SPATIAL FORM IN THE POETRY OF YEATS:
THE TWO LISSADELL POEMS

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I

In 1949, A. Norman Jeffares declared that, although Yeats's poetry "had reblossomed in The Wild Swans at Coole [1919] and Michael Robartes and the Dancer [1921], the flowering came with The Tower" [1928]. In 1954, Richard Ellmann called The Tower and The Winding Stair "the two finest volumes" of the period 1917-33. Today, this estimate is the generally accepted one: B. Rajan has recently written, "With The Tower and The Winding Stair, Yeats's writing comes fully into its strength and words respond completely to the poem's call to order. To say that Yeats was incapable of writing a bad poem during this phase is an exaggeration, but one within the limits of critical licence."1

In what sense do "words respond" more completely to the poem's "call to order" in the Tower and Winding Stair poems than in those of the two preceding volumes? Criticism has been rather vague on this question. The most frequent answer seems to be that in the mid-twenties Yeats finally learned to write poetry that embodied his favorite formula, "Think like a wise man, yet express ourselves like the common people." In discussing the development of Yeats's style, T. R. Henn writes, "By 1919 Yeats is recollecting the best of his past emotions in something approaching tranquillity. The language in which they find expression appears to be striving continually towards simplicity, with speech rhythms which give place at will to lyric, the whole moving easily and gracefully." Amy Stock talks of the "authentic ring of speech" and "spoken syntax" of the later poetry, and Thomas Parkinson refers to the "complete release" of his [Yeats's] powers that came with his later poetry, a release conditioned by "a passionate syntax that would allow the voice to move in proximity to authentic patterns of speech." In his chapter on the later Yeats in the Pelican Guide, Graham Martin writes, "Yeats is writing in the syntax and idiom of ordinary discourse—elaborated only at moments of intensity" [all italics mine].2

These comments imply that the later poetry simply brings to its culmination that "prose directness" which Ezra Pound had isolated for praise as long ago as 1914 when he reviewed Responsibilities.3 Yeats's own statements seem to lend support to the view that the "language of common speech" is a major feature of the later poems. In 1926, he writes to Herbert Grierson, "My own verse has more and more adopted . . . the syntax and vocabulary of common personal speech." A few years later, he tells Dorothy Wellesley, "You have the best language among us because you most completely follow Aristotle's advice and write 'like the common people'. You have the animation of spoken words and spoken syntax" (Letters to DW, p. 44).

And, more than once, he tells her that "The natural words in the natural order is the formula" (pp. 56, 126).

It is curious that critics have taken these statements at face value for they plainly do not square with Yeats's poetic practice. In a recent study of the Tower poems, John Holloway argues that the later style has precisely the same peculiar mixture of "simple diction" and "extraordinary syntax" that Richard Ellmann has described as characteristic of Yeats's middle period (1904-14).4 Ellmann discusses the "extreme stylization" of the syntax in the Green Helmet and Responsibilities poems, noting such deviations from normal syntax as "the condensed subjunctive" (e.g., "To bundle time away / That the night come"); inverted subjunctive clauses ("Who were it proved he lies"); the substitution of the relative pronoun "that" for "who" ("What's riches to him / That has made a great peacock"); the archaic use of "what" as demonstrative adjective ("He shadowed in a glass /

What thing her body was); and the use of detached ablative absolutes ("Ah! when the ghost begins to quicken, / Confusion of the death-bed over, is it sent / Out naked on the roads"). Holloway finds precisely the same stylistic features in the later poetry and concludes, "the time has come to recognize that the staple of Yeats's later verse is not common idiom at all, but the relinquishment of one deviation from common idiom (that which strikes us... as the worn-out poetic diction of the nineteenth century, and especially the 'nineties) and its replacement by another deviation; one more original, calculated and expressive, but a deviation none the less" (p. 90). The resulting style, which is characterized by "power, passion, intensity, energy" and by its "emphatic terseness" (p. 91), is, then, not peculiar to the Tower and Winding Stair poems; it occurs as early as "The Folly of Being Comforted" (1902) and as late as "Politics" (1939).7

If stylistic criteria do not distinguish the Tower and Winding Stair poems from those in the preceding volumes, how else can we account for the "flowering" that supposedly takes place? A second possible answer is provided by Ellmann, who argues that the later poetry is distinguished by its thematic density. "Human incompleteness and grandeur receive their most convincing expression" in these poems; "there is a steady expansion of his world to include cosmic, public, political and domestic themes" (Identity of Yeats, p. 146). This statement is echoed by Jeffares: "The poetry of The Tower period is rich because of the fullness of Yeats's life, because his style was reaching maturity at the same time as his life. The poems of the twenties therefore deal with many of his interests: politics, philosophy, friendship and love" (W. B. Yeats, p. 215). But if thematic range is to be our criterion, why is The Winding Stair more "advanced" than The Wild Swans at Coole? "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" is surely not more "philosophical" than, say, "The Double Vision of Michael Robartes," which is squarely built on A Vision. Nor is the range of the Crazv Jane poems greater than that of such love lyrics as "Memory," "Broken Dreams," and "A Deep-swnorn Vow" in the earlier volume. Again, if the swan symbol relates "Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931" to "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1916), what accounts for the seemingly greater "control" over words in the Coole Park poem?

