In the opinion of many literary and cultural critics, William Butler Yeats’s 80-line lyric, “Easter, 1916,” is the finest political poem in the English language—period. Yeats composed it (in Normandy, France, and then in County Galway, Ireland) during the summer of 1916 in response to a week-long armed insurrection, mainly in Dublin, that began on Easter Monday, April 24th, 1916. Unsuccessful but influential, the event is known to historians as the Easter 1916 Rising.

While the Rising came as a surprise to the majority of the Irish public, who at first treated it with relative indifference, the British response of executing 16 members of the core leadership had the effect of redirecting public sentiment in favor of the rebels. One can connect the Rising and the executions to the outbreak of the Irish War of Independence (or Black and Tan War) in January 1919, which, in turn, precipitated the partition of Ireland into two states, under the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 1921. The island’s 26 “South” counties became the mainly Catholic Irish Free State, a self-governing dominion within the British Empire (as opposed to a sovereign republic). Meanwhile, the island’s six “North” counties became the mainly Protestant Northern Ireland, a unit of the U.K., which was renamed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (a name that endures to this day).

Under the new arrangement, Northern Ireland received a limited-powers parliament of its own in Belfast (called Stormont). Foreign affairs, defense, and other major issues continued to be determined by the overall U.K. parliament in London (called Westminster), which legislated such matters for all “four countries” of the U.K.: Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and England.

In 1949, all legal ties between the British Empire (or Crown) and the Irish Free State were terminated. Thus, the Irish Free State became a sovereign republic, completely outside the Empire, with the Gaeilge (Irish-language) name Éire (pronounced air-eh) and the English name Ireland. By that time, Yeats’s long, productive life was over, but he had served the Irish Free State as a senator in its legislature’s upper house and as the chair of the committee that designed its coinage.

For years, the British colonial authorities had feared revolution in Ireland with the aim of breaking up the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (the U.K.) to establish a sovereign Irish republic. That anxiety was high in 1904, the year in which James Joyce sets “The Dead.” When the Great War broke out in 1914, the British had to focus less on Ireland. Hard-core Irish nationalists in the physical-force Fenian tradition saw the war as “England’s difficulty” and, thus, “Ireland’s opportunity.” Under the veteran Fenian Thomas Clarke (whose father was an Irish sergeant in the British army) and a young, talented idealist in the movement, Patrick Pearse (whose father was an English stone-carver), they planned a revolution, originally scheduled to begin on Easter Sunday 1916 to symbolically align Irish freedom with Christ’s resurrection.
Auden praises Yeats

Almost a decade after Yeats's death, one of the leading English poets, W.H. Auden, published an essay, “Yeats as an Example,” in an issue of Kenyon Review, an important journal. In the piece, Auden identified as one of Yeats’s two great legacies his having "transformed ... the occasional poem." A poem about an occasion, such as the Easter 1916 Rising, is an occasional poem; and in visiting praise upon Yeats, Auden had the 80-line masterpiece “Easter, 1916” particularly in mind. Auden averred that Yeats’s occasional lyrics are "serious" and "reflective," blending the "personal" and the "public." Arguably, Yeats’s most personal note in “Easter, 1916" is his invocation of "some who are near my heart" (l.34) against whom one of the executed rebels, John MacBride (l. 75), “had done most bitter wrong” (l. 33). This discourse refers to domestic abuse on MacBride’s part, the victims being his wife, Maud Gonne MacBride, and her daughter, Iseult Gonne, fathered by another man prior to her marriage.

Who should “write it out”? During 1915, the second year of the Great War (World War I), the 50-year-old Yeats was asked to compose a poem in support of the British war effort. (The image on the right includes a British army recruiting poster used in Ireland: “I’ll go too!: The Real Irish Spirit.) A popular Irish politician, John Redmond, leader of the mainstream-nationalist Irish Parliamentary Party, had been successful in persuading thousands of young Irishmen to join Irish regiments in the British army to fight on the allied side, in part because of the existential threat that the German Empire and its partners posed to small nations (such as Belgium and Ireland). Redmond argued that, after the war, the British would be morally obliged to effect Home Rule (self-government) in/for Ireland due to Irishmen’s willing assistance during the conflict. A majority of the Volunteers, an Irish nationalist militia, agreed with Redmond, but those who did not split from the organization, under the leadership of Eoin MacNeill, a noted scholar. The pro-Redmond group became the National Volunteers, while the pro-MacNeill group called itself the Irish Volunteers. The latter participated in the Easter 1916 Rising. During the subsequent Irish War of Independence, the Volunteers essentially rebranded to become the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.).

