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Yeats's stillnesses

Every writer knows that published words have a distinctive relationship with the static. That is, assuming there is no revision, words remain the same through time, however much their author changes in relation to them. (I am setting to one side textual issues from, in particular, the ancient world, like that, for instance, of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, which reaches us via significant revision and additions so that we cannot be sure what the original words were.) What the young writer publishes in his or her early twenties is, generally speaking, still the same at the end of that writer's career and beyond. Publishing commits one to one's past: youthful thoughts and feelings, youthful ideas, youthful rhythms and patterns serve in stillness as the permanent counterpoint to new directions, changes of mind, re-casting of voice.

The act of reading, then, is almost always involved with a certain kind of obstinacy; the ability of printed language to face down time. This is as true for William Butler Yeats as for anyone. But Yeats, I propose, provides the reader with a peculiarly intense experience of the broad permanence of words and of what different meanings and effects, as well as affects, might be involved in that experience. This is partly because Yeats is, simply, interested in permanence. It is one of his—most permanent—concerns. The sea-green slates might fall to ruin. Yet the characters of Yeats's inscription at Thoor Ballylee will, it is to be hoped, outlast them.¹

Language's ability to persist is a splendid consolation against the decay of other things: 'All things fall and are built again',² the poet says, optimistically. Within Yeats's concept of the circularity of history, too—of the perning of the gyres—there is always movement. Yet it is movement, considered in one way, back to the same place: a perpetual cycle of return; a mobile stillness, as it were. Being within the passage of time, in this conceptual sense, does not for Yeats mean alteration but recuperation—or at any rate oscillation between fixed points.

Yet Yeats's romance with different forms of stillness is more involved than this because his poetry is entranced—hypnotized, one might say—by ways of figuring, and of creating, other

readerly perceptions of removal from time, or at least from *chronos*, the ancient Greek term for the plain chronological passage of events. If a reader of poetry in general is normally involved in reacquaintance with words that have not altered—one of the real psychic comforts, as Catherine Robson has explored, in knowing poetry by heart³—then reading Yeats extends that sense of the familiar because stillness, for him, is always more than this. Stillness—including that partly expressed or created in Yeats’s distinctive use of tenses—is a sustaining element of Yeats’s poetic imagination and a revealing matter to grasp in relation to Yeats’s understanding of narrative, of grammar, and the reader’s experience of poetry in relation to the clock and the calendar.

Yeats in various ways—to start somewhere obvious—tells us to value stillness. And that is in a lived sense. This is stillness that is actual: which belongs in the real world, where they marry in churches. For his daughter, Yeats memorably hopes her new husband will take her to a house, ‘Where all’s accustomed, ceremonious’ (p. 405, l.74). That is a form of permanence in the business, and outside of the busyness, of living. The ‘all’ is powerful: the space of Anne Yeats’s married life will be, it is to be hoped, in *everything* regulated. In ‘A Prayer for my Daughter’ (1919), the same manners and patterns will, it is proposed, be unbroken in a calmness of aristocratic dignity that Yeats would always cherish as, on stage, he explored in his versions of the almost ritualistically static Noh plays. (And those plays, even at the most local level of character, have their own depictions of the cessation of time’s passing. There is, for instance, the silent Cuchulain in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* (1919): ‘he is but a phantom now’, says his figure, ‘And he can neither touch, nor hear, nor see’.⁴) There will be, for the best households, the tranquillity of settled things—as certain as an ancestral stair up which generations have climbed and will climb.

And in the poetry, Yeats can openly look for literal stillness as well as admire the unruffled aristocratic dignity of, for instance, the dying lady (‘Upon a Dying Lady’ (1917)). There are literal spaces of tranquillity too, where Yeats offers us a kind of psychogeography of retreat. The poet of ‘The Lake Isle of Innisfree’ (1890), plainly enough, longs for a certain kind of remote peace in, or on, Lough Gill. Michael Stephens made the thoughtful point that each return to this poem,

however well we know it, ‘still has that dramatic value of the illusion of the first time [of reading]’.⁵ This observation strikes me as true though also hard to explain (and Stephens does not explain it). Perhaps it is something to do with the suspended nature of time *in* the poem. It is an intriguing thought that the only repeated words—‘I will arise and go now’ (p. 117, l.1)—are the ones that explicitly refer to movement (Yeats came to regret these words, as it happens, since he thought they were archaic or formulaic and disturbed the naturalness of the rest of the poem). Repeating words of encouragement to, or announcement of, movement has a paradoxical effect, like Matthew Arnold’s use of ‘farewell’.⁶ Yeats’s own ‘*O what of that, O what of that, | What is there left to say?*’ (p. 580, ll. 7-8) repeated in ‘The Curse of Cromwell’ (1937), and followed, until the end, by more to say, is another version of the destabilizing effects of reiteration that concerns words trying to *enact* something. The repeat in ‘The Lake Isle’ allows us to infer that the words have not worked. Repeating the statement that one will arise and go confirms, to stay with this example, that one has not arisen and gone. The stillness of the lake isle is neatly matched by the stillness of the poet not going there yet (as indeed, of course, he never did).

