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'Cast a cold eye': Yeats and War

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Yeats thought long and hard throughout his life on war and peace, and brought that contradiction into relation with the antinomy of love and hate, especially in his lifelong dreaming and yearning and feeling about Maud Gonne and the violence of her politics.[1] Those antinomies, love/hate, war/peace, structured his own struggle with and exploration of the differences and conflicts between his own vocational subject position as lyric poet in the nationalist-individualist, Romantic-bardic tradition, and the man of action, the warrior, the Cuchulain of his psychic dreamwork. This chapter will look at the very late Yeats, the Yeats of Last Poems and Plays, and the reception of that volume and the representation of Yeats's achievement in the aftermath of his death, in the context of the Second World War and late 1940s.

This chapter will first consider the reception of his late work in the aftermath of his death in January 1939, looking in particular at the reaction of his fellow modernists, and then the judgements made on his lifetime achievement by Irish writers of different persuasions. . The aim is to measure one sense to Yeats' epitaph, 'Cast a cold eye': that sense relating to how his generation, his living readership at the moment he died, the most celebrated poet in the world, Nobel prize winner, spirit of his country, read and reacted to his late work at a time of international crisis and world war. The second section will consider another thrust to Yeats's epitaph: his injunction to those passing by to treat death lightly: 'Cast a cold eye, / On life, on death'. *Last Poems* dwells on a paradox that entranced Yeats, the cold clarity, quiet ecstasy and momentary-eternal peace felt by the warrior at the instance of death. We might think of this strange death experience as an aspect of what psychoanalysis defines as the death drive, an internal psychological attraction to death deep in the psyche. For Freud, the death drive was an internal movement of the mind towards an earlier still state, towards destruction, and yet at the same time, as Lacan argued, towards the quietude of an immortality or endlessness of that very movement towards death.[2] This phase of the lecture will explore this aspect of Yeats' poetics as a means of pacifying the war instinct as death drive, as a conjuring of a Shakespearean interim as Nietzschean joy: that pacification is itself a mode of the death drive, and finds form in the idea of the lyric epitaph as engraven last words. The last section will

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[1] For a useful account of the Romantic mystique of war in Yeats's early youth, see Samuel Hynes, 'Yeats's Wars', *Sewanee Review* 97.1 (Winter, 1989), pp. 36-55.

[2] Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920); Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (1964) (London, The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977). Cf. Sigmund Freud, 'An Outline of Psycho-Analysis': 'So long as [the destructive instinct] operates internally, as a a death instinct, it remains silent; we only come across it after it has become diverted outwards as an instinct of destruction. […] When the super-ego begins to be formed, considerable amounts of the aggressive instinct become fixated within the ego and operate there in a self-destructive fashion' [*International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 21 (1940), 27-84 (p. 31).]

venture out into the darkness of death as a mystery in late Yeats, attending to the epitaph's injunction 'Cast a cold eye' as addressed to the dead, to the passing horseman of the next historic phase, and also to all future readers as mortal beings, . This final section will seek to winkle out from the verse the lineaments of prophecy as foreboding, as weird contact with the war dead of the future.

Yeats's Reception in Wartime: 'Cast a cold eye'

In his provocative treatise of late 1938, *On the Boiler*, Yeats played fast and loose with the relations of a nation to the state-sponsored violence of warfare. *On the Boiler* advocates a military caste capable of defending Ireland from 'the disciplined uneducated masses of the commercial nations'.[3] Yeats imagines the caste will form not only in times of national defence, but also in order to check the population explosion of disorderly lower classes – a 'prolonged civil war' of the future is more likely than the submission of the masses, and will be led by heroic cavalrymen in tanks: 'the victory of the skilful, riding their machines as did the feudal knights their armoured horses' (*On the Boiler*, p. 19). War in this sense was to be welcomed as a blood-letting that would ensure national renewal and racial transformation from democracy to oligarchical rule by an aristocratic clerisy trained in arms. War as the means to this end is a unifying, stratifying and ideological crucible. *On the Boiler* quotes Michael Robartes, Yeats's Magus alter-ego, in *A Vision*:

> Dear predatory birds, prepare for war […] Test art, morality, custom, thought, by Thermopylae; make rich and poor act so to one another that they can stand together there. Love war because of its horror, that belief may be changed, civilization renewed. We desire belief and lack it. Belief comes from shock and is not desired.[4]

It is this reactionary dream of a future military caste that drew Yeats to flirting with General O'Duffy's Blueshirts, traceable in the three marching songs in *Last Poems.* The longer poems are more ambiguous, however, about the valency of just war as a trigger of authoritarian revolutionary change. In particular, 'Under Ben Bulben', the poem that stages the imaginary compositional and cultural frame around Yeats's own epitaph, stages warfare as apocalyptic, destructive, fearful, but irrepressibly ambivalent. Roy Foster, in his superb biography, traces the poem's image of the warrior 'at peace' at the moment before death, caught in a moment that both sustains a positive vision of war's transformative powers (with the allusion to John Mitchel's *Jail Journal* and the prayer 'send war in our time') and the sheer chaotic destructiveness of war. Foster writes:

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[3] W.B. Yeats, *On the Boiler* (Dublin: Cuala Press, 1939), p. 30. Irish neutrality was written into the 1922 Constitution, and is alluded to in the section where Yeats critiques British sovereignty, praising the Irish mind's 'detonating impartiality' (31); also the

[4] W.B. Yeats, *W.B. Yeats's Robartes-Aherne Writings*, ed. Wayne Chapman (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 21-22.

