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PRESENCE OF AN ABSENCE: YEATS'S SOLITARY SWAN

Kelly Sullivan

The cover image to Yeats's 1928 *The Tower*, the volume in which "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" appeared, shows the stark upright lines of Thor Ballylee and its inverted reflection in rippling water. Dividing the image and its reflection is a leafy branch; the only mark on the smooth water are lines of slight movement that subtly displace the reflected tower. The composition emphasizes the blocky, linear quality of the once-defensive building, set against the stylized organicism of the branch. Despite the stillness of the scene, the effect is not entirely peaceful. Part of the aura of unease comes in the significant absence of birds or animal life.

In a 1927 letter to his friend T. Sturge Moore, the artist who created the cover, Yeats makes clear his priorities for the image: "Do what you like with cloud and bird, day and night, but leave the great walls as they are" (*CL Intellex* 5,000). Despite the significance of the natural world, it is the human-made and its destruction—the walls and rubble of civilization—that most concerns Yeats in this book. Yet the reflection of the tower within the water also echoes a significant avian image within: the swan of section III of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen." The poet claims he will be "Satisfied if a troubled mirror show" the swan "An image of its state" as it pauses before choice (*VP* 430, ll 62–64). Thus the "great walls" of Thor Ballylee reflected in the vaguely troubled waters of the cover in turn recall the great body of a swan half-risen from a lake with its wings thrown wide for flight. It is as if, in showing us the reflective waters, the swan is made present by his absence.

This image of a swan preparing for flight, captured in the moment just before an action, is self-consciously loaded with meaning. The swan represents a soul, and here we see it on the cusp of potential. Yet more radically, after an interrupting stanza, the swan "has leaped into the desolate heaven:" "it took off when the poem wasn't paying attention," jokes Michael Wood, but this quip captures something of the swan's agency.¹ It has wrested control from the poet, made the choice to fly, and moved from a symbolic swan to something more literally avian. This distinction between representing and experiencing—or, to put it another way, between echoing or directly showing—preoccupies aspects of Yeats's poetic oeuvre, particularly in relation to birds and other animal life. That the swan, like the tower itself, represents something seems clear; and that the bird also trammels upon whatever it briefly stands for comes clear in the poet's reaction, his rage at the bird ascending toward "the desolate heaven." The swan's leap is the central preoccupation of "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen"

even as its enclosing stanza “seeks to register this deed and to ignore it.”² Significant in its absence is the moment of crossing over, an experience of choice and action that, the poem suggests, remains unknowable even as it may be the ultimate understanding to which poetry aspires.

Poems in both *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921) and *The Tower* increasingly engage images of birds and other wildlife, often using them first as symbols only to find they “wing” out of control and cannot be tamed into fixed meaning.³ These volumes also track Yeats’s interest in and frustration with ethical and political themes, and his decreasing sense of confidence in human nature and behavior. Linking this ethical and political interest to the animal allows us to see a poem like “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” as preoccupied with the limitations of human experience and understanding. In some parts of this poem such a preoccupation helps reveal a modernist interest in individual isolation, what Fredric Jameson describes as a sense of the inability to communicate experience in any way, that everyone “is equally locked into his or her private language, imprisoned in those serried ranks of monads.”⁴ Yeats’s attitude toward the unknowability of human nature extends to an exploration of and bewilderment with human violence, particularly the ongoing violence of world war followed by revolution and uprising. Helen Vendler argues the “original enigma” of the poem is “the human race’s urge to obliterate the very civilizations it has constructed.”⁵ And Wood calls Yeats “a poet almost everyone associates with violence.”⁶ In “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” Yeats’s constant return to debilitating and frustrating human destruction renders the symbolic birds a part of this destruction—the swan may escape the poem, but instead of other poems’s joy or at least wonder at the otherness of the animal, in 1919, the defiant swan brings rage. As an uncontainable emblem, it vacillates between being symbolic of and subject to human destruction.