Aesthetically, it is not difficult to recognize a particular habit of stillness in Yeats’s poetry about real people, too. He was aware, as ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’ (1939) acknowledges, of his own habit of figuring ‘Character isolated by a deed’ (p. 630, l.29), a way of representing human beings in such a manner, Yeats added, ‘To engross the present and dominate memory’ (ibid., l.30). Dominating or transfixing memory—of leaving an image in the mind that was permanent and a kind of stillness in itself—was part of Yeats’s aesthetic more amply. And that includes the drama. The great images, to dominate memory, in the plays include, for example, Cathleen Ni Houlihan described (though not seen) as a young queen at the end of Yeats’s and Lady Gregory’s 1902 play of that name. And more plainly the end of *At the Hawk’s Well* (1916-17)—Noh inspired—which leaves its audience with the memorably heroic self-assertion of the Young Man (Cuchulain) and then, immediately afterwards, the strangely destabilising last words of the Musicians, concluding the play with the figure of a withered tree. A single image, at that’s

play's close, has something of the ability to shut down time: to hold the present and reduce the past to one verbal picture intended to remain in the mind.

Yeats's poetry develops, so to speak, into the photographic—pun intended. His writing treats not so much of moving images but fixed ones—the photographic sense of a 'still' enters the language according to *OED*, interestingly enough, in the year of the Easter Rising. There, for instance, in 'Beautiful Lofty Things' (1938) is Maud Gonne on Howth Station and John Butler Yeats on the Abbey stage; much earlier, in 'Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea' (1892), there is the unfaithful Cuchulain seemingly permanently framed as fighting the invulnerable tide; or The O'Rahilly in the poem of his name (1938), penning his own epitaph (in a way not historically accurate), somewhere off Henry Street (actually on what is now O'Rahilly Parade). These powerful visual glimpses of men and women, both real and mythical, are forms of portrayals that capture an essence—that invite the reader to think that an essence has been captured—in a single view, rather like John Butler Yeats's work as a portraitist.⁷ There is a resistance to narrative here even though each image belongs *in* a narrative: what is offered is a moment, a fixed instant, which we are asked to assume sums up a life or part of it while remaining itself: memorable, exemplary. The messy complexities and contradictions of real human existences are poetically stilled. And we are allowed to believe that there is such a thing as a true, unitary, and single identity for each man and woman that can be clinched in a verbal picture. In one odd way, this is Yeats involved with a kind of verbal taxidermy.

Yeats invites us to believe, in 'The Municipal Gallery Revisited' (1937), that painted or drawn pictures themselves can capture identities too. Paintings, Yeats allows, bring clarifying repose to exemplary forms, somehow standing in for the real person no longer living. There in the Gallery, surrounded by the images of thirty years, Yeats observes his 'permanent and impermanent images' (p. 602, l.20), asking his reader, first of all, to ponder on what differences these words might describe. What could be Yeats's *impermanent* images? Those he has forgotten or will forget? Those he will only inaccurately recall? Pictures, more prosaically, only on temporary loan to the

Gallery? It is an odd form of discrimination but one that pushes the question of art's durability, and of what it is that art can and cannot capture, into view. And then, in this celebrated poem's celebrated end, Yeats echoes the permanence of his permanent images with a verb choice:

Think where man's glory most begins and ends,
And say my glory was I had such friends.

p. 604, ll.54-5.

As the poet has presented himself in old age, with medieval knees, so here he writes as if posthumously. What a difference there would be in a line that said 'And say my glory *is* I had such friends.' The glory, as it stands, passes seemingly with the passing of the friends, as if in death their friendships in their former, earthly, life vanish. Yeats writes as if his terrestrial time were over, though he continues. He has obtained a position of permanence, a kind of changelessness imaginatively akin to his transformation at the end of 'Sailing to Byzantium' (1928) into a perpetually singing object of hammered gold and gold enamelling.

