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"All Changed, Changed Utterly: A Terrible Beauty is Born." What Did Easter 1916 Change?

Martin Leer

The centenary of the Easter Rising in Dublin in April 1916 brought out how much our perception of the event is still framed by W. B. Yeats' poem "Easter 1916." Nowhere was this clearer than in the leading Irish historian Roy Foster's highly praised *Vivid Faces: A Biography of the Revolutionary Generation in Ireland 1890-1923* (2014): Foster takes not only his title, but his historical judgement from Yeats' poem. But also more recent revolutionary upheavals have brought the reaction so hauntingly formulated by Yeats' refrain: "Changed/ changed utterly./ A terrible beauty is born". The essay meditates on this response in connection with recent theories of revolution – Foster's liberal scepticism, as well as Immanuel Wallerstein's and David Graeber's politically engaged reinterpretation: that revolutions have been for the past 250 years periodic realignments of political common sense and deep social change. Yeats' poetry, it seems, had already found words for this, partly because of Yeats' theories of permanent cyclical change. But also recent historical revisionist fiction in Ireland, such as Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* and Jamie O'Neill's *At Swim, Two Boys*, have found ways of narrating Easter 1916 in such a way that the events come to reflect social change in areas of class and gender, which had only just begun at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as feminism and a fully elaborated queer view of society.

Key words: Easter Rising, Dublin 1916, W. B. Yeats, theories of revolutionary change, Roy Foster, David Graeber, revisionist histories of Ireland, macho feminism, queering of historical events.

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Can poetry effect change in the world or in our response to it – and if so, how? W. H. Auden is often quoted for proclaiming in his elegy "In Memory of W .B. Yeats" that "poetry makes nothing happen." But in the continuation, even of the same line, Auden goes on to say that poetry

> . . . survives
> In the valley of its saying where executives
> Would never want to tamper; it flows south
> From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
> Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
> A way of happening, a mouth. (197)

Far from ineffectual, then, poetry has become a river carving out a landscape in which people grieve, believe and die – mirrored aurally by the echo effects of those words, which come out of the mouth of this unexpected River Alph. This has come about because, as the elegy for Yeats puts it earlier, "the death of the poet was kept from his poems." Not only did Yeats die on the Côte d'Azur, and not in Ireland. But with death his poems escape to come out of the mouths of other people: "The words of a dead man/ Are modified in the guts of the living," who may not share his emotions, tastes or political views. And yet his words come to our mouth when we try to express our feelings, our reactions to events. It is the words, however, that matter, not concepts or historical contexts, or the beliefs of the poet who first voiced them. "Time," Auden says with a perhaps over-cocky confidence "worships language and forgives/ Everyone by whom it lives."

Yeats was a fitting recipient of this homage by Auden in 1940, despite what Auden would have considered Yeats' often reactionary political views. Yeats had expressed something about the twentieth century's response to revolutionary change and the ravages of a sense of speeded-up time, which echoed also in Auden's reflective, leftist mind (as it still was in 1940). The history of the twentieth and even twenty-first century would surely have been thought about differently, if it had not been for "The Second Coming" or "Easter 1916." "The centre cannot hold" has become an almost unavoidable cliché. "The beast slouching towards Bethlehem to be born" has been identified with most transformative political figures from Hitler to Trump, and since that "terrible beauty" was born, it just won't leave us alone:

> All changed, changed utterly:
> A terrible beauty is born. (Yeats 203)

It is the refrain about change in "Easter 1916" that is the subject of my contribution to this volume about change. I want to trace its afterlife both in a poetically educated response to revolutions, but also in historians', poets' and novelists' accounts of the Easter Rising. Strangely, since Yeats' response to the Rising was so ambivalent, it seems to have remained valid while other explanations of revolutionary change have faded. I do not pretend to be a Yeats scholar, but it may take a fool from outside the demesne of the Tower to notice that we have reached a new stage in writing about Yeats and politics. After the elevation of the poet above politics that was characteristic of "the New Criticism," which had a great investment in Yeats, came a period of ideological critique in the 1970s-90s, where Yeats was unmasked as a reactionary, even a proto-fascist, before Roy Foster's great biography presented copious documentary evidence for a more liberal Yeats. What interests me is not how to categorise the poet's politics, though I see him as immersed both in a well-developed if idiosyncratic ideology and in day-to-day political events. I want to try to understand Yeats' poetic intuitions about the phenomenon of social and political change and what it may hold for an age where abrupt change seems to have become normal again, after the stability of the Cold War and the apparent liberal hegemony from the fall of the Berlin War to 9/11. Change is less and less explicable as the providential effects of the great god Progress.

"All changed, changed utterly:/ A terrible beauty is born." The phrase has come back to haunt us, in all its ambivalence, from the Post Office in what was then Sackville Street (now O'Connell Street), Dublin in April 1916 to Tahrir Square in Cairo and Syntagma Square in Athens, to the demonstrations in Dar'aa in March 2011, which launched the Arab Spring in Syria, the brutal repression by the Assad regime and a Civil War, which seems to be ending with the Assad regime killing or driving out half its own population. It seems to be the great new truth for authoritarian regimes, whether Assads or Sisis or Putins or the economic masters of the EU: do not negotiate, repress, even beyond reason, and you will not create martyrs. But will it last?

When I say "we," I don't just mean sentimental liberal humanists in front of TV screens in countries far from the events, who have too much to lose to become engaged in revolutions, but may be sympathetic to them if we don't have to risk our security. I also mean "hard-headed" revolutionaries (if there are any left) and "realistic" defenders, down to the last bit of gratuitous violence, of the existing order. Because what is at stake here are not revolutions long planned by the Communist International, rogue Trotskyists or radical Islamists, who seize the state appa-

ratus of structural violence and turn it against the former elite. Such revolutions are very rare in history, though the conservative political imagination was long obsessed with them. What is at stake are volatile moments of change, not the kind of change we think we can prepare for: progress or decline in "the course of history," which we may assimilate to science: evolution or the second law of thermodynamics. The line "a terrible beauty is born" would be a cliché without the wonder at the sudden change that brings it into the world when it is least expected.

