Yeats, Violence, and Aesthetic Distance

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Introduction

In Frank Lentricchia's chapter "The Explicit Poetics of W.B. Yeats," he writes about a "Yeatsian poetic of will" that relies on "impersonality" and is "framed in tragic awareness." Lentricchia's observation leads to an important question for Yeats's poetry: "How can he involve himself in a finite universe and still become a creative artist, rather than simply a secretary to this world of brute fact" (62-63)? The intense, visible suffering of violent times often reveals the way a deterministic world, which Lentricchia believes Yeats's poetry depicts, erodes individual agency. To understand how Yeats preserves the individual's significance in times of especially copious violence, I will analyze several of his poems that respond to World War I and the Easter Rising. During these events, violence encroaches on Yeats's personal life as an artist, leading him to respond with deliberate aesthetic choices.

Aesthetic distance, the poetic speaker's intellectual and emotional detachment from the poetic subjects' visceral suffering amid violence, allows individuals to recognize fate and continue to act in Yeats's poems. In his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats famously defends his controversial editorial decision to exclude popular World War I poets such as Wilfred Owen by writing, "Passive suffering is not a theme for poetry." (xxxiv). Scholars have paid much attention to this quote as it applies to Yeats's political attitudes towards World War I.[1] Of course, Yeats's decision does reflect his revolutionary political views by excluding prominent English authors, but a political explanation fails to fully account for the phrase "passive suffering" as it relates to individual action. For Yeats, "passive suffering" should not be present in poetry because he has an alternate approach of poetic distance that keeps the individual from becoming caught in an immediate, subjective response to violence. Yeats

[1] For the connection between "passive suffering" and Yeats's political attitudes, see Allison 212 and Foster ("Yeats at War..." 145).

uniquely represents violence by connecting the individual's actions to broader forces that contextualize violence outside of the poem's temporal moment.

Upon first glance, Yeats's decision to place individuals in these contexts seems to diminish their influence since the chaos of violence obscures personal action. However, by putting his subjects in the context of these larger concepts, Yeats amplifies their ability to act rightly. The formal result in his poetry is a more distant approach to violence in which individuals become symbols and sacrifices as in "Easter, 1916" and "The Rose Tree," and a view from the air highlights the ability of a strong will to transcend suffering in "An Irish Airman foresees his Death." Yeats glides between subjectivity and detachment, emphasizing how acknowledging the reality of predetermining forces is the only way to deliver oneself from their immediate effects. His poems centered around World War I and the Easter Rising take an aesthetically distant approach to violence, contrasting with the poetry of "passive suffering" by emphasizing the ways individuals accept fate and continue to act in the world. In doing so, Yeats's poems simultaneously humanize and empower sufferers of violence while carving out an elevated role for the poet.

In this thesis, I will examine several of Yeats's poems that address violence and suffering as major topics but keep their depictions of violence at a distance. These poems often focus on individuals in a struggle against forces larger than themselves that threaten to sweep them away into the totality of violence and suffering that is taking place. How can an individual's actions be significant when conflicts such as World War I and the Easter Rising threaten to produce violence on such a grand scale as to completely obscure them? Ultimately, Yeats's aesthetically distant approach to violence makes sense of individual action in a deterministic world by showing how that action fits into a wider philosophical, mythological, and historical context.

Embracing this distant aesthetic that values detachment over immediacy does not diminish the individual's importance; instead, it offers significance for the individual who recognizes the tragic force of fate and continues to act.

World War I and the Easter Rising are good starting places for examining Yeats's approach to violence. As we will see, Yeats begins contextualizing violence through aesthetic distance in earlier poems such as "No Second Troy," but the poems during these later violent events fully elaborate Yeats's approach. The Easter Rising also helps precipitate the Irish War of Independence and Irish Civil War, violent events that Yeats often refers back to in his widely admired later poems. To understand Yeats's poetry of violence during World War I, immediately before and after the Easter Rising, I will begin by analyzing his criticism of "passive suffering" in the poetry of that period. This will allow me to evaluate how his poetry contrasts with that type of writing through my analysis of the way he depicts leaders such as Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, and Maud Gonne. I will continue by examining the detached role Yeats prescribes for the artist in war. Finally, I will show the poetic effect his distant approach to violence has on the subject of "An Irish Airman foresees his Death," which is the closest Yeats comes to writing a World War I poem. In all, his poems must finally contend with the tension between the sufferer's agency and the deterministic forces violent events reveal.

"Passive Suffering" and Aesthetic Distance

In his introduction to the 1936 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats elaborates his reasons for rejecting poems that he feels hold "passive suffering" as a theme. Properly understood, Yeats's criticism of "passive suffering" helps explain his poems written around the time of the Easter Rising. When we apply the philosophical ideas Yeats elaborates in his

introductory essay to these earlier poems, we see that he uses many of the same concepts to make the Irish revolutionary leaders' sufferings significant in their contexts. This means he also takes a more distant approach to violence in these poems than some major World War I poets do. How can an aesthetically distant poem make its suffering subjects appear significant in the midst of violent events? Answering that question requires attention to the specific philosophical context in which Yeats uses the term "passive," and the differences between his poems and the war poems he rejects. Given this assessment, Yeats's poems demonstrate an alternative to "passive suffering" by using aesthetic distance to show how the individual's actions have philosophical meaning, even when the forces of fate are inescapable.

The term "aesthetic distance" suggests Kant's aesthetic philosophy and captures Yeats's approach to depersonalizing and contextualizing violence. In his discussion of sound judgement as devoid of interest in the *Critique of Judgement*, Kant writes, "Everyone must allow that a judgement on the beautiful which is tinged with the slightest interest, is very partial and not a pure judgement of taste" (205). Yeats takes the same approach to violence. The individual involved in violence may only exercise sound judgement, and have the freedom to act rightly by extension, if he detaches himself from immediate interest in the event. Aesthetic distance describes a detached approach in poetry that relates immediate events through abstract symbols and systems that contextualize them. Because Yeats does not use the same types of imagery as the poets he criticizes for "passive suffering," the actual violence he addresses remains in the periphery of the text, mediated through symbol. As a result, the poetic voice approaches the subject from a neutral, detached position. This does not mean the speaker does not betray his doubts and subjective responses, as we will see in "Easter, 1916." Rather, the speaker remains impartial by tying violence to a broader philosophical framework in which subjective doubts and

impressions have an impact on the world beyond the instant in which the individual experiences them.

This type of detachment through aesthetic distance appears in Yeats's discussion of "passive suffering." After asserting, "passive suffering is not a theme for poetry," Yeats goes on to suggest distance from war's suffering as a best practice: "If war is necessary, or necessary in our time and place, it is best to forget its suffering as we do the discomfort of a fever, remembering our comfort at midnight when our temperature fell, or as we forget the worst moments of more painful disease" (xxxv). As I will discuss in my conclusion, we might consider Yeats's view of suffering irresponsible. However, the way he advocates forgetting the pain of war reveals the philosophy he uses to approach violence in his work. In Yeats's poetry, this type of forgetfulness suggests the poet must select images that hide the immediate pain of violence and create the ability to move past it. Yeats explains his position with a vivid image of war that the Connaught Rangers recount "always with laughter."[2] According to Yeats, they describe how "an unpopular sergeant struck by a shell turned round and round like a dancer wound in his own entrails" ("Introduction" xxxv). Although the sergeant's suffering is severe, Yeats places emphasis on the image of the dance by connecting it to a sort of medieval "*Dance of Death*." It is no longer passive suffering because the onlooking soldiers connect the dying man's movements to a philosophical understanding of the world, allowing them to look back and laugh at the gruesome, terrifying scene. The story transforms suffering by viewing it through the symbolic motion of the world, which becomes a wide conceptual lens that covers the immediate suffering.

