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W.B. Yeats: A Poet in a Destitute Time

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Abstract:

In the elegy titled “Bread and Wine,” Friedrich Hölderlin asks, “and what are poets for in a destitute time?” Drawing on the theories of Martin Heidegger, who addresses this very question in his essay “What are Poets For?”, I argue that the modernist poetry of William Butler Yeats offers an answer, as well as a demonstration. Through an analysis of “The Second Coming” (1919), “Sailing to Byzantium” (1926), and “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” (1939) in the order of their publication, I reveal that as Yeats’ poetic career developed and transformed, so too did his understanding of, and relationship to, his role, his world, and his work. In this way, the poet’s subjective journey through his psyche and its products parallels or mirrors the universal experience of those who turn to poems in destitute times for truths, solutions, and distractions. Overall, though poets may craft poetry to unconceal, mend, avoid, and embellish the world around them, the poetry of W.B. Yeats reveals that poets ultimately have a responsibility to themselves, their society, fellow citizens, and to poetry itself, to help humankind endure and cope with the experience of modernity by paradoxically facilitating a deeper descent into its abysmal darkness and enigmatic despondency.

Keywords:

Heidegger and Poetry; Role of Poetry; Poetry in Modernity; Yeats and Modernism; What are Poets For

W.B. Yeats: A Poet in a Destitute Time

In the elegy titled “Bread and Wine,” Friedrich Hölderlin asks, “and what are poets for in a destitute time?” As Martin Heidegger explains in his essay that takes the question of “What Are Poets For?” as its title, “The word ‘time’ here means the era to which we ourselves still belong. For Hölderlin’s historical experience, the appearance and sacrificial death of Christ mark the beginning of the end of the day of the gods. Night is falling” (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 89). In other words, the modern period is characterized by godlessness and desolation. As Albert Hofstadter writes in the introduction to Heidegger’s *Poetry, Language, Thought* (1971), poetry consequently takes on “an indispensable function for human life” in this era: “it is the creative source of the humanness of the dwelling life of man. Without the poetic element in our own being, and without our poets and their great poetry, we would be brutes, or what is worse and what we are most like today: vicious automata of self-will” (*Poetry* xv). Therefore, the modern poet has an enormous and crucial responsibility to his or her society, and to the individuals that inhabit it. William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) is largely considered to be one such poet whose voice and oeuvre is integral to the landscape of modern poetry (Longley x). However, as Daniel Albright explains, Yeats’s place in Modernism is paradoxically defined by his unwillingness to accept that place, and his resistance to modernity more generally: “The more fervently Yeats tries to disencumber himself of the modern world, the more deeply the modern world imprints itself upon his work” (Albright 68). At the same time that Yeats criticises and condemns modernity, his poems—specifically, “The Second Coming” (1919), “Sailing to Byzantium” (1926), and “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” (1939)—demonstrate, as well as outline, the ways in which poetry can be called upon to describe, bind together the fragments of, and ultimately make bearable the condition and experience of the modern world at both the level of society and

the individual, all in accordance with Heidegger's theories on the role of poetry and poets in modernity.

Before poetry—which Heidegger views as “the saying of truth, the saying of the unconcealedness of beings” (*Poetry* x)—can be employed to help the world contend with the darkness and nihilism of the modern period, the existence and nature of that darkness must first be brought to light. In “The Second Coming,” Yeats uses poetry to construct an apocalyptic portrait of his present age, and to present a prophetic vision of the world to come. The first stanza illustrates a world of disorientation, disorder, devastation, and disconnection:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world[.] (line 1-4)

The shadowy wasteland of Yeats's poem possesses what Heidegger refers to as the “destitute character” of the modern world (*Poetry* 91). Yeats's use of punctuation throughout the poem, such as infrequent commas and significant instances of caesuras (line 3, 13), in addition to the mixing of harsh consonance with mournful assonance (as exemplified in the above quotation), causes disjunction or fragmentation within and between the words, lines, and ideas that mimics or conveys the chaotic experience of modernity. In the world Yeats presents, religious rites like baptism are rendered perverse and parodic (line 4-6), and like the falcon, the people no longer answer to a higher power or moral authority: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity” (line 7-8). As previously mentioned, the defining feature of modernity for Heidegger is the absence of God, or gods more generally (*Poetry* 89), and despite its spiritual imagery and religious lexical field, “The Second Coming” foregrounds this lack. The

