

Multifariousness in Form and Substance of “Easter, 1916”¹⁾

Young Suck Rhee

Abstract: Yeats’s poem “Easter, 1916” has been much researched and written about.²⁾ But in fact the poem’s form in relation to content has not received enough attention. That is, the external of the poem have been the main focus: the political, the social, and even the psychological. Not the poem itself as a dynamic force of “terrible beauty.” Yeats has paid so much attention to fashioning significance by way of form. If that is considered, it is time we should read the poem’s form as meaning, so we could have a deeper understanding and fuller appreciation of this poem. I see that “Easter, 1916” originates from the poetics of paradox: the paradoxical natures of man and language. I focus on feeling and thinking of the poem’s “terrible beauty” to find that “Easter, 1916” is the best lyrical elegy of the 20th century with multifarious meanings as Yeats desired by hiding his intention in it in perfect abstraction of the form he has sought for life.

Key words: terrible beauty, paradoxical natures, Yeats, Donne, MacBride, Blake, Francis Bacon, Albright, Vendler

Author: Young Suck Rhee is professor of poetry and creative writing of poetry in the Department of English, Hanyang University, Seoul, 133-791, Korea. He divides his time between teaching, writing poetry, and painting.

E-mail: yrshee@hanyang.ac.kr / ranjongrhee@hotmail.com

제목: 「1916년 부활절」의 형식미의 다층적 의미

우리말 요약: 예이츠의 시 「1916년 부활절」은 많이 연구되고 논문도 많이 쓰여 졌다. 그러나 사실 내용과 연관된 시의 형식은 충분한 관심을 받지 못하고 있다. 즉, 시의 외적인 것, 즉 정치적인 것들, 사회문제들이라든지, 심리적인 것들까지 주된 관심사였다. “지독한 아름다움”의 역동적 힘으로서의 시는 논외였다. 그러나 예이츠는 형식을 통한 의미 만들기에 많은 관심을 쏟았다. 그렇다면, 의미로서의 시 형식을 읽어내야 할 시기가 되었고, 그렇게 함으로써 우리는 이 시를 보다 깊이 있게 이해하고 보다 충만하게 음미할 수 있게 될 것이다. 필자는 「1916년 부활절」이 역설의 시학에서 나온 것을 본다. 즉, 인간, 언어의 역설적 본성에서 나온 것이다. 필자는 이 시의 “지독

한 아름다움”을 느끼고 생각하는데 초점을 맞추었고, 결과적으로 에이즈는 그가 평생 추구한 형식의 완벽한 앵스트랙션을 통해서 자신의 의도를 감춤으로써 자신의 소망처럼 20세기 최고의 다층적 의미의 서정적 엘레지를 만들었다는 것을 증명한다.

주제어: 지독한 아름다움, 역설적 본성, 에이즈, 곤, 맥브라이드, 블레이크, 프란시스 베이컨, 올브라이트, 벤들러

저자: 이영석은 한양대학교 영어영문학과와 시창작과 영시 담당 교수이다. 그는 시를 가르치고, 쓰고, 그림을 그리는데 시간을 배분한다.

“Painting is a world of its own, it’s self-sufficient” — Francis Bacon

I

I have long been puzzled by “Easter, 1916”’s form of beauty and complexity, epitomized by the strangeness of “terrible beauty” that continually stirs my mind and heart, even after it’s been read and put aside: the four stanzas each end with an interlocking rhyme scheme of three lines: aba, aba, aba, aba, if you see only the last three lines. The four stanzas: the first has 16 lines with 2 sentences; the second 24 lines with 5 sentences; the third 16 lines with 2 sentences; the fourth 24 lines with 5 sentences: that is, the stanzas are interlocked. And each stanza has interlocking rhymes: ababcdcd..., though the later lines are slightly varied, yet they too are woven by interlocked rhymes. I have thought it strange; but I find that Vendler was the first scholar to have found that the line lengths represent the date of the Easter Rising on April 24, 1916!: the four stanzas represent the fourth month; the two 24-line stanzas the date of the Rising; and the two 16-line stanzas the year of the Rising. (25, 192) Vendler sums up the form:

