

IN MEMORY OF W. B. YEATS

- W. H. Auden - 1907-1973

I

He disappeared in the dead of winter:
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,
And snow disfigured the public statues;
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.
What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;
By mourning tongues
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;
The provinces of his body revolted,
The squares of his mind were empty,
Silence invaded the suburbs,
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,
To find his happiness in another kind of wood
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.
The words of a dead man
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the bourse,
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom
A few thousand will think of this day
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.

What instruments we have agree
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

II

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
The parish of rich women, physical decay,
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.

III

Earth, receive an honoured guest:
William Yeats is laid to rest.
Let the Irish vessel lie
Emptied of its poetry.

In the nightmare of the dark
All the dogs of Europe bark,
And the living nations wait,
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace
Stares from every human face,
And the seas of pity lie
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,

In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

Summary:

William Butler Yeats died in winter: the brooks were frozen, airports were all but empty, and statues were covered in snow. The thermometer and other instruments told us the day he died “was a dark cold day.”

While nature followed its course elsewhere, mourners kept his poems alive without letting the poet’s death interfere. Yet, for Yeats himself, mind and body failed, leaving no one to appreciate his life but his admirers. He lives through his poetry, scattered among cities and unfamiliar readers and critics, who modify his life and poetry through their own understandings. While the rest of civilization moves on, “a few thousand” will remember the day of his death as special.

In the second section of the poem, Yeats is called “silly like us.” It was “Mad Ireland” that caused Yeats the suffering he turned into poetry. Poetry survives and gives voice to survival in a space of isolation.

In the third, final section of the poem, the poet asks the Earth to receive Yeats as “an honoured guest.” The body, “emptied of its poetry,” lies there. Meanwhile, “the dogs of Europe bark” and humans continue their “intellectual disgrace.” But the poet is to “follow right / To the bottom of the night,” despite the dark side of humanity somehow persuading others to rejoice in existence. Despite “human unsuccess,” the poet can sing out through the “curse” and “distress.” Thus one’s poetry is a “healing fountain” that, although life is a “prison,” can “teach the free man how to praise” life anyway.

Gerontion

- T.S. Eliot

Thou hast nor youth nor age

But as it were an after dinner sleep

Dreaming of both.

Here I am, an old man in a dry month,

Being read to by a boy, waiting for rain.

I was neither at the hot gates

Nor fought in the warm rain

Nor knee deep in the salt marsh, heaving a cutlass,

Bitten by flies, fought.

My house is a decayed house,

And the Jew squats on the window sill, the owner,

Spawned in some estaminet of Antwerp,

Blistered in Brussels, patched and peeled in London.

The goat coughs at night in the field overhead;

Rocks, moss, stonecrop, iron, merds.

The woman keeps the kitchen, makes tea,

Sneezes at evening, poking the peevish gutter.

I an old man,

A dull head among windy spaces.

Signs are taken for wonders. 'We would see a sign!'

The word within a word, unable to speak a word,

Swaddled with darkness. In the juvenescence of the year

Came Christ the tiger

In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut, flowering judas,

To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers; by Mr. Silvero
With caressing hands, at Limoges
Who walked all night in the next room;

By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians;
By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room
Shifting the candles; Fräulein von Kulp
Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door.

Vacant shuttles
Weave the wind. I have no ghosts,
An old man in a draughty house
Under a windy knob.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Think now
History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,
Guides us by vanities. Think now
She gives when our attention is distracted
And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions
That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late
What's not believed in, or is still believed,
In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon
Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with
Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think
Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices
Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues

Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.

The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours. Think at last
We have not reached conclusion, when I
Stiffen in a rented house. Think at last
I have not made this show purposelessly
And it is not by any concitation
Of the backward devils.

I would meet you upon this honestly.
I that was near your heart was removed therefrom
To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.
I have lost my passion: why should I need to keep it
Since what is kept must be adulterated?
I have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:
How should I use it for your closer contact?

These with a thousand small deliberations
Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,
Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,
With pungent sauces, multiply variety
In a wilderness of mirrors. What will the spider do
Suspend its operations, will the weevil
Delay? De Bailhache, Fresca, Mrs. Cammel, whirled
Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear
In fractured atoms. Gull against the wind, in the windy straits
Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn,

White feathers in the snow, the Gulf claims,
And an old man driven by the Trades
To a sleepy corner.

Tenants of the house,
Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.

Summary:

At the beginning of the poem an old man is shown who is being read to by a boy. He starts drifting into his thoughts and the actual thoughts form the poem. His thought is fused with the description of Fitzgerald's old age. He sadly misses the fight in the wars and regrets his living in the common place which is full of boredom. He goes on saying that there is a loss of humanity in the modern world. The truth is darkened and molded in any way one likes as per their wish. The divine judgment is there already for all the sinners.

