Re-reading “Easter 1916” by W. B. Yeats

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“Easter 1916” is written to commemorate the Irish rebellion against England. It is said that the poem is one of the finest of Yeats’s public poems.

The manuscript of “Easter 1916” is dated 25 September, 1916. But according to his letter to Lady Gregory, it seems that he began to work over his ideas of this poem just after the leaders of the rebellion were executed. He wrote to her:

... The Dublin tragedy has been a great sorrow and anxiety ... and today I see that an old friend, ...who began with me the whole work of the literary movement has been shot in a barrack yard without trial of any kind. I have little doubt there have been many miscarriages of justice ... I am trying to write a poem on the men — terrible beauty has been born again — 1)

This powerful oxymoron ‘terrible beauty’ is used as a refrain at the end of each stanza except the third one in this poem which was completed four months later. In the finished poem the word ‘again’ is dropped, but the refrain makes the poem strong, animated and well-proportioned whether the word ‘again’ is included or not.

In the first stanza, Yeats describes the uneventful scene of Dublin before the tragedy happens. We can see streets where there are dark grey eighteenth century houses and people coming home towards evening after their work who nod or say ‘polite meaningless words.’

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head

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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:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

Yeats here describes them with conciseness which is one of the characteristics of his style. His expression is very beautiful. But such a beautiful and simple description is in striking contrast to the fear of the coming tragedy. He suddenly changes his tune almost at the end of the stanza. ‘... they and I ... lived where motley is worn’ but unexpectedly the tragedy happened, and ‘All changed, changed utterly’, and ‘A terrible beauty is born.’

In the second stanza, Yeats describes the executed men not sentimentally but realistically.

That woman’s days were spent
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
And rode our winged horse;
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
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:
A terrible beauty is born.

Constance Gore-Booth who passed her younger days ‘in ignorant good-will’; Patrick Pearse who ‘kept a school’; his friend, Thomas MacDonagh, a poet and dramatist whom Yeats had liked since 1909; James Connolly, a trade union organiser ‘who had carried through the streets a coffin with the words “British Empire” upon it,’ throwing it into the river were among those executed. Also there was John MacBride, ‘A drunken, vainglorious lout’ who ‘had done most bitter wrong’ to some who were close to Yeats. But Yeats thinks that, in spite of this, we can number him too in the song about such an extraordinary occurrence, because ‘dykes that separate man from man have now been broken’ and each has ‘resigned his part in the casual comedy ... Transformed utterly’; that is to say, even if Yeats hates this man, he has been transfigured and splendid because this political and historical event was so big. So Yeats here is very generous in a way.

Is the third stanza on the riverside a facet of Yeats’s imagination or is it a view he is really seeing and brooding over? The scene from the riverside is disinterestedly described like a picture scroll spread out. He imagines the horseman sliding into the river. ‘A shadow of cloud on the stream’, ‘moor-hens’ and so on. This is a natural scene where everything is passing peacefully. All the animals and all the living things are moving ‘minute by minute’. But there is a stone in the river which resists the flow of the stream. In spite of the water flowing all around it, it never moves. The stone which resists the natural stream symbolises the rebellion which opposes and is willing to stop the stream of the world and of life. Even such warm hearts as are described at the beginning of the first stanza are changed into a stone at last after they kept on pursuing only one purpose — the freedom and independence of the fatherland — ‘through summer and winter’. The very stone symbolises the rock-like integrity of purpose of the men who died bravely in that rising. Similarly life may go on in the same way as water goes on round the stone in the river, but these political fanatics and idealists never change.

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 plashes within it;
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.

As above mentioned, only this third stanza does not have the refrain ‘A terrible beauty is born’ which is so effective in this poem. But there is a line ‘The stone’s in the midst of all’ at the end of this stanza. Yeats here contrasts this stone to all things which live and change. He technically makes this stanza stronger and more forceful by bringing out this immovable stone ‘in the midst of all’ So this sentence takes the place of the line ‘A terrible beauty is born’ at the end of the other three stanzas; in other words, ‘The stone here symbolizes the “terrible beauty” of those who are born by their deaths into human greatness.’