There is an ambivalence in our response to *the revolutionary sublime*, which we owe to Yeats rather than to the original formulation by Danton of the principle of revolutionary repression: "*Soyons terribles pour éviter au peuple de l'être*" (Let us be terrible to prevent the people from being so; my translation). *La Terreur* in France was a pre-emptive strike by the revolutionary state to avoid even worse by mob rule. There is no Burkean or Kantian aesthetic in Danton's *terreur*, by which he himself would die. It is *Realpolitik* gone wrong.

Not so in Yeats, where the dreams and love of individuals become the new focal point of a nation in formation. A confusion of spent dreams, beauty, terror and suffering may be the underground source of the strength of nationalism:

> We know their dream, enough
> To know they dreamed and are dead;
> And what if excess of love
> Bewildered them till they died?
> I write it out in a verse –
> MacDonagh and MacBride
> And Connolly and Pearse
> Now and in time to be,
> Wherever green is worn
> Are changed, changed utterly:
> A terrible beauty is born. (Yeats 204-5)

It was, according to Roy Foster's *Life* of Yeats, Maud Gonne herself (Yeats' great love and estranged wife of the executed John MacBride), who first "unerringly spotted the poem's central ambivalence" when he sent it to her in manuscript:

> My dear Willie –
> No I don't like your poem, it isn't worthy of you & above all isn't worthy of the subject – Though it reflects your present state of mind perhaps, it isn't quite sincere enough for you who have studied philosophy & know something of history know quite well that sacrifice has never yet turned a heart

> to stone though it has immortalized many & through it alone mankind can rise to God – You recognize this in the line which was the original inspiration of your poem "A terrible beauty is born," but you let your present mood mar or confuse till even some of the verses become unintelligible to many. Even Iseult reading it didn't understand your thought till I explained your (?retribution) theory of constant change and becoming in the flux of things –
>
> . . . There are beautiful lines in your poem, as there are in all you write but it is not a great WHOLE, a living thing which our race would treasure and repeat, such as a poet like you might have given to our nation & which would have avenged our material failure by its spiritual beauty. (qtd. in Foster, *Life* 63)

Maud Gonne is very astute about the aesthetics of the poem, its uncertainty about what exactly it is expressing, its wavering attempts to explain the changing situation through Yeats' great cosmic theories. She is most critical of the poem's moral judgement of the executed men as less-than-perfect beings caught up in "the casual comedy" of a great moment of change. To Gonne they are tragic heroes, such as heroes could be defined in an age which believed in the practical possibility of heroism as a conscious preparation for martyrdom, an ideology somewhere between Romanticism and Fascism and Christian martyrdom:

> But you could never say that MacDonagh & Pearse & Connolly were sterile fixed minds, each served Ireland, which was their share of the world, the part they were in contact with, with varied faculties and vivid energy! these were men of genius, with large comprehensive & speculative & active brains the others of whom we know less were probably less remarkable men, but still I think they must have been men with a stronger grasp of Reality a stronger spiritual life than most of those we meet. (Foster, *Life* 63)

Foster focuses his comments on Yeats' scepticism towards martyrdom: "Throughout the mounting rhetorical questions WBY's doubts about the utility of self-immolation and the dangers of fanaticism beat an insistent rhythm" (Foster, *Life* 63-64). As I read it, however, the poem fails to crystallize into rhetoric, into elegy, or a liberal-humanist plea for reason. Elegy sits badly with abrupt change, even the kind of disturbed elegy that Auden would later write for Yeats. There is still too much doubt in "Easter 1916"; too much hurt; too vivid, but disjointed memories. The dead are still too individual for martyrdom or for becoming part of a rhetorical argument:

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among gray
Eighteenth century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
And thought before I had done
Of a mocking tale or a gibe
To please a companion
Around the fire at the club,
Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn:
All changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born. (Yeats 202-3)

The photographic nature of the memories make them too contemporary for classic elegy; the acquaintance and even the slight guilt at verbal back-stabbing are too banal, as is the memory of them in the context of urban middle class life in a mundane world "where motley is worn," where people have different views (on Home Rule or independence) which coexist because nothing has been decided. That is not elegiac distance – nor is the "terrible beauty" a sublimation of sacrifice in which to reach God. The distance is that of life ("vivid faces") against the past ("gray/ eighteenth century houses"): the rather grand Georgian architecture of Dublin is only a bland background, in which the memory of the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798 has been erased. This is the wrong time and scene for a great national rebirth of the kind Maud Gonne demands, and which Yeats had provided in his Celtic Revival mode. But all these lacks and negations make "Easter 1916" a modern poem. Rebirth is apocalyptic in "The Second Coming"; it is imminent, but not quite there. What is born, in "Easter 1916," not only in Dublin, but "wherever green is worn," is not yet a nation, and not quite an oxymoron because of the theory of the sublime.

This is why we still "treasure and repeat" the poem. Maud Gonne was wrong about its afterlife. But we probably do not learn the whole by heart, as we do "No Second Troy," "The Second Coming" or the Byzantium poems. The hesitations of the rhythm, the surprising line-breaks prevent this. To compare with the poems being written at the same time in the trenches of Belgium and France, it would be like memorising the heart-rending sprung rhythms of Ivor Gurney rather than the accomplished rhetorical articulations of Wilfred Owen. What we remember from "Easter 1916" is the phrasing, the character judge-

ment of the people involved and a mood which can only be articulated, it seems, in a kind of future past.

