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Reading William Butler Yeats's "Coole Park, 1929"

Coole Park, 1929

I meditate upon a swallow's flight,
Upon a aged woman and her house,
A sycamore and lime-tree lost in night
Although that western cloud is luminous,
Great works constructed there in nature's spite
For scholars and for poets after us,
Thoughts long knitted into a single thought,
A dance-like glory that those walls begot.

There Hyde before he had beaten into prose
That noble blade the Muses buckled on,
There one that ruffled in a manly pose
For all his timid heart, there that slow man,
That meditative man, John Synge, and those
Impetuous men, Shawe-Taylor and Hugh Lane,
Found pride established in humility,
A scene well set and excellent company.

They came like swallows and like swallows went,
And yet a woman's powerful character
Could keep a swallow to its first intent;
And half a dozen in formation there,
That seemed to whirl upon a compass-point,
Found certainty upon the dreaming air,
The intellectual sweetness of those lines
That cut through time or cross it withershins.

Here, traveller, scholar, poet, take your stand
When all those rooms and passages are gone,
When nettles wave upon a shapeless mound
And saplings root among the broken stone,
And dedicate—eyes bent upon the ground,
Back turned upon the brightness of the sun
And all the sensuality of the shade—
A moment's memory to that laurelled head.

Coole Park, 1929,” which first appeared in his 1933 volume *The Winding Stair and Other Poems*, is one of Yeats’s great memorializing poems. Yeats had a natural gift for the elegiac; as he said in his poem “In Memory of Major Robert Gregory,” in no remorseful tone, “all that come into my mind are dead.” One need only think of such typical declarations as “The woods of Arcady are dead” (the very opening line of the *Collected Poems*), “Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone” (“September 1913”), “The Garden died. . . .” (“Fragments”). Within his mind these corpses are then resurrected, and turned into “Beautiful Lofty Things.” “Coole Park, 1929” performs this same transformational miracle not only for the people mentioned in the course of the poem, but also (and above all) for the place and time indicated in the title.

Places in Yeats’s poetry are celebrated more for the symbolic resonance that the poet himself has managed to confer on them than for any intrinsic or autochthonic qualities they might possess. The poet celebrates the almost arbitrary nature of his power in proud, declarative fashion: “I declare this tower is my symbol; I declare/ This winding, gyring, spiraling treadmill of a stair is my ancestral stair;/ That Goldsmith and the Dean, Berkeley and Burke have travelled there” (“Blood and the Moon”). It is as if the poet’s statements have the self-fulfilling power of those of an all-powerful autocrat, transforming the world by the simple fact of having been uttered.

One could almost say that the locations he dignifies by naming assume their real meaning and importance from the place they are assigned within the carefully imposed order of his *Collected Works*. Although many of his poems are known to readers as individual anthology pieces, for Yeats their fullest meaning can only be found by studying them where he chose to locate them, first in his individual volumes and then in the carefully assembled *Collected Works*. Yeats is as much an architect (both of stately homes and of landscapes) as he is a poet, creating a great ordered structure, where towers, winding stairs, lakes, houses and trees all have their ordained locations. Individual poems respond to other poems; sometimes at a distance of years and pages (“Sailing to Byzantium” and “Byzantium”), sometimes by carefully chosen propinquity (“Coole Park, 1929,” “Coole and Ballylee, 1931,” on flanking pages).

The recurring symbols—the gyres, towers, swords, hawks—also serve to bind his scattered poems together. As Louis MacNeice put it, Yeats, like so many other poets of the 1890s, rejected rationality, but nonetheless wanted a system and so happily created his own irrational one, based on visions and dreams (and his wife’s visions and dreams, at that). Yeats’s admiration for Shelley’s poetry was based to a large extent on what he saw as the poet’s arbitrary creation of a system of personal symbols (domes, rivers, shells, caverns . . .), and he was clearly determined to create something similarly idiosyncratic for his own works.

At times this can make the reader feel that he or she is listening in on a private conversation—or, perhaps more aptly, monologue. However, many of the obscurer allusions in individual poems can be clarified by broader reading of the entire corpus. Yeats expects the reader to be familiar with his private system of reference. This applies not only to the meaning he has conferred on such symbols as the tower or the gyre, but also to the representational significance of the people he refers to. In “Coole Park, 1929” we are expected to know not only who Lady Gregory and John Millington Synge are (a reasonable expectation, for anyone with an interest in Irish literature), but also such personalities as Douglas Hyde, John Shawe-Taylor and Hugh Lane. For a critic like Yvor Winters, this is a highly unreasonable expectation; such characters are really little more than footnotes to Irish history and literature.