“Easter, 1916” [abab x 4] + [abab x 6] + [abab x 4] + [abab x 6] (m and 4 f) [1916; *New Statesman*, Oct. 1920] (204)

Why this abstraction of the poem?: it may reflect the Yeats, who is “the

strange, chaotic, varied and completely unified personality[.]" as Ann Saddlemyer concludes her new edited letters of Yeats and George. (561)

Furthermore, to me, the development of mental scheme (in contrast to the rhyme scheme) is likewise interlocked, except for the beginning stanza. The narrator in the beginning stanza ends its stanza *calmly* (compared with the two more repetitions of the same cry in stanzas 2 and 4) crying!:

Being certain that they and I
 But lived where motley is worn:
 All changed, changed utterly:
 A terrible beauty is born. (*VP* 392)

II

When my mind was still filled with the strange beauty of the poem after having read it in a seminar led by Professor Vendler in Sligo a few days before, on Sunday, 18 August 2013 I visited the Dublin City Gallery and meditated upon a painting by Francis Bacon. The truth of "terrible beauty" dawned upon me all of a sudden. The key to the poem's form and substance is *Paradox* in nature, which exists universally in the world we live in, not only in Ireland then and there. What I feel about this poem and a painting by Bacon I thought must be the same. To distance what I feel from my subjective introspection, I rely on an authority on Francis Bacon and a Yeatsian who has spent much time editing Yeats-George letters. First, on Bacon:

Francis Bacon was one of the past century's most elusive and enigmatic creative geniuses. However much his avowed aim was an (albeit sophisticated) simplicity, he remained a deeply complex person. Bacon was keenly aware of the underlying contradiction, and whether he was talking or

painting, he strove consciously towards absolute clarity and directness. At the same time, Bacon knew that every attempt to elucidate the warring confusion within him (which was, of course, also the mainspring of his creativity) could at best be only partially successful. “There it is,” he once said to me disarmingly, “I’m what’s called ‘simply complicated.’” (Peppiatt 1)

And Yeats’s “terrible beauty”?—compared with Bacon’s “simply complicated” [beauty]? The two have something in common: they search for clarity and directness in art, one in language, the other in picture, in the face of complexity or what I call *Paradox* here. Both pursue form, Yeats reinvents conventional form and Bacon invents new form based on Modern conditions of man. If you look at any of Bacon’s painting, it is too complicated but *terribly* beautiful: *Three Studies for a Self-Portrait*, 1967, Private Collection, is the very picture that defines the essence of Bacon’s art.

One of the most reliable biographers of Yeats, Ann Saddlemyer’s fine final character analysis of Yeats is summed up: “the strange, chaotic, varied and completely unified personality.” She, after spending years editing the letters of Yeats and George, quotes an insightful characterization of her hero Yeats, sympathizing with George who was “widowed when only 46[:] George was left to care for two teenaged children. She would always miss Yeats, “the strange, chaotic, varied and completely unified personality[,]” with whom she had shared so much ... ” (561). It is a precise and definite character analysis that corresponds with the definition of Bacon by Michael Peppiatt, an authority on Bacon, and it is of great importance, for it is part of a *post-script* of a great Yeats scholar who spent years editing their letters.

III

“Easter, 1916”’s first stanza begins calmly, but the ending is not calm.

The depiction of the middle class³⁾ is disparaging, but unexpectedly he equates himself with them by use of a coordinating conjunction *and*:

Being certain that they and I
But lived where motley is worn: (392)

Isn't it a complex and brave act of courage to disparage himself in an occasional poem, a group elegy,⁴⁾ to be read by all? It just reminds me of Bacon who distorts himself, so in his self-portrait he looks like a piece of butchered head of a pig or a mutilated head of a human, namely in his *Three Studies for a Self-Portrait*.

Let me begin a comparison: the first stanza begins:

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.

