

IRISH CONFLICTS IN YEATS'S POETRY: REPRESENTATIONS OF THE EASTER RISING IN "EASTER 1916".

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to analyze the poem "Easter 1916" of the Irish writer William Butler Yeats which was written weeks after the Easter Rising. An armed revolution held by teachers, poets, and writers, among others. It had as its main objective to grant freedom to Ireland, once it was still under British rule. The rising was rapidly suppressed and the leaders condemned to death. This episode was a watershed in Irish history for many reasons and many writers and poets had written about it. One of the most famous poems about it is going to be scrutinized in this article.

Keywords: Poetry, Yeats, Easter Rising.

RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é analisar o poema "Easter 1916" do escritor irlandês William Butler Yeats, poema escrito semanas depois do Levante da Páscoa. Revolução armada realizada por professores, poetas e escritores, entre outros. Teve como principal objetivo a concessão de liberdade para a Irlanda, uma vez que esta ainda estava sob o domínio britânico. A insurreição foi rapidamente suprimida e os líderes condenados à morte. Este episódio foi um divisor de águas na história da Irlanda e muitos escritores e poetas escreveram a esse respeito. Um dos poemas mais conhecidos sobre o levante será analisado neste artigo.

Palavras-chave: Poesia, Yeats, Levante de Páscoa.

In 1921 the acclaimed Irish writer William Butler Yeats published *Michael Robarts and the Dancer*. There are important political poems in this collection such as: "The Rose Tree", "Sixteen Dead Men", "The Second Coming", "A Meditation in Time of War" and also the poem that was selected to be the focus of this work: "Easter 1916". In this collection, he did not follow a strict pattern of organization regarding the theme of the whole book, such as the case of *The Rose* or *The Wind among the Reeds*. Besides containing the political poems covering the happenings of 1916, it also covers some unrelated topics. According to Edna Longley in the article entitled "Michael Robarts and the Dancer: Helicon and ni Houlihan": *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* is an odd combination of ballad-history and epithalamion" (LONGLEY, 1994, p. 119). She manages to bring other critics opinion about the book: "Harold

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Bloom finds a single unifying theme in the collection: "hatred, sexual and political". Elizabeth Butler-Cullingford divides this into "two central preoccupations: sexuality and politics". I would like to add a third tier: aesthetics: or the tension between aesthetics and politics" (LONGLY, 1994, P.120). Although the choices in the composition of the book might be controversial, to some extent, the political poems, more specifically, "Easter 1916" deserves special attention.

"Easter 1916" is about the Easter Rising that took place in the Easter week of 1916. Among the myriad of details regarding its organization and implications, Roy Foster states that: "Any theoretical contradictions present in the 1916 rising, however, were obscured by the fact that its rhetoric was poetic. Several poets took part, and the most famous reaction to it was a poem: Yeats's 'Easter 1916', written between May and September and strategically published during the Anglo-Irish war four years later." (FOSTER, 1988, p. 479) The Rising had as the main goal to proclaim the independence of Ireland. After a couple of other failed attempts to get rid of English domination, most of them performed by means of negotiation, some Irish people decided to grab guns and fight for their freedom from the British empire. Yeats's poem about it starts with a description of his relation with other Irish people. The first stanza, which contains sixteen lines, brings the following:

I HAVE met them at close of day
 Coming with vivid faces
 From counter or desk among grey
 Eighteenth-century houses.
 I have passed with a nod of the head
 Or polite meaningless words,
 Or have lingered awhile and said
 Polite meaningless words,
 And thought before I had done
 Of a mocking tale or a gibe
 To please a companion
 Around the fire at the club,
 Being certain that they and I
 But lived where motley is worn:
 All changed, changed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born. (YEATS, 1921, p. 84)

In the first lines of the poem, Yeats seems to construct a sort of detachment between him and the other Irish people. They do not seem to maintain a warm relation, or maybe even what he says or writes may seem "meaningless" to them. Nevertheless, towards the end of the stanza, Yeats recognizes that, at least for one reason, they are united, they share the same country: "Being certain that they and I / But lived where motley is worn". Besides that, both he

and they were supposed to face the changes operated by the Easter Rising. The change was beautiful because it was a move towards freedom; terrible because the change shed blood. According to Edna Longley:

Primarily, the poem sets forth Yeats's intuition that as the world has been swept away: "All changed, changed utterly". But it inhabits that moment of change without leaving the present tense. And "A terrible beauty is born" hardly provides the hoped-for closure of Young Ireland balladry. In 'Easter, 1916' Yeats offers his verse (not art) as a medium for unfolding history. At the same time, he distinguishes his singular voice, his "personal style" from the Young Ireland solidarity of first-person plurals. The first stanza features I and them, they and I. (LONGLEY, 1994, p. 131).

In "Easter 1916" Yeats writes, in a wide-ranging fashion, about the subject related to the Rising. He tries to encompass all that is part of or affected by that happening. If in the first stanza the ordinary Irish people are present, in the second stanza he addresses specific people. Yeats starts the second stanza referring to one of the people that took part in the Rising. "That woman" who Yeats refers to was Constance Markievicz, one of the leaders of the Easter Rebellion. She was born in a wealthy family in London and later moved to Ireland. Her engagement in Irish nationalism arose in a curious way. Tomás O'Riordan writes about it in the multitext project in Irish history available online: "In 1906 she rented a cottage at Ballally, Co. Dublin, and came across a number of old copies of the revolutionary publications the Peasant and Sinn Féin left by a previous tenant, the poet Pádraig Colum. After reading these, Markievicz knew she had found a cause to inspire her life. Her interest in the struggle for freedom was aroused". O'Riordan also brings some information about Markievicz trajectory after her engagement in the Irish struggle for independence. "In 1908 she joined Sinn Féin and Maud Gonne's women group, *Inghinidhe na hÉireann* (Daughters of Ireland). She also became a regular contributor to *Bean na hÉireann* (Women of Ireland), Ireland's first women's nationalist journal and the *United Irishman*".

In *The Irish Rebellion of 1916: A brief history of the revolt & its suppression*, John Boyle refers to her participation in the Easter Rising week: "her headquarters were at the Royal College of Surgeons of Stephen's Green, where she was in command of 120 insurgents, who remained in possession of the building from the start of the revolt right to the very finish" (BOYLE, 1916, p. 106). Yeats's verses about Constance Markievicz seem to contain more criticism than praise, he writes: "That woman's days were spent / In ignorant good-will, / Her nights in argument / Until her voice grew shrill. / What voice more sweet than hers / When, young and beautiful, / She rode to harriers?" (YEATS, 1921, p. 84). Yeats recognizes

Markievicz's good will to engage in some of the nationalist actions, but he suggests that she is not aware of what she is taking part in. Yeats's criticism towards her seems to have its root in their political disagreement. Yeats was a kind of nationalist that relied on pacific manners to make the changes come true in Ireland. The members of the Rising had a different outlook. Edna Longley discusses about Markievicz's presence in Yeats's verses, she writes that: "Perhaps Markievicz, whose actions were more extreme than Gonne's, might less disturbingly represent much that Yeats has come to deplore" (LONGLEY, 1994, p. 127).

In the sequence of the same stanza, Yeats talks about a man, "this man" whom he refers to was Patrick Pearse, one of the leaders of Easter Rising and also the one in charge to read the proclamation of the Irish Republic in front of the General Post Office at the start of the Easter Rising. Pearse played a remarkable role in the nationalist struggle. Besides engaging in army revolution, he was concerned with the damages caused by the process of colonization in the educational system in Ireland. Among his writings on the subject, "The Murder Machine" stands out. He demonstrates his rage towards the substitution of the Irish Language and cultural features. In one of the passages of his text he writes: "A new education system in Ireland has to do more than restore a national culture. It has to restore manhood to a race that has been deprived of it. Along with its inspiration, it must, therefore, bring a certain hardening. It must lead Ireland back to her sagas" (Pearse, 1916, p. 12). Pearse claimed for radical changes that would be operated by means of education. That, however, seemed a vague dream once Ireland still remained under British rule. Maybe that was the greatest motivation to make the Irish teacher, poet and writer shift his pen for a gun.