narrator proclaims (however uncertainly, due to the use of anaphora) that “Surely” these conditions are a sign that “some revelation is at hand; / *Surely* the Second Coming is at hand” (line 9-10; emphasis mine). However, the “vast image” that emerges out of the world spirit proves to be more riddle than revelation. Similar to Heidegger who felt that “[t]he turning of the age does not take place by some new god, or the old one renewed, bursting into the world from ambush at some time or other” (*Poetry* 90), Yeats imagines the new era being ushered in by something distinctly unholy: a sphinx (line 14), which is presented through the poem’s title and allusions to the birth of Christ (line 20-22) as some sort of demon (line 21), omen of cataclysm, or Antichrist (Albright 73). Due to the absence of divinity in the modern world, Heidegger explains that “there fails to appear for the world the ground that grounds it... [and] [t]he ground for which the ground fails to come, hangs in the abyss” (*Poetry* 90). Yeats’s sphinx—its “gaze blank and pitiless as the sun” (line 15); an incarnation of enigma, mystery, secrecy, fundamental unknowability, and concealed Truth—can be perceived as an embodiment of this abyss, and therefore, as the poem’s emblem for modernity. If, for Heidegger, poetry is “What is spoken purely” (*Poetry* xiii), the sphinx, and modernity by extension, represents poetry’s precise opposite. As Longley notes, “Yeats tends to see ‘modern’ and ‘poetry’ as oxymoronic” (Longley x). Therefore an analysis of the imagery in “The Second Coming” foregrounds the paradoxical task of poetry and poets in the modern age, which is to capture in words, and thereby reveal or *unconceal* the essence or spirit of a period that, by definition, resists comprehensive representation and understanding.

The conflict or tension between poetry and modernity established in “The Second Coming” is likewise foregrounded in “Sailing to Byzantium,” particularly in the first stanza where Yeats presents poetry and the role of the poet as largely underappreciated, disregarded, or

overlooked by the people of the modern age. Ultimately, however, the poem identifies poetry as an important underlying force capable of, and necessary for, establishing a sense of connection or continuity between the chaotic present and the past from which it seems to be detached—regardless of whether society and its people appreciate or choose to acknowledge this function. Yeats begins by describing the modern world as “no country for old men” (line 1). Rather, it is a utopic place for those youths who—as representatives of all those who are wholly *of* the modern period—blissfully “neglect / Monuments of unageing intellect” like poems (line 7-8). This metaphor establishes poetry as something that exists and endures outside of Time, or as Heidegger writes, as a “once-present” and therefore always present “being” (*Poetry* 139). The fact that poetry exists apart from “Whatever is begotten, born, and dies” (line 6) is immediately juxtaposed with an image of the mortal poet who is confined by his body, bound to Time, and consequently reduced to another “aged man” (line 9-12) or “dying animal” (line 22) among many. After observing the indifference that displaces both poetry and the poet in the modern world, the speaker imaginatively departs on a journey to “the holy city of Byzantium” (line 15-16). In this ancient world embedded in an idealized past, the speaker hopes or intends to assume the role of an ornate golden bird. Significantly, he does not wish to become the goldsmith (line 27), which indicates his desire to position himself outside of Time as a work of art rather than a producer of it. In summary of Heidegger’s views, Hofstadter writes: “In such a dark and deprived time, it is the task of the poet to help us see once more the bright possibility of a true world. That is what poets are for, now. But it means that, as poets, they must free themselves completely from bondage to the time’s idols” (*Poetry* xv). As the metal bird, the poet is able to fully embody or adopt the role of poetry, which is to “keep [the] drowsy Emperor awake” to the truths about his empire, and to “set upon a golden bough to sing / ... / Of what is past, or passing,

or to come” (line 30-33). The presence of birdsong in both the first and fourth stanzas (line 2-3; 30), as well as the parallel constructions of the poem’s sixth verse and final line, links the ending of the poem with its beginning, and attaches modernity to a history and tradition. This ultimately illustrates the way in which poetry, according to the poem itself, is capable of unifying past, present, and future in an attempt to ground, tether, or stabilize the modern age, and the individual’s experience of it as both a product and producer of the disorder.