> the idea of impending war hangs behind [the poem]. Early drafts included references to bombs falling upon 'hateful cites' and to apocalyptic visions of horsemen riding out of mountainsides – along with the idea that an eternal moment of peace was contained at the heart of conflict, as of sexual love.[5]

The poem comes as the culmination of a long career as national poet that saw Yeats negotiate, trim, evade, blast, rhetoricize, inspire and be impassioned by the wars of his time, from the Great War through the Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish War of independence, the Irish Civil War through to the looming Second World War. The moment of peace of the warrior at the time of his death might be figured as the lyric poem itself, as a language object of calm quiet fixity in tumultuous times. Equally, it might stand as a literally empty gesture, a dreamlike extinguishing or emptying out of the man of action that needled and disgraced Yeats throughout his life, whether it be the Oisin or Cuchulain figure, the Maud Gonne love object, the Irregular soldier he is envious of in 'Meditations in Time of Civil War', the 'Caesar – or Cataline' expected round the corner in his Blueshirt phase, the ambiguous lure of the subject position implied by the gift of Sato's sword.[6] The late poems sing as much the extinguishing of the man and woman of action as they do the temptations of violence, succumbing to and resisting martial energies and authoritarian gestures of violent power in an oscillation impossible to order into tidy dialectic, or even into the voluminous complexities of the grids, gyres and cycles of *A Vision*.

This is as much as to say that war accompanies Yeats as a question, a temptation, a challenge not only to the vocation, where there is conflict between lyric poetry as an art of peace and epic poetry as martial, heroic and nationalist allegiance and witness to violent change, but also to the man, the pastoral dreamer and lover caught up in aesthetic visions of erotic objects of desire at the same time as drawn to the action demanded by the time of revolution. And it is war that, consciously or not, shaped the immediate reception of Yeats's last posthumous collection among the outpouring of responses across the world once his death was announced and subsequently when the Second World War broke out in September 1939.

The death of Yeats had a creepy repetitiousness: his last poems were published and reviewed after IRA bomb attacks on London, Manchester, Coventry, Birmingham, Liverpool: the S-Plan campaign that hit targets between January 1939 and March 1940 – as though replaying the entanglement of Yeats's poetry with the Easter Rising during the Great War. The response to Yeats's death in the wartime that ensued was muted in the coteries of London modernists, partly as a result of the S-Plan attacks, Irish neutrality and Yeats's interwar flirtation with eugenics and fascism. Auden dramatises this in his Spring 1939 article in *Partisan Review*, 'The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler

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[5] Roy Foster, *W. B. Yeats: A Life II: The Arch-Poet 1915-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 635.

[6] *W.B. Yeats, The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (London: Dent; 1990).

Yeats', written soon after the attacks and Yeats's death. The orthodox Marxist view comes first with the public prosecutor criticizing Yeats's 'feudal mentality' and fascist war-mongering on the basis of the allusion to Mitchel's prayer 'Send war in our time' in 'Upon Ben Bulben': 'In the last poem he wrote, the deceased rejects social justice and reason, and prays for war. Am I mistaken in imagining that somewhat similar sentiments are expressed by a certain foreign political movement which every lover of literature and liberty acknowledges to be the enemy of mankind?'[7]

In Auden's essay, t he counsel for the defence puts up a more spirited array of arguments and stands close to Auden's own view, praising Yeats as a 'man of action' in the 'field of language', with a 'true democratic style'.[8] Notwithstanding, the piece does insist on the famous argument that poetry makes nothing happen, the idea which Auden was to make the central claim of his elegy for Yeats: 'The case for the prosecution rests on the fallacious belief that art ever makes anything happen, whereas the honest truth, gentlemen, is that, if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged.'[9] This influential line on Yeats draws Auden towards echoing the aesthetic arguments proffered by New Critics at the time that erased the real war contexts from the verse;[10] then it uses that very aestheticism against Yeats. In his review of *Last Poems*, Auden criticizes the rehashing of old themes in the last collection as an exercise in sound patterns: Yeats succumbing to the aesthetic temptation, 'always more concerned with whether or not a phrase sounded effective, than with the truth or the honesty of its emotion'. The work was consummate lyric writing, however, in its deployment of a simple, sensuous and passionate diction – Auden damning with faint praise.[11]

Eliot's 'Little Gidding', the first great poem of the Second World War, aims to prise the poet Yeats away from entanglements with history and war into the zone of the uncanny. Eliot writes as receiver of Yeats's theory of history as repetitive wartime violence both psychological and cultural, situating the poem's scene in a ghostly wartime space of Nietzschean recurrence: 'At the recurrent end of the unending'. Eliot's persona hails the ghost of Yeats as though he were Dante hailing Virgil:

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[7] W.H. Auden, 'The Public v. the Late Mr William Butler Yeats' (*Partisan Review,* Spring 1939), in *The Engish Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, edited by Edward Mendelson (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 389-93 (p. 391).

