



## The sacrificial emplotment of national identity. Pádraic Pearse and the 1916 Easter uprising

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### Abstract

*A sense of national identification remains amorphous and inert unless it is cognitively structured and motivationally oriented. Perhaps the most consequential way of structuring and orienting nationalism is through emplotment (organizing in the form of a story). Emplotment commonly follows one of a few cross-culturally recurring genres. In nationalist contexts, the heroic genre—treating military conflict, loss or potential loss, and reasserted sovereignty—is the default form. However, this default may be overridden in particular circumstances. When social devastation precludes heroic achievement, a sacrificial emplotment—treating collective sin, punishment, sacrifice, and redemption—is often particularly salient. Earlier work has examined cases of sacrificial emplotment in its most extreme varieties (treating Hitler and Gandhi). The following essay considers a more ordinary case, the sacrificial nationalism of the prominent Irish anti-colonial revolutionary, Pádraic Pearse, as represented in his plays.*

### Keywords

*Emplotment, genre, heroic narrative, nationalism, Pádraic Pearse, sacrificial narrative*

### Introduction

It has been clear since at least Benedict Anderson's (1991) *Imagined Communities* that we do not have some sort of simple and direct access to national identity. Cognitively, national identification needs to be structured; emotionally, it needs to be motivated. In *Understanding Nationalism* (Hogan 2009), I have argued that one of the most important ways in which nationalist identification is organized and oriented is through emplotment.

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Emplotment, most influentially discussed by Hayden White (1973), is the narrative shaping of a history or a condition. It involves selecting and construing events in ways consistent with a particular story structure, typically following the pattern of a prominent genre.

The first section of the following essay briefly outlines the emplotment of nationalism, stressing in particular the sacrificial genre. The second section takes up some broad considerations regarding the role of sacrificial emplotment in anti-colonial Irish nationalism generally and in the 1916 Easter Uprising in particular. The third section turns to Pádraic Pearse, both a playwright and a leader of the 1916 Uprising. Subsequent sections consider three of Pearse's plays, addressing their relation to sacrificial nationalism.

The analysis developed across these sections has three main purposes. First, it aims to illustrate a common form of nationalist sacrificial emplotment, perhaps the most common form, but one that was not represented in *Understanding Nationalism*. Second, it seeks to demonstrate the continuity between imaginative narrative organization and actual political action. To do this, it focuses on the relatively unusual situation of a major revolutionary figure who was also a writer of fictional narrative. Finally, it sets out to do all this by way of an examination of Pearse, thereby, I hope, furthering our understanding of this historically important figure as well.

### **Emplotting nationalism**

Nationalism is not simply a set of beliefs or ideas.<sup>2</sup> It is equally, perhaps more importantly, a set of story structures that guide both understanding and emotional response. There are many such structures—organized and oriented by human emotion systems—that may be used to emplot national identification. The most prominent is the heroic structure. Specifically, heroic tragi-comedy is a cross-culturally recurring prototype with two components—usurpation and threat/defense—bearing on individual and in-group pride and the related desires for individual and in-group dominance. The usurpation sequence concerns the internal subversion and restoration of a society's legitimate governance. The threat/defense sequence concerns the conquest of the home society by an external enemy and the eventual restoration of autonomy. This is, so to speak, the default form of emplotment for nationalism, the form that, for example, serves to justify war. The structure involves numerous recurring components, including the celebration of martial valor that may lead to death, thus one form of self-sacrifice for the nation.

There are, however, conditions in which the heroic structure cannot readily be applied. If the nation is so thoroughly devastated that it cannot engage in direct military confrontation with an enemy—for example, in some colonial conditions—then it may be difficult to apply the heroic structure plausibly to the nation's current situation. In that

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<sup>2</sup> The following comments on national emplotments summarize the conclusions of Hogan 2009. For the arguments and evidence supporting these claims, the reader should consult that book. Support for the cross-cultural recurrence of the narrative prototypes is presented in Hogan 2004.

case, national emplotment may adopt other structures. It is important to note that, in these cases, the heroic structure is unlikely to disappear completely. Indeed, other structures are often, so to speak, embedded in the heroic structure. In other words, the threat/defense and usurpation narratives are commonly presupposed as broadly applicable to the national condition, even when another genre is used to emplot more local or immediate events.

Perhaps the most prominent of the alternative structures is sacrificial tragedy-comedy. In sacrificial emplotment, the society has been devastated due to some sin on the part of the populace as a whole or some representative section of the populace (e.g., the leadership). That sin has often been provoked by some enemy, a seductive or corrupting figure. (The obvious case of this—for a religious, rather than nationalist narrative—is Satan in the Judeo-Christian story of the Fall of humankind.) Social devastation may take different forms, but in (non-nationalist) literary manifestations it is often a matter of drought and famine. For this reason, real conditions of famine—which are not unheard of in politically devastated societies—are particularly likely to foster sacrificial emplotment. Whatever the nature of the social misery, the way to end the suffering is through sacrifice. Sacrifice in effect atones for the original sin and thereby allows the reversal of the national devastation. This structure draws on the motivation system of hunger (relating to the prototypical devastation of famine) as well as the more complex emotion of guilt.

There are two broad tendencies regarding the sacrifice itself. It may focus on the group or groups putatively responsible for the devastation. In that case, the (supposedly) guilty parties, the representative sinner and the seductive enemy, become the sacrificial victims. This is the *purgative* version. Alternatively, sacrifice may focus on the widespread, collective sin of the home society, in which case removing the guilty parties becomes impossible (often it would amount to self-genocide). In this case, it is precisely someone who is not guilty—an innocent victim—who takes on the guilt of the society. This is the *penitential* version of the sacrificial plot.

*Understanding Nationalism* includes an extended analysis of Hitler's nationalism as consistently developing a sacrificial emplotment, embedded within a frustrated heroic narrative (largely related to World War I). It also includes a developed treatment of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi too took up a sacrificial emplotment of nationalism and embedded this within a frustrated heroic narrative (in this case, bearing on British colonialism). The key difference in these two modes of emplotment was that Hitler adopted an extreme version of purgative sacrificial nationalism, whereas Gandhi followed a virtually pure form of penitential sacrifice. Hitler and Gandhi serve well to illustrate the difference between these varieties, representing as they do the most extreme versions of sacrificial sub-types. However, they are also for that reason somewhat unrepresentative.