Yeats's stilling imagination gives us, too, peculiarly out-of-time places, even as his representations include movement. County Sligo, as the 'Lake Isle' reminds us, is often enough, like Ireland as a whole for Yeats, a place of the mind. Visited in summer holidays, Yeats's Sligo in part became an inspiring memory for the rest of the year, a still point—and a Rosses Point—to which next summer he could literally return. Memories of, and desires for, Sligo—even, as Yeats puts it in 'Reveries over Childhood and Youth' (1926), 'for a sod of earth from some field I knew, something of Sligo to hold in [my] hand'⁸—which were captured in the early poetry include the western coast's dramatic weather. And, in the recollection of the central stanza of 'Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland' (1894), Sligo's stormy climate moves out of time into a place of the mind that is secure from change. 'The wind', Yeats writes,

has bundled up the clouds high over Knocknarea.
 And thrown the thunder on the stones for all that Maeve can say.
 Angers that are like noisy clouds have set our hearts abeat;
 But we have all bent low and low and kissed the quiet feet
 Of Cathleen, the daughter of Houlihan.

p. 207, ll.6-10.

In the literal sense this is not still at all: there is a storm. But Yeats's referents are, at the same time, to the unchanging: to, first of all, the undated and undatable drama of the natural world on the Atlantic coast—now, since 2014, part of the Wild Atlantic Way—where the winds whip the clouds up above Knocknarea. When have they ever not done that? And it is, too, ancient, mythic Ireland that is in the storm. The huge burial cairn of Medb, Queen of Connacht in the Ulster Cycle, crowns Knocknarea, visible for miles within the county. Yeats's storm is out of time because Medb addresses it as if, though it is tumult, the tempest does not belong to the *chronos* of the real atmosphere. And then the last lines—in common with all three of the poem's stanzas—changes the text's relation to time again. For here, Yeats says that '*we have* all bent low': the bending, the obeisance to the personification of Ireland herself, has already happened. There is another still point, something already achieved, which implicitly sets to one side the angry storm. 'But' suggests that whatever else is happening, an earlier and completed action takes priority and is the ground of the song.

Yeats is particularly attentive imaginatively to actions that continue, as the storms over Sligo are seemingly a permanent feature of the county governed by neither clock nor calendar. Poetry, paradoxically, figures something being done that obtains a kind of static-ness because it keeps being done: the repose that can be ascribed to repetition. Consider Yeats's 'The Valley of the Black Pig' (1896). 'The dews drop slowly and dreams gather;' the poet writes:

unknown spears

Suddenly hurtle before my dream-awakened eyes,
 And then the clash of fallen horsemen and the cries
 Of unknown perishing armies beat about my ears.
 We who still labour by the cromlech on the shore,
 The grey cairn on the hill, when day sinks drowned in dew,
 Being weary of the world's empires, bow down to you,
 Master of the still stars and of the flaming door.

p. 161, ll.1-8.

The poem plays, openly, on different meanings of the word 'still' (Keats's 'Ode on Grecian Urn' (1819) or, long after Yeats's death, Beckett's 'Stirrings Still' (1986-9), are but two other texts to mine this indecisive word in different ways from Yeats). For a start, 'The Valley of the Black Pig' appears to be a dream-vision—the poet is asleep as the action happens. And what somnolently occurs is a distant sonic and visual memory of a conflict, presumably the attack on the murderous Black Pig as she reached Enniscrone. This event has happened at some far distant time (the time of legend not history), though it remains 're-enacted' in the sleeping mind, as if it were still going on. (Jonathan Culler, notably, in 'Framing Past Events', part of chapter VI of *Theory of the Lyric* (2017), deftly explores lyric's use of the present tense, though not Yeats's use of tense, to re-invigorate history as a recoverable experience.) Yet Yeats's poem then moves out of time in a different way. The speaker observes that he is among those 'who still labour by the cromlech on the shore': but what point in time is this labouring being done? Is this the poetic contemporary or does it, too, belong with a legendary past that continues, like the principal figure in Walter Pater's *Apollo in Picardy* (1893) or Edward Thomas's 'Lob' (1917)? Whatever the case, those labourers, weary of the business of the world, honour without ceasing a higher power that is itself unchanging. They bow down—a hint of that characteristic Yeatsian fondness for

honouring feet again—to the ‘Master of the still stars and of the flaming door.’ A power outside of time, an authority over *il sole e l’altre stelle*. And if that word ‘still’ catches the eye, it is not only because it is the final example of the poem’s figuring of curious relationships with time but because of a material fact: stars twinkle. The pulsing of light caused by atmospheric turbulence is a wholly familiar feature of the night skies. Yeats, against this, makes his reader notice ‘still’ all the more because it forces us to *visualize* in the inner eye what is different for imagined rather than real stars.