What strikes me as the distinctively "new" note in the poetry of the mid-twenties and early thirties is not Yeats's use of colloquial speech rhythms or his creation of symbols and thematic motifs, but the poetic structure itself. Up until 1920 or so, the structure of a Yeats poem is, for all its "dramatic" or "conversational" intensity, characterized by logical sequence. After 1920, Yeats turns away more and more from sequential structure and begins to experiment with what has been called "imagistic structure," or, in a celebrated essay by Joseph Frank, "spatial form" —that form in which "syntactical sequence is given up for a structure depending on the perception of relationships between disconnected word-groups. To be properly understood, these word-groups must be juxtaposed with one another and perceived simultaneously."8 Cleanth Brooks refers to this "structure of simple juxtaposition and occasional stark confrontation" as the "groundwork of a great deal of modern poetry" and traces it back to the Romantic movement, specifically to the Lucy poems: "Wordsworth's simplest poems... reveal gaps in logic that the reader is forced to cross with a leap of the imagination; they hint at analogies that cry out to be completed and yet which can be completed only by the reader."9

So Yeats may well turn out to be one of "the

7 Amplifying Ellmann's analysis, Holloway cites such typically Yeatsian deviations from "the idiom of ordinary discourse," as the transformation of a normally transitive verb into an intransitive one in a line like "I summon to the winding ancient stair" ("A Dialogue of Self and Soul"), or the consistent use of "but" where normal English or Anglo-Irish idioms would demand "only" as in "And there's but common greenness after that" ("Meditations in Time of Civil War," rv). See pp. 91–92.

8 By Sarah Youngblood in her essay "The Structure of Yeats's Long Poems," Criticism, v (1963), 321–335. The author argues that in his long poems "Yeats fuses two modes, the discursive and the imagistic... The discursive mode in poetry depends upon the structural principle of syntax, a deploying of thought in logical, rational structures of statement; the imagistic mode depends upon the structural principle of the image, which replaces logical syntax with what Hart Crane calls 'the logic of metaphor'" (p. 321). A long poem like "Meditations in Time of Civil War" combines, according to Miss Youngblood, the discursive and imagistic modes. Although my terminology is very much like that used in this essay, I think that Miss Youngblood slight the chronological development from discursive to imagistic in Yeats's poetry. Again, "imagistic" does not seem to me to be the best adjective for the second of the two modes because it carries connotations of Imagism and Yeats was surely not an Imagist. The terminology of Joseph Frank and Cleanth Brooks (see below) seems more satisfactory in this respect.


last Romantics" in a sense not intended by himself or by his critics. When Brooks writes, "This device of direct confrontation and juxtaposition came into being, one supposes, as an almost instinctive attempt on the part of Wordsworth and his brother poets to circumvent what had seemed to them the chilling effects of misapplied reason" (pp. xvi-xvii), one wonders if Yeats, at least in his later years, did not share their motive. "A General Introduction for my Work" (1937) is Yeats's final and perhaps definitive statement of poetics; its opening section, "The First Principle," begins with the sentence: "A poet writes always out of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy . . . he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria."11 Phantasmagoria is defined in the OED as "a shifting series or succession of phantasms or imaginary figures as seen in a dream or fevered condition, as called up by the imagination, or as created by literary description." "Phantasmagoric" may well be a better descriptive adjective than "colloquial" or "dramatic" for the Tower and Winding Stair poems, in which a sequential reasoning structure is indeed replaced by "a shifting . . . succession of phantasm . . . as called up by the imagination."

To illustrate the shift from sequential to spatial form in Yeats's poetry, I have selected two closely related poems: "On a Political Prisoner" (1920), which appeared in Michael Robartes and the Dancer, and "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz" (1927), the opening poem of The Winding Stair. Both poems deal with the tragic effects of political engagement on the beautiful, aristocratic Gore-Booth sisters of Lissadell.12 The overt theme of both—the destruction of feminine beauty and innocence by "abstract thought" or revolutionary fervor—is a recurrent theme in Yeats's poetry: one thinks of "A Prayer for my Daughter," "Easter 1916," and "Why Should Not Old Men Be Mad?" Moreover, the two Lissadell poems have a similar appearance on the printed page: they are roughly the same length (24 lines and 32 lines respectively) and are both written in iambic tetrameter with a regular rhyme scheme.13 Because theme and versification are so much alike, the disparity of structure is all the more striking. In comparing the poems, two hitherto unrecognized but quite distinct structural modes in Yeats's poetry may be defined.

II

In 1916, Yeats wrote to Eva Gore-Booth, "Your sister and yourself, two beautiful figures among the great trees of Lissadell, are among the dear memories of my youth."14 Yeats's first visit to Lissadell, home of Constance (1868–1927) and Eva (1870–1926) Gore-Booth, took place in 1894. The great patrician house still stands and is described by D. J. Gordon: "Built in 1832, a plain late Georgian house of dark grey granite, Lissadell stands among the woods that go down to the sands of Lissadell bay. It lies ten miles from Sligo . . . The windows of the south front look out over the bay, past Rosses Point to the hill of Knocknarea crowned with the tomb of Queen Maeve" (p. 40). For the young middle-class poet, the Gore-Booth sisters symbolized the last flowering of the Protestant aristocracy in Ireland. The serene and opulent Great House, filled with pre-Raphaelite and Japanese curios, became a background for the artistic activities of the sisters: Constance painted and Eva wrote verse. Both girls were evidently striking beauties; both were fearless horsewomen, but Constance, the more reckless of the two, was said to be the finest horsewoman in Ireland. Eva, more remote and timid—the "gazelle" of Yeats's memorial poem—studied mysticism and philosophy.

