**Yeatsian Reprisals: Jack and William in 1921**

William Butler Yeats’s poem, ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ and Jack Yeats’s painting, *Singing ‘The Dark Rosaleen’, Croke Park* were first exhibited and published two months apart, in the autumn of 1921. These works by two brothers working quite separately in London and Dublin are centred in and move out from the events of one month a year earlier, namely November 1920. The artworks set up a kind of wild goose chase of deliberately inaccurate dating while remaining intimate with the specific locations in which they were composed. The painting and the poem emerged from a time of guerrilla warfare marked by regular reprisal killings and seemingly wilful destruction, and any interpretation of them must regard the specificities of their time and their ability to refer beyond their immediate circumstances. They are forms of political art which contain within them both the present fact and the long memory of the wilful destruction of cultures in the Ireland of their time and across European history.

Both artworks present a pessimism about the adequacy of culture for the immediate political needs of its circumstances. Their present moment appeared to be inscrutable, or at least an illusion of the inscrutable, and they make a fictive representation of agency over the course of history as, to paraphrase one of these artists, a mind moving over silence.[[1]](#footnote-1) While the violent deaths both of the year when they were created, from November 1920 to November 1921, and centuries of cultural waste, form a major part of their nominal subject-matter. While lament is both a formal component and a part of that subject-matter, the idea of elegy does not quite describe the form of these artworks. What their aesthetic forms might be are nevertheless intimate with a querying ethics of representation in a time of a war manifest merely as reprisal killing. The poem and painting revise that ethics across the time of the artists’ careers and the art and artists which preceded and followed them.

***Singing ‘The Dark Rosaleen’, Croke Park***

To start with the youngest of the brothers. Jack Yeats has two paintings titled after the Irish poet James Clarence Mangan’s 1846 poem ‘Dark Rosaleen’, and the song or songs from which it derives, or which have derived from it. The second painting, *Singing My Dark Rosaleen*, dates from 1949, painted when Yeats was 80. It is one of the last of Yeats’s paintings or drawings of the performance of music, here as usual drawn from the street or the music hall. The painting appears to be *en plein air*, framed by a line of distant hills against a blue-grey sky. As viewers we appear to be eavesdropping over the shoulder of a singer-actor figure on a musician, a piper, sporting a vivid green hat, with light flashing off the drones of his uillean pipes. The painting offers a picture from memory shading into dream, a memory of being in the audience. Only in its title – and maybe the piper’s green hat and his pipes – does it suggest a national theme, or rather a theme of national music. But it is hard to distinguish figures among the blaze of colour and the thick impasto painting so typical of Yeats’s late style. It bears out what David Lloyd says of Yeats’s late style, ‘the almost belligerent orneriness of the paintings and the unabashed difficulty with which they refuse to resolve to the viewer’s gaze.’[[2]](#footnote-2) Vividness of colour and the play of perception and imperception suggest a painting sifting spectral memories of figures which are ghostly images glimmering out from a West of Ireland scene which is part music-hall song, part national anthem, a dreamy colourfulness which alludes to melodrama and may even be bordering on kitsch.

The Republic of Ireland Act of 1948 passed by John Costello’s government in Dublin came into force in April 1949, so this second version of the ‘Dark Rosaleen’ theme was exhibited and sold at the moment of the legal beginning of the Irish Republic. It cannot but echo Yeats’s first picture on this theme. That painting dates from the revolutionary period, a work of art conceived and completed in a time of war.[[3]](#footnote-3) It is quite different in tone and style from the later iteration, although the viewpoint is over the shoulder of another female figure, an apple-seller. Three men are performing in a clearing made by a large crowd most of whom are moving in front of a palisade fence, behind which there are houses, smoking chimneys and a line of hills in the distance. The painting is called *Singing ‘The Dark Rosaleen’, Croke Park*. Theme and treatment seem closely related, as is the performance in the picture and its first exhibition, at the Society of Dublin Painters in November 1921. For a picture first shown in that month, mentioning in its title the Gaelic Athletic Association’s national stadium, Croke Park, it has not gone unremarked that the events of the so-called ‘Bloody Sunday’ of 1920 cannot fail to be evoked in it.