Nothing seems unusual in this opening sentence. It is calm and even *prosaic*, like a monologue, but it feels swift and fast. Why? Isn't it strange? Strange, like the Francis Bacon's background of his *Three Studies for a Self-Portrait*? Which is green and *calm*, contrasted with the distorted tormented self in it. [Yeats dislikes green so much (Vendler 24), but he in "Easter, 1916" borrows the street ballad's *green* he may have heard at that time ("Wherever green is worn" (l.78, "Easter, 1916").)] But in fact this beginning stanza is a gem Yeats has just hewn out of a rough stone, which begins his greatest elegy in ballad form. It is in fact the poetics he has long sought that is realized: "a powerful and passionate syntax, and a complete coincidence between period and stanza" as quoted below:

Style is almost unconscious. I know what I have tried to do, little what I have done.... The English mind is meditative, rich, deliberate; it may remember the Thames valley. I planned to write short lyrics or poetic drama where every day speech would be short and concentrated, knit by dramatic tension, ... I must seek, not as Wordsworth thought, words in common use, but a powerful and passionate syntax, and a complete coincidence between period and stanza. Because I need a passionate syntax for passionate subject-matter I compel myself to accept those traditional metres that have developed with the language. (*EI* 521-22)

To confirm this poetics in this stanza, I supply the rest of the lines, which each end, with self-sufficient form and substance: that is, each line is an independent image with significance:

I have passed with a nod of the head
 Or polite meaningless words,
 Or have lingered awhile and said
 Polite meaningless words,
 And thought before I had done
 Of a mocking tale or gibe
 To please a companion
 Around the fire at the club,

At this moment I linger awhile, wondering why the narrator has done it: that is to say, nodding the head or saying “polite meaningless words” (repeated twice); even trying to think of a mocking tale or jibe? To please a companion. Yes, to make him happy; but the more important reason is that “I” [have] lived with them and that “they and I” (l. 13) wear motley. Albright provides an excellent introduction to this poem by touching on the “mutation of comedy [that is, motley] into tragedy [tragic beauty or joy]”:

... Yeats described the differences between the two genres [comedy and tragedy] as follows: “tragedy must always be a drowning and breaking of

the dykes that separate man from man, and ... it is upon these dykes comedy keeps house"; and he quoted a phrase of Congreve's to define "'humour' itself—the fountain of comedy—as a 'singular and unavoidable way of doing anything peculiar to one man only'" (*EI*, p. 241). The rebels of "Easter, 1916" are comedians, full of idiosyncrasy, of "character," until the rebellion begins: then, under a kind of historical pressure, coal fuses into diamond, and the rebels grow impersonal, universal, outside the flux of nature, no more individual than stones or tombstones. In his portraits of the rebels, Yeats shows how attractive youth, a somewhat lax sweetness of disposition, a comic boastfulness, can be altered by extreme tension into self-resignation, self-oblivion. (609)

What's quoted above is coherent in the context and flow of the poem "Easter, 1916," which transmutes the young rebels into "stones," *terrible beauty*. But my reading diverges here with this. "Them" here in this beginning stanza are the motley, the clowns, who are just eager to please companions around him, who are met in the street or in the club. They are the middle class Yeats despises: but witnessing the tragic executions of the rebels he [wishes to] count[s] himself among them, thus disparaging himself, for he was not brave enough to be part of the noble cause of the rebels or at least misunderstood them. That is, there are two kinds of people: one is like him and the common "comedians" on the street and the other the noble kind like the young rebels. The act of turning himself into comedians, who wear motley (notice also the *green* (l. 78) the Republicans wear; the color *green* he also despises but which he ennobles here in this particular line—what a complex poem it is, as in Bacon's portraits!)—, causes himself to be changed, changed utterly. Which is tragic, and which is terribly beautiful. Another dimension hidden in this cry is the narrator's hidden object of turning this poem into abstraction, as he has fashioned this poem in secret form: 4 stanzas (April), 16 lines (the year of the rising), 24 lines (the day of the rising) in a measure of "military" beats. And his aim is achieved: the

best Modern elegy in reinvented form: *a terrible beauty is born*, which means the poem “Easter, 1916,” an instance of perfect abstract art, as achieved by Francis Bacon. This reading is strengthened by the fourth and final stanza’s first person’s open conclusion: “I write it out in a verse—... ∴ A terrible beauty is born.” (*VP* 394) Does the narrator mean that all the rebel leaders/

Are changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born?