[2] Yeats describes the entire incident in his introduction to the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* as follows: "Florence Farr returning third class from Ireland found herself among Connaught Rangers just returned from the Boer War who described an incident over and over, and always with loud laughter: an unpopular sergeant struck by a shell turned round and round like a dancer wound in his own entrails. That too may be a right way of seeing war, if war is necessary; the way of the Cockney slums, of Patrick Street, of the *Kilmainham Minut*, of *Johnny I hardly knew ye*, of the medieval *Dance of Death*" (xxxv).

The importance for Yeats of maintaining distance from immediate suffering by connecting it to philosophical frameworks for understanding the world originates in his use of Matthew Arnold's ideas about suffering. Yeats claims he rejects poems of "passive suffering" for the same reason Matthew Arnold removed *Empedocles on Etna* from circulation (xxxiv). In a preface to his poems, Arnold writes of the circumstances that cannot produce poetic joy, or "tragic joy" as Yeats takes up the idea: "They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done" (Arnold 105). For Yeats, the World War I poets' need to "plead the suffering of their men" leads to this passivity ("Introduction" xxxiv). These poets feel a need to write of circumstances in which men cannot act decisively. Instead, they must only endure, susceptible to the "disease" of war that Yeats tries to avoid.

Writing about Arnold's "Preface to *Poems*," Manfred Dietrich points out, "*Empedocles* examines the limits of extreme subjectivity and self-consciousness whereas the Preface tries to articulate a position of extreme objectivity and strict classicism" (313). Since Yeats is siding with the preface to defend his editorial choices, his artistic goals lie on the side of objectivity rather than extreme subjectivity. But he still proposes balancing the subjective and the objective, which he thinks many of the poets he includes in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse* have done correctly. These poets have "combined the modern vocabulary, the accurate record of the relevant facts learnt from Eliot, with the sense of suffering of the war poets, that sense of suffering no longer passive, no longer an obsession of the nerves; philosophy had made it part of all the mind" (xxxvi). For a poem to successfully avoid dealing only with "passive suffering," the speaker must mediate suffering through the intellect, which involves careful and detached

philosophical consideration. The poem should no longer represent an immediate psychological and physical response to violence.

To make poetry no longer "passive suffering" but "part of all the mind" means that the poem must engage the individual's entire being. In Ezra Pound's article "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" he defines an image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (200). For Pound, an image in poetry is not just a sense impression or an abstraction. An image must employ the intellect and emotions at the same time. It is a "complex" in the psychological sense because it is seated deeply inside the individual. Likewise for Yeats, a poem that deals with suffering must not see the victim in a single, materialistic light, which he suggests with the phrase "an obsession of the nerves." Some World War I poets have this tendency, but tying suffering to philosophical frameworks that employ both the intellect and the emotions can allow the poet to break free from passive suffering.

"Easter, 1916," written in response to the Easter Rising, demonstrates aesthetic distance from suffering and mediation through the mind by the way it avoids depicting immediate individual suffering. The poem opens with a scene from the speaker's memory:

> I have met them at close of day
> Coming with vivid faces
> From counter or desk among grey
> Eighteenth-century houses. (1-4)[3]

Although the speaker personally meets the figures who walk amongst the houses, he does not describe any aspects of their faces that would make them memorable for the reader. The "vivid faces" belong to the speaker's mind, but there are no distinguishing features to separate one face

[3] All quotes from Yeats's poems are from the *Collected Poems*, edited by Richard J. Finneran.

from the next or a counter from a desk in this grey scene from the reader's perspective. There is certainly nothing like the "white eyes writhing" or "guttering, choking" of the gas victim in Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est" (16, 19). Instead of remembering the sufferers in the height of their solitary agony, Yeats prefers starting with a setting that obscures their personalities, emotions, and actions within a dim cityscape. The reader sees a speaker in reminiscence and intellectual reflection rather than a sufferer enduring immediate emotional distress.

As the poem progresses, Yeats replaces sparse descriptions with symbolic language. In the middle of the poem, there are a series of reflections on the individual lives of the revolutionaries. Then, in the third stanza, these individuals mesh in a single image:

> Hearts with one purpose alone
> Through summer and winter seem
> Enchanted to a stone
> To trouble the living stream. (41-44)

Like at the beginning of the poem, the revolutionary figures are indistinguishable from one another, but their unity is now stronger. In his commentary on the poem, Norman Jeffares suggests the heart "Enchanted to a stone" was "Yeats's symbol for those who had devoted themselves to a cause without thought of life or love" (192-93). Although the symbolism here erodes some of their individuality by its abstraction, they still attach themselves to their cause without thought of danger. The successive strong syllables and repeated long vowel sounds of "one purpose alone" drive the beginning of the stanza forward, as if to highlight the unity of the rebellion's action. A single symbol represents the collective attitudes of the rebels, shifting the poem's focus farther away from individual responses to suffering. Abstract symbolism provides

a lens to view the violence of the Easter Rising through a philosophical system that mediates violence through the mind.

However, once they are "enchanted to a stone" in the stream, it is difficult to tell what effect their actions have, if any. Nature continues moving as it did before:

The horse that comes from the road,

The rider, the birds that range

From cloud to tumbling cloud,

Minute by minute they change; (45-48)

Everything continues changing together in its due course. The stone might "trouble" the stream, but it does nothing to trouble the horse, rider, bird, or clouds (44).[4] The revolutionaries who tied themselves to a cause are still subsumed by the deterministic forces at work in the world. The speaker's recognition that those forces exist and continued remembrance of the revolutionaries' names helps the change continue to take place, but it does not control the change. Poetic intervention by the speaker can only direct the transformation by understanding and contextualizing the victims' suffering.

In his book *Yeats and Violence*, Michael Wood recognizes that the perspective change towards the end of this poem gives some readers the impression that Yeats "escapes at the end into a sort of historico-spiritualist hocus-pocus," but he believes the "radical imperfection of form" at the poem's turbulent end still gives a powerful effect (94). I would argue that the poem's effect remains strong because of the clarity of the stone's image in the midst of confusion and turbulence. By the end of the poem, the concrete action of the revolution threatens to become lost in a jumble of "minute by minute" changes that repeat themselves (48-55). The speaker is so

[4] Victor Luftig pointed out how the suggestion that the stone might "trouble" the stream is somewhat passive and throws the effect of the rebels' action into question.

far removed from individual suffering that he remembers the rebels by a "murmur" of their names and a "dream" (61, 70). However, just when the individual actions of "MacDonagh and MacBride / And Connolly and Pearse" will be subsumed into the collective dream of Ireland's independence, Yeats reminds the readers of their active influence by writing their names in verse (75-76). In this way, Yeats recognizes the risk that violence will overrun the individual, but he admires them for continuing to commit to their purpose despite the violent forces at work. The fact that the speaker is aesthetically distant from the physical suffering of the named leaders does not diminish their actions. Instead, the abstract symbolism of the stone contextualizes the rebels' sacrifice by mediating violence. Through symbol, suffering can be contained within the mind.

Looking at the opening and closing stanzas of "Easter 1916," it is clear that Yeats moves to mediate violence through the speaker's first-person point of view and through abstract symbolism. In later poems, "Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen" for example, Yeats writes using the pronoun "we" to involve his speaker in the nation's struggles: "We pieced our thought into philosophy. . . / Who are but weasels fighting in a hole" (32). The speaker is one of the animals fighting in a confined, underground space as close to suffering as possible. This means the speaker's philosophy falls short because he does not have the necessary distance from violence to contextualize it. By contrast, there is a distinction between the observing "I" and the fighting "they" in "Easter 1916," allowing the speaker to remain separate from violence and contextualize it. Yeats writes about the legacy of the rebellion in terms of the revolutionaries' dream that onlookers may or may not carry forward: "We know their dream; enough / to know they dreamed and are dead" (70-71). The speaker of the poem is separate from the heroic group of rebels, lending their deeds more gravity, but the rebellion's results are uncertain and distant. The

speaker has no choice except to recognize the violent forces at work and make sense of them through reflection and remembrance.

