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Yeats’s Poetry of Witness

by JONATHAN HUFSTADER

“PASSIVE SUFFERING IS NOT A THEME FOR POETRY,” Yeats declared in his introduction to the 1936 Oxford Book of Modern Verse. “In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies; in Greece the tragic chorus danced.” Passing rapidly from the stage to the sickbed, Yeats then writes, “If war is necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of fever, remembering our comfort at midnight when our temperature fell, or as we forget the worst moments of more painful disease.” It then occurs to him that it might be best to deal with horror by making jokes about it, as soldiers do who laugh about “an unpopular sergeant struck by a shell turned round and round like a dancer wound in his own entrails” (xxxiv-v).

Yeats, of course, wrote political poems which are not poems of witness: celebrations of heroism like “Easter, 1916,” polemical poems like “September, 1913,” or meditations on history like “The Second Coming” and “Meru.” In the poems written during the Black and Tan troubles and the civil war, however—“Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War”—Yeats found himself forced by circumstances to confront violence as an empirical fact, a fact which intruded upon his life as a private citizen. Hence the poetry of witness.

Yeats’s eccentric prose passage suggests three dilemmas facing the writer of a poem of witness. First, passive suffering is indeed intrinsically uninteresting as a subject of tragic literature: it is accidental, not the result of the sufferer’s actions. Dramas of the hospital usually belong to soap operas. Second, such spectacles of suffering, expressed in a lyric voice, tend to sound self-pitying, to demand appropriate and predictable responses from its readers (“we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us,” says Keats). Finally, the enormity of violence and the number of its victims render such spectacles unmanageable within the scope of a personal imagination. To look, to feel, to think, to speak? Better perhaps to joke, or remain silent.

Poets of this century, nevertheless, have repeatedly found themselves confronted by just such disagreeables—by invasion, oppression, genocide, and internecine bloodshed—and have repeatedly felt called upon to respond to them artistically. How is such poetry to be discussed, evaluated? Clearly, the discussion must start by considering the fictive persona of the poem and the
kind of witness which that person bears. Celan and Levi, survivors of the Nazi death camps who returned through suicide to the ranks of the victims, write as "martyrs," in the sense that "witness" translates the Greek *martyria*. While there is never any question of the authenticity of these poets' works, one does ask whether the speaker of, say, Celan's "Death Fugue" or Levi's "Shemâ" does not lapse into posturing rhetoric (I am not claiming that it does or does not, but only that the question must be raised). At the other end of the subjective spectrum, in such a poem as Heaney's "Punishment" where the "artful voyeur" looks upon the violence of his Northern Irish tribe from a safe distance, we ask how the observer can distance himself from both victims and perpetrators of the punishment, "yet understand the exact / and tribal, intimate revenge" (38). In every case, we begin by examining the stance, perspective, and tone of the witnessing voice, and thus encounter the following paradox: although, for a poem to be really one of witness (as opposed to political or historical poems), there must be some authentically witnessing subject, it is in this very subjectivity that the poetic pitfalls lie hidden. If Celan, Levi and Heaney write successful poetry of witness, how do they manage to preserve both the authenticity of their subjective seeing and, on the other hand, avoid lapsing into confessional cant?

Yeats, observing the civil war from his tower, forges his subjective persona by means of two fictions, both of them symbolized by the tower itself. As a householder, situating himself between the tower's original inhabitant in the sixteenth century and his own children, to whom he will leave the tower, the poet bears a generational witness, testifying against both his predecessors and his successors. As a visionary, he climbs to the tower's top to see phantoms of both past and future evil. The persona as parent and the persona as visionary are well known to all students of these poems; my point is that both serve to validate artistically the empirical persona who observes warfare. In all three cases of witnessing—viewing historical events, considering generational decline, beholding visions—the poet is in fact writing poetry about historically specific, passive suffering.

*Three Modes of Witnessing*

Despite the failure of the Rising, Sinn Fein candidates scored major victories in the parliamentary elections of 1918, then refused to take their seats at Westminster, constituted themselves as the Dáil Éireann (Irish assembly), and declared the new republic of Ireland. After two years of guerrilla warfare between the IRA and British mercenaries (the Black and Tans), England concluded a treaty with Michael Collins and other members of the Dáil, establishing the Irish Free State and partitioning from it the six counties of Ulster. Although this treaty was ratified and the new state created in January 1922, the IRA refused to accept the settlement. Thus began the civil war, another

1. These poems are collected in Forché's anthology.
guerrilla engagement, ending in eventual victory for the Free State forces.

