Reading Yeats: "The Fascination of What's Difficult"

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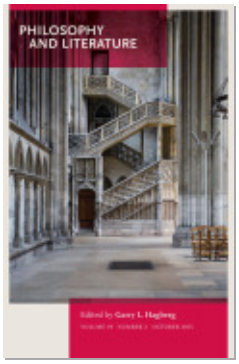

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In Focus:
Jules Brody Reading Yeats and Dylan Thomas

For Susan, who helped.

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READING YEATS: "THE FASCINATION OF WHAT'S DIFFICULT"

Abstract. This article offers a new reading of Yeats's "The Fascination of What's Difficult." Rather than speculate, as do the mainstream approaches, on possible allusions in the poem to Yeats's life, career, and professional concerns, it argues that he is personally intrigued by the difficulties inherent in the poetic process itself, which he views as a challenge to his own creative powers. The poem, in short, is a performative show of Yeats's virtuosity as a verbal artist.

As every teacher of literature knows, obscure writing is not necessarily the most problematic kind to deal with. A sonnet by Donne or an equal number of lines by Dylan Thomas will handily fill the teaching hour. But what about that *other* kind of writing, the kind that imposes silence, not by its obvious difficulty but by its infuriating obviousness, the perfection of its form, the simplicity of its language, the transparency of its meaning? There is no trouble filling the hour with Yeats's Byzantium poems, but what about this one?

1 The fascination of what's difficult
2 Has dried the sap out of my veins, and rent
3 Spontaneous joy and natural content

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Out of my heart. There's something ails our colt
That must, as if it had not holy blood
Nor on Olympus leaped from cloud to cloud,
Shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt
As though it dragged road-metal. My curse on plays
That have to be set up in fifty ways,
On the day's war with every knave and dolt,
Theatre business, management of men.
I swear before the dawn comes round again
I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt.

In reading this poem out loud, I would stress what I think is its most obvious characteristic: the closeness of its word groupings and cadences to the natural rhythms of spoken English. I refer specifically to the parallelisms in lines 2 and 4: *Out of my veins ... out of my heart,* where the accents on *veins* and *heart* displace attention from the line-endings and the rhyme-pattern, thereby reducing our awareness, at the very outset, that we are reading rhymed verse at all. The same is true of the construction *must ... shiver* (lines 5–7), where the intervening words must be read quickly in order to complete the sense, thus blurring even more the metric scheme.

This poem would offer no semantic problems for the kind of person who might spend time reading modern English poetry in the first place. The only difficulty here, if we can call it that, is the word *colt* (line 4), which is a little surprising, although it clearly refers to the mythological figure Pegasus, the winged horse, the flying red horse that adorned the Mobil gas stations of yesteryear, the horse that carries poets to the heights of inspiration. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Pegasus is "the favorite steed of the Muses, ... said allusively to bear poets in the flights of poetic genius." The voluntary reader of poetry, as a partner in a shared cultural code, would almost automatically know what to do with Pegasus, just as he/she would know what to make of expressions like "Achilles' heel," "the arms of Morpheus," "the slave of Bacchus," and the like.

But even without this information, the reader would find a number of hints in the text itself: the word *Olympus*, the words *cloud* and *holy blood*—Pegasus was, according to legend, born of the blood of the gorgon Medusa. In any event, there is enough in the poem itself to point the minimally cultivated but curious reader to a mythological dictionary that would sooner or later supply the information needed to naturalize in the context of the poem the veiled reference to Pegasus.

In similar fashion, if the reader were not quite sure how to interpret the references to *plays* and *theatre business*, it could learned from the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on Yeats that he was in fact associated at a certain point in his career with the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Finally, if one had the time and really cared, one might want to check out the standard critical literature on Yeats, where one would find, as I did, the following comment on Yeats's early poetry:

> This poem is about his experience as a writer, producer and manager with the Abbey Theatre ... the poem was written between Sept. 1909 and March 1910. There are classical allusions in the poem to Pegasus and Mt. Olympus ... The literary imagination is presented as a *colt,* accustomed to the ethereal heights ... of Olympus, but now subjected to the mere drudgery of *theatre business, management of men.* Surveying the frustrations of his life at the Abbey Theatre, Yeats concludes, in a tone of mock anger: *I swear before the dawn comes round again / I'll find the stable and pull out the bolt.* Though explored humorously here, the theme is a common one for Yeats at this time, the acceptance, with mixed feelings, of what's difficult, the reluctant and ironic fascination with what once have been rejected out of hand.[1]