However, Winters’s objection rather misses the point. Yeats’s poem is partly celebrating these figures (something he does in other works, like “The Municipal Gallery Revisited”), but is principally celebrating the poet’s own power to make them into legendary figures. Even if these figures did not do anything of historic importance, the poet can and does bestow

immortal fame on them. And, perhaps more importantly, he places them all in their allotted positions within the great orderly dance of his vision of life.

Given the highly structured, almost processional movement of the poem—four stanzas of stately ottava rima, each consisting of a single sentence—it makes sense to analyze it stanza by stanza. First, though, the title: Yeats gives us place and date. The place is, of course, already well-known to readers of his poetry: the home and grounds of his great aristocratic patron and friend, Lady Gregory, where he has found comfort, peace and encouragement. The date is two years after Lady Gregory has been forced to sell the house and estate to the Forestry Department. This explains the elegiac tone of the poem; Lady Gregory is still alive, though now “an aged woman,” but the estate is no longer the place of aristocratic privilege and enlightened generosity that made it so important to the poet.

Line 1 begins by firmly placing the poet in control: “I meditate. . . .” All that follows is included within his meditation: the symbolic swallow and its flight, the aged woman and her house, the trees, the clouds, the great works, the scholars and poets, and their thoughts. . . . While the six lines of the sestet emphasize abundance and variety, the couplet serves to show that everything is under firm control. All of the images hinted at in this opening stanza will be taken up again in the course of the poem. Clearly the stanza is paying tribute to the aged woman and the germinal power of her house (“those walls begot . . .”), but it is also a celebration of the poet’s own art: it is his own poem that has succeeded in summoning up these images and binding them together in its “dance-like” movement. We might wonder at the desirability of “thoughts long knitted into a single thought” but we must recognize that this tendency towards harmonious union is what Yeats’s poetry so often seeks: the dance is his special symbol for the unification of multiplicity. This opening stanza, despite giving us images that seem to gesture towards dissolution and oncoming destruction (the swallow’s flight, which could, in Keatsian fashion, suggest the approach of winter; the trees being lost in night), maintains its celebratory tone specifically because the poet is so firmly in control.

The second stanza now gives us the list of scholars and poets who have created the “great works” already mentioned. Douglas Hyde (1860-1949) was the founder of the Gaelic League, a politician and academic; for him Yeats uses the characteristic image of poetry as a sword. The notion of it being “beaten into prose” (presumably echoing the Biblical notion of the sword being turned into a ploughshare), even though it might suggest a downgrading, is nonetheless in keeping with Yeats’s ideas of art as something that is deliberately wrought and shaped, like metal in a forge (as Peter Conrad said, “Byzantium,” with its “dolphin-torn, [. . .] gong-tormented sea,” sounds like an anvil chorus). Hyde is followed by a slightly ironic self-portrait; there is a disarming modesty in the image of the poet assuming manliness like a bird aggressively (or nervously) ruffling its feathers, but the reader is fully aware that it is a false, or, at least ironic modesty. The three figures that follow are characterized by simple adjectives (“slow,” “meditative” for Synge, and “impetuous” for Shawe-Taylor and Hugh Lane); however, readers of his works are already familiar with these figures (John Shawe-Taylor had been the subject of a commemorative essay in 1911 and Hugh Lane figured in his poems on the Municipal Gallery) and Yeats relies on that knowledge.

The final couplet of the stanza gives us his ideal of true aristocracy, where “pride” is “established in humility.” The little self-portrait he has included exemplifies this notion perfectly—and therefore shows that he, too, is an aristocrat by virtue of his poetic gift. The final couplet, which verges on the prosy in its unexciting diction and deliberately non-imaginistic language, seems like an attempt to exemplify poetic humility. The couplets of the four stanzas are all very different, as if Yeats were deliberately showing his ability to contain a range of tones and areas of diction—including, as in this stanza, even lowly blandness.

The third stanza moves away from this plainness in striking fashion. Its first line, taking up the image that opened the poem, re-establishes a lightness and agility of movement in the

verse, in keeping with the image of the swallow. As Harold Bloom has pointed out, the central notion in this stanza is the reverse of what we find in “The Second Coming”; here the falcon *can* hear the falconer. A “woman’s powerful character” acts as center here—as “compass-point.” Both meanings of the word “compass” here seem to be contained: the instrument that creates a circle around a sharply defined point and the instrument that provides geographical and locational bearings. The swallow-like spirits engage in an aerial dance, but one that has a fixed center, constituted by the certainty emanating from the woman’s powerful character.

