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'The late Dublin Rebellion, whatever one can say of its wisdom, will long be remembered for its heroism. "They weighed so lightly what they gave," and gave too in some cases without hope of success' (W.B.Yeats, 1916). With close examination of 'Easter 1916', and with reference to one other appropriately selected poem, discuss Yeats's attitude to heroism.

In this essay, I will try to analyse Yeats's attitude to heroism, as it appears in two of his poems: 'September 1913' and more particularly 'Easter 1916'. Before examining the poems themselves, it is necessary to understand the contexts in which they were written: not only the historical background, but also Yeats's own experiences of these times. By alternatively looking at the two poems, their tones, their structures and their symbols, I will try to identify Yeats's picture of heroism, and his uses of it.

In 1913, a controversy erupted over Hugh Lane's collection of paintings; the nephew of Lady Gregory (a close friend of Yeats's), Lane, an art dealer, offered the bulk of his large collection as a gift to Dublin, if an appropriate gallery could be built. Soon, however, Dublin Irish nationalists began to attack the project (the proposed gallery's architect being English). Arguments about how to fund the project soon followed, in which Yeats, who by that time was evolving into a public figure (as the director of the Abbey theatre), became involved. William Martin Murphy, the owner of two popular daily newspapers, became his most vociferous opponent. Around the same time, strikers, led by a supporter of Lane were locked out by the employers' group, led by Murphy. Those two episodes, the Lane controversy and the lockout of strikers, added to the

previous riots against *The Playboy of the Western World* in 1907, increased Yeats's disappointment with the Irish nationalist middle class (context described in Unterecker, 1969, pp.117-121, or Jeffares, 1949, pp.169-172).

'September 1913', part of Responsibilities, is obviously directed at these new Irish nationalists, like Murphy, whom Yeats opposes to the noble heroes of previous times. The poem starts with a sarcastic tone, attacking the petty mercantilism and bigotry of the former: the 'greasy till', shiny with use, the repetition of 'halfpence', 'pence' and the pun on 'pray and save' (your soul or your money). The end of the first stanza bemoans the death of 'Romantic Ireland', who is in the grave with John O'Leary, a representation of the Old Fenians and a late friend of Yeats's. From then on the poem develops, in the second and third stanzas, into a nostalgic evocation of that former Ireland, with the 'wild geese' (the Irish earls who fled English rule), Fitzgerald, Emmett or Wolfe Tone (United Irishmen who were hanged). Yeats opposes the 'hangman's rope' which faced them to the pusillanimous 'pray and save' attitude of modern times; those were heroes because of their passionate sacrifice, as is underlined by the images of death or exile: 'for this that all that blood was shed', the repetition of 'dead and gone', 'loneliness and pain'. What animated them was not the hope of gain, because 'they weighed so lightly what they gave'; it was 'all that delirium of the brave' which pushed them. As Jeffares argues, Yeats saw that delirium was essential to those 'fitfully audacious and fancifully delirious' heroes (Jeffares, 1949, pp.172, 173), whom he contrasts with the mere 'excitement' of the modern times. Heroes do not ponder their sacrifice, because they are neither rational nor religious.

After the Boer War at the beginning of the century, Ulster's rejection of a Home Rule Bill in 1912 and the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, Irish politics became more radical, with parties like Sinn Feín on the rise. Irish nationalism, Anglo-phobic and anti-Protestant was obsessed with the 'Celtic Race' (denied to Irish Protestants or Ulster Unionists), a narrow-mindedness that Yeats had already decried in 'September 1913'. On Easter Monday 1916, around 1600 poorly armed members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and the Irish Citizen Army took key buildings in Dublin, including the General Post Office. Without the expected German support, it was doomed from the start, and the rebels were forced to surrender, after heavy shelling, six days later. The initial reaction to the rebellion amongst Dubliner and Irish people was astonishment and derision, followed by disgust at the pointless destruction of the city centre, but opinions quickly turned in favour of the rebels after the British government's heavy-handed punishment, whereby sixteen leaders were executed by firing squad (historical background from *Modern Ireland*, chapters 18 and 19).

