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THE BIOAESTHETICS OF “EASTER, 1916”

Joseph Valente

I

A disability studies approach to W. B. Yeats’s most famous poem, “Easter, 1916,” will almost inevitably focus upon the final stanza, wherein the poet represents but also elides, reckons and fails to reckon, with the biopolitical consequences of the Rising in its ideological context. Often in Yeats’s verse, however, the full significance of such a salient passage, stanza or trope ultimately resides not in what it says but in the structural effects of what it leaves unsaid. In the case of “Easter, 1916,” the question of disability—its place in the Imaginary of patriotic sacrifice, its inescapability as a fortune of war, its deviation from the muscular norms of nationalist embodiment—remains a haunting absence, a reverberating silence to be experienced and evaluated in relation to the formal dynamics whereby the poem constructs the historical event of the same name.

The impetus driving “Easter, 1916” is Yeats’s need to position himself towards the main agents of the Rising in a manner that fully reflects and satisfies his profoundly conflicted feelings about the event itself. To this end, the poem unfolds in an accordion-like structure: Yeats’s vaunted sociocultural distance from the Volunteers collapses into a bardic identification with their enterprise, only to resume along the initial lines before collapsing once more. The first verse establishes this movement and the chains of associations that it carries. Yeats’s superior distance from the mainly middle-class revolutionaries—expressed in his “mocking tale or gibe...at the club”—is located in the recent but continuous past, as indicated by the steady use of the present perfect tense (“have met,” “have paused,” “have lingered,” etc.). The abrupt shift in the verse refrain to the present—“All changed, changed utterly / A terrible beauty is born”—not only compounds the temporal proximity of the now with Yeats’s newfound affective proximity to the martyrs’ agenda, but also conveys the sheer velocity of both Ireland’s transformation and Yeats’s convergence.

Yeats casts both of these developments in an aesthetic, specifically dramaturgical register, which through a subtle reverse logic of self-reference brilliantly qualifies and clarifies his identification with the insurgents. Yeats represents the alienation of the past as low comedy (“where motley is worn”) and opposes it to the present rapture of high tragedy, with that famous phrase, “a terrible beauty,” encapsulating a pragmatic marker of the genre, not unlike

Aristotelian catharsis. The rhyme heralding this shift in dramatic mode, "worn" to "born," makes for an understated allusion to a cultural movement spear-headed by Yeats himself, the Irish Renaissance, whose very name bespeaks the goal of birthing an aesthetic of national self-assertion, a canon of liberationist "beauty." Yeats in effect credits the Easter rebels with bringing a crucial strain of his own life's work to culmination—a view not inconsistent with Patrick Pearse's avowed politics of symbolic renewal. In other words, Yeats identifies with the rebels' project in its prior allegiance to his own.

This dialogical identification concentrates itself in a single object of reference, one with a particular resonance, as it turns out, for a disability reading of the final stanza. The sudden switch here from comedy to tragedy, animated by an ethos of patriotic self-immolation or "blood sacrifice," uncannily (if unconsciously) mimics the dramatic structure of Yeats's most popular contribution to the Irish Renaissance theater, *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, whose title character is indeed "changed utterly" into a "terrible beauty" by the doomed patriots answering her call. Counted as a primary source of inspiration among the leaders of the Rising, the play functioned in the same vein as its eponymous national persona: it prompted men to lay down their lives for Ireland in fact much as she summons them to do in fiction. Patrick Pearse paraphrases the play to just this effect in his poem, "A Mother": "They shall be spoken of among their people / The generations shall remember them."¹ As Fintan O'Toole has observed, "The line between Irish theatre and Irish history is not so clear after all,"² and, it is important to add, that line was permeable in *either* direction. Long before Yeats worried in "Man and the Echo," "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot," his allusive subtext in "Easter, 1916" retroactively "sent" those same men back into the larger orbit of the play, as the historical exemplars of its crowning action and a material extension of its Revivalist agenda.