The final couplet is the most intriguing in the entire poem and Denis Donoghue offers a suggestive reading of it: “The lines cut through time not to destroy it but to mark its possibilities, like a flare.” He compares the image to one that we find in Wallace Stevens’s “Stars at Tallapoosa,” which posits lines “straight and swift between the stars” which have nothing to do with the sea-lines or the earth-lines; they are pure intellectual acts, performed by man’s imagination for its own pleasure. But the lines which Yeats praises in his poem are continuous with the earth-lines and the sea-lines, they are made articulate in speech, style, grace, accomplishment.

They may be continuous with the earth-lines and the sea-lines and they may not destroy time, but the final word, “withershins,” does suggest that they render time irrelevant. The meaning of the word is contrary to the course of the sun (which is to say, anti-clockwise). It is as if the intellectual dance that has been set in motion is one that is now free from the usual pressure of history and events—all those things that are “past, or passing, or to come.”

This leads into the proclamatory tone of the final stanza. It has been suggested (see Unterecker, for example) that the poet is now addressing the five men already mentioned as ghosts. But given the sense of timelessness he has managed to impose, we can perhaps interpret these words as an address to travellers, scholars and poets of the future; in any case, the specific people referred to in the second stanza have now essentially become representatives of these categories.

Yeats takes advantage of the little grammatical quirk of English, whereby the verbs in a subordinate time-clause referring to the future are always in the present tense, to extend that sense of timeless reference: “When all those rooms and passages are gone. . . .” He calmly and deliberately pulls down his patron’s house, reduces it to a “shapeless mound” and lets nature take it over; despite the overall tone of reverence for the subject of his poem, there is undoubtedly an echo of Ozymandias in this operation—or, perhaps more aptly, a memory of Shelley’s tribute to the power of nature in the preface to *Prometheus Unbound*, where he recalls composing the work in the “mountainous ruins of the Baths of Caracalla, among the flowery glades and thickets of odoriferous blossoming trees, which are extended in ever winding labyrinths upon its immense platforms and dizzy arches suspended in the air.”

The listener is now instructed to turn his back upon “the brightness of the sun/ And all the sensuality of the shade.” It again suggests a symbolic act of stepping outside of a life in a fixed time and place. What now counts is the act of memory. This is the final tribute to the dedicatee of this poem and it comes, typically enough for Yeats, in the form of an imperative sentence. The poet formally pays homage to Lady Gregory and her “laurelled head”; but even as he does this, he assumes her powers for himself. His own verses show that he can do the same things that he attributes to her, keeping half a dozen images and notions whirling in the dance-formation of his stanzas. While Coleridge can only wish for the power of the Abyssinian maid (and by proxy that of Kubla Khan) in a subjunctive mood (“*Could I* revive within me/ Her symphony and song . . .”), Yeats is both Kubla Khan decreeing pleasure-domes and the inspired poet of flashing eyes and floating hair.

Each stanza consists of a single masterful sentence, winding its way with only apparently mazy motion through the interweaving rhymes of the sestet and reaching the measureless

calm of the final couplet. The shapes of the sentences vary from stanza to stanza, but each has the elegance and power of a stately dance. The central image of the poem—the swallow's flight—is tossed into the air of the first stanza and when it returns in the third stanza we have a sense of the poet's skill as caller of the dance, keeping his image "to its first intent." He shows a similar agility and poise in the last stanza, when he holds off the object of the verb "dedicate" in line 5 until the last line of the stanza.

The "laurelled head" is that of Lady Gregory, but it is also, of course, that of Yeats, who reconstitutes in his poems the powers that Lady Gregory symbolizes. In particular, there is something superbly magisterial in his handling of the ottava rima stanza. Yeats is the great reviver of this stanza form in English poetry after Byron. His real achievement is to have de-Byronized it. After *Don Juan* it seemed impossible to use the form for anything but comic or satirical poetry. We tend to forget that in Italian it was not only used by the comic poets, such as Berni and Pulci, who influenced Byron. It was also adopted by Ariosto and Tasso in their great epics. Yeats succeeds in using it in a wholly serious fashion. And, of course, Yeats is happy to use a form that brings with it all the associations of the Renaissance courts of Italy. In his case it is the poet rather than the courtly patron who seems to merit the title of *Magnifico*.

Works Cited

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