Yeats lingers on ‘still’, or allows his reader to, as if the word contains a clue to what is peculiarly treasured in the *Darstellung* of the poet’s imagination. ‘A storm-beaten old watch-tower,’ Yeats writes in ‘Symbols’ (1932):

A blind hermit rings the hour.

All-destroying sword-blade still

Carried by the wandering fool.

Gold-sewn silk on the sword-blade,

Beauty and fool together laid.

p. 484, ll.1-6.

Plainly enough, this is a miniature gathering, a gathering in miniature, of some of Yeats’s favoured symbols and figures: the tower, the sword, the fool (derived from the Tarot in part, as Joan Weatherley reminds us⁹). And they are gathered almost completely out-of-time, ironically in a poem that begins with, literally, a marking out of time’s happening. To the first couplet, a reader might want to say: but where and when? Where is this watch-tower and when is, or was, the hour rung from it? The second couplet more daringly plays with time’s movement, for the

placing of the word ‘still’ enables two of its meanings to emerge, one after the other. First, the sense of the third line on its own is simply that the all-destroying blade is not destroying any more—that like Cato’s sword it lies stationary. But the enjambement obliges a revision as ‘still’, paradoxically, shifts to mean not the static but the continuing. The sword remains carried, though to which time the poem refers we still—that word again—do not know.

Yeats’s later poetry continues to offer new aesthetic experiences, in the reading process, of words that hold time in suspense. That poetry, including ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ (1928), finds fresh ways to invite the reader into what might be described as psychic motionlessness. The words, as we return to them, have not changed through time—like published or private writing in general. Yet richly for Yeats, poetic form creates a deeper sense of exclusion from *das Vergehen der Zeit*, the movement of time. It is a movement not into *kairos*—the ancient Greek sense of the significant or important moment—but into an experience of time being lifted, held in abeyance. Here is ‘My House’, the second part of ‘Meditations in Time of Civil War’ (1923):

An ancient bridge, and a more ancient tower,
 A farmhouse that is sheltered by its wall,
 An acre of stony ground,
 Where the symbolic rose can break in flower,
 Old ragged elms, old thorns innumerable,
 The sound of the rain or sound
 Of every wind that blows;
 The stilted water-hen
 Crossing stream again
 Scared by the splashing of a dozen cows;

A winding stair, a chamber arched with stone,

A grey stone fireplace with an open hearth,

A candle and written page.

Il Penseroso's Platonist toiled on

In some like chamber, shadowing forth

How the daemonic rage

Imagined everything.

Benighted travellers

From markets and from fairs

Have seen his midnight candle glimmering.

Two men have founded here. A man-at-arms

Gathered a score of horse and spent his days

In this tumultuous spot,

Where through long wars and sudden night alarms

His dwindling score and he seemed castaways

Forgetting and forgot;

And I, that after me

My bodily heirs may find,

To exalt a lonely mind,

Befitting emblems of adversity.

pp. 419-20, ll.1-30.

Words in the first section ask the reader to recognize, in one sense, a form of motion. They describe, or narrate, a scene that changes: an audio-visual account ('audio-visual' dates, according to *OED*, from 1902) of the views from Yeats's house, a house that is entered by the poem's

watchful eye at the beginning of the second stanza. But this motion of the observing eye—from a perimeter wall and the stream to what lies on the desk beside the hearth in Yeats’s study—is also static, because it is produced from, or rather produces, the verbal equivalent of a sequence of (static) photographs, as if in an album. The absence of a main verb (“There is an ancient bridge ...”, for instance) leaves Yeats’s verse paragraph as a list: an inventory of things noticed and noted. And that noticing—that act of enumerating what is there—peculiarly enhances, it seems to me, the ‘thereness’ of what the poem narrates, like the opening statement of ‘A Crazy Girl’ (1937): ‘That crazed girl improvising her music’ (p. 578, l.1). Yeats, in ‘Meditations’, makes us realise that ‘An ancient bridge’, ‘a more ancient tower’, have a substance that is more ample, more present, than, say, “There is an ancient bridge ... there is a more ancient tower’. The sparseness somehow enables a greater clarity or poetic communication of what G.M. Hopkins would call thisness. The ‘winding stair’, another example, already mentioned, is there too without a main verb: language marks its presence by naming it *as* there, not saying more clunkily that it *is* there. And ‘winding stair’, in addition, is a phrase that is intimately Yeats’s own: its utterance calls up misty or sharp recollections of its use before and after 1928 (not least in *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933)). The two words quietly supplement the poem’s wider invocation of that which is suspended in, or out, of time, reminding us of a way in which repeated words across years—Robert Douglas-Fairhurst has written engagingly about the poetic practice of self-allusion, including Tennyson’s, which is differently part of Yeats’s business here—confuse, or rebut, the basic process of chronology.¹⁰