Yeats declined to fashion a war poem. Instead, he produced a lyric to detail his rationale for refusing the request. In that work, he argued that “at times like these” (i.e. during a war) the poet’s best strategy is to “be silent,” for poets “have no gift to set a statesman right.” The following year, Yeast manifested no such reticence in the aftermath of the Easter 1916 Rising. Thus, the war poem entitled “Easter, 1916” emerged. Apparently, Yeats determined that he should “write it [the Rising] out” in a verse” (l.74).
The Pearse factor

Yeats’s desire to position himself as a poet of the Easter 1916 Rising may have had to do with jealousy he felt towards Patrick Pearse. (In the image on the left, Pearse preferred to be photographed so that a squint in his left eye wasn’t visible.) In his poetry, Pearse, a lawyer-turned-educator, had advanced a rhetoric of Christ-like blood sacrifice. In addition to his progressive, anti-colonial boys’ school (St. Enda’s) near Dublin, he became engaged in several nationalist endeavors. On the physical-force nationalist side, he embraced the Irish Republican Brotherhood (I.R.B.) or Fenians, as well as the (Irish) Volunteers. On the cultural-nationalist side, he enthusiastically participated in the Gaelic League, whose goal was the restoration of Gaeilge (the Irish language) as Ireland’s everyday tongue.

Pearse clearly understood that the chances of an Irish rebel victory over the British Empire were slim, so he helped mastermind the Easter 1916 Rising with an expectation of defeat, execution, and martyrdom. He and his brother Willie both followed that trajectory. In his poem “The Mother,” Patrick Pearse imagined his mother addressing God: “Lord, I do not grudge | My two strong sons that I have seen go out | To … die … | In bloody protest for a glorious thing.” When anticipating the Pearse brothers’ martyr-status, the poem evokes words from the Annunciation: “The generations [to come in Ireland] shall remember them, | And call them blessed.” According to Luke’s Gospel (chapter 1, verse 48), after Gabriel’s Annunciation to her, Mary declares, “[F]rom henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.” In a letter written to his mother after his trial, while he was awaiting execution, Pearse characterized his impending death for Ireland as “a sacrifice which God asked of me and of you.” In a way, Yeats (by means of an assertive “I” and showy dash) claims the last word on Pearse: “I write it out in a verse — | MacDonagh and MacBride | And Connolly and Pearse” (ll. 74-76).

Psychogeography

In “Easter 1916,” Yeats presents non-identifiable urban and rural spaces: “grey | Eighteenth-century houses” (ll. 3–4; perhaps Dublin); and “the stream” (l. 49; perhaps the West of Ireland). However, the poem emerged across a variety of sites, as indicated on the map in the image to the left. When the Easter 1916 Rising began, Yeats was having his portrait painted by Will Rothenstein, a famous artist, in the picturesque Cotswolds region of Gloucestershire, a county in southwestern England. Rather than head for the suddenly revolutionary Ireland, he next spent a spell at his apartment in Woburn Buildings, London. Only some time later did he made a brief visit to Dublin, where shelled structures (bottom right of image) offered a sobering contrast to Rothenstein’s idyllic honey-stone farmhouse (bottom center of image, in a rendition by the artist).
Restless in Dublin, Yeats proceeded to Colleville, the Atlantic coastal village in Normandy in northwest France where Maud Gonne MacBride was living. He spent most of the summer of 1916 there with both Maud and her 21-year-old daughter Iseult. Yeats could be said to be in love with each woman. For the poet, ideas that had been germinating about “Easter, 1916” since the Cotswolds bore fruit in Normandy. However, while Yeats accomplished much writing chez Gonne, it took most of September at Coole Park, Lady Gregory’s Big House (the Irish term for a rural mansion) in County Galway, for him to complete his poem. Given the number of geographic locations through which Yeats moved while contemplating and then composing “Easter, 1916” — and given, in addition, how psychically and emotionally fraught those travels were — we can identify a psychogeography with respect to the poem.