On Sunday 21 November 1920, the IRA leader Michael Collins sent out a team of volunteers to assassinate the so-called ‘Cairo Street Gang’ of British intelligence officers. It was a semi-successful military operation: fifteen people were killed, not all of them British army, police or agents. In reprisal for these assassinations, the police and the armed English auxiliaries (the so-called ‘black and tans’) opened fire for ninety seconds on a crowd watching a Gaelic football game between Dublin and Tipperary in Croke Park. They killed ten supporters and one Tipperary player, Tom Hogan, after whom Croke Park’s Hogan Stand is named. Three more supporters died trying to escape, two of them trampled to death by fleeing fans; more than sixty more were injured.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The memory of the events of that day is manifest in the sombre clothes worn by the singers and the crowd. The minute’s silence, like a national anthem, is a regular feature of sports events nowadays, and the standing to attention while both are observed is part of the etiquette of these moments. The crowd in this painting is not entirely standing still, though some spectators seem to be noticing what is going on in the cleared space at its centre. At least two spectators are observing respect. The apple-seller, a brown-coated man and a shoeless boy circle the scene. We the viewers can see the basket of apples but are not allowed close enough to see what the child is selling. On the ground, numerous pieces of paper are clearly visible. Movement and stillness turn around the three figures at the centre of the picture. The fiddler accompanies a ballad singer who stands to attention along with another man in a green coat who may also be singing. These figures impose a static centre-point of focus against the circling indistinct crowd. They do not appear to be sellers of broadsheet ballads as in earlier West of Ireland fair day or sports paintings by Yeats, although the child may be collecting for the singers. This is an urban scene, and from the mid-nineteenth century such city musicians are known as ‘buskers’. There are long shadows, so this might be a bright evening, but the light is bleached and it is clearly cold – the heavy brown and dark blue and black and dark green coats and trousers and shawl and the greyed-out grass on which the figures are standing all suggest late-autumn. But colour, composition and movement evoke music as much as the November Dublin weather. As with the pipes on John Keats’s Grecian urn, heard melodies are sweet but unheard melodies are sweeter, and the tune that the fiddler is playing and is being sung – the unheard melody that we viewers do not hear – gains an extraordinary if grim reverberation across the narrowly-resonant palate of colour. This is a musical and visual culture prone to the commemorative that is coalescing into one of its dominant modes, lament.

Quite unlike the kitsch colourfulness of the 1949 version of the theme, the treatment is realist, giving an impression of authenticity. The style – of painting and, we must imagine, song – is of a plain unvarnished performance and a roughness of execution and conception which operates as an index of sincerity and purity of feeling. The dowdiness of the surroundings, the crowd which may or may not be interested in the song, the everyday commerce of apple-selling, the everyday poverty of the shoeless child, tells of a feeling which resonates with the commemoration of atrocity and defeat. Even the litter scattered over the ground contributes. Yeats’s notes to the picture, which may be memories of one or more visits to Croke Park, note ‘bits of paper, some coloured’ lying on the ground.[[5]](#footnote-5) The detritus of matchday does not go unmissed, human waste left behind after the match which never finished (on 21 November, 1920) or may now be taking place in exhibition as a commemoration (1 November, 1921) – anthems, minute’s silence, litter and all.

A month later, in December 1921, a treaty was to be signed between the Irish revolutionary forces and the British government who granted a measure of independence to the southern states of Ireland, along with partition of the island as a whole. Northern Ireland was to remain within the United Kingdom with the newly ‘free state’ remaining within the British Commonwealth. Jack Yeats opposed this treaty. By way of contrast, the painting of twenty-eight years later coincided with the declaration of the Irish Republic in 1949, an achievement not managed in 1921. As Lloyd says, in terms applicable to the later, post-independence paintings: ‘In the ruins of representation alone, where the nation meets its end, the anticipatory trace of a republic emerges as that thing that yet eludes representation.’[[6]](#footnote-6) This is partly an aesthetic incompletion but also a constitutional one: a century later partition remains. Clues to interpretation are similarly incomplete, as Lloyd rightly says, pointing to their ‘teasing, highly literary titles that seem to allude to an explanatory framework outside the canvases, to a tale in which they might become clear, but which yet eludes the viewer.’[[7]](#footnote-7) But in the case of the pictures which attach the ‘Dark Rosaleen’ song to their titles, the explanatory framework would be all too clear to the Irish viewer. That is not to say that there would not be a contest over the implications, the meaning of the concept, nor indeed its aesthetic as much as political efficacy. In the later paintings, according to Lloyd, the titles of the pictures ‘transform what might have been symbols into allegories, but into allegories that cannot be reduced to conceptual clarity, to interpretative mapping. This is a figuration without a possible turn to the literal.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

Lloyd’s is the most significant discussion of Jack Yeats as a political artist, or an artist who painted in politicised times. At the heart of his account is the diagnosis of the failure of the state after revolution, and the subsequent puzzle of representation in Yeats’s work on historical subjects and whether it should be read as allegory or realism. The account is partly an involved retelling and critique of the presentation of Yeats as an Irish national artist, if not *the* Irish national artist by the poet and curator Thomas MacGreevy. The critique inevitably invokes Samuel Beckett’s demurral from his friend’s view in an *Irish Times* review of MacGreevy’s book, *Jack B. Yeats: An Appreciation and Interpretation*, completed in 1937 but not to find a publisher until after the second world war in 1945.[[9]](#footnote-9) *Singing ‘The Dark Rosaleen’, Croke Park* is one of four examples that MacGreevy gives of Yeats’s art in the period of the revolutionary period from 1918-1924. And MacGreevy directly raises the puzzle to which Lloyd later returns. MacGreevy’s position is explicitly republican, but a position which admits the difficulties for art in that emerging republic. With the memory of events such as those of 21 November 1920 in mind, he says, ‘For several years the country was given over to warfare, but to warfare that could not be faithfully represented in art since it was warfare against imperial authority, waged by hunted handfuls of men’. He goes on: ‘All of that warfare that an artist was likely to see was the tanks and lorries of imperial terrorists patrolling the country roads and streets of the towns with their rifles and machine guns levelled at the passers-by.’ MacGreevy’s use of the word ‘terrorists’ is partial, or, as he says a few pages previously, ‘it is usually the counter-revolutionaries who make revolution bloody.’ He offers only one Yeats picture as an achieved ‘historical painting’, *The Funeral of Harry Boland* (1922), in which ‘Jack Yeats rose to the full height of the heroic in art and, like Gros in *The Battle of Eylau*, lifted the contemporary scene on to the plane of historical painting.’[[10]](#footnote-10)

