“Of what is past, or passing, or to come”: Engaging Yeatsian Temporality in “Easter 1916”

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Abstract This article examines W. B. Yeats’s “Easter 1916” through an interpretative lens of Yeatsian temporality and discusses how such a lens maps the ways in which Yeats commemorates the Easter Rising by both questioning and affirming it — how to elegize the same people who had up to then been the object of his contempt and how to revise the ways in which he was making sense of contemporary Ireland. To that end, I first look into how the modernist temporality as belated reinvention of the archaic and the classical order meets up with the Yeatsian “belatedness” deeply rooted in the Irish literary tradition. I ultimately explores how the two voices, embedded within the poem in a ventriloquist fashion, both contest and complement each other and how this ventriloquism is simultaneously predicated upon the “belatedness” of Yeatsian poetics that cuts back and forth between the poet’s personal urge to make sense of the contemporary historical event and the bardic tradition that constantly returns in its engagement with the present, thereby bring into focus the poet’s self-divisive ambivalence and conflicting impulses.

Key Words Yeats; Easter 1916; temporality; commemoration; belatedness

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1. De Mannian Modernity and Modernist Temporal Impasse

"Literature has always been essentially modern" — this provocative statement of Paul de Man haunts like a ghost his essay "Literary History and Literary Modernity," bringing into focus literature's "desire to wipe out whatever came earlier" and to possess "a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure" (148). However, it should be taken with a grain of salt: it is not so much a statement *per se* as an *aporia* in literary studies since his assertive tone is immediately compromised by the ambiguity that permeates the essay in putting forward hypotheses and casting doubt on them. While associating literature with an "unmediated, free act that knows no past," de Man complicates such association by pointing to the "ambivalence of writing": writing is not only an "act" but also an "interpretative process" that can never coincide with the act it interprets (152-53). This temporal rupture is at the heart of de Man's critical insight, but it is insightful as long as (and because) it is always pitted against a strenuous but hopeless effort to accomplish a temporal rapport in the form of "a true present": "Modernity invests its trust in the power of the present moment as an origin, but discovers that, in severing itself from the past, it has at the same time severed itself from the present" (149).

As de Man elucidates this paradox of the (im)possibility of being modern through Baudelaire's ideas of "*représentation du présent*" and "*mémoire du présent*" that combine the repetitive with the instantaneous, such paradoxical temporality is what characterizes modernists' notion of time. In the wake of the postwar cultural crisis, modernists, devastated by spiritual hollowness and bereft of a reliable inheritance, were squarely confronted with the pressing question of how and what they were to write. Many modernists opted for escaping the confines of the world they inherited by constructing a formal replacement of that world as embodied in Joyce's Dublin, Woolf's Bloomsbury, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, Proust's Combray and so on. However, this imperative is immediately shadowed by the anxiety that the repressed and seemingly forgotten world always returns to gnaw at its brilliant replacement no matter how much it is repressed. It is this "return of the repressed" that results in the double bind of modernism — a compulsion to transcend the past and its concomitant treachery. While modernists has sought to enact a break with the dead past, it continues to retain its haunting power. As shown in the Faulknerian inexorable forces of tragedy of shuttling between attempting to transcend the past and being condemned to repeat it, modernist time is inextricably tied to the essential contradiction between a rejection of the past and the fated

repetition of the past already inherent in that rejection.

This double bind of modernism, always locked in the constant movement between the extremes of sheer repetition and "making it new," generates the Janus-faced temporality, which trade in the eternal and the ephemeral or the changeless and the contingent. Such duality of modernist temporality, for example, is true of T. S. Eliot's poetic practices. The pre-modern in his poetry represented by Fisher Kings and fertility cults, and the classic order in his prose are not only stealthily at work converting all that seems to be solid but never fails to melt into air (à la Karl Marx) into archetypal truths but also exemplify the modernist temporality in which modernists are seen "moving backwards into a future." In other words, modernists, casting a backward glance to the primordial while lured into an avant-garde future, are troubled by the sense of unresolvable temporal impasse and are, accordingly, coerced into questioning what "renewing" or "creativity" really means.