A more typical case of sacrificial nationalism - involving partially heroic and partially purgative killings of the enemy as well as penitential self-sacrifice—may be found in Ireland. As a playwright and an important revolutionary leader, Pádraic Pearse is a particularly valuable figure to examine in this context. There are obvious ways in which

the 1916 Easter Uprising was bound up with a sacrificial emplotment of Irish national history and aspirations (as we will discuss in the following section). However, real historical events are always messy. They do not confine themselves to the structures imagined or intended even by the most powerful leaders. In Pearse's case, however, we encounter relatively pristine instances of his sacrificial nationalist emplotments through his fictional works.

### **Irish colonial politics and the sacrificial genre**

On Easter Monday, 1916, a few hundred people rose up in an insurrection against British rule in Ireland. The leaders proclaimed an independent Irish republic. They were defeated easily and executed. The uprising was a bloody and miserable failure. But the failure did not last long. Five years later, Ireland was a free nation. The uprising inspired the Irish people with a renewed desire for independence and a will to work for independence. Or, rather, the British reaction to the uprising did this—the executions, thus the martyring of the leaders. As Coffey (1969: p. 262) put it, “After the execution of the leaders, public opinion in Ireland swung sharply in their favor and in favor of the Republican cause” (for a fuller discussion, see Lyons 1973, pp. 375-77 and 381-82.)

Lyons (1979, p. 92) points out that the “rank and file” revolutionaries who went out on Easter Monday “may have hoped for some miraculous deliverance in the form of German aid” and thus may have had some hope of victory. But it is clear that “the leaders” had “no such comfortable illusion.” The proclamation of the Irish Republic (“The Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the People of Ireland” [in Coffey 1969, p. 27) was signed by seven revolutionaries. Three of them were poets—Pádraic Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, and Joseph Plunkett (Lyons 1979, p. 86). “The poets, especially, assumed that they would die in battle . . . for they shared a common myth” (Lyons 1979, p. 92). Lyons refers to that myth as “Messianism.” It is in fact a version of the cross-cultural sacrificial plot.

Specifically, the Easter 1916 poets saw the Uprising as a sacrifice that would renew Ireland and ultimately redeem the nation, ending foreign rule, and restoring sovereignty. The final sentence of the proclamation makes the point explicit, referring directly to “the readiness of [Ireland's] children to sacrifice themselves for the common good” (27). The word “sacrifice” here is more than a mere incidental metaphor. It suggests the story implicit in the authors' imagination of the Uprising, its motives, precedents, and consequences.<sup>3</sup> The word “children” too is suggestive, for it indicates that this is a sacrifice of the innocent. It also draws on the standard metaphor of the nation as mother, and the devotion of the people to the nation as a form of the devotion given by children to an aging parent.

It is surely no accident that the time of the rebellion coincided so closely with the major Christian feast celebrating the sacrificial narrative of Jesus and that it became known universally as the “Easter Uprising.” It was, in fact, initially planned for Easter Sunday itself. That was the date chosen by the Military Council, including Pearse and

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<sup>3</sup> Lyons infers that the author of the proclamation was Pearse (1973, p. 370).

most other signatories of the proclamation of independence. (The decision was made before Thomas MacDonagh joined the Council; see Lyons 1973, p. 342 and Porter 1973, p. 34.) It was postponed until Monday due to internal divisions among the Irish Volunteers (see Porter 1973, p. 34; the Irish Volunteers were a nationalist militia that contributed the bulk of the fighters in the Uprising [see Lyons 1973, p. 366]). Indeed, Lyons is right to conceive of this in terms of Messianism, for the sacrificial narrative here relies on a specific paradigm—the story of Jesus. A number of Irish writers took the story of Jesus as a model for understanding the condition of Ireland. Colonial occupation was like exile from the Garden of Eden. The martyrdom of patriots, willing to die for the freedom of their country, was parallel to the crucifixion. The major difference between the 1916 poets and others was that these poets seem to have taken the sacrificial narrative more seriously, and to have elaborated it more fully. They saw Ireland as having sinned and brought the suffering of colonialism on itself. They saw a “blood sacrifice” as necessary for the redemption of the nation (on the doctrine of blood-sacrifice among the 1916 revolutionaries, see Lyons 1979, pp. 89-92). They were sure that, if rightly done, such a sacrifice would indeed redeem the nation, just as Jesus’s sacrifice redeemed humanity. Observers recognized this connection. Within weeks of the Uprising, James Stephens—entirely an outsider to the events—set out the following comparison: “The day before the rising was Easter Sunday, and they were crying joyfully in the Churches ‘Christ has risen.’” On the following day they were saying in the streets “Ireland has risen.” He predicted that Ireland would not “ever again [be] buried” (v).

The sacrificial emplotment of national history, thus its formative contribution to the sense of national identity, appears to have had particular importance and persistence in Ireland. Lyons points out that even popular and religious novelists such as Canon Sheehan took up this work of fusing “nationalism and religion”—or, more properly, nationalism and sacrificial narrative. Thus, in his 1914 novel, *Kilmorna*, we find characters making such proclamations as the following: “as the blood of martyrs was the seed of saints, so the blood of the patriot will be the sacred seed from which alone can spring new forces, and fresh life, into a nation that is drifting into the putrescence of decay” (qtd. in Augusteijn 2010, p. 295). Lyons (1979, p. 91) argues that Sheehan was not setting out to express a new, revolutionary ideology. Rather, he was “an unconscious” follower “of the *Zeitgeist*” and “swimming with a current.” After the establishment of the Irish Free State, George Bernard Shaw looked back at the Easter Uprising and spontaneously drew on the standard imagery and metaphors of sacrificial narrative to characterize it: “Those who were executed . . . became not only national heroes [thus figures in a heroic plot], but the martyrs whose blood was the seed of the present Irish Free State” (qtd. in McHugh 1966, p. 361). It is worth noting that Sheehan and Shaw not only point to the importance of sacrifice. They also draw on agricultural imagery for the nation, in keeping with the most prototypical form of devastation in the sacrificial narrative (which, again, treats famine).