The following two verses iterate, with significant variation, the accordion-like pattern of expansion/compression, distance/proximity. In verse two, the movement is redoubled across a catalogue of notable revolutionaries whom Yeats treats individually. He begins with a portrait of Constance Markiewicz. Her "ignorant good will," "shrill" voice, and non-martyred status combine to relegate her to comic status, her recent distance from Yeats provoked and italicized by her foolish estrangement from her own aristocratic youth, with its high responsibilities and solemn prerogatives. Turning to Pearse and Thomas MacDonagh, Yeats changes his mode of address from one of wistful alienation to a sense of fellowship grounded in their shared aesthetic commitments ("rode our winged horse," "daring and sweet his thought"). At the same time, he modulates the tense of his account, first into the past progressive ("was coming") to give the feel of ongoing action, and then into the future perfect ("might have won"), which emphasizes the present of judgment rather than the past being

judged. With reference to “this other man,” John MacBride, Yeats resumes his critical distance and takes it to the extreme, painting him as a comical butt of Shakespearean proportions (“drunken, vainglorious lout”) for actions cast in the past perfect (“had done”). By resigning his part in the “casual comedy,” however, MacBride too enters the present of tragic regeneration.

In switching the focus of the poem from the revolutionaries to a pastoral scene symbolic of their being in the world, the third verse would seem to afford no occasion for the sort of telescoping of perspective we have seen thus far. And yet—the enchanting “stone” metonymic of the single-mindedness of the insurgents, does “trouble the living stream” as an *extrinsic* force in the recent past (“Through summer and winter”) only to become in the spring (“when hens to moor-cocks call”), in the present of the Easter Rising, a central point of identification, organizing the entire panorama (“in the midst of all”). What do we make of Yeats’s decision to sustain this structure of temporal and affective association in a stanza otherwise designed as a figural outlier, a sort of Homeric simile within the larger narrative? I would submit that his purpose is to underscore or call attention to how the x-y coordinates of temporal and personal distance carefully preserved to this point are about to break down in the final verse, and how far this breakdown goes to informing its climactic tenor.

The final stanza fully reverses the trajectory of the previous units. Instead of proceeding from past doubt and disaffiliation from the rebels to a robust ethno-aesthetic identification with their mission, the verse begins with Yeats expressing present skepticism about the Rising and finding reconciliation and solidarity with the martyrs by relegating them, however honorifically, to the past. As the poem opens to the future, Yeats begins to suspect the sufficiency of the “sacrifice,” which is to say blood-sacrifice (“O when may it suffice?”); he then distrusts the necessity of that sacrifice (“Was it needless death after all?”); and he concludes by questioning the very point of the revolutionary demarché (“For England may keep faith”). The only thing Yeats does not doubt in this pregnant moment is “their dream” and the immovable fact of their demise. But their dream remains a construct subject to manifold interpretation and contrary assessment, from mere delusion or fantasy on one side to empowering aspiration on the other. What alone authorizes “their dream” irrefutably for Yeats, what alone indemnifies the value of their dream, irrespective of its possible folly or futility, is the price they were willing to pay for it, and did in fact pay for it. That is why it is not enough for Yeats and his readers to know “their dream,” unless they also know that having dreamed they “are dead.” Death proves the ultimate warrant, erasing all incertitude and rendering all quibbles and cavils moot (“And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?” What does it matter?). *It is death and not the cause of Ireland that ultimately sanctifies the martyrs for Yeats*, and this alone explains the decisive peripeteia of the final verse: past estrangement from

the Irish rebels/present identification with their exploit turns into present skepticism at the exploit/canonization of Irish rebels now past.