Although destined to a future of coming-out parties, presentations at court, and suitable marriages, the sisters revolted against the established order and left home at the turn of the century. Eva went to do social work in Manchester, and in the course of organizing women workers in the textile factories into trade unions she became deeply embroiled in the women's suffrage movement in its most militant phase. She continued to study Neo-Platonism and Indian mysticism and to write poetry, but her attitude to mysticism, unlike Yeats's, was evidently didactic: at one point, he begged her to "avoid . . . every tendency to teach." In an unpublished section of his Autobiography, Yeats speaks of Diana Vernon as having "the same sensitive look of destruction I had admired in Eva Gore-Booth,"15 in other words, "the shadow of those abstractions which

12 Strictly speaking, "On a Political Prisoner" deals with the older sister, Constance, only.
13 It should be noted that "On a Political Prisoner" is divided into stanzas rhyming abba, while "Eva Gore-Booth" has a rhetorical division into two parts but no stanzaic division, the whole poem rhyming abba.
15 Cited by Jefferies, W. B. Yeats: Man and Poet, p. 100.
were to destroy her beauty no less than her poetry” (Gordon, p. 42).

Constance’s life was more turbulent than Eva’s. In 1898, she left Lissadell for Paris, where she studied art and met her future husband, the painter Count Casimir de Markiewicz. Returning to Ireland, Constance was soon engaged in revolutionary politics. In 1914, she became a member of the Citizens’ Army and hence a leader of the 1916 Easter Uprising. After the surrender, she was condemned to death but subsequently reprieved because of her sex. When her term of imprisonment in England was over, she returned to Ireland and continued to play a prominent role in extremist politics until Eva died. The two sisters had been very close, and after Eva’s death, Constance seemed to change. Gordon writes, “For the first time, she discovered the resources of the inner life. There is a sad story of her in these last years speaking to a small audience with a sling around the arm she had broken cranking her old car. At this time she was living in the slums of Dublin, working for the humblest poor, not as a great lady or as a politician, but as one who had identified herself with them completely and in a spirit of simple humility” (p. 44).

Ultimately, she totally rejected the manners and physical appearance of her caste.

For Yeats, Eva and Constance were tragic figures. Like his beloved Maud Gonne, they had sought the abstract at the cost of beauty, and—since beauty was the very center of their being—of life itself. Their destruction thus stands for much more than just the destruction of two lovely young girls; it is the destruction of the Great House, of the Irish aristocracy, of tradition and beauty.

This is the necessary background for an understanding of Yeats’s two Lissadell poems. In the first, “On a Political Prisoner,” the point of departure is the imprisonment of Constance Markiewicz after the Easter Rebellion:

She that but little patience knew,
From childhood on, had now so much
A grey gull lost its fear and flew
Down to her cell and there alit,
And there endured her fingers’ touch
And from her fingers ate its bit.

Did she in touching that lone wing
Recall the years before her mind
Became a bitter, an abstract thing,
Her thought some popular enmity:
Blind and leader of the blind
Drinking the foul ditch where they lie?

When long ago I saw her ride

Under Ben Bulben to the meet,
The beauty of her country-side
With all youth’s lonely wildness stirred,
She seemed to have grown clean and sweet
Like any rock-bred, sea-borne bird:

Sea-borne, or balanced on the air
When first it sprang out of the nest
Upon some lofty rock to stare
Upon the cloudy canopy,
While under its storm-beaten breast
Cried out the hollows of the sea.14

Jeffares calls this poem “a superb piece of technical achievement. The starting point, the symbol of the grey gull which came to the prisoner, is used to illustrate the change which had come upon the life of the Countess. The use of the adjective ‘grey’ suggests the monotony of the prison, yet the gull is in the poet’s mind a means of returning to the contrast of her youth” (W. B. Yeats, p. 189).

This reading is essentially correct, although the gull is, strictly speaking, metaphor rather than symbol, both halves of the comparison (woman=gull) being present throughout the poem.17 In Stanza 1, the narrator depicts the ironic reversal of the political revolutionary turned prisoner. Always restless, impatient, straining to perform unusual and heroic deeds, the woman prisoner can now do no more than distract herself by reaching out to tame a “grey gull” that alights on the bars of her cell window. Her former beauty, freedom, and spirit are offset by the “greyness” of prison life, and so she is herself the “grey gull,” although the equation is not made explicit until the second stanza, in which the speaker wonders whether the “lone wing,” the proud independence of the gull, reminded the woman of the time before she plunged into political activities, before she cast her lot with the “blind mob” and drank from their “foul ditch.” This stanza echoes lines 17–20 of “Easter 1916”:

That woman’s days were spent
In ignorant good-will

14 This and subsequent citations of Yeats’s poems are from The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats, ed. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alsop (New York, 1957).

17 Meyer Abrams, in A Glossary of Literary Terms (New York, 1957), writes, “It should be noted that a metaphor, like a simile, has two items or subjects: the ‘principal subject,’ to which the metaphoric word is applied . . . and the ‘secondary subject,’ or the standard literal meaning of the metaphoric word itself.” When a word is, on the other hand, a symbol, “it lacks the paired subject . . . Blake’s rose is a rose—yet it is also something more . . . the described object has a further range of significance which makes it a symbol” (pp. 36–37, 95–96).
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.