But why was the sacrificial narrative so important, so pervasive in Ireland at the time?

There were several reasons for this. The first was the condition of the country. In order to invoke a sacrificial narrative, the people must be seen as suffering. Again, the basic sacrificial narrative involves suffering through famine or epidemic disease. The nationalist version may and often does involve hunger or illness. But it almost necessarily involves suffering, first of all, from a loss of sovereignty, a loss of the in-group's status as a nation—thus an utter and apparently irreversible defeat in the invasion/defense sequence of the heroic narrative. In short, there is a complete loss of the goal of group autonomy, a shattering of pride, for the home society is thoroughly subordinated to a national enemy. In the worst cases, thus the most motivationally consequential cases, this domination may involve a threat to distinctive practical identity. (Practical identity is the set of competencies—from language to table manners—that allow people to interact in a society [see Hogan 2009, pp. 25-37]. It is the experiential particularity that is abstracted and generalized under the name “culture.”)

The loss of sovereignty was, of course, palpable in the case of Ireland. Moreover, according to Irish nationalists, the loss of sovereignty was leading to the gradual loss of (practical) identity, as Irish people began to lose touch with Irish language and Irish custom. Thus Pearse, in his “Graveside Panegyric on O’Donovan Rossa,” called for Ireland “not free merely, but Gaelic as well; not Gaelic merely, but free as well” (1966, p. 397). As is well known, many political nationalists in Ireland were active cultural nationalists, men and women who worked to preserve or restore Irish traditions. Pearse, for example, was “an enthusiastic member” of the Gaelic League (Lyons 1973, p. 333), which was devoted to the preservation and spread of the Irish Language (see Lyons 1979, p. 43), and an educationist who founded his own school to “instill into the rising generation a love for their own past, and for their language and literature” (Lyons 1973, p. 332).

On the other hand, the long-standing loss of national sovereignty and the creeping dissolution of practical cultural identity were not the only reasons for the importance of sacrificial narratives in Ireland. A further reason is suggested by Lyons’s emphasis on Messianism. The cultural centrality of the story of Jesus provided Irish nationalists with a sacrificial paradigm for understanding their condition and for formulating responses to that condition. Indeed, religion defined a crucial practical and, perhaps even more significantly, categorial opposition between the Irish and their English rulers. A categorial opposition is an opposition in identity categories, the rubrics that one takes to define oneself. Though in this case both groups were Christian, the nature of their conflict nonetheless tended to make religious identity categories (particularly “Catholic” and “Protestant”) salient, functional, enduring, oppositional, and highly affective<sup>4</sup> and to intertwine these religious identity categories with the national identity categories (“Irish” and “English”). (Note that the general principle holds even for Protestant Irish nationalists, who could hardly be impervious to the prominence of religious identity categories in the national conflict.) One result of this was that religious motifs became particularly salient for Irish nationalists. The most important of these motifs was Jesus’s redemptive self-sacrifice.

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<sup>4</sup> On the importance of these variables, see chapter two of Hogan 2009.

A final reason for the centrality of the sacrificial prototype is the national-historical prominence of “The Great Hunger,” the terrible famine of the mid-nineteenth century. Again, sacrificial narratives are, first of all and prototypically, narratives of famine. Certainly, many nations have experienced famine. Moreover, many have experienced famine as the result of colonialism. However, the Great Hunger of 1845-50 has had a particularly important place in Irish conceptions of nationalism. For example, it is no accident that Lyons’ standard history of modern Ireland is entitled *Ireland Since the Famine* or that Sinéad O’Connor, the Irish pop singer, wrote a song about contemporary Ireland attributing its current problems to, precisely, the Famine. In part, the prominence of the Famine in Irish nationalism is due to the fact that so many Irish people emigrated at the time. Thus many Irish-American families trace their links with Ireland back to the Famine. But the prominence of the Famine is not merely a matter of exile. The Famine was a crucial point of cultural transformation. In Ireland itself, traditional Irish customs, even the Irish language, declined rapidly after the Famine. The Famine marked the point where distinctive Irish practical identity came to be threatened, centuries after the loss of sovereignty.

### **Pearse and sacrificial nationalism**

Given these various factors, it is hardly surprising that sacrificial narrative assumed unusual significance in Irish nationalism. Of course, this does not mean that it was equally significant at all times and places in colonial Ireland. Nor does this imply that it was equally significant for all individuals. It was singularly evident in the writings and activism of Pádraic Pearse, “Commander-General Commander-in-Chief of the forces of the Irish Republic” (in the Uprising) and “President of the Provisional Government” proclaimed at the outset of the Uprising (McHugh 1966, p. 260). Pearse was obsessed with the story of transgression, collective punishment, and sacrifice. He almost always formulated the national question in terms of sin and redemption. For example, in his 1915 pamphlet, *Ghosts*, he chastised the constitutional nationalists for their failures--“How, he asked himself, had these men sinned, that they should have come to such impotence?” (Lyons 1973, p. 85). Specifically, he asked “Is it that they are punished with loss of manhood because in their youth they committed a crime against manhood?” Their main or general crime, Pearse indicates, was a betrayal of Ireland. However, Pearse also suggests a more particular crime--the betrayal of the Irish nationalist parliamentarian, Charles Stuart Parnell--for he goes on to ask, “Does the ghost of Parnell hunt them to their damnation?” (n.d, vol. I, p. 224; see also pp. 241-46, 255).