In many ways this view of the Irish revolutionary wars as unrepresentable experience echoes that of MacGreevy and Yeats’s friend Ernie O’Malley, in his 1936 classic of the guerrilla war, *On Another Man’s Wound*. But the unrepresentable is also the note of World War One writing across Europe, and MacGreevy was a survivor of that conflict. His war poems testify to an experience which could not be reduced to ‘conceptual clarity’. The fragmentary lyric ‘Nocturne’ is just one of a number of poems war in France and then in Ireland: ‘I labour in a barren place / Alone, self-conscious frightened, blundering’.[[11]](#footnote-11) Beckett wrote his review of MacGreevy’s book after his own second world war experience, first in resistance and hiding and then witnessing the aftermath of carnage in the ruins of liberated France while working at a hospital in Saint Lô, in Normandy. He could be said to have brought a sort of clarity about the lack of clarity in war writing, and this is marked in the difference of opinion with MacGreevy about national art. The review ends up being less than appreciative of his friend’s book, and in an odd exchange Beckett gave MacGreevy the fee he received from the *Irish Times.*[[12]](#footnote-12)

The disagreement was over MacGreevy’s contention that Yeats had achieved a form for heroic or historical painting, no matter how fleeting. Beckett’s argument is not about the lack or erasure of representation, but he reads Yeats’s pictures as bringing light to ‘the issueless predicament of existence’, the impossibility of a semantic or even perceptual ‘door’ between subject and object, of an interpretative link or even sympathy between the figurative and the literal. It is an argument which cannot allow allegory. The review ends thus:

… because he [Jack Yeats] brings light, as only the great dare bring light, to the issueless predicament of existence, reduces the dark where there might have been, mathematically at least, a door. The being in the street when it happens in the room, the being in the room when it happens in the street, the turning to gaze from land to sea, from sea to land, the backs to one another and the eyes abandoning, the man alone trudging in sand, the man alone thinking (thinking!) in his box – these are characteristic notations having reference, I imagine, to processes less simple, and less delicious, than those to which the plastic vis is commonly reduced, and to a world where Tir-na-nOgue makes no more sense than Bachelor’s Walk, nor Helen than the apple-woman, nor asses than men, nor Abel’s blood than Useful’s, nor morning than night, nor the inward than the outward search.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The passage picks up a theme in Beckett’s interpretation of Yeats’s pictures from a pre-war correspondence when he was aware that MacGreevy was working on the Yeats book. By 1945, the ‘issueless predicament of existence’ occupied a place he had earlier characterised as ‘no-mans-land’[[14]](#footnote-14) where both the human subject and its geographical or historical positioning are pictured as irrevocably distinct. In two letters written the same day, 14 August 1937 – to his aunt Cissie Sinclair and MacGreevy -- Beckett worked through formulations for his idea about Yeats: ‘A kind of petrified insight into one’s ultimate hard irreducible inorganic singleness’, or ‘A painting of pure inorganic juxtapositions, where nothing can be given or taken & there is no possibility of exchange’. What might be deemed a failure in genre Beckett deems as their success: ‘the dispassionate acceptance which is beyond tragedy’.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The ‘apple-woman’ appears towards the end of the final sentence in the *Irish Times* review, although the Croke park picture has not been mentioned previously in Beckett’s review and the figure of the apple-seller does not appear in MacGreevy’s description of the 1921 Yeats painting. We must assume that Beckett had seen that picture, though he may be confusing it with the flower-seller in the picture to which he does refer, Yeats’s *Bachelors Walk, In Memory.* A female figure is shownoffering a solitary flower as an act of sympathetic memorial for those killed in a previous, pre-Rising police shooting of Irish Volunteer protesters on the street. (The picture was painted in 1915, though not exhibited until 1922). Whatever the particularities of Beckett’s references, it seems that in disagreeing with MacGreevy he is also disagreeing with Yeats’s paintings on a historical or even contemporary political theme. The disagreement is with genre – primarily allegory but also moments of pity or sympathy in elegy or tragedy. It is also a disagreement with art that seeks to depict moments of shared feeling, whether or not those moments imply community or even nationalism. MacGreevy certainly reads Yeats’s subject as national: his book begins by addressing the contention that ‘“He paints the Ireland that matters.”’ He manages to back up this statement without losing the sense that the matter of representation, like the matter of nationalism or the meaning of a revolution marked by guerrilla atrocity and reprisal, is not so easily solved.

