. For a summary of those historical debates see Ciarán Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994). A seminal work for analyzing Irish literature through the lens of postcolonialism is Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995). Other postcolonial approaches were spearheaded by David Lloyd beginning with *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Postcolonial Moment* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1993). See also Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). Historians who have disputed the colonial model in Ireland include Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), and Liam Kennedy, *Colonialism, Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1996). For recent assessments of Ireland and postcolonialism, see Joe Cleary, “Postcolonial Writing in Ireland,” *The Cambridge History of Postcolonial Literature*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 539–42, and Calvin W. Keogh, “The Critics’ Count: Revisions of Dracula and the Postcolonial Irish Gothic,” *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1.2 (2014)L 189–206. For a wider history of Irish studies since 1980, including the waxing and waning of postcolonialism, see Ronan McDonald, “Irish Studies and Its Discontents,” in *Irish Literature in Transition*, vol. VI: 1980–2020, eds. Eric Falci and Paige Reynolds (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 327–43.

2 Derek Attridge and Marjore Howes, eds., *Semicolonial Joyce* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Joseph Valente, “Between Resistance and Complicity: Metro-Colonial Tactics in Joyce’s ‘Dubliners,’” *Narrative: Michel de Certeau and Narrative Tactics* 6.3 (October 1998): 325–40.

3 Edward Said, “Yeats and Decolonization” in *Nationalism, Colonialism, Literature*, eds. Terry Eagleton, Frederic Jameson, and Edward W. Said (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 69–95, esp. 73.

4 Pascale Casanova shows how Irish modernism became “consecrated” in the global Anglophone marketplace. Her analysis challenges the postcolonial paradigm by showing the comparative advantages that Irish writers enjoyed. See Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 303–22.

5 Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

its revolutionary period and the atrophied isolationism and stagnancy of the partitioned new state.

An obvious descriptor for this stance is cynicism. However, both in the Irish case, and more broadly in postcolonial writing, cynicism, as a philosophical or theoretical lens, has seldom been used to examine post-independence literature, despite the abundance of cynical satire that has been produced in many postcolonial societies following independence.<sup>6</sup> This article, then, seeks to use cynical theory to analyze some familiar texts of Irish modernism, its withering treatment of nationalism and post-revolutionary disappointment in the context of the attitudinal protection against suffering. Although there is here much modernist disdain for the mystifications of romantic nationalism, there is also a tendency for Irish modernist cynicism to question its own aspirations to cosmopolitanism and abstraction. What emerges then is a recursive cynicism—or cynicism about cynicism—that undoes both callow optimism or self-satisfied pessimism and with them any clear distinctions between observer and observed, colonizer and colonized. That interstitial, self-implicated position chimes with the in-between, ambi-colonial condition of Ireland. The article concludes with an analysis of the poem that affords its title: Yeats's great poem about violence and civilizational breakdown, which aligns both the Irish War of Independence and the Great War, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

### The Paradoxes of Cynicism

Before reverting to the literary analysis later in the article, I begin with some reflections on the shifting meanings of cynicism, modern and ancient, and specifically its relation to suffering, the theme of this special issue. On the one hand, the cynical attitude seems distant from suffering understood as pain, grief, passion, or intensity of emotion. Indeed, cynicism manifests as weak affect. Cynics may be disillusioned but not crushed, or perhaps not in pain because they have proleptically dispensed with the possibility of disappointment. There are many differences between the common sense of cynicism as used today and its classical origins, the philosophical school associated with Antisthenes, Diogenes, and Crates, but both adopt a stance of knowing refusal. Both share what could be characterized as attitudinal prophylaxis. Ancient cynics dispense with things, modern cynics with hopes. In both cases, they protect themselves from disappointment by expecting the worst: or perhaps more precisely they define themselves as knowing, undeluded, and unduped. Why leave oneself open to loss and disappointment by nurturing delusory hopes or depending on unnecessary frippery? The 1647 painting by Nicolas Poussin, "Landscape with Diogenes," held in the Louvre, depicts the famous story whereby the famous Cynic throws away his last remaining possession, his drinking cup, when he sees a boy drinking from a stream by cupping his hands. For the ancient Cynics, precursors to the Stoics as they were, reliance on material objects for satisfaction renders one vulnerable to their loss. A better way to live is to

6 Alexander Adkins is currently writing a book about the role of satire as response to political cynicism in the developing world. See his article "Chinua Achebe's Beautiful Soul," *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 4.3 (2017): 398–408. Also see Alexander Adkins, "Postcolonial Satire in Cynical Times" (PhD diss, Rice University, 2016 [<https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/96613/ADKINS-DOCUMENT-2016.pdf?sequence=7&isAllowed=y>]).

forsake them as much as possible and live as close to nature as you can. Freedom, and indeed ethical living, means dispensing with luxury. Nature, for Diogenes, provides enough for one's needs and, conversely, what is natural cannot be shameful or indecent. Hence Diogenes and his fellows, like many a modern cynic, relished violating conventions and scandalizing public propriety, all in the name of stripping away the deluded niceties of social norms with no basis in reason or nature. The cynics ate in the temple and defecated in the street. Diogenes dressed in rags prompting his nickname the "Dog." (Dogs are often associated with Greek Cynics, though in some ways the modern connotation might be more cat like—self-interested, manipulative, knowing but indifferent.)<sup>7</sup>