And it is the more remarkable absence of a main verb in the final section that extends yet further the reader’s sense of this part of ‘Meditations’ as circumventing time. What *is* the main verb, the grammatical marker of time, of that enormously long second sentence of the final portion (if sentence, indeed, it can be called)? How does one grammatically and syntactically relate the statements on either side of the semi-colon? Or, to put this more locally—which verb governs the language after the semi-colon? ‘And I,’ Yeats writes,

that after me
 My bodily heirs may find,
 To exalt a lonely mind,
 Befitting emblems of adversity.

This, taken on its own, is incomprehensible. That is because the subject ('I') is most obviously linked to a participle ('Befitting') not a conjugated verb that—befits. The effect is telling: Yeats as 'I' is lifted out of grammatical time, time that is marked by verb forms, so that although he is thinking of his heirs, he is also seemingly permanently present because he has lexically by-passed the clock by not belonging in, or to, a clear tense.

As he produces these various effects of stillness in his verse and drama, Yeats takes himself out of narrative in noticeable ways. Narrative is that, of course, which for the most part, despite post-modernity, is thought to progress: it is, like the practice of history, to do with a plot imposed on time. Narrative, usually, regulates events into orderliness, finding patterns, causality, or its illusion, where the experience in the midst, to use Frank Kermode's term,¹¹ is more often of accident, uncertainty, and randomness. Narrative, from a psychoanalytical perspective, is likewise a psychic habit that can explain—or, rather, give the illusion of, or, for Freud with Oedipus, the *myth* of, explanation—as much as it, narrative, can inhibit. Being trapped in a narrative—particularly one of obvious progress—can be psychically imprisoning not least because the very notion of a progress narrative is one that belies the more familiar messiness of actual experience, of the midst. Narrative takes us out, from this perspective, of confusion and disorder that is both the lived nature of human life and, often enough, the circumstances of that life. 'We can only think of our lives as a progress narrative', as Adam Phillips remarks, surveying what psychic damage can be done by too great a commitment to the notion of existence as developmental, 'because we happen by accident to have heard of the idea of development'.¹²

Narrative, or, as Kermode would say in shorthand, the sense of an ending, is as attractive as it is perilous in its relationship with actuality.

Yeats's stillnesses take his poems, even if they concern a narrative, or—to put this inelegantly—narrate a narrative, out of a development plot. He avoids the question of the character change, for instance, or of the tremendously difficult subject of the causality of events. No-one would turn to, say, 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' better to understand the deep-seated reasons behind the conflict between the pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty IRA. The characters of Yeats's imagination, it is true, occasionally do change their mind: like Michael and his engagement to Delia in *Cathleen Ni Houliban*. But mapping the psychology of such alterations is not primarily Yeats's interest. He is no novelist just as, by his own admission, he was not a logical thinker. The balloon of the mind, as Yeats wryly put it in the poem of that name, only rarely could be forced into its shed. The stillness of the poetry, as this essay has been describing, is part of the poet's more general, and often austere or ritualised, commitment to things lifted outside of plots and plans, arguments and developments.

That is not to say, though, that Yeats is unconcerned with the patterns of time's movement. As he grew older, Yeats concerned himself with such patterns more and more. There are, in overview, essentially two dimensions to this concern. First, there is William Blake's notion that without contraries is no progression. That semi-alchemical idea clinches for Yeats his strong sense that the movement of time was from opposite to opposite, a conviction that reached its most extraordinary, and bizarre, treatment in *A Vision* (1925/37). 'The Second Coming' (1920) expresses, more accessibly, something of the gyre's movement from, in this poem's case, Christ to Anti-Christ, while the two Byzantium poems do not map changes in time but the simultaneous present of opposites: objectivity *versus* subjectivity; lofty aesthetic withdrawal *versus* the tormented sea, held together like William Empson's ambiguity of the seventh type. And second, though related, is Yeats's increasing conviction, essentially from the close of the Celtic Twilight period, that Ireland, and in particular though not exclusively the Catholic working and

middle classes, were increasingly debased in taste, unable to comprehend beauty, unable to sustain the aristocratic lineage of high culture, and unable to give the right twigs for an eagle's nest. The response to Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), whatever actually motivated the riot, struck Yeats as concrete evidence of this decline, as did—what Yeats frames as—the Wealthy Man's hopes for popular metrics to assure Dublin that Sir Hugh Lane's offer of pictures were worthwhile accepting. By the end, by 'Under Ben Bulbin' (1939), Yeats, in arguing against this cultural downturn—which is the closest Yeats comes in thematic terms to being a Modernist in the spirit of Eliot of *The Waste Land* (1922) or Pound of *The Cantos* (c. 1915-62)—produces, I think, rhetoric rather than poetry.¹³ The rant—it is hardly more—at the end of 'Under Ben Bulbin' about base-born products of base beds is the last of Yeats's increasingly unsophisticated denunciations. These have become un-beautiful themselves: he rails against the turning of the gyre downwards from the high achievement of his generation towards the impoverished future.