THE SWAN HAS LEAPED

In section I of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” Yeats seeks a way of distancing humanity from the ills of the contemporary moment but finds no “comfort” in assuming this is yet another phase of history. Now that “the nightmare / Rides upon sleep,” humans (in the collective “we”) are likened to weasels “fighting in a hole” (*VP* 429, ll 25–26, 32). This reference conjures up the trench warfare of the First War, but also swiftly indicts man as like a mammal known for its surplus killing of prey even when it has just fed, a distinction it shares with, among a handful of other animals, humans. The second section describes a troupe of dancers conjuring a dragon out of ribbons and cloth, an aestheticized evocation of the “dragon-ridden” days of the War of Independence

erupting in the first poem. Thus, it is emblems of war and blood-mired reality that converge in the third section of the poem, despite its seemingly peaceful imagery. In an act of narrating the creation of a symbol, Yeats calls up "some mythological poet" (himself, in this instance, regardless of any other poet he may have in mind) who compares "the solitary soul to a swan" and finds in this image a temporary satisfaction akin to the comfort he sought in the first section in attempting to situate present political violence in a continuum of human history (*VP* 430, ll 59–60).

Yeats reinforces the emblematic role the swan plays in describing it half out of the water, "the wings half spread for flight / the breast thrust out in pride," and suggests the bird is cognizant of its role as a symbol—the speaker feels "Satisfied if a troubled mirror show it, / Before the brief gleam of its life be gone, / An image of its state" (*VP* 430, ll 65–66, 62, 64). Its "state" is one of choice (as Vendler emphasizes), either "to play, or to ride" the "winds that clamour of approaching night" (*VP* 431, ll 67–68).⁷ As a symbol, this swan suggests grace, elegance, power, and pride in its stance on the water, qualities coupled with swans' association with fidelity. Yet the image is also significantly static—no actual swan on the waters of Coole demesne, this emblematic swan seems rigidly fixed in an attitude of power and potential—capable of toying with ill-blowing winds or harnessing them. The association of nightmares with "riding," invoked in the first section of the poem, helps inflect both these options with a sense of dread or doom.

If the swan poised for flight represents pure potential in choice, Yeats's account of the labyrinth of "art or politics" suggests that human choices and actions—the pursuit of knowledge, civilization, aesthetics—lead to confusion. Worse, involvement in the labyrinth means missing the moment at which the swan takes flight, suggesting an opacity of knowledge about both the "solitary soul" and the swan itself. The swan's leap, that absent action, preoccupies the poet. The avian ascent into air happens as the poet mires himself in the labyrinth of poetry or politics; the bird "has leaped," an action that takes place off the page. The man lost "in his own secret meditation" misses both the symbol and reality (*VP* 431, l 69). The moment of choice and action seemingly cannot be represented in the poem itself, and points to ephemeral experience or to a wholly other consciousness. This unrepresentable action is the heart of this poem, even as it the stanza "seeks to register this deed and to ignore it."⁸

Why does this decision so enervate the poet? Why does it even "end" the very page he hopes to write, signaling the death of poetry, the blend of imaginative dwelling and futuristic dreaming that makes up these political poems? Wood argues the poem most appreciates the potential of the swan "poised to leap but never leaping, because all leaps wreck the pure potentiality of the wings half spread for flight."⁹ The image of "pure potentiality" clarifies the swan

as a symbol (the potential inherent in a soul, or the potential for an individual to recognize, just for a moment, his or her “state”). Yet the poem’s sleight-of-hand in positioning the swan’s choice and action of leaping out of the frame (mirroring the avian absence in the cover of *The Tower*) emphasizes what we miss, that for which there is no potential recording. If the heaven that the swan has entered appears desolate, it may be all the more liberating for it. Desolation seems to undo any Christian meaning inherent in “heaven,” deliberately calling up and canceling out significance so the swan ascends into nothingness. Yeats’s swan defies what the poet elsewhere referred to as the limiting, anthropocentric way Wordsworth (and by implication the Romantic poets) “has to burden the skylark with his cares before he can celebrate it.”¹⁰ If Yeats tries to burden the swan with the responsibility of representing a soul, the creature defies him and points to the inevitable failure of lyric poetry (another emblem of civilization). Yet the swan-as-symbol allows Yeats to have it both ways: in implying the failure of art to convey meaning or representation, the bird represents failure and conveys its depths. The swan echoes through the presence of its absence.