In the spring of 1921 the Yeatses, who had been living for two years in Oxford, confronted a dilemma. They wanted to live again in Ireland, but Ireland was becoming an increasingly dangerous place. Yeats balanced his deepening pessimism about Irish society with a cavalier attitude to personal safety: “We are nerving ourselves to go to Ireland . . . at the first sign of lull in the storm there as George pines for Ballylee. I begin to think she would be in better health there with even an occasional murder in the district than in this place or any other spot” (Wade 667). He writes, at the same time, that he is in the process of composing “a series of poems on the state of things in Ireland” (Wade 668), the work now known as “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.”

The Yeatses moved to Dublin in March 1922, and went on to Thoor Ballylee in April, where they spent the summer and where Yeats wrote “Meditations in Time of Civil War.” As long as Yeats remained quietly on this country property in South Galway, keeping his political opinions to himself (Yeats supported the Free State and the Treaty), the family might suffer inconvenience, but not danger. Nevertheless, they were living in the midst of a war. Sometimes confined to home by the fighting going on around him and deprived of newspapers, Yeats in his letters of that summer appears to be peering out from the tower, trying to guess at events from the random evidence of things seen and heard: soldiers passing by, smoke and gunfire in the distance, the stories he hears from neighbors.

In addition to the public turmoil of 1921-1922, two other, more private sets of events were occurring in Yeats’s life, both of them closely intertwined with his marriage and to both of which, in an important sense, he also bore witness: first the events which led to A Vision, then the birth of his two children and the advance of old age.

In October 1917, Yeats married Georgie Hyde-Lees, on the rebound, as it were, from his failures in courting Maud Gonne and her daughter Iseult. During the days after the wedding, Yeats was despondent, afraid that he had acted too impulsively and made a mistake. On one of these days, his wife took a piece of paper and started her now famous automatic writing. Yeats described the event to Lady Gregory as “something very like a miraculous intervention” (10/1917, Wade 633), recounting that immediately after the writing had begun everything changed: “From being more miserable than I ever remember being since Maud Gonne’s marriage I became extremely happy. That sense of happiness has lasted ever since” (633). Mrs. Yeats did not stop there; her writing continued over several years and became the basis for A Vision, Yeats’s homemade mythical system which served in its turn as the foundation for his subsequent poetry. In his “Packet for Ezra Pound,” the introduction to A Vision, Yeats again describes the beginning of the automatic writing as something adventitious, unexpected (8), and repeatedly returns to this point (e.g., 21-23).
It would, of course, take a naive soul to imagine Yeats breathlessly waiting for each day’s revelation as it emanated from his wife’s writing (and subsequently speech), taking down his system, as it were, from dictation. Too much sophistication, however, might also mislead the puzzled interpreter of Yeats’s claims. The point not to be missed is that Yeats, while admitting his role as imaginative systematizer of symbols, clearly believes that the data for the system are, as that word implies, given. He claims to have made the system, but not to have made it up. He witnesses, and then imaginatively composes what he has experienced.

An odd but significant corroboration of the empirical side of Yeats’s supernaturalism appears in his correspondence with T. Sturge Moore. Writing to his friend in December 1925, Yeats says this:

The night of the day I left you I made an old friend see a vision. For about a minute she sat turning the pages of a missal invisible to me and describing the pictures. Hitherto I have always taken the idealist view of such visions but now, thanks to your brother’s Refutation of Idealism, I am permitted to think that they exist outside the human mind. (Bridge 59)

Moore’s brother was the philosopher, G. E. Moore, who had rejected Bradley’s idealism and reexamined the relationship between states of mind and the objective world of sense. As Sturge Moore wrote back the next week, his brother’s book “only furnishes reasons for supposing that the universe does exist independently of the consciousnesses aware of it, not that those consciousnesses may not be subject to hallucinations, bad logic and other diseases” (60). Interestingly, the letters exchanged between the two men on this one point, between January and June 1926, require fifty pages of text to reprint—Yeats continuing to give Johnsonian kicks to the boulders of his visions, and Moore continuing doggedly to insist that his friend’s kicks were in vain.

The fact, then, that Yeats was hard at work on A Vision during the early 1920s serves to strengthen, not weaken, the sense of a poet increasingly preoccupied with phenomena, events seen, and with their power over his mind.

