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The Ironic Dialectic in Yeats

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Much has been said about Yeats's mind working in terms of something akin to the Hegelian dialectical triad in which a thesis and antithesis find resolution in a synthesis. Hegel, in whom Yeats was reading widely by the middle of the 1920's, and toward whom the poet maintained a strong ambivalence throughout his life, would have it that it is in this dialectical triad "and in the comprehension of the unity of opposites, or of the positive in the negative, that speculative knowledge consists." But for Yeats the various sets of opposites he found in the world remained unresolved no matter how hard he fought toward resolution. In the running battle he had with them, he always failed to synthesize the diverse virtues in his many-sided debate with himself. The theses and antitheses with which he struggled never attained triadic unity. Instead, they survived as a series of clashing binaries: art/nature; youth/age; body/soul; passion/wisdom; beast/man; a Nietzschean Apollonian/Dionysian; revelation/civilization; poetry/responsibility; time/eternity; being/becoming; the heroic/non-heroic; and, finally, the ultimate dialectic between antitheses themselves and a Platonically ideal realm where antitheses in the end are annihilated.

Yet little or no attention has been given to a particular and particularly interesting subgenre of this dialectical system of knowledge, which I shall call the ironic dialectic, and which for me strikes to the heart of what Yeats is all about. By irony here I do not mean a simple figure of speech or a linguistic trope. Rather, I mean a figure of (not necessarily always conscious) thought, a mode of perception, a deep recognition of the incongruities between appearance and reality. Throughout a good number of Yeats's poems, and more so in his later and more Modernist ones than in his earlier and more Romantic ones, there exists a series of dialectical relationships that are essentially ironic in the way I use the word. Here one set of meanings in a poem or complex of poems function, either consciously or unconsciously, to disarm or deconstruct another and opposite or near-opposite set of meanings in a poem or complex of poems, thereby charging the poem or complex with a ten-

sion that jams any sense of a precise understanding the reader may attempt.

What I should like to do in this essay is point out five different kinds of ironic dialectics I find in Yeats’s poetry (symbol/symbol; form/content; content/content; tone/content; and finally irony/doctrine); discuss the way in which they work and the effects they have on a reader who tries to find a pure center to any poem or poetic complex; and suggest what this might tell us about the distinction between the poet and his poems, and how the recognition of the ironic dialectics may help us in assigning Yeats a place among the Moderns.

Perhaps one of the mildest and more obvious of these ironic dialectics appears between symbol and symbol. As the meaning of some symbols accrue during one’s reading of Yeats, and as Yeats himself begins to alter meanings slightly or greatly from one poem to another and through the years, meanings start conflicting with each other. A symbol like the rose does not so much have opposing meanings as it does a multitude of them. It is associated with Maud Gonne, Ireland, suffering, history, beauty, the Ideal, and a general sense of mystical profundity. In this way it functions like most other symbols. But with the tower, for instance, the reader starts running into difficulties because it begins carrying meanings that counter one another. It is not only associated with sexuality, the phallic, the bestial intrusion on the landscape, but also with modes of integrity and diversity, with the aristocratic past, with the sages and visionaries of Shelley’s towers or that in Milton’s “Il Penseroso,” as well as with the soul confronting the horror of a stark reality. In other words, it does not carry a charge of consistent associations. The force of one system of associations undercuts the force of another. This is even more evident when the reader tries to interpret Maud Gonne, who, it seems clear to me, becomes for Yeats less of a person than a symbol. In a poem such as “No Second Troy,” where she appears as Helen, or “The Song of Wandering Aengus,” where she appears as “a glimmering girl / With apple blossom in her hair,” she assumes two complexes of meaning at the same time. She becomes on the one hand seductress, demonic queen, the destructive femme fatale, and on the other the ideal of the courtly myth, the poetic muse, the creative and procreative eternal feminine. Thus Yeats’s symbols begin to resist interpretation because their associative power is so great as to allow conflicting meanings, the ironic deconstruction of one system by another. A tension develops in each poem and between poems whereby symbols acquire greater depth, but also greater complexities and subtleties, and the reader encounters increasing confusion in interpretation because Yeats’s private and unspoken norms are not simple and manifest.2