Yeats reminds Pearse's wish for change by means of education in the lines eight and nine of the second stanza of "Easter 1916": "This man had kept a school / And rode our winged horse" (YEATS, 1921, p. 84). The image produced by the ninth verse is both beautiful and consonant with Pearse's as well as Yeats's longing for a return to mythical Ireland. Mythical in the sense that the heroes from their folklore would be part of their imagery again. In the sequence, Yeats brings another participant of the Rising to his poem, "This other his helper and friend / Was coming into his force; He might have won fame in the end, / So sensitive his nature seemed / So daring and sweet his thought" (YEATS, 1921, p. 84). "This other" was Thomas MacDonagh, as Pearse, he was also a teacher, poet and writer. Yeats mentions he was a helper because he joined the staff of teachers at St. Enda's bilingual school found by Pearse in 1908. The observation in relation to MacDonagh's sensitiveness is also remarked in *Vivid Faces* by Roy Foster. "His own insecure, febrile and intermittently gloomy temperament had propelled

him into an emotional state even before the upheavals of the Easter weekend” (FOSTER, 2014, p. 233). Foster also adds that: “Sleep deprivation, isolation from other spheres of insurrectionary activities, as possibly the unrelieved diet of cake and biscuits made MacDonagh an erratic leader; (FOSTER, 2014, p. 234). The “daring and sweet thought”, traits of MacDonagh personality which are highlighted by Yeats’s verse are perceived in MacDonagh’s own words quoted by Foster: “A man who is a mere author is nothing. I am going to live things that I have before imagined” (FOSTER, 2014, p. 233).

Yeats continues the stanza talking about the participants of the Rising; however, he changes from a praising allusion to MacDonagh to an almost degraded reference to John MacBride. “This other man I had dreamed / A drunken, vainglorious lout” (YEATS, 1921, p. 84). The hostile description performed by Yeats has its roots mainly based on his previous relation with John MacBride. Besides any other possible political disagreement between them, there was the fact that MacBride had gotten married to Maud Gonne, Yeats’s muse and woman for whom he had nourished an almost lifelong love. Yeats also referred to the way MacBride treated Gonne and possibly Gonne’s children: “He had done most bitter wrong / To some who are near my heart,” (YEATS, 1921, p. 84). Roy Foster also comments on that matter. He says that the “advanced nationalists” refused to listen to Gonne’s complaint about the drinking habits of her husband. Foster brings Gonne own words in a letter to John O’Leary in which she says: “I was blameless as regards my married life. My husband has wronged me deeply... (...) I had hidden from everyone what I have suffered from John MacBride’s drunkenness during our married life” (FOSTER, 2014, p. 126). Gonne goes on with her criticism towards MacBride and the male nationalist that thought she should put up with it. Then, in the same letter, she quotes something Yeats has told her: “The trouble with these men is that in their eyes a woman has no rights” (FOSTER, 2014, p. 127). Gonne’s quotation of Yeats’s words in relation to such subject shows that he was aware of what was going on in their relationship. It justifies Yeats’s use of the word drunken to describe MacBride and his uncertainty to include him in “Easter 1916”. But then Yeats explains the inclusion of such a man in the poem: “Yet I number him in the song; / He, too, has resigned his part / In the casual comedy; / He, too, has been changed in his turn, / Transformed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born” (YEATS, 1921, p. 84). Despite Yeats’s disapproval of MacBride’s conduct, he could not ignore his participation in the Rising.

Yeats starts the third stanza with a different approach. Instead of focusing on other participants of the Rising, he concentrates on the change that has been operated by those people and by the upheaval itself:

Hearts with one purpose alone
 Through summer and winter seem
 Enchanted to a stone
 To trouble the living stream.
 The horse that comes from the road.
 The rider, the birds that range
 From cloud to tumbling cloud,
 Minute by minute they change;
 A shadow of cloud on the stream
 Changes minute by minute;
 A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
 And a horse plashes within it;
 The long-legged moor-hens dive,
 And hens to moor-cocks call;
 Minute by minute they live:
 The stone's in the midst of all. (YEATS, 1921, p. 84).