[8] Ibid. p. 393.

[9] Ibid. p. 393.

[10] In a 1941 special issue of the New Criticism journal, *The Southern Review*, Howard Baker argues that 'Sailing to Byzantium' is about the aestheticization of the world ['Domes of Byzantium', The Southern Review 7.3 (Winter 1941): 639-52.]; R.P. Blackmur urges readers to censor out the silly magic in Yeats and get to the real matter of the poems on the page ['Between Myth and Philosophy: Fragments and Yeats', 407-25]; Allen Tate asks them to 'censure [Yeats] for possessing "attitudes" and "beliefs" which we do not share' ['Yeats' Romanticism: Notes and Suggestions', 591-600].

[11] 'Yeats: Master of Diction', 1940 review reproduced in *Yeats: Last Poems – A Casebook*, ed. John Stallworthy (London: Macmillan, 1968), 47-49.

the sudden look of some dead master
Whom I had known, forgotten, half recalled
Both one and many; in the brown baked features
The eyes of a familiar compound ghost
Both intimate and unidentifiable.
So I assumed a double part, and cried
And heard another's voice cry: 'What! are you here?'[12]

The double part being played and the cycle of knowing, forgetting and half-recall are symptomatic not only of the plural roles over long and war-traumatized times the dream poem asks its characters to play (Yeats as himself and Virgil and all precursors; Eliot as himself and Dante and all descendants) but also the purgatorial double wartime of the Second World War, the double movement of gyre-like history and its recurrences, and the interplay of repeated acts of violence. The double part here mimics Yeats's, suspended between two war times as ghost of the interwar, "'spirit unappeased and peregrine / Between two worlds become much like each other'". 'Unappeased' is a strange and vivid choice given its association with appeasement of Nazi Germany before the war. Eliot takes that political meaning and ghosts it away, and joins forces with the New Critics in this depoliticization, leaving us with the much more powerful vision of Yeats as presiding ghost and creative intelligence, as a Death figure at the threshold between the worlds of life and afterlife. What is unappeased is as insubstantial yet powerfully supernatural as the wind-spirit Sidhe of Yeats's 1896 poem, 'The Unappeasable Host', conjured and conjuring presence from another world.

The Irish responses to Yeats's death are as polarised as Auden and Eliot's responses,. They depend on the allegiance and the history of friendships and political journeys through the wartorn history of Ireland post-Rising, turning on Yeats's espousal of Ascendancy culture as central to the story of independence. The orthodox Catholic view is severe. As J.J. Hogan puts it in an obituary review in the Jesuit journal *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Yeats is:

> specially the poet of the Anglo-Irish. But he has lived in Ireland and taken part in every Irish cause and quarrel for nearly forty years. He has fallen in with nationalist movements, and has fallen out with them and lashed them from the Anglo-Irish, the planter's, side.[13]

'Yeats's politics', he goes on, 'are so simple as to be almost negative'.[14] There is a recognition of the importance of war as a trigger for change in Yeats, but here understood as the Irish wars from the Rising through the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War; expressed in these patronising terms: "War, and the Irish war, and their consequences, and the shortening of his years, wrought the

[12] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1974), 204.

[13] J. J. Hogan, 'W.B. Yeats', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 28, No. 109 (Mar., 1939), 35-48 (p. 41).

[14] Ibid. p. 42.

change. He was brought to question and doubt his simple reading of life; to face the problems of Good and Evil, of heaven and hell'.[15] Most intriguing of all, Hogan argues that Yeats may have been right to fear the influence of his poems, historically, which brings us back to the strange figure of Yeats as a harbinger of heroic death:

> Quite early, he shows himself excited by the thought of revolution in *The Old Pensioner* –
>
> Lads are making pikes again
>
> For some conspiracy.
>
> The play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* might be called the culmination of the Gaelic patriotic *aisling*. *September 1913*, his poem on John O'Leary's death, a rebuke to calculating moderation, was also a thrilling call to the bloodshed that was in store –
>
> Was it for this the wild geese spread
>
> The grey wing upon every tide …?
>
> It leads to *Easter 1916*, *A terrible beauty is born* – leads to it as one poem leads to another, and perhaps actually led many men to their death. Poetry such as that of *The Nation* makes men demonstrate, but because of poems like those, or *The Dreaming of the Bones*, men will die. Yeats himself wondered much, in these last years, how much of our history was his doing.[16]

Hogan wishes the late politics away, the better to concentrate on the haunting figure of Yeats as a poet at the radical threshold between life and death. That sense of Yeats's influence over the deaths of Irish men in the Easter Rising and as a figure at the threshold is articulated as another way of downplaying the Yeats of the 1920s and 1930s who identified with the Anglo-Irish class.

