

Through Oneness and Plurality: The Journey of Self-Reflection in “The Wild Swans at Coole”

Meiqing Xiong
Agnes Scott College

In “The Wild Swans at Coole”, Irish poet William Butler Yeats portrays the speaker’s experiences visiting Coole Park. A beautiful depiction of the swans at the park, the poem is essentially a journey of self-reflection, during which the speaker is reminded of his loneliness through observations of the swans. Yeats implies the speaker’s realization of the inevitability of loneliness, specifically the isolation from companionship, through the multifaceted contrasts between imagery of singularity versus plurality. The speaker clearly senses his lack of companionship through the contrast between his solitude and the swans’ togetherness. Furthermore, the speaker, swamped by loneliness, views the dynamic between the swans and him changed from the previous singular harmony to two separate worlds, one featuring the lasting youthfulness among swans, another calling attention to the inevitable aging in him.

Yeats uses objects of plurality and singularity to infuse the poem with the speaker’s sense of loneliness. The most prominent plural figures in the poem are the swans inhabiting Coole Park, just as the only plural word (“swans”) in the title suggests. Similar to the speaker whose attention is constantly attracted to “those brilliant creatures” (13), Yeats devotes much space to the swans and depicts them within a group image throughout the poem. For instance, when the speaker recollects in the second stanza the swans he saw during his first visit, Yeats uses verbs and phrases like “scatter”, and “wheeling in great broken wings” to talk about the swans’ activities as a whole group (11). If it was only one swan that the speaker observes, it would be impossible to see these

motions performed. Starting from the second stanza, Yeats’s substantial uses of plural pronouns, “they”, “[t]heir”, and “them” strengthen the swans’ cohesive group image in the poem. A type of social animal, the swans have a trait of togetherness that is emphasized under Yeats’s pen, whereas the existence of the singular “I” is distinct throughout the poem, constantly reminding the readers of the speaker’s status of being alone while observing the swans.

While the swans take plural pronouns in the poem, the speaker’s singular voice characterized by “I” emerges in the second stanza, accentuating the fact that he, unlike them, is companionless. Prompted by the familiar scenery, he recalls when he first counted the number of swans and appreciated their beauty during his first visit. His flashback of “those brilliant creatures”, however, does not last long, and soon his reflections leave his heart feeling “sore”, which is the first instance of expressing the speaker’s emotion that sets the morose and painful tone for the remainder of the poem. “And now my heart is sore” (14) contrasts considerably to the previous line, “I have looked upon those brilliant creatures” (15), because of the contrasting plurality and singularity between the lines (“those” vs. “my”; “creatures” vs. “heart”). These two lines indicate a turn of the tone from tranquil and peaceful nostalgia to painful recognition of reality. The fact that this “I” is the only human figure in the poem, coupled with the speaker’s constant obsession with counting while observing the swans implies that the speaker was, and still is, alone. Whatever motions they do, whatever “bell-beat” sounds their “clamorous wings”, the swans

behave together, and they are each other’s companions. Under this sharp contrast, the speaker, with no companion, is suffering from his loneliness.

To show that the speaker is further swamped by solitude when he visits the park for the nineteenth time, Yeats artfully uses numbers to play with the readers’ conception of singularity and plurality with the plural swans. In the poem, “nine-and-fifty” is the first detail depicting the swans (6), which seems slightly awkward for disrupting the standard phrase “fifty-nine”. Swans are typically regarded as love-birds, embodying loyal love, persistent affection, and often happy marriage in numerous literary works, and therefore one tends to picture them always with their mates. As the speaker observes later, whether “paddl[ing] in the” streams or “climb[ing] the air” (20;21), each of them is always paired with another: “lover by lover” (19). Containing fourteen letters and five syllables, the word “Companionable” is the longest word in the poem, both visually and phonetically (21). Through placing this word after “cold” to describe the streams (20), Yeats further highlights this powerful companionship that helps the swans overcome the tough environment condition. Yet notice that “nine and fifty” is an odd number, meaning that there is always one swan ending up alone and tasting the loneliness while witnessing the other twenty-nine pairs. By using “nine-and-fifty” instead of “fifty-nine”, Yeats calls attention to this incongruity between the odd and even number, the singularity and the plurality within the swans, thereby complicating the loneliness that the speaker experiences. Not only does the speaker distinguish himself from the group of plural swans and feel unaccompanied, he also feels lonelier through identifying with the one swan that is likewise isolated from the rest of the swans.

Adding to the contrast between singularity and plurality between the speaker

and the swans, Yeats establishes yet another layer of such polarity this time through the speaker noticing the changing dynamic between the swans and him, from a harmony to two disjointed worlds. During the speaker’s first visit, the atmosphere between him and the swans is harmonious and comforting, and in his interpretation, the friendly swans were welcoming him to be a part of them; in the air, they “mount/And scatter wheeling in great broken rings” above the speaker (11-12), almost forming a circle surrounding him on the shore. As for the speaker’s reaction to the swans’ amiability, he himself also tried to maintain the rapport between them:

All’s changed since I, hearing at twilight,
The first time on this shore,
The bell-beat of their wings above my
head,

Trod with a lighter tread. (15-18)

In order not to disturb the swans surrounding him and drive them away, he avoided “tread[ing]” with heavy steps. In the speaker’s perspective, it seems as if the swans accepted him as one of them and altogether they had become a singular emotional circle, a unit. The way that Yeats maneuvers the syntax in the long sentence above also illustrates this emotional oneness. By interposing the swans’ amiable actions between the speaker’s actions “saw” and “trod”, Yeats creates a scene where the speaker and the swans are blended into a unified group. But this harmonious singularity disappears during his nineteenth visit to the same place.