In the mid-1950s, the term psychogeography was advanced by the French “situationalist” thinker Guy Debord. While we are using it loosely, its basic concern is the effects that geographic environments (and their inhabitants) have on an individual as she or he moves through them. The individual may be conscious of those effects — or not. Consider Yeats from April through September of 1916. One minute he is ensconced in a quintessentially English farmhouse (the residence on Will Rothenstein’s 55-acre Iles Farm in the Cotswolds); and the next he is surrounded by the ruins of grey, eighteenth-century (or Georgian) houses in Dublin: buildings shelled by a British warship brought up the River Liffey during Easter Week to intimidate the Irish republican rebels into surrender. One minute he is on the Normandy coast of France (only 200 miles from some of the worst fighting of the Great War), navigating tensions between Maud and Iseult Gonne; and the next he is in Lady Gregory’s three-story West-of-Ireland mansion, surrounded by her mother-like care and her seven woods. By being jolted from one locale to another, Yeats effectively weakened perceived boundaries between locales. This fluid state yielded for Yeats a new awareness of both public and personal concerns, an awareness that informed what he wrote in “Easter, 1916” — and how he wrote it.

One of the basic situationist practices is the dérive [literally: “drifting”), a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérives involve playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll.

In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.

— Guy Debord

With the revolt and executions in Dublin almost constantly in his thoughts, the emotional stresses and excitements of the various, changing environments (England, France, Ireland) affected Yeats as he crafted the dynamic streets and stream in “Easter, 1916.” In the theory of psychogeography, the act of moving from place to place is called the dérive (“drifting”), which Debord defines as “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances,” with participants permitting themselves to be influenced by “the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.” While Debord focused mainly on urban environments, he was open to an understanding of the dérive across both urban and rural landscapes. In a way, we can argue that “Easter, 1916” emerged out of Yeats’s transporting the ideas that feature in it over a number of geographies, not least Rothenstein’s Cotswolds, Gonne’s Colleville, and Gregory’s Coole.
The final date

The image on the left shows the closing lines of “Easter, 1916,” in Yeats’s handwriting. Yeats was delayed in learning to read and write, perhaps because of dyslexia. Nevertheless, he won the 1923 Nobel Prize in literature. One notable feature of “Easter, 1916” is Yeats’s inclusion of a date — “Sept. 25, 1916” — at its conclusion. Yeats dated only a small number of his poems, and usually his doing so was significant. In essence, the poem opens with one date (“Easter, 1916”) and ends with another. We need to interrogate why Yeats engineered this temporal span into his designedly political lyric. Beyond the Rising, what happened between Easter 1916 and late September of that year worthy of contemplation vis-à-vis Irish nationalism? The executions of 16 of the rebel leaders assuredly comes to mind. Both Yeats and Dora Sigerson Shorter (Clement Shorter’s wife) composed poems entitled “Sixteen Dead Men.” The final execution, that of Roger Casement, occurred on August 3, 1916. However, another major event with serious implications for Ireland must also have been in Yeats’s thoughts.

Occurring in northern France, the event in question was the Battle of the Somme, the largest engagement in the Great War (i.e. World War I). Stretching from July 1st through November 18th, 1916 (140 days), the battle caused around 456,000 British casualties and losses; and it resulted in six miles of allied penetration into enemy-held territory. The first day, July 1st, remains the single worst day for causalities in British military history (57,470). Irish regiments in the British army suffered hugely in the Battle of Somme. On the field (really, in the trenches) at the Somme, the 36th (Ulster) Division had 12 battalions (i.e. 1,000-men units); the Tyneside Irish had four battalions; and there were seven other regular Irish battalions (including the First Battalion of the Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers, the First Battalion of the Royal Irish Rifles, and the Second Battalion of the Royal Dublin Fusiliers).