2. "Belatedness" in Yeatsian Poetics

Yeats and Afterwords (2014) is a recent noticeable contribution to Yeats studies. As its two editors, Marjorie Howes and Joseph Valente, explain in their introduction, it brings into sharp relief "W. B. Yeats's powerful, multilayered sense of cultural *belatedness* as part of his complex literary method" (1, emphasis mine). Structured by the divide of three tenses such as "past-pastness," "present-pastness," and "future-pastness" (8), the volume explores how Yeats engages time through the lens of the "pastness" that modifies each tense by the hyphenated temporal distance. The collection's achievement lies in its success in securing a key with which to unlock the door to understanding how revivalism plays a vital role in all of Yeats's engagement with time. If one of the knotty problems in Yeats scholarship is to bridge the gap between the two contesting chapters of his career, the so-called Celtic Twilight phase in his early career and the relatively traditional, authoritarian late period, the collection's primary argument that the Irish Revival is at the heart of Yeatsian poetics as an ever-enduring subtext for creating "a vibrant future for Ireland by resuscitating the past" (1) sheds light on the trajectory of his evolving poetic engagements:

> [T]he broad based cultural renaissance for which Yeats was a symbol, spokesman, and literary architect took up the Irish past not as a nostalgic lost origin, but as a reality that persisted, in suppressed or marginalized forms, in the ongoing Irish present and could, accordingly, provide a renovated cultural foundation on which to build the Irish future. As befits those engaged

> in a decolonizing enterprise, the revivalists tended to cherish the indigenous potential rather than the antiquity of "hidden Ireland," the contemporary urgency rather than the lost-ness of the objects they sought to recover. It is therefore at once curious and telling that, while the apparently backward glance of his own literary movement remained forward looking, Yeats eventually came to identify his literary circle with a re-"visionary company" who were of (and looked to) a bygone era. Whereas the Irish Revival instanced a kind of reverse vanguardism, its leader did not so much suffer as embrace a doubly reinforced belatedness in their name. (2)

What is telling here is that "the sense of fatal belatedness" as "Yeats's true muse" (3) constitutes a unique Yeatsian temporality that places Yeats in both Irish and modernist tradition. Irish literature bears a certain "relatedness" in the sense that one of its tendencies is to revisit a broken tradition and to rewrite the past. Occupying a liminal space where language confronts the "ineffable" such as memory of the lost origin, absence, the spectral, its temporality is fashioned in the way that the rhythms of myth, fairy tales, otherworld journeys, and the elegiac are juxtaposed with the violent interruption of the new and the disruptive. Such temporality is directly related to Yeatsian poetics that tends "*to move forward and backward simultaneously*, into a future" (*Yeats and Afterwords* 7, emphasis in original) and, by the same token, to the modernist temporality set in motion in the form of moving backwards into a future rather than moving backwards into the past or moving forwards into a future. It is precisely at this point that the modernist temporality as belated reinvention of the archaic and the classical order meets up with the Yeatsian belatedness deeply rooted in the Irish literary tradition. In what follows, I will examine with a focus on "Easter 1916" what constitutes an interpretive lens of Yeatsian temporality and how such a lens maps Yeats's poetry in ways that differs, if not crucially, from other readings of the poem.

3. Engaging Yeatsian Temporality in "Easter 1916"

One of Yeats's most well-known poems from the middle years of his career approximately in the first two decades of the twentieth century, "Easter 1916" commemorates the Easter Rising of April 24, 1916. Under the leadership of the Military Council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, about 1600 members rose against the colonial rule of England to proclaim the independent Irish republic while the United Kingdom was heavily engaged in World War I. The rising lasted for six days, and the British army with vastly superior numbers and artillery

suppressed it. The British government executed 15 of the leaders in May 1916, surprisingly much earlier than was generally expected. It was so heavy-handed an action that it ironically contributed to escalating the initially unpopular rising dramatically into a national myth.

At the heart of "Easter 1916" are the mixed feelings of respect and annoyance, grief and horror. Whereas it was hard for Yeats to deny the deep impact of the rising on his outlook, he could not help feeling perturbed by both the outbreak and aftermath of the Rising. Yeats basically took the Rising to be shocking since he had difficulties understanding how those people of Catholic middle class he had so disregarded before could metamorphose themselves into martyrs reaching after a high ideal. In "Easter 1916," Yeats, as a result, was confronted with the question of how to elegize the same people who had been the object of his disrespect and how to revise the ways in which he was making sense of contemporary Ireland. In this regard, "Easter 1916" is a poem that reveals a divergence between the Ireland onto which he projected his poetic aspirations and the actual Ireland he bore witness to with his own eyes in his middle age. Such divergence engenders some lingering ambiguity that hovers over the poem and discomfits over and again anyone who seeks to arrives conclusively at a clear-cut understanding of the poem.

In the first stanza, Yeats introduces the insurgents and explains his passing acquaintance with them. The poet here does not hesitate to refer to the middle-class background of the revolutionaries, but the references to their middle class background are not necessarily cast in a negative light. He obviously does not disdain them, but he unmistakably does not show any sign of respect for them, either. His acquaintance with them is so perfunctory that it is merely characterized by "polite meaningless words" of which he later makes "a mocking tale or a gibe" in his club:

> 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. (*VP* 392)[1]

Nonetheless, when those ordinary citizens who have been up to then an object of

his "mocking tale" and "gibe" participate in the Rising, everything has "changed utterly": "All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born" (*VP* 392). The oxymoronic phrase "terrible beauty" is indicative of Yeats's conflicted attitudes toward what has happened: their sacrifice for their country and people has transformed them into martyrs, and Yeats has no choice but to aestheticize, if not glorify, their sacrifice while still struggling with such a profoundly disturbing act. Yeats is thus vacillating between the two opposing poles of reaction: both drawn to and withheld from the Rising.