Or does the narrator mean that [he (Yeats)] write[s] it out in a verse—

[so]/ A terrible beauty is born? [A poem of terrible beauty is born?]

I tend to conclude that it means both, but my preference for the reading of this poem is that Yeats’s *secret* (*embedded in the poem through abstraction*) wish to make it the best of best elegies in English is being realized by this poem: thus, *A terrible beauty* [that is, this poem, “Easter, 1916”] *is born*. (l.80, which is the final line of this poem.)

We will see that this seemingly calm first stanza is deceptive, once it is spoken aloud as if Yeats recited it: according to Vendler, each line is built in “military” beats. To exemplify this, she makes some changes in the beats in a stanza to illustrate how swift and passionate this original stanzaic form of his is. She takes the concluding part of the last stanza. This last stanza goes back to the first person narrator “I” as in the first line of the beginning stanza: “I have met them at close of day.” The concluding part of stanza four, as explained by Vendler:

I write it out in a verse— [*step*]
 MacDonagh and MacBride [*step*]
 And Connolly and Pearse [*step*]
 Now and in time to be, [*step*]

Wherever green is worn, [*step*]
 Are changed, changed utterly: [*step*]
 A terrible beauty is born. (*VP* 394)

"[T]he trimeter quatrain ... has a pause at the end of each line, a built-in unsounded 'fourth beat' which suggests an invisible but implicit march-step: left, right, left, [right]." And then to prove that "Yeats's choice of meter has a distinct imaginative and mimetic advantage," she further experiments with the poem's stanza to show "how it loses its kinetic martial tension" when it is turned into "four-beat lines":

[I write it out in *bardic* verse,
 MacDonagh and *the bold* MacBride
 And *soldiers* Connolly and Pearse
 Now and in *every* time to be,
 Wherever green's *by patriots* worn,
 Are changed *forever*, utterly,
 A terrible beauty is *newly* born.] (italics my emphasis; Vendler 209)

Even though the changes made in the stanza sound quite unnatural, the point she's made makes sense.

IV

Where does form [art] come from?

I saw a *death* (made while alive) mask of William Blake in Francis Bacon's last studio in the Dublin City Gallery. His London studio was removed piece by piece by archaeologists, and reassembled in the gallery. It looks like the original studio he had worked in. The way Bacon *made* his painting attracts my attention: he makes use of clippings of all kinds of

material, photographs, magazines, and other arts: thousands of things left to pile up on the table and floor of his studio. This is how he creates art. He got inspiration from arts and artists and writers. In an interview, Bacon says:

... I'm sure that every artist fits into a context, is influenced by his particular heritage and is placed at a certain point in time. Just as if he's using all his ingenuity to hit the same nail persistently, but that's another story. What is true, though, is that even if you manage to understand where artists are coming from, what makes one work fail and another work succeed remains a mystery. I don't even understand how certain works that we've already talked about so much, and about which so much has been written, have managed to hold out.

The most important thing is to look at the painting, to read the poetry or listen to the music. Not in order to understand or to know it, but to feel something. (Bacon 77)

That is to say, if Bacon does not have feelings when he sees or hears something, he does not like it. He did not like Blake's paintings, even though he did paintings of Blake's death mask. [He just happened to get it from a person, he said.] He did not like Beckett, either, although critics compare his work with Beckett's. And in an interview in which Beckett's work was discussed, Bacon says that "Beckett has tried to say a lot by cutting as much as possible in order to leave nothing superfluous. ... [and that] nothing left, and in the end his work sounds hollow and completely empty." (Archimbaud 117-18) I think Bacon finds Beckett's way of writing interesting, but that he knows how to follow his instinct, "hon[ing] his text [painting] down," (118) as Yeats did in "Easter 1916." He also said that because Yeats and Synge wrote differently than others, he likes them.