Nationalist and republican responses were harsher still. Aodh de Blacam, in a poisonous reminiscence, 'Yeats as I knew him', in *The Irish Monthly* in March 1939 writes: 'how great a man he would have been, how great a poet, if he had been constant to the dream of his youth and to the fire that was kindled in him again by the deeds of the men of Easter Week'.[17] The anger with Yeats's Ascendancy values continued in Blacam's review of Hone's biography in 1943: 'So, when Yeats talked of Two Irelands, he was pleading for the continuance of an alien ascendancy that never struck roots. All this was inconsistent with his own better genius, his true love of Ireland'.[18]

But it is Louis MacNeice's 1941 study , *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats,* that stands as the most eloquent defence and judgement of the Irish Yeats; from as non-partisan point of view as was possible at that time, the book is written as a wartime response to his life's work from a poet-critic whose own identity as an Ulster Protestant merges with a poet's vision of the presiding genius of Irish

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[15] Ibid. p. 43.

[16] Ibid. pp. 42-3.

[17] Aodh de Blacam, 'Yeats as I knew him', *The Irish Monthly* Vol. 67, No. 789 (Mar., 1939), 204-212 (p. 211).

[18] 'Yeats Reconsidered', *The Irish Monthly*, Vol. 71, No. 839 (May, 1943), 209-217 (p. 216).

poetry. It is also as a member of the Auden group that he is most valuable in his contesting of Auden's powerfully normative view of Yeats's poetry:

> [Auden says] the case for the prosecution [in 'The Public v. Mr W.B. Yeats'] rests on the fallacy that art ever makes things happen. […] It is an historical fact that art *can* make things happen and Auden in his reaction from a rigid Marxism seems in this article to have been straying in towards the Ivory Tower. Yeats did not write primarily in order to influence men's actions but he knew that art can alter a man's outlook and so indirectly his actions. He also recognized that art can, sometimes intentionally, more often perhaps unintentionally, precipitate violence.[19]

The book, too, is a powerful reading of Yeats's attention to warfare and violence from the Easter Rising on. Yeats, MacNeice writes, was 'caught in two minds' about the rebels: 'The rebels were in the tradition of Wolfe Tone – a tradition whose decline he had deplored – but he could not be sure that their sacrifice was necessary'.[20] That state of being caught in two minds chimes with Eliot's vision of Yeats as peregrine spirit between two worlds, and MacNeice saw, too, how war was a trigger for the creative two-mindedness: '[Yeats] repeatedly recognizes the creativeness of violence (see *Blood and the Moon*)'[21] 'Also,' MacNeice later states, 'In *Blood and the Moon* he blesses "the bloody, arrogant power" of men of action and envies the shedders of blood'.[22] For MacNeice, Yeats identified violence with Maud Gonne and her impatience with the Celtic Twilight:

> I suspect that he had an unconscious revenge in throwing the twilight on her in his love poems. In his 'white woman with numberless dreams' it is a little difficult to recognize the notorious agitator who had thought Parnell 'had failed when he repudiated violence' and who plotted with a Belgian to blow up British troops during the Boer War. (MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, p. 82)

Gonne's political violence is identified, too, with the rise of fascism as a cult of violence: MacNeice reads 'The Second Coming' as about the advent of fascism, the 'blood-dimmed tide' representing 'that upsurge of instinctive violence' associated with fascist mob-mania'. The relish in the lines about this advent in the poem is 'attributable to the fact that Yeats had a budding fascist inside himself'.[23]

But at the same time, just as Yeats was caught in two minds by the Easter Rising, so too are the late poems caught in two minds about political violence, for MacNeice, despite the relish and temptation. MacNeice returns again and again to Yeats on death as a double matter, not as an end to

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[19] Louis MacNeice, *The Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London: Faber & Faber, 1941), p. 225.

[20] Ibid. p. 42.

[21] Ibid. p. 43.

[22] Ibid. p. 143.

[23] Ibid. p. 132.

life but as an intersection with a timeless and constructed joy or zest for life, a threshold event that MacNeice compares to Rilke, whom he quotes: "'Only from the side of death (when death is not accepted as extinction, but imagined as an altogether surpassing intensity), only from the side of death, I believe, is it possible to do justice to love'".[24] This Rilkean sense of the loving, joyful and timeless threshold-experience is very close to Yeats's celebration of the liminal state, a death drive poetics.[25]

For MacNeice, Yeats' legacy is to have created a plain style capable of merging contemporary and mythological subjects in idioms tried and tested by an imagination that has been through the wars; and that Yeats as a persona and as a various-sided set of voices and attitudes, spoke to his generation's obsession with and fear of violent death as destruction of being as the Second World War loomed and broke upon the world.