If such a drastic change is considered to be a sign of Yeats's approval of the self-sacrifice of them, the rebel leaders should be taken as martyrs who have been "changed utterly" through the mythic rite of blood-sacrifice and metamorphosed into visionaries with "hearts with one purpose alone." They have, in short, been redeemed from the contingencies of history and ritually inducted to the sanctuary of national martyrs to the extent that they scale almost the same heights of the mythic personages of the generations past. In this reading, "Easter 1916" is viewed as a poem that gropes its way to a rapprochement between Yeats the nationalist poet and the revolutionaries. However, apposite would be here to remember that Yeats's attitudes towards Irish nationalism, called "sanguinary nationalism" (Martin 269), have fluctuated throughout his career and he has tried to keep a critical distance from it as he matured into a visionary poet. In actuality, a lingering ambivalence in regard to the sacrifice of the martyrs is deeply embedded within "Easter 1916." If *Cathleen ni Houlihan* is Yeats's most acclaimed nationalist play commemorating the 1798 rebellion, "Easter 1916," I would like to argue, attests to the poet's complicated and mixed relationship with Irish nationalists' anticolonial struggle — straddling the fence between attachment to and detachment from the Easter rising martyrs.

In the last two stanzas, the internal distress of Yeats is aggravated as he goes back and forth between accepting the martyrs and questioning their sacrifice. The penultimate stanza is structured by the contrasting imagery of change and stillness, amplifying ambiguity of the poem: "Hearts with one purpose alone / Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone / To trouble the living stream" (*VP* 393). The very ambiguity arising from the use of the verb "seem" leads to a sense of insecurity — the poet who is appalled by violence and, at the same time, dragged into acknowledging, if not outright, that something could be achieved *only* through that violence. "Stone" is likely to be read as a symbol for immobility and "stream" for change. This static "stone" stands in stark contrast to the "stream" that stands for a dynamic and constantly changing life. By comparing the hearts of the

revolutionaries to a stone, Yeats seems to be critical of their bigotry and myopia not to be able to acclimate themselves to change. The nationalist are so bogged down by "one purpose alone" that they have become blind to the historical change. The very use of the word, "enchanted," is an intriguing allusion to how Yeats perceive their sacrifice — not necessarily "needless death" but something that lacks the profound understanding of historical contingencies. However, the same contrasting imagery of immobility and change also leads to the question of "whether their sacrifice is a part of life's flow or an impediment to it" (Castle 87-88). A stone can serve not only as a barrier to but also as a conduit for the flow of stream.

Yeats begins the final stanza by building upon the imagery of the stone from the penultimate stanza and reconsiders all the bloodshed and self-sacrifice from the outset:

> Too long a sacrifice
> Can make a stone of the heart.
> O when may it suffice?
> That's heaven's part, our part
> To murmur name upon name,
> As a mother names her child
> When sleep at last has come
> On limbs that had run wild" (VP 394).

Yeats is seen to be still perturbed by the resonances of the Rising and all he can do is just murmuring to himself. As David Lloyd suggests, his commemorating act in the form of a lullaby may be redundant because "the obsessive repetition of the child's name after it is asleep no longer serves as a lullaby, but only asserts one's own anxious continuity with it in its virtual absence" (70). The words, "wild" here and "bewildered" in the closing lines flesh out his conflicted reaction to the Rising and intensify his internal tension. Yeats concomitantly bares his lingering skepticism in the middle of the stanza by intimating that England might have granted Home Rule at the end of World War I. He finally poses an overdue question that has been delayed elaborately and intentionally:

> 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" (*VP* 394)

Yeats's uncertainty about the necessity of the Rising is epitomized by the very question, "Was it needless death after all?" and subsequently reinforced by his belief, if partial, that "England may keep faith." However, the concomitant awareness that he has to recognized the dream of the executed rebels implies that the poet does not fully disapprove their aspirations and the cause they died for. The mixed feeling of approval and disapproval thus once again insinuates itself into the poem.

