

“Delirium of the Brave”: Yeats on Revolutionaries in “September 1913” and “Easter, 1916”

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In the early 20th century, during the final years of attempting to overthrow British rule, Ireland experienced massive political upheaval. W.B. Yeats, one of the most well-known Irish poets in recent memory, was deeply affected by this period and its significant advocates. This paper works to understand the literary implications of this political turbulence in Yeats’ writing, specifically within “September 1913” and “Easter, 1916.” Both of these poems were drafted in response to acts of mass Irish resistance to the British, the Dublin Lock-out and the Easter Rising, and demonstrate Yeats’ distinct changes in perspective concerning rebellions and their revolutionaries. These shifts can be seen through a formalistic review of his portrayals of these revolutionaries, the consequences of their actions and sacrifices, and an exploration into the poems’ confused expressions of time and the past. Ultimately I argue that Yeats used these poems as a way to digest the impact of the Easter Rising on his own personal views of martyrdom and as a more national reflection of Ireland’s views on revolution.

The early 20th century in Ireland was a tumultuous time politically, economically, and culturally. It saw the beginning and end of the Dublin Lock-out, the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, and the establishment of the Irish Free State, among other similar upheavals. This climate affected all Irish people and poets, and W. B. Yeats was no exception. Two of his most well-known works, “September 1913” (1913), published a month into the Dublin Lock-out, and “Easter, 1916” (1921), first drafted during the Easter Rising, attest to this profound influence. Yeats seems to be most moved by the people behind these social movements, the martyrs and the revolutionaries, and was continually poetically preoccupied with the true worth and impact of what they willingly chose to give up for their cause. Through the years, Yeats struggled with the reality and significance of rebellion, which can be seen particularly in his evolving, but always reverent, portrayals of revolutionaries, in his depictions of the consequences of their sacrifices, and in the confused temporal concerns of the poems.

Though the presence of these various revolutionaries is felt throughout both pieces, “September 1913” manifests them through a much more historical lens than their expression found in “Easter, 1916,” wrapping them up in Ireland’s past with a tone similar to that of an elegy. There is a sense of idealization, perhaps idolization, of those who were involved or died in the assorted revolutions for Ireland’s freedom – Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet, Wolfe Tone, and John O’Leary. In the second stanza, Yeats begins to introduce them as

“of a different kind” (9), in opposition to the normal people who “were born to pray and save [money]” (6) to whom the first stanza is directed toward, in an implicating second person point of view. Yeats asks, “what need you, being come to sense / But fumble in a greasy till / [...] until / you have dried the marrow from the bone?” (1-2, 4-5), and not only creates the audience as merely eking out a living, but also wonders why they are not doing more for their country, as if they were leeches. This point of view works to widen the gap between the revolutionaries and the ordinary man, as well. Playing on the word “save” from line 6, Yeats goes on to ask “what, God help us, could they save?” (14), suggesting obliquely at the heart-breaking dramatic irony of their driving desire to save Ireland being written about years after the fact in a still-imprisoned Ireland. The implication of any ability to save at all directly positions them above those who “[stilled their] childish play” (10) when the revolutionaries’ names were spoken.

It is not until halfway through the third out of four stanzas that the readers are familiarized with the revolutionaries by name. This prolonged introduction, especially in direct contrast to the immediate presentation of the “you” furthers the distant idolization of Fitzgerald, Emmet and Tone. Initially established with the abstractive image, “was it for this the wild geese spread / the grey wing upon every tide” (17-18), deepens the aura of them being more than human that Yeats created. He goes on to ask if their deaths were worth it, “for this Edward Fitzgerald died, / And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone, / All that delirium of the brave?” (20-23), lamenting

the loss of them and all they could have done for Ireland. Followed by the poem's refraining couplet of "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, / It's with O'Leary in the grave" (23-24), it becomes increasingly clear how highly Yeats regards them, equating them with the entirety of "Romantic Ireland." This association is highlighted in the last two lines of the poem, in which "Romantic Ireland's dead and gone" (23) is replaced with "But let them be, they're dead and gone / They're with O'Leary in the grave" (31).