The first day of the Battle of the Somme alone produced 2,467 Irish deaths, with 2,000 of them coming from the 36th (Ulster) Division. This number compares to a total death toll of 485 (around 54% civilian) during the entire length of the Easter Rising. By invoking “Sept. 25, 1916,” Yeats may well intend to imply the massive Irish sacrifice in the Great War, especially the Battle of the Somme, then still ongoing — indeed, experiencing an intense and critical phase with much Irish involvement.

One should note that some of the Irish battalions at the Somme not part of the 36th (Ulster) Division or the Tyneside Irish had been organized under the 16th (Irish) Division of the British Army, a division whose men were mainly members of the (National) Volunteers, the nationalist militia associated with John Redmond.
During Easter Week 1916, while some of their fellow Irishmen were fighting the British Army in Dublin and a few other Irish locales, members of certain 16th (Irish) Division battalions faced sheer horror in a Great War engagement at Hulluch, in northern France (not too far from the Somme). On April 27th and 29th, 1916, the Germans attacked the battalions of the 16th (Irish) Division deployed at Hulluch, using a deadly mixture of gases (chlorine and phosgene). On the first day alone, the 16th (Irish) Division lost 442 men, mainly from gas poisoning.

While Yeats was developing “Easter, 1916” at Lady Gregory’s Coole estate during September 1916, news filtered in of brave attacks on German positions by some battalions within the 16th (Irish) Division: actions that constituted a phase of the larger Battle of the Somme. On September 2nd, the Irish troops captured Guillemont; and on September 9th, they captured Ginchy. The September 12th edition of London’s Daily Express newspaper offered the headline, “How the Irish Took Ginchy — Splendid Daring of the Irish Troops.” When securing Guillemont and Ginchy in early September 1916, the 16th (Irish) Division recorded in excess of 4,000 casualties, including some 1,200 deaths. One Irish officer wrote from the scene at Guillemont, “There is nothing but the mud and the gaping shell-holes — a chaotic wilderness of shell-holes, rim overlapping rim - and, in the bottom of many, the bodies of the dead.”

When Yeats included the date “Sept. 25, 1916” as part of his public poem “Easter, 1916,” he likely wanted to ensure that, forever after, readers could not think of the Easter 1916 Rising without also contemplating the extraordinary Irish sacrifices in the Great War (at Hulluch, the Somme, and elsewhere) that occurred between April and September of 1916. On lines 67-69 of “Easter, 1916,” Yeats’s speaker asks and answers a question: “Was it needless death after all? | For England may keep faith | For all that is done and said.” Here, the poem hopes that England (i.e. the British colonial authorities) will keep faith with a commitment, enshrined in law but suspended due to the Great War, to permit Home Rule in Ireland — that is, self-government via a Dublin-based Irish parliament.

One could interpret the logic behind the “keep faith” statement as follows: While rebel activity in Dublin during Easter Week of 1916 may not have provided the authorities with much of an incentive to deliver Home Rule, the preparedness of Irish nationalist Volunteers to put aside their anti-U.K. activism and wear British army uniforms in the Great War must count for a lot. What better reason to “keep faith” could there be than the thousands of Irish deaths in military service on behalf on the British Empire between the dates at the top and bottom of the poem? While it remains difficult to determine total Irish soldier losses in the Great War, most present-day historians produce estimates in the region of between 27,000 and 35,000 Irishmen killed while in British military uniform during the overall conflict (August 1914-November 1918).
Claiming the Myth-Making

Yeats’s absence from Ireland during the Easter 1916 Rising provided him with an incentive to make a strong compensatory claim on the event, after the fact. If he didn’t position himself in the discourse that emerged from the Rising and the executions — not to mention the complicating factor that was Irish soldiers’ service in the Great War — he ran the risk of losing his nationalist credibility. In urging him, during August 1916, to leave France and return to Ireland (specifically, Coole) in order to complete the writing of “Easter, 1916,” Lady Augusta Gregory flattered Yeats by spotlighting his status as an influential spokesperson among Irish nationalists:

“I believe there is a great deal you can do [in the aftermath of the Rising], all is unrest and discontent [in Ireland] — there is nowhere for the imagination to rest but there must be some spiritual building possible, …. perhaps more intense [than during a crisis in 1890], and you have a big name among the young men [the emerging generation of Irish nationalists].”