Here, you might say, is where the reading of this poem *ends*: with the factual, reasoned, accurate biographical statement that this is in fact a poem about something external to it, that it was intended to be, and that it functions as a simple referential statement, as a vehicle for information *about* the poet's encounters in life, his reactions to them, and his feelings *about* them. When I gave an oral presentation of this article to a university audience, a professor of English was present who seemed to know a lot about Yeats, and who came up with the remark during the discussion period that "the outstanding feature of all of Yeats's poetry of that period is that it is so occasional." He meant "occasional" in the sense that it is all *about* something, with the implication that it is neither personal, nor deep, nor philosophical, nor particularly poetic—a mere response to external events: occasional.

There is only one problem with this view of the question: this eminently sensible, historical, and biographical approach to the poem's meaning happens to run completely counter to the attentive reader's actual experience of words *in* the poem. The implicit reader—that is, the reader who shares in Yeats's cultural code, the one who is able to solve more or less rapidly the Pegasus puzzle—this reader also knows, or may be presumed to know, that Pegasus is not a *colt* but a *steed,* "the

favorite *steed* of the Muses" in the definition of the *OED*. The normal way of evoking the image of Pegasus would be the one that I found, also with the help of the *OED,* in a poem by Longfellow, "Pegasus in Pound," where he speaks of *that strange steed, the poet's wingèd steed, that wondrous wingèd steed with mane of gold.*

My point here is that in the *horse* paradigm, which covers the range of positions such as *nag, mare, pony, filly, colt, stallion*, and *mount,* the word *steed* stands at the very top, occupying the highest and most noble slot several rungs above *colt.* In other words, in the eyes of the reader who knows that *steed* is the normal lexical form used by poets to designate the "Pegasus" kind of horse, Yeats's choice of *colt* will necessarily and immediately be perceived as somehow deviant. The *OED* also gives a quotation from Byron that uses a similar ploy and achieves a similar deviance for satiric purposes. Byron is talking here of the literary scene of his day:

> Behold! in various throngs the scribbling crew,
> For notice eager, pass in long review:
> Each spurs his jaded Pegasus apace,
> And Rhyme and Blank maintain an equal race...[2]

Here, the *wingèd steed* of myth has degenerated into the worn-out, earth-bound, literary hack, engaged in the mad scramble for position in a third-rate horse race, in what today would be called the literary rat race.

At this point, I would like to take a few steps backward and retreat to where I would have been if I had never gone to the library to consult the literature on Yeats. At that earlier stage, I was in fact better off than I had reason to believe.

Although I was more or less ignorant at that stage of the facts of Yeats's career, I was, in spite of that deficiency, or perhaps even because of it, substantially closer to the position in which the poet presumably saw me as a potential reader. That is to say, I am reasonably sure that he would have wanted me to know who Pegasus was, that Pegasus was really a *steed* and not a *colt.* But I have no reason at all to believe that he cared whether I or anybody else knew that he was personally connected with the Abbey Theatre. Now, as an innocent reader I began to wonder very early on about the presence at that point in the poem of the word *colt* itself. I quickly came to terms with Pegasus, as I assume I was expected to do, but I could not easily account for this reference to a young, inexperienced, untamed horse, especially when I figured out that Yeats was 45 years old when he wrote the poem. The more I reread

it, the more I became convinced that the main feature of the word *colt* is its extremely low predictability and, logically, that this extremely low predictability was the reason Yeats decided to use it: as a provocation, for its natural, inevitable shock value.