The Moment of Death:

'Cast a cold eye / On life, on death'

The reception of Yeats's poetry shows a dynamic of contestation of its political premises due in no small measure to the outbreak of the Second World War, and it is characterised by efforts either to depoliticize the work, or to challenge its belief systems. At the same time, the poets, led by Eliot, Auden and MacNeice, attempted to redeem Yeats's reputation by affirming the aesthetic power of the plain style of the late period (Auden), to identify the iconic force of Yeats's representation of the threshold between life and death (Eliot and MacNeice) and to reaffirm the importance of the work as a means of capturing war experience and violence at revolutionary moments of international crisis. Yeats's haunting poems about old age and limit experiences at the brink of death stand as icons for the mid-century imaginary: he speaks *as* death to the wartime generation, as a harbinger of a potentially redemptive idea of death despite war's violence. *Last Poems and Plays* returns again and again in different guises to the figure of the 'wild old man in the light' ('The Wild Old Wicked Man', *Poems*, 32), the frenzy of the 'old man's eagle mind' ('An Acre of Grass', *Poems*, 17), Browning's 'old hunter talking with gods' ('Are You Content?'),[26] the grandfather singing under the gallows of the third marching song (*Poems*, 65), Crazy Jane, old Cuchulain. The figure of the old seer and sage as beggarman, mad lustful dancer, prophet at the edge of reason, here in this world and yet not, an absent presence: this is the figure of Yeats himself, his elderly identity parsed and dramatized into a spectrum of roles and routines. The figure stands as a prophetic ghost at the edge of wartime culture, like a guardian spirit or charm against war's destruction. It is this liminal Yeats at the old ghost's threshold that bewitched his generation, and many Irish writers after; the Yeats of 'The Tower', the

[24] Ibid. p. 185.

[25] MacNeice may have been aware that the Ben Bulben epitaph was provoked by Yeats's reading of essays on Rilke's views on death (Albright, *Poems*, note, p. 814).

[26] Browning's hunter represents his childhood self identifying with the heroes found in his father's books in *Pauline*. Albright note, pp. 802-3.

figure who has passed through the 'wreck of body, / Slow decay of blood, / Testy delirium / Or dull decrepitude', the death of friends and lovers, till all of these:

> Seem but the clouds of the sky
> When the horizon fades;
> Or a bird's sleepy cry
> Among the deepening shades.[27]

The verse has a quite beautiful rhythm to it, with the first of the three stresses of three of these lines light as a catch in the breath, not a dying fall: a dying rise:[28] 'Seem but the **clouds** of the **sky**./ When the ho**riz**on **fades** / […] / Among the **deep**ening **shades**'. The three to two shape of this chimes with the way the rhymes (two) are supplemented by a third internal rhyme word or half-rhyme (three), so 'sky'-'cry' has 'horizon' and 'fades'-'shades' picks up 'bird's'. The lines have a triplet internal rhyme audible across their surface: 'seem' in the first quoted, 'sleepy'-'deepening' in the third and fourth, splitting one / two in terms of distribution; whilst lengthening syllable by syllable from one to two to three, so bringing to the ear the two / three play. The sense of the lines, that it is the sheer length of time spent at scholarly or writerly work that will eventually enable the poet to pass through decrepitude and the deaths of others, vanishes in the last lines as time itself becomes evanescent, the present moment just a vanishing of cloud and bird cry as night falls.

The two / three play is there semantically, clouds + sky then horizon; bird + cry then shades: and gives us a metaphysical code for what is happening at another level: the poet's 'I' and his soul are at work ('Now shall I make my soul, / Compelling it to study') as a double act that engenders a third bodiless energy, the body become cloud-like, or become pure voice, a cry as the soul enters into the company of the dead (the secondary meaning of 'Among the deepening shades'). The relation of body and soul becomes a third thing, the voice at the threshold, just as the relationship of lyric, the I-voice speaking whilst the reader overhears, engenders a third force, the words on the page as textual afterlife, the threshold he survives in, beyond cry, body, grave,

Yeats returns to this theme in *Last Poems* with 'Long-Legged Fly', and associates the voice at the threshold with the man of action suddenly stilled:

> Our master Caesar is in the tent
> Where the maps are spread.
> His eyes fixed upon nothing,
> A hand under his head.
> *Like a long-legged fly upon the stream*
> *His mind moves upon silence.* (65)

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[27] 'The Tower', *Poems*, p. 245. Beckett bases a late play on this poem, …*but the clouds*.

[28] Hinted at lightly through the stressed element in 'horizon'.