By the time September 25th, 1916, rolled around, Yeats could synthesize the Rising itself, the 16 executions, and such Irish Great War sacrifices as Hulluch, Guillemont, and Ginchy (not to mention the horrendous First Day of the Somme). Using this relatively broad synthesis as a foundation, he could then deploy his exceptional poetic gifts and his considerable national (and international) status to become, in effect, the principal shaper of a near-mythic narrative about the Easter 1916 Rising. Pearse’s poetry and his prose polemics (political essays) may have constituted a first draft of the mythic narrative of the Rising; however, as Yeats’s speaker acknowledges in line 71 of “Easter, 1916,” by late September of 1916 Pearse and his fellow rebels “[were] dead.” As regards articulating the value and meaning of the Easter 1916 Rising, Pearse’s demise vacated a rhetorical space for Yeats to occupy (one might even say colonize). Given this reality, one is hardly surprised that Yeats has his speaker in “Easter, 1916” make the almost egotistical assertion, “I write it out in a verse —” (l. 74). Starting with the first-person pronoun (“I”) and ending with an assertive dash, this line is not, strictly speaking, necessary. Clearly, Yeats wants to claim a role for himself (“I”) in the myth-making about the Rising and associated events. (One notes that the incipit of the entire poem is also “I.”)

With Pease liquidated, the opportunity to narrate the Easter 1916 Rising became available. In “Easter, 1916,” the poem’s speaker is unambiguous about the method by which he intends to seize that opportunity: “a verse” (l. 74). Often associated with the Bible, the English substantive verse derives from the Latin verb vetere: to turn, especially in the sense of turning a plow. The implication here is that Yeats is turning the narrative of the Rising and, figuratively speaking, plowing a new furrow for Ireland. One might say that he is articulating how the Rising will be recollected and assessed from the moment of his intervention onwards: “now and in time to be” (l. 77). As regards Yeats’s understanding of his ability to become the post-Pearse voice of the Rising, one of the poem’s most significant dictional (i.e. word) choices is the adverb utterly: “All changed, change utterly” (l. 15; almost repeated in the penultimate line [l. 79]).
When selecting an adverb to characterize the nature of the change he perceived — or he believed that he (as a “big name among the young men”) was effecting — Yeats had multiple options from which to choose. He could have written “changed completely” or “changed entirely,” for example. By picking utterly, he places the notion of utterly into play. If one consults the Oxford English Dictionary, one gains an appreciation of the range of meanings attaching to utterly. Some of the definitions appear in the image on the right. As you can see, the circulation of money, the marketing of goods, and tournament-competition on horseback are but three activities that utterly indicates. Even the meaning of utterly most common in everyday speech — to say — gets refined when we open the dictionary. It acquires force. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the particular kind of speech historically associated with utterly involves “burst[ing] out,” “cry[ing],” and/or “yell[ing].” While “Easter, 1916” associates the verb murmur with the identification of the rebels — “murmur name upon name” (l. 61) — its deeper intention may be, in fact, to yell about the event.

When analyzing “Easter, 1916,” perhaps the most compelling definition of utterly is “vanquish, conquer, or overcome.” That definition accords not only with the Rising’s goal of vanquishing the British from Ireland but also Yeats’s desire to overcome Pearse as the principal spokesperson for Ireland. In summary: Twice deploying the phrase “changed utterly,” Yeats poem attempts to make change by means of utterance.

and Lady Gregory against the British authorities over whether Dublin or London should be the home of 39 paintings collected by Gregory’s nephew, Hugh Lane. Originally, Lane had willed the works to the city of Dublin; however, he then switched in favor of London before reverting back to Dublin. After Lane’s premature death in a shipwreck, the National Gallery in London claimed the paintings, arguing that the amendment in Lane’s will reinstating Dublin was unwitnessed and, thus, invalid. The 39 paintings are known as the Continental Pictures, and eight Impressionist pieces constitute their highly desirable core. Among them are Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s Les Parapluies (“The Umbrellas”; included in the image on the left) and Edouard Manet’s Portrait of Eva Gonzalès. Lady Gregory in particular feared that the British would perceive a hostile Irish-nationalist tone in “Easter, 1916” and, thus, terminate the negotiations over the Lane Bequest.