In keeping with his focus on the nation and sin, Pearse developed his nationalism in spiritual terms, emphasizing the special relation of Ireland to God<sup>5</sup> in a way that fit well with sacrificial emplotment. In part, this was personal, a matter of Pearse’s own longstanding commitment, as indicated by his statement that “When I was a child of ten I went down on my knees by my bedside one night and promised God that I should

<sup>5</sup> Kiberd (1995, p. 211) notes that Pearse “equated patriotism with holiness” and connected the “kingdom of God” with the “kingdom of Ireland.”

devote my life to an effort to free my country” (qtd. in McHugh 1966, p. 260). But it was also general, social. For example, the intellectual problem with the constitutional nationalists was that they “conceived of nationality as a material thing, whereas it is a spiritual thing . . . . They have not recognized in their people the image and likeness of God” (qtd. in Lyons 1979, p. 85). Unsurprisingly, the God that Ireland resembles, for Pearse, is Jesus: “the people itself will perhaps be its own Messiah, the people labouring, scourged, crowned with thorns, agonising and dying, to rise again immortal and impassable” (qtd. in Lyons 1979, p. 90). Of course, not everyone in Ireland would have to be sacrificed. (That would rather defeat the purpose of independence.) Thus Pearse distinguished between the rebels, who were identified more directly with the Messiah, and the people in general, as when he wrote “We must be ready to die . . . as Christ died on Calvary, so that the people may live” (qtd. in O’Connor 1975, p. 68).

Lyons (1979, p. 91) notes that “metaphors . . . of sacrifice recur in the speeches and writings of the last two years of [Pearse’s] life,” which is to say, in the period leading directly to the Uprising. A good example may be found in “The Coming Revolution,” published just before the period to which Lyons refers. In that article, Pearse made one of his most famous statements, one that clearly emplots nationalist activism in a sacrificial narrative: “bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing” (qtd. in Porter 1973, p. 60). Bloodshed is cleansing and sanctifying only in a ritual of sacrifice. The idea finds almost continuous expression in Pearse’s subsequent writings. In 1914, he referred to the death of the patriot, Robert Emmet, as a “sacrifice Christ-like in its perfection.” He went on to generalize the point, maintaining that “when England thinks she has purchased us with a bribe, some good man redeems us by a sacrifice” (qtd. in Porter 1973, p. 61). In his “Graveside Panegyric on O’Donovan Rossa,” delivered about eight months before the Uprising, he stated that “Life springs from death; and from the graves of patriot men and women spring living nations” (1966, p. 397). Just before his execution, Pearse wrote to his mother, urging her, “Do not grieve for all this but think of it as a sacrifice which God asked of me and of you” (qtd. in McHugh 1966, p. 262).

As these examples suggest, Pearse is a figure in whom we see with particular clarity the way in which nationalist activists may emplot national history and national identity and the way those emplotments are bound up with political actions. The Easter Uprising is inseparable from the sacrificial narratives that Pearse and others used to organize and understand Irish nationhood—its history, its present condition, and its possible future.

In the case of Pearse, this emplotment was elaborated in fictional form as well. Pearse not only wrote political tracts, but also literary narratives—nationalist literary narratives in which sacrificial emplotment figures prominently. Specifically, Pearse wrote stories, poems, and dramas. The dramatic work comprised “two three-act outdoor pageants, a three-act passion play, one short skit, and four one-act plays” (Porter 1973, p. 94). The pageants were drawn from Irish epic and have a heroic orientation. The passion play is a straightforward rewriting of one part of the primary Christian sacrificial narrative, the story of Jesus. The earliest one-act play, *losagan*, treats the salvation of an old man by a young boy. It is a spiritual tale, which relates to Pearse’s usual



preoccupations, giving the innocent youth a redemptive role. The skit, *Owen* concerns a young boy who discovers that his teacher is a rebel against British rule, and that he (the teacher) is about to be arrested. He alerts the teacher, who escapes. Owen stays behind to delay the police. In the subsequent encounter, he is killed. Though primarily heroic, this story stresses those elements of the heroic plot—particularly its celebration of self-sacrifice—that overlap with the sacrificial plot. The remaining one-act plays bear even more clearly on the sacrificial emplotment of national identity. We may consider them in sequence.

### **The King**

The first and most famous of these plays is *The King*. First written in 1912, it was revised for performance at the Abbey Theatre the following year. The play takes place in a monastery, thus establishing its religious orientation from the start. It concerns a king who has lost many battles—in fact, “every battle into which he has gone” (p. 51).<sup>6</sup> The link with Ireland’s many failed rebellions is only suggested, but inescapable for any reader or audience member familiar with Pearse and with Irish history.

Several boys discuss whether they would like to be the King. The superficial characters dream of ruling the land, but the hero, a “little boy,” “Giolla na Naomh,” meaning “the Servant of the Saints” (p. 46), feels differently. When asked whether he would “like to be a King,” Giolla na Naomh answers, “I would not. I would rather be a monk that I might pray for the King” (p. 50). This is a very striking dialogue. At one level, it may seem simply trite and pious. But it directly opposes the desire for social domination that animates heroic tragi-comedy, and thus most nationalism. It sets aside the idealized martial hero for something else. Though not clear at this point, the alternative proposed by Pearse is the idealized scapegoat of sacrificial narrative. This relates to the King’s repeated losses. In connection with Ireland, the contrast between Giolla na Naomh and the other boys begins to suggest that Ireland cannot win the battle against England by traditional means of heroism.

The monks enter. We learn that the King is at war once again. The First Monk explains that “it is a good fight that the King fights now, for he gives battle for his people” (p. 52). Here, the parallel with Irish revolutionary activity becomes clearer. But the First Monk wonders why the King always loses his battles. The Abbot responds that the King has sinned. He has committed the spiritual violation that leads to collective punishment in sacrificial narratives. Specifically, he “has shed the blood of the innocent . . . He has oppressed the poor. He has forsaken the friendship of God and made friends with evil-doers” (p. 52; note that forsaking the friendship of God and making friends with evil-doers, which is to say, tempters, are primary features of the prototypical sin in the sacrificial narrative—as, for example, the case of Adam, Eve, and Satan illustrates). The implication is that Ireland too has sinned, or at least Irish leaders have sinned, and their sins have led to the sufferings of the people. The point is developed in what follows.

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<sup>6</sup> This and subsequent quotations from Pearse’s plays refer to volume two of his *Collected Works* (n.d.).

