

Black and White: the Balanced View in Yeats's Poetry

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YEATS'S collections of poems *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair* (1933) have for some time now been regarded as, in very general terms, presenting two conflicting responses to experience — the one dramatising the claims of the soul, and the other stating the rival claims of the body. But this tension of opposites, or the struggle to maintain an equilibrium between opposites, is by no means restricted to the relationship between those two volumes. Throughout the *Collected Poems*, in fact, one can constantly discern the fluctuation between statement and counter-statement within single poems, or between various groups of poems, as well as between whole collections (Yeats's frequent use of the self/anti-self pattern being the most obvious manifestation of it).

For present purposes, though, I wish to limit myself to a discussion of various instances of balance with reference to just two poems — "Easter 1916" and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."¹ I have chosen these particular poems because, though the conclusions arrived at in them are radically different, the poems are nevertheless similar enough in basic content to make a comparison worthwhile. Both, for instance, refer to twentieth-century historical events in Ireland (indeed, in each case we are confronted with the historical significance of the material in the fact that the titles are actual dates); yet both rely ultimately on a transformation into something of wider import of the political material which provides the starting point of the poem.

The Rising which is the ostensible centre of "Easter 1916," while occurring in the public arena, created a number of personal and artistic problems for Yeats. Inevitably, it brought up the whole dilemma of stance — the choice of commitment or detachment — in both artistic and practical moral terms. It exacerbated Yeats's sense of being divided in himself by forcing him to reconsider urgently in changed circumstances the old dichotomy between the man of action and the man of contemplation. Furthermore, it created a violent reality of street-fighting which clashed with the poet's own vision of enlightened Irish nationalism.

Yet he managed to handle the tensions; not by reconciling them, exactly, but by contriving to be on both sides at once, with the kind of honesty which allowed him to see the negative and the positive (the black and the white) simultaneously — the terrible side and the beautiful side of the "terrible beauty" which was born.

Essentially there are two Yeats's in "Easter 1916" (they might, perhaps, be labelled the self and the anti-self) — Yeats the man, involved in the everyday world, with his own fears and grudges and cynicisms; and Yeats the poet, who stands and looks on, who presides over the poem as a shaping influence (there is scarcely any need to draw the reader's attention to the bare strength of the diction and the regularly formal yet pliant verse structure, so typical are they of the mature Yeats). So we get the best of both worlds — the "passion" of active involvement and the "cold" visionary detachment of the contemplating artist. In "The Fisherman" Yeats says he hopes that

Before I am old
I shall have written . . . one
Poem maybe as cold
And passionate as the dawn. (*CP*, p. 167)

In the first stanza of "Easter 1916" the vivid faces of the people are balanced against the greyness of their surroundings in the mundane everyday routine of going home from work. The terrible beauty to come in the living

legend of the new Irish martyrs (Pearse and Connolly and the others) is balanced against the laughable blunders of Irish nationalism in the past, the "mocking [tales]" fit only to be told by a jester. The idealistic and the cynical voices are both there.

In stanza two the same pattern recurs — there is "good will," but there is "ignorance" too; there is the *mun-dane* (the statement that Pearse "had kept a school") and the high-flown ("had rode our winged horse"); there is the negative view of MacBride as a "drunken, vainglorious lout," but the positive vision of the man "Transformed;" there is the "casual comedy" of before, and (at least by implication) the far from casual tragedy of after.

Stanza three is more complicated though the basic format remains unchanged, as is emphasized by the close verbal balance between lines 8 and 10: adverb, verb ("Minute by minute they change")/verb, adverb ("Changes minute by minute"). Looking at what is said in this third part, one becomes aware of a tension established between movement and stasis: the stream moves while the stone stands still. But there is more to it than this, because both motion and stillness are ambiguous and both sides of the ambiguity, predictably, are elicited by Yeats. The movement (identified here with the natural world) is fertile and teeming as the moorhens call to the moor-cocks; but at the same time the clouds cast their shadows (possibly the shadow of death?) over the troubled stream: mention is made of "summer" but in the balance against summer is "winter." The stasis (the stone, which Yeats seems to have made into a symbol of the Irish nationalist cause) in positive terms represents the heroic intransigence and single-mindedness of the martyrs ("with one purpose alone"); yet stasis can be negative too — unnatural and sterile ("Hearts" turned "to stone").