This is not just a modernist spat over allegory and what it might mean. The song in the picture’s title need not elude viewer or listener. The matter of the political thinking hidden in allegory is an old diagnosis of Irish art, a seeking for allegory where the literal is deemed unachievable or even dangerous, an art accustomed to functioning away from ‘conceptual clarity’. But reading for an allegory which cannot be conceptualised is also a seeking for meaning where it has been lost to time, a memory of the tune, an unheard and possibly un-recreatable melody. The debate is a long one in the Irish antiquarianism with which Beckett for one had long lost patience, ‘a world where Tir-na-nOgue makes no more sense than Bachelor’s Walk’.

The song in the picture is an unheard melody and there is a question over which song is actually being sung. There are two candidates, both with related lyrics but different melodies. The first is ‘Dark Rosaleen’ with words translated from an Irish original by James Clarence Mangan in 1846, set by Alice Needham in 1897. The song is a close setting of four of the seven stanzas of Mangan’s lyric and it was quite rapidly adopted in Irish stage musical performance. John McCormack recorded it early in his career, in 1907.[[16]](#footnote-16) John McCourt tells us that it was in the repertoire of MacGreevy and Beckett’s friends James Joyce and Nora Barnacle.[[17]](#footnote-17) It is not a ‘folk song’.

The Irish song, ‘Roisín Dubh’, is the other possible source for the song that is sung in the picture. The tune was collected by Edward Bunting from the harper Daniel Black at the Belfast Harper’s festival in 1792 and printed many years later in his *Ancient Music of Ireland* in 1840.[[18]](#footnote-18). The lyric associated with it is the ‘original’ for Mangan’s version. So, before and after 1920, ‘Roisín Dubh’ is a sort of double text in debates over the right way to read Irish language lyric and the right way to perform Irish songs. According to James Hardiman, writing in his emancipation-era collection of Irish language poetry, *Irish Minstrelsy, or Bardic Remains of Ireland* (1831),

‘No nation’ says General Vallancey … ‘is more fond of allegory than the Irish. Their ancient poets were celebrated for their *Meimeadh* or allegorical poems. No other language other than the Arabic has a word of this signification, viz. *Mamma* a verse of occult mysterious meaning’.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Vallancey’s false etymology was adduced by Hardiman to provide a gloss for ‘Roisín Dubh’, in which, according to Hardiman, ‘the allegorical meaning has been long since forgotten’. He hazards a guess at that lost meaning which was subsequently picked up by Mangan in 1846, who locates the song ‘in the reign of Elizabeth’, positing an author as ‘one of the poets’ of Red Hugh O’Donnell and the poem as ‘an allegorical address from Hugh to Ireland on the subject of his love and struggles for her, and his resolve to raise her again to the glorious position she held as a nation before the irruption of the Saxon and Norman spoilers’.[[20]](#footnote-20) For Hardiman, like Mangan, the song is the authentic ruin of the tune along with the Gaelic aristocratic order, as if all that is left is a feeling, ‘the characteristic melancholy which pervades Irish music’.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The ‘tone’ of Jack Yeats’s Croke Park picture picture reverberates as melancholy, a depiction of someone performing a lament, albeit one with a translated song in its title, and one with a famous (and disputed) content. It is an allegory of singing a song with an allegory. The song has persisted long after Yeats’s picture, and the Irish language lyric and its melody have become a staple of Irish musical tradition and its various revivals through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The republican connection was made explicit when it was adopted by Seán Ó Riada as the theme around which he developed the soundtrack for RTÉ’s 1959 *Mise Éire* documentary about the events of Easter 1916.[[22]](#footnote-22) In the contemporary repertoire it is as likely to be sung both in the sean-nós style of Ó Riada’s contemporary Joe Heaney and with full orchestral accompaniment, as recorded by Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh and the Irish Chamber Orchestra.[[23]](#footnote-23)

A continuing cultural history of the performance of this song will not entirely explain Yeats’s picture, no matter how the antiquarian might be attuned to the seeming continuity of its meaning in the folk memory. Bunting collected the Gaelic melody of the song along with many others, to be subsequently plundered by Thomas Moore for his English-language series of songs, *Irish Melodies*. Prefacing the 1840 *Ancient Music of Ireland,* his last collection of Irish music, the disgruntled Bunting complained of the alteration of the tunes in the interests of the English words. Reading this, Moore dismissed Bunting’s collection as ‘a mere mess of trash’ claiming that ‘many of the songs now most known and popular would have been sleeping, with all their authentic dross about them, in Mr. Bunting’s first volume.’[[24]](#footnote-24) Whether or not he knew of Moore’s dismissal of Bunting, the digging up of trash and dross by antiquarians and in debates around authenticity of text and authenticity of performance, Jack Yeats’s picturing of performance shows awareness of the detritus of a culture clinging to cultural purity in the aftermath of atrocity. The ‘bits of paper, some coloured’ which Yeats noted covering the ground on that Croke Park day assume a place in an allegory of arguments about trash or dross as waste by-products of cultural debate. The passers-by seem intermittently interested, as most of us probably are, in the tiresome quarrels over the dogmas of traditional art. The litter scattered over the ground speaks back from an event which is moving on, leaving behind the authentic dross of the folk text itself.

**‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’**

In September 1921, two months before the exhibition of his brother Jack’s painting in Dublin, William Butler Yeats published a long poem, or as he liked to call it, a series of poems in the American journal *The Dial*. It was called ‘Thoughts Upon the Present State of the World’ and started thus:

Many ingenuous lovely things are gone   
That seemed sheer miracle to the multitude;

Above the murderous treachery of the moon,   
Of all that wayward ebb and flow. There stood   
Amid the ornamental bronze and stone   
An ancient image made of olive wood;   
And gone are Phidias’ carven ivories   
And all the golden grasshoppers and bees.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The lost objects here were anything but dross, and Phidias’s ivories or golden grasshoppers and bees are not the sort of things you will see littering the ground after a football match. Something has laid waste to artefacts which have come from a classical version of civilization which is not quite the national culture envisaged by Jack Yeats outside Croke Park. Acts of random reprisal, ‘all that wayward ebb and flow’, have been wrought waste under the murderous treachery of the moon.

To the publication date we must add an earlier one May 1921, written after a note appended to the poem as the date of composition or submission. In the first printing there appears to have been a howler in the text, in the very first line: ‘Many ingenuous lovely things are gone’ was swiftly corrected for its November 1921 appearance in *The London Mercury* to ‘Many ingenious lovely things are gone’. Phidias’s ‘carven ivories’ became his ‘famous ivories’. The poem was subsequently retitled in the 1928 *The Tower* volume, ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’.[[26]](#footnote-26) But ‘ingenuous lovely things’ makes a certain sense when we think of ‘golden grasshoppers and bees’, a childish art from an age of mimesis, albeit a golden age. The revised phrase ‘famous ivories’ too, offers a redundant epithet to an unthinking memory of lost art: all we know of them is their fame. It is an art of ornament, carved from wood and ivory, in un-guilty connection with both the spoils and the waste of Empire. Viewing Alma-Tadema’s 1868 imagining of Phidias showing off the just-finished, vividly-painted frieze on the Parthenon to Socrates, Pericles and others, we must remember that those sculptures that remain from the Parthenon are no longer on that building, given that they were ‘saved’ for world culture by a later Empire, the British.[[27]](#footnote-27) By the end of the first section of the poem, the speaker says that ‘none dared admit … Incendiary or bigot could be found’ to burn the Acropolis, destroy the ivories, ‘Or traffic in the grasshoppers or bees’. Art as spoil of war or consumable product is sundered from the origins which might provide meaning.

Incendiaries or bigots (and traffickers) could also be found in abundance in 1919 or 1920 in Ireland, yet the poem seems to take a long view, what Helen Vendler calls the poem’s ‘originating enigma … the human race’s urge to obliterate the very civilisations it has constructed’.[[28]](#footnote-28) A critic of a distinctly different hue, J. Hillis Miller, while also sharing the view that the poem is about the destruction of cultures, contends that nevertheless Yeats ‘speaks as no-one, from nowhere, at no time, to no identifiable listeners’. Miller admits that the history of interpretation of the poem veers between the specificities of its time and place and a terrifying question for the poem and the artefacts it mourns: ‘Does the poem continuously self-destruct, or is its scattering caused by some force outside itself?’[[29]](#footnote-29) In the face of the looting and reprisals that the poem records, there is a certain comfort in generalisation on the one hand or the urge to present a model deconstructive reading on the other. William’s ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’, like Jack’s *Singing ‘The Dark Rosaleen’ Croke Park*, is an artwork which cannot omit the specificities of the violence with which it treats. W.B. Yeats brings the long view together with a specific moment in imperial history when the British Empire was losing control of its closest island neighbour. While the dates may have been changed in the early life of Yeats’s poem, we are being invited to consider both fairly precise dates for these art-works – paintings and poems – and the question of what Nicholas Grene calls ‘creative misdating’.[[30]](#footnote-30) The signature ‘W.B.Y. May, 1921’, added to the endnote to ‘Thoughts on the Present State of the World’ in *The Dial*, was replaced with the italicised date ‘*1919*’ in *The Tower*. It offers a tautology of poem and historical date, as if the numbers in the date at the end of the poem reiterate the date which has been spelt out in both the title and the poem itself – if indeed the year Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen was its subject-matter.