Maybe revolutionary change can only be understood in its afterlife. This may seem counter-intuitive as revolutions are mostly thought of as progressive: a future-oriented new breakthrough. But that of course goes counter to the etymology of "revolution," which would have been totally explicable in Yeats' theory of gyres and eternal return. It may even be closer to contemporary definitions of revolution, for those who are not entirely disillusioned with them. David Graeber, one of the leading thinkers of the Occupy Wall Street Movement, asks in *The Democracy Project*:

> . . . What is a revolution?
> We used to think we knew. Revolutions were seizures of power by some kind of popular forces aiming to transform the very nature of the political, social and economic system in the country in which the revolution took place, usually according to some visionary dream of a just society. Nowadays we live in an age when, if rebel armies do come sweeping into a city, or mass uprisings overthrow a dictator, it's unlikely to have any such implications; when profound social transformation does occur – as with, say, the rise of feminism – it's likely to take an entirely different form . . .
> At moments like this, it generally pays to go back to the history one already knows and ask, Were revolutions ever really what we thought them to be? (Graeber, *Democracy Project* 274)

Graeber finds the answer in the historian Immanuel Wallerstein, who has argued that the revolutions of the last 250 years are really "planet-wide transformations of political common sense": 1789 did not just affect France, 1848 "saw revolutions break out simultaneously in almost fifty countries, from Wallachia to Brazil," and the Russian Revolution of 1917 or the events of 1968 were part of widespread tectonic plate-shifts.

What they really do is transform basic assumptions about what politics is ultimately about. In the wake of a revolution, ideas that had been considered veritably lunatic fringe quickly become the accepted currency of debate. Before the French Revolution, the idea that change is good, that government policy is the proper way to manage it, and that governments derive their authority from an entity called "the people" were considered the sort of things one might hear from crackpots and demagogues, or at best a handful of freethinking intellectuals who spent their time debating in cafés. A generation later, even the stuffiest magistrates, priests and headmasters had to at least pay lip service to these ideas. Before long, we had reached the situation we are in today: where it's

necessary to lay the terms out, as I just did, for anyone to even notice they are there. They've become common sense, the very grounds of political discussion. (Graeber, *Democracy Project* 275)

Yeats intuited something very similar, if not deeper, from a conservative sense of loss, as what Graeber writes from a wish to rehabilitate the "failed revolutions" of 1968 and 2011 (which may indeed have changed "political common sense" on sex, gender, bureaucracy and money in ways that are still only becoming clear). Yeats expressed his sense of loss obliquely in the Byzantium poems and directly in "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen," where it is balanced against the sense of the world of yesterday as having kept a lid on things for too long:

> We too had many pretty toys when young:
> A law indifferent to blame or praise,
> To bribe or threat; habits that made old wrong
> Melt down, as it were wax in the sun's rays;
> Public opinion ripening for so long
> We thought it would outlive all future days.
> O what fine thought we had because we thought
> That the worst rogues and rascals had died out. (Yeats 233)

Maud Gonne was certainly right that "Easter 1916" did not articulate a revolutionary nationalist spirit for Ireland, though the other woman of Yeats' life, Lady Augusta Gregory, found it "extraordinarily impressive," according to Foster, and "needed to read some Hillaire Belloc afterwards to restore balance" (Foster, *Life* 64). Yeats, like Lady Gregory, was opposed to the Rising in the first place. He was a fixture in the salon of the Prime Minister's wife in London, Lady Asquith, and the Asquith government had ensured Home Rule for Ireland in 1913, as the Irish Parliamentary Party had demanded for a generation. Its introduction was merely suspended until the end of the War.

The Rising was in late April, an unusually late Easter that year. By all accounts it was a fumbled disaster of an insurrection, with few people supporting it, outside of the two small militias of the nationalist Irish Volunteers and James Connolly's largely socialist Irish Citizen's Army and 200 women of Cumann na mBan ("the Women's Council"), who managed to seize control of the General Post Office, and that only by dint of Connolly's great skill and bravery. But it drew an incommensurate response from a frightened British army and government, obsessed with the difficult situation on the Western Front. Among the convicted leaders that Yeats would "write out in a verse," the schoolteacher, poet and playwright Thomas MacDonagh, Major John MacBride, the syndi-

calist labour leader and Marxist theoretician James Connolly and the poet and teacher Padraig Pearse were executed in early May. The woman "whose days were spent/ in ignorant good will/ her nights in argument/ until her voice grew shrill," Countess Constance Markievicz, née Gore-Booth, would be spared to become the first woman cabinet minister in the Irish Free State (1919-22). The only male Commander spared, Eamon de Valera, who held American citizenship, would emerge as the father of the new nation after 1932. Other nationalist leaders were executed in early August, principally the diplomat and humanitarian Sir Roger Casement, though he had in fact opposed the Rising, as he was hoping to secure arms support for a serious insurrection from Germany. This rebellion of the whole Irish Republican Brotherhood Yeats had in fact supported. Yeats, with other intellectuals, tried in vain to use his influence with Lady Asquith to intercede for Casement, who was in many ways the father of modern human rights activism in the Congo and Peru.

Yeats finished "Easter 1916" in early September and sent it to friends like Gonne and Gregory, but by that stage he found it unpublishable. It would have been read as seditious in London. In December came Lloyd George's putsch against Asquith in the Liberal government in London, and the commitment to Home Rule took a back burner. Yeats toyed with the idea of placing the poem at the beginning of his next volume of poetry, but withheld it from both the Irish and English editions of *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1916 and 1919). The poem, Foster concludes, "stayed out of public circulation until its publication in *The New Statesman* on 23 October 1920 – when the political situation in Ireland and Anglo-Irish relations with it, had changed more utterly than anyone could have imagined" (Foster, *Life* 66). Foster is here to some extent engaging with Peter Kuch's argument that Yeats delayed publication because "as a great poet, as one who believed in the power of poetry to make things happen, he waited until the Rebellion had acquired its own myths in order that he might counter them with the fictions of his poem" (Kuch 200). I am inclined towards Foster's view; though Yeats was always concerned with his stature as what Foster calls "the Arch-Poet," he strikes me as being genuinely concerned about the *change* in real politics, as opposed to long-standing ideological strategy. Kuch's argument seems to suppose that Yeats had read Auden.