During the speaker’s nineteenth visit, the camaraderie between the swans and him is missing when their active interaction fades, as a result of his physical separation from the swans. The physical location of the speaker makes it hard for him to directly communicate with the swans and impossible to join their activities in the water. Unlike the first time, when he felt the swans in the air

surrounding him, he only observes the swans in the water while staying on the shore. The fourth stanza and the first two lines of the last one, which contain the depiction of the present moment, are filled with the swans' actions in the water. The voice of the speaker, "I" vanishes from these lines, as opposed to the blended voice that narrates the first visit. Compared with the speaker's first encounter with the swans when they were situated in one single harmonious space, he is physically separated from the swans and therefore unable to join their activities in the water.

Contrary to his first encounter with the swans when they were situated in one single harmonious space, the speaker's nineteenth visit features also emotional isolation, for the speaker notices the difference between the swans' timelessness and his aging process. The repetition of the word "still" in the fourth stanza ("Unwearing still" (19); "Attend upon them still" (24)) emphasizes the consistency of the swans' positive qualities. Through a synecdoche in line 22, "Their hearts have not grown old", Yeats points out the speaker's perception that the swans have not grown old and accentuates the recognition of his own aging and inactive qualities; the speaker, by contrast, comes back an aged man with downbeat attitudes. Even from the first time the speaker's voice occurs in the poem, his gloomy outlook of his aged life is distinct; in line 7, "The nineteenth autumn has come upon me," he is the object, the "me" who passively endures whatever comes with the pass of time, instead of the subject, the "I" who is able to initiate changes actively. This incongruity associated with aging becomes so evident that it places an invisible and yet unbreakable barrier between the swans and the speaker, separating them into two worlds. Transformed from the singularity filled with camaraderie eighteen years ago, this plurality composed of the swans' timeless world and the speaker's aged world makes him emotionally detached from the swans, further

adding to the loneliness the speaker feels at the moment. Besides being physically separated from the swans, he sees his own world negatively affected by the passage of time and realizes his powerlessness to ameliorate his loneliness that exacerbates as he ages.

In order to accentuate the switched dynamic between the swans and the speaker on physical and emotional levels, Yeats employs the speaker's act of counting to conceptualize the oneness and plurality the latter perceives in the two different experiences. In spite of the speaker's obsession with counting swans throughout the poem, it is only during his nineteenth visit that the specific amount of swans ("nine-and-fifty") is revealed to the readers. During the first visit, because the swans' behaviors were full of liveliness and hospitality, the speaker did not finish his first counting. But as the pluperfect tense in "before I had well finished" suggests (9), he finished counting eventually. Yeats never provides the accurate number of the swans observed this first time. It is possible that he intentionally downplays the significance of the speaker's action of counting, so that readers can focus on the community, featured with oneness, established around the swans and the speaker, rather than the actual amount of swans. On the contrary, there is a sense of alienation in the act of counting animals of another species, which is reflected in the actual quantity of swans that Yeats has revealed about the speaker's nineteenth visit. Perhaps the speaker did not care how many swans there were, for he enjoyed imagining himself being one of them, whereas now he can single himself out and count the exact number of the swans. Different from the first time, the speaker is influenced (unconsciously or knowingly) by the broken camaraderie between him and the swans that Yeats underscores.

Even though the speaker's first encounter

with the swans was pleasing and comforting, the nineteenth experience of visit afflicts this aged man with immense loneliness. Through comparing himself with the plural swans, and identifying with the fifty-ninth swan that has been singled out from other pairs, he is constantly reminded of his lack of companionship. In addition, the contrast between the unity of rapport and the two distinct communities between the swans and him makes him feel the impotency of reversing the loneliness associated with aging. To enrich the speaker’s loneliness exacerbated by the passage of time, Yeats uses multiple layers of contrast embedded in the unique timeframe, in which he intermixes the speaker’s past experiences and present observations and reflections, as opposed to narrating the speaker’s experience chronologically. In this way, he suggests the speaker’s conflicted inner world in which the past memory and the current reality are intertwined. Having difficulty separating the past from the present, the speaker is constantly inflicted by a constant comparison between the two experiences and becomes more aware of the altered dynamic between him and the swans.

Influenced by the perception of these singularities and pluralities, the speaker eventually projects a future in which the swans might eventually fly away and leave him behind. There seem to be two ways of interpreting this ending and the speaker’s self-reflection. It is possible that the speaker blames the swans for disguising themselves as saviors and implies the speaker’s inexorable loneliness. On the other hand, by using the word “awake”, he might also celebrate the moment of realization from the illusion of gaining companionship and consolation from outside (29). He emphasizes that it is futile to seek comfort from the swans and that it might be necessary to combat loneliness by himself. Regardless of the readers’ specific interpretations of the

speaker’s final reflection, it is important to acknowledge Yeats’s tactful maneuver of the contrasts between singularity and plurality to convey and enrich the speaker’s loneliness and reflection on aging.

Works Cited

Ramazani, Jahan. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, Volume 1: *Modern Poetry*. 3rd edition. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003. Print.

Submitted February 28, 2015

Accepted April 23, 2015