This emphasis on presence through absence, a sleight of hand that suggests what we cannot see or know and therefore emphasizes evocation over representation, connects to other absences of knowledge in poems from this period in Yeats’s writing. This swan, like gulls and hawks elsewhere, may come close to representing a human soul, but ultimately its consciousness—its decision, instinct, and the meanings that inhere in playing or riding—are opaque to us. They are not meaningless, but we can at best only understand that the bird experiences life as a bird and cannot know what this life may be like. This preoccupation with the swan’s leap gestures to a frustration with the human need for trappings of civilization: art and politics. If we are capable of destroying what we have created (“break in bits the famous ivories”), section III comes close to suggesting we would do better to ignore the labyrinth of aesthetics and instead observe the swan at the moment of flight (*VP* 430, *l* 47).

The association of the image of the departing swan with “rage” links to the implied failure of communication or transmission of knowledge (*VP* 431, *l* 80). This opacity or incommunicableness finds parallels in the labyrinth and in the shifts from first person plural (“if our works could/ But vanish”) to singular possessive (“my laborious life”) to a castigation of a collectively-deluded past (“we were crack-pated when we dreamed”). In increasingly angry statements, Yeats muses on the possibility that it would be better if all our works vanished with our death, wishes away the very endeavor he engages in—the poem we are reading—and finally denies any empathy with his and civilization’s ambitions for a better future. Neither collective ambition nor aesthetic or political work brings knowledge, and in losing the moment at which the swan leaps, the

poet finally misses out on the potential empathy he might share with another consciousness.

John Shoptaw frames questions of non-human empathy in relation to risk: poets risk feeling their way into an empathic relationship with the non-human, trusting that this process will show forth truth in its representation.¹¹ But "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" explores and fixates not on empathy, animal or otherwise, but on the seemingly perpetual dissolution of relationships, civilities, even civilizations. That the avian has a place in this—beyond symbol, through its tense shift between figurative and literal—connects to the centuries-long place of animals in human culture. Onno Oerlemans suggests that although humans have been "curious" about animal behavior, culturally we have marginalized them as unknown. This in turn leads to a vacillation in the animal's place within or beyond human culture: "Our awareness of animals is simultaneously bound by human history and culture and outside of that history and culture, which is true too of animals themselves."¹² Central to the concept of "civilization" that troubles "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" is a distinction between the human and the animal (with the weasels symbolically linked to the human capacity to shoot a woman in her doorway), yet the breakdown of civilization endemic in this poem has the effect not of drawing the human down to an animal level, but of drawing our attention to the arbitrary and easily violated boundaries we use in such definitions.¹³

The etymological weaving in this stanza helps clarify the thinness of such boundaries. "Solitary" and "solitude," both linked to "soul," derive from *solitudinem*, "loneliness, a being alone; lonely place, desert, wilderness."¹⁴ In most of his other poems, Yeats's swans are paired, yet this swan is itself solitary, tying in with the theme of "ghostly solitude" broken by "triumph" in section I and marred by it in section III; solitude is abandoned for "a holiday" in section V. Wood stops just short of suggesting that what Yeats might want in section III is the solitude that comes from not attempting to understand others and, more significantly, leaving no archive by which others might attempt to understand oneself. One etymological connection links this to a desire for "wilderness," that antithesis to civilization. If this is a poem concerned about ongoing violence and the irrational damage humans do to the very civilization they have conceived (a poem for our times as much as it was Yeats's), it is also a poem about the "uncommunicableness" (to use Louis MacNeice's word) of one's own experience of the world.¹⁵