2. For an extended discussion of how complexities, subtleties and a privacy of norms create problems in the interpretation of irony, see Wayne C. Booth’s The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 320-23.
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A second and certainly more conventional ironic dialectic exists between the form of a poem and its content. We come across this in a poem like “A Prayer for My Daughter,” where the terrible violence of nature on a stormy night suggests the larger and more terrible violence of “The Second Coming,” the violence of the ultimate revolution and the advent of a barbaric age that will emerge “Out of the murderous innocence of the sea”; or again, and perhaps to an even greater extreme in another poem concerning what Yeats called “some violent annunciation,” “Leda and the Swan,” in which the powerful, phallic, pure, ineffable Godhead of the swan rushes upon Leda to produce two destined women, Helen and Clytemnestra. In both poems a frightening force pulses in the content, but that unmediated content is mediated—and thereby to a certain extent disarmed—by essentially aristocratic formal structures: in the first case by means of its generally iambic pentameter rhythm and careful aabbcddc rhyme scheme, in the second by means of the sonnet form. In The Identity of Yeats Richard Ellmann begins his discussion of “Leda and the Swan” by commenting that “although [Yeats] has powerful feelings to express, his poems are in no sense their ‘spontaneous overflow.’ The ‘lyric cry’ of Shelley is not his way. . . . There is nothing unplanned in his art; its many surprises come from long preparation, like the discoveries of a great scientist.” On some level, then, Ellmann recognizes the grotesque disparity between the internal spontaneous horror of the poems and the external almost mechanical calmness that parallels Wayne Booth’s notion of “any grotesque disparity between word and word or word and deed” that serves to warn the reader that some sense of irony is at work.

Chances are that the ironic dialectic form/content is, to use another of Booth’s helpful ideas, stable irony. That is to say, it is probably intended, covert, interpreted by the reader as yielding a more interesting reading than the one presented to him, fixed in that the ironic tension does not change upon further readings, and finite in application. But the clash between content and content can be much more difficult to interpret unambiguously because several conflicting contents occur side by side in the same poem. This is the case, for instance, in “Easter 1916,” in which Yeats on the one hand clearly celebrates the revolutionary spirit whose impulse is toward the ideal of an Ireland that has recaptured and reaffirmed its tradition and history, while on the other he recognizes through his use of the image of the stone—a dual symbol of stability and deadness—the folly of it all because “Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart.” Again, Ellmann realizes this when he says “the poem has been castigated because it satisfied both the nationalists

and the anti-nationalists." But it is just in this dual content that the irony springs to life. We find another example of this sort in "A Prayer for My Daughter," a ritual celebration of the birth of Anne Butler Yeats as well as a recognition of the second dispensation. In one content here Yeats argues that the innocent can maintain their innocence by withdrawing into and affirming the self, while at the same time partaking of that which lends culture its continuity and stability: ceremony, custom, ritual. Yet in another content he acknowledges "the sea-wind scream upon the tower, / And under the arches of the bridge, and scream / In the elms above the flooded stream," the ultimate horror in the realization "That the future years had come," that the final revolution is upon the world and that such a revolution will annihilate ceremony, custom, and ritual, while obliterating the self as we of the present age can conceive it. In both poems we have examples of what Booth calls unstable irony, "where the author refuses to declare himself, however subtly, for any stable proposition." In other words, there is a lack of warning that irony is at work, and yet one content of the poem ironically deflates another. The reader knows that the poem indicates extreme complexity and subtlety, and knows that Yeats manipulates a system of private norms, but to what extent the complexities unwind, to what extent the subtleties manifest themselves, exactly what Yeats's norms are, remain uncertain, and the poet's position as narrator remains finally unclear.

More difficult still is the ironic dialectic that plays between the tone and content of a poem. Tone is always hard to talk about, and more so when it seems to collide with what a poem is all about. Unlike a poem such as "News for the Delphic Oracle," which maintains a fairly stable irony, ones like "Sailing to Byzantium" or "Byzantium" display an ethereal content and a vital tone in which the reader senses a possible lack of control at worst, and an ambivalence or ironic disarming at best. How can the reader reconcile, in a poem such as "Byzantium," a content concerned with the relationship between the human and the superhuman, a spiritual night vision of a ghostly mummy, the delicate artifice of a finely crafted golden bird, and souls gliding across streets, with the powerfully living tone of the last stanza:

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
The dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.