Maybe the turnarounds, betrayals and horrors of the Irish Civil War were unforeseeable and unimaginable. But it seemed as if Yeats had *stated* them in ways that turn tragically inevitable when the uneasy movement between iambs and trochees in each stanza of the poem

rings out in a gong of spondees: "Changed, changed utterly," followed by dactyls: "A terrible beauty is born."

There is a sense of "managed confusion" in Yeats' poem, probably because he thought he could explain the confusion by reference to his great cosmological system. But within this is a very astute observation of historical causality and transformation, imaged in the stone/heart that emerges first out of collective feeling:

> Hearts with one purpose alone
> Through summer and winter seem
> Enchanted to a stone
> To trouble the living stream. (Yeats 204)

The seasons may change, the landscape of life reveal its many and varied beauties, but the common "purpose" remains submerged: "The stone's in the midst of all." It will out, like all hidden things:

> Too long a sacrifice
> Can make of the heart a stone.
> O when may it suffice?

In Irish historiography this is what F. S. L. Lyons referred to as "the Yeats thesis" of the "long gestation" from 1890 to 1916-23. Yeats held that after the death of Parnell, in a moral scandal on the eve of achieving Home Rule, nationalism in Ireland divested from *politics* and became *cultural* and artistic (the Celtic Revival, to which Yeats himself contributed so much) only to break out seemingly from underground in 1916 with the transformative and devastating result of a revolution (nicely summarised in Foster, *Vivid Faces* xv). Graeber's theory of revolutions, as appropriate for a Jewish internationalist anarchist, evades the nationalist element in the popular uprisings he is trying to explain. In the case of the Easter Rising that is not possible, and it may be a catalyst in many of them, even say, the Prague spring of 1968. This does not prevent the triggering effect across borders. Nationalism is an internationalist phenomenon, but not a constant flame, and it has left- and right-wing forms. There is no such thing as a national will or consciousness operating at all times, but in certain critical situations it comes readily to mind.

All revolutionary upheavals share this suddenness and seemingly inexplicable timing, according to Graeber:

> One of the remarkable things about such insurrectionary upheavals is how they can seem to burst out of nowhere – and then, often, dissolve away just

> as quickly. How is it that the same "public" that two months before say, the Paris commune, or the Spanish Civil War, had voted in a fairly moderate social democratic regime will suddenly find itself willing to risk their lives for the same ultra-radicals who received a fraction of the vote. Or, to return to May '68, how is it that the same public that seemed to support or at least feel strongly sympathetic toward the student/worker uprising could almost immediately afterwards return to the polls and elect a right-wing government. The most common historical explanations – that the revolutionaries didn't really represent the public or its interests, but that elements of the public became caught up in some sort of irrational effervescence – seem obviously inadequate. (Graeber, *Utopia* 97-8)

In the case of the Easter Rising (and I have been using this term deliberately rather than Rebellion, because of its apparent suddenness, later seen to have had mystical significance), "the public" first rejected and then sanctified it. The notion of "the public" is spurious here, as Graeber points out: it is not "an entity with opinions, interests and allegiances that can be treated as relatively consistent over time"; it is an "audience to a public spectacle" (Graeber, *Utopia* 99). In the latter half of 1916 in Ireland, the public turns into a people, a nation, and a spontaneous insurrection becomes the turning point in what later becomes a teleological nationalist narrative. The Rising was suddenly inevitable, not contingent.

The Easter Rising became the mythic point of transformation in the Irish nationalist history of martyrdom that took hold as the Irish Free State and subsequently the Republic of Eire emerged from the ruins of the Civil War. Easter 1916 came to be seen as the logical conclusion to a national history of heroic defeat that ranged from the Norman, Elizabethan and Cromwellian conquests and the failed rebellions to the Great Famine and the failed parliamentary road to Home Rule.

But very little art dealt with it, or at least that had become the considered opinion of literary and cultural historians by the time James Moran wrote *Staging the Easter Rising: 1916 as Theatre* (2005). The main piece of literature by an actual participant in the Rising, Sean O'Casey's play *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) puts the Rising off-stage (Padraig Pearse speaking outside the pub where the main action is taking place) – and deals with the aftermath, the British army reprisals as they affect the inhabitants in a working-class Dublin street. O'Casey's play was considered blasphemous of the sacred event and the martyrs and caused a riot outside the Abbey Theatre. Even more recently, as anniversaries of the Rising were commemorated by major films, Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* in 1997 and Ken Loach's *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* in 2006, they

deal with the aftermath and the Civil War in their contrasting liberal and left-wing portrayals of political commitment and heroism. The Rising is a pre-credit moment at the very beginning of *Michael Collins* to place our hero at the mythic point of origin, and sow doubts about Eamon de Valera's duplicity, which will later lead to Collins' own martyrdom and his consecration in the state funeral ordered by the man who betrayed him. The film consecrates the benefits of the negotiated deal, at a time when the Good Friday agreement seemed to create a new, pragmatic, if not morally pure, future for Ireland. *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* begins deliberately not with a grand moment, but a small act of silly bravado, which will eventually lead to the hero's sacrifice of his own life in a show of solidarity that is as inevitable as it is ineffectual, except to retain a hope of honesty and personal commitment. The two films portray the origins of the Civil War in credible, if contradictory, ways; but they are silent on the origins of the Rising.