Yeats's negative attitude to practical political involvement is so well known as scarcely to need further confirmation. It is perhaps interesting to note, though, that the

poem printed almost immediately after "Easter 1916" in the *Collected Poems*, "The Rose Tree," depicts what one might call the positive heroic side of the Easter Rebellion; while the following poem, "On a Political Prisoner," is probably the most famous of the poems illustrating the negative, debasing side of politics. This suggests that not only in the poem under present study but also in the collection as a whole Yeats is attempting to achieve a balanced response to the violent political realities of his time.

The last stanza of "Easter 1916" continues to give both sides of the coin at once. The main opposites now are clearly death and birth — not one nor the other, but both simultaneously. This is a crucially important point to which I shall return a little later. But first we should briefly look at instances of balance in the other poem under discussion.

"Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" again works by a complicated pattern of balanced opposites. It would be tedious, I think, to go through the poem exhaustively picking them out; so I shall here content myself with some of the more notable examples.

The first obvious balance is a structural one, between the long parts I and III and the short parts II and IV. In the recurring animal and bird references in the sequence of poems we see that the swan (representing the tranquil "solitary soul") is set against the weasel (representing animal violence).

The swan itself appears to have two aspects. On the one hand it suggests the contemplative poet, and possibly the mystery and beauty of his transcendent vision. In "The Wild Swans at Coole" the swans are "Mysterious, beautiful" (*CP*, p. 148). Their legendary faithfulness makes them a symbol of eternal constancy, as in Shelley's *Alastor* for instance (Shelley probably being the "mythological poet" in part III of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"). On the other hand, the swan appears to be trapped

in the transient world of time, doomed to the "brief gleam" threatened with extinction in the "approaching night:" and is, in fact, singing its "swan song." In another poem, just before "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" in the *Collected Poems*, Yeats refers explicitly to the swan song. Part III of "The Tower" begins, "It is time that I wrote my will" (p. 222), and then goes on to associate that action with the time when

the swan must fix his eye
Upon a fading gleam,
Float out upon a long
Last reach of glittering stream
And there sing his last song. (p. 223)

One notices in passing the verbal echo of the second line here in the "brief gleam" of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

To return to the latter, the "weasel's tooth" of today is balanced with a past time when "All teeth were drawn." Similarly, the "guardsmen's drowsy chargers" from the past (in part I) are set against the turbulence of the "dragon-ridden days" of the present when "the nightmare/Rides upon sleep" (also in part I), and the "violence of horses . . . running round and round in their courses" in part VI. The "dragon-ridden days" of current violence and ugliness in part I are counterpoised by the beautiful silk "dragon of air" created by the artistic dances of Loie Fuller in the nineties. Her civilised Chinese dancers at the beginning of part II are balanced by the "barbarous" dancers at the end of that part (who, moving to the "clangour of a gong," suggest a tribe of savages doing a war-dance). So the details go on, carefully arranged against each other.

On a slightly wider scale, one can detect various contrasted tones or voices: the elegist of that supremely beautiful line, "Man is in love and loves what vanishes," is set against the cynical satirist of "Come let us mock at the great:" the musing voice which "Compares the solitary soul to a swan" is balanced by the desperate and frenzied

voice which will "Shriek with pleasure if we show/The weasel's twist."

Most significant of all, though, is the balance of opposites achieved between the subject-matter of the poem and the shape it takes. Basically, the subject of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" appears to be the falling apart of things as the time for the second coming approaches (see "The Second Coming," *CP*, pp. 210-11). The seemingly timeless artistic monuments referred to in part I — "Phidias' famous ivories" and so on — have long since disappeared and the gyre winds on into mindless violence and chaos. But the shape of the poem is by no means mindless or chaotic: on the contrary, its regularity and shapeliness defy the flux from which it rises. The pull of despair in the material of the poem is counteracted by the bare strength of the poetic framework within which it appears: the darkness of the sentiment expressed is circumscribed by the clarity and life of the craftsmanship involved.