Introducing the motif of sacrifice, and relating it to the model of Jesus, the Abbot predicts that the King will fail in this battle too for “It is an angel that should be sent to pour out the wine and to break the bread of this sacrifice,” not “an unholy King” (p. 52). The First Monk questions this, asking “Why must all suffer for the sins of the King?” The Abbot responds, “The nation is guilty of the sins of its princes. I say to you that this nation shall not be freed until it chooses for itself a righteous King” (pp. 52-53). The Abbot’s statement serves not only to rationalize this collective punishment. It does so in such a way as to re-enforce the link with Irish nationalism, for the Irish people choose their national representatives, while the “nation” does not choose its princes and king. Indeed, the Abbot’s statement seems to point toward something more specific—the Irish parliamentary nationalists (see Lyons 1973, pp. 301-11 on legislation regarding home rule in the year the play was written). Pearse may be suggesting that, as long as the Irish people give their support to this group, they will continually fail to achieve independence. In any case, the First Monk worries, “Shall women be mourning in this land till doom?” (p. 53). This question expresses a momentary feeling of despair—not a personal despair, but a sort of national despair, a despair over the possibility of national redemption, a despair very much in keeping with the abandonment of the heroic prototype and the substitute of a sacrificial prototype.

Here the discussion turns to the “music of the fighters” that “makes drunk the hearts of young men” (p. 54). Even the Abbot waxes lyrical over this “heady ale which all young men should drink” (p. 55). Here once more we have the standard heroic ambition. Giolla na Naomh undercuts this by explaining that he would indeed go into the battle—but only to serve the King “when all would forsake him” (p. 55). The Abbot realizes his mistake. “The child is right,” he says. “While we think of glory he thinks of service” (p. 55). Again, the idealized heroism of victory in battle is diminished and an alternative ideal is raised in its place. We are now beginning to see more clearly that this is an ideal of self-sacrifice. Giolla na Naomh does not wish to fight with the King when the King’s forces are strong and when they might win. He will join the king when everyone else abandons him, and thus when he is sure of losing.

The news comes quickly that the King has suffered yet another defeat. He enters, fully recognizing his sin: “It is I who have brought God’s wrath upon this land” (p. 57). He begs the Abbot to intervene with God, not on his behalf, but on behalf of the people. In connection with this, he expresses national despair, saying, “God has forsaken my people.” The Abbot responds with certainty that God “will save this nation.” However, God will do so only “if [the nation] choose a righteous king.” The King agrees immediately. But looking around, the Abbot cannot find any monk or any boy who will do. One by one, they all confess “I have sinned” (p. 58). But the boys tell him that there is one who is “sinless” (p. 58) and “innocent” (p. 59), Giolla na Naomh.

Like Jesus on his way to the crucifixion, Giolla na Naomh is “stripped of his clothing,” in this case to put on “the raiment of a King” (p. 61). The monks and the King kneel before him as their ruler, and he sets off to the war. The Abbot prays, “O God, save this nation by the sword of this sinless boy” (p. 63). The phrase suggests that Giolla na

Naomh will defeat the enemy by force of arms, that this will be a heroic narrative, perhaps akin to the story of David and Goliath.

But things do not work out that way. This is not a heroic plot, but a sacrificial one. The enemy is defeated; “They are scattered as a mist would be scattered” (p. 66) when the sun rises. But the child is dead. The King pronounces a eulogy over his corpse, explaining that “it is thy purity that hath redeemed my people” (p. 67). It is a highly prototypical version of the sacrificial narrative, where the idealized scapegoat dies to save his people—here in its nationalist version, where the people are saved by achieving their sovereignty and the form of the sacrifice is bound up with military conflict (due to the intrusion of the default heroic prototype). (Note that, though primarily penitential, this is not at all so purely penitential as Gandhism.) The political point, and its implicit relation to Ireland, are recapitulated in the final speech of the play, as the Abbot adjures those present, “Do not keen this child, for he hath purchased freedom for his people” (p. 67).

### **The Master**

Though it is not precisely a sacrificial plot itself, *The Master* deals with issues that derive directly from Pearse’s sacrificial emplotment of Irish national history. Like the skit, *Owen*, this play concerns a teacher and pupil. Here too the pupil’s purity is crucial, and it saves the teacher—though, in this case, the salvation is spiritual. The action takes place in ancient Ireland. Ciaran has been preaching Christianity. He is challenged by the King, Daire. Daire demands that Ciaran produce a sign from God. But Ciaran’s faith wavers. The innocent student, Iolann Beag, however, has such firm faith that he calls down an angel. Seeing this miracle, Ciaran dies, now certain of his faith. Produced in 1915, this play is most noteworthy for its development of Pearse’s own doubts about the nationalist sacrificial narrative.<sup>7</sup> It is, in this way, a play about Pearse’s own crisis of faith—not regarding religion *per se*, but regarding the religious version of national identity that he espoused and that would culminate the following year in the Uprising. When Iollan Beag asks if God’s angels will come to one who invokes them, Ciaran responds, “Yes, they will come.” But in an aside, he confesses his uncertainty. “Is it a true thing I tell this child or do I lie to him?,” he asks, adding “My spirit reaches out and finds Heaven empty” (p. 89). These are almost certainly the doubts that assailed Pearse himself as he called on his fellow Irish men and women to sacrifice themselves for the redemption of Ireland. In the prototypical story, sacrifice brings renewal—the rain falls on the drought-stricken land; crops grow again. But Pearse must have wondered if the sacrifice he was calling for would in fact beget national renewal and free Ireland, or would simply lead many young people to a tragic, pointless death.

In keeping with the central motifs of the sacrificial structure, Ciaran sees his doubt as a punishment for his own sin—the sin of pride, the characteristic sin of a warrior: “I thought that I was sacrificing everything, but I have not sacrificed the old pride of my heart . . . and God, that terrible hidden God, has punished me by withholding from me His

<sup>7</sup> Edwards (1978, pp. 232-233) notes that the play suggests political self-doubt on Pearse’s part.

most precious gift of faith” (p. 91). The connection with the heroic or warrior ethos is clear in the play, for Ciaran’s pride comes initially from the fact that he was always “first in all manly games” (p. 86). Here again we seem to see a criticism of the heroic emplotment of nationalism, and its replacement by a sacrificial emplotment. Ciaran’s inability to believe, to have faith, results from his continuing desire to achieve domination, the heroic goal. Like the secondary characters in *The King*, he has falsely concentrated on glory, when he should have devoted himself to sacrifice.