Without attending to the ethical question of the specific moment we cannot read these texts. As Michael Wood has reminded us in his book on the poem, *Yeats and Violence*, the ethical matter is the adequate bearing of witness to the killing of a specific individual. At the centre of the poem, and returning throughout, is an event which involved the murder of one person, Eileen Quinn. It occurred on 1 November 1920, twenty days before the twenty-nine reprisal deaths in Dublin on Bloody Sunday. On that day Quinn, seven months pregnant and surrounded by her three children, was shot dead just outside the front of her house in the village of Kiltartan, on Yeats’s friend Augusta Gregory’s Co Galway estate. A group of auxiliaries, or Black and Tans were, in the kindest version of events, firing indiscriminately from their truck as they passed by; in another version they were seeking revenge in reprisal for the killing of a policeman. A military court of inquiry held only a few days later returned a verdict of death by misadventure – in British law, an accident. As with the Derry shootings many years later in 1972 – a later Bloody Sunday – the legal exoneration of the perpetrators caused nearly as much outrage as the killing itself.[[31]](#footnote-31)

The outrage is present in Yeats’s poem, in its fourth stanza, wedged between the consideration of the fate of ‘Phidia’s famous ivories’ and the confrontation with a history of art in which ‘no work can stand’:

Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare

Rides upon sleep: a drunken soldiery

Can leave the mother, murdered at her door,

To crawl in her own blood, and go scot-free;

The night can sweat with terror as before

We pieced our thoughts into philosophy,

And planned to bring the world under a rule,

Who are but weasels fighting in a hole.[[32]](#footnote-32)

The stanza is an irruption of ‘Now’ into an already fraught consideration of the destruction of cultures. Yeats’s picture of a land transfixed in its violence is established with exactitude, a precision seemingly at odds with the outrage. The ethical, indeed political, question is about how that outrage can be held in check or in place in the poem – or indeed poetry. If poem and poetry should assume a philosophical distance, a judicious sense of the measure of a world under rule in order to avoid the ‘passionate intensity’ of the ‘worst’,[[33]](#footnote-33) then why are ‘We’ ‘but weasels fighting in a hole’?

Dragons and nightmares and terror all have a place in poetry on a historical subject. But there is something anti-symbolic – anti-poetic – about the weasel. It is no swan. It appears nowhere else in Yeats as symbol – although in the manuscript of the unfinished novel, *The Speckled Bird*, it occurs as a supernatural figure, the shape that a witch takes. When the weasel’s tooth appears in the early play *The Countess Cathleen* it is as common country analogy: ‘Squeal like a rabbit under a weasel’s tooth.’[[34]](#footnote-34) I have just alluded to ‘The Second Coming’, a poem first published on 6 November 1920, five days after Quinn’s death. It has a nightmare at the end, but also a falcon and a sphinx, symbols which are attuned to doing the work of representing ‘Mere anarchy […] loosed upon the world’. The weasels here certainly appear anarchic, but they tip the poem into the inconsequence of conflict among the lowest of an animal hierarchy, a pecking order in which certain animals – falcon or swan – assume a sort of sovereignty. ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ struggles with the inscrutability of a lower order symbolism for the atrocity it feels it must picture: the poem contains an admission that it can no longer read philosophy and rule out of that atrocity. It does not end up with weasel words – certainly not that, this is far too focused on the exactitude of the symbol and the question of the representability of extreme and indiscriminate (and no less extreme because it is indiscriminate) violence. But it seeks in the symbol of the weasel an existence born to fight – and loving that fighting.

The poem’s shortest section offers what Vendler calls a ‘coarse-imaged epigram … a self-hating epigram’:[[35]](#footnote-35)

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.

Yeats’s natural history is fairly precise: the weasel’s twist or dance is performed before its terrified kill; its tooth punctures the spinal cord of its prey. ‘We’ shares the same pleasure. And whether we take the ‘seven years’ here back to 1914 from 1921 (worldwide dates of significance, the beginning of the Great War) or 1912 from 1919 (in Irish history, the Home Rule crisis and the year of the Ulster Covenant, the formation of the Ulster and Irish Volunteers), the ensuing years have resulted in a desensitised community, for whom the long sacrifice has made more than a stone of the heart, it has created pleasure in fighting and killing.

Through examination of the smallest words (the English articles ‘a drunken soldiery’, ‘the mother’) in his definitive analysis of the lines the stanza concerning the killing of Eileen Quinn, Michael Wood shows that ‘Yeats’ recourse is not only to his own considerable poetic powers but to something like the powers of the English language itself’. For Woods, this triumph of technique achieves the effect of a sort of anti-allegory, an ethics of refusal, where it would be obscene to weave the death of *this* woman, Eileen Quinn, into an allegory for the larger political violence:

It is possible to allegorize a figure through the definite article, of course, and Yeats may be seeking to do something of the sort here. But it isn’t possible to lose her, to convert her into a simple instance, and in this case the allegory would not be at odds with the specificity of one mother’s dying.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Yeats marks outrage at the court’s cover-up, the fact that the drunken soldiery can go ‘scot-free’. It cannot deny the urge of many to make the event a metonym for a larger conception of a world no longer under rule. If Quinn is granted the specificity of her dying so is British power granted the specificities of one injustice mounted on another. ‘[S]cot-free’ voices this outrage, a cliché which admits little by way of ambiguity.