At this point in my reading, I resolved to put aside whatever factual knowledge I might have had concerning the poet and his poem, and to allow the word *colt* to work on me and to motivate, as I had come firmly to believe it was intended to do, my reception of the other words in the poem that had brought it into play. My guiding question, then, became the question of the innocent, uncultivated reader, who does not necessarily know about Pegasus, but who wants very badly to know how the highly improbable word *colt* found its way into the poem in the first place. And once I was able to frame the question in this manner, I was in a position to begin, at least, to sense a number of other connections: the link, for example, between *colt,* as a young, untamed, unbroken horse, and the words *spontaneous* and *natural.* I was able to see, likewise, that the word *ails—There's something ails our colt*—stands on the same semantic line as *dried the sap* and *rent* (tore out) *the joy*; one might say that the three verbs *dried*, *rent*, and *ails,* taken together, express collectively, in a kind of disability code, the idea of *fascination* as a sick, perverse attraction.

It became clear to me, as well, that the implicit opposition *colt/ dray-horse*—the latter is embedded, after all, in the word *dragged*—fills the same semantic function as *play-horse/ work-horse.* Whether I knew about Pegasus or not, it became obvious to me that these oppositions were all saying the same thing in equine code, that they were all inscribed in a series of polarities in which difficulty and ease, drudgery and passion, stand in the same relation to each other as sickness and health, damage and wholeness, freedom and servitude, humanity and divinity. I was also able to discern a vague but real connection between *colt* and *sap*, between *colt* as a young horse and sapling as a young tree. I was able to see in the same way how the word *blood* (line 5) connects with *veins* (line 2), how *leaped* (line 6) is generated by *spontaneous joy* (line 3)—compare the idiom *jump for joy*—how *dragged* (line 8) contrasts in turn with *leaped* (line 6), how *Olympus* (line 6) echoes *holy* (line 5). That is to say: once I stopped looking for their possible referents in the realities of Yeats's career and began to concentrate, instead, on the realities harbored by the words themselves, I began to realize that the presence of the word *colt,* however improbable it appears, is far from accidental or arbitrary. Or, to move the discussion in a somewhat different direction: precisely *because of* its unpredictability and resultant shock value, the rhetorical

function of the word *colt* is to urge the reader to seek out and discover the resonance and undercurrent of meaning that it carries in its wake.

The reader who follows Yeats's prompting and uses the problematic word *colt* as the starting point of his enquiry will finally be led to observe that each and every word in the poem is there as the result of a process of generation and derivation from a common, unitary nucleus. By this I mean the semantic nucleus of the title, "The Fascination of What's Difficult," and the redundant first line in which a positive term, *fascination,* and a negative term, *difficult,* are rolled together in a paradoxical union. Even the utility word *must* (line 5) reflects this pervasive binary tension: *That must, as if it had not holy blood.* Here, the word *must,* in the sense of "cannot help itself," actually rewrites and reenacts the substance of the word *fascination*: is slave to a fatal attraction, must *Shiver under the lash, strain, sweat and jolt.*

This, however, is not the end of it; one final item still begs for the reader's attention, because it is not enough to explain, on the mere grounds of semantic relevance, how and why this unlikely word *colt* functions in its context. The essential question lies elsewhere: whatever could have possessed Yeats to place it in the rhyming position? To have put *that* word in *that* place was for Yeats a crucial and expensive move. One has only to open a rhyming dictionary to learn that the *-olt* ending in English is strikingly poor in rhyming possibilities. In fact, in order to write this poem using the rhyme scheme that he did, Yeats had to exhaust all the semantically viable rhyme partners, since the ones left over happen to be *holt, molt, smoult, poult,* and *volt.* Except for the last, none of these possibilities would have any immediate relevance for the normally competent reader of English. It should be noted, however, that for the speakers of Yeats's Dublin English, the *-ult* ending, as in the title and first line, would have been an admissible alternative.

In a nutshell: by imposing upon himself the *-olt* rhyme, Yeats was deliberately and consciously making it maximally difficult for himself to write this poem. This observation invites a drastic revision of our answer to the question: what is this poem about? When we read "The Fascination of What's Difficult" as a self-contained, self-referential literary work, it begins at long last to look exactly like what the title says it is: a poem *about* the fascination of what is difficult, in which the poet actualizes, dramatizes, and exemplifies his theme and meaning by dint of his own dazzling technical performance. The poem is also, and not incidentally, about human perversity, about the strange, prideful mindset of the literary artist, the versifier, the solitary rhymester, who in this topsy-turvy scale of values somehow claims and enjoys a higher

status than men of the theater or those who, for whatever reason, stand before the public eye.