Importantly, Yeats's use of aesthetic distance does not always entail total separation between the speaker and the suffering individual. For example, Yeats writes "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" from a first-person perspective, but the speaker remains detached from suffering despite his impending death. Although it resembles a war poem, the nature of flight keeps the violence of the soldiers on the ground at a distance. Rather than being dependent on the speaker, aesthetic distance depends on how directly the poem moves towards a depiction of individual suffering without a philosophical framework to contextualize it. Michael Wood points to Derek Attridge's argument that the poem "Easter, 1916" envisions a movement by which "the quotidian becomes the remarkable, the casual becomes the compulsive" (Attridge 328). How can the ordinary in a poem become remarkable in a violent time? For Yeats, the individual's actions become extraordinary when they transcend passive suffering in keeping with the phrase "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart" ("Easter, 1916," 57-58). Individual suffering is active rather than passive when the philosophy behind the sacrifice is more important that the suffering itself. At that point, the heart is hard to any desires beyond achieving the desired change, but an individual act of willful violence has created that hardness.

After criticizing "passive suffering" in the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats writes that "In all the great tragedies, tragedy is a joy to the man who dies" (xxxiv). For Yeats, passive suffering leads to no such joy. If a man suffers and dies while asserting his will on the world, that act is joyful even if it is tragic. This idea is one key to understanding the way Yeats describes individuals in violent times. Using a distant, philosophical approach to violence, Yeats lends weight to an individual's actions in the world, rejecting passive suffering in favor of tragic

striving. Yeats's understanding of tragedy becomes important for the way he humanizes and empowers those who die during World War I and after the Easter Rising. The next section will examine the ways Yeats depicts these individuals through myth and history to explain the role of individual actions during violence.

Myth and the Individual in Violence

In addition to symbolism that provides philosophical mediation, Yeats also uses mythology and history to carve out a space in which the individual can take effective action during violence. The poems in his collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* that reference the Easter Rising look back on the event and consider its place in the course of history by referencing myth and blood sacrifice. "Easter, 1916" and "The Rose Tree" specifically name the Irish revolutionaries who were executed and consider their sacrifice for Ireland. Although Yeats's earlier poems contain hints of his view of the effect individuals' actions have on history,[5] the poems that address the Easter Rising specifically question the results of sacrifice and heroism in a chaotic, violent time that threatens to erase their significance. In response to this threat, Yeats focuses on elegizing individuals in a way that preserves the tragic significance of their actions during violence. Paradoxically, this involves the poet taking a step back and viewing these individuals from a distance, examining individual actions through mythological symbolism and historical context.

For example, in "The Rose Tree," Yeats uses a historical symbol of Ireland to elegize Pearse and Connolly. The rose has a long history in Irish folklore of symbolizing both Ireland itself and eternal beauty or perfection (Billigheimer, 363). When Pearse says in the poem,

[5] For examples, see Yeats's depictions of Irish nationalist leaders in "To a Shade" and "September 1913."

"Maybe a breath of politic words / Has withered our Rose Tree," he comments on his own historical period (3-4). Something about the rhetoric of that time, which seems in the moment to be sensible, has caused the Rose Tree to suddenly wither, disconnecting Ireland from its past. The Rose Tree symbolizes the eternal, ideal Ireland, but that ideal state comes at a price of blood in the poem. Connolly expresses a desire to "make the green come out again," as if they will return Ireland to some former glory (9). But Pearse's final observation suggests that their sacrifice is something new: "There's nothing but our own red blood / Can make a right Rose Tree" (17-18). Pearse and Connolly are participating in a blood sacrifice that is both unique to their time and fits with a long history of Irish violence and revolution. By placing them in history, Yeats emphasizes the importance of their action, taken at the right time, for preserving Ireland.

However, "The Rose Tree" differs from "Easter, 1916" in that the speaker takes a less active role in the poem's action. In fact, there is little action in the poem overall since it is dominated by dialogue. Although it suggests ideas of blood sacrifice, that sacrifice does not occur within the poem, and the poem's representations of Pearse and Connolly discuss it as aa future possibility. The fact that the poem does not directly describe the act of sacrifice contributes to the poem's sense of distance from violence. Where are Pearse and Connolly speaking? Why are the violent events of the Rising only alluded to in the poem rather than explicitly described? The first line of the poem has a gentle tone: "O words are lightly spoken." This conversation between Pearse and Connolly seems to take place in some ideal, peaceful place. The speaker of "Easter, 1916," who intervenes in a violent, turbulent time is far from this idealized conversation. Like the ideal of the Rose Tree, Pearse and Connolly have been idealized themselves. As a result, the poem is immersed in myth and symbol, drawing on historical

traditions of Irish folklore, dialogue, and political ideas. Its appeal to mythology is another strategy for connecting individual suffering to a firm purpose.

Because of its form, the poem's peaceful, quiet tone clashes with the violent concept of blood sacrifice it describes. Pearse and Connolly's conversation has a rhythmic quality as the dialogue alternates between them in each stanza. Although it deviates at times, the poem has a lilting, song-like rhythm as it alternates between tetrameter and trimeter, using a typical balladic meter. This formal consistency highlights the unity of thought that Pearse and Connolly achieve, moving from the doubtful speculation, "Or maybe but a wind that blows / Across the bitter sea" to the certain, violent ending, "There's nothing but our own red blood / Can make a right Rose Tree" (5-6, 17-18). Although Pearse and Connolly work towards the idea of sacrifice in their conversation, it is a necessary conclusion from the beginning. Despite Pearse's multiple suggestions as to what has caused the rose tree to wither, the cause of the withering is not the poem's primary issue. When Connolly says, "It needs to be but watered," the blood sacrifice becomes necessary immediately, and Pearse naturally ends with that idea (7). The poem's formal certainty undermines Pearse's seeming doubt at the beginning of the poem and leads to a forgone conclusion, controlled by fate. The mythological symbolism ensures that Pearse and Connolly will be guided to action by deterministic forces, but it also gives the two leaders significance beyond their own quiet worlds in the poem.

By contrast to some of Yeats's other poems dealing with violence, the subjects of "The Rose Tree" are not caught up and distorted by the chaotic world around them. Connolly replies to Pearse's initial thoughts in the poem by expanding on the metaphor of the rose tree and describing the purpose of watering it:

'To make the green come out again

And spread on every side,

And shake the blossom from the bud

To be the garden's pride.' (7-12)

The botanical imagery in this stanza reinforces the poem's tranquil tone. Sacrifice during revolution becomes an act that brings new growth, and the violence of that act is not immediately visible. Yeats has replaced the "grey / Eighteenth-century houses," the urban dreamscape of "Easter 1916," with an idyllic garden. The setting of "The Rose Tree" removes Pearse and Connolly from the practical politics and material destruction of the Easter Rising to their own world in which they can think about the necessity of their sacrifice for Ireland. The poetic speaker does not enter the poem as he does in poems like "Easter, 1916," but the two Irish revolutionary leaders develop their own symbolism through dialogue. The poem's perspective remains distant from the violence of the revolution, only evoking the event symbolically through the dialogue about sacrifice.

