

## Irony as an Art: Yeats's *Last Poems* “Long-Legged Fly” and “In Tara’s Halls”

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**Abstract:** Irony is now considered one of the crucial tests for the modernity of poetry, frequently exhibited by major modern poets. Not necessarily modern, irony dates back and deeply indebted to the techniques of Elizabethan poet-dramatists and the metaphysical poets who skillfully displayed an ironic tension between emotional theme and rational form with a typical dramatic effect. Yet, irony as an art in the modernist poets is peculiar in its indeterminacy from a unique, de-centering play of opposites in tones and sensibilities, which eventually liberates modern poems from any doctrines, as such liberation was well-exemplified in the last poems of Yeats.

**Key words:** Modernity, Ironic dialectics, Indeterminacy, Dramatic Effect, State of Mind

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**제목:** 예이츠의 『최후의 시』에 사용된 아이러니 기법: 「긴 다리 각다귀」와 「타라의 궁전에서」를 중심으로

**우리말 요약:** 아이러니는 많은 모더니즘 시인들이 즐겨 사용하였듯이 시의 현대성을 판단하는 데 매우 중요한 척도로 자리 잡았다. 사실 그 기원은 아주 오래전으로 거슬러 올라가 엘리자베드 시대의 소네트 시인이나 극작가 형이상학과 시인들의, 극적효과를 동반한 이성적 형식과 감성적 주제 사이의 긴장에서 자주 발견되며 이러한 극적기법에 모더니즘의 시인들이 많은 빛을 지고 있다. 그러나 모더니즘 시인들이 원용한 아이러니는 어조나 감성에 있어 적대적인 요소를 그대로 병치함으로써 소위 의미의 미확정성이라는 독특한 성질을 가지며, 예이츠의 『최후의 시』가 잘 보여주듯이 바로 이러한 애매모호함 또는 불확정성은 역설적으로 그 어떠한 원칙에도 얽매이지 않는 자유를 시에 부여하였다.

**주제어:** 현대성, 불확정성, 극적효과, 아이러니적 변증법, 마음의 상태

**저자:** 정경심은 동양대학교 교양학부 교수이다.

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## I

Irony is now considered one of the crucial tests for the modernity of poetry, frequently exhibited by major modern poets, Yeats, Pound, Stevens, Williams, and Eliot. Irony is not necessarily modern, however, for we see irony inherent in form and content even in the closed forms of poetry. The sonnet distinctively displays an ironic tension between the highly emotional theme and the perfectly calm form with a typical dramatic effect. In fact, Eliot's and the Imagists' ironies as well as Yeats's during and even before the assistantship of Pound were directly learned from the French symbolists, especially Laforguean irony of self-dramatization—to express a “*dédoublement* of the personality against which the subject struggles,” as Eliot clarifies in 1933 (“A Commentary” 470). Since Eliot dates it back to the self-dramatization of Othello (*Selected Essays* 112), the modernist ironic dialectics is deeply influenced by the techniques of Elizabethan dramatists, especially of Shakespeare, and the dramatic effects of the metaphysical “conceit” (“Introduction” viii)

Nonetheless, there is something peculiar to the modern poems than anything else in the usage of ironic dialectics. Deliberate or not, they generate some ambivalence—so called indeterminacy—on the part of the reader. In other words, there is no Hegelian synthesis in the modernist irony but only thesis and antithesis. Balancing between jest and earnest or moderating “between comedy and tragedy” (Shroder 25), the modernist irony challenges the pure, naïve Romantic absolutism. A unique and decentering play of oppositions in tones and sensibilities makes the modernist poem liberated from any fixed definition or doctrine, as Olsen remarks: “the poetry of a Yeats, Pound or Eliot is freer from doctrine than the poets themselves” (220). This modernist ironic dialectics is basically in line with Yeats's earlier symbolism that generates paradoxical freedom as Rhee catches in the poet's 1890 poem “Street Dancers”—“The poet is beyond tragedy singing tragedy” (71) as well

as in line with the paradoxical greatness of the Irish ballad whose trivial materials generates universal, grand themes (Yoon 282-3).