The ancient Cynic does without wealth in order to be free, but the modern cynic, sardonic, selfish, urban, and urbane, is hardly famous for forsaking like's luxuries. But they do share with this Hellenic predecessor the self-image of the clear-eyed truth-teller, the exposé of hypocrisy, the debunker of cant. We can recognize some of Diogenes's uninhibited and unintimidated urge to illuminate in modern cynicism, which adopts Diogenes's ethos of puncturing pretension and scorning status. But with the modern cynic's scepticism comes shrewdness not courage; they may be street wise, but not as often Greek wise. The cynic has low expectations of human behavior, distrusts rhetoric, disbelieves promises, expects the worst, and adopting an image as nobody's fool, takes pride in that identification. Modern cynicism often deploys modes of irony and the nonliteral, which is one reason why cynical attitudinizing often buttresses modern satire and comedy of darker shades, in a tradition that can be traced back to Diogenes's disciple, Menippus of Gadara, the founder of Menippean satire, and, after cynical ideas migrated to the Roman Empire, in the Assyrian-Roman second-century ironist Lucian of Samosata, whose voluminous writings ridicule hypocrisy, pretension, and superstition. This humor that delights not only in exposing a double-standard, but in playing with taboo and transgression. But cynical satire is also a mode of self-protection, an attitudinal response to disappointment or even trauma. Freud's observation about the analgesic effect of humor applies particularly to the cynical mode. "The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure."<sup>8</sup> Tragedy, comedy, and cynicism all emerge from the distance between the imagined or idealized world and a recalcitrant reality and the pain that results from that schism between fact and value. All are attempts to textualize that falling short through incongruity, anomaly, or tragic conflict.

By virtue of its analytical cast of mind, cynicism takes a posture of distance. It tends toward the temporally totalizing, which may be one of its attractions. I mean that, of its nature, cynicism brings the past to bear on the present and future. Its investment in seeing the whole dismal picture creates a narrative totality: the cynic applies the lessons

7 Many anecdotes about Diogenes of Sinope are contained in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. Robert D. Hicks, 2 vols., Loeb's Classical Library 185 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958). See especially vol. 2, book 6, 22–85. The anecdote of the drinking vessel appears 6:39.

8 Sigmund Freud, "Humour" (1927), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1976), 162.

of the past to the future, and thereby avoids false hope. This tendency toward an integrated or deterministic prejudice, which tends to see the future inevitably reproducing the failing of the past, might tend the cynic toward conservative politics, which is perhaps one reason why postcolonial theory has fought shy of extensive discussion of the abundance of cynical satire in postcolonial writing. The cynic will agree that the social conditions are awful but will tell you that your utopian plans will fail—because the system is rigged or because those in charge are always corrupt. While politically speaking it's common to decry cynicism as the enemy of agency and aspiration, it has a crucial role in exposing the hypocrisies of the preachers or in checking political fanaticism. It thrives as a counter to the revolution, emerging when idealistic movements run aground or when authoritarian regimes insist on maintaining the veneer of fading zeal, the distance between noble goals and squalid reality. In some cases, it enables adaptive, if disillusioned, participation in a compromised polity.

The chafing against inherited institutions, the doubting of conventional authority, the individuality, the faith in reason, it is little wonder that so many Enlightenment figures looked back admiringly at the ancient Cynics. It's clear in a text like Voltaire's *Candide* (1759) how idealism and cynicism, trust in progress and the suspicion of Panglossian cheeriness, are braided in Enlightenment thinking. Jean Jacques Rousseau's preference for thought over custom, nature over artifice, earned him notoriety as a "modern Diogenes." One feature of cynicism is that, like critique, it has a tendency to turn on itself. It emerges from the attitudinal scepticism of modernity.<sup>9</sup> Yet it was also during the Enlightenment when cynicism started to accrue some of its pejorative connotations. Even in classical times, cynics could be mocked, as well as be the source of mockery, especially when imitators started to form countercultural groups. It was Lucian who turned cynicism back on itself, making fun of the earnestness and moralism of the movement. His dialogue on Peregrinus Proteus mocks a hypocritical cynic, who in an act of faux supreme renunciation, announces his own suicide expecting to be restrained from going through with it, but is then forced to burn himself at the 165 CE Olympic Games in order to save face.<sup>10</sup>

Cynicism can turn its withering gaze onto the cynical mode itself, especially since cynicism for all its nay-saying and ostensible heterodoxy has a tendency to congeal into modes of counter-establishment conformity. By Lucian's time, the cloak and staff of the self-identifying cynic had become a uniform as much as the long hair and hippy beads of later refuseniks. Dropping out is often also and contrapuntally dropping in. Cynicism begins with an attempt to avoid conformity and inherited authority, but often thereby depends on that same authority by defining itself in oppositional terms. The cynic, like the countercultural urbanite, often relies on that orthodoxy in order to be dissensual. This is why, perhaps, we imagine Cynics living on the edge of the city rather than in the desert like anchorites: they depend on that which they renounce. Lauren Berlant writes, in *Cruel Optimism*:

9 For cynicism and the Enlightenment, see Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2010) and Sharon Stanley, *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

10 Lucian, "The Death of Peregrine," *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, trans. H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), iv, 75–94.

The political depressive might be cool, cynical, shut off, searingly rational or averse, and yet, having adopted a mode that might be called detachment, may not really be detached at all, but navigating an ongoing and sustaining relation to the scene and circuit of optimism and disappointment.<sup>11</sup>

There is perhaps a “kind pessimism” to the cynical attempts to forestall or short circuit the disappointments they claim are inevitable. It also indicates just how implicated and immersed the cynic is from the political formations they seek to repudiate.