The use of dialogue in the poem makes it possible for the poem's logic to unfold apart from the speaker's direct intervention while also emphasizing the importance of individual personalities. When Pearse makes his final assertion that "our own red blood" is the only water that will help the rose tree grow again, he does not speak for himself as an individual but for both him and Connolly (17). Although Connolly asks a question in the middle of the poem, he does not respond after Pearse answers him, showing that he assents to Pearse's idea. Because of this, the poem does not follow the argument of a usual dialogue, instead unifying the two speakers into a single course of action at the end in a move towards objectivity. In this way, the poem resembles a parable as much as a dialogue with its characteristic "extended appropriation of metaphor" through the symbol of the tree that leads to a central, shocking idea at the end of the

interaction (Champion 16). The poem operates independently, detached from the immediate the violence and political turmoil Pearse and Connolly are involved in. It reaches its conclusion without requiring an external speaker's intervention because it operates without personal interest, depending on the two participants in the dialogue to determine their fate in history.

In providing a concise, clear dialogue with a definitive conclusion, Yeats seems to distinguish his poem from past dialogues, especially Edmund Spenser's *A View of the State of Ireland*. This difference highlights the power of myth in violence. Yeats criticizes Spenser in an introduction to a selection of Spenser's poems: "Like an hysterical patient he drew a complicated web of inhuman logic out of the bowels of an insufficient premise" ("Edmund Spenser" 361). For Yeats, Spenser's dialogue is logically convoluted and obscure. Yeats's criticism might suggest that Spenser's personal investment in Ireland causes him, an otherwise effective poet, to go astray in his dialogue. The clarity of "The Rose Tree," in which Pearse offers an answer "plain as plain can be," provides an alternative to Spenser's obfuscated dialogue in *A View of the State of Ireland* (16). Yeats resists the imperial ideas of Spenser's dialogue by providing his own support of the Easter Rising through an alternative dialogue that provides unity of purpose to the rebels through the myth of sacrifice. Pearse and Connolly's dialogue makes sense of violence without becoming lost in it as Spenser does in his violent desires for Ireland.

The poem's brevity and the way it attributes lines of speech also highlight the role of Pearse and Connolly's personalities in drawing them to the concept of a blood sacrifice. Although some other poems in Yeats's collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* are written as traditional dialogues, including the title poem and "An Image from a Past Life," "The Rose Tree" has a different format. Normally, the dialogue has parts corresponding to the two speakers, marked by their names and divided with spaces between them. In these dialogues, the two

speakers become instruments by which the author can address each side of an argument. Instead of using this approach, "The Rose Tree" contains the phrases "Said Pearse to Connolly" and "James Connolly replied" to mark the speakers of the dialogue. Yeats suggests that these individuals are conversing of their own volition, and he creates the impression that they are independent personalities conjuring their own thoughts. Because he uses these specific leaders, Yeats demonstrates the impact of their unique visions on Irish history, and he sets them up as mythical figures themselves who suffer and die for a cause.

In particular, Pearse had specific ideas about sacrifice that influenced his actions leading up to the Easter Rising. Yeats talks about Pearse's childhood desire for martyrdom in his essay "Modern Ireland" (264). He goes on to explain how the rebels' deaths during the 1916 Rebellion ushered in a new era of Irish understanding of violence:

> Something new and terrible had come in Ireland, the mood of the mystic victim. For a generation speeches, commemorations led before men's minds the martyrs for the national cause, all the more popular national songs were in their praise; not one of them, not Lord Edward, not Wolfe Tone, was the victim. They had served their cause and met their deaths, but they had not deliberately sought suffering. The man who dedicates his suffering is more powerful than any orator, because we measure his love by his suffering (266).

Yeats claims that the Irish rebels who were executed after the Easter Rising, Pearse and Connolly included, caused a heightened admiration for martyrs stretching back into Irish history. These men were seen as suffering for the sake of something larger than themselves. In this case, Yeats explains how Ireland was shaped by Pearse's poetic ideas of myth and sacrifice,[6] and those ideas

[6] In "Modern Ireland," Yeats references Pearse's poem "The Wayfarer" (265), which suggests that Pearse's death will change Ireland.

brought more significance to the individual's capacity for suffering violent acts. With this in mind, "The Rose Tree," through its dialogue form and naming of Pearse and Connolly, comments on the impact individuals have in the spread of unique understandings of suffering through violence.

Furthermore, this concern with Pearse's concept of sacrifice that sweeps across Ireland has a mythological significance. In a study of poetic responses to the 1916 Rebellion, Augustine Martin writes about Pearse's dedication to sacrifice and says, "His doctrine of a blood sacrifice is so wide in its implications that it is not quite accurate to call it a symbol. In as far as it involves the enactment of a symbolic story the correct critical term for it would be a myth" (39). It is important that Yeats chooses to use Pearse's idea of the blood sacrifice as the image that supports the poem "The Rose Tree." When Pearse asks, "But where can we draw water . . . When all the wells are parched away?" the poem remains in the environment of the garden (13-15). Then, the introduction of the blood that serves as a substitute for well water sharply subverts the peaceful mood of the garden scene, bringing violence into the picture again. By interspersing sacrificial imagery with a peaceful scene, Yeats shows how Pearse's personal views of myth intrude and enact change. The symbol of blood has the suggestion of a mythical system behind it because of the powerful symbolism Martin refers to, lending weight to Pearse's assertion that his and Connolly's deaths will restore the rose tree and cause it to thrive again.

To better understand Yeats's use of myth in the poem to contextualize individual actions, we can examine Yeats's understanding of myth more closely. In the 1925 version of *A Vision*, Yeats writes, "It is as though myth and fact, united until the exhaustion of the Renaissance, have now fallen so far apart that man understands for the first time the rigidity of fact, and calls up, by that very recognition, myth - the Mask - which now but gropes its way out of the mind's dark but

will shortly pursue and terrify" (212). Explaining how this idea fits in with Yeats's "mythical method," Denis Donoghue writes, "A fact is rigid when it is merely itself, when it does not participate in a structure of values that alone would give it dignity. A myth is a value deracinated, like gods in exile, till it finds its local embodiment, at which point presumably it becomes wisdom or counts as wisdom in the community it addresses" (214). In Yeats's system, a "rigid" fact does no good on its own. Myth, as embodied in the individual through his particular desires and visions of the world, gives "dignity" to the fact of suffering.

This interplay of myth and fact appears in the dialogue of "The Rose Tree." While the idea of a blood sacrifice suggests mythology, it is not enough for the poet to apply the symbol of blood sacrifice to Pearse and Connolly's deaths. The two, with their individual motives and desires, must converse and find an understanding of blood sacrifice as the only option that makes sense. This is the sudden, inevitable realization in the poem's final lines:

> O plain as plain can be
> There's nothing but our own red blood
> Can make a right Rose Tree.' (16-18)

Knowing Pearse's personal commitment to the myth of blood sacrifice, Yeats illustrates how the two rebel leaders view their sacrifice within a mythological system. Although the required action becomes "plain" to them, meaning they had little choice in the matter, the way they contextualize their actions makes all the difference. The dialogue of the poem emphasizes how, through myth, the fact of the violent sacrifices made during the Easter Rising are no longer rigid. This allows the individual's actions to make an impact within their broader context.

