INTRODUCTION

Though Yeats took part in active politics and wrote a number of poems on public themes, there has been no systematic study of political influences on his poetry. The critics\(^1\) who have dealt with Yeats's politics are either prejudiced or propagandist in their views; while L.C. Knights's essay is concerned with Yeats's aristocracy only, O'Brien's article is a political propaganda and he fails to show the impact of political ideas on Yeats's poetry. Other critics have wasted much of their energy in tracing out the sources of the symbols as if Yeats's poetry is a communication in a code.\(^2\) What is really needed is that we should pay some attention to the external influences, particularly to the political situation in Ireland, that shaped Yeats's thought and poetry and saved him from being merely a mystic or visionary poet; his poetry should be read not with the help of 'A Vision' alone, but with other prose works also.

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2. J. Hall and M. Steinmann (Editor) The Permanence of Yeats (In this collection all the essays, excluding that of Ceanth Books, David Daiches, T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, deal with the esoteric aspect of Yeats's poetry) and F.A.C. Wilson, W.B. Yeats and Tradition Yeats's Iconography Virginia Moore, The Unicorn.
"In my youth", writes Yeats, "I was accustomed to say that no man should be permitted to open his mouth until he had sung or written his 'Utopia', for lacking that we could not know where he was taking us, and I still think that artists of all kinds should once again praise or represent great or happy people." The contention of Yeats that artists must have contact with life and hold their own political views urges us to study the development of his political ideas for, without them, it is not possible to trace out how Yeats, brought up in the tradition of Spenser, Shelley and the Pre-Raphaelites, could develop into a great original poet.

Yeats was born in a very important period. Ireland, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, was struggling against England for freedom and the Irish leaders were using literature as a means of arousing patriotic feeling among the Irish people. The members of the revolutionary Young Ireland party were both politicians and poets. Among them, the most important were Thomas D'Acrey Mac Gee (1825-68), Sir Samuel Ferguson (1810-86), William Allingham (1824-89) and Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-45). The typical Irish situation demanded that of Yeats that he should desert the world of Arcadia and look at its glorious past. At the age of twenty-four he wrote to Elizabeth White advising her to handle Irish material as theme for her poetry.

"You will find it a good thing to make verses on Irish legends and places and so forth. It helps originality and makes one's verses sincere, and gives one less numerous competitors. Besides one should love best what is nearest and most interwoven with one's life".¹

In making the final assessment of Yeats's poetry, if we overlook his political ideas and political background we shall miss something very vital; had Yeats eschewed politics, he would not have produced poems like 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen', Meditations in Time of Civil War, The Second Coming, Easter poems and Hugh Lane poems. It is the political influences that made the poet of The Island of Statues develop into a modern poet writing some of the greatest poems of all time. It is customary for critics² to say that Yeats's early poetry is romantic and later poetry is modern, but they fail to show how Yeats developed into a modern poet. It is certain that he did little to learn from the French symbolists (Villiers de l'Isle Adam was Yeats's favourite author but his influence on Yeats's poetry is of little importance) because he had insufficient knowledge of French and interpreted symbolism in his own way. To say that frustration in love made him a modern poet is far from the truth. It is mainly the political situation of Ireland and

¹. Letters, of W.B. Yeats. (Ed. A. Wade) page 104.
². F.R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry, chapter I.
his friendship with Lady Gregory, Synge and Ezra Pound that made him a modern poet. In his youth he sang the glory of Ireland, as the poets of the Young Ireland Party did. But frustration in politics, the tragic death of Charles Parnell whom he admired so much, the controversy over the Hugh Lane pictures, the opposition to his own plays and Synge's and the 1913 lock out - all embittered him and the antinominal vision, to quote Professor Bornstein, took the place of the dreamy vision of life.

"Through all the lying days of my youth
I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun
Now I may wither into the truth".

In preparing this work it has been my intention to show how Yeats's active interest and participation in politics helped him to understand better the world of men and things about which he wrote so profoundly in his poems. Even many of his great poems would have lacked the hard core of poetic substance without this understanding of the practical world of man's earthly activities. This is not to say that his important poems are political or that his political experience can be traced in its original form in them. In

1. Antinomial vision, according to Professor Bornstein, means an inclusive vision based on the tension between opposites like the ideal and the actual. Shelley and Yeats, p. 116.

poetry all experiences are transformed into the essential stuff of poetry; sometimes they are so transformed that they cannot even be recognized and that is how it should be. An artist has to be able to translate his experience, whatever be its nature, into a work of art. And Yeats too has done it admirably. But it is still necessary to make a proper estimate of the various sources of his poetic inspiration at least for tracing the development of his poetry from one phase to another. I have chosen only one of these sources of inspiration - his political experience and ideas - for the purpose of this study.