Anne Yeats was born in February 1919, and Michael in August 1921, when W. B. Yeats was 57. His progress as a father can be measured as the distance between “A Prayer for my Daughter” which, as any parent who reads the poem can tell, is spoken by someone who has never yet lived with a baby (but is about to), and the shorter and humbler “Prayer for my Son,” uttered by a more experienced father. Instead of praying that his child may become a flourishing hidden tree, Yeats will now settle for his child sleeping through the night. Instead of protecting his daughter from becoming too beautiful and opinionated, like Maud Gonne, he now wants to protect his son, as the parents of Jesus protected theirs, from physical harm. Although it is not clear to me whether the poet envisages that harm as coming from violence in Ireland or, as Jeffares claims from evidence in A Vision, from

2. Anyone interested in Yeats and his young children should study that wonderful photograph of the trio, taken in the mid-1920s and reproduced in the Jeffares biography opposite page 271.
malign spirits (Commentary 237-38), it is clear that all three areas of experience—children, spirits, and political violence—were requiring the poet to be a witness: to listen, in Heaney’s phrase, to the music of what happens.

Closely linked to Yeats’s experience of his children was the experience of his own aging. “That is no country for old men,” states the first line of the first poem of The Tower (CP 193)—a factual utterance of observation, an act of witnessing to personal decline. In June of 1922, as he was writing “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” Yeats wrote to Olivia Shakespear, “[I] am tired and in a rage at being old. I am all I ever was and much more but an enemy has bound me and twisted me so I can plan and think as I never could, but no longer achieve all I plan and think” (Wade 685). The violence of time exceeds that of the drunken soldiery.

Yeats’s tower at Thoor Ballylee functions as a sign for all three kinds of witnessing. (Accustomed to think of that tower as one of Yeats’s great symbols, we forget its empirical solidity until we read Yeats’s letters about finding lumber, engaging artisans, making decisions on interior colors.) In the midst of civil war, the tower is the keep from which one dare not stray at times of violence and through whose windows one peers at passing soldiers and listens for gunfire. It is the tower up whose winding stair Il Penseroso’s Platonist climbs to have visions. Finally it is the tower built, as Yeats wrote to Quinn in 1918, as “a setting for my old age, a place to influence lawless youth, with its severity and antiquity” (Wade 651). Here the tower is imagined as functioning, not as the place of witnessing but as the witness itself, testifying, before a future and politically lawless generation, to the visionary ideals which that generation will have forgotten.

Turning, then, to “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War,” I see the persona of those poems engaged in witnessing the evil that is happening, witnessing the decline of generations through past and future time, and finally witnessing in a visionary mode, seeing phantoms of historical evil.

The Evil That is Happening

“NINTEEN HUNDRED AND NINETEEN,” in spite of its title and the subscript “1919,” was written in the spring and summer of 1921, in Oxford. Late in 1920 in Gort, Lady Gregory’s market town (and the Yeatses’, when they were at Ballylee), a group of drunken Black and Tan soldiers had murdered a young mother in an aimless drive-by shooting. In the same month at Gort, the Black and Tans also tied several young brothers to the back of a truck, pulling them along the road until they died. When he heard of these atrocities, Yeats sent to The Times a short, angry verse entitled “Reprisals,” in which he calls on the ghost of Major Robert Gregory to return to Kiltartan Cross: “Half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery / Are murdering your tenants there” (Variorum 791). Lady Gregory thought the piece in bad taste and insincere; it was not published by The Times. A few months later, Yeats
wrote “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” in which the drunken soldiery, leaving the mother murdered at her door, reappear (they would not be put to sleep until “Byzantium”).

Why should a poem written in 1921, partly about an event occurring in 1920, bear the date 1919? The number, written out in the title (unlike the exact dates of “September, 1913” and “Easter, 1916”), symbolizes imperfect or uncompleted time—time as historical accident rather than as completed cycle. In contrast to Loie Fuller’s Chinese dancers, whose whirling symbolizes the perfect numerology of the Platonic Year, the dance of humanity is a tread accompanied by “the barbarous clangour of a gong” (CP 208), an imagined clock which rings such imperfect year-numbers as 1919. Torchiana (316) points out that 1919 was the year not only of Yeats’s first child’s birth but also of the poem “The Second Coming.” “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” may be read as an empirical counterpoint to the visionary apocalypse of “The Second Coming.” Both poems enunciate a similar view of the world, but in the different modes of prophecy and witness.

