The artist as nation-builder: William Butler Yeats and Chaim Nachman Bialik

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ABSTRACT. The poets William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) and Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873–1934) were among the builders of their respective Irish and Jewish national cultures. Their lives and careers were in limited ways remarkably alike and throw light on the dynamics of cultural nationalism. Each emerged in an historical watershed, leading to the establishment of an Irish state in 1921 and a Jewish state in 1948. Though their circumstances, styles, receptions and fates differed, each represented a profound moral vision in an age of declining faith, expressed his people's sense of victimisation and exposed their weaknesses as he saw them. Each saw his culture as being humanist and universal, not narrowly nationalistic. Each identified with his nation for reasons that were in part intensely and disturbingly personal. Each found a poetic voice in a rich heritage of ethnic myth, legend and symbol but was conscious of tension between the need for self-expression and national demands. It is argued that the creative powers of both Yeats and Bialik were set free by the national movements of which they were a part, and that the national struggle for self-determination was, in effect, mirrored on the private scale by the poet striving for artistic freedom and originality.

Nation building is rightly, though at times excessively, associated with political and social processes. Yet, it is not confined to national liberation movements, charismatic leaders and liberators, wars of national independence, and the struggle of national entities to emerge to independence from a position of relative powerlessness and subservience to a dominant power. Nations are as much cultural as political forms, and the creation of a unique high culture of world significance is often central to their legitimation (Smith 1991). True, the effects of culture are not as clearly quantifiable as those of politics. The effect of Verdi, for example, on Italian nationalism is hardly as clear cut as that of Garibaldi. Wagner's impact on German

nationalism is amorphous alongside the concrete political achievement of Bismarck. William Butler Yeats' influence on Irish nationalism is not as definable as that of Michael Collins or Eamon De Valera. The inspiration of Chaim Nachman Bialik on Jewish nationalism is diffuse in comparison with that of Herzl. Yet it may be argued justly that artists have equal if not greater importance. They above all express the nation's distinctiveness; their creativity is part of the momentum to independence; they are themselves symbols and icons of the nation's unique creative power; they regenerate their nation morally and speak for its heart and conscience.

Studies of artistic nation builders are thin on the ground. This essay aims to rectify this neglect by exploring the careers and writings of two roughly contemporaneous poets whose authority derived not just from their creative achievements but also from their activism in helping to found the modern culture and politics of their nations: Yeats (1865–1939) and Bialik (1873–1934).[1] This essay will look at some similarities between the two and argue that for both the Irish and the Jews the cultural nationalism they appeared to embody and promulgate was in some ways as important as political nationalism.

Yeats and Bialik were the outstanding poets of literary movements integral to national revivals. Each spoke for a subject people with glorious and violent ethno-religious memories, now struggling for survival in an imperial state with an attractive dominant culture. In common with other romantic cultural nationalists (Hutchinson 1994), they set the artist above the cleric as custodian of the national culture. Breaking with failed traditionalism, they aimed to regenerate their nation morally, creating a humanist universalist culture by evoking a golden age of collective national memory. They galvanised this vision through artistic innovation and virtuosity, marrying European modernism to indigenous forms and themes. Their poetry belongs to the best in their cultures.

Bialik as national figure

Together with the philosopher Ahad Ha'am (pen name of Asher Ginsberg, 1856–1927), Bialik was a key figure in the creation of a Jewish national culture (Aberbach 1988). His greatest poetry was written mostly in Odessa in 1911–11 (Spicehandler 1985). He edited Jewish legends and folklore, wrote the first folk poems in Hebrew and some of the loveliest Hebrew children's poems. He was a founder of the Hebrew national theatre (the *Habimah*) and a major figure in Hebrew publishing. As poet, editor and publisher, he was dedicated to the concept of *kinnus* (cultural ingathering) by which fragments of Jewish culture from many ages and lands of exile might be 'gathered in' and unified as a modern secular national culture. This concept derived in part from the traditional idea of *kinnus galuyot* (the ingathering of the diaspora): the return of the Jewish people to their homeland. In the field of Jewish education, Bialik was regarded as a

supreme authority. When he moved to Palestine in 1925, the centre of Hebrew literature, previously in Russia, moved with him. He was on the board of governors of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and a founder of the Hebrew Writers Union in Tel Aviv and its important journal, *Moznayim*. He served on countless committees and was always ready to advise and help young writers. He was a representative at a number of conferences of the World Zionist Organisation and went on extended lecture tours to raise money for the movement.

In his poetry, however, Bialik is no cipher of the national cause. He expresses disillusionment and despair with political Zionism at practically every stage in its growth.

Yeats as national figure

Yeats, too, was a public nationalist and poetic skeptic. He, too, was a polymath and a self-taught intellectual with no university education. His most lasting 'national' achievement was the Irish National Theatre, which in 1904 became the Abbey Theatre and the centre for a school of famous Irish playwrites. But he also founded literary societies, collected and edited Irish folklore, led occultist Celtic societies, wrote nationalist journalism and, briefly, under the influence of the dazzling Maud Gonne whom he loved fruitlessly, dabbled in revolutionary politics. He supported the nascent Irish Arts and Crafts movement and Horace Plunkett's Agricultural Cooperative Society whose aim was to safeguard the economic and social basis of Irish rural society. After Irish independence in 1921 he became for a time a senator and what he called 'a sixty-year-old smiling public man' ('Among School Children', 1921).

Conflict between the public and the private selves

The cultural nationalism of Yeats and Bialik accompanied, even inspired a revolutionary political nationalism. After independence, both to different degrees became canonical figures for the states whose creation they inspired. Yet their status as national poets is marked by irony and ambivalence. Fiercely individualistic, they were suspicious of the very nationalism which unleashed their creativity. A sense of national commitment in each jostled with purely private concerns, a source both of originality and guilt. Private trauma, though, mirrored national concerns up to a point. In particular the longing for a woman out of reach – in poems such as Bialik's *Scroll of Fire* (1905) and Yeats' 'No Second Troy' (1908) or 'Words' (1908) – could express collective yearning for national wholeness. Chronic frustration, especially in Bialik, was enlisted in the national cause. Private obsession in each might be viewed as the creative mainspring.