Moran in *Staging the Easter Rising*, however, draws attention to the Rising itself as a very successful piece of political theatre, played out in a nation obsessed with drama, of which the Abbey Theatre was only the visible peak. MacDonagh, the first on Yeats' list, perhaps not only on rhythmical grounds, was a young Yeatsian playwright moving towards Ibsen's realism. Moran also resurrects Yeats' own play *The Dreaming of the Bones*, written in 1916, but first performed in 1932, and mainly discussed in terms of Yeats' interest in the Japanese Noh plays. Like the Noh plays *The Dreaming of the Bones* portrays the present as a kind of shadow of a distant past, where an act was committed which determines anything people can later do. In this case Yeats uses the love affair of Diarmuid and Devorgilla in the twelfth century as, according to Moran, the original act of miscegenation between Gael and Norman, which has led to the Irish tragedy, and can only be excised by a form of cultural eugenics. Against Helen Vendler's reading of the play, which sees it as Yeats rising above politics, Moran puts it straight back into the context of Yeats' interest in eugenics and his belief in a new aristocratic, rather than "mob" rule, for an independent Ireland (Moran 53-67). Moran claims that Yeats originally wrote the phrase in "Easter 1916" as "a terrible beauty is born *again*," which would put the poem more in line with Maude Gonne and the nationalists –and with those partisan stagings of the Rising all over Ireland and in Irish Clubs throughout the diaspora from North America to Australia, which Moran categorises as the Sinn Fein and Fianna Fail versions: the former seeing the Rising as prelude to the betrayed revolution; the latter a parade of the "sacrificial mummy" (meaning both the embalmed corpse and the mother figure)

which dominated the commemorations that de Valera stage-managed from 1936 onwards (Moran 76-78).

By the end of the twentieth century the events and participants of Easter 1916 had achieved that terrible stasis of secular sacrality, which Eavan Boland evoked in her poem "The Dolls Museum in Dublin." In the display case of "Easter in Dublin," the dolls are terrifying. Any beauty or sublimity has gone: "The wounds are terrible. The paint is old." The moment frozen in time is incapable of change:

> The eyes are wide. They cannot address
> the helplessness which has lingered in
> the airless peace of each glass case:
> to have survived. To have been stronger than
>
> a moment. To be the hostages ignorance
> takes from time and ornament from destiny. Both.
> To be the present of the past. To infer the difference
> With a terrible stare. But not feel it. And not know it. (Boland 10)

The word "terrible" is what remains of Yeats' "Easter 1916," but it is no longer connected with beauty and change, but with being "hostages" to an unchanging view of the past. The collection in which it appears, *In a Time of Violence*, is Boland's feminist critique of the male mythologisation of Ireland, from Yeats to Heaney. It thus complements and confirms James Moran's over-all observation that the Easter Rising in its theatrical and literary afterlife seems to have had more to do with gender than with nationalism or a conflict between nationalists and socialists. From the genuine belief in women's emancipation among leaders of the Rising like MacDonagh and Connelly through Yeats' obsessions with feminine power and de Valera's equally obsessive determination to restrain female power within the family and the mother role, Moran only sees a change of emphasis in more recent revisionist readings of the Rising, where gender politics have become explicit. Feminist revisionism first challenged the male dominance of the Rising – and of Irish literature – but towards the end of the twentieth century, in theatrical performance, TV dramas (which unlike feature film have a long tradition of actually portraying the Rising) and historical studies, there was an increasing concern with recovering the experience of women in the Rising and changing the perception of the role of women, like Padraig Pearse's mother.

Yeats' poem, on the other hand, returns with a transformative vengeance in Roy Foster's *Vivid Faces*, his *biography* of "the revolutionary generation of 1916" published to great critical acclaim in 2014. Colm

Toibin in *The New Statesman* called it "the most complete and plausible exploration of the 1916 Rebellion and the power it subsequently exerted over the public imagination" while John Kerrigan in *The Guardian* struck even closer to home when he said that Foster "can pin character down as memorably as Yeats." Foster in his book takes more than his title from Yeats' "Easter 1916." As far as I read it, it is almost an extended commentary on the poem, filling in the historical gaps. The epigraph quotes part of the poem and the conclusion ends on the whole of it; borrowed phrases are used throughout for characterisation and moral judgement. The book is a tribute to poetry as the formulation of the past that may best unlock it for a new interpretation. This is an interpretation that attempts to escape nationalist teleology.

Roy Foster is the acknowledged leader of the school of *revisionist historians* of Ireland, who beginning with F. S. L. Lyons' *Ireland since the Famine* (1971) have been critical of the *nationalist* school of Irish history, which they have seen as being based more in mythic interpretation and anti-English polemic than in an actual study of the sources. Foster's own *Modern Ireland 1660-1972* (1988) places Irish history squarely in the context of European modernity, rather than national exceptionalism. The revisionist historians, who initially tended to be Protestants, have been associated with the liberal-revisionist movement in Irish politics led by Garret FitzGerald (1926-2011), who sought ever closer integration in the European Union as a way to break out of the isolationism that de Valera had chosen. Neither Foster nor Lyons, however, have departed from the tradition in Irish culture that sees politics and literature as deeply connected, so that Foster's biography of Yeats, perhaps the greatest myth-maker of them all, which he inherited from his teacher Lyons, is very careful in following precisely how Yeats' mood and thoughts vacillated with those of the nation to which he was deeply committed, even as an appointed member of the Senate of the Irish Free State in the 1920s.

When Foster comes to write the biography of the revolutionary generation, however, he deems Lyons' "Olympian detachment" no longer appropriate. Though Foster initially questions the "Yeats thesis" with reference to the considerable success of the Irish Parliamentary Party under John Redmond, it is confirmed by the vast corpus of autobiographies, memoirs and correspondence of the Fenians and their families that Foster has recovered. The revolutionary generation came from a full range of class backgrounds: farmers, working class, shabby genteel, aspirational middle class, as well as the higher reaches of the Ascendancy (the feudal Protestant upper class) and the Dublin bourgeoisie,

like the genteel Gore-Booth sisters and the very wealthy Plunketts. Most seem to have been deeply emotionally committed to the Irish cultural revival, learning Irish and taking Irish names, before finding themselves involved in an armed resurrection. And they were as much motivated by a rebellion against their parents' generational *paralysis* (to just touch on James Joyce's theory of what happened to Ireland after Parnell), by socialism in some form or other, the suffragette movement (one of Foster's great achievement is to put the women revolutionaries centre stage) or bohemian rebellion against the strictures of respectability, as they were motivated by any clearly thought-out nationalist political agenda. Such an agenda barely existed, except as a form of Catholic mysticism or Symbolism applied to politics. Above all, Foster argues, the main motivations were anti-Imperialist and Anglophobic, whether a Fenian was born and bred in Ireland or a returnee from Liverpool, Glasgow, New York or Boston.