The question posed in Stanza 11 is left open: whether or not the woman remembers her happier days, the speaker clearly does. In Stanza 11, he recalls the dazzling image of the young girl riding through the beautiful Ben Bulben country; in her “lonely wildness,” she seemed as “clean and sweet” as a “rock-bred, sea-borne bird.” The comparison between girl and bird is now stated as a simile. The epithet “rock-bred” connotes “lofty,” “arrogant,” and “firm,” while “sea-borne” is, of course, also a pun; like Venus, Constance is pictured as mysteriously rising from the sea.19

In the last stanza, girl and bird merge completely: the bird that, springing from its nest, is at home on both land and sea, and that perches on the rocky cliff overlooking the “cloudy canopy” beneath, obviously represents the young girl, who, having just emerged from the protective nest of childhood, “perches” aloft at Lissadell, surveying from her vantage point the “cloudy canopy” of the chaotic world below her. The imagery of the last two lines refers to the girl’s future, which is the present time of the poem’s opening scene. Despite its lofty position on the rock, the gull’s breast is “storm-beaten” and the “hollows of the sea” cry out not far beneath it. Even so, the girl’s aristocratic elevation is short-lived; touched by the storm below, she “springs” from her perch and is absorbed in the tumult of the “fool’s ditch.”

From this summary it appears that the metaphorical equation of woman and gull is rather explicit; there is a directness of statement in “On a Political Prisoner” matched by the directness and neatness of its overall structure, which is sequential and discursive. We may note, to begin with, that each stanza is an independent syntactic unit. The first stanza sets up the pattern which is followed with slight variation by the other three; it is a single complex sentence with two subordinate clauses: “that but little patience knew” and “[that] A grey gull lost its fear and flew.” This second subordinate clause has a compound predicate with four verbs in parallel formation: “and flew,” “And there were,” “And there endured,” “And and its bit.” The syntax of the fourth stanza differs slightly from this pattern since the stanza has no independent clause; the “When” clause of line 20 is dependent upon “bird” in line 18. Stanzas 11 and 12 are thus more closely related syntactically than any of the other stanzas, but the extended “When” clause of Stanza 12 is a relatively independent syntactic unit as well. Generally, then, Yeats here achieves his stated demand for “a complete coincidence between period and stanza.”20 The first stanza could be written as a prose sentence except that the subordinate conjunction “that” must be supplied at the beginning of line 3: “She that but little patience knew, from childhood on, had now so much [that] a grey gull lost its fear and flew down to her cell and there alit, and there endured her fingers’ touch, and from her fingers ate its bit.” The rest of the poem could be similarly transposed if we supply a short clause like “before she became” in front of “Blind” at the beginning of line 11 and a coordinating conjunction before “She seemed” in line 17.

The time sequence of the poem also deserves attention. The whole situation is given in the past tense, but when the poem moves from immediate past (the prison scene) to the more remote past (the woman’s youth at Lissadell), Yeats gives us all the necessary signals; for example, “She that but little patience knew, / From childhood on, had now so much”; “Did she ... Recall the years before her mind / Became an abstract thing”; “When long ago I saw her ride”; “When first it sprang out of the nest ... While under its storm-beaten breast / Cried out the hollows of the sea.” Place is similarly clearly established: we begin with the “cell” and move backward in time to “Ben Bulben.” The final stanza furnishes a good example of the precise establishment of time and place in the poem: it is when “the bird first jumps out of its nest that it springs upon some lofty rock and stares upon the cloudy canopy, while underneath, the sea cries out.”

The development of the central metaphor is, then, a perfectly straightforward one: (1) the narrator describes the prisoner’s encounter with the gull; (2) he wonders whether the gull reminds her of her former self; (3) it does so remind the speaker; and (4) identifying the woman with the gull, he defines her tragic nobility. There is something slightly unsatisfactory about this neat, logical sequence in a poem that argues that political rationalism can make “a bitter, an abstract thing” of the mind. Yeats has not yet found the suitable structure for his attack on “intellectual hatred.” But the structural flaw has no doubt gone unnoticed because it is suc-

19 Cf. l. 17 (“While that great Queen, that rose out of the spray”) of “A Prayer for my Daughter,” which was written the year before “On a Political Prisoner.”
cessfully masked by the famed Yeatsian rhetoric, the blend of the “distant” (e.g., “Like any rock-bred, sea-borne bird”) and the “familiar” (“an abstract thing,” “some popular enmity,” “Drinking the foul ditch where they lie”).

“On a Political Prisoner” is not one of the great poems in Michael Robartes and the Dancer, but its structure turns out to be typical. “Easter 1916,” for example, may well have finer rhythmic control and dramatic intensity, but its structure is equally discursive. The poem can be divided into four logically related sections: the first (lines 1–16), the speaker gives his impression of the mental and moral climate of Ireland prior to the Uprising; in the second (lines 17–40), he characterizes particular individuals who are tragically involved in the conflict; in the third (lines 41–56), the image of the stone that troubles the “living stream” is introduced as an explicit symbol of the political fervor that destroys the vitality of life; finally, in the fourth section (lines 57–80), the crucial question as to the value of the rebellion is posed and is answered in the paradoxical refrain: a “beauty” has indeed been born—but it is a “terrible” one. As in “On a Political Prisoner,” the development is straightforward, the chronology is clearly indicated, and the symbolism of the third section is introduced by the transitional explanatory phrase, “Hearts with one purpose alone / Through summer and winter seem / Enchanted to a stone,” while the meaning of the stone symbol is succinctly summed up at the beginning of Section 1v: “Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart.” At the appropriate juncture, then, the signal is always given.

“A Second Coming” (1920), for all its difficult symbolism and its ambiguous ending, again develops sequentially and discursively. The “revelation” of the second stanza depends entirely upon the opening description of universal chaos and violence. The “vast image out of Spiritus Mundi” comes to trouble the speaker’s sight because he has already understood that “the centre cannot hold.” Not a line in this poem could be transposed without destroying the whole; from the initial premise, “Turning and turning in the widening gyre / The falcon cannot hear the falconer,” everything else follows inevitably until, in the final moment of terror, the “rough beast” “Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born.”