Bialik became a national icon almost in spite of himself. His main preoccupations were personal: orphanhood, separation, neglect, suffering,

alienation, childlessness, despair (Aberbach 1982, 1984, 1988). These were expressed with rare virtuosic mastery of biblical and talmudic Hebrew sources. His poems resonate with the yearning of Jews through the ages. His reluctance as national poet was virtually 'proof' of Bialik's authenticity. His apotheosis brought him feelings of guilt, worthlessness and deceit. In his poetry he is the perpetual unloved outsider.

Yeats, too, felt himself from childhood to be an outsider as member of the 'colonial' Protestant minority which after the British conquest of Ireland in the seventeenth century had supplanted Ireland's Gaelic Catholic aristocracy. In his literary and public activities, Yeats evidently aimed to overcome this state of alienation (Ellmann 1969; Foster 1997). His reworking of Ireland's native Gaelic traditions in English and revival of the legendary heroic pagan Ireland symbolically wedded Protestant 'colonist' and Catholic 'native'. However, what worked in literature did not work in social reality. Yeats' cult of the aristocratic hero was alien to the populist nationalism of Catholic Ireland, which was antagonistic to what it regarded as the superior airs of the Protestant Ascendancy (Lyons 1979: ch. 3). Yeats' sense of failure as national poet led to his disillusionment with mass democratic values and flirtations with elitist, often irrational politics.

Contexts of Irish and Jewish nationalism

Bialik was the poet of a Zionist diaspora nationalism, identified with the return of diaspora Jews to the Land of Israel. His early readership was mainly Russian Jews under Tsar Nicholas II (1894–1917). Most of these Jews were impoverished, and in various ways discriminated against and degraded. They had only limited control over the land they inhabited in the Pale of Settlement, the area on the western frontier of the Russian empire to which they were confined by law under tsarist rule (Frankel 1981; Löwe 1993; Klier 1995). By the end of the nineteenth century their numbers reached 5 million. This was the largest Jewish community at the time.

Yeats dreamed of becoming the poet of the Catholic Irish who wanted autonomy in their native homeland from British imperial rule and a reversal of the land confiscations of the seventeenth century. He spoke for a rural society still traumatised by the Great Famine of the 1840s which had killed 1 million and turned Ireland into an emigrant country in rapid demographic decline.

Different though their nationalisms were, Jews and Irish shared common ground as small nations with a long history of religious persecution, subject to a powerful imperial state. They can be categorised as 'chosen peoples', seeing themselves as divinely separated from the world of power by their suffering which uplifted them for a higher, even messianic, purpose (Smith 1992). Bialik and Yeats were strongly influenced by this ethno-religious outlook. Each spoke for peoples victimised by imperial power and sure of holding the moral high ground. Bialik seemed to hold continually in his

mind's eye the whole history of Jewish tragedy, above all the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, while Yeats mourned the destruction of the Gaelic aristocratic culture by the English conquest in the seventeenth century.

Still, the cultural nationalism of Yeats and Bialik was as much an inner rebellion against established leaders as a cry against historical wrongs. Each spoke for a generation radicalised by its sense of victimisation and destabilised by rapid social change. The new moral vision based on a revival of history and culture which they articulated gave direction to radical political activism.

Bialik and the Hebrew revival

Bialik was the major poet in a wide-ranging Hebrew cultural revival, including Ahad Ha'am and Mendele Mokher Sefarim ('Mendele the Book-peddler', pen name of S. J. Abramowitz, 1835?–1917), who after 1881 challenged traditional Jewish authority and implicitly rejected the imperial Russian state. The basis of this literature was established mostly in the quarter-century prior to 1881. The liberalising rule of Tsar Alexander II (1855–81) had promised civil equality to 'useful' Jews – the tiny minority who were wealthy or professionally trained. Hebrew culture developed during this period as a tool of secular enlightenment (Hebrew: Haskalah) whose aim was to encourage Jews to gain an education which would improve their lives, acculturate them within Russian society and remove from them the stigma of parasitism. Hebrew literature of the Haskalah also had an important nationalist undercurrent (Patterson 1985). As the ideas of the Haskalah took root, a Hebrew secular culture flourished and the religious authority of the rabbis was undermined. However, Alexander's liberal programme, whose most radical act was the freeing of the serfs in 1861, also threatened the autocratic basis of the imperial state. A wave of Russian nationalism and accompanying anti-Semitism followed, heightened by the failed Polish revolt of 1863 and the Russian–Turkish war of 1877–8. The assassination of Alexander II in 1881 triggered a wave of pogroms which ended the hopes of the Jewish intelligentsia for emancipation under tsarist rule. It is estimated that from then until the outbreak of World War I in 1914 nearly one third of the Russian Jews emigrated, mostly to America, and relatively large numbers of Jews joined Russian socialist and revolutionary groups. During this period, too, the first organised Zionist movement began: Hibbat Zion (Love of Zion) was set up in Odessa in 1881 and brought an estimated 25,000 Jews, mostly from Russia, to Palestine by the time of the creation of the World Zionist Organisation by Theodor Herzl (1860–1904) in 1897 (Vital 1975). Another 35,000 – the second *aliyah* – came between 1903, when the second wave of Russian pogroms began, and 1914. Modern Jewish nationalism was based largely on an alliance between

the disillusioned Russian Jewish intelligentsia and the Jewish lower middle classes.

