

History and Myth in Yeats's 'Easter 1916'

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YEATS wrote his *Easter 1916* in the September of that year, over three months after the execution of the leaders of the uprising; and this time-interval—long enough for the event's implications to be deeply pondered, too brief for any hard historical conclusions to be drawn—is crucial for the poem's emotional structure. Like many mature Yeats poems, *Easter 1916* combines confidently affirmative statement with a candid confession of painfully unresolved ambiguities; the point of the ballad-refrain is to create a framework within which a rhetorical firmness can be played off against the terse, shifting notations of conflicting, even contradictory, attitudes:

What is it but nightfall?
 No, no, not night but death;
 Was it needless death after all?
 For England may keep faith
 For all that is done and said.
 We know their dream; enough
 To know they dreamed and are dead . . .

Like other Yeats poems also, the business of the poetic language is to separate, clarify and define, rather than cryptically conflate, the ambiguous feelings it handles. The ambiguities belong to the historical experience, as it were, rather than to the language which records it; and to this extent the purity of the poem's diction (as often in Yeats) suggests its capacity to stand over against, and take the measure of, the fluctuating complexities of the recorded event and its confused aftermath. This is not to suggest that there aren't points at which the confusion infiltrates the poem's own language, as I hope to show; rather that the decisive tone of the poem is established by its strategy of admitting the presence of complexities while simultaneously fending them off, either muting them to a disturbing

resonance just beneath the poem's surface or gathering them into the affirmative statement.

This tension between the achieved poise of the poetic act, and the blurred, unfinished business it presents, is central to the poem's meaning. *Easter 1916* is, evidently enough, the creation of a myth: its aim is less to comment analytically on the dead rebels than to 'write (them) out in a verse', so that what matters is the ritualising act of the art itself, defining its own limits and setting its own terms. In this sense, a refusal to pursue critical analysis which might undermine the myth can emerge as decorous—proper to the *genre*—rather than as cautiously evasive; Yeats can turn his own political reservations to poetic use, inserting qualifications which make their point but leave the elegiac balance undisturbed, since the death of the rebels has in any case rendered them irrelevant. Since the executions have prepared the ground for transmuting history into myth, replacing unresolved complexity with distanced finality, the English themselves have conveniently rendered further questioning redundant. The poem's language is thus not forced to be more uncomfortably specific in its moral criticism of the rebels, since there is properly nothing to be specific about—nothing, after the deaths, left to analyse:

We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse—
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

The urgent question raised in the third and fourth lines is neither answered nor evaded; the possibility needs to be entertained, but the movement of the poetry, intent on

passing beyond shifting historical uncertainty to the permanent stillness of myth, can take it easily in its stride, neither over-emphasising nor underplaying its significance. It is important for Yeats's *general* doubts about the reliability of revolutionary emotion, and the relation of these doubts to his total attitude to the Irish situation, that the issue should be raised; but in the particular case of the executed rebels it can be courteously waived, if only because the answers are quite literally no longer important. This tension between a general attitude, and one particular to the dead leaders, is central to the poem: for if the affirmative feelings are directed on the whole towards the dead, the hesitations relate to the general historical context they have abandoned. In this sense, by separating the rebels from those historical doubts—or, more exactly, by exploiting the fact that the English have severed that connection by executing them—an affirmation of the rebels is possible which is in fact more limited in its general application than the poem's tone would in part suggest.

As a piece of myth-creation, then, the poem is able to create its own reality, gathering and distancing the dead into the artifice of mythology; yet it does so with an uneasily analytic eye on the course of an objective history external to itself: the loose ends and incalculable effects of the uprising itself, still too contemporary an occurrence to be controlled and finalised within the poem's own art. From one viewpoint, the poignancy of *Easter 1916* lies in its bold decision to mythologise the dead before the objective validity of that action—the assurance that it is more than subjective—can be historically confirmed, and to do so in full awareness of the risks and exposures involved: risks and exposures which, by courting the possibility of a rash prematureness, reflect the problematical character of the uprising itself. Yeats, bitterly certain that he had lived where motley is worn, has already been badly caught out once, forced into a humiliating *volte face*; the courage of the poem lies not merely in admitting a reversal, but in risking another. From another viewpoint, though, that exposure is by no means unmitigated: there are senses (more subtle than the striking oxymoron of 'terrible

beauty') in which the poem covers itself defensively from the pitfalls of premature commitment:

I write it out in a verse—
 MacDonagh and MacBride
 And Connolly and Pearse
 Now and in time to be,
 Wherever green is worn,
 Are changed, changed utterly . . .