In order to arrive at its Yeatsian declarations about history, “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” establishes a fiction of witness. The point is not that Yeats should have seen the murders (Lady Gregory did not see them either), but that the events happened “close to home,” that they touched him. Evil changes literature by providing the writer with a text of events which he must read, “nor sink unmanned / Into the half-deceit of some intoxicant / From shallow wits” (CP 207). Neither reportage nor editorializing will do for the poet-witness. The extreme historical pessimism of this part of the poem (“if our works could / But vanish with our breath / That were a lucky death”) points to the subjective difficulty of writing such poetry, a difficulty reflected in the letters of the time in which Yeats describes the poem as “not philosophical, but simple and passionate,” and wonders “whether I now have enough emotion for personal poetry” (Wade 667-68).

In contrast to Ellmann (243), who considers “Meditations in Time of Civil War” as the expression of a self-fulfilled man in confident possession of a symbolic system (thus Ellmann finds evidence of egotism in the short titles’ repetition of “my”: “My House,” “My Table,” etc.), more recent critics agree in reading the poem for the hard facts they contain and the discomfort those facts provoke in the poet as he tries to come to terms with them. Samuel Hynes points out that Yeats, both before 1916 and after 1923, imagined war as heroic, wonderful, terrible, and necessary, but when faced with the realities of war in his own land produced another kind of poetry. Hynes, however, is more interested in poetic imagining of war than in poetic witnessing of it, and so passes over the poems under consideration here. Elizabeth Cullingford also finds that Yeats’s experience of the civil war forced him to reevaluate his earlier enthusiasm for violence. Cullingford’s perspective on Yeats’s historical imagination, his use of the past to characterize events of the present, may now be complemented by a perspective on Yeats as witness of those events themselves.
Poems II, III and IV of "Meditations," "My House," "My Table," "My Descendants," provide an illuminating perspective on the specific acts of witness in poems V and VI, a perspective which opens up within the word "meditation." As Louis Martz explains (25-39), classical methods of meditation required the use of an object or image to be presented to the mind's eye (thus Yeats's second poem ends with emblems of adversity). The meditator first uses sight, regarding the image in specific detail, then intellect, considering various "points," and finally will or emotion, expressing sorrow and love, making resolves, and so on. Yeats's meditation does not of course imitate the Christian meditations of the metaphysicists, although he certainly knew their work well (he liked and admired Donne). It does, however, proceed from consideration of objects, to thought, to a final expression of emotion ("O! ambitious heart").

Thus "My House," the second poem, proceeds meditatively, first considering the house as object, seen in its material particularity (the position of the farmhouse, the acreage, the one water-hen scared by the twelve cows); then the house as setting in chiaroscuro for the meditator (the symbolic rose, the winding stair, Il Penseroso's Platonist, the midnight candle); finally the house as occasion for a movement of will or emotion, "to exalt a lonely mind." This meditative act of looking and reflecting becomes an act of witnessing as the poet confronts the tower's violent history. Ulick De Burgo built his tower in the sixteenth century as a "tumultuous spot" for waging war, and then was forgotten. Yeats makes his tower a place to live instead of a place to fight, just as his daemonic rage, creating instead of destroying, replaces the bitterness and violence of old ancestors. The artistic act of witnessing violence, of representing adversity in an emblem, is meant to replace the social act of violence.

The meditator can fully be a witness, though, only when he forsakes his chamber and looks outside: thus poem V, "The Road at My Door." First "An affable Irregular, / A heavily-built Falstaffian man" comes by; then, in the next short stanza, the Irregular's mortal enemies, "A brown lieutenant and his men" stand at the door. The third and last stanza is given over to "those feathered balls of soot," the moor-hen's chicks being guided by their mother on their road, the river which runs by the door (CP 204). Of the fifteen lines of this three-stanza poem, all but three end in soft r's, m's and n's (each word for human endeavor being equalized by its natural counterpart: man-sun; men-complain-rain; uniform-storm) whose effect is to suggest that the soldiers, like the chicks, are being swept along in a stream of circumstance. The poem achieves further balance by the interplay of objectivity and subjectivity: exactly the first half (seven and one-half lines) is occupied by the soldiers, while the second half is reoccupied by the poet who complains of weather (a neutral topic), counts chicks, silences his thoughts and turns towards his chamber. Whereas the Irregular is Falstaffian, a man whose jokes crack like gunshot and who lives psychologically under the sun, the poet complains of rain and is "caught / In the cold snows of a dream." The
witnessing poet transmits without rhetoric or opinion, as a skilled journalist writing his dispatch from a sensitive war zone, his coded views of war through reported acts of observation.