Put another way, the poem might offer a reflection of "some poet's" tired symbols and "half imagined, half written page," but it can never enable us to experience the swan's leap or the sense of utter confusion in the midst of a labyrinth of one's own making (*VP* 431, *l* 83). These things—the animal other and the terrifying richness of intellectual or imaginative creating—have

no fully successful equivalent in poetry or prose. If “triumph can but mar our solitude,” it is because it tames it, brings it in from the wilderness (*VP* 431, *l* 78). Thus the swan, in escaping its role as symbol, asserts the value of what is wild, beyond human civilization. In doing so, it thematically links to lines from Yeats’s *The Resurrection* (begun between 1925 or 1926).¹⁶ At a moment of climax, one character asks, “What if there is always something that lies outside knowledge, outside order? What if, at the moment when knowledge and order seem complete, that something appears?”¹⁷ The poem suggests the limits of the lyric, forcing us to experience the disconcerting effects of confusion, chaos, violence, and the limits of knowledge. But it is in this experience of limitations that we find “that something that lies outside knowledge.” For this reason, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” is a deeply ambitious poem at the moment it is most pessimistic.

COMBS OF HER COCKS

The labyrinth that prevents the speaker, in section III, from watching the swan take flight offers little consolation or shared aesthetic vision. Instead, cultural constraints (the desire to figure out art or politics) fit with a pattern in the rest of the poem in which human endeavor has been driven to chaos in abstraction, or destroyed by irrepressible human violence. Avian images in other poems, particularly those of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer*, often show a generous interest in the non-human. “The Wild Swans at Coole” imagines fifty-nine swans suddenly lifting off from the water, but they scatter, wheel, and return. Yeats made a significant revision to this poem, moving the third stanza to the end so the poem concludes with a final note of uncertainty—the poet recognizes he will, someday, find the swans gone.¹⁸ Yet by projecting this event into the future, the stanza suggests mysterious, transient beauty rather than dissolution. These swans also break free of symbolism, resisting his attempts to count them, even slyly resisting their association with love and fidelity in their odd numbering. But they allow him to empathize with a future viewer whom they will delight. By contrast, the solitary swan in section III obliterates a future-oriented view. The swan undoes its own symbolism to leap into nothingness, suggesting that whatever meanings and values we believe adhere in language or culture will be undone, that just because something “sheer miracle to the multitude” does not mean it will last (*VP* 428, *l* 2). In this poem, Yeats both historicizes and prophesizes that even accomplishments and cultures collectively made and celebrated will be destroyed.

The final section of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” returns to the avian theme in relation to violence. Yeats describes “That insolent fiend Robert Artisson,” a demon who “lurches past” much like the “rough beast” “slouching

toward Bethlehem” in the earlier but related “The Second Coming” (VP 433, ll 126–28). Lady Kyteler, a fourteenth-century noblewoman accused of witchcraft and of having a sexual relationship with the demon, brings him sexual offerings that include “bronzed” peacock feathers, echoing the golden bees of the opening section, and the “red combs of her cocks” (VP 433, l 130). The combs may have erotic significance linked to their role in distinguishing roosters from hens, or in their cultural associations with decadence and dandies.¹⁹ Yet the sacrificial image suggests nothing of beauty—unlike the peacock feathers, coxcombs are grotesque when detached from the bird itself, and call up the violent action of animal sacrifice. This folk cultural reference brings the poem full circle, suggesting violent debasement in 1919 as much as in medieval or mythological Ireland, with the striking central image of the murdered woman encased in a series of mythologizing instances of violence and destruction of civilization. The coxcomb offering undoes any remaining thought of avian beauty or human veneration for the unknowable animal consciousness, or for the aesthetic accomplishments of high culture. Vendler concludes that in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” we appreciate most the “powerful attempt by the poet to ingest his country’s tragic contemporary moment whole [...] and to project his exploration of the abstract enigma of violence into a set of chosen symbolic forms.”²⁰ The unobserved flight of the swan at the center of the poem suggests endemic human violence links to unknowability, and ultimately to the failure of aesthetic form to contain or describe this solitary state.