This nationalism took two forms. One was political, embodied by Herzl, with the aim of achieving not political independence but a mass return of Jews to the Land of Israel as a place of asylum from persecution. The second, whose chief ideologue was Ahad Ha'am, was cultural. Its goal was the spiritual reformation of the community, the recreation of Jewish identity along secular nationalist lines. From the viewpoint of cultural nationalists such as Ahad Ha'am and Bialik, the language of this revival had to be Hebrew as it is the most ancient and distinctive source of Jewish identity and is the only language which unites all Jews, in Scripture and prayer. Zionism both political and cultural naturally thrived in reaction to worsening Russian and European anti-Semitism. In Russia, as elsewhere, internal and external crisis provoked Jew-hatred: the war with Japan in 1904–5, social revolutionary unrest in the cities, and nationalist insurgence among the non-Russian populations. In these circumstances, Hebrew literature took the gigantic leap from being primarily a didactic tool of the Haskalah to a highly creative vehicle of Jewish nationalism (Alter 1988; Aberbach 1993), and Bialik emerged as the Jewish national poet.

Yeats and Irish nationalism

Yeats, likewise, was part of an extensive cultural nationalist movement (Sheehy 1980). This movement, which lasted from the 1870s to 1914, sought to revive Ireland's pre-conquest Gaelic culture and combat the increasing assimilation of Irish society into industrial Britain. At the same time, there was a large-scale constitutional nationalist drive, led by Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–91), to achieve a Home Rule parliament with limited political autonomy from Britain. A catalyst of Irish nationalism was the agrarian crisis of the late 1870s which evoked fears of another famine and led to a land war between the Catholic peasantry and Protestant landlords. However, Irish political nationalism was stimulated by British democratising reforms. These expanded educational opportunities, opened up the civil service and the professions, and devolved local government to the Catholic majority (Hutchinson 1987: ch. 8). The result was a native middle class, strongly acculturated to British secular liberal ideals, which saw themselves as the natural leaders of Irish society (O'Day 1977). This class, driven to nationalism by the continued ascendancy of the Protestant minority protected by the British state, allied with the conservative Catholic Church to demand a parliament for the Catholic majority.

After the scandal which ended Parnell's career in 1891, a prolonged conflict broke out between secular liberals and clerical nationalists. Out of this 'civil war', an alternative cultural nationalism crystallised (Hutchinson 1987: chs. 4 and 5; Lyons 1979: chs. 2 and 3; Kiberd 1995). Both sought to

reconcile the warring factions by creating a national identity based not on secular statist British norms but on a rediscovery of pre-conquest communitarian values. The organisations which supported Irish cultural nationalism were much smaller than the Home Rule movement. However, between 1910 and 1914 this movement was weakened by the irreconcilable aims of Irish democratisation and the desire of both British Liberals and Conservatives to preserve British imperial dominance. The outbreak of war in 1914 shelved Home Rule plans in the British government. A faction of the Gaelic revivalists allied with revolutionary nationalists to stage first a rebellion (1916), then a war of independence (1918–21) that overthrew established Irish political leadership and broke the British hold on Ireland (Garvin 1987).

Personal dilemmas and national 'solutions'

The nationalism of Bialik and Yeats arose both from problems of identity shared by their generation and from personal trauma. In a broad sense, both poets shared an unhappy family history and in early manhood underwent a religious crisis. Deracination pushed both to poetry and to the identification with a similarly unhappy national community.

   Though his family was from respectable middle-class stock, Yeats suffered much of his life from status anxiety. When he was a child, his father gave up law for the insecure vocation of painting. He moved his family from Sligo to London, where he joined a pre-Raphaelite community of artists. The young Yeats was swept from a stable rural world into the anonymity of a vast, alien metropolitan society. Poor, lonely and Irish, he was mocked and humiliated by the English boys at school. He escaped by identifying with his father's cult of the romantic artist as higher being, transcending the material world (Ellmann 1969: ch. 2). Here is the kernel of Yeats's later perception of the artist as the last aristocrat, struggling for self-mastery and in conflict with society, who by sheer will can summon up life forces that will transform the nation. Alienated from English society, Yeats dreamed of leading a viable Irish national community.

   Like many young men from similar backgrounds at the *fin-de-siècle*, Yeats went through a religious crisis and a search for personal and collective meaning. Recoiling both from an ossified Christianity and the alternative mechanical scientific ideologies of progress (including his father's Darwinism), he was drawn to mystical and magical cults such as Theosophy and Rosicrucianism. After he and his friend, George Russell, founded the Dublin Hermetic Society and the Order of the Golden Dawn in the 1890s, he claimed to have rediscovered a cosmic force, ever present in ancient times but now forgotten except by an esoteric artistic elite. The role of this elite was to revive the ancient wisdom and cast out the deadwood of sectarian Christianity and of industrial materialism. A new millennium of harmony and progress would then come into being (Hutchinson 1987: ch. 4).

Abstruse, far-fetched, even somewhat ridiculous, this spiritualism yoked to Irish nationalism propelled the young Yeats into missionary zeal for his cause. Already as a young man in London in the 1880s, Yeats (like his father) identified with the Irish peasants in their land war against British imperialism, which he scorned as corrupt. On his family's return to Dublin in 1885, he joined fellow Protestant revivalists on the *Dublin University Review*, including the folklorist Douglas Hyde. He studied Standish O'Grady's 'Homeric' *History of Ireland*, which celebrated Ireland's legends and heroes. He met the Fenian revolutionary, John O'Leary, who became his mentor. O'Leary directed him to the Gaelic myths and legends of the western Irish peasantry, in which he 'discovered' a pre-Christian pagan Druid cosmology, akin to theosophical doctrines (Lyons 1979: ch. 2). To Yeats, Ireland was a holy land and he was its *magus*. By the end of the nineteenth century, Yeats had a clear idea of his task as national poet: to give the political struggle a spiritual dimension in the overthrow of a corrupt cosmopolitanism and degenerate European industrial civilisation.

