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“EASTER, 1916” AND TRAUMA

Charles I. Armstrong

Interpreting “Easter, 1916” in light of Trauma Studies may at first appear to be an unpromising enterprise. The latter is an interdisciplinary field, the foundations of which have been embattled and shifting over the last few decades. Although the focus on a psychological “wound” and its aftermath is a common denominator, different inflections of trauma theory have developed, dependent not only upon the disciplinary affiliation of its theorists but also their nationality and choice of historical context. As can be expected from the “peculiarly disrupted, discontinuous history” of trauma,¹ its theoretical foundations have varied, as its conceptualization has based itself upon such different historical episodes as 9/11, the Vietnam War, Auschwitz, World War I, and nineteenth-century railway accidents. The first World War gave us not only Freud’s influential theories on the death drive and repetition compulsion, but also the concept of “shell shock” and memorable literary creations such as Sean O’Casey’s *The Silver Tassie* and the suicidal veteran Septimus Smith in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Mrs Dalloway*. Historically, this war is the key episode among those formative for Trauma Studies that took place during Yeats’s mature authorship. Yet Yeats avoided writing directly about the war, famously snubbing, for instance, the war poets in the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*. In the introduction to that volume, he bluntly stated that “passive suffering is not a theme for poetry,” and contrasted the war poets’ expression of that suffering with the more suitable literary form of tragedy—the latter conveying “a joy to the man who dies” (CW5 199).

Ben Levitas has argued that the “lost context” of World War I can “be felt as a ghost limb” in “Easter, 1916.”² A tragic interpretation of the Easter Rising is however at the forefront of the poem, as Yeats depicts the transformation of the rebels of the Rising from comedic figures to tragic heroes. Already in the earliest correspondence following the events in the Irish capital, when the poem was still at the planning stage, we find Yeats referring to the Rising and its aftermath as “The Dublin Tragedy.”³ In another letter, he observes to an American patron that “This Irish business has been a great grief.”⁴ Might there be something of a hazy border, or lack of overlap, between tragedy and a messy “business” that causes “great grief”? Edna Longley has noted that “Easter, 1916” is a poem about personal and political shock, in which Ireland “changes its national genre to tragedy.” She also observes, however, that the poem open-endedly poses rather than resolves its central questions.⁵

The final part of “Easter, 1916” famously has recourse to the Young Ireland ballad tradition, yet evidently deploys that generic framework in a manner

that is both equivocal and hesitant. Might something similar be at work in terms of how “Easter, 1916” embraces a tragic narrative? Can the interpretive framework explicitly endorsed by Yeats himself be productively challenged, or supplemented, by an alternative vantage point? Insofar as the poem represents an elegiac deployment of the past, the tragic “regime of memory” it proposes may not tell the whole story.⁶ The story tragedy tells makes sense of the deaths of the rebels: their actions may have been violent and seemingly ill-advised (lacking realistic chances of immediate success), and many of them lost their lives, but fate transfigures their memory “Wherever green is worn.” What is the alternative to such transfiguration? Yeats’s poem places one alternative in open view: “Was it needless death after all?” Futile loss of life would present a very different kind of narrative—one full of “great grief,” but not tragic in a heroic sense—compared to the dominant one we find in “Easter, 1916.” Still, the poem also gives voice to that alternative history, hesitantly nudging a counter-narrative of incomprehension, fanatical, stone-like hearts, and unbearable suffering out of view even as it lets us glimpse it.