The image captures the man of action as he contemplates nothing, a Nirvana deathlike state of being: the eyes are fixed on nothing, and yet the Coleridge allusion of the fly on the stream, *Biographia Literaria*'s image of the water-insect and its 'cinque-spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of the brook', assumes that the image is an emblem of 'the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking'.[29] The hand under the head summons Rodin's thinker. The nothing, with this self-experience in mind, is the shadow fringed with colour on the sunny bottom of the brook: Caesar is fixed in radical thinking upon his own shadow, the death shadow, just as the poem on the page reads as a text moving upon the silence of post-mortem ontology. Caesar in his tent summons up memories of Brutus seeing the ghost of Caesar in his tent in the fourth act of *Julius Caesar*; the scene itself recalling the second act and Brutus steeling himself to the murder of Caesar: 'Between the acting of a dreadful thing / And the first motion, all the interim is / Like a phantasma or a hideous dream' (*Julius Caesar* 2.1, ll. 63-65). Caesar in his tent in Yeats's poem is haunted by the future, becoming like his murderer when spooked by his ghost, and like his murderer too in being stuck in the dreadful interim, caught in two worlds, two minds. Note how in Yeats's lines 'Nothing' stands alone in no rhyming relationship to other line endings, emphasized by the acoustics of 'tent'-'spread'-'head'. It connects to nothing, it seems; except that it does begin to move into relation with the word '*silence*' because of the shared 'upon' – Caesar's eyes are fixed *upon* nothing whilst the mind moves *upon* silence. Silence and nothingness, during this fixity and stilled moment, this phantasmatic interim, signals death: not death as fixity and stillness, but as a lonely movement above or upon the nothingness and silence of non-existence and endless death. Brutus's acting and motion in this allusive revision are not a before and after, but a during, the moving of the mind in the interim, an idea that blossoms into being with the quite extraordinary way 'moves' expands when one reads the lines ('*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream / His mind* ***moves*** *upon silence*') – chiming with the moments in the other stanzas of the poem: Helen dancing a tinker's shuffle in the street, whilst the narrator asks us to 'Move most gently if move you must / In this lonely place'; Michelangelo with his hand that 'moves to and fro'. This lonely place is the zone of the death drive at the limit of war's violence, an active creative zone of the mind moving between endless surviving and ever-ending dying, the lonely place of the poem on the page by the poet who has died.[30]

The movement and cry at this threshold is staged in *The Death of Cuchulain* when Emer dances round the head of the warrior (the stage staging six heads of the warriors who wounded Cuchulain, set in a row at the backcloth as parallelograms):

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[29] The allusion first noted by W.E. Rogers in his 1975 *Concerning Poetry*, cf. footnote 9, Albright edition, p. 831. Alan Gilis notes the allusion in his chapter 'Yeats in the 1930s'. See Alan Gillis for a fine discussion of 'Long-Legged Fly' in terms of its ballad and folk energies, its zoom effects and their relationship to what Gillis calls 'the boundlessness of lyric's domain'.

[30] The emphasis on the death drive ambivalence in the man of action could be seen as part of the revision of Spenglerian and Fascist Caesarism that Lauren Arrington tracks in her 'Yeats in Fascist Italy' chapter in this volume.

> *She so **moves** that she seems to rage against the heads of those that had wounded CUCHULAIN, perhaps makes **movements** as though to strike them, going three times round the circle of the heads. She then **moves** towards the head of CUCHULAIN; it may, if need be, be raised above the other on a pedestal. She **moves** as if in adoration or triumph. She is about to prostrate herself before it, perhaps does so, then rises, looking up as if listening; she seems to hesitate between the head and what she hears. then she stands **motionless**. There is silence and in the silence a few faint bird notes.* (124-5; italics in original, bold my emphasis)

As in 'The Tower' and 'The Long-Legged Fly', this is the lonely place where the dead listen and sing as a bird cries in the silence. Emer's dance is the movement of the mind at threshold, a movement that is double, caught in two minds as in a hesitation or interim ('[hesitating] between the head and what she hears'). Emer moves as a violent act, as an act of aggression (her raging against the heads, as though to strike them). She also moves towards the lost other, driven by elegiac love, easily confused as the triumph of the victor. But that movement is interrupted and turns into a listening, attending to the lonely space as sounding place for the repeated notes of the creatures of that realm – these movements are both ambiguous, caught between two drives, love and death, and compulsively iterative, as with the three times she moves round the circle. The dance triggers an abstracting of the space, so the six warriors and Cuchulain's head become parallelograms, quadrilaterals that surround the two figures of Cuchulain and Emer. Cuchulain's head is also spiritualised into a parallelogram (a daring comic manoeuvre on Yeats's part, deliberately risking ridicule), inviting us to see Emer as making four moves, the three moves round the circle, then the move to Cuchulain. Repetition is core to the double drive structuring the dance but also the *mise en scène*.