There is, then, a contradictory braid in cynicism and not just that which marks out ancient and modern. It is within the connotations of the word itself and is evident in a taxonomy of its meanings. One facet is highly moral, critical of hypocrisy and the distance between words and actions. Another aspect is venal, evasive, self-interested, spurning standards altogether. There is ascetic cynicism, exemplified by the Greeks, and a modern writer like Samuel Beckett, and there is amoral cynicism, which is deeply self-interested action that plays the system. We also have the cynicism of ennui, the too-knowing figure of Hamlet. Cynicism is often caught up in doubleness and paradox: between pain and satisfaction, realism and idealism, bravery and cowardice, antiestablishment and reliant on the establishment, realism and a scarcely obscured idealism. It is about a stern refusal to be deluded coupled with a suspicion with truth itself. It is radically individualist, but also rapidly becomes a group identity of dropouts or conspiracy theorists. It is undeluded and unmoved, but also rather smug and pleased with itself. We can see cynicism and idealism slot into each one another hand and glove in contemporary populist politics, with its suspicions of self-serving “elites” and “fake news” combined with fervid belief in a demagogic leader and faith that the swamp can indeed be drained.

In the humanities, there has been a surge of interest in cynicism since the early 1980s, especially concerning reflections on the perils and possibilities of modernity and critique. Many of these works argue that cynicism is more important to the emergence of modern modes of thought than has been generally acknowledged. Remarkably, two major philosophers, working independently, wrote works on cynicism in the early eighties: Peter Sloterdijk wrote his *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), and his French contemporary Michel Foucault, whose final 1983–1984 lectures on ancient Greek truth telling, or *parrhesia*, were published in English in two volumes, *The Government of Self* (2010) and *The Courage of Truth* (2011).<sup>12</sup> Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting’s 1979 book on how Diogenes’s *Kynismus* devolved into modern *Zynismus* was a sizeable influence on both Sloterdijk and Foucault.<sup>13</sup> To these works we could add, in English, the monographs by Louisa Shea, and Sharon A. Stanley, which I have already mentioned, as well as

11 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 26.

12 Peter Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983), published in English as *Critique of Cynical Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 1987). Michel Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II; Cours au Collège de France, 1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros (Paris: Seuil/Gallimard, 2009). Published in English as *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–83* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

13 Heinrich Niehues-Pröbsting, *Der Kynismus des Diogenes und der Begriff des Zynismus* (Munich: W. Fink, 1979).



a pioneering collection of essays by R. Brach Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, and books by Timothy Bewes, David Mazella, Arthur Rose, and others.<sup>14</sup>

Sloterdijk's book affords the most thoroughgoing analysis of the connection between cynicism and political disillusionment. He diagnoses a broad cynical malaise in the aftermath of the dashing of the revolutionary hopes of the 1960s. For Sloterdijk, cynicism is closely connected to the history of Enlightenment critique, the systemic doubt that pulls away delusion and superstition but also leads to disenchantment and disillusionment. Both critique and cynical reason are the cause of "soreness" and pain but also provide a means to endure and go on. A "diffuse cynicism" in his view characterizes the late twentieth century, when the possibility of political change seems itself exhausted. Modern cynicism for Sloterdijk is an attitudinal deadness. For Sloterdijk, we live in an age when political ideals have atrophied to the point of knowing uselessness. It is not just the failure of a particular project, but rather the belief that political action or reform is always doomed, though we must act as if it is possible. So the contemporary cynic deploys a spectral, empty hope, even though he knows it's a chimera, a condition he dubs "*enlightened false consciousness* [emphasis his]."<sup>15</sup> Modern cynicism (*Zynismus*) betrays its origins in ancient Cynicism (*Kynismus*), by putting on a suit and tie, assuming an air of bourgeois respectability. To return to its satirical energies, it must break away from society, to stick its tongue out in the embodied and somatic refusals that he finds in Diogenes. Sloterdijk offers a rather sixties solution to a post-sixties phenomenon: a carnivalesque, bodily wisdom, based on spontaneity and rootedness, opposed to philosophical abstraction and bloodless rationalization.

Sloterdijk is much less sympathetic to Lucian, who he sees as pandering to the bourgeois cultural elite, "the paradigm of a new cynical tone of voice that intellectuals of more advanced times assume as their contempt is provoked."<sup>16</sup> Yet it is the satirical elements of later cynicism, those deriving from culture rather than nature, that allows cynicism to turn on itself, to play with language and double meaning, to mock its own mockery. Cynicism starts out by demurring from an orthodoxy, but its own heterodox alternative can quickly calcify into a set of propositions every bit as fixed and certain. It is in this anticonformity conformism that cults are born. It is also where attitudinal cynicism congeals into complacency or superciliousness. Or indeed where, like Rousseau, a complete solitude becomes the only option. Recursive cynicism, cynicism about cynicism, acknowledges a lack of fixity and the precarity of the spurious totalities that cynicism needs—of self, time, and narrative. It reproduces the tendency for critique to cast a cold eye on its own presumptions. A metacynicism that discriminates between cynicisms, whose scepticism and doubt can double back, cracks open this sense of assuredness and stasis, showing up the limitations of rational analysis without abandoning it. It is this recursive cynicism I would like to trace now in some major texts of Irish modernism.

14 Robert Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé, eds., *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Timothy Bewes, *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1997); David Mazella, *The Making of Modern Cynicism* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007); Arthur Rose, *Literary Cynics: Borges, Beckett, Coetzee* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

15 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 5.

16 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 171.