If death freely volunteered ratifies the value of their dream, however, it does not settle the question of what its significance might be, nor underwrite any particular interpretation of its meaningfulness. To the contrary, for Yeats their death elevates their dream to a realm beyond everyday meaning or political advantage, confers upon it the dignity of the existential: i.e., the import of their dream becomes coextensive with the grand gesture of sacrificing their lives, willingly, in its name. In this regard, Yeats not only surpasses the aestheticization of politics that was, as we have seen, rife in Ireland at the time, but he alters its very nature. Indeed, while such aestheticization might seem consistent, at first blush, with both the Revivalist nationalism of a Pearse or a Plunkett, and with this poem's initial gloss on the Rising, Yeats has in reality effected another reversal of terms from verse one. No longer is the poetic imagination seen as inciting political action, which then appropriates the aesthetic dimension to itself as a part of its overall significance. Such was the dynamic at work in the "Volunteers" reception of *Cathleen ni Houlihan* and in Yeats's cited incorporation of them within the wider ambit of that dramatic scenario. Here, instead, the political action culminates and expends itself in an apotheosis of the rebels themselves, as dreamers rather than fighters. Whereas aesthetic figures had given rise to the framing of material practice, here material practice terminates in the fashioning of aestheticized figures.

The resulting contrast is made plain enough in the text of the poem. In *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, the structural basis for verse 1, the title character endeavors to awaken the children of Ireland (as the *Proclamation* would style them) to *stir* themselves in the national cause. Here in verse 4, Yeats likens his "part" to that of a mother—in context, a variant of Mother Ireland and so Cathleen herself—who "names her child" in order to *still* it and lull it asleep. Now I am not saying that Yeats works to aestheticize death in "Easter, 1916" nor that he is unwary of the temptation to do so engendered by the doctrine of blood sacrifice. Indeed, he allows a false start in his conclusive recitation of heroes, a rift between his oral announcement ("to murmur name upon name") and his written execution ("I write it out in verse") for the precise purpose of staging his refusal to succumb to that very temptation.

To murmur name upon name,

As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;

But if Yeats acknowledges in order to forestall the eulogistic reflex of dressing mortality in soothing metaphor, if he sees clearly through the aestheticization of death, he is far less vigilant or circumspect when it comes to mobilizing death *as* a mode of aestheticization. Even as Yeats nullifies his figural equation of death and nightfall, he leaves in place the sleeping child of great energy and limbs as an image of the martyrs to be hallowed. Perhaps this figure is meant to suggest a youthful death, of the kind the Volunteers suffer, but it also suggests a death that leaves undisturbed the health and vigor of its subject, or, to take matters further, a death whose sanitized cast actually serves to preserve healthy and vigorous embodiment as a patriotic, even sacrificial ideal.

II

At this point, it proves useful to bring a disability studies perspective to bear on the colonial struggle that contoured Easter, 1916, both the event and the poem. The imperialist discourse of stereotype and stigmatization took an ableist complexion with the emergence of the biopolitically charged racism that Michel Foucault analyzes in *Society Must be Defended*. The timing was fortuitous. The last great decolonizing push that eventuated in the Rising coincided with the developmental stage in European biopower that was “almost completely covered,” as Foucault observes, by the discourse of degeneration.³ As white subalterns enfolded within the British metropole, the Irish had every reason to be anxious about being ethnically profiled as an adulterate locus of degenerative contagion, every reason to recognize and fear that the ideological justification for continued British rule would come to reside in the imputation of racial disability to the “mere” or Irish-Irish, whether that disability be couched in terms of anatomical infirmity, alcohol addiction, a more psychotic addiction to violence, dyshygienic predilections, or hysterical over-emotionalism and a corresponding vitiation of the rational faculty. Revivalist nationalism, accordingly, advanced in a context defined by what Robert McRuer has designated “compulsory able-bodiedness”⁴ and, under the pressure of imperialistic denigration, aligned its decolonizing agenda with that principle. The impetus of Irish nationalism generally—physical and moral force, political and cultural—was to rehabilitate from the degenerative consequences of colonial domination an Irish body politic often imaged in terms of actual infirm bodies. Even the ethos of blood sacrifice, as articulated in the graveside oratory of Patrick Pearse, was conceived not as submitting Irish bodies, Irish men, to impairment and destruction but as renewing the Irish body and Irish manhood from a degeneracy understood, in the biopolitics of the time, to be a blood-borne malady.