There is, however, one poem in Michael Robartes whose structure looks ahead to The Tower and The Winding Stair: the famous “A Prayer for my Daughter” (1919). This poem still has a logical skeleton. On a stormy evening, the speaker watches his infant daughter, safely asleep, and as he contemplates the scene, the storm symbolically suggests the violent future which he fears for her (Stanzas 1–11). The remainder of the poem (Stanzas 11–14) is the speaker’s reply to the storm, his prayer that his daughter will be learned in “courtesy,” that she will hate “opinions,” that her soul will recover “radical innocence,” and that her bridegroom will bring her to a house “Where all’s accustomed, ceremonious.” But the key words in the poem—“custom,” “ceremony,” “beauty,” and “innocence”—take their meanings, not from the discursive statement that the poem makes, but from the cumulative enrichment which they receive from the developing poem. For example, if we wish to understand the meaning of “radical innocence,” we must go, not to Stanza 1v which contains the phrase (“Considering that, all hatred driven hence / The soul recovers radical innocence”), but back to lines 47–48: “O may she live like some green laurel / Rooted in one dear perpetual place.” This “rooted” or “radical” innocence is not anything spontaneous or natural; it is the very opposite of the “murderous innocence” (line 16), the blind, aimless violence of the storm, for it is something to be painfully learned and acquired, the result of discipline and order. Thus, when the speaker finally asks, “How but in custom and in ceremony / Are innocence and beauty born?” it is the cross-reference of symbols, not the discursive development of the poem, that provides the final statement,

Ceremony’s a name for the rich horn
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

III

“In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz” presents, in the space of its 32 four-stress lines, the very heart of the Lissadell tragedy which was summarized above:

1

The light of evening, Lissadell,
Great windows open to the south,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both

\footnote{See Richard Ellmann, Identity of Yeats, pp. 140–141.}

\footnote{The basic argument is whether the poem should be read as an independent text, in which case its language suggests that the “rough beast” is bringing a new dispensation of nightmare and terror, or whether it should be read in the light of A Vision, in which case one may argue, as Helen Vendler does in Yeats’s Vision and the Later Plays (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), that “Yeats approves intellectually, if not emotionally of the Second Coming. . . . The Beast is a world-restorer” (p. 99). For a good recent summary, see Donald Davie, "Michael Robartes and the Dancer," in An Honored Guest, pp. 76–79.}
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Beautiful, one a gazelle.
But a raving autumn shears
Blossom from the summer’s wreath;
The older is condemned to death,
Pardoned, drags out lonely years
Conspiring among the ignorant.
I know not what the younger dreams—
Some vague Utopia—and she seems,
When withered old and skeleton-gaunt,
An image of such politics.
Many a time I think to seek
One or the other out and speak
Of that old Georgian mansion, mix
Pictures of the mind, recall
That table and the talk of youth,
Two girls in silk kimonos, both
Beautiful, one a gazelle.

II
Dear shadows, now you know it all,
All the folly of a fight
With a common wrong or right.
The innocent and the beautiful
Have no enemy but time;
Arise and bid me strike a match
And strike another till time catch;
Should the conflagration climb,
Run till all the sages know
We the great gazeebo built,
They convicted us of guilt;
Bid me strike a match and blow.

The first four lines of the poem strike a note
quite unlike anything in “On a Political Prisoner.” A series of images is rapidly presented in a
“phantasmagoric” procession which must be
apprehended spatially rather than sequentially:
“The light of evening,” “Lissadell,” “Great
windows open to the south,” “Two girls in silk
kimonos,” “both / Beautiful,” “one a gazelle.”
It is as if the speaker breathlessly conjured up
those images that most sharply recall the tran-
quility of the Lissadell of his youth. The four
lines consist of a series of noun phrases without
a single verb or an adverb of time, so that the
total image is one of timelessness—the picture
is fixed, permanent.

When one compares the finished poem to the
manuscript drafts published by Jon Stallworthy,
one notes that, although the first version similarly
begins with a series of noun phrases, Yeats’s
tendency is not, as Stallworthy argues, to revise
in the direction of specificity (p. 176), but rather
to expand the range of suggestiveness. When, for
example, “A Georgian house under a hill” be-
comes “The light of evening, Lissadell,” the re-
vised line, in which one phrase is replaced by two,
is, on the one hand, less descriptive (in the first
instance we know precisely where we are) but,
on the other, much more evocative thematically,
it immediately characterizes the two girls—theirs
is an evening light, a dying beauty and radiance.

The juxtaposition of images in the first four
lines seems random but actually gives a complete
picture of the two sisters in their youth: “light,”
“windows,” “south,” “silk kimonos,” “gazelle”
—the image is one of silky delicacy and warmth,
of oriental grace. The name “Lissadell” fits
perfectly into this complex, because the alliteration
of l’s (“light,” “Lissadell,” “girls,” “silk,” “beau-
tiful,” “gazelle”) and the assonance of short
i’s (Lissadell, “windows,” “in,” “silk,” “ki-
monos”) evoke precisely the liquid rustling sound
which defines the world of the two young sisters.
T. R. Henn holds that the poem is spoilt for him
“by the seeming-forced rhyme of Lissadell-gaze-
nelle, though indeed there is no other rhyme for
that once-great house” (Lonely Tower, p. 306).
But the drafts make clear that “Lissadell,”
which is not one of the original rhyme words, is
intentionally placed in the emphatic rhyming
position in the final version; embedded in the
matrix of oriental images, the rhyme “Lissadell”
/ “gazelle” defines the abstract adjective “beau-
tiful” in line 4: it is not just any beauty that the
poem associates with Lissadell but a very definite
one—the delicacy and cool light of a Japanese

print.