NOTES

1. Michael Wood, *Yeats and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 71.
2. Wood, *Yeats and Violence*, 70.
3. For more and other interpretations of avian and animal imagery in Yeats’s work, see Nicholas Grene, “Beasts and Birds,” in *Yeats’s Poetic Codes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Rachel Billigheimer, “Passion and Conquest: Yeats’s Swans,” *College Literature* 13, no. 1 (1986): 55–70; Lucy McDiarmid, “The Avian Rising: Yeats, Muldoon, and Others,” *International Yeats Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016): 74–85; Jacob Bender, “‘The Waters of the Wild’: W. B. Yeats, Julia De Burgos, and Romantic Wilderness,” *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 50, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 31–55; Anita Feldman, “The Invisible Hypnotist: Myth and Spectre in Some Post-1916 Poems and Plays by W. B. Yeats,” *Yeats Annual* 21 (2018): 63–121; Herbert J. Levine, “Freeing the Swans’: Yeats’s Exorcism of Maude Gonne,” *ELH* 48, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 411–26; and John Rowlett, “Ornithological Knowledge and Literary Understanding,” *New Literary History* 30, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 625–47. Patrick Smiddy establishes that the swans at Coole Park in 1917 were almost certainly Mute Swans (*Cygnus olor*) in Smiddy, “The Wild Swans at Coole,” *The Irish Naturalist’s Journal* 34 no. 2 (Oct. 9, 2015): 149–50, and J. Lyndon Shanley shows the direct influence of Thoreau’s *Walden* on the composition of “The Wild Swans at Coole” in Shanley, “Thoreau’s Geese and Yeats’s Swans,” *American Literature* 30 no. 3 (Nov. 1958): 361–64.

4. Fredric Jameson, "Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism," *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1975): 19.
5. Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, Harvard), 65.
6. Wood, *Yeats and Violence*, 7.
7. Vendler, *Secret*, 71.
8. Wood, *Yeats and Violence*, 70.
9. Wood, *Yeats and Violence*, 71.
10. Quoted in Bender, "Waters of the Wild," 34.
11. John Shoptaw, "Why Ecopoetry?" in *Poetry* (Jan. 2016): 395–408.
12. Onno Oerlemans, *Poetry and Animals: Blurring the Boundaries with the Human* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 2.
13. See Oerlemans, *Poetry and Animals*, 5 and passim; and Carey Wolfe, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
14. *Online Etymological Dictionary*, s. v. "solitude," accessed July 15, 2019, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=solitude>.
15. MacNeice, "Postscript to Iceland," in *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 98.
16. According to Feldman, "The Invisible Hypnotist," 79.
17. Quoted in Feldman, "The Invisible Hypnotist," 84.
18. See Feldman, "The Invisible Hypnotist," 102–03, 112. Feldman also remarks that the swans in this earlier poem appear as "truly 'wild' because [...] their meaning as totems or symbols or emblems is still latent, still potential" (112).
19. In his *The Historie of Ireland* (1577), Raphael Holinshed explains that Kyteler "sacrificed in the high way ix red cockes, & ix peacocks eies;" quoted in Richard J. Finneran, "Notes to the Poems," in W. B. Yeats, *The Tower: A Facsimile Edition*, ed. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2004), 115. Yeats's change of peacocks's eyes for bronzed feathers recalls the golden birds of "Sailing to Byzantium" and also points to a further aestheticization verging on decadence, with the organ of sight transmuted into the bronzed eyespots of the peacock feather. Yeats likely understood the peacock's use of tail feathers in courtship, thus further linking violent human ritual to observable animal behavior. My thanks to Lauren Arrington for pointing this out.
20. Vendler, *Secret Discipline*, 79.