We see a similar treatment of the individual's role in history as related to myth in an earlier poem, "No Second Troy," which Donoghue cites as an example of the "mythical method"

in Yeats. While this poem uses myth to elucidate Yeats's view of the individual in violence, it also foregrounds the issue of distance. Of course, the poem can be understood to refer to Yeats's constant love interest, Maud Gonne, but it focuses on the speaker's own desire for her instead of depicting her as an independent figure (Jeffares 87). The opening lines emphasize the speaker's impulse to cast "blame" and to name the "misery" that the "she" of the poem causes him (1-2). As the poem proceeds, it describes the female subject in relation to other men saying she would have "taught to ignorant men most violent ways" and suggesting their "desire" outstrips their courage (3, 5). The first level of mediation through distance that the poem offers is the mediation of desire. Yeats does not name Maud Gonne, but describes her through the desiring subjects of both the poetic speaker and the other ignorant men. Notably, apart from the title, no mention of the Trojan War or mythology appears in the first part of the poem. Yeats goes to great lengths to construct Gonne in the poem as a distant, unnamed figure who is at once closely related to the events she brings to pass yet distant as an agent of that action.

At the same time, the poem evokes violence while keeping it in the realm of possibility rather than actuality, creating tension between fate and individual agency. The "violent ways" the woman teaches will presumably be performed by those other men the speaker criticizes, leaving the action separate from the poem's desired subject. More poignantly, the speaker describes her as having "beauty like a tightened bow" (8). This image suggests potential energy that is not yet realized. The mention of "violent ways" earlier along with the association of the bow with warfare turns the energy into violent potential. Concern with what is possible but not yet realized persists across the poem. The entire poem is a set of just four questions, making everything the poem says uncertain. However, the central questions of "What could have made her peaceful?" and "Why, what could she have done, being what she is?" bring fate into the

speaker's assessment (6, 11). Violence in the poem is both potential and predetermined. While the individual must loose the bowstring upon the world, it is unclear what other alternative there is. The final question, "Was there another Troy for her to burn?" is one without an easy answer (12).

Although the mythological allusion only appears in the title of the poem and the final question, it illuminates the way Yeats represents individuals in violence. Donoghue connects the version of Helen we see in the poem to the instance in the *Iliad* when Helen looks over Troy's walls, not knowing that her brothers, Castor and Pollux are already dead. In Book III of the Iliad, the epic poem's narrator intervenes, "So she spoke, but the teeming earth lay already upon them / away in Lakedaimon, the beloved land of their fathers" (III. 243-44). According to Donoghue, there is an "enlargement of immediate experience" here because of the disconnect between what Helen knows and what the narrator knows (210). In "No Second Troy," it appears that there is very little the "she" already knows. Her future is open to all possibilities, demonstrated by the questions, and it is only by the speaker's tying her with the mythological figure of Helen that her actions realize their potential and act upon the world. No matter what, she is bound to fate, but the "mythical method" still gives her actions significance.

In his book *Yeats and the Poetry of Death*, Jahan Ramazani explains how Yeats often takes on the role of the "tragic spectator" (85). Specifically in the poem "The Second Coming," Ramazani says, "The poem effects . . . a *sublime* transfer of energy from the violent scene to its own aesthetic work" (86). As Ramazani explains, poems such as "The Second Coming," written several years after the Easter Rising, offer this sublime quality by describing a prophetic sight of danger and transformation. In a discussion of power, Edmund Burke explains how pain is always inflicted by a power above, and the result is that "strength, violence, pain, and terror, are ideas

that rush in upon the mind together" (65). Experiencing the sublime transformation must then require distance from these immediate emotions that impinge on an individual's mind during violence. The only way to obtain that distance is by understanding transformation through history rather than only within the violent immediacy of the poem. While the "Second Coming" evokes the *Spiritus Mundi* to describe a universal transformation of humanity, Yeats also transforms the individuals he names in his elegiac poems responding to the Easter Rising based on their places in history.

For instance, the concept of sublime transformation appears explicitly in "Easter, 1916." The poem's repeated lines, "All changed, changed utterly: / A terrible beauty is born," describe the aesthetic pleasure that comes from a terrible, violent event (15-16). The lines ring out like a tolling funeral bell at the end of the first, second, and fourth stanzas. Missing this refrain in the third stanza gives the impression that the transformation might fade away in the chaos of natural changes, splashing, and shadow in that section of the poem. Violence becomes a flurry of movement and natural, determined processes. However, the "terrible beauty" returns. The speaker wonders, "Was it needless death after all" (67)? The repetition of the lines describing transformation offers the answer that these deaths might not be meaningless when they are placed in their proper context. This requires the poet to intervene from outside and "murmur name upon name, / as a mother names her child" (61-62). Yeats simultaneously blends their names with the sounds of nature, the murmur of the stream, and ensures their names will be passed on across generations from mother to child. In the recovery of the individual's role during violence, the sublime transformation requires the poet to provide the calm contrast of a quiet "murmur" in the loudness of the poem's motion that places the revolutionaries in history.

Yet the specifics of the transformation change from the beginning to the end of the poem, and the repeated lines differ slightly, referring to different subjects. The lines at the end of the first stanza describe the transformation of the mundane and indistinct scene at the beginning of the poem. The change breaks through the hazy dream of everyday life, interrupting it with violence. Next, one of the transformations is described in detail:

> This other man I had dreamed
> A drunken vainglorious lout.
> He had done most bitter wrong
> To some who are near my heart,
> Yet I number him in the song;
> He, too, has resigned his part
> In the casual comedy;
> He, too, has been changed in his turn,
> Transformed utterly:
> A terrible beauty is born. (31-40)

Yeats is describing Major John MacBride, referring to the breakup of his marriage with Maud Gonne and his abusive behavior, but MacBride remains anonymous for now (Jeffares 192). The poet displays his reluctance to "number him in the song" but nevertheless names him in the final stanza. The simple statement that "[h]e, too, has been changed in his turn" highlights how transformation is predetermined in a violent context. He was transformed at a particular time in history according to his individual role, but the transformation is beyond his control. What matters are not the personal flaws and "bitter wrong" he has committed, but the part he has played in the "casual comedy." He is transformed as an individual by the historical context or

stage on which his actions occur. By embracing that idea, the violent event that sparked the transformation, the Easter Rising itself, does not dominate MacBride's personality.

However, the Irish rebels do not remain unnamed, and the third repetition of "terrible beauty" connects their legacy to its historical context. At the end of the poem, Yeats makes his strongest intervention as the poet by writing

> 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. (75-80)

Here, Yeats uses his perspective as an outsider to situate the rebels' actions in a long history of Irish revolutionary violence. Naming the dead allows their sacrifices to have not only an immediate impact but to influence "time to be" by writing them down for future generations to know. However, it is not the individual rebels with their personal passions who are to be remembered. Instead, it is their changed state which Yeats ties to Irish history. The phrase, "Wherever green is worn," calls back to revolutionary songs of the 1798 Rebellion such as "Green on my Cape" (Jeffares 193). This context depersonalizes the Easter, 1916 revolutionaries by placing them within a historical tradition of violent rebellion. The green represents Ireland across history rather than only a few of the individuals involved in the Rising, and the transformation allows those individuals to stand for Ireland itself. Those who were unnamed individuals, "young and beautiful" (22), "sensitive" (29), and "drunken, vainglorious" (32) lose

some of their individual characteristics in favor of aesthetic distance that makes their actions significant during a violent event.

Yeats later offers thoughts on sacrifice that demonstrate more doubts about the danger of excessively abstracting and mythologizing violence: “I may say that it is not wholesome for a people to think much of exceptional acts of faith or sacrifice, least of all to make them the sole test of a man's worth” (Yeats, “Modern Ireland” 266). In understanding violence, Yeats believes there must be a balance between recognizing large-scale philosophical and mythological forces at work and refusing to allow the individual’s impact to be dissolved into those forces. This attitude comes up again in his view of the poet’s role during war in which he is more pessimistic about the individual artist’s ability to enact change during violence.