Man, as Yeats has it, lives between two eternities, that of race and of soul. And so doing he lives amid the unstoppable, interminable movements of the gyres, spinning from opposites to opposites. More locally and immediately, in Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century, the most prominent movement of time as the poet observes is a spiralling down, an etiolation, of high culture: a philistinism; a weakening of the indomitable Irishry. The stillnesses I have been observing in Yeats's poetry, set in this macro-, indeed universal, context, are doing remarkably important work. They help in defining what, in part, it feels like to read Yeats, for sure. But that feeling of suspension, of pause, means that Yeats's stillnesses are aspiring to create a buttress, by giving the illusion of lifting the reader out of time, against Yeats's perception of those external movements of *chronos* that are deleterious, particularly to culture, to poetry itself, and the values of Yeats's Ireland. The repose of Yeats's writing—and I will add a final meaning to it at the end of this essay—is, in fact, one of his poetic answers to Modernity's deteriorations and deracinations. Louis MacNeice in his still invaluable study of Yeats associated him with Oscar

Wilde's assertion that the artist should avoid two things: 'modernity of form and modernity of subject matter'.¹⁴ Stillnesses are, in this context, an important part of Yeats's Wildean work.

So what happens to these kinds of stillnesses when Yeats's poetry concerns moments when narrative in the poetry itself is *not* escaped, when change is registered, when the gyres are noticed, when history wakes? Yeats gave to Ireland memorable phrases that described her condition (including 'Great hatred, little room' ['Remorse for Intemperate Speech' (1932), p. 506, l.12]). But perhaps the most memorable, or at least the most cited, is that from 'Easter 1916' (1920), partly borrowed, it might be, from William Morris:¹⁵ 'All's changed, changed utterly | A terrible beauty is born' (p. 392, ll.15-16). The Easter Rising, as every scholar of this moment knows, was initially perceived as a dangerous, even reckless, distraction. John Redmond, leader of the Irish parliamentary party from 1900 to 1918, had encouraged Irish men to fight with the British army in the trenches, believing that the Westminster government would, at the conclusion of the War, honour its commitment to Home Rule, given royal assent in 1914 but then suspended. ('England', as Yeats says, 'may keep faith | For all that is done and said', p.394, ll.68-9). Many had agreed and joined the National Volunteers. But there, in Dublin at Easter 1916, was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood declaring an Irish republic from the steps of the General Post Office on Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street) and the city in bloody conflict. Yeats's poem treads, as well as must be *read*, carefully. It recognizes the importance of the Rising but declines to say what that importance was. For certain, the tide of Irish, and particularly Dublin, support changed after the Rising. That change commenced when the British government began to execute the leaders of the revolt, including James Connolly, tied to a chair because he was too badly injured to stand. The executions—sixteen in all, including Tom Clarke, Patrick Pearse, and John MacBride—proved disastrously misjudged. Subsequent claims of, and revelations about, British atrocities in Dublin, added to the growing anti-British feeling as did the internment of Irish nationalists in British prisons.

But Yeats, firmly convinced that poets have no gift to set a statesman right, surveys in any analytical detail none of this. His poem—published during the War of Independence—marks change but does not, as I have said, suggest what the change was. Yet as a poem about *a* change—where, indeed, things are ‘changed utterly’—‘Easter 1916’ creates an objective memorial in words, a plaque in language. Here in terms of the event itself is not stillness, for certain, not the slow rotation of the gyres, but a violent bifurcation in time: a split, wherever motley is worn, between ‘before the Rising’ and ‘after’. And yet, facing this extraordinarily turbulent moment in modern Irish history, Yeats’s poem still pauses time in its act of commemoration.

The poet’s deep-seated imaginative preference for poetry abstracted and extracted from the process of history continues even as ‘Easter 1916’ is overtly about history. This is writing analogous to the painting or the statue: like Giambologna in reverse, perhaps, Yeats gives to movement the illusion of the stationary. ‘Easter 1916’ dwells on images to dominate memory and, in turn, exploits the capacity of language to suggest an event caught in the amber of collective experience, of the collectively experienced, which is beyond the passage of the clock.