How was the enthusiasm of an intellectual coterie transformed into a substantial cultural revival? One answer lies in the fall of Parnell and the disintegration of the Irish political movements in the 1890s which exacerbated the power struggle between religious and secular. To cultural nationalists, this internecine conflict resulted from a loss of contact with the integrative values of Ireland's Gaelic culture and an assimilation into British materialistic and political norms. Consequently, Yeats, Douglas Hyde and his fellow theosophist George Russell, established several institutions to achieve a cultural nationalism based on the revival of Ireland's ancient culture: the National Literary and Irish Literary Societies in 1891 and 1892 and the Irish Literary Theatre in 1899, while in 1893 Douglas Hyde and Eoin MacNeill set up the Gaelic League in the belief that a bilingual Ireland would ensure the survival of Irish legend. These organisations appealed to a rising generation of educated middle-class Catholics, deeply frustrated in their ambitions for power and status by continued British rule in Ireland and by the control of nationalist politics by an older and 'failed' generation (Garvin 1987: chs. 2 and 3; Hutchinson 1987: ch. 8).

Bialik: the making of a national poet

Bialik's social and educational background was considerably different from that of Yeats, but the pattern of national involvement is comparable. Born in the Ukraine, Bialik lost his father at six and was separated soon after from his mother, who was unable to support him and passed into the care of his paternal grandparents. His sense of loss, grief and exile, and search for union with the lost motherland, are central in his poetry and resonated with particular force among the Russian Jews. He grew up in a Hasidic environment whose religious fervour and mysticism were a seedbed for his

poetry. He went through the main institutions of traditional Jewish learning, the *heder* (the 'room', where children were taught mainly the Pentateuch with Rashi's commentary), the *bet midrash* (house of study, for older students) and the *yeshivah* (rabbinical seminary, for advanced students of the Talmud). He gained a mastery of Hebrew sources and absorbed the passion for justice of the biblical prophets and the love for scriptural exposition and legends of the Talmud. But he also studied in secret the new, prohibited literature of the Haskalah (the secular Enlightenment) which was published in Hebrew (initially with the official approval of the Russian government in order to promote Jewish assimilation). He simultaneously belonged to the majority and to a minority within it. By the time he reached his late teens, he was writing Hebrew poetry and was recognised as having exceptional gifts.

At this point, his ideological direction might be compared with Yeats'. Bialik also went through a crisis of faith and disillusionment not only with the passivity and backwardness of the quasi-medieval world of the *shtetl* but also with Russia. As noted earlier, Russian anti-Semitism, stirred up by the Polish Revolt of 1863 and by the chauvinism created by the Russian–Turkish war of 1877–8, became virulent when Alexander II was assassinated in 1881. The pogroms and their socioeconomic and psychological con-sequences dominated his early life – he was eight when they began in 1881 – effectively ruling out the possibility of Jewish emancipation and civil rights under tsarist rule. These pogroms triggered a large-scale emigration to Palestine, the rise of hundreds of Hebrew-speaking groups in Russia, and a union of the Hebrew intelligentsia with the Russian lower middle class. The result was a remarkable increase in Hebrew journalism and Hebrew readers who may have numbered 100,000 even in the 1880s (Miron 1987: 59ff.).

Drawn to reformist cultural Zionism, Bialik like Yeats found his mentor: Ahad Ha'am. The pogroms of 1903–6 drove him to write a series of 'poems of wrath', expressing angry indignation and despair. *In the City of Slaughter*, written after the Kishinev pogrom of 1903, is the most famous and influential modern Hebrew poem. It more than any other poem expresses wrath at Jewish cowardice and fatalism; it is an implicit call for action, for emergence from powerlessness. Though it may be that the most authentic poetic voice of both Yeats and Bialik was that of the private lyric poet, the need for action, both personal and national, animates much of their poetry. Like many late-nineteenth-century romantic intellectuals, Yeats and Bialik gloried in and lamented the inward nature of their creative gifts which, they sometimes felt, reduced them to ineffectual passivity from which they longed to escape through masterful action. Both were practical dreamers, their private obsessions not always well hidden behind the mask of national poet. Ellmann's observation on Yeats applied also to Bialik:

He spent much of his life attempting to understand the deep contradictions within his mind, and was perhaps most alive to that which separated the man of action lost in reverie from the man of reverie who could not quite find himself in action. (1969: 2)

National missions

Yeats and Bialik aimed to overthrow fatalistic stereotypes produced not only by external powers but also self-imposed by their kinsmen. Bialik attacked Jewish passivity enforced both by anti-Semitism and by Jewish tradition, and Yeats the stage Irish image of the feckless, lovable Paddy supported by church attitudes and by the Irish elite kow-towing to British imperial culture. Each sought to construct a secular, activist high culture evoking historic and 'authentic' national models of heroism in order to stir the young to action. Yeats' Cuchulain, for example, served a purpose not dissimilar from that of the Maccabees or Bar-Kokhba in Bialik's poetry. Literature could thus serve the high purpose described in Shelleyan terms by Yeats as 'the great teaching power of the world, the ultimate creator of all values' (Yeats 1903).

Yeats was the more programmatic nationalist and had developed his philosophy by 1901. He believed that literature was the natural medium of Irish cultural nationalism, its roots in the Gaelic bardic oral tradition depicting a golden age of gods and heroes and uniting the community of listeners. This tradition had died with the collapse of native aristocracy. The bard was replaced by the Christian cleric and by the journalist, the apostle of English industrial print culture (Yeats 1901: 94–8). Small-scale rural communities were being supplanted by mass urban class societies, driven and fragmented by a lust for power and wealth, exemplified in the rise of empires (*ibid.*: 90). Only the solitary romantic artist kept alive the old aristocratic and spiritual ideals. Ireland itself was in danger of 'anglicisation' and social division. Yet fragments of Ireland's heroic culture survived in the oral traditions of the Irish-speaking peasantry of the western counties. This linguistic heritage had evolved a uniquely expressive and imaginative variety of English. Yeats believed that the writer might reconstruct from its folk fragments Ireland's pagan life-force and stir up a latent nationalism among the young English-speaking generation. This was his version of *kinnus*. Remade by a romantic elite, a heroic Ireland based on the land would emerge as a *synthesis* of English (romantic) culture and the Gaelic heritage, reunited by the cosmology and ethos that preceded the sectarian divisions of Christianity. It was Ireland's mission, once restored, to be an inspiration to a Europe grown weary of materialism and class conflict.