But heroic emplotment is not the only problem here. In keeping with the usual development of sacrificial nationalism, the play points to the fundamental sin of collaborationism as well. When Daire comes, he offers Ciaran a place in his government. This appears to suggest the parliamentary alternative to Pearse’s revolutionary activism. In other words, Daire offers Ciaran a way of achieving individual authority while putatively working in “the service of [his] people.” This would put Ciaran in the position of the parliamentary nationalists, who entered the British governmental system supposedly to work in “service” of the Irish people. The link is strengthened by fact that Daire’s primary opposition to Ciaran is religious; he opposes Ciaran’s Christianity. The motif of religious intolerance was bound to remind Irish readers and audience members of the English suppression of Catholicism in Ireland. Crucially, Ciaran’s response to Daire’s offer is a rejection of collaboration. He dismisses Daire’s offer, asking contemptuously, “You would bribe me with this petty honor?” Here Pearse seems to imply that the parliamentary nationalists have been bribed by the petty honor of entering British government. The connection becomes clearer when one recalls Pearse’s statement the year before that “when England thinks she has purchased us with a bribe, some good man redeems us by a sacrifice” (qtd. in Porter 1973, p. 61).

On the other hand, sacrifice alone is not enough. The play culminates in what must have been a painful admission for Pearse. He has Ciaran call to Daire “slay me,” explaining “I will bear testimony with my life” (p. 98). This is, in effect, Pearse’s real solution to the dilemma of his country—his own death. But Daire responds quite rightly, “What will that prove? Men die for false things, for ridiculous things, for evil things. What vile cause has not its heroes? Though you were to die here with joy and laughter you would not prove your cause a true one” (p. 98). In the context of Pearse’s own life and work, this is a moment of almost complete despair. There seems to be nothing that resolves the questions Pearse raises, questions that, if unanswered, threaten to undermine his entire work.

The crisis proceeds further still as Daire insists that he will kill Iollann. This, I believe, reaches the very crux of Pearse’s dilemma. Perhaps his sacrificial views will send out young boys such as Iollann to be killed by the British—and all to no purpose. The problem is resolved in the play when Iollann calls out for Michael, and the angel arrives. Daire accepts the angel. Ciaran sees the “Splendour” of the “Seraphim and Cherubim” who “stand horsed” (p. 100) as Michael is ready to lead the “Host of God” as its “Captain” (p. 99). Ciaran dies and the play ends.

Though superficially an affirmation of faith, the ending of the play is far from convincing. It seems more like Freudian wish fulfillment than resolution. It is very difficult

to believe that Pearse himself accepted the conclusion. Moreover, the point of Ciaran's death is unclear. Is it the required sacrifice? Is it a punishment? What are we to make of his final celebration of war and military "Splendour," given what has gone before?

### The Singer

Pearse's last and lengthiest play, *The Singer*, was scheduled to receive its first performance the week before the Uprising, but was canceled for fear that it would "jeopardize the planned insurrection" (Porter 1973, p. 151n.36). At least superficially, the play shows little of the self-doubt that pervades *The Master*. It is, rather, a straightforward national sacrificial narrative. It expresses Pearse's own commitment to sacrificial action on behalf of the nation, and urges the readers or audience members to engage in such action as well. The play concerns a singer, MacDara. It begins with his family—his mother, Maire ni Fhiannachta; his brother, Colm; and the woman who loves him, Sighle. They discuss how MacDara left seven years ago, banished from the place; we later learn that the banishment was due to his songs (p. 21). As in a number of Irish works, the mother suggests traditional Ireland. Sighle suggests contemporary Ireland. She loves MacDara deeply, and speaks of how "He put me into his songs" (p. 8)—but, of course, it must be Ireland that he put into his songs, for a simple love poem to Sighle would not merit banishment. The sacrificial motif is introduced almost immediately as well. In speaking of her love of MacDara, Sighle explains that "At Mass his face used to come between me and the white Host" (8-9)—this association with the Host is, of course, an association of MacDara with the Savior, whose self-sacrifice is commemorated in the Eucharist.

Here, the conversation turns to an imminent rebellion against the British. Sighle imagines the deaths of the young men in detail. She stresses Colm in particular: "Colm's hair will be dabbled with blood" (p. 9). Maire responds, "I am his mother, and I do not grudge him" (p. 10). Her statement connects directly with Pearse's poem, "The Mother" (beginning, "I do not grudge them; Lord, I do not grudge/My two strong sons" [in Edwards 1978, pp. 263-264]). The suggestion is that this uprising will be "a glorious thing," as "The Mother" has it. Indeed, returning to Sighle's images of death, we see that they are not simply terrible, but divine as well. Her description of the boys with "a red wound in their white breasts, or on their white foreheads" recalls Jesus, stabbed in the side by the Roman soldier (see John 19:34), his forehead torn and his hair, like Colm's, dabbled with blood, due to the crown of thorns.

Sighle goes on to explain that the boys are going out to fight "because a voice has called to them to right the wrong of the people." This is not simply a metaphor, the voice of the people. There is "a mountainy man" who has "set their hearts on fire with the breath of his voice" (p. 10). Colm enters and explains that they are waiting for a command to begin the uprising. He also explains that this great man, who inspires the people—"the Singer," as he is called—may be coming as well. Some of the other rebels enter and they compare the Singer to an angel (such as Michael in *The Master*) "or the Son of Mary Himself that has come down on the earth" (p. 17).

Just as they are speaking of the Singer/Jesus, MacDara enters. After the expected scene of reunion, MacDara goes off with his family and the remaining rebels speak. One asks why it was that MacDara was banished. Another explains, “Songs he was making that were setting the people’s hearts on fire”—in short, nationalist songs. The content of the songs confirms the association of Sighle with the nation: “They were full of terrible love for the people” (p. 21; recall Sighle’s comment that “He put me into his songs” [p. 8]). Referring to the frequent complicity of the Catholic Church with the colonial power, this character goes on to explain that “Some said there was irreligion in them and blasphemy against God. But I never saw it, and I don’t believe it.” Nonetheless, MacDara was threatened with both prison and excommunication (p. 21). Indeed, the suggestion here is that the Church itself has betrayed Jesus—for MacDara has already been linked with the Savior, and the Irish national cause has been tied to “the Son of Mary Himself that has come down on the earth” (p. 17). The Christ-like nature of MacDara is repeated on the next page. MacDara explains that “When my mother stood up to meet me with her arms stretched out to me, I thought of Mary”—recall that his mother’s name is Maire or Mary—“meeting her son on the Dolorous Way” (p. 24), thus going to his crucifixion.