What a curious tense defines the opening:

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
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.

pp. 391-2, ll.1-16.

The present perfect ('I have met', 'I have passed') is suggestive: it might indicate a definite event that happened in an indefinite moment in the past but does not rule out the possibility of that event occurring again or, indeed, of the event still continuing. 'I have met them' has within it the chance that 'I will again ...' in a way not quite so clear in the simple past ('I met them ...'). And it has too the residual possibility, for which the present perfect allows, of continuation: of 'I have met them [and I am meeting them]'. And that participle, 'Coming', brings the action into a suspended present in an additional way: we know they were coming in the past, but 'coming' on its own can work as well with the present tense ('They are coming') as the present perfect. Did they come or are there still coming? The word allows for both.

The force of the last two lines from this verse paragraph is, apparently, to disrupt these implied disruptions of time. All this, those lines appear to say, is altered, completely. But it is important—to return to the subject of repetitions—that the repeat of these lines about being changed utterly twice manages to still them, figuratively speaking, too. All the poem can do, in this respect, is to record the permanence of a change, and underline it with the same words that do not themselves change. What is altered, we realise, remains altered—and always will be. That is a species of stillness after all. Something of that fixity is, more personally and bravely, present in the shaping of the poem's last lines. 'And what', Yeats writes,

if excess of love
 Bewildered them till they died?
 I write it out 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.

p. 394, ll.72-80.

Yeats's cryptic conviction that speaking the name of an individual possessed the occult power to call that individual into being is in the substrata of these lines: though dead, these men are brought back to sublunary existence in and by Yeats's poem as if there could be, so to say it, nothing but mere rhyme between 'died' and 'MacBride'. (I set to one side what exactly Yeats might have been feeling about the death of Maud's unwelcome husband.) Notice, though, Yeats's present tense, 'I write it out ...', where the verbal form is enduringly caught in a seemingly ongoing, uninterrupted present. Yeats, like the Bold Lover in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', is always doing what he is doing (though Yeats *is* writing while Keats's lover is *not* kissing). And, in terms of time and its avoidance, these lines invite the reader to reflect on the meaning of the word 'now' in a poem. Particularly, in a line that reads: 'Now and in time to come'. What could 'time to come' really imply during the reading experience of a poem? The 'now' is where we are when reading and, more importantly, where we always will be every time we read these unchanging words. On each occasion a reader returns to 'Easter 1916', the 'now' is a different time, but still a *now*—that is the way reading works. We never, as readers, reach the

time to come, even as, as living human beings rather than readers, we do exactly that. The perpetual-ness in the experience of reading of the ‘now’ blots out, in this act of rhetorical stilling that is in Yeats’s writing peculiarly *erlaubt*, the future that we cannot, re-encountering Yeats’s words perhaps throughout a whole lifetime of reading, obtain.

Even in a poem that belongs profoundly to, or in, a narrative, an episode of very recent Irish history, Yeats, so to describe it, keeps the brakes on time. Stillness is achieved by language even in the contemplation of the ruins on Sackville Street. So are there any memorable exceptions to what I have been describing? Moments, perhaps, when poetry is characterised more by its acknowledgement of the *motion* of narratives than by what forces could restrain them? Yes, is the answer: on a few occasions in the very late work. Yeats in the *New Poems* of 1938—some of the last poetry he published—is retrospective: he is here an old(ish) poet ruminating on his life, his friends, and his work. I have already observed that Yeats’s stillnesses, as understood in this essay, work against the challenge of narrative; they enable, not least, a resistance to the movement of modernity, as Yeats saw it, downhill into cultural degradation. But those stillnesses at the close of the poet’s life also, and this is my final claim, constitute a resting, and a resisting, point against death.

This claim is best appreciated by considering those rare moments in the late poetry when stillness is *not* what Yeats contemplates or creates. These are the points when, instead, poetry is invaded by, or forced to contemplate, narrative as that which is in process and in which, as Pearse might have desired from his political commitments, extinction becomes visibly its end.¹⁶ The irruption, or interruption, of history into personal life at the end of Yeats’s career results in poetry, occasionally, which is unusually contemplative not of stillness but of the implacable. Yeats’s ‘What then?’ (1937) is among the clearest instances of this. Here is a striking mixture of fearfulness and confidence, of achievement and its uncertainty, tapped out against the shadow of a narrative of disastrous movement that cannot be compensated for, as in ‘Easter 1916’, by a retaliatory withdrawal from time. ‘His chosen comrades thought at school’, Yeats begins:

He must grow a famous man;
He thought the same and lived by rule,
All his twenties crammed with toil;
'What then?' sang Plato's ghost, 'what then?'