The fourth stanza begins with:

Too long a sacrifice
Can make a stone of the heart

S. Spender says, ‘Yeats was perhaps the writer who best understood that public passion can “make a stone of the heart”,’ and in A. N. Jeffares’s phrases, ‘the sacrifice referred to is, in particular, Maud Gonne’s long service given to revolutionary ideals.’ But in any case this means that even if the rebellion is a good thing, if our minds stay focused only on one thing, it must in some way limit us human beings or make our hearts into a stone, because all our energy goes to one thing and we must cut off all other aspects of our life. Out of such a heart, as solid as a stone, all human sensibility has been drained.

Yeats asks ‘O when may it suffice?’, but he himself answers that Heaven may answer the question:

That is 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.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death.

It is clear that his so-called ‘name’ symbolises the executed men. Yeats here means that all we have to do is to number them in the song eternally with motherlike affection. But he all at once pulls us back from
the lyric world of night where a gentle and affectionate mother puts her child to sleep to the realistic world of dark and dreaded death. He says ‘No, no, not night but death’. It seems to us as if “Eine Kleine Nacht Musik” by Mozart was suddenly changed into “Das Schicksal” by Beethoven. We can understand Yeats’s complicated feelings particularly in this fourth stanza because the ‘stone’ here also symbolises the recklessness of the dead men who took part in the rebellion.  He says in his letter to Lady Gregory ‘the heroic, tragic lunacy of Sinn Fein.’ He also ironically criticises their folly in “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War”. We can see his proper critical spirit here. He asks:

Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.

Yeats here uses that expression back to front, and this means that he emphasises acts rather than talk. This shows his mastery in arranging words. But at any rate he does not answer the question because it doesn’t matter that it is not becoming clear. It is not important whether these men acted for a practical purpose or for a simple ideal. What is important is that we know their dream. Because of this dream and this excess of love for their country, they died and we can write it out in a verse. What they were to become in Irish history is very important. They have become a symbol of the nation and from their dream has been born this ‘terrible beauty’.

Yeats has once had the ambition to have an Irish literature which represents not just what one or another individual wrote but a literature which expresses the whole soul of people as he admired in Byzantine art, where ‘nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle or related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind which is of all states of mind not impossible, the most difficult to that man, race or nation; because only the greatest obstacle which can be contemplated without despair rouses the will to full intensity’. And in this event he suddenly found the realisation of this idea.

However, what did he think of before he posed the question ‘Was it needless after all?’ Why did he leave it to heaven to resolve? Why did he say that what was important was their dream? His endless suffering and confusion revolved round this point. It is because of this suffering that he lost some irrecoverable friends of his, including O’Rahilly, a member of the Gaelic League, as he says in his letter in June to Robert Bridges ‘all my habits of thought and work are upset by this tragic Irish rebellion which has swept away friends.’ It is also his lamentation and tears of vexation for the fact that they died swimming against the stream of life. On the other hand, he observed with bitter regret the fanaticism of the Easter Rising because he originally disliked democracy and his thought was to support the aristocratic culture, and his feelings were very conservative. So he ‘wanted to go back to the eighteenth century rather than on into the twentieth. He hoped that the “Big Houses” would survive.’ Though he wanted the traditional and aristocratic culture, what the Rising stood for was different from what he wanted. He was displeased about this. It can be understood in “To Ireland in the Coming Times” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War”. When ‘the Hibernian Academy with all its treasures had gone up in flames’, he realised keenly that ‘violence can in a short time destroy values that it has taken law centuries to
build up. The fact that Yeats later said ‘many ingenious lovely things are gone’ in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” means that his uneasiness about the destruction of the traditional culture by the Easter Rising was stronger than his sympathy with the Easter Rising. In addition to this, he hated with such a passionate intensity as turned the heart to stone. He himself made this thought clear in “A Prayer for My Daughter.”

From another point of view, it is also true that Yeats admires heroism highly in connection with the traditional and aristocratic culture. We can understand this from his characters of Caoilte, Cuchulain and Michael in “Cathleen ni Houlihan”. Therefore, his sympathy with the Easter Rising does not mean that he is in favour of their revolutionary theory but rather with their heroism in resolutely resisting the stream of life and love. That is the reason he thinks highly of ‘their dream’ and he can ‘write it in a verse’ and at the same time he can admire them as heroes and a beautiful symbol of the country forever ‘wherever green is worn’.