The gathering crescendo of that first line promises a pregnant insight; yet the subsequent statement says much less than it appears to. What it actually says is that the heroes are changed and will be so for all time—but only, as the lines stand, in the platitudinous sense that every historical truth is true for all time. It is only the crucial reference to the wearing of green (ringing a change on the first stanza's 'motley') which implies that the transformation will be *fertilising*: received and lived out in the future. And this meaning, which the rhetorical resonance invites one to read in while simultaneously withdrawing any substantial evidence, must be played off against the literal sense of the lines, which promises and prophesies much less. That local ambiguity draws its force from one of the poem's more comprehensive paradoxes: the fact that what it asserts as utterly permanent is, ironically, a change. Death, in a fruitful ambivalence, is both transformation and finality; and a 'permanent change' can mean either one which brings you to a finalised, unalterable condition, or one which will be perpetually re-created in its effects. The lines quoted above say the first while hinting at the second: in this way the poem covers its losses under the shield of its rhetorical tone. 'History' and 'myth'—the real, unpredictable upshot of the events and the urge to draw them in the present, despite that worrying aftermath, into an achieved permanence—stand in uneasy interrelation; a sharp historical consciousness is retained, but also played off against the moral imperative which motivates the poet to mythologise the event now, in generous inattention to historical contingency. In its combination of a shrewd

historical sense with a boldly affirmative impulse which cuts self-sufficiently through history's mere complexities, the poem reveals a characteristic duality in Yeats's general sensibility. Moreover, both 'historical' and 'mythical' perspectives share a similar quality: both in their different ways distance the recorded event, the first by hinting at its relativity and therefore qualifying any over-eager claim for its centrality, the second by removing it from the realm of temporal contingency into the shadowy dimension of eternal achievement. In this sense, there is a quality of essential detachment inherent in the mythical treatment itself, carried over, as it were, from Yeats's prudent historical hesitations; and in this way a glorification of the dead can be achieved without an unreserved commitment to their *historical* importance.

This two-fold tendency—the mythical affirmation and the counterpointing historical uneasiness—emerges most clearly in the subtle changes rung, just beneath the poem's surface, on a set of key-notes: dream, drama, art, illusion, reality. The poem's opening lines juxtapose the heroic mythology of 'vivid faces' with the familiar realities of 'counter and desk'; yet the issue refuses to resolve itself to a simple counterposing of former illusion and present truth:

I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn . . .

'They' in that ninth line may refer either to the rebels with whom the poet has spoken, or to the club-companions; in either case, the interchanges of artifice and reality are interestingly complex. If 'they' refers to the companions, then the 'motley', it would seem, is a gesture outwards to

the rebels: their posturing theatricality, the sceptical Yeats believed, shared in, as well as reacted against, the brittle unrealities of the clubmen's blandness, in a counterpointing of neurosis and complacency. Yet if the rebels pose histrionically behind assumed masks, so does the less-than-candid Yeats who exchanges polite conversation with them while conscious of his jeers (in an equally artificial club setting) behind their backs. Again, if 'they' refers to the rebels, then the motley perhaps attaches more closely to the clubmen themselves: the implication then may be that it is the shallowness of Ireland, rather than the rebels' own ideals, which renders them ludicrous. Both meanings seem present: it is, at any rate, not clear who wears the motley, and Yeats, through the ambivalence of that 'they', is stranded at a confused point between a common (if critical) front with the rebels against pervasive foolery and a contemptuous alliance with the clubmen against them.

The *certainty* that motley is worn has now, of course, been radically undermined, as utopian dream converts in part to historical reality; yet the poem's language still insists on the elements of illusion within the new creation:

This other man I had dreamed
A drunken, vainglorious lout.
He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart,
Yet I number him in the song;
He too has resigned his part
In the casual comedy;
He too has been changed in his turn,
Transformed utterly . . .

The previous judgment on John McBride is both formally retracted ('*dreamed*') and restated: the old assumptions were—*must* have been—delusions, yet the fact of the 'most bitter wrong' still stands, to qualify the thoroughness of the transition. The new events have revised previous history, but not so much by showing it in a different light as by breaking to a new level which both leaves it intact and renders it redundant; and in this sense history seems both

cancelled and preserved by what has happened, in a disorientating merging of perspectives. Thus, no such similar confession of former misapprehension is extended to the case of Connie Markievicz, whose previous image ('What voice more sweet than hers/ When, young and beautiful,/ She rode to harriers?') still resists the necessary revision; and McBride, in any case, seems to have resigned from the casual comedy, disengaged from artifice and illusion, only to assume the alternative dramatic role-playing of revolutionary heroism. He is 'changed *in his turn*', ritually exchanging one mask for another ('motley' for 'green'); and the passive verb distances and qualifies the personal character of the transformation, allowing him the objective glory of martyrdom while staying quiet, uncommittedly neutral, about the personal change which he may have actively achieved, as a moral agent, in the process.