Everything he wrote was read,
After certain years he won
Sufficient money for his need,
Friends that have been friends indeed;
'What then?' sang Plato's ghost, 'what then?'

All his happier dreams came true –
A small old house, wife, daughter, son,
Grounds where plum and cabbage grew,
Poets and Wits about him drew;
'What then?' sang Plato's ghost, 'what then?'

'The work is done,' grown old he thought,
'According to my boyish plan;
Let the fools rage, I swerved in nought,
Something to perfection brought;
But louder sang that ghost 'What then?'

The last line of each stanza undoes the work of the previous lines. And, as the reader re-encounters the same words, the poem's movement towards demise becomes clearer. The question 'What then?' shifts its meaning during the course of the poem from 'What happened next in the poet's life?' to something like: 'Can this life retain its significance after the poet's death?' Yet at the end of the poem, the answer to Plato's ghost's question becomes more starkly 'death' in an acceptance that nothing more is possible, that there is no 'then' left. That which, artistically, has been brought to a high point—to perfection—is not to be the poet's last thought on the shape of his life and the nature of his achievement. A finality yet to come obtrudes and, in the fullest shadowy sense, obscures. The poem leaves its reader with a rare glimpse, in that disturbing formula, *what then?*, of Yeats contemplating a history of movement and change that no stillness created in language can impede.

Yeats's imagination is, often enough, compelled by the ability of poetry to provide the reader with the illusion of being out of time. At the end, the thought of nothing less *than* the end interrupted this life-long commitment to what in Irish would be *socracht*: peace, stillness, motionlessness. But before that final stage, poetry for Yeats is, in its relationship to time, against history. What he offers is an image to dominate memory and, in turn, a sequence of brilliant verbal evasions of the clock. Words, as Eliot says, move in time but, as Yeats aspired, are not entirely of it. We can go back to Yeats's poetry as we can to any poet's and re-read. But re-reading Yeats means that, distinctively, we find more than the words have remained the same. The stillnesses by which his poetry is peculiarly entranced remain, like the Lake Isle—still.

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¹ My thanks to Matthew Campbell, Alan Gillis, Jean Gooder, and Kate Williams for their invaluable contribution to the thinking in this essay.

Ann Saddlemeyer usefully points out that, despite Yeats's statement in the inscription, George herself had done much work in restoring the tower. See 'Portrait of George Yeats', in Warwick Gould, ed., *The Living Stream: Yeats Annual 18: Essays in Memory of A. Norman Jeffares* (Cambridge: OpenEdition, 2013), pp. 107-119.

² 'Lapis lazuli' (1938), *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan), p. 566, l.35. All subsequent references to Yeats's poems are to this edition.

³ See Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁴ *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, *The Variorum Edition of the Plays of W.B. Yeats*, ed. Russell K. Alspach (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 576, ll. 610-11.

⁵ Michael Stephens, 'In the Valley of the Black Pig Coming to Terms with W. B. Yeats' [*sic*], *The Sewanee Review*, 102 (1994), pp. 32-45 (p. 35).

⁶ Cf. Francis O'Gorman, 'Matthew Arnold and Rereading', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 41 (2012), pp. 245-61.

⁷ This is discussed at greater length in Francis O'Gorman, 'Yeats's presences', *Literary Imagination*, 21 (2019), pp. 167-83.

⁸ W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 31.

⁹ See Joan Weatherley, 'Yeats, the Tarot, and the Fool', *College Literature*, 13 (1986), pp. 112-21.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, *Victorian Afterlives: The Shaping of Influence in Nineteenth-century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 36-8, p.261, and pp. 263-9.

¹¹ See Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

¹² Adam Phillips, 'Contingency for Beginners', *Winnicott Studies*, 8 (1993), pp. 31-46 (p. 34).

¹³ Eliot's relationship to Modernism has most recently been re-assessed in a valuable essay by David Ellis, 'Modernism and T.S. Eliot', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, 47 (2018), pp. 53-64.

¹⁴ Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber, 1967 [first published by Oxford University Press in 1941]), p. 43.

¹⁵ See Bethany J. Smith, "'Changed utterly": Narrative Transformations in William Morris and W. B. Yeats's "Easter, 1916"', *ANQ*, 23 (2010), pp. 231-7.

¹⁶ On Pearse and the desire for death, see Colmán Ó'Hare, "'Even What I Alter Must Seem Traditional": W. B. Yeats and "Easter 1916"', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 24 (1998), pp. 93-104.