



Title	W. B. Yeats and the Nature of Time
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Citation	Osaka Literary Review. 1994, 33, p. 103-112
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://doi.org/10.18910/25480
rights	
Note	

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W.B. Yeats and the Nature of Time

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Time has been an important motif in literature from ancient times, and a number of writers have tried to describe its elusive nature. In *The Wanderer* and *Beowulf* of the eighth century we can find a lamentation for a perfect time long past and irretrievable. And *The Pearl* and *Piers Plowman* handle the eschatological future and the millennial reunion with God, following the medieval Christian idea that life is perceived as a directional tending-in-time towards God. And the *carpe diem* motif, which is based on the thought that life span is brief and limited, is characteristic and prominent in the lyrics of the Renaissance Cavalier poets. These examples show that time is conceived of as a fate over which human beings have no control. And this conception of time had been definitely established until about the middle of the nineteenth century.

To describe the elusive and invisible phenomenon that we experience, writers used to think it necessary to express it as a visible spatial object by way of metaphors, and they often employed the expression: "Time is like...." A description of time as a line originates essentially from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, in which time is depicted as a line that stretches backward into the past, forward into the future. Since then our most eminent definitions of time had been wholly spatialised configurations — as in time as a circle, an arrow or a river. These definitions were framed on the assumption that time flows in a systematic course from the past to the future, and that it can not be reversed by any means. In literature time flowing in right order was

fundamental to plot: Aristotle explained that plot presents to the human memory and intelligence a pattern of narrative and dramatic events in which time is discerned as structuring mere sequence into a harmonious, consistent unity and evolving possibility into probability and finally into necessity.

The years from around 1880 to 1920, in which William Butler Yeats was active as a poet, were a time of drastic change. Stephen Kern points out that technological innovations like the telephone, the wireless telegraph, the cinema, the bicycle, the automobile, and the aeroplane completely changed the conception of time and space, and consequently influenced cultural developments including Modernist writers. He says, human beings have never experienced such a drastic change before or after that period.¹⁾ The concept of an immutable length of time was suddenly altered by artificial power.

And around this time philosophers such as William James, Henri Bergson and Friedrich Nietzsche challenged the old long-accepted idea that the flux of time can be divided into three discrete parts (the past, the present and the future), and formulated a new idea that time is essentially fluid and not a sum of temporal fragmentations. They also discriminated between objective time — irreversible historical time that could otherwise be called a fate, and subjective time, the course of which can be freely controlled by man's will; and they all attached importance to the latter. Plato insisted that true and perfect being resides not in what we perceive from the actual world, but in a dimension of transcendence and timelessness. But philosophers at the turn of the century claimed that the notion of Platonic idea is merely a conceptual abstraction, and that true being should exist in changeable subjective time formed from immediate

experience which James called "stream of consciousness", Bergson "real duration" and Nietzsche "chaos of sensations". Unlike Plato and Aristotle or human scientists before their time, these philosophers believed that the present has no breadth, and that neither the past nor the future can exist outside of human expectation and memory, and considered the limitless and plotless interior time of human psychology as real time.

It can be easily assumed that both the prodigious development in technology and the new concepts on time set forth by the philosophers (especially Nietzsche's idea that even historical time must be formed from "will to power" which is originated in subjective time) stimulated Modernist writers, including Yeats, into inventing some progressive or experimental methods to express the nature of time.²⁾ In this essay I will study how the change in the notions of the nature of time influenced Yeats's poetry, and what meanings time bears in it.

In poems of the early Yeats we can read the traditional idea of time as a fate. For example, in *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889) we can see such an idea:

And if joy were not on the earth,
 There were an end of change and birth,
 And Earth and Heaven and Hell would die,
 And in some gloomy barrow lie
 Folded like a frozen fly;
 Then mock at *Death* and *Time* with glances
 And wavering arms and wandering dances.
(pp. 18-19, italics mine)³⁾
 And in a wild and sudden dance
 We mocked at *Time* and *Fate* and *Chance*

(p. 20, italics mine)

Here in this poem we detect Yeats treating time in the same

manner as death, fate and chance over which no human being can have control. Upon this poem there is detectable the influence of the following motto of typical Irish heroic legends: "I care not if I live a day and night, so long as my deeds live after me". Time is considered as a heavenly gift with a definite limit. And there is also the evidence that Yeats wants to escape and transcend time in the motif that Oisín goes to Tir-na Oge where there is no limit to time.