Another dated poem is even more explicit on the outrage at murder and cover-up. This is ‘Reprisals’, unpublished in Yeats’s lifetime, one of four poems Yeats wrote for Augusta Gregory’s son, Robert, whose RAF plane was shot down over Italy in January 1918. It ends with lines that record the moment of its composition, the art that moves from the heroic figure of the pilot who had a ‘a good death’ after shooting down nineteen German planes, to the ‘Today’ of incendiaries or bigots stalking the country lanes and city streets. Yeats asks the ghost of Gregory to return home, to have ‘second thoughts’ confronted with this:

Half-drunk or whole-mad soldiery  
Are murdering your tenants there.  
Men that revere your father yet  
Are shot at on the open plain.  
Where can new-married women sit  
To suckle children now? Armed men  
May murder them in passing by  
Nor parliament, nor law take heed.  
Then stop your ears with dust and lie  
Among the other cheated dead.

*November 23rd, 1920*[[37]](#footnote-37)

The appended date of composition here places it three weeks after the murder of Quinn and two days after the Dublin Bloody Sunday killings. But here the outrage itself takes on an indiscriminate quality, firing off the rhetorical shots that are mainly held in reserve in ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’. The further reference to the breakdown of the rule of law in the exoneration of murderers, ‘Nor parliament, nor law take heed’, is one thing. The concluding reference to the cheated dead is to the millions who died in the Great War as well as the two thousand who died, or were then dying, in the Irish War of Independence.

Speaking as much for the sensibilities of her English daughter-in-law -- Gregory’s widow Margaret – Lady Gregory asked Yeats not to publish this poem about her son. He acceded to her wishes, and it appeared only after Yeats’s death in 1948 (though Margaret Gregory was to live to be 95, dying in 1979). Its opening – a good death – and the opposite position by its conclusion – the cheated dead – are in marked distinction to the most celebrated (and best) poem by Yeats on the subject of Gregory, ‘An Irish Airman Foresees his Death’. That poem had little difficulty piecing its thoughts into philosophy as it pictured its final moment of airborne ‘balance’:

A lonely impulse of delightDrove to this tumult in the clouds;I balanced all, brought all to mind,The years to come seemed waste of breath,A waste of breath the years behindIn balance with this life, this death.[[38]](#footnote-38)

That ‘lonely impulse’ makes Gregory part Nietzschean tragic hero and part insouciant English air-ace. It offers to his family the achieved elegiac consolation that Yeats notoriously denied the British war poets: ‘some blunderer has driven his car on to the wrong side of the road – that is all.’[[39]](#footnote-39) The poem offers nobility to its subject, a nobility elsewhere elevated into the full renaissance courtier: ‘Soldier, scholar, horseman, he’.[[40]](#footnote-40) It may even achieve what Thomas MacGreevy said about Jack Yeats’s *Funeral of Harry Boland*, ‘the full height of the heroic in art’.

In ‘Reprisals’ and ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ the nobility of the Gregory line, like the security of those on their estate, admits of no such balance or height. The descent into the weasel hole is one in which Yeats puzzles as only he can with opinions which have now been shown by historical fact to be untenable. A great artist can hold various positions across the course of a career, the inevitable course of the person changing their mind and opinions as facts reveal one set of views to be inadequate. The textual life, like the historical account must admit change, as one reading must give way to the next. This is a sort of inscrutability, a moment when art is offered an event but then discovers that it does not know how to read it – neither the event nor indeed the work of art itself. As Seamus Heaney said in his 1995 Nobel acceptance speech, ‘It is difficult at times to repress the thought that history is about as instructive as an abattoir’.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Grene suggests that ‘Dates for Yeats were not mere matters of record but movable markers to be included or withheld, rendered accurately or falsified, dependent on the literary purpose in hand’.[[42]](#footnote-42) The poem ‘Easter, 1916’, for instance, was not composed on that date and it was to be four years after its September 1916 composition before it was published in anything but private editions. That was in *The New* *Statesman,* on 23 October 1920, seven days before the killing of Eileen Quinn.[[43]](#footnote-43) There is one big date right in the middle of ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’. When it looks like Yeats is heading off for a dance, he brings in the platonic year:

When Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers enwound  
A shining web, a floating ribbon of cloth,  
It seemed that a dragon of air  
Had fallen among dancers, had whirled them round  
Or hurried them off on its own furious path;  
So the Platonic Year  
Whirls out new right and wrong,  
Whirls in the old instead;  
All men are dancers and their tread  
Goes to the barbarous clangour of a gong.

Leaving aside the wonderful swerve of these lines into the dance, their memory of being caught up in a fancy of flying in the wind, there is more than a weasel hole, rather a rabbit hole that we could go down here, tracking what Yeats means by that ‘Platonic Year’. It is related to the golden year in the visionary books and their version of history as epochal, gyre giving way to gyre, as ‘twenty centuries of stony sleep’ give way to the next epoch slouching towards Bethlehem to be born. Grene even says that the reasoning behind the title ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’ is the idea of the millennium minus one.