Heidegger writes that “[i]n the age of the world’s night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured” (*Poetry* 90). In “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” Yeats presents two conflicting ways that poetry can be used to help one manage or face life in the modern world. First, he figures the products of his poetic career as the circus animals of the poem’s title (line 6), and implies that poetry can be a tool for entertaining and distracting the masses, as well as the poet himself, from their destitute lives and surroundings. However, by the end of the poem, the speaker acknowledges that using poetry as a diversion, or an embellishment on the surface of reality to conceal the void underneath, is more a strategy of avoidance than a form of coping. Therefore, the act of desertion referenced in the poem’s title can apply to the way in which the poet is essentially left abandoned or unfulfilled by his life’s work, as well as to his realization that he must discard and reinvent his current approach and relationship to his medium of choice. As Heidegger explains, in order to sustain or endure life in the abyss, “it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss” (*Poetry* 90). As Albright explains, for much of his career, Yeats resisted doing just that. He aimed to distance himself from the “sloppiness” and “flatness” of the Modernists (Albright 63) by prioritizing metaphor and symbol, and turning to myth, folklore, fairy tale, and romanticism. These features of Yeats’s poetry highlighted in the second section of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” therefore serve as examples of how “Yeats’s poetic

lexicon always favours the ‘ancient’ or ‘old’ over the ‘modern’” (Longley x), and of “Yeats fight[ing] Modernism as hard as he can” (Albright 75). Albright writes: “Of course, if Modernism is defined as the art of fugitive urban junk... Yeats is the least Modernist of poets” (65). However, in the final stanza of “The Circus Animals’ Desertion,” the poet expresses a desire or a need to finally explore the foundation or source of “Those masterful images.../ [Grown] in pure mind” (line 33-34). By refusing to engage with the subject matter of Modernism, Yeats essentially locks himself into the trap of modernity: isolation, alienation, and disconnection from one’s surroundings and peers. This poem is therefore the product of the poet’s realization that in order to survive and resist the conditions of the abyss, he must first acknowledge and accept the abyss as his reality. He “must lie down” in it (line 39), and sort through the unglamorous, unromantic truths that make up its foundation and form the “mound of refuse” (line 35) that collects in the core of the modern individual, just as it piles up in the urban, industrial streets.

When analysed together, “The Second Coming,” “Sailing to Byzantium,” and “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” address and demonstrate the ways in which poetry can be used to unconceal, unify, distract from, and ultimately facilitate deeper investigation into the darkness and despondency of modern times. However, in addition to describing how poetry can help humankind endure and cope with their experience of modernity, which is what Heidegger identifies as the poet’s most important purpose, Yeats foregrounds another possible function of poetry in the modern world. As previously discussed, in “Sailing to Byzantium,” the speaker undergoes a metaphorical metamorphosis from human being to golden bird. By way of this transformation, he sheds his soul’s “mortal dress” (line 9-12) and distances himself from the condition and concerns of the modern world. In the final stanza of “The Circus Animals’

Desertion,” Yeats describes poems as ladders that one can use to climb up and out of his or her “foul rag and bone shop of the heart” (line 40). Overall, Yeats implies that poetry can also be used to facilitate one’s escape from Heidegger’s abyss. However, as Heidegger explains, “poets in a destitute time” do not only have a duty to the world and individuals that inhabit it: They also have a responsibility to poetry itself:

It is a necessary part of the poet’s nature that, before he can be truly a poet in such an age, the time’s destitution must have made the whole being and vocation of the poet a poetic question for him. Hence “poets in a destitute time” must especially gather in poetry the nature of poetry. (Heidegger 92)

Therefore, if poems are essentially formulated from questions and truths generated in the depths of the abyss, then retrieved and revealed by poets, in order to explore the true nature of poetry, and not act contrary to one’s nature as a poet, the poet has no choice but to forgo escape. As “Sailing to Byzantium” and “The Circus Animals’ Desertion” reveal, the paradox of modernity is that escape from it can only occur at the expense of one’s subjectivity, humanity, and identity. Furthermore, escape through poetry ultimately amounts to nothing more than a trick of metaphor, logic, or rhetoric, and finally, as “The Second Coming” suggests, there is no guarantee that the place, time, or state to which one would flee would be any better or brighter than his or her current circumstances and experience.

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