Yeats may be thinking here of Freud's theory of the death drive as set out in the 1920 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – as featuring a fusion of erotic and thanatological elements, as in masochistic and sadistic feelings; as characterised by the compulsion to repeat; as dominant in cultures that have suffered the violent losses of war; as made up of libidinal desires that conflate destructiveness as release, as in a warrior's zest for killing or the calm stoicism of a MacDonagh before execution (' I am ready to die and I thank God that I die in such a holy cause'), and also a dreaming of death as immortality, as in Zizek's précis of Lacan's definition of the death drive:

> The Freudian death drive has nothing whatsoever to do with the craving for self-annihilation, for the return to the inorganic absence of any life-tension; it is, on the contrary, the very opposite of dying – a name for the 'undead' eternal life itself, for the horrible fate of being caught in the endless repetitive cycle of wandering around in guilt and pain. The paradox of the Freudian 'death drive' is therefore that it is Freud's name for its very opposite, for the way immortality appears within psychoanalysis, for an uncanny excess of life, for an 'undead' urge which persists beyond the (biological) cycle of life and death.[31]

[31] Slavoj Zizeck, *The Parallax View* (London: MIT Press, 2006), p. 61.

We can see in Yeats's figure of the threshold poet – the undead head of Cuchulain, the wild old men or Crazy Janes at the frontier of life and death, caught up in a dance of patterns, as with the sound repetitions analysed earlier, or in the abstract shapes formed by Emer's dance – the lineaments of the death drive as uncanny excess, a fusion of destructiveness and immortality. That immortality is an endlessness of play of the warring mind's movements at the threshold, at the limit of war's violence: and the threshold, for Yeats, is the constructed afterlife and textual space where art listens, sings, shapes, patterns, repeats and acts.

Addressing the Dead:
'Cast a cold eye / On life, on death. / Horseman, pass by!'

Yeats's epitaph took a while to be realised: the war intervened and kept the body locked in a coffin in France and moved from cemetery to ossuary in 1944; the family had to wait beyond the end of the war for Yeats's body to be transported to its rest in Drumcliffe cemetery (Foster, 657-7). It is perhaps unfitting to imagine his body unappeased and peregrine in France waiting for return home beneath the gravestone.[32] It is a little uncanny if we read poems from the last collection as taking on other significances, as though addressed to the future war dead he would be accompanied by as the years rolled on between 1939 and 1948. The epitaph itself can be read as addressed to all those who read the poem, or who visit the graveside, as textual and engraven lines set up deliberately to accompany each other – we read the poem knowing the lines exist as stone epitaph; and we read the epitaph knowing it is the ending of 'Under Ben Bulben'. But its syntax insists, in fact, that Yeats is addressing the dead, the horseman being one of the ghost warriors the family servant Mary Battle saw in the childhood home coming out of the mountains.[33] It may also be a tank commander come home from the Second World War that Yeats knew would break out, one of 'the skilful, riding their machines as did the feudal knights their armoured horses' of *On the Boiler*. The horsemen stand too for the future horde, the forerunner of whom is Yeats as prophet, triggering the next phase of history. But they also represent the ghosts of the heroes of 1916: this is the sense of the repeated refrain '*From mountain to mountain ride the fierce horsemen*' of the 'Three Songs to the One Burden' – the roaring tinker, the reclusive Henry Middleton, and the Abbey player Connolly first to be shot in the Easter Rising, . So the epitaph is addressed to a liminal figure representing the dead of the past, of the Rising, but also the dead of the future, the horde sensed in the mountains around the lonely

[32] There was considerable controversy surrounding the return of Yeats's body to Ireland, and even speculation that the bones returned were not Yeats's at all (MacNeice's view). This has some basis in fact – see the story in *The Irish Times*, 'WB Yeats: Papers confirm bones sent to Sligo were not poet's', August 13, 2020: https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/wb-yeats-papers-confirm-bones-sent-to-sligo-were-not-poet-s-1.2288662

[33] T.R. Henn has a good account of the allusive network of references the horsemen have, including the myth of Dhoya, the Fomorian giant and his horses, Rosicrucian legend of the dead leader, etc. 'Horseman, Pass By!', Yeats: Last Poems*: A Casebook*, ed Jon Stallworthy (Macmillan, 1968), 115-21.

place of the act of threshold witness. Patrick Pearse invoked Cuchulain at the Post Office, and that entanglement of 'warriors' is remembered by the Singer at the very end of *Last Poems and Plays*:

> What stood in the Post Office
> With Pearse and Connolly?
> What comes out of the mountain
> Where men first shed their blood,
> Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
> He stood where they had stood? (126)

This mythologizing of the rebellion takes shape from the Oliver Shepherd statue that figured the Easter Rising dead as the wounded Cuchulain;[34] and also Pearse's own sense of his mission (influenced by Yeats and Standish O'Grady) as reviving the 'hero-spirit' of 'Fearghus, Conchubar, Cuchulain, Fion, Oisin, Oscar'.[35] Here the death drive honours the Easter Rising dead in the form of repetition of rhetorical questions: 'What stood…' – 'What comes out…' – 'Who thought…' (recalling Eliot's 'Who is the third who walks always beside you?'),[36] here curiously emphasised by the six capital Ws that open these lines, accompanied closely by the hs – What With What Where Who.[37] The aspirated 'wh-' of Irish English chimes with the 'ch' of Cuchulain, as though the hero-spirit is also a breath-spirit inspiring and exhaling the lines. The rhetorical question becomes a rhetorical accent, a special stress along the words signalling repetition as shaping movement, as war dead hero-spirit, as acoustic hauntedness. The feelings being tracked in the lines acknowledge the eerie Gothic sensationalism involved: the 'Who' is first a 'What', a Thing that first stands with Pearse and Connolly, then where they had stood, as though a memory-image once they have passed on, a moment ago, or as an icon or statue marking those who have passed away across the threshold (partly the Shepherd statue, which is itself comprised of Cuchulain tied to the standing stone which is his own monument). The lines shelter obliquities and mysteries nevertheless: for the 'What' which resolves into the 'Who' that is Cuchulain is in the interim a potential they: 'What comes out of the mountain / Where men first shed their blood'. They figure Mary Battle's Queen Maeve and the Sidhe, firstly.[38] They then