Betraying the Hegelian triad, the modernist irony is not so much a linguistic trope or a figure of speech as a figure of thought, for it reflects and focuses on the sense of belatedness that time for the resolution of opposites has now gone and we are left with them as is. Perhaps this is why Yeats, who was reading widely Hegel by the middle of the 1920s, remained ambivalent toward the German philosopher throughout his life. Poignantly enough, he left unresolved the oppositions he found in his life, for the theses and antitheses he struggled the whole life with never reached the stability of the triadic unity. Irony for Yeats is so a mode of perception, a perspective that recognizes the inherent incongruities of life between reality and appearance. Throughout his career, Yeats searched for the ironic dialectics for such a state of mind which must have changed over time. So they are not isolated from poem to poem but characteristically linked between poems. For example, a set of meanings in a poem interact with another set of meanings in a different poem, displacing and deconstructing the latter. While this generates the tension with further charged meanings, the reader finds it difficult to have any sense of a precise understanding.

## II

Yeats has long experimented with ironic dialectics. The characters of Yeats' ironic dialectics can be classified into three: ironies from the tension between the mythical, historical symbols and their adjusted meanings, between form and content, and between content and tone. When Yeats borrows symbols/images from myth, history and even life, he tends to accrue the meaning of a symbol/image in a poem and between poems. For example,

Helen of Troy is a mythical symbol of beauty, immaturity, and daemonic temptress but is also associated with Ireland, the nation's suffering and the Ideal. Likewise, Maud Gonne is a real person but is also a national symbol of Ireland, a paradoxical one both personal and universal (Chung 128). Both symbols are associated, enlarging and de-constructing interpretations. In "No Second Troy" Maud Gonne appears as Helen symbolic of the destructive seductress, while in "The Song of Wandering Aengus" she becomes "a glimmering girl / With apple blossom in her hair" (54),<sup>1)</sup> symbolic of the poetic muse. In this way a tension develops in a poem and between poems, betraying the reader's expectation of consistency in meaning.

Another peculiarity in Yeats's irony comes when the tension generates between content and form. In both "The Second Coming" and "Leda and Sawn" a theme of terrible violence on the civilization is featured in the elegant, soft form of iambic pentameter with the formal rhyme scheme *aabbccddc* and the sonnet. As Richard Ellmann says, though the poem is about to present an instant of so powerful feelings, Yeats's poems are "in no sense their 'spontaneous overflow'... There is nothing unplanned in his art" (176). The irony of this sort is usually intended, giving the impression to the reader that the meaning will be stable from poem to poem. However, Yeats betrays the reader again by juxtaposing conflicting contents within a poem let alone between poems. In "Easter 1916," the poet acclaims the revolutionary spirit that aims to recapture the Irish tradition as a national ideal on the one hand, while he ridicules it with the image of the stone symbolic of both firmness and stupidity on the other as seen in the lines "Too long a sacrifice / Can make a stone of the heart" (180).

The third of Yeats's ironies comes from the crash between content and tone. This is perhaps most difficult to detect, for tone is not easy to talk about especially when it carries ironic connotations. In "Byzantium," for example, "the powerfully *living* tone of the last stanza" (Olsen 4) with its vivid images

and vigor is so ill-matching with the contemplative, serious theme of the poem:

Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,  
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,  
The golden smithies of the Emperor!  
Marbles of the dancing floor  
Break bitter furies of complexity,  
Those images that yet  
Fresh images beget,  
The dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea. (252)

How the vision of dark, strange, impersonal and anti-humane age figured in the images of unnatural relationship between the human and the superhuman, a ghostly mummy, the artifice of a golden bird, and street souls could match with this vivid tones with charged energies of the verbs used in the stanza?