### Gallous Stories, Dirty Deeds

Political cynicism, the gap between rhetoric and reality, between revolutionary goals and squalid outcomes, is often true for the experience of decolonization. It is certainly true for the Irish literary experience, which reflects mordantly on the way high ideals ended in fratricidal violence of a civil war, followed by a repressive and impoverished new state, marked by emigration and confessionalism. That Ireland had such close geographical and linguistic ties to the colonial center also meant that some of its writers had the option of sloughing off nationhood for an assumed urbanity and cosmopolitanism: many did so under the banner of universal modernism. Cynics, often literally in the tropology of postcolonial writing, show that great ideals have turned to shit, even as they negotiate the imperial discourse that associate a subject people with dirt and excrement.<sup>17</sup> Analyzing African fiction, Joshua Esty has argued that excrement functions not just as a naturalistic detail but as “a governing trope of postcolonial literature.”<sup>18</sup> Esty discerns scatological investments in both Soyinka and Armah and in the Irish modernists, specifically Joyce and Beckett. For Esty, the excremental vision complicates the colonized/colonizer boundaries that have dominated the field of postcolonial studies insofar as the scatological metaphors typically mock both the colonial aesthetic categories and the nationalist modes that are used to resist them.

Just as Armah and Soyinka express disillusionment about African independence, so Joyce and Beckett satirize the tired conventions of the Irish renaissance. If the excremental vision aligns with postcoloniality, we might note its equal kinship with cynicism, ancient and modern. Post-independence cynicism targets both sides—colonizer and colonizer—precisely because of its habitual stance of distance and affective detachment. Shit, the cynic shrugs, is never far away, however much we fancy ourselves as the stuff of angels. Another Irishman, Jonathan Swift, also liked to puncture high-minded ideals and respectable conventions with the brute facticity of human excrement. Even the loveliest ladies keep chamber pots as his “The Lady’s Dressing Room” satirically illustrates.

Cynics are sceptical of love, romance, anything noble, anything residually invested in idioms of the sacral: we are, they remind us, creatures of finitude, limitation, and waste, even as we aspire toward the elevated, the noble, and the grand. In his poem “Crazy Jane and the Bishop,” Yeats’s alter ego, the sexual and libidinous Crazy Jane, calls out the disingenuity and self-deceit of official piety. The bishop, seeing that Jane has aged, urges her to tame her wild ways and to live in “a heavenly mansion / Not in some foul sty”; Jane triumphantly proclaims the falsity of the binary:

“Fair and foul are near of kin,  
And fair needs foul,” I cried.  
“My friends are gone, but that’s a truth  
Nor grave nor bed denied,  
Learned in bodily lowliness  
And in the heart’s pride.

17 For an elaboration of these themes see Warwick Anderson, “Crap on the Map, Or Postcolonial Waste,” *Postcolonial Studies* 13.2 (2010): 169–78.

18 Joshua D. Esty, “Excremental Postcolonialism,” *Contemporary Literature* 40.1 (Spring 1999): 22–59, esp. 23.



“A woman can be proud and stiff  
 When on love intent;  
 But Love has pitched his mansion in  
 The place of excrement;  
 For nothing can be sole or whole  
 That has not been rent.”<sup>19</sup>

Patriotic ideals as well as romantic ones are, for the cynic, tellingly close to the organs of excretion. What is discomfiting for romantic love is also so for romantic nationalism. In the Irish case, the nationalism that fueled both the cultural revival and the move for political independence fetishized an authentic, precolonial Irish identity that replicated the British idea of Irishness as primitive and colorful. The Irish modernists that followed defined themselves against these mystifications and sentimental obfuscations, debunking what Beckett called the “altitudinous complacency of the Victorian Gael.”<sup>20</sup> There are few modern writers more searingly cynical than Beckett, and Irish cultural and political nationalism was a particularly rich target for his scorn. Notably, on several occasions he deploys an excremental vision to describe its idealism and mystifications, such as his short story “First Love” (1970):

What constitutes the charm of our country, apart of course from its scant population, and this without help of the meanest contraceptive, is that all is derelict, with the sole exception of history’s ancient faeces. These are ardently sought after, stuffed and carried in procession. Wherever nauseated time has dropped a nice fat turd you will find our patriots, sniffing it up on all fours, their faces on fire.<sup>21</sup>

The tone of this judgment is mordantly cynical, debunking nationalist veneration of historical narrative precisely by pulling its high ideals into the muck. For the narrator of Beckett’s story, the dereliction of independent Irish society, its population depleted by emigration, its sexual life policed by Catholic dogma, is counterpointed by the slavish veneration of nationalist history. Beckett has no more time for the cultural revival, excoriated in his famous manifesto “Recent Irish Poetry” (1934), where he derides the “antiquarians” as “in flight from self awareness” in an essay replete with a tropology aligning the national imaginary with Irish peat bogs.<sup>22</sup>

Although part of the motive of so-figuring Irish national concerns is to disavow firmly any obligation to partake of the national allegory, to declare a modernist’s independence from local concerns, excremental satire also tends to turn toward itself. As Esty crucially argues, the key point of scatological aggression, missed by many

19 W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, eds. Peter Alt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 513.

20 Samuel Beckett, “Recent Irish Poetry,” in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London: John Calder, 1983), 70.

21 Samuel Beckett, *First Love and Other Shorts* (New York: Grove Press, 1973), 21. For a now classic analysis of this story in relation to postcolonialism, see David Lloyd, “Writing in the Shit: Beckett, Nationalism, and the Colonial Subject,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 35.1 (Spring 1989): 71–86.

22 Samuel Beckett, “Recent Irish Poetry,” in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London: John Calder, 1983), 70, 71.

accounts of political satire, is that it “carries a secret charge of self-implication.”<sup>23</sup> Excrement may, like money, be that which flattens difference and creates sheer equivalence, but it is also charged with a certain infantile creativity, emergent from the body but also other, both subject and object. In that respect to present everything as having gone to shit also collapses the power of critique to effect change. The excremental vision of postcolonial despondency often marks a depletion of political and aesthetic energy, even as it presents itself as knowing and distant. In breaking down self and nonself, excrement also begins to turn cynical critique back on itself, having nothing else to target. In a similar fashion, the cynical observers of postcolonial revolution are implicated in those very failures they deride.