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[34] 'Dying Cuchulain' created in 1911, installed in the GPO in Dublin to commemorate the Easter Rising dead at de Valera's request in 1935.

[35] Qu. Reg Skene**,** *The Cuchulain Plays of W.B. Yeats: A Study* (Macmillan 1974), p. 19.

[36] T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber & Faber, 1974), p. 77.

[37] It is of interest that in the drafts for these lines, Yeats is clearly working to preserve a wh- opening. For the 'Where men first shed their blood' line, we have 'Who [=when? where?]' before the choice of 'where' [Phillip L. Marcus, "'Remembered Tragedies": The Evolution of the Lyric in Yeats's *The Death of Cuchulain', Irish University Review*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Autumn, 1976), 190-202 (p. 195)]

[38] The second-sighted servant of Yeats's uncle George Pollexfen had visions of the Sidhe, the faery spirits associated with the neolithic burial mounds and mountains. Yeats tells the story of her

figure the heroes of Easter 1916; in the drafts for these lines, Yeats had first written: 'He seemed to have come down his mountain /To stand where they stood /To stand in the post office /Where they must shed their blood'.[39] 'What comes out of the mountain / Where men first shed their blood' fuses Cuchulain and Ben Bulben with Pearse/Connolly and the Post Office; and then mythologizes them as a standing stone severed head in a stone circle of other severed heads, perhaps linking the Sidhe story to Com Cruach and the sacrificial rites associated with the Killycluggin Stone in County Cavan (itself a stylized form of severed head).[40] This puts a different reflection on the stone motif of 'Easter, 1916': 'The stone's in the midst of all', and 'Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart' (229). In *The Death of Cuchulain*, the parallelograms also figure as head-stones, and Cuchulain's head is 'about to sing' in the moments before he is decapitated. The singer we hear in the last section at the Irish fair, figuring contemporary poetry and drama that is both song and speech, both myth-making and of this world, is the singing head of Cuchulain, man of war singing of the dead, singing as the collective. In temporal terms, then, the dead horsemen of the Sidhe are the ancient Irish of the mounds, the heroes of Irish independence, and the future war dead of the next historic phase. The mountain where men shed their blood may be taken to be war itself.

Returning to 'Under Ben Bulben', the Sidhe appear in the second strophe of the first section as 'That pale, long-visaged company' (89). The 'gist of what they mean' is then itemized: in the second section we are told they mean every man and woman who dies is resuscitated, so the Sidhe signify all mortals in cycles of reincarnation. In the third section, they mean the war dead, specifically those who die and experience the weird calm interim: 'For an instant stands at ease', a fine use of the military command at drill. The man of war is transformed, 'his heart at peace' (90). The fourth section articulates another meaning of the Sidhe: the artists who attempt to give shape and form to paradise, a peaceful afterlife 'where a soul's at ease' (91). The fifth section identifies the Sidhe as national poets, singing the Irish as ideally a fusion of peasant and aristocracy, but more clearly signifying a species continuity across seven centuries, binding the people together across time and space. Finally, the Sidhe resolves down to one man, Yeats the poet laid to rest in Drumcliff, lying among his people, at peace after a lifetime of many wars, including the Second World War where he lay, in France, and among the crowd of voices of love and loathing, elegiac and judgemental, guarded by the contentious spirits of Eliot, Auden, MacNeice. The horseman once the 'gist of what [horsemen] mean' has been articulated – the ancient peoples of prehistory, the human species moving through reincarnation cycles, the war dead, the artists of the afterlife, the poets of the Irish people, the dead Yeats among his poet-critics – signifies as the collective singer of Cuchulain's keening song beyond the wars of history, beyond the cycles of life and death that shape the death drive as cold destruction, and into

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encounter with Queen Maeve, their Faerie Queen, in his memoir, *Autobiographies, The Collected Works of W.B. Yeats*, eds. W. Donnell & D.N. Archibald, vol. III (New York: Scribnder, 1999), p. 212.

[39] Ibid., p. 194.

[40] 'Black out; Heaven blazing into the head' ('Lapis Lazuli', 4). Yeats is laid to rest under 'bare Ben Bulben's head' (92).

the lonely space of the interim where the endlessness of the death drive as immortality and textual survival can be dreamt as peace.