One of the rebels then asks MacDara why he has returned home. Here, we have a curious passage that verges on the sort of self-doubt that filled *The Master*. MacDara explains, “I seemed to see myself brought to die before a great crowd that stood cold and silent; and there were some that cursed me in their hearts for having brought death into their houses.” With this vision, he feels that he must see his mother, his brother, and Sighle once again, for they would inspire him “to die with only love and pity in my heart, and no bitterness” (p. 25). In this context, the three people MacDara comes to see are not only individuals, but symbols of or metaphors for larger groups. His mother is, again, traditional Ireland, which has given him birth. His brother is the leader who goes forth to battle the English, whatever the odds. He stands for all the heroic fighters of Irish history. Sighle is, once more, Ireland today. These are what inspire MacDara. These are what allow him to follow through with his sacrifice. But, of course, there is a problem here. To say that these figures inspire MacDara “to die with only love and pity . . . and no bitterness” is not to say that they justify the deaths that he has brought into the houses of others. The question remains, to be answered at the end of the play.

The following pages develop the sanctity of the nation, even going so far as to displace religion *per se* with the sacrificial plot of nationhood. The first indications of this are mild enough, such as MacDara’s comment that “beauty like Sighle’s must be holy” (p. 27). This suggests a sanctification of the Irish people, and of the land itself, for Sighle is equally the population and the physical place of Ireland. Subsequently, MacDara discusses the task of the poet, identifying the ideal poet with the nationalist orator, and assimilating both to Jesus: “He must break bread to the people.” The poet must share the ordinary life of the people by sharing their food. But, more importantly, the poet must institute the Eucharist, specifically a Eucharist of the nation (“the people”). Moreover, the poet must, like Jesus after the last supper, sacrifice himself as well: “he must go into Gethsemane and toil up the steep of Golgotha” (p. 31).

This is all common enough. Pearse is simply using the story of Jesus to develop the role of the nationalist poet. Subsequently, however, MacDara proposes something more radical—the replacement of religion *per se* with the national sacrificial narrative. “Once, as I knelt by the cross of Kilgobbin,” he explains, “it became clear to me . . . that there was no God” (p. 33). He lives with his miserable “secret” (p. 33) for some time until he has a second, positive revelation. God, he says, finally “revealed His Face to me” and, as if he were Moses, told MacDara His name.<sup>8</sup> But it was not the Face he expected, and not the Name: “His Name is suffering.” The rebel to whom he is speaking does not understand. MacDara goes on, “I have lived with the homeless and with the breadless . . . the poor!” (p. 34). He has discovered “The people . . . suffering people: reviled and outcast, yet pure and splendid and faithful. In them I saw . . . the Face of God. Ah, it is a tear-stained face, blood-stained, defiled with ordure, but it is the Holy Face!” (pp. 34-35). Here, Pearse takes the common divinization of the nation and extends it to the point where it actually replaces divinity. Rather than being chosen by God, these people are God. It is a strange transformation within the sacrificial context, for one is left wondering what a sacrifice will accomplish. If the people are God, then who is being petitioned or placated by the sacrificial death, and who will set things right after the sacrifice? On the other hand, it makes the sacrifice absolutely pure, for it is now only an act of love for God, which is to say, the people, not a sort of bribe offered to an omnipotent deity.

As it turns out, however, Pearse does not seem to maintain this extreme view. The passage is hyperbole, intended to divinize the ordinary people as manifestations of God, as forms of Jesus. Indeed, at one level, it is extremely orthodox Christianity. It is the literalization of Jesus’s claim that he is identical with “the least of these brothers of mine” (Matthew 25:40 in *Jerusalem*). Specifically, Jesus asserted that when one gives drink to the thirsty, clothes the naked, welcomes the stranger, visits the sick and imprisoned—thus does good to the downtrodden people celebrated by Pearse—one does those things to Jesus himself.

From here, the play returns to the issue of the uprising. Colm is, again, a military leader, a hero in a heroic tragi-comedy. The enemy is marching, but there is as yet no word as to whether the rebels should act, for the messenger has not yet arrived. While MacDara is offstage, Colm argues that they should go out and meet the advancing troops no matter what. In true heroic fashion, he says that he will go “out the road to meet the Gall, if only five men of the mountain follow me” (p. 37). He receives little support from the other rebels, but heads out to fight anyway. MacDara re-enters, ignorant of what has passed. He tells Sighle that “Once I had wanted life. You and I to be together in one place always.” Once he had wanted to live with his beloved, beautiful, holy Irish people in the beautiful, holy land of Ireland. But now “I have to do a hard, sweet thing, and I must do it alone.” He is, of course, referring to the sacrifice, and he must do it this way, he explains, “because I love you” (p. 39).

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, even Moses was not allowed to see God’s face (Exodus 33:20); on the revelation of God’s name to Moses, see Exodus 3:13-14.

MacDara exits again and the focus returns to Colm, shifting from the sacrificial part of the plot back to the heroic. One of the rebels, Diarmaid, feels remorse that they allowed Colm to go out with a small group of men, facing certain defeat; “we should all have marched,” he says (40). When MacDara re-enters, Diarmaid recognizes him as the Singer. All present acknowledge MacDara as their leader. Here the sacrificial and heroic lines of the plot come together. The question is—how will they be resolved? Moreover, how will their resolution answer the earlier question regarding the justification of multiple deaths? (Note that this question arises with particular force when the sacrificial emplotment is neither wholly purgative nor simply penitential, thus neither confined to the putatively guilty nor limited to a purely innocent representative.) MacDara chastises the rebels, asking them “Why did you let him go out with fifteen men only? You are fourscore on the mountain.” He seems to be pointing toward a heroic narrative in which the united forces fight bravely in an attempt to defeat the enemy. Diarmaid speaks of strategy—they would lose no matter what, “We thought it a foolish thing for fourscore to go into battle against four thousand, or, maybe, forty thousand” (p. 43). These were precisely the arguments used against the Easter Uprising, the very arguments Pearse opposed in real political action.