As was shown by 'September 1913', before the Easter Rising Yeats was disappointed with the current trends in Irish nationalism, their calculating narrow-mindedness and their lack of higher ideals and passions. His attitude to nationalism was ambivalent, and he was mainly attracted to it because of Maud Gonne; he had long been wary of her support for violent militancy. However, as Ellman argues, Yeats largely remained above politics: he was interested in establishing an Irish national culture and literature, based on indigenous mythologies and oral traditions. In England at the time, he

was tremendously shocked by the Easter Rising and the following years of trouble and civil war. The historical changes would trigger a change in his own perceptions.

'Easter 1916', from *Michael Robartes and the Dancer,* is a powerful celebration of the martyrs of the Easter Rising. The first stanza mirrors Yeats's initial opinion of Dublin nationalists, his slight condescendence: they are only worth a 'nod of the head' and 'polite meaningless words', or 'a mocking tale or a gibe', and, like jesters, they live 'where motley is worn'. That contempt, however, is suddenly shaken by the last two verses, which become part of the global rhythm of the poem: 'All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born' (actually a reborn beauty, see Jeffares, 1949, p.186). The second stanza describes the former lives of the martyred leaders underlining their limitations and their human imperfections: 'ignorant good-will', 'He might have won fame in the end', 'A drunken, vainglorious lout'. They are not named, but easily recognisable. Once again, the initial condescendence to that 'casual comedy' is shattered by the repetition of the two verses. The third stanza sees a break in rhythm and language: it seems to slow down, becoming a single long sentence, and elevate itself through the use of images from nature. The allegory of the stone in the middle of the stream, of death surrounded by life, is beautifully evocated through the use of repetition ('minute by minute'), movements ('from cloud to tumbling cloud', the verbs of movement), and natural noises ('plashes', 'And hens to moor-cocks call'). That rock symbolises the resolution of the rebels, but also their obstinacy verging on stubbornness. It also symbolises the immutable fact of their death, influencing the continuing lives of people around them. This ambiguity is again present in the fourth and last stanza, where a

succession of interrogations seem to question the rebellion and its achievements: ‘O when may it suffice?’, ‘What is it but nightfall?’, ‘Was it needless death after all?’ and ‘And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?’. The only certain thing is that they are dead, and their sacrifice in itself elevates them, makes them worthy to be each remembered by name: ‘MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse’. Indeed, it is the part of the living ‘To murmur name upon name’ (as the repetition of ‘name’ emphasizes).

One of the main themes in ‘Easter 1916’ is the transfiguration of the rebels, who by their tragic death are elevated from imperfect humans to a heroic status; and there is something beautiful in that sacrifice, for which they must be admired and remembered. However, there is also something terrible in the obstinacy that pushed them to rebel, with the knowledge that they would certainly be crushed. Is there not something pointless in their death: ‘For England may keep faith / For all that is done and said’? Were they indeed ‘bewildered’ by their ‘excess of love’? Indeed they were dreamers, but ‘No, no, not night but death’, they are not asleep but dead. ‘Easter 1916’ never resolves this ambivalent attitude to heroism: was it necessary? Did it achieve anything? It does not discuss their heroism, but it affirms it.

‘Easter 1916’ and ‘September 1913’ seem to reveal a fundamental ambiguity in Yeats’s attitude to heroism: he stands in awe in front of it, but his admiration is also mixed with apprehension. There is something inherently frightening in that absolute resolve that pushes men towards their tragic death. Such obstinacy in life may be

questioned, because ‘Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the hearts’, and is it not a part of that ‘delirium of the brave’? And is it not a terrible and sad waste of potential talent, of someone who was ‘young and beautiful’, or ‘coming into his force’? Maybe, but Yeats seems to think that, by death, they have become heroes, and that irrefutable fact stands beyond and above our human misgivings: their passion, their deadly ‘excess of love’ has transformed them into statues, symbols for our inspiration, for us mere mortals. Heroism is for Yeats a form of art: he must admire it, reluctantly.

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