After all, we can see the subject of this poem in Yeats’s two hearts is the stream which is dammed up by a stone. In one of them Yeats marvels at the heroes who died for their country and the ‘terrible beauty’ created by their immolation. The stone symbolises their immortality, and there they are ‘transformed utterly’ from what they were into ‘terrible beauty’. On the other hand, when Yeats views the situation from the side of life, it seems to him that even their great cause is a heart of stone which has no warm human sensibility. S. Spender says again, “The withered stone of the heart on the one hand, and on the other hand the stone which is the transformation of life into beauty, and two opposites which represent a conflict in Yeats’ s own mind between the cause which justified the sacrifice of personal living to it and that which withers the heart of all personal feeling.” Concerning this interpretation, the explanation of Edward Malins is interesting too. “Yeats saw the Easter Rising not as the work of politicians or patriots, but of heroes who in the moment of death had transcended all their intellectual limitations and formed themselves complete. Nothing else mattered … This was not the intellectual nationalism of the politician but the moment fulfilment of the hero, and that for Yeats was sole reality.”

Yeats’s poems concerning the Easter Rebellion in 1916 are “The Rose Tree”, “Sixteen Dead Men” and “On a Political Prisoner” in addition to “Easter 1916”. “The Rose Tree” is a poem of a dialogue between Pearse and Connolly. The rose in his poetry has been a symbol of love and ideal since his early days. It here also symbolises the executed men’s ideals and their patriotism. “Sixteen Dead Men” is a short, ballad-type poem. In the poem, Yeats emphasises that we should think highly of the fact that they have died for their country and their ideals as Lord Edward and Wolfe Tone did, instead of discussing logically whether it was right or not. These poems are politically noncommittal, and this is also Yeats’s distinctive feature. At any rate, this Rising was a very remarkable event in his mental development as he says, ‘I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me and I am very despondent about the future. I feel that all the work of years has been overturned.’ It is quite obvious that this was a turning point for him where he went out to the world of reality from the world of dreams. But if so, did Yeats sever his connection with his spiritual or mystic aspect? No. I don’t think that he is so simple. C. M. Bowra says, in his The Heritage of Symbolism, ‘indeed in 1916 it seemed as if Yeats had really ceased to care for dreams and spirits, so great was the effect of events in Ireland on him. To his old mythological manner he never returned .... But he had not really abandoned his belief in a
As a matter of fact, he keeps living in the mythological world. His practical interest in the real life is mingled with his romantic longing for the dreamy world, and a more complicated and dual element develops in his later poems.

By the way, seeing that this poem “Easter 1916” deals with a political problem, it is also important for us to consider the relation between Yeats’s thought and political sense and his mental attitude in composing poem. Yeats hoped that “the Protestant Ascendancy would still, because of their wealth, their wit and their manners, constitute a dominant group. He thought of the local grandees patronizing poets and the peasants touching their hats. He was romantically innocent about politics.” So it is quite clear that he was very conservative whether or not, to some extent, he was sympathetic towards Adolf Hitler, or whether he thought or not that “the discipline of fascist theory might impose order upon a disintegrating world.” Moreover, he thinks “if the English Conservative Party had made a declaration that they did not intend to rescind the Home Rule Bill there would have been no rebellion.” From this point of view comes the line ‘England may keep faith’. But doesn’t this thought of his politics show us his innocence about politics? Can politics and diplomacy be so simple as he thinks? In any case, his innocence about politics reminds us of that of William Blake. We may judge it from what William Blake says:

I am really sorry to see my countrymen trouble themselves about politics. If they were wise, the most arbitrary princes could not hurt them. If they are not wise, the freest government is compell’d to be a Tyranny.

This is one of the reasons Yeats’s poetry is different from that of Walt Whitman’s who loved democracy and established his principle of equality. When we read some poems of theirs it is understandable. For example, comparing “Easter 1916” with “Europe, the 72nd and 73rd Years of These States”, and “To a Foiled European Revolutionaire”, this will be clear. This leaves an interesting problem for us to ponder too.

However, it doesn’t matter whether or not Yeats was a rightist, or whether or not he was innocent about politics. The important thing is how these problems have an influence upon his view of art and his attitude in composing poems.