Delay While Yeats had completed the lyric by September 25, 1916, he delayed its release to the public until late 1920. He was proud of “Easter, 1916” and received positive reactions from friends, such as Lady Augusta Gregory, with whom he shared it. (Maud Gonne’s opinion was a notable exception: “[I]t isn’t worthy of you & above all it isn’t worthy of the subject.”) Yeats’s anxiety about widespread publication had to do with an ongoing dispute that pitched him
Shorter began producing the 25 copies in March 1917, choosing what has become an iconic green cover. Those copies place a comma in the title, between Easter and 1916; most subsequent versions omit that punctuation mark. A few lines in the so-called Shorter edition are different from the same lines as they appear in the (later) version that we’re studying, which has become standard. Some recipients of Shorter editions shared them clandestinely, meaning that a fair number of people became familiar with “Easter, 1916.” By the fall of 1920, Yeats and Lady Gregory had determined to settle the Lane dispute. Thus, Yeats organized the public release of “Easter, 1916” in not one but two magazines. The fact that the more major of the two — the politically focused New Statesman — was headquartered in London underscores Yeats's intention to remind the British about the Easter 1916 Rising and the related executions. The other magazine, the Dial, was based in the U.S.; had just been re-launched; and catered primarily to those interested in the arts and culture. Also in 1920, Yeats determined to include “Easter, 1916” in a collection of his poetry that, in the first place, would be hand-printed and bound in light-blue covers by the press at his sisters’ Cuala (pronounced *coo-la*) Industries, an Arts and Crafts manufactory in Dublin. The collection’s title is *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*.

**Form** Whenever we interpret verse, probably the worst initial question to ask is “What’s this poem about?” Apart from anything else, a given poem usually contemplates multiple matters: there are lots of *abouts!* The question is also problematic because it bypasses one of the most critical issues in poetic hermeneutics (i.e. interpretation), namely, the form of a poem. Poets choose verse over prose in part because it allows them significant amplitude as regards form or shape. How a poem looks influences how we glean its meaning.
A poem’s content is important, but so too is its form. The (deliberately) blurred text on the left of the image at the top of this page is a large portion of “Easter, 1916.” By making the words impossible to read, one draws attention to the poem’s shape, which is an unusual one, sometimes called “long and skinny.” Yeats employed the same basic shape in another political poem, “The Fisherman,” written in June 1914. One might use the adjective columnar to describe the container into which Yeats fits “Easter, 1916.” By placing the blurred text alongside a photograph of Sackville (now O’Connell) Street, Dublin, taken a little more than two weeks after the Easter 1916 Rising, it’s easy to see what Yeats wished to suggest by his chosen shape. The rubble in the photo’s left foreground is the remains of a building shelled by a British warship, the Aud, brought up the River Liffey to attack the rebels. The destruction permits a clear view of the burned-out shell of the edifice that served as rebel H.Q.: the General Post Office. Patrick Pearse and his fellow (female and male) rebels selected the G.P.O. because it was the center of Dublin’s — and, indeed, Ireland’s — mail and telegraph systems and, thus, of massive strategic importance. The columnar shape of “Easter, 1916” echoes the pillars of the neoclassical building’s front portico, precisely the venue where Pearse cried out (or uttered) the Proclamation of the Irish Republic on the first day of Rising.