The conflation of national viability and autonomy with normative bodily strength and soundness, ethnic with somatic integrity, shaped not only the credo of blood sacrifice, its perceived stakes and consequences, but how the act of martyrdom itself could be imagined. Since the death embraced in patriotic song and story was not to count as the crowning impairment of Irish (bodies) but rather to function as a psychosymbolic shield against such impairment, as a defense of a normative, racialized somatic integrity, the act of martyrdom would of ideological necessity be depicted as unravaged by the sort of physical trauma that would challenge or destroy that integrity. And such proved to be generally the case. In the years leading up to Easter 1916, the era of Yeats's "casual comedy," Revivalists envisaged death for Ireland as a pristine, clean death, one that left the body essentially intact.

The nationalist template for this vision, adopted from the signature Christian trope of transfiguration, was Yeats and Gregory's *Cathleen ni Houlihan*. While the Poor Old Woman freely, proudly prognosticates slaughter for her devoted courtiers, she never represents their physical frames as being shattered or in any way degraded, as being marked by anything more severe than a change from red to white cheeks. The one courtier central to the drama, Michael Gillane, "rushes" to meet his end offstage and thus leaves us with an impression of robust embodiment that is conserved in, rather than despoiled by its self-immolation. The consequent metamorphosis of Cathleen from decrepit hag to stately girl, symbolizing the renewal of the Irish body politic, comes at the cost of Michael's life, but not the normative proportions or dynamism of his physique.

Upon opening St. Enda's, Patrick Pearse had a not unrelated dream of a boy abiding his execution for Mother Ireland. Like Michael Gillane, he is suspended in the youthful perfection of masculine able-bodiedness, protected by his imminent martyrdom from the slightest damage. In his play *The Singer*, Pearse goes a step further. He contrives to limn the young patriots of his political dreams as being safeguarded from bodily trauma even in their imagined death. Speaking through the title character's sweetheart, Sighle, he portrays the perspective slaughter of Irish rebels as an aestheticized dream-vision of beautiful, clean white bodies dabbled with just a bit of red blood, rather like subjects of a pre-Raphaelite painting.⁵

With his wild limbs, hallmarks of athletic able-bodiedness, Yeats's allegorical sleeping child of "Easter, 1916" can be seen to invoke precisely this established, ultra-hygienic strain in the Revivalist portraiture of martyrdom—can be read, that is, as a deliberate type of a certain nationalist subgenre. But whereas this pristine iconography took shape in advance of the Rising, Yeats's poem was written in the immediate aftermath of the event, which not only saw dozens of rebels and hundreds of civilians die, but saw thousands wounded,

debilitated or disabled,⁶ and all suffer physical impairment to one degree or another, a shattering of those metaphorical “limbs.” To figure the martyrs and by extension their enterprise in terms of a once frenetically active and now dormant but intact child is, at minimum, to airbrush the disabling of Irish bodies that the Rising entailed, while tacitly espousing a conventional or classic paradigm of aesthetics that would disqualify bodies thus disabled or out of frame from the canons of beauty. Is there a substantive distinction—ethical, political or otherwise—to be drawn between the proleptic exclusion of likely physical trauma and disability in the literary summons to blood sacrifice and the post-hoc elision of the traumatic effects of its enactment? I would argue, yes, a crucial distinction, and one that consists with the poem’s overall “drift,” both its progress and its meaning.