Detachment and the Poet’s Role

Upon being asked by Henry James to write a political poem about World War I, Yeats wrote his poem “On being asked for a War Poem” and included the prefatory note, “It is the only thing I have written of the war or will write, so I hope it may not seem unfitting” (qtd. in Jeffares 161). His sentiment is blunt but aligns with his later comments about forgetting the war. More importantly, his poem reveals his view of the poet’s role in violence. Because the poet takes a detached position from violence and continues to represent reality for Yeats, we can connect the poet’s role to the ideal, detached state of mind the suffering individual must take during violence. Despite his distance, the poet’s stance towards violence is analogous to that of the soldier or suffering victim who must create his own significance by accepting fate. While Yeats chooses to remain distant from the politics of World War I, his attitude reveals the predetermined,

conflicting forces within individuals experiencing violent events and the detached response to those events that brings meaning to individual suffering.

For Yeats, establishing a role for the individual poet involves examining a plethora of philosophical and occult sources that shed light on the way the world is constructed. When he starts to systematize his theory of reality in the 1918 essay "Per Amica Silentia Lunae," he seems to question the impact a poet can have on the world by tending towards a deterministic outlook. For example, he writes in the essay, "I think that all religious men have believed there is a hand not ours in the events of life, and that, as somebody says in *Wilhelm* Meister, accident is destiny" (11). While he might not count himself among these "religious men," Yeats emphasizes that this belief illuminates the "deep enmity between a man and his destiny" (11). If "a hand not ours" governs events and man must struggle with a "destiny" outside of his control, what impact can the poet's hand have apart from chronicling predetermined events? Richard Ellman, one of Yeats's foremost biographers, claims Yeats's poems "could not quite concede to flesh and blood the minor role which his theory seemed to accord them" ("Yeats's Second Puberty"). Here, Ellman refers to the fully-developed theory Yeats systematizes in the revised version of *A Vision*, but the theory Yeats describes in "Per Amica Silentia Lunae" demonstrates the same struggle to define the poet's role in creating significance for "flesh and blood" suffering and violence. Placing Yeats's essay alongside "On being asked for a War Poem" and "Ego Dominus Tuus," we see that Yeats's poetry attempts to regain the importance of the individual poet's role in a violent and deterministic world through detachment.

"On being asked for a War Poem" is pessimistic about the poet's ability to effect any change on a large scale or influence political outcomes of violence. The poet should produce pleasing works and not political works:

> I think it better that in times like these
> A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth
> We have no gift to set a statesman right;
> He has had enough of meddling who can please
> A young girl in the indolence of her youth,
> Or an old man upon a winter's night. (p. 155)

Yeats's response to the request for a war poem is short, simple, and traditional. It uses steady iambic pentameter and a progressive *abcabc* rhyme scheme that suggests the speaker is unattached to his subject, already moving on and asking readers to move past the war with him. If so, what is Yeats's poem moving towards? The poem gives a hint through its two sections. The first three lines explain how the poet should not use his writing in the political realm before the final set of three lines moves towards lyric poetry, producing pleasing language and images, a more personal style of verse that does not attempt to bring about any sweeping changes. Even in a time of war and intense violence, the poem encourages writing for art's own sake, detached from any material aim.

The shift between the first and second half of the poem illustrates the difference between rhetoric and poetry that Yeats describes in detail in "Per Amica Silentia Lunae." After discussing some common characteristics of great writers in the past, Yeats writes,

> We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. Unlike the rhetoricians, who get a confident voice from remembering the crowd they have won or may win, we sing amid our uncertainty; and, smitten even in the presence of the most high beauty by the knowledge of our solitude, our rhythm shudders. (8)

In this passage, Yeats describes several differences between rhetoricians and poets. While both produce work out of struggle, the rhetorician's work is dependent on other people, and the poet's work is internal. Rhetoric belongs to the "statesmen" who are ultimately in charge of war, gathering people to their side and creating more violence. On the other hand, the poet, out of his own internal turmoil, produces order that becomes pleasing to individuals such as the "young girl" or the "old man," people who lack any interest in violence or wars. The poet's solitude means the scope of his influence is limited, but he also remains above the violence and war that sometimes threaten his occupation. By remaining detached and disinterested, he has the freedom to pursue his own destiny as an artist.

Presumably, the poet might have some practical role in providing temporary respite or delight for those who read his work in violent times, but "On being asked for a War Poem" dampens this possibility. The quaint figures of the "old man" and the "young girl" are interrupted by "meddling" and "indolence," making the second half of the poem just as unviable for explaining the poet's role as the first. According to the poem, the poet should be silent about politics, but pessimism limits even the small remaining sphere in which the poet should write. Although the poem seems to suggest writing a more personal style of verse is better than writing of politics, even that suggestion does not adequately describe the poet's role and is ultimately rejected. The poet should not be involved in politics or the opinions of the crowd, but too intense of a turn inward will also leave the poet unable to represent anything beyond trivial matters. There must be some middle ground between personal investment in violence or ignorance of violence for achieving that "presence of the most high beauty" Yeats describes.

In his poem "Ego Dominus Tuus," which accompanies the essay "Per Amica Silentia Lunae," Yeats further explains the poet's position compared to others in society:

The rhetorician would deceive his neighbors,
The sentimentalist himself; while art
Is but a vision of reality.
What portion in the world can the artist have
Who has awakened from the common dream
But dissipation and despair? (46-51)

Here, poetry does not offer any consolation for the artist or have any visible effect on the world. However, it does allow the artist to access a "vision of reality," seeing the world as it is without abstraction. Neither the outward focus of the rhetorician nor the inward focus of the sentimentalist will be able to access this reality. Rather, detachment from personal and public interest allows the poet to represent reality, even if recognizing that reality causes despair and not happiness. Detachment and suffering go hand in hand so that the artist is interchangeable with the suffering victim of violence. The proper response for both individuals is detachment.

As the poem goes on to demonstrate, the poet only achieves this detachment through opposition. The poem's final section sees Ille, the character representing the subjective side of the dialogue, explaining what he is waiting for:

I call to the mysterious one who yet
Shall walk the wet sands by the edge of the stream
And look most like me, being indeed my double,
And prove of all imaginable things
The most unlike, being my anti-self,
And standing by these characters disclose
All that I seek . . . (71-76)

Ille anticipates the arrival of an anti-self to provide him with the answers he is looking for. The anti-self will offer a sense of certainty and closure, but it comes neither from public life nor entirely from the poet's inner life. It is both from far away, a "mysterious" stranger, and familiar, looking "most like me." This section of the poem has a prophetic tone; the anti-self is guaranteed to arrive. It is also mysteriously predetermined and beyond the individual's control. The poets who "[o]wn nothing but their blind, stupefied hearts" must accept this opposition to their own desires, which is outside of their control, and lose their attachment to selfhood in order to see reality (69).

Seeing the reality of the world allows the poet to oppose those who cause violence. The final line of this section of the poem connects this coming figure to the speaker's antagonistic stance towards political conflicts by referring to "blasphemous men" who will remain in ignorance (79). In a compelling analysis of this passage, David Ward connects the anti-self to Carl Jung's concept of the "shadow" as what is "denied or repressed," and he explains, "What Yeats most repressed and desired, however, was a relationship with the blasphemous men of the modern world. The anti-self will provide Ille with an imagined social relationship to compensate the poet for the sociality he cannot find among actual men" (146). In the context of "On being asked for a War Poem," the "blasphemous men" Yeats represses a relationship with are those who cause the outbreak of World War I. In one letter, he calls the war "merely the most expensive outbreak of insolence and stupidity the world has ever seen" (qtd. in Foster, *W. B. Yeats* 5). Clearly, the poem's "statesman" is implicated in this "stupidity," but the poet remains disinterested in order to properly represent reality according to his vision of the poet's role in general. This detachment opposes the strong convictions of those Yeats criticizes for the war.