Money, again like excrement, is a great unifier. The father of Diogenes, Hicesius, was employed at a bank or a mint. The story goes that the young Diogenes was instructed by the oracle to deface the coinage, a crime for which he was banished from Sinope, eventually ending up in his famous barrel in the outskirts of Athens.<sup>24</sup> The act of currency defacement is a powerful metaphor for cynicism’s relation to value: if money represents agreed upon price and the conventions of equivalence, the cynic refuses and refutes such systems. Money is based on shared belief, or “credit”; the cynic withholds their “credo” and thus disrupts the circulation of settled norms. Oscar Wilde’s famous definition of the cynic—a man who knows “the price of everything and the value of nothing”—could, from this perspective, be inverted. The cynic disorients *homo economicus*, precisely by opening the gap between price and value. Or by challenging the convention that holds agreed value together.

So the cynic from this perspective reduces or resists the flattening pressure of exchange value. By contrast, however, the more pejorative modern sense of the cynic is in direct opposition to this challenge. Indeed, the modern cynic stands accused of reducing everything, including high ideals and tender love, to the basest equivalence: to money or to excrement. For the cynic, everything and everyone has a price, a price that must be prised from any high-faluting or moralistic notions of the good that are used to obscure it. There are many literary cynics in this vein, villainous wheedlers like Iago or Uriah Heap, who seek to exploit the idealism of others. One of the purist senses of modern cynicism is the denial of any notion of intrinsic good: all value is exchange value, and all is drearily reducible to the uniformity of hard currency. The Irish writer and journalist Flann O’Brien, writing in the socially and economically stagnant context of the Irish Free State, gives a satirical trope for this attitude in *The Third Policeman* (1939), where all the differentiated goods in the world can be reduced to “omnium.” A character in this novel expresses a nihilistic view of the good of life, precisely because he cannot convert it to self-interest and utility:

“Is it life?” he answered, “I would rather be without it,” he said, “for there is queer small utility in it. You cannot eat it or drink it or smoke it in your pipe, it does not keep the rain out and it is a poor armful in the dark if you strip it and take it to bed with you after a night of

23 Esty, “Excremental Postcolonialism,” 34.

24 Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 6, 22–23.

porter when you are shivering with the red passion. It is a great mistake and a thing better done without, like bed-jars and foreign bacon."<sup>25</sup>

Flann O'Brien's life and career emerged in an independent Ireland, which in contrast to the high ideals of the revolutionary period had calcified into the conservative and repressive pieties of the impoverished "free state," stifled by confessional politics and censorship. As in many post-revolutionary societies, high ideals, corroded by bitter reality, breed cynical irony and satire.

The Irish modernist literary tradition, of which O'Brien is a distinguished late embodiment, emerged in tangled opposition to the fluorescence of cultural creativity, nationalist romance, and political ambition of the Irish revival. So marked by recognizable tropes and sentimental, twilight, *volkisch* aesthetic modes was the revival that one could claim the counter-revival was born almost simultaneously. Leading Anglo-Irish revivalists, such as J. M. Synge or W. B. Yeats, were themselves sceptical or cynical about aspects of that variegated cultural phenomenon, while there was no shortage of sneering by the so-called Irish-Islanders against what they perceived as the elitist opportunism of the ascendancy eavesdroppers of the Abbey theater. Synge's work in particular is based on disillusionment, disappointment, and a keen tragic sense of frustrated idealism, as witnessed for example in his most famous play, the tragicomic *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907). This play, adapted to 1950s Trinidad by Mustafa Matura, tells of a community starved of spiritual, emotional, and sexual stimulation that becomes enchanted by an outsider, Christy Mahon, with a story of having killed his father. When real, as opposed to reported, violence occurs on stage, the villagers turn on their erstwhile hero. Christy's sweetheart, Pegeen Mike, ruefully declares "There's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed."<sup>26</sup> It is this gap, between the ideal and the real, rhetoric and reality, where cynicism, ancient and modern, resides. It is a realization that carries the threat of pain, but calling it out, declaring it, cynically, as the way things are, proleptically neuters it.

The Irish counter-revival is in many ways energized by cynicism, by a critical and sceptical spirit against nationalist idealism that emerges in Synge's plays and in those of a later playwright, Sean O'Casey. "A principle's a principle," declares Johnny Boyle, the physically and mentally crippled veteran of the War of Independence, in O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), set during the Irish civil war. His long-suffering, pragmatic mother Juno remonstrates, "Ah, you lost your best principle, me boy, when you lost your arm; them's the only sort o' principles that's any good to a workin' man."<sup>27</sup> Both cultural and political nationalism were, in the Irish case, accompanied by disbelief and urbane mockery in Irish literature, not least because the Irish metropolitan writers were themselves caught up with aspirations and aesthetics often geared to a London market, not to mention the sectarian divisions within Irish literary life. The best of these cynical texts are often recursive, doubting both the piety and pretense of nationalist ideologues but also the liberal complacency that mocks them. In other words, they end up being

25 Flann O'Brien, *The Complete Novels* (New York and London: Everyman Library, 2007), 257.

26 J. M. Synge, *Collected Works*, gen. ed. Robin Skelton, 4 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962–8), IV, 169.