One might say that Yeats, in talking about the fall of monuments, has paradoxically built one of his own — the poem: he has achieved what he was later to call an "artifice of eternity" (*CP*, p. 218). In the ideal poetic process as Yeats seems to have seen it, elements were taken from the never-ending flux or vortex of experience, and through the poet's shaping technique rendered still, whole, and perfect, beyond the grasp of the gyres of history. As T. S. Eliot was to write in "Burnt Norton,"

Only by the form, the pattern,
Can words or music reach
The stillness.

This type of metaphysical justification for reliance on pattern (which, in view of the strong Yeatsian presence in *Four Quartets*, notably in part II of "Little Gidding," Eliot may well have taken partly from Yeats's work) perhaps helps to explain Yeats's unwillingness ever to try free verse when he came to "modernise" his technique halfway through his poetic career — though he was pre-

pared, of course, to find greater freedom *within* the overall perfect pattern of the "artifice of eternity." Certainly in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" Yeats needed the regularity of standard line-lengths to act as a counterpoint to the apparent anarchy of contemporary historical events.

So far I have limited myself to a study of the two poems separately; but I wish now to have a closer look at the last parts of both together. I have indicated already how each is made up of an intricate balance of contraries; and I want to move on from this to suggest that "Easter 1916" itself is balanced against "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen."

In "Easter 1916" the ritual is one of sacrificial blood-letting. In some ancient societies a ritual sacrifice was made at the end of winter so that the world would be reborn in Spring. Death and birth (rebirth) coexisted simultaneously in the same situation — as they do in the last stanza of "Easter 1916." Easter itself was originally a Spring festival, a celebration of the pagan goddess of dawn (Eostre) at the vernal equinox. Perhaps Yeats sees this particular Easter of 1916 as the turning point in Ireland's fortunes, the dawning of a new era, the rebirth of the old heroic Ireland. The "green" at the end of the poem, obviously the green banner of the Irish nationalist cause, may also be the green of natural growth in Spring (as with the symbolic figures of the "green man" in English folklore or the Green Knight who met Sir Gawayne). This might seem at first glance an unlikely reading of Yeats's poem; but it is confirmed in what Yeats has written elsewhere.

He himself briefly discusses Padraic Pearse and blood sacrifice in an article entitled "Modern Ireland: An Address to American Audiences."² More significantly, he explicitly develops the motif in a poem which closely follows "Easter 1916" in the *Collected Poems*, "The Rose Tree" (p. 206). In that poem he makes James Connolly speak of the need "to make the green come out again" on the Irish "Rose

Tree" after it has been "withered" by "a breath of politic words;" then he has Padraic Pearse conclude that

"There's nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right Rose Tree."

So "The Rose Tree" sets out the cure which is put into practice in "Easter 1916:" in the latter, a "terrible" ceremonial blood sacrifice has taken place which breaks the "spell" that had turned the heroes to stone, and transforms the grey, dead world of winter into the vivid "beauty" of Spring and new growth.

As part of this ceremony, the "polite meaningless words" at the start of the poem ultimately turn into a ritual incantation. When Yeats finally names the names of the heroes who had been part of the debased world of empty verbal social gesture at the beginning of the poem, we notice that

MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse

fit perfectly into the rhythmic structure and the rhyme-scheme of the poem ("MacBride" rhyming with "died" and "Pearse" rhyming with "verse" — the latter a perfect rhyme with Irish pronunciation, so I'm assured). The historical figures in an abortive political rebellion have been transformed by the poetic process into a part of Yeats's "artifice of eternity."

The transformation might be seen as a piece of magic, a verbal spell (what the surrealists would have called "l'alchimie du verbe") changing the men from one state to another. The ritual has very positive results: if there is magic here, it is "white" magic. This is important because, as we shall see, in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" there is a ceremony enacted at the climax of that poem too, but its result is highly destructive and the ritual is a "black" magic one.