But the best is yet to come. Many months after the point where I felt I had exhausted the complexities of this deceptively simple poem, I stumbled on the fact, out of pure dumb luck, that Yeats kept a journal in which, as many writers do, he put down ideas and assembled potential materials for future works and works in progress. In his first entry for the year 1909, this is what I found:

> Subject: To complain of the fascination of what's difficult. It destroys spontaneity and pleasure and it wastes time. Repeat the line-ending 'difficult' and rhyme on bolt, exult, colt, jolt. One could use the thought of the wild, winged and unbroken colt must drag a cart of stones out of pride because it is difficult and end by denouncing drama, accounts, public contests and all that's merely difficult.[3]

In other words, the rhyme scheme not only preceded the poem; it was the poem's immediate cause and, in point of fact, its inspiration.

In my mind, I can never divorce the thought of "The Fascination of What's Difficult" from a random comment that I overheard a French colleague make concerning the concept of poetic inspiration, which he viewed as nothing more than "le culte de la difficulté vaincue." This irreverent, deflationary quip would no doubt have pleased Yeats immensely. For it draws on an artisanal view of literary activity that is utterly dismissive, as he was of the Romantic mythology of personal uniqueness and so-called "creativity."

My reading of the poem at hand builds on an approach to literary study that, although far from original with me, is not so widely shared in the scholarly community as to preclude repetition. As I learned many years ago, largely from Leo Spitzer and the late Michael Riffaterre, works of literature are first and foremost independent verbal events, as much for their authors as for their implied readers, before their eventual inscription in the annals of literary history. I use the word "reader" not in any absolute sense, but with reference to a specific individual who perceives and experiences the actual difficulties presented by each text rather than by addressing its presumed position within some larger body of knowledge. This approach has the advantage of recognizing factors and raising questions that other, more professional and ambitious modes of literary study do not often deign to address.

Within the practical, empirical framework that I have marked out for myself, my primary concern is to identify the subtle signals that suggest

just when and why we should no longer be content merely to "read" (absorb a thought, follow a message, admire, delight in graceful language and pleasing sounds, etc.), and look instead for ways to interpret, that is, to pursue meanings, discern structures, attribute motives, and infer judgments that may not be present in the text itself. I have come to view literary criticism as a process of discovery that aims not at establishing facts or elucidating truths but at outlining the actual steps that I have gone through over the years in arriving at an interpretation of a given work. I am concerned with explaining, for example, what prompted me to read it in the first place, what I found problematic about it, why I may have failed to appreciate the relevance of certain words or expressions, at what point I felt the need to turn to dictionaries, encyclopedias, or concordances, and with what results.[4]

I am especially alert to the competing, often conflicting interpretations proposed by the various editors and commentators on particular works, as I am to statements of authorial intent in comparison with what is implied in the words on the page. I am concerned, above all, with the process of discovery that has allowed me as an amateur—in the etymological sense, as one with a motivated passion for literature—to develop some of the theoretical implications of the ways in which the formal, rhetorical, and aesthetic features of language (rhyme, imagery, archaism, quotation, colloquialism, repetition, patterning, etc.) attract attention to themselves, distribute emphasis, and produce meaning.

DEKALB, ILLINOIS

1. Raymond Cowell, *W. B. Yeats* (New York: Arco, 1970), pp. 41–42. Subsequent critics have for the most part repeated and endorsed the view of the poem as a reflection of events in Yeats's life and career. See, for example, Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 162–64.

2. Lord Byron, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*, stanza 8, lines 143–46.

3. William Butler Yeats, *Memoirs: Autobiography—First Draft, Journal*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 229. Helen Vendler quotes this passage, notes the rhyme scheme, but finds nothing remarkable about the choice or position of the word *colt* (Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline*, p. 162).

4. A reviewer of one of my earlier works expressed annoyance at my practice of enumerating the steps that I followed in this process of discovery. Every critical démarche harbors unstated methodological implications. Is it not useful and instructive, especially for the younger and less experienced reader, that these implications be made clear?