27 Sean O'Casey, *Plays*, 2 vols. (London: Faber, 1998), 31.

cynical about their own cynicism, and thereby undercut the idea that any side has a monopoly on wisdom. James Joyce's disdain for the revivalists' provincial ethos is notorious and is evident in essays such as "The Day of the Rabblement" (1901). Yet this picture is greatly complicated by the tautly responsive depictions of revivalist debates and personalities in other works, both fiction and nonfiction. Episode 9 of *Ulysses* (1922), "Scylla and Charybdis," has some ripe parodies of Lady Gregory's and Synge's Hiberno-English, but it also acknowledges an intellectual power to the literary movement that is beyond flowery-tongued peasant exoticism. The relationship of Joyce and Irish cultural and political nationalism and its colonial status has been the subject of much commentary and debate.<sup>28</sup> But part of his strategy of silence, exile, and cunning is the deployment of provisional cynical modes, which nonetheless typically self-undercut, just as the assumed authority of the self-styled artistic insurgent Stephen Dedalus is always ambivalent and undercut by narrative irony.

In *Dubliners* (1914) Joyce sets out his fictional career seeking to expose the foibles and hypocrisies of his native city, caught as it is in paralysis both religious and imperial. It eschews the detailed interest in excretion and bodily waste of *Ulysses* (1922), which the earlier collection carries with it; he tells his publisher, "the odour of ashpits and old weeds and offal."<sup>29</sup> The concluding story, "The Dead," deals ambivalently with the whole question of nationalism and identity. Gabriel Conroy is dismissive of the nationalist Molly Ivors, who chides him for writing for the *Daily Express* and for holidaying on the continent, rather than in the west of Ireland. Gabriel, embarrassed by her description of him as a "West Briton," is scornful of her shrill patriotism. "O to tell you the truth, retorted Gabriel suddenly, I'm sick of my own country, sick of it."<sup>30</sup> But by the end of the story, his cosmopolitan cynicism has been replaced by humility and expansiveness. His imagination does indeed move westward, toward Connemara, and downward, toward the dead. He moves against his own certainties, toward a recognition if not of Miss Ivors's national pieties, at least toward the occluded lives and passions of his snowclad country.

Another example of a cynicism that turns flat in a famous Irish text is Yeats's poem "Easter 1916," which begins with the protestant poet remembering his encounters with the mostly Catholic and declassé intellectuals and writers who would lead the future Irish rebellion. They come from the "counter and desk among grey / Eighteenth-century houses" of Dublin; he passes with "a nod of the head" or exchanges "polite meaningless words."<sup>31</sup> But later will amuse his friends at an exclusive gentlemen's club with stories, deriding these middle-class idealists:

And thought before I had done  
Of a mocking tale or a gibe  
To please a companion

28 For an elaboration of Joyce's complex engagement with the Irish literary revival, see Emer Nolan, *James Joyce and Nationalism* (London: Routledge, 1994), 23–54, and Andrew Gibson, *Joyce's Revenge: History, Politics and Aesthetics in Ulysses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 60–80, 103–19.

29 James Joyce, *Letters*, ed. Richard Ellmann, vol. 1 (London: Faber, 1957), 64.

30 James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Penguin, 1976), 189.

31 W. B. Yeats, "Easter 1916," in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, eds. Peter Alt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 391–94.

Around the fire at the club,  
 Being certain that they and I  
 But lived where motley is worn:  
 All changed, changed utterly  
 A terrible beauty is born.

The poem moves from mockery to tribute, as from comedy to tragedy, motley to green or certainty to bewilderment, haughtiness to humility. In other words, the poem upends the poet's own initial cynicism, and it moves not toward celebration but rather toward expansiveness, magnanimity, ambivalence, fellow feeling, as he comes to memorialize the martyred rebels by naming them in the final lines.

Yeats's use of cynicism in his poetry is intriguing because he is always a poet of contraries and, with its photograph negative relationship to hope and affirmation, its dependence on the optimism it renounces, cynicism is deeply dialectical. He can invoke Burkean scepticism and Swiftian scorn, but is also lured by the prophetic and visionary force of Shelley and Blake and their revolutionary age. Yeats's tendency for system building, for elaborate imaginative and intellectual edifices, is profoundly twinned with a sense of their precarity and fragility. He is at once the most credulous and the most sceptical of figures, an artist moulded both by fugitive religious urges and a need for positive verification. Even as he vaunts the triumphs of culture across history, he is contrapuntally aware of the shifting sands that underlie them—an awareness that fuels his great poems of apocalypse like “Leda and the Swan,” “The Second Coming,” and “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.”

#### “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”

I am going to conclude with an in-depth consideration of the last of these. “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” uses its moment of historical crisis and destruction both Irish and European to reflect on the inevitability of civilizational collapse. Yeats confessed to Olivia Shakespear that when he reread the *The Tower* (1928), the collection in which this poem appears, he was struck by the “bitterness” he found therein. Yet, he went on to claim “that bitterness gave the book its power” and “it is the best book I have written.”<sup>32</sup> Of all the great poems in that estimable volume, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” is surely the bitterest and has a claim to be the most pessimistic poem Yeats ever wrote. In an earlier letter to Shakespear in 1921, Yeats described the poem sequence that would become “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”:

I am writing a series of poems (“thoughts suggested by the present state of the world” or some such name). I have written two, there may be many more. They are not philosophical but simple passionate, a lamentation over lost peace lost hope. My own philosophy does not much brighten the prospect, so far as any future we shall live to see is concerned, except that it flouts all socialist hope if that is a brightening.<sup>33</sup>

32 Letter from Yeats to Olivia Shakespear, April 25, 1928, in *The Letters of William Butler Yeats*, ed. Alan Wade (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 742.