Foster's account is by no means pro-revolutionary; it is urbanely sceptical, both as regards the nationalist ideology and the call to subsume the individual in the social through sacrifice, as comes out when he quotes Sean O'Faolain and Alexander Herzen:

> Writing a biography of Constance Markievicz in 1934, Sean O'Faolain asked himself "if revolutionary movements ever move towards defined ends, whether all such movements are not in the main movements of emotion rather than thought, movements arising out of a dissatisfaction with things as they are but without any clear or detailed notion as to what will produce satisfaction in the end." Writing about revolutionary idealism Alexander Herzen remarked that "the submission of the individual to society – to the people – to humanity – to the idea – is a continuation of human sacrifice . . . What the purpose of the sacrifice was, was never so much as asked." (Foster, *Vivid Faces* 331)

But in Foster's argument the last stanza of Yeats' "Easter 1916" comes back to trump this post-revolutionary high humanist detachment, which makes a lot of sense after the moment when the revolution has already eaten its own. Yeats is closer to the moment:

> Too long a sacrifice
> Can make a stone of the heart.
> O when may it suffice?
> That is Heaven's part, our part
> To murmur name upon name,
> As a mother names her child

> When sleep at last has come
> On limbs that had run wild.
> What is it but nightfall?
> No, no not night but death;
> Was it needless death after all?
> For England may keep faith
> For all that is done and said
> We know their dream; enough
> To know they dreamed and are dead;
> And what if excess of love
> Bewildered them till they died? (Yeats 204)

Yeats' tone clearly transcends the urbane liberal scepticism about individual human sacrifice into a pathos of doubt, some kind of eternal ambivalence of the human heart, which may well be in accordance with what Maud Gonne identified as "Yeats' theory of constant change and becoming in the flux of things" or what Yeats wrote about in enigmatic poems like "A Dialogue of Self and Soul." There is acknowledgement of sacrifice as well as doubt about it in Yeats' vacillations; there is standard Christian theology in the abstention from ultimate judgement, but also the inevitability of sacred-secular martyrdom as the names begin to form a litany. In my reading, the real subject of Yeats' poem is change itself, which may manifest itself in dreams of revolution before it reshapes the fabric of social thinking, and while the change is happening it is hard to identify what it is affecting. Foster admits as much when he takes centrally from Yeats the echoing word "dream" and sees the historian's task as uncovering "the dream" of the revolutionaries:

> But "to know the dream" of the revolutionaries, it may help to strip back the layers of martyrology and posthumous rationalization, to get back before hindsight into that enclosed, self-referencing hectic world where people lived before 1916, and see how a generation developed, interacted and decided to make a revolution – which for many of them may not have been the revolution that they intended, or wanted. (Foster, *Vivid Faces* 332)

Are revolutions redeemed by their dream? Looking at the Easter Rising and the revolutions it inspired in Russia and Hungary in 1917 (though sceptical of the extent of this inspiration, Foster provides much evidence of the connection from Dublin to Budapest and St Petersburg), the question becomes inevitable, given the generations of conservative repression that both precipitated and followed the revolutions. Nowadays that question is asked almost in prospect rather than retrospect.

Even for those of us who find it hard *not* to support Scottish or Catalunyan independence, there is the nagging question: what will happen after? Perhaps especially if the revolutions involve nationalism, as successful ones nearly always do. If I had been writing this 10 years ago, self-congratulatory remarks on the successful "revolutions" against Post-Stalinist dictatorships in Eastern Europe would have been *de rigueur*. Now doubt is ubiquitous all over Europe. Are there natural laws for revolutions like those "tipping-points" so often mentioned in the historiography of the American Revolution?

Foster writes himself into a post-1970s tradition in the historiography of revolutions, which sees them not as Marxist-Hegelian upheavals in an eternal class struggle, for which there is admittedly little evidence apart from political discourse, especially as regards timing: if class struggle is permanent, why does it suddenly turn violent? The political theory that Foster works with "demotes the centrality of ideological dynamics and interprets ostensibly 'political' impulses as reflections of ethnic antagonisms, anti-imperial reaction and what one historian has resonantly called 'the psycho-underground of masculinities and local community conflicts'" (Foster, *Vivid Faces* xviii). The "psycho-underground" of masculinity was certainly an area Yeats knew and wrote about in much of his poetry and drama, not least "that play of mine" which he felt had overly influenced the Fenians: *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), the legend of the semi-divine young woman and old mother symbolising Ireland, for whom young men go out and sacrifice themselves. It is not hard to combine a sense of affronted masculinity with anti-imperialism and community conflict in the background to the Easter Rising. But there was also a change in that a contingent of armed women participated in the fighting – as was the case also in the February Revolution in St Petersburg less than a year later. The deeper revolutionary change of the 1916-18 insurrectionary cycle may have had as much to do with a change in the role of women, who achieved the vote in many countries around this time, as in a recognition of the rights of the industrial proletariat and lower middle class.