The indications of such changes are made by means of a sequence of metaphors. History pervades the poem but as argued by Terry Eagleton in his analyses of “Easter 1916”, it does not seem to be, in this specific case, the ultimate goal of his writing. According to Eagleton, Yeats also has the objective of mythologizing both the event and the participants. In Eagleton view:

The point of the overall metaphor of the stanza is to sustain this duality of vision: to urge at once the living process of the event ('history') and its strange, stone-like inscrutability ('myth'). Thus, the imagery of stone and stream 'naturalises' the disruptive rebellion, transmuting it effortlessly to an organic disturbance within the texture of a known landscape; but by the same token it distances and depersonalises what has occurred to an elusively obscure process which can be registered rather than understood. The metaphor, that is, dignifies but also withdraws the historical experience, gracing and stylising the bloody events while holding them simultaneously at arm's length (EAGLETON, 1971, p. 256).

It seems that there is a pursuit to conform history to myth, and vice versa. It is done in a sort of dialogue among them. Another aspect worth mentioning is the emphasis on time, a little fraction of the time. In the third stanza, Yeats repeats “minute by minute” in three different lines. The repetition brings the sensation of the change, as a sudden process that was operated on that week.

The Last Stanza of “Easter 1916” presents a myriad of feelings. Yeats talks about the sacrifice, not only of the one made by the participants of the Easter Rising but he seems to evoke all the others that died for the same cause before them. He writes: “Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart. / O when may it suffice? That is Heaven's part, our part / To

murmur name upon name, / As a mother names her child / When sleep at last has come / On limbs that had run wild”(YEATS, 1921, p. 85). In these lines, Yeats shows the strong feeling of helplessness face to one more sacrifice. To mourn the deaths is what is left for those that have not seen any effective sign of independence. From helplessness, Yeats gets to anger when he writes: “What is it but nightfall? / No, no, not night but death; / Was it needless death after all? / For England may keep faith / For all that is done and said. / We know their dream; enough / To know they dreamed and are dead; (YEATS, 1921, p. 85). His anger is present but maybe also a little of his disagreement in relation to the foundation of the Rising, that is, the use of violence and sacrifice. That can be perceived in his question that could be interpreted as rhetorical one. Besides questioning the validity of the sacrifice, Yeats adds another question: “And what if excess of love / Bewildered them till they died?” (YEATS, 1921, p. 85) Again this question could be assumed as rhetorical, as another disapproval of the Easter Rising. Be that as it may, Yeats immortalizes some of its participants: “I write it out in a verse — MacDonagh and MacBride And Connolly and Pearse / Now and in time to be, Wherever green is worn, Are changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born”(YEATS, 1921, p. 85). All the names presented in these last lines were present in an indirect way in the second stanza of this poem, except James Connolly. As remarked by Foster, “Yeats’s poem profiled the renegade aristocrat, the charismatic mentor of the young, the literary intellectual and the violent man of action: symbolic figures in every classic revolution” (FOSTER, 2014, p. 22). But, as Foster says, it also owed to James Connolly, described by Foster as a “brilliant socialist ideologue” (FOSTER, 2014, p. 22). Not all the participants are named in the poem but they are all present and represented in a general way.

In Declan Kiberd’s article, “Irish Literature and Irish History”, published in *The Oxford History of Ireland*, he, probably bearing in mind the aftermath of the Easter Rising, says that “the points in history at which literature and politics meet have been described as a ‘bloody crossroad’. Romantic impulses, derived from literature, allegedly lead to carnage and terror in city streets” (KIBERD, 1989, p. 230). Kiberd also talks about the Conor Cruise O’Brien thoughts about the Irish collaboration between nationalism and art which he considered as ‘an unhealthy intersection’. Nevertheless, Kiberd presents an existing counter-argument that says that “art is too potent a force to be left entirely in the hands of its creators, and politics too pervasive in its effects to be left in the sole control of politicians” (KIBERD, 1989, p. 230). What is seen in Yeats’s “Easter 1916” is precisely the interrelation of art, history and politics.

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