33 Allan Wade, ed., *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 668.

The result was indeed first published in *The Dial* (September 1921) as “Thoughts Upon the Current State of the World,” though the world in this instance is mainly the Irish revolutionary struggle and the violence it has unleashed, some of which occurs near his own home, deeply affecting him. The cosmopolitan implications of “world” include geography and history as the poet reflects with anguish on the seeming permanence but actual transience of all the achievements, both artistic and ethical, or so-called civilization, including the Anglo-Irish, settler “Big House” culture, which he liked to glorify. Though Yeats calls it a series of poems in his letter to Olivia Shakespear, most critics treat it as one poem, divided into what Helen Vendler calls “stations,” signaled by roman numerals.<sup>34</sup> The poem is, among many other things, a great exploration of modern attitudinal cynicism. It explores a number of the various taxonomies of cynicism—clear-eyed despondency, self-isolating rejection (“ghostly solitude”), mockery of the ideals of others—as responses to the problem of the discordant clash between human value and brute reality. The poem’s governing thematic is the awareness of the precarity and transience of all hope, effort, human achievement, a stricken assertion of bestial humanity, unadorned by culture. It is a poem that sees through the veil at the great whirl of destruction underneath. Across six stations variations on the timeless question “What, in the face of our condition is the point in trying?”

Yeats’s aforementioned claim that these are “passionate” rather than “philosophical” explorations needs some glossing in this respect. The poem does not begin with an eschewal of philosophy, but rather discards it: ratiocination frays as a result of imaginative strain. Reaching across history for figures and emblems of civilizational collapse, the poet stumbles upon precarity and groundlessness that not merely confirm a cynical diagnosis but, crucially, risk collapsing its own capacity to diagnose. In other words, the cynicism falls on its own strictures: already the recursive, self-implicating pattern emerges.

The poem begins with an image of the fallen Acropolis: “Many ingenious lovely things are gone / That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude, / Protected from the circle of the moon / That pitches common things about.”<sup>35</sup> The Greeks thought—as so many did after them—that their achievement would endure, that there was an eternal quality to their achievement. Yet the fall of Greece has been repeated, throughout history, and the poet’s attention now turns to the awful cataclysm that has befallen Ireland and Europe, unleashing fanaticism and untrammelled violence:

We too had many pretty toys when young:  
A law indifferent to blame or praise,  
To bribe or threat; habits that made old wrong  
Melt down, as it were wax in the sun’s rays;  
Public opinion ripening for so long  
We thought it would outlive all future days.  
O what fine thought we had because we thought  
That the worst rogues and rascals had died out.

34 Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

35 W. B. Yeats, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” in *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, eds. Peter Alt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1957), 428–33.



The tone is belated and regretful, bruised by historical adulthood: it ruefully recalls the naive turn of the century confidence that war was over permanently and that “civilization” was on an ever upward path, as we today might look back on premature declarations of the end of history in the 1990s. Enlightenment, it was vainly believed, had “worked.” Peace had come. Canons could really become ploughshares, “teeth drawn,” armies retained only for ceremonial show. But, he moves quickly to point out:

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare  
Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery  
Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,  
To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;

This is not just a local historical catastrophe but rather the dropping of a veil, an exposure of the savage default behind civilization’s temporary protections, the enduring Hobbesian reality.<sup>36</sup>

The night can sweat with terror as before  
We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,  
And planned to bring the world under a rule,  
Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.

This leads the poet to reflect on the transience of all effort, all work of creativity whatever damage it does to the creator. “He who can read the signs” already knows the vanity of effort and has protected himself from the intoxicating destructiveness of futile dreaming:

He who can read the signs nor sink unmanned  
Into the half-deceit of some intoxicant  
From shallow wits; who knows no work can stand,  
Whether health, wealth or peace of mind were spent  
On master-work of intellect or hand,  
No honour leave its mighty monument,  
Has but one comfort left: all triumph would  
But break upon his ghostly solitude.  
But is there any comfort to be found?

The cynic here remains “manned” because clear-sighted, intelligent, undeluded, but comforted by his independent mindedness and autonomy. The cynic needs the worst. Because he has staked the very pith of his identity on expecting the worst, on nay-saying and refusal of effort, the only risk he faces is that the disavowed triumph would “but break upon his ghostly solitude.”

By his use of the third person here, the poet remains distant from the cynic or subjects him to the same analytical reading of signs that he habitually gives to the efforts

36 The murdered mother refers to an instant in the Irish war of independence when British forces killed a Galway woman, Eileen Quinn. A. Norman Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 231.

and dreams of others. But cynicism nonetheless offers a tempting response to the reality that “Man is in love and loves what vanishes.” Importantly, the poet does not follow the cynic, identified in this poem—where pronouns are greatly important—by the third person masculine. Or rather he adopts a much more befuddled tone than this all too resigned and knowing figure. In station II, the poet imagines that the “platonic year,” like a Chinese dancer carrying a floating ribbon of cloth, “whirls out new right and wrong / Whirls in the old instead / All men are dancers and their tread goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.” The whirl of right and wrong, the endless change and passing of all things, sounds like the Nietzschean concept of becoming in contrast to the fixity of being, which traditional institutions and philosophy vaunt and venerate. Yet despite the provisional solution of solitary withdrawal and meditation considered in station III, there is no answer here to the melioristic impulse, which can now be dismissed: “O but we dreamed to mend / Whatever mischief seemed / To afflict mankind, but now / That winds of winter blow / Learn that we were crack-pated when we dreamed.”