The gender aspect of the afterlife of the Easter 1916, which James Moran explores in *Staging the Easter Rising*, takes another turn than redressing an imbalance and drawing attention to women's changing role. There is a homoerotic and queer side to it that Moran finds much more uncomfortable. One of the most controversial aspects of Declan Kiberd's postcolonial reading of Irish literature and politics in *Inventing Ireland* (1996) was that he took so seriously the feminisation of Ireland in the colonial relationship with Britain – and read Oscar Wilde as the

most significant Irish literary figure of the last decade of the nineteenth century. Wilde's trial takes on almost as much of a national Irish significance as the downfall of Parnell. The "outing" of homosexuality as a life-choice (though Wilde, of course, with his canny intelligence and moral integrity, never posits it as such) may be part of the deep underlying change which comes to the surface in the Easter Rising. Roger Casement had to be "outed" by British intelligence services through the publication of his *Black Diaries* to make his execution possible, and the homoeroticism of Padraig Pearse's writings is undeniable. The "psycho-underground" was ripe. A similar psycho-underground came to the surface in the Trenches of the First World War, where as Martin Taylor demonstrated in the long preface to his anthology *Lads: Love Poems of the Trenches* (1989), some of the most striking features of First World War poetry come from the application of the gorier effects of late nineteenth century Degenerate Aesthetics: unearthly beauty coexisting with death and defilement. Except that in the Trenches "the terrible beauty" was real: the terrifying death and maiming of beautiful young men in meaningless industrialised warfare. I do not think it far-fetched to read into Yeats' "terrible beauty" a similar realisation of 1890s Aestheticism, which Yeats had after all used to its fullest in his Celtic revival phase. Fergus (Irish *Feargus:* "man-strength") meets Dorian Gray.

The psycho-underground of gender emerges strikingly in *the historical revisionist fiction*, which came into its own in Ireland in the 1990s with writers like Colm Toibin, Sebastian Barry, Roddy Doyle and Jamie O'Neill. Toibin, as an openly gay Catholic with the clearest inspiration from the history writing of Lyons and Foster, has explored the sexual psycho-underground of the national mythology that kept Ireland in its grip from the de Valera to the Haughey era in novels and non-fiction from *The Heather Blazing* (1992) to *The Blackwater Lightship* (1999), which also feature memories of the only rebellion of Easter 1916 outside of Dublin, in Toibin's native Enniscorthy. Barry, with great sensitivity, has explored the Loyalist side left out of Irish history, from the almost incidental traitor in *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty* (1998) to the woman incarcerated for fifty years in a mental asylum in *The Secret Scripture* (2008). But it is Doyle in *A Star Called Henry* (1999) and O'Neill in *At Swim, Two Boys* (2001) who have directly narrated the events of the Easter Rising.

Doyle's and O'Neill's methods of narration form a complementary study of revolution and social change to Foster's Yeats-based *histoire de mentalité*, especially perhaps as they enter the psycho-underground of

masculinity. Doyle's is macho metafiction, while O'Neill's is tragic queering.

Henry Smart in *A Star Called Henry* becomes involved in the Rising mainly to avenge his brother Victor, who had died of TB while they were street kids, their mother no longer capable of looking after them in a Dublin slum which in Doyle's portrayal seems almost exaggeratedly poor even for one of the poorest and most unequal cities in the Empire: some historians have ranked Dublin with Calcutta. Doyle seems to link Irish poverty with the Irish obsession with story-telling. Henry's main revolutionary action is to shoot out the windows of the expensive shops across the street from the Post Office – and his main concern is class warfare on behalf of the women demanding food of the revolutionaries, who cannot give it, and will not, since many of the women are the mothers and widows of soldiers in the British Army. Even though he is certainly caught up in the excitement of the Rising and well-informed on all the participants (especially Connolly whom he regards as a kind of father figure), the excitement quickly fades:

> Another day of waiting. Day Two of the Revolution and I was already bored. Staring out on the empty street and the rain. Listening to the far gunfire, waiting for it to come closer. Waiting to be surprised. Wanting it. Badly. Wanting to shoot and wreck and kill and ruin. But Dublin, that part of it outside my window, didn't really wake up at all. (Doyle 109)

As for the revolutionary "dream," "I kept a tight watch on all street corners and let Miss O'Shea make up my dreams for me" (Doyle 110). Miss O'Shea is his former schoolmistress turned lover – and "his dreams" in a superficial sense are of soup and sex. But there is a deeper level on which the women are the really determining dream figures in a metafiction of Ireland and storytelling. First there is Henry's Granny Nash, an ageless, illiterate hag who carries round the collected works of Dickens and Tolstoy in her shawl to find spells, but who learns to read, magically, when Henry is born; there is his mother Melody whose fate is as tragic as the worst of Irish ballads; there is the brothel owner and perhaps prime mover in the Dublin underworld with the wonderful name Dolly Oblong, for whom both Henry and his father work as enforcers and contract killers, Henry wielding his dead father's wooden leg as his main weapon as he tries to figure out the real story of his father's death; and there is Kitty O'Shea as the only committed revolutionary with a dream for Ireland's future. It is a curiously macho version of the strength – and weaknesses – of women. Compared to their mythical solidity, Henry is a transient shadow only made real by the urgency of

his telling the story of how he was central to Irish history, before by the end of the book he emigrates to America. Almost as a materialisation of "subterranean masculinity" his secret knowledge which allows him to survive on numerous occasions, is that his father has passed on his knowledge of the sewer system of Dublin. But this does not allow him to figure out the plot behind his father's death; a woman has to enlighten him. He is a fantasist, a figure of boasting and blarney characteristic of the stereotypical Irishman – partly because he is in a sense just a replacement: Henry is his father's name and that of his dead brother, who is a "star" to his mother. And in such a devastating exposé (through metafiction) of the myth of the Rising, it is of course not insignificant that Henry II was the first Norman-English invader of Ireland.

