The day the news of Yeats’s death reached Dublin I was lunching with my mother’s sister, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington. Hanna was the widow of Frank Skeffington, pacifist and socialist, who had been murdered on the orders of a British officer, Bowen-Colthurst, in Easter Week 1916. She was not consistently a pacifist; she was an Irish revolutionary; Madame MacBride and Countess Markievicz were among her close political friends, Countess Markievicz being, however, politically the closer. Physically she looked a little like Queen Victoria and — a comparison that would have pleased her better — a little like Krupskaya. Mentally she was extremely and variously alert. Her conversation, when politics were not the theme, was relaxed, humorous and widely tolerant of human eccentricity; when politics were the theme she always spoke very quietly and economically, with a lethal wit and a cutting contempt for ‘moderates’ and compromisers. Hers was the kind of Irish mind which Yeats could call — when he felt it to be on his side — ‘cold’, ‘detonating’, ‘Swiftian’, or when — as in this case — it was not on his side, ‘bitter’, ‘abstract’, ‘fanatical’.

On this day I tried to tell her something of my generation’s sense of loss by Yeats’s death. I was genuinely moved, a little

1 An unpublished letter from Yeats to my father, dated October 1927, contains an extremely angry reference to her ‘ungraciousness and injustice’ in some controversy.
pompous, discussing a great literary event with my aunt, a
well-read woman who loved poetry.

Her large, blue eyes became increasingly blank, almost to
the polar expression they took on in controversy. Then she
relaxed a little: I was young and meant no harm. She almost
audibly did not say several things that occurred to her. She
wished, I know, to say something kind; she could not say
anything she did not believe to be true. After a pause she
spoke:

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘he was a Link with the Past.’

I had been speaking of the poet; she was thinking of the
politician.

At the time I thought this attitude exasperating and even
ludicrous. Who cared about Yeats the politician? What
mattered was the poetry; the fact that Yeats had been at sea
in politics — as I then thought — was irrelevant. Yeats the
poet was all-in-all.

This opinion was characteristic of my generation — which
is partly why I cite it — and, as that generation is now middle-
aged, it is now perhaps the dominant one. On re-reading
Yeats’s poetry, and some of his prose — and reading some of
the prose for the first time — I no longer think this opinion
quite adequate. I no longer believe Yeats’s political activities
to have been foolish or fundamentally inconsistent or his
political attitudes to be detachable from the rest of his person-
ality, disconnected from action, or irrelevant to his poetry.
His politics were, it now seems to me, marked by a considerable
dergree of inner consistency between thought and action, by
a powerful emotional drive, cautious experimentalism in
action, and, in expression, extravagances and disengagements
which succeeded one another not without calculation and not
without reference to the given political conjuncture of the
moment.

It is true that warrant — rather too much warrant — can
be found in his poetry for the conventional picture of the