Here, MacDara (or Pearse) changes the terms of the debate. He says that it is not for the sake of his brother or even for the nation that they should have gone. It is not for a heroic goal, aimed at victory. “It is for your own souls’ sakes I would have had the fourscore go, and not for Colm’s sake, or for the battle’s sake.” He goes on to make an even stranger comment, “the battle is won whether you go or not” (p. 43). The point is that the purpose of the battle is not domination through arms, but redemption through sacrifice. MacDara regrets that they have not gone because they will feel the shame of it forever. He says that it is a better thing to die in self-sacrifice than to live in remorse. This is also MacDara’s response to the accusation that he has brought death into the houses of many people. It is Pearse’s response to the accusation that he knows will be thrown against him—that because of him so many young people died before they had a chance even to live.

It is hard to say just what Pearse really thought of this response. As with the end of *The Master*, there seems to be an element of psychoanalytic denial here. Pearse is faced with the accusation—not only from others, but from himself—that he is leading a group of naive boys to destruction when they could have lived full lives. He responds by saying that this is their true spiritual fulfillment. He probably did believe this in part. Indeed, there is even some degree of truth in the idea that one hardly lives at all if one simply surrenders to oppression. But, of course, self-effacing submission and self-destroying sacrifice are not the only options. One can defend principles without committing suicide.

In any case, however much Pearse believed MacDara’s claims, a strange thing happens at this point in the play—a thing that has no parallel in Pearse’s own life and practical political action. Just after MacDara makes the comments we have been considering, a messenger enters announcing that Colm has died. Here, MacDara completely reverses his previous judgment—though in a way that preserves his central



point about sacrifice. Specifically, he says that, rather than everyone going with Colm, they should have kept anyone from going with him. He chastises them again, saying, “You should have kept all back but one” (pp. 43-44), explaining, “One man can free a people as one Man redeemed the world” (p. 44). This is a sacrificial narrative in its purest, penitential form. He insists that no heroic battle was necessary, only the willing death of a single scapegoat. Indeed, heroic battle should have been prevented in order to preserve the purity of that sacrifice. The play ends with MacDara making himself this sacrificial victim who eschews heroic combat. “I will take no pike, I will go into the battle with bare hands. I will stand up before the Gall as Christ hung naked before men on the tree!” (p. 44). He exits, “*pulling off his clothes as he goes*” (p. 44). The nakedness suggests his childlike innocence, the innocence of the idealized scapegoat. It also recalls the stripping of Jesus on the Dolorous Way. The implication is that his death will redeem Ireland and that no other deaths are necessary. Indeed, no other deaths are even permissible.

The ending is strange because it does not fit Pearse’s own actions in the Uprising that followed the first planned production of this play by only a matter of days. Indeed, there are in effect two endings to this play. The first shows MacDara chastising the men and explaining that a collective sacrifice in battle would have benefited them—a sacrificial emplotment, both purgative and penitential, and with significant heroic elements. The second shows MacDara repudiating a general sacrifice and thus entirely rejecting the heroic model—in order to replace it with a purely penitential sacrificial structure in which there is one Jesus-like scapegoat only.

I suspect that the first ending more accurately represented Pearse’s nationalist vision. It was certainly more in keeping with what actually happened in the Easter Uprising. He does not appear to have seen a single sacrifice as adequate to the nationalist task. In part, this was simply the result of history; there had been many sacrifices to that point and none had resulted in the redemption of the nation. But such a vision also derived from Pearse’s continuing attachment to heroic narratives. He never fully extricated the sacrificial from the heroic—a point related to his mixing of purgative and penitential forms of sacrifice. (On Pearse’s “emotional addiction to the heroic,” see Edwards 1978, p. 37.) This is unsurprising, given the fundamental or default status of the heroic emplotment for nationalism. On the other hand, as I have stressed, it seems that Pearse was also deeply uncertain about this mixed sacrificial narrative (combining purgative, penitential, and heroic elements). The plays suggest that he feared it was all a mistake, that collective sacrifice would be pointless. Consistent with this, Augusteijn (2010, p. 316) points out that Pearse experienced “moments of doubt” even during the Uprising itself. In *The Singer*, he resolved the dilemma by limiting the sacrifice to a single figure, a figure evidently representative of Pearse himself. In life, however, he did not have that option.

## Conclusion

As noted at the outset, I hope to have accomplished three things through the preceding analyses. Primarily, I hope to have presented a clear illustration of the operation of sacrificial emplotment in nationalism. In opposition to the cases of Hitler and Gandhi (examined in *Understanding Nationalism*), Pearse's version of sacrificial nationalism is more complex and, connected with that, apparently more ambivalent. As such, it is probably more representative of sacrificial nationalisms found elsewhere in the world (e.g., in some groups of Sri Lankan Tamil or Palestinian nationalists). This is related to another purpose of the preceding discussions—advancing our understanding of Pearse. I hope to have indicated the degree to which Pearse's nationalist thought was not simply a matter of a loosely applied metaphor of "blood sacrifice." Rather, it was linked with a widespread and extensively developed narrative genre. Pearse's work is both significant and revealing in this context because Pearse represented his nationalist emplotment relatively freely in his fiction while developing it practically in revolutionary action. This last point brings us to the third main purpose of the preceding reflections—to suggest the crucial continuity between nationalist imagination, on the one hand, and nationalist action, on the other. Pearse's sacrificial emplotment of nationalism was not confined to his fictions; it was borne out by his revolutionary politics. Moreover, his plays and other explicit emplotments of Irish anti-colonial nationalism must have had consequences for others as well. They undoubtedly impacted many of those who joined in the Uprising, who supported it indirectly, or who came to be committed Irish nationalists after it had occurred and the sacrificial victims (on all sides) had been killed.<sup>9</sup>

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