Declan Kiberd's account of the fundamental skepticism and irresolution ingrained in "Easter 1916" strikes an insightful ring here:

> It enacts the quarrel within his own mind between his public, textual duty (to name and praise the warrior dead) and his more personal urge (to question the wisdom of their sacrifice). The poem speaks, correspondingly, with two voices, and sometimes enacts in single phrases ("terrible beauty") their contestation. The sanction for the first voice from bardic tradition was strong: but the force of the second was becoming more apparent to Yeats who increasingly defined freedom in terms of self-expression. He was abandoning the rather programmatic nationalism of his youth for a more personal vision of Irish identity. (213)

While concurring with Kiberd who locates the two voices at work in the poem, I would like to both build upon his insight and extend it to the discussion of how those two voices work in a ventriloquist fashion inflected by temporal divergence. To put it otherwise, when one of the voices is heard, the other, echoing in the background, still retain its resonance and puts on the slippery path the reader who has difficulty identifying which voice is being articulated. It is in this ventriloquist fashion that the two voices both contests and complement each other, and the ventriloquism is simultaneously predicated upon the "belatedness" of Yeatsian poetics that cuts back and forth between the poet's personal urge to make sense of the contemporary historical event and the bardic tradition that shapes such a personal urge and constantly returns in its engagement with the present. As a result, the poet's self-divisive ambivalence and conflicting impulses are brought to the foreground.

A ritual naming of the martyrs in the final stanza is enacted in the trance-inducing metric and repetition of a particular phrase ("A terrible beauty is born"),

generating its therapeutic effect. By building maternal imagery, Yeats scarcely hides a feeling of intimacy for the martyrs. The murmuring tone may imply the poet's on-going doubt, but it is certainly shrouded by his sense of affection for them. No matter how much he reserves his judgment, Yeats obviously closes the poem in a commemorative tone:

> I write it 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. (VP 394)

Such a commemorative tone is, however, unusual as it is qualified by the oxymoronic phrase "terrible beauty," which means that Yeats cannot turn a deaf ear to the "terrible" aspect of the Rising while he cannot help embracing its beauty.

If the urgent task confronting Yeats in "Easter 1916" is both articulating historical contingencies and transcending them and both questioning and affirming the significance of the nationalists' sacrifice, he comes to terms with it through his split voices whose split-ness is put into motion by the "belatedness" of Yeatsian poetics. Viewed in this light, it is important to ask why the editors of *Yeats and Afterwords* compares Yeats to a Benjamin's angel of history "facing insistently backwards as he is borne ceaselessly into the future" (7). Paralyzed by a storm called "progress" that "propels him into the future to which his back is turned while the pile of debris before him grows skyward" (Benjamin 258), Benjaminian angel of history seems to be caught up in history's tangle as he is urged forward, yet incapable of disengaging himself from the past. What he incarnates are then a kind of empty time and the sense of a foreclosed future that rules out any significant change. In contrast, Yeatsian angel of history is hardly helpless to control what it sees and instead appears to want to intervene in a "now" through the belatedness conditioned by the two voices articulated in a ventriloquist fashion—the two voices contest and complement each other and such dynamics is exactly what enables Yeats to both question and affirm the nationalist sacrifice.

By the end of "Easter 1916," the past is bit by bit dragged in its incantatory rhythms and spellbound mood into the present in which the fading rhythms of a residual bardic tradition, the archaic, remnants, and revenants are juxtaposed

with the personal urgencies of "making sense of it" and "making it new." In this regard, the "now" in the last line, "A terrible beauty is born," takes on added meaning as that line is repeated several times throughout the poem as a refrain. It is a de Mannian "true present" that opens "perspectives of distance and difference within the apparent uniqueness of the instant" (de Man 157), layered not only in its contingencies but also in its implicit relations to other temporalities. It deals with not so much "what was, what is, what shall be" as "what may be and what should be" — not the tenses but the modalities inflected by wish, desire, necessity, and obligation. Thus emerges a future as a paradoxical replication of "a still unprocessed past" — "'the coming times' not just in relation to the unalterable past that has produced them, but as themselves a pastness, a lostness, located in an emergent future" (*Yeats and Afterwords* 5).[2] As such, Yeats is finally enabled to sing "of what is past, or passing, or to come" in "Easter 1916."[3]

Notes

1. All the quotations of "Easter 1916" are from *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats* (1957). The edition will be cited hereafter as *VP* within the text.

2. Defining "complexity" and "honesty" as what truly characterizes the identity of Yeats, Richard Ellmann argues that "Easter 1916 has been castigated because it satisfied both the nationalist and the anti-nationalists, but Yeats, who had elements of both in his thought, expressed his whole position" (144). Ellmann's insight captures the Yeatsian paradox in "Easter 1916" through the lens of Yeats's "complexity" and "honesty"—articulating his complex position by both being blamed by and satisfying the nationalists and anti-nationalists. While arriving at the same conclusion that Yeats has finally succeeded in expressing "his whole positon," I have taken another path in this article to discuss how he maneuvers to circumvent the opposing demands of his contemporary Ireland with a focus on Yeatsian temporality in "Easter 1916."

3. The phrase, "of what is past, or passing, or to come" that also appears in the title of this article, comes from Yeats's poem, "Sailing to Byzantium."

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