Yeats called for a spiritual and communal 'Anglo-Irish' literature, and he opposed what he saw as the deadening realist forms of contemporary bourgeois England. The poet Samuel Ferguson (1810–86) provided him with a model against which to react. Ferguson's epic poetry, based on Ireland's pagan aristocratic legends, aimed to nationalise Protestant gentry and middle class. Ferguson failed in Yeats' view because his project and its proposed constituency were unnaturally yoked to British cultural and political forms (Yeats 1886). Instead, Yeats discovered his linguistic medium in the vibrant Irish-English vernacular, employed by Douglas Hyde to

convey the authentic idioms of the Gaelic oral tradition. Yeats believed that creating an Irish theatre, based on Gaelic legends and this novel vernacular (arising out of the decay of the Irish language), was the most effective and influential instrument for the arousal of nationalism among a new generation of native English-speaking Catholics. He regarded the theatre as the modern equivalent of the native institutions of oral communal story-telling (Yeats 1899).

Yeats' drama was also inspired by Wagner and the Bayreuth Theatre (*ibid.*). He wrote for the Irish literary theatre a cycle of plays based on the Irish chieftain Cuchulain, the embodiment of pre-modern Irish unity, as Siegfried was to Germany in Wagner's remaking of the *Nibelungenlied*. With his chief collaborator, Lady Gregory, he aimed to attract an aristocracy of talent to express the Irish national soul.

In common with Yeats, Bialik yoked his poetic gift to the cultural and political regeneration of ancient traditions. In the folklore and legends of his people he discovered heroic life-energies lacking in traditional orthodoxy. Most of Yeats' national-cultural activities have parallels in Bialik's work: the call for moral regeneration, the pseudo-mysticism and messianism translated into secular form, and above all the high valuation – perhaps influenced ultimately by Herder – of myth and legend. Like his contemporary revivalists, he was steeped in the classical idioms of Hebrew and its sacred writings, and even when he indulged in mock-heroic satire, he implicitly accepted their power to inspire. As indicated earlier, one of Bialik's major achievements was the editing of the legends in the Talmud and Midrash. To Bialik, as to Yeats, the rediscovery of the fragments of the past, including those depicting ancient traumas of defeat and exile, was essential in the creation of a new national identity. This was not programmatic activity but a natural consequence of Bialik's justified esteem for these works as a unique creation of the Jewish people. At the same time, like Yeats, he depicted the poet as a solitary dreamer communing with Nature (e.g. in *The Pool*, 1905), and this, paradoxically, asserted the authenticity of his national role. For nationalism could set free the purely personal, dammed-up creative urges of the individual.

Yeats' nationalist impact

The main period of Yeats' influence as an active cultural nationalist was prior to independence, during 1885–1913, and that of Bialik throughout his career from the 1890s until his death in 1934. As mentioned earlier, in the years prior to World War I, Yeats helped establish some of the formative institutions which promoted the creation of an Irish national literature. Both poets inspired their readers by invoking a golden past but had their most profound and lasting influence on young nationalists through their attacks on the alleged moral decadence of their people.

Yeats made an early impact through his patriotic plays *Countess Cathleen* (1899) and *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902). In these plays, he uses the ancient personification of Ireland as a beautiful woman, Cathleen (who could be either mother or beautiful maiden), to depict romantic sacrifice. Even at this early stage, Yeats' pre-Raphaelite interests and Rosicrucianism aroused suspicion among traditional nationalists for whom St Patrick and the Catholic Church exemplified authentic national values. His theatre was controversial from the start. The leading Gaelic League intellectual, Eoin MacNeill, denounced it as elitist and pagan for its cult of aristocratic warriors (Tierney 1980: 66). James Joyce attacked it as vulgar and provincial as it staged Irish-language plays while neglecting contemporary European drama (Ellmann 1966: 92–4). Still, Yeats' strident anti-British and anti-Boer sentiments brought him the support of 'advanced' nationalists such as Arthur Griffith. At the end of *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the young man abandons his bride to take part in an Irish rebellion and offers his life for Cathleen. The line 'They shall be remembered forever' converted many young Irish to the national cause as similarly banal lines in Bialik's early poems turned young Jews into Zionists, in some cases overnight.

Yeats' Cuchulain plays put on the stage for the first time the 'ungovernable' warrior hero, who in his battle with fate embodied the Nietzschean will to overthrow limits. To modern audiences and especially to revolutionary nationalists such as Patrick Pearse, a Cuchulain devotee, these limits could include mass opinion and democracy. Perhaps more explosive, if limited in reach, were Yeats' increasingly bitter satirical verses as the literary and linguistic revival lost impetus. Poems such as 'September 1913' (1913) evoked dampened revolutionary ardour in the face of impending Home Rule. Its refrain, 'Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave', set the heroic Irish heritage of sacrifice against the decadent reality of a petty bourgeois society governed by greed and hypocritical piety. It in effect declared the failure of Irish nationalism. This attack on Irish society deeply affected young cultural nationalists such as Pearse and MacDonagh who abandoned constitutional politics for revolutionary activism (Edwards 1977).

Bialik and the emergence from Jewish powerlessness

Bialik, similarly, more than once in his poetry, depicted the Jewish people as incapable of national revival. In the direct, forceful style of the ancient prophets he attacked the status quo. He scourged those Jews who remained passive in the face of oppression and denounced those who abandoned their national roots: 'Will dew revive a dead leaf off a tree, or hyssop clinging to rocks, or a broken vine a dry flower? Can trumpet blasts and a raised banner revive the dead?' ('Surely the people is grass', 1897.) This righteous anger was expressed most famously *In the City of Slaughter*, with its attack

not on the perpetrators of the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 but on the unheroic
Jews, a small minority, who used the national tragedy to elicit sympathy
and funds for themselves:

> Away, you beggars, to the charnel-house,
> The bones of your father disinter!
> Cram them into your knapsacks, bear
> Them on your shoulders, and go forth
> To do your business with these precious wares
> At all the country fairs ...   Trans. A. M. Klein in Bialik (1965: 127)

Far from being seen as defeatist, this condemnation inspired the creation of
Jewish defence groups in Russia and had lasting effects. Many members of
these groups came to Palestine, where they formed the nucleus of the
Haganah, the antecedent of the Israeli army.