This is all part of the cosmological system-building of *A Vision* which Yeats was to publish in 1925, one of various points in history at which the planets come back to their original alignment before spinning away again out of joint.[[44]](#footnote-44) Nevertheless, recent local events inevitably get mixed up in the grander scheme of things. Miller offered the image of the shape of the poem as ‘a circular labyrinth’.[[45]](#footnote-45) So given a structure designed to get the reader lost, it ends with a returning local and mythical violence running round in the circular reprisals of ‘the labyrinth of the wind’. The unnamed imminent event – ‘evil gathers head’ – is followed by figures which look quite specific:

Violence upon the roads: violence of horses;

Some few have handsome riders, are garlanded

On delicate sensitive ear or tossing mane,

But wearied running round and round in their courses

All break and vanish, and evil gathers head:

Herodias' daughters have returned again,

A sudden blast of dusty wind and after

Thunder of feet, tumult of images,

Their purpose in the labyrinth of the wind;

And should some crazy hand dare touch a daughter

All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries,

According to the wind, for all are blind.

But now wind drops, dust settles; thereupon

There lurches past, his great eyes without thought

Under the shadow of stupid straw-pale locks,

That insolent fiend Robert Artisson

To whom the love-lorn Lady Kyteler brought

Bronzed peacock feathers, red combs of her cocks.

*1919*

The sudden calm stills the action of the daughters of Herodias, not just Salome but the generations of witches, like Lady Kyteler, that follow.[[46]](#footnote-46) Yet Robert Artisson and Lady Kyteler seem impossibly obscure.

Yeats’s May 1921 note to ‘Thoughts Upon the present State of the World’ offered this explanation:

I have assumed in the sixth poem that these horsemen, now that times worsen, give way to worse. My last symbol, Robert Artisson, was an evil spirit much run after in Kilkenny at the start of the fourteenth century. Are not those who travel in the whirling dust also in the Platonic Year?[[47]](#footnote-47)

To say this is not helpful is to understate the case. The invocation of a symbol – even ‘My last symbol’ – suggests something that it might symbolise. But in its way these obscure, occult figures are also participating in this circularity of violence, where rape is both spectacle and outrage: ‘All turn with amorous cries, or angry cries, / According to the wind’. Whichever side you take is a mere matter of which way the wind blows. Into this labyrinth of reprisal and counter-reprisal, Robert Artisson, a figure which may be a world-historical spirit or just a local superstition arrives. Such a figure may even be the detritus of folk-belief, the litter of folk-memory. For all the circularity, Yeats’s poem is not closed: whatever is about to happen will happen after the poem. This is by way of paradox as much as labyrinth, in the date appended at the end, ‘*1919*’, which was nine years before the date of the retitled 1928 ‘Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen’. This doesn’t necessarily make it a historical poem, although there is history in it. As in all of these artworks, the pressure of the present moment remains as the terrifying prospect that Samuel Beckett saw in Jack Yeats, ‘the issueless predicament of existence’.

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2. David Lloyd, ‘Republics of Difference: Yeats, MacGreevy, Beckett’, *Beckett’s Thing: Painting and Theatre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is currently in a private collection and was last exhibited in 2016 in the National Gallery of Ireland’s *Creating History* exhibition of Irish history paintings. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Atlas of the Irish* Revolution, ed. John Crowley et al (New York: New York University Press, 2017), p. 593 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the catalogue note on the painting by Kathryn Milligan on the painting, in Brendan Rooney, ed. *Creating History: Stories of Ireland in Art* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2016), p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Lloyd, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, pp. 65-66. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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10. Ibid, pp. 25-26; 23. Antoine-Jean Gros, *The Battle of Eylau* (1808), which depicts a victorious Napoleon surrounded by the dead and wounded after battle. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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12. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1941-1956*,ed. George Craig et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
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15. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940*, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 2009), 533-540. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
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18. Edward Bunting, *Ancient Music of Ireland* (Dublin: Hodges and Smith, 1840), pp. 97 & 16-17 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. James Hardiman, *Irish Minstrelsy,* *or Bardic Remains of Ireland,* 2 Vols. (London: Joseph Robins, 1831), I, p. 351. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
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22. *Mise Éire*, dir. George Morrison (Dublin: RTÉ, 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
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    [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
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26. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Alma-Tadema, Birmingham, 1868. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
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31. See Gerard Quinn, ‘The Killing of Eileen Quinn’, *Law Society of Ireland, https://www.lawsociety.ie/gazette/in-depth/eileen-quinn.* Accessed 12 May 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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39. W.B. Yeats, introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (Oxford: OUP, 1936), p.34. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
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44. See Book II, chapter x of *A Vision* (1925), ed. Catherine Paul and Margaret Harper (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp.121-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
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