7. Ellmann, p. 144.
The exclamations, the vividness of image, the vigor of the verbs, the rich intricacies and variety of language all disarm the serious and contemplative content of the poem. As in the case of content/content dialectic, the three greatest pleasures the reader usually experiences in the presence of irony (the pleasure of deciphering; the pleasure of collaboration; and the pleasure of secret communion and collusion) are jammed and misfire. The reader feels uncertain as to what to make of the poem at hand, and has a vague suspicion he may be the butt of the ironic point—if there is one. The tonal energy resists the enchantment of the ethereal content, and leaves the reader in a quandary.

Last, for my purposes, and fortunately much less subtle and frustrating than either the ironic dialectic of content/content or tone/content, will be the ultimate ironic dialectic between irony itself and the—for Yeats, at any rate—enchantment of doctrine. Here the vitality of irony itself works to deconstruct, disarm, and deflate the nobility of dogma. I am thinking of "Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop," where the stuffy clergyman falls prey to Jane, who recognizes that only in experiencing everything, fair with foul, can the soul be made whole; or of that marvelous little piece, "Politics," where in the face of Mann's rather righteous and solemn decree that "In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms," the reader finds the delightful facticity of a beautiful girl; or of "News for the Delphic Oracle," an ironic address of Yeats the prophet to that other prophet, an address that concerns, not the divine spirituality of a Byzantium where "maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious aesthetic and practical life were one," but a Yeatsian heaven filled with "golden codgers," and the faintly ridiculous Church martyrs who are bound for the next world "Straddling each on a dolphin's back / And steadied by a fin," and the sexual abandon of the "intolerable music" that falls from Pan's cavern, where

Foul goat-head, brutal arm appear,
Belly, shoulder, bum,
Flash fishlike; nymphs and satyrs
Copulate in the foam.

These kinds of poems, most of which are from Yeats's late period, finally and ironically undercut the doctrinaire side of the poet's character through the realization and celebration of life before stoney ideology. Between the accrued effect of these kinds of poems and those more doctrinaire, an ironic dialectic of a larger kind results in the intersticies of the complex of Yeats's poetry. The stable irony of "Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop," "News for the Delphic Oracle," or "Politics," when confronted by the serious and ideological poems like "An Irish Airman


To sum up, I should like to begin by suggesting such ironic dialectics as I have pointed out are not particular to Yeats. Others, such as Pound, Stevens, Williams, and to some degree Eliot, exhibit them rather frequently. Nor should I want to suggest that they necessarily are particular to the Modernists alone. The irony inherent in the form/content dialectic has probably been around as long as poetry, and certainly as long as carefully closed forms like the sonnet, in which usually an ironic tension exists between a highly emotional interior (often concerning jammed love, as in Wyatt, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, and so on) and a perfectly calm exterior. Nonetheless, I should want to suggest that there is something strangely more Modernist than anything else in the ironic dialectics. Whether intended or unintended, they generate on the part of the reader an ambivalence toward a given poem's or poetic complex's subject, and create an uncertainty concerning the pure thematic center of that poem or poetic complex. Irony, as Maurice Shroder notes in his essay on the novel, "modulates between comedy and tragedy."11 It is this equipoise between jest and earnest that functions as a corrosive force in Modernism against the forces of Romantic absolutism in the early part of this century. Ironic dialectics deflate the early Modernist tendency toward Romantic overstatement and deconstruct the pure and naive sense of the ideological. They give rise to a poetic density and a play of opposing values and sensibilities that are uniquely bountiful and humane (and it is thus that the poetry of a Yeats, Pound or Eliot is freer from doctrine than the poets themselves), and set the poet well outside the pale of absolutistic Romanticism, while placing him firmly among the Moderns, who use the ironic mode, not just as a linguistic trope, but as a figure of thought, a mode of existence, because they are keenly aware that any sharp, stable and severe ultimate reality has left them; that (to return to Hegel for a moment) all human values have some point but are contradictory; that "truth is a bacchana­lian revel where not a member is sober."12

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