The nation as mask

Each poet, driven in his nationalism by purely personal experiences and
emotions, faced the dilemma of projecting such emotions onto the national
cause. The result was added depth and complexity, raising their art far
beyond nationalist propaganda.

Yeats' powerful evocation of a visionary aristocratic Ireland led by self-
sacrificing seers rejecting materialist values can be read as a reaction of a
member of a *déclassé* Ascendancy family forced for much of his early career
to eke out an insecure existence as a journalist in the literary marketplace.
His celebration of romantic, sometimes tragic, individuals who brought to a
life of action high moral ideals regardless of mass opinion, derived from his
longing as a shy, insecure intellectual to be similarly active. His ambivalent
romanticisation of Ireland came partly out of his unrequited passion for
Maud Gonne, actress and revolutionary nationalist. He made his service to
her a metaphor for his thwarted dedication to Ireland. Yeats cast Maud
Gonne as heroine queen in his nationalist plays, *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and
Countess Cathleen, and used her in his poetry, fusing the dilemmas of
nationalist politics with his own sexual frustration.

All this is surprisingly close to some of Bialik's poetry, in which,
however, the poet's guilt at using national trauma as an outlet for purely
personal obsessions (as the beggars do in *The City of Slaughter*) is a major
theme (Aberbach 1988: 63, 107). The image of a woman yearned for but
emotionally out of reach is an overriding image both for the poet's private
failures and for the Jewish people *vis-à-vis* their motherland and the lofty
biblical ideals always beyond human reach.

Aware of the irreducibly personal aspect of his verse, Yeats rejected
sentimental nationalist propaganda. He particularly disliked the Young
Ireland poets, beloved of political nationalists; their poetry seemed to come

largely out of external political motives rather than inner passion (Yeats 1961: 205–9). Yeats demanded from art an original inner vision welling up from intensely felt experience and expressing communal consciousness. But could the private obsessions of the artist be compatible with a public nationalism? By encouraging writers such as Synge and, later, Sean O'Casey because they were good, he not only subverted his original aristocratic ideal of the artist but also the possibility of a coherent, broad-based cultural movement. By defending the principle of self-expression, Yeats also came into conflict with former supporters such as Arthur Griffith, Maud Gonne and George Russell, who were antagonised by the corrosive satires of Synge and others as they appeared to attack Ireland, Irish institutions, the Irish family and the church. Especially after 1903, when Maud Gonne dashed his romantic hopes by marrying her fellow revolutionary John MacBride, Yeats pondered deeply the responsibility of the artist to personal authenticity rather than to a public cause. In 'No Second Troy' (1910), in which Maud Gonne is depicted as a modern Helen of Troy, the poet is revulsed by the power of love and beauty to provoke violence and destruction.

Bialik was similarly torn between the simultaneous need to curtail his individuality in the face of collective aims and to realise himself as a private lyric poet. His actual 'national' poems are few, belong to his early period and are not among his best, though they had much influence. It is true that communal bereavement and infertility in his work, conveyed in biblical images of the destruction of the Temple and the loss of Jewish national independence, struck deep chords with his generation, who themselves felt orphaned (Aberbach 1984). But they derived partly from a personal sense of loss in early childhood. Bialik chastises his people using the same epithets with which he criticises himself: they are dry as a tree, withered like grass, rotten from head to foot. Like the beggars in *The City of Slaughter*, the poet uses national trauma for personal ends. A prevailing theme in Jewish liturgy is the yearning for national renewal and for a lost land associated with the nation's childhood. Such yearnings are prominent in Bialik's poetry of his childhood, though he rarely identified the nation's hopes as his own:

> I too have power enough.
> In open spaces set free my imprisoned strength!
> A weak nation will blossom,
> My rotten bones will flourish like grass.   ('A Short Letter' 1894)

Though he revered his nationalist mentor, Ahad Ha'am, Bialik went his own way as a poet, and the lacerating guilt that resulted entered his poetry. He remained to the end of his life deeply ambivalent about the degree to which Zionists read into his expression of private trauma a call for national renewal. He was far less a poet of hope than of almost suicidal despair. A good example is his poem 'On your desolate hearts' (1897), which had its immediate inspiration in the First Zionist Congress in 1897:

Do you see who lurks
   behind the door, broom in hand?
The caretaker of ruined temples –
Despair!

Yeats' reception as national poet

Similar though their writings are in some ways, Yeats and Bialik were very
differently received. Yeats, longing to be Ireland's national poet, was
rejected by the Irish nationalists. Bialik, guiltily ambivalent about his
national role, was nevertheless elevated against his will by Zionists into a
national institution. These ironic twists of fate affected their creativity.

Why did Yeats in his lifetime fail as a national poet? Yeats hoped to
create a sophisticated national culture, open to the world. But Ireland had
little market for high culture, and its best artists left for London or Paris.
His theatre survived through the selfless dedication of writers and actors,
financed between 1904 and 1910 by an English patron, Annie Horniman.
His cultural nationalism outraged mainstream Catholic opinion which
unfairly perceived his works as a blow for the Protestant Ascendancy. In
fact, Yeats had begun by rejecting his own caste as philistine and unpatriotic
and looked to convert the best of the young Catholic middle class to a non-
sectarian Irish nationalism. But the new Catholic intelligentsia, many from
poorly educated rural backgrounds and imbued with 'memories' of sectarian
persecution, remained profoundly ethnocentric and suspicious of secular
High Culture. They had little understanding of Yeats' sophisticated neo-
pagan vision and felt threatened by Synge's plays, championed by Yeats
which satirised Catholicism, patriotism and family in the name of freedom.
They embraced rather the Gaelic League and its vision of Ireland as a
superior rural Irish-speaking peasant community whose golden age was in
the Middle Ages. To the Irish Catholics, this image of authentic Ireland was
an *insula sacra* of Christian values which could prevail against the spread of
English materialist values. The campaign of the Gaelic League to revive a
culturally separate democratic nation legitimated its drive to overturn the
economic, social and political power of the alien Protestant elite and to
assume leadership in Ireland (Garvin 1987: ch. 5; Hutchinson 1987: ch. 8).
Its leaders denounced Yeats' project as a Protestant ploy to hijack
leadership of their cultural revival and divert it towards apolitical aestheti-
cism or, worse, a decadent European neo-paganism.