Form—accomplished form—is something in common in Blake, Yeats, and Bacon: Blake's "The Tyger," Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," and Bacon's *Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1955, oil on canvas.

Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines. I can imagine each working on his work. The two poems and the painting are very different, yet each of them could represent how they work on them, I imagine, in a certain way.

Blake's:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
 In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry? (italics my emphasis; Heath 56)

Yeats's:

Once out of nature I shall never take
 My bodily form from any natural thing,
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
 To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
 Or set upon a golden bough to sing
 To lords and ladies of Byzantium
 Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (italics my emphasis; *VP* 408)

Bacon's:

Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X 1953. (Russel 33)
Study for Portrait III (After the Life Mask of William Blake), 1955.
 (Archimbaud 53)

"... when I work I only have a vague idea, sometimes even no idea at all of what I want to do. In a way it's purely *by chance* that something happens on the canvas. Most of the time it has nothing to do with the original idea, if indeed I had one to start off with. ... In other respects, it's also true that I have a curious type of self-discipline which is probably an asset, because

painting doesn't consist of throwing paint at the canvas. I don't have a master plan when I begin a canvas, *but there is acquired skill which, together with time and age, amounts to a certain ability.*" (italics my emphasis; Archimbaud 87)

V

As shown above, form has nothing to do with intention. It just comes "with time and age." Yeats's "Easter, 1916" met with the particular time and place in which Yeats was ready to do it, just as Francis Bacon was when he did *Study after Velazquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* 1953. According to Bacon, however, "there is acquired skill which, together with time and age, amounts to a certain ability."

VI

Now the multi-layered overall structure of "Easter, 1916" and its multifariousness of its meaning.

Jeffares's commentary on "Easter, 1916" begins:

The manuscript of this poem is dated 25 September 1916. Yeats wrote it when he was staying with Maud Gonne MacBride at Calvados; it first appeared in *Easter, 1916* (1916) an edition of twenty-five copies "privately printed by Clement Shorter for distribution among his friends" and subsequently in the *New Statesman* (23 Oct. 1920). ... Menon ... called [this poem] a palinode to "September 1913." ... The Irish Republic was proclaimed on Easter Monday, 24 April and the centre of Dublin occupied by the Republicans. They were the Irish Volunteers of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, probably about seven hundred in all. They held out until 29 April. From 3 to 15 May fifteen of the leaders were executed after a series

of courts martial. (190)

How much Yeats was shocked is shown in his letter to Lady Gregory on 11 May:

My dear Lady Gregory, The Dublin tragedy has been a great sorrow and anxiety. ... I am trying to write a poem on the men executed—"terrible beauty has been born again." If the English Conservative party had made a declaration that they did not intend to rescind the Home Rule Bill there would have been no Rebellion. I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me—and I am very despondent about the future. At the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics. Maud Gonne reminds me that she saw the ruined houses about O'Connell Street and the wounded and dying lying about the street, in the first few days of the war.... I do not yet know what she feels about her husband's death. Her letter was written before she heard of it. Her main thought seems to be "tragic dignity" has returned to Ireland. (191)

"Easter, 1916" expresses how Yeats reacted to the Rebellion. His reaction to it is most complex and indefinable, as shown in its form; with the ever-changing minds of the narrator working underneath the surface of his form the substance in it seems like genome mapping in progress, despite the streamlined outer form of the poem.

The poem's overall structure hinges on the third stanza. The first stanza is independent of the rest of stanzas, as I have shown in the previous sections. Stanza one shows Yeats in transition from a distant observer to a shocked sympathizer. If stanza one is separated, the rest look symmetrical:

a 24-line stanza with 5 sentences + 16-line stanza with 2 sentences + a 24-line stanza with 5 sentences.