### III

Toward his *Last Poems* (1938-1939), Yeats continued to experiment his ironic dialectics of the three modes. Especially in the poem, "Long-Legged Fly," he comprehends them all: the mythical, historical, and political symbols with their original meanings twisted; the serious, grave themes such as history, beauty and creation, juxtaposed with such trivial refrains; the grand, solemn content with the easy, fluent, soft tone. Especially the poem is attended for the strange power of its refrain of "Long-legged Fly":

That civilisation may not sink,  
Its great battle lost,  
Quiet the dog, tehter the pony  
To a distant post;  
Our master Caesar is in the tent

Where the maps are spread,  
 His eyes fixed upon nothing,  
 A hand upon his head.  
*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream*  
*His mind moves upon silence.*

That the topless towers be burnt  
 And men recall that face,  
 Move most gently if move you must  
 In this lonely place.  
 She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,  
 That nobody looks; her feet  
 Practise a tinker shuffle  
 Picked up on a street.  
*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream*  
*Her mind moves upon silence.*

That girls at puberty may find  
 The first Adam in their thought,  
 Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,  
 Keep those children out.  
 There on that scaffolding resides  
 Michael Angelo.  
 With no more sound than the mice make  
 His hand moves to and fro.  
*Like a long-legged fly upon the stream*  
*His mind moves upon silence. (347-8)*

The refrain with such an easy tone and single trivial image seriously undermines the theme of the poem, perfectly standing on its own, generating another conflict message. As Haney-Peritz comments, "It may be best to read that refrain not as an allusion but as an intertextual figure...Although such as figure still appears to offer some kind of knowledge, its offering is so cryptic that it almost seems beside the point" (Haney-Peritz 31). Paired with all the

three areas of Yeats's greatest life-long interests, the mythological, personal, and political, the refrain tends to deconstruct their meanings both with its absurdity and similarity. Absurd because it is cut off from the previous grand lines by its tiny image of "a long-legged fly" and similar because it is continuous with them by its zigzag—forward and backward—movement on the surface of water that resembles the way history, politics, or life is.

The refrain is three times repeated, thereby rendering its effect three times stronger. As John Unterecker notes, "Stripped of rhyme, confined to one ironic image ('adventure'), it relies for its power on characterization, brutally direct speech, and casually controlled repetition. (Repetition, as a matter of fact, substitutes for rhyme.)" (278), the wonder of the poem is the refrain. Specifically, even the biological traits of the long-legged fly were explored as a symbol of the function of the human mind and history—comprehending art, politics, and mythology: "This is no unapt emblem of the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking," meaning mind moves in thinking by repeating forward and backward endlessly just as does the long-legged fly (Edgecombe 37).

On a closer scrutiny, however, the poem as a whole is a carefully prepared structure with accurate formal proportions: "The stanzas are linked by close parallels in syntax and theme, and above all by the recurring refrain, which offers a unifying image for all three," as A. E. Dyson tersely analyzes (101):

The construction of the stanzas has to be noted with great care. Each opens with "That"—a resounding "that," rather in the manner of a conjurer: 'in order that' is its force. The first two lines go on to prescribe a condition that must be fulfilled if something of great importance is to occur—the saving of civilization (stanza 1), the destruction of Troy (stanza 2), the awakening of generations of school girls to sexual desire (stanza 3). The third line of each stanza continues with an imperative, "Quite," "Move," "Shut"; and the action commanded looks, on the face of it, entirely trivial—silence the animals

(stanza 2), silence yourself (stanza 2), silence the children (stanza 3). The fifth line of each stanza, after these preliminaries, introduces a famous historical or legendary figure, caught at a moment of supremely significant choice. ... Then, in the seventh and eighth lines of each stanza, Yeats underlines the apparent ordinariness of all these scenes. (101-102)

Caesar, Helen and Michelangelo are transformed into any other man or woman whose autonomous movements are caught at the moment of stillness: Caesar vacantly gazes in front of him, Helen's feet move in a "tinker shuffle," and the hands of Michelangelo "moves to and fro" silently as does the mice. With such ironic coexistence of all incongruities of symbols, images, and tones, generating dramatic effects that disperse fixed meanings, one thing about the poem is clear enough: all the moments of great importance are still moments, linked to a recurring pattern of ordinary life, and both are unified at a deeper level despite their apparent dissimilarities.