When one reads through "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" one becomes aware that the build-up to its climax is remarkably ominous. The wind which has been blow-

ing intermittently through the poem from the first stanza of part III seems to take over towards the end like a malign force: it levels man's achievements to the ground, consumes "the good" with a shriek (an echo, surely, of the hellish weasel-like shriek of part IV), and turns into a "foul storm" to overwhelm the "good, wise or great."

As the poem develops, the images of violent circling become stronger and more anarchic. Early on, the circle of the moon pitches things about and the weasels trapped in the hole turn viciously on each other. The barbaric dancers circle like a gyre winding down into chaos. Then, later in the poem, as the heroes exhaust themselves milling violently round and round, the vortex movement becomes identified with the whirlwind which sweeps over the world as "Herodias' daughters" return. Herodias' daughters are related to the Irish Sidhe (who themselves, "rushing 'twixt night and day" ["The Hosting of the Sidhe," *CP*, p. 61] are perhaps related to the "nightmare" which "Rides upon sleep" in part I of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"). Yeats himself, in a note to "The Hosting of the Sidhe," wrote:

Sidhe is . . . Gaelic for wind, and certainly the Sidhe have much to do with the wind. They journey in whirling wind, the winds that were called the dance of the daughters of Herodias in the Middle Ages
(*CP*, p. 524)

This brings to mind a section of Eliot's great Yeatsian poem, *Four Quartets*. Section II of "East Coker" begins with a wintry passage which, in its increasing headlong pace and the uneasy chiming of its half-rhymes, suggests a rush towards disjunction and final chaos, "Whirled in a vortex" that destroys the "Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity/And the wisdom of age." One might think of the famous Poundian vortex too, perhaps, though this latter seems to generate rather more positive energy than do the vortices of either Yeats or Eliot here (see for instance Hugh Kenner's assessment in "Knot and Vortex," *The Pound Era*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1971, pp. 145 ff.).

In Yeats's poem, Herodias' daughters assume dominion over a scene of blindness and crazy anger in a "sudden blast of dusty wind" which voids the "labyrinth" of thought (previously — in part III — occupied by "secret meditation" in "art or politics") and makes all move "According to the wind," mindlessly and without positive direction.

But still worse is to come when the whirling movement ceases and the wind drops. We move into the eye of the tornado and are confronted by the arch-fiend of the drama. Robert Artisson moves forward into the lime-light, all attention riveted by the poet on this demon who is at the centre of things in the strife-torn world of 1919. The rather difficult last three lines of the poem are the description of the black magic ceremony which has transformed Ireland into a place for devils:

That insolent fiend Robert Artisson
To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought
Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks,
(*CP*, p. 237)

Robert Artisson, stupid, insolent and, as A. Norman Jeffares tells us, "of low rank," represents the mob of common people in modern Ireland who have caused chaos through their pillaging and killing.³ Lady Kyteler, a fourteenth-century woman of high birth, represents the Irish aristocracy of the early twentieth-century (one imagines Yeats is thinking of women such as Con Markievicz). Like the legendary lady, some of the aristocracy have carried on an illicit love affair with the forces of darkness, by embracing the cause of the proletariat and sacrificing to it their beauty (peacock feathers), strength and pride (the red combs of the cocks). This is an extension of the criticisms levelled at Con Markievicz earlier, in stanza two of "Easter 1916" (*CP*, p. 203), and in "On a Political Prisoner" (*CP*, pp. 206-07).

The leaders of the community have turned themselves into "coxcombs" or fools (which possibly reminds us of the "casual comedy" and the jester's "motley" of "Easter

1916.") Ireland has become a place where "evil gathers head" and there seems to be nobody to stop it. The country has been taken over by blind violence ("all are blind"): the showiness of the peacock feathers is hollow, for the "eyes" on them are as sightless as the eyes of Herodias' daughters.

The reference to peacocks may have further significance. In part IV of "The Tower," the scream of the peacock acts as an annunciation for some kind of ultimate revelation. Yeats himself wrote in *A Vision*,

A civilization is a struggle to keep self-control. . . .
The loss of control over thought comes towards the end;
first a sinking in upon the moral being, then the last
surrender, the irrational cry, revelation — the scream
of Juno's peacock.