The upshot of this sense that events have passed not only from illusion to reality but also, confusingly, from one dramatic artifice to another, is that reality itself seems dissolved rather than consolidated by what has occurred. The relations between dream, history, myth and drama are deeply obscured: if pre-uprising history was dream and complacent artifice, present history seems at once more and less 'real' than what went before—the concrete enactment of a vague utopian vision, an intersection of dream and reality which seems to have had the disturbing effect of disembodiment both. Isolated from their historical consequences, the deaths of the leaders are indubitably substantial: the only substantial fact, indeed, on which Yeats can go to work. Yet they are also, in their way, a 'disembodiment', a dissolution and negation; and this, even more sharply, is how they appear when they are returned to their historical context. If the events in question have the undeniable solidity of stone, it is stone grasped in terms of its blurring, dissipating, de-realising effect on the living stream of history:

Hearts with one purpose alone
Through summer and winter seem
Enchanted to a stone

To trouble the living stream.
 The horse that comes from the road,
 The rider, the birds that range
 From cloud to tumbling cloud,
 Minute by minute they change;
 A shadow of cloud on the stream
 Changes minute by minute;
 A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
 And a horse splashes within it . . .

The subjective illusion of 'enchanted' is fused with the hard objectivity of 'stone': the event is at once irreducibly concrete and rapidly elusive. What the stone symbolises is human *hearts*, a living historical action; but, at least by the end of this stanza, 'stone' stands in a similar relation to 'heart' as myth stands to history, emerging from it organically, yet also, in its transmuting of turbulent feeling to impersonal stillness, opaque and remote, difficult to dissolve back into human realities:

The long-legged moor-hens dive,
 And hens to moor-cocks call;
 Minute by minute they live:
 The stone's in the midst of all.

The stone's symbolic reference to human agency ('hearts') has now been muted, leaving it a disconnected, autonomous, impenetrably mysterious object within the stream. It is the sheer, uninterpretable fact of its inert, depersonalised presence, its immovable, bruise-like insistence within the living flesh of Ireland which these lines stress, dislocating it from the human reference with which it was introduced. By the end of the stanza, the stone can be related back only with an effort to the hearts it symbolises, as the new image of McBride is both a growth out of, and radically discontinuous with, his former state.

The point of the overall metaphor of the stanza is to sustain this duality of vision: to urge at once the living process of the event ('history') and its strange, stone-like inscrutability ('myth'). Thus, the imagery of stone and

stream 'naturalises' the disruptive rebellion, transmuting it effortlessly to an organic disturbance within the texture of a known landscape; but by the same token it distances and depersonalises what has occurred to an elusively obscure process which can be registered rather than understood. The metaphor, that is, dignifies but also withdraws the historical experience, gracing and stylising the bloody events while holding them simultaneously at arm's length. It achieves simple definition at the cost of a calculated externalisation; and to this extent it evokes feelings of alienness and naturalness together. Both qualities fuse in the word 'stone', but they co-exist less satisfactorily in the stanza as a whole. Thus, reality has been dissolved and perhaps re-ordered by the new events, yet the precise relationship between 'stone' and 'stream' is surely vague. The stone 'troubles' the stream, but also lies inertly at its heart: it acts *on* the stream, stirring and disintegrating its waters, yet the end of the stanza ('The stone's in the midst of all') also insists on imaging it as a reality in itself, bluntly present but stolidly inactive. That there is a real ambiguity here is evident enough in the verbal shift from 'Minute by minute they (horses, rider, birds) *change*' to 'Minute by minute they (moor-hens) *live*': the first image envisages a landscape pervasively altered by the stone-created ripples, whereas the second seems to point up the mysteriousness of living processes which *persist* in their usual modes of being despite an 'objective' change of context. The ambiguities of real history—has the event changed anything or not?—here infiltrate the poem's own language: the simple nature images, which seemed a way of controlling, perhaps 'domesticating' the experience by rooting it in a familiar landscape, turn out to be ways of suggesting, but not adequately tackling, the complexity of what is at stake. The stone seems both to have metamorphosed the natural process and left it curiously intact, in a way which evokes the previous ambiguous relation between history before and after the uprising; and the joint effect of these two perspectives is to hint at a real change which is nevertheless too deep-seated and all-embracing to be concretely localised. The poem's own imagery is certainly unable to

do more than feel after it, deploying 'objective' metaphor which promises, but fails, to 'objectify'. The change is pervasive enough to be insubstantial; and the persistence of the moor-hens' calls places an implicit question-mark over that substantiality, intimating a *contrast* between enduring natural reality and short-lived political turmoil which directly reverses the main tendency of the stanza's general metaphor: its *integration* of 'politics' into 'nature'. A stone which disturbs running water is in one sense 'natural' (part of the landscape), in another sense an interference with nature; and the inherent ambiguity of the image reflects Yeats's conflicting attitudes. Similarly, the stone's coldness and hardness is vividly evoked, but also softened by the appealing implications of 'enchanted'; and if the image of hearts turned to stone criticises the 'fanaticism' of the rebellion, it also suggests, more sympathetically, the stilled hearts of the executed leaders.