He is also not far from the judgment of God as he was removed from near the heart of Him. Because of the loss of his passion he was removed. He rejected his passion of his will because he did not want to see his passion getting corrupted. He states the modern condition of human being mechanized and running here and there with their cold heart. He confesses that he does not have any active participation in the hustle and bustle of the modern world so he has been living in a forlorn corner far away from the present world. He laments on the direction the modern world has taken to head.

His house is in ruins both literally and metaphorically. The reference to Greek tragedy — such as the ruin of the house of Atreus and to the decay of European nobility are important, because the ruin is blamed on the decadence of capitalism, the growth of a cosmopolitan money-culture without roots, identified by Eliot with his silly anti-Semitism with the Jews!

There is a Biblical reference. In Jesus's time, the people would say: "We would see a sign!" They were looking for wonders and miracles, but were not prepared to believe and to change their lives. Therefore the Word ("Logos", the Word of God, and Jesus Christ) remains hidden "in darkness". The word "Swaddled" may

refer to the child Jesus swaddled in a manger in Bethlehem. In St. John's Gospel, the Christmas story is missing, but instead there is a metaphysical, very Greek, prologue explaining that Jesus was the Word of God ("Logos") made flesh (8). In this sense the Word "swaddled in darkness" (the infant Jesus) is a symbol of man's rejection of God's love. "Swaddled in darkness" also harks back to Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*. Thus, when Christ appears in all his glory he is like a tiger, a terrifying apparition.

Spring is "depraved May", a time of sexual stirrings. Though Christ is in opposition to the world, and the flesh, God's spirit is also present in the created natural universe, and above all in the spring in which Nature renews itself. Though Gerontion represents a decayed and dying humanity, he recognizes with alarm the terrible energy of that humanity when in the spring in which Nature renews itself, and the sexual power blooms. This world of his youth seems to be symbolized in the mysterious foreign figures who rise up like the ghosts from a Witch's cauldron: Silvero, Hakagawa, "Bowling among the Titians", Madme de Tornquist, Fraulein von Gulp. These have no special significance except that we notice Eliot's preference for aristocratic women. Their invocation stresses the decay of aristocratic Europe. Europe has become a museum instead of real civilization. The wind once more rattles the door to disperse his memories.

The next paragraph is a meditation by Gerontion on his failure, and on all failure. How can we earn forgiveness? How can we redeem the past? History seems to have no pattern, but mocks man's decisions and plans. Vanity and ambition are history's chief guides. History like Nature is a blind force. She gives 'too much knowledge when we are too old to act; she gives us energy, ambition and confidence when we haven't the knowledge or wisdom to act. The result is that old men are angry and frustrated, all passion and no power, and young men are bewildered and fearful, all action and no knowledge. Courage can't save us — because we don't know what bravery is for; and fear stops us doing the actions which might bring good. Courage, heroism, may lead to "unnatural vices."

Gerontion then returns to the impact on this world of a spiritual awakening from outside. Christ the tiger springs "in the new year" and destroys the old life. He is now an old man at the end of his life "in a rented house," with stiffening bones and an awareness of death. "Rented" is symbolic of the body, which is not a man's permanent home, but is only lent to him for seven decades, "We have not reached conclusion": we have come to the end of life but not to a satisfactory solution of

our desires and aspirations. At this point Gerontion seems to address his remarks to a woman (present in his memories only) and the sexual content places the religious speculation of the earlier sections. Beauty is replaced by terror, terror not of old age's ravages (the physical decay) but terrors of the truth ("terror in inquisition") that when physical passion can no longer be expressed there will be nothing left of the love between them. He has lost his "sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch" and therefore can have no contact with a woman.

In the last section, he considers other old men of life and literature who have tried to revive in old age their sexual potency and pleasure. The principle reference here is to Sir Epicure Mammon in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* who, though old, dwells on the delicious pleasures of food ("pungent sauces") and sex, which he hopes to obtain through the alchemist's aid. Amongst the aphrodisiacs which Mammon's fertile imagination conjures up to "excite the membrane" is a room full of mirrors in which his naked mistresses will be reflected with "multiple variety".

At last human effort and energy are shown to be useless and futile. Human beings (De Bailhacehe, Fresca, and Mrs. Carmel) are whirled about in space with all the planets and stars "in fractured atoms" (another reference to Henry Adam's chaos). This mad whirling chaotic cosmos is vividly compared to a ship running round Cape Horn or "in the windy straits/Of Belle Isle", like feathers in the snow of the infinite spaces. Gerontion too has been driven by the Trade Winds of time "To a sleepy corner."