Another characteristic theme of time in the early poems of Yeats is that of a change from the past to the present with his longings for the by-gone days. "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner" in *Rose* (1893) gives a concrete example of such poetry:

Although I shelter from the rain
Under a broken tree
My chair was nearest to the fire
In every company
That talked of love or politics,
Ere *Time* transfigured me.

Though lads are making pikes again
For some conspiracy,
And crazy rascals rage their fill
At human tyranny,
My contemplations are of *Time*
That has transfigured me.

There's not a woman turns her face
Upon a broken tree,
And yet the beauties that I loved
Are in my memory;
I spit into the face of *Time*
That has transfigured me. (pp. 131-32, italics mine)

This poem is based on the traditional idea that time consists of three fragmented parts — the present, the past and the

future. The passage of time is limited from the past to the present as is shown by the phrase: "Ere Time transfigured me". Like in "The Wanderings of Oisín", here in this poem "Time" with the capital T could be regarded as something with special authority. And it is noticeable that the subject of the poem is based on the concept of time's fluid nature that "transfigures" everything, which Bergson and James advocated. But the "Time" discussed here is subjective time, not objective time that these philosophers emphasised.

It appears that the primary concern about time in the middle Yeats is shifted from objective time as a fate to its cruel flowing movement that transforms everything described in "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner". And he begins to find that his concern is aligned with the idea of the philosophers contemporary with Yeats — that time is a stream and not a sum of discrete Parts, and think that the past, the present and the future are one unit. In 1908 he asks himself why "life is a perpetual preparation for something that never happens",⁴⁾ and his autobiographical reminiscences written in 1914 read "All life in the scales of my own life seems to me a preparation for something that never happens".⁵⁾ These expressions manifestly show that he is interested in the uncertainty in subjective time. And around this time, unlike other Modernist writers such as Eliot or Pound who attempted to express subjective time of human being by the use of spatial forms under some radical creeds,⁶⁾ Yeats attempts to make use of his own experience to express subjective time peculiar to himself in his poems.

A typical example of the poems into which Yeats put his personal experience is what George Bornstein calls a "greater Romantic Lyric", where a mental action from the circumstantial description in the first stanza to the last

stanza is presented with displacement in space and time.⁷⁾ Though Bornstein insists that the movement of mental action is a present-past-present sequence, in Yeats's poems the movement is actually a present-past-present-future sequence, at the basis of which the present situation of the first stanza consistently lies. This aspect is discernible in "The Wild Swans at Coole", which is composed in 1916 and could be supposed to be one of the last poems that display the principal features of Romanticism. In this poem the concrete situational description in the opening stanza is what the poet is seeing in Coole Park, a significant place to the poet:

The trees are in their autumn beauty
The woodland paths are dry,
Under the October twilight the water
Mirrors a still sky;
Upon the brimming water among the stones
Are nine-and-fifty swans. (p. 322)

In the second stanza his consciousness goes back to the past inspired by the first scene: "The nineteenth autumn has come upon me / Since I first made my count" (p. 322). Closer scrutiny of the poem reveals that the following four stanzas, including this stanza, all elucidate or illustrate the pictorial landscape of the first stanza. This is achieved by absence/presence antithesis — a typical Modernistic rhetoric for evoking what is absent by what is present. And in this way the present moment of the beginning stanza is suspended, and if it is considered as flowing, it is just while the poet is counting the swans up to fifty-nine, or while he is contemplating his past and future. The segment of time is miraculously detached from the actual passage of time; for the last utterance "when I awake some day / To find they have flown away?" (p. 323) shows that the poet is asleep

and inanimate now.⁸⁾ It is permissible to think that the poet's act of mind is going with "real duration" or "stream of consciousness".

"Among School Children" (Written in 1926) is another "greater Romantic Lyric" in Bornstein's sense, and in its draft Yeats makes the following comment that is similar to the phrases that I quoted above:

Topic for poem — School children and the thought that live [life] will waste them, perhaps no life can fulfill their own dreams or even their teacher's hope. Bring in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens.⁹⁾

Like "The Wild Swans at Coole", what counts in this poem is the act of mind from the first setting in which Yeats is inspecting school children to the famous last line "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (p. 446). The poem develops in an unpredictable way, and as Yeats says in the draft, the progression "prepares for what never happens". What is distinctive in this poem is the development that is not limited to his personal subject-matters, but expanded to embrace historical and philosophical context. But this expansion is initiated from Yeats's personal experience and the historical or philosophical view is merely his own speculation.