The actual trauma of senseless bloodshed is however kept off-stage. Apart from the executions, the fighting of the Rising itself “at very close range, was grim enough to satisfy the goriest fantasies of hand-to-hand combat.”⁷ There is no doubt that Yeats was deeply struck by the event. As he noted in a letter a couple of months later: “All my habits of thought and work are upset by this tragic Irish rebellion which has swept away friends and fellow workers.”⁸ But he was far away, in France, when the events took place, and there are no recurring flashbacks of gruesome deaths in his later life. Does the omission of graphic references to violence and death signify a process of textbook repression, creating a complex coupling of witnessing and forgetting typical of traumatic memory? There are other circumstances surrounding “Easter, 1916” and Yeats’s response to the Easter Rising that can more confidently be grasped in terms characteristic of Trauma Studies. Although disputed and subject to differing interpretations, the poem’s protracted publication history suggests a belated response of the kind characteristic of trauma. Composed between May and September 1916, “Easter, 1916” first circulated privately. As Matthew Campbell points out in another piece in this issue, the text was available—in a small edition printed by Clement Shorter—for readers at the British Museum by June 1917. Yet Yeats waited until 1920 before assuring a wide circulation of it, through publication in the *New Statesman*. This delay has been interpreted as the result of various personal and professional circumstances. The most obvious reason is the fear, which Yeats ascribes to Lady Gregory, of that the poem’s “getting about” might damage the cause of obtaining the Huger Lane Pictures for Ireland.⁹ The same letter refers to “Easter, 1916” as “the rebellion poem,”

and some critics have indeed been prone to see the delay as more generally linked to Yeats's difficulties with coming to grips with the events of the Rising.¹⁰

Certainly the poem itself highlights a struggle to comprehend. The refrain's "terrible beauty" has the quality of a wilfully challenging paradox, reminiscent perhaps of Keats's conflation of truth and beauty in "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Beyond that puzzle, though, Jahan Ramazani has pointed to how the entire poem, more fundamentally, is characterized by an "epistemological rift [...] between the knowledge that a change has occurred and the absence of an 'efficient cause' to explain the change."¹¹ This accounts, for instance, for the second stanza's seemingly slipshod enumeration of personal traits of some of the rebels: all is changed utterly, and the transformation of these ordinary figures into heroic revolutionaries is fundamentally mysterious. Although Yeats implicitly frames the metamorphosis in ways linked to his ideas of literary creativity, magical powers, and tragic plots, none of these is proffered as a straightforward solution. The messy script of everyday life has been overtaken by a symbolical narrative, but the process that has brought this about remains elusive. The resulting "rift" is strongly akin to the sense of blockage and incomprehension that typically features in attempts to interpret traumatic events. In his previously mentioned writings after World War I, Freud famously highlighted how the soldiers were overwhelmed by their combat experiences, repeatedly revisiting the terrible details in compulsive fashion.¹² Yeats would himself revisit the Rising also in literary work written after "Easter, 1916": several of the poems in *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* deal with those same events, indicating that Yeats indeed had trouble formulating a definitive and final response. Beyond that context, Yeats continued exploring the ramifications of the Rising in later works such as "The Man and the Echo" and *The Death of Cuchulain*.

Written not long before Yeats's death, over twenty years of the fateful events in the city centre of Dublin, among worries keeping the poet "awake night after night," "The Man and the Echo" includes the following: "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot?" Yeats's worry, at this juncture, about his early use of sacrificial rhetoric in "that play" *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, is reminiscent of his less-than-convincing disclaimer of propounding anti-Catholic rhetoric in another early play, *The Countess Cathleen*: "In using what I considered traditional symbols I forgot that in Ireland they are not symbols but realities" (CW3 309). Here Yeats's literary treatment of the Easter Rising fits into a larger pattern. In his literary dealings with political issues, he is fascinated by the relationship between symbol and reality. On the one hand, there is a sense of anxiety when the borderlines between them become blurred, and literature risks becoming a subservient form of propaganda—or exist at the mercy of what Yeats takes to be the uncontrollable mob. On the other hand, Yeats also is inexorably attracted to the idea that symbols may have political

