

That woman's days were spent [II]
In ignorant good-will,
Her nights in argument
Until her voice grew shrill.
What voice more sweet than hers
When, young and beautiful,
She rode to harriers?
This man had kept a school
And rode our winged horse;
This other his helper and friend
Was coming into his force;
He might have won fame in the end,
So sensitive his nature seemed,
So daring and sweet his thought.
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.

Hearts with one purpose alone [III]
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.

Too long a sacrifice [IV]
Can make a stone of the heart.
O when may it suffice?
That is Heaven's part, our part
To murmur name upon name,
As a mother names her child
When sleep at last has come
On limbs that had run wild.
What is it but nightfall?
No, no, not night but death;
Was it needless death after all?
For England may keep faith
For all that is done and said.
We know their dream; enough
To know they dreamed and are dead;
And what if excess of love
Bewildered them till they died?
I write it out in a verse -
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn,
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

MEDITATIONS IN TIME OF CIVIL WAR VI: THE STARE'S NEST BY MY WINDOW (1923)

The bees build in the crevices
Of loosening masonry, and there
The mother birds bring grubs and flies.
My wall is loosening; honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

We are closed in, and the key is turned
On our uncertainty; somewhere
A man is killed, or a house burned,
Yet no clear fact to be discerned:
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

A barricade of stone or of wood;
Some fourteen days of civil war;
Last night they trundled down the road
That dead young soldier in his blood:
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

We had fed our hearts on fantasies,
The heart's grown brutal from the fare;
More substance in our enmities
Than in our love; oh, honey-bees,
Come build in the empty house of the stare.

THE SECOND COMING (1920/23)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

SAILING TO BYZANTIUM (1927)

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
- Those dying generations - at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unageing intellect.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress,
Nor is there singing school but studying
Monuments of its own magnificence;
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come
To the holy city of Byzantium.

O sages standing in God's holy fire
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,
And be the singing-masters of my soul.
Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
Into the artifice of eternity.

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.

THE CIRCUS ANIMALS' DESERTION (1939)

I

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

II

What can I but enumerate old themes,
First that sea-rider Oisín led by the nose
Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows;

But what cared I that set him on to ride,
I, starved for the bosom of his faery bride?

And then a counter-truth filled out its play,
'The Countess Cathleen' was the name I gave it;
She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away,
But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.
I thought my dear must her own soul destroy
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
This dream itself had all my thought and love.

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea;
Heart-mysteries there, and yet when all is said
It was the dream itself enchanted me:
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love,
And not those things that they were emblems of.

III

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start
In the foul rag and bone shop of the heart.

UNDER BEN BULBEN (1939)

6

Under bare Ben Bulben's head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.
An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago a church stands near,
By the road an ancient cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut:

*Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by!*

POLITICS (1939)

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics?
Yet here's a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms!

Why do they sing Yeats? What is it that they see in the words of this man? He has, after all, been dead for more than fifty-eight years and when he lived there was little in his life among the cultural élite of the salons of London and Dublin to suggest that today's musicians would find inspiration in it. And it's not as if rock musicians regularly cast an eye back to the literary voices of the past. Yet sing Yeats they do. Why? Well, for one thing, it's relatively easy. The ballad with its haunting refrains, regular rhyme schemes and metrical simplicity, is ready-made for musical settings. Yeats used it because he saw himself as the protector of the ancient bardic tradition which contained the people's collective wisdom. "All the old writers," he said, "wrote to be spoken or sung ... for hearers who had to understand swiftly or not at all." [...]

(Liner Notes for *Now And In Time To Be: A Musical Celebration of the Works of W.B. Yeats*, 1997)

John Hewitt (1907-87)

TO A MODERN IRISH POET (1927)

You drowsed my senses by your mystic kings.
 dream-drunken ladies languid as the noon,
until I deemed no other songbird sings,
 save nightingale in twilight to the moon.

You came with your strange, wistful, trembling verse,
 beguiled me for a while in quaint deceit;
and I forgot th'oppressor's blow and curse,
 the muffled tread of workless on the street.