Some of this criticism was just. Yeats' nationalism had something of the
arrogance and ambivalence of the Protestant settler minority, protected by
English colonialism, their privileges based on spoliation and religious
exclusion (Beckett 1976: 143–7). Yet, in common with others within this
minority periodically since the eighteenth century, Yeats turned away from
British interests and became an Irish nationalist. Why did these Protestants
become Irish nationalists? The answer lies, perhaps, less in their love for

Ireland than in disillusionment with England. The condescension shown them by England drove them to identify with aspects of Irish heritage, particularly in the legendary pagan aristocratic period. If in British eyes, they were facsimile aristocrats, in Irish eyes they could be true aristocrats. In his alienation from increasingly urban industrial Britain, Yeats was typical of this Protestant minority. He found his main allies within his own class of reform-minded Anglo-Irish Protestants, such as Lady Gregory, cofounder of the Abbey Theatre; Sir Horace Plunkett, leader of the Irish agricultural cooperative movement; and Sir Hugh Lane, Plunkett supporter and patron of the arts (Sheehy 1980: ch. 6). Unable to submit to a populist Catholic Irish democratic identity, they pioneered the idea of a new Irish rural nation blending traditions of conqueror and conquered. In the circles of the elite, Yeats somewhat quixotically created from above a heroic Irish nation while asserting the independence of the artist from political constraints. Throughout the period 1885–1913, Yeats oscillated between these vexing opposites, breaking with Irish nationalism in favour of the higher responsibility of the artist and leaving Dublin for London, then drawn back to the nationalist fray by crisis in Ireland. All things considered, then, it is not surprising that his reception among Irish Catholics was a damp squib.

Bialik: public success, private despair

In Bialik's case, the pressure of anti-Semitism increasingly united the highly diverse international Jewish communities and made possible the idea of a Jewish national poet. However, in Bialik, conflict between the artist and the nationalist was more extreme than in Yeats. Whereas Yeats was criticised for using the nation as a vehicle for self-seeking interests, Bialik seems to have attacked himself in his own poetry – above all in *The Scroll of Fire* – for doing the same. The contrast between his public role as selfless servant of a cause and his consciousness of the private springs of his inspiration filled him with guilt. In 'Faithful Tear' (1894), Bialik expresses this guilt openly: 'When you see me weeping for some wondrous land ... do not mourn or comfort me, my tears are false.'

In 1909 Bialik paid his first visit to Palestine where many Jewish settlers looked to him for inspiration and hope. They did not appreciate that most of his main work came out of private, not national, obsessions; and when during a reading in Jaffa, from a recent short story of his, depicting the friendship and, later, sexual liason between a Jewish boy and a Christian girl, he was stopped by his audience which demanded national poems instead. In 1923, during the international fanfare which marked his fiftieth birthday, Bialik wrote a poem beginning, 'My spirit is bowed to the dust / under the yoke of your love', and he compared himself to a coin vulgarly jangling in the national coinbox.

Still, Bialik's private concerns as an artist, and the conflict this stirred up with his national role, did not seriously affect his image as national poet. This role, a response to fervent demand, was played effectively by a poet wholeheartedly committed to his cause. Even those who might have questioned Bialik's authority were generally overwhelmed by his dominance as a brilliant cultural figure. Also, from the time Bialik started writing in the early 1890s until his death in 1934, the number of Hebrew speakers and readers grew steadily. The great milestones in the history of Jewish nationalism – the foundation of the World Zionist Organisation by Herzl in 1897, and the Balfour Declaration of 1917 – created an atmosphere of political dynamism and cultural ferment in which Bialik had a highly receptive readership. These market forces ensured Bialik's success as national poet and meant that by the 1920s he could make substantial sums of money from his writing.

Yeats' failure as national poet

Yeats' readership was infinitely larger than Bialik, but his circumstances as an aspiring national poet were less fortunate. By 1910 the Protestant reform movement, including Yeats' plans for the Irish theatre, had run to ground for lack of popular support. Even his theatrical *proteges* had subverted his original aristocratic hopes, establishing a largely realist, demotic view of Ireland. To Yeats, the last straw was the rejection in 1913 by the Dublin City Council of Hugh Lane's offer of his priceless collection of paintings on condition that they house it suitably in a separate gallery. Yeats responded with poems such as 'September 1913', declaring his disillusionment with Ireland. He then left for England.

This break marked the end of Yeats' major period as a national cultural leader and the beginning of his conversion via Ezra Pound to poetic modernism. He used his new stark and direct form of verse to respond to the Easter Rebellion of 1916, 'Easter 1916', praising the rebellion for heroic, even mythical qualities while recoiling from its stony fanaticism: 'Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart.' Precisely when Yeats, defeated in public life, turned from activism to immerse himself in his craft, he found a voice whose crystal-sharp tones expressed the psychological transformation of Ireland, anticipating independence:

I write it out in a verse –
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

After independence in 1921, Yeats returned to Ireland, where he was made a senator of the Free State. During the subsequent civil war, he wrote of his despair at internecine strife and his hope for reconciliation. He became involved in several cultural ventures, including a revived Abbey Theatre, and found new controversy defending Sean O'Casey's plays. But the national culture promoted by the new Irish state was oppressively puritanical, populist and Gaelic-Catholic. Large sections of the Protestant community 'returned' to England (Brown 1981: chs. 1 and 4). Yeats himself retreated to a private Ireland, an idealised conservative Anglo-Irish tradition of Berkeley, Swift, Grattan and Burke. He even flirted with fascism in the 1930s (Cullingford 1981; O'Brien 1988). His last years were spent mostly out of Ireland, and he died in France in 1939.