efficacy. The latter provides the underlying motivation for much of his theatrical work,¹³ and it resurfaces in his treatment of the Rising. Thus the concluding song of *The Death of Cuchulain* ponders upon the historical manifestation of political ideals. Using as an object of meditation Oliver Sheppard’s statue of Cuchulain in the General Post Office in Dublin, made to commemorate the Easter Rising, Yeats asks: “Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed / He stood where they had stood?” (VPI 1063). Even in an age alien to tragedy, it is implied, there can still be an essential continuity between the literary creativity that creates lasting myths and the agency behind decisive political acts—both seek to partake in the ideal, embodying a transcendent truth in the world. Here the proximity of *The Death of Cuchulain* to “Easter, 1916” is underlined by a draft version of these lines: “Who has dreamed Cuchullain till it seemed / He stood where they had stood.”¹⁴ In “Easter, 1916,” Yeats writes of the rebels: “We know their dream; enough / To know they dreamed and are dead.”

Crossing from its mythological sources into the stark reality of the General Post Office, and from dream into waking life, the efficacy of the symbol is both a source of affirmation and wariness for Yeats in his interpretations of the Rising. His qualms about “Certain men the English shot” does not quite suggest an instance of perpetrator trauma,¹⁵ but there is at least a sense of complicity—of having indirectly become an accessory to the bloodshed. Seen from such a perspective, the emphasis in the opening stanza of “Easter, 1916” on the distance—particularly the class distance—separating Yeats the clubman from the rebels, comes across as a form of denial. Later, in “Sixteen Dead Men,” the rebels would be cast in a role akin to the witches of *Macbeth*: “loitering there / To stir the boiling pot.” In Shakespeare’s “Scottish play,” of course, that boiling pot feeds the hubristic dreams leading the Macbeths to a lasting nightmare of regret and madness. “Man and Echo” indicates that despite the evasive gestures of “Easter, 1916,” Yeats cannot prevent himself from identifying with—indeed even seeing himself as an originator of—the Irish rebels’ call for sovereign violence.¹⁶ In this light, the sacrificial rhetoric of his early plays is a precursor for the originary moment of founding violence ambivalently celebrated in the refrain “A terrible beauty is born.” This would provide at least a partial explanation why Yeats in an early letter to Lady Gregory gave a slightly different version of the same words: “terrible beauty has been born again.”¹⁷

The “terrible” nature of the Rising is of course partly linked to its human cost. A key focus for Trauma Studies has been the extreme suffering issuing out of personal or collective cataclysms. To be traumatized is to have one’s agency warped, pathologically subject to the past in a way that inhibits, or skews, one’s actions in the present. Van der Kolk and McFarlane have addressed how this may take divergent forms: on the one hand there is the “hyperarousal” that interprets even the most everyday of signals as a dangerous threat, on the other

hand one has a “generalized numbing of responsiveness to a whole range of emotional aspects in life.”¹⁸ This links up with the key trope of the stone in “Easter, 1916.” The final stanza opens by using this figure to ponder on the cost of excessive pain and loss: “Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart. / O when may it suffice?” Here there is a suggestion of a collision between the tragic regime, which includes and makes sense of heroic sacrifice, and a more liberal sensitivity to the traumatizing effects of bloodshed. The preceding, more symbolical stanza contrasts the fluidity of life with hearts that “with one purpose alone / Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone.” The stone-like hearts of the fascinated rebels precede, and may also cause, the stony numbness of the grieving masses, and both are sidelined from the free potentiality of vital, unfettered existence.

Yeats cannot renege on his commitment to life’s generous open-endedness, even while he pays tribute to the epochal importance of the acts of the rebels. The narrative of nationhood provides a possibility of mediating between these contesting concerns. In the poem, a nation is founded by the rebels’ act of violence. The poet is explicitly a witness, whose status as a bearer of testimony uneasily but productively hovers between the categories of *testis* (a neutral, external observer) and *superstes* (a witness who partakes in the event).¹⁹ He provides a measured defence of the rebels’ vision in the court of history, but is also more implicitly an enabling prophet of this decisive, epoch-making event: “their dream” is not alien to Yeats, but rather troublingly familiar. Later key Yeatsian performances such as “The Second Coming” and “Leda and the Swan” would return to such founding acts of violence, albeit on a world stage. More easily identifiable with a particular community and moment in recorded time, “Easter, 1916” can be read as forging a link between “individual trauma” and “historical or generational trauma” as theorized by Cathy Caruth.²⁰ Yeats insists upon the collective significance of the rebels’ self-sacrifice.