The opposition between the self and anti-self in Yeats's system applies to all individuals attempting to act in violent contexts. The poet must continue to write and represent reality, whether that act begins to affect the world or merely becomes a pleasing object as it does in "On being asked for a War Poem." On the other hand, individual soldiers, leaders, or victims of suffering are faced with the same question Yeats asked of the woman in "No Second Troy": "Why, what could she have done, being what she is" (11)? The individual must accept his own predetermined role before he is able to act rightly. Like the anti-self, this role is both impersonal, belonging to fate, and only accessible to the individual. Instead of trying to "set a statesman right," the poet detaches himself from the immediacy of violence and large-scale conflict in order to reassert the reality of the world that blaspheming men cannot see. The importance of this detachment for Yeats helps explain why his only poem directly addressing World War I does not explicitly mention any of the war's violence or suffering. As we will see through the Irish airman, the individual suffering from violent circumstances must adopt the poet's detached disposition in order to take meaningful action.

The Pilot's Perspective

Yeats's poem "An Irish Airman Foresees his Death" is his work that most closely resembles a war poem, yet it involves no direct depictions of violence. It elegizes Major Robert Gregory, Lady Gregory's son, who died while flying for the Royal Flying Corps in Italy during World War I. The circumstances of his death, which occurred while flying in combat, cause Yeats to engage with the reality of World War I and its effects. However, Major Robert Gregory's unique position as a pilot allows Yeats to place him at a distance from the intense violence of modern mechanized warfare. This distance even extends to Major Gregory's own

death, as Yeats does not address the violence of the fiery crash the airman would have experienced. The way Yeats emphasizes aesthetic distance in the poem and causes the Irish airman to step into the role of the tragic hero demonstrates how detachment allows for significant personal action in the midst of violence.

In the opening lines, the speaker's location is ambiguous, but the poem suggests the feeling of flight as it continues. The speaker reflects in the first two lines, "I know that I shall meet my fate / Somewhere among the clouds above." At this point, it is unclear whether the speaker is flying or considering his future while looking up at the clouds from the ground. Regardless, there is a mystery to this future death. He knows it will take place in the sky, but he does not know where, apart from the knowledge that it will be "somewhere" in the clouds. The location of his death does not matter except that it is far from his homeland. Later lines provide a different perspective though. The poem ends with the following lines:

> A lonely impulse of delight
> Drove to this tumult in the clouds;
> I balanced all, brought all to mind,
> The years to come seemed waste of breath,
> A waste of breath the years behind
> In balance with this life, this death. (11-16)

Here, regardless of the speaker's actual location, Yeats emphasizes the immediate experience of flying. When the poem describes "this tumult," it refers to the events leading up to Major Gregory's death, which is happening in the present. The chiasmus and repetition of "waste of breath" and "years" give this climactic point in the poem a feeling of symmetry, as if the poem is balanced on two wings in the air. Finally, the movement between "years to come" and "years

behind" suggests the forward movement and distant sight that an airman would experience in a cockpit.

This poem's tone and movements differ significantly from other war poems of the time, especially poems written by those Yeats later criticizes as poets of "passive suffering" which often focus on the uncertainty and fog of war. For example, Siegfried Sassoon's "Attack" emphasizes the obscurity of fighting as it describes the sun "[s]mouldering through spouts of drifting smoke that shroud / The menacing scarred slope" (3-4). The infantryman's proximity to violence makes it difficult for him to see through the smoke of the battle, while the pilot's distance from it provides him unhindered access to information. Unlike the infantrymen from Sassoon's poem, Yeats's speaker in "An Irish Airman foresees his Death," is able to think of both the enemy and his homeland. He can bring "all to mind," having a near-omniscient perspective, while the common soldier is more limited in his view (13). This broader perspective gives the airman more freedom of action and decision, placing him above the "passive suffering" of the soldiers whose poetry Yeats criticizes.

Another difference between Yeats's poem and many World War I poems that emphasizes its aesthetic distance is the contrast between ground and sky. In his essay "Writing the War," which discusses World War I from the perspective of Irish writers, Terence Brown highlights the common trope of subterranean environments in World War I writing and compares it with Yeats's airman who is "able to assess and welcome his own version of fate far above the random slaughter of earth-bound engagements" (242). Often, we associate the words "war machine" and "mechanized warfare" with the ground battles of World War I, suggesting the rise of increasingly efficient weapons that contributed to an appearance of fate's randomness for the

common soldier. The airplane is part of this mechanized warfare, but flying it is both a mechanical and mental exercise.

The word "balance," repeated twice in the poem, captures this dual aspect of flying. It evokes the feeling of being suspended in the air while various forces act on the wings and flight control surfaces of the aircraft. A pilot must be mentally and physically present when working the controls of a plane to maintain equilibrium. The poem's consistent, alternating rhyme scheme underscores the idea of balance, demonstrating how this is a meticulously crafted equilibrium of the speaker's making. However, Yeats focuses this idea of balance around the airman's mind. On one hand, this frees the Irish airman to consider his impending death and how to approach it in a detached manner. On the other, it shows how Yeats chooses to emphasize the mental aspect of flying while distancing his pilot from the mechanized aspect.

In doing so, Yeats evokes an idealized vision of aviation and its role in violence. In her essay "'Knights of the Air': Yeats, Flight, and Modernity," Fran Brearton writes about the "chivalric, heroic, or lonely" myth of the airman during the First World War. She claims Yeats sympathizes with Gregory's motivations in the poem because "the 'myth' emerged in part from pre-existing Romantic conceptions of warfare and flight that were shared by him, thereby enabling an absorption of Gregory's wartime death into an aesthetic always committed to the ideals embodied in individual 'ascent' and heroic action" (Brearton 215). During the First World War, pilots represented an ideal of freedom and heroism because of the novelty and danger of airplane technology. In addition, flight's novelty on the battlefield distinguished the pilot's fight from the common forms of fighting. The pilot was then able to act in a mythical capacity, illustrating perfect, abstract qualities, which we can see in Yeats' poem with Robert Gregory. In "An Irish Airman foresees his Death," Gregory becomes the ideal, balanced figure, named only

in the poem's dedication. This limited identification allows him to become an anonymous representative of the characteristics of flight in the poem itself. While this further establishes Yeats's commitment to detachment through myth, it fails to acknowledge the realities of combat flight.

Yeats's lack of terms referring to modern technology and mechanized warfare in the poem shows how he is engaged in a different project than the poet who describes "passive suffering." Yeats's Irish airman has almost touched an ideal world in which he achieves ultimate freedom of action. However, what does it mean that the airman ultimately cannot escape his untimely death? The poem's title refers to the pilot's ability to "foresee" his death without allowing him to prevent it. He will still "know" with certainty, in the poem's first line, that his fate is unavoidable. Because he accepts his fate, the poem is causally deterministic and freeing at the same time. The pilot's inability to prevent his death has no bearing on his ability to achieve balance and make sense of his death. In fact, Yeats seems to admire his airman for embracing fate's inevitability.

Major Robert Gregory's resolve in the poem provides a contrast to "passive suffering" because it accepts forces outside of its control while still maintaining a degree of personal freedom. This freedom is absent in many popular World War I poems. Returning to Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," the soldier who falls victim to the gas attack is taken over by his survival instincts, but those instincts do nothing to help him. For Yeats, failure to accept forces beyond one's control is tragic but not admirable. While the soldier's fate is unavoidable, his struggle against it makes his action seem insignificant. By contrast, the Irish airman sees that his fate is predetermined and does not lash out blindly against it. Then, when the Irish airman flies,

he is acting in harmony with his whole being, and the acts of flying and dying are meaningful upon detached reflection.