Even more strikingly similar to the shape of “Easter, 1916” is the freestanding granite column directly in front of the G.P.O. Irish physical-force nationalists would bomb it out of viability in 1966 (50 years after the Rising); however, in 1916 it dominated central Dublin (notwithstanding that James Joyce’s “The Dead” doesn’t mention it). In a way: Yeats intends “Easter, 1916” to constitute a monumental poem, a verbal artifact that effectively replaces the assertive column. In fact, the column was known as Nelson’s Pillar (or, simply, the Pillar). It was completed in 1809 as a tribute to the victory over Napoleon that the English admiral Horatio Nelson achieved in the Battle of Trafalgar (1805). The Pillar served as a symbol of British imperial supremacy over much of the earth’s waters and lands, including Ireland. During the early nineteenth century, monuments to Nelson were constructed in many locales under British control. There is a Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square in central London and a second one in Place Jacques-Cartier in the old section of Montréal, Canada. Since 1813, a statue of Nelson has stood in Bridgetown, Barbados. And the list goes on. Yeats built “Easter, 1916” to offer the Irish an alternative monument.
One could ascend a staircase within Nelson’s Pillar to an outdoor viewing platform under the statue of Nelson atop the column. (See the image to the left.) Thus, many Dubliners were familiar with Nelson’s likeness up-close. They understood the impact of placing the principal signifier at the highest point. In constructing for his fellow Irishmen and Irishwomen an Irish replacement for the very British Nelson’s Pillar, Yeats had to produce an impactful utterance at its highest point — that is, its title. The poem’s title is the equivalent of the Pillar’s statue! Yeats could have entitled the poem “Rising” or “Terrible Beauty”; however, he produced a phrase that’s unambiguous, serious, and memorable: “Easter, 1916.”

In essence, “Easter, 1916” signals change: a new dispensation’s “[being] born” (ll. 16, 40, 80) in Ireland. Changing the voice of nationalist (or national) discourse from Pearse’s to Yeats’s, the poem becomes a monument for the future Ireland to look to: a nuanced, effective monument. It’s a pillar of words replacing a pillar of granite. As already acknowledged in these notes, the verb change features in the lyric, strengthened by the adverb utterly. Thousands of times each day, acts of change were, in fact, associated with Nelson’s Pillar, for while an apparently unmovable imperial monument, it also constituted the nexus of Dublin’s electric tram network. The Pillar was the locale where passengers had to change from one tram to another, as James Joyce explains in his 1922 novel, Ulysses. Its seventh episode or chapter begins by noting how the trams and the mail functioned in the Pillar-G.P.O. zone: the high-value site that the Easter 1916 rebels determined should be their H.Q.

IN THE HEART OF THE HIBERNIAN METROPOLIS

Before Nelson’s pillar trams slowed, shunted, changed trolley, started for Blackrock, Kingstown and Dalkey, Clonskea, Rathgar and Terenure, Palmerston Park and upper Rathmines, Sandymount Green, Rathmines, Ringsend and Sandymount Tower, Harold’s Cross. The hoarse Dublin United Tramway Company’s timekeeper bawled them off:
— Rathgar and Terenure!
— Come on, Sandymount Green!

THE WEARER OF THE CROWN

Under the porch of the general post office shoeblacks called and polished. Parked in North Prince’s street His Majesty’s vermilion mailcars, bearing on their sides the royal initials, E. R., received loudly flung sacks of letters, postcards, lettercards, parcels, insured and paid, for local, provincial, British and overseas delivery.
For contemporary readers, the phrase “all changed” — a kind of refrain in “Easter, 1916” — might have evoked the act of changing trams at the base of Nelson’s Pillar. The image on the right shows that location with a couple of double-decker electric trams, perhaps the most democratic form of transport in early-twentieth-century Dublin. For those unable to read, published material from the tram company used symbols to differentiate between routes. The text in the image — which comes from the July-December 1902 issue of Tramway and Railway World — underscores the centrality of Nelson’s Pillar to Dublin’s tram system. Yeats may have revered such aspects of traditional Ireland as its fairy lore; however, he was also aware that, because of the events from Easter through September of 1916 (i.e. the Rising in Dublin and the machine guns and poisoned gas of northern France), his country would have to negotiate modernity more seriously than before — that is, than in the days of “causal comedy” (l. 37). Likely, he hoped that post-Rising and post-Somme Ireland would be able to act in the spirit of mutual “courtesy” that Ada Peter, writing in 1907, identified as being “engendered” by journeys on Dublin trams.

Ada Peter, Sketches of Old Dublin (1907) reflections on riding in Dublin trams

[While on a tram, to] gaze at the visages of the neighbours we don’t visit is certainly not very agreeable until one gets accustomed to it, and, in a small social centre like Dublin, the tramcar includes a curious mixture, oftentimes of persons who know all about each other, and yet have no acquaintance.

There is a courtesy, however, engendered by the constant intercourse of strangers in the few minutes... [of] [journeying] together that was formerly not a feature of Irish manners.