If one insists on treating the poem as a logical
sequence, lines 5–13 offer all sorts of difficulties.
Obviously this passage, which is thematically
related to Stanzas 11 of “On a Political Prisoner,”
refers to the destruction of the Lissadell world,
but what brings on that destruction? In the first
version, lines 5–6 are: “But Ireland is a rag and
seems / What she touches with her breath”
(Sfallworthy, p. 169). Here the blame is put
squarely on Irish Nationalism, but Yeats quickly
discards the explicit statement for the following:
“But the spring to summer wears / That brings
round October breath” (p. 169). This reference to
the destructive power of time seems to be analog-
ous to the thematic statement in lines 24–25 of
the finished poem: “The innocent and the beau-
tiful / Have no enemy but time.” But the final
version is different again: “But the raving
autumn shears / Blossom from the summer’s
wreath.”

It is not, as was the case in the second version,
the inevitability of seasonal change that these
lines stress, but rather its cruelty. “Shears” is
the first verb in the poem; Yeats no doubt puts

* See Between the Lines: Yeats’s Poetry in the Making
(Oxford, 1963), p. 168. All references to earlier drafts of
the poem are to Stallworthy’s book.
it in the present tense so that we witness the destruction itself rather than hearing about it as a fait accompli as we do in "On a Political Prisoner." But why is the autumn "raving"? Henn suggests that "the violence and overtones of cruelty and casualness (as of the Blind Fury) give perfectly the destruction, as it were to nakedness, of both the beauty and the wisdom of the two girls: the raving autumn being the madness that came with political leadership in middle age" (Lonely Tower, p. 306). "Raving" is, in other words, a transferred epithet: it is the women in their revolutionary zeal who are "raving." Lines 5–6 are thus impossible to paraphrase: it is time that destroys the girls, but, then again, it is not only time. The phrase "raving autumn" implies that the girls are to blame for their actions, and yet these actions are perhaps part of the inevitable time in the sense that the beauty and radiance of Eva and Constance is bound to fade no matter what way of life they choose. The meaning of this passage is, then, much more oblique than that of Stanza II of "On a Political Prisoner," with its precise reference to a time before Constance became "Blind, and leader of the blind." Furthermore, when Yeats changes "But the spring to summer wears / That brings round October breath" to "But a raving autumn shears / Blossom on the summer’s wreath," he picks up and enriches the imagery of the first four lines. The delicate "blossom" (one thinks of a Japanese cherry tree), which is violently torn off, accords with the image pattern of “South,” “silk kimonos,” and "gazelle," and again the alliteration of l’s and s’s creates a phonetic cluster that underlines the symbolic one: "Lissadell," "silk," "blossom." There is, then, a "phantasmagoria" of related images here rather than a logical development of one central image, as was the case with the egglull in "On a Political Prisoner."

In lines 7–9, Yeats abruptly turns from the autumn image to a stark, matter-of-fact description of what happens to "The older" sister, Constance. In the first draft, line 7 is preceded by a transitional line containing the rhetorical question, "What distinguished calm endures" (p. 169). This is crossed out and replaced by the line "How can happiness survive." In the finished poem there is no such transition; we jump from the seasonal image to the description of the pitiful old woman. The logic of line 8 is puzzling. The first draft reads "But pardoned and elects to live" (p. 169). Here the relationships are clearly established: Constance is condemned to death but pardoned and still has the will to live. Again the revision produces a greater density of meaning. Does line 8 mean "After she is pardoned, she drags out lonely years," or "Although pardoned and hence theoretically free, she never truly recovers and lives only to drag out lonely years"? In either case, the main effect of "drags out lonely years" is to cancel ironically the force of the word "Pardoned." Pardoned for what, one wonders? The phrase, "Conspiring among the ignorant" seals her fate, for what can be more humiliating than to conspire among the ignorant, to expend one’s energies on a hopeless and pointless cause? And there is a further irony that although never alone (surrounded by the "ignorant"), Constance nevertheless "drags out lonely years."

The first draft of lines 10–13 has a precision which Yeats again works to remove:

All the younger’s labour seems
Abstract humanitarian dream
Her body grown skeleton-gaunt
A fitting symbol of all of her politics.

(p. 169–170)

In the revision, this harsh condemnation is tempered as the speaker pleads ignorance: "I know not what the younger dreams." The "vague Utopia" of line 11 is purposely not defined more closely; it may be no more than the vague, dreamy longing of a gazelle-like girl in a silk kimonos, or it may refer to her misguided socialist activities. In any case, not just her body but her very self now becomes "withered old and skeleton-gaunt," reflecting, like a mirror, the emptiness of her dreams. It is noteworthy that Yeats here takes a hackneyed phrase like "old and withered," and, by reversing the elements, removing "and," and omitting a comma between the adjectives, creates a phrase that is striking in its intensity.