"Easter, 1916" was first written three years after "September 1913," but it was published closer to a decade afterward. It expresses a similar level of reverence for those who died for Irish freedom as in "September 1913," but it also demonstrates the effects those three years full of war and violence had through the more humanizing, grounded, and less idealized depictions of the revolutionaries who were imprisoned or killed during the Easter Rising. Yeats specifically mentions Constance Markievicz, Patrick Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, John MacBride, and James Connolly, who were all, aside from John MacBride, significant figures in the organization of the Rising. The second stanza of the poem briefly describes each of these rebels, excepting Connolly, in ways that make them entirely human – Markievicz spent "her nights in argument / Until her voice grew shrill" (19-20), Pearse "kept a school" (24), MacDonagh "might have won fame in the end, / So sensitive his nature seemed" (28-29), while MacBride Yeats "dreamed / A drunken, vain-glorious lout" (31-32). The space that Yeats dedicates to these accounts, a 24-line stanza, clearly implies their importance – he is not dealing with monolithic heroes of the past, rather people he knew personally or by association, which eliminates any chances for idolization and demonstrates how rebellion was no longer a distant concept for him.

The first-person point of view in this poem is an important aspect of this tone shift as well, as it does not incriminate the reader, but instead the speaker, and by extension Yeats himself. Within the first stanza he discusses how, after exchanging "polite, meaningless words" (8) with various revolutionaries, he would think

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 (10-14)

which states explicitly the lack of true respect Yeats had for them; perhaps even showing the lack

of seriousness with which he took the struggle against the British. This passage serves to underline Yeats' initial distance from the revolutionaries, as they clearly run in different social circles: Yeats' circle apparently certain that the concerns of those unhappy with the British were trivial, as though they were merely fools in "motley" (14).

This conception of the revolutionaries and Yeats is broken apart in the last stanza however, in which he, as he does in "September 1913," laments the passing of these people he sees as "changed, changed utterly" (79) into something more than they were. He understands it as his duty as a poet "to murmur name upon name" (61) in order to keep them alive in some way. The same sense of reverence, an expression close to awe, is found in this last stanza as well, in which Yeats describes MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly, and Pearse as transformed completely. With these changes "a terrible beauty is born" (80) – he was a witness to people essentially becoming mythic heroes. Yeats' proclivity to contribute to this mythologizing, as seen in "September," is complicated and deepened in "Easter" as he works through how their deaths changed the meaning of their lives.

Yeats persistently ruminates on their sacrifices and the consequences of giving up a life for a cause. He continually turns over if anything is worth that cost, especially if it ends without success, as a large portion of Ireland's rebellions did. While Yeats' formations of the actual revolutionaries underwent a shift from "September" to "Easter," both of these poems are stuck on the aftermaths of their acts. They ask the same questions despite being written years apart. The most apparent similarity is the sense of admiration and veneration, which naturally accompanies the people mentioned, that rubs up against Yeats' conflicted views about the true value or impact of their undertakings for a free Ireland; in other words, how he creates poetically the dissonance he feels about their actions.

This "poetic dissonance" is seen in the third stanza of "September," which explicitly asks if "this" (17), i.e. an Ireland still under British rule and no longer "Romantic" (23), was really worth the deaths of Edward Fitzgerald, Robert Emmet, Wolfe Tone, and the "delirium of the brave" (22). In the subsequent stanza, Yeats asserts that if "[we could] turn the years again / And call those exiles" (25-26) into the present day, that they would act as if their sacrifices were not much, given how "they weighed so lightly what they gave" (30). He seems to be grappling with what a life

is worth: to the people who live them, to those around them, to a whole country. In the second to last line, after talking about bringing them back from the dead, he tells the reader to “let them be, they’re dead and gone” (31), which demonstrates not only a respect for them in their final rests, but also Yeats’ ostensible awe at the fact that they are dead at all. This is reinforced by the repetition of the last line of every stanza, “[It’s/They’re] with O’Leary in the grave” (8, 16, 24, 32), as if he has to continually remind himself.