The middle stanza is an aside, which is the crux of this poem, and which universalizes all in the world and simultaneously eulogizes the rebels; Yeats neither praises nor disparages them: it is the Heaven's part to do that:

Hearts with one purpose alone
 Through summer and winter seem
 Enchanted to a stone
 To trouble the living stream.
 The horse that comes from the road,
 The rider, the birds that range,
 From cloud to tumbling cloud,
 Minute by minute they change;
 A shadow of cloud on the stream
 Changes minute by minute;
 A horse-hoof slides on the brim,
 And a horse plashes within it;
 The long-legged moor-hens dive,
 And hens to moor-cocks call;
 Minute by minute they live:
 The stone's in the midst of all. (*VP* 393)

Probably this will be the most remembered lines for me, if I think of all the famous elegies in the world. It compares well with Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth's monologue, "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," with Yeats's passage of time when things change "Minute by minute." [Both Yeats and Bacon are under the influence of Shakespeare.]

VII

Stanzas 2 and 4 are most complex delineations of the rebel leaders executed. They represent Yeats's complex attitudes to politics, and his unfulfilled love toward a woman whose husband was executed, as well as his

to the current uprising. The beauty of the two stanzas is that, like Francis Bacon, Yeats does not know how to complete his poem; it [the poem] just happens as he is making progress. "His age and time" takes it over and finishes it beautifully: *A terrible beauty is born*. That is, a new great poem is born; yet, he gives this poem also to the memory of those who died, including "McDonagh and MacBride/ And Connolly and Pearse":

Too long a sacrifice
 Can make a stone of the heart.
 O what may it suffice?
 That is Heaven's part, our part,
 To murmur name upon name,
 As a mother names her child
 When sleep at last has come
 On limbs that had run wild. (*VP* 394)

Yeats expands this elegy to the dimension of Michaelangelo's *Pietà* as well as to Mother, our mother in flesh, and Mother, Death in this world, like that of Wallace Steven's "Sunday Morning."

Notes

- 1) I attended a seminar led by Helen Vendler at the Yeats International Summer School, Sligo from August 5 to August 9, 2013. She said she loves poetry so much and that her books have resulted from her devotion to poetry and its form. In the seminar she dealt with some of Yeats's poems with so much care and love, and we all seem to be under the spell of her passion for poetry.
- 2) According to Jochum's *W. B. Yeats: A Classified Bibliography of Criticism* (U of Illinois Press, 1978. 325-26) there are about 20 studies on this poem, including Ben L. Collins, "A Note on the Historicity of Yeats's Stanzaic Pattern in 'Easter, 1916,'" *Eire-Ireland*, 3:1 (Spring 1968), 129; Majorie Perloff, "Yeats and the Occasional Poem: 'Easter 1916,'" *PLL*, 4:3 (Summer 1968), 308-28. In Korea, there are three articles on this poem: Jung Mook Yoon, "'Easter 1916' and Women," *The Yeats Journal of Korea* 24 (December 2005): 81-108; Jooseong Kim, "Romantic

- Nationalism in Yeats's Easter Poems." *Studies in Modern British and American Poetry* 9 (2003): 67-94, and Oksoo Kim, "Yeats's 'Easter 1916' and Decolonization." *The New Korean Journal of English Language* 40 (1998): 19-34.
- 3) Most scholars read that *them* (l.1) in stanza one represent those who participated in the Easter Rising, which seems to be a logical reading, but which seems to me to deprive the poem of its richer complexity, considering the ever changing minds of his in this poem. My reading is that *them* here are the ordinary people you and I meet on the street and greet with each other. The narrator's "terrible beauty" in stanza one originates from a lowering and disparagement of himself by equating himself with the motley; that is, those middle class people who are not capable of feeling "tragic joy." They are just frivolous clowns that make people laugh. Why did he lower himself facing the Easter Rising's sacrifice? "They and I" are the objects of ridicule from the perspective of the rebels who participated in the rising; even from the perspective of the stance Yeats has maintained and is now to sympathize with them or [seems to] agree with them.
- 4) For a detailed explication of "Easter, 1916," see Vendler 22-26.

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