What is so dreadful about receiving representatives of opposing armies at one’s doorstep (for all we know, they could have come at different hours of the same day), so dreadful that the poet must count objects to silence his thoughts? In “Easter, 1916,” the moor-hen and her chicks were among those things which symbolized change, play, and growth, in contrast to the stone at the bottom of the stream, the menacing, inflexible force of a fixed, violent purpose. Now, however, nothing is hidden; soldiers and chicks are equally visible and equally subject to natural processes: hail, rain, storm and stream (“Wind shrieked—and where are they?” asks the mocker of the good in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen”). Whatever the observer is thinking, he is no longer attempting to decide how to apportion blame and forgiveness; now nothing, no one, enjoys privileged status. This witness, unlike the poet of “Easter, 1916,” enjoys no vantage point, occupies no moral balcony, as it were, from which to watch the violence down below. If all are swept away, then so is he. The witness and his poem literally collapse at the end, the last line (“In the cold snows of a dream”) sinking to trimeter from the required tetrameter as the poet’s thoughts are overcome with “envy,” a word which must be read in the strict sense of invidia or “hate.” It is to purge this envy, or at least to reconcile himself to it, that the meditator engages himself in the process of the final two poems. Having considered his house from the outside, contemplated an object on his table, pondered the house’s past and its future, and ventured out the front door to meet callers (all of these acts as forms of witnessing to the war going on around the house), the observer now, in the sixth poem (“The Stare’s Nest by My Window”), turns in towards his “chamber,” looking outward from within.

Yeats’s commentary on “The Stare’s Nest” in The Bounty of Sweden (1925) further elaborates the relationship between the two empirical acts of meditation and witness—only now the witnessing comes first.

I was in my Galway house during the first months of the civil war, the railway bridges blown up and the roads blocked with stones and trees. For the first week there were no newspapers, no reliable news, we did not know who had won or who had lost, and even after newspapers came, one never knew what was happening on the other side of the hill or the line of trees. Ford cars passed the house from time to time with coffins standing upon end between the seats, and sometimes at night we heard an explosion, and once by day saw the smoke made by the burning of a great neighbouring house. Men must have lived so through many tumultuous centuries. One felt an overmastering desire not to grow unhappy or embittered, not to lose all sense of the beauty of nature. A stare (our West of Ireland name for a starling) had built a hole beside my window and I made these verses out of the feeling of the moment. (Bounty of Sweden 50, cited in Commentary 228)

This passage and the poem itself may be taken as a description of how Yeats looked at the fighting going on around him. Unable to venture abroad (“We are closed in, and the key is turned / On our uncertainty; somewhere / A man is killed, or a house burned, / Yet no clear fact to be discerned”), he tries to
read the signs of noise and smoke in the distance. In the third stanza, he sees coffins in cars, and must surmise the events leading up to that sight. The poetic lines combine the seen car and coffin with the unseen fatal deed: “Last night they trundled down the road / That dead young soldier in his blood.”

It requires little imagination to read the word “stare” as suggesting an act of observation. In the first stanza the witness-meditator limits himself to staring at bees, birds, grubs and flies. In stanzas two and three, his mind goes from the certainty gained by seeing minuscule events (like chicks) to the uncertainty caused by hearing and seeing far-off signs of large events (explosions and smoke), and then to inferences drawn from nearby signs (cars and coffins); in the final stanza, he speaks from the house of the inward stare, expressing an interpretation of outward events. As at the poem’s beginning (“My wall is loosening”), the final call to the honey-bees expresses the poem’s central act—witnessing to social breakdown, the dissolution of human bonds in the internecine aggressions of civil war.

The Decline of Generations

SO MUCH FOR THE witness of specific events, which Yeats calls the “return of evil” (“men must have lived so through many tumultuous centuries”). The man in the tower, and the tower itself, also bear witness to decline.

The prevailing tone of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” is one of disillusion over the past, solitude in the present, and despair for the future. Torchiana (317) cites a speech Yeats gave in 1924, in which he recalled the pervasive naiveté of the early twentieth century, when people expected universal peace and prosperity. Now there are no more dragons and swans, only weasels fighting in a hole. The sole authentic position for the poet of 1921 is a comfortless solitude, a solitude which, he twice affirms in the poem, political triumph of any kind would only compromise.