The great irony of Yeats' career was that his failure as national poet drove him to write some of his finest poetry which was – with the exception of Ireland itself – universally accepted as the achievement of Ireland's national poet. (He was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1924.) His poetry in romantic fashion transforms his public failures to universal triumphs of the human spirit. In 'Coole Park, 1929', for example, he celebrates his cultural efforts and those of his dearest associates, Lady Gregory and John Synge, as the last stand against modernity of the heroic folk tradition starting with Homer. In prose this would be blarney; in poetry it is sublime. In poems such as 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1926), he elevates his doomed struggles as a metaphor for the eternal battle of the creative imagination against death. And in a sense, Yeats was right: there is no question of victory, but by confronting and defying his fate, and recording his struggles in art, the poet can achieve a form of immortality. Yet, the poet's adjuration to the sages of the past to 'gather me / Into the artifice of eternity' has no mention of Ireland or of his hopes for Ireland. His homeland here is art.

A similar irony is apparent in Bialik's poetry; he made some of his best poetry (e.g. *The Scroll of Fire*) out of the guilty conflict between his collective prophetic identity, the voice of rage and justice, and the soft, private voice of the lyric poet bewailing his losses, of mother and father, love and youth. In the poem 'The sea of quiet spits secrets' (1901), the poet confesses: 'One world alone is mine – The one in my heart.'

Bialik's weakest poems included the purely national ones, which date from his early period, pre-1900. Yet, the perception of Bialik was more important than the reality. Political figures as diverse as the moderates Weizmann and Ben-Gurion, the extremists Jabotinsky and Begin, and the Zionist Orthodox rabbi, Abraham Isaac Kook, greeted him as the reincarnation of a biblical prophet and symbol of national resurrection, moving the nation to political action. And so he was. He expressed the rage of the persecuted, the hopes of a people emerging from powerlessness, the sense of a great dislocated past which it was possible, in some form, to recover. Perhaps most important to Bialik's national role, as to Yeats', was

the creation of superb language which roused national consciousness and pride even when it did not aim to, and even when it condemned the nation for pettiness, cowardice, passivity and hypocrisy. The act of creation – never mind the content – was part of and stimulated creative, revolutionary nationalism which fed it in turn.

Conclusion

It would be naive to suggest that the usefulness of comparing Yeats and Bialik is self-evident. Their lives and circumstances were different, and it is unlikely that either read the other. Yet the value of such a comparison, though hard to define, is not inconsiderable. Their careers exemplify the tensions general to cultural nationalism between romantic visionaries and 'political' activists. Whereas Bialik and Yeats in the name of authenticity were committed to exploring the individuality of the nation in all its disconcerting complexities, the focus of an Ahad Ha'am and an Arthur Griffith was more on the construction of simpler ideal types (even stereotypes) by which to inspire national feeling. In some ways, the idea of a 'national poet' is a contradiction in terms. Indeed, prior to Yeats and Bialik, there is no comparable sense of conflict in their literatures – perhaps in any literature – between the solitary artist and the national figure. The poetry of Yeats and Bialik raises complex questions about the relationship between the artist and the nationalist, about the meaning of national art and the constraints imposed as well as the creativity released by nationalism.

Judging from his poetry, Bialik's life was a failure, full of longing and deprivation, loss and impotence. His poetic career seems to have been cut short by trauma and ambivalence; after 1911, he practically stopped writing poetry, except for children. Yet as a poet Bialik has a unique place in modern Hebrew. He can be read with pleasure by philosophers as well as by children learning Hebrew. Over a hundred of his lyrics have been set to music. His poems of loss and longing, articulated in the powerful symbols and rhetoric of the biblical tradition, resonated with the hopes and fears of his people. His influence on contemporary and subsequent Hebrew poets was enormous. In the history of cultural nationalism he had unparalleled success. A decade and a half after his death, the people whom he lambasted and lamented, who at the time of his birth had no territory of their own nor a political organisation to achieve one, created an independent state.

Yeats' poetic achievement was greater than Bialik's (and, indeed, virtually all other twentieth-century poets), though in his lifetime his social and political impact was more modest. Yeats expresses the attraction and pride of belonging to a nation whose legends and culture are powerful tools for overcoming rootlessness and transforming individual concerns into something of wider, more permanent importance. Yet no poet, however

gifted, can go against the ethnic grain to construct a nation. Yeats was rejected by the Irish as Bialik was never rejected by the Jews. Still, Yeats chose not to live the life of the cosmopolitan romantic. Repeatedly he came back to Ireland and wrote of it to the end, in 'Under Ben Bulben' (1938), celebrating 'the indomitable Irishry'.

In the long run, though, Yeats had an impact on Irish culture comparable with that of Bialik on Jewish culture; in large part this was because of his international recognition as an Irish nationalist and as one of the great poets of the twentieth century. Since the Gaelic revival failed to produce a vital national culture, Yeats' project to create a distinctive Irish literature in English has appeared increasingly plausible and viable. In particular, the Abbey Theatre which survives to this day has shown through the high quality of its dramatists and the controversies that it has excited the potential for Irish cultural nationalism in English. In his reflections on the competing demands of personal conscience and national duty, Yeats was true both to his poetic calling and to his self-constructed national role. His career highlights the contribution of the minority Protestant community to Irish identity. His glorification of pagan Irish heroes of legend denies any single sectarian definition of the nation and has particular value in an island in need of a unifying ideology but wracked by divisions between its different religious and cultural traditions. His individual voice as rebel against disunity and mediocrity in his 'blind bitter land' – a voice originating in the same tradition of prophetic dissent in which Bialik wrote – is the conscience and direction of Irish national culture.

Notes

1 Most of the vast bibliography on Bialik is in Hebrew. For a brief account of Bialik's life and career and selected bibliography in Hebrew and translation, see Aberbach (1988).

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