“Easter, 1916” accomplishes an analogously ambivalent tone, in particular through the third and fourth stanzas, which once more emphasize Yeats’ struggle to understand the meaning and repercussions of revolution and martyrdom. The third stanza is a definite break from the rest of the poem, rife with natural imagery and animals, describing “hearts with one purpose alone” (41) as a stone disrupting “the living stream” (44). The stone, or the revolutionaries’ hearts, remain unchanged and stubborn where the horses, the birds, and the clouds live and vary constantly. The beginning lines of the fourth stanza, “too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart” (57-58), work to elucidate the third stanza’s sudden shift, positioning revolutionaries as stalwarts resisting an overwhelming force. The ambiguity of whether or not a heart of stone is a positive attribute, which connotatively could imply anything from stubbornness to strength to antipathy, works to subtly call back to the same dissonance Yeats expresses in “September.” He is clearly still struggling with how to feel about those who died for Irish freedom, especially considering that he is trying to conceptualize those he knew personally.

The fourth stanza of “Easter” also begins to more fully explore Yeats’ internal struggle about the expense of sacrifice, as he goes on to ask, “O when may it suffice?” (59). Despite declaring it not truly his or anyone’s job to understand in the next line, it nonetheless clearly preoccupies him, as more questions occur about the effectiveness and mystery of the revolutionaries’ ultimate sacrifice: “What is it but nightfall? / No, no, not night but death” (65-66), “Was it needless death after all?” (67), and “what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?” (72-73). It is as if he cannot truly wrap his mind around the implications of and the bravery he finds in MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly, and Pearse’s deaths during and after the Rising. These also echo the last two questions of “September,” of “what, God

help us, could they save?” (14), and “was it for this [...] / all that blood was shed, / [...] all that delirium of the brave?” (17, 19, 22) – Yeats is still trying to figure out the same conundrums in “Easter, 1916” that drove him to write a poem from three years earlier.

The ways in which time is constructed and dealt with throughout these two poems also demonstrate Yeats’ inner conflict, perhaps a bit more subtly. Within “September 1913” there is an obvious concern with the past, introduced from the first iteration of “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone” (7), as well as in the repeated use of the past tense. In the second stanza, Yeats mentions “[the reader’s] childish play” (10); in the next, revolutionaries all active from decades before are mentioned by name; and in the final stanza Yeats wonders about turning back time completely and bringing those from the past into the future. These instances certainly play into the elegiac tone of “September,” creating a mournful atmosphere wary of the present and the future, in addition to building the past as, if not idyllic, then rather more heroic than Yeats’ current present. This aspect of its temporality is also seen in the present tense of the refrain found in “September,” which explicitly puts the speaker’s context in opposition to the dead Romantic Ireland. The distance this creates does significant but subtle work to further Yeats’ near-mythological constructions of past revolutionaries.

“Easter, 1916,” on the other hand, directly, almost anxiously, tackles the prospect of the future after the events of the Rising. There is a move within the piece from what came before into what comes next, which again is reflected in the tense – shifting from the past tense found in the first and second stanzas into the present tense of the third and fourth stanzas. Certain phrases also underline this shift, as the “eighteenth century houses” (4) become “now and in time to be” (77). The phrase “minute by minute,” repeated three times within eight lines, contributes to the restless present of the third stanza; an indirect contrast to the slow-moving past of the first stanza and its sluggish “polite meaningless words,” enconced by commas in both its iterations. These small details are extremely important in creating the ambiance of “Easter,” and maintaining its worried contemplation of time; the effects of the Rising were widespread and meaningful and Yeats was clearly aware of how lasting they would be. This temporal aspect of “Easter” seems to interrogate how an event that lasted only a few days and the deaths of only a few men could have such an impact.

Comparing these two poems' portrayals of revolutionaries, the consequences of revolutionary sacrifice, and time allow for a deeper look into how Yeats used "September 1913" and "Easter, 1916" as a way to work towards understanding his confused feelings about the struggle against British control of Ireland. Yeats' shift of focus from the idealized past into the reality of the present, seen through both subject and form, his evolving perspectives concerning revolutionaries, and the ways in which he conceptualizes time between these poems are significant. It demonstrates how he uses them to process his developing views concerning the state of

Ireland in the early 20th century. It is clear he was not only speaking for himself when he wrote these however, but rather encapsulating national feelings of ambivalent nostalgia for the past, trepidation of the future, and a grappling with what the consequences of society-wide social movements were.♦

Works Cited

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