The central theme of the poem is the uncertainty of the course of life. Yeats tries to apply it to the nature of objective time, making it embrace the theme in its movement, where his point of view is extended from individual to general. And the idea that an individual can create historical or objective time seems to be equivalent to the concept of Nietzsche's "will to power", which motivated Yeats to form a spectacular historical view appearing in *A Vision*. As poems like "The Second Coming" and "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" display, his original historical view originates from an apocalyptic way of thinking caused by the anxiety

of the age. Rather, it might be better to say that it originates from a desire to make a revision of the external situation or that of Yeats himself. "Byzantium" (written in 1930), a poem in which Yeats portrays an ideal land according to his concept of historical sequence, is not a reconstruction of the real world but of an imaginary one. Yeats's aim in making his own historical view is to escape from actual history — in other words, to escape from actual flowing of time.

From the foregoing it will be seen that what we detect in the poems from early to late that deal with the nature of time is his will to deviate radically from strict objective time. The phrases like "mock at Time" in "The Wanderings of Oisín" and "I spit into the face of time" in "The Lamentation of the Old Pensioner" demonstrate Yeats's wish to forget about time which is beyond control. In "The Wild Swans at Coole", by spatialising a moment which is meaningful to Yeats, the poet tries to make the moment transcendental or eternal. This method of mythologizing experience could be conceived of as a Romantic conception, although, as I discussed earlier, in this poem we are able to discover a Modernistic rhetoric of absence/presence antithesis. This duplicity should be one of the reasons that sometimes Yeats is not considered as a typical Modernist poet. And in "Among School Children", the first scene is, like "The Wild Swans at Coole", based on his own personal experience; in contrast with the earlier poem, Yeats's consciousness as well as the subject matter of the poem deviate from the actual experience and go into the realm of transcendence. After he goes into the transcendental world, the moment of the concrete circumstantial at the beginning stanza can not flow or pass — the moment is also suspended and becomes a transnatural one. This is another way of

mythologising experience.

Eliot and Pound attempted to mythologize their work or what they describe in their work by the use of myths or experimental methods. On the other hand, Yeats attempted to mythologise his own experience, or the poet himself. The change in concept of the nature of time at the turn of the century influenced merely the method of escaping from objective time. All through his career the poet's idea on time is consistent — to establish his identity in objective time which exists like a fate. No matter how much emphasis the philosophers placed on individual subjective time, Yeats could never ignore limited and unmanageable objective time. Such consciousness of Yeats can be aligned with that motto of Cuchulain legends which we can see in "The Wanderings of Oisín" as well: "I care not if I live a day and night, so long as my deeds live after me". This is also evident in "Pardon, Old Fathers" (Introductory Rhyme of *Responsibilities*):

*Pardon that for a barren passion's sake,
Although I have come close on forty-nine,
I have no child, I have nothing but a book,
Nothing but that to prove your blood and mine* (p. 270),

and in "The Circus Animals' Desertion" which is itself mythologizing his own former work. And at the end of his career as a poet he eternalises himself and makes "his deeds live after himself".

Under bare Ben Bulben's head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.
An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago, a church stands near,
By the road an ancient cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:

*Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!* ("Under Ben Bulbin", p. 640)

NOTES

- 1) Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U. P., 1983), pp. 1-9.
- 2) Sanford Schwartz discusses the relationship between these philosophers and Modernist writers in *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot and Early Twentieth-Century Thought* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1985) to the exclusion of Yeats in order to retain "depth of exploration". But he admits that Yeats can be included in his study. See, pp. 10-11.
- 3) William Butler Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (Peter Alt and Russell K. Alspach, eds.: 1957; rpt. London: Macmillan, 1989). Subsequent citations of poems are from this edition and page numbers will be incorporated in the text in parentheses.
- 4) Yeats, *Memoirs* (Dennis Donoghue ed., London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 230.
- 5) Yeats, *Reveries over Childhood and Youth* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 132.
- 6) For example, Pound's idea: "an 'image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" in *Make It New* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), p. 336. But indeed it is impossible to appreciate poetry "in an instant of time" because literature is a time-oriented art. What Pound meant by this phrase is that images or plots in a poem should be interconnected each with the other so that the course of time in it can be suspended until the end. This is a method of spatialisation of time.
- 7) George Bornstein, "The Last Romanticism of W.B. Yeats", in *Transformation of Romanticism in Yeats, Eliot and Stevens* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P., 1976), pp. 27-93.
- 8) I already examined this aspect of the poem in another essay. See, Yuko Kitamoto, "The Spatial Form of W.B. Yeats's 'The Wild Swans at Coole'" in *Machikaneyama Ronso* 27 (1993), pp. 19-32.
- 9) A. Norman Jeffares, *A New Commentary on the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 251.