In line 14, Yeats returns to the present but there is no indication of this shift in the verb tenses or in the modifiers. The poem maintains a continuous present in which all images merge. It is no coincidence that lines 14–17 each end with a transitive verb. In contrast to the opening image (lines 1–4), the speaker now tries consciously to revive the past, to make it live: he seeks, speaks, mistras pictures, recalls. Thus, when he returns to the initial image of the two girls in silk kimonos in lines 19–20, the repetition is, as Thomas Parkin-

Cf. "No Second Troy":
Why should I blame her that she filed my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or buried the little streets upon the great,
Had they but courage equal to desire?
son observes, "so changed by its context that its meaning has shifted...from the original exaltation to muted sadness... What was so sweetly and spontaneously present initially has by now become soiled and darkened by the irrelevancies of life" (The Later Poetry, p. 196).

But the mood of wistful sadness does not last. In the opening line of Part II, there is an abrupt shift as the speaker directly addresses the girls: "Dear shadows now you know it all" [italics mine]. The "dear shadows" are evidently the dead (in the first version Yeats writes, "Learn dear shadows in the grave," p. 171), but what is the significance of "now"? It might be supposed that "now" indicates that there has been a definite shift in time from that of the opening scene of the poem, but of course the speaker has known all along that the girls whom he memorializes are dead. Why, then, do the sisters "know it all" "now"?

The answer is that the relationship of Parts I and II is not temporal or causal but tonal. The speaker breaks off abruptly after line 20 and shifts in Part II to another angle of vision. It is his mood, not the actual events recounted, that changes. What seems reprehensible in Part I is forgiven by the more sympathetic speaker of Part II. The girls become "Dear shadows," and it is not so much they who "know it all" "now" as it is the speaker; it is he who can now commiserate on "All the folly of a fight / With a common wrong or right."

Lines 24–25 must be understood in this context. The statement "The innocent and the beautiful / Have no enemy but time" is misleading; it looks suspiciously like a nice neat summary of the poem's theme. John Unterecker, for example, says that "Yeats is attacking... the whole destructive force of time itself." But surely this is to oversimplify, for, as B. Rajan observes, the poem clearly suggests other enemies besides time: "the gazelle's innocence is destroyed in the corruption of politics and those who built the gazebo are convicted of guilt... The question which the poem cleverly leaves open is whether 'politics' and mob condemnation are not really part of the time-process" (W. B. Yeats, p. 124).

The point here is that the pat statement of lines 24–25 is not a reasoned deduction; it does not follow logically as each statement in "On a Political Prisoner" follows from the one before. Seen from one angle, the girls have brought on their own destruction; seen from another, it is perhaps inevitable—innocence and beauty cannot last. The phrase "raving autumn" provides us with the key to the meaning of lines 24–25: both freedom and necessity are involved in the tragedy.

Lines 26–32 are the most obscure in the poem. Unterecker writes, "At the end of the poem, joining the aristocrats turned revolutionists, Yeats calls to the ghosts of their youth in a shout of destructive ecstasy at the thought of that conflagration that could end not only the past but all murderous time as well" (Reader's Guide, p. 204). The final mood does seem to be one of "destructive ecstasy," but I think it is incorrect to conclude that the speaker's aim is to destroy all time; in Part I, after all, he has painstakingly and lovingly recalled time past. In evaluating the speaker's tone at the end of the poem, we must determine what it is that he wants the "sages" of line 29 to "know." In the first draft, there is no period at the end of the line so that the meaning seems to be that the "sages" (cf. the "sages standing in God's holy fire" in "Sailing to Byzantium"), the immortal spirits, will know that he has built "the great gazebo." In the final version, however, Yeats deletes the period, the implication being that he wants the sages to acknowledge not just the erection of the gazebo, but the whole human tragedy which has occurred in Time—the Time now to be defyied by the striking of the match and the conflagration. Unterecker takes "They" in line 31 as referring to the mob, but it is more likely that the pronoun refers to the sages, as it does in the first draft:

Bid me let the sages know
I the great gazebo built
They brought home to me the guilt (p. 171)

It is significant that the speaker now implicates himself in the guilt of the political revolutionists, and the climbing conflagration thus becomes a symbol of his venom and anger purged. The sages will recognize the gesture.

"We the great gazebo built" is the key line of Part II and probably the most troublesome line in the poem. The OED gives the following meaning for gazebo: (1) "A turret or lantern on the roof of a house, usually for the purpose of commanding an extensive prospect... a belvedere or look-out"; (2) "a projecting window or balcony." From this definition, the basic meaning of the line is clear enough: "We built the lofty look-out, the 'ivory tower' from which we surveyed Ireland." Stallyworth believes that the gazebo represents Yeats's "early vision, more romantic than realistic of a resurgent Ireland" (p. 172). But

D. J. Gordon points out that in normal Irish usage gazebo means not so much “look out” but an architectural folly—“something to look at rather than look from . . . aristocratic folly, which is finally identified with a look-out tower into a Utopian future, a future that has no place for aristocratic values; and both in turn are associated with the folly of art; art that abolishes time and establishes memory” (Images of a Poet, p. 43).

For our purposes, however, the important thing is not whether gazebo means “look out” or “look at,” but that, in either case, it is intimately related to the earlier oriental images in the poem. The etymological note in the OED suggests that “it may possibly be a corruption of some oriental word.” A gazebo is an architectural structure inspired by oriental design, a graceful turret on a roof or a delicate projecting balcony. Line 30 thus points back to the opening scene of the poem: the “great gazebo” merges with the “great windows open to the south,” and it is the perfect setting for the “two girls in silk kimonos.” There is, moreover, a pun on gazebo-gazelle. The architectural curiosity is, then, the perfect symbol for a way of life that is charming, delicate, graceful—and that is a vision doomed to fail, partly due to the common guilt of Yeats and the Gore-Booth sisters, and partly because time destroys all lovely dreams. The final line of the poem is intentionally ambiguous: does it mean that the fire will be blown up or blown out? It does not really matter because, in either case, the demon has been exorcised by the defiant gesture; the sudden switch to the past tense in lines 30–31 indicates that the speaker has come to terms with what has happened and can close this chapter of the book. Nothing is altered but everything is understood.