This set of ambiguities relates to a more general hesitation in the stanza: the question of whether the transformations at issue are 'subjective' or 'objective'. If the changes in horse and rider are subjective, part of a troubling inner disorientation projected onto the scene, the shifting of birds, clouds and shadows are objective enough; and the difficulty is to grasp the point of their close juxtaposition. The relation, in fact, is not successfully clarified: the stanza moves cryptically from images which suggest disintegrating illusion to a sense of routine objective flux, thus presenting that flux as both alien disturbance and organic continuity. Thus, the anxious sense of a dissolving reality is checked by an emphasis on change as natural and cyclical; but equally, that natural cycle is caught up into, and by implication made to share in, the dissolutions of the first, 'subjective' set of images. The poem, in other words, is radically uncertain in its choice between seeing a subjective loss of stability as no more alarming, and no less organically inevitable, than objective natural change, and, more gloomily, implying that natural reality is itself damagingly undermined by the human alterations which have taken place. So the absorption of history into nature cuts both ways:

it graces and naturalises the unfamiliar, but only at the cost of rendering nature itself alien.

If the relation between the 'subjective' and 'objective' is imprecisely achieved here, however, it is put to powerful effect elsewhere, in the poem's 'Are changed, changed utterly' refrain. The phrase is, of course, grimly ironic: it refers at once to the mythical transformation which the rebels have undergone in the eyes of the Irish, and to the historical fact that the English have converted them into corpses. Here 'subjective' and 'objective' meanings forcefully interlock, defining a single event. Yet the poem's characteristic tension persists within this unity: for if its objective aspect points to failure, its subjective meaning suggests heroic achievement. 'Utterly' evokes in the same breath the tragic finality of the rebels' death and the gloriously unalterable completeness of their new signification. The passive verb 'are changed' both qualifies and celebrates: it deprives the rebels of personal, self-creating autonomy by insisting (with an echo of the poem's general imagery of dramatic artifice and role-playing) on the thoroughness with which they have been reduced to the manipulated puppets of uncontrollable historical forces; yet it simultaneously exploits this victimised depersonalisation for the mysterious impersonality of heroic myth. In this way, it can transplant the dead from the contingencies of history to the inviolable security of myth without allowing the central historical fact of their failure to be lost sight of.

The dialectic of history and myth in *Easter 1916* has a peculiar relevance to Yeats's own complex relation to the events he records, and it is worth adding a final comment on this. One major element of that relation is guilt; yet the guilt is not simple. To have been *certain* that motley was worn was, after all, to have had at one's disposal an evaluative perspective which went beyond the blindnesses of others, and out of which the confident judgment on the 'motley' could be made; and in that sense Yeats can defend himself from a charge of *mindless* complacency, in a way which both provides a precarious bridge to his present, revised attitude and saves him, if not from guilt,

then at least from accusations of opportunism. The guilt, then, springs from seeing one's own jettisoned idealism tragically revived by others; and to that extent the poet is both external to what has occurred and yet has a title to participate, recognising the relation between the rebels' motives and his own discarded hopes. Yeats's own participation in the event is, of course, the poem itself: his 'part' in the drama is to transform it to permanence by ritually invoking the names of its protagonists:

O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name on name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild . . .

The mother's naming is both purposeless (the child sleeps, unconscious of her presence) and yet an intimate benediction; she is excluded by the child's sleep, reduced to a merely external presence, yet the child is of her flesh. Through this image, then, Yeats confesses his own guilty estrangement from contemporary history at the same time as he obliquely claims a kind of maternity, acknowledging the uprising and its aftermath as the alien children of his own idealism. In a parallel way, the 'myth' of the poem both creates, and yet is subservient to, the historical material with which it deals. The naming (a murmuring, in any case, rather than an affirmative chant) must follow on the real history, when the wildness has wound itself out into deathly sleep; yet although in this sense myth merely revives and re-creates a history already finished and done with, the contrary implication—that event *becomes* history by the power of art and myth—is also active, providing the artist with a self-consciously restricted yet centrally significant role. The act of naming is both a passive recording of objective reality and a way of having it on one's own, creative and subjective terms; and this interaction between terse transcription and assured personal declaration sets the poem's tone. Thus, the weighty rhetorical confidence, in the case of McBride, of 'Yet I number him in the song' (a

confidence firm enough to imply that the possibility of actually *rejecting* McBride from the poem lies within the poet's own free choice) co-exists with the modest, limited artistic purpose which the line actually defines. Myth, art and illusion grow out of historical reality and conform to its pressures; yet reciprocally, a dream has created an event: and with this assurance behind it, the poem can generate its own myth with genuine, if qualified, confidence in its efficacy.

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