At Swim, Two Boys takes another metafictional route to the events of Easter 1916: that of intertextual allusion, with Flann O'Brien's arch-metafiction *At Swim Two Birds* in its title, with Joycean free indirect discourse in its narrative style, with Oscar Wilde, Roger Casement and Padraig Pearse, but overall a sense of foreboding that comes straight out of Yeats. The free indirect discourse brings the age to life; the events are internalised by being seen from different perspectives, and mainly through the love triangle of three young men. It is probably the very fine-tuned exploration of early twentieth century male-on-male sexuality that makes possible an overall sense of loyalty to the characters in their historical time, which is more or less consciously absent from *A Star Called Henry* with its tall tales and fast plot. Jim Mack is an academically gifted college student from the aspirational petty bourgeoisie, his father an army sergeant turned shopkeeper; Doyler Doyle is a dungman's lad, son of a drunken ex-soldier, who was a comrade of Mr Mack's in the Boer War; and MacMurrough is the scion of one of the most important Irish Catholic families, but also an officer in the British Army returned to his aunt's house after a prison sentence for sexual misconduct with his batman. Their way to involvement in the events of Easter 1916 is indirect. Jim and Doyler are both preparing to participate in the Catholic Easter parade, where a nationalist priest has managed to sneak in a rendition of "A Nation Once Again." Jim hears an inspired speech by Pearse; Doyler more seriously reads one of Connolly's books on socialism and joins his Citizens' Army; MacMurrough is involved through his aunt's widespread charity work and her role as a natural hereditary leader if only she had been a man. But loyalties are still seriously divided in the lead-up to Easter: Jim's brother is a soldier in France, Eva MacMurrough's charities directed towards the Front as well as national-

ist causes, and dominated by her great admiration, which is also infatuation, for Casement. MacMurrough comes to articulate most strikingly the queering of nationalism when he is confronted by an old schoolfellow about whether he is "an unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort." MacMurrough answers, "If you mean am I Irish, the answer is yes" (O'Neill 309).

The moving and sometimes stunningly beautiful effect of the book comes from a conflation of the political events and the sexual awakening of the three young men, which is also a conflation of irony and pathos. James Moran notes prudishly that the term Rising nearly always has an "obscene" double meaning (Moran 118), but this is not blasphemy, rather an amplification of the doomed Rising by the difficulties of same-sex relationships in Dublin in 1915-16. There is a brief moment and space where things might have turned out differently. MacMurrough and Doyler have sex, and Jim falls in love with Doyler on the Forty Foot beach at Sandycove, famous for the Martello Tower in which Joyce's *Ulysses* begins and from which Stephen Dedalus and Buck Mulligan observe a ship rounding Muglins Rock. If the beach in *At Swim, Two Boys* is a zone where the young men have the freedom to explore each other and themselves, the Muglins come to carry all the promise of a political and personal Utopian dream for Jim and Doyler. Their bond of destiny based on it gives the novel its title:

> Doyler reached inside his shirt and tugged on the string that held his medal. Between thumbs and fingers he twisted the tin till it split in two. Jim saw the proffered half of St Joseph.
> "It's my pledge to you. We'll have our Easter swim, my hand and heart on that. We'll make them rocks together, Jim. Are you straight so?"
> "I'm straight as a rush," Jim said. He sniffed. "I am too."
> "Old pal o'me heart," said Doyler.
> "Come what may," said Jim. "Come what may."
> Doyler grinned. "Come Easter sure. 1916." (337)

That the old pledge of Wolfe Tone's United Irishmen, "Are you straight so?" becomes *queered* as a personal pledge between the two boys, confirmed by Jim's erection, is what makes this moving to a twenty-first century reader, especially once the foreboding is added, with the poignant pause of the full stop: "Come Easter sure. 1916." For of course the boys will never make their swim; Doyler will be killed in the Rising, watched over as he dies by Jim and MacMurrough, who will later join the IRA as partisans and lovers. Jim's and Doyler's dream will be forever held in that comma of the title: *At Swim, Two Boys*. Irony and pa-

thos return again to MacMurrough's mind when the defeated rebels are paraded through Dublin:

> The British marched them through the streets. All hungry Dublin crowded the way. In all that taunting spitting mob one man gravely had lifted his hat. That little, lovely, silent act recalled MacMurrough to Wilde, when Wilde too had been paraded for the crowd. And MacMurrough had wondered could there truly be something to this business – that stooping so utterly low one should rise again to gain all. (O'Neill 640)

It is in the end the personal that lifts MacMurrough out of national-political defeat into an acceptance of building change:

> It was true what Jim said, this wasn't the end but the beginning. But the wars would come to an end one day and Jim would come there then, to the island they would share. One day surely the wars would end, and Jim would come home, if only to lie broken in MacMurrough's arms, he would come to his island home. And MacMurrough would have it built for him, brick by brick, washed by rain and the reckless sea. In the living stream they would swim a season. For maybe it was true that no man is an island: but he believed that two very well might be. (O'Neill 641)

It takes Doyler and his vernacular to bring Jim and MacMurrough out of sentimentality about the future, and being redeemed by the dream, into a "terrible beauty" and the wise-cracking of the boy who made them revolutionaries:

> He never again looked for his friend, until one time, though it was years to come, years that spilt with hurt and death and closed in bitter most bitter defeat, one time when he lay broken and fevered and the Free State troopers were hounding the fields, when he lay the last time in MacMurrough's arms, and MacEmm so tightly held him close: his eyes closed as he drifted away, and that last time he did look for his friend. Doyler was far far away on his slope, and his cap waving in the air. "What cheer, eh?" he called. (O'Neill 643)

Perhaps what literature can add to the historians' and social scientists' theories of revolutionary upheavals is this element of fierce personal loyalties and the longing for companionship with or without a sexual component as well as energy that will lash out sometimes from complete humiliation. Revolutions are not, from our present vantage-point, it seems, redeemed by the dream, but by moments of liberation and solidarity, which may be early appearances of a wave of change. But the

underlying change may skip an upheaval or two, which makes possible the striking reinterpretations in the historical revisionist fiction that are opened by Roddy Doyle's macho feminism and Jamie O'Neill's gentle queering, which in its peculiar combination of tragedy (the overwhelming mode of gay love stories) and hope made possible in the shadow of gay marriage.

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