In all, the type of balance the speaker achieves in the poem is consistent with Yeats's emphasis on detachment and reflection when faced with violence. For Major Robert Gregory's suffering and death to be meaningful, they must be in balance with an all-encompassing understanding of the world and the passage of time. His suffering is designed to produce clarity instead of an excess of emotion. Balance also serves as a reminder of the opposites that interact in Yeats's occult system, especially the will and mask. In the 1937 version of *A Vision*, Yeats simply explains the will and mask as "the will and its object, or the Is and the Ought" (73). The opposition of will and mask is deterministic since those two faculties "whirl in contrary directions" without any conscious input from their subject (74). Balancing everything as the airman does involves recognizing the opposite interactions within his own faculties and coming to terms with them.

Since Yeats did not fully systematize his occult theory until after writing this poem, an equally relevant concept might be Schopenhauer's idea of will, which is also deterministic. In her essay "Yeats and Schopenhauer," Ruth Nevo details how Yeats must have read Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* shortly after it was published when Yeats was a young man, and she cites repeated references to Schopenhauer throughout Yeats's writings (15-16). Schopenhauer's will is the root of suffering with its endless strivings, but denying the will allows for deliverance. This denial comes naturally to those who see their impending deaths and for whom, "Indeed, their suffering and dying become agreeable to them, for the denial of the will-to-live has made its appearance" (Schopenhauer 393). For the Irish airman, he sees his death and accepts his fate, which is a form of denial of the will. His final ability to place everything

"[i]n balance with this life, this death" embraces Schopenhauer's ethic of renouncing the will until it becomes nothing. Insofar as "An Irish Airman foresees his Death" aligns with Schopenhauer's philosophy, it demonstrates how Yeats creates a place for individual significance in the midst of the deterministic forces of violence by allowing the individual to distance himself from suffering.

The airman's mental clarity extends to the repeated distinctions the speaker is able to make that provide a contrast to traditional war poems. By virtue of his position as a pilot, the speaker is able to easily see parallel categories from afar. For example, there is no confusion between "[t]hose that I fight" on one hand and "[t]hose that I guard" on the other (3-4). The poem continues with other parallel lines: "Nor law, nor duty bade me fight, / Nor public men, nor cheering crowds" (9-10). This again suggests the reluctance to go along with the crowd that the speaker of "On being asked for a War Poem" feels. One final set of lines, "No likely end could bring them loss / Or leave them happier than before" shows how the airman's actions will have no visible effects (7-8). When faced with violence, the individual cannot find significance for his actions in material effects or the approval of crowds. He is bound to violent forces but must remain distant from pressures that threaten to throw his flight out of balance.

Because of his detachment and ability to balance all in his mind, the Irish airman becomes for Yeats the ideal tragic hero and artist. He contains that ability Yeats believes the artist needs to see reality for what it is in the midst of chaos and violence. In his essay "The Artist's Tragic Flight: Yeats's Portrayal of Major Robert Gregory," Edward Pickering describes the kinship Yeats may have felt towards Robert Gregory as a fellow artist who created landscape paintings Yeats admired (83). Beyond this, the Irish airman demonstrates the characteristics necessary for the artist or the individual in general to make sense of violence. The kinship

between Yeats and the Irish airman is a kinship between the poet as "tragic observer" and the soldier as "tragic hero." Because of this similarity, Yeats's poem serves as a genuine reminder of the individual's ability to find significance during violence by recognizing tragic force and continuing to act rightly in his own eyes.

Conclusion

As a second lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force preparing to attend pilot training, I both relate with Yeats's Irish airman and feel disconnected from him. On one hand, the realities of modern air warfare make the assertion "[t]hose that I fight I do not hate" a reality for many members of the armed forces (3). It is difficult to hate those you cannot see, and the increasingly complicated technologies and force structures of today's Air Force mean many Airmen will never put a face to those they inflict violence upon, directly or indirectly. For Yeats's airman, the gap between his experience of flying and the violence he enacts allows him freedom to act according to his own idea of balance. For many pilots today, their distance from the violence they inflict, amplified by layers of bureaucratic and technological barriers, makes them feel trapped. This might be one reason remotely piloted aircraft operators, the pilots who are most directly involved in violence while being geographically removed from it, report relatively high levels of emotional distress.[7] Entering my career as a pilot, the Irish airman's mental balance is appealing because it offers personal significance in the face of forces that feel out of one's control, which is a common feeling in the U.S. Air Force.

On the other hand, I cannot fully relate to the Irish airman's detachment because it could lead to indifference bordering on irresponsibility. In his essay "War Literature, the Constitution,

[7] For an overview of research on these operators' mental health, see Wallace and Costello.

and Fostering Reluctant Killers," Thomas McGuire uses his experience teaching officer candidates at the U.S. Air Force Academy to defend the importance of war literature. He argues that poets like Owen and Sassoon "value the personal and the concrete," and this type of art can keep future officers from falling for a "morality of altitude" that allows them to remain ethically ignorant as long as they are far enough away from violence (26). I am constantly aware of this moral pitfall that is endemic to my career field. As I have argued in this thesis, Yeats's approach to violence often opposes that of Owen and Sassoon. He is at times less "personal and concrete" than detached and abstract when he describes suffering. Because of this, I reflect on Yeats's Irish airman with both admiration and caution. His ability to act in the face of deterministic forces is relevant to my Air Force career, but the extent of his intellectual distance from violence seems amiss.

Because aesthetic distance creates an opening for this "morality of altitude," Yeats sometimes espouses unsupportable views on violence. Examples include the times when he advocates forgetting the suffering of World War I or refuses to write a World War I poem when asked to by Henry James. Yeats's responses to the war seem presumptuous and dismissive; however, he does at times express doubt about his role in violence. In a pair of oft-quoted lines from the poem "Man and the Echo," Yeats asks, "Did that play of mine send out / Certain men the English shot" (11-12)? When I consider my relationship to Yeats's Irish airman, I think Yeats's doubt serves as a reminder to carefully reflect on my own role in violence. An approach I can live by will balance both purposefulness and reluctance. It is possible to both "meet my fate" with confidence and remember the human face of suffering that should always inform decisions to inflict violence (1). In this way, I find that Yeats's aesthetic distance in "An Irish Airman

foresees his Death" relates to my future in the Air Force but comes with a warning not to take my position lightly.

Yeats's poems responding to World War I and the Easter Rising address a fundamental problem of human agency in the face of deterministic forces. Periods of intense violence bring this problem to light, and Yeats attempts to preserve the individual's significance in a violent context. In this thesis, we have seen that his approach to violence aligns with his later ideas about "passive suffering" because he connects violence to a philosophical system in order to make sense of it. In other poems, mythology and history play contextualizing roles for violence. Abstract symbolism often creates a greater sense of aesthetic distance. When Yeats describes the poet's role, he presents an ideal state of detachment from violence and suffering through which the individual accurately represents reality. Finally, the individual in violent circumstances becomes free by accepting fate and becoming detached from immediate suffering.

With this in mind, Yeats's aesthetically distant approach to violence in his poetry requires framing suffering in its correct context. Rather than diminishing the individual's significance, this approach allows the individual to continue to act rightly, even in a predetermined world. If he accepts fate and looks at violence in a detached manner, the individual's actions will no longer be obscured by the chaos of violence. The idea of aesthetic distance is counterintuitive. It seems as if distance from depictions of violence should be a shortcoming, and avoiding direct depictions of immediate suffering should diminish the poem's subjects. However, Yeats's aesthetic distance permits the poet to make sense of violent events and elevate the individual's actions.

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