#### IV

"In Tara's Halls" (1939) which was completed in June 1938 two months later than "Long-Legged Fly," Yeats resumes his theme of still moments again with ironic dialectics through a kingly figure—and also any man—who is about to end his one hundredth year:

A MAN I praise that once in Tara's Halls  
Said to the woman on his knees, 'Lie still.  
My hundredth year is at an end. I think  
That something is about to happen, I think  
That the adventure of old age begins.  
To many women I have said, "Lie still,"  
And given everything a woman needs,  
A roof, good clothes, passion, love perhaps,



some kind of “evasion, displacement, or supplement,” indicating that “near the end of Yeats’s last will and testament, there is a loophole which leads one to question not only the poem’s finality but also the antithetical poet’s credulity” (4, 3). As is the poem “The Tower” considered to be Yeats’s *intended* final, Harold Bloom finds its apparent finality in its dominant symbol: the water tower as the goal of every antithetical romantic’s quest for the “image of his mind’s freedom” (9). However, why should Yeats intentionally pursue “finality” who did not believe in the Hegelian triad? As Haney-Peritz recognizes, Yeatsian irony is rather metalepsis, “a figure that seems powerfully willful if only because its attribution of a present effect to a remote cause requires a big leap” (32).<sup>2</sup> This sends us back to the French Symbolists’ symbols, Elizabethan dramatists’ dramatic ironies and the metaphysical conceit. Frank Kermode once read the strong root in the French symbolists of the modernist irony. Citing Bateson, he says, it was borrowed from “Gourmont’s peculiar account of the process of poetry in the mind of an individual (specially Laforgue)” and applied “to the history of a nation’s poetry” (150). As Eliot later admits, the mythical components for this purpose were also quite popular among the modern poets (*UPUC* 10).<sup>3</sup> While the Romantic symbols arrived ready-made for the modern poets through the late Romantics and the French Symbolists, the typical Romantic theme of cultural belatedness is rather modified in the modern scenes whose unprecedented realities—states of bare oppositions—pressed them hard to confront the so-called ritual of “negation” for “the removal of repression”: the idea of the poet as a saviour figure, and poetry as an embodiment of a new whole/unity. While the myth of “dissociation of sensibility” provides Eliot with the challenge of healing the split, Yeats chooses poetry to remain as “the song flowing with the fluidity and indefiniteness of music but surging from the heart not from the head, as with Poe” (Frendo 10). However, what intersects all major modern poets, Laforgue, Yeats, Eliot and Pound, is that they “thrust upon poetry prophetic

duties it could rarely, if ever, perform without stumbling into the ridiculous on the way to the sublime," and so Prufrock's "overwhelming question" is, indeed, laughable, but somehow it manages to become the reader's own" (Frendo 28).

Why then the two poets eventually rest on the particular image of the "stillness" that is inherently ironic, with Eliot's "still point" and Yeats's imperative to stay "still"? In Eliot, the still point is at the intersection of Heaven and Earth where all opposites are harmonized. In *Four Quartets* Eliot's God stands at the intersection of time and timelessness, motion and stillness, permanence and change. Recognition of the "still point" dispels the apprehension and fear of the meaninglessness implicit in flux, disorder and death. It is achieved only in ephemeral moments, "in and out of time," as finally Yeats's typical dance and dancer image comes late to Eliot as a symbol that achieves the still moment. However, Yeats departs from Eliot in the trust of the higher synthesis. Unlike Eliot who finally resorted to the Anglican God, Yeats rather chose to be a God of his own who keeps every absurdity of life in this world and beyond and finally recounts, "God I have loved, but should I ask return / Of God or woman, the time were come to die." God and woman are one and another. The dancer and the dance are one and another. Jane and the Bishop are one and another. Though only in the still moment melt their paradoxes. Even then, why should we ask it is *real*? As a result, Yeatsian ironies are thematic rather than structural or formal.

## Notes

- 1) All the lines of Yeats's poems cited in this essay are from *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996). The pages will be inserted in the text after the citations.
- 2) Regarding the remote cause, refer to Richard Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1969), pp. 65-66. Also refer to John Pier, "Metalepsis," in *Peter Hunn Ed. The Living Handbook of Narratology* (Hamburg: Hamburg UP, 2013), pp. 1-12. Web. 12 Oct. 2016.

- 3) See the chapter, titled “Dissociation of Sensibility: Modern Symbolist Reading of Literary History,” in Kermode, *Romantic Image*, pp. 138-161.

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