A silver trumpet, or a golden thong,
 these were the harmonies loved of thy muse.
'Tis better done to beat from bitter wrong
 a flaming slogan's challenge, fit for use.

EASTER TUESDAY (1931)

I carefully let Easter pass this year
 Without a thought of Calvary's bare hill,
 being intent on bird and daffodil,
and April skies with one cold star and clear,
I watched the red-tipped daisies peep and peer
 out of the fresh thick grass, and skylarks fill
 the air with fluttered chorusing until
I felt myself a similar sonneteer.

But yesterday a man went up the street
 singing a rebel song of Easter Week
 and the old unquiet woke within my head.
I saw again the blood bedabbled feet,
 and all the horror that I dared not speak,
 and knew that Christ and Connolly were dead.

Louis MacNeice (1907-63)

AUTUMN JOURNAL (1939)

xvi

Nightmare leaves fatigue:

We envy men of action

Who sleep and wake, murder and intrigue

Without being doubtful, without being haunted.

And I envy the intransigence of my own

Countrymen who shoot to kill and never

See the victim's face become their own

Or find his motive sabotage their motives.

So reading the memoirs of Maud Gonne,

Daughter of an English mother and a soldier father,

I note how a single purpose can be founded on

A jumble of opposites: [...]

And I remember, when I was little, the fear [...]

Seamus Heaney (*1939)

DIGGING (1966)

Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests; as snug as a gun.

Under my window a clean rasping sound

When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:

My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds

Bends low, comes up twenty years away

Stooping in rhythm through potato drills

Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft

Against the inside knee was levered firmly.

He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep

To scatter new potatoes that we picked

Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade,

Just like his old man.

My grandfather could cut more turf in a day

Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, digging down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mold, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

THE GIVEN NOTE (1969)

On the most westerly Blasket
In a dry-stone hut
He got this air out of the night.

Strange noises were heard
By others who followed, bits of a tune
Coming in on loud weather

Though nothing like melody.
He blamed their fingers and ear
As unpractised, their fiddling easy

For he had gone alone into the island
And brought back the whole thing.
The house throbbed like his full violin.

So wether he calls it spirit music
Or not, I don't care. He took it
Out of wind off mid-Atlantic.

Still he maintains, from nowhere.
It comes off the bow gravely,
Rephrases itself into the air.

THE TOOME ROAD (1979)

One morning early I met armoured cars
In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,
All camouflaged with broken alder branches,
And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.
How long were they approaching down my roads
As if they owned them? The whole country was sleeping.
I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,
Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,
Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds
Of outhouse roofs. Whom should I run to tell
Among all of those with their back doors on the latch
For the bringer of bad news, that small-hours visitant
Who, by being expected, might be kept distant?
Sowers of seed, erectors of headstones ...
O charioteers, above your dormant guns,
It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,
The invisible, untoppled omphalos.

THE REPUBLIC OF CONSCIENCE (1987)

I

When I landed in the republic of conscience
it was so noiseless when the engines stopped
I could hear a curlew high above the runway.

At immigration, the clerk was an old man
who produced a wallet from his homespun coat
and showed me a photograph of my grandfather.

The woman in customs asked me to declare
the words of our traditional cures and charms
to heal dumbness and avert the evil eye.

No porters. No interpreter. No taxi.
You carried your own burden and very soon
your symptoms of creeping privilege disappeared.

CROMWELL

A Poem by Brendan Kennelly (1983)

This poem tries to present the nature and implications of various forms of dream and nightmare, including the nightmare of Irish history. Just as Irish history is inextricably commingled with English history, so is this poem's little hero, M.P.G.M. Buffún Esq., helplessly entangled with Oliver Cromwell as the latter appears and disappears in history, biography, speeches, letters, legend, folklore, fantasy, etc.

The method of the poet is imagistic, not chronological. This seemed to be the most effective way to represent a 'relationship' that has produced a singularly tragic mess.

Because of history, an Irish poet, to realise himself, must turn the full attention of his imagination to the English tradition. An English poet committed to the same task need hardly give the smallest thought to things Irish. Every nightmare has its own Logic.

History, however, is only part of this poem. Buffún's nightmare is his own. Hence the fact that he is not a voice; he is many voices.

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