It is an ambivalent sort of a renunciation here, which both declares the erstwhile dreams to be “crack-pated” while at the same time recognizing that it is only winter—that is a time of violence and crisis—that teaches this truth. A world of continual change is not one that the Cynic can get any purchase on either, for even his own certainties are subject to the whirling motion, both dance and dissonance. Again, we have the motif that cynicism itself, with its propensity to doubt and deride, needs to be doubted. Part V famously runs with a ballad-like refrain:

Come let us mock at the great  
That had such burdens on the mind  
And toiled so hard and late  
To leave some monument behind,  
Nor thought of the levelling wind.

Come let us mock at the wise;  
With all those calendars whereon  
They fixed old aching eyes,  
They never saw how seasons run,  
And now but gape at the sun.

Come let us mock at the good  
That fancied goodness might be gay,  
And sick of solitude  
Might proclaim a holiday:  
Wind shrieked—and where are they?

Mock mockers after that  
That would not lift a hand maybe  
To help good, wise or great  
To bar that foul storm out, for we  
Traffic in mockery.

Each stanza has a fifth line, producing a rhyming couple in a sort of discord or superfluity with the alternating rhyme of the quatrain. The great, the wise, and the good foolishly underestimate the forces of change, which will wipe away their toil and effort to produce something valuable that endures. The “levelling wind” makes their efforts vain. Yet mockers do not escape mockery, indeed the injunction in the final stanza of part V is an instruction, not as before an invitation (“Come let us”).<sup>37</sup> If the wise can only stare at the sun, the cynic can only passively point at the “winds of winter.” The cynic is wedded to a fixity of purposelessness that mirrors the fixity of purpose that afflicts those meliorists who try to make things better and more truthful. The “traffic” here, echoing the dreadful, disrespectful traffic in ornamental grasshopper and bees at the end of part I, suggests mindless commerce, equivalence, the flattening of value, as well as the endless circulation of time and change, the movement of wind, dancers, ribbons, and horses that pervade the poem.

This movement is not linear, but rather a circulation that brings past and present together, evincing a collapse of history into the present in the concluding section. “Herodias’ daughters have returned again, / A sudden blast of dusty wind and after / Thunder of feet, tumult of images / Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind.” Both values and valuelessness are caught up in the flux. But in the disturbing final lines, the poem sees the wind drop, the arrival of unenlightened fanaticism, and modes of “blindness,” in the form of the “insolent fiend Robert Artisson,” his “great eyes without thought.” Artisson is the familiar of the murderous fourteenth-century Lady Kyteler, the first recorded woman in Ireland condemned for witchcraft. (Yeats’s note defines him as “an evil spirit much run after in Kilkenny at the start of the fourteenth century.”)<sup>38</sup> So although “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” both indulges in and indicts cynicism, it also ends with a horrific, disturbing image of the departure of critical thought, the brutality of atavism and credulity. The poem does not end on the uplifting note of “The Tower” or even “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” adjacent in the same volume. But it does end with a warning, or a fear, about credulous violence or violent credulity. Michael Wood argues of Robert Artisson’s and Lady Kyteler’s appearance that “they are the thing itself, they are what happens when the wind drops and the dust settles,” embodying the “undying power and desire, the ability to enchant and the longing to be enchanted, a world of magical dominion and magical sacrifice.”<sup>39</sup> Yet surely they are simply one alternative mode of social relationship rather than “the thing itself,” if by that Wood means the “real” nature underneath the veil of culture. They are horrific not because they are what is really there behind the wind and discordant dance of human activity, but rather because they resonate uncomfortably with better cultural productions. They are part of history. Note the wind drops; it does not stop. It will pick up again, and as part II puts it, “The platonic year / Whirls out new right and wrong, / whirls in the old instead.” The items in the tortuous last line—“Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks”—are themselves part of the endless cycle of “pretty toys.” But some things that human beings traffic in are preferable to others, and despite the mockery of part V, the

37 See Michael Wood, *Yeats and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 159. Wood’s book reads violence in Yeats through an in-depth reading of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.”

38 Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems*, 433.

39 Wood, *Yeats and Violence*, 208.

poem does conclude with making a value judgment: one in favor of thought (a word repeated eight times in the poem). The eyes of the ghastly Artisson are “without thought” and under the “shadow of stupid straw-pale locks.” The superstitious tokens offered to him are a parody of “ingenious lovely things.” In other words, the poem is not ultimately nihilistic in outlook: it reflects painfully that civilization is temporary, provisional, precarious, and shot through with violence. But it also negates its own negations, which does not here amount to an affirmation but rather to a weakened epistemology, a more humble and bewildered tone that productively counterpoints the historical sweep and ambition of the poem.

“Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” may not be a philosophical poem, as Yeats claimed, if by that we mean expressing a particular philosophical viewpoint. It nonetheless is a poem concerned with encounters between intellect and suffering or, more particularly intellect and disappointment, personal and political. That encounter is the province of cynicism. It also brings together the cataclysm of the First World War, an imperialist war, with Ireland’s own painful struggle toward postcolonial independence, a pairing made pertinent by the high numbers of Irish soldiers who fought in the former. As the first half of this article surveyed, cynicism has many contradictory meanings and connotations. “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” explores many of them, including ascetic solitude, salesmanship and trade, and self-satisfied mockery. Yet these remain contingent stances, rather than resolutions, ones that implicate the poet as both mocker and mocked. It is precisely because it puts thought itself under a critical eye that ways of knowing, other than ratiocination, can emerge. It shows that cynicism can be disrupted by its own procedures. The poem does not settle. It’s aware of the locatedness of its own diagnostics, which leads it to a weak thought, not one of which dispenses with thought altogether. This weak thought checks the idea of moral and political purity. In that respect the poem might point toward a nightmarish history that can give cynicism and scepticism their due, without leading to the renunciation and certainty of cynical stagnation.