This subjectivity—bearing witness to disillusion, voicing the wish that one’s works might vanish with one’s breath—now constitutes an integral part of the witnessing act, as the poet moves from mere observation to the martyrria of bearing witness. Yet the distinction blurs when the observer comes to consciousness that he is a part of that which he observes, that his subjective stance does not place him on some Archimedean platform of observation. Self-expression, the observer’s reaction to the events he sees, must, to the degree that the observer is truly witnessing, itself fall under the observer’s scrutiny—and elicit another reaction which must in turn be observed, and so on ad infinitum.

Thus it is that Section V of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” consists of various mockings—of the great, the wise and the good—ending with

Mock mockers after that
That would not lift a hand maybe
To help good, wise or great
To bar that foul storm out, for we
Traffic in mockery. (CP 210)
Jeffares (Commentary 234) correctly relates these lines to Blake’s “Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau,” but misses the force of Yeats’s “Let us mock.” The first three stanzas do, to be sure, deplore the present ruins, as Yeats saw it, of what the great men of the past had accomplished. More importantly, though, they testify to the ruin of Yeats’s own illusions about those men’s work, the very disillusion which “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” proclaims. Because it has already said, “O what fine thought we had because we thought / That the worst rogues and rascals had died out” (CP 207), the voice that now says “Let us mock,” and says it four times, must be heard as the voice of one who is participating in the tearing down of his own beliefs. The witness deplores the abandonment of noble old ideals, but by admitting that those ideals were in fact chimeras, he admits that he too has abandoned them. That is why he must end, “Mock mockers after that . . . for we / Traffic in mockery.” Since the old nationalism led only to murderous violence, the observer must testify to disillusion; yet by implicitly abandoning the ideals of Tone and Parnell, the observer must admit to being a part of that which he deplores; he must, therefore, mock at himself.

In the preface to A Vision Yeats alludes to his famous distinction in Per Amica Silentia Lunae: “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry” (Mythologies 331), changing “quarrel with others” to “combat with circumstance” (A Vision 8). Where the statement occurs in the earlier work, Yeats in fact shows no interest in the quarrel with others, devoting himself single-mindedly to the inner struggle of the artist. “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” I think, belies this distinction (as does A Vision, with its endless rotations from subjective to objective, and on again). Observing the terror as it mutates into the civil war, writing first “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and then “Meditations,” Yeats shows that the quarrel with others turns into the quarrel with oneself, even as the war between Irish and English turns into a war between Irish and Irish.

To the disillusion over the great men of the past, over their thoughts and actions, which we found in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” the first poem of “Meditations,” “Ancestral Houses” (which Jeffares [Commentary 223] claims to have been written in Oxford in 1921) now adds disillusion over those men's monuments. As in “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” the poet must participate in what he despises, the dismantling of ancient ideals. The houses are ancestral, passed on to descendants who are here imagined as inferior to their forbears. In the fourth poem, Yeats will imagine a “natural declension” in which his descendants will be inferior to him, but in the first poem it is he who necessarily belongs to the ranks of lesser progeny. Both ancestor and progeny are seen as corrupt, “bitter and violent men.” The refrain, “But take our greatness with our violence” (or “bitterness”), makes sense only if the pronoun “our” includes the ancestors as well as the descendants; the monuments of the great take greatness from their creators, but never without also taking from them their violence and bitterness. The bitter and violent men’s attempts to “rear in stone” the sweetness and light they
longed for were doomed, since like can only beget like. The greatness remained only in the houses and gardens, while the original violence and bitterness of the man and his architect continue to be transmitted to the fourth-generation mice. One bears witness to oneself by rearing children, as well as by building monuments. Yet, thinks Yeats, monuments can do nothing to realize our best hopes, while our children can do everything to perpetuate our worst follies (in civil war fathers and sons, brothers and sisters, are at each other’s throats). Hence the need for a kind of witness more creative than either monuments or even children—poems.