In “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes”, a girl is dancing between the Sphinx which means the intellect and the Buddha which stands for the heart. Yeats imagines this girl to be the incarnation of art. We can also read in “Michael Robartes and the Dancer” his thought that art lies balanced between intellect and love. Judging from this, it is quite obvious that he endeavours to find the truth between his own thought and feelings and the opposite — taking “Easter 1916” as an example, it means the thought and opinion of people who were fighting against England for Ireland’s freedom and independence. It is also clear that he endeavoured to assimilate such a complicated political event in the verse at a correct distance without being one-sided and while trying to establish a new symbol of eternal truth. When he says:

O little did they care who danced between,
And little she by whom her dance was seen
So she had outdanced thought. 31)

this means the exhalation of ego, but at the same time it means that the personality of the girl as a dancer dies away and the dance itself exists there, and it is art itself. In fact, the fruit of his affliction, his wandering ‘between extremities’ and his endeavour was “Easter 1916”.

Therefore even if he, as a man, asked Maud Gonne to abandon her patriotic intensity, he, as a poet, left his personality, thought and opinion out of the poem.

There he created a universal image and eternal truth. This is the greatness of a true poet. We can agree with C. K. Stead on this point: ‘In “Easter 1916” Yeats has already achieved a solution — one solution — to a problem which had bedevilled poetry for many years: the problem of how a poem could enter the public world without losing itself in temporal opinion.’ 32)

Notes

2) E. Malins, Yeats and the Easter Rising (Dolmen Press, 1966), p. 5.
3) A. N. Jeffares refers to ‘Maud Gonne, and perhaps Iseult and possibly even Sean MacBride.’
4) With regard to these names in the preceding passage, vide pp. 226-227, A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats.
9) ‘To Rothenstein he spoke of innocent and patriotic theorists carried away by the belief that they must sacrifice themselves to an abstraction.’
11) A political organization in Ireland, founded about 1905, advocating the advancement of Ireland along national lines and its complete political separation from Great Britain. (Encyclopedic World Dictionary, Paul Hamlyn)
12) He critically says:
‘All the folly of a fight’
or
‘As though to die by gunshot were
The finest play under the sun.’
13) Yeats started the Irish Literary Society in 1891, founded the Irish National Literary Society in 1892, established the Irish National Theatre Society in 1903, and opened Abbey Theatre in 1904. The purpose of
his literary movement is as follows:

I believe that the renewal of belief which is the great movement of our time, will more and more liberate the arts from ‘their age’ and from life, and leave them more and more free to lose themselves in beauty, and to busy themselves like all the great poetry of the past and like religions of all times, with ‘old faiths, myths and dreams’, the accumulated beauty of the age. I believe that all men will more and more reject the opinion that ‘poetry is a criticism of life’ and be more and more convinced that it is a revelation of a hidden life, and that they may even come to think painting, poetry, and music the only means of conversing with eternity left to man on earth.

(W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet, p. 125)

Although we may call this a kind of art for art’s sake, he later developed more mature principles, which bore fruit in “Sailing to Byzantium”. His artistic point of view also reads in “The Reform of the Theatre in Samhain” in 1903.

14) Although Douglas Hyde founded it in 1893, it is generally regarded as one of the subcommittees of the National Literary Society. This league, in a word, sought to realise the Gaelic kingdom.

15) Yeats and the Easter Rising, p. 16.

16) The landed class.


19) An intellectual hatred is the worst,

So let her think opinions are accursed.
Have I not seen the loveliest woman born
Out of the mouth of Plenty’s horn,
Because of her opinionated mind
Barter that horn and every good
By quiet natures understood
For an old bellows full of angry wind?

20) ‘Green’ is the colour of Ireland. Irish soldiers often wear green emblem like clover. ‘Green’ also symbolises ‘life’ in English poems.


23) Lord Edward FitzGerald (1809-83). He was president of the military committee and died of wounds received while he was being arrested.

Theobald Wolfe Tone (1763-98), educated at Trinity College Dublin, founded the United Irish Club, was appointed chef-de-brigade in France, and led a French force to Ireland. He was captured in Lough Skilly and condemned by court martial. He is said to have committed suicide in prison. (A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats, pp. 130-131)

26) W. B. Yeats, p. 19.
28) The Bill for Home Rule for Ireland, passed in 1913, was shelved at the beginning of the 1914-18 war.
29) *W. B. Yeats*, p. 20.
31) “The Double Vision of Michael Robartes” (1919)

**Bibliography**

1. Yeats’s works

2. Critical works