The collective dimension invites a broader perspective. Had Yeats kept the original wording of his refrain, whereby the terrible beauty has been born “again,” it would have underlined the link with earlier uprisings and acts of resistance, including the Young Ireland movement, 1798, and the Wild Geese commemorated in “September, 1913.” Does the stoniness of the rebels’ hearts not only constitute the cause of present trauma, but also amount to a traumatized state resulting from past sacrifices? Between the lines, traces of a more encompassing traumatic narrative appear, “which sees history from the point of view of the losers, the bereaved, the victims.”²¹ As it is, by partially occluding that heritage, Yeats suggests that 1916 has the exceptional status of an unprecedented beginning. But it is far from being an innocent or insouciant beginning: by troping the reception of the Rising in terms of a mother’s love for a child—“As a mother names her child / When sleep at last has come”—he implies that

the event carries the freight of almost irreparable debt and loss. Inscribing itself as a collective elegy, “Easter, 1916” marks a communal sense of stupefied grief, transcending the personal identities of MacBride, Connolly and the other participants. As such their individual heroism risks being overshadowed by the collective cataclysm. In this regard Yeats’s poem does indeed, whatever his intentions might have been, bear poetical witness to a form of collective trauma, in a manner that lives on even after the death of tragedy.

Notes

1. Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), 15.
2. Ben Levitas, “War, 1914–1923,” 48, in David Holdeman and Ben Levitas, eds., *W. B. Yeats in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
3. To Lady Gregory, 11 May 1916, *CL InteLex* #2950.
4. To John Quinn, 23 May 1916, *CL InteLex* #2960.
5. Edna Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 121.
6. On “regimes of memory,” see Susannah Radstone and Katharine Hodgkin, “Regimes of Memory: An Introduction,” in Radstone and Hodgkin eds., *Memory Cultures: Memory, Subjectivity and Recognition* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006).
7. Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London: Penguin, 2005), 203.
8. To Robert Bridges, 13 June 1916, *CL InteLex* #2980.
9. To Clement Shorter, 28 March 1916, *CL InteLex* #3204.
10. Although belated memories have traditionally been associated with trauma, they are not universally acknowledged to be a necessary feature of the condition. See Alan Gibbs, *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 10–15.
11. Jahan Ramazani, *Yeats and the Poetry of Death: Elegy, Self-Elegy, and the Sublime* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 61.
12. The most thorough working through of these issues takes place in Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, translated by James Strachey (New York: Bantam Books, 1959).
13. On the mob and Yeats’s political ambitions for his theatre, see chapter 3 of Marjorie Howes, *Yeats’s Nations: Gender, Class, and Irishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
14. W. B. Yeats, *The Death of Cuchulain: Manuscript Materials, Including the Author’s Final Text*, edited by Phillip L. Marcus (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 123.
15. On the concept of perpetrator trauma, see Saira Mohamed, “Of Monsters and Men: Perpetrator Trauma and Mass Atrocity,” in *Columbia Law Review*, volume 115 (2015), 1157–1216.
16. On Yeats’s ambivalent relationship to violence, see Michael Wood, *Yeats and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 15.
17. To Lady Gregory, [11 May 1916], *CL InteLex* #2950.
18. Bessel A. Van der Kolk and Alexander C. McFarlane, *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1996), 12.
19. This opposition is discussed in Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 17.
20. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 136 n. 22.
21. Joep Leersen, “Monument and Trauma: Varieties of Remembrance” in Ian McBride, ed., *History and Memory in Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 215.