Certainly much of this would apply to "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" (as well as to "The Tower"), but with *negative* implications, I suggest. There is an ultimate revelation, perhaps — but of disaster; there is a surrender to the irrational — but only to the irrationalism of animal violence; there is a loss of control over thought — but it is replaced only by the anarchic wind blowing through the vacant labyrinth. It seems that because of the symbolic sacrifice of the peacock feathers, modern Ireland has been turned into a place of darkness and emptiness.

So, as with "Easter 1916," there is a transformation at the end of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen;" and it is "terrible" too, but *not* beautiful. The positive magic of the earlier poem is now set against the dark powers that invest the later one (just as the political promise and idealism of the Easter Rebellion were tempered by the growing incidence of atrocities committed in Ireland both for and against the nationalist movement in 1919).

Yet, though this later poem may seem an essentially negative work in content, one still has to bear in mind (as I suggested earlier) the artistic structure in all this. Yeats is not like, for instance, the Surrealists, who often succumbed to hysteria in the process of dealing with it

artistically. As a poet he never succumbs; but always maintains tight technical control over his material. This is manifested clearly in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" in the deliberately reiterated references to what George Barker was in the thirties to call "the violent spinning of things:"⁴ though the subject suggests chaos, the controlled repetitions rising to the climax of the appearance of the daughters of Herodias in the whirlwind emphasise a presiding technical expertise and order. That is, the topic may be anarchy, but the treatment is anything but that. The preoccupation may be (as Yeats said in "The Fisherman") a vision of

The beating down of the wise
And great Art beaten down; (p. 167)

but the statement itself is a triumph of art.

It is surely this perception of structure which saves the poetry from total despair: one can be reconciled to destruction and degeneration if one sees it as part of a larger movement, part of an ultimate pattern⁵ — in this case, perhaps, the pattern of the gyres (whose presence in the poem is itself positive even if referentially it is the negative side which is emphasised); and certainly the pattern of the work of art as it makes from the flux an "artifice of eternity."

The use of reference to legendary figures (Artisson) and mythic ones (Herodias' daughters) to dramatise or symbolise current political reality — as well as the mention of "the circle of the moon" and "the Platonic Year" — also suggest a wider context in which to view the depressing political situation: one might say, as did Eliot, that these provide a mythic context. Eliot spoke of a "mythical method" which was

a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious⁶

What Ezra Pound called the "repeat in history" and the "subject-rhyme"⁷ are also present in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" — the former implicitly at the end of the poem, when Con Markievicz's allegiance to the mob is suggested by Lady Kyteler's bargain with Robert Artisson: and the latter throughout, in the circle of the moon, the whirling dancers, and the ride of Herodias' daughters in the tornado. Perhaps, like Pound in *The Cantos*, Yeats has here written a poem "including history."⁸ So as a final balance in Yeats's poetry, one has the ephemeral everyday experience juxtaposed with, and often even coinciding with, archetypal experience: the world of historical, linear time balanced against the world of cyclical recurrence.

NOTES

¹*The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* [CP] (London: Macmillan, 1950), pp. 202-05 and pp. 232-7. My references to Yeats's poetry cite this edition.

²Published in *Massachusetts Review*, 5, no. 2 (Winter 1964), 265.

³A Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 280-81. See Jeffares' quoted reference to "a certain evil spirit of low rank, named the son of Art [Artisson]" to whom are sacrificed "nine red cocks and nine peacocks' eyes."

⁴*Calamiterror*, Faber and Faber, London, 1937, p. 37.

⁵One is again reminded of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The famous divebomber scene of part II of "Little Gidding" also deals with immediate violent destruction placed in a wider perspective of order. Though Eliot's transfiguration of reality is here more apparently optimistic in content than is Yeats's, nevertheless the two seem closely parallel in artistic approach.

⁶"Ulysses, Order and Myth," *The Duel*, 75, no. 5 (Nov. 1923), 483.

⁷See *The Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 285.

⁸"Date Line," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 86.