Still beset, in “My Descendants,” with Oedipal anxieties of a double nature (If I am as vigorous as my old fathers, why shouldn’t my descendants be as vigorous as I? On the other hand, if my descendants lack my vigor, must I not lack that of my old fathers?), Yeats poetically replaces his children with the tower. Having left it to them in “My House,” as a place for necessary solitude, he imagines his children playing the fool and leaving the tower to be a roofless ruin, one which will truly represent that solitude which the children, by abandoning the tower, have rejected. Whatever may happen in the future, the tower will always remain a monument to the three people—the poet himself, Lady Gregory, and George Yeats—who caused it to be restored:

And I, that count myself most prosperous,
Seeing that love and friendship are enough,
For an old neighbour’s friendship chose the house
And decked and altered it for a girl’s love,
And know whatever flourish or decline
These stones remain their monument and mine. (CP 203-04)

Unlike the violent and bitter men who tried to rear sweetness in stone, Yeats excludes from his stones “whatever is begotten, born, and dies” (CP 193), “whatever [may] flourish and decline.” Whereas, in “Sailing to Byzantium,” he attempted to abandon the world of change for that of imagined artistic permanence, here the world of change (his own descendants) has abandoned him. He therefore relies for permanence on a monument which stands in the world of time and is itself subject to time’s ravages, ultimately to be tenanted by owls. If “Sailing” was a poem of flight, “Meditations” is a poem of remaining, and therefore of witnessing (as even the golden bird in Byzantium must witness) to what is past, or passing, or to come.

These meditations on historical breakdown fall well within the spectrum of Yeats’s other great pronouncements in this mode, from “The Second Coming” to “Meru.” What serves to distinguish “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations in Time of Civil War” within that spectrum as poems of witness is their mise en abîme, an inner collapse precipitated by circumstances of witnessing social breakdown—exchanging pleasantries with soldiers on both sides, rejecting ancestral houses even while lamenting their rejection by others, deploiring the betrayal of ancestors by children, including the betrayal one has already committed as a child and that which
one will yet suffer as an ancestor. The guilt of the observer is to become a major characteristic of later Irish poetry of witness; one has only to think of Heaney’s self- indictments in the Bog poems. These Irish witnesses, like those of the holocaust or of Soviet oppression, experience guilt through the very act of witnessing. Yet whereas poets like Milosz testify to a guilt which is sown in their consciousness by an alien evil, the conscientious Irish witness is forced to confess, as does Yeats, that “the key is turned / On our uncertainty.” In Ireland, the best lack all conviction because each conviction, each “intoxicant from shallow wits,” leads to the same violent outcomes. To be able both to moralize about history with grandeur and authority and still to say we—

We, who seven years ago
Talked of honour and of truth,
Shriek with pleasure if we show
The weasel’s twist, the weasel’s tooth—

is to render a kind of witness which, I suggest, is distinctively Irish.

Phantoms of Historical Evil

As evil returns, Yeats’s writing is changed, finally, by visions which he sees, or claims to see, and which provide both “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” and “Meditations” with their closing lines. How do these visions differ from “a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi”? The lurching figure of Robert Artisson differs from the figure who moves its slow thighs as an historical being differs from one that is mythical. Yeats’s own note to the later poem characterizes Artisson as both an historical and apocalyptic beast—“these horsemen [the “ancient inhabitants of the country” which country folk see in apparitions], now that the times worsen, give way to worse” (CP 461).

Yeats had done his homework about the fourteenth-century sorceress of Kilkenny, Dame Alice Kyteler, and her incubus, Robert Artisson; Dame Alice did indeed, Jeffares assures us from a reference to Holinshed (Commentary 236), bring to her lover the sacrifices which the poem enumerates. There is more, then, to the appearance of witches and fiends at the end of “Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen” than a systematic belief in the eternal return of the Platonic Year. Yeats bears witness, as does the Heaney of North, to the return of local, historic, Irish patterns of violent behavior, and confesses his foolishness for ever having imagined that the Irish—including himself—could have escaped them.

In the last poem of “Meditations,” having witnessed soldiers and been driven inward to muse on natural events, the observer is finally driven both inward and upward (“on the stair”) to see three phantoms. First (“Hatred”) he sees and hears the angry troopers, calling for vengeance upon the murderers of Jacques Molay. Next (“the Heart’s Fullness”) he sees ladies on their magi-
cal unicorns, themselves unseeing and unthinking because they are so full of their own sweetness. Finally ("the Coming Emptiness") he sees the "indifferent multitude," a flock of predatory birds, empty of any emotion, whether hate, self-delight, or pity—"nothing but grip of claw." Cullingford convincingly argues that the angry troopers represent fighters for nationalism, the ladies their dialectical opposite, the denizens of the big houses, and the indifferent multitude the chaos of the return of evil, the civil war. Do these three visions on the tower top also constitute acts of witnessing, or are they, as in "The Second Coming," to be read as constructs of the historical and symbolic imagination? I am not, of course, asking whether Yeats "really saw" troopers, ladies and hawks one night from his roof, but rather what state of mind is being represented by the "I" of this final poem. The poet examines that state of mind in the final stanza:

I turn away and shut the door, and on the stair
Wonder how many times I could have proved my worth
In something that all others understand or share;
But O! ambitious heart, had such a proof drawn forth
A company of friends, a conscience set at ease,
It had but made us pine the more. The abstract joy,
The half-read wisdom of daemonic images,
Suffice the ageing man as once the growing boy. (CP 206)

The title announced "I see Phantoms," and by the end of the fourth stanza these phantoms have all been seen. Why then this fifth stanza? Telling us that he turns away and shuts the door, the poet emphasizes that this seeing was an event, an encounter from which he now retreats. Descending the stair like a Prufrock of the supernatural (surely a disingenuous pose for the next year’s Nobel Laureate) and regretting that he did not prove his worth to others, the poet here expresses the dilemma of rendering both witness of and witness to. He has seen—he is a witness of—all Ireland, "all that senseless tumult," "the innumerable clanging wings," regressing into mutual hate and anarchy. To have one’s witness understood or "shared" by that multitude, therefore, would be to succumb to the temptation to share in their hysteria:

and I, my wits astray
Because of all that senseless tumult, all but cried
For vengeance on the murderers of Jacques Molay. (CP 206)

To cite Ionesco’s homelier metaphor, what is one supposed to do when everyone, even one’s fiancée, has turned into a rhinoceros? Bérenger remains alone at the window, shotgun on his knees; Yeats remains alone in the tower, confident that his wife and Lady Gregory at least will keep their hides, but not at all sure about his children. "The only consolation to be

4. As Cullingford shows, the troopers and ladies also represent the dialectical opposites of Ambition and Contemplation as seen in phase 22 of A Vision (the time of political upheaval). Even as phase 22 turns towards the total darkness of phase 28, Cullingford concludes, so does Ireland’s upheaval lead to the total chaos of civil war (the Russian revolution of 1917 had also been followed by a civil war which was still going on in 1922).
found in such a situation,” as Cullingford points out, “is the ability to perceive the pattern—an ability that depends upon detachment” (786). The moral stance of authenticity, of not having given in, requires the intellectual stance of the witness.

What, finally, of that Wordsworthian last sentence?5 In his own years that brought the philosophic mind, Wordsworth was driven inward from his revels in nature to more somber consideration of the mind itself. Yeats the witness is driven inward, not from romantic scenery, but from scenes of social gladness, “a company of friends, a conscience set at ease”: first from the camaraderie of the Revival, then from the grace and ease of the big house. The poet was always able to read, or half-read, images which proceeded from within, from his daimon. Now, however, the older poet can read these daemonic images as one text with his readings of the society around him, thus bringing the political, the social, and the personal into one focused act of witness. In 1915, writing to his father, Yeats criticized Wordsworth for having compromised his rich experience by yoking it to his commonplace intellect (Wade 590). One senses that Yeats, in the last lines of “Meditations,” is yoking intellect to experience, affirming the primacy of the images he has seen and insisting that, intellectually, he has only half-read them.

It is fashionable to suppose that Yeats preferred mythology to fact, and that Irish poetry after 1939 has altered the balance. I nevertheless see the Yeats of 1921-1922 as a poet forced to register observed facts—political, social, personal and even spiritual facts—and hence as a forerunner of poets to come, in the Ireland of the post-1970 troubles. How subsequent generations of poets have responded to subsequent political crisis is of course another story, one that is still to be told. Those of us who undertake to tell it will do well to remember how Yeats’s genius addresses the acknowledged dilemma of such poetry, caught as it is between the need for authenticity of voice and the danger of lapsing into sentiment and cant. Achieving authenticity by turning to some of his most intimate concerns—his children and his visionary project with his wife—Yeats uses the symbol of the tower to fuse his witnessing of violence and his personal response to that experience into great poetry. Subsequent Irish poetry of witness must, to some extent, be measured against Yeats’s standard.

5. Stan Smith reads Yeats’s evocations of Homer, Milton, and now Wordsworth—all writers of epic—in conjunction with his writing of a will in “The Tower,” and concludes that Yeats, who also wants to write an epic but cannot, finding his world and himself too fragmented for the unitary vision which epic requires, concedes to the supersession of the poetic “I” by his “children,” those people, and their creations, that will follow him. This postmodernist interpretation of Yeats helps to bring into focus my own perspective on Yeats as observer.
Works Cited