The development of the poem is, then, not a sequential or a logical one. Its form is discontinuous or spatial: the reader must fit the fragments together and keep allusions in mind “until, by reflexive reference, he can link them to their complements” (Frank, p. 18). Thus, the futility of “conspiring among the ignorant” is intensified not by argument but by the progressive changing of the images. In contrast to “On a Political Prisoner,” “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth” does not contain a single complex sentence; the sentences are short and choppy, there are frequent caesuras as in lines 3, 11, 17, and 19, and the images seem to rush spontaneously to the speaker’s mind, often without connectives or subordination. In this “phantasmagoria” everything is given equal weight and the syntax is often pseudo-syntax, as in the case of “now” (line 21) and in the sudden use of the past tense in lines 30–31, when Yeats had intentionally omitted the past tense where one would expect to find it in lines 5–13.

The reflexive intensification of images is extremely artful. “Dear shadows” in line 21 recalls the phrase “withered old and skeleton-gaunt” in line 12: the girls wither and become mere shadows of their former beautiful selves. “Shadows” also points back to the “light of evening,” the shadowy half-light of line 1, and reminds us that this is an elegy and that the girls have been dead all along. The “great gazebo” recalls the “great windows” of Lissadell, the “silk kimonos,” the “blossom on the summer’s wreath,” the “gazelle.” The image of Time as the enemy takes us back to the “raving autumn” of line 5. In Part II, moreover, the destruction theme of Part I is given a new twist, for the speaker turns the tables and suddenly becomes one of the destroyers he formerly condemned. And the blaze of the destructive fire is contrasted to a very different kind of light—the “light of evening” which the speaker associates with Lissadell. The juxtaposition of the half-light of evening with the bright flare of the conflagration gives us, in fact, the central thematic antithesis of the poem, the tension between violence and order, disruption and “silky ambience.” The opening line of the finished poem (unlike the original “A Georgian house under a hill”) thus introduces a key motif which is not fully understood until the very end.

The structure of “In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth and Con Markiewicz” is the basic structure of Yeats’s later poems. In “Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931,” for example, line 25, “Sound of a stick upon the floor” makes no sense until we remember that the “wood” of Stanza II is “Now all dry sticks under a wintry sun.” Lady Gregory, who “toils from chair to chair” inside Coole Mansion, has herself become a “dry stick.” In “Byzantium,” the image of the great dome in Stanza I is juxtaposed with that of the “super-human” “shade” of Stanza II, and with the “Miracle, bird or golden handiwork” of Stanza III—all symbols of eternity, but logically quite unrelated.

“Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,” which was written in 1921 and appeared in The Tower, is one of Yeats’s first poems to exhibit spatial form. Part I presents an existential view of the horror

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and violence of civil war in Ireland; Part II regards that same violence from a panoramic, cyclical viewpoint—the repetitive nature of evil and turmoil is thus stressed. In Part III, escape from the cycle is wished for and contemplated, but the swan, here a soul-symbol, "leaps" only into a "desolate heaven," and so in IV and V we have a litany of self-mockery, and finally, in Part VI, a visionary coda in which the speaker experiences, for a brief moment, a kind of Walpurgisnacht: "Herodias' daughters" and "That insolent fiend Robert Arisson" merge in their orgiastic movements. All six sections are related by the cumulative development of wind and riding images: the bitter, disillusioned speaker of Part I tells us that "Now days are dragon-ridden, the nightmare / Rides upon sleep"; in the nightmare vision of Part VI, there is "violence of horses" and "a sudden blast of dusty wind," as the evil spirits frenziedly gallop through the night. This apocalyptic coda has no logical or narrative connection to Part I with its description of modern Ireland, and yet the "Bronzed peacock-feathers," introduced in the final line of the poem as a symbol of the debased lust of "lovelorn Lady Kyteler," point back ironically to the "ornamental bronze" of the Acropolis (line 5), the image of traditional splendor and vanished glory.

Spatial form—the "structure of simple juxtaposition and stark confrontation"—which also is the basic form of such diverse modern poems as "The Waste Land," Stevens' "The Auroras of Autumn," Williams' Paterson, and Robert Lowell's "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow," is, then, a distinguishing feature of Yeats's later poetry. The dramatic tone, the colloquial diction, and the theme of "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth" relate it to an earlier counterpart like "On a Political Prisoner," but the organization of its parts is quite different. Yeats became a modern slowly and painfully; although the rhetoric of the pre-Raphaelites was abandoned before 1910, their typical poetic structure remained his norm until the mid-twenties. By the time he wrote The Tower and The Winding Stair, however, Yeats understood what later poets such as Pound and Williams have not always grasped: that "phantasmagoric" structure is not just a matter of repeating images—they must be developed, altered, "charged" so that their confrontation creates a unified pattern. In "In Memory of Eva Gore-Booth," the central unifying image is the paradoxical "light of evening," for the memory of the "two girls in silk kimonos" ultimately lights up the dark evening of the speaker's recent experience. The method of the poem is to reconcile the images of "light" ("silk kimonos," "windows open to the south," "blossom") and those of "evening" ("raving autumn," "Withered old and skeleton-gaunt," "shadows"). Without such reconciliation, Yeats's lookout tower, his "gazebo," would be nothing but a crumbling structure.

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