The proleptic exclusion of Irish physical harm, disfigurement and mutilation was designed to serve revivalist nationalism directly, a central tenet of which, that blood sacrifice will renovate the Irish race on normative geo- and bio-political lines, would be viscerally challenged by images of prospective martyrs broken or maimed.⁷ But once the event occurs, widespread bodily insult becomes an irrefutable fact that will either be taken to belie the rehabilitationist premise underlying the sacrificial endeavor or will be taken to countersign the ethno-national renewal already assumed into evidence. Accordingly the post-hoc elision of the physical impairments wrought by the Easter Rising tended to serve the cause at best indirectly, performing what we might call a hagiographic function: even as attention to the great majority of the victims (the “civilians” or bystanders) was muted at best, the sainted leaders of the Rising, having been executed out of public view, were resurrected as immaculate remembered images in the popular mind and could therefore stand as emblems of the renovative power of nationalist soteriology. In retracting its initial endorsement of the Rising and offering in its stead an exaltation of martyrdom *as such*, “Easter, 1916” takes hagiography to the point at which it exceeds and even annuls itself. Its post-hoc elision of the violence done the bodies of the rebels obeys the same logic. That is to say, Yeats figures the martyrs in a state of stilled yet unmarred able-bodiedness not to confirm the galvanizing power of their specific dream—a possibility entertained earlier in the poem—but in veneration of their willingness to die for *a* dream. More than just the secularization of hagiography that we saw in *Cathleen ni Houlihan*, this is, if you will, hagiography without any church or creed, a highly aestheticized mode of hagiography analogous in its domain to Kant’s purposiveness without purpose.

It is also a highly personalized form of hagiography, in which the movement may be said to live on in the service of the martyrs, rather than the martyrs dying in service of the movement. Consider: if death alone, and not the cause to die for, is what sanctifies the martyrs, then the corollary must be that death

sanctifies the martyrs alone and not the cause they died for. The conclusion of "Easter, 1916" confirms this ratio in an astonishing contrast with the poem's beginning. The inaugural instance of redemptive transformation, at the end of verse 1, seems to embrace the Irish nation at large: "all is changed." But after Yeats registers misgivings about the Rising in verse 4, the Irish nation is abruptly cast as the mere context wherein the martyrs themselves—MacDonagh, MacBride, Connolly, and Pearse—undergo redemptive transformation. "Wherever green is worn," they are all that is utterly changed. And while this metamorphosis is recorded in the present and the future, it befalls the martyrs only in the memory of yesteryear, of which Yeats proclaimed them an indestructible remnant. The poem thus completes its scissor-like reversal of present and past in the only temporal dimension where "The [martyred] body is not bruised"⁸... or impaired or disabled: what we might call the epitaphic Imaginary.

Notes

1. Padriac Pearse, *Poems, Stories, Plays* (Dublin: Talbot Press, n.d.), 333.
2. Fintan O'Toole, "Where Irish Theatre and Irish History Meet," *Irish Times*, Saturday, March 11, 2000.
3. Michel Foucault, "The Abnormals" in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: New Press, 1997), 51.
4. Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory* (New York: NYU, 2006), 2.
5. Padraic Pearse, *The Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Plays, Stories, Poems* (Dublin: Maunsel and Roberts, 1922), 9.
6. Ronan McGreevy, "New Research Suggests 485 People Were Killed in the Easter Rising," *The Irish Times*, Thur. March 12, 2015; "Easter 1916," www.Easter1916.net; John Dorney, "The Easter Rising: A Brief Overview," The Irish Story www.theirishstory.com/2011/04/22/the-easter-rising--abriefoverview
7. The most comprehensive account of the racist construction of Irishness during the late colonial era can be found in L. P. Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts* (Bridgeport: Bridgeport UP, 1968) and *Apes and Angels* (Newton and Abbott: David and Charles, 1971). The most mordant account can be found in Liz Curtis, *Nothing But the Same Old Story* (London: IOI, 1983). For the gendered contours of such imperial racism and the constraints it placed on Irish counterdiscourse, see my *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880–1922* (Urbana: U. of Illinois Press, 2011), 1–25.
